



THE FAILINGS OF THE WESTERN ETHIC  
EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS—AN INVITATION  
TO A NEW/OLD PERSPECTIVE  
by Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

*Bismi-Llaah, Alhamduli-Llaah,  
Allaahumma salli wa sallim ‘alaa sayyidinaa Muhammadin,  
wa ‘alaa aalibi wa sabbih*

INTRODUCTION: SIGNS OF THE FAILURE OF THE WESTERN ETHIC

Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*) guides us in the Holy Qur’an:

***Wa-l-takum-miñkum ummatuñy-yad‘uuna  
ila-l-khayri wa ya’muruuna bi-l-ma‘ruufi  
wa-yanhawna ‘ani-l-muñkar; wa ulaaa’ika  
humu-l-muflihuun.***

Let there be of you an *ummah* to call to the good, to enjoin virtue and forbid vice. Those who do so are the felicitous (3:104).

How are we to “call to the good”? Where can we begin, in a country where poverty crushes the dreams of inner city youths; where prejudice preys upon minorities and immigrants; and where unrestrained sexuality encroaches further and further upon childhood, preparing youths for lives of passion, not compassion?

Our situation may be likened to a crisis that once faced the Khalifah Umar (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*). A fire broke out in Medina and spread rapidly, until half the city was burning. People threw

waterskin after waterskin of vinegar and water on the flames, but they continued, unabated.

Someone ran to Hazrat Umar (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) exclaiming, “The water won’t put the fire out!”

Umar (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) replied, “That fire is a sign from Allah. It is the multiple flames of your wrong actions and laziness. Forget the water and distribute bread. Abandon greed, if you are of the people of Islam.”

The people protested that they already gave freely in charity. Hazrat Umar (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) said, “You give bread from habit. You do not open your hands for the sake of Allah. You give not out of gratitude, but out of greed for recognition.”

This story offers a metaphor for the state of ethics in much of the Westernized world today. Outer affirmations of ethics, inner greed, unconscious habits, bewilderment: these are the messages of modern-day headlines. Americans talk about morality, but what does our society really promote? Individualism, self-centeredness, hedonism, cosmetic beauty over inner contentment, information over wisdom. Now there are signs of growing racism and the threat of fascism and anarchy.

There *are* people in our society who strive to uphold ethical standards. Unfortunately, in keeping with structuralist world views, some reduce ethics to black and white terms, unresponsive to our changing culture or times. The Christian Right rails against iniquity, yet supports a witch hunt mentality that fosters prejudice, if not violence. Conservative Americans emphasize the sanctity of the family, while backing prosecutors’ decisions to call mothers to testify against their children. Lawyer/client privilege is abrogated and the accused are guilty until proven innocent, at least in the court of public opinion.

In about the year 9 A.H., the Prophet Muhammad (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) received a revelation warning him as follows:

**...Wa mimman hawlakum-mina-l-a’raabi  
munaa-fiquun. Wa min abli-l-Madeenati  
maraduu ‘ala-n-nifaaq...**

**...And among the Arabs who dwell around you  
there are hypocrites (*munaafiqun*); and among  
the people of Medina, also, there are such as have  
grown insolent in hypocrisy... (Qur’an 9:101).**

We, too, live in a time of *munaafiqun*. Where does civilization end up in a world of self-serving politicians, religious extremists of all faiths, corporate monopolists, and unethical school teachers? Where else could we find ourselves? What does a genuinely ethical society lead to?

Ethics, or *akhlaaq* (to use the Islamic term), has long been a favorite topic of Muslim scholars. But it is not centuries of scholarship that make *akhlaaq* important today: it is the pressing needs of our times, needs that we as Muslims and as students of the Way have a responsibility to address.

We have not only a responsibility, but the strongest foundation from which to address these needs. It is to this foundation that I would like to turn my attention next.

*FOUNDATIONS FOR “EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS”: QUR’AN AND SUNNAH*

Sufism provides an experiential introduction to qualities such as compassion, patience, and tolerance as tools for adjusting personal and collective patterns of behavior. It enables individuals and groups to manifest their deepest and most sublime human character in the service of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*) and of Allah’s creation.

At the core of this transformative process lies the Divine revelation and the teachings and examples of the Prophet Muhammad (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*). Abu-l-Qasim al-Junayd (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) said:

**This knowledge of ours is built of the Qur’an and *sunnah*** (al-Misri 864).

All the ethical guidelines that one could possibly need are available in the Qur’an and *sunnah*. These guidelines are not rigid rules, but rather a framework for a new/old ethic which I refer to as “evolutionary ethics.” Evolutionary ethics reflect the readiness of the individual to grasp the next level of ethical potential, the next level of inner and outer freedom.

#### *A HISTORY OF STAGNATION*

The key to activating the framework of evolutionary ethics lies in placing the timeless guidance of Qur’an and *sunnah* in the context of our time, place, and circumstances.

History testifies to the failure of Muslim nations to keep up with a changing world. For more than 200 years after printing presses flourished across Europe, the ‘*ulamaa*’ (religious scholars) of the Ottoman empire considered printing to be *haram*, for texts (especially sacred ones) were too precious to be mass produced. The first Islamic printing press was not established in the Ottoman empire until 1720. Moreover, this press was only granted permission to print secular and scientific books, further divorcing sacred Islamic texts from the rapidly modernizing world (Murad 4).

Some Muslims argue that it was colonization that stifled creative thought in the Islamic world. Contemporary scholar Ismail Serageldin observes that, in fact, Muslim leaders suppressed

progressive thinking before the colonists arrived. This suppression helped open the way for colonization, which in turn furthered the deterioration of Islamic society (Serageldin 82).

Historic misinterpretations of the Qur'an and *Hadith* have given rise to stereotypes of Islam as rigid and backwards. Still today, some Muslims reinforce these stereotypes by rejecting technology, forbidding women from working outside the home, condemning non-Muslims, and castigating fellow Muslims.

Such attitudes deny Islam its rightful place in the ethical discourse of today. It falls to the people who are fluent in the *sharē'ah*, the *sunnah*, and *Tasammuf*—and in the technology and vocabulary of our age—to present the teachings in ways that can make them a positive force for change.

#### *DISTRUST OF ORGANIZED RELIGION AND DANGERS OF CATERING TO IT*

The challenges involved are enormous. The world is linked as never before by a global economy, communications technology, and environmental crises. We also are operating on new frontiers of consciousness, as scientists learn more about the human mind and brain. Many people question whether any religious tradition meets the needs of such a diverse and rapidly changing world. They argue that institutionalized religion is passé, and should be replaced by new forms of spiritual expression.

It can be tempting to cater to those who wish to be “spiritual” without having to be “religious.” Add to this trend the widespread fear of Islam in the West, and it is not surprising that new strands of so-called Sufism should emerge, distant from the guidance of the Holy Qur'an, the *Hadith*, and the genuine traditions of the Way.

The guidance of an authorized *shaykh* is essential to success on

this Path. Those who are rightly guided and who can guide others rightly are those who point students towards the Qur'an and *Hadith*, towards *share'ah*, towards *akblaaq*, towards the essence of Islam.

Westerners who are drawn to Sufism are usually compelled by a personal search for inner realization, for meaning, for an understanding of their purpose in life. In many cases, they are dissatisfied with the belief system or religion with which they are raised. Wary of doctrine, institutions, and hierarchy, they adopt an intellectual and experiential approach to finding answers to their questions.

It is understandable that individuals who come to the Path in this way initially tend to gloss over the essence of Sufism: namely, Islam. But the longer they maintain this attitude, the greater the obstacle it poses to spiritual progress. Shaykh Ahmad ar-Rifa'i (*radiya-Llaahu 'anhu*), founder of the Rifa'i Order, said, "The *tareeqah* (way of the Sufi) is the same as the *share'ah* (the laws of religion), and the laws of religion are the same as the *tareeqah*" (AICP 5). Hazrat Khwaja Abdul Khalique Ghujduwani (*radiya-Llaahu 'anhu*), one of the Masters of Wisdom in the *silsila* of the Naqshbandiyya Order, wrote to a *mureed* (student):

Adhere to the *sunnah*. Study the *fiqh* (the knowledge of the rules of the religion). Study the *Hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet [*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*]). Study *tafseer* (the commentary of the Qur'an), and beware and avoid those who are ignorant and claim to be Sufis (AICP 5).

The farther removed Sufism becomes from *share'ah*, the more it becomes labeled a New Age fad, as yoga has been. Sufism is not a fad. Sufism is the understanding of how to operate the archetype, the *naqsh* (design) within the human being, in the ever-renewing universe of consciousness and materiality. In all eras and places,

Sufism has purified the hearts of sincere seekers. It was the reality of experiencing “Know yourself and you will know your Lord” long before it had a name.

Certainly, we cannot solve ethical and social problems through unconscious litanies or rituals. When and where Islam has been reduced to such, its spiritual underpinnings must be revitalized. At the same time, we cannot effectively address ethics by creating a new religion or by diluting *Tasamwuf* so much that it no longer causes a seeker to stretch or to experience the treasures of submission (*islaam*), faith (*imaan*), and trust (*tawakkul*).

#### *ISLAAM, IMAAN, AND TAWAKKUL*

Post-modern intellectuals dismiss submission as servile, faith as blind, and trust as naive. From a Sufic point of view, submission, faith, and trust are wakeful, mature, and premised upon insight and attentiveness to the moment. As the bird submits to the currents of the wind, so, too, seekers submit to the forces that can take them to their destination.

Every human being is submitted to something. We submit to our children’s needs, and to cultural standards for attire and manners. We allow the media to shape our opinions. We submit to advertising campaigns. We submit to the law. Every day, we submit at least thirty or forty times (perhaps more!). We stop what we are doing when the phone rings or someone drops by. We remember something we meant to do yesterday, and switch to doing that. We spend our days, submitting again and again. Yes, that’s life—*alhamdulillah-Llah*, Islam is what life is all about!

Islam makes this minute-to-minute social submission purposeful, within a framework of *‘aqeedah* (belief) and values. In contrast, many people operate from unconscious conditioning, even while they

affirm “freedom of choice.” They submit to the material world, to the demands of desire and convenience, rather than to a Higher Power. Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*) observes in the Holy Qur’an:

***Al-haakumu-t-takaathur hattaa zurtumu-l-  
maqaabir.***

**You are obsessed by greed for more and more  
until you go down to your graves (102:1-2).**

Along with such greed comes an attitude of ethical impunity. I remind you again of the people of Medina, confident of their merits while “flames of wrong actions” enveloped their city. So, too, modern-day societies, confident in their ethical underpinnings, suffer from environmental destruction born of their own consumerism. We fear nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, bred of our own hunger for hegemony. We suffer disillusionment, depression, alcohol and drug dependencies in the wake of our own disregard for community values.

And so we find ourselves at a crossroads in thought and philosophy. The path that can take us toward solutions is not the one leading away from Islam, but rather the one that taps its evolutionary potential.

*SUFIC ISLAM AS PROCESS*

Almost every aspect of *shareeah* points to process, as this saying sometimes attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) indicates:

**Seek knowledge from cradle to grave.<sup>1</sup>**

Truth is revealed throughout the lives of individuals and societies as we are ready to see, hear, and understand it. All aspects of

Islam and *Tasawwuf* encourage this discovery by promoting flexibility and patience.

Consider Islam's approach to slavery. Slavery was a mainstay of Arabian society, and the Prophet Muhammad (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) never called for its immediate abolition. Instead, the Qur'an and *Hadith* provided new guidelines for the treatment of slaves. Slaves were to be dressed and fed in the same manner as their masters. If they embraced Islam, they stood shoulder to shoulder with their masters in prayer. To free a slave was a commonplace punishment for crime. Such guidelines inevitably led to the emancipation of many slaves.

Just as *share'ah* could progressively address slavery in seventh century Arabia, so, too, it is progressive enough to address key ethical issues today. Methods of adapting the Qur'an and *sunnah* to the needs of a particular place and circumstance include *ijtihad* (the exercise of independent judgment), *qiyaas* (analogy), and *ijmaa'* (consensus). Volumes have been written on these subjects, and I do not have time to explore them today. But perhaps two brief examples can illustrate these processes.

Organ transplants obviously were not an issue in the Prophet's day. But the following statement in the Qur'an bears on this and other issues in medical ethics:

***...man abyaahaa fa-ka'annamaaa abya-n-naasa  
jamee'aa.***

**...whoever saves a life, it would be as if he [or  
she] saved the life of all the people (5:32).**

The violation of a body is forbidden in Islam, a prohibition that governs the removal of organs. Yet, according to Islamic law,

“Necessities overrule prohibition,” and “the lesser of two evils is to be chosen if both cannot be avoided.” Combining these injunctions, one Muslim leader concludes that if a person is likely to die without a transplant, then the transplant should be undertaken (Organ).

Entering the debate over genetic engineering, the same scholar notes that

Gene replacement is essentially transplantation surgery, albeit at the molecular level....[G]enetic engineering [could] open tremendous vistas in treatment of many illnesses and the possibilities in agriculture and animal husbandry might be the clue to solving the problem of famine the world over (Genetic).

These and other examples show the Qur’an and *sunna* as frameworks for evolutionary ethics.

Such ethics are articulated and enacted by the individual, within a secure community. Both individual and community are essential to the process.

*“INVELOPMENT”: PERSONAL & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INVOLVEMENT*

Human beings have an inherent urge to become constructively involved in the lives of others. We want to play a useful part in the community (*umma*). Appropriately directed, this urge creates a link between personal development and society’s progress. I call this link “invelopment”: personal and societal development through involvement.

“Involvement” results when the innate desire to contribute to the community has a proper venue for expression. The more a person is involved in fostering the well-being of society, the greater his or her personal growth and the more rapid the spiritual evolution of society.

*THE BEST (AND WORST) MAN OF THE BANI ISRA'EEEL*

Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaah*) once commanded the prophet Musa (Moses) (*alayhi-s-salaam*) to ask the *Bani Isra'eel* to select the thousand men and women of the highest ethic among them. They did, and once the group was formed, they were asked to choose the top one hundred. From these they were to choose the top ten, and from the top ten, they were to pick the one with the highest ethic.

They selected a man of the most refined, kindly, and humble disposition. This man was then instructed to find the worst person among the *Bani Isra'eel* and to bring him or her to Musa (*alayhi-s-salaam*).

After a few days, he came across someone who was notoriously immoral. He thought, “Surely no one could be worse than this!” But he decided not to be too quick to end his search.

A little while later, he came across someone whose acts were even more vile. Again he hesitated. He reminded himself that he was judging based only on outward appearances, and that God alone knew the depths of a person’s heart. He was also becoming wary of his own pride in being “the best.”

Finally, he decided that he could not pass judgment on anyone other than himself. He concluded that the worst person had to be he, because he knew how many faults he had.

He returned to Musa (*alayhi-s-salaam*) and introduced himself as the worst person among the *Bani Isra'eel*.

God then revealed that this man was indeed the best. Because he considered himself worst, he would always work to improve himself, his relationship with Allah, and his relationship with other people (Jamnia, 60-61).

In order to make ethics real, we must look closely at our own behavior. The term *akblaag* encompasses both “ethic” and “character.” Each of us must continue to refine our own character if we are to foster an ethical society.

#### *‘IBAADAH AND ADAB*

The person in the story was of high ethic because he remained conscious of Allah. He understood the full breadth of the Islamic concept of *‘ibaadah*, or worship.

As children, many if not most of us attended church, synagogue, or (in some cases) mosque. But few of us were taught to truly worship: to turn our entire lives into service of the Divine, always seeing around us the beneficence of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*), and feeling humbled by that greatness. Other words from the same root as *‘ibaadah* include *‘abada* (venerate) and *‘ubuudah* (humble veneration). This is *‘ibaadah*—worship, veneration, and humility.

*‘Ibaadah* requires *adabah* (a moral, ethical approach to life). We are all familiar with the related term *adab*: spiritual courtesy rooted in the heart. *Adab* is one of the most practical tools of ethics, for it curbs the human tendency to be self-centered rather than God-centered.

Traditional sources on *adab* include the guidelines for behavior in the *kehanaqabs* of the Khwaja Khwajagan, the rules of the

Naqshbandi Order, the duties of brotherhood of Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*), and the principles of *futuwwah* (chivalry), among many others. Allow me to share a sampling of the treasures that these resources contain.

- According to Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*), “Concealing faults, feigning ignorance of them and overlooking them—this is the mark of religious people.” “You should seek seventy excuses for your brother’s [or sister’s] misdeed, and if your heart will accept none of them you should turn the blame upon yourself...” (39, 67).
- Imam Al-Ghazali (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) also reminded readers that “the Prophet Muhammad said: ‘...If a person gives up contention even when he [or she] is...right, a house will be built for that person in the loftiest part of the Garden [of Paradise]’ ” (45).
- Hazrat Muhammad ibn al-Husayn as-Sulami (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) instructed students of the Way to “respond to cruelty with kindness, and do not punish for an error.” “Be satisfied with little for yourself, and wish much for others.” “Remember that you are a servant of Allah and should not regard yourself or your actions highly, nor should you expect a return for your actions” (37, 41, 43).
- And, finally, Shaykh Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) stated: “Association with ignorant persons should be with patience, good manners, and sympathy.” And, further, “...one should not listen to indecencies and slander” (47, 49).

Earlier I posed the question, “Where does civilization end up if it continues in the direction it’s headed today? Where else might it end up?” I invite you now to imagine one alternative:

a community and civilization centered around *adab*, *‘ibaadah*, *akhlaaq*, *‘aqeedah*.

*TOWARDS AN ECOLOGY OF ETHICS*

This is the community of Islam: one filled with light (*nuur*) and kinship and affinity (*nisbah*). It is a community where each person recognizes her or his responsibility for the well-being of others, where people assist those who are in need, where everyone has a duty and finds joy in fulfilling it, no matter how humble the task. It is a community of “involvement,” where every individual is engaged in perfecting himself or herself, and, as part of that perfecting process, is serving the community at large.

The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said,

**The believers, in their mutual love and affection, are as one body. When one member has a complaint, the rest of the body is united with it in wakefulness and in fever** (An-Numan bin Bashir/Bukhari).

Ethics are cultivated within this matrix of relationships, in the shared context of walking on a straight path (*siraata-l-mustaqeem*) towards a goal that is within and beyond the gates of this life. They are affirmed by a *sharee‘ah* that promotes economic equity, education, social justice, and the balanced fulfillment of material and spiritual needs.

Such an environment naturally creates an ecology of goodness and ethic. It provides the basis for a trust, morality, and honesty that is not imposed from the outside, but rather inspired from within.

Of course, breaches of ethics will occur even in the best community. The Prophet Muhammad (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said:

**One who amongst you sees something abominable should modify it with the help of his or her hand; and if he [or she] has not strength enough to do [so with the hand], then...with the tongue; and if he [or she] has not strength enough to do [so with the tongue], then he [or she] should abhor it from the heart, and that is the least of faith (Abu Sa’id al-Khudri/Sahih Muslim).**

In a community governed by *sharee’ah*, each person is an “officer of the law.” But this law is not enforced with ethics investigations and media rampages. It is enacted with love, gentleness, and kindness; with sweet words, encouragement, and models of what it means to live a principled life while covering the faults of others.

**A man came to the Prophet Muhammad (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) to confess a sin and receive the punishment due him. The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) ordered him to free a slave. The man replied that he had no slaves to free.**

**The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) then said he should fast for two months. He said he was too weak to do that.**

**The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) instructed him to provide food for all the poor, but he said he did not have the means to do so.**

Then the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said, “Please wait here.” After some time, a person came with a basket of dates for the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*). The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) gave them to the man, telling him to use them to feed the poor. “Am I to give them to someone poorer than I?” the man asked. “For I swear by Allah, there is no one poorer than my family!”

The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) laughed, it was said, “until his eyeteeth showed.” Then he told the sinner, “Give the dates to your family, and eat!” (Abu Hurayra/Al-Muwatta).

On another occasion, the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said:

**Do not hurt those who believe, and do not impute evil to them, and do not try to uncover their nakedness [meaning “faults”]... (Abu Hurayra/Sahih Muslim).**

As we well know, this is not the way in the Westernized world, literally or figuratively. Here, everything is to be brought out into the open, in order to get at “the truth of the matter.”

But who among us is qualified to represent the Truth? As the man of the *Bani Isra’eel* realized, only Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’ala*) is *al-Haqq* (The Truth). We may have facts and information, but these do not equal truth. They may not even equal understanding. Understanding comes through the process of receiving with an open heart, filtering everything through *shara’eeh* and *sunnah*, and adjusting for personal and cultural biases. The person who understands can reject unethical behavior without judging or publicizing it. She or he does not mistake others’ worst qualities for their only qualities.

The Prophet Isa (*alayhi-s-salaam*) (Jesus) was walking with his followers one day when they passed the rotting carcass of a dog. His followers cried out, “How terrible it smells!” But Isa (*alayhi-s-salaam*) said, “How white its teeth are.”

Disclosure (even when accurate) does not necessarily improve a person’s behavior. Nor does humiliation. Wrongful acts can only be ameliorated in ways that are appropriate to the capabilities of the people involved.

The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) offered dates as punishment for sin. Hazrat Umar (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) prescribed charity in the face of fire. Both understood that the key to ensuring ethical conduct lies in preserving the fabric of the community, and that that lies in the dignity of the individual.

This is the core of “invelopment”: to accept and act upon one’s innate patience, tolerance, faith, and belief. Herein lies the foundation and the heart of Islam and Sufism.

#### *LEARNING THE MOST FROM THE LEAST ETHICAL BEHAVIOR*

The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said:

**Every person is born in *fitrah* [in a state of essential goodness and submission]. It is one’s parents who make one a Christian, Jew, or Magian. (Abu Hurayra/Bukhari)**

Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*) has sown not only religious differences, but many other differences among human beings by the hands of their families and their environments. Despite the purity of our natural

disposition, we find huge and frightening variations in definitions of good and bad, right and wrong, morality and immorality. Twenty years after he slaughtered more than a million Cambodians, Pol Pot said that his conscience was clear, for he had done it for the good of his people. What misery has ever been inflicted in the name of bad?

We give thanks to Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaau*) that most individuals seem to resonate with the higher end of the spectrum. As for the people at the lower end, they underscore the message that we are all responsible for everyone's well-being. Until that message becomes a primary message to every child in the world, we will still have the confusion that comes of irrational actions undertaken in the name of "good" and "right." Until we and the generations after us know what it means to adore God (*ibaadah*) and to evoke the highest conduct through *adab* and service to others, ethics will remain the stuff of Senate investigations, CNN reports, Rush Limbaugh radio programs, and tabloid exposés.

This takes me to the final topic I would like to address: focal points for action. Let me turn to the subject of future generations as a departure, and a beginning.

#### *FOCAL POINTS FOR ACTION*

### **1. Global Demographics and Education**

The hope for a real basis in Islamic ethics, free of many of the cultural overlays, lies in how we raise and educate our youths. Today the need for sensitive education in *akbblaag* and *adab* is more pressing than ever. While Western populations are "aging and static...with stable, introspective political cultures," Muslim countries are experiencing a "youth bulge." Political and social turmoil frequently accompany growing percentages of youths in a society. The Protestant reformation and the rise of German fascism are two cases in point (Murad 10-11). More recently,

The Islamic revival over the past few years has faithfully reflected this trend. One of the first Muslim countries to reach a peak proportion of youth was Iran, in the late 1970s ([when youth made up] around 22% of the population), and revolution occurred in 1979. ...in Algeria this proportion was reached in 1989, just when the [extremist Islamic Salvation Front, or] FIS, was winning its greatest support (Murad 11).

If we want our children to grow up with ethical principles, they have to be taught the Qur'an and *sunnah* properly from early in life. Young people need to understand the Qur'an and *sunnah* in the context of being part of a global society, understanding the terminologies of post-modern political and social discourse, participating in the information revolution, and being voices of tolerance, compassion, faith, trust, and reliability.

We have to look towards educating our youths to be strong Muslims and Sufis. What does this mean in the United States? How can we best use the texts, tools, and technologies that are available? After all, a failure to incorporate the Internet into our educational approaches could be as damaging as the Ottomans' disdain for the printing press.

In addition to working with our youths, a second focal point for action lies in acting as facilitators and models of dialogue.

## **2. Relations Among Muslims: Tolerance, not Takfeer**

Both Muslim and non-Muslim societies today are fraught with schisms, contractiveness, and suspicion. Fear and the abandonment of basic human and spiritual principles characterize much of the content and style of communications among people of faith, be they Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists or others. One need spend only a short time on the World Wide Web to come across dialogues turned into diatribe. Any hope for reconciliation among our brothers and sisters is shrouded in doubt and *takfeer* (charges of unbelief).

It appears that the Sufis alone may be able to reconcile the disparity and celebrate the diversity of our community of faith. However, we can only manifest this ability if we truly agree upon and practice what Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaah*) and the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) have provided, bringing our unique methods, commitments, personal experiences, and, hopefully, Islamic unity to the critical task at hand. We must resist engaging in *takfeer*, and rather enjoin others to reflect the same tolerance and love that we experience among ourselves in gatherings such as this.

### **3. Expressing the New/Old Perspective Throughout Society**

A third focal point for action lies in expressing the new/old perspective of Islam and *Tasammuf* through our daily work.

Each of us who has benefited from the blessings of this Path has an obligation to share what we have gained. Some of us may do this on a local scale, working with just a small circle of neighbors. Others may attain international acclaim. Some of us may publicly identify ourselves as “Muslims” or “Sufis;” others may not. As Muslims, as Sufis, we work in both *dunyaa* (this world) and *akhirah* (the Hereafter). The criteria for our success neither excludes nor depends upon the criteria of the material world. Rather, we know that Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaah*) is aware of our successes and failures. Remaining ever mindful of the Divine Presence in our lives, we strive each day to be able to answer “yes!” in response to the question: “Am I reflecting an Islamic and Sufic paradigm in my work, in my interactions, in every aspect of my life to the best of my ability?”

With Allah’s mercy, the day we can say “yes!” is the day that our work will have profound effects for the betterment of our society... and of our world.

The attainment of this goal begins with turning attention to our inward state.

CHARACTER BUILDING AND MUHAASABATU-N-NAFS

Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'ala*) tells us in the Holy Qur'an:

***Qad aflaha man zakkaahaa. Wa qad khaaba man dassaahaa.***

**Blessed indeed is [the one] who purifies it [his soul], and unsuccessful is [the one] who debases it (91: 9-10).**

In the pursuit of purification (*tazkiyah*), each of us must strive to recognize that all that is unhealthy and unwholesome in life is neither necessary nor, ultimately, desirable. *Tazkiyah* is acquiring what is healthy for us. It involves maintaining the physical surroundings, the psychological states, and the types of interactions that are purifying for us in *dunyaa* (the material world). It means supporting and encouraging the inclinations and aspirations that are spiritually fulfilling (Ahmed 1).

A key tool of character building is conscious reflection, encompassed in the Islamic concept of *muhaasabah*, which literally means to reckon, to reconcile, or to take an account of (as in balancing an organization's financial accounts). The Sufis practice *muhaasabatun-nafs* (accounting for one's self), as Shaykh 'Abdullaah Nooruddeen Durkee presents in his book, *Insajaama*.

***Qaala Rasuulu-Llaah (salawaatu-Llaahi wa salaamuhu 'alayh) "Haasibu anfusakum qabla an tuhaasibu, wa zinu a'maalakum qabla an tuzanu 'alaykum."***

The Messenger of Allah (*salawaatu-Llaahi wa salaamuhu 'alayh*) said, "Account for your 'self' (*anfus*) before you are accounted; weigh your actions before your actions become a weight upon you."

*Muhaasabatun-n-nafs* entails the examination of one's self, of one's intentions, decisions, actions, and conscience. This is a practice of utmost significance. It forms a practical basis for change, for refocussing one's life and point of view, for beautifying one's character, for evolving and for "invelopment." Ultimately, this is the aim of every spiritual journey.

In sum, the Qur'an and *sunnah* provide an essential, flexible, and relevant framework for evolutionary ethics in today's world. In an ethical environment, everything is oriented first towards the community and the sustainability of that community. But this orientation can only be arrived at and maintained by making commitments and utilizing appropriate mechanisms for expressing one's own understanding of *ibaadah* and building one's character as an individual Muslim and *mu'min*.

Islam speaks directly to each person's role, commitment, remembrance, and duty to others and self. It stresses a personal ethic (*akhlāq*) which begins its development at home, in relationships with one's family and neighbors. It is refined through the mastery of *adab* and extends to self-observation and the understanding that "every action I perform affects the whole." As each of us learns how we can best express our inborn urge to contribute to the community, "invelopment" takes place: we become better people, and the community makes progress.

Let me end with a story, and an invitation to try one of the approaches I have just described.

Once a king decided that he wanted to have a lake of milk next to his palace. A hole was dug, and everyone in the kingdom was notified that they should bring a liter of milk and pour it into the hole on a particular night, so that the king could watch the sun rise over the lake the next morning. When the night finally arrived, the king lay awake in anticipation, listening to the footsteps and

sounds of pouring. Finally, the first rays of light brightened his room. He rushed to the window, threw open the curtains, and looked out upon...a beautiful lake of water!

The king sent his wazir to find out what had happened. The wazir traveled far and wide, speaking to people throughout the king's dominions. After many weeks, he returned with an explanation. All of the king's subjects were so poor that each one had thought, "I have no milk to spare, so I'll bring water. After all, who will miss *my* little bucket of milk?"

A Sufi knows the value of his or her bucket of milk. A Sufi's concern for the well-being of others takes precedent over his or her concern for himself or herself—gladly, gratefully, humbly, and out of inner necessity.

With this story in mind, I remind you again of *muḥaasabatu-n-nafs*: accounting for one's self. May I invite you to take a few moments now for private reflection.

Please relax. Breathe deeply. Turn your attention to your heart, and recite the *Suuratu-l-Faatihah*:

***Bismi-Llaahi-r-Rahmaani-r-Raheem. Alḥamdu-li-Llaahi Rabbi-l-ʿaalameen, Ar-Rahmaani-r-Raheem. Maaliki yawmi-d-deen. Iyyaaka naʿbudu waʿiyyaaka nastaʿeen. Ihdina-s-siraatal-mustaqeem, siraatal-ladheena anʿamta ʿalayhim, ghayri-l-maghduubi ʿalayhim, wa la-d-daaalleen. Aameen.***

In the Name of Allah, the Universally Merciful, the Singularly Compassionate, Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds—the Universally Merciful, the Singularly Compassionate—Master

of the Day of Judgment. You alone we worship,  
and You alone we ask for help. Guide us [to] the  
straight way, The way of those whom You have  
blessed, not [the way of] those on whom is [Your]  
anger, nor those who are astray (Qur'an 1:1-7).

Then recite the following *du'aa'* both in Arabic and in translation.

***Qaala Rasuulu-Llaah (salawaatu-Llaahi wa  
salaamuhu 'alayh) "Haasibu anfusakum qabla  
an tubaasibu, wa zinu a'maalakum qabla  
an tuzanu 'alaykum."*** —

—  
The Messenger of Allah (*salawaatu-Llaahi wasalaamuhu  
'alayh*) said, "Account for your 'self' (*anfus*) before  
you are accounted; weigh your actions before your  
actions become a weight upon you."

Think over your day in detail, from the time you got up this  
morning, to this moment...

...reflect upon the real purpose of life and how you live it...

...ask yourself, "What could I have done more according to Allah's  
will today? How could I have changed my responses, words,  
thoughts, actions to be in harmony with Allah's will?"...

...make the internal commitment that can change nations, by  
changing yourself.

*Jazaaka-Llaah khayr*—thank you.

\* \* \*

*Wa-Llaahu lahu-l-haqqu wa huwa yahdi-s-sabeel.  
Hasbuna-Llaahu wabdahu wa ni'mal-wakil.*

*Wa salli ‘alaa Sayyidina Muḥammadin  
wa aalibi wa sabbihi ajma‘een  
wa-l-ḥamdu li-Llaahi Rabbi-l-‘aalameen.*

Truth belongs to Allah; it is He who shows the way.  
Allah, alone, suffices us, and what a fine guardian is He!  
Blessings upon our Master Muhammad  
and his family and companions altogether  
and praise is due to Allah, Lord of the Worlds.

O Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta‘aalaa*) give peace, understanding,  
and highest ethic to all those who are gathered here today.  
Grant them the ability to worship You humbly,  
to serve You, to have trust and rely upon You,  
and to gain the deepest insight that is buried in their hearts.

*Rabbanaa laa tu‘aakhidhnaaa in-naseenaaa aw akhta’naa.  
Rabbanaa wa laa tahmil ‘alaynaa israan  
kamaa ḥamaltahu ‘alaa-l-ladheena minn qablinaa.  
Rabbanaa wa laa tahammilnaa maa laa taaqata lanaa bih.  
Wafu ‘anna, wagh-fir lanaa warḥmnaaa.  
Anta Mamlaanaa fa-nṣurnaa ‘alaa-l-qawmi-l-kaafireen.*

Our Lord! Condemn us not if we forget or miss the mark! Our  
Lord! Lay not on us such a burden  
as Thou didst lay on those before us!  
Our Lord! Impose not on us  
that which we have not the strength to bear!  
Pardon us, absolve us, and have mercy on us,  
Thou, our Protector, and give us victory  
over the disbelieving folk (Qur’an 2:286).

## Notes

1 The saying, “Seek knowledge from cradle to grave,” is typically attributed to the

Prophet Muhammad (*salla-Llaabu 'alayhi wa sallam*), although this specific wording is not found in *hadith* literature. However, other *hadith* are quite similar in language and meaning, such as, "Seeking knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim," which was reported as a saying of the Prophet (*salla-Llaabu 'alayhi wa sallam*) by Ibn Majah, Bayhaqi, and other scholars. Consequently, the former statement is regarded as part of the general wisdom of Islam, whether it was uttered by Muhammad (*salla-Llaabu 'alayhi wa sallam*) or one of his early followers.

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