

Concept of Good and Evil: Views of Amin Ahsan Islahi

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Abstract

Human beings are born with the intrinsic sense of good and evil, and if the knowledge of good and evil is inherent in man, then why do men commit evil deeds, and what makes an act good or evil. These are the questions that remain a focus in all human scholarship. A contemporary Muslim scholar, Amin Ahsan Islahi, provides views on the good and evil which do not differ drastically from those of other Muslim scholars, but with an emphasis on human norms that may set him apart from them. His views are based mainly on the exegetic principles of nazm as found in the Qur'an, and he leaves little space for the role of external sources in reaching his conclusions, human intellect excepted. Islahi credited good as being innate in human beings, and blames evil actions on certain unavoidable human weaknesses that are mentioned in the Holy Qur'an. However, God also has provided guidance about how to overcome these weaknesses by means of revelation, and through the invisible critic, or conscience, found in human beings.

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Introduction

Allah made man unique as compared to all other creatures. Human actions are shaped by their thoughts in the sphere of ethics and morality. Since the ancient Greeks, philosophers and intellectuals have endeavoured to define what is good and what is evil. Scientific and technological advances, especially those in the life sciences, have provided certain new questions for modern ethical philosophers. Since the early days of Islam, Muslim scholars also have devoted much thought on the basis for good and evil in human actions. Some modern scholars deviated from this tradition, but the majority of religious scholars have followed the earlier jurists, and particularly the Asharite. Mawlana Amin Ahsan Islahi, an exegete of twentieth century, has expressed himself on these issues, which are important for contemporary educated Muslims. Islahi's views are valuable in many ways. He is a scholar of the Farahi School of thought, which holds that *Nazm* [Arabic: coherence]¹ is the principle by which to interpret the Holy Quran, but he deviates somewhat from the traditional way of interpretation. Secondly, Islahi was once the *naib amir* [Urdu: 'vice-president'] of the Jama'at-i-Islami Pakistan, and so also has practical experience in dealing with people rather than merely advocating abstract ideas. Thirdly, his thoughts regarding the individual and society are greatly influenced from his concept of good and evil. These factors necessitate investigating Islahi's thought in an academic way in order to make visible what is invisible to those who have no direct access to his works in Urdu. Bits and pieces have been collected from his nine volume exegesis, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* [Arabic: 'Pondering over the Qur'an'] to answer the question

1 According to this school there is an inner coherence in the whole text of the Qur'an. Every *surah* is a unit revolving around a central theme (*'amud*), and each *surah* must be interpreted in the light of this central theme. All *surahs* are found in pairs that complement each other. There is also a logical link, unity and coherence in the different *surahs*. See the detailed study of Mustansar Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an — A Study of Islahi's Concept of Nazm in Taddabur-i-Quran*. (Indianapolis IN: American Trust Publications, 1986).

of why man commits evil acts, if Islahi's assertion is correct concerning man's "inborn knowledge about good and evil". The commentary of Islahi on some western philosophers has been supplemented with other sources, including his book *Falsafay ki Bunyadi Masayl Qur'an-i-Hakim ki Roshni mayn* [Urdu: Basic Philosophical Issues in the light of the Qur'an].

Amin Ahsan Islahi (1904-97)

Coming from a rural background and agrarian family, Islahi received his early education from his village school, then completed his studies at the Madrasat al Islah in Sarai Mir, Uttar Pradesh (UP), India, and graduated in 1922. Islahi won the appreciation of his teachers as well as of those Muslim leaders who visited the Madrasa, among whom were the noted religious scholars Sayyed Suleman Nadvi and Mawlana Mohammad Ali Jauhar. Having worked for some time in journalism, in 1925 Islahi decided to study the *Qur'an* from Hamiddudin Farahi.² After Farahi's death in 1930, he then served his *alma mater* as a teacher until he accepted an invitation from Mawlana Sayyed Abul Ala Mawdudi, founding leader of the Jama'at-i-Islami, to join him in Pathan Kot in 1944. In the Jama'at-i-Islami, Islahi soon rose to become *naib amir*, and he usually led the Jama'at in the absence of Mawlana Mawdudi. His contribution to the moral and character-building of the Jama'at's workers was second only to Mawdudi. In 1958 he resigned from the Jama'at on doctrinal grounds.

2 Hamiddudin Farahi was an important religious scholar. Born in 1863 in Pariha (UP), he studied religious disciplines from the contemporary Ulama. This included Mawlana Faizul Hassan Seharanpuri and Mawlana Shibli Nomani, who was also his cousin. He completed his modern education from Aligarh College and greatly benefited from Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan's presence there. His stay in Aligarh College as a student, and the Sind Madrasa, Karachi and Allahabad University as a faculty member, exposed him to modern education and the orientalist's scholarship and scepticism about Islam. He concentrated his research on the Holy Qur'an and recorded his findings in books (mostly unfinished) in Arabic, except one which is in Urdu, and was closely involved in establishing Usmania University, Hyderabad and Darul Mussanifin, Luknow. During his last days he devoted all his time in teaching Qur'an in the Madrsatul Islah in Sarai Mir, and he died in 1930 (See Dr. Sharfuddin Islahi, *Zikr-i-Farahi* [Urdu: Remembering Farahi] (Lahore: Darul Tazkir, 2002).

The subsequent period of Islahi's life was dominated by his full time work on writing his exegesis,³ and training of some modern graduates in the study of the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* on the basis of the *nazm* principle. He was successful in drawing together a group of scholars who carried out the mission of understanding the *Qur'an* directly and ensuring that any outside human explanations are subject to these principles. They continued to pass on the process to subsequent generations and Farahi and Madrasat ul Islah⁴ have had an enormous impact upon Islahi's own thought, practices and life style.

Good and Evil through Non-Muslim Eyes

In introducing his views, Islahi first takes note of Western notions of good and evil. According to him, a considerable number of thinkers concluded that whatever provides happiness and pleasure to human beings is good and what does otherwise is evil. To such thinkers, the goal of life is happiness and so whatever is helpful in achieving happiness is also good. Some consider mental pleasure to be the real pleasure and happiness, in contrast to physical pleasures. These hedonists had to respond to the criticism in the form of the question; whose happiness? What will happen if happiness of one is sorrow of the other? Where will we place variations in human tastes which are different in different people and at different times? Utilitarians hold that all actions are best that result in "the greatest happiness of the greatest number".

Islahi then speaks of the Relativists who challenged Absolutism and Universalism in moral matters. "Relativism" upholds the notion that it is beyond man's capacity to reach

3 *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* was completed in 1980.

4 This was a madrasa founded at the beginning of the twentieth century by an organization called *Anjuman-i-Islah-ul-Muslimin*. Mawlana Shibli and Mawlana Farahi took an interest in the designing of the curriculum. It imparted religious as well as modern education to the students. Special attention was given to the Arabic language and the *Quran* was at the centre of all branches of knowledge. All *fiqh* were taught to the students without any discrimination.

universal agreement on the concept of good and evil. Variation in geography and culture gives way to different sets of values in the world. The history of mankind also does not support uniformity in ethics. Moreover, existing human behaviour proves that the order of priority in morality changes with changes in circumstances. Islahi, however, rejects the Relativists and states that moral standards always exist far above variations in social status. Truth and falsehood, mercy and tyranny are never alike.⁵ An acceptance of relativism will make it difficult, if not impossible, to understand a particular community or society because the epistemological standards will be different. Moreover, no room will be left for efforts to reform a particular society since every society will believe itself to be the best.

Islahi noted that still other Western theorists thought that the good or evil of an action depended on the intentions of the doers. According to this school, an act in itself is not good or evil, but the intention of the doer makes it good or evil. An evil done with good intention is not sinful. Criticism against such view was that the criterion of intention did not provide a complete enough solution to the complicated questions of morality. One could accommodate an evil act performed with a good intention, but the act itself could not be counted as good. Good and evil have existed as independent entities throughout history.

For quite some time Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was considered to be the most important discovery in recent history. It claimed to provide a suitable solution to the important question of the "origin of man". His theory was then extended from the biological sciences to the social sciences. The study of ethics was influenced by it as well, and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) propounded his theory of "evolutionary ethics". This argued that "the essence of life is the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external

5 Amin Ahsan Islahi, "Good and Evil — Views of the Philosophers", *Renaissance* (February 1993), 20-21.

relations”, and laid stress upon the adoption of the inner self of human beings to the external environment. Acts tending to promote this adjustment were good; others were evil. The supreme moral purpose is to help the process of this development and so progressively perfect the adjustment of internal relations to external relations. Failure in this adjustment may put an end to the human body. Thus fear of physical destruction provides the basis for the ethical choices. Yet in Islahi’s view this theory fails to provide sound grounds for the explanation of certain human actions such as the sacrifice of parents for their children, or the sacrifice of any person for another person in a time of need. If adjustment is taking place in human body, this means that there are options before human beings. If survival of the body (which according to evolutionists has the highest value) does not become the highest goal for a human being, the process of adjustment will be the other way around. In addition, man is capable of taking independent decisions and has the potential to create an environment in conformity with his own internal relations.

Good and Evil through Muslim Eyes

Among Muslims there are two schools of thought – the *Mu’tazilites*⁶ and the *Asharites*⁷ – and they took quite different positions on morality. The *Mu’tazilites* consider human reason as being capable of distinguishing the good from the evil. According to Abdul Jabbar⁸, actions are

6 The school emerged in eighth century Iraq as a consequence of a religious dispute between Hassan al Basri and Wasil ibn Ata over the issue of the fate of a Muslim who commits a major sin. The school mainly followed a rationalist approach, coupled with revelation. Since their views were opposed by the majority of Muslims, they could not gain ground in the mainstream of Muslim theology.

7 This school has its origin in the reaction against the rationalist approach to religion adopted by the *Mu’tazilites*. They asserted that a complete understanding of divine attributes is not possible through reason and that all moral good has its origin in revelation. This school still represents the majority of Muslim theological trends in the modern world.

8 He was a great theologian of the *Asharite* who converted to *Mu’tazilism* and remained a chief *qazi* of Rayy. His treatise on ethics was discovered in a library in Yemen in 1951, and it is considered to be one of the most

identified as being either good or evil according to the intention of the doer. He identified three types of good actions: the permissible, the admonished and the obligatory. The adventitious quality of action is a matter of intuitive certainty, and it is known aesthetically in the same way that one knows a picture to be beautiful or ugly.⁹

As for the *Asharites*, they believe that reason alone cannot enable a person to recognise good and evil. It is revelation which determines value of deeds and actions. Abu'l Hasan al-Ashari (representative of the school) rejected the view that a rational conclusion can stipulate anything that is morally or religiously obligatory. A knowledge of God can be attained through reason, but it becomes obligatory only through revelation. In the same way, reward and punishment are also necessitated only after revelation.¹⁰ According to the *Asharites*, falsehood, avarice, cruelty, injustice, and ostentation are evil traits because revelation has declared them to be evil. The same is the case with truth, sympathy, justice, and mercy. They are all good traits because God ordained them to be good. If God had declared them to be evil, then these virtues too would have become evil.

Good and Evil: Islahi's Assertion

Islahi evaluated nearly all the available ethical theories in the series of lectures on the subject which he later published in Urdu as *Falsafay ki Bunyadi Masayl Qur'an-i-Hakim ki Roshni mayn*. Although he criticised all the theories, but he considered the intrinsic theory of ethics to be nearer to the truth. According to Islahi, the ability of recognizing good and evil is inherent in human nature, and not imposed from outside. There is no doubt that God and the prophets

important discoveries in the *Mu'tazilite* history. George Hourani undertook a study of the ethics of Abdul Jabbar in his *Islamic Rationalism: The Ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

9 Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam (Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science)*, as cited in Yasin Muhammad, "The Evolution of Early Islamic Ethics", *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 18, no. 4, (Fall 2001): 105.

10 Muhammad, "The Evolution of Early Islamic Ethics", 106.

ordered humans to do good and avoid evil, but the sense of right for good and wrong for evil exists in man's nature. Moreover, these values can be observed even among those communities who apparently had or have no access to the word of God. The Holy *Qur'an* says: "And a soul and Him who perfected it. And inspired it (with a conscience that knows) what is wrong for it and (what is) right for it."¹¹ The *Qur'an* also declares the knowledge of good and evil to be the special bounty of God. It says: "Have we not made for him a pair of eyes? And a tongue and a pair of lips? And shown him the two highways?"¹² According to Islahi, man's knowledge of good and evil is inborn, innate and implanted in him at the time of creation. The Holy *Qur'an* describes it as the whiff of Almighty's spirit into man. In the story of creation of Adam, God ordered the angels to bow before Adam. In words of the *Qur'an*, "When I have perfected him and breathed My spirit in him, fall you down bowing before him."¹³

The question then arises that if human nature is enough to guide human beings, then what is the role of revelation? Islahi sees the complete harmony of faith with human nature, and believes that there is no inconsistency between faith and human nature. Again he quotes the *Qur'an*: "So get thyself upright to your religion. This is the providential nature in which He created man. There is no altering the creation of Allah. This is the right religion but most men know it not."¹⁴ Islahi asserted that man is required to look for the teachings of the prophets, not because he was unable to distinguish between right and wrong without them, but rather he was asked to follow them because there are certain weaknesses in man such as forgetfulness, due to which he is likely to

11 91:7-8.

12 90:8-10.

13 15:29.

14 30:30.

forget the voice of his inner self. The purpose of revelation is to remind us of what is forgotten by human beings.¹⁵

According to Islahi, religion did not unearth the concept of good and evil for the first time; rather it makes unmistakable a concept which already exists in human nature. This reminder closes all doors for human beings to run away from the utterance of nature.¹⁶ Islahi interpreted one of the very important verses of *Surah Noor*, “light upon light”, as meaning that Divine Revelation is not light over darkness, but light upon light.¹⁷ He also rejects those thinkers who maintain that human beings are born with a clean slate. According to these theorists, a baby is not exposed to ethical values by birth. An infant becomes aware of these values only slowly and gradually through his surroundings and the experiences, he gains with the passage of time. Rather, according to Islahi, a human is fully aware of the ethical values as early as the embryonic stage. If surroundings affect a newly born, he then asks how these surroundings were affected by ethical notions. Man’s actions spring from his original nature, which is *khayr* [Arabic: good], *’adl* [Arabic: just] and *ma’ruf* [Arabic: proper]. Whenever the desires hold a sway over man, his nature turns to *shar* [Arabic: evil] and *zulm* [Arabic: tyranny].¹⁸

Belief in God – The Highest Good

Aristotle declares knowledge as the highest virtue. Evolutionists think the same about the survival of human body. For the hedonist, pleasure is the ultimate good; but the utilitarian prefers (tangible) utility and the consequentialist seeks the good results of an action. Different mystic schools, including Thomas Aquinas, declared communion with God to be the highest good and seek to renounce all worldly

15 Amin Ahsan Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur’an*, vol. 6, 5th ed. (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1994), 94.

16 Islahi, *Dars-i-Quran* [Urdu: Qur’anic Lessons], *Surah Al-Balad*, (No. 9, Danish Sara Collection).

17 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur’an*, vol. 5, 409.

18 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur’an*, 5th ed., v. 3, 394.

belongings in order to achieve this goal. In the words of Aquinas, “man cannot reach ultimate happiness in this life.”¹⁹ But Islahi’s highest good is faith in the unity of God. In his view, to combine another god with the One God is a heinous crime. The *Qur’an* and sayings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) frequently refer to the belief in unity of God. According to Islahi, belief in God is the fountainhead of all good conduct and morality. It is the Divine Sanctuary of all good, without which no good or virtue is defensible.²⁰ All the messengers of God taught this same lesson to their adherents. An Israelite jurist enquired “what is the first commandment of God?” Christ answered: “The first commandment is: ‘Hear! O Israel; The Lord, our God is one Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with thy entire mind, and with all thy strength’.”²¹ Citing the *Qur’an*, Islahi believes that the idea of the unity of God, the highest good, has been implanted in human nature since the creation of man. At the time of Genesis, God obtained a solemn pledge from the souls of the children of Adam that they would accept Allah alone as their *Rab* [Arabic: Lord]. The reason for this pledge was to forestall excuses on the part of humans on the Day of Judgement.²² For Islahi, no one on earth had any excuse for negating of the idea of the unity of God. This is the first of the fundamentals of human nature. Islahi believes that there is inextricable relationship between the idea of one God and human values. The idea of one God is not only an intellectual reality, it has enormous practical implications. Certain attributes, such as wisdom, power, knowledge, authority, sustenance, organizing and planning, are inseparable from this idea.

Furthermore, Islahi considers good moral conduct to be an offshoot of faith in God. For him faith and good conduct

19 Roger Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature — An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 43.

20 Amin Ahsan Islahi, “Good and Evils (II) – Views of *Qur’an*”, trans. Said Ahmad, *Renaissance*, March 1993, 14.

21 *Holy Bible* (The New Testament), Mark, 12: 29-30.

22 7:172.

seem inseparable. In most of the *Qur'anic* verses the word... 'aminu [Arabic: grasp the faith] is followed by 'amilu al-salihat [Arabic: good conduct].²³ Thus one famous *Qur'anic* verse likens faith to a fruit tree that is firmly rooted in the earth, has branches elevated to the sky, and bears fruit every season.²⁴ In this regard, Islahi interpreted *kalimtu tayyabatun* [Arabic: the good word] in the verse just cited as faith that is "firmly rooted in earth". He means that it has penetrated and become established in human nature, and that it is not a weak stem that can be easily uprooted. Indeed, faith is compared with a dense tree that provides shade and fruit in every season. A person with faith in God not only profits himself from his belief, but the fruit of his conviction also benefits those with whom he interacts. Faith is like a grape vine. It can move, grow and bear fruit, but it needs a tree or a net to climb on before it can do so.²⁵ Some Muslim scholars have emphasised belief in the Holy Prophet (PBUH) along with that in the unity of God. They assert that today's advances in science and technology, as well as our unlimited access to information, makes it compulsory upon all sane people, especially intellectuals, to accept the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as the last prophet. In one of his early writings, Islahi also declared the human intellect was itself proof enough to serve as *hujjat* [Arabic: evidence] to convince modern man of the need to accept the message of Muhammad (PBUH).²⁶ However, in his later life he argued that the fate in the hereafter of such people will be decided according to their natural faculties and the sources of information available to them.

There is likelihood of salvation in the hereafter of all those people who had not been approached properly by the mission of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Their excuse

23 Islahi, *Tazkiyah-i-Nafs* [Urdu: Purification of the Soul], vol. 2 (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1998), 14.

24 14:24-26.

25 Islahi, *Tazkiyah-i-Nafs*, vol. 2, 16.

26 Amin Ahsan Islahi, *Tafhim-i-Din* [Urdu: Understanding of Religion], ed. Khalid Masud (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1992), 112.

might be acceptable in the hereafter on the basis of their sincerity and their belief in God, and their good deeds. Islahi himself opined that excepting the apostles, nobody on earth could provide unchallengeable evidence to convince people to accept Islam. Ordinary missionaries, whatever their efforts for the propagation of the Faith, do not have the capabilities to present the word of God in its fullness. The Holy *Qur'an* states: "Those who believe [in the *Qur'an*], and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians [other monotheists], and [those] who believe in Allah and the last day, and [who] work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve."²⁷ According to Islahi, the concept of faith in one God is not static but rather dynamic and changing. It grows continuously if it is nourished properly and cared for. Otherwise it becomes lifeless and worn out.²⁸

Apart from faith in the unity of God, Islahi stresses that the concept of justice is a component of human nature as well. Justice, he believes, is also inborn and innate in human nature. Islahi emphasises that throughout history, human beings have advocated justice. Even those who choose to transgress the norms of justice always demand that they receive justice from others.²⁹ This shows how innate is the idea of justice among mankind. Even so, Islahi recognizes that many may not get justice in this world, but he believes justice will be done in full on the Day of Judgement. Islahi considers the occurrence of this Day as the responsibility of God. It is God Himself Who talks about it as an inevitable event for all of humanity.³⁰ On that Day each individual will

27 2:62.

28 Islahi, *Tazkiyah-i-Nafs*, vol. 2, 18.

29 For example, a person himself may cheat but he will not expect a shopkeeper to cheat him in terms of the weight and quality of a commodity. This means that justice is the basic need of humans and that it exists in their nature as well. They only ignore it for certain personal reasons.

30 Islahi, *Dars-i-Qur'an, Surah Al Infitar* [Arabic: The Cleaving], (No 2, Danish Sara Collection). This idea of Islahi resembles that of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant used the ethical argument to establish the existence of the Good after showing that all proofs derived from so-called "pure reason" were invalid. His argument was that the moral law required that men be

be judged on the basis of his potentials, faculties, opportunities, and limitations. An individual's beliefs, thoughts, intentions, desires, and actions in this world, will be taken into account and judged on that Day without any discrimination.

On basis of the above arguments, Islahi maintained that the nature of this world was as a *dar al-azmaysh* [Arabic: place for trial]. In a way, every faculty that is given to man is used to test his behaviour. In the world, people have not been similarly endowed. Each individual is different from the others. Some are affluent, others poor. Mental capacities and level also vary. One is a genius while others are average. Some are given powers to persuade and to force while others are only followers. In all such situations, says Islahi, man is required to behave appropriately, and is expected to act with *shukr* [Arabic: gratefulness] and *sabr* [Arabic: patience] throughout his life. A fortunate person should demonstrate gratefulness in words and deeds. To express *shukr* genuinely, one has to think of his good fortune, not as an outcome of his own efforts, but as a means for the use of which he is to be held accountable. One also has to show his gratitude by using his resources in a judicious way. Secondly, an affluent person should not ignore the oppressed of society and, according to Islahi, should not compare himself to those who are more fortunate in society, for this usually makes him ungrateful.

As for *Sabr*, this means to stand firmly and confidently. The term is used for bearing hardships without complaining. An individual should not despair but instead should continue his struggle for improvement. The word also implies taking a strong stand on principle in the face of unfavourable odds. In Islahi's worldview, faith in God will provide such a person

rewarded proportionately to their virtue. Since in everyday life, men who were not virtuous might often be happier and more successful than men who were, such rewards evidently were not assured in this life. He therefore inferred that there must be another existence where men were so rewarded, and this led him to the conclusion that there was a God and an eternal life. See Richard H. Popkin *et.al. Philosophy* (London: W.H. Allen, 1956), 36-37.

with the necessary strength. The ultimate goal of a man is to be successful and happy. However, success should not be confined to life on this earth only. Real success is found in the next world, and it also provides a man with absolute happiness. Life here being a preparation for the other world, God requires a man to live an active and moral life in this world. A life of seclusion (a sign of asceticism) on this earth does not necessarily mean that a person will be regarded as successful on the Day of Judgement. Rather, one should live as ordained by the Creator, making full use of one's endowments from God and creating justice among people. Islahi's emphasis on creating happiness and justice was in accordance with the views of such modern Muslim revivalists as Shah Wali Ullah, who assigned a very important role to the struggle to establish the "rule of God" on earth, leading to the creation of the just society as ordered by Him. Shah Wali Ullah stated his views on this subject as follows:

The ultimate end for which man has been entrusted with the enterprise of Religion will be actualised in the Life Hereafter. But in order to qualify for Paradise, man is expected to create a paradise here. To this end, he is required to disseminate justice and constantly try to eliminate injustice and wilful acts of evil from the earth.³¹

Human Intellect — A Bounty of God

Islahi gives intellect a central place among man's capabilities for discerning the good and distinguishing it from the evil. The use of the word "pondering" in the title of his exegesis *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* highlights the status he gives to human intellect. According to Islahi, the ability to think is the greatest *n'ymat* [Arabic: blessing] that God has bestowed upon man.³² In his view, human intellect provides the best guidance to humanity. He argues for the belief in one God and the dynamic nature of faith, but states that the growth of faith depends upon human intellect. He argues that if man

31 Muhammad Al Ghazali, *The Socio-Political Thought of Shah Wali Ullah* (Islamabad: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Islamic Research Institute, 2001), 20.

32 Islahi, *Tazkiyah-i-Nafs*, Vol. I (Faisalabad: Malak Sons Tajjiran-i-Kutub, n.d.), 62.

constantly deliberates over this universe and what it contains, it will enhance his faith in God.³³ He rejects the views of those who curse 'aql [Arabic: intellect] and consider it to be the cause of humankind's deviation from the right path. He thinks that there should be difference between a syllogistic view and a holistic view when searching for new paths within the framework set by the *Shari'ah* [Arabic: codes of Islamic law].

In terms of their faculty for acquiring knowledge, Islahi placed people into three categories. The first category comprised those who cannot comprehend the natural phenomena and who must therefore listen to men who can. They are called *yasma'un* [Arabic: those who can listen]. The second category contains those called *ya'qilun* [Arabic: those who can realise]. The *ya'qilun* arouse their mental faculties, organise premises and draw conclusions based on these premises. In the third and highest category comes the *yatafakkarun* [Arabic: those who can think]. Those falling into this class deliberate over the mysteries of the universe and through constant thinking they can discover its mysteries. This pursuit not only satisfies them, but it also provides some remedy for the malaise of others. Islahi exemplifies this stage with the bees which collect the essence (or pollen) from different flowers to benefit human beings.³⁴

Islahi argues that the growth and development of intellect is possible in a society in which freedom is guaranteed to each individual. In his view this element of freedom emanates from the concept of one supreme God with all His attributes. In fact, it is some of man's weaknesses and needs that force him to surrender his freedom to some mighty entities, be they physical or metaphysical. In such conditions, man sometimes suppresses his own ideas and thoughts. This is especially the case if his submission to such an entity is forced and

33 Islahi, *Tazkiyah-i-Nafs*, vol. 2, 18.

34 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 4, 5th ed., 429.

made unwillingly.³⁵ This distorts an individual's intellectual faculties. Consequently, the process of independent thinking comes to a standstill and the individual adopts certain untoward styles of behaviours and practices. If such a situation is prolonged, it may cause certain psychological problems and moral vices among individuals. However, the idea of one God emancipates man from all such considerations. Faith makes a man courageous enough to express himself freely without taking into account the consequences of his actions.³⁶

Islahi condemns every inhibition that curtails human freedom in any shape or form. He is among the very few Muslim theologians and scholars who do not follow the doctrines of earlier Muslim jurists and scholars, unless these are confirmed by his own deliberations. On several occasions he showed his courage in differing with them. For his refusal to accept traditional views he was roundly and bitterly criticized by some other Muslim scholars for the alleged "sin" he had "committed." Despite this, he preferred to avail himself of "freedom", one of the greatest blessings of God,³⁷ rather than surrendering and blindly following previous scholars, howsoever high their stature is in the eyes of most Muslims.³⁸

35 M. M. Sharif, *National Integration and Other Essays* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1965), 118-19.

36 Islahi substantiated his views with anecdotes from the Holy *Qur'an*. Accordingly, a group of magicians in the court of Pharaoh had asked for remuneration if they defeated Moses in a contest of magic. Yet after Moses persuaded these magicians to confess their belief in God, they then paid no heed to the pressure of the king, who threatened them with dire consequences if they did not return to the old faith i.e. paganism.

37 In one of his articles, Hafiz Salahuddin Yousaf declared Islahi as *zall* [Arabic: one who lost his path]. He even suggested that Islahi be declared as '*kafir*' [Urdu: non-believer] because Islahi had deviated from the *ijma-i-ummat* [Arabic: Consensus of the Community] *Muhaddith* [Urdu: Specialist of Hadith], Lahore, (August 2001), 23-24.

38 In the Shariat Court of Pakistan, Islahi appeared to express his view on an important and sensitive religious and legal issue i.e. the punishment of fornication. When he expressed himself openly and rejected the view of the traditional 'ulama, he was threatened of dire consequences if he did not

Human Intellect and Moral Transgression

Nonetheless, we are still left with a crucial question: if all moral values are innate in human nature, why then humanity does not adopt these. There are many instances in the past and modern times alike when man has transgressed these values. Yet Islahi insists that such deviations from the natural urge really are very small, and states that the collective conscience of society never agrees on these deviations.³⁹ He sees a consistency and continuity in the observance of moral values throughout human history. According to Islahi, whenever there was deviation, this was due to man's "unheedfulness." The factor which Islahi highlights as maintaining these values is the presence of an invisible moral critic or conscience in man. Islahi believes that God not only embedded the knowledge of good and evil in man's nature, but also included an invisible guard called the *nafsi-i-lawwama* [Arabic: admonisher].⁴⁰ This guard frequently and constantly sanctions good and warns man against evil acts. As the *Qur'an* states: "Nay, I swear by the day of Resurrection. Nay, I swear by rebuking soul."⁴¹ According to Islahi, whenever a man commits an evil act, he soon realizes his sin, is ashamed, and feels an urge to return to his God. However, when this urge is ignored repeatedly, the guard or conscience leaves him alone and stops warning him against sins.

Moral values cover all affairs from the day-to-day lives of the ordinary people to international relations, and the principles remain the same in every instance. In all cases, Islahi explains, the basic criterion is that a person may not observe a moral restraint in his own actions and commit a theft, but he still will not want others to steal from him. This shows, he argues, that a realization exists even on the part

recant. Nevertheless, he held firm in his stance. Thus Islahi sought freedom for himself and defended it for others as well.

39 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 9, 80.

40 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 9, 79.

41 75:1-2.

of a thief that theft is an evil act.⁴² The judgement of good and evil as such needs no external evidence.⁴³

Again, if the result of an ethically wrong act is apparently beneficial for humanity, does this then sanctify the act? Islahi's answer is no. According to him, it is also the procedure, the means, of the act which should be considered, and not only the end. In his worldview, there is no place for musical concerts, theatrical shows, and so on in Pakistan, even for raising funds for the welfare of needy people. He believes such functions have inherent vices which cannot be justified on the plea that their income will be spent on helpless people.⁴⁴ For this purpose, the inner self of man should be awakened to help the needy rather than some individuals being coerced for the same.

Good and Evil: Variance in Value

There is no simple or uniform manner to judge values. The balance will differ depending on the consequences of the act involved. Some have far-reaching consequences, not only for a person but also for humanity. Thus good and evil can be evaluated within two categories: *muta'addi* [Arabic: contagious] or causative, and *ghayr-i-muta'addi* [Arabic: non-contagious] or ordinary. Islahi compared moral values to a genealogical table. He said that sometimes we consider a good act to be very minor, but it still belongs to that family tree from which originates the trunks of greater good. The same is the case of evil.⁴⁵ With the passage of time, consequences of an act determine the gravity of moral values involved. In this regard, Islahi cites the illegal death of Abel by Cain. This act opened the path to the killing of man by man. So according to Islamic teachings, Cain has a share in the guilt in every offence of man against man, because he showed the way to this crime. Islahi concluded that actual

42 Amin Ahsan Islahi, "Good and Evils (II) – Views of Quran" trans. Said Ahmad, *Renaissance* (March 1993), 18-19.

43 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 3, 146.

44 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 1, 515.

45 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 1, 21.

worth of a moral act would be determined on the Day of Judgement. Only there the nature of each action will be unearthed.⁴⁶ In another classification, he divides all the moral values into material and non-material. The non-material (theoretical) aspect of values resides inside a man while the other comes to the surface of human life. Both are interconnected with each other: one flourishes with the support of the other. Islahi suggests that in case of good, the theoretical as well as exhibited value should be promoted, and that in the case of evil both should be discouraged.⁴⁷ He also notes that the *Qur'an* in the *Surah Al-Shura* [Arabic: the consultation] categorises all the moral vices in three types: *ithim* [Arabic: sin], *fawahish* [Arabic: indecency] and *ghadab* [Arabic: anger]. The first, *ithim*, is that which involves injustice and domination, while the second, *fawahish*, comprises all those vices which stems from lust and desires. The third, *ghadab*, stems from pride, self-importance and arrogance, and it gives birth to disturbance, transgression, rebellion and oppression.⁴⁸

Why Does Man Commit Evil Acts?

In Islahi's view, man has been imbued with the knowledge of good and evil so that his innate nature is never mistaken in the selection of good and evil. Yet man also is provided with freedom of choice between these moral values so that he can take decisions concerning all moral values freely. But again we face the most crucial question of why man, who knows the good, has acted evilly in the past, and why do a considerable number of people not follow the right path today? Islahi explains this by certain weaknesses and shortcomings in man. As the *Quran* states: "Allah doth wish to lighten your (difficulties): for man was created weak (in the flesh)."⁴⁹

46 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 7, 99.

47 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 3, 156.

48 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 7, 177.

49 4:28.

The first weakness is forgetfulness. Man forgets that he has been created not for the world, but that the world has been created for him. Everything has been structured for his service and not *vice versa*. Man usually forgets that he has been given not only this life, but he also has been promised another permanent and better life, subject to his moral character he reveals in this life. Man has lost his original place and purpose. Consequently he became a slave to worldly desires.⁵⁰ Furthermore, man has become so involved in worldly affairs that he usually forgets the purpose of his creation. He is prone to forgetting. Therefore God sent His messengers, including the last Prophet (PBUH), to remind humans of the forgotten faith and other moral values.

The second weakness of man is *'ujlat* [Arabic: haste]. The *Qur'an* tells us that "the prayer that man should make for good, he makes for evil: for man is given to hasty (deeds)."⁵¹ Another verse warns: "Truly man was created very impatient."⁵² Both the terms *'ajul* [Arabic: haste] and *halo* [Arabic: anxious], which are used in these verses, refer to man's impatience. It is observed that many hardships aside, the results of morally good acts usually take a lot of time to be revealed, and sometimes they do not ever bear fruit in this world. On the other hand, the results of morally evil acts may become evident without any delay, and men therefore opt for immediate benefits rather than distant future rewards.

The third reason of our failure to attach ourselves to the good is the lure of worldly desires. It is the tangible world which attracts man instead of the world which is in our imaginations. Islahi points out that man has an interest in fulfilling not only his ordinary needs (e.g. food, clothing, etc.), but also his yearning for elegance and beautification. He wants well-furnished beautiful houses while the satisfaction of his sexual appetites can never be ruled out when

50 Islahi, *Tazkiyah-i-Nafs*, vol. 2, 158-59.

51 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 4, 487.

52 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i Qur'an*, vol. 8, 571.

discussing man's nature. A human needs, desires, lust and sentiments demand fulfilment. Man is susceptible to ignoring the ethical aspects of the means of obtaining fulfilment of these needs.⁵³ The *Qur'an* likens such behaviour to that of person who walks headlong with his face down.⁵⁴ Islahi dubbed such persons with dogs who hound to get something to eat rather to use his intellect. Man, however, has been made not to bend over the earth like an animal chasing his needs, but to stand straight, head raised to look to his right, left, back and front, and then to walk the right path.⁵⁵ This recognizes that upholding the right path is not an easy task, while there is no obvious difficulty in committing moral vices. Thus Islahi points out that it is easier to read a light-hearted novel than to study a book on philosophy. To follow one's desires seems less difficult than to hold them in check. There is no problem in letting the boat go with the waves of the sea rather than fighting against opposing winds. The same is the case with ethical values. Since man is attracted more by evil than by good, he moves smoothly forward in the direction of the vices.⁵⁶ Another characteristic of man that is stressed by Islahi is his propensity when he starts moving in a particular direction, even if it violates human nature and rationality, to feel initial reluctance, but then soon to become familiar with the new demands and adapt himself accordingly.⁵⁷

Man is social by nature, and each of us is dependent upon others. Man can influence others, and be influenced by them. He cannot ignore his surroundings, especially when the majority is agreed. It is observed that when an act is performed by a majority of people, this becomes a proof of its validity. Whatever becomes a fashion, more or less, affects all. Islahi narrates the story of the fall of Bani Israel, whose religious leaders at first warned the people, but when

53 Islahi, *Tazkiyah-i-Nafs*, [1], 220-21.

54 67:22

55 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 8, 499-500.

56 Islahi, *Tazkiyah-i-Nafs*, [1], 159-61.

57 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 8, 357.

it became clear that reformation was impossible, the theologians themselves then joined in the moral degradation. Islahi also points to different periods in Muslim history when a particular theological school had achieved dominance and affected all branches of knowledge and the practices of people. He particularly makes note of mysticism and its influence on Muslim theology. At the same time, however, he also recognizes that throughout history there have been people who did not follow the crowd, who firmly stood their ground, and who suffered enormous hardships and difficulties for so doing.

Highlighting another moral failing of human beings Islahi remarks that whenever a man is blessed with good things by God, he becomes overconfident and arrogant instead of being grateful to his Benefactor. But when he runs into difficulties, he soon forgets his past good fortune and despairs,⁵⁸ and in some cases even starts cursing God.⁵⁹ It is common for men to demonstrate their weak characters by succumbing to morally evil practices. One verse of the *Qur'an* depicts man as being *qaturah* [Arabic: tight-fisted] and reads: "For man is (ever) niggardly!"⁶⁰ Islahi interprets this as meaning that man is miserly, that he simply accumulates wealth, and that he makes no place in his heart for others.⁶¹ The *Qur'an* points out another characteristic of man: "But avarice has been made present in the minds (of men)."⁶² Islahi explains both the positive and negative aspects of the word *shuh* [Arabic: wish]. When used positively it means the creative desires and aspirations which properly exist in human nature. But such desires can be evil, over-reaching and illegitimate as well. Islahi indicates that in majority of people, the negative aspect of *shuh* dominates and can become an ailment.⁶³

58 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 4, 111.

59 67:211.

60 17:100.

61 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 4, 544.

62 4:128.

63 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 2, 398-99.

Revelation as Source of Knowledge on the Good and the Evil

God has sent different messengers to different nations whenever there was a need to remind them of the good. For a long time man had to be reminded constantly of the right and innate path to God through revelation. By the time of Muhammad (PBUH), however, humanity had matured enough to receive God's final revelation. This last revelation is sufficient to prepare humanity to meet all future challenges by taking guidance from the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. Islahi is well aware of the differences of opinion among Muslim jurists regarding interpretations of the *Qur'an*. Examining these differences, one can easily be confused about the correct meanings of *Qur'anic* verses. Islahi claims that applying the *nazm* principle one can hardly find any place to derive more than one meaning.⁶⁴ This method relies on two sources: (i) internal and (ii) external. Among the internal sources he includes language of the *Qur'an* — *nazm* and *tafsiri Qur'an bil Qur'an* [Arabic: clarification of the *Qur'an* with the help of the *Qur'an*]. As for the external sources, these include the *Sunnat-i-mutawatirah* [Arabic: constant practices of the Holy Prophet], the *Hadith* and the *Athar-i-Sahabah* [Arabic: transmission of the Companions], the *Shan-i-Nazul* [Arabic: background of the Revelations], exegeses, previous Holy Scriptures, and Arab history.⁶⁵ These sources are rational and are legitimate in any scholarly pursuit and by applying this principle, Islahi was successful in producing his monumental commentary on the *Qur'an*.

If widely adopted, Islahi's method could help narrow dogmatic, sectarian, juristic and personality-oriented differences and so bring about a more reasonable, intellectual dialogue among different Muslim groups.⁶⁶ The method also can be extended to the inter-faith dialogue, and it might prove fruitful in promoting peaceful coexistence in a

64 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 1, 22.

65 Islahi, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, vol. 1, 14-33.

66 Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, interview by author, Lahore, November 7, 2002.

multi-religious and multi-cultural world. Instead of blindly following the early jurists and exegetes, a study of the linguistics, the uses of a particular word, and the application of certain grammatical and literary rules, should dominate the discussion among the various schools of thought. Consequently, a time might come when all humanity will benefit from the revelation sent to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in the seventh century A.D.

Conclusion

In Islahi's worldview man is fully mature in the domain of morality. It is man's ability to recognize good and evil which distinguishes him from other entities of the universe. For all basic knowledge in morality human beings are not in need of external sources. A constant deliberation in the right direction can help him achieve the ultimate goal of moral life. The ethical choices need intellect and freedom which is entrusted to human beings by God. However, Islahi's man is not faultless. He falls prey to certain distractions like forgetfulness and fulfilment of worldly desires and lusts without looking into the ethical consequences of means to achieve the same. Man is ungrateful at the time of ease and comfort, and he despairs at the time of hardships. To overcome his distractions, human being is provided guidance through revelation and the Holy *Qur'an* is the last revealed book of God. According to Islahi, good life is possible only when certain measures are taken to minimise these faults to promote and nourish human potentialities not only to conquer the spiritual world, but also to explore and conquer the physical world. The task can be achieved if social and political institutions are formulated on the principles of Islam, primarily drawn from the *Qur'an* in the light of the principle of coherence enshrined in it.