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Diseases of the Spiritual Heart as Root Causes of Moral Decay and Corruption of Justice Based on Imam al-Ghazali’s Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues based on the analysis of Imam Al-Ghazali that the major cause of moral decadence in the society today is as a result of non-purification of the diseases of the heart. It makes an analytical exposition of the term *Ulu’l-Albab*, i.e. men of Intellect as used by the Qur’an to show those men are of high moral standards. Thus, a purified soul will be of moral quality thus reducing corruption and moral decadence in the society.

Key words: Morality, Spiritual Heart, Corruption, Justice, Purification of Soul.

Introduction

The relationship between law and morality, being one of the most important issues in the philosophy of law, has long been a subject of intense debate in modern Western thought. The three categories of analytic jurisprudence, normative jurisprudence and critical theories of law, provide a wide scope for the existence of a plurality of schools of thought. Under analytic jurisprudence, one comes across the important debate between those that affirm that a conceptual relation exists between law and morality, and those that deny the existence of such relations and those whose position are somewhere in between the two poles. In the philosophical conflict between the Natural Law proponents and the Legal Positivism proponents, one could assume that certain fundamental assumptions about the nature of man and society are implicated in the arguments, but given the dominance of the theory of secular man and secular society in the Western political context, the influence of positivism and the reparability thesis would continue to hold sway despite the strong opposition and critique against them. (Coleman, 1982, 1989, 1990, 1996; Hart, 1963, 1984, 1994, and Dworkin, 1982, 1986).

The contemporary divide between academic philosophy and legal practice also enhance the separation of law from morality. Francis J. Mootz, Professor of law at William Boyd School of Law, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, argues that in our quest for justice in today’s world, one cannot hope to find answers or guidance from contemporary philosophy. He says:

Can we hope for justice in this world? Plato thought not. In the *Republic* he ...that justice can be achieved only if the philosophers rule, but also that philosophers cannot simultaneously rule the many and remain in the sunlight of true knowledge. They must return to the cave. Leo Strauss famously interprets Plato as arguing that the philosoper in the cave must speak esoterically because if he speaks plainly his wisdom will be misunderstood, leading the prisoners to attack the one who opens this dangerous line of thinking….What, then, can be said about striving to create a just world? Plato leaves us with the *Laws*, in which three tradition-bound men discuss politics in light of real-world practical constraints. Law is our resignation in the face of the impossible demands of justice; it is not just unphilosophical, it is antiphilosophical. (Mootz, 2008).

Mootz assumes that it is unrealistic to expect today’s philosophers to provide a reliable roadmap towards just social relations. In his opinion:

Philosophy no longer is a way of life for members of a community seeking to determine what the good life entails. Today, “philosophy” designates a department of the modern research university, a technical discipline whose members vie for prestige and glory in the shadowy world of academe. This is not to say that philosophers are disqualified by their profession from active participation in the communal effort to define justice, but it is to suggest that being a professional philosopher is no better preparation for this task than being a literature professor, artist, or medical doctor (F.J. Mootz, 2008).

The Integration of Morality and Law in Islam and Emphasis on Purification of the Soul:

The impotence of contemporary philosophy, the ascendency of secular humanistic liberalism, the advent of post modernistic relativism, the deterioration of moral consciousness and conduct in contemporary society, the
lack of moral integrity in several professions and institutions, and the rising phenomenon of social ills among the younger generation provide us more than sufficient reason to be very concerned with the current state of the law, the legal profession, the independence and incorruptibility of the judiciary, and the way law is taught in the university.

In the Islamic unity of the Creed ('Aqidah), Divine Law (Shari'ah) and Morality (Akhlq), good conduct and righteous behaviour (husn al-khuluq) are at the core of mission of Islam, and Divine Law provides the parameters of what is right or good (al-ma'raif) and what is wrong or bad (al-munkar). While good akhlq covers many aspects of spiritual and moral virtues as opposed to spiritual and moral vices, a considerable part of those virtues could not be legislated because they have to do with the intangible or unseen inner states of the spiritual heart which, however, have their respective impacts on human actions and behaviour. Law and legislation are therefore required to ensure the minimum level of order and discipline in society in accordance with the will of Allah Most Gracious and to observe His commandments and prohibitions, without which the forces of evil and vices would make human society subservient to them. Allah Most Gracious as the supreme and absolute Lawgiver provides the Shari'ah as the highest Law which embraces all aspects of human life. The scholar-jurists, judges and legislators may then legislate detail laws which are not explicitly provided for by Shari'ah, but they must be subservient to the latter and in accord with the higher purposes (maqasid) of the Law. There is no way the laws could contradict or be opposed to the moral values or principles revealed by Allah Most Gracious. But the rational science of jurisprudence (fiqh) could be misused for non-religious or worldly interests. As a consequence, justice could be compromised and undermined. In Imam al-Ghazali’s magnum opus, Ihya’ Ulum al-Din, he deplors and strongly criticizes the moral failures of the scholar-jurists (fuqaha’) of his time. Let us carefully ponder upon what he says at the very beginning of “The Book of Knowledge”:

I proceed to enlighten you, who are the most self-righteous of those who reject belief, and you, who are the most immoderate of the thoughtless unbelievers.

I am no longer obliged to remain silent, because the responsibility to speak, as well as warn you, has been imposed upon me by your persistent straying from the clear truth, and by your insistence upon fostering evil, flattering ignorance, and stirring up opposition against him who, in order to conform to the dictates of knowledge, deviates from custom and the established practice of men. In doing this he fulfils Allah’s prescriptions for purifying the self and reforming the heart, thus somewhat redeeming a life, which has already been dissipated in despair of prevention and remedy, and avoids by it the company of him whom the Law giver (Muhammad, s.a.w) described when he said, (2) “The most severely punished of all men on the day of resurrection will be a learned man whom Allah (s.w.t) has not blessed with His knowledge.” For, by my life, there is no reason for your abiding arrogance except the malady which has become an epidemic among the multitudes. That malady consists in not discerning this matter’s importance, the gravity of the problem, and the seriousness of the crisis; in not seeing that life is waning and that what is to come is close at hand, that death is imminent but that the journey is still long, that the provisions are scanty, the dangers great, and the road blocked. The perceptive know that only knowledge and works devoted to Allah avail.

To tread the crowded and dangerous path of the hereafter with neither guide nor companion is difficult, tiring, and strenuous. The guides for the road are the learned men who are the heirs of the Prophet, but the times are void of them now and only the superficial are left, most of whom have been lured by iniquity and overcome by Satan. Everyone of them was so wrapped up in his immediate fortune that he came to see good as evil and evil as good, so that the science of religion disappeared and the torch of the true faith was extinguished all over the world. They duped the people into believing that there was no knowledge except such ordinances of government as the judges use to settle disputes when the mob dots; or the type of argument which the vainglorious displays in order to confuse and refute; or the elaborate and flowery language with which the preacher seeks to lure the common folk. They did this, because apart from these three, they could find no other ways to snare illegal profit and gain the riches of the world. On the other hand the science of the path of the hereafter, which our forefathers trod and which includes what Allah (s.w.t) in His Book called law, wisdom, knowledge, enlightenment, light, guidance, and righteousness, has vanished from among men and been completely forgotten. Since this is a calamity afflicting religion and a grave crisis overshadowing it, I have therefore deemed it important to engage in the writing of this book; to revive the science of religion, to bring to light the exemplary lives of the departed imams, and to show what branches of knowledge the prophets and the virtuous fathers regarded as useful. (al-Ghazali. The Book of Knowledge 1962: 1-2)

Al-Ghazali discusses the root vices which demand purification beginning with gluttony, excess in sexual desire, desire for excessive speech, strong anger, envy, rancour, love of the world, love of wealth, miserliness, love of influence, ostentation, pride, conceit and delusion. The love of the reprehensible world (al-dunya al-madhmumah) is a great vice which gives rise to other vices, and scholars may succumb to this disease. They are also vulnerable to the disease of ostentation (riya‘), pride (kibr) and conceit (‘ujb). Delusions (ghurar) abound in the world and worldly-oriented scholars are not spared of the disease either. These destructive maladies (muhlikat) can destroy those scholars who do not have the fear of Allah’s displeasure and wrath in their hearts. Hence the need to be constantly striving to purify the soul or cleanse the spiritual heart to remove the poisonous
qualities or toxic elements which are hidden from human eyes, but not at all concealed from the sight and
dnowledge of Allah Most Gracious. The Qur’an refers to the mission of purification of the soul as one of the
central missions of the Prophets of Allah Most Gracious.

Self-Purification (tazkiyat al-nafs) as One of the Primary Objectives of Islam.

Some of the relevant verses in the Qur’an:

- It is He who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves reciting to them His verses and
  purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom - although they were before in clear error. (Q. 62:2)
- Just as We have sent among you a messenger from yourselves reciting to you Our verses and purifying you
  and teaching you the Book and wisdom and teaching you that which you did not know.
  (Q. 2:151)
- Our Lord, and send among them a messenger from themselves who will recite to them your verses and
  teach them the Book and wisdom and teach them. Indeed, you are the Exalted in Might, the Wise. (Q. 2:129)
- Certainly did Allah confer [great] favour upon the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from
  themselves, reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and wisdom,
  although they had been before in manifest error. (Q. 3:164)
- By the sun and its brightness.
  And [by] the moon when it follows it.
  And [by] the day when it displays it.
  And [by] the night when it covers it.
  And [by] the sky and He who constructed it.
  And [by] the earth and He who spread it.
  And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it.
  And inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness.
  He has succeeded who purifies it.
  And he has failed who instills it [with corruption]. (Q. 1:10)

Characteristics of Islamic scholars as Described in the Qur’an

Some relevant verses from the Qur’an:

- They said, "Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who
  is the Knowing, the Wise. (Q. 2:32)
- It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses [that are] precise - they are
  the foundation of the Book - and others unspecific. As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth],
  they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to
  them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. But those firm in knowledge say, "We
  believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord." And no one will be reminded except those of understanding. (Q.
  3:7)
- But those firm in knowledge among them and the believers believe in what has been revealed to you, [O
  Muhammad], and what was revealed before you. And the establishers of prayer [especially] and the givers
  of zakah and the believers in Allah and the Last Day - those We will give a great reward. (Q. 4:162)
- And among people and moving creatures and grazing livestock are various colours similarly. Only those
  fear Allah, from among His servants, who have knowledge. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and
  Forgiving. (Q. 35:28)
- Allah witnesses that there is no deity except Him, and [so do] the angels and those of knowledge - [that He
  is] maintaining [creation] in justice. There is no deity except Him, the Exalted in Might, the Wise. (Q. 3:18)
- O you who have believed, when you are told, "Space yourselves" in assemblies, then make space; Allah
  will make space for you. And when you are told, "Arise," then arise; Allah will raise those who have
  believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees. And Allah is well-acquainted with
  what you do. (Q. 58:11)

Among the Virtues of a Truly Islamic Scholar

- Deep and sound knowledge of Islam.
- Humility, sincerity, not suffering from pride, egoism, conceit.
- Seeking the pleasure of Allah Most Gracious.
- Wisdom in the application of knowledge.
- Good conduct, high integrity and manners.
• Good example to be emulated by the students.
• Persistence and responsibility in studying, teaching and research.
• Sacrifice of time, money, self-interest in promoting the cause of truth and Islam.
• Firmness in opposing Unbelief, Polytheism, Hypocrisy and Injustice.
• Independence from the government control, political party or organizational influence.

The Heart and Intellect Of The Ulu’l-Albab (Those Who Possess Sound Intellects and Understanding):

The production and growth of more Islamic intellectuals, scholars, scientists, professionals, political leaders and educated classes who combine or unify scientific knowledge and religious values, thinking (fikr, tafakkur) with spiritual recollection (dhikr) of Allah (s.w.t.), worldly concerns with otherworldly ends, reason with revelation, professionalism with taqwa of Allah (s.w.t.), and are not afflicted with the diseases of the spiritual heart which al-Imam al-Ghazali called al-mihiqiat (destructive elements) – these holistic and God-fearing human resources are the need of the hour to transform the ailing Muslim nations and to reconstruct contemporary human civilization mired in the moral anarchy of secular modernity.

By revisiting the meaning and implications of the Qur’anic vision of integrated knowledge and sound intelligence/reason/intellect/understanding as represented by the term Ulu’l-Albab and the term al-’ulama’ we will be able to internalize the nature of the mind of God-fearing/God-loving intellectuals, scholars and professionals in this most challenging era of human history when corruption, fraud, deception, crime and vices are so widespread and so rampant.

The Definition of Ulu’l-Albab (henceforth UA)

The word albab in Arabic is the plural of lubb which means ‘aql (intellect or reason) or the purest and best part of any substance. The expression “lubb al-ra’jul” (the purest part inside a man) means “the intellect that is set in his heart” (ma’ju’ila fi qalbihi min al-‘aql) (Lisan al-’Arab, 1: 729; al-Tabari, Jami’ al-Bayan: 120). The ‘aql is the essence of a human (khulasat al-insan), and when it is cleansed of the influence of desire (hawa), or negative imagination, it becomes the most special part of the intellect, the lubb (al-Zabidi, Taj al-’Arus: 475; al-Qurtubi, Tafsir al-Jami’ li-Ahkam al-Qur’an).

The commentators of the Qur’an are generally unanimous in defining UA briefly as “possessors of intellect” or “people of intelligence”. Al-Tabari says in his commentary (p.470) that UA means “the possessors of great minds” (ashab al-’uqul al-kabirah). Al-Zamakhshari says that UA, among other things, means “those who acted in accordance with the dictates of their intellects, then they observed and reflected” (al-Kashshaf: 494). Al-Razi observes that the term UA is an expression of praise and appreciation which Allah (s.w.t.) applies to those who use their intellects in the best possible way. To him the UA can be understood briefly as “the possessors of intellects” (ulu’l-’uqul), or to be more precise as “those who possess complete consummate intellectuals” (duh al-’uqul al-kamilah) (al-Tafsir al-Kabir: 145, 155). The expression, according to him, reflects great honour (al-sharaf al-’azim) and high esteem (al-martahab al-’aliyah) conferred upon those who possess sound intellects.

An interesting and insightful interpretation is given by al-Razi when he compares verse 164 of surah al-Baqarah which ends with the expression “li-qawmin ya’qilun” (for people who use their reason) with verse 190 of surah Al-’Inran since both verses contain a similar message, although the former is more elaborate, in the sense that “people who use their reason” is precisely the fundamental attribute of the UA mentioned in the latter. He explains that the term UA is used in verse 190 of Al-’Inran although the theme is the same because the intellect has two aspects – an outward (zahir) dimension and an inner dimension which is the lubb. He opines that the reasoning at the initial stage is ordinary intellection (‘aqlan), while at a more perfect stage it becomes profound intellection (lubban). But his humility and intellectual modesty make him say, with caution, “this is what comes to my mind, while Allah knows better the secrets of His great, munificent and wise Words” (fahadha ma khatar bi al-bal wa Allah a’lam bi-asrar kalamihi al-’azim al-karim al-hakim) (idem, p.110).

Ibn Kathir in his Tafsir al-Qur’an al-Karim explains the meaning of albab as “pure and consummate intellectuals (al-’uqul al-tammah al-zakiyyah) which comprehend things and their realities in the clearest way” (www. al.islam.com/tafsir, acc. 14 October 2009). He elaborates that “those who understand, reason, and ponder over the meanings of things in their true nature are only those who possess sound intellects and correct understandings (al-’uqul al-salimah wa al-fuhum al-mustaqimah) (www. altafsir.com/Tafsir, acc. 21 October 2009).

Al-Alusi says in his Tafsir Ruh al-Ma’ani that UA are “those who possess unadulterated intellectuals (al-’uqul al-khalisah) which are freed from any kinds of blindered sentiments or imaginations” (www.altafsir.com, tafsir, acc. 21 October 2009).

Al-Shawkani defines UA as “those who have sound intellects which are freed from defects of deficiency” (al-’uqul al-sahihah al-khalisah ‘an shawa’ib al-naqs). In another paragraph he defines albab as “intellects which are pure (or uncontaminated)” (www.altafsir.com. acc. 19 October 2009).

Sayyid Qutb in his *Fi Zilal al-Qur’an* describes UA as “those who possess sound comprehension” (*ulu al-idrak al-sahih*) (vol. 2: 188).

HAMKA translates UA in his *Tafsir al-Azhar* as:

a) “orang-orang yang mempunyai inti fikiran”
b) “orang-orang yang mempunyai fikiran dalam”
c) “orang-orang yang berfikir”
d) “orang-orang yang berakal”
e) “orang-orang yang berfikiran dalam”

Shaikh Abdullah Basmih, the Malaysian translator of the Qur’an, *Pimpinan al-Rahman*, gives the following translations:

a) “orang-orang yang menggunakan akal fikiran” (p. 87)
b) “orang-orang yang berfikiran” (p.96)
c) “orang-orang yang berfikiran” (p. 55)
d) “orang-orang yang berakal (yang dapat memikir dan memahaminya)” (p.62)

In English commentaries of the Qur’an, UA is translated as “men of understanding” by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (The Holy Qur’an), Marmaduke Pickthall (Holy Qur’an), Zafar Ishaq Ansari (tr. Tafhim al-Qur’an of Mawdudi) and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (The Noble Qur’an), while Muhammad Asad (The Message of the Qur’an) is the only one who translates UA as “the ones endued with understanding”. It should be pointed out the translation of UA as “men...” is not quite accurate as UA includes both male and female genders.

A Brief Summary of the Quality of the Character and Mind of UA

From a study of the 16 verses in which the term UA is used in the Qur’an it is possible to summarise the quality of the character and the mind of the UA – the mind which manifests the Qur’anic paradigm of the truly integrated knowledge and integrated intellectuals – as follows:

1. In looking back at the life struggles of Prophets and Messengers of Allah (s.a.w.), the UA draw moral and spiritual lessons for them to internalize. (Q. 12:111).
2. In dealing with verses of the Qur’an which are regarded as allegorical (*mutashabihat*) or open to several interpretations, the UA’s attitude is one of unquestioning acceptance of the Qur’an as a whole as the words of Allah (s.w.t) and not allowing their base desires, intellectual arrogance or satanic impulses to influence them negatively with regard to any injunctions of Allah (s.w.t). The true Islamic intellectuals also adopt the attitude of the UA vis-a-vis the Qur’an and Sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.). (Q. 3:7, 2:269, 14:52).
3. The UA believe, know and are always cognizant of the fact that whatever was taught or enjoined by the Prophet (s.a.w.) was the truth that came from Divine revelation. (Q. 13:19, 38:29, 39:9).
4. In responding to advice, views or opinions coming from external quarters, the UA weigh carefully and sincerely those ideas or propositions; anything that comes from Allah (s.w.t) or is in conformity with Allah’s injunctions or norms will be chosen and followed by them. (Q. 39:18).
5. The stories relating the sufferings of Allah’s Prophets (such as Ayyub (a.s.) and others will be given serious thought by the UA in order to derive useful lessons and wisdom in facing the tribulations of life in this world. (Q. 38:43).
6. The history of the struggle between Moses (A.S.) and the Pharoah which ultimately resulted in the destruction of the latter, because of his arrogance, over-confidence, selfishness, injustices and denial of the sovereignty of Allah (s.a.w.) becomes a source of guidance (*huda*) and reminder (*dhikra*) to the UA. (Q. 40:54).
7. The UA keenly observe the natural life cycle of vegetation beginning with the initial growth leading eventually to lifeless rubble on earth, and understand this process of rise and fall in the natural world as conveying deep lessons and wisdom for them and for mankind as a whole. (Q.39:21).

**Conclusion:**

The mind or intellect of the Islamic intellectuals derive their knowledge of the One True God and of His power, wisdom, mercy and presence not from one source, i.e. the written book of Allah (s.w.t) but from two sources, the other being the unwritten and observable book of the Cosmos and the world of nature. In several places the Qur’an urges the “people who use their reason” (*qawm ya‘qilun*) to study and contemplate on the multitude of Allah’s creation in nature, on the wonders in nature and on their usefulness and indispensability for
the physical sustenance and wellbeing of human life, with the condition that human beings show their gratitude (shukr) and their dependency (tawakkul) on the infinite grace and blessings of the One Living Lord and Sustainer. (Compare Q. 2: 164 and 3: 190).

The intellect or intelligence that is pure and uncontaminated, as in the minds of the UA, is ever in need of consciousness of taqwa to Allah (s.w.t.) – the deep consciousness of the presence and sovereignty of Allah (s.w.t.) such that the believer is always mindful lest any of his/her actions, thoughts or behavior would incur Divine displeasure or wrath. It is this spirit of taqwa that will lead human beings, including scholars, lawyers, judges and national leaders to true success and wellbeing (al-falah). Taqwa then becomes a necessary ingredient in the formation of the mind of Islamic intellectuals, leaders, scholars, professionals and the ordinary believers. The virtue of taqwa becomes the common spiritual core value in the development of the life of the individual, the family, the institutions, the community, the nation, and civilization. (Q. 5:100, 10:65). Scholars, leaders, intellectuals, lawyers, judges and other professionals of this Age of Turbulence, global crises and rampant corruption are in greater need of taqwa than ever before.

References