

## WHAT SPIRITUAL TOPICS MATTER MOST TO YOU?

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many of our religious scholars remain crippled by unhealthy disagreements over trivial *fiqh* and *aqeedah*-based issues, while such relevant topics as the hyper-sexualization and growing extremism among our youth are avoided.

So how do we "navigate these challenges and seize the opportunities"?

We can start by finally acknowledging that we're broken and should have exercised our "manufacturer's warranty" long ago by returning to our Creator through the Quran, prayer and repentance. Each one of us needs to make sincere *dua* for our *ummah*, curb our rampant "someone else's problem" mentality and take personal accountability for our condition, for "surely God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves" (Quran 13:11). This accountability eventually affords us the independence to pave our own path, reduces interference from parties who have conflicting interests and unifies us as one entity.

Next, we need to find the silver lining in our current state and capitalize on it. Now that Islam is in the spotlight, what better time to learn (or re-learn) our religion so that we can explain it to ourselves and others? Moreover, this is a great time to equip ourselves to be qualified interfaith participants and inform others of what Islam actually says, as opposed to the distorted version that boosts ratings and elects politicians, and to learn about other religions from the people who actually practice them.

Ignorance of Islam and the Quran will not be accepted as a valid defense in the afterlife and should not be used as a reason to disengage from religious discussions in this world. This is especially true now, given that accurate knowledge is, for many people, so easily accessible. After all, does not God Himself repeatedly condemn those who blindly follow a faith? If we call ourselves Muslim, we should know why. This will help shrink the extreme polarization of ideologies and encourage tolerance and empathy.

Finally, we need to practice *tawakkul* as described by Quran 14:12, "And why should we not put our trust in God when it is indeed He Who has guided us to the ways of our life? We shall surely continue to remain steadfast in face of your persecution. All those who have to put trust, should put their trust only in God."

Our trial as an *ummah* is truly great, but our Lord is greater. Let's "navigate the challenges and seize the opportunities" to become the *ummah* of Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) through prayer, accountability and *tawakkul*. ■

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# Why I Am Who I Am

Revealed religion provides us with an absolute basis for our soul

BY SYED IMTIAZ AHMAD

**T**HE WORDS "WHY I AM WHO I AM" came to my mind several years ago when I started reading the Quran with the intention of actually understanding what it was saying. I focused on the oft-repeated words *Rahman* and *Rahim*, which are commonly translated as "beneficent" and "forgiving," respectively. However, each one also has a fuller meaning. For the former, it is "entirely merciful" in the sense of providing guidance for actions; for the latter it is taking care when things go wrong, as long as one recognizes what has happened and intends to correct it. These two words serve as sources of light for shaping our daily affairs.

Our story as human beings begins with God informing us that all other members of creation were afraid to accept the trust of free will, but that humanity had agreed to assume this trust and therefore was endowed with certain faculties. However, over the ages we have been acting against of our own interests because the vast majority of us have forgotten "who we are."

The Quran defines itself as a book of guidance, one that shows us how to distinguish between right and wrong and makes its case within various easy-to-understand perspectives and contexts. Some of these words, however, may inhibit practical benefits if they are not understood correctly. For example, *taqwa* is often translated as "fear," a word that is now generally associated with unpleasant emotions. One may argue that "fear of God" should not have that connotation, because God is free of all wants and worthy of all praise. However, a broader meaning is to be "mindful" of God, Who guides us entirely and especially for our benefit alone.

In the Quran, God identifies hearing (*sama'*), seeing (*basar*), and intelligence (*fouad*), which receives and processes the sensory signals through the eyes and ears, as the key human faculties. *Fouad*, also commonly translated as "heart," requires further reflection. In Arabic, it is taken as "intelligence," that which processes the sensory signals received by one's ears and eyes. This critical faculty requires a guiding framework within our mind, one that can interpret whether the incoming information sits well with our choice of acceptable behavior, a play of free will.

Another common Quranic word is *qalb*, again in the sense of one's "mind" as opposed

to the physiological "heart." Two other Quranic words, *lubb* and *sadr*, signify the innermost workings of the heart, such as the desirable attributes of the ability to discern or the arising of various apprehensions that require our attention.

The Old Testament and other Biblical literature also use "mind" and "heart" as synonyms. Equating these two words draws our attention to the need to be alert when receiving sensory signals that, if not processed correctly, can put us on the wrong track. Shakespeare asks, "Tell me where fancie is bred; Or in the heart or in the brain." We may call it "heart" or "mind," but it is the place where things are thought and imagined. Sensory signals should engage thought processes, and imagination involves seeing or hearing things within the mind, a phenomena known as the "heart's eyes" or the "heart's ears." Interestingly, "heartless" is defined as a complete lack of feeling and consideration. The Quran talks about the *qalb saleem*, one who shows good judgment and reasoning.

One needs to find the truth of religion by discovering how to translate religious beliefs into practical action by engaging one's heart and mind. Socrates said that it is not good enough for one to merely understand the surrounding universe, but that one must also understand and examine the universe that dwells within one's soul, as a way of reaching out to the events around us. I mention Socrates in the Quranic spirit of looking at the surrounding world from different perspectives and in various contexts.

The Quran emphasizes *ihsan*, defining oneself in terms of goodly deeds to others. The Renaissance philosopher Hegel echoed this when he said that the spirit can achieve self-consciousness only through humanity.

Revealed religion provides us with an absolute basis for our soul. It is our responsibility to bring forth from it an objective spirit that will enable us to live an ethical life. In his "On the Freedom of the Will" (1839), Schopenhauer advises us not to follow our free will blindly for "Man can do what he wills, but he cannot will what he wills." God tells us that even though He created human beings with the greatest possible positive potential for goodness, they can nevertheless descend into the lowest abyss once they let their guard down. ■

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