



Cultivating Faithful Enthusiasm: How the Qur'an Creates Transformative Willpower

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The moral and spiritual providence of God

What is exceptional about the mission of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, even in a history of prophetic missions that spanned millennia, is that the early Muslims not only believed and joined the mission, they did so with unparalleled enthusiasm and total self-surrender. Against a culture that not only tolerated but valorized the pursuit of physical and sexual conquest, intoxication, and fulfillment of other base human instincts, Islamic society embodied faith-based solidarity, discipline, sobriety, sexual chastity, and altruism without expectation of worldly reward. Under the leadership of its exemplary leader, this Islamic community was committed to the pursuit of individual and communal virtue, standing as a just and balanced witness against all nations.¹

Note that the Qur'an's high praise for the Prophet ﷺ as a perfect role model (*uswah ḥasanah*) is revealed in the context of a battle, the highest form of struggle and sacrifice.² The Qur'an, after all, declares all of life an arena for probation, trial, and struggle. Armed with the Word of God, the Prophet ﷺ trained believers to outdo their enemies in endurance and grit: "O you who have believed, persevere and endure and remain stationed and fear Allah that you may be successful."³ In the crucible of the earliest struggles for the establishment of Islam, the Revelation called on the men who were about to be martyred at the battle of Uhud to "fear God in a manner that is rightly His due."⁴ Similarly, even as death approached Prophets Abraham and Jacob (peace be on them both) as they bequeathed their people, alone among the pagans, the precarious inheritance of true faith, they issued the beautifully complex command: "Certainly do not die—unless you are in total self-surrender."⁵

¹ Qur'an 2:143.

² The same is true for Abraham, upon him be peace, whose many iconoclastic acts—such as disowning an idolatrous family—set him up as a model for our Prophet ﷺ (Qur'an 60:4-6).

³ Qur'an 3:200.

⁴ Qur'an 3:102.

⁵ Qur'an 2:132.

How did the Qur'an motivate people to prioritize the eternal next life over the immediate pleasures of this ephemeral world? What are the resources the Qur'an offers us to cultivate the correct kind of motivation, if not zeal, in matters of faithful striving? These are the questions that this essay sets out to answer.

To this end, we must analyze not only the concept of the intellect but also the often-neglected concept of *will*: the scope and capacity of intention, the primal reality of fear, and the biologically implanted instincts to pursue pleasure and eschew pain—as these relate to the life of faithful conviction and the virtuous action it ought to produce. The insights into the pitfalls of human nature and their cures that adorn the pages of the Qur'an offer us a moral anthropology—one opposed to the materialist (biological, constitutional, and physiological) anthropology that dominates the modern perspective.

In Section I, we look at the significance of religious enthusiasm at the origins of Islam. In Section II, we deepen our understanding of the link between reflective reason and the demands of the decisive actions of religious commitment. In Section III, we examine the moral problem of the sincerity of motivation in the life of committed faith and virtue. In Section IV, we return to the reasoning (*jadal*) strand. In Section V, we note the distractions of this world, including family life, that may sabotage the life of faith. In Section VI, we discuss how the Qur'an, through commanding daily worship and a month of fasting, demands constant spiritual caution and moral self-surveillance at all times, including self-restraint in matters of bodily appetites.

As we will see, we all need God but often rebel and think we do not—and reckon without His grace, “Because he [man] sees himself as self-sufficient.”⁶ This pride (*takabbur*), the proclivity to reckon one is intrinsically better than others, the primordial sin committed by the Devil when he refused to prostrate, is our greatest liability. Our ultimate purpose is to align our wills with the divine will, the very meaning of *islām* (self-surrender), as we learn to place a spontaneous, even effortless, trust in the divine plan for us. However, what is ostensibly effortless

⁶ Qur'an 96:6–7.

trust requires much effort—the paradox of trust in God (*tawakkul*). Anxiety about one's future, as opposed to merely planning prudently for provisions, is incompatible with true faith and trust in divine providence.

I. A case study in enthusiasm: The Tabūk expedition

The term 'zeal' (*hamās*) and the derivative adjective 'zealous' (*mutaḥammis*) are not found in the Qur'an. Yet zeal may be said to be the central theme of the ninth Qur'anic chapter, a late Medinan revelation. This *sūrah*, with its divinely sanctioned armed struggle against militant pagan opposition, begins with a formal notice of the elimination of idolatry in the Arabian peninsula. This chapter deals with a military expedition, yet it concentrates not on local circumstances and details of geography but on the moral and spiritual aspects of warfare.⁷ It demands military discipline, zeal, and zestful self-sacrifice in the unending struggle for establishing a just, God-centered order on earth, boycotting those who failed to join the campaign. This call was so successful that the Qur'an had to exhort the community to permit a learned faction to stay behind to instruct the returning warriors in the peacetime duties of the faith.⁸ The warriors had fulfilled the duty on behalf of society, thus rendering the rest of the community no longer blameworthy for inaction.

Ibn Ishāq's biography of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ contains extensive details of this expedition which, unlike other prophetic campaigns, was openly announced ahead of its undertaking.⁹ The Prophet ﷺ heard rumors of an imminent attack by the Christian (Roman) Byzantines settled in the Eastern Roman province of Syria, where forces were probably gathering near Tabūk, at the northern frontier of the Arabian peninsula near present-day Jordan. They intended to annihilate the infant religion. In 9 AH (October 630 CE), about two years before his death, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ began to enlist volunteers for this vital expedition. He meticulously planned this campaign, traditionally named 'the army of hardship'

⁷ Qur'an 9:38–99.

⁸ Qur'an 9:122.

⁹ A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1978), 602–14.

(*jaysh al-‘usrah*),¹⁰ which was to pioneer, after his death in June 632, Islam’s elephantine military triumphs in the fastest, largely permanent, expansion in recorded history.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, surrounded by his loyal and devout companions, was prepared to traverse scorching and desolate desert paths to please his Lord. Through the Qur’an, God successfully generated enthusiasm for the faithful cause even though the human capital with which the Prophet ﷺ worked was often unpromising. Some weak-willed believers along with the hypocrites complained, as recorded in the Qur’an: “Among them is also one who says: ‘Give me leave [to stay behind] and don’t tempt me.’”¹¹ While the temptation awaiting them was thought to be the outstanding beauty of Christian Byzantine women, God warns that these men have already fallen into temptation—referring, perhaps, to the fear of failing the trial when its hour arrives. In general, the Qur’an does command Muslims to avoid, not merely resist, temptation. However, in the cause of God, one must face all one’s fears. During jihad, desertion caused by cowardice is condemned and lack of morale attributed to the Devil’s machinations.¹²

‘Do not go out into the heat!’ This advice from hypocrites, who worried about their physical health and comfort rather than the welfare of their souls, receives the counter: “Say: ‘The Fire of Hell is hotter still, if only you knew!’”¹³

II. Reason shall save you from the Fire

What motivates the fervor required for the attainment of *continuously* enthusiastic obedience to God’s commandments which constitute the good life? The Qur’an

¹⁰ Muhsin Khan, trans., *Summarized Sahih Al-Bukhari* (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar Al-Salam, 1994), part 52, Book of Wills and Testaments, chap. 7, hadith no. 1202, p. 578.

¹¹ Qur’an 9:49.

¹² The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his companions failed to locate any Byzantine imperial army. The warrior-prophet, thus named in tradition (*nabī al-malḥamah*), returned from the expedition to find that in his absence, a rival party had, as an act of mischief and infidelity during a time of hostilities, established an alternative mosque. This is the only house of worship, of any faith, which the Prophet ﷺ felt obliged to destroy. See Qur’an 22:40.

¹³ Qur’an 9:81.

consistently and persistently argues for an honest realism—noting our ordained moral endowment, our human essence, and our spiritual limitations. This case is supported with logical reasoning (*jadal*). The Qur'an, ultimately, contends that there is adequate rational motivation for religious enthusiasm as opposed to mere belief.

Western and Islamic philosophers alike have extolled the importance of reason, the intellectual faculty, in achieving the good life. From Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to Spinoza and John Dewey, from Ya'qūb Al-Kindī to Ibn Rushd, all have maintained that intelligence and virtue are organically linked: only those who know what they are doing are likely to do what is right. Moreover, what is good for us is known by knowing who we truly are—linking ethics with ontology and self-mastery with self-knowledge. This philosophical consensus, inspired by too sanguine an estimate of reason, must face the fact that the overwhelming majority of morally good people have not been particularly learned or intelligent or self-consciously aware of their own nature and limitations. Conversely, intelligent people have no monopoly on virtue, to put it politely.

Socrates over-emphasized the role of knowledge, self-knowledge, and reasoning as adequate goals to virtue. Our awareness of the compulsion of the moral ideal is the cornerstone of Kant's ethical system, a compulsion that, unlike the intense life of the mind, is experienced universally by human beings. Kant wisely emphasized good will, not refined intellect, as central to ethical life. Even for a rationally inclined person, the principal fuel of religious enthusiasm is not knowledge. While knowledge of important goals, especially short-term ones, can partly motivate some rational persons, it alone never actuates religious zeal. In goals whose pursuit demands enthusiasm, whether religious or secular, we are primarily driven by desire and the will to experience it. Will and desire can jointly motivate us where the intellect fails to induce action.

Enthusiasm requires more than an active awareness of the existence or desirability of some holy grail. Its remoteness or accessibility is also key. In religious as in secular life, even a lazy or unmotivated person is moved to action when he or she

perceives imminent danger. Equally motivating is the imminent prospect of extreme pleasure. Commenting on the reward of eternal life, the scholastic Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas rightly argued that “by such a reward the will is moved to assent to what is proposed, although the mind is not moved by anything understood.”¹⁴ Thus, an incentive can be sufficient to persuade the will without being sufficient to persuade the intellect. We act, sometimes spontaneously and other times unwillingly, even though we are not fully rationally persuaded to give assent to some abstract proposition in scripture. Our wills and our intellects require different types and levels of motivation to spring into action. Fortunately, the very prospect of the reward of eternal life—the very promise of it—suffices to move our will.

It will help now to clarify the capacity and scope of divine guidance in our lives by examining the role of the mind. The primary function of the intellect in the life of piety is to coordinate diverse desires into a united and harmonious will rather than to directly motivate us into virtuous action. The boundary between impulse and action, absent in children, is heavily guarded in adults. It is prior desire that probably conditions the will. There are no pure desire-less acts of will—except in God's own case.

Our will is driven not by our intellects or even talents but rather by the innate *compulsion* of our passions and instincts. These are hard to detect or counteract since they are concealed even from our own selves. Yet such inner drives are often strong enough to be autonomous, effectively overpowering our minds. Thus our instinctive desire to avoid pain and obtain pleasure supplies more powerful motives for action than knowledge alone does or would. This explains the Qur'an's emphasis on the terrors of Hell and the delights of Paradise. Thus God motivates and guides inner *yet independent and free* human intention. We avow our intentions to God who knows whether we lie or speak the truth, and we avow our intentions to other human beings who may or may not trust us.

¹⁴ *De Veritate*, 14.1.

The Prophet ﷺ preached about the true status of intention—*niyyah*.¹⁵ While the Qur'an does not mention this word, it does speak of *irādah* (volition), divine and human, that intends or guides action. The interior deliberative component of human intention, whether openly professed or entertained inarticulately, precedes an action, and wholly determines its moral status with God. Actions are judged not by their consequences, which fall outside the power of the agent performing the action, but by their intentions. The Prophet's ﷺ teaching reinforces the Qur'an's singular stress on sincerity and quality of motive—human beings can only attain that for which they sincerely strive.

Unlike our intentions, we cannot change our desires at will. In the absence of desire, merely entertaining a belief about the good can lead to virtuous intention. In an unpremeditated action, such as action wholly motivated by strong desire, the conscious intention follows rather than precedes the action. In a premeditated act, however, one can intend repentance before committing the sin that requires it. Thus, Joseph's brothers anticipate that they can, after harming Joseph, still become righteous people, by repenting of their evil deed.

III. Motives: Good, bad, and mixed

The pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain—desire and fear—are the sovereign masters directing human behavior. We need fear so that we may live and flourish, as we inhabit a physical environment that penalizes anyone ignorant of its dangers. Think of a child attracted to a poisonous snake. The child is at high risk of not surviving. Extreme fear, including the fear of imminent death for a cause, can be counteracted by the comforting prospect of extreme pleasure.

Secular detractors of religion argue that religious conviction hinders the achievement of true virtue. As the argument goes, an atheist is more virtuous than a believer since the believer's moral stance is corrupted by selfish fears and hopes

¹⁵ The hadith on the primacy of human intention is the opening hadith of *al-Bukhārī*. It is one of three or four premier sayings of the Prophet ﷺ that are considered foundational to Islam.

centered on a world beyond the grave. This view, which nourishes the bold atheist claim about the alleged purity and autonomy of secular ethics, is mistaken.¹⁶ A Muslim's hope of entering Paradise provides a valid motive for leading an ethically worthy life. It is fallacious to argue that since believers desire to enter Paradise, they cannot really love God.

The secular contention is that those who act morally in order to succeed in religious life are not acting in a genuinely moral way since they treat morality as a means to a further end—and thus attach no intrinsic value to their moral motives. Moreover, the argument continues, such agents intend to deceive God since their sole aim is to enter Paradise! This reasoning is invalid since only some, not all, reasons for action are incompatible with morally praiseworthy action. If we act morally *solely* in order to serve our interests, we are not authentically moral. But it is absurd to think that if we act with *any* end in view, we are automatically disqualified from acting morally. Furthermore, there are ends, certainly in religion, which can be achieved only where the means used to achieve them also have independent and intrinsic moral worth. Only a worthy lifestyle on earth is rewarded with the crowning glory of eternal life with God.

A natural corollary of loving God is desiring Paradise. Islamic ethics, the instrument for achieving the Muslim's religious goal, is organically, not accidentally, tied to the hope of entering Paradise. This outlook contrasts with the mistaken Kantian view that behavior cannot be moral if it's conditional on attaining some particular aim. It must rather be freely chosen out of a purely, wholly, intrinsically good will. The Kantian objection is that those who pursue the reward of the religious life are pursuing their self-interest and are therefore not genuinely moral. Their motives are contaminated by their desire for reward when the pursuit of virtue should be its own reward, not something other than or additional to it.

If we examine a largely analogous though not wholly parallel secular case, we can readily expose the error in this view. If a woman befriends someone and desires the

¹⁶ For more on my attempt to refute the autonomy of secular ethics, see my book *The Quran and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2008), 97–104 for the famous Euthyphro dilemma.

happiness that comes from true friendship, it is wrong to suspect that since she desires such happiness, her friendship is false. If the argument used to discredit the moral dimension of religious life were used in parallel secular cases, no human relationship would be legitimate since no such relationship, no matter how altruistic, lacks non-moral motivation. No one could be said to love their children or spouses since what one desired, while pretending to love one's family, was gratification of one's selfish desires. The argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Not only are there morally good and morally bad motives, the status of such motives is unstable over time. For example, the life of faith may be initially motivated solely by the fear of God. Such fear is regarded by Islam's Christian critics as a disreputable and merely prudential motive. Such initial fear may, however, change gradually, indeed be transformed, into the love of God. We conclude therefore that fear is not a bad motive if it evolves over time or if it is combined *ab initio* with morally superior motives, specifically an unconditional love of God coupled with a sincere intention to obey His commandments. That said, unalloyed fear, untempered by belief in God's mercy, is not only a bad motive for religiosity, it is a cardinal sin that amounts to infidelity.

Fear, then, can be a form of reasoned prudence rather than primal terror. Only those Christians who emphasize the exclusive role of love in the religious life reject fear, whether initial or concomitant with love at all subsequent stages, as a wise motive. The Hebrew Bible teaches that "the fear of the Lord (Yahweh) is the beginning of wisdom."¹⁷ The Christian Bible, however, preaches that "there is no fear in divine love (Greek, *agape*), rather, perfect love casteth out fear since fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love."¹⁸ The Muslim objection here is that such love also casteth out any real commitment to obeying a divine law against transgressions.

IV. The Qur'an makes a case against infidelity

¹⁷ Prov. 9.10.

¹⁸ 1 John 4.18.

We circle back now to pick up the thread of *jadal* (argument). The Qur'an advocates forgoing the provisions of this world for the pleasures of the next world on the basis of the former's finitude and the latter's permanence. I examine this argument now which, rhetorically considered, has two *ad hominem* versions—reflecting two different groups of opponents—but the same logical core.

The Qur'an proffers the first version in response to the pagans' determined derision of its threats. The Meccans even mockingly pray that their portion of the punishment be hastened and fall on them immediately.¹⁹ Some request the sky rain stones down upon them.²⁰ The Qur'an answers with what is, even by its standards of high concision, extreme ellipsis: "Consider! If we let them enjoy [this life] for [a few] years; then there comes to them [at last] that which they were promised [due punishment], the pleasures they enjoyed [in the past] shall not benefit them [in the present]."²¹

Here the Qur'an presupposes that pleasure, unlike goods such as knowledge or virtue, is not cumulative. Pleasure is enjoyed and then it is no more, except as a memory. The memory of a pleasure enjoyed can be either a source of further pleasure or of pain in the realization that it is no more. In any case, no matter how much pleasure we have experienced in the past, none of it can mitigate the pain of the moment of chastisement that arrives in the present. All pleasure, no matter how ardently yearned for or enjoyed, remains fleeting. An enjoyable meal following a fast, a fading sunset over a mountain side—all such delights, whether physical or aesthetic, are transient. Nothing endures except the face of God.

The Qur'an advances another version of this argument against the Jews of Medina, who are mocked for thinking themselves exclusively destined for an after-life. Untroubled by the Qur'an's threats and unfazed by the prospect of Hell, some rabbis in Medina tell the Prophet ﷺ that the fire shall touch them only for a limited number of days.²² The Qur'an replies: If the final abode in God's presence

¹⁹ Qur'an 38:16.

²⁰ Qur'an 8:32.

²¹ Qur'an 26:205–207.

²² Qur'an 2:80, 3:24.

is reserved exclusively for Jewish members, then they should wish for immediate death if they are sincere. The Qur'an predicts that they will never wish for death since they know well what "their own hands have sent on before them," a euphemism for evil actions. The Qur'an continues: "And God knows well those who do wrong. You will find them, of all people, even more than idolaters, greedier for any kind of life."²³ Each of them wishes he could be granted a life of a thousand years. The granting of such longevity, however, would not save them from due punishment.²⁴ God sees well their actions.²⁵

While goods such as wealth, health, happiness, knowledge, pleasure, and so on can, in principle, be acquired in large quantities and enjoyed—though not in all cases accumulated—we have only a fixed lease on physical life on this earth in which to enjoy these benefits and blessings. This upper limit on longevity permanently restricts the amount of other goods we can acquire so long as we are bound by *al-dunya*. There can be no equivalence drawn between the joys of this life and the one to come.

V. Distractions and delights of *al-dunyā*

Surah al-Jumu'ah (Friday) concludes with an incident that serves well to show how easily people are distracted by the glitter and glamor of this lower life, despite its impermanence.²⁶ Only a dozen men stayed to listen to the Prophet's ﷺ sermon in the mosque when a caravan laden with exotic merchandise and accompanied by drum-beating entered Medina. The rest were distracted by the prospect of trade and gossip. The lower world, *al-dunyā*, pulls us away and drags us down.

²³ The word for life is used in the indefinite singular (*hayātin*, a life) to indicate contempt: they would opt for any kind of life, even one of disgrace and misery, if only they could avoid death.

²⁴ That pleasure is not cumulative is implied in the Hebrew book *Qohelet*, a work of skeptical wisdom attributed to Solomon, who had enjoyed much pleasure but ultimately found it unsatisfying. The book notes this feature of pleasure but does not develop it to argue any thesis. It is not trying to motivate people to defer to a long term goal. Indeed, the book is subversive of Hebrew ethics since it ultimately advocates for pessimism. Later redactors added a few bits to conceal its ultimately nihilistic message. Its inclusion in the canon, even in the third (least) holiest portion, is in my judgment, an error.

²⁵ Qur'an 2:94–96.

²⁶ Qur'an 62:9–11.

We read candid accounts of the Prophet ﷺ's companions bashfully admitting to him that they find it difficult to retain an awareness of God after they leave the mosque to return to their wives and children. Some found the obligations of family life so irksome and spiritually distracting that the Qur'an orders believers to live with their wives "on a footing of kindness and equity: if you dislike them, it could be that you dislike something through which God brings about much good."²⁷

Though the Qur'an endorses a high estimate of marriage and offspring as among the beauties of this world, some Medinan verses do criticize family life whenever it threatens the service and remembrance of God. The family nexus is futile as a defense against divine reckoning.²⁸ Spending generously on one's family and looking after their welfare can bring one closer to God, yet as one verse warns: "Among your wives and your children, some are your enemies."²⁹ This revelation, dated to 1 AH, possibly even very late Meccan, may refer to either pagan or reluctant Muslim migrant wives of the believers. The Qur'an counsels forgiveness of such wives. However, *Sūrah Al-Mumtaḥanah*, revealed in 8 AH, orders complete severance of ties between disbelieving and faithful spouses, after due formalities have been completed.³⁰

Even the Prophet's ﷺ own domestic life was not entirely without spousal difficulties. His wives, understandably, desired a little more worldly comfort but were expected to continue living in voluntary holy poverty, even in the aftermath of military successes that brought some wealth to the treasury. The Prophet's ﷺ own poverty was conspicuous and noted by his companions, especially *ahl al-ṣuffah*, the destitute ones living on his verandah.

"Your wealth and your children are only a trial (*fitnah*); with God is the greatest reward."³¹ This intriguing but elastic word *fitnah* sustains a vast range of meanings,

²⁷ Qur'an 4:19.

²⁸ Qur'an 80:33–37.

²⁹ Qur'an 64:14.

³⁰ The opposite verdict is found in 1 Cor. 7.12–16, which Paul admits is personal, not revealed.

³¹ Qur'an 64:15.

some pregnant with moral connotations. It encompasses distraction, certainly, but also strife, confusion, public disorder (*fasād*), trial, adversity, and tribulation. It also references the disbelieving temptation to persecute the faithful and the endurance of persecution as a test of the believers' moral mettle.³²

The Prophet ﷺ announced that “I have not left behind any temptation (*fitnah*) more harmful to men than women.”³³ This hadith, which coheres with the Qur'an's message, simply reports the reality of romantic and sexual attraction and implies that it is a trial in the lives of chaste men and women. It need not mean anything negative since this divine gift, like any other, contains an ambiguous potential: It may either be enjoyed properly or abused fanatically.

VI. Holding fast to the month of the fast

Many of the less demanding, more routine Qur'anic commandments—duties that require sustained observance rather than difficult but standalone acts of enthusiasm—help believers properly enjoy divine gifts by training them to periodically abstain from them. The Qur'an treats prayer and fasting as ends and means to cultivate the stamina that shall sustain us in our struggle for the more arduous duties of faith, including social and political activism.

The difficulty of prayer lies in the frequency and constancy of its performance rather than the severity of its exertion, although observing the dawn prayer requires discipline. Regular prayer combats lust and indecent desires.³⁴ Mainly through the timed ordinance of prayer, we maintain an awareness of God virtually all day, every day of our lives. This awareness is deepened by the Sunnah's supererogatory

³² In classical Arabic, the rare proper name *Fatona* means a woman of distracting beauty. Islamic languages such as Urdu borrow the Arabic word *fitnah* but assign it a narrower meaning, an exclusively negative sense of something evil, a cause of problems, rather than a test of spiritual mettle.

³³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5096; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2740.

³⁴ Qur'an 11:114, 29:45.

prayers—the Qur'an orders the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to pray in the deepest reaches of the night³⁵ and to recite “the revelation at dawn.”³⁶

Fasting is an ordeal of self-denial that Muslims still endure every year in Ramadan, the ninth lunar month. Nutritionists classify it as a ‘true fast’ since no food or beverage, not even medicine, may enter the body for a sustained period of time.³⁷ Moreover, sexual intercourse is prohibited during fasting. The Qur'an recommended a period of retreat into celibacy (*i'tikāf*) during Ramadan inside the mosque. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ withdrew for the last ten days of Ramadan and some believers still follow him in this practice.

The fast is especially demanding in the modern West. Apart from enduring ubiquitous sexual imagery and afternoon headaches that render mentally taxing work nearly impossible, Muslims must often live among those who openly disrespect them as they alone abstain from food, water, and bodily pleasures.

Fasting is a duty irreducible to mere ritual since its performance places heavy physical and mental strain on the observant Muslim. It is hard to fake fasting—unlike with other duties, such as prayer, which can easily be performed insincerely, ostentatiously, and lazily.

Both prayer and fasting, ultimately, foster mindfulness of God, cultivate patience, and nurture resilience in the face of heavy odds. They are therefore critically valuable tools of self-mastery, always necessary to tame the human being's perennially insatiable appetite.

VII. The ideals of faith: Doing our best suffices

³⁵ Qur'an 11:114.

³⁶ Qur'an 17:78–79.

³⁷ A fast practiced by Jewish ascetics required that nothing enter or leave the body for a sustained period of time. Islamic law would reject such a ban on expulsion of potentially toxic material. The Islamic fast is confirmed by modern science to be good for one's health.

God has made human beings crave naturally and forcefully the immediate satisfactions enjoyed in the company of their offspring and spouses. A natural disposition is not an irresistible impulse—but it can occasionally be strong enough to be virtually autonomous. Internal impulses, wrongly indulged, can destroy and overwhelm us. The life of impiety is easier and appears more glamorous, at least in the short term.

To attain even a modest degree of righteous self-restraint requires sustained moral labor. God's moral demands on the human frame call for unwelcome privations and uncomfortable sacrifices. The Qur'an acknowledges the force of our natural desire to defy our higher nature.³⁸ It notes, neutrally, without regret, our prevalent natural proclivity to seek the easier option.³⁹ Faced with the choice between engaging in physical combat with an armed caravan and an unarmed one, even committed believers preferred "the one unarmed."⁴⁰

As a scripture marked by realism about the human predicament, the Qur'an notes the urgent presence of agitating passions. Its list of desires in the lower world opens with women,⁴¹ a metonymy for sexual desire in both sexes.⁴² The sexual pressure on the human frame is profound, but the Qur'an's list would have been different, critics might contend, if the Arabs had been relatively indifferent to women and inordinately fond of strong drink, an item not listed at all. A Muslim would retort that sex is an instinctive desire while alcohol is at best an acquired taste and a luxury.

We noted in Section I above that all life is a trial. The Qur'an exhorts all believers to do the best they can, to fear God as much as possible. As a practical and practicable revelation, the Qur'an draws on the existing resources of human nature: "It will be good for whoever obeys his own impulse to goodness."⁴³ We can do

³⁸ Qur'an 12:53.

³⁹ Qur'an 8:7, 9:42.

⁴⁰ Qur'an 8:7.

⁴¹ Qur'an 3:14.

⁴² While this verse only considers sexual desire from the male perspective, men can also be a temptation for chaste women, as implied in 24:31 and 33:53.

⁴³ Qur'an 2:184.

otherwise: a son of Adam chose to obey his soul's impulse to evil and murdered his innocent brother, the first homicide in our species' history. This calamitous milestone was driven by the envy of the brother whose sacrifice was rejected because "God accepts only from the God-fearing."⁴⁴

While moral demands should be heavy so that failure is commoner than success, they must not be so heavy that failure becomes inevitable and success virtually impossible. Moral rules that are impossible to obey are as pointless as those which are impossible to disobey. A practicable religion must command us to make only those righteous choices that we have the strength to make. For our strength, unlike divine strength, is of the kind that may fail us. The magnitude of the natural impulse to good should match the quality of piety demanded. "God does not burden anyone with more than they can bear."⁴⁵ The Qur'an contains rationally defensible rules that guide us in matters ranging from wartime conduct to dietary restrictions, all capable of being followed by all according to their capacity.

As such, though we ought to judge religions by their professed ideals rather than by their adherents' typically flawed attempts to fulfill them, the practicability of an ideal still determines its worth. There is no point in recommending an ideal, no matter how noble in content, if that ideal is impossible to practice. And to be practicable, a religious ideal must correspond to the moral and spiritual capacities of human nature.

Take the case of the canonical fast examined above. Exemptions and exceptions were codified from the Qur'an and the Prophet's ﷺ customary practice. Accordingly, the law exempts travelers, the ill, elderly individuals barely able to fast, pregnant and lactating women, warriors engaged in active military conflict, and children who have not reached puberty, the age of legal majority. These

⁴⁴ Qur'an 5:27. During the civil war and commotion (*al-fitnah*) during the reign of the third caliph 'Uthman bin 'Affan, Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas reported that the Prophet ﷺ had predicted such a time. The sitting one is superior to the standing one and the latter to the walking one and so forth. He concluded that if a man entered your home with intent to kill you, then "Be the better son of Adam." See *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, no. 2194, bk. 33, hadith 37. This means it is better to be the victim than the aggressor.

⁴⁵ Qur'an 2:286.

categories of persons, children apart, are required to make up fasts missed or to feed indigent people during the holy month.

The Shariah, then, already contains sufficient and appropriate concessions to our frail nature. To say that we should further relax the canonical standards of normative piety—in order to make our modern lives easier—is a thinly disguised plea for self-indulgence. It suits an age of libertinism in which the egoism of the will to serve one's own pleasures and desires has supplanted the humility of the will to serve God and His cause. Rules are not for fools, but for the wise.

IX. Divine grace

Yet the question of whether or not human nature is intrinsically capable of fully obeying God lingers. Does divine grace enable or only facilitate complete obedience? This conundrum is unique to monotheism. The role of human will versus divine enablement cannot arise in pagan and secular ethical systems of thinkers such as Aristotle and the Stoics—these ethical schemes appeal only to human willpower, with all of its merits and limits.

Our capacity for frustrating our higher nature is no unintended tragedy: it is a divinely intended and therefore irremovable feature of our nature. Our unbending potential for recalcitrance is why we shall always need divine grace to fully submit to God's law. Accordingly, our ability to sustain enthusiasm for good actions shall necessarily, not contingently, depend in part on a mysterious operation of God's grace. We can therefore never take full credit for our meritorious actions. God has the last and *decisive* word—but not the *only* word. Our freely willed human condition remains divinely controlled, though not wholly divinely determined.

“Man is in a state of loss, except...”⁴⁶ The Companions would routinely recite this *sūrah* to each other to boost each other's morale while under persecution in Mecca. The quoted verse has a desolating comment after the initial oath. Like the

⁴⁶ Qur'an 103:2.

affirmation of faith, it proceeds from the pessimism of denial—there is no God—to the optimism of the exceptive clause. This clause exempts those who have faith, do what is right and just, and mutually exhort one another to uphold truth while persevering in the pursuit of such qualities of character. Humans were created weak. But their sustained struggle, with God's grace, gives them unimaginable strength.