An Exemplary Human Being

The subject under discussion is the perfect man from the viewpoint of Islam. A perfect man means an exemplary human being, who is superior and exalted, or any other interpretation that one can make. Like everything else, a human being may be perfect or imperfect, and sound or defective. A sound person, too, may be both sound and perfect or sound and imperfect.

To know a perfect or exemplary human being from the viewpoint of Islam is necessary for Muslims because it is like a model and example, by emulating which we can, if we wish, attain our human perfection under Islamic teachings. We should, therefore, know what a perfect man is, how he looks spiritually and intellectually, and what his peculiarities are, so that we may improve ourselves, our society and other individuals based on that model. But if we do not know what a perfect human being is in Islam, surely we cannot become a perfect Muslim, or even a relatively perfect human being.

From the viewpoint of Islam, there are two ways of knowing a perfect person: One way is to see how the Qur'an in the first place and tradition in the second place have defined a perfect man, even if it is meant to be a perfectly faithful and good Muslim. A perfect Muslim is a person who has attained perfection in Islam; a perfect believer is one who has attained perfection in his faith. Now we must see how the Quran and tradition have portrayed such a person and with what peculiarities. As it happens, we have many things to quote from both of these sources.

The second way is to regard real individuals who are built up on the model of the Qur'an and Islam, not an imaginary and idealistic being, but a real and objective personality who exists in various stages of perfection at its highest level or even at slightly lower stages.

The holy Prophet himself is an example of a perfect man in Islam. Imam Ali is another example. To know Ali (as) is to know a perfect man, and that means to know him thoroughly, and not only his name, lineage and apparent identity. We may know that Ali is the son of Abu Talib and the grandson of Abdul-Mottalib, and that his mother is Fatima, daughter of Assad-bin-Abdol-Ezi, and his wife is Fatima Zahra (as) and he is the father of Hassan and Hossain, and at what dates he was born and died, and what battles he fought etc. But this knowledge is only about his apparent identity, and not about him as a perfect man. Recognition of Ali means knowing his personality, rather than his person.

To the extent that we get acquainted with his whole personality, we will know him as a perfect man of Islam; and to the extent that we take him as a model and accept him in actuality and

not literally as our leader and Imam, and follow and emulate him, we will then be a Shi'a follower of this perfect man.

A Shi'a means one who accompanies Ali, not only with words and sentiments, but with the act of following him in practice and act in philosophical and academic terms.

These two ways of recognition of a perfect man are not only theoretically useful, but we must also use this knowledge to follow the ways shown by Islam to become a true Muslim and make society truly Islamic. The way is thus shown and the result is explained. But the question arises as to the meaning of 'Perfect'. Some things may seem obvious, but explicit things are sometimes harder to explain than difficult matters.

In Arabic the two words meaning 'Perfect' and 'complete' are close to each other but not exactly similar in meaning, and both of them have an antonym meaning 'defective'. The difference between the two words is as follows: The word 'complete' refers to something which is prepared according to a plan, like a house and a mosque, and if any part of it is unfinished, it is incomplete or defective. But something may be 'complete' and yet there may exist a higher degree of completion or many degrees higher than that, and that is called 'perfection'. 'Complete' is a horizontal progress to maximum development and 'perfect' is a vertical climb to the highest degree possible.

When we speak of a 'perfect wisdom or knowledge', it refers to a higher degree of an already existing wisdom or knowledge. A man may be complete in a horizontal sense, without being perfect vertically. There are people who are half-complete or even less than that. But when perfection is attained, there are still higher levels of perfection until a perfectly perfect state is reached.

The term ‘perfect’ did not exist in Islamic literature until the seventh century of the Hejira. It is now used frequently in Europe, but was first used in the Islamic world by the well-known Gnostic "Mohyedin Arabi Andalusi Ta’i", who is the father of Islamic Gnosticism, and many Islamic Gnostics, including Iranian and Persian-speaking ones, and even Rumi, have been his pupils. Rumi with all his greatness is small compared with Mohyedin in Gnosticism.

He is of Arab extraction and a descendant of Hatam Ta'i, from Andalusia, that is modern Spain. He has traveled in Islamic countries and died in Damascus where he was buried. He has a pupil called Sadredin Ghownawi who is rated second to his teacher as a Gnostic. Islamic Gnosticism has been given a complicated form by Mohyedin and commentaries of Sadredin. Rumi is a contemporary of the latter and his follower through whom he imbibed the ideas of Mohyedin.

This man used the term "perfect man" from the special viewpoint of gnosticism, but we intend

to discuss it from the viewpoint of the Qur'an. We have human beings who are physically sound or defective. But you do not consider blindness, deafness, paralysis, or shortness as defects of virtue, personality or humanity.

For example Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher, who is sometimes rated as a prophet, was a most ugly man, but this ugliness is not counted as a defect. Abol-Ala Mo'arra, and Taha Hossain of our time were blind. Is this blindness a defect of personality? This means then that a person has a physical personality and a spiritual one, with two distinct reckonings.

It is a mistake to suppose that the spirit is a dependent of the body. Can the spirit be sick while the body is sound or not? This is a question in itself. Those, who deny the genuineness of the spirit and believe spiritual peculiarities to be the direct influence of the nervous system, have no belief in the spirit and for them everything is dependent on the body, According to them if the spirit is sick, it is because the body is sick, and mental sickness is, in fact, the same as physical sickness.

Fortunately, it has been proved to-day that the body may be perfectly sound with regard to blood composition, nerves, vitamins, etc, and yet, one may be mentally ill, such as suffering from what they call a "complex". Consequently, the way to treatment mental illness may not be medicine and drugs at all. Can we find a drug for someone who is suffering from narcissism, which is a kind of mental disorder? Can we change a person's haughtiness into modesty, or his cruelty into kindness by means of a pill or an injection? It is deprivations, which produce such illnesses, and cause someone for example not to rest until he takes revenge.

What is this feeling of revenge? What is this envy which rouses a person to dislike other people's enjoyment of a blessing, and long to deprive them from it. Such a man is not thinking of having that blessing for himself. The envy of a sound person always gives priority to his own goal, and this is not a fault. But desiring harms and defeats for others is an ailment. You find that such individuals are prepared to hurt themselves wholly in their bid to even partially harm the envied person.

A historical story is told in this connection. In the time of a caliph, a rich man bought a slave whom he treated, from the beginning, like a gentleman, giving him the best of food and clothes, and money exactly like his own child or even more lavishly. But the slave noticed that his master always felt uneasy. Eventually he made up his mind to set him free and provide him with some capital. One night as they were sitting together, the master said: "Do you know why I have treated you so well?" The slave asked the reason.

The master said: "I have one request to make which if you fulfil, you would enjoy all I have given and will give you! But if you refuse, I will be discontented with you." The slave said: "I will

obey whatever you ask. You are my benefactor who has given me my life." The master said: "You must promise me in good faith to do it, for I am afraid you may refuse it." The slave said: "I promise to do what you want." The master said: "My proposal is that you must behead me at a specific time and place." The slave exclaimed: "What? How can I do that?" The master said: "That is what I desire." The slave said: "That is impossible." The master said: "I have got your promise. You must do it." One midnight, he awakened the slave and gave him a sharp knife and a bag full of money and climbed up a neighbor's roof, and told the slave to behead him there and then go wherever he liked. The slave asked the reason for such an act. He answered: "I hate this one man and prefer death to seeing his face. We have been rivals but he has gone ahead of me and excels me in everything, and I am burning with hatred. I desire him to be jailed for this fake murder and this idea is a relief to me. Everyone knows him to be my rival, and so he will be condemned to death for this act. " The slave said: You seem to be a foolish man and deserve this death." So he beheaded the man and ran away, His rival was consequently arrested and imprisoned, but no one believed that he would have killed his rival on his own roof. It had become a mystery. At last, the slave felt a prick of conscience, went to the authorities and confessed the truth. When they understood the matter, they freed both the slave and the neighbor.

This is a fact that envy is a disease. The Qur'an says in Chapter "The Sun" (Shams), Verses 9 and 10. "He will indeed be successful who purifies it, and he will indeed fail who corrupts it." Thus, the first proposal of the Qur'an is purification of the self from ailments, complexes, ignorance, deviations and metamorphoses. You could have heard that in the past there were people who, because of excess of sins, were cursed by the Prophets of their time and were thus metamorphosed, that Is, they were transformed into animals such as a monkey, a wolf, a bear etc.

One may not become physically metamorphosed, but he may be mentally or spirituality transformed into an animal the like of which in wickedness and nastiness may not be found in the world. The Qur'an speaks of those "who are in worse errors" and who are lower than quadrupeds.[1] How can that happen? Man's personality depends on his ethical and spiritual qualities, without which he would be a beast. Thus, a defective man may be lowered to the level of a metamorphosed being. Some may think this a fancy, but it is real and true.

Someone said: "We had made a pilgrimage to Mecca along with Imam Sajjad and when we looked down at the Desert of Arafat it was full of Hajis (pilgrims). There were so many of them that year. The Imam said: "There is much uproar, but few are true pilgrims. " The man says: "I don't know how the Imam gave me the insight, but when he asked me to

look down again, I saw a desert full of animals, like that in a zoo, among whom a few human beings were moving about." The Imam told him how things looked to those who had a clear sight and were concerned with the inward concept of things.

This is quite obvious but if our so-called modernized mind does not accept it, we are at fault. In our own time there have been and are individuals who have discerned the real character of others that, like animals, knew nothing but eating, sleeping and sexual intercourse. They had lost their human qualities and been turned into beasts. We read in the Qur'anic Chapter, the "Great Event" (Naba) Verse 6. "The day on which the trumpet shall be blown, so you shall come forth in hosts, and the heaven shall be opened so that it shall be all openings."

Religious leaders have repeatedly said that only one group of people is to be raised from among the dead in the shape of human beings; others would appear as animals, tigers, monkeys, scorpions, snakes and ants. Does God do so without a reason? No, there are reasons. When a human being has done nothing in this world but to sting and hurt others, he takes his real form in the next world and that is a scorpion.

He who acts like a monkey in this world, will appear as a monkey in the next world. And a person with a doggish nature will be a dog. Thus, all people will be raised from the dead according to their intentions, desires, and true character. Are your desires in this world those of a human being, or an animal or a bird? You will take the same form on resurrection.

That is why we are forbidden to worship any but God. If we worship anything else, we will have it with us in the hereafter. If we worship money it becomes a part of our nature, and as the Qur’an says in Chapter "Immunity" (Baraat), Verse 35 that molten metal will be with us on resurrection: "And (as for) those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend it in Allah’s way, announce to them a painful chastisement, on the day when it shall be heated in the fire of hell, then their foreheads and their sides and their backs shall be branded with it; this is what you hoarded up for yourselves.

" Do not say that currency notes have taken the place of coins; in the next world, these banknotes would be turned into a fire as scorching as gold and silver coins!

So, a human being with a complex is defective, and one who worships a matter is imperfect and metamorphosed. Perfection in every kind of creature is different from perfection in another kind. A perfect human being is different from a perfect angel, and each has separate degrees of perfection. Those who have told us of the existence of angels, say that they are created with pure intelligence and thought in whom the earthly aspect, lusts, anger etc are absent, whereas animals are wholly earthly, and lack what the Qur'an terms as divine spirit.

But man is a mixture of the two, both angelic and earthly, both high and low. This is described

in a narration in the book "Usul al-Kafi", and Rumi, the poet, has turned it into a poem the translation of which is as follows:

"A narration says that the Glorious God created three different groups of creatures: The first group is the angels who are pure intellect, knowledge and liberality, and know only prostration. They lack every element of greed and passion, but are pure light, and alive with the love of God. Another group lacks knowledge altogether, and is fattened like animals in the pasture, They see nothing but the stable and fodder and are ignorant of both villainy and honor, The third group are human beings who are half angel and half donkey, the donkey half is inclined to the low and the other half is inclined to the sublime; one must see which half wins the day, and which one conquers the other,"

The Qur'an says in Chapter "The Man" (Insan) Verse 2; "Surely we have created man from a small life-germ uniting' (itself): We mean to try him, so we have made him hearing, seeing. Surely we have shown him the way. He may be thankful or unthankful."

This means that he has been granted many talents and left free to show whether he deserves a reward or punishment by his acts, whereas other creatures do not possess such deservedness, He must choose his own way and attain perfection through moderation and equilibrium and by employing all his talents.

A child grows up and is sound in all his organs and limbs, and these develop harmoniously. But if he grows up cartoon-like, some parts of whom develop to excess and others not growing at all or growing insufficiently, he cannot attain perfection. But a harmonious and well-rounded development may result in a perfect human being.

The Qur’an says in Chapter "The cow"(Baqara), verse 124:

"And when his Lord tried Abraham with certain words, he fulfilled them. He said: Surely I will make you an Imam of men. Abraham said: And of my offspring? My covenant does not include the unjust, said He." Abraham was tested in many ways, including his readiness to sacrifice his son for God, when a call from God said (the Qur'an, Chapter "The Rangers" (Safat), Verse 104:

"And we called out to him saying: 0 Abraham! You have indeed shown the truth of the vision."

When Abraham successfully passed through various trials, the Qur'an said about him: Chapter "The Bee", (Nahl) Verse 120:

"Surely Abraham was an exemplar, obedient to Allah, upright, and he was not of the polytheists."

He stood alone fighting against all unbelievers, and it was then that God called him an Imam, a leader and a model for others to follow. Imam Ali is a perfect man since all the human values have had their maximum growth in him and in a harmonious manner.

You have watched the low and high tide in the sea, which is caused by the gravitational attraction of the moon. The spirit of man, too, as well as that of society shows a similar tide, Human beings undergo such ebb and flow, and this attraction is sometimes to one direction to such an extent that all other values are forgotten. In this way, they are like defective beings that show growth in one respect, and lack of it in other respects.

Society, too, may lack harmony in its development; this is true that it is not wholly deviated but it is very often corrupted in one way or another. One of the human values confirmed by Islam is devotion, which is communion with God. Of course, in Islam every act performed for God is devotion.

Having a job and a trade to support oneself and one's family and to serve society is in itself a form of devotion. But devotion, in its special sense, is private communion with God in prayer, hymns, remaining awake for vital acts at nights etc., all of which are part of religion and can not be omitted. Sometimes, you see individuals or society being drawn only to one aspect of devotion, and performing the recommended acts of prayer, ablution etc, all of which, done in excess, will ruin society.

Sometimes this way of devotion becomes fashionable in an Islamic society, and once one gets used to it, it is difficult to observe moderation. Such a person cannot say to himself that God has created him a human being, not an angel, and as a human being he should develop every aspect of himself harmoniously.

It was once reported to the Prophet that a number of his companions had sunk in devotion. The Prophet felt uneasy, came to the mosque and shouted it out loud: "O People, what has happened to some groups who have appeared among my people. Even I as your Prophet do not show devotion in this way to keep awake all night. I rest part of the night and attend to my family. I do not observe fast every day. Those who are following their new way have deviated from my tradition:" Thus, when the Prophet notices that an Islamic value is about to eliminate other Islamic values, he combats this trend severely,

Amr ibn Aas had two sons called Abdullah and Muhammad. The former was noble and advised his father to follow the way of Ali, while the latter, who like his father loved the world and position, urged him to follow Muawiah. Abdullah was mostly inclined to devotion. One day, the Prophet met him on the way and said: "I hear that you spend the whole night in prayer and the whole day fasting." He replied in the affirmative. The Prophet said: "But I am not so, and I do not agree with your way."

Sometimes a society is drawn towards asceticism. Asceticism is a fact which is undeniable, and is a value which must exist in a prosperous society. But when everything in a society is

based on asceticism and nothing else, there is something wrong with it. Another value is to serve people, and it is fully supported by Islam, the Prophet and the Qur'an in Chapter "The Cow" (Baghara), Verse 177:

"It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteousness is this that one should believe in Allah," and the Verse ends emphasizing the value of serving God's creatures. But sometimes people go to excess and, as the poet Sa'di says: "Devotion is nothing but serving people", The next step is to negate the value of devotion, asceticism, knowledge or jihad, all of which are the exalted values for man in Islam.

Today some of our intellectuals imagine that they have found a very lofty principle called "humanity and humanitarianism". Serving people is fine and we should serve them. But if we provide them with food and clothes alone, we would be treating them like animals, especially if we suppose no higher values exist for them. If service is confined to this, what would be the difference between Abu Dhar and Muawiah? This is another example of going to excess, similar to the overvaluing of freedom.

Freedom is among the highest of human values which is above man's animal nature and material values. You can see that those who possess humanity are willing to bear hunger and nakedness, and live under hard conditions, provided they are not enslaved by another human being and can live freely. A story is told in the book of "The Mirror of Scholars", about Avicenna who held the rank of a minister for some time.

One day, he was passing through a street with great pomp and show when he noticed a scavenger removing putrid stuff from a pit. Avicenna heard him murmuring to himself a couplet meaning that he honored his 'self' for finding his world easy. Avicenna laughed to hear a man who was doing the lowest task so contently.

He drew the vein of his horse called the man to him and remarked sarcastically: "What a way to choose to honor the "self"! The man on recognizing Avicenna by his appearance said: "I have chosen this job so that I would not be the slave of another in the way you are! To enjoy freedom while being a scavenger is far better than your rank, assets and dependence," It is said that Avicenna became red in the face with shame and had no answer to give.

According to the worldly and animal aspirations, there is no point in forsaking the best food, and having servants and all that pomp and show and becoming a scavenger, and then speaking of freedom. Is freedom something tangible? No, but for a vigilant conscience, it is so worthy that a man prefers scavenging to slavery.

This value is sometimes forgotten in some societies, but when it is awakened in them, they claim freedom to be the only value and forget about other values like justice, wisdom etc.

Others may consider love as the only value, and forget the intellect, as the Gnostics do; while some go to the other extreme, thinking love to be a fancy, and intellect as the only worthy thing Love,

intellect, justice, freedom, service and devotion are all values. Who is a perfect human being? One who is an absolute devotee, or ascetic, or freeborn, or in love, or intelligent? None of these results in a perfect man. But if all these values are developed in him in a harmonious way, he may be considered perfect,

Imam Ali was such a man, In Nahjul-Balagha you meet mostly the eloquent side of him, and in reading this book, you get different pictures of him. Sometimes in reading the sermons, you suppose that Avicenna is there lecturing. At other times, you observe Rumi or Mohyedin Arabi speaking to you. Then you feel the epic of Ferdowsi, or a man of liberty, or an ascetic or a retiring devotee in a state of giving discourses. All human aspects show themselves in Ali's words, and then you discern how great he is, and how small we are.

In the past and until fifty years ago, our society was inclined, in religious matters, towards asceticism. Preachers often confined themselves to those sermons of Nahjul-Balagha which were related to ascetic matters, calling this world a transient place and the next world eternal, and advising people to prepare for the hereafter.

The rest of the sermons had no place because the society could not absorb them, as it had turned to a series of values only. For a period of a hundred years, no one read the decree of Imam Ali to Malik Ashtar, which is full of social and political injunctions [2]. There, Ali speaks of an utterance of the Prophet that "no people can attain the degree of sanctity and freedom from defect until they reach a position where the weak stand against the strong and claim their right without stuttering". Fifty years ago the society could not understand this, because it was a society of a single value, while Ali's words contain all human values as shown in his biography and personality.

I do not intend to praise our present society, but fortunately some worthwhile values have appeared in it. I fear, however that once more they may become single-dimensional and destroy other values.

If we wish to have Imam Ali (as) as our model and a perfectly well balanced man, this should not happen. He is a man in whom all human values have developed harmoniously. At night and during the communion with God, no Gnostic can rival him in his divine ecstasy and his flight towards Him. He is so deep in his devotion that nothing can divert his attention, and this divine love seems to have taken him to another world. This is how he is in the altar of worship at night.

In daytime, he is a different man. Unlike many ascetics, he is cheerful sitting with his companions and even witty. Amr ibn Aas criticized him and termed him as unsuitable for the Caliphate since he was so cheerful, as if a caliph must always look glum to frighten people. In battle too he was cheerful and smiling, while in the altar he was tearful.

The Qur'an says in Chapter "Muzzamil", Verses 6-7: "Surely, the rising by night is the firmest way to tread and the most corrective of speech.. Surely, you have, in the day time, a long occupation."

The night is for worship, and the day for living and mingling with society. The poet Hafiz is sometimes alluded to a pretext to mislead the young, They say this great poet was addicted to wine, whereas in reality, his poems are wholly spiritual and mystical, and his wine is of a spiritual nature. He was a religious man who was an interpreter of the Qur'an, and, later on, became famous as a poet. He has expressed the above Verse of the Qur'an in a poem, saying that daytime is for work and effort, and nighttime for the wine of devotion.

Ali is such a man, and has been recognized in this way for over a thousand years. The compiler of "Nahjul-Balagha", Sayed Razi, says: "The amazing thing about this book is that you see Ali in so many different worlds as you read it, that is in the words of devotion, philosophy, mysticism, military affairs, court of justice, religious jurisprudence and so on, and he is never absent from any human world."

Safiyedin Hilli, a poet of the sixth century of the Hejira, says about Ali that he is a collection of all contraries, he is both a ruler and a sage, docile and brave, poor and generous, gentle and resolute, and a devotee and a man of action. He is a hero in all human spheres, something that we cannot be, but we can at least maintain a certain degree of equilibrium among all values to be called a true Muslim in different walks of life, Notes:

Notes

[1]. Chapter A'raf, Verse 179

[2]. Nahjul Balagha, letter 53