

Seeing Life through Sacred Eyes

We often think of Islam as a tradition that tells us do certain “sacred” activities, such as going to hajj, and avoid other activities which trap us too much in worldly life. While this is true on one level, at a deeper level Islam teaches us to see all of life as a sacred activity.

I remember when I was a new father, and how a significant percentage of my waking hours was taken up with caring for my son. How much dhikr could I have made if I wasn’t changing diapers? How many texts could I have studied if I wasn’t taking him to the park in New York where we lived at the time. Probably like many new parents before me, both male and female, I felt a sense of struggle between my spiritual aspirations and my worldly responsibilities. But then I read the following hadith in the risāla of Grand Āyatullāh Taqī al-Modarressī, who was the marja‘ for the shaykh leading the majālis at New York University:

وقال الصادق عليه السلام:

إن الله عز وجل ليرحم الرجل لشدة حبه لولده

Verily Almighty Allah will have mercy upon a man by the strength of his love for his son. ((Grand Āyatullāh Sayyid M. Taqī al-Ḥusaynī al-Modarressī, *The Laws of Islam* (Enlight, 2016), 364.))

Even though I had studied Islam for 4 years at Brown University under Prof. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 4 years at Princeton University under Prof. Hossein Modarressi and others, and with dozens of other *shuyūkh* and professors in a variety of settings, I had never heard this narration. It was as if God was waiting to share it with me at the right time, when I was ready to listen.

I was never someone particularly eager to have children, but when it happened, it was life changing. I had given sermons on the importance of caring for daughters, but I had never done it myself. (“The Blessing of Daughters,” A

Mercy Case (blog), November 17, 2014, <https://amercycase.com/2014/11/16/the-blessing-of-daughters/>.) Now that I was in the midst of this new life experience, I was ready to hear a single sentence from our tradition that completely changed my outlook. Loving my son, and showing that love through spending time with him, was now part of my search for the Eternal Mercy of *al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, alongside facing Makkah in prayer and fasting in the month of Ramadan. I remember worrying about his safety while he was trying daredevil moves at the playground, and calling on Allah with a deeper level of need to protect him, in all the ways I could not.

It is often forgotten that of the four largest global religious traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam) Islam is the only one that actively discourages monasticism. In a well-known hadith in the Sunnī canon, the Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace upon him and his family) actually intervenes with some overzealous companions and tells them not to become vegetarian, sleep on the ground, and remain celibate. In this text he states, “I pray and I sleep, I fast and break my fast, and I marry women.” ((Abu Amina Elias, “Hadith on Balance: Sunnah Is Moderation in Acts of Worship,” August 1, 2012,

<https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/08/01/sunnah-moderation-ibadah/>.) In short, I act like most normal human beings. Yes, he came to teach us how to worship, but his path of worship *includes* normal human activities!

The prophetic teachings include matters as mundane as normal bodily functions. ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā’i (may Allah have mercy on him) collected 4 pages of narrations on the etiquettes of using the bathroom in his book *Sunan al-Nabī*. ((Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Taba’taba’i, *Sunan Al-Nabi: A Collectino of Narrations on the Conduct and Customs of the Noble Prophet Muhammad*, trans. Tahir Ridha Jaffer (Kitchener: Islamic Publishing House, 2007), 119–22.)) This is the sort of thing that may go unnoticed by those raised as Muslims, but for a convert like me it is truly astounding. When I came into the religion, I had to learn a new way of cleaning my body, from *ghusl* to *wudū’* to even how to use a *lota* (the Urdu term for a pot of water near the toilet meant

for cleaning oneself)! At first, I found it challenging, but over time I realized that it was a way to remember God even in the midst of the most mundane and private of daily tasks. Islam was not just when I went to the masjid and was surrounded by other Muslims – Islam was also there at times when I was completely in private, giving me guidance on how to turn the mundane into the sacred. All human beings have to clean themselves in one way or another, and so Islam provides guidance on how to transform these common human practices into reflections of our deeper desire to surrender our bodies, minds, and hearts to the Lord.

That transformation of the everyday into the sacred is at the heart of Islamic practice. When both my wife and I were working and needed to hire someone to spend time with our children, there were Islamic teachings that could be applied then as well. Imam al-Şādiq (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, “give the worker their wages before their sweat dries.” (“Islam And The Wage Labor Law,” May 23, 2021, <https://www.al-islam.org/selections-labor-law-islam/islam-and-wage-labor-law>.) So if I was out while my son was with the babysitter, I would go to the ATM machine, remember *al-Razzāq* (The Generous Provider) when it spit out cash, and then bring it to the babysitter as an act of worship. I would make it a point to pay in cash immediately if possible, and felt that doing so was honoring her for her sacred work. The Qur’an states, “Allah raised some of you in rank above others so that Allah may test you in respect to what Allah has given you.” [6.165] Allah had given me wealth whereby I could employ another person to do a task that would otherwise be the responsibility of my wife or myself. But that did not make me better than the babysitter, but rather subject to Allah’s test to see how I would behave. Presumably the majority of humanity sees the parent-babysitter relationship simply as an economic transaction that takes place between an employer and the employed in capitalist terms, or between capital and labor in a Marxist framework. But for me it was a sacred relationship, and an act of worship, precisely because the Islamic tradition had provided the textual resources (*nuşūş*) and lived tradition (*turāth*) to see it as such. Islam never asked me to flee from the world to find God, but to find God in the midst

of all the myriad realities that are part and parcel of God's creation.

When we read the words of an *'ārif* (a knower of Allah) stating that all of creation are signs (*āyāt*) of Allah, we sometimes think this is a special and unique category that only a select few people have access to, such as the Imams (upon them all peace) and their closest followers. However, the practical teachings of Islam remind us that *every single phenomenon* in Creation is a path to God or away from God. Raising children is a way to God if we choose to see it in that light, and raising children can lead us away from God if we are obsessed with the worldly status that it provides us. Employing another person in a *ḥalāl* job can be an act of worship with the right mentality and intention, or it can simply be an economic transaction. Eating food can be an act of worship if we remember that it is ultimately, in the chain of causality, a gift from *al-Razzāq*, or it can just be an act meant to please our selfishness (*nafs*). Islam does not have a sign outside its gates that states, "everyday people need not apply," but instead flings the doors of God-consciousness wide open to the stay-at-home parent, the wage labourer, the employer, and even the person who just has to go to the bathroom.

Given the trajectory of the 21st century, this aspect of Islamic teaching will need to be emphasized more than any other. Very few people want to flee the world - they want to embrace it. If the world's vision is dominated by secular language and processes, then people will not be able to see the Divine hand that is present in every moment. They will see only biology and economics, and not realize that biology and economics are merely descriptions of what Allah is always doing in the natural world and human societies. If this Earth was truly made as a place where Allah "creates death and life to try [us] to see which of us is best in deed," [Qur'an 67.2], then our understanding of what unfolds upon it needs to reflect that truth. The battle between truth and falsehood did not just happen at Badr and Karbala, but it happens every day in our hearts. Imam Khomeini wrote about this as a reality:

The [spiritual armies] related with the divine and intellectual powers attracts him towards the sublime, heavenly spheres, and summons him to the acts of

virtue and goodness. The other [demonic army] is the ignoble and satanic, which attracts man towards the baser realms of darkness and shame, and invites him to the acts of villainy and destruction. There is always a state of conflict and strife between these two forces, and human existence serves as the battleground of these two bands. When the divine forces of good become successful, man emerges as a virtuous and blessed being, and attains the high station of angels, and is congregated under the category of prophets, saints and the pious. When the satanic forces of darkness dominate, man becomes a rebellious and vicious being, and is flocked with the fiendish group of the infidels and cursed.((Imām Khomeinī, *Forty Ḥadīths: An Exposition of Ethical and Mystical Traditions*, trans. Mahliqā Qarā'ī and 'Alī Qulī-Qarā'ī (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imām Khomeinī's Works, 2003), 36.))

This constant battle - between seeing existence as nothing but the material pursuit of finite ends, or recognizing the Eternal Mercy of Allah as flowing through our lives and extending beyond our deaths - happens every day in public and private ways. We might draw strength from Zaynab's (upon her peace) vision of beauty on Ashura, and that is understandable, but should we not also assume that she had such a vision even in more "secular" moments of life? When she was pouring a glass of milk for her child, did she not see the Divine Beauty that never fades in that moment as well! When she embraced her husband, did she not thank Allah for such experiences! We too often restrict our vision of Islam to the masjid and the majālis, but the Qur'an intervened in world history to remind us that "wherever you turn, there is the Face of Allah." [2.115] Our task as Muslims in the 21st century is to develop the eyes to see that for ourselves, and to share that vision with others as best we can. For that is humanity's birth right.