





function of ethics is to foster self-realisation through giving of one's self, for the common good, in response to God's benevolent majesty.

By grounding societal values in the principle of human moral responsibility to the Divine, Islam lifts the sense of public and social order to a transcendent level. The lasting legacy of the Prophet Muhammad is the strong suffusion of the mundane, of daily life, with the sense of the spiritual. This prophetic example remains a source of emulation for Muslims everywhere, in every age. Within Shia Islam, it is the mandate of each hereditary Imam from the Prophet's progeny, as the legatee of the Prophet's authority, to seek to realise that paradigm through an institutional and social order which befits the circumstances of time and place. In a world of



the exalted ones. Such cannot be equated with those who are ignorant. "My Lord! Increase me in knowledge", is a cherished prayer it urges upon the believers, men and women alike. Learning ennobles, whatever its source, even if that be distant China, and is obligatory upon every Muslim man and woman, the Prophet is reported to have said. "One's greatest ornament is erudition", and "the most self-sustaining wealth is the intellect" which "gives one mastery over one's destiny", are among the sayings attributed to Hazrat Ali, the first Shia Imam. "Knowledge is a shield against the blows of time", wrote Nasir-i Khusraw, an eleventh century Iranian poet-philosopher. But the person of knowledge and wisdom carries the greater obligation of sharing it. The Prophet likens the knowledge which is kept from others to a girdle of fire round one's neck. "One dies not", said Hazrat Ali, "who gives life to learning".

Early Muslim Scholars

The teachings of Islam were a powerful impulse for a spiritually liberated people. It spurred them on to new waves of adventure in the realms of the spirit and the intellect, among whose symbols were the universities of Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ilm in Fatimid Ismaili Cairo and their illustrious counterparts in Baghdad, Cordova, Bukhara, Samarqand and other Muslim centres. Reflecting the spirit of the culture which honoured the pursuit of knowledge, Al-Kindi, a ninth century philosopher and student of Greek philosophy, saw no shame in acknowledging and assimilating the truth, whatever its source. Truth, he wrote, never abases. It only elevates its seeker. As a result, sciences flourished in their different domains: mathematics, astronomy, botany, medicine, optics, pharmacology, zoology and geography. In his *History of Science*, George Sarton traces, from 750 onwards, an unbroken stretch of six centuries of Muslim pre-eminence in the world of science.

The Spirit of Inquiry

Scientific research was considered a meritorious duty. It was the response of the faithful to the persistent call of the Quran to ponder creation in order to understand God's greatness. This attitude helped to cultivate an open yet inquiring bent of mind. Ancient sages were esteemed but their legacy was critically appraised. Ar-Razi (d. 925), philosopher and medical scientist, while in admiration of Galen, wrote: "But all this reverence will not and should not prevent me from doubting what is erroneous in his theories". Ibn Haytham (Al-Hazen), al-Biruni and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), in challenging the long held view of Euclid and Ptolemy that the eye sent out visual rays to the object of vision, laid the foundations for modern optics.

Research was recognised as a way of intellectual growth, an ethical duty since the human intellect is a divine gift to be cherished and cultivated. "Accept whatever adds to your wisdom, regardless of the nature of its source", is a well-attested Prophetic tradition. "Wisdom sustains the intellect" whose "natural disposition is to learn from experience", are among the sayings of Hazrat Ali. Jurists and mystics, from the classical Middle Ages to the 20th century, from al-Ghazali, Ibn Khallikan and Sanai to Shaykh Shalut and Mohammad Iqbal, have upheld and celebrated the never-ending duty of the mind to push the frontiers of its gaze to ever expanding horizons to capture glimpses of a flawless, continuing creation.



Ethic of Compassion and Sharing

A truly enlightened society urges the care of the weak and restraint in their sway by the rich and powerful. Scriptural tradition regards wealth as a blessing, and its honest creation one's duty for it can aid the general welfare of society. "When the prayer is finished, scatter in the land and seek God's bounty, and remember God frequently; haply you will prosper". But when misused or hoarded, wealth is a derisory pittance, an illusory source of power. The pious are the socially conscious who recognise in their wealth a right for the indigent and the deprived whom they help for the sake of God alone, without any desire for recompense or thankfulness from those whom they help.

Charity is not just sharing one's material wealth. Generosity with one's intellectual, spiritual, material or physical wherewithal is highly commended. When withheld, such gifts are a futile burden, "a twisted collar tied to the miser's neck". "One who is more blessed by God", goes an Alid tradition, "is needed more for people". The ethic of voluntary service is, thus, a strongly marked trait of Muslim tradition, celebrated in the example of the *Ansar*, the Helpers, the honourable title for those citizens of Medina who gave succour to Muhammad and his fellow fugitives when they had to emigrate from Makkah to escape persecution.

Ethic of Self-reliance

The poor, the deprived and those at the margin of existence have a moral right to society's compassion, the tradition reminds frequently. But Muslim ethic discourages a culture of dependency since it undermines one's dignity, preservation of which is emphatically urged in Muslim scripture. "Man shall have only that for which he labours", says the Quran. That encouragement to self-help is reinforced in Prophetic traditions: "Man cannot exist without constant effort". "The effort is from me, its fulfilment comes from God". From the time of the Prophet, therefore, the greater emphasis of the charitable effort has been to help the needy to become self-reliant. It has been narrated, for instance, that the Prophet would rather that a mendicant was helped to equip himself for gathering and selling wood to earn sustenance. During his tenure as the last of the four rightly-guided Caliphs, Hazrat Ali helped, for instance, to fund a self-help scheme, voluntarily proposed by a group of residents of an area, to improve its irrigation potential. He preferred that people should prosper, he explained, to their remaining economically weak.

Ethic of Respect for Life and Health Care

As the care of the poor, so that of the sick and disabled is a frequently articulated duty. Good health, like knowledge, is a divine gift, says the Quran, which forcefully urges the sanctity of human life, equating the saving of one life to the saving of the entirety of humanity. "God has sent down a treatment for every ailment", is an oft-quoted saying of the Prophet. People achieve happiness because of the gift of reason, of which medicine is a salient fruit, so wrote a tenth century physician al-Majusi in the introduction to his canon. Learning medicine, according to Muslim jurists, is a "duty of sufficiency", which is incumbent upon, ua eo7lp the needy neevdtH C



flourished as did mobile dispensaries, which were, not uncommonly, staffed by both male and female health personnel.

The science of medicine was supported by meticulous research. In the late 14th century, when the great plague, the Black Death, struck Europe and Asia, Muslim physicians rejected the widely entrenched superstition that the scourge was a divine retribution. Explaining their scientific hypothesis of contagion, Ibn al-Khatib, an eminent statesman and physician of Granada, wrote that the existence of contagion was established by experience, study of the evidence of the senses, by trustworthy reports of transmission, by the spread of it by persons, by infection of a healthy sea-port by an arrival from an infected land, by the immunity of isolated individuals. "It must be a principle that a proof taken from the tradition has to undergo modification when in manifest contradiction with the evidence of the perception of the senses".

Ethic of Sound Mind

An equal, if not greater, emphasis was placed on mental health since preservation of sound mind is among the foundational principles of Islam's ethical code. The principle was seriously applied in practice. In designating a ward of the Mansuria Hospital, built in Cairo in 1284, for mental patients, its endowment deed stipulated: "The foremost attention is to be paid to those who have suffered loss of mind and hence loss of honour". The principle has had a wider application in tradition. Any substance abuse which interferes with the normal functioning of the mind is a greater violation of the ethical code for it amounts to self-inflicted loss of personal dignity and of the ability to fulfil one's responsibility to oneself, to one's family and to society. "Do not be cast into ruin by your hands", is a recurring admonition.

Ethic of Sustainable Environment: Physical, Social and Cultural

Care of the environment, in its comprehensive meaning, is a duty of trusteeship which humankind owes by virtue of its vicegerency over creation. Each generation of people are described as both "viceroys and successors in the earth", stewards over its reso



property "except to improve it". The tradition, hence, obliges administrators of a charitable foundation not only to maintain, but to seek to enhance, the value of its corpus and maximise its yield in order to sustain its charitable commitments.