

True Believers Do Not Fear God, They Love Him

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Some people have problems reconciling the following truths.

First, it is rightly said that you can never love a person whom you fear (a statement often ascribed to Aristotle). There is no room in the heart for both fear and love towards the same person or thing. It is either one, or none.

Second, the highest level of one's piety is to fear God as He should be feared (Alu 'Imran, 102). Whenever God is mentioned, the hearts of true believers become full of fear (al-Anfal, 2).

Third, believers are expected to love God more than anything else. Not doing so is a serious spiritual deficiency (al-Tawbah, 24).

Fourth, true believers, who follow the heavenly guidance, are supposed to have neither fear nor grief (al-Baqarah, 38).

All of the above assertions are correct. The best way to reconcile them is to carefully analyse the Qur'anic concepts of piety, fear, love and man's relationships with God, the Creator, and His creations. The same concepts can be further explained in the light of the Prophet's Sunnah.

One should also bear in mind that the Arabic language is so reach and diverse that sometimes two apparently synonymous words may be significantly different. They may be a world of subtle meanings apart.

Thus, a main condition for truly excelling in any branch of Islamic studies is the adequate knowledge of Arabic. Without that, more harm than benefit can be generated, notwithstanding people's sincere intentions and the levels of their commitment. In passing, herein lies one of the main causes of the biggest predicaments Muslims face today.

God reveals that He has sent it (the Qur'an) (Yusuf, 2), and has made it (al-Zukhruf, 3), an Arabic Qur'an that people may be able to understand and learn wisdom. That means that no proper understanding and wisdom (epistemology) are possible without the Qur'an, or the revealed knowledge, and without the Arabic language as its method and system of communication.

Born to love and be brave

According to the Islamic worldview, people are created to love. They learn how to hate. When they love, they stay true to themselves and their primordial nature (*fitrah*).

To love is to be normal. That is why love is called *hubb* in Arabic. Related to the same root word is the word *habb*, which means seed. When a person is born, he is implanted with the seed (*habb*) of love (*hubb*), which he is expected to grow and cultivate throughout his life.

To hate, conversely, is an anomaly. A person who hates is abnormal. That is why hatred in Arabic is called *karahiyyah*. It is from the same root word as the words *akraha* and *ikrah*, which mean "to force or compel" and "compulsion" respectively. That implies when a person hates, he goes against his intrinsic nature. He forces an aberrant feeling and activity upon himself.

Consistent with His divine attributes, Almighty God created life full of goodness. What can be perceived as life's negativities, such as

Satan, pain, suffering, death, etc., are relative things. Their being bad and undesirable is only skin-deep. It is an outward property and so, easily deceiving.

God created those things as means to a higher order of meaning and experience. They are to be openly and decisively dealt with. They are likewise to be contemplated, thus penetrating the greatest secrets of life and man's purpose in it.

Man in addition is created as God's vicegerent on earth. The end of his successful life mission is God's pleasure and His *Jannah* (Paradise). Every moment and activity is a step closer to the fulfilment of that noble objective.

Thus, a believing man has no reason to worry about anything, let alone be afraid, except about whether he will succeed in his mission or not. Everything else is secondary and takes a back seat. Whatever aids a believer in what he strives for is priceless to him and he effortlessly develops a deep affection for it. He loves only those things. The more they are important for his life aims, the more he loves them.

It goes without saying that God as his Creator and the Creator of life, is loved most by such a person. As the Source of all goodness and worth, God deserves to be loved most. Nobody gets even close to His rights and entitlement, making this paradigm as much a logic as a palpable reality. Surely, a similar reasoning goes to the ways people feel about the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), Islam as Truth, the Holy Qur'an, and fellow believers as well.

With these spiritual and mental states, a believer needs neither to hate nor fear genuinely anything. He does not need to hate because life is so short and so precious to be wasted on such a meaningless and futile matter. He knows that the reason for his existence (*raison*

d'être) is love, compassion and being useful. He hates to hate. When he must, though, his hate is conditional and short-lived. It is resorted to only when his life ideals and mission are at stake. Such hate is virtual and never personal.

A believer furthermore does not need to fear anybody and anything because it is unnatural and counterproductive. It is likewise incompatible with his second nature: love. A believer is the bravest being. He is on the right path, is an embodiment of Truth, and has Almighty God, the Creator and Master of all creation and the Absolute Truth, on his side. Not only that, God is his best ally, protector and friend on his journey.

Fears associable with such a person are not fears *per se*. The abject fear of the coward is unknown to him. The fear before a potential unidentified danger is also unfeasible, for only actual dangers are confronted, making that pursuit an act of courage itself. There is no such thing as childish (immature) and imaginary fears for a believer.

Moreover, the fear of a sensible man who wants to protect himself and such as have been entrusted to him against some actual evil forces, is no more than a preventive measure against those forces before they are systematically prevailed over. At the end of the day, that, too, does not warrant to be called a fear. Rather, it is a great act of bravery, diligence and maturity.

Fearing God

Believers do not fear God. They love Him more than anything else. He means to them everything. All value, goodness, beauty and knowledge come only from Him. Believers know they came from God as their Creator, they belong to Him, they live under His care, love and providence, and in the end they return to Him.

Believers' total lifestyles, based exclusively on love, are mere offshoots of their infinite and unqualified love for God. Moreover, their love is an earthly reflection of God's divine love for His creation, in that man has been created in God's image (*Sahih Muslim*).

In this love relationship, there is a significant degree of fear on the side of man, which however is conditional and yet fully placed in service of love. So immense and authentic is a believer's love for God that he constantly fears that he may do something he shouldn't do, or that he may not do something he should do, whereby his personal relationship with God, imbued with love, might be weakened. These are ostensibly fears. However, in reality, they are extensions, as well as signs, of true love.

For example, a person prays not because he fears God, but because he loves Him. He also trusts God and knows that prayers are good for him. He fears the prospect of missing his prayers only because his love for God, and God's love for him, will be affected thereby, which is unimaginable for him. The same holds true as regards all the other commands and prohibitions aimed to strengthen and nurture man's relationship with God.

This is what is normally interpreted as *al-taqwa*, as the highest station in one's spiritual ascension. The concept is often translated as "fear of God". However, if the translation is properly conceptualized and contextualized, and is accompanied with necessary clarifications, it is then acceptable. If it is not, then it shouldn't be accepted as such, for the translation entails more than a few problematic nuances. Indeed, if a person believes in God and obeys him solely as a result of fear, such in no way is a mark of commendable faith.

Al-taqwa is derived from the words *waqa* and *wiqayah*, which mean "to protect" and "protection" respectively. *Al-taqwa* could therefore be

construed as "observing one's duty to God", "God-consciousness", "self-restraint", "protecting the relationship with God, and protecting oneself from the consequences of damaging such relationship by means of performing righteous deeds and shunning immoral ones". *Al-taqwa* is also understood as a shield.

To fear God in the conventional sense of the threat of a perceived danger, or because God is seen as innately angry, aggressive and willing to punish, is not right. It is a sign of one's weak faith and even misguidance. Needless to say that one needs to fear God and His punishment only if he rejected and disobeyed Him. He must do so proportionately to his misconduct.

A true believer is so obsessed with cultivating love for God that he has no time, nor interest, to worry about unduly fearing him. His heart is so filled with love that there is no room whatsoever for components of unnecessary fear in it.

At any rate, it is either love or fear. One needs to fear God only because he does not love Him. Whereas one needs not fear God only because he loves Him and behaves in accordance with the dictates of that love.

The Qur'an and the concepts of fear

There are more than ten types of fear articulated by the Qur'an. This is partly because of the richness of the Arabic language, and partly because of the importance of the concept and its many categories and their detailed nuances. Four categories stand out.

The first and most basic category is *khawf*, which is the fear of something specific - physical or otherwise - that is dangerous and unpleasant, and can harm. This category appears 124 times in the Qur'an in several derived forms.

Believers do not harbour this type of fear in relation to God. Yet if they to some extent do, it is rather metaphorical and deterrent. Evildoers entertain it, and are advised to do so, as their actions merit nothing but God's punishment and wrath.

Illustrative of this type of fear are the following verses: "Say: "Indeed I fear (*akhaf*), if I should disobey my Lord, the punishment of a tremendous Day" (al-An'am, 15).

"O Musa (Moses), fear not (*la takhaf*). Indeed, in My presence the messengers do not fear (*la yakhaf*)" (al-Naml, 10).

"And how should I fear (*akhaf*) what you associate while you do not fear (*la takhafun*) that you have associated with Allah that for which He has not sent down to you any authority? So which of the two parties has more right to security, if you should know?" (al-An'am, 81).

"...So surely there will come to you a guidance from Me, then whoever follows My guidance, there shall no fear (*khawf*) come upon them neither shall they grieve" (al-Baqarah, 38).

Even Satan admitted that he fears God (*akhafu-Allah*). He did so for obvious reasons. He knows what consequences he will have to face on the Day of Judgment for all his evil schemes and deeds in this world. No surprise that after confessing his cowardly fear of God, Satan also acknowledged: "Allah is severe in punishment (His retribution)" (al-Anfal, 48).

The second prominent category of fear in the Qur'an is *khashyah*. It occurs 48 times in a few derived forms. It means a fear based on knowledge of some aspects of Truth which, in turn, is associated with action. It is a positive fear. It is synonymous with utmost respect and reverence. It means to be awestruck and captivated by the excellence and greatness of the known.

This fear is always mentioned as a sign of true faith and as a feature of true believers. For example, the Qur'an says about God's upright and knowledgeable servants: "Only those fear Allah (*yakhsha-Allah*), from among His servants, who have knowledge" (Fatir, 28).

Even the Prophets have been praised by dint of this type of positive fear: "(Allah praises) those who convey the messages of Allah and fear Him (*yakhshawn*) and do not fear anyone but Allah. And sufficient is Allah as Accountant.

The third conspicuous type of fear in the Qur'an is *khushu'*. It appears 17 times in several derived forms. It connotes a positive fear of God in the heart, which however manifests itself on the body and its limbs. Its root word *khasha'* means "to surrender and submit to", "to humble oneself before", "to become humble", and "to obey". The bodily manifestations of the inner fear (respect and veneration) here take precedence over the internal state.

For example, the Qur'an describes true believers with respect to their prayers: "They who are during their prayer humbly submissive (*khashi'un*)" (al-Mu'minun, 2).

Just as there are humbly submissive and obedient hearts (*qulub khashi'ah*), there are also hardened and disobedient hearts (*qulub qasiyah*): "Has the time not come for those who have believed that their hearts should become humbly submissive at the remembrance of Allah and what has come down of the truth? And let them not be like those who were given the Scripture before, and a long period passed over them, so their hearts hardened; and many of them are defiantly disobedient" (al-Hadid, 16).

This category of fear is often mentioned in the context of the Hereafter. The reason for that is that in the Hereafter all veils will

be lifted and people will discover and come to terms with the whole Truth. It will be then that their hearts and souls, as well as their entire being, will be overwhelmed by the greatness and magnitude of Truth. Every aspect of their selves will clearly display such an inner and also outer condition.

The Qur'an says: "Their eyes humbled (*khushsha'an*), they will emerge from the graves as if they were locusts spreading" (al-Qamar, 7).

"On that Day (many) faces will be downcast (humbled) (*khashi'ah*)" (al-Ghashiyah, 2).

Of course, the most famous form of "fear" in the Qur'an is *al-taqwa*, as explained earlier. It occurs 258 times in many derived forms.

Other lesser known forms of fear are: *hidhr* (fearing something and trying to avoid it at all costs), *raw'* (being alarmed and panicking due to a sudden situation), *wajas* (abruptly fearing something but trying to hide that feeling), *wajl* (fearing something in the sense of deep reverence and admiration), *rahb* (fearing something to the extent that a person is always kept alert and vigilant), *ru'b* (being terrified of something), *shafaq* (fearing something and mixing that feeling with an amount of love), and *wajf* (fear combined with distress and worry) (Amatullah, www.muslimmatters.org).

The Prophets Zakariyya and Yahya

The Qur'an depicts the spiritual condition of the Prophets Zakariyya (Zechariah) and his son Yahya (John) as follows: "Indeed, they used to hasten to good deeds and supplicate Us in hope and fear (*rahaban*), and they were to Us humbly submissive (*khashi'in*)" (al-Anbiya', 90).

In this verse, two types of fear are attributed to the Prophets Zakariyya and Yahya. The first one is *rahb* (*rahaban*). It means that

they were terrified at the prospect of not proving equal to the task of protecting and fulfilling God's rights upon them, offending Him thereby and hence, being denied His divine love, benevolence and mercy. That kept them alert and vigilant at all times, strengthening in the process their love for and service to God. That featured regularly in their supplications as well.

The second type of fear mentioned in the above verse is *khushu'*. It means that the first spiritual and mental state of the Prophets Zakariyya and Yahya - that is, *rahb* - was the cause of them humbly submitting all their decisions and actions, yet their entire lives, to the will and power of God alone. That is the meaning of them being *khashi'in*, which was a result of their adoption of *rahb*.

The Prophets Zakariyya and Yahya did not fear God in the conventional sense of the term. Rather, they loved Him immensely and were ready to do whatever it takes lest they should imperil that beauty and privilege. The only way to do so was through their total obedience and humble submission to God. They feared the possibility - however remote - of losing, and also not receiving, the splendour of love, along with the chance of actualizing and living it.