

The Quran:

1) The Quran teaches absolute uncompromisable justice. Verses (4:105-106) clearly underscore the position of justice in Islam. They say: " We have sent down to you the Book in truth, that you must judge between people as guided by Allah: so be not used as an advocate by those who betray their trust. But seek the forgiveness of Allah for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." The agreed-upon occasion of revelation of these verses was that a Jew was accused unjustly for stealing some property from a Muslim. The real thief was a Muslim from the Helpers (*al-Ansar*) and he faked evidence to incriminate the innocent Jew. These verses were revealed promptly to defend justice by exculpating the non-Muslim and castigating the Muslim. The Prophet was instructed to realize justice between all people and not only between Muslims. *Al-Ansar* were the ones who supported the Prophet and dedicated all their resources to help him establish the city-state of Medina. The Jews were the ones who rarely observed their treaties with the Prophet and even conspired to assassinate him. Despite the fact that understanding this verse requires referring to the books of exegesis, the Quran is replete with other verses that cement this same concept: justice for all without any form of discrimination even on the basis of religion. For example, the Quran teaches to uphold justice even against our closest family or ourselves. Verse (4:135) says, "O you who believe: Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even against yourselves, or your parents, or your relatives. Be that against the rich or poor, for God will deal with both as they deserve." Verse (5:9), "O you who believe! Be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably; act equitably, that is nearer to piety, and he careful of your duty to Allah; surely Allah is Aware of what you do," is a clear conclusive text on the utmost importance of dealing justly even with one's enemies.

2) The Prophet himself is admonished in the Quran several times. Verses (4:105-106), mentioned in point 1, are but one example of this theme. Surah (chapter) 80 starts by gently reproving the Prophet when he frowned and turned away because there came to him a blind man while he was talking with the notables of Mecca. If the Prophet were the author of the Quran, why did he include criticisms of himself? Someone may argue that these verses may have been an attempt to furnish the Quran with a divine touch. Yet, a cunning person as such should have worked to indulge in power and worldly gains, an assertion that has no evidence from the life of the Prophet. Why would the Prophet admonish himself for the sake of a poor blind man? Should not he concentrate his efforts on the possessors of power in society? Why would he admonish himself for a Jew belonging to his enemies and put his relationship with the Helpers at stake?

3) Verse (4:25) gives a specific detail of law but what is interesting is the general principle. The verse says, "then if they (slave girls) are guilty of

indecency, they shall suffer half the punishment which is inflicted upon free women." Throughout history, the norm was to inflict severe punishment on slaves. In this verse, and in the context of the sin of fornication, slave girls suffer only half the punishment of free women. It is amazing to find a jurisprudential system taking care of the violability of a specific group of people and commanding a lenient treatment for them.

4) Verse (2:219) talks about wine and gambling, "They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both of them there is a great sin and means of profit for men, and their sin is greater than their profit." In another verse in the Quran, the consumption of wine is completely prohibited. What is impressive in this verse is its rational approach to the problem of wine and gambling, and consequently almost everything in life. Except for very few things (like justice and injustice), there is nothing that is absolutely good or absolutely evil. Despite the fact that wine is forbidden, the Quran does not try to say that wine is absolute evil. The Quran does acknowledge some benefits for wine. Nevertheless, and as rational people should do, the Quran balances the merits of wine and weighs them against its demerits. Since demerits prevail, then wine is to be avoided. This verse is the epitome of rationality. It teaches people that in almost everything there can be benefits and harms. The question of whether to do or to avoid depends on a balance analysis to determine whether the benefits or the harms are preponderant.

5) When the Quran tackled Muslims' defeat in one battle, it engaged in self-criticism, another recurring theme in the Quran. "What! When a misfortune befell you, and you had certainly afflicted the unbelievers with twice as much, you began to say: Whence is this? Say: It is from yourselves; surely Allah has power over all things," (3:165). "It is from yourselves," the verse says. Even in a battle when the Muslims were victorious, some deficiencies were highlighted, "Even as your Lord caused you to go forth from your house with the truth, though a party of the believers disliked it. They disputed with you about the truth after it had become clear, and they went forth as if they were being driven to death while they saw it. And when Allah promised you one of the two parties that it shall be yours and you loved that the one not armed should be yours and Allah desired to manifest the truth of what was true by His words and to cut off the root of the unbelievers," (8:5-7). The Quran does not leave any important event, whether victory or defeat, but uses it to rectify Muslims' behavior. The correction process does not involve blaming the other, it stems from within the individual and the community.

6) The Quran teaches equality for people of all races: All humanity is one family, no 'chosen people', no lower castes, only the deeds of people matter. Verse (49:13) says, "O Mankind: We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes to know each other. Indeed, the most honored of you in the sight of God are those who are most righteous. Indeed God is aware of all things." Verses (4:123-124) abort any claim that

Muslims, by the virtue of being Muslim, will escape punishment if they sin, "This shall not be in accordance with your vain desires nor in accordance with the vain desires of the followers of the Book; whoever does evil, he shall be requited with it, and besides Allah he will find for himself neither a guardian nor a helper. And whoever does good deeds whether male or female and he or she is a believer--these shall enter the garden, and they shall not be dealt with a jot unjustly." Not only the Quran teaches equality, it also presents Islam as an uncompromisingly universal religion, "O mankind! Adore your Lord Who created you and those before you so that you may guard against evil," (2:21). The message is not confined to a special race or group of people. It is to all mankind.

7) The Quran vehemently attacks blind imitation. "And when it is said to them: Follow what Allah has revealed, they say: Nay! We follow what we found our fathers upon. What! And though their fathers had no sense at all, nor did they follow the right way," (2:170). The Quran calls for rational inquiry away from docile surrender to long-standing traditions. Abraham is hailed in the Quran because he, while a teenager, discovered the senselessness of the worship of his people. He, then, challenged all his community, "When he said to his father and his people: What are these images to whose worship you cleave? They said: We found our fathers worshipping them. He said: Certainly you have been, both you and your fathers, in manifest error. They said: Have you brought to us the truth, or are you one of the triflers? He said: Nay! Your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, who brought them into existence, and I am of those who bear witness to this," (21:52-56).

8) The Quran teaches accountability for all people's actions before God. Verses (99:6-8) say, "On that Day all mankind will come in multitudes, to be shown all their deeds. Then whoever has done even an atom's weight of Good shall see it. And whoever has done even an atom's weight of Evil shall see it." The Quran puts it clear, "And a burdened soul cannot bear the burden of another and if one weighed down by burden should cry for another to carry its burden, not aught of it shall be carried, even though he be near of kin," (35:18). No one will be punished for a sin he did not commit or advocate. Following someone or some group does not absolve the individual from his responsibility and accountability before God. There is no original sin. There is no clergy or priesthood that lay exclusive claim on the way to God.

9) The Quran teaches freedom of religion: the most fundamental of all human rights. Verse (2:256) says, "Let there be no compulsion in religion. Indeed, Truth stands out Clear from Error. So whoever rejects Evil and believes in God has indeed grasped the most firm holding. And God hears and knows all things." "And say: The truth is from your Lord, so let him who please believe, and let him who please disbelieve," (18:29). The Quran even upholds the right of those who choose to disbelieve.

10) The Quran teaches modesty and honesty: Arrogance and hypocrisy are the worst character traits. Verse (40:76) says, “Enter then the Gates of Hell, forever residing in it, and evil indeed is the final residence of those who are arrogant.” Verse (4:145) says, “Indeed the Hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of Hell, and you will find none willing help them.”

11) The Quranic principle for dealing with the ‘other’ is clear from verses (60:8-9), “Allah does not forbid you respecting those who have not made war against you on account of your religion, and have not driven you forth from your homes, that you show them kindness and deal with them justly; surely Allah loves the doers of justice. Allah only forbids you respecting those who made war upon you on account of your religion, and drove you forth from your homes and backed up others in your expulsion, that you make friends with them, and whoever makes friends with them, these are the unjust.” The Quran does not present Islam as a religion of unquestionable peace or relentless aggression. Those who do not transgress should be treated humanely and benevolently. Those who transgress should be fought, “And fight in the cause of God those who fight against you, and do not commit aggression. Indeed God does not love those who are aggressors,” (2:190).

12) Although the Quran scolds the Christians and Jews, it does not demonize them all. Verses (3:113-115) are clear in this regard, “They are not all alike; of the followers of the Book there is an upright party; they recite Allah's communications in the nighttime and they adore Him. They believe in Allah and the last day, and they enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong and they strive with one another in hastening to good deeds, and those are among the good. And whatever good they do, they shall not be denied it, and Allah knows those who guard against evil.” Reason dictates that there exists no group of people who are all good or who are all evil, and the Quran agrees with this, even when it comes to its theological opponents.

13) The Quran presents four methods to deal with one’s own opponents. Verse (3:134) gives three methods, “and those who restrain their anger and pardon men; and Allah loves the doers of good to others.” The three methods given here are, a) to restrain one’s anger and not respond, b) to pardon the one who wrongs you, and c) to do good to the one who transgresses against you. According to verse, method (c) is the most beloved one by God. This is the same as the purport of verse (41:34), “Goodness and evil are not the same. So repel evil with goodness, then the one who had enmity between you becomes as a trusted and dear friend.” So the Quran teaches that responding to evil with goodness is better. Nevertheless, the Quran also grants a fourth method: retaliation. Verse (2:194) is clear on this, “whoever then acts aggressively against you, inflict injury on him according to the injury he has inflicted on you.” Verse (16:126) gives the same meaning, “And if you take your turn, then retaliate with the like of that with which you were afflicted.” The Quran makes retaliation permissible and, at times, obligatory on the condition that it does not exceed the

limits. If the Quran has just advocated forgiveness, it would have been preposterous. A main theme in the Quran is that it instructs people to do things that are consistent with their psychology and nature.

14) The Quran tackles the problem of the apparent inequality of people's shares in life in a unique way. Verse (6:165) says, "And He it is Who has made you successors in the land and raised some of you above others by various grades, that He might try you by what He has given you; surely your Lord is quick to requite evil, and He is most surely the Forgiving, the Merciful." Verse (102:8) says, "Then on that day you shall most certainly be questioned about the boons." The Quran explains that some people are raised above others by having more joy, health, power, or wealth in their lives. Yet, this is not inconsistent with absolute justice. People in the Hereafter will be asked about the blessings they enjoyed in their lives. Put simply: having something more in this life means more responsibility and accountability before God in the Hereafter, a fair game.

15) The Quran teaches that killing one soul unjustly is like killing all humanity. Verse (5:35) says, "For that, We ordained for the Children of Israel that whoever kills even one person, except as punishment for murder or major crimes, it would be as if he has killed all of humanity. And whoever saved one innocent life, it would be as if he saved all of humanity." This is the Quranic view of human life and its sacredness.

16) Again the Quran reveals deep understanding of human nature by its gradualism in legislation. Before wine was completely prohibited, people were stimulated to think of its harms in comparison with its benefits, and then it was forbidden to drink before prayers. Although slavery was not banned in the Quran, emancipating slaves is presented as a benevolent deed that merits reward and grants salvation, "It is the setting free of a slave, or the giving of food in a day of hunger to an orphan or to the poor man lying in the dust," (90:13-16). Freeing slaves was considered the expiation for many sins. More importantly is that the Quran emphasized the equality of humans, and that only their deeds matter. In other words, the Quran, besides encouraging the emancipation of slaves, tried to free them first in the minds of the society. People are taught by the Quran that slaves are their brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. I, for while, could not understand why slavery was not explicitly banned and why slaves were not freed all at once. The answer became clear to me by contrasting the Quranic method with the way slavery was disestablished in the United States. Slavery was abolished by force and the result was that the White ex-masters treated the emancipated Blacks as slaves though they were officially free men and women. The plight of the Blacks is but one example of how ineffective the application of force can be, especially when the objective is social reform. The Quran, obviously more knowledgeable of human nature, tried to solve the problem of slavery without severely disrupting the society. The focus was on convincing people that they are all equal and inducing them to set slaves free voluntarily.

The abolition of slavery was a natural consequence without any form of residual racism and claims of supremacy.

17) One day, I was reading a lecture offered as part of the “Problems of Philosophy” MIT course¹. The problem was evil and suffering. The last question was, “If God is not a deceiver, why does He not reveal Himself and his plan more clearly to us?” The Quran tackles this point with great care. The intentions of God are clearly stated, “And We will most certainly try you with somewhat of fear and hunger and loss of property and lives and fruits; and give good news to the patient,” (2:155). The purpose is testing and not always punishment, “Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, we believe, and not be tried? And certainly We tried those before them, so Allah will certainly know those who are true and He will certainly know the liars,” (29:2-3). According to the Quran, God does reveal his plan clearly to us. And since people differ in their tribulations, their reckoning will be different in the Hereafter. Justice is realized in life and afterlife taken together. As for evil emanating from humans, it is their choice, not God’s will, “These are the signs of Allah which We recite to you with truth, and Allah does not desire any injustice to His creatures,” (3:108). The Quran puts it clearly: when someone does evil, it is absolutely his responsibility, “This is due to what your two hands have sent before, and because Allah is not in the least unjust to the servants,” (22:10). On the other hand, people are rewarded because they choose to do good and avoid evil, “And they shall hear the cry: ‘Behold! The garden before you! You have been made its inheritors, for your deeds of righteousness,’” (7:43).

18) The Quran calls for self-discipline. The most remarkable manifestation of this is the daily prayers, “Attend constantly to prayers and to the middle prayer and stand up truly obedient to Allah,” (2:238), and fasting in Ramadan, “O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you,” (2:183). One wonders why a fabricator of a religion repulses people by imposing hardship on them. Prayers, for example, are not arbitrary, and they follow a strict schedule, “surely prayer is a timed ordinance for the believers,” (4:103). Even the Quran admits the hardness of prayer except on the most pious, “And seek assistance through patience and prayer, and most surely it is a hard thing except for the humble ones,” (2:45). The Quran does not compromise its basic tenets, like monotheism, or its required obligations, none of which were of direct benefit to the Prophet.

19) The Quran makes a balance between the role of the individual and the role of the society. Although each one is individually accountable, there are duties that are to be discharged by the whole community, “And as for the believing men and the believing women, they are guardians of each other; they enjoin good and forbid evil,” (9:71). The Quran calls for a society in which people aid each other in developing their moral character and religiosity, “I swear by the time, Most surely man is in loss, Except those who believe and do good, and

¹ Available from: <http://ocw.mit.edu/24/24.00/f01/lecture-notes/fa01-lec03.html>. Last Accessed on 05/15/03.

enjoin on each other truth, and enjoin on each other patience," (103:1-3). Once again, the Quran reveals deep understanding of human nature. Humans rarely live alone, and their interaction with their societies should be positive and designed for the benefit of both the individual and the community.

20) The Quran makes a balance between material life and spiritual life. The Quran emphasizes that the way to spiritual comfort is the worship of the Creator and seeking refuge in Him, "Who have believed and whose hearts have rest in the remembrance of Allah. Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest," (13:28). At the same time, the Quran tackles various aspects of material life with deep understanding of human needs and desires. For example, the Quran talks about marriage, divorce, inheritance, criminal law, financial transactions, peace and war.

21) The Quranic approach to history is balanced, perspicacious, and rational. The historic stories in the Quran bypasses distracting details. For example, the name of Moses's Pharaoh is not mentioned. The concern is not about this specific Pharaoh, the transcendent concern is about oppression and tyranny. This is a recurring theme when the Quran deals with history. Verse (2:134) says, "This is a people that have passed away; they shall have what they earned and you shall have what you earn, and you shall not be called upon to answer for what they did." The Quran immerses the reader in history but, at the same time, liberates him from history. This is consistent with the principle of individual responsibility. The reader should learn from what had happened to previous nations. Yet, he has nothing to do with their fate. He is only responsible for his own deeds.

22) The Quran contains many scientific indicators that are consistent with modern scientific knowledge². For example, verse (21:30) talks about the primordial condition of the universe, "Do not the unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?" Verses (23:12-14) describes the stages of embryonic development, "And certainly We created man of an extract of clay, Then We made him a small seed in a firm resting-place, Then We made the seed into a leech-like structure, then of that leech-like structure We made a chewed lump, Then We made out of the chewed lump, bones, and clothed the bones in flesh, then We caused it to grow into another creation, so blessed be Allah, the best of the creators." Verse (16:68) addresses bees as females (evident only in Arabic), "And your Lord revealed to the bee saying: Make hives in the mountains and in the trees and in what they build." Verse (24:40) mentions the internal waves below the sea or ocean surface, "Or like utter darkness in the deep sea: there covers it a wave above which is another wave, above which is a cloud, (layers of) utter darkness one above another; when he holds out his hand, he is almost unable to see it;

² I mean knowledge that is based on compelling evidence and numerous observations, and not tentative theories and incomplete understanding.

and to whomsoever Allah does not give light, he has no light." Verse (41:11) talks about the initial nebulous nature of skies, "Then turned He to the heaven when it was smoke, and said unto it and unto the earth: Come both of you, willingly or unwillingly. They said: We come, obedient." Last, but not least, verse (51:47) talks about the ever-expanding universe, "We have built the heaven with might, and We it is Who increases its vastness." This verse is interesting because Einstein, in his general theory of relativity, discovered that his theory predicted an unstable universe -- one that would either expand or contract, but would not remain stationary. But since almost all scientists at Einstein's time believed in a stationary universe, he inserted a fudge factor (the cosmological constant) into his equations to make them predict a stationary, eternal universe. When astronomer Hubble discovered that the universe is expanding, Einstein removed the fudge factor and admitted that it was the biggest blunder of his life. The expanding universe was mentioned in the Quran more than 14 centuries ago.

23) Interestingly the Quran urges people to study, rather than blindly accept, it, "Do they not carefully analyze the Quran. If it had been from other than Allah then surely they would have found many discrepancies therein," (4:82). The Quran praises the people who free themselves from imitation and self-indulgence and use their reason, "Thus do We make the communications distinct for a people who use their reason," (30:28) and "most surely there are signs in this for a people who think," (39:42).

In addition to superb language unmatched by any piece of ancient or contemporary Arabic literature, the Quranic worldview is rational, reasonable, and coherent. The Quranic code of ethics resonates with my visions of a just and equitable world. The Quranic theology is simple and based on duality, not dualism: there is the Creator and the created. The Quran is free from illogicalness, myths, and superstitions. Without going to extremes, or indulging in unreality, the Quran reveals deep knowledge of humans and their material, emotional, and spiritual needs. The Quran does not shrink from criticizing the Prophet himself and the community. The Quran pays attention to the poor hard-pressed people, entitling them to a share in the property of the wealthy, and even decreeing lenient punishment for them when they transgress the law. The Quran emphasizes the notions of self-discipline and individual responsibility, fights imitation, and calls upon people to use their intellect.