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4 minutes

The Roadmap to Ultimate Happiness

This article is a summary of the compact book *bāṭin al-’ithm* written by the great Islamic scholar professor Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Buti (may Allah’s Mercy be upon him).¹

This book mainly deals with the hazards of inner sins. He categorizes the Islamic religion into external and internal rules. Examples of external rules are law of marriage or law of divorce or rules about financial transactions. Some examples of internal rules are the prohibition of showing off, and arrogance and greed, and similar spiritual diseases.

External religiosity is worth nothing and is meaningless without internal religiosity. The core of servanthood consists of the internal feelings and experiences. Because even the external rules and the rituals are there to strengthen and to improve the people in spirituality and in their internal relationship with Allah ﷻ. This distinction of course also made in the Qur’an:

وَدَرُّوا ظَاهِرَ الْإِثْمِ وَبَاطِنَهُ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَكْسِبُونَ الْإِثْمَ سَيُجْزَوْنَ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ

Meaning: “And leave what is apparent of sin and what is concealed thereof. Indeed, those who earn blame for sin will be recompensed for that which they used to commit.”

¹ Shaykh al-Buti was born in 1929 in the village of Jeilka, located near Cizre in Turkey. His father was Molla Ramadan al-Buti who was one of the greatest scholars of his time. When Shaykh al-Buti was four years old, his family migrated to Damascus due to Ataturk’s secularization processes. He was enrolled in a primary school and received specialized religious tutoring from his father. At the age of eleven, Shaykh al-Buti studied with Shaykh Hasan Habannakah and with other great scholars in the Manjak Mosque in al-Midan. Later when the mosque was transformed into the Institute of Islamic Orientation, he studied Qur’an exegesis, logic, rhetoric and the fundamental principles of Islamic jurisprudence until 1953. In 1954, he travelled to Cairo to complete his undergraduate studies at Al Azhar University, at the Faculty of Sharia. After returning to Syria, he progressed to higher academic levels. He taught at several institutions and universities and gave lectures in different countries. He wrote many books about philosophy, theology, ethics and history. He was one of the greatest scholars of his time.



In another verse Allah ﷻ says:

قُلْ تَعَالَوْا أَتْلُ مَا حَرَّمَ رَبُّكُمْ عَلَيْكُمْ ۗ أَلَّا تُشْرِكُوا بِهِ شَيْئًا ۗ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا ۗ وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا
أَوْلَادَكُمْ ۗ مِنْ إِمْلَاقٍ ۗ نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُكُمْ وَإِيَّاهُمْ ۗ وَلَا تَقْرَبُوا الْفَوَاحِشَ مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَمَا بَطَّنَ

Meaning: “Say, "Come, I will recite what your Lord has prohibited to you. [He commands] that you not associate anything with Him, and to parents, good treatment, and do not kill your children out of poverty; We will provide for you and them. And do not approach immoralities - what is apparent of them and what is concealed.”

In the last verse of sura al-Kahf Allah ﷻ says:

فَمَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُوا لِقَاءَ رَبِّهِ فَلْيَعْمَلْ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا وَلَا يُشْرِكْ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِ أَحَدًا

Meaning: “So whoever would hope for the meeting with his Lord - let him do righteous work and not associate in the worship of his Lord anyone.”

Because avoiding shirk (idolatry) in worshipping Allah ﷻ is the central axis of all internal rules. So, the distinction between external and internal dimensions of the Islamic religion is made by the Qur'an. Additionally, there are Qur'anic verses and Prophetic narrations that emphasize the importance of spiritual purification such as:

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا

Meaning: “He has succeeded who purifies it. And he has failed who instills it.”

In the hadith the beloved Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

أَلَا وَإِنَّ فِي الْجَسَدِ مُضْعَةً إِذَا صَلَحَتْ صَلَحَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ وَإِذَا فَسَدَتْ فَسَدَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ
أَلَا وَهِيَ الْقَلْبُ



Meaning: “Beware! In the body there is a piece of flesh which, if it is sound, the whole body will be sound, and if it is corrupt, the whole body will be corrupt. It is the heart.”

So, this distinction is a fact, but names may vary. Some scholars call it *al-bāṭin* and *al-zahir*. Some call it *al-diyāna* and *al-qadā'*. Some others call it *al-ḥaqīqa* and *al-sharī'a*. Both of the aspects are part of the Islamic religion. Whoever tries to separate these two aspects, is in reality violating the Islamic religion. Both internal and external rules are required for the validity of worships and good deeds. If one of the two is missing, then the following verse applies:

وَقَدِمْنَا إِلَىٰ مَا عَمِلُوا مِنْ عَمَلٍ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ هَبَاءً مَّنْثُورًا

Meaning: “And We will regard what they have done of deeds and make them as dust dispersed.”

If we look now at the Muslim world and Muslim communities we will see that our greatest enemy isn't the enemy that occupies the regions and countries and using the most dangerous weapons against us. But our greatest enemy is more dangerous and deadlier. That greatest enemy is what gives access to the enemy who occupies the country. That's what leads to the manufacture of deadly weapons. That's what causes conflicts and schisms between people and movements. This most dangerous enemy is our egos! The Islam is in essence nothing else than purifying this ego from spiritual diseases and forbidden desires.

Another remarkable fact is that when the internal religiosity is missing by the Muslim and he tries to practice the external rules of the Islam, he begins to subject the Islam to his desires and pleasures. He makes the Islam an armor or a veil to cover his degeneration. This is very curious and is unfortunately in general our state of being today as Muslim world. How is it possible that Allah's help comes in order to rescue and save us while we are roaming in such spiritual and religious troubles and crises. Because we are not sincere towards Allah ﷻ and towards each other. Our tongues saying something, but in fact our hearts say something quite different! So, it's possible to say that our problem isn't about knowledge and intellect, there is



enough knowledge and opportunities to study and learn, but our problem has to do with ethics and behavior.

Now, it's necessary to speak about the cause and source of the spiritual diseases and forbidden desires. This cause or source is nothing else than loving the Dunya and to give more worth to the Dunya than what Allah ﷻ gave for it. If we mention Dunya, we don't mean only money, property and wealth, but we mean also all desires and lusts of the ego like high status, fame, leadership, arrogance, etc. So, it is expected of you to work hard to redeem yourself from these spiritual diseases and to tame and moderate your forbidden desires. Otherwise the ego will be a monster and it becomes an 'abdulego (composed of the Arabic word 'abd which means *servant* and the English word *ego*). I mean: servant of the ego. Otherwise you become an opportunist, a broker, a crook. If individuals become like that then it is not to be expected that the society will be charitable, pious and honest. In this case schisms appear, betrayal appears, suspicion appears, and so on. So, if the heart of the individuals becomes corrupt, then the whole society will be corrupt. This is unfortunately, as Muslim society, our state of being today. Of course, there are exceptions, but I'm not speaking about exceptions, I'm talking about the general condition. This is also predicted by the beloved Prophet ﷺ when he said: "I'm worried about you, not because of poverty and starvation, but due to wealth and luxury."

This troubled state of being results in the division of the Muslim community and in the weakening of the Muslims. Another important result of this spiritual crisis is that all deeds and worships become formal and apparent without soul and spiritual meaning. One more problematic result is the fanaticism that emerges among the Muslims. Therefore you see some people experiencing the Islam like a hooligan who causes conflicts and violence among the people because of his own religious views. Take as example some Islamists who are the adherents of political Islam and take as example some Islamic organisations. It's only about formal and ceremonial activities without integrity and decency.

All deeds and worships, even our purpose of existence, all rotating around one thing: servanthood to Allah ﷻ. This is the core of all spirituality. This becomes weak and risks disappearance when the heart and the soul are surrounded by spiritual diseases and forbidden



desires. So, Islam and Islamic activities, whatever it may be, without spiritual purity and without consciousness of servanthood, are mere structural formalism and inanimate cult. While the Islam is a moderate lifestyle that balances between material and spirit.

So far on the causes and sources of our spiritual crisis, as for the remedy, the cure and the solution, I should ask first of all the following question: “Did you understand the problem and are you confident about the problem which I described you just now?” The reason that I asked you this question is that understanding the problem is the half of its solution! If you didn’t understand the problem and if you didn’t recognize the problem analysis, then it is useless to concern yourself with the solution, for it will be of no avail. You must first acknowledge the problem.

Let me give an example for the solution: Imagine a young student who is taking an exam at school. During the exam he gets thirsty and asks for water. When the water comes, he drinks but his eyes keep staring at the water in the glass while he forgets the exam. Meanwhile time passes. So, what is the solution of this student? He needs someone who warns him and wakes him up. The same thing we can say about the negligent, careless and sinful servant. He needs someone to warn him and wake him up. So, the solution is that we constantly remember our true identity and our task in this life. Our true identity is servanthood to Allah ﷻ. And our task is to apply this servanthood in our lives. The only way to reach this is firstly to purify the ego, secondly to subject the ego to the commands of our Lord ﷻ and thirdly to consider the material and worldly favors as a means to get spiritual closer to Allah ﷻ and to consider it as a means to worship Him in the best way.

We have to talk also about the way we are going to apply this remedy and cure. It can be applied through the following means:

- By doing *tafakkur* regularly. It’s necessary that you think about yourself and your journey in this life. And that Allah ﷻ is constantly seeing and hearing you. *Tafakkur* is the fuel of ‘*aql* (reason). Without *fikr* and *tafakkur*, the ‘*aql* is worth nothing. Because of that Allah ﷻ ends many verses in the Qur’an with:

لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَفَكَّرُونَ



Meaning: "... that you might give thought."

Or with:

أَفَلَا تَتَفَكَّرُونَ

Meaning: "Then will you not give thought?"

Or with:

لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

Meaning: "... for a people who give thought."

To perform this, you have to devote certain times of the day to self-reflection and contemplation. This doesn't mean to separate yourself from the society, but you have to do it such as a merchant or trader who keeps his accounts at the end of each day. It is this that allows him to survive in his trade.

- The second one is to regularly maintain certain *'awrād* (routine) from the recitation of the Qur'an and from the *'adhkār* like *istighfār* and *tasbīh*. Of course we don't mean with *dhikr* (remembrance) and *tilāwa* (recitation) moving the tongue and using the prayer beads, but we mean remembrance with heart and thinking with mind and awakening of the innermost.
- Third one is frequently begging and turning to Allah ﷻ. To make frequently plea for the Mercy and Forgiveness of Allah ﷻ.
- Fourth one is to avoid consuming forbidden food. Consuming this will spiritually destroy you.

These four means are necessary to improve your spiritual condition, to purify your ego and to get closer to Allah ﷻ.

Another important point is that you have to avoid discussions about terms and names like the Wahabis do. It isn't important whatever you call this whole subject. Whether you call it *taṣawwuf* or *sulūk* or *tarbiyya* or *iḥsān*. It's the same. We are interested in the content and not the names. Let that be clear!



Another noteworthy point is the urgent need for separation between *al-taṣawwuf al-akhlāqi* and *al-taṣawwuf al-wijdāni* or *al-falsafi*. The first is about purifying the ego and to internalize good behaviors while the second is about the spiritual experiences and feelings during the application of *taṣawwuf* or *ihsān*, whatever you call it. So, it isn't permissible to speak about *al-taṣawwuf al-wijdāni* or *al-falsafi* while you are in need to purify your ego and to work on the improvement of your behaviour.

At the end of the book Shaykh Ramadan al-Buti (may Allah's mercy be upon him) concludes his book with some advice which will help you become a better Muslim. This is as follows:

1. Start your day always with the prayer of *al-fajr* and if possible in the mosque together with the group.
2. When you hear the *'adhān*, go to the nearest masjid to pray together with the group.
3. Spend your valuable life and time only on worships, good deeds, learning useful knowledge, or earning halal money and food, or on rest and halal recreation after tiredness and hard work.
4. If it is night and you want to sleep, remember that this is your last night and you will not wake up tomorrow. Therefore sleep with Qur'an recitation and *'adhkār*.
5. When you are tested with adversity or with prosperity, you have to keep in mind that Allah ﷻ is the only who gives and who takes. You must have patience in bad times and you must be grateful in good times.
6. When you are finished with your prayer, always make *du'ā'* to Allah ﷻ and ask Him what you wish. Allah ﷻ likes to be asked.
7. Don't care about the anger or dissatisfaction of others. The satisfaction of Allah ﷻ is important for us.
8. When you want to gossip about other people, immediatly remember your own shortcomings and sins.
9. Work hard to make your main capital on the Day of Judgement your purified heart. Because few good deeds benefit with purified heart, but many good deeds without purified heart don't benefit.



10. If you are about to sin, immediately remember death, because remembering death prevents you from sinning and motivates you to perform good deeds and worships.

