



## ***Perspective/Opinion***

# **Morality as a Religious Imperative: A Perspective on Flourishing by a Muslim Medical Student**

By Zaid Parekh

*Student Doctor Zaid Parekh shares his perspective on the intersections of faith, character and medical practice.*

The sound of my footsteps echoing across the stone walls of the gothic chapel, I slowly made my way to center stage where my faculty advisor was waiting to greet me. A few words of congratulations were exchanged as she helped me slip my arms into a new white coat and pause for a picture. Gazing into the crowd of family and friends all gathered to celebrate my medical school class as we embarked on our new journey, the reality of being a student doctor finally began to set in. I was suddenly overcome with feelings of excitement mixed with apprehension. Excitement about the new opportunities this position would bring, yet apprehension about my ability to uphold the responsibilities that came with them. While the donning of the white coat marked the beginning of a new chapter for me, it also symbolized a great authority that I had been entrusted with. As I walked off the stage, questions of where I fit into this noble profession lingered in my mind—continuing to challenge me even now as I conclude my first semester of medical school. What does it mean to be a good physician? And how can I ensure that I am fulfilling these duties to the best of my ability while also staying true to the reasons I took them up in the first place?

As an American Muslim medical student, I have come to realize that the answers to such questions draw heavily from my religious tradition and the ideological framework that it establishes. A framework in which success is directly tied to one's obedience to God, and good morals serve as a foundational element in enacting such obedience. As I have grown in my understanding of Islam, it is clear that the value system and character traits embedded in the tradition not only coincide with the moral values that an ideal virtuous physician should uphold, but also augment and orient them. Practicing medicine in light of these values thus leads to flourishing from both the Islamic perspective by pleasing God as well as in the professional sense by cultivating a healthy physician-patient relationship and establishing trust with one's patients and community.

The religion of Islam primarily draws its teachings from two main sources: the Quran—the recorded word of God—and the *Sunnah*, the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH-peace be upon him). While the main message is to have belief in One God and to live a virtuous life as prescribed by His commands and demonstrated by His Prophet (PBUH), Islam is much more comprehensive than a simple list of rules. Commonly described as a complete way of life, it is a system that encompasses habits, customs, and beliefs that impact all parts of a person's and a group's life. From hygiene to food consumption, business transactions to family life, almost every facet of a Muslim's life is guided by Islamic principles with the ultimate purpose of pleasing God. Our entire existence is viewed as a means of growing closer to the Divine, and we draw upon these primary sources as a means of doing so. God tells us in the Qur'an that He created us only for His worship<sup>1</sup>; elsewhere in the Qur'an, He says: *"And whoever obeys God and His Messenger and fears God and is conscious of Him – it is those who are the successful ones."*<sup>2</sup> These verses indicate that true success in Islam is achieved through those things that are in a person's control. God does not look at wealth, appearance, and social status as signs of virtue; instead, He looks at the steps we take to become closer to Him and to serve His creation. As God says, *"Verily the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you."*<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the idea of flourishing is not the most material benefit, but rather the constant strive to please God. As the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated, *"How wonderful the affair of the believer is! Indeed, all of his affairs are good for him. If something good happens to him, he is grateful to God, which is good for him. And if something bad happens to him, he has patience, which is good for him."*<sup>4</sup> This hadith (*statement of the Prophet*) sums up the mindset that every Muslim adopts: every situation is viewed as an opportunity to fulfill God's commands and thereby grow closer to Him.

In Islam, attaining this state of righteousness and God-consciousness is not something that is limited to ritual worship and supplication. Instead, it can take the form of any virtuous act when done with the correct intention and in accordance with religious teachings. For example, when asked about acts that constitute charity, the Prophet (PBUH) said, *"Every good deed is charity. Your smiling in the face of your brother is charity. Encouraging good and discouraging evil is charity. Giving directions to a lost person is charity."*<sup>5</sup> Serving as a physician naturally includes many of these aspects; the faith thus teaches us that striving to become the best physician possible can be a means of immense reward and goodness in this life and the next. Indeed, in one well-known tradition, the Prophet (PBUH) said, *"The most beloved people to God are those who are the most beneficial to the people."*<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, perfecting one's character and ethics is also given great importance in Islam and is a central avenue for achieving righteousness. As the Prophet (PBUH) used to say to his

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an 51:56

<sup>2</sup> Qur'an 24:52

<sup>3</sup> (Qur'an 49:13)

<sup>4</sup> Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim #2999

<sup>5</sup> Sunan al-Tirmidhī 1970

<sup>6</sup> Al-Tabarani

companions, “Among the best of you are those with the best character”<sup>7</sup>, and that “Righteousness is good character.”<sup>8</sup> Both statements use the Arabic word “*khuluq*”, which is translated here as “character”. However, the term is more expansive and actually refers to all non-physical parts of a human being—encompassing outward qualities such as good manners and service, and inner qualities such as morals and beautiful character.<sup>9</sup> Overall, statements such as these showcase the idea that maintaining a state of God-consciousness should manifest itself in everything that we do. True belief is not just held in the heart or attained through ritual worship, but is also something that reveals itself through the outward expression of good action and service.

This framework emphasizes our belief that Islam perfects and orients good by giving it the right purpose (*to please God*), providing it a higher and lasting level of motivation (*the Afterlife*), and assigning it the right meaning and balance among competing values through the revealed Law. Referring to morality as a religious imperative endows it with greater value and recognizes it as a means of becoming a better Muslim. Logically, God could have limited His religion to ritual worship alone, but out of His perfect wisdom He made goodness to the creation also part of worshiping Him and having faith in Him, He made goodness to others and all creation part of our nature, and He reinforced such goodness through His revealed guidance.

What does the connection between good character and attaining righteousness actually look like in practice, and how does it relate to my future career in medicine? As a Muslim, there is no better guiding example on how to improve our character than the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In a well-known narration, he even states “*I have been sent only to perfect noble traits of character*”.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the Quran, God continuously commands us to be morally upright, and the life of the Prophet (PBUH) is full of practical examples for us to derive benefit from and apply to our own lives and professions. In his classic treatise *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-Dīn*, the famous 12th-century scholar Imam al-Ghazālī (d. CE 1111) dedicates an entire section to reproducing several detailed descriptions of the Prophet’s character composed by earlier scholars.<sup>11</sup> Some of these narrations include:

***“He would get angry only for the sake of his Lord but never for himself. He would uphold what is right even if it meant risking harm or pressing a right against his own companions.”***

***“He accepted invitations, visited the sick, attended funerals, and walked among his enemies without any bodyguard. He was the humblest of men, silent without being insolent, eloquent without being loquacious. He had the most joyful countenance and was never overawed by the affairs of this world.”***

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<sup>7</sup> Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 3559

<sup>8</sup> Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2553

<sup>9</sup> The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic 4th ed., page 299.

<sup>10</sup> Musnad Aḥmad 8729

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1402/1982), 2:359–64.

***“He sat and ate with the poor, showed regard to those who were virtuous in their morals and gave honor to noblemen.”***

***“He did not tyrannize anyone and accepted the excuse of anyone who begged his pardon.”***

The etiquette of the Prophet (PBUH) was sublime, combining internal excellence with external beauty, while remaining fully human. Although he struck a balance between strength and gentleness, his governing attributes were most notably mercy and compassion. As described by the Almighty Lord, he was sent as a *“Mercy for the worlds.”*<sup>12</sup> The role of a physician is unique in that it is one that is guided by these same principles in everyday practice. Entrusted to take care of people in their most vulnerable states, a good physician is expected to always have the best interest of the patient in mind—caring for them to the utmost of their ability while respecting confidentiality and exercising compassion and empathy. The true Muslim physician cannot be but a good physician precisely because moral obligations in Islam make one a certain kind of being that embodies such virtues. A physician who will not favor one patient over the other, but treat all patients equally as God commands, *“If you judge, judge in equity between them. For God loves those who judge in equity.”*<sup>13</sup> A physician who will restrain their desires if they go contrary to reason and morality remembering that *“for those who were in awe of standing before their Lord and restrained themselves from ‘evil’ desires, Paradise will certainly be their home.”*<sup>14</sup> And lastly, a physician who will not abuse their status for monetary gain nor mislead their patients by keeping in mind that *“Wealth and children are the adornment of this worldly life, but the everlasting good deeds are far better with your Lord in reward and in hope”*<sup>15</sup> as well as the command, *“Do not confound truth with falsehood or hide the truth knowingly.”*<sup>16</sup>

Overall, in the context of Islam, true flourishing is not confined to any one position or status. Instead, it is a state that can be achieved by anyone through the remembrance of God and obedience to His commands in all aspects of their lives. This is not to say that material wealth is of no value at all; indeed, it can be a means to attain closeness to God through the unique privileges or opportunities of service that it presents. A flourishing life for a Muslim is one that allows them to find true meaning and purpose, and the opportunity to strive for these ultimate goals through cultivating and applying their strengths to benefit the world around them. As a Muslim medical student, this can take the form of using my role to care for my patients in concordance with my religious obligations to be morally upright and enjoin what is good. I still have much to learn as I navigate this new frontier, but I am reassured knowing that pursuing excellence in my religious values can also provide answers to my earlier questions and allow me to find my role in the medical field. Just as the demands of the profession call for good character, Islam reinforces this by giving value to morality and sets the foundations for what this entails—urging Muslims to exemplify the requisite character traits to become a fine person and, by extension, a better physician.

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<sup>12</sup> Qur'an 21:107

<sup>13</sup> Qur'an 5:42

<sup>14</sup> Qur'an 79:40-41

<sup>15</sup> Qur'an 18:46

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