Between Fear and Hope: Implications of Divine Names

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In the previous issue a brief essay outlined the basic Islamic understanding regarding the most beautiful names of Allah (SWT). The present essay will show that a correct understanding of divine names is closely related to a correct understanding of Islam. The latter has direct implications for Islamic activism, as our relationship with Allah (SWT) ends up determining the shape of our actions and the contours of our lives.

It has been pointed out earlier that the dhat (or Essence) of Allah (SWT) is an unknown and unknowable mystery; human beings cannot know Him as He truly is in Himself. Yet, human beings have a need and a strong desire to know their Creator and Cherisher so that they can love, serve, and worship Him in a manner worthy of Him. In His infinite mercy, therefore, Allah (SWT) has made it possible for us to gain some degree of knowledge of who He is; our knowledge of Allah (SWT) is possible through our experience and understanding of His names and attributes as they manifest within this world, within our own souls, and within His own living speech. In other words, even though humans cannot know Allah (SWT) as such, they can come to know some of the ways in which His names and attributes are manifested.

All of the most beautiful names, with the possible exception of the name Allah (SWT), consist of adjectives preceded by a definite article. These names are indicative of various attributes of Allah (SWT). Each name therefore indicates a particular aspect of the relationship that Allah (SWT) chooses to establish with His creation. In the present issue, we will discuss the traditional Islamic view of the inherent symmetry of these names. As noted by a number of Islamic authorities, many (but not all) of the most beautiful names of Allah (SWT) may be divided into two groups: 1) names denoting His majesty (or jalal), and 2) names denoting His beauty (or jamal).

Some divine names indicate that Allah (SWT) is majestic and wrathful, a just ruler, a sovereign king; He is distant from the creation and utterly transcendent. Such are the names of jalal or majesty. When we experience and understand our relationship with Allah (SWT) through His distance, transcendence, power, justice, holiness, majesty, severity, wrath, etc., then we use His names of jalal to describe the corresponding attributes. We say that He is Magnificent, Overbearing, Tremendous, King, Holy, Majestic, Slayer, and so on. These experiences of our relationship with Him, and the corresponding attributes and names, make us feel finite, small, and insignificant; we realize our impotence and we fear His justice and His wrath.

On the other hand, some divine names indicate that Allah (SWT) is near and very easily accessible to His creation; that He is immanent and merciful in relation to His creation. He is kind, lenient, and loving. Such are the names of jamal or beauty. When we experience and understand our relationship with Allah (SWT) through His nearness, immanence, mercy, beauty, kindness, love, etc., then we use His names of jamal to describe the corresponding attributes. We say that He is Merciful, Gentle, Loving, Beneficent, Life-Giving, etc. These experiences of our relationship with Him, and the corresponding attributes and names, make us feel loved, cherished, protected, and appreciated; we realize our loving closeness with Him and we hope for His mercy and blessings.

Anyone who is somewhat familiar with the Qur’an and its teachings regarding the nature and attributes of God would immediately notice a sort of symmetry in divine names. Allah (SWT) is both Merciful and Wrathful, both Beautiful and Majestic, both Forgiving and Just, and so on. Even though this may appear contradictory to an uninformed observer, Muslims have traditionally understood God as the supreme “coincidence of opposites.” It is only in God that mercy and wrath, transcendence and immanence, distance and nearness, come together in perfect harmony and cause no contradiction or internal conflict.

Please note that “symmetry” in this context does not mean equality. It is wrong to say, for example, that wrath and mercy have the same value for Allah (SWT). Several texts from both the Qur’an and Hadith can be cited to show that Allah (SWT) prefers mercy over wrath, nearness over distance, and beauty over majesty. In the end, all divine names are qualified as Al-Husna or “most beautiful,” even when they describe God’s majestic or wrathful side. That, however, is a topic for another essay. For now, the point to be noted is
that many divine names occur as pairs, where one of them stands for the majestic aspect of divine qualities and the second represents their beautiful aspect. In other words, there are at least two sides to how human beings can imagine their Creator. Since there is no god but God, these two sides must go together.

Consequently, one-sidedness in our approach to God can have serious repercussions. If we understand God only through His names ofjalal we would end up having a wrong image of what He is like. We would think of God as distant but not near, as wrathful but not forgiving. On the other hand, if we understand God only through His names jamal we would also end up with a mistaken image. We would think of God as near but not distant, as forgiving but not wrathful. The primary human response to divine jalal is fear, and the primary human response to divine jamal is hope. If we recognize divine majesty but ignore divine beauty, our understanding of religion would be distorted by too much fear. On the other hand, if we recognize divine beauty but disregard divine majesty, our understanding of religion would be distorted by too much hope.

In a well-known Hadith, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has said that Iman lies between khawf and raja’, that faith is situated between fear and hope. This implies that a correct relationship with Allah (SWT) requires that we experience His names of majesty as well as His names of beauty in a manner appropriate to each. In the same way, a correct understanding and practice of Islam requires that we experience both fear and hope in a manner appropriate to each. It is perfectly fine if our spiritual state moves back and forth between these two poles, but it is a dangerous sign when our spiritual state become permanently locked in either fear or hope.

What would a person’s understanding of Islam look like if he/she were to emphasize only the divine names of majesty? And how would a person understand Islam if his/her view of Allah (SWT) is to be based only on the divine names of beauty? If a person’s relationship with God is defined only through fear, it is likely that his/her way of looking at the world will also become dominated by fear. On the other hand, if a person’s relationship with God is defined only through hope, it is likely that his/her way of looking at the world would also become dominated by hope. In each case, one would develop certain beliefs and attitudes corresponding to the dominant emotion, and these beliefs and attitudes would, in turn, shape his/her approach to all aspects of life.

Generally speaking, a predominance of fear causes people to emphasize distinctions and boundaries. Fear of being oppressed or exploited by others makes them suspicious and overcautious; they would wish to differentiate themselves from everyone else. When such people look around, they find potential enemies everywhere; they easily accept conspiracy theories, and believe that everyone is out to get them. Fear makes them defend their religion in too harsh a manner; they develop a deep commitment to one understanding of their beliefs and practices as the right and authoritative one, which makes them intolerant of other understandings. They do not entertain the possibility that they might be wrong and their opponent might be correct. It is as if they like to construct fortresses to defend themselves against what they see as enemy sieges. Consequently, in a defensive posture they close their minds to any challenges or criticisms, and their fearful intolerance sometimes leads to violence. Another way to identify a person whose dominant emotion is fear is to note that his/her main frame of reference is usually characterized by “competition.” Such a person might assume that in order for him/her to win, all others must lose.

On the other hand, a predominance of hope causes people to emphasize commonalities and resemblances. They trust other people too easily and often allow themselves to be oppressed and exploited. They always look for similarities and points of agreement between themselves and everyone else, and tend to see potential friends and allies wherever they look. Hope makes them less able to defend their religion; their commitment is so casual that they are easily swayed from one viewpoint to another, believing that everyone is correct and all perspectives have equal merit. They find it difficult to take a firm stand on any issue, because they always suspect that they might be mistaken and their opponent might be right. Instead of constructing fortresses, they demolish the walls of their houses so as to welcome their neighbors. They are so open-minded that it is difficult for them to hold on to any set of beliefs and practices. Another way of identifying such a person is to say that his/her main frame of reference will be “cooperation.” Such a person is likely to look for solutions in which everyone can win; if such a solution cannot be found, he/she is willing to lose so as to let others win.

The way in which the consequences of too much fear and too much hope are described above, it is easy to see that neither of them is an acceptable choice. Too much fear can lead to lack of trust, excessive suspicion, paranoia, and aggression, including the madness of “preemptive strikes.” On the other hand, too much hope can lead one to throw all caution to the wind and become vulnerable, an easy target for potential exploiters or oppressors—a sitting duck waiting for the hunter.

It can be seen how a one-sided relationship with God can lead to a serious imbalance in one’s entire life as well as in the understanding and practice of religion. Just as a correct relationship with Allah (SWT) is impossible without taking into account His names ofjalal as well as His names ofjamal, a correct understanding and practice of religion—or, indeed, of one’s very approach to life in general—requires a balance between fear and hope, between competition and cooperation, between assuming everyone to be an enemy and assuming everyone to be a friend.

As the “middle community,” Muslims need to find a just equilibrium between the extremes of too much fear on the one hand and too much hope on the other hand. The symmetry of majesty/beauty that is found among many divine names is related to the balance that we need to cultivate in our lives.

Today, many Islamic groups are choosing the “fearful” version or the “hopeful” version of Islam. By choosing one or the other alterna-
tive, they fail to find the right balance between the two sides of divine qualities. They sway too much on this side or that side. Consequently, we see some Muslims who are extremely harsh and intolerant on the one hand, and on the other hand we find those who are too conciliatory and compromising. We should remember that it is fear that makes people aggressive and violent, not courage. Similarly, it is hope that makes people trusting and willing to compromise, not treachery. Yet, fear has as much place in religious and social affairs as hope; it is the imbalance that is pathological.

Consequently, to ask as to which approach is correct and which is incorrect is to miss the point. Of course, it is easy to find support from the Qur’an and the Sunnah for either of these approaches. This is because the sacred texts do recognize the significance of both fear and hope under different circumstances, just as they recognize the importance of the divine names of jalal as well as the divine names of jamal. It is one thing to recognize this symmetry in the abstract and quite another to realize it in concrete reality. The balance found in the Qur’an and Sunnah, therefore, is not every easy to establish in the here and now. As we try to come to terms with this situation, we continue to experience that an exclusive emphasis on fear is as misguided and dangerous in its consequences as an absolute accent on hope.

Today, the inability to adequately deal with the fear/hope dichotomy is a major cause of confusion among many Islamic groups. If we limit ourselves at the level of this dichotomy, we would inevitably feel that we must choose either fear or hope—that there is no third, fourth, or fifth options. Yet, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has directed us to find the middle way of faith between fear and hope. The middle way can be found only by accepting both fear and hope, but then going beyond both of them to something higher. How do we go about doing this? The key lies in our approach to Islam, which shapes how we understand our sacred texts as well as what we find in them. Because of its peculiar intellectual heritage that allows it to approach Islam in a balanced manner, IONA is in a unique position to transcend the fear/hope dichotomy. It has a distinct advantage in this regard.

How one approaches the Qur’an and the Sunnah depends to a large extent on whether one’s approach to God is determined primarily by His names of jalal or by His names of jamal, i.e., whether one is dominated by fear or hope. In each case, one would select those Ayat or a Hadith that correspond to one’s own dominant emotion and frame of reference. This creates two divergent understandings of what Islam is and how Muslims are supposed to act. The people of fear emphasize the strictness and harshness of Islam; the people of hope emphasize the leniency and flexibility of Islam. The people of fear insist that everyone in the world must submit to religion’s maximum requirements; the people of hope look for concessions and allow for religion’s minimum standards. Whereas the people of fear insist on qisas (retribution) in every case, the people of hope encourage ‘afw (forgiveness) in every case. Yet, the way to salvation lies somewhere in the middle—between qisas and ‘afw, between khawf and raja’. The road to salvation is found in locating the just balance that avoids extremes. The endeavor of finding the just balance, in turn, depends on knowing where the extremes are located and in figuring out how to transcend the extremes in any particular case. This insight is something with which most Muslims are (or should be) already familiar. It is fundamental to how they have been taught to understand the Qur’an and Sunnah.

Contemporary Islamic groups, should find the required balance that avoids the extremes of fear and hope. Islamic groups should strive in finding and practicing the middle way. Such an endeavor requires a self-critical attitude, one that does not shy away from acknowledging and correcting its own mistakes.

This work is not guaranteed to be always successful, for it is largely a matter of trial and error. Like the mujtahid who strives to formulate the right legal ruling, we may be sure of our rewards in the Hereafter but we cannot be sure of the correctness of each and every conclusion that we may reach. We cannot claim that we have already transcended extremes, that we are incapable of making any errors of judgment, or that we are free from the deceiving influence of Satan or of our own lower egos. In other words, we may not find the just balance for each issue in the very first attempt; in fact, it is likely that our first, second, or even third attempts will miss the target despite best intentions. Yet, the rewards of the Hereafter are compensations only for human struggle, while the success or failure of any given enterprise lies entirely in the hands of Allah (SWT). We are responsible for trying our best, not for actually succeeding. We are accountable for traveling on the road for as long as we can, not for reaching the destination. At the same time, our consecutive failures to find the right balance in any given issue only increases our chances of success in the future, provided we learn from our errors.

As we strive to find the elusive point of justice that avoids extremes of all kinds, we remind ourselves that only Allah (SWT) is the perfect “coincidence of opposites.” Only He combines within Himself in perfect harmony and balance the opposite qualities of beauty and majesty, wrath and mercy, distance and nearness. Human beings may try to approximate that harmony and balance, but—being weak, forgetful, hasty, and heedless—we always fall short of reaching divine perfection.

Still, it is our humble and inadequate struggle that is appreciated by Allah (SWT) who alone blesses it by giving it more value than it deserves on its own.