

Power of the word

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When we are motivated by goals that have deep meaning, by dreams that need completion, by pure love that needs expressing -- then we truly live life.
(Greg Anderson)

When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice.
(Cherokee saying)

Some quotes make us laugh, some let us think. A few grasp our soul, pull us into the magical world of words of wisdom, and affects us intensely.

Where does power of the word come from? How come a weak breath in resonance with nose, cheeks, and mouth can affect us so deeply? Clearly, language is the most powerful instrument of humans. Words play the miraculous show of languages to display ugliness and beauty, bitterness and sweetness, weakness and power. I wonder if anyone could solve this mystery.

Despite cultural dimension, words may have cross cultural effects. Some quotes are translated from one language to another, in each language they are reborn, live and eventually die.

Power of the word has deeply impressed humans since their existence. Thousands of years ago, Aryan's considered words as a god. In ancient India, while reading the holy book Rig Veda, the people were so impressed with the mysterious effects of sounds that they considered the words as appearance of the divine power which holds everything together and makes them alive.

The stories in the Bible affected great composers deeply. As such, they composed their best work for glorifying the Bible.

Recitation of the holy books, especially Torah and Koran has been considered as an emotional interaction between the Creator and the readers. Koran states that the words used by humans have a divine origin:

He has thought Adam all the names.
(Koran; The Cow (2)/31)

Humans are in search of transcendent knowledge. They feel obliged to give meaning to everything that they observe. It is obvious that words are effective means to carry meaning over from person to person, from yesterday to tomorrow.

The people who do not associate themselves with any religion also consider beautiful words as one of the most valuable assets of human beings. By listening music and reading books, they try to experience the transcendence.

Being able to speak is for every human a very a valuable gift. In every religion and belief, to speak and listen beautiful words is a respectful act. I have been wondering what the common values of human beings might be. Now, I begin to realize that beautiful words are our common values.

My curiosity dates back to a summer day. In front of an old mosque, around a fountain, I am sitting together with a couple of people. The weather is hot and dry. Aged trees stretch their leaves to protect us from the fierce sun. The spraying water gives us freshness.

The oldest one among us asks me: "You must have been in most places in the world". "Not everywhere, but due to my work, I have been in many countries, indeed". "Then, probably you have met many different kinds of people. Have you ever thought what the common values of human

beings might be?"

The shepherd who was sitting among us added: "They say philosophy is dead now. But then, what is going to guide human beings in the current age?"

The last question was asked by the pharmacist: "You scientists try to invent new things. With the advancement of technology, human beings are rushing towards an unknown destiny. Besides science, do you scientists also discuss what the future of human beings will be?"

Inability to give a quick answer to these questions brings me into deep thoughts.

If I am not able to discover the common values of human beings, what is the usage of visiting so many countries?

If I cannot clearly answer where the technological developments are leading human beings to, to whom it serves all the research effort that I have been spending since many years?

Ethics, also called morality, is a sub-branch of philosophy which aims to determine proper conduct of behavior.

Text books on ethics [1] generally start by introducing the history of ethics from the Ancient Greeks, Socrates and Aristotle, then continue with the Christian ethics, developments in the middle and new ages, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, and discuss some of the contemporary ideas.

There are a couple of questions, however, still keeps me puzzled:

First of all, most of the published text books on ethics only focus on the "western-oriented ethics".

Secondly, in parallel to the developments in science, study on ethics today shows a great diversity, such as "medicine ethics", "information and communication ethics",

etc. It is therefore promising to assess the effect of technological advancements on humans and society along these specializations. Uncertainty is one of the key characteristics of the rapidly developing technologies, and as such, ethical principles are introduced almost always too late. This makes it difficult to take timely measures against the harmful effects of a newly introduced innovative technology before the damage is made.

Lastly, and most importantly, we cannot ignore the fact that the past 100 years have been the bloodiest years of the human kind despite our claims that we have now reached to a very advanced state of civilization. The first and second world wars, Vietnam, Bosnia, Rwanda, destruction of the World Trade Center, Afghanistan, Iraq and many more disasters. These are not small scale wars among some "primitive tribes", but are killings among the nations that call themselves highly civilized, and devastation of a large amount of poor people who happens to be in the vicinity of the conflicts.

Diversification and introduction of new ethical principles are some very positive and promising developments. But, it looks like that the ones who have the power, are also very handy to rationalize and circumvent the principles, if their personal advantage is at risk.

All over the world, there are millions of displaced people.

There is an increase in racial discrimination in the so-called civilized countries of the world. The national policies undermine the human rights of the immigrated minorities by restricting their free choice of selecting their partners and by discouraging them to learn their mother tongue.

Despite the economical progress, there is still a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Especially in the large metropolises, increasingly growing numbers of people lose their traditional moral values. Gangs

terrorize the cities.

Unfortunately, rational thinking and law enforcement only are not sufficient to overcome such problems. We need a more profound and deep conviction to guide our behavior. Sincere belief in a religion could help us. Sadly, the fanatics in all religions misuse their faith in justifying their crimes.

But, is there any solution to all this misery? Who is going to overcome the power of hate and eliminate all that arsenal of weapons?

I believe we must seek refuge in the world of great thoughts that we all share. I have a relentless desire to seek the beautiful words that are being whispered, told, written and read, from parents to children, from generations to generations, which advise us decency, and guide us to a peaceful life.

The holy books tell us many beautiful stories as examples of decent behavior.

We are in Jerusalem of two thousand years ago.

A man approaches Hillel in a nervously defiant attitude. "I will embrace your belief. On the condition that you can teach me the whole of the Torah while I am standing on one foot." Straightway Hillel replies. "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now, go and study."
(Story from the Babylonian Talmud; Shabbat 31a)

What a concise, simple and yet powerful message!

Karen Armstrong has published several books [2-5] on our religious heritage. These books analyze the ethical values of ancient Aryans in Asia, Confucianism and Daoism

in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, philosophers of the Ancient Greece, Prophet Abraham and early Monotheism, Judaism and early Christianity in the Middle East, Roman Christianity, Prophet Muhammad and his time, Muslim thinkers in the middle ages, and Sufism.

I asked myself anxiously: Are there common principles that all these beliefs share?

A through reflection makes clear that all great religions and beliefs share certain principles that can be considered as their core advices:

1. Accept the universality of moral values, and desire happiness for all human beings;
2. It is more important what you do than what you believe;
3. Respect the free will and thought of every individual;
4. Refrain from aggression;
5. Control your ego and aim to reach high moral qualities such as empathy, compassion and love, respecting the truth, preserving the justice and peace.

In fact, according to Koran, the existence of common values among religions is very natural (see the annex):

And certainly We raised in every nation a messenger. (Koran; The Bee (16)/36)

To get to know that all human beings have inherited similar moral values, gives hope to me. The existence of all these beautiful words which have been carried from thousands of years ago, comforts me.

I stand up with joy, and start whirling as if I am a dervish. In my lips Rumi's powerful words, I turn and turn again:

*What shall I do, O Muslims? I do not
recognize myself,
I am neither Christian nor Jew, nor Magian,
nor Muslim,
I am not of the East, nor the West, not of the
land, nor the sea,
I am not from nature's mine, nor from the
circling stars,
I am neither of earth nor water, neither of
wind nor fire,
I am not of the empyrean, nor of the dust on
this carpet,
I am not of the deep, nor from behind,
I am not of India or China, not of Bulgaria,
nor Saqsin,
I am not of the kingdom of Iraqain,
nor of the land of Khorasan,
I am not of this world nor the next,
not of heaven, nor of purgatory,
My place is the placeless, my trace is the
traceless,
It is not the body nor is it the soul,
for I belong to the soul of my love. (Rumi)*

References

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, "A Short History on Ethics", University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, Second edition, 2002.
2. Karen Armstrong, "The Great Transformation", First Anchor Books Edition, 2007.
3. Karen Armstrong, "The Bible", Grove Press, 2007.
4. Karen Armstrong, "Mohammed: A Prophet of Our Time", HarperCollins, 2007.
5. Karen Armstrong, "A History of God", The Random House Publishing Group, 1993.
6. M. Arif Aksit, "The Differences between the East and the West (in Ethical aspects)", Draft report. 2003.

Annex: Justification of the five common principles from the perspective of Koran

In this section, by referring to Koran, the five common principles that are mentioned in this article will be justified. A similar study over the other great religions can be found in [2].

While interpreting Koran, the following method is used: (a) The annotations which are added to Koran are neglected; (b) Koran is considered as a whole. This means, if there are multiple interpretations of a verse, the ones that are in conflict with the other verses are not considered; (c) While interpreting the verses, the time and the context of the events are taken into account.

1. Accept the universality of moral values

And certainly We raised in every nation a messenger. (Koran; The Bee (16)/36)

Say: We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. (Koran; The Cow (2)/136)

Surely the religion with Allah is Islam. (Koran; The Family of Imran (3)/19)

According to these verses of Koran, Islam is the name of the common religion given to all human beings. From this perspective, Koran assumes the universality of moral values.

One may claim that the persons such Buddha and Confucius cannot be proven for sure to be among the prophets that are referred to by Koran (16/36), since their names are not explicitly mentioned. This article does not make this assumption. In fact, Koran calls all kinds of such theological speculations zannah- self indulgent – guesswork (10/36). Nevertheless, we consider the similarity among the advices of these great religions as an interesting historical fact.

We observe that the word Islam is frequently misinterpreted both by Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, referring to certain periods of time as pre-Islamic period is not meaningful because Islam refers to the religion which has started with Adam, and includes the

religions of the prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, and all other Prophets who are explicitly mentioned in Koran and the unnamed ones that were sent to every nation. In fact, at the time of Prophet Mohammed, Muslims did not exclusively name their religion as Islam [2].

2. It is more important what you do than what you believe

Surely those who believe, and those who are the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve. (Koran; The Cow (2)/62)

Allah has promised to those who believe and do good deeds, they shall have forgiveness and a mighty reward. (Koran; The Table (5)/9)

According to Koran, human beings will be awarded based on their good deeds. In these verses, the term “believing” is used in an abstract way including all revelations.

We see today that some states explicitly name themselves as Islamic. Unfortunately, most of these states suffer due to poverty, unrest, injustice, violation of human rights, poor scientific progress and less emphasis on artistic development. It looks meaningless to term a state Islamic, if that state and its society do not display a clear evidence of good behavior. This is because, in Koran, the term Islam refers to a set of high human quality values; it is not just a reference by name.

3. Respect the free will and thought of every individual

There is no compulsion in religion. (Koran; The Cow (2)/256).

You shall have your religion and I shall have my religion. (Koran; The Disbelievers (109)/6)

If it had been His will, He could indeed have guided you all. (Koran; Cattle (6)/149)

Koran describes itself in the following way [6]:

Koran, is the book (2/2, 3/7, 6/155, 21/10, 31/2) which confirms the previous revelations (12/111), and is a reminder (6/69), and is an advisor (21/10, 20/2, 3, 24/34, 54/17, 22, 32, 40,

51), and explains the right and the wrong (6/55, 12/111), and contains stories, news and knowledge (12/2, 2/120), and gives the natural laws and the others as examples (24/34, 31/31), and warns (2/119, 11/2), and is advised to follow (6/155), and is full of compassion (31/3, 12/111), and gives the good news (2/119, 11/2), and is a blessing (6/155), and contains knowledge and wisdom (31/2), and is a guidance, (2/2, 12/111, 31/3, 72/2) and is holy (6/155).

Koran does not define itself as a compulsion, pressure or punishment.

4. Refrain from aggression

If any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. (Koran; The Table (5), 32)

Whether open or secret; take not life, which Allah had made sacred, except by way of justice and law. (Koran; Cattle (6)/151)

Surely Allah enjoins the doing of justice and the doing of good and the giving to the kindred, and He forbids indecency and evil and rebellion; He admonishes you that you may be mindful. (Koran; The Bee (16)/90)

And if they incline to peace, then incline to it and trust in Allah; surely He is the Hearing, the Knowing. (Koran; Spoils of War (8)/61)

Koran advises us to refrain from aggression. The verses in Koran that refer to war and killing are valid during war conditions, and only for self defense. In fact these verses were given when Muslims were under attack. When the danger is over, it is advised to stop the animosity [4].

5. Control your ego and aim to reach high moral values

In Koran, human beings are advised to obtain high moral values at least in two ways:

- (a) According to Muslim tradition, there are at least 99 attributes of God that human beings may comprehend. The majority of these attributes can be found in Koran. Also according to Koran, human beings have the duty to be the representative of God on this earth (2/30). Muslims generally believe that in order to get closer to the Creator, one has to try to approach the great attributes of God as much as possible.
- (b) As it can be read in the following verses and the words of Prophet Muhammad, every human being is only responsible according to his/her capabilities, is advised to be just and correct and carry out good deeds. This shows that reaching to high moral values is considered as one of the major goals of the religion.

Allah does not charge a soul more than it can bear. (Koran; The Cow (2)/ 286)

Say: My Lord has commanded justice. (Koran; The Heights (7)/29)

Enjoin you righteousness upon mankind while you yourselves forget to practice it? (Koran; The Cow (2)/44)

Allah has promised to those who believe and do good deeds, they shall have forgiveness and a mighty reward. (Koran; The Table (5)/9)

And most surely you conform yourself to sublime morality. (Koran; The Pen (68)/4)

I am only sent to complement high moral values. (Prophet Muhammad, from Bukhari ve Muslim)

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