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The Spirituality of Gratitude

 According to Islamic spiritualists, gratitude comprises half of the religion and half of a person’s spirituality (Ibn Qayyim v.2 p. 200). Spirituality here is defined as a person’s relationship to God. Why does gratitude hold such a crucial place in spiritualty and why is its role so important? This essay seeks to better understand gratitude by exploring its spiritual implications. To prevent repetition and excessive citations of Islamic texts, this essay will focus on two main verses which will be discussed in the following paragraph. I argue that the implications of gratitude plays an essential role in a person’s spirituality because it forms a solid basis from which it grows and strengthens. I begin by referencing two verses from the Quran which highlight the implications of gratitude on spirituality. I follow with an elaboration of the definition of gratitude and then an in depth understanding of its spiritual dynamics. I conclude by offering an important concept which helps promote the application of gratitude in daily life.

 The Quran tells the reader of the importance of gratitude in two ways. First, worship, which is the essence of the relationship between man and the Creator, is conditional to gratitude “and be grateful to Allah if it is [indeed] Him that you worship” (2:172). The verse suggests that in order for an individual to truly worship God then they must express gratitude to God and that an ungrateful individual cannot be a worshiper of God. The second verse states the following “And be grateful to Me and do not deny Me” (2:152). The Arabic word used, translated here as ‘deny,’ is *kufr* which linguistically means to cover up. The word was adopted by the Quran to refer to someone who rejects God after learning of him (Asfahani). Both the linguistic and Quranic definitions are possibly meant in this verse and both seem to arrive at the same conclusion. That is, the absence of gratitude is an indicator of one’s rejection of God; the question is how and why?

 To answer these questions a better understanding of gratitude and its functions is required. Gratitude is defined as “the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness” (dictionary), however, psychologists offer a more specific definition. In order to fully appreciate gratitude it must be differentiated from indebtness and appreciation. Indebtness, in this context, refers to the expressing of gratitude due to it being an obligation. For example, if a person were to receive a favor, they feel a social or moral obligation to return the favor even if it is with an expression of thanks. Although this is a form of thanks, psychologists distinguish it from gratitude due to the two factors (1) it is an obligation which leads to (2) it can cause resentment and negative feelings. By being an obligation, the emotional power of gratitude is essentially lost because it is losses the heart factor – it is not coming from a response of emotion and want. As a result and due to a feeling of weakness, the beneficiary may develop negative feelings towards the benefactor (Burton 2014).

 Gratitude is also differentiated from appreciation which is “the recognition and enjoyment of the good qualities of a person or thing” (Burton 2014). Here, appreciation is a type of thankfulness but is void of emotion. That is, appreciation tends to manifest itself in an exclusively outward manner with words that are empty of meaning thus losing the key element of emotion. Therefore, psychologists view gratitude as the acknowledgment of something favorable that causes an emotional response and connection. It is further heightened when that emotional response affects the behavior of the person in the present and future. In other words, gratitude is beyond an expression of thanks, but response to an event or reality that can have profound effects on the individual.

 Switching over to the Islamic understanding of gratitude, one finds that the previous three terms, indebtness, appreciation, and gratitude, are all expressions of gratitude; rather, they are differentiated based on the level of gratitude. In other words, how a person expression gratitude differs. Where Islamic spiritualists differ with psychology is the relationship between gratitude and action. Psychology’s definition centers gratitude on an emotional response which manifests itself in a simple gesture such as a ‘thank you.’ Spiritualists, on the other hand, view gratitude as both a physical, emotional, and verbal response to something they are grateful for.

 Understanding a Quranic concept begins with understanding the word chosen by the Quran. The word *shukr* is used throughout the Quran and is commonly translated as gratitude. From a purely linguistic definition, *shukr* is the “the effect food has on the body of an animal” (Ibn Qayyim v. 2 p. 200). What is meant here is that when an animal eats food it becomes heavier which has a clear and visible effect on the animal. Therefore, *shukr* is the manifestation of a blessing or blessings on the entirety of a person. From here, spiritualists understood the goal of *shukr* and added an extra element to the definition and that is the acknowledgement that those blessings are from God. Thus, the definition of *shukr* as an Islamic spiritual concept is “the manifestation of God’s blessings verbally through praise and acknowledgement; emotionally on the heart through witnessing the blessings and loving God; and physically through submission and servitude” (*Ibid*).

 Based on this definition, the goal of *shukr* can be broken into five categories. First, gratitude that brings about the submission of the individual to his benefactor. In order for an act to be worthy of gratitude the beneficiary must conclude that the benefactor’s action was done for the sake of the beneficiary – thus making the benefactor benevolent. In other words, the benefactor is not benefiting in the least (Emmons *et al* 2004p. 62). When the individual recognizes his benefactor, God, as being completely independent of the individual and perfect in of himself, one concludes that the actions of the benefactor are purely in the best interest of the beneficiary resulting in the building of trust in God. The Quran utilizes this point multiple times explicitly stating that God has nothing to gain from the creations servitude nor does he lose anything from because of their disobedience (Q 2:255, 4:133, 35:15, 47:38). Through *shukr,* a person’s spirituality increases by recognizing God’s perfection and their own imperfection thus building the feeling of need for God and trust in him (Emmons *et al* 2002 p. 463).

 The second category is the love for the benefactor. Similar to the previous category, by identifying the motive of the benefactor one can better appreciate their favors. “Gratitude is fundamentally a moral affect with empathy at its foundation: In order to acknowledge the cost of the gift, the recipient must identity with the psychological state of the one who has provided it” (Emmons 2002 p. 461).[[1]](#footnote-1) That is, by recognizing God’s perfection one concludes that his blessings are entirely in the best interest of the beneficiary despite not bringing any return to him. Thus, the Quran utilizes this concept repeatedly throughout the book. To list a few, the Quran reminds the human reader that he created the human species directly with his two hands (38:75), he created them in the best physical and mental form (95:4), gave him nobility (17:70), commanded the angels to prostrate to him out of reverence (38:72-3), made him unique by giving him knowledge and language (2:31), exiled Satan who refused to revere him (7:13), allowed him into Paradise (7:19), forgave his mistake (2:37), designated angels to protect each individual (13:11) and supplicate God to forgive the believers (40:7-9), created an entire world that caters to his needs (2:29), among plenty of other blessings which express God’s love, care, and compassion of the human.

 The remaining three categories revolve around the individual acting upon their gratitude by acknowledging them, praising God for them and using them in a manner acceptable to God. In order for gratitude to play a role in spirituality, then the blessings one enjoys must be utilized in a manner that connects them with God. Initially, one must acknowledge that all blessings are from him thus establishing a connection between the self and the Divine. This is then elevated to where the individual views these blessings as more than inanimate objects but entities that serve a purpose. By doing this one begins to see and appreciate the wisdoms behind these created entities enlightening the individual to the Creators abilities and qualities. Finally, after recognizing the general and specific wisdoms behind each creation, one feels a greater sense of purpose, responsibility, and loyalty. That is, engaging the previous five categories establishes love for the benefactor (Ibn Qayyim v. 2 p. 203). Observing the care and compassion of the benefactor for his creation establishes the feeling of loyalty towards the one who has cared for us as well as responsibility since he created everything with purpose.

 The remaining question for the essay is how all this information functions in the greater realm of spirituality. That is, what is the dynamic of *shukr* in the individual’s relationship to God? To illustrate this, *surah Fatiha* (Q 1:1-7) offers a profound model of the relationship between the individual and God. According to an authentic *hadith[[2]](#footnote-2)* prayer functions as a two way engagement between God and the one praying; it is a conversation between them in which God responds to the recitation and motions of the one praying. This engagement is summarized in the middle verse “*it is You alone we worship and it is You alone we seek help from*” (Q 1:5). The verses prior to this one are dedicated to the praise of God and show the extent of his perfection while the verses following this verse are an invocation from the individual to God.

From here the first element, and perhaps the most critical, of spirituality is understood; God is perfect while the individual is in need. *Surah Fatiha* is bringing to light the fact that humans are incapable of reaching the ultimate goal of spirituality without God’s help and therefore are taught to ask him for it since he is perfect and therefore capable of offering it. *Isti’anah* (help) is offered by God to the invoker, as mentioned in verse 1:5, establishing the first link between God and the individual. By revealing *surah Fatiha,* teaching the reader how the invoke God, showing him his ability to respond to his requests, and by obligating the Muslim to recite it every day, by doing this God has taken the first step in building a relationship between the individual and himself. This link will be referred to as *link 1*.

Upon reading this chapter the individual has a choice to make, do they acknowledge their needs and the reality that only God can help them in this cause or do they reject God’s premise? If it is rejected then the relationship between him and God is stopped but not entirely cut off. *Link 1* remains and will remain until the end of the person’s life. That is, the Quran keeps the gateway between the Divine and mankind up constantly offering the individual an opportunity. God will always offer is *‘awn* (help) to humanity but it is upon them to utilize it. If, however, they acknowledge the premise of *surah Fatiha* and accept the reality of their need for God and the individual acts upon it, then the second link (*link 2*) is established. *Link 2* is represented in the first part of 1:5 “*it is You alone we worship*.” Worship, in Islamic spirituality, serves as the relationship between the individual and God while *‘awn* (help) serves as the relationship between God and the individual. There are many layers to worship in Islam and *link 2* manifests itself through the basic Islamic rituals – prayer, fasting, *dua* (invocation), etc.

A second type of *‘awn* (help) which God uses to initiate the relationship is the natural universe and the blessings it offers. Throughout the Quran, the reader is encouraged to observe and contemplate the natural wonders witnessed on a daily basis including the sun, the moon, and the mountains, among others. These entities are then tied into spirituality by offering two things (1) it offers the individual an observable representation of God and (2) is a manifestation of God’s care and compassion for his creation. As for the former, the physical universe being created by God allows the observer a means to understanding who God is. To elaborate with an example, the universe is a massive place filled with marvelous wonders which can be studied and offers great amounts of knowledge. Being the creator and designer of the universe, one can better know God through it by acknowledging God’s extensive knowledge. In other words, a functioning universe such as ours requires an unimaginable amount of knowledge and wisdom therefore God must be All-Knowledgeable and All-Wise. This holds true with most of God’s names and attributes.

The second way *‘awn* (help) manifests itself through the natural world is seen in the way God designed the universe and how each natural entity functions. What is found is that the natural world functions in a manner that caters to the needs and wants of humans. Such a design should be understood by the observer as an indication of God’s care for the individual. Analogous to this is the following example: while walking in a desolate land a person sees a structure ahead. Upon reaching the building the person realizes that it is a home and upon entering it he finds that it is fully functioning, clean, and designed in way that indicates it is meant for a family. Similarly, the universe is designed in a manner that indicates it was meant for humans and caters to their needs. The natural world shows the Creator’s *‘awn* (help) to those he created it for.

With *link 1* and *2* established, the relationship has completed one circle shedding light on an essential dynamic of worship – it is two way. In other words, spirituality in Islam is viewed as an engagement between the Divine and the individual where the individual responds to God’s commands and God responds to the individuals worship. Another unique and important aspect of this model is that the circle is continuous and capable of building upon itself. As for its continuity, God is continuously offering his *‘awn* (help) to the individual and the individual is worshiping God on a daily basis – at least 5 prayers per day. As for its capability to build upon itself, the Quran shows that when the individual responds to God’s *‘awn* (help) with worship, the relationship between God and the individual is strengthened through the concept of reward. That is, when the individual obeys God he rewards them for their efforts in various ways. It could be through the promise of Paradise and the glad tidings of it; it could be through worldly blessings; and it may be through other non-tangible blessings such as health, a strong family, or even being privileged with knowledge and wisdom. Here, *link 3* is established.

*Link 3* is a type of *‘awn* (help) that manifests itself through blessings, promises and rewards, which helps the individual persist with their spiritual engagements, motivates continuity and increased engagement. By rewarding the person’s spirituality, one sees the fruits of their efforts thus encouraging more spirituality. It is here, however, where I theorize most Muslims’ engagement with God stops and remains stagnant. Going back to *link 2*, the average practicing Muslim easily recognizes their basic religious duties to God and engages him on a daily basis. However, what the average Muslim overlooks is the *‘awn* that manifests itself in the natural world and in *link 3*. That is, in order to appreciate these two types of *‘awn*’s one must seek them out, observe, reflect, and understand the significance behind each. This is simply not practiced except by engaged spiritualists. Likewise, in order to appreciate *link 3* one must look for the rewards of their actions in their daily lives which is not always obvious. To give an example, the Quran promises to replenish any wealth that was spent in what pleases God “*And whatever you spend of good - it will be fully repaid to you*” (Q 2:272). If a person were to give to charity only to see it paid back in an unexpected manner, such a situation will strengthen that individual’s perception of God and their engagement with him. Experiencing this verse allows it to evolve from a abstract concept in the mind to a certainty in the heart; a type of certainty upon which *iman* (faith) grows. If however, this individual fails to make the connection between the unexpected wealth and the charity, the spiritual element is lost and the link is not established.

One may ask how this model fits into the topic of *shukr*. I argue that the continuation of the cycle and the establishment of *link 4* is precisely attained through the enactment of *shukr*. That is, the response of the *‘awn* of *link 3* is by worshiping God through the enactment of *shukr.* By doing this as per the various modes of *shukr* mentioned earlier and by recognizing how God is giving the individual, he is able to strengthen his relationship with God by strengthening their emotional attachment to him. Seeing the fruits of ones efforts and the reward therein allows the individual to experience spirituality along with practicing it. Reward is an expression of acceptance, love and compassion from God which should be received with awe, love, and inspiration.

After establishing *link 4* and completing the second circle, God responds to the person’s *shukr* in the manner mentioned in the Quran “*And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will surely increase you [in favor]*” (14:7). The question which this verse arouses is why does God reward *shukr* with an increase in blessings? The answer is requires a pretext on the purpose of creation. The Quran states that the reason he created humans is to worship him “*And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me*” (51:56). Furthermore, the creation also serves as a channel to increasing one’s knowledge of who God is “*It is Allah who has created seven heavens and of the earth, the like of them. [His] command descends among them so you may know that Allah is over all things competent and that Allah has encompassed all things in knowledge*” (65:12). The enactment of *shukr* profoundly serves these two purposes. Since it is enacted through the praise of God and other acts of worship *shukr* is an act of worship in of itself. Also, to perform *shukr* one must first appreciate and recognize the qualities of the benefactor thus fulfilling verse Q 65:12. Since the individual has utilized their blessings as a means of fulfilling their purpose and strengthening their relationship with God, God increases his blessings upon them so that they continue to increase their spirituality. God’s blessings are now understood to be *‘awn* (help) for the individual in that it helps him spiritually by serve the spiritual cause. If this is done, the individual will have properly established *link 5* after which God responds by further increasing his blessings and establishing *link 6* which leads to *link 7* etc.

This model of spirituality is heavily centered around blessings which begs the question, how does this model function for those who are stricken with hardships and lack of blessings? The response to this is in two ways (1) to reject the question as inaccurate and (2) the role of *sabr* (patience) in spirituality. As for the former, it is incorrect to claim that a person lacks blessings or that affluent people are at an advantage. To elaborate, the blessings which the Quran constantly refer to are not monetary or blessings which are allotted to some and withheld from others. Rather, the true blessings are those which are accessible to all individuals in an equal manner or similar manner. Among the most mentioned blessings in the Quran are the sun, moon, sky, clouds, and rain among others. What is in common between all these blessings are that they are natural, beyond human control, and therefore God given. All individuals have access to these blessings and therefore all individuals have the necessary elements of spirituality. Example passages in the Quran include 16:1-83, 24:41-45, 35:1-41.

As for the latter, it is accurate to say that some people live harsh and tough lives. Islamic spirituality will comment, however, that tribulation (*‘ibtilaa’*) is a form of *‘awn* (help) from God. That is, through *‘ibtilaa*’ the individual is being trained or reminded to strengthen their relationship with God among other functions. In such scenarios, one worships God through the spiritual concept of *sabr* (patience) which is beyond the context of this essay.

Finally, this model of spiritual engagement is rooted in the Quran and is illustrated in various passages. Among them is the following:

“*Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day are signs for those of understanding. Who remember Allah while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying], "Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly; exalted are You [above such a thing]; then protect us from the punishment of the Fire. Our Lord, indeed whoever You admit to the Fire - You have disgraced him, and for the wrongdoers there are no helpers. Our Lord, indeed we have heard a caller calling to faith, [saying], 'Believe in your Lord,' and we have believed. Our Lord, so forgive us our sins and remove from us our misdeeds and cause us to die with the righteous. Our Lord, and grant us what You promised us through Your messengers and do not disgrace us on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed, You do not fail in [Your] promise."* *And their Lord responded to them, "Never will I allow to be lost the work of [any] worker among you, whether male or female; you are of one another. So those who emigrated or were evicted from their homes or were harmed in My cause or fought or were killed - I will surely remove from them their misdeeds, and I will surely admit them to gardens beneath which rivers flow as reward from Allah, and Allah has with Him the best reward"* (3:190-95).

*Link 1* is established by God’s *‘awn* which is expressed through the creation and the wonders and wisdoms it offers. Through the creation, the observer is taken with awe and emotion and realizes that the one who created it will not have do it void of reason and purpose. Thus, they respond to the *‘awn* by worshiping God through *dua* (invocation) establishing *link 2*. The series of verses are concluded with a response from God stating that he accepts their efforts and will reward compensate them for it. *Link* 3 is established.

 One final element of *shukr* which is important to mention is its role with other spiritual concepts. The ancient philosopher Cicero states that “gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others” (Emmons 2002 p. 459). What is interesting is that Ibn Qayyim makes a similar comment asking “and what level of spirituality is higher than *shukr* which all other levels of faith are subcategories of – even love and contentment (*rida*)” (Ibn Qayyim v.2 p.205)? This, along with the previous model of spirituality begin to elaborate the Quranic verses which correlate *shukr* to faith. Not only is it critical to an individual’s relationship to God, but embodies other elements of spirituality. *Shukr* directly effects two important elements of spirituality.

 Exegetes of the previously referenced verses (2:152, 172) tends to focus on the enactment element of *shukr* without mention of its spiritual function. This is not to say that they denied it, perhaps it was omitted for the sake of brevity. Their choice, however, to focus on the enactment part may be due to the sheer difficulty of being consistently grateful and by acting out *shukr*, it draws their attention to the other elements it offers. Al-Sa’di states that “*shukr* in this verse (2:172) refers to good deeds” (Al-Sa’di 66). The focus here is on the physical manifestation of *shukr* which is by using one’s blessings as a means of building spirituality. Since God created these blessings with purpose – they express God’s love and care for us and should be used to strengthen spirituality – they should be used in a manner that fulfills that purpose. For example, the sense of vision is among the greatest blessings a person has. The spiritual purpose of vision is to observe the natural world in order to better know God. If a person does this then they have proper offered *shukr* for the blessing of vision. If, however, it is used in a manner that distances the individual from God – what is referred to in Islamic spirituality as sins – then they have rejected (*kafara*) that blessing.

In sum, the role gratitude is given in the Quran indicates its critical status to a person’s spirituality. Various verses allude to the fact that *shukr* is fundamental to faith and a person who fails to adhere to the conditions of *shukr* is at risk of losing faith. This essay explores the spiritual implications and dynamics of gratitude in an attempt to better understand those verses. The results show that *shukr* serves as a means to better knowing God which manifests itself through a series of phases. First, the individual must search for the blessings and by doing that changes their perspective from focusing on the wants to focusing on what they already have. This leads to greater appreciation and recognition of the positives in ones life allowing the person more optimism. Second, the person links those blessings to the benefactor – here being God – which reveals many elements of who God is and his concern for his creation. Once this is internalized in the person’s hearts, its benefits begin to manifest itself on the person’s heart, mind, and body; it manifests itself in the form of love for God and submission to him. *Shukr* ultimately reveals the extent God’s love and concern for the individual which strengthens the trust and love of the individual for God.

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1. Islamically speaking, it is not befitting to claim that God has a psyche or that he can be analyzed psychologically. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Narrated by Muslim [↑](#footnote-ref-2)