

Contemporary Psychological Challenges to Humanity: A Quranic Solution

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary challenges facing humanity are multi-faceted. Especially advancement of technology has ushered a new generation of millennials with their own unique set of problems and challenges. Amidst other things, this new era has taken its toll on peoples` mental health. According to World health organization`s (2018) report on depression, globally 300 million people across all ages suffer from depression. In addition some of the issues underlying these mental disorders, prevalent at an alarming rate, are issues of self-esteem, a sense of purposeless, body-image, and pathologic worrying about future. This study attempts to explore how Quran, the holy text of the Muslims helps to do away with the issues of mental health. The reason for taking Quran as an object of analysis is that it is a text of religious authority for Muslims and therefore important in shaping their worldview. In order to achieve this objective the relevant verses of the Quran will be identified, then themes will be drawn at two levels, one at the level of translation of the verses and the other at the level of the interpretation (exegesis). The analysis of the identified verses reveals the following themes: spirituality (a connection with the divine), superiority of man over the rest of the creation, and certain Islamic practices which help to do away with the issues of mental health. It, therefore, becomes evident that Quran promotes those thoughts and behaviors which equip humans to deal with challenges that face humanity at any given time.

Keywords: *Contemporary challenges, exegesis, mental health, self-esteem, body-image, pathologic worrying, spirituality, Quran.*

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With the mind-boggling advancements in the field of science and technology, an individual living in 21st century has many challenges to face. Today when cloning, artificial intelligence and internet of things are changing the dynamics of the world man has inhabited, man`s role is subtly tending towards re-definition. While exploring the challenges facing humanity in 21st century, Harari (2018) points out that people in this century will have to fight irrelevance in face of the emerging and seemingly flawless services of artificial intelligence. Furthermore, he writes though the poor of today are better than king`s of tomorrow yet anti-depressants

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are being consumed at an alarming rate that it has resulted in opioid epidemic. Therefore, the paradox is, despite the blooming development, this new era has taken its toll on peoples` mental health. According to World health organization`s (2018) report on depression, globally 300 million people across all ages suffer from depression. Some of the issues underlying these mental disorders, prevalent at an alarming rate, are issues of *self-esteem, a sense of purposeless, body-image, and pathologic worrying about future.*

Self-esteem is the panacea of modern life. It is seen as the key to financial success, health, and personal fulfillment, and it is regarded as the antidote to underachievement, crime, and drug abuse (Branden, 1994; Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989). However the paradox is that self-esteem is also associated with psychiatric illnesses, for instance too little of it leads to depression and too much of it leads to narcissistic tendencies. Mankind in 21st century has in no way found an escape to depression or narcissism. In fact its manifestations have changed with the advancement in technology. Owing to this advancement, we have cyber-pathology as an added term to the list of pathologies. Likewise one of the common manifestation of age-old concept of narcissism (extreme self-love) in today`s technology driven world is selfitis (obsession with taking selfies). This indicates that though the manifestations of certain problems of mankind change with changing societies, but the underlying mechanisms of these problems remain same.

In light of these issues facing humanity, this paper attempts to explain Quranic idea of man`s worth. Besides giving a balanced view of man`s worth, Quran envisions each man with a mission. This in turn gives a sense of responsibility and purpose to one`s existence which really acts as an anti-dote for depressive thoughts and behaviors.

Quranic solutions to the contemporary challenges

Following verses were identified from the Quran which equips a person to meet the challenges of modern man. Themes derived from these verses are: *spirituality, superiority of man, a sense of purpose, and Islamic practices.*

Analysis of the verses

Theme 1: Spirituality: Connection with the divine

Spirituality can be a character strength. In fact Peterson and Seligman (2004), while identifying 24 character strengths in their *Values in Action (VIA)* classification of human strengths, they identified spirituality as one of the character strengths under the moral virtue of *transcendence*. They define *transcendence* as “strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning” and they define

spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose] as having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.

1.1 Spirituality in Quran

1.1.1 Spirituality at an unconscious level as primordial human nature:

So, set your face to the Faith steadily, this (faith) being the fitrah (nature) designed by Allah on which He has created the mankind. There is no change in Allah's creation. That is the straight faith, but most of the people do not know. (Al-Quran, 30:30)

The above verse indicates that it is the innate predisposition in man to recognize Oneness of God. This owes to a Quranic statement about the ontological covenant that the mankind took before their physical existence in this world, when they were asked "Am I not your Lord?" and they replied "Of course". The fact that recognizing God is an inborn tendency of humans is reflected in tough times, whenever a person faces difficulties, he calls unto God; many ayaat in Quran reflect this aspect of human nature, particularly referring to a sea journey wherein a storm may drown a ship and the on-boarders realizing the threat call unto God for help, for example, "*And when you face a hardship at sea, forgotten are those who you used to invoke, except Him (Allah). Then, once He brings you safe to the land, you turn away (from Him). And man is so ungrateful*" (Al Isra, 17:67). Raazi explains this ayah, he writes that hardship here means extreme fear, such as fear of drowning. In face of such a difficulty man turns to true God, but once God helps him to escape this adversity, he turns away from Him. Therefore, man is ungrateful by nature as he remembers God in adversity and forgets Him in ease. It is this innate connection with the God which acts as a coping mechanism for man in the face of his miseries.

1.1.2 Spirituality at a conscious level:

So, know for sure that there is no god but Allah, and seek forgiveness for your fault, and for (the faults of) the believing men and believing women. And Allah knows your moving from place to place and your permanent abode. [47:19]

Besides having an innate connection with the God, the above verse commands mankind to consciously know and internalize the principle of *tawheed* (that is, oneness of God). The stages of acquisition of this knowledge are being underscored by Qushayri who writes that initially a bondsman knows God through logical arguments then slowly more description and arguments are added to this knowledge. Finally it is through the remembrance of God in heart that the state of

this knowledge culminates into a state of certitude. Once this stage is acquired the bondsman gets engrossed in the existence of His Creator to this extent that he tends to forget himself and the people around him. Buqa`I explains this by an apt analogy. He gives an example of a person who acquires knowledge about sea in stages. The first stage is to know that there is a sea, the second stage is to see the sea and seeing it will certainly add more dimensions to the knowledge of the sea but the third stage is to get immersed in the sea where only sea remains in the conscious realm of the mind. This is how the knowledge of the Divine has to proceed from reason to complete immersion. One explicit implication of immersion in the Divine is reduced concern with mundane materialistic worries. In this respect, a question arises, how to know the Divine? Since the essence of Divine is beyond comprehension, therefore, He can be known only through His Divine attributes. For instance, Allah says in the Quran which is be translated as, "So, when it was clear to him, he said: 'I know that Allah is Powerful over everything.'" (2:259); "And know that Allah is Mighty, Wise." (2: 260). These verses give few attributes of Allah, like powerful, mighty and wise. Now in dealing with the problems of this world, a connection with a Divine Being who happens to be powerful, mighty and wise can ease the stress of facing the challenges of this world. It instills a sense of positivity and optimism amidst the gloom and despair of one`s problems.

Theme 2: Superiority of man: realizing one`s status

2.1 Allah`s vicegerent/representative on earth

And when your Lord said to the angels, "I am going to create a deputy on the earth!" They said, Will you create there one who will spread disorder on the earth and cause bloodsheds, while we, along with your praises, proclaim Your purity, and sanctify Your name?" He said certainly, I know what you do not know. And He taught Adam the names, all of them; then presented before the angels, and said, "Tell me their names, if you are right." They said to you belong all purity! We have no knowledge except what you have taught us. Surely, you alone are the all-knowing, all-wise". He said, "O Adam, tell them the names of all these." When he told them their names, Allah said, 'Did I not tell you the secrets of the skies and of the earth, and that I know the secrets of the skies and of the earth, and that I know what you disclose and what you have been concealing (2:30-33)

"And We bestowed dignity on children of Adam and provided them with rides on the land and in the sea, and provided them with a variety of good things and made them much superior to many of those We created. (17:70)"

Now there are three questions with respect to man`s being honored: First, in what respect is man honored (Does honor lie in materialistic success or is there anything more than that)? Second, how is this honor manifested in the universe?; and Third, what makes man worthy of this honor?

Mostly the idea promoted in the Islamic tradition which is informed by the Quran is that man`s honour lies in the fact that he/she houses a soul. A soul sets man apart, makes him worthy of taking charge of the world. Therefore, the scientific endeavor of taming nature for serving humankind is fine in its place, but the attitude that Quran promotes towards this progress is completely different. Indeed humans have reached pinnacles of success, achieving strange milestones in science and technology every passing year but they are not superior because of material success brought forth by their material bodies, they are superior because they own a soul. There are some spiritual honors which are common to all like, the honors of -housing a soul which has its origin from Allah Himself (*“blow in him of My spirit”*); teaching man knowledge, (*And He taught Adam the names, all of them, 2:31*); talking to Allah (*“Am I not your Lord”*? To which they answered, *“Of course”*); making a covenant of obedience to Him; and manifesting miracles for man.

There are some spiritual honors that are specific to Allah`s chosen ones. These include: being guided to the Straight path, moving beyond this materialistic realm to the transcendental one, internalizing the Divine attributes of Allah, and giving up the earthly desires to experience a connection with the Divine. (Buqai)

These special spiritual honors work as protective factors for man against the worries of this world. Furthermore to boost one`s self-esteem man is being made to think that he is superior than the rest of the creation. Man`s honor is specially manifested in the fact that the entire universe acts in his service. The sun, moon, stars, rain, clouds and other things are serving man and amazingly enough without man`s control over them (Shurawi). The Quran reiterates the subservience of the universe to man at many places, for example, it says, “Are you not aware that Allah has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, both outward and inward?” (31:20)

Some say that man is honored because of his intellect (Raazi, Asad); others say because of his ability to distinguish between right and wrong; yet some say because of his free-will; whereas some believe it is because of the appearance of man- his erect posture and the beautiful design of his hands which sets him apart than the rest of the creation.

Firstly, Allah bestowed Adam with knowledge which made him superior than angels; secondly, Allah made the angels to prostrate to Adam and thirdly Allah accepted Adam's repentance. (Buqa`i). All these honors made man a natural candidate for being Allah's vicegerent on earth. His superiority over the rest of the creation was symbolically demonstrated by angels prostrating to him but the fact that the entire universe works for the service of man sets him distinct, worthy of dominion. (Shurawi).

Theme 3: A sense of purpose

It is not for you to put them on the right path. Rather, Allah puts on the right path whom He wills. And whatever good you spend is for your own selves, and you shall not spend but to seek the pleasure of Allah. And whatever good you spend, shall be paid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged. (2:272)

In the present context, the term "li wajh-i-llah" which is translated as "pleasure of Allah" is the object of interest. However while setting the context it is pertinent to mention that this passage in the Quran talks about charity. But it is charity with a purpose and the purpose is seeking pleasure of Allah.

Moreover, the Arabic expression, "li wajh-i-llah" is very interesting and powerful as it literally means "for the face of Allah". So why to say "for the face of Allah" instead of a simpler expression which would be "for Allah's sake"? Raazi, a famous exegete points two reasons for this usage. One is that it is more powerful to say "for someone's face" rather than simply saying "for someone's sake". Because it bestows dignity to that Being for whom an act is being done. The other reason is that it adds exclusivity to this Being. Therefore, it can be concluded that any virtuous act (like charity etc) need to be carried out for the pleasure of a transcendent reality that is, Allah rather than for any concrete or tangible reason. This, in effect, is the essence of spirituality, a connection with the divine being and in Islam this connection happens to be a primary motivator of a person's deeds. Now this dimension of having a relation with a divine being and doing things for His sake actually changes the dynamics of one's thought process in a positive direction. It helps to do away with a pathological worrying and a sense of immediacy and urgency that is the underlying factor in many psychological problems. For instance, when a person does well, he or she wants immediate results whether it is in terms of success or acknowledgement or appreciation or recognition. And the failure to achieve any of these desired outcomes lands a person in the state of despair. On the contrary, a spiritual dimension gives an existential meaning and purpose to a person's life which is beyond and much higher than the mundane materialistic desires.

Theme 4: Islamic practices

*Indeed man is created weak in courage, very upset when touched by evil, and very niggard when visited by good (fortune), except the performers of **salah**, who are regular in their **salah**, and those in whose riches there is a specified right for the one who asks and the one who is deprived, and those who believe in the Day of Judgment as true, and those who are fearful of the torment of their Lord - Indeed the torment of their Lord is not something to be fearless from and those who guard their private parts, except from their wives and those (slave-girls) owned by their hands, because they are not to be blamed, but the one who seeks (sexual gratification) beyond that, then such people are the transgressors, and those who are careful about their trusts and covenants, and those who are upright in their testimonies, and those who take due care of their **salah**. Those will be honored in gardens (of Jannah). (70:19-34)*

Now this verse says that the innate quality of all people is that they are restless except those who do the following practices: *be regular in prayer, give charity, believe in hereafter, practice chastity, be trustworthy, keep promises, and stand firm on witnesses*. Each one of these practices is an enormous asset for a person to live a dignified, healthy and meaningful life.

Conclusion

Although the challenges of 21st century for humankind are enormous, yet a prescription provided by ages old religion of Islam is timeless. The basic underlying premise for facing challenges of any era is same and that is, establishing and fostering a connection with the Divine. It is this connection which liberates, soothes, nourishes and flourishes a person. It gives meaning and purpose to one`s life and when one finds meaning in life, its natural consequence is a happy and contented life.

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