Synopsis of Friday Sermon
Ameer Mustapha Elturk

Shari’ah – Part 6 (Protection of Intellect)

Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on July 22, 2011

The fifth objective of Shari’ah is the protection of intellect (hifz al-‘aql), the other four being protection of faith, life, wealth, and progeny.

What is ‘aql (intellect)? What is its purpose? Where does it reside in the human body? These are questions that need to be expounded because ‘aql plays an important role in man’s life. It can either benefit or ruin man in both worlds; hence the necessity to preserve and protect it.

Al-‘aql is derived from the root word (ل ق ع), which means to detain, to arrest, to comprehend, and to have intelligence. As a term, it means intellect, discernment, and intelligence. It may be defined or understood as the mind’s ability to apply knowledge to a problem solving situation, or a power of the mind by which one knows, think, plan, and learn. It is al-‘aql that differentiates man from animals and makes him occupy a unique position among God’s creations. “We have honored the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea; We have provided good sustenance for them and favored them specially above many of those We have created” (al-Isra’, 17:70).

People generally believe that the seat of al-‘aql is the brain. The Qur’an tells us that it is the heart. Allah (SWT) explains this by saying, “Have they not travelled about the earth and do they not have hearts to understand with or ears to hear with?...” (al-Hajj, 22:46). To clarify the matter, Allah (SWT) specifically refers to the heart that is in the chest, which implies the physical heart that is responsible for the intellect. This is further corroborated by the hadith which states, “Indeed there is in the body a piece of flesh which if it is sound, then the whole body is sound, and if it is corrupt, then the whole body is corrupt. Indeed it is the heart.”

The brain is the central processing unit (CPU) of the body where all information and data are collected through the faculties of hearing and seeing, and then transmitted to the heart, but it is the heart that takes the decision and commands the brain to do or not to do something. Therefore, it is the heart that is responsible for comprehending, and understanding. This becomes all the more clear with the ayah, “And most certainly We have destined for hell many of the jinn (invisible beings) and men who have hearts with which they fail to understand...” (al-‘Araf, 7:179).

The Qur’an adopts the word fu’ad to mean both heart and also intellect. Surat al-Qasas explains, “Moses’ mother felt a great emptiness in her heart (fu’ad) and she was going almost to disclose his (case), had We not strengthened her heart (with faith), so that she might remain a (firm) believer” (28:10). The same word fu’ad is used to mean intellect as we have in Surat al-Mulk, “Say (O prophet), it is He who brought you into being and gave you hearing, sight and understanding (af‘idah, plural of fu’ad). What little thanks you give!” (al-Mulk, 67:23).

Referring to Ibrahim (AS), Allah (SWT) talks about his sound heart (al-qalb al-saleem) that refused to reconcile with the polytheism of the idolatrous household and environment in which he was living, and was both rationally
and inherently directed towards tawhid or the absolute oneness of Allah (SWT). “Verily among those who followed his (Noah) way was Abraham, when he came to his Lord with a sound heart” (al-Saffat, 37:83-84). Allah (SWT) certifies to Ibrahim (AS)’s pure monotheism when He says, “…And he (Ibrahim) was never of those who associate partners with God” (al-Baqarah, 2:135).

There are two main purposes of the intellect. The first is to reflect and recognize the signs around us in order to arrive at the truth. The second is to think and plan of how to live our religious and secular lives in this world in the best way possible.

Among the things that help us preserve and protect the intellect are the obligation of learning and the obligation of reflection. Seeking beneficial knowledge helps protection and strengthening of faith. According to a hadith, seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim male and female. There is another hadith that says, “If anyone pursues a path in search of knowledge, Allah will thereby make easy for him a path to paradise.” The very first word revealed to Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was the imperative or command “Read,” which denotes knowledge. It was the urge to seek knowledge that had made the early Muslims during their heyday ahead of their times. This Islamic thinking that remained the dominant paradigm of the whole humanity for centuries needs to be revived and revitalized.

Allah (SWT) acknowledges the difference between those who have knowledge and those who don’t. “...Say (O prophet), ‘Are those who know equal to those who do not know?’ Only those who possess intellect take admonition” (al-Zumar, 39:9). The possessor of true knowledge in fact is close to Allah (SWT) and close to truth. “…Only those of Allah’s servants who have knowledge fear Him” (Fatir, 35:28).

To reflect, ponder, and contemplate in order to recognize the truth is also a source of preserving and protecting the intellect. There is a reality of the world of matter that can be observed and experienced through our senses. There is another reality that belongs to the realm of the unseen. For example, even though we do not see God as He is transcendent, yet by pondering over His countless signs spread around us, our intellect can rationalize His existence as an undeniable reality. The Qur’an invites us to reflect on the signs of God. “Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding; those who remember Allah, standing, sitting and lying on their sides, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying), “Our Lord, You have not created this for nothing. Glory be to You! So safeguard us from the punishment of the Fire”(Aal’Imran, 3:190-191). Man, when he reflects on the signs of Allah (SWT), using his pure heart, reaches the conclusion that there can be only one God who is responsible for the existence of this whole universe.

Although man has made great strides in gaining knowledge of the material world, yet he continues to struggle to find answers to the basic fundamental questions such as, “Who am I?” “From where have I come, and to where do I go?” And, “What is the purpose of life?” The answers to such questions can only be known through revelations that have been revealed to the prophets and messengers by Allah (SWT) from the dawn of human history.

Once a framework of belief is established and our relationship with the creator and the creation are understood, we can use our intellect to think and plan in order to live our worldly and religious lives in the best way possible. Emphasizing the importance of achieving excellence and perfection in whatever we do, the Prophet (SAW) said, “Allah has ordained excellence in everything,” and “Whatever you do, do it to perfection.”

It is meaningful to practice our faith with full use of the intellect. This is conducive to understand the wisdom behind Allah (SWT)’s commands and prohibitions, and behind the various modes of worship. We learn from the Qur’an that salah helps us in the remembrance of Allah (SWT), fasting helps us to attain taqwa (God consciousness), zakah helps us to purify ourselves and our wealth, hajj helps us to renew our covenant with Allah (SWT) and seek His forgiveness. Understanding the wisdom behind the modes of worship makes them more meaningful. They no longer remain something to be done out of habit and tradition. Thus, the God gifted faculties of hearing, seeing, and intellect have to be put in good use at all levels, whether individual and collective or private and public.

As a rule of thumb, shari’ah prohibits anything that threatens the protected, inalienable rights of people pertaining to their faith, life, wealth, posterity, and intellect. Going by this rule, there are two main things that threaten
the 'aql or intellect. These are: (1) intoxicants and (2) entertaining or cultivating harmful thoughts and ideas. Hence, both of them are prohibited in Islam.

Khamr is the generic Qur’anic term for every intoxicant. All speculations about a certain substance being khamr or not and whether it is prohibited or not have been resolved by the prophetic hadith which unequivocally states, “Every intoxicant is khamr and every khamr is prohibited.” The Prophet (SAW) also defined khamr as anything which befogs the mind. Intoxicants dull the brain, cloud the mind, and produce psychedelic effects that affect the brain. The heart gets wrong signals from the brain and therefore its capacity to make sound and correct decisions is impaired.

There are people who argue that there are benefits in drinking and gambling. Allah (SWT) informs in the Qur’an that the harm and sin in indulging in these habits is far greater than their benefits. “They ask you (O prophet) concerning wine and gambling. Say, ‘There is a great sin in both, and some benefit for people, but their sin is greater than their benefit’... Thus does God make clear to you His messages, so that you might reflect”(al-Baqarah, 2:219). “O you who believe, intoxicants, and games of chance, and idolatrous practices, and the divining of the future are but abominable acts of Satan. Therefore, avoid them so that you may be successful” (al-Ma’idah, 5:90). Hence, intoxicants and gambling are both prohibited.

Entertaining and cultivating harmful thoughts and ideas may distract us from the truth. This practice constitutes a threat to the intellect and is therefore discouraged. An example of this is to delve into the issue of ‘Essence and Being of God’. We are not permitted to enter into debates and discussions about the Supreme Being. The Prophet (SAW) is reported to have advised people to think about anything other than the essence of Allah (SWT). He also advised us to reflect on the creation of Allah but not to reflect on His Being. This is because the Being of Allah (SWT) is incomprehensible. “…There is nothing like Him…” (al-Shura, 42:11).