

PITFALLS

—♦ OF THE ♦—

PRACTICING MUSLIM

Surkheel Sharif

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Pitfalls of the Practicing Muslim

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TABLE *o f* CONTENTS

Foreword	5
1. Convert, Not Revert	7
2. Beware of Self-Conceit	11
3. Outward Obsession	15
4. Weaponising Religiosity	22
5. The 'Holier-Than-Thou' Syndrome	26
6. Shaykh Google to Mufti AI	29
7. Too Much, Too Quick	34
8. Islam Isn't A Joyless Checklist	38
9. Keep to the Consensus	42
10. Allah as Neighbour, Not Stranger	46

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

FOREWORD

For converts, learning how to gradually grow into an observant, ‘practicing’ Muslim has a host of complex challenges. For those born into Muslim families, the journey towards becoming practicing presents its own set of hurdles. Once practicing, however, both the convert and born Muslim are exposed to the same set of pitfalls or challenges. In an age of endless information, competing voices, and highly conflicting claims to authenticity, it’s all too easy to get confused, fall for unsound methodologies, or unknowingly embrace interpretations which depart from the classical scholarly consensus (*ijma’*).

Sincerity aside; it is not enough merely to claim to follow the Qur’an and *Sunnah* — the two root sources of Islam. Since the Qur’an and *Sunnah* often need interpreting. So that interpretation

can be our own desires and half-baked learning, or some contemporary voice that is in complete opposition to the classical *ijma*‘, or it can be the *ijma*‘ of a galaxy of highly learned scholars who knew the Qur’an and *Sunnah* far better than we, or any other person in this age, ever will. Thus, without a grounding in the Qur’an, *Sunnah* and the inherited classical scholarly tradition, even the most well-intentioned Muslim may end-up gradually adopting ideas, attitudes or practices that subtly reshape the religion itself.

It’s these contemporary pitfalls that practicing Muslims can fall into — and the principles that help us avoid them — that this booklet seeks to address. This is not meant to be a scolding, nor a finger wagging, but an encouragement to be grounded, engage in thoughtful reflection, and remain within the safe pastures of the *ijma*‘.

Surkheel Abu Aaliyah
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1. CONVERT, NOT REVERT

This one, although not quite a pitfall, helps demonstrate just how people can start-off with a sound principle, and then put a spin on it to make it at complete odds with the prophetic practice.

How many times has someone insisted upon this alleged ‘correction’ in a gathering, social media post or conversation: ‘He’s a revert to Islam, *not* a convert!’ Yet how often has anyone stopped to question whether that distinction is truly valid in Islamic theology, or whether the Prophet ﷺ ever told anyone who had taken the *shahadah* that they had come back to Islam or re-entered; reverted to, Islam? Or did he simply ask them to ‘submit’, be Muslim, rather than re-submit? It’s a question which people seem never to ask; even though droves of people became Muslims

at the hands of the blessed Prophet ﷺ, and the hadith corpus relate many of those conversions (not reversions).

Nor is this just semantics or being finicky about terms. For the use of revert, instead of convert, is now widespread, particularly among English-speaking Muslims. Anecdotally, we hardly ever find the ‘correction’ offered gently. Instead, it’s given forcefully; along with implying that to use convert isn’t just wrong, but reflects a defect in one’s understanding of Islam.

So how did this error arise? Well, it is a case of starting with a good premise, but ending with a wrong conclusion. The argument runs like this: Muslims believe that all people are born with an innate, natural sense of God. Islam terms this: *fitrah*. One famous hadith states: ‘Every child is born upon *fitrah*, but it is his parents that make of him a Jew, Christian or a Magian.’¹ Becoming Muslim, then, is seen as a return to that innate,

1. Al-Bukhari, no.1358; Muslim, no.2658.

1.CONVERT, NOT REVERT

primordial state. So for this reason they insist that one is a revert — since one has returned to a former condition or belief.

As appealing as this logic might sound, it does not have the support of scripture. It is a case of one plus one equals three – the ingredients on one side of the equation are fine, but the final conclusion is not. For as said before, droves of people accepted Islam in the Prophet's life ﷺ, and at his hands. His call to them was simply: *aslim* – ‘enter Islam,’ ‘submit,’ ‘become Muslim’; not: ‘re-submit’ or ‘re-enter’ Islam.

For example: Anas relates: ‘A young Jewish boy used to serve the Prophet ﷺ and he became ill. So the Prophet ﷺ went to visit him. Sitting by his head, he ﷺ said: ‘Become a Muslim (*aslim*)!’ The boy looked at his father who was with him, and who said to him: ‘Obey Abu'l-Qasim.’ So he submitted/became Muslim (*fa aslam*).’² There's nothing about re-entering Islam.

2. Al-Bukhari, no.1356.

Another example is when the Prophet wrote to Heraclius inviting him to Islam, saying: *aslim taslam* – ‘Submit, and be saved.’³ Again, there’s no invitation to come back to Islam or re-enter Islam.

Or take these triumphant words of Ibn Mas‘ud: ‘We have not ceased to be strong since the time ‘Umar submitted (*mundhu aslama ‘umar*).’⁴ Yet again, there’s no suggestion of re-submitting or reverting.

In summary: Calling someone a revert can be a pitfall of sorts, as it elevates a newly-invented theological notion into a supposedly mandatory term. The Qur’an and *Sunnah* invite people to submit (*aslama*), not: ‘re-submit;’ so correcting ‘convert’ as if it were wrong is to go beyond the language of the Book and *Sunnah* when no such reason warrants doing so.

3. Al-Bukhari, no.7; Muslim, no.1773.

4. Al-Bukhari, no.3684.

2. BEWARE OF SELF-CONCEIT

This is quite likely the worst pitfall a person of any religious faith or practice could fall into, and Islam and Muslims are no exception. Self-conceit or *‘ujb* (which can also translate to: vanity, vain-glory, egotism, self-amazement, or self-glory) is to have an inflated sense of one’s own piety, knowledge, works of faith and other religious accomplishments, which lead to pride and spiritual arrogance.

In Islam, *‘ujb* is a failure to see that the worship we do, or the knowledge we have gained, or the charity we have given, for instance, isn’t of our own doing; it’s a gift from Allah. Only when we are blinded to such a reality do we then start to see such works as our own accomplishments or efforts. We then start to become vain, conceited and enamoured with ourselves – basking in our

own self-glory. The more a person realises this, the less room there is for self-conceit, and the more room there is for humility and seeing that whatever works of faith we have done, and are doing, are all divine gifts: *Allah created you and what you do.* [Q.37:96] And: *Whatever good befalls you is from Allah.* [Q.4:79]

One hadith tells us: ‘If you were not to commit sins, I would fear for you something far greater than that: self-admiration (‘*ujb*).’⁵ This hadith doesn’t encourage sin. Instead, it cautions that there is a spiritual disease – one of the worst of the major sins – that is even more destructive than general sins. For a Muslim who sins might humble themselves, feel remorse and repent to Allah. But someone afflicted with ‘*ujb* admires their own piety, feels secure in their godliness, and puts their righteousness down to their own doing rather than Allah’s grace. In such a state, they may see little need to repent.

5. Al-Bazzar, no.6936, and it is *hasan*. Cf. al-Albani, *Sahih al-Jami’ al-Saghir* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1988), no.5303.

2.BEWARE OF SELF-CONCEIT

This is why some of the early scholars said that a sin that begets humility is better than an act of obedience that begets conceit. The issue isn't the sin itself, but the depth of spiritual darkness it leaves behind in the soul.

Ujb often reveals itself subtly. A person begins to feel self-superiority because of their worship, practice or learning; looks down on those who struggle with sin or religious practice; resents sincere correction; desires recognition for their piety; and steadily comes to see their religious commitment as their own achievement rather than Allah's unmitigated gift. What starts out as gratitude can quietly become self-conceit.

The cure is in what Ibn Ata'illah says: 'Let not acts of obedience make you joyous because they come from you. But be joyous because they come from Allah to you.'⁶ The key, then, is to see that every act of obedience is Allah's Gift before it is

6. Ibn Ata'illah, *al-Hikam al-Ata'iyah* (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2006), no.58.

an achievement. The more we ascribe our good to Allah, the less room there is for *'ujb*, and the more our hearts fill with gratitude, humility and a shrinking of our own ego.

In short, it may be said that keeping *'ujb* at bay isn't to think less of our good deeds, but to think more of Allah's great favour in enabling them.

3. OUTWARD OBSESSION

Let's start with two hadiths to set the tone. The first is the Prophet's words ﷺ: 'No one who has even an atom's weight of arrogance in his heart shall enter Paradise.'⁷ The other is the Prophet's ﷺ words — when he saw some people performing *wudu*', but not washing their heels properly: 'Woe to the heels from the Fire.'⁸

The above two hadiths complement each other by highlighting an important principle: Islam is concerned with the inward state of the heart as well as the outward correctness of one's actions. Nothing is too great or small, weighty or trivial. However, some acts of the heart and duties of the limbs are required (*fard/wajib*), while others

7. Muslim, no.91.

8. Al-Bukhari, no.60; Muslim, no.241.

are recommended (*sunnah/mustahabb*). But no act taught by Revelation, be it inner or outer, is inconsequential or petty. There's just priorities and degrees of importance.

Now, while some Muslims without justification reduce religion to being 'all in the heart,' thus downplaying the importance of outward actions (even obligatory acts of worship such as prayer and fasting), this does not represent those who are genuinely committed to religious practice. Since the former view falls outside the scope of the discussion I wish to have, I shall set it aside and instead focus on practicing Muslims whom Allah has saved from the misguided belief that Islam is confined to the heart alone.

Here, the problem is not necessarily a failure to perform outward acts. Instead, the issue often lies in becoming overly concerned with outward practise, whilst paying little or no attention to the spiritual acts of the heart, the cultivation of good character, and the pursuit of inner beauty. When Islam becomes reduced to external form

3. OUTWARD OBSESSION

instead of inward transformation, this becomes a cause for the disfigurement of religiosity. For when the heart's purity and beauty of character are neglected, acts of worship become shallow, giving rise to those who are harsh, hostile, self-righteous and thrive on schism or controversy, rather than humility, service and compassion.

The Prophet ﷺ offered us a clear illustration of this when he warned against the dangers of the Khawarij, stating about their precursor: 'From the loins of this [man] shall arise a people who will recite the Qur'an but it will not pass beyond their throats. They will slay the people of Islam but spare the people of idolatry. They will pass through Islam just as an arrow passes through its prey.'⁹ Another hadith says: 'Leave him; for he has comrades whose prayer and fasting will make your prayer and fasting look insignificant. They shall recite the Qur'an but it shall not go beyond their throats.'¹⁰

9. Muslim, no.1064.

10. Al-Bukhari, no.3610.

His ﷺ saying: ‘They will recite the Qur’an, but it will not pass beyond their throats’ means that the Qur’an will fail to penetrate their hearts or character. Their recitation remains confined to the tongue or the throat, producing neither true understanding nor inner illumination. Despite their intense apparent piety and their devotion to outward acts of worship, they will direct their violence against the Muslims. For their outward religiosity is bereft of inward traits of sincerity, mercy, wisdom and sound judgement which the Qur’an is meant to nurture.

The Prophet ﷺ thus identifies the hallmark of the Khawarij, not as lack of outward religiosity, but as an obsession with outer practice devoid of inner spiritual transformation. Tongues are reading the Qur’an, yet hearts remain untouched by its guidance.

Part of the brilliance of Islam is its clarity that Allah isn’t worshipped via mere outward form; rather, He has prescribed certain outward forms as a context where *‘ibadah* — worship or loving

3. OUTWARD OBSESSION

submission to Allah — takes place. If the heart is absent, and just the external form is present, then it isn't worship: we're only going through the motions.

About the prayer (*salat*), the Qur'an states: *And established prayer for My remembrance*. [Q.20:14] It is a reminder that prayer has a wise purpose; namely, restoring the remembrance of Allah to the heart, and to sharpen the awareness of His Presence in our lives. *Salat* isn't some arbitrary act of mere bowing or prostrating — until, that is, the heart forgets to bow or prostrate to Allah along with the physical body.

The same applies to fasting (*siyam*). One hadith says: 'Perhaps a fasting person receives nothing for his fast, save hunger.'¹¹ That is, without an inward (*batin*) fast, without the heart's piety or abstinence from sins or distraction from Allah, the outward (*zahir*) fast can become little more

11. Ibn Majah, no.1690. It was graded as *sahih* in al-Albani, *Sahih al-Jami' al-Saghir*, no.3488.

than a hollow token void of reward, re-centring or being raised in rank with Allah.

Or take the sacrificial rite during the *hajj* on the day of 'Id. So in one verse, we read: *Neither their flesh nor their blood reaches Allah. But it is your [heart's] piety that reaches Him.* [Q.22:37] Now, if neither flesh nor blood reaches Allah, why then does the shariah lay down detailed rules about which animals can be sacrificed? Because such outward orders are themselves meant to be an expression of loving submission. Allah doesn't need the sacrifice; rather, He commands it in a specific manner so that we can demonstrate our heart's adoration for Him. The value of the act, therefore, is not in the animal itself, but in the heart's piety, godliness and obedience that the sacrifice embodies.

In summary: The outward aspects of Islam are indispensable, but they must never overshadow the inward realities they are meant to nurture. When the *zahir* becomes an over-obsession, at the cost of the *batin*, then worship is reduced to

3. OUTWARD OBSESSION

an empty husk. Rather, authentic religiosity lies in uniting the *zahir* with the *batin* in order that our outward acts are internalised and animated by inward purification of the heart and an ever-shrinking ego.

4. WEAPONISING RELIGIOSITY

Ibn Mas‘ud said: ‘Allah looked at hearts of His servants and found the heart of Muhammad ﷺ to be the best heart among His servants. So He chose him and sent His message with him. He looked at the hearts of His servants after the heart of Muhammad ﷺ and found the heart of his Companions to be the best of hearts. So He made them ministers for his Prophet, fighting for His religion. So whatever the Muslims hold as good, is good with Allah and whatever they hold as bad, is bad with Allah.’¹²

The point in quoting this report from one of the earliest and most learned Companions is that it shows how the Divine Gaze first examined the

12. Ahmad, no.3600. The chain was graded *hasan* in al-Arna‘ut, *Musnad al-Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risalah, 1996), 6:84.

4. WEAPONISING RELIGIOSITY

quality of the heart before conferring on it the Revelation. The same striking point is noted in the next report too. Thus, Hudhayfah said:

‘Allah’s Messenger ﷺ related two hadiths to me; one I have seen fulfilled, and I await the other. He said that trust (*amanah*) descended into the very roots of men’s hearts. Then the Qur’an was sent down, so they learnt from the Qur’an and learnt from the *Sunnah*.’¹³

Al-Qurtubi wrote: ‘*Amanah* refers to everything entrusted to a person for safekeeping, over which they are given responsibility and discretion. It is why the divinely-revealed duties (*taklif*) have been — according to the interpretation of many of the exegetes — termed an *amanah* in Allah’s words: *We indeed offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains ...* [Q.33:72]’¹⁴

13. Al-Bukhari, no.6497; Muslim, no.143.

14. Al-Qurtubi, *al-Mufhim* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1996), 1:356. The verse partly cited ends: ... *and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were apprehensive of it; but man undertook it. Truly he is a wrongdoer, ignorant.*

Again we see that true faith has to do with the goodness of the heart. It has all to do with how the soul is illumined with Revelation and how it honours the *amanah* entrusted to it. It has to do with how it disposes itself to its Lord and to others. When a person's core nature is generally sound, the light of faith usually enhances such a nature and further beautifies it. The Prophet ﷺ said: 'The best of people before Islam are the best in Islam, provided they gain understanding [of the religion].'¹⁵

The trouble starts when that is not the case. If, before converting or beginning to practice, the soul is already crooked or dark, then unless one strives against their ego or false desires, when religious teachings descend upon such crookery or darkness, then religion can all too readily be weaponised and be put in the service of the ego. Religiosity itself then comes across as painfully ugly, arrogant and off-putting; thereby driving people away from Allah.

15. Al-Bukhari, no.335; Muslim, no.2526.

4. WEAPONISING RELIGIOSITY

If a heart is already darkened — made crooked through pride, envy, insecurity, love of fame or attention, a need to always be right, or a desire to dominate — and if left untreated, religion or religious teachings can be hijacked. Instead of shrinking the ego, it begins to serve it. Instead of being a means of drawing close to Allah, it is used to exalt oneself, pursue the world, or wax proud over people. Instead of religious learning being humbling and inwardly transformative, it becomes a vehicle for self-importance; craving admiration; or other devilish, narcissistic ways of feeding the ego.

Thus, without working on the crooked timber of our flawed humanity, clothing the darkness of the ego in garments of the *Sunnah*, or adorning the tongue with religious vocabulary while the heart grows increasingly egotistical, won't give birth to light, but to a disfigurement of beauty; akin to when botox goes tragically wrong on a hitherto beautiful face.

5. THE 'HOLIER-THAN-THOU' SYNDROME

One subtle pitfall for practicing Muslims is to think that deeds somehow become the 'payment' for entering Paradise. This, however, is wrong, and can breed self-righteous pride.

In this respect, Revelation presents two truths combined: *Firstly*, we are commanded to strive and do righteous actions, and are accountable for all that we do: *O you who believe! Bow and prostrate yourselves, and work good that perhaps you may prosper.* [Q.22:77] *Secondly*, our ability to strive, the acceptance of our actions, as well as our very salvation all come from Allah's grace, not from our deeds. The Qur'an declares: *Allah created you and what you do.* [Q.37:96] Whilst the Prophet ﷺ informed: 'None of you shall enter Paradise because of your deeds.' They said: 'Not even you, O Allah's Messenger?' He ﷺ replied:

5. THE 'HOLIER-THAN-THOU' SYNDROME

‘Not even me; unless Allah covers me with His kindness and mercy.’¹⁶

Shedding more light on it, al-Nawawi said: ‘The apparent meaning of these hadiths is evidence for the People of Truth that no one is deserving of reward or of Paradise merely by virtue of his obedience. As for Allah’s saying, exalted is He: *Enter Paradise for what you used to do* [Q.16:32] or: *This is Paradise that you have been given to inherit due to what you used to do* [Q.43:72], and similar verses indicating that entry into Paradise is due to deeds, they do not contradict these hadiths. Rather, the meaning of such verses is that entry into Paradise is by *means* of deeds, and then the grace to perform them, guidance to sincerity in them, as well as their acceptance by the mercy and grace of Allah. Thus it is correct to say that one doesn’t enter Paradise *due to* deeds alone; and this is what the hadiths intend.’¹⁷

16. Al-Bukhari, no.6103; Muslim, no.2816.

17. Al-Nawawi, *Sahih Muslim bi Sharh al-Nawawi* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1995), 17:132-3.

As for deeds, then while they are not the ‘price’ to enter Allah’s Paradise, they are a reason for one’s level in it.¹⁸ And Allah knows best.

How does this help the practicing Muslim? As we start to see the good that we do as pure gift from Allah that we do not deserve, then we are saved from feelings of superior Muslimness, or acting self-righteously. Rather, we are humbled and thankful to Allah for His grace (*tawfiq*) and kindness upon us. Not only are we saved from arrogant conceit knowing that, ultimately, the good was never of our own making, but we are saved from showing-off or bragging about the deed for the very same reason. Thus, when the gaze of our heart is lifted away from our deeds, towards the One with whom all good originates, humility is birthed, sincerity is actualised, and the ‘holier-than-thou’ syndrome that too often darkens practicing hearts is erased.

18. As stated in Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-‘Azim* (Cairo: Dar al-‘Aqidah, 2008), 4:160.

6. SHAYKH GOOGLE TO MUFTI AI

We are told this warning in the following well-known hadith: ‘Allah does not take away knowledge by wresting it from the hearts of men; but He takes away knowledge by taking away the scholars. So when no scholar remains, people take the ignorant as leaders who, when asked give fatwas without knowledge; they are misguided and misleading.’¹⁹

This prophetic hadith has taken on something of a contemporary relevance. From around the late 1980s, at least in Britain, Muslims steadily shifted away from the age-old practice of asking known, qualified scholars (*‘ulama*) — usually in their local mosque — and began instead to ask the ‘knowledgeable brother’ or the *‘da‘i’* whose

19. Al-Bukhari, no.100; Muslim, no.2673.

charisma and enthusiasm often exceeded their learning. Cassette culture, gradual publication of Islamic bookshops, weekly circles and ISoc lectures, and the annual conferences all helped democratise access to Islamic information and learning. While this brought much good, it also blurred the distinction between possessing some Islamic facts or information and possessing real scholarly qualification and authority. Relevance and relatability, of course, were crucial factors in this steady transition.

The internet exponentially accelerated the trend. Search engines made fatwas instantly available, often detached from any context. Today, many Muslims instinctively turn to ‘Shaykh Google’ first, where search algorithms (not scholarship) determine which fatwas are encountered. More recently, AI tools such as ChatGPT have become another layer in this evolution; able to rapidly bring up classical views, but unable to replace the lived wisdom and scholarly competency of trained, qualified voices. This has only added to the anarchy over religious authority.

To be clear, the problem is not about accessing sacred knowledge, but confusion over authority. The *‘ulama* inherit not only texts but, through long, arduous study, the skillset and disciplines required to interpret them: a thorough mastery of Arabic, the Qur'an, and Hadith corpus; legal methodology (*usul al-fiqh*); awareness of issues wherein there is scholarly consensus so as not to oppose it (except on pains of deviation); and issues of valid *ijtihadi* disagreement (so as to be tolerant or free from Kharijite-like zealotry and disunity); along with the ability to apply eternal principles to changing realities. So an eloquent speaker, search engine, or an AI assistant may transmit the texts, but they lack the obligatory training of issuing sound religious judgements. The Qur'an asserts: *Ask the people of knowledge if you do not know.* [Q.21:7] So no 'knowledgeable' brother/sister, online influencer, or AI reply can ever be a stand-in for the duty to ask a qualified scholar. To do otherwise is to defy Allah's order and maybe fall into sin — regardless of whether the answer given was right or wrong.

A typical passage from a classical text on legal theory says about the layman:

‘It is obligatory to seek a fatwa regarding every new issue whose ruling one is required to know. He is also obliged to investigate until he knows that the person from whom he seeks a fatwa is qualified to issue fatwas, if he does not already know this ... It is not sufficient that the person is merely a scholar ... It is permissible for him to seek a fatwa from someone whose reputation is widely established among the people, and from somebody whom he has come to understand is qualified to give fatwa.’²⁰

So a layman’s obligation is twofold: *Firstly*, the obligation to ask a qualified scholar. *Secondly*, to do their best to ascertain that this person is qualified. Not any scholar suffices. Since not all scholars are qualified jurists or muftis. As some are scholars of hadith, language or history with

20. Ahmad b. Hamdan, *Sifat al-Mufti wa’l-Mustafti* (Riyadh: Dar al-Sumay‘i, 1436H), 271-2.

no *fiqh* mastery or specialisation. Fatwas about Islamic rulings — which is outside their specific subject — cannot be sought from them.

After a layman does their best to ascertain who is qualified to ask — such as when other *‘ulama* who are well-known vouch for him or for her, or they’ve graduated in *fiqh* from some recognised Islamic seminary, or they are scholars at a local mosque known to follow one of the Four Sunni *fiqh* schools — they have fulfilled their duty. But those who make no such effort, turning instead to ‘knowledgeable’ brothers, preachers, or now AI tools like ChatGPT or Google Gemini — not making any attempt to see if they are qualified to give fatwa and religious instruction — might well be guilty of supporting or normalising one of the most dangerous forms of misguidance to afflict Islam. For the dangers of tyrant rulers or non-Muslim armies attacking Islam are clear to see. But the harm of those unqualified to teach or issue fatwas, acting as public scholars, subtly corrupts and deforms Islam from within!

7. TOO MUCH, TOO QUICK

‘Indeed, this religion is strong and firm,’ said the Prophet ﷺ, ‘so proceed through it with gentleness.’²¹

Enthusiasm can be a double-edged sword. So on the one hand, it motivates us to try and mend our ways and to practice, reform ourselves, and draw closer to Allah. On the other hand, if left unchecked, it can lead us to take on more than we are able to sustain. One pitfall of the newly practicing is that they can burden themselves with practices beyond their capacity, only to be overwhelmed and exhausted and then abandon what they had begun. In fact, that can happen to their entire religious practice, if they are not

21. Ahmad, no.13052, and it is *hasan*. Cf. al-Arna’ut, *Musnad al-Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal*, 20:346.

7. TOO MUCH, TOO QUICK

careful. It's a well-known phenomena known as religious burnout, or faith fatigue — may Allah save us all.

It is why the Prophet ﷺ described the religion as *matin* — strong, firm and robust — and asked us to go through it with *rifq* — with gentleness and gradualness; step-by-step. Lasting religious growth; especially growth of the *batin* or inner spiritual state, is not achieved through bursts of intensity, but via steady measured effort that can be consistently maintained over time. ‘The deed,’ runs one hadith, ‘most beloved to Allah is that which is done consistently, even if it be small.’²² Consistency in works of faith or deeds of love shows commitment to the Beloved.

Al-Manawi wrote: ‘*Indeed, this religion is strong and firm, that is, robust; so proceed through it with gentleness* means: traverse its path lightly, and do not burden yourselves with what you are unable to bear, lest you become exhausted and

22. Al-Bukhari, no.6465; Muslim, no.783.

abandon your deeds ... Al-Ghazali said that: By this he meant that a person should not impose upon himself, in matters of religion, what runs counter to his usual capacity. Rather he should advance with kindness toward himself and via gradual stages. He should not move all at once to the utmost point of spiritual transformation. For human nature is resistant, and it cannot be weaned from its blameworthy traits save a little by little, until deeply ingrained vices are purged. Whoever ignores gradualness and plunges head long all at once may reach a state that becomes a burden for him, causing his affairs to reverse: what was once beloved to him becomes hateful, and what he formerly disliked becomes pleasant and agreeable, such that he no longer feels any aversion to it.’²³

In conclusion: The Prophet ﷺ teaches that the remedy for excessive zeal is neither diminished aspiration nor is it complacency, but gentleness,

23. Al-Manawi, *Fayd al-Qadir Sharh al-Jami' al-Saghir* (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 2010), 3:361; no.2508.

7. TOO MUCH, TOO QUICK

disciplined moderation and gradual progression. Religious or spiritual growth best endures when it moves at a pace that chimes with our human nature and — just as vitally — can be sustained over time. By avoiding self-imposed hardships and nurturing consistent habits of worship, the seeker is more likely to persevere, thus allowing faith, righteous action and religious practice to take deep and lasting root.

The rule of thumb in this respect comes to us in this timeless maxim: ‘The sage-teacher (*rabbani*) is one who nurtures people on small knowledge before the larger one.’²⁴ That is, one starts with foundation learning and obligatory acts, before moving to the recommended or deeper ones. So let us each be *rabbani* to our own souls.

24. Al-Bukhari, 17; *Kitab al-ʿIlm*, Ch.10.

8. ISLAM ISN'T A JOYLESS CHECKLIST

Useful questions for practicing Muslims to self-reflect are not just: ‘Am I completing my religious obligations?’ or ‘Did I do my daily religious duties?’ But more essentially, we must also ask ourselves: ‘How did their performance affect my heart?’ and ‘Are these acts helping me to become more mindful of Allah’s presence in my life?’ Without such introspection, we are in danger of turning our observance of Islam into a joyless checklist where religion begins to feel very mechanical or purely procedural. Religion, in other words, can turn into a long list of empty rituals.

To prevent our Islam becomes joyless or merely ritualistic, it is important to continually renew our intention (*niyyah*) and to remind ourselves that it’s all about: Becoming beloved to Allah by

8. ISLAM ISN'T A JOYLESS CHECKLIST

doing what pleases Him — *al-tahabbub ila'Llah bi ma yarda*. Let us also recall that the Prophet ﷺ stated; that Allah said: 'My servant does not draw closer to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the obligatory duties I have enjoined on him. My servant continues to draw closer to Me with the optional deeds till I love him.'²⁵ So it is all about letting love lead the way.

Seeking to understand the meaning behind the acts of worship and obedience is another great way of our Islam not collapsing into an empty husk. For then, routine rituals are transformed into conscious acts of loving, purposeful, fruitful devotion. For example, learning the meanings of the words we recite in prayer — such as: *You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help* [Q.1:5] — can transform prayer from a sequence of mere movements into a sincere conversation with Allah. Likewise, understanding that fasting is intended to cultivate a mindful awareness of Allah, rather than merely abstaining from food

25. Al-Bukhari, no.6502.

or drink, gives the practice deeper purpose and makes it a means of spiritual growth instead of a ritual to be merely endured.

Furthermore, we should realise that the overall purpose behind the acts of worship is twofold: *First*, to root in the heart the remembrance and awareness of Allah. *Second*, as certain scholars stated, it is: To bring a person out of what their ego wants, to what their Lord wants (*yukhrij al-insan min murad nafsihi ila murad rabbihi*).

As we begin to understand the deeper purpose behind the acts of worship, and as we grow in knowing Allah, *halawat al-iman* — a ‘sweetness of faith’ that the Prophet ﷺ spoke of ²⁶ — starts to be tasted in our hearts. Then, even the daily skirmishes against our ego take on a sweetness, as we strive against it to yield to Allah’s will.

In summary: Revealed rituals are essential: they help root consistency of faith and ingrain pious

26. As in Muslim, no.34.

8. ISLAM ISN'T A JOYLESS CHECKLIST

habits. But these rituals, and the rules, must be accompanied by their interiorisation. If outward obligations like prayer aren't internalised, and are performed as joyless, meaningless rites, it's not really going to work — or in harder times, even be sustained. So meaning must be infused into hearts. Likewise, if our Islam is only about externals, without allowing these ritual acts of worship to illuminate or transform our inward state, then an extremist, puritanical Islam will likely emerge; if not, eventual burnout.

9. KEEP TO THE CONSENSUS

Bear with me on this. Imagine that you were lost in a desert. One person points to the east as the way, another to the west, a third tells you to stay where you are, and a fourth insists that everybody is wrong. Who would you trust? Whose opinion would you follow? Now imagine a thousand experience guides — all of who had travelled the route before, and fully acquainted with this desert terrain — pointed in the same direction. Ignoring them to instead follow one lone voice would hardly seem sensible. In fact, it may seem rather foolish, or even misguided. This same principle applies to our religion. So when the highest ranking scholars (*mujtahids*) agree on an interpretation of the source-texts, i.e. the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, then their consensus (*ijma'*) isn't something that a Muslim can brush

aside. In fact, it is something that is binding on Muslims to follow. The Prophet ﷺ said: ‘Indeed, Allah will not permit my *ummah* to agree upon an error.’²⁷ The *ummah* here, when it comes to qualified knowledge of the Qur’an and *Sunnah*, means the scholars of the *ummah* and not every Tom, Dick and Harry.

This does not mean scholars never disagree, or that individual scholars cannot be wrong. They do differ, and they may be mistaken. But their scholarly differing is seen as a mercy, and their unanimous scholarly agreement is protected by Allah from error. And that’s a vital distinction: between issues where the scholars differed and issues upon which they reached a settled *ijma’* or consensus. Knowing the distinction protects a Muslim from being misled by anti-*ijma’* views that have significantly crept into the *ummah* in the past six decades; making it one of the worst pitfalls for any practicing Muslim.

27. Al-Tirmidhi, no.2167, and it is *sahih*. Cf. al-Albani, *Sahih al-Jami’ al-Saghir*, no.1848.

Typifying the orthodox scholarly stance in this respect, Ibn Taymiyyah said — when speaking about the most distinctive trait of the deviant, heterodox Muslim sects: ‘The hallmark of these sects is their splitting from the Book, the *Sunnah* and the consensus (*ijma*’). Whoever speaks with the Book, the *Sunnah* and the consensus is from *ahl al-sunnah wa’l-jama*’ah.’²⁸

Ibn Battah wrote: ‘If one interpreting from the jurists interprets a ruling that opposes an *ijma*’, and is adamant in following it [due to thinking it doesn’t oppose an *ijma*’], the most that may be said when criticising him is: ‘You have erred’. It will not be said: ‘You have disbelieved, denied or become a heretic.’²⁹ Of course, if one oppose the *ijma*’ knowingly, then such can be said!

A common slogan today, that continues to dupe and misguide many practicing Muslims, is: ‘We follow the proofs, not the consensus.’ It sounds

28. Ahmad b. Taymiyyah, *Majmu’ al-Fatawa* (Riyadh: Dar ‘Alam al-Kutub, 1991), 3:346.

29. Ibn Battah, *al-Ibanah* (Riyadh: Dar al-Rayah, 1988), 1:566.

9. KEEP TO THE CONSENSUS

admirable; very authentic, even. But it rests on an extremely faulty assumption, that the *ijma'*-consensus of qualified scholars somehow exists independently of the proofs. In reality, though, *ijma'*-consensus is based upon the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. The scholars did not unanimously agree despite proofs; they agreed unanimously *because* of the proof. For *ijma'* doesn't come out of thin air; rather it is the unified agreement of the highest calibre of scholars concerning how the proofs in an issue are to be understood.

So rejecting an established scholarly consensus under the name of 'following the proofs' today means either following one's own reading of the proofs — as is the case with liberal or feminist reinterpretations of Islam; or else following an isolated, fringe opinion of some contemporary shaykh over the collective understanding of the *ummah's mujtahid* scholars — as is the case with false Salafism. In either case, this is not greater adherence to the proof; it is greater confidence in misguidance.

10. ALLAH AS NEIGHBOUR, NOT STRANGER

Divine Love is the theme of a slim tract that was written by Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali. In it, he lays down the cornerstone of what it means to be a Muslim, and unveils the very essence of Islam. At the heart of his discussion lies a core, fundamental truth: that authentic faith begins and ends with knowing Allah. He wrote:

‘Indeed, Allah brought creation into existence so that they might worship Him in reverential fear, hope and love. As Allah, exalted is He, said: *I did not create jinn or mankind except that they may worship Me.* [Q.51:56] Yet Allah, glorified is He, can only be worshiped after He is known and recognised. It is for this purpose that He created the heavens and the earth and all that is within them, that they may serve as signs pointing to His oneness and majesty. As the Most High said:

10. ALLAH AS NEIGHBOUR, NOT STRANGER

*Allah is He who created seven heavens and of the earth its like. His command descends throughout them, so that you may know Allah has power over all things and that He encompasses everything in knowledge. [Q.65:12]*³⁰

Here we are told that the whole of creation was created *li ta'lamu* — ‘that you may know’ Allah: that His Command permeates all creation, and that His power and His knowledge encompass all things. This, then, is the profound wisdom behind creation itself: that humanity can know Allah — i.e. know that He is One, utterly unique, the sole Lord, Creator, and Sustainer of all that exists, and that none else is worthy of worship except Him.

In this context, it might be said that there are three different degrees of knowing: knowing *of*, knowing *about*, and knowing *truly*. To know *of* something is to have merely heard about it, but not much more. The second kind of knowing is

30. 'Abd al-Rahman b. Rajab, *Istinshaq Nasim al-Uns* (Riyadh: Dar al-Sahabah, 1991), 25.

a step up from the first. To know *about* a thing is to have some basic acquaintance with it. The third degree is *truly* and properly knowing. It is where there is a good grasp of the matter, and a deep familiarity with it.

Now, the Qur'an wants us not only to know *of* Allah, or *about* Him; it wants us to *truly* know Him, so that the whole of our being inclines to Him in reverence and loving surrender. Let me cite Ibn Rajab on this too. He said: 'A servant's knowledge of his Lord is of two kinds: The first is a general knowledge: namely, the knowledge of acknowledging Him, affirming His truth and possessing faith in Him. This is common to all believers. The second is a particular knowledge which entails the heart turning entirely toward Allah, devoting itself exclusively to Him, being intimate with Him, attaining tranquility in His remembrance, feeling shy before Him and being in awe of Him.'³¹

31. Ibn Rajab, *Jami' al-'Ulum wa'l-Hikam* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1998), 1:473.

10. ALLAH AS NEIGHBOUR, NOT STRANGER

These two levels of knowing may be likened to the case of a man and his neighbour who has recently moved in next door. Initially, the man comes to know his new neighbour in a general sense only. He learns his name, his occupation, whether he is married, and perhaps a few other basic details. He also becomes familiar with his appearance and is able to recognise him when they pass each other in the street. He might, by asking around, even find out additional details regarding him. Yet whatever he learns remains indirect and impersonal, unlikely to awaken in his heart any deep respect or admiration for his neighbour. Apart from perhaps acknowledging his neighbour's presence in the area, his overall attitude towards him will most likely be one of polite indifference. This corresponds to the first degree of knowing described by Ibn Rajab.

Let us now imagine that the man determines to know his neighbour personally. He introduces himself, visits him regularly, spends time with him and, over the years, cultivates a sincere and lasting friendship with him. Through this close

companionship he comes to witness, first hand, his neighbour's gracious character, generosity kindness, wisdom, compassion, or other virtues that can only be known by direct acquaintance. This deeper knowing steadily awakens in him a deep respect and admiration for his neighbour, and eventually a deep and abiding love.

In time, it is not only probable, but inevitable that his neighbour will start to entrust him with many of his most private thoughts and deepest feelings — things which could never have been uncovered through even a lifetime of inquiry, observation or second-hand gossip. This degree of knowledge is granted because the neighbour himself desires to be more intimately known, and because the man has approached him with courtesy, sincerity and the right protocol (*adab*) of friendship. This corresponds with Ibn Rajab's higher degree of knowing.

In summary: The pitfall, therefore, is to mistake knowing *about* Allah for truly knowing Him. The former informs the mind, but the latter captures

10. ALLAH AS NEIGHBOUR, NOT STRANGER

the heart. And while the first is indispensable, it is only the second that gives rise to love, awe, intimacy, reverence and complete reliance and devotion to Him. Again, the pitfall is to imagine that mere acquaintance with the truths of faith is itself the goal. Yet such knowledge is just the beginning. Its true purpose is to lead the seeker to that intimate knowing of Allah from which flow love, awe, tranquillity, and each and every act of sincere worship of Him.

Wa'Llahu wali al-tawfiq.