



Towards Effective Understanding of the Concept of *Zuhd*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explain the basic concepts of *Zuhd* with the Islamic situation. There is no gainsaying the fact that many people have misconstrued the meaning of *Zuhd* through negative exposition given to it and have received so much attention from the orientalist who have equated the word with the idea of choosing the Hereafter by neglecting social relationship and responsibility in this world. In order to enhance the accomplishment of our goal, we shall consider the definitions of the theme, the life that is condemned, Islamic *Zuhd* versus Christian Monasticism. We shall examine the elements of *Zuhd* which comprise altruism, kindness with sympathy and freedom. We have discovered that Islamic *Zuhd* requires simple and unaffected life style based on abstention from luxuries, love of comfort and pleasure in the midst of society by fulfilling social responsibilities and duties. We have also noted that Christian Monasticism advocates withdrawal from people and negation of responsibility and commitment towards them. Some recommendations were made and the study was concluded.

Introduction

This introduction can best be rendered in the words of Ali b. Abi Talib, the fourth caliph (May Allah honour him), according to Abduhu (2004:117), who is reported to have said:

*The world is a place of transit, not a place to abide.
Its people fall into two categories: those who sell*

*away their souls into slavery and those who ransom
their souls and liberate them*

The world is neither without a purpose nor is human being created by any error. The attachment to the world implies bondage to material and worldly affairs which leads to spiritual stagnation and eventually deprives man the spirit of his freedom of movement and makes him immobile and dead.

Zuhd is a spiritual exercise and discipline for man by getting contented with barest necessities of this world by curtailing of hopes and aspirations in amassing wealth which will be accounted for in the Day of Resurrection. It is categorised under pragmatic Sufi themes.

Its origin can be traced to a group of youth called *Ashabul-Kahf* (dwellers of cave) who have preferred the belief of Allah to disbelief, moved away and stayed in the depth of a cave for the period of three hundred and nine years (Q18:25) Prophet Muhammad used to conceal in the cave of *Hira* for spiritual exercise which brought the revelation of the Qur'an to him through the Arch-Angel, Jibril in the year 612 A.D. In the later part of his life, he used to the mosque of Madinah for *I'tikaf* which means seclusion in the mosque for the last ten days of Ramadan.

It is also owed to a group of people called *Ahl as-Suffah* which means the people of the bench. They were wretched and pious members of Prophet Muhammad's community who lived in the mosque of Madinah. Even Abdur-Rahman b. Sakhar popularly called Abu Hurayrah was ranked among them. Abu Dharr al-Ghifari (d.652 A.D.) and Hudhayfah (d.657 A.D.) were among the companions of the Prophet who chose hard ascetic life at a time when most of their contemporaries had chosen the softer life of the world.

Definition of Terms

The word “*zuhd*” is a verbal noun derived from the trilateral root verb, either “*zahada*” or “*zahida*” (Cowan 1971:383) and (Al-Qurtubi n.d:159) literally means renunciation of the world. It is translated to mean abstinence, a religious life, exercising oneself in the service of God, especially being abstinent in respect of eating and subduing passions (Hughes 1965:716). Al-Kahlani (n.d:170) opined that it is by having little hope in a thing. Technically, it means appreciation of Allah’s blessings and bounties by curtailing of hopes, and abstaining from all form of iniquities which Allah has made unlawful (Jamiu 1992:5)

Zuhd, according to Tijani (1991:40), is a way of meditating on death, preaching renunciation of the world because of the ephemerality of this life on earth. The hereafter is the real abode as this world is atmospheric and temporary.

There are two conspicuous places where we come across the definition of *zuhd* in the *Nahjul-Balaghah*. Both of them confirm the above definition of *zuhd*. Caliph Ali b. Abi Talib (May Allah honour him), according to Abduhu (2004:157), says:

أيها الناس الزهادة قصر الأمل والشكر عند النعم والتورع عند المحارم
*O people! Zuhd means curtailing of hopes
 thanking God for His blessings and bounties
 and abstaining from that which He has forbidden.*

In *Hikmah* (Abduhu 2004:199-200), he says:

الزهد كله بين كلمتين من القرآن : قال الله سبحانه : لكيلا تأسوا علي ما فاتكم
 ولا تفرحوا بما أتاكم ومن لم يأس علي الماضي ولم يفرح بالآتي فقد أخذ الزهد
 بطرفيه

*Az-Zuhd is summarized in two statements of the
 holy Qur’an: Allah, the Most Exalted says:
 in order that you may not despair over matters that
 pass you by, nor exult over favours bestowed upon*

you. (Q57:23) Whoever does not grieve over what he has lost and does not rejoice over what comes to him has acquired zuhd in both of its aspects.

Accordingly, *zahid* (i.e. one who practises *zuhd*) is someone whose interest transcends the sphere of material existence and whose object of aspiration is beyond the kind of things that are ephemeral. The only place where we come across the word *zuhd* in the holy Qur'an is in chapter 12:20 but the plural form of *zahid* is employed. According to Fakhr ad-Din Razi(2008:108), (Jawhari n.d:34), (Tabari 1987:102-104) and (Qutub1992:197) the word connotes two principal meanings. In the first place, the travelers who rescued Prophet Yusuf , the son of Prophet Ya'qub, from the well were ascetics and as a result, they considered him as *al-luqtah* (something found by luck) and they had the fear that his owner might recover him. In the second place, they had been obsessed with ascetic trait before embarking on the journey which made it possible for them to sell him at a meagre amount of money.

The life that is condemned

Commonly it is said that attachment to the “world” is condemned and disapproved by Islam. This is both true and false. If what is implied is an emotional attachment, it cannot be true; because man, in relation to the total system of creation, has been created with a series of congenital emotional attachments and inclinations. All innate human tendencies and aptitudes have a purpose which is wise and sagacious. The Holy Qur'an regards such tendencies as the signs of Divine Wisdom thus:

ومن آياته أن خلق لكم من أنفسكم أزواجا لتسكنوا إليها وجعل بينكم مودة ورحمة

And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may

dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put
 love and mercy between your hearts (Q30:21)

These attachments and sentiments form a series of channels of communication between man and his world. Without them man would not be able to pursue the course of his development. Consequently, it should be mentioned that the Islamic world-outlook, even as it does not permit us to denounce and reject the world, it also does allow us to regard the natural attachments and the channels of communication as useless and breakable because such sentiments and tendencies are a part of the general pattern of creation. In fact, the Prophets (May Allah shower blessings on them) and the saints (*Awliya* ') were endowed with these sentiments and emotions to a high degree of exuberance.

From the view point of Islam, the relation of man to the world is not that of a prisoner with his prison; or that of one entrapped in a well with the well; rather it is the kind of relation that exists between a peasant and his farm, or a horse and the race course, or a merchant and the market place, or a devotee and his temple. The world, from the Islamic point of view, is a school for man, his training ground and the place where he can acquire perfection.

The world is neither without a purpose nor is human being created by any error. The Qur'anic verses relating man and the world are of two kinds: the first group of verses consists of those which emphasize the change ability, the inconstant and ephemeral nature of this world. This set of verses constitutes a kind of a background argument for denying the importance of material things as ultimate ideals worthy of man's adoration. These verses are followed immediately by the reminder that man should know that there exists another world which is eternal and everlasting. The second set of

verses illuminates the solution to the problem of man's relation to the world.

The Holy Qur'an has this to say concerning the world:

المال والبنون زينة الحياة الدنيا والباقيات الصالحات خير عند ربك ثوابا وخير أملا
Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world ; but the things that endure, good deeds are best in the sight of your Lord as rewards and best as (the foundation for) hopes.(Q18:46)

This verse, as can be seen, speaks of the ultimate aspiration of man. His ultimate aspiration is the thing for which he lives and without which life has no meaning in his eyes.

إن الذين لا يرجون لقاءنا ورضوا بالحياة الدنيا وأطمأنوا بها والذين هم عن آياتنا غافلون أولئك مأواهم النار بما كانوا يكسبون
Those who rest not their hope on their meeting with us, but are pleased and satisfied with the life of the present and those who heed not our signs, their abode is the Fire, because of the (evil) they earned.(Q10:7)

In this verse, that which is considered execrable is the absence of hope in the next life and the satisfaction and contentment with material things.

فاعرض عن من تولى عند ذكرنا ولم يرد إلا الحياة الدنيا ذلك مبلغهم من العلم
Therefore, shun those who turn away from our message and desire nothing but the life of this world. That is as far as knowledge will reach them.(Q53:29)

Showing their covetous interest in the worldly affairs, the Holy Qur'an portrays the instance when it says:

وفرحوا بالحياة الدنيا وما الحياة الدنيا في الآخرة إلا متاع
They rejoice in the life of this world: but the life of this world is but little comfort in the Hereafter.(Q13:26)

In another verse, Allah refers to infinitesimal of their knowledge about this world as He says:

يعلمون ظاهرا من الحياة الدنيا وهم عن الآخرة هم غافلون
*They know but the outer (things) in the life of
of this world: but of the End of things they are
heedless.(Q30:7)*

There are many other verses which have a similar meaning. In all of them the same theme recurs, that is the negation of the world as the goal and ideal of man's highest aspirations and the ultimate object of his desire, and the only source of his happiness and delight. A close study of the Qur'an will reveal that Islam has not depreciated the world; rather it has elevated the station and worth of the human being as compare to it. For Islam, the world is for the sake of man and not the other way round. It aims at reviving human values and to disparage the world.

Islamic *Zuhd* versus Christian Monasticism

Zuhd is a spiritual state that makes the *zahid* on account of his spiritual and other worldly aspirations, indifferent towards the manifestation of material existence. This indifference is not confined to his heart, intellect and feelings and is not limited to his conscience. It also manifests itself on the practical level of life in the form of simplicity, contentment and abstention from hedonistic urges and love of luxuries. A life of *zuhd* not only implies that one should be free from attachment to the material aspects of life, but he should also practically abstain from indulgence in pleasure. The *zahid* is the one who in life is satisfied with the barest material necessities.

Christian monasticism advocates for retreat from people and society and seclusion for the purpose of worship. According to this practice, the life and works of the world are separated from the works of the Hereafter and the one is alien to the other. One should, of necessity, choose either one of the two. One should either devote oneself to worship of God which shall bear fruits in the Hereafter, or take up the life of the world and benefit from its pleasures. In fact, monasticism is opposed to life and social relationships. It requires withdrawal from people and negation of responsibility and commitment towards them.

Islam has vehemently opposed monasticism which, according to Nicholson (1979:224-225), is considered to be an innovation of Christian priests and monks. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have stated categorically on monasticism thus:

لا رهبانية في الإسلام

There is no monasticism or celibacy in Islam (Doi 1984:114)

Once some of the companions had retired into seclusion by renouncing everything and devoting all their time to worship and prayer. As a result they became very indignant. He told them: “I, who am your Prophet, am not such”. In this manner, the Prophet made them understand that Islam is a religion of life and society. It is not a monastic faith.

Zuhd in Islam, requires simple and unaffected life style and is based on abstention from luxuries, love of comforts and pleasure. It operates in the midst of society and life with an inspiration from the goal of better fulfillment of social responsibilities and duties. The concept of *zuhd* in Islam may not lead to monasticism because a sharp distinction between this world and the next is nowhere drawn. From the Islamic view point, this world and

the next are inseparable, not alien to each other. The Islamic *zuhd* as we said is deeply rooted in the very content and stream of life.

Our study of this theme reveals three essential principles of the Islamic world-outlook thus:

1. Enjoyments, derived from the physical material and natural means of life, are not sufficient for man's happiness and felicity. A series of spiritual needs are in built in the human nature without whose satisfaction the enjoyment provided by material means of life is not enough to make one truly happy.
2. The individual's felicity and happiness is inseparable from that of society. Since man is emotionally bound to his society, and carries within him a sense of responsibility towards it, his individual happiness cannot be independent of the prosperity and peace of his fellow men.
3. The soul, despite its fusion and a kind of unity with the body, has a reality of its own. The soul is an independent source of pleasure and pain. It stands in need of nourishment, training, growth and development.

Elements of *Zuhd*

a. *Zuhd* and Altruism

One of the main pivots on which *zuhd* is heavily relied upon is altruism which its Arabic equivalent words *Ithar* (altruism) and *Atharah* (egoism) are derived from the same root. *Atharah* means giving precedence to one's interest over those of others. In other words, it implies monopolizing everything for oneself and depriving others. But, *Ithar* means

preferring others over oneself and bearing hardship for the comfort and good of others (Cowan 1971:4)

The *zahid*, by virtue of his simple, humble and content living, makes others to live in ease. He sacrifices for the sake of the needy as he derives greater satisfaction by feeding, clothing other and working for their ease²⁵ than if he did those things for himself. He endures deprivation, hunger and pain so that others may be well fed and live without hardship. The maxim in the household of Caliph Ali b. Abi Talib (May Allah honour him) was “the neighbours first”. In describing the qualities of the pious, Caliph Ali is quoted to have said:

نفسه منه في عناء والناس منه في راحة

“(The pious man) subjects his own self to hardship so that the people may live in comfort.”(Abduhu 2004:23).

The Holy Qur’an describes the hospitality and hardship undergone by the *Ansar* (the Helpers), who in spite of their poverty welcomed the *Muhajirun* (the Emigrants) as their own brethren giving them preference over their own selves in the following words:

..... show their affection to such as they came to them for refuge, and entertain no desire in their hearts for things given to the (latter), but gave them preference over themselves, even though poverty was their (own lot)

Obviously, this type of *zuhd* is conditionally required. In an affluent society, altruism is less frequently needed. But in condition where poverty and deprivation are prevalent as in the society of Madinah during the time of Prophet Muhammad, its need is greater.

b. *Zuhd* and kindness together with sympathy

The willingness to share the suffering of needy and the deprived

and the sympathy towards them is another main stream through which *zuhd* flows. When the less privilege people or destitute witness the kind of luxury and comfort of the affluent classes, their pain is multiplied. Man, by nature, cannot tolerate to remain a silent spectator while others who have no merit over him eat, drink and enjoy freely at the cost of his deprivation. Amelioration of his state affair through altruism and self-sacrifice by sharing with the needy whatever he possesses. When the situation has deteriorated beyond reparation and it is practically impossible to alleviate the misery of the poor through sympathy, the *zahid* practically shares their deprivation and tries to soothe their wounded hearts by adopting a life-style similar to that of the poor.

c. *Zuhd* and Freedom

Human needs are insatiable but independence from want is characteristic of freemen. By adopting *zuhd* and contentment, they reduce their wants to a minimum, liberating themselves from the bondage of need, of things and persons. The life of human being, like that of any other animal, requires a series of natural and indispensable necessities such as air, shelter, food, water, clothing, light and heat which man cannot free himself entirely from attachment to such needs. However, there are a series of other wants which are not necessary but are imposed upon one in the course of life either by oneself or by social factor beyond his control which limits his freedom. These unnecessary needs, as one continues to search for them, lead to weakness and defeat of inner mechanism as he accustoms to and engrosses in comfort and luxury.

Zuhd is rooted in the love of freedom. By nature, man is disposed towards possession of things and their exploitation; but, as a *zahid* realizes that those things make him outwardly powerful but inwardly weak without

will-power. He rebels against slavery of his mind through the adoption of *zuhd*.

Recommendations

Through the subject of this study, we here recommend the following steps:

- i. That the three tiers of government should expedite action in incorporating the teaching of Religious studies into schools' curricula so that the subject could be taught to students not only in both primary and secondary but also at tertiary institutions so that the students would realise that life is measured but not by the quantity of brutality or destruction, but through the quality of one's contribution to development and humanity.
- ii. Since the subject instill spiritual exercise and discipline that enable one to get contented with barest necessities of this world, bribery, corruption, thuggery, robbery, hooliganism and cultism are canker worms that eating the fabric of society would be avoided for peace and love to reign in the society.
- iii. That enjoyment derived from the physical and natural materials of life are not sufficient for man's happiness and felicity but he needs a series of spiritual exercises which substantiate the enjoyment provided by material means.
- iv. That life without Zuhd is meaningless likewise Zuhd without the incorporation of worldly enjoyment is baseless.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the word "*zuhd*", despite its sublime human meaning, has suffered an evil fate, and is fiercely denounced particularly in our own

times. Sometimes, the term is advertently or otherwise misinterpreted; sometimes it is equated with sanctimoniousness and show of piety; at other times, it is considered equivalent to monasticism and ascetic seclusion. Everybody is free to coin terms of his own with any meaning of his own choice. But no one has the right to condemn any concept or term by imparting to it a wrong and misconceived meaning and sense. Before we make any judgement about *zuhd* in Islam, we must understand its Islamic connotation.

In this paper, we have attempted to explain Zuhd which has been described as esoteric dimension of Islam which aims at teaching its adherents sincere dedication of their activities wholly to the service of Allah bearing in mind that if they curtail their hopes and abstain from that which He has forbidden, their life in this world will be profitable and rewardable in the Hereafter. We have looked at the life that is condemned which emanated from the fact that one's attachment to the worldly affairs and materials by total submission to them leads to spiritual stagnation that deprives the human spirit of its freedom of movement and eventually makes it immobile and dead.

Furthermore, we have pointed out the differences between Islamic Zuhd and Christian Monasticism. While the former requires simple and unaffected life style based on abstention from luxuries, love of comfort and pleasure in the midst of society by fulfilling social responsibilities and duties, the latter advocates withdrawal from people and negation of responsibility and commitment towards them. We also focused attention on the elements of Zuhd which have been classified into three: altruism, kindness together with sympathy and freedom. The elements have been explained and examples were provided to buttress our points.

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