

# Our “Share” in this World

By Mohammed Rustom

We often hear people speak of the need to balance our religion (*din*) and our worldly lives (*dunya*). This is a rather uncustomary formulation in traditional Islamic parlance, especially because the Qur'an juxtaposes the *akhira* (afterlife), not *din*, with *dunya*. Needless to say, the Muslims in the past had their priorities straight. They understood what the demands of living the life Islam entailed, and they knew what the demands of living in the world entailed. Thus, they did not need to “strike” a balance between these two, since this balance naturally fell into place for them in their lives, punctuated as they were by the constant remembrance of God, listening to the sounds of the *adhan* in the streets, the general lack of ambivalence so characteristic of the world we live in today, etc. Nowadays, however, perhaps because this natural balance is not there, many will seek to remind themselves and others of the need to keep their *din* and *dunya* in harmony with one another. From what I have seen over the years, this kind of attitude really does not amount to much. What it means is that we are supposed to pursue the world as much as possible, provided we perform the rites of Islam, however perfunctorily. The actual ethical and spiritual life is not up for grabs here. To be sure, what is really being said is, “be as worldly as you want, but also make sure you fit the practices of Islam into your daily routine.” This is tantamount to saying, “make sure your *din* fits into your *dunya*.” We should be after something deeper than this superficial kind of approach to life. The Muslims of the past, who best embodied Islam's traditional norms and values, used to fit their daily lives into their spiritual lives, their *dunya* into their *din*.

Modern-day Muslims who wish to emphasize the importance of the pursuit of the *dunya* commonly cite this Qur'anic passage to support their stance: "*and forget not your share in this world.*"<sup>1</sup> Their understanding here is that "share" refers to material well-being. On a grandiose scale, it may even be taken to refer to an unlimited pursuit of material things. The actual context of this Qur'anic passage involves the counsel Prophet Musa offers to one of his enemies, Qarun, who was a member of Pharaoh's court. The pertinent part of his advice to Qarun is as follows: "*And with what God has given you, seek after the Abode of the Hereafter, and forget not your share in this world*" (28:77). The illustrious commentators upon the Qur'an in classical Islamic civilization (such as al-Tabari, al-Qurtubi, and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi) provide a number of interpretations of these words by Prophet Musa.<sup>2</sup> In specific, he is advising Qarun, who was very rich, to use his wealth to do good and not to be greedy with it. But the advice also has a general applicability. Concerning the word "share" in particular, the commentators tell us that it can refer to doing good works and to giving charity, or to simply enjoying the bounties that God has given us in this world.

At the same time, "share" can also refer to our *graves*. The words "*and forget not your share in this world*" are thus understood to mean, "and forget not the grave while being in this world." The "share" in question, therefore, has to do with the remembrance of death. On this reading, taken as a whole, the words "*And with what God has given you, seek after the Abode of the Hereafter, and forget not your share in this world*" have to do with the pursuit of the afterlife and how we use the world as a means to realize that goal. In effect, this advice of Prophet Musa can be read as an admonishment to balance *din* and *dunya*, but with *din* as the condition for our comportment in the *dunya*.

Taking as our point of inquiry the interpretation that "share" can refer to the remembrance of and preparation for death, how are we supposed to be spiritually-rooted and afterlife-oriented people (a basic component of being Muslim) while also seeking to maintain a dignified life and livelihood in this world?

<sup>1</sup> Translations from the Qur'an, with modifications, are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The interpretations of this verse which are given here are taken from Caner Dagli's commentary upon 28:77 in *The Study Quran*.

The preservation of traditional religious norms is of utmost importance for Muslims today, whether they live in the East or the West. With a world around us which is growing ever-more materialistic as the days go by, and which consequently can only speak to the most outward part of man, namely his body, we are confronted with a great challenge: how are we as followers of the Prophet Muhammad to faithfully adhere to his spiritual teachings amidst a world which is generally forgetful of God, and which seeks to replace the remembrance of God with the remembrance of the false gods of the modern world, chief amongst them the god of materialism? This then leads to the question of whether or not it is possible to amass wealth and at the same time remain faithful to the teachings of Islam.

I understand "materialism" here in its most negative sense. That is, not the simple accumulation of material goods commensurate to our needs in our daily lives, but, rather, the consumption of material goods by individuals well beyond any reasonable measure of need in their daily lives. Taken on a mass scale, as a defining element of daily life, materialism becomes the single lens through which all other things are viewed. Our current global crises, be they related to war, poverty, ecology and the like, all go back to the single problem of materialism.

Materialism can only entail the destruction of the human being and society at large, since it is so closely tied to greed and other diseases of the human soul. It is a part of human nature to want more and more. Indeed, such excessive desire has no end. This is why the Prophet said, "If you give the son of Adam one valley of gold, he will wish that he had two valleys of gold. And nothing shall fill his mouth except the dust of the grave." In other words, human beings will always want more and if this spiritual ailment of greed is not remedied, we may end up carrying it with ourselves to our graves, which is obviously not a good thing.

Since the Islamic tradition insists that man is comprised of a body and a soul, we must ask, what aspect of the human totality is it that materialism addresses? As alluded to earlier, the answer is the body. The body, in Islamic teachings, is the lowest possibility of the human being. It is the most outward part of who we really are, and although it plays an important role in our lives and in our afterlives (where we have subtle bodies), the physical body is not who we *actually* are. Thus a life given to just the body will severely obscure our true selfhoods from

being realized. Materialism can only speak to the body, and for those who subscribe to materialism as their life-governing principle (and there is no reason to believe that many Muslims are exempt from this *in practice*), they can go their entire lives without addressing the other, more substantial part of the human totality, namely man's inward nature or soul. Notice here how the rhetoric of *din* and *dunya* amongst many modern day Muslims gives short shrift to the *din* part of the formula, emphasizing as it does the outward practice of the religion and not its ethical and spiritual dimension. In effect, reducing the *din* to just the physical dimension of Islamic praxis, which is concerned with the body only, conveniently dovetails with the materialist mindset, whose exclusive concern, *qua* materialist, is with the body.

In short, a life excessively and almost (if not) exclusively lived in the pursuit of material things and hence the strengthening of the bodily dimension of existence will weaken the other part of man, namely his spiritual dimension.<sup>3</sup> Such a life will also necessarily entail man's unhappiness since, in the ultimate sense of the term, the aspect of the human being that experiences happiness is the soul and not the body as such. A simple look at the many people who have lived purely sensual lives only to realize that there is something more that they are seeking, something beyond the sensory and bodily, should suffice as evidence.

There is a profound logic to the principle that human happiness is tied to immaterial things: God is not in any way material, and yet is the Source of all happiness and is indeed happiness itself. The more God-like we become (in accordance with the Prophetic command to "take on the character traits of God"), the less "material" we are and the happier we are. The less God-like we are, the more material we are and the less happy we are. A person who is solely concerned with the material world and the physical body is in fact very much removed from God, whereas a person who seeks to become more God-like by shunning materiality and actively preparing for his encounter with God in the afterlife enjoys a special kind of proximity to God, and thus is in a state of happiness that cannot be fathomed by the person engrossed in the world of the senses, and who naturally flees from death. This is the "share" that we must, amidst all of our necessary material pursuits in this world, never forget.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this point, see my commentary upon 14:3 in *The Study Quran*.

As should be clear, by no means am I trying to say that living a life in which we participate in the physical world and the like is a bad thing. In fact, it is necessary for us to seek God’s bounty in this world and to seek to establish, as much as possible, lives that are comfortable for ourselves, our progeny, our communities, etc. One of the *maqasid* or aims of Islamic law (*shari’a*) is the preservation of wealth (*mal*), and this is something that has not been lost on any of the great teachers of Islam, past and present. To be sure, the human body also plays an important role in the spiritual life, but this is a topic that would require a much more detailed discussion.<sup>4</sup> What I am addressing here is the specific, deep psychological attachment to materialism which we as human beings are prone to have, and how the bonds of this attachment are only strengthened by living in a secular world which is unconcerned, in its fundamentals, with the remembrance of the divine. It is this form of materialism that can delude us and cause us to forget our true selves. Even well-intended believers can fall into the trap of materialism if they are not careful. The surest way to know if materialism is holding us back from progressing as spiritual beings is to see where the desire for the accumulation of wealth and material goods stands in relation to the remembrance of God in our lives. At its heightened state, the amassing of wealth and a kind of excessive quantification of life can completely beguile us until it is too late, namely, when death comes knocking at our door: *Quantification distracts you, till you visit the graves* (102:1-12).

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<sup>4</sup> Those interested in this line of inquiry will find an excellent analysis in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chapter 7.