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The Provocative Qur'an

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*BOOK I*

**THE  
PROVOCATIVE  
QUR'AN**

*A Practical Guide  
for Self-Improvement*

**Farooq Husayn**

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## Preface

**I**t is a cold, dark and overcast night at sea. The winds gust and moan; the waves rise and roll. In this peering dark, one can barely see a large sailboat trying to make its way through a blinding rain. However, those on board see that the boat is under the control of a superb crew. They are not only well-trained to anticipate the wind and control the rudder but also perform these difficult tasks with self-discipline. The sailors not only work together with one mind and carry out their captain's instructions as one body, but they also display a sincere sense of mutual fellowship. These advantages favor the boat. It rides out the storm and on a gleaming morning sails proudly into its harbor.

Now we too are sailors on the ship of earth. We have to learn how to live out our life with happiness and fulfillment. But then there are the crosswinds of external challenges. Many children around us lack either the basic necessities of life or the loving care required to enjoy them. Brilliant young people with promising goals are lost to reckless accidents and the blight of drugs. The adult workforce is often struggling either to make ends meet or to enjoy itself in a fulfilling manner; even the elderly face financial strains or loneliness and depression. Further, we cannot always sail amid the natural beauty around us; there are troubled waters of pollution and global warming. Like the crew of a sailboat we also have to learn to love and respect each other; unfortunately, communities and nations are interlocked in deadly conflicts. So what can we do?



When we are faced with even a simple challenge, we try to find the answer through asking questions from our friends and mentors, by reading about the subject, or by surfing the Internet. Now complicated challenges are actually conglomerates of simple ones; if we can break them down and analyze them, they can be overcome. The *real* problem then, is not the problem itself but the motivation to solve it; a plugged drainpipe can only be unplugged if I have the desire to get up and do it. This 'want to' is **Self-building**—the core of *The Provocative Qur'an*.

Like all life-skills, Self-building cannot be learned without an inspiration to seek it. *Now, all faiths, religions and philosophies can provide this crucial motivation.* But judging from the laundry list of unsolved problems around us, religion appears to be, at its best, a beginning. Can it be that the fault does not lie with religious texts but instead with our approach towards them? Can we find something that can help us improve our approach towards religion and make it more practically rewarding for us? The Qur'an asserts that it not only provides inspiration to do the right thing, but also unlocks the treasuries of all other faiths, scriptures and philosophies for our benefit.

**25:1** *Blessed is He who sent down the Criterion (the Qur'an as an objective standard) to His servant, that it may be an instruction to all the worlds (of human mind and experience).*

The claim appears extravagant. My book, then, is an exploration of this claim; through its pages we will find out for ourselves whether the claim is authentic or not. However, before we set out on our journey, let us address and resolve the issues of bias and prejudice; otherwise our image of the Qur'an will be distorted and our judgment unfair.

*Bias* against the Qur'an is based on a justifiable skepticism. After all, many Muslim countries, inhabited by those who claim to fol-

low the Qur'an, are doing poorly; poverty, corruption and strife are rampant in the Muslim East. However, the problem is not the Qur'an itself but instead the approach taken by its students. If one studies the Qur'an fossilized in the Middle Ages or quibbles on words to fuel sectarian violence, one cannot learn anything practically beneficial from it. On the other hand, *prejudice* against the Qur'an is politically driven. The media are continuously barraging Americans about the Muslim threat, and the Qur'an is vilified as the underlying culprit. My book will correct this misinformation.

This first book is a *provocation* to make us think about the ideal of Virtue, or 'being good,' and how to become inspired to do the 'right thing.' Next, this volume will *instigate* us towards an open-minded and critical approach to the major epochs of human thought and discover their practical benefit. Finally, I will share the Qur'an's potential to unify human diversity in the common quest for being good to others and ourselves; we can use its opportunity to tear down the false barriers between human beings and their humanity.

Let us begin this epic. I promise to keep it simple and practical, contemporary and exciting. *Bon voyage!*



## CHAPTER I THE IDEAL OF VIRTUE

*O friends, be honest, just and brave  
Such leaders does Mankind crave*

—IQBAL

### THE BEGINNING OF A PROVOCATION

Most non-Muslim Westerners are introduced to Islam by the televised sound and sight of violent gunfire. Nancy, a young American college student, wonders how a religion could excite its faithful to rack up such daily death tolls. Yitzhak, an Israeli peace activist, finds his good intentions made more difficult everyday by suicide bombings. “How,” he reflects, “can the Qur’an preach such indiscriminate killings?” Kumar, a young Hindu in India, and Siri, a Buddhist housewife in Thailand, want to lead a good life. “How blessed we are,” they reason, “to escape the dangerous Qur’an.” All in all, most non-Muslims who wish to pursue liberty and personal happiness, reason, “What has the Qur’an to do with being good?” Even Muslims begin to have self-doubts about the supposed benefits of the Qur’an. “We can get along,” they reflect, “by learning values through our friends. Printed matter, the Internet, and the daily radio and TV shows tell us all we want and need to know. The schools and colleges will prepare us for financial success. Our social skills will find us mates and families to call our own. Isn’t the Qur’an practically unnecessary?” Thus, while the Qur’an is actively distrusted by non-Muslims, it has become a

mere spiritual display for many Muslims; on the other hand, those most devoted to it, are often its worst spokespersons.

Is anything wrong with this picture? Let me provoke my readers—these interpretations are not simply wrong but disastrously self-destructive. Why? Because all of us, from Jim and Sara, an American working couple with three children, to Jamal, a young student in Pakistan, have an identical pursuit—the pursuit of the good life through ‘being good’, and we turn to a religion or a moral code to find guideposts. Not only are our journeys—despite our different faiths—similar, but we also face identical challenges and obstacles in our quest. The Qur’an is but a valuable guide to help in these journeys and to overcome their challenges. Let me provoke my readers with yet another thought. The Qur’an is not meant to be merely waved by the radical firebrand. Instead, as I will explain, it invites everyone, religious or atheist, Muslim or Christian, Hindu or Jew, to receive its objective assistance in becoming good without believing in it as *their* religious book.

*Come, come whatever you are, it doesn't matter*

—RUMI

Quite appropriately then, this section not only highlights some challenges to our quest to *do things right*, but also provides some provocatively useful answers from the Qur’an. I will then illustrate that, contrary to our misconceptions, the Qur’an will actually put us on the journey towards ‘being good.’

## **The Challenges**

The challenges of being good are two-fold. Being good can become tiresome; it can also make us seek unwholesome cures. Let us explore these stumbling blocks.

### **A Tiresome Event**

Most of us easily get tired of ‘being good.’ Why? Because we have been brought up with the notion that fun only comes from doing whatever we want to do and not necessarily from doing the right thing. This means that if our hearts are set on certain actions—like getting intoxicated at a party, lying to our spouse or cheating on a test—we find these actions impossible to resist even if we *know* that the consequences will be negative or destructive. Every time we give in to the selfish impulse, the prick of conscience is painful. Finally we dispose of the tiresome burden of conscience altogether.

### **Cures Worse Than the Malady**

#### *The Challenge of Subjectivity*

Virtue is ‘being good.’ All of us have subjective ideas about defining this goodness. Unfortunately, this subjectivism often makes us deceive ourselves; we start out with good intentions but end up hurting either ourselves, others around us or everyone. Thus the evangelist preacher who steals money from his church and the suicide bomber who kills indiscriminately are not inherently bad characters—they weren’t born evil—it is just that they justify their crimes through subjective thinking.

#### *The Problem of the Religious Label*

We are all inherently selfish and, if permitted by conscience or society, would like to self-indulge in *whatever* appeals to us. Further, the feeling that today’s opportunity will not last until tomorrow adds haste to this selfish waste! Should I fast on a feast day? Shouldn’t I ravish beauty before it goes bust? If someone screams at me, isn’t it more satisfying to scream back at them there and then? Most of us think that our religion will help us to overcome this selfishness and thus enable us to practice Virtue with a sense of fulfillment and joy.

Unfortunately, religion's track record is more one of failure than success. Why? Because the very fact that it is "my" religion makes it an ego-coddler rather than an ego-rejecter; suddenly, self-centered thinking has found a holy mantle to disguise its evil. The religious label itself becomes a redeemer. When the actual practice of being good becomes superfluous then the same religion or moral code, which should have inspired us to do the right thing, becomes an excuse for not doing it. The Qur'an points out that this is a misguided state of affairs!

*68:34–41 Verily, (only) for the Virtuous, are Gardens of Delight, in the Presence of their Lord.*

*Shall We then treat the People of Faith (who practice Virtue) like the People of Sin (who merely claim Virtue through their religious label)?*

*What is the matter with you? How do you judge (this to be correct)?*

*Or do you have a (religious) book through which you learn That you shall have, through it whatever you choose (even with bad actions)?*

*Or do you have Covenants with Us under oath, reaching to the Day of Judgment, (providing) that you shall have whatever you shall demand (without being good)?*

*Ask of them, which of them can give (palpable) guarantee for that! Or do they have some "Partners" (beings who can change the consequences of good and bad acts)? Then let them produce (in fact) their "partners," if they are truthful!*

When the religious solution itself is the problem, then how can we turn it back into an inspiring cure for our selfishness? Let us turn to some provocative answers.

## Some Provocative Answers

### **First: Don't just look at the Label—Open the gift box!**

Consider Jim and Sara, a married working couple with three children. Jim enjoys his work as an auto mechanic, while Sara is a hairdresser. Both do a wonderful job taking care of their customers. Sara gets done early to pick up the kids from school and helps them with their assignments. Jim gets home in time to help with the dinner and both spend quality time with each other. Both Jim and Sara have many good friends, a satisfying social circle, maintain loving ties with their parents and even an appreciation for their in-laws. Now this wonderful couple is also religious; they seek *inspiration* from their favorite scriptures to do whatever is right and to refrain from whatever is objectively wrong. Now does it really matter if Jim and Sara are Muslim or Christian? Whether their faith is Buddhist or they revere atheism? Obviously not. However, the Qur'an points out that there is something else that not only matters but is also crucial to being good. Let us see what that is.

Our universe runs according to unchangeable rules. We have to abide by this 'System of Rules', not only to make the most of our lives, but also for our very survival. For instance, I can put gravity to many uses but if I hallucinate that I can levitate in thin air, I will most likely hurt myself. If I have good manners, I will have many good friends; but if I am nasty, my enemies may do me in. We will refer to this 'System of Rules' as *The Reality*. Of course, this Reality is a created thing, distinct from its Creator (or **Allah**); though, figuratively speaking, they are often proxies of each other. For instance, if reckless drivers hurt themselves, their hurt is caused by the rules of the Reality, but since Allah created this Reality, one could, figuratively speaking, call it God's punishment. Similarly, mankind has evolved over millions of years, but we can take the short cut and say that God made man. This point is important to keep in mind as you

read this book; often when Allah is mentioned, the reference is to Allah's Reality, the unchangeable rules that we have to—for our own success and happiness—recognize and abide by. The Qur'an proposes that this recognition and submission is vital to being good.

Smart kids, who are adept at learning and using this Reality—how to become creative and industrious, focused and social—surpass their peers who either refuse to accept it or waste their lives fighting it. If adults engage in unsafe sex and get sick, whom can they blame but themselves; people who drive recklessly wreck their driving record or worse.

Let us turn to Jim and Sara. They are good to others because they know that in *Reality*, being good brings them personal safety and social success; they turn to their scriptures for inspiration to do the right thing, because they know that, in *Reality*, the scriptures exist for their benefit. They may not know this Reality perfectly, but the more they know about it, the more successful they become. For instance, their marriage will become happier and more fulfilling if they play by the rules of successful marriage. In other words, as the Qur'an points out, if we are friendly towards the Reality of Allah, the Reality in turn befriends us. As long as, like Jim or Sara, we remain true to the unchangeable rules that bind us, we have less cause to fear others and even lesser cause to grieve for ourselves.

**10:62** *Behold! Verily on the friends of (the Reality of) Allah there is no fear (about doing the 'right thing'), nor shall they grieve (in self-pity).*

One important question remains. How do Jim and Sarah remain focused on what really matters—the *Reality*—and avoid getting trapped by their religious label? The answer lies in their approach. I am not saying that we have to abandon those doctrines and dogmas that interest us; however, if Jim and Sarah turn to their scriptures



only to agonize or gloat over metaphysical fantasies (supernatural details, such as how many angels can stand on a pin's head), then being good in real life may become a secondary issue. On the other hand, if they are not interested in quibbling about metaphysics ('Our Lord is only Allah'), it is more likely that they will turn to the practical business at hand and secure happiness through abiding by the rules.

**46:13** *Verily those who say, "Our Lord is (only) Allah," and remain firm (in doing good), on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.*

We have learned that the rules of being good are not difficult mysteries; they are discoverable. The Qur'an has provoked us to turn to our religion to find these objective answers.

### **Second: Redefining fun?**

Human beings instinctively think of fun as an event happening only for their own gratification. This means that when being good does not meet this expectation—when we are not instantly gratified—it is harder to continue to exhibit good behavior or participate in its scene. However, like a junk food menu, self-gratifying fun does not necessarily equate with health and happiness. Let us explore this issue.

All of us know what being happy means. A child is happy being with parents, friends and doing fun things. As adults we share similarities with our children; happiness is derived from friends and relationships, hobbies and vacations. However, adults are different in that their happiness also requires contentment and fulfillment.

*Contentment* is quantitative—it seeks permanence; once a loved one leaves me, can I still cherish happy memories or am I hopelessly depressed?

*Fulfillment* is qualitative—it is the pleasure of being useful to others. Parents feel it when they have helped their child with schoolwork. Physicians experience it by healing others, and so forth.

In other words, for emotionally and spiritually mature persons, *real* happiness does not end when the toy breaks but refreshes us through serving each other.

How can we secure such happiness? My proposition is that contentment follows fulfillment. If we can discover fun in doing good things for one another, then we will never be diminished by the loss of our toys.

This makes me remember my good friends Bill and Juanita. Bill was always happy helping himself and others have a good life. When Bill was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Juanita and her friends were devastated. But Bill took it upon himself to console Juanita *and* us; he was so busy cheering up everyone else that he had no time to grieve for himself. I have never seen such a gentle death. The Qur'an points out that people who are busy doing the right things while alive are spared the sting of losing life. Why not turn to our selected religion or moral code to inspire us to find joy in serving others?

**79:1–2** *By the (angels) who tear out (the souls of the wicked) with violence;*

*By those who gently draw out (the souls of the blessed);*

This book will illustrate that signing up for being good takes us on exciting adventures that we could have otherwise missed. Naturally, we'll also become eager to share this wonderful discovery with our children, so that they can also have the happiest life possible without making wrong choices.

**Third: Why not give happiness an eternal dimension?**

The eternity of time and space is not fiction but fact. Plato explained a long time ago in his *Theory of Forms* that the essence of everything finite is in the infinite. Is it really far-fetched for a good person to enhance his goodness by giving it an eternal context? I am not referring to Paradise as a balm for those whose present grapes are sour, or the carrot of Heaven which secures compliance; I am referring to the Paradise of infinite happiness, in the present, which every good person experiences when they are doing the ‘right thing.’ Should this idea of eternal happiness inspire Jim and Sara to abide by the *Reality*? The Qur’an gives us a resounding affirmative!

**16:30–32** *To the Virtuous (when) it is said, “What is it that your Lord has revealed?” They say, “All that is good.” To those who do good, there is good in this world, and the Home of the Hereafter is even better and excellent indeed is the Home of the righteous—Gardens of Eternity which they will enter: beneath them flow (pleasant) rivers: they will have therein all that they wish: thus does Allah reward the righteous, those whose lives the angels take in a state of purity, saying (to them), “Peace be on you; enter the Garden, because of what (good) you did (in the world).”*

**Fourth: Good role models do exist!**

The idea that we can actually practice being good instead of just claiming it is not a theoretical ideal. Many people on this planet, not only respect the ideal of goodness but also aspire to emulate models of goodness like Abraham.

**4:125** *Who can be better in religion than one who submits his whole self to Allah, does good, and follows the way of Abraham the true in Faith? For Allah did take Abraham for a friend.*

**16:122** *And We gave him (Abraham) Good in this world, and he will be, in the Hereafter, in the ranks of the Righteous.*

Now role models of goodness are not just national leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King. From the co-worker who lends a helping hand to a kind friend who holds our hand, role models for good behavior are found everywhere. The Qur'an informs us that Virtue is practical.

**21:73** *And We made them (the Virtuous) leaders, guiding by Our Command, and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practice regular charity; and they constantly served Us (and Us only).*

### **Moving On**

The Qur'an has provided some provocative answers to the problem of religious *labels* and the misconception about *fun*. How about the challenge of *subjectivism*? Can we give our 'gut feeling' about being good an objective form? Can we find a universal standard that not only transcends ethnic, cultural and religious biases, but one that cannot be perverted by our subjective views?

My suggestion that the Qur'an offers such a standard to *everyone* may sound provocative. Yet, this is what the next section is all about. We are about to discover that the Qur'an's primary mission is to make being good both a pleasurable and a rewarding adventure; it is time to replace prejudice with an open and inquisitive mind.

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