

On the allegorical nature of the Qur'an's depictions of realities beyond human experience, including Heaven and Hell, I refer the reader to question 3 of chapter 1.⁸² To debate allegorical passages seems to me a puerile exercise, but for the sake of accuracy I wish to correct a few points: the Qur'an does not mention the seventy-two houris promised to martyrs—this is mentioned in a *hadith* in the collections of Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah; the Qur'an states that the "wine" in paradise is not intoxicating (37:47; 52:23; 56:19); and it categorically states that righteous women will go to Heaven.

Finally, I should mention that the same kinds of arguments the questioner attempts to make against the Qur'an have been made against the Bible with much greater force and effect by Western scholars. Since the questioner apparently believes in the divine Revelation of his own Scripture, he either does not know of this scholarship, or his criteria for judging the Bible and the Qur'an are different.

Question 3 (part of a lengthy conversation I had with a young immigrant Muslim woman who struggles to find peace of mind and spirit in her inherited faith; this struggle is a frequently mentioned frustration of many young Muslim Americans):

I think that in my last e-mail I mentioned to you that the more I study Islam and the more I learn about it, the less I feel connected to God. I am sure that this sounds strange to you since you have come to know God through Islam. But the fact is that the more I go through the do's and don't's of our faith, the further away I feel from God. For example, for about four months or so, I was extremely religious about my prayers: five times a day, on time and all of that stuff. Well, not even once in my prayers did I feel God's presence or any sense of peace. I would pray that He would guide me to the truth and show me His way.

After a while, my prayers started feeling like a burden. I felt like I was doing them because "that is the way it is," or "God commanded us to do

82. Also, *Even Angels Ask*, Amana Publications, Beltsville (2000), pp. 9-15.

them." I wanted to get them over with. This just does not feel right to me. Isn't prayer supposed to be our quiet time with God, where we feel a connection rather than resentment and burden and consequently a disconnection and moving away from God? I do not feel that I should be feeling all these negative emotions in my worship to Him. In other words, I felt like a total hypocrite just going through the motions of prayer while resenting the fact that I had to do it.

Then, of course, I started getting angry. I started asking: why does God not want me, why does He not help me, why does He not guide me and help me find the Truth when I try so hard and when I beg for His help? Well, all this anger and resentment ended up in my stopping my prayers (last three to four weeks) and my study of Islam. Plus, I had a couple of conversations with my imam that turned me off. I just feel that every Muslim feels that there is a conspiracy against Islam and all of the Muslims in the world, and that we are always the victims and never the criminals. They also feel that whatever happens to the Muslims, it is really the Jews' fault. I guess I get tired of hearing all of this because we are never willing to admit where we went wrong, we are never willing to admit that we might be wrong.

Well, I really did not want to bore you by going into all of this, but I guess I still have so much energy, anger, and conflict about all of it that it just comes out. So, I ask you, Dr. Lang, why does God not guide some of us when we want to be guided so badly? Why does He not come into our lives when we admit our need for Him and beg Him to come into our hearts?

God has sent down the most beautiful discourse, a book with repeated allegories, whereat shiver the skins of those who hold their Lord in awe, then their skins and their hearts soften to God's remembrance. That is God's guidance—He guides whom He wishes, and he whom He allows to stray, for him there is no guide. (39:23)

It is very hard to answer a question like this one. It elicits profound feelings of inadequacy and responsibility. How can something so personal, intangible, and mystical be analyzed? The human personality in itself can be mysterious and unfathomable but what about the divine nature and the communion between them? This is not like diagnosing a weight problem and proscribing a diet. God is not subject to our formulations; it is we who are subject to His laws. Also, given the yearning and passion behind the question, almost any response is bound to disappoint, since from the human side the problem is often too deep-rooted to hope for a quick remedy. Spirituality is so enmeshed in individual perceptions of life, self and God, so strongly affected by the traditions and teachings to which we have been exposed and the lives we have led, that a profound reorientation might be necessary. Yet, despite the disclaimer, a plea such as this should not be ignored, even if all we can offer is advice based mostly on experience, because God guides as He chooses, and sometimes He does so through the filter of our limitations.

It is important to try as much as possible to avoid ambiguity in this discussion, for our imagination can set expectations so high that what we long for is rarely if ever attained by anyone. On the other hand, mystical happenings are by definition difficult to define and they vary widely in kind and profundity from one individual to the next. Nevertheless, we must assume that a potential for spirituality is part of human nature and that almost all of us have felt this faculty at least slightly aroused at some time by something. Just as we all have the ability to love other than God, we probably all have the ability to have our spirituality stirred even by non-religious means.

Worshippers who have shared with me their spiritual encounters in prayer differ in their descriptions. As to be expected, their initial depictions seem rooted in their religious backgrounds and educations. All of them report a distinct physical or spiritual sensation but describe it in different words. Some report feeling a kind of

encompassing "heaviness" descending over them, others the "descent of angels," some describe being bathed in an invisible "light," some feel a "warmth" radiating from within. Some have feelings of being either "submerged" or "lifted up" by God's "mercy" or "love." Some describe the perception of an intangible "presence." A very common description is of being permeated by a kind of "coolness," and many report shuddering involuntarily and feeling goose bumps. The length of these encounters can be as short as a fraction of a second or as long as an entire prayer (and sometimes beyond that), but most recall moderately short experiences. The intensity of the encounter also varies from mild to very strong. Almost all of those I spoke with state that these experiences are not very frequent. Many say that they are rare. It should also be noted that most of those I interviewed about their prayers reported no such encounters, although many of them are devout. When I asked those who recalled spiritual moments during prayer if they ever had similar episodes outside of worship, many admitted they had on rare occasion somewhat similar experiences, most often when listening to or seeing something particularly moving or beautiful, like an inspirational song, speech or poem, or a breathtaking scene from nature. Most state that the difference between the moments within prayer and those unconnected to worship is that the former often come unexpectedly and with no discernible inspirational stimulus; for example, many report that they were consumed by feelings of shame or repentance when they occurred. From these informal investigations and at the risk of trivializing mystical experiences, I would venture to say that they resemble the moments of numinous awe people in general experience when they are deeply inspired, like when many Americans hear the national anthem beautifully sung or a stirring oration promoting the ideals of universal freedom, brotherhood, and justice; the major differences I can discern—at least from what was conveyed to me—are the spiritual experiences often seem longer and more intense than non-religious moments of inspiration, they happen with greater unpredictability, and most often occur when

the worshipper is experiencing profound feelings of humility, remorse, gratitude or love. My personal opinion is that the "spiritual sense" by which we are deeply moved by an emotive song or speech is the same as that by which God communicates His mercy to us in worship, but God knows best.

As mentioned repeatedly in the first chapter, spirituality and growth in goodness go hand in hand. The more we grow in the attributes that emanate from God, the greater becomes our ability to receive and experience His most beautiful names, both in and out of the rituals, and in this life and the next. Worship in Islam is holistic. Self-surrender to God is revealed more by our day-to-day conduct toward others than by our practice of religious rites. This point is made emphatically in *Surah al Ma'un*:

Have you seen the one who belies religion? That is he who repels the orphan, and does not urge the feeding of the needy. So woe to the praying ones, who are unmindful of their prayer, who would be seen (at worship), yet refuses small kindnesses (107:1-7).

This may also explain why the Qur'an so frequently refers to the obligations of *salat*⁸³ (prayer) and *zakat*⁸⁴ (charity) in tandem,⁸⁵ because faith and charitable giving augment each other.

Note too that *salat* and *zakat* are not impromptu supplication and self-sacrifice, both of which are highly valued in Islam, but prescribed and strictly regulated ritual prayer and charity. These are minimal prayer and charitable requirements that should habituate the believer

83. The ritual prayer of Islam performed five times daily. It consists of prescribed positions and recitations combined with personal supplications. It is the second pillar of Islam.

84. The annual charity tax in Islam set at 2.5% of one's capital. It is the third pillar of Islam.

85. E.g. 2:43; 2:83; 2:277; 4:162; 5:12; 9:18; 13:22; 19:31; 19:55; 21:73; 22:41; 24:37; 27:3; 31:4; 33:35; 73:20; 98:5.

to both forms of worship, just like regular exercise accustoms an athlete to physical exertion and regular homework habituates a student to learning. Growth in virtue is akin to both of these forms of personal training, for it too takes determination and discipline; it requires pressing on, not just when it feels good or you are inspired to, but even when you are not, or when it is uncomfortable, or when it is certain not to be appreciated by anyone other than God. Moreover, with regular practice of Islam's rituals the desire to serve God usually grows, prompting the worshipper to go beyond what is required, the same way athletes and students typically develop the need to continually "raise the bar" of their performance.

However, it is important to recognize that God does not require perfection before divine intimacy can be experienced.⁸⁶ Indeed, the Qur'an states that none of us should claim to be pure (53:32) and it repeatedly shows that even the prophets, God's elect, had weaknesses and failings. Yet one quality in particular softens the heart to reception of divine light and its opposite hardens it. "Successful are the believers, who are humble in their prayers," states the Qur'an (23:1-2). Although it bucks the current trend in American culture, humility is the appropriate bearing of the Muslim;⁸⁷ this is because it acknowledges our true standing before God, and truth is crucial to real intimacy in any relationship, but especially in our relationship with God, the source of truth.

I have heard of Muslim converts who turned their lives totally around and abandoned virtually all of their former vices from the day they made their first *shahadah*. Unfortunately, my example was not so inspiring. Mine has been at times a long and difficult struggle toward personal reform. In that critical period following conversion I fought hard against some long-standing bad habits, and suffered my share of setbacks, so that my five daily prayers were filled with tears, remorse,

86. Cf. chapter one, pages 112-118.

87. Cf. 2:45; 4:36; 5:54; 6:42-43; 11:23; 17:37; 22:34-35; 22:54; 23:2; 23:76; 31:18; 33:35; 57:16; 57:23.

and pleas for help. I knew with every ounce of my being the reality of my weakness and complete dependence on the mercy of God. Yet it was in this state of acute consciousness of my utter lowliness that I experienced some of my most moving prayers. I don't know why God graced me with those intense spiritual moments back then, but I do know that I prayed with the most genuine humility and contrition, and although my Qur'an recitation was short and clumsy, I spent a long time in *salat* pouring out my heart in repentance.

There have also been lengthy intervals in which I felt no such divine closeness. The first time this happened I fell into a state of prolonged dismay. Why has God withdrawn Himself from me? I thought. I pleaded with Him to let me feel His merciful embrace once again, to let me know the assurance and beauty that used to come so freely. But despite my persistent beseeching my prayers remained non-descript.

Although I endured a period of despondency, I ultimately found solace in a number of considerations. The first was God's assurance in the Qur'an that He is always near, and that He hears and responds to our supplications, even though we are most often oblivious of it.

And when My servants ask of Me, I am truly near. I heed the call of every caller when he calls on Me. Let them also, with a will, listen to My call and believe in Me, that they may walk in the right way. (2:186)

Another was that while I was not experiencing the intensity I had come to anticipate in my prayers, I was still gaining very much from them. Just the discipline of five daily prayers at appointed times became a source of strength during a period when I was under enormous pressure because of my choice to convert. The prayers also became a spiritual retreat, an opportunity to remove myself for a few minutes from the chaos and stress of temporal pursuits to reorient and remind myself of life's real purpose.

Then there was the verse in the *Surah al Kabf* that tells the

Prophet that the Revelations don't come to him when he wants, but when God decides.

And say not about anything, truly I will do that tomorrow,⁸⁸ [but say] unless God wishes. And remember your Lord when you forget, and say: Perhaps my Lord will guide me unto a nearer way of truth than this (18:23-24).

One of the things I got from this is that while God's Revelations and our prayers are certainly for our benefit, we should remember that one of their basic aims is to inculcate self-surrender to Him and that He is not at our service but we are at His. This changed my outlook on *salat*. I realized that to think of it mainly as a means of obtaining divine assurance and mystical experiences is to conceive of God as serving me and thus undermines their principal function.

Finally, there is the Prophet's well-known break in Revelation, where after his first Revelation—consisting of the first five verses of *Surah al Alaq*—a period elapsed when he received no Revelation at all. The length in the break cannot be established with certainty but estimates put it between six months and three years. It was a time of deepest distress for the Prophet. I often reflected on why God imposed this interruption in Revelation, especially since it caused the Prophet so much anxiety and self-doubt. I found almost no commentary on this, either in the *Hadith*, *sirah*, or *tafsir* literature. Nevertheless, I felt that if God in His wisdom allowed His Messenger to suffer a long and anxious period of perceived separation, then who am I to fret over periods when my prayers were unremarkable. Of course, I would examine myself to try to determine if I had lost focus in my prayers, or had been doing something wrong recently, or had taken steps backwards in faith, and sometimes I felt this was the case and I then tried to correct myself, but I think sometimes God simply

88. It is said that the Prophet told his detractors that he would receive a Revelation about one of their questions the next day.

chose to let me be for a while. So I resolved to just continue to gratefully perform the Islamic rituals and to work on self-improvement, to derive the many divine benefits that come from doing so, and to leave the matter of spiritual encounters in God's hands, where it entirely belongs anyway. I thought that even if I never had another one throughout the rest of my life, I would be forever thankful for those I already had and for everything else God has given me.

And then it was not long before I began to feel God's merciful embrace again, sometimes in prayer, sometimes in contemplation, and even sometimes when in the company of others. Even so, my most intense experiences still belonged to that early stage after conversion. I know it is foolish to try to explain this, but I truly believe that I would not have made it through that difficult period without them. Despite my absolute conviction in the Revelation of the Qur'an and prophethood of Muhammad, I probably would have given up on faith if it were not for the divine support. It was not that I doubted Islam, but rather I doubted myself. I did not believe that I could overcome the wrongdoing to which I had become so accustomed, and many times I felt like fleeing the community instead of remaining a hypocrite within it, but these moments of divine mercy inspired me to persevere. In other words, I feel that those moments of divine tenderness had more to do with God's mercy and my utter weakness than anything else. I write this because I do not want readers, like the young lady above, to despair if they do not have spiritual moments in their prayers. It does not mean that they have lost favor with God. I know of many devout Muslims who have rarely, or even never, had such experiences, but have come to know tremendous happiness and inner peace—a state of inner well-being that grew gradually and to them indiscernibly through the years—through steadfast commitment to Islam. This said, I will attempt to give somewhat practical advice to young American Muslims who are disillusioned with their prayers.

My oldest daughter—she is now seventeen—began complaining

several years back that her experience of prayer was extremely dry and meaningless. She finally stopped praying altogether and despite our urging she would not return to them. After she and I discussed the issue at length I made a few suggestions.

She told me that she had no idea what she was reciting in Arabic, that she felt like a mindless parrot, and that this made the ritual for her completely sterile. I suggested that she try saying the entire prayer in English, including the Qur'an recitation, for a while, and see if she notices a difference. I also told her that in the meantime she should try to learn the meaning of the Arabic recitations, preferably word for word, and that my wife and I would help her with this, so that she might incorporate them back into her prayers with real understanding. I shared with her that in the prayers I perform alone, I often follow my Arabic recitations with my own English translations, and that she might try this someday as well.

She also stated that she found it impossible to stick to the discipline of five prayers daily, that she didn't have the willpower. I mentioned that performing five prayers every day might be too much for her to start with, like the fellow who decides he will get in shape by running ten miles every day and then gives up after the first run because he becomes so badly winded. I suggested that she begin with a more comfortable regimen, such as pray the evening prayer each day or perhaps the afternoon and evening. I recommended that she try to become regular in this, then gradually increase the level when she feels ready.

I mentioned to her that sometimes people are blocked by guilt in their worship, either about things they did in the past and can't forget or things they currently are doing and can't overcome. I said that in this case they should tell God about them in their prayers, and ask Him for His help and forgiveness, and, most importantly, trust that He will help them if they are sincere.

I advised her to make the most of *salat* by using it as an opportu-

nity to express herself to God; to tell Him her fears, hopes, and problems; to ask Him for help and guidance; to pray from her heart. I suggested that this might be why the prayers became monotonous and meaningless to her, because we tend to make them that way by being too formulaic. I advise all my children to speak to God from the heart, even if only a few words, in every prayer.

I also discovered that she had a paralyzing fear of God that she somehow picked up from the Muslim community while she was growing up, and which helped to turn her prayers into an unpleasant standing before what she saw as a terrifying deity. I told her that I thought she needed to reorient her thinking about God; that it might help to remind herself of the many verses of the Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet that emphasize God's forgiveness and compassion, and His not demanding perfection from us. I reminded her that the Qur'an was revealed to a people the majority of whom made war against truth, and so it warns and threatens them, but it also continually reassures those who believe in God and who strive to serve Him. I also said that we all have failings and that she is a good person, and that God says in the Qur'an that only the wicked will suffer in the Hereafter.

Of course, I realize that the advice I gave my daughter is not going to be a cure-all for young people who are not performing their prayers, and I don't offer it as one. I hope that it might encourage others to think creatively on ways to address similar problems. As for my daughter, I left her to herself for a while. I resisted the urge to monitor her progress, because I felt it important that she return to her prayers on her own initiative, for the sake of her relationship with God instead of her relationship with me. About a month later I found her praying one evening when I went to kiss her goodnight. I asked my wife about it and she told me that she had been praying pretty regularly lately. After another month my wife told me that she was now praying all five prayers. A few weeks passed and then I asked her while we were sitting alone one evening if she was getting anything

out of her prayers lately and she assured me she was. I do not think my advice played a major part in her return to the prayers—my intuition tells me that this was something very personal between God and her—but as always, God knows best.

Question 4 (from a young man in his mid-thirties and pertaining to verse 34 of *Surah al Nisa'* about wife-beating. Most of those who contact me to discuss religion are second generation American Muslims and converts to Islam, but I also receive a fair amount of mail from American non-Muslims interested in Islam. The biggest issue for the latter, regardless of gender, is the position of women in the Muslim community. The subject of wife beating very frequently comes up. This topic is also one of the most hotly contended these days on the Internet.):

I have been thinking about converting to Islam, but I can't seem to get past some issues. Most of my problems pertain to the treatment of women. At the top of the list is Qur'an 4:34, which instructs husbands to beat their disobedient wives. I'm sorry, but beating your wife for not abiding by your commands—no matter how reasonable they may be—is just flat out wrong. I'm interested to know your take on this?

Question 5 (also about wife-beating and from a convert to Islam in his late twenties):

*I was searching the Internet the other day for information on the position of women in Islam. The non-Muslim sites, which quote heavily from Muslim sources, present an appalling picture—so do some of the more conservative Muslim sites. I've noticed that most of the Muslim web pages that defend the status of women in Islam do not discuss the most embarrassing *hadiths* quoted on Christian sites. I have also come across several Muslim sites that state that "daraba" in 4:34 does not mean "beat" as traditionally understood, but has other more innocuous meanings, such as "separate" or even "make love"! My first reaction was, "What a relief!"*