

The Ghazālian Alchemy of an Islamic Nation

John Lim¹

There is a general misconception that governments have little impact on individual happiness. A study carried out in Australia revealed that people believed their government contributes little to their happiness as compared to other potential sources.² The result was not a surprise since many equate their level of happiness in terms of material well-being like employment, income, education, social status and wealth. The concept of happiness is difficult to define since the level of happiness is anchored to the level of material well-being that changes with time and circumstances.

In recent years, the consideration of happiness has gained much momentum. The United Nations, in July 2011, proposed a happiness index as a new measure to guide development policies, and in April 2012, launched the first meeting on happiness and well-being, resulting in the first World Happiness Report published on 2 April 2012.³ The innovative report differs from the Australian study because it also included the non-material aspect of mental well-being into consideration. The Report showed that individuals who are emotionally happier have more satisfying lives. An individual living within the framework of a particular social system has a certain dependence on the whole system of social standards and as well as autonomy that is a necessary precondition for the life and development of the system.⁴ It is clear that there is a positive correlation between the happiness of an individual with that of the society. Anecdotally, the nature of happy individuals makes happy societies, which forms positive governments. That in return, creates a framework to nurture a society of happy individuals. For the purposes of this paper, the concept of happiness shall be de-

¹ John Lim Jit Nong is a former Assistant Director with the Ministry of Law Headquarters in Singapore, holding positions in both the Strategy Planning Division and the Corporate Development Unit.

² Headey B, Wearing A., *Understanding Happiness: A Theory of Subjective Well-being* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire Pty Limited, 1992)

³ "Overview", *World Happiness Report*, Accessed 15 October 2015, <http://www.earth.columbia.edu/articles/view/1791>.

⁴ "Dialectic Marxism", Alexander Spirkin, Published in 1983, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/spirkin/works/dialectical-materialism/index.html>

defined as the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his or her life as a whole favourably.¹ Happiness is a universal aspiration of every individual that can also be used as a measure of social progression.²

What is Islamic Governance?

There has not been a conclusive definition on what is 'Islamic Governance' and there may very well never be. Is that a set of rules and processes governing a particular state occupied by Muslims or conversely, a set of rules and processes governing an 'Islamic State'? Does the set of rules and processes apply only within the boundary of that state or do they reach out to the '*Ummah*'? Although there are differences of opinion of what constitutes 'Islamic Governance', those differences converge at the point of '*Tauhīd*'. The concept of '*Tauhīd*' encapsulates all Islamic belief system and permeates every aspect of a Muslim's life.

Thus, for Muslims, the key to happiness is knowing and worshipping Allah. The concept of '*Tauhīd*' epitomises the entire Islamic faith and value system. It suffuses every aspect of Muslim life. The assumption is that true happiness can only be achieved when Islamic values are met and only by seeking to know Allah can this happiness be found. It is on this understanding that this paper will explore al-Ghazālī's treatise, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, and to examine the relations between Happiness and 'Islamic Governance'.

The Alchemy of Happiness

The Alchemy of Happiness, or *Kimiyyah Sa'ādah* in Arabic, is a philosophical and religious writing that expounds on how an individual should live his life to achieve true happiness. True happiness comes from the cultivation of the self and the realisation that the individual is primarily a spiritual entity. A human being lives in both a material and spiritual world. The ultimate ecstasy is not to be found in material possessions alone but in discovering through personal experience with the ultimate Reality, which is Allah. Happiness is not dependent on the things owned but the quality of life lived. According to al-Ghazālī, there are four elements that show the path to true happiness:

¹ R. Veenhoven, *Conditions of Happiness* (the Netherlands, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1984)

² "World Happiness Report 2013", World Happiness Report, Accessed 15 October 2015, <http://worldhappiness.report/>

- Knowledge of Self;
- Knowledge of God;
- Knowledge of the World as it really is; and
- Knowledge of the Next World as it really is.

Al-Ghazālī's 'Alchemy' is essentially a model to transform the condition of men from that of the unsubstantiated to that of the purity of the angelic state. Knowledge of self is the key of knowing Allah. Before this transformation takes place, there is first, a need to know the self. That entails knowing the flaws, limitations and goodness within the self as what al-Ghazālī broadly termed the attributes of the animal, the devil and the angel.

Knowledge of Self

The concept of '*Tauhīd*' opens an individual's heart to '*Inshirāh*'¹ or spiritual consciousness, through which divine guidance will direct the individual towards a path that can only be traversed from beyond the given sensory faculties of sight, taste, smell, hear and touch. The understanding begins by the study of the physical body and the transformation of the spiritual heart and the answering to Allah on all deeds done rightly or wrongly on Judgement Day. Metaphorically, the human body is the kingdom and represented by the soul. The spiritual heart is the king and the five different sensory faculties are the army of the kingdom. In this kingdom, reason is the prime minister, passion is the revenue collector and anger is the policeman.² The kingdom is in a constant struggle between the animalistic and devilish attributes that deter it from attaining spiritual fulfilment via the cultivation of the angelic attributes. This is done via the army, revenue collector and policeman.

The knowledge of self is central to the beginning of the pursuit of happiness because of the dangers of wrongful assumptions and making wrong conclusions. This is understood in two ways. Firstly, by understanding the feature of acquired knowledge - which is the essence nurtured from infancy till death of the spiritual heart and facilitated by feelings, emotions, physical senses brought about by the five senses. Secondly, by understanding the feature of the immedi-

¹ Surah al-Inshirāh: 8

² Al-Ghazālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, pg. 22

ate knowledge - this is the essence within the spiritual heart given by Allah from infancy that may or may not be nurtured, that constitutes faith, consciousness, mental formations and predispositions contained within the body. Often times, the acquired knowledge overrides the immediate knowledge,¹ which in turn causes a person to act in an animalistic and devilish manner. When individuals allow these negative attributes to take control, it is as if “one who should hand over an angel to the power of a dog”.² However, if the intentions arising from animalistic and devilish attributes can be restrained and with the cultivation of the angelic attributes, individuals will begin to be intuitive and gain knowledge that do not come about via the senses in the physical body. Essentially, the knowledge of self-entails knowing the nature of the spiritual heart and how it connects to the soul. This knowledge is followed by the spiritual and physical needs stemming from immediate and acquired knowledge. Mental forms of human minds from acquired knowledge alone are insufficient of comprehending any knowledge outside man-made logic, animalistic and devilish tendencies, which effectively block the path towards Allah. The Qur’ān aptly teaches: ﴿He who is blind in this life, will be blind in the next life and astray from the path.﴾³

The essence of the spiritual heart has two variants. Firstly, the one that is much influenced by the acquired knowledge and nurtured by the physical body and the five sensory faculties. This essence evaporates once the physical body perishes. The second variant is the spiritual heart influenced by the Divine, which remains even after the death of the physical body. The nature of the spiritual heart can either bring the soul away or closer to Divine teachings and thereby, bringing the soul further away or closer to God. It is clear that the spiritual heart is essential in supporting the effort to respond more faithfully to the love of Allah in the pursuit of ‘*Tauhīd*’, which leads to true happiness. This is not only an intellectual exercise to deepen the academic understanding, but the effort towards Allah, and it is something that everyone has to experience by themselves; this cannot be transferred or bequeathed. The goal is to give birth to a certain kind of response within the self from the spiritual heart that recognises the divine guidance and live according to that guidance. Although along the way, minds may be enlightened, and certain ability may be cultivated to understand

¹ “Lesson 13: The Boundless Knowledge of God”, *Al-Islam.org*, Accessed 10 October 2015, <http://www.al-islam.org/god-and-his-attributes-sayyid-mujtaba-musawi-lari/lesson-13-boundless-knowledge-god>

² al-Ghazālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, pg. 23

³ Surah Al-Isra: 72

and respond to the workings and mysteries of this world. One such example would be the implementation and support of Islamic Finance. This effort safeguards the Objectives “*Maqāsid*” of Sharī’ah that contribute and realise the best interest and attain true happiness by either securing a benefit or preventing harm “*Maslahah*” for humankind on earth.

Knowledge of God

“He who knows himself, knows Allah”.¹ Conversely, this dictum can also be understood as, “He who does not know himself, does not know Allah”. This knowledge of God – of Allah – opens the individual’s heart to ‘*futūh*’², a sense of hope and fear of the ultimate Truth derived from the Qur’ān and teaching of the Prophet ﷺ. This comes with the understanding that the existence of the individual and whatever temporal experiences and material possessions accrued were not acquired by individual’s efforts alone³ but with Allah’s power. When the journey on this realm has ended, individuals will then return to Allah, the source, the origins and beginnings of existence. However, to truly gain the knowledge of God is an impossible endeavor due to His infinite attributes. Allah is above all man-made concepts, and beyond the scaffolds of logic, and it is only by way of spiritual cultivation can individuals acquire some knowledge of God. God is an absolute being, identical with knowledge, power, life, stability and realisation. Allah is not subjected to any mental or external limits or restrictions.⁴ From this knowledge of the creation of self and extending the understanding to the world around, stems the awareness of the existence of God. From contemplating the physical body, comes the understanding of God’s power and wisdom. Even when one is physically or mentally handicapped, there are still the ample direct and indirect provisions from the Divine love of God for the various physical and spiritual needs. In the cultivation of the angelic attributes, both God and the soul are invisible, indivisible, unconfined by space and time, and beyond any manmade categorisation of quantity and quality.⁵ Allah is a creator that is not confined to any space or time. Nothing in the past, present or future is beyond His comprehension.

¹ Mizan al-Hikmah, hadith 12223 [Urdu trans.] quoting from *Ghurur al-Hikam Safinat al-Bihar*, vol. 2, p603.

² Quran 20:131 and eighth discourse from *Futuh Al-Ghaib*, Accessed at http://al.baz.com/shaikhhabdalqadir/Books_and_Text_of_Wisdom/Futuh_al-Ghaib/futuh_8/futuh_8.htm

³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, p33

⁴ “Lesson 11: The Incomparability of the Divine Attributes”, *Al-Islam.org*, Accessed 10 October 2015, <http://www.al-islam.org/god-and-his-attributes-sayyid-mujtaba-musawi-lari/lesson-11-incomparability-divine-attributes>

⁵ Ibid.

One attribute that God has given mankind is the ability to distinguish and discriminate between good and evil, and between beauty and ugliness. With such freedom to make individual decisions, God will test individuals on their ability to create phenomena bearing witness to His wisdom and power¹ of either doing good or evil. Although God neither compels humankind to do either, He expects them to do good and in exchange, God provides abundant and unimaginable rewards² in this world and the hereafter, which individuals have much to be grateful for. Similarly, torment and punishments follow those who follow the path of evil. Individuals are essentially spiritual in nature and are the creation of God, and the fact is that they will eventually return to God. These understanding leads to the natural acts and deeds required that are derived from Sharī'ah Law where the validity is universally accepted and cannot be repealed.³ One such example is the safeguarding of the "*Deen*". There is therefore a need and responsibility towards the Creator, who is fully aware of the slightest act and deeds in the universe, and to avoid sins that only serves to increase distance away from God.⁴ With that comes the fear that actions done are insufficient to warrant the obedience to God and also hope that all actions are in compliance and sufficient to merit the approval of Allah. There is therefore, much to be grateful for and obey God's teachings and follow the path because there is no greater purpose in this world than to cultivate the angelic attributes and be closer to God.⁵

Knowledge of the World as it Really is

To understand the world is to know the purpose of life in this realm, which is to worship Allah and do His bidding. This comes with the acknowledgement that human beings are spiritual in nature with God as the creator. After a human body expires, the soul will return to where the source, origin and beginning of existence is, and answer to God on the deeds done rightly or wrongly in this realm. This understanding opens up the individual soul to '*redha*'⁶ the acceptance of the state of happiness and awareness that events in this world are parts of the Divine order and to see things as they really are. To subsist in this

¹ "Lesson 13: The Boundless Knowledge of God", *Al-Islam.org*, Accessed 10 October 2015, <http://www.al-islam.org/god-and-his-attributes-sayyid-mujtaba-musawi-lari/lesson-13-boundless-knowledge-god>

² Surah al-Talāq: 3

³ Al-Ghazālī in Mashhad Al-Allaf, *The Objectives (Maqasid) of the Islamic Divine Law*, vol. 1 (1997), pg. 416

⁴ Surah al-Baqarah: 283

⁵ "Lesson 13: The Boundless Knowledge of God", *Al-Islam.org*, Accessed 10 October 2015, <http://www.al-islam.org/god-and-his-attributes-sayyid-mujtaba-musawi-lari/lesson-13-boundless-knowledge-god>

⁶ Surah Āli 'Imran: 173

world, only two things are required. Firstly, the protection and nurturing of the soul for it is only the soul that enters heaven and not the body.¹ This is done with the love for and knowledge of God. Being absorbed in the love for anything else is the ruin of the soul. Secondly, the care and nurture of the physical body. The body, being the kingdom of the soul, should be in a good condition to enable the journey in the path towards God.² The maintenance of the physical body is simple with only the need for food, clothing and a dwelling place. It is the excess and insatiable pursuits of temporal pleasures and material wants from the acquired knowledge that juxtapose with the immediate knowledge in the pursuit of the Divine.

Rightful living is crucial for the maintenance of the body and the cultivation of the soul. Exercising the freedom that was given by God and bearing witness to His wisdom and power can achieve the cultivation of the soul.³ Rightful living is the conscious living in striving towards God, regardless of the type and nature of roles or living conditions and is essentially a daily spiritual practice of being aware of intentions and actions towards the angelic attributes and limiting the animalistic and devilish attributes. In the course of livelihood in this world, mankind has forgotten the objective of making the body fit for the soul to pursue its journey towards God and to the next world. The real necessities for life had been replaced with the material wants and pleasures to satisfy the acquired yearnings of the physical body. There is a failure to understand or a wilful disregard to the fact that these temporal pleasures and material possessions only bring transient happiness although the impression that these possessions created was as if they would last forever,⁴ especially when carried out in excess. One such example is the acquisition of multiple motor vehicles in scores for self-consumption, where one suffices for the purpose of transportation. This is possibly the most challenging aspect to humankind that hinders the relevance and rightful progression in this world in accordance to Shari'ah teachings.

This false impression of the eternity of material possessions came to be because humankind mistook these temporal pleasures and material possessions as an end rather as a means towards the next world. In truth, pleasures and pos-

¹ Surah al-Fajr: 27

² Al-Ghazāli, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, pg.48

³ "Lesson 13: The Boundless Knowledge of God", *Al-Islam.org*, Accessed 10 October 2015, <http://www.al-islam.org/god-and-his-attributes-sayyid-mujtaba-musawi-lari/lesson-13-boundless-knowledge-god>

⁴ Al-Ghazāli, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, pg. 51

sessions in this world only slip away moment by moment. The Prophet ﷺ aptly described worldly attachments as things that engross the mind and cause clinging to this world and therefore, being careless of the next world, as purely evil. The world is a curse, and all that are in it, are cursed, except for the remembrance of Allah.¹ All events in this world form a part in the Divine order and humankind should not be overcome with fear or pessimism for the lack or want of any temporal pleasures or material possessions, but to be grateful and contented² with what has already been provided for as a cultivation aid and to not deviate from the spiritual path of doing God's bidding in preparation for the next world.

Knowledge of the Hereafter as it Really is

The knowledge of the Hereafter and the reality of Paradise and Hell is something that mankind will never be able to understand until they actually enter it. Allah has given mankind a glimpse of Heaven described in the Qur'ān and the conversation between Allah and the people of Paradise that reads: O People of Paradise! They will respond: Here we are, our Lord and all the good is in Your hands. Allah will say: Are you satisfied? They will answer: Why shouldn't we be satisfied when You have bestowed on us what You have not bestowed on any of Your creations? Allah will then say: Shall I not bestow you something even better than that? They will say: O Lord, what could be better than that? Allah will say: I bestow you My pleasure and I shall hereafter, never be angry with you again.³ The entry to Paradise is limited to followers of the Islamic faith with spiritual hearts connected to Allah and not the pleasures of this world. Even amongst the believers, there are two categories. The first being those who are aware of the Hereafter, but their spiritual hearts are inclined towards the acquired knowledge brought about by the pleasures of this world and much influenced by the animalistic and devilish attributes. They do not seek out or are aware of the Divine love in this world but constantly in pursuit of the transient pleasures and material possessions in this world.

Without Divine love, existence in the current world constitutes hell itself and their souls are constantly moving away from God with each passing moment

¹ Ibid.

² "How Sura Ad-Duha Can Change Your Life", Understand the Quran Academy, Accessed 10 October 2015, <http://understandquran.com/how-sura-ad-duha-can-change-your-life.html>

³ "Conversations in Paradise and Hell", *The Religion of Islam*, Aisha Stacey, Accessed 10 October 2015, http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/5257/viewall#_ftnref21444

and their entry to Paradise is denied. They would have wasted their time in this world foolishly pursuing temporal and transient happiness instead of the eternal happiness in Paradise. The second group are followers whose spiritual hearts are opened and consciously cultivating angelic attributes. They are constantly aware of and are grateful to the Divine love bestowed upon them by God in this realm and using the given material possessions to further their spiritual duties to Allah. In the spiritual hearts of these people, they know for certain and by (through?) actual spiritual experiences and not by hearsay or traditional beliefs on Paradise in this world and the next. This (certainty) can only come about with the 'Knowledge of Self', 'Knowledge of God', 'Knowledge of the World as it Really is' and 'Knowledge of the Next World as it Really is', worshipping,¹ (as well as the) cultivation of the angelic attributes and rightful living. With the cultivation of angelic attributes and the personal spiritual experience, the door to spiritual Paradise within this world is opened. The love, gratitude, obedience and longing to be closer to God also open the actual door to Paradise in the hereafter. On the other hand, the feeding of animalistic and devilish attributes only brings forth spiritual hell in this world when spiritual hearts are intertwined with the temporal pleasures and worldly possessions they crave. These unwholesome attachments bring individuals further away from God and closer to the gates of Hell in the hereafter.

Conclusion

The Alchemy of Happiness is indeed a timeless gift from al-Ghazāli. Central to the teaching is the concepts of 'faith' and 'awareness'. Awareness stems from knowledge and knowledge comes from practice, learning, internalising and experience with faith in Allah enveloping all. Human beings are spiritual and intelligent beings and have the ability to pursue true happiness despite having different levels of faith and awareness. In the pursuit of happiness, it is incumbent upon us to pursue the right path in order to secure happiness not only in this realm, but also in the hereafter. It is clear there is interdependence between the spiritual and temporal aspects in life on this realm. Humankind should not fall prey to the excess in temporal and material desires, which are matters not of utmost importance, but (instead to) focus more on the guidance from Allah by way of incorporating theological understanding to the current time and world that humankind lives in by integrating this understanding into the framework of

¹ Al-Ghazāli, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, pg. 57

the Objectives or *Maqāsid* of the Shari'ah both at an individual and at an institutional level either to secure a benefit or prevent harm "*maslahah*" for humankind on earth. The benefits are categorised into 3 types:

Accredited benefits (*Masalih Mu'tabarah*)

These are the benefits and interests of acts and deeds regulated by the one in authority derived from textual authority from the Shari'ah Law where the validity is universally accepted and cannot be repealed.¹ An example would be the commandment for '*Jihad*' aimed at safeguarding the '*Deen*'.

Nullify benefits (*Masalih Mulghat*)

These are the benefits and interests of acts and deeds rejected outright by the Shari'ah Law because of the harm and hardship that ensued². An example would be the financial transactions with interests ('*riba*') that may lead to usury even if that may lead to financial profits.

Unregulated benefits (*al-Masalih al-Mursalah*)

These are the benefits and interests that are not accorded in the Shari'ah Law and are neither explicitly denied nor approved. The regulations of these benefits and interests are left to the scholars of jurisprudence to negotiate in accordance to time, place and cultural context³. An example of which may be the award of the custody, care and control of a minor child to the parent who is in the best position to provide welfare during a divorce. This is a powerful aspect under the ambit of the Shari'ah Law that enables relevance and progression with times in the form of '*itijhād*'.

The pursuit of true happiness is synonymous with the framework of the "*Maqāsid*" of the Shari'ah and can be achieved by the preservation and advancement of the five essentials of:

- i) Religion - example of building mosques for prayers and religious activities;
- ii) Intellect - example of building '*Madrasahs*' for Islamic studies and schools for secular studies;

¹ Al-Ghazāli in Mashhad Al-Allaf, *The Objectives (Maqāsid) of the Islamic Divine Law*, vol. 1 (1997), pg. 416

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

- iii) Body - example of the provision of healthy and non-contaminated foodstuff and overall framework to avoid any physical harm to an individual;
- iv) Family Relations - example of the conducive environment for individuals to settle down and set up a family;
- v) Property - example of the conducive environment to pursue economic gains and earthly material possessions.

This understanding is crucial not only to each individual, but also corporations and governments since the latter are nowadays the concentration of wealth and power that shapes society and the world. Corporations and government have the ability to carve out goals and aspirations and mould thoughts and languages.¹ They create images and metaphors of current times to provide a model to transform the conditions of men from that of the unsubstantiated to that of the purity of the angelic state, which our children and future generations will use to define their worlds and their lives. Islamic Governance is therefore, the governance in a state or nation that propagates the pursuit of true happiness and people living their lives in the manner taught by the Qur'ān and articulated by al-Ghazāli. That has an escalating effect within a state or nation and a positive spill over to the '*Ummah*'.

¹ Grossman Richard, "Revoking the Corporation", *Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation* 2, (1996)