

Islamic Ethics: The Attributes of *Al-Ihsan* in the *Quran* and Its Effects on Muslim Morality

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Abstract

As it is common knowledge that one of the objectives of all religions is to turn societal morality to perfect morality which will be of benefit to society. Islam is no exception to this objective. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to discuss and analyze one of the ethical or moral attributes, al-Ihsan (goodness/kindness), mentioned in Quran and how this affects Muslim morality as well as enhance the faith of the believer. This paper is a library-based research which utilizes the content analysis method in the interpretation of Quranic verses that talk about al-Ihsan and the ethical usefulness of al-Ihsan in Muslim morality. The importance of this paper lies in the fact that on more than one occasion, different Qur'anic verses emphasize the role of ethics in human society, especially the believer, and it also points to the role it plays in enhancing the levels of faith. It concludes on the note that once a believer understands and imbibes the attributes of al-Ihsan his moral character is bound to be perfect both in worship and in dealing with his/her fellow human beings and this also reflects on the society at large.

Keywords: Islamic ethics, Attributes; *al-Ihsan*; Interpretation; al-Quran; Muslim morality.

1. Introduction

Al-Ihsan literally means goodness/kindness. It refers to the acts of worship by a believer with the belief that *Allah* is present and watching that act of worship. In other words, it means worshipping *Allah* as if one sees *Allah* watching him (Al-Ghamdi, 2001). This is the meaning given to the word by the Prophet when he said “al-Ihsan is to worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you do not achieve this state of devotion, then (take it for granted that) Allah sees you” (Sahih Bukhari, 1997: Hadith 47 Vol. 1). The Almighty said in the Holy Qur'an: (لَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا الْحُسْنَىٰ وَزِيَادَةٌ وَلَا يَرْهَقُ وُجُوهَهُمْ قَتَرٌ وَلَا ذِلَّةٌ أُولَٰئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ)

To those who do right is a goodly [reward]- Yea, more [than in measure]! No darkness nor shame shall cover their faces! they are companions of the garden; they will abide therein [for aye]! (*Surah Yunus*, 10: 26).

Sincerity in worship and the love of *Allah* makes one becomes one of the people of *al-Ihsan*. The people of *al-Ihsan* are the best among the servants of *Allah*, who are doers of good deeds which leads to goodness and guidance (Al-Maraghi, 1946; Al-Razi, 1981) as indicated by the word of *Allah* thus: (إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ عَمَلًا) As to those who believe and work righteousness, verily We shall not suffer to perish the reward of any who do a [single] righteous deed. (*Surah al-Khaf*, 13: 30).

Thus, the first thing to note here is that Allah ties the concept of Al-Ihsan to worship and sincerity in worship. This shows that goodness in worship is an ethic that all Muslims should emphasize especially considering the fact that when the worship of a believer is good, other things naturally follows as Allah said when He describes the purpose of the Salat, the five daily prayers, as follow: "...and perform As-Salât (Iqamât-as-Salât). Verily, As-Salât (the prayer) prevents from Al-Fahshâ' (i.e. great sins of every kind, unlawful sexual intercourse) and Al-Munkar (i.e. disbelief, polytheism, and every kind of evil wicked deed)..." (Surah al-Ankaboot: 45).

Equally, Allah, the Almighty said in *Sūrat al-Rahman*: 60 (هَلْ جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَانِ إِلَّا الْإِحْسَانُ) Is there any Reward for Good - other than Good? that the reward for the goodness is none other than goodness, implying that Allah would be of good to the one who is good among the people. Apart from goodness in worship, a good Muslim is known for his good talk, good deeds, and obedience to Allah, as well as abstinence from the things that have been forbidden by Allah. This is considered to be part of faith (*Iman*) whose reward is none other than good rewards. Thus, *Al-Ihsan* has certain attributes that one should possess in order to attain to its level (Tantawi, 1998; Sam'ani, 1997) and some of them as mentioned above are good behavior, good talk, good deeds, abstinence from evil and so on.

In an article entitled "Exploring *Ihsan*-based leadership among academic leaders" Busari et al, (2016), explore the understanding and practice of *Ihsan* from the perspective of intellectual leaders in performing their roles in teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement. Thus, the paper discusses the concept of *Ihsan*-based leadership and outlines how it is supposed to be practiced among intellectual leaders in higher educational institutions. This shows that *al-Ihsan* has many dimensions and it covers many endeavors of mankind in its applicability and implementation. This will be shown in what is to come below when we expatiate on the attributes of al-Ihsan from the Quran.

2. Research methodology

This study is a library-based research using the content analysis method which has been defined as a research method for the interpretation of the content of text data through the methodical classification process of coding and determining themes or patterns (Ritchie et al., 2014; Elo & Kynga, 2008). Thus, this approach enhances the research objectives through explanation, interpretation, and exploration of the Quranic texts.

3. The attributes of al-Ihsān

As earlier mentioned, there are certain attributes that one should possess in order to attain to the level of *al-Ihsan*, (goodness, kindness or excellence). However, apart from what has been said earlier, the following attributes are tied to *al-Ihsan* and they have been taken from the Quranic verses keeping in line with our focus which is the Quran. The method of content analysis has been applied to them in order to show their relation to al-Ihsan and they are explained below as follows:

3.1 The attribute of sincerity in the commitment to the orders of Allah, as mentioned in His word that:

لَنْ يَنَالَ اللَّهُ لُحُومَهَا وَلَا دِمَاؤها وَلَكِنْ يَنَالُهُ التَّقْوَىٰ مِنْكُمْ كَذَلِكَ سَخَّرَهَا لَكُمْ لِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَاكُمْ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

It is not their meat nor their blood, that reaches Allah: it is your piety that reaches Him: He has thus made them subject to you, that ye may glorify Allah for His Guidance to you and proclaim the good news to all who do right (Surah al-Hajj: 37).

This verse signifies that it is compulsory for an individual to devote his deed to Allah alone. There should not be arrogance, hypocrisy and showing-off. The act of worship should not be considered as any other normal activity as it is a serious moment between man and his Lord. This also applies to other forms of worships. The meat and blood of the sacrificial animals that we slaughter during the festive season do not reach Allah because Allah is self-sufficient and the praised one. What Allah considers in these acts of worship are the sincerity and good intentions. The act of worship should be done for the sake of Allah alone. Sincerity should permeate all the activities involving knowledge, prestige, commanding what is good, forbidding what is evil, and so on. Sincere people would have glad tidings from Allah according to the Quran and they are successful in this world and the hereafter. Allah will be good to them as they devote their worships (to Allah) in this world (Baghawi, 1989; Al-Saadi, 2002).

3.2 Attributes of submissiveness to Allah as mentioned in His word thus:

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ دِينًا مِّمَّنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ وَاتَّبَعَ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا ۗ وَاتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ خَلِيلًا

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 (Surah al-Nisaa: 125).

The verse indicates that the right religion with which *Allah* is pleased is the submission to *Allah* and sincerity of the heart for Him alone. “His whole self to *Allah*” denotes sincerity and submissiveness of the worshipper. The worshipper should also comply with the divine law [*Sharī‘ah*] which *Allah* sent through the messengers and revealed in His books, and which He makes a way of worship. “And follows the way of Abraham” means His religion and His law as practiced by Abraham. “The true in Faith” means devoid of *Shirk* (associating partner with God), worshipping *Allah* alone, and seeking His help alone. “For *Allah* did take Abraham for a friend” denotes that *Allah* took Abraham as a friend because Abraham did what he was commanded to do, he passed his trial, and then *Allah* made him a leader of the people. This kind of position was given to only two friends of *Allah*, Muhammad and Abraham, (Peace and blessings of *Allah* be upon them). In addition, the love of *Allah* is meant for the generality of believers (Ibn Ashour, 1984; Wahidi, 1994). Thus, for one to attain to the level of *al-Ihsan*, one has to be submissive to Allah as Abraham was submissive to Him.

3.3 Attributes of loving for the sake of Allah as stated in Surah al-Baqarah: 195 that:

وَأَنْفُقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ وَأَحْسِنُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

And spend of your substance in the cause of *Allah*, and make not your own hands contribute to [your] destruction, but do good; for *Allah* loveth those who do good.

Allah has commanded His servants to spend in His cause. This implies spending wealth on every good cause that is connected with *Allah*. It involves giving alms to the poor and relatives, spending for whomsoever it is compulsory to spend for, spending in the cause of *Jihād* such as physical training, strengthening Muslims, and institutionalizing the religion of *Allah* in the face of polytheism and the polytheists. Spending in the cause of *Allah* is a key element of *Jihād* while abandoning spending in the cause of *Allah* revokes *Jihād* and becomes enabling for the enemies. Also related to this is part of the verse which says: “and make not your own hands contribute to [your] destruction.” Spending in the cause of *Allah* is a type of *al-Ihsān*, and *Allah* commands all kinds of *al-Ihsan* as the verse stated: “and do good; for *Allah* loveth those who do good.” This involves all the types of *al-Ihsan* because *Allah* did not specify the kind of *al-Ihsan* to be done. Hence, *al-Ihsan* covers the monetary aspects and all other aspects as mentioned before (Baghawi, 1989; Ibn Ashour, 1984). Therefore, to spend in the course of Allah, either for Jihad or helping the needy is to show love for the sake of Allah and this is part of the *Ihsan* of a believer. All the discussions above, in this section, are represented in Figure 1 below which is titled, The Attributes of Al-Ihsan.

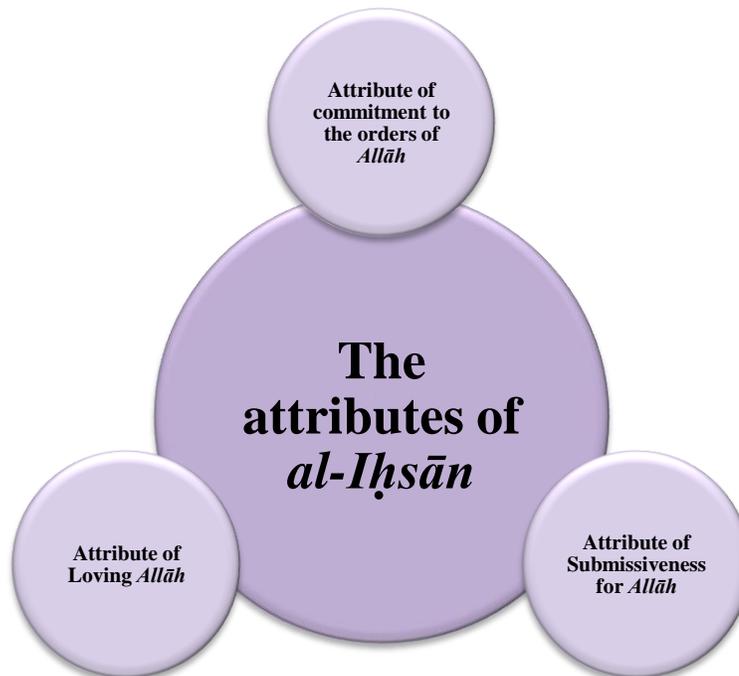


Figure1. The Attributes of Al-Ihsan

4. The effects of *al-Ihsanon individual morality*

Generally, *al-Ihsan* means goodness/kindness of whatever kind to any creature of *Allah*, but *al-Ihsan* is determined by the type of personality, rights and status of the person to whom the kindness is shown. *Al-Ihsan* is also determined by *al-Ihsan* itself and its significance, this is explained as follows:

4.1 Effect of *al-Ihsan'ilaal-walidain* (Kindness to both parents): this implies obedience and respect for the parents. It also involves being kind to them. The Quranic verses that exhort kindness to parents abound in numbers. *Allah* said:

وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا إِمَّا يَبُلُغَنَّ عِنْدَكَ الْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَا أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُلْ لَهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا

Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour (*Surah al-Israil: 23*).

As explained by the exegesis, obedience to parents is next to obedience to *Allah*, and it involves giving thanks to them and being kind to them because *Allah* mentioned kindness to the parents next to His worship. *Allah*, the Exalted said: (and that ye be kind to parents) (Ibn Kathir, 1998; Al-Tabari, 2001). Therefore, one of the effects of *al-Ihsan* on individual morality is making the individual show kindness and be good to his/her parents.

4.2 Effect of *al-Ihsan'ila al-Yatāmawa al-Masākin* (Kindness to orphans and the needy): this involves the protection of the rights of orphans and the needy. It also involves taking care of their education, having affection for them and giving them a helping hand, as *Allah* said:

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ لَا تَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا وَذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَقُولُوا لِلنَّاسِ حُسْنًا وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِّنْكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ مُّعْرِضُونَ

And remember We took a covenant from the Children of Israel [to this effect]: Worship none but *Allah*; treat with kindness your parents and kindred, and orphans and those in need; speak fair to the people; be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity. Then did ye turn back, except a few among you, and ye backslide [even now] (*Surah al-Baqarah: 83*).

This verse contains a command in respect of the highest level of rights which include *Allah's* rights and peoples' rights. *Allah's* right refers to worshipping *Allah* without associating a partner with Him. Peoples' rights start with the rights of both parents because parents are the one who gives birth to a child, bringing him up, and educating him. The next level of right is that of orphans because they are in need of help since they have lost their parents. Then, the rights of the needy follow because the needy are unable to adequately provide for their needs. The next rights are the rights of other people and it involves good word, good treatment of people because people may not be in need of money but good words and a guide to the worship of *Allah* which will enhance their connection with their creator via *Ṣalāt* and *Zakāt* (Baghawi, 1989; Al-Saadi, 2002). Thus, a person who has imbibed the attributes of *al-Ihsan* is bound to carry out the instructions concerning these rights and to be kind to those who deserve his kindness as mentioned in the verse above. *Al-Ihsan*, therefore, has the effect of making a believer to be kind to the orphans and the needy.

4.3 Effect of *al-Ihsan'ila al-Jār* (Kindness to neighbors): *Allah* said:

وَ بِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا وَبِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَالْجَارِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْجَارِ الْجُنُبِ وَالصَّاحِبِ بِالْجَنبِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ

Serve *Allah* and join not partners with Him; and do good- to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer [ye meet], and what your right hands possess: For *Allah* loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious (*Surah al-Nisaa: 36*).

This verse mentioned kindness to the neighbors as (neighbors who are near), and it refers to the relatives for whom there are two rights: rights of being a neighbor and rights of being a relative. The statement (neighbors who are strangers) denotes the neighbor who is not a relative. Neighbors are exhorted to be kind to each other by being good to each other, protecting each other, tolerating each other, putting on a smiling face for each other, being kind in word and deeds to each other, refraining from harming each other in words or deeds, and so on. (Ibn Ashour, 1984; Tantawi, 1998). *Al-Ihsan*, therefore, has the effect of making the individual to be morally upright in dealing with those around him/her once the person has imbibed its attributes.

4.4 Effect of *al-Ihsan'ila al-Musi'* (Kindness to the unkind): *Allah* said:

وَلَا تَسْتَوِي الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ ادْفَعْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِي بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِيٌّ حَمِيمٌ * وَمَا يُلْقَاهَا إِلَّا الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَمَا يُلْقَاهَا إِلَّا ذُرٌّ عَظِيمٌ

Nor can goodness and Evil be equal. Repel [Evil] with what is better: Then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as it were thy friend and intimate! And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint one but persons of the greatest good fortune (*Surah al-Fuṣṣilat*: 34 – 35).

The statement (Repel [Evil] with what is better) means be kind to the one who is unkind to you. This verse denotes the concept of *al-Ihsān*, especially when it has to do with those who have great rights such as relatives, companions, and others. In addition, one should be kind in words and deeds to those who are unkind to him in words or deeds. If they break ties with him, he should mend it, if they oppress him, he should forgive them, if they make spiteful or slanderous comments about him in his presence or otherwise, he should not reciprocate, he should forgive them, and be kind to them in words. Also, if they forsake him, he should be kind to them in words; he should talk to them and greet them. Being kind to the unkind has great benefits. Furthermore, the verse reiterates that none would be able to do it except those who are self-restraint because it takes self-discipline for one to have the ability to reciprocate kindness for unkindness because the human soul is naturally inclined to reciprocate good with good, and evil with evil. Reciprocating kindness for unkindness can be easier if one is self-disciplined, obedient to *Allah's* command, and aware of the great rewards awaiting him. Also, being kind to the unkind can be easier if one is aware that reciprocating evil with evil does not help matter but compounds the problem or prolong the enmity. Likewise, if one is aware that being kind to the unkind does not denigrate his status, then he will find it easier to do it. It is said that whoever is humble for *Allah's* sake, he will be elevated and his challenges will be made easier for him to surmount. The statement (none but persons of the greatest good fortune) indicates that *al-Ihsan* (kindness) is among the qualities of special creatures (Al-Qurtubi, 1935; Ibn Kathir, 1998), with which one can get elevated in this world and the hereafter. It is also among the qualities of good manners which manifest in how the believer treats those who do evil to him with kindness (*al-Ihsan*).

4.5 Effect *al-Ihsan*fi *al-Kalām* (Kindness in speech): *Allah* said:

وَقُلْ لِعِبَادِي يَقُولُوا الَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ يَنْزِعُ بَيْنَهُمْ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ كَانَ لِلْإِنْسَانِ عَدُوًّا مُّبِينًا

Say to My servants that they should [only] say those things that are best: for Satan doth sow dissensions among them: For Satan is to man an avowed enemy (*Surah al-Israil*:53).

Allah, in these verses, commands the believers to be of good manners in their deeds and speeches because their success in this world and the hereafter lies with it. *Allah* said: “And tell my servants to say that which is best”, because if they refuse to do so, *Shayṭān* would induce dissension among them in order to render them unsuccessful in this world and the hereafter (Al-Saadi, 2002; Tantawi, 1998). This is part of the attributes that we mentioned in the introduction. The effect of *Al-Ihsan* shows in the believers’ individual morality through their words/speeches. The better the attributes of *al-Ihsan* are imbibed, the better a believer becomes in the way he/she addresses others. All the discussions above, in this section, are represented in Figure 2 below titled The Effects of *Al-Ihsan* on Individual Morality.



Figure 2TheEffects of *Al-Ihsan* on Individual Morality

5. Conclusion

The attributes of *al-Ihsan* have positive effects on the morality of the individual Muslim and the development of his personality. They also have positive effects on an individual's social interaction. For example, *al-Ihsan'ilaal-walidain* (Kindness to both parents), *al-Ihsan'ila al-Yatāmawa al-Masākin* (kindness to the orphans and the needy), *al-Ihsan'ila al-Jār* (Kindness to neighbors) all have social implication as they can strengthen the bonds of society and serve as a means to achieving peace, security and social harmony in the society.

Moreover, as discussed in the effects of *Al-Ihsanon* the individual morality, morality is something that is ingrained in the human soul and is, in turn, reflected in the behavior of the person as well as in his/her interaction with others in the society. Morality indicates good behavior while immorality indicates bad behavior. On numerous occasions, the importance of morality has been emphasized by the Quranic verses which were revealed to the Prophet of mercy, Muhammad (peace and blessings of *Allah* be upon him). The roles it played in enhancing the levels of faith were also emphasized by the Quranic verses. Particularly, it is mentioned that when *Allah* was eulogizing Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of *Allah* be upon him) in the verse which states that "And thou [standest] on an exalted standard of character" (*al-Q'alam*: 4), the reference is to the behaviour and moral standing of the Prophet which is second to none among the Prophets before him. Finally, to underscore the importance of morality, the Prophet himself was reported by AbūHurayrah to have said that "I have only been sent to perfect good moral character" (Musnad Ahmad, 2012: 8595). This shows that the fundamental message of the Prophet is the perfection of the human character which in Islam is said to be both vertical and horizontal. It is vertical because Muslims are expected to show good moral character in worship and in establishing a relationship with Allah their Lord. And, it is horizontal because they are expected to show good moral character to their fellow human beings and other creatures of Allah on earth. All of these, therefore, can only be achieved when man imbibes the attributes of *al-Ihsan*.

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