



How Sincere are You?

By Imam Muhammad Magid with Samuel Ross

In the Qur'an, Allah (Subhanahu wa Ta'ala) asks us to worship Him with "sincere devotion" (98:5). What does "sincere devotion" mean, and how can we determine our level of sincerity towards Him? As wayfarers on the spiritual path, we all struggle to know where the signposts lie so that we might measure our progress and where the boundaries lie lest we go astray. It is our hope that this column may facilitate our own reflections by offering several suggestions for both measuring and boosting our level of sincerity towards Allah. For as Allah tells us in Surah Saad, Iblis can lead any of us astray, except those who are "sincere and purified" (38:83).

Let us begin with the definition of sincerity provided by our scholars. Ikhlas, or sincerity, is the intention to please Allah only. The word actually derives from the root khalas, which means to purify something. In Surah An-Nahl, for example, Allah tells us "verily in cattle will ye find an instructive sign. From what is within their bodies, between excretions and blood, We produce, for your drink, pure milk [leben khalisan]" (16:66). So why might Allah use the same word for describing the milk of the cow as he does for intention? Perhaps it is that when we make our intentions only for Allah, our actions are imbued with the wholesomeness and beneficial properties of milk.

There are several ways of measuring ikhlas. One is to look within, examining our emotions and contemplating our sense of closeness to Allah. Are we performing our actions only for Allah? How indifferent are we to what others think, whether positive or negative? Are our hearts and minds actively engaged in what we do?

Yet as valuable as these questions are, there is a danger in only turning inward, as all spheres of life are ultimately interconnected in Islam. The interior is fundamentally inseparable from the exterior. In a beautiful chapter in the Qur'an, for example, Allah links for us the oppressor of orphans with the man who shows off in prayer (107:2, 6). What unites them both is their failure to act with total sincerity to Allah.

For this reason, it is to our actions and social relations that we must, also, turn if we wish to assess our level of ikhlas. Consider the following scenarios, all of which should raise a question:

1. A Muslim says, "I love Allah", but then does not pray to Him.
2. A Muslim says "O Allah, I repent", but then persists in his disobedience.
3. A Muslim tells his spouse that he loves her, but then neglects her emotionally or abuses her physically.

In all of these situations there is a disconnect between the intention and the action. As our blessed messenger, Prophet Muhammad (salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam) counseled, "Be conscious of Allah wherever you may be". When we are truly conscious of Allah we will avoid actions that are displeasing to Him. Had the individuals above been truly conscious of Allah would they have done what they did?

More concretely, one of our great scholars, Isma'il ibn al-Husayn al-Jurjani (d. ca. 1136/531 H), provided an excellent benchmark for ikhlas, when he noted, "Ikhlas is when you don't ask anyone to witness your work except Allah." We should all try to meet this standard. Thus, the next time we perform our worship, let us ask ourselves: "Are we truly focused on our worship?" "Are we doing this for Allah only?" "Are we indifferent to what others might think, whether it be positive or negative?" The scholar al-Fudeli ibn 'Iyad once said that to leave an action for fear of someone saying you are good is itself riya (showing off) and to do it so that others might think you are good is shirk! Of course, this not to suggest that we should cease encouraging each other, nor that we should stop thanking others for the good that they do. As Muslims we are required to express our gratitude to each another. As our blessed Prophet once said, "no one becomes grateful to God unless he becomes grateful to people."

Once we know our level of ikhlas, we can pursue a variety of paths in order to boost it even higher. First, we should remember that perfection belongs only to Allah. As humans, we make mistakes but we shouldn't let this discourage us. As Allah counsels us in a hadith qudsi, "If you take one step toward Me, I take ten toward you."

Second, we should strive to be consistent in all our actions. A scholar once said that our hearts are like the stones lining the seashore. When we wash them vigorously but erratically they remain rough; when we wash them lightly but consistently they become smooth.

Third, we should equip ourselves with self-knowledge of both our shortcomings and our deficiencies. If we don't know our own faults how can we improve them?

Fourth, we should endeavor to be as trustworthy as we can with our fellow human beings by fulfilling all of our obligations at work, home and in the community. When we build trust with our fellow human beings, we build trust with Allah.

Fifth, we should examine our current relationships and search for ways to improve upon them. Have we deceived someone in the past? Is there someone we need to apologize to? No matter how much time has passed, it is never too late to improve a relationship. In most instances, the benefits of addressing long-term problems far outweigh short-term costs.

Finally, we should implement these changes gradually. If one has difficulty concentrating in prayer, for example, one should begin by trying to improve just one ra'ka, rather than working on all of them. Then, after improving it satisfactorily, move on to the next ra'ka.

In many ways, our challenge is laid out for us in Surah Yunus. There, Allah provides a beautiful parable about some sailors caught in a raging tempest. With waves crashing upon the deck and their deaths looming nigh, "they cry unto Allah, making their faith pure for Him only" (10:22). Yet once the storm has subsided, "they rebel in the earth without right" (10:23). As believers we all struggle with this ebb and flow in our lives. Can we persevere and boost our ikhlas to the highest levels? Can we retain it through both weal and woe? May this column be one additional source of help for us along the way.

We look forward to incorporating your feedback and questions into our future columns. Please send all correspondence to: foodforthespirit@isna.net. Please also visit us at our website where you can download this and previous columns at: <http://www.isna.net/foodforthespirit>

Imam Mohammed ibn Hagmagid is Vice President of ISNA and Executive Director of the ADAMS Center in Sterling, Virginia. His father was an Azhar graduate and a leading scholar in Sudan. Imam Magid studied at the hand of his father and other notable scholars, gaining ijaza in several disciplines, including Maliki Fiqh and Imam Ghazali's 'Ihya ulum Al-deen'. He delivers lectures throughout the United States.

Sam Ross is a student of the Arabic language.