

PROFESSIONALISM: THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of professionalism from the Islamic perspective. As in the case of all other concepts in Islam, professionalism in Islam is rooted and based upon the two basic and primary sources of reference in Islam, namely the Quran and the Hadith. These two established and acknowledged sources set the Islamic weltanschauung or worldview upon which professionalism in Islam can then be comprehended. This worldview lays emphasis on the viceregency role of man on earth that requires submission and obedience to the Almighty God. The need to perform the said role of being God's viceregent or khalifah demands that man, in going about his everyday life establishes worship in each and every of his actions. This total worship and submission to Lord the Creator puts man's daily obligations and duties into either fardhu 'ain or fardhu kifayah. The former relates to individual responsibility to God and society where every single Muslim is required to perform by himself, while the latter relates to collective responsibility where one is absolved of such an obligation whenever someone else performs the same satisfactorily. Although professionalism is required in both kinds of obligations, in engineering it is clearly within the realm of fardhu kifayah. The paper also highlights the concepts of al-quwwah and al-amanah as being the two basic ingredients of professionalism in Islam as expounded by the Quran. In conclusion the subtle difference between professionalism as understood in the engineering practice and that elucidated by Islam is presented.

INTRODUCTION

The religion of Islam prides itself as not only a set of ritualistic instruction but a comprehensive way of life, whose teachings give guidance to man in his multifarious facets of life, both in the spiritual as well as the mundane. While the spiritual side takes care of man's relationship with his Lord, the everyday mundane deals with his daily interaction with fellow men, and women of course. His daily activities for the sake of survival and in particular his engagement in profession, are thus regulated by and fall within the Islamic tenets. The aim

of such regulation is to ensure fair and equitable transactions among parties involved and to prevent injustice and oppression; for the general goals of the Islamic Syariah or al-maqasid al-ammah lis-syariah are guaranteeing the prevalence of interests and benefits of man and society by promoting good or al-makruf in such form as equity, justice and fairness and suppressing evil or al-munkar in such form as discrimination, tyranny and oppression.

THE ISLAMIC WELTANSCHUNG

The worldview of Islam begins with

the basic question of the purpose of existence of man. Two verses of the Quran perhaps best summarise the purpose of man's existence on earth, namely verse 30 of the Second Chapter and verse 56 of Chapter 51. The former declares the creation of man as the viceregent of God on earth when it says: "And remember when your Lord said to the angels, 'Verily, I am going to place on earth a khalifah (viceregent)...'" The latter verse says: "And I (Allah), created not the jinn (genie) and man except they should worship me." The combination of these verses gives the understanding that the basic purpose of man's existence is to become the viceregent of God on earth performing duties and functions in the course of worshipping the one God.

The viceregency of man entails his participation in bringing progress to mankind on earth based on principles and guidance decided by none other than the Lord. In his endeavour to bring about such progress and development, he would be concurrently worshipping and submitting to the Lord, the extent of which would depend on the degree of compliance with the said divine principles. The Muslim aims a complete adherence to the Islamic principles in pursuing his worldly affairs so that he would fulfill his very purpose of existence in totally submitting to Almighty Allah. The two-prong purpose of man's existence is to be abduallah or servant of Allah, and to be

kalifahullah or viceregent of Allah. In carrying out his daily life and daily work, man should aspire to fulfill these two roles and both demand al-itqan or professionalism and excellence in performance as the hadith or saying of the Prophet Muhammad exhorts in a narration by Imam al-Baihaqi: "Verily Allah loves anyone of you who, when he undertakes a job, carries it out with al-itqan (professionally)." In another hadith the Prophet had used the word al-ihsan which means 'best' when he says in the narration of Imam Muslim: "Verily Allah has prescribed the practice of al-ihsan in everything; if you need to take life lawfully, do it in the best manner; if you need to slaughter animal, do it in the best manner, sharpen your knife and rest the animal before slaughtering." The word al-ihsan can be said to be equivalent to 'best practice.' It comes from the word hasan which means good. In essence the meaning of al-ihsan is almost that of al-itqan. The business and organisational management people use the term 'best practice' while people in the engineering and legal fields are used to the term 'professional.' From the Islamic standpoint as pointed out by the above hadith, a job is done only when it is best done as al-ihsan is demanded in every job done.

PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE OBLIGATIONS

The obligatory functions that a Muslim has to perform can be divided into personal obligation or fardhu 'ain, and collective obligation or fardhu kifayah. The former covers all duties that every individual Muslim has to perform and delegation is generally not acceptable. The latter however concerns duties which need not be performed by each and every individual whenever they are

satisfactorily carried out by someone or some group of individuals. Religious rituals such as the daily obligatory prayers, fasting in Ramadhan, reciting of the Quran correctly, performing the haj, as well as earning a lawful or halal living and having basic religious knowledge that enables the performance of these obligations, are broadly within fardhu 'ain. While engagement in a particular profession such as engineering is fardhu kifayah so long as there is a sufficient number of individuals involved, ensuring a satisfactory degree of participation and hence a satisfactory level of service being provided to the community.

In both types of obligation, al-itqan or professionalism is demanded. In verse 142 of chapter 4, the Quran chastises the hypocrites for not performing their prayers in the best of manners when it says: "And when they stand up to pray, they stand with laziness and only to show off to people, and they do not remember Allah except little." The culture of excellence in fulfilling every duty and obligation is demanded in Islam. When asked about al-ihsan or best practice, the Prophet Muhammad replied in a narration by Imam Muslim by saying: "It is that you worship Allah as if you see Him, however if you are unable, then know that He always sees you." The spiritual communication with the Lord that creates a consciousness which maintains constant submission and worship will be more powerful in bringing out the best of man than mere mechanical or physical monitoring. The spiritual aspect of professionalism in Islam as embodied in the expression of al-itqan or al-ihsan, indeed gives an added dimension to the meaning of professionalism.

Beside obligatory acts there are others in the optional or harus, and recommended or sunat categories

which would not be discussed as the requisite for professionalism in undertaking such acts is not too obvious.

THE CONCEPTS OF AL-QUWWAH AND AL-AMANAH

Professionalism as understood by many of us encompasses the basic elements of education and experience, standards and regulations, ethics and integrity, responsibility and accountability, reasonableness and fairness, and the complementary but yet necessary scale of fees. Off late another element has become crucial namely CPD – continual professional development. In the corporate world, instead of professionalism, 'corporate governance' is the jargon widely used. In the management field, professionalism is captured by the phrase 'culture of excellence.' Despite the different terms in use, the subject matter being delved upon does not differ in essence. It is about getting a job well done. It is about motivating human resource to achieve organisational performance objectives. It is about achieving the best from available resources. It is about making an organisation competitive and ahead of competitors.

Professionalism from the perspective of Islam can be explained by a combination of the meaning of two Quranic expressions, namely al-quwwah and al-amanah. Verse 26 in Chapter 28 of the Quran mentions these two qualities in the adjective form: "Verily the best person whom you can employ is the one who is al-qawwiy (strong) and al-amin (trustworthy)." This verse has recorded the words of one of the two daughters of Prophet Syaib, who had found Prophet Moses to possess these two excellent qualities while helping them to draw well-

water for their herds. In fact the Prophet of Islam Muhammad himself was known as al-amin or the trusted one, from his early adulthood; qualifying him to be a person worthy of trust, with whom the dwellers of Makkah willingly deposited their valuables for safekeeping, in the absence of the deposit box offered by banks today.

The noun form of al-qawwiy is al-quwwah which can be translated as 'strength' and that of al-amin is amanah which can be best translated as trustworthiness. Strength as being encompassed by al-quwwah includes all ingredients and resources that would make a person educated, qualified, skilful and competent to perform a particular task. Qualification, knowledge, training, skill, expertise, talent, capability, ability, aptitude, self-discipline, prudence, expedience, transparency and experience are elements of al-quwwah. Good physical health no doubt can be added to this list as it clearly constitutes an important component of al-quwwah. These elements of al-quwwah can be globally viewed as the intellectual, mental, and physical strengths of a person. These elements of al-quwwah are prerequisites for a professional to be able to uphold and promote professionalism.

The quality al-amanah is more than trustworthiness as it is the culmination of numerous related qualities which make a professional worthy of being called one. This expression implies the spiritual internalisation of good values that could ascertain the prevalence of ethical conduct and behaviour in the course of being a professional. It thus encompasses trustworthiness, truthfulness, integrity, responsibility, accountability, commitment, attitude, justice and fairness, proactiveness, kaizen, and other similar positive values.

CONCLUSION

Employment to a Muslim through which he seeks halal earning is generally considered as within the realm of fardhu kifayah. The engineering profession is an inevitable part of society in that it contributes towards its progress. It has also contributed towards civilisation and undoubtedly has benefited mankind. There is no doubt that Islam considers it as a fardhu kifayah or collective obligation. And such an obligation demands professionalism or al-iqtan and al-ihsan. Professionalism is a necessity condition of fardhu kifayah. In order for a profession or job to qualify as fardhu kifayah there are three other simultaneous conditions that need to be fulfilled – firstly, the consciousness that one is working for the sake of Allah, earning a lawful income to live on and to support the family; secondly, the nature of work undertaken is compatible and not in contradiction with the Islamic rules, such that collection from gambling or cheating is unacceptable; and thirdly, the priority of fardhu 'ain is not compromised while in employment, such that the daily obligatory prayers are observed or fasting in Ramadhan is not always sacrificed. Under these conditions of fardhu kifayah, a sense of spirituality is present while undertaking a profession and adhering to the ideals of professionalism. To continuously act professionally in line with the demands of professionalism in any profession is therefore an act of worship or ibadah and should be fully realised and accomplished according to the perspective of Islam. This spiritual dimension of professionalism is somewhat missing from the prevailing understanding of professionalism in the engineering profession. ■

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