



# BEAUTY AND THE SACRED LAW



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### *Summary*

“Verily Allah is beautiful and loves beauty”. With these few words, the Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace) reminds humanity of the intrinsic relationship between beauty and God’s own being: It is from God that abundant goodness flows, and all that is beautiful is in turn the object of His love. It is for the purpose of preserving and furthering all that is beautiful that God revealed the Sacred Law (the Shari’ah), as adherence to His Law is the very basis of beautiful action. In turn, any attempt to modify or to implement His Law in a piecemeal fashion can only distort the harmony and proportion that issues when seen as a whole, leading to ugliness rather than beauty. Understanding what beauty is and that the Sacred law itself is beautiful helps explain why contemporary revival and reforms so often lead to such ugliness. And recognizing the beauty of the Sacred Law transforms adherence to the Law into an act of love and devotion.

### *About the Author*

MUSA FURBER is a Senior Research Fellow at the Tabah Foundation. He studied the various Islamic Disciplines in Damascus, where he received a license to teach the Shāfi‘ī school of law. He then studied at Dar al-Ifta in Cairo, where he received a license to deliver legal edicts (*fatwas*) from Sheikh Ali Gomaa. He also has a BA in Applied Linguistics from Portland State University (Oregon, USA), and a Masters in Public Administration from Dubai School of Government. Some of his recent publications while at Tabah Foundation include: *Ethical Dimensions of Nanotechnology, Ethics & Virtual Worlds, Ranking Confidence in the Validity of Contemporary Fatwas & Their Dissemination Channels, Obligations to Future Generations, Rights and Duties Pertaining to Kept Animals*, and *The Public Understanding of Islamic Scholarship in Society: Addressing the Faux Fatwa Fiqhtion Addiction*.







## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE SACRED LAW OF ISLAM, the Shari‘ah, is beautiful. Its primary sources are beautiful as are its individual injunctions. Adherence to the Sacred Law is the basis for beautiful action. That it is beautiful helps explain why piecemeal implementations lead to ugliness. Recognizing this beauty changes motivations in adhering to the Sacred Law.

This essay<sup>1</sup> begins with a short definition of the Sacred Law and an examination of the basic concepts of beauty in Western and Islamic civilization. It then presents the beauty of the primary sources of the Sacred Law. Next it argues that the Sacred Law as a whole is beautiful, and that each of its rulings contributes to beauty. It closes with a discussion of some of the fruits of recognizing and appreciating this beauty. Understanding what beauty is and that the Sacred Law is beautiful helps explain why contemporary revival and reforms so often lead to ugliness. And recognizing the beauty of the Sacred Law transforms adherence to the Law into an act of love and devotion.

Before examining basic concepts of beauty, it is important to understand what is meant by the “Sacred Law”.

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1. This essay is based on a series of lectures delivered at Zawiyah Rosales 2015, Spain.

The Arabic word *Sharīʿah*, translated in this essay as the “Sacred Law”, comes from the root *shīn-rāʾ-ʿayn*. The verb *sharaʿa* means to clarify or to make manifest, and words related to this verb tend to include the concept of clarifying one thing from another.

In the context of Islamic technical discourse, the verb *sharaʿa* and its morphologically related words have a restricted meaning. The verb itself means to clarify that something is permitted or forbidden, or to clarify that something is made permissible or unlawful. The source of this clarification is the *Shārīʿ* or “Legislator”. This source clarifies legal judgments and the correct manner of practicing the religion. The true Legislator is Allah Most High. His legislation is known through revelation. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) is sometimes referred to as a legislator since the commands of the true Legislator (Allah) are revealed, explained, and exemplified through him.

When the ruling of something has been clarified to be permissible, it is considered *mashrūʿ* or “lawful”.

The *Sharīʿah* or “Sacred Law” is what Allah Most High has clarified as being permissible or prohibited. The Sacred Law covers the full gamut of actions and is not restricted to matters of worship or what is typically covered in books of *fiqh*. This is in contrast to *dīn*, which is restricted to matters of devotion, obedience, worship, rewards, and recompense.

In this essay, the “Sacred Law” refers to whatever Allah Most High has clarified as being permissible or prohibited. This clarification is recorded in the primary textual sources of Islam: the Qurʾan and the Sunnah of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace). These clarifications are the raw material for legal and ethical norms. Later we will return

to the sources of the Sacred Law and how they are a basis for action.

#### CONCEPTS OF BEAUTY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD AND IN THE WEST

Contemporary dictionary definitions of beauty tend to mention that it is a characteristic of a person, animal, place, object, or idea that provides a perceptual experience of pleasure or satisfaction. Beauty has traditionally been counted among the ultimate values, along with goodness, truth, and justice.

The earliest Western conceptions of beauty can be found in the works of Greek philosophers from the pre-Socratic period. The classical Greek noun that best translates to the English “beauty” or “beautiful” was “κάλλος” (“kallos”). The word can be translated as “good” or “of fine quality” so it has a broader meaning than just physical beauty.

Prior to the Age of Enlightenment, the dominant philosophical accounts of beauty treated it as an objective quality of the beautiful object itself or of one of its qualities. Beauty was a matter of arranging integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion, harmony, and symmetry. This beauty could lead to the experience of pleasure. This pleasure was an effect of beauty. The effect itself might be subjective (something within the eye of the beholder), but the beauty itself was objective (something external and independent of the eye of the beholder). Beauty was often considered something embodying divine goodness. Beauty was not limited to physical items. Rather, behavior could be classified as beautiful, coming from an inner state of morality, which is aligned to the good.

During the Enlightenment, the pleasure associated with beauty was no longer held to be the effect of beauty, but rather its very origin. The beholder’s experience of pleasure was itself

the beauty. Beauty was considered something within the eye of the beholder, moving beauty from the object being beheld to a state within the subject doing the beholding. Beauty was no longer a cause external to ourselves for what we experience, but rather the very experience itself. Beauty, thus, had been relegated to being a subjective mental state.

Some Enlightenment philosophers pointed out that beauty is neither entirely subjective nor objective. If beauty is a subjective pleasure, then its status is no different from something that merely entertains, amuses, or distracts. How then could beauty be regarded as being comparable in importance to goodness, truth, or justice? We differ in some of our aesthetic judgments, so it does not make sense to say that beauty is entirely objective and aesthetic judgments are universal facts. Yet many of our aesthetic judgments do agree to a remarkable extent and we do agree that some judgments are better than others, so it also does not make sense to say that beauty is completely subjective. In the end, it does not seem to make sense to say that beauty has no connection to subjective response or that it is entirely objective.

These are among some of the reasons that beauty is one of the most enduring and controversial themes in Western philosophy.<sup>2</sup> As we will soon see, there are many parallels between pre-Enlightenment Western conceptions of beauty and Islamic conceptions thereof.

#### CONCEPTS OF ARABIC AND ISLAMIC BEAUTY

The Arabic words that indicate beauty are at the heart of Islamic conceptions of beauty. So knowing these words along

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2. Crispin Sartwell, "Beauty", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/beauty/>>.

with their definitions is the first step in understanding beauty in Islam. The second step is looking at how beauty is discussed in Islamic scholarship. This will be done here with samples from the works of Ibn Fāris, al-Aṣḥānī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah.

Arabic has several words that convey the same meaning as the Greek word “κάλλος” or the English “beauty”. The most common words are derived from the roots *jīm-mīm-lām* and “*ḥāʾ-sīn-nūn*”. These words include *jamāl* (“beauty”) and *jamīl* (“beautiful”); *ḥusan* (“beauty”) and *iḥsān* (“beneficence, excellence”). There are other words, like *ṭayyib* (“delightful”); but this essay focuses on these due to their primacy. The opposite of beauty is often indicated by words derived from the root *qāf-bāʾ-ḥāʾ*, such as *qubḥ* (“ugliness”) and *qabīḥ* (“ugly”).

#### IBN FĀRIS

The core linguistic senses in classical Arabic for these words are documented in Ibn Fāris’s lexicon *Maqāyīs al-lughah*. Ibn Fāris was a lexicographer who died in 395AH/1004CE. A distinguishing feature of his lexicon is that it gives the core senses shared by words derived from a single root. Ibn Fāris mentions that the root *jīm-mīm-lām*—from which we get *jamāl* (“beauty”) and *jamīl* (“beautiful”), as well as *jamal* (“camel”) and *jumlah* (“sentence”)—has two base senses. The first sense is gathering things together and being enormous. The second sense is that *jīm-mīm-lām* is synonymous with *ḥusn* and the opposite of *qubḥ* (“ugliness”).<sup>3</sup>

As for the root *ḥāʾ-sīn-nūn*—from which we get *ḥasan* (“good”)—it has a single sense meaning the opposite of *qubḥ* (“ugliness”).<sup>4</sup>

3. Aḥmad ibn Fāris, *Muʿjam maqāyīs al-lughah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1399/1979), 1:481.

4. Ibid., 2:57.

He mentions that the root *qāf-bāʾ-hāʾ*—from which we get *qabīḥ* (“ugly”)—denotes the opposite of *ḥusn* (“beauty”), thus meaning *qubḥ* (“ugliness”).<sup>5</sup>

#### AL-AṢFAHĀNĪ

There are also lexicons of Qurʾanic Arabic. One of the most famous ones is al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī’s *al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qurʾān*. Al-Aṣfahānī was a scholar known for his works on lexicography, *tafsīr* (exegesis or explanation of the Qurʾan), and moral philosophy. He died in 502AH/1108CE. His lexicon of Qurʾanic Arabic lists each word that is mentioned in the Qurʾan, and enumerates its various senses with Qurʾanic examples for each sense. He is also the author of *al-Dharīʿah ilā makārim al-sharīʿah*, which lays out an overall philosophy of Islam—especially its moral and political philosophy.

In his *Mufradāt*, he defines *jamāl* as a great amount of *ḥusn* (“beauty”), and says that it is divided into two. The first division is beauty that is restricted to an individual in his self, body, or actions. The second division is beauty that is transitive and extends to others. It is this second division that is intended in the hadith narrated from the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace): “Verily Allah is beautiful and loves beauty.” So this hadith means that abundant goodness flows from Him, and He loves whoever possesses it (i.e., those individuals to whom His beauty has flowed).<sup>6</sup> An example of this occurs in the Qurʾan in describing the blessing of livestock. Allah Most High says: “And for you in them is beauty (*jamāl*) when you bring them in [for the evening] and when you send them out [to pasture].”<sup>7,8</sup>

5. Ibid., 5:47.

6. Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qurʾān* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1412/1991), 202.

7. Q16:6.

8. al-Aṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt*, 202.

Elsewhere in the lexicon, al-Aṣḫānī writes that *ḥusn* (“beauty”) denotes every enjoyment that is desirable. These things fall into three categories, based upon whether it is via one’s reason (*min jihat al-‘aql*), proclivity (*min jihat al-hawā’*), or senses (*min jihat al-ḥiss*) that the object is deemed to possess such beauty.<sup>9</sup>

The word *iḥsān* is one of the many words derived from the same root. *Iḥsān* is often rendered in English with a meaning that indicates excellence or beneficence. But it also indicates the production of beauty.

Al-Aṣḫānī mentioned that the word *iḥsān* (in its sense of “beneficence”) is more general than the word *‘adl* (“justice, fairness”), which means to give what one is obliged and to take only what one deserves. The word *iḥsān*, in contrast, is more general since it means to give more than what one is obliged, and take less than one deserves. Also, practicing “*‘adl*” (“justice, fairness”) is obligatory, whereas practicing “*iḥsān*” (“beneficence”) is recommended and supererogatory. This is why Allah Most High gives such a tremendous reward to those who surpass in goodness and beneficence (*al-muḥsinīn*). Allah Most High says, “And truly Allah is wholly on the side of the *muḥsinīn*.”<sup>10,11</sup>

The lexicon mentions that *qabīḥ* denotes entities that vision considers disagreeable; and deeds and states that the self considers disagreeable.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Ibid., 235.

10. Q29:69.

11. al-Aṣḫānī, *al-Mufradāt*, 235.

12. Ibid., 651.

Imam al-Ghazālī is the well-known Shāfiʿī polymath who died in 505AH/1111CE. In the section on listening to music or song, and ecstasy in *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, Imam al-Ghazālī wrote:

Every beautiful thing is beloved to whoever perceives that beauty. Allah Most High is beautiful and loves beauty. When beauty is through harmonious physical features and purity in color, it is perceived by the sense of sight. When beauty is through majesty and greatness, high rank, beautiful attributes, manners, wanting good for all of creation (and wanting it flowing over them continuously), and other inward attributes—it is perceived by the sense of the heart.

The phrase “beauty” (*jamāl*) can be used metaphorically for this [beauty that is perceived through the heart]. It is said, “So-and-so is beautiful (*jamīl*) or fine (*ḥasan*).” His appearance is not intended by this, but rather what is meant by it is that he has beautiful (*jamīlah*) manners, praiseworthy attributes, and a fine (*ḥasan*) form of conduct. An individual might even be loved for these internal attributes out of love for the attributes themselves—just as the external form is loved. This love can become intensified until it is called *ʿishq*—passionate love.<sup>13</sup>

In the same section, Imam al-Ghazālī pointed out that we naturally love the prophets, Companions, and others who possess inward beauty. It is amazing and rational to have intense love for an individual who has passed away and whose physical appearance one has never seen—due to the beauty of his internal form, excellent conduct, and all the good things he has done.<sup>14</sup>

13. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah, n.d.), 2:280.

14. Ibid.



Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah is the well-known Hanbali scholar and student of Ibn Taymiyyah. He died in 751AH/1350CE. He was a prolific writer who touched on almost every subject. The subject of his book *Rawḍat al-muḥibbīn* [Garden of the lovers] is love of Allah. One of its chapters is titled “The Merits of Beauty and How Individuals Are Always Attracted to It”. I will summarize some of the more relevant points here.

Ibn al-Qayyim begins the chapter by dividing beauty into two. The first division is internal beauty. This beauty includes qualities such as knowledge, the intellect, generosity, virtuousness, and bravery. Allah Most High looks at this internal beauty when He looks to His servants, and it is the object of His love. The authentic hadith “Verily Allah does not look to your forms and wealth, but rather He looks to your hearts and actions”<sup>15</sup> refers to this internal beauty.

The second division is external beauty. This beauty is a quality that Allah gives to some instances of His creation, and it is part of what is meant by “increasing in creation” in the verse “He increases in creation what He wills”.<sup>16</sup> External beauty for humans, for example, can exist in the shape of their body, and voice.

Internal beauty adorns the external form. Someone who possesses an ugly external form can be deemed beautiful due to his internal beauty. We consider a man who is righteous and charitable, and who has beautiful character, among the most beautiful of people—even though his physical appearance is ordinary or even repulsive. Similarly, internal ugliness can cloak external beauty when this internal ugliness manifests

15. Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth, n.d.), 4:1986.2564.

16. Q35:1.

as bad behavior—leading us to consider such a person ugly despite his external beauty.

Internal beauty is superior to external beauty. One of the reasons for this is that internal beauty leaves a longer impression on our hearts. We continue to extoll, love, and be attracted to those who possess and exercise internal beauty long after we have forgotten those who possess only outward beauty.

Ibn al-Qayyim then mentions that internal and external beauty are both blessings from Allah Most High. Anyone who possesses a form of beauty must express his thanks to Allah for blessing him with it. One way to express thanks is by preserving one's beauty and ensuring that it is used only in ways and for the sake of things that are lawful. Someone who expresses thanks for his beauty will become even more beautiful. Someone who does the opposite and uses his beauty to disobey Allah will lose his beauty or even have it turned into ugliness and disgrace. An increase in beauty or its inversion does not even require an external change, since internal beauty covers external ugliness and conceals it, just as internal ugliness covers external beauty and conceals it.

External beauty can be used as a means to develop internal beauty. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) would sometimes mention an individual's external beauty in order to call them to develop their internal beauty. Jarīr ibn 'Abdullāh—who some described as being the most handsome Companion (Allah be well pleased with them all)—reported that the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) said to him: "You are an individual whom Allah has given a beautiful appearance, so beautify your character."<sup>17</sup> Some sages have said that one should look in the mirror every day; if he considers himself to have a beautiful appearance, he does

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17. Abū Bakr al-Kharā'itī, *al-Muntaqā min kitāb makārim al-akhlāq* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1406/1985), 5, 7.

not disgrace it by performing something ugly. And if he sees himself to be ugly, he does not combine having an ugly appearance and ugly actions.<sup>18</sup>

Ibn al-Qayyim also includes a small discussion on the true nature of beauty. He begins with stating that beauty cannot be comprehended except through its description (*waṣf*), thus excluding the possibility of defining it through its essence (*dhāt*). He then gives several possibilities for what *ḥusn* (“beauty”) truly is.

The first possibility is that beauty is when characteristics are symmetrical, proportionate, and in balance. He then notes that one problem with this description is that many forms possess symmetrical characteristics that are not considered to possess *ḥusn* (“beauty”).

The second possibility is that *ḥusn* is specific to beauty in the face, while *malāḥah* is when beauty is in the eyes.

The third is that beauty is a combination of radiance and gracefulness, fine portions and design, and rosiness in the skin.

The fourth is that beauty is a concept that cannot itself be comprehended via expression nor encompassed by a description. Rather, people possess qualities that are *ḥusn* (“beauty”) and it is those qualities that can be expressed. And the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and grant him peace) was the pinnacle in possessing beautiful qualities.<sup>19</sup>



Arabic and Islamic works are consistent in using words derived from the roots *ḥāʾ-sīn-nūn* and *jīm-mīm-lām* almost interchangeably to describe forms, qualities, and actions that

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18. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Rawḍat al-muḥibbīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1403/1983), 221–3.

19. Ibid., 232.

are pleasing and agreeable. The words *ḥusn* and *jamāl* both have senses that something is experienced as pleasurable or delightful, and that these senses are the opposite of *qubḥ*, which denotes what is experienced as disagreeable. So there is a linguistic connection between *ḥusn* (“goodness”) and *jamāl* (“beauty”).

Actions, objects, and ideas can all be beautiful or ugly; and the apprehension of this quality can occur through different faculties. This beauty exists in the object being perceived. It is not located in the act of perception or in the perceiver.

Many Islamic texts affirm that beauty is related to arranging integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion, harmony, and symmetry.

Beauty as an arrangement and the connection between beauty and the good are both common themes in the conceptualization of beauty in both Western and in Islamic civilizations.

It is now time to look closer at the beauty of the Sacred Law’s Legislators.

#### BEAUTIFUL LEGISLATORS

Allah and His Messenger (Allah bless him and grant him peace) are the sources of Islamic knowledge and disciplines—which include the Sacred Law. Both of these sources are beautiful. Allah is the ultimate in beauty and He possesses His most beautiful names. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) is the best of His creation. His appearance, character, and actions were described as being the most beautiful. His beautiful character and actions were a living expression of the Qur’an. Descriptions of his character and actions are recorded in the Sunnah.

Allah possesses the most beautiful names and He is the ultimate in beauty. Allah Most High says: “And to Allah belong the most beautiful names, so invoke Him by them”<sup>20</sup>; “Say, ‘Call upon Allah or call upon the Most Merciful. Whichever [name] you call—to Him belong the most beautiful names.’”<sup>21</sup>; “Allah—there is no deity except Him. To Him belong the most beautiful names”<sup>22</sup>; and “He is Allah, the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner; to Him belong the most beautiful names.”<sup>23</sup> The “most beautiful names” in these four verses have been understood to be the “ninety-nine names” that are referred to in an authentic hadith narrated by Abū Hurayrah (Allah be well pleased with him) and enumerated in other hadiths, and which have been explained in various works.<sup>24</sup>

The names of Allah are described as “the most beautiful and excellent (*aḥsan*) names because they point to excellent meanings of rending majesty, exalting (Him), and so forth”. These names reflect magnification (*taʿzīm*), yield paradise as a reward according to the divine promise, attract hearts through divine generosity and mercy, teach which aspects of His description are necessary, possible, or impossible with respect to Him, and constitute the noblest type of knowledge conceivable, since their referent is the Almighty.<sup>25</sup>

Abū Hurayrah (Allah be well pleased with him) said that the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and grant him peace) said, “Truly Allah possesses ninety-nine names—one hundred minus one—and whoever comprehends them (*aḥṣāḥā*) enters

20. Q7:180.

21. Q17:110.

22. Q20:8.

23. Q59:24.

24. Gibril Fouad Haddad, “Beautiful Names of Allah”, in *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Quran*, ed. Muzaffar Iqbal (Sherwood Park, AB: Center for Islamic Sciences, 2013), 357–8.

25. Ibid., 358.

paradise.” Al-Bukhārī and Muslim both transmitted this authentic narration.<sup>26</sup>

The enumerated list of names that most of us are familiar with is a narration that al-Tirmidhī transmitted. This narration does not include *al-Jamīl* (“the Beautiful”).<sup>27</sup> However, Ibn Mājah transmitted another narration that does include *al-Jamīl* as one of the names.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Muslim transmitted an authentic narration that describes Allah as *jamīl*: “Allah is beautiful (*jamīl*) and he loves beauty (*jamāl*).”<sup>29</sup>

Some scholars include *al-Jamīl* among the beautiful names of Allah Most High.<sup>30</sup>

Many books are dedicated to explaining the meanings of the ninety-nine names and how individuals can put them into practice. Imam al-Ghazālī’s *al-Maqṣad al-asnā* is probably the best-known example. It has been translated into numerous languages. Imam al-Ghazālī explains that “the perfection and happiness of man consists in conforming to the perfections of God Most High, and in adorning himself with the meanings of His attributes and names insofar as this is conceivable for man”.<sup>31</sup> So one learns these names, contemplates them, makes them part of his character, and then puts them into practice.

Imam al-Ghazālī explained that Allah is *al-Jalīl* (“the Majestic”) because He is the one who is qualified by the attributes of majesty (*jalāl*). These attributes include might, dominion,

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26. Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut: Dār Tawq al-Najāh, 1422/2001), 3:198.2736, 9:118.7392; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2063.2677.

27. Muḥammad ibn ‘Isā al-Tirmidhī, *al-Sunan* (Cairo: Sharikah Maktabah wa Maṭba‘ah Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1395/1975), 5:530.3507.

28. Abū ‘Abdullāh ibn Mājah, *al-Sunan* (Aleppo: Dār Ihya’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, n.d.), 2:1269.3861.

29. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:93.147.

30. Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Taḥbīr fī al-Tadhkīr* (Damascus: Maktabat Dār al-Bayrūtī, 1424/2003), 71.

31. al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1995), 40; idem., *al-Maqṣad al-asnā* (Cyprus: al-Jaffān wa al-Jābī, 1407/1987), 115.

sanctification, knowledge, wealth, and power. When the intellect perceives these attributes, they are called “beauty”, and the one qualified by them is called “beautiful”. The absolute and truly beautiful one is God alone since all the beauty, perfection, splendor, and attractiveness in the world comes from the lights of His essence and the traces of His attributes.<sup>32</sup>

So Allah is beautiful and He possesses beautiful names. This beauty is manifested in the world around us. One of its greatest manifestations is through the Qur’an with its beautiful phrasing and content, and which we are commanded to recite in a beautiful fashion. His Qur’an is the first of the Sacred Law’s primary textual sources.

THE BEAUTY OF THE MESSENGER (ALLAH BLESS HIM AND GRANT HIM PEACE)

The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) is the best of His creation. His appearance, character, and actions were described as being the most beautiful. His beautiful character and actions were shaped by the beauty of the Qur’an and recorded in his beautiful Sunnah.

One of the most complete accounts of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) is *al-Shifā* by al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 544AH/1149CE). Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ wrote:

Know, may Allah illuminate my heart and yours and increase my love and your love for this noble Prophet!—that if you were to look into all those qualities of perfection which cannot be acquired and which are part of one’s constitution, you will find that the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) has every one of them—all of the various good qualities without there being any dispute about it among the transmitters of the traditions.

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32. Ibid., 122–3; idem., *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, 115–16.

The beauty of his form and the perfect proportion of his limbs are related in numerous sound and famous traditions. [...]

He had the most radiant colouring, deep black eyes which were wide-set and had a sort of red tint to them, long eyelashes, a bright complexion, an aquiline nose, and a gap between his front teeth. His face was round with a wide brow and he had a thick beard which reached his chest. His chest and abdomen were of equal size. He was broad-chested with broad shoulders. He had large bones, large arms, thick palms and soles, long fingers, fair skin and fine hair from the chest to the navel. He was neither tall nor short, but between the two. In spite of that no tall person who walked with the Prophet seemed taller than him. His hair was neither curly nor straight. When he laughed and his teeth showed, it was like a flash of lightning or they seemed as white as hailstones. When he spoke, it was like light issuing from between his teeth. He had a well-formed neck, neither broad nor fat. He had a compact body which was not fleshy.<sup>33</sup>

Something to notice in this description is that proportion, symmetry, and balance all played a role in the physical beautify of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace).

His character was a major part of his beauty. And his character was the Qur'an. Imam al-Ghazālī's abridgment of his own *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* provides a glimpse:

Sa'd bin Hishām said, "I visited 'Ā'ishah, may Allāh be pleased with her, and I asked her about the manners of the Messenger of God [Allah bless him and grant him peace]. She asked me whether I read the Koran or not, to which I answered in the affirmative. To which she reported that the manners of The Messenger of God

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33. al-Qāḍī 'Iyād, *Muhammad: Messenger of Allah*, trans. Aisha Abdarrahman Bewley (Inverness, Scotland: Madinah Press, 1991), 33–4; idem., *al-Shifā bi ta'rīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā* (Amman: Dār al-Fayḥā', 1407/1986), 145–51.



[Allah bless him and grant him peace] were the Koran, and his example in the Koran akin to The Exalted stating therein, ‘Practice tolerance, enjoin goodness, and shun the ignorant’ [Q7:199]. And The Exalted saying, ‘God orders justice, benevolence, and generosity to kith and kin, and forbids grossness, abominations and injustice.’ And The Exalted saying: ‘and be tolerant of what befalls you, for that is firmness (in faith) in the order of things.’” And many other statements. [...]

Verily, note that these *āyāt* (verses) abound in the Koran, and he is the prime target for emulation and perfection, for from him emanates the light that shines on the rest of Creation. He [Allah bless him and grant him peace] said, ‘I was sent to complete the perfection of manners.’ [...]

He [Allah bless him and grant him peace] was the most fluent speaker of all and the sweetest talker, and he used to say he was the most eloquent of Arabs; and that the residents of Paradise speak in the language of the Prophet [Allah bless him and grant him peace].

He spoke with the authority of Comprehensive Knowledge, without superfluity or incompleteness, his words flowed perfectly, interspersed with pauses that would imprint them on the listener and enlighten him.<sup>34</sup>

Allah Most High commands us to follow and emulate the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace). For example, Allah Most High says, “O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in result”<sup>35</sup>; and “He who obeys the

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34. al-Ghazālī, *Mukhtaṣar Ihya’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn: The Ihya’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn as abridged by himself*, trans. Marwan Khalaf (Nikosia, Cyprus: 2013), 211–20; idem., *Mukhtaṣar Ihya’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Damascus: Maktabat Dār al-Bayrūtī, 1420/1999), 177–94.

35. Q4:59.

Messenger has obeyed Allah; but those who turn away—We have not sent you over them as a guardian.”<sup>36</sup> The statements, actions, and description of the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) are recorded in the Sunnah. His Sunnah is the second of the Sacred Law’s primary textual sources.

Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty. We experience this beauty when we examine the created world and contemplate the *āyāt* (“signs” or “indicators”) He has placed therein.<sup>37</sup> We also experience this beauty when we interact with the Qur’an via recitation, understanding, contemplation, and implementation. He possesses the most beautiful names. Since some of His names are fit as descriptions for human beings, making them our character and putting them into practice allows us to become reflections—albeit limited and imperfect reflections—of His beauty and His beautiful names. The most perfect example of this is His final Messenger Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace).

Allah Most High and His Messenger (Allah bless him and grant him peace) are Legislators of the Sacred Law. The Qur’an and the Sunnah are the primary textual sources of the Sacred Law. The sources of the Sacred Law are beautiful. So is the Sacred Law itself. It is beautiful as a whole and in its individual rulings.

#### THE BEAUTY OF THE SACRED LAW

Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. What He does is beautiful and good. The *Sharī‘ah* or “Sacred Law” is what Allah Most High has clarified as permissible or prohibited. This clarifica-

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36. Q4:80.

37. See Jihad Hashim Brown, *Metaphysical Dimensions of Muslim Environmental Consciousness*, Tabah Essays Series 3 (Abu Dhabi: Tabah Foundation, 2013).

tion is among what He does. It follows that the Sacred Law, as a whole, is beautiful.

The Sacred Law as a whole is beautiful. So are its individual commands and prohibitions. Allah Almighty prescribed *ihsān* in all things. Allah Most High says, “Indeed, Allah orders justice (*‘adl*) and *ihsān* and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded.”<sup>38</sup> The word *ihsān* is often explained to mean “good conduct”, though linguistically it also means to make beauty.

The verse uses the present imperfect tense of the verb *ya’muru* (“orders”). This form indicates that the command and prohibition are continuous and ongoing. So He commands beauty and excellence always and continuously; and He prohibits ugliness and wrongdoing always and continuously. Since they are continuous, they are also concurrent to all other commands and prohibitions. So a command for beauty is embedded within each of the Sacred Law’s commands.

This command is enforced in another verse where He Most High says, “And do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of *ihsān*.”<sup>39</sup> This verse is an incitement to do the good and the beautiful since people are likely to strive for and compete in any affair that is a cause for Allah’s love.

So Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Allah has commanded us to perform what is beautiful and good. He has prohibited us from what is ugly and wrong. He does this always and continuously. Everything He commands is good or a cause for good. And due to the link between the good and the beautiful: everything He commands is beautiful or a cause for beauty. It follows that obeying His commands leads

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38. Q16:90.

39. Q2:195.

to beauty. Disobeying His commands leads to the opposite of beauty; that opposite is ugliness.

Similarly, everything that Allah prohibits is wrong or a cause for what is wrong. Due to the link between the bad and the ugly: everything He prohibits is ugly or a cause for ugliness. It follows that disobeying His prohibitions leads to ugliness. Obeying His prohibitions leads to the opposite of ugliness; that opposite is beauty.

There are two immediate benefits from recognizing that the Sacred Law (*shari'ah*) is beautiful. The first is that it helps explain why altering the Sacred Law or focusing on some parts at the exclusion of others both result in a reduction or complete loss of its beauty. The second is that appreciating the beauty of the Sacred Law transforms its practice into an act of love and devotion.

Some definitions of beauty state that it is the arrangement of the integral parts of a whole according to proportion, symmetry, and harmony. If this is the case, then altering such an arrangement via addition, removal, or other change will result in a rearrangement that risks violating the proportion, symmetry, and harmony that led to the beauty. Similarly, the Sacred Law is beautiful as a whole and in its individual rulings. Altering a single ruling within the Sacred Law can transform its beauty into ugliness since the new arrangement will either decrease or end the portion, symmetry, and harmony that led to its beauty. Therefore, altering the Sacred Law results in a reduction or complete loss of its beauty.

The Sacred Law is perfect as it is. Allah Most High announced its perfection when He said, “This day I have perfected for you your religion and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion.”<sup>40</sup> Any alteration to the Sacred Law—any other selection or arrange-

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40. Q5:3.

ment of laws—will be imperfect. This imperfection will come with a loss in the portion, symmetry, and harmony that led to its beauty. Once again: altering the Sacred Law will result in a reduction or complete loss of its beauty.

Similarly, focusing on some parts of the Sacred Law at the exclusion of others will also result in the same. This is because focusing on some parts of a beautiful whole while excluding its other parts also leads to a loss of portion, symmetry, and harmony. Imagine a face. The eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and other features have the proper proportion, symmetry, harmony, and arrangement to be beautiful. Now imagine that one of the eyes is larger and lower down while the other is smaller, higher up, and triangular. The face will lose its portion, symmetry, and harmony—resulting in a partial or complete loss of beauty. Now imagine that every feature except the mouth disappeared. It would be impossible to continue to claim that this single remaining part is a face.

So we can expect ugliness (and injustice) to occur when the Sacred Law is reduced to focusing on the rights of husbands and the duties of wives while ignoring the duties of husbands and rights of wives; or to implementing punishments (*hudūd*) without ensuring that their requisite conditions have been met and that the judge has made every attempt to ward off the punishment; or to acts of worship to be performed in the mosque or house while ignoring laws related to trade, personal status, diet, or justice. So focusing on some parts of the Sacred Law at the exclusion of others results in a reduction or complete loss of its beauty and purpose. And if parts of the Sacred Law are removed one by one, there is a point where it becomes impossible to claim that what remains is the Sacred Law.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that attempts to reform the Sacred Law and selectively reintroduce parts result in ugly monstrosities that bear little resemblance other than in name.

Appreciating the beauty of the Sacred Law transforms its adherence into an act of love and devotion. It was mentioned when exploring beauty in Islamic writings that recognizing something is beautiful leads to attraction and love for that thing. When we love a thing, we seek to be near it, to protect it, to employ it in a way that is faithful to it and its purpose—to follow and adhere to it, to act in a way that is pleasing according to it. And love for a thing leads to love of its possessor, founder, master. When we love a living being, we seek to spend time in its company and minimize separations; and we strive to please it and avoid anything that leads to its displeasure.

Similarly, recognizing beauty in the Sacred Law should lead to attraction and love of it, seeking to be near it, protecting it, and to follow and adhere to it in a way that is pleasing, according to it. And this love for the Sacred Law should lead to love of its Legislator, Allah Most High. Love of the Legislator should lead us to spend time in His company and minimize being separated from Him; it should lead us to strive to please Him and avoid anything that leads to His displeasure.

True love propels hearts, tongues, and limbs to please and obey. The proof of our love for the Legislator is our adherence to His legislation—to His Sacred Law—wherein He clarified what pleases and displeases Him.

Commands and prohibitions are the primary means for clarifying what pleases and displeases Him. That He commanded us to perform something indicates that it pleases Him. This is usually indicated using the verbal form *ifʿal* (“Do this!”). Similarly, that He prohibits something indicates that it displeases Him. This is usually indicated using the verbal form *lā tafʿal* (“Do not do this!”).

But clear commands and prohibitions are not the only way that Allah and His Messenger (Allah bless him and grant him peace) indicate to us what is pleasing and displeasing (or what is beautiful and good, or ugly and bad). In *al-Imām*, al-‘Izz ibn ‘Abd al-Salām lists thirty-three other phrasal forms that are used in the Qur’an to indicate commands. His list includes:<sup>41</sup>

1. That the action is extolled.<sup>42</sup>
- 2–3. That the action is praised,<sup>43</sup> or its actor is praised.<sup>44</sup>
4. That the action is a cause for delight.<sup>45</sup>
- 5–6. That the action is loved,<sup>46</sup> or its actor is loved.<sup>47</sup>
- 7–9. That the action is pleasing,<sup>48</sup> a cause for its actor being pleasing,<sup>49</sup> or being pleased by His Lord.<sup>50</sup>
- 10–15. That the action is described with uprightness (*istiqāmah*),<sup>51</sup> being a blessing (*barakah*),<sup>52</sup> as a way of draw-

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41. Examples for each item are included in the footnotes. They have not been included in the essay as they are not essential to its argument.

42. “To Him ascends good speech, and righteous work raises it” (Q35:10).

43. “Indeed, prayer prohibits immorality and wrongdoing” (Q29:45).

44. “An excellent servant, indeed he was one repeatedly turning back [to Allah]” (Q38:30, 38:44).

45. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) said, “Allah is more delighted with the repentance of one of you than any of you are with recovering a lost animal.” al-Tirmidhī, *al-Sunan*, 5:547.3838 (*ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ gharīb*).

46. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) said, “Verily, You [O Allah] are forgiving and love forgiveness.” al-Tirmidhī, *al-Sunan*, 5:534.3513 (*ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*); Ibn Mājah, *al-Sunan*, 2:1265.3850.

47. “Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves” (Q2:222).

48. “And if you are grateful, He approves it for you” (Q39:7).

49. “Allah will say, ‘This is the Day when the truthful will benefit from their truthfulness.’ For them are gardens [in paradise] beneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever, Allah being pleased with them, and they with Him. That is the great attainment” (Q5:119).

50. “Then as for one whose scales are heavy [with good deeds], he will be in a pleasant life” (Q101:6–7).

51. “And they were not commanded except to worship Allah, [being] sincere to Him in religion, inclining to truth, and to establish prayer and to give zakat. And that is the correct religion” (Q98:5).

52. “But when you enter houses, give greetings of peace upon each other—a greeting from Allah, blessed and good” (Q24:61).

ing closer to Allah (*qurbah*),<sup>53</sup> the actor as being close,<sup>54</sup> being wholesome (*tayyib*),<sup>55</sup> or its actor as being wholesome (*tayyib*).<sup>56</sup>

16–17. That an oath is sworn by the actor,<sup>57</sup> or the action.<sup>58</sup>

18–23. That the action is made a cause for His love,<sup>59</sup> reward in the near<sup>60</sup> or far<sup>61</sup> future, remembrance,<sup>62</sup> expression of thanks,<sup>63</sup> guidance.<sup>64</sup>

24–28. That the action is made a cause for forgiveness of errors and the expiation of sins,<sup>65</sup> deeds being corrected (*iṣlāḥ*)<sup>66</sup> or accepted,<sup>67</sup> or the actor being given assistance and victory,<sup>68</sup> or glad tidings.<sup>69</sup>

53. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) said that Allah says: “Whoever draws close one hand-span I draw close to him a cubit.” al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 9:121.7405.

54. The Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) said that Allah says: “I am in the company of whoever mentions me.” al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 9:121.7405, 7505; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2061.2675, 2877.

55. “And they had been guided [in worldly life] to good speech [saying ‘There is no deity worthy of worship other than Allah’]” (Q22:24).

56. “Say, ‘Not equal are the evil and the good (*tayyib*)’” (Q5:100).

57. “By Dawn. And by the ten nights. And by the even number and the odd” (Q89:1–3)—when it is understood to correspond to the prayer.

58. “By the racers, panting” (Q100:1)—which praises those who fight in the way of Allah.

59. “Say, [O Muhammad,] ‘If you should love Allah, then follow me, [so] Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful’” (Q3:31).

60. “And their words were not but that they said, ‘Our Lord, forgive us our sins and the excess [committed] in our affairs and plant firmly our feet and give us victory over the disbelieving people.’ So Allah gave them the reward of this world and the good reward of the Hereafter. And Allah loves the doers of good” (Q3:147–8).

61. “And whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger has certainly attained a great attainment” (Q33:71).

62. “So remember Me; I will remember you” (Q2:152).

63. “And whoever volunteers good”—here meaning *tawwāf*—“then indeed, Allah is Appreciative and Knowing” (Q2:158).

64. “And those who strive for Us—We will surely guide them to Our ways” (Q29:69).

65. “But if you conceal them”—meaning charity—“and give them to the poor, it is better for you, and He will remove from you some of your misdeeds” (Q2:271).

66. “O you who have believed, fear Allah and speak words of appropriate justice. He will [then] amend for you your deeds and forgive you your sins” (Q33:70–1).

67. “Indeed, Allah only accepts from the righteous [who fear Him]” (Q5:27).

68. “Indeed, Allah is with the patient” (Q2:153).

69. “And give good tidings to those who believe and do righteous deeds that they will have gardens [in paradise] beneath which rivers flow” (Q2:25).



29–31. That the action is described as good conduct,<sup>70</sup> a cause for negating sadness and fear from its actor,<sup>71</sup> or with promise of amnesty in the Afterlife.<sup>72</sup>

32. That the prophets (peace be upon them) supplicated for the action to occur.<sup>73</sup>

33. That the action is a cause for friendship with Allah.<sup>74</sup>

He then notes that each of the forms go back to praising an action or its actor, or promising rewards for its performance.<sup>75</sup> He gives a similar list of forty-seven additional phrasal forms to indicate prohibition. He similarly notes that all of them go back to dispraise and threats.<sup>76</sup>

Someone who truly loves Allah will seek anything that pleases Him and avoid anything that displeases Him. Knowing what pleases and displeases Him requires looking beyond “Do!” and “Do not do!” (“*ifʿal!*” and “*lā tafʿal!*”) as those are just two of the many phrasal forms Allah uses for clarifying these things. And it is these clarifications that make up the Sacred Law.

Love of Allah and love of the Sacred Law are tied together since Allah is beautiful and the Legislator of the Sacred Law, and the Sacred Law is beautiful. Recognizing beauty leads to love, and love motivates the lover to obey in certain ways towards the object of their love.

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70. “And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful” (Q3:104).

71. “Indeed, those who have said, ‘Our Lord is Allah’ and then remained on a right course—the angels will descend upon them, [saying], ‘Do not fear and do not grieve but receive good tidings of paradise, which you were promised’” (Q41:30).

72. “Indeed, the righteous will be within gardens and springs. [Having been told], ‘Enter it in peace, safe [and secure]’” (Q15:45–6).

73. “Cause me to die a Muslim and join me with the righteous” (Q12:101).

74. “Allah is the ally of those who believe” (Q2:257).

75. ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī, *al-Imām fī bayān adillat al-aḥkām* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyyah, 1407/1987), 87–103.

76. Ibid., 105–25.

So recognizing the beauty of the Sacred Law and its Legislator should lead to a profound change in perspective and motivation in one's practice of the Sacred Law. Islamic texts affirm this expectation. When writing on love of Allah in his *tafsir*, Ibn Juzay (the well-known Maliki scholar of law and exegete of the Qur'an, who died in 741AH/1340CE) wrote: "Know that when love for Allah is established in the heart, its effects appear on the limbs. Its effects include earnestness in obeying Him and energy for serving Him; coveting what pleases Him; delight in His secret discourse; contentment with His decrees."<sup>77</sup> Elsewhere, he pointed out that it is false to claim one's love for Allah—and by extension His Messenger (Allah bless him and grant him peace)—while continuing to engage in acts of disobedience. He summarizes the idea in two lines of poetry:

You disobey God while displaying love for Him,  
                   this, by my life, is an unprecedented analogy.<sup>78</sup>  
 Had your love been true you would have obeyed Him;  
                   Verily the lover is obedient to his beloved.<sup>79</sup>

True love does not settle for barely scraping by, but rather strives towards perfection. True love does not disobey or rationalize away the need to please or obey. Such rationalizations are the product of a love that is false—a mere lip service and vanity.

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77. Ibn Juzay, *Ibn Juzay's Sufic Exegesis*, trans. Musa Furber (n.p.: Islamosaic, 2015), "Love of Allah"; idem, *al-Tashil li 'ulūm al-tanzil* (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam, 1416/1995), 1:105.

78. Another version of the poem has "*shani*" instead of "*badi*".

79. Ibn Juzay, *Ibn Juzay's Sufic Exegesis*, "Love of Allah"; idem, *al-Tashil*, 1:169.

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