

Privacy in Islamic Eschatology and the Journey to the Divine

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Abstract

Privacy in Islam has been studied by researchers on urban as well as dwelling levels and a clear hierarchy has been identified from public to private spaces. The purpose of seeking privacy is understood either as to separate genders or to hide sin or good, or bad, fortune from others. However, concepts in Islam have another dimension connecting them with the unseen. This research aims to establish the significance of safeguarding one's privacy, during this life, in Islamic eschatology through investigation of the primary scriptures: Quran and Sunna. Privacy is demonstrated as an area where sin may easily be forgiven, as long as it did not violate another individual's rights, and where sincerity of a good deed may enable the believer to reach as high a level as being under the protection of God in this life and on Judgement Day. This is based on two ideas in Islam: first, that all human beings are vulnerable to sin by nature; and second, that the door for repentance, during lifetime, is always open to start anew.

Keywords: Islamic theology, privacy, Judgement Day

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Introduction

Scholars have noticed the absence of a single Arabic equivalent to the notion of privacy in classical Islamic sources, which maybe the reason why modern scholars lack engagement with the concept of privacy in Islam; nevertheless, it is implied frequently that preserving one's privacy is essential for reaching the good (maṣlaḥa) and avoiding corruption (mafsada) for the individual and the community¹. Several Quranic verses stressed the importance of privacy of the house through the details of the way to ask for permission when approaching a house other than one's own²; and in a ḥadīth, sometimes even when approaching one's own house as one comes back from a long trip³. Another Quranic verse sets boundaries for the individual's privacy within one's own house and between family members and the house servants⁴. Also, many Prophetic traditions (aḥādīth) emphasized the importance of safeguarding one's private domain, whether it be in one's physical space or personal information for example, and warned against trespassing others' privacy.⁵

The point behind the protection of privacy is mainly to preserve the individual's dignity and, in turn, create a good community. Also, it would help reduce societal ailments that may result from the exposure of one's private domain and oversharing of personal information. However, there is another dimension to this concept that has to do with the relationship of the individual with the Divine since in Islam, life is considered a phase that prepares the individual for another sort of existence after death. Therefore, the protection of privacy may be seen as a way of creating a space for the individual to grow as they navigate their own personal relationship with God through their particular life path.

Sin in Privacy

In an authentic ḥadīth, the Prophet said that if people never sinned, God would replace them with others who would sin and ask for forgiveness and He shall forgive them⁶. The ḥadīth here was not told to encourage people to sin; rather, it meant to explain the nature of the human's creation and that sin is inevitable. Unlike the angels who were predisposed to doing good, humans were created with the ability to choose, or not choose, to do good, which puts them in a higher position than the angels if they did. This does not mean, however, that sin is favorable. In fact, committing a sin publicly necessitates punishment as part of the Islamic concept of commanding good and forbidding wrong; but, once the person is within a private place, he/she gains control over access to that place, in which they have the freedom to do whatever they wish. In this case, God, who is aware of all aspects of the person's life and intentions,

¹ Alshech, E. (2004). "Do Not Enter Houses Other Than Your Own": the Evolution of the Notion of a Private Domestic Sphere in Early Sunnī Islamic Thought. *Islamic Law and Society*, 11(3), 291-332.

² Quran (24:27-29).

³ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī*, Volume 7, Book 62, ḥadīth 17. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* Book 8, ḥadīth 3462.

⁴ Al-Qurtubi exegesis. Qurān (24:58).

⁵ Kamali, M. H. (2008). *The right to life, security, privacy and ownership in Islam*. Islamic Texts Society.

⁶ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* B. 37, ḥadīth 6622.

is the only One who would decide if the sinful person deserves to be forgiven after he/she repents, or should be exposed and punished in this life, or will be exposed and punished on Judgement Day. And the time taken for this decision, also, depends on various factors. Ibn Qudāma mentioned the story of a man from the Israelites who sinned in private then repented:

“Moses and his people went out to pray and ask God for rain when drought hit the land, when God told him that there is a sinner among them who had been in the wrong for forty years, and that was the reason that rain was held back. When Moses called among his people that the sinner who had been disobeying God for forty years must leave so rain may fall again, no one moved; however, clouds started to form and rain began to fall. God told Moses that the sinner had repented and was forgiven; when Moses asked God to tell him who the sinner was, God said: I have concealed his wrongdoing when he was a sinner and I will not expose him now that he repented”⁷

Privacy is key in this story in keeping the sin concealed and for the acceptance of the repentance. It could also be reasoned that withholding rain was part of a Divine plan to get that man to repent after forty years of committing sin.

In another Prophetic tradition, it is mentioned that all people would be forgiven their sins except for those who reveal them and brag about them in public.⁸ God is more likely to forgive the person in case the sin is concealed. And if someone learned about another’s sin by coincidence, or from the sinner him/herself for an acceptable reason such as feeling of guilt or seeking advice, and concealed that sin, they will be rewarded⁹. The protection of one’s privacy when he/she commits a sin aims at preserving one’s self-respect in public. And in case of repentance, they would be able to take a meaningful role in society without the shame of sin. On the other hand, revealing a sin, especially a major sin, in a community of believers, would result in the loss of the right to privacy and necessitates punishment for the sinner, lest the sin gradually becomes the norm and others in the community would follow suit leading to the corruption of the community¹⁰. Here comes the role of the Islamic principle of commanding right and forbidding wrong, in which, those who are in charge (ie. Al-Muḥtasib) are forbidden from breaking into any person’s private space unless it is known, beyond doubt and through multiple witnesses, that a sin is being committed in that private domain.¹¹

Perhaps in no other case the importance of privacy is clearly highlighted as in adultery. Four witnesses to the act of adultery are required to inflict punishment according to the Quran¹²; however, due to the private nature of the act, it is almost

⁷ Ibn Qudāmah (1980). *Attawābīn*. Beirut: Dār Al-Kutub Al-‘Almiyya. My translation.

⁸ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī*, Volume 8, Book 73, ḥadīth 95.

⁹ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī*, Volume 3, Book 43, ḥadīth 622. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* Book 32, ḥadīth 6250.

¹⁰ Kamali, M. H. (2008). The right to life.

¹¹ Cook, M. (2001). *Commanding right and forbidding wrong in Islamic thought*. Cambridge University Press.

¹² Qurān (24:4; 24:13).

impossible to fulfill this condition. In fact, when three witnesses accuse a couple of fornication and fail to provide one more witness as required to validate their accusation, they would be considered as false witnesses and punished, even if one of the witnesses is the Caliph himself¹⁴. This protection of the person's privacy would provide the chance for the sinner to repent and straighten up their life. Dealing with repentance is a private matter between the sinner and God; he/she utters the words asking God for forgiveness and may: pray special prayer for forgiveness, give charity or get involved in various types of good deeds to please God and reconcile with a righteous way of living.

Nevertheless, confessing to committing the wrongful act leaves no alternative but to resort to punishment; but then the consequences of such incident are evident in the unseen world. In a famous story, a man came to the Prophet and admitted to committing adultery and asked to be punished; he revealed his wrongdoing because he wanted to receive punishment in this life rather than on Judgement Day. The Prophet tried to turn away from him telling him that he might be mistaken, maybe he did not commit the act in a way that calls for infliction of punishment; but the man insisted that he did¹⁵. After he was stoned and buried the Prophet heard couple of his companions badmouthing the man; so he told them that what they just said about their brother is worse than eating from a rotten animal's carcass, and informed them that the man was between the rivers of Paradise¹⁶.

The man in this incident revealed the sin of adultery that was committed in privacy and asked for punishment knowing that he would pay for it with his own life because he wanted to be purified before the Day of Judgement. The Prophet said that his repentance was vast enough to forgive a large group of people as this type of punishment was originally set to deter people from the wrongful act rather than to inflict it on regular basis.

Then again, there is a Prophetic report that command men and women to keep the spousal intimate relationship, which is not a sin, private and prohibits against discussing it with anyone unnecessarily and warns that whoever does so would be considered wicked in the eyes' of God.¹⁷ It is meant to protect the trust between the spouses and avoid the social problems that follow as a result.

The consequences of concealing a sin are evident on Judgment Day when the believer is questioned by God about his/her sins as it is mentioned in a ḥadīth where the Prophet mentions a situation on Judgement Day when every person will be in the presence of God Who will speak to him and remind him of the sins that he had committed in his life and tells him that He will forgive them just as He had concealed them during his lifetime.¹⁸

¹³ Hallaq, W. B. (2009). *Sharī'a: theory, practice, transformations*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Kamali, M. H. (2008). *The right to life*.

¹⁵ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Book 17, ḥadīth 4206.

¹⁶ Abū Dawūd. *Sunan Abī Dawūd*. Book 39, Hadith 4414.

¹⁷ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* Book 8, ḥadīth 3369.

¹⁸ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī*, Volume 3, Book 43, ḥadīth 621.

In fact, this ḥadīth shows that just as the believer was watchful of God and careful to hide the sins and keep them private, and by doing so avoided spreading evil in the community, he/she entered a private domain on Judgment Day and was alone with God Himself who consoles the sinner with forgiveness. It is a fine balance that the believer tries to strike between the weakness of being human and the strength that is to be found in asking God for guidance towards the upright path. Indeed, being aware of the shame of sin and concealing it, then asking God for forgiveness results in a feeling of humility, while revealing the sin and insisting on it leads to the grave sin of arrogance.

Good Deed in Privacy

According to a long authentic ḥadīth, the first group of three people who will be asked about their deeds on Judgment Day and will be sent to the Hell fire are a martyr who in reality was fighting to gain reputation as a courageous man, a philanthropist who spent his money to gain reputation as a generous man, and a scholar who sought knowledge to gain reputation as a knowledgeable man¹⁹. In Islam, those who do good deeds are rewarded on Judgement Day only if their intention was purely for the sake of God²⁰. Therefore, the men mentioned in the ḥadīth above were punished because their intentions were not exclusively to please God; rather, they wanted to gain fame. And since they gained fame in this life, their end goal had been fulfilled. Here, comes the role of privacy, which can be the way to ensure sincerity when one is undertaking a good deed.

Acting in a charitable way secretly is encouraged and usually considered better than making it public as in a Qurānic verse where giving charity at night and in secret takes precedence over giving it during daytime and in public to ensure a deeper sense of sincerity; although giving in both situations is praised and rewarded²¹. Also, in another verse, God urges the believers to give charity and remind them that if they choose to hide it and give it to the poor it would be better for them as God is aware of their intention and will forgive their offences²².

On the same note, in a long and authentic ḥadīth, the Prophet mentions seven categories of people who will be protected in God's shade on the Day of Judgment, among them is a man who gave charity so secretly that one of his hands was not aware of what the other hand was giving²³. Here, exaggeration is used to show the extent to which the person tried to hide the good deed. And such act of kindness would be rewarded abundantly on Judgement Day specifically because of the honesty in the intention to only please God and the protection of the dignity of those who are receiving the charity, which was achieved through privacy.

The consistency in doing good deeds with sincerity is a form of worship that eventually leads to building a special relationship between the believer and God.

¹⁹ Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim Book 20, ḥadīth 4688.

²⁰ Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī, Volume 1, Book 1, ḥadīth 1.

²¹ Quran 2-274

²² Quran 1-271

²³ Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī, Volume 1, Book 11, ḥadīth 629.

Worship in Privacy

In a Quranic verse God urges his Prophet to wake up in the middle of the night to pray and be ready to receive the heavy words that were about to be revealed to him²⁴. The time at night is particularly chosen so to be the farthest from distractions and be focused on the Divine presence as will be mentioned below.

In another verse, God urges the believers to call on their Lord secretly and with humility²⁵, to praise Him, give thanks, ask for good living and forgiveness, and ask for great rewards on Judgment Day. And, in a ḥadīth narrated by Abū Huraira that the Prophet said that God comes down to the worldly sky every night at the last third of the night time and call on His servants to ask Him so He would grant them their wishes and repent so that He would forgive them²⁶.

The emphasis on a time of the night when most people would be asleep is to discern honesty in the believers who would desert their beds to worship and respond to the closeness of God while being farthest from hypocrisy. These night prayers are not part of the obligatory worship; they are performed voluntarily and when the intention for performing them is to get closer to God, the person ascends to higher levels of growth as a believer. This is mentioned in another ḥadīth where God states that the surest way for his servants to draw closer to Him is to perform additional acts of worship and good deed; that is when He would love them and they will hear, see, strike and walk through Him, and He will grant them their wishes and be their refuge should they need it²⁷.

Reaching this level of closeness to, and knowledge of, God would not be possible without utmost sincerity, which can almost always be attained when worship and good deeds are done privately. This would lead to the realization of happiness as the believer lives in harmony with, and as part of, God's creation and ultimately finds peace²⁸. That state of being would place the believer under another category among the seven who would be shaded in God's shade on Judgment Day as mentioned in the ḥadīth above: a man who, while on his own, remembers God and sheds tears as he realized His Majesty. This is when the believer loves God and is loved by God and, in turn, through him/her, God would bring good to His creation in this life and alleviate evil.

Conclusion

The importance of privacy is clear in Islamic scriptures and the implications of protecting, or transgressing, the privacy of the individual go beyond this worldly life. The general nature of human creation indicates that virtue and sin are both part of the

²⁴ Quran (73-1-6)

²⁵ Quran (7-55)

²⁶ Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī, Volume 2, Book 21, ḥadīth 246.

²⁷ Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī, Volume 8, Book 76, ḥadīth 509.

²⁸²⁸ El Fadl, K. A. (2014). When happiness fails: An Islamic perspective. *Journal of Law and Religion*, 29(1), 109-123.

human path in this life; yet, no two human beings will ever have the same life journey. Accordingly, the way people develop their relationship with God is different during various phases of an individual's life, and it also differs from one individual to another.

This brings us to the point that there is a reason God has created us in different nations and in different colors, shapes and abilities, so that there will be many ways that would lead to Him. Therefore, keeping one's privacy can help the individual reflect on his/her life and actions and engage in an essential kind of worship: meditation and reasoning; this way they can grow spiritually and develop into a human being worthy of meeting, speaking, and seeing the Almighty God.

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Quran 2-274

Quran 1-271

Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī, Volume 1, Book 11, ḥadīth 629.

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