

Our “Share” in this World

By Mohammed Rustom

We often hear people speak of the need to balance our religion (*din*) and our worldly lives (*dunya*). This is a rather uncustomary formulation in traditional Islamic parlance, especially because the Qur'an juxtaposes the *akhira* (afterlife), not *din*, with *dunya*. Needless to say, the Muslims in the past had their priorities straight. They understood what the demands of living the life Islam entailed, and they knew what the demands of living in the world entailed. Thus, they did not need to “strike” a balance between these two, since this balance naturally fell into place for them in their lives, punctuated as they were by the constant remembrance of God, listening to the sounds of the *adhan* in the streets, the general lack of ambivalence so characteristic of the world we live in today, etc. Nowadays, however, perhaps because this natural balance is not there, many will seek to remind themselves and others of the need to keep their *din* and *dunya* in harmony with one another. From what I have seen over the years, this kind of attitude really does not amount to much. What it means is that we are supposed to pursue the world as much as possible, provided we perform the rites of Islam, however perfunctorily. The actual ethical and spiritual life is not up for grabs here. To be sure, what is really being said is, “be as worldly as you want, but also make sure you fit the practices of Islam into your daily routine.” This is tantamount to saying, “make sure your *din* fits into your *dunya*.” We should be after something deeper than this superficial kind of approach to life. The Muslims of the past, who best embodied Islam's traditional norms and values, used to fit their daily lives into their spiritual lives, their *dunya* into their *din*.

Modern-day Muslims who wish to emphasize the importance of the pursuit of the *dunya* commonly cite this Qur'anic passage to support their stance: "*and forget not your share in this world.*"¹ Their understanding here is that "share" refers to material well-being. On a grandiose scale, it may even be taken to refer to an unlimited pursuit of material things. The actual context of this Qur'anic passage involves the counsel Prophet Musa offers to one of his enemies, Qarun, who was a member of Pharaoh's court. The pertinent part of his advice to Qarun is as follows: "*And with what God has given you, seek after the Abode of the Hereafter, and forget not your share in this world*" (28:77). The illustrious commentators upon the Qur'an in classical Islamic civilization (such as al-Tabari, al-Qurtubi, and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi) provide a number of interpretations of these words by Prophet Musa.² In specific, he is advising Qarun, who was very rich, to use his wealth to do good and not to be greedy with it. But the advice also has a general applicability. Concerning the word "share" in particular, the commentators tell us that it can refer to doing good works and to giving charity, or to simply enjoying the bounties that God has given us in this world.

At the same time, "share" can also refer to our *graves*. The words "*and forget not your share in this world*" are thus understood to mean, "and forget not the grave while being in this world." The "share" in question, therefore, has to do with the remembrance of death. On this reading, taken as a whole, the words "*And with what God has given you, seek after the Abode of the Hereafter, and forget not your share in this world*" have to do with the pursuit of the afterlife and how we use the world as a means to realize that goal. In effect, this advice of Prophet Musa can be read as an admonishment to balance *din* and *dunya*, but with *din* as the condition for our comportment in the *dunya*.

Taking as our point of inquiry the interpretation that "share" can refer to the remembrance of and preparation for death, how are we supposed to be spiritually-rooted and afterlife-oriented people (a basic component of being Muslim) while also seeking to maintain a dignified life and livelihood in this world?

¹ Translations from the Qur'an, with modifications, are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

² The interpretations of this verse which are given here are taken from Caner Dagli's commentary upon 28:77 in *The Study Quran*.

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