

The Qur'anic Perspective on the Criterion of Individual and Societal Primacy in Liberal Thought

- 1- Enayatollah Ehsas, PhD student in Comparative Exegesis at the Al-Mustafa University, Gorgan branch.
- 2- Seyed Mohammad Ali "Daei Nejad" Faculty Member of al-Mustafa University Qom, Iran
- 3- Ahmad Saadat Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy and Theology Mustafa University, , Gorgan Branch

Abstract:

The present article explores and compares the perspectives of the Qur'an and liberal individualism regarding the primacy of the individual and society. Liberal individualism, as a fundamental pillar of Western modernity, is based on principles such as the primacy of the individual, independence from religious and traditional authorities, and the rule of a minimal state. Within this framework, the individual is viewed as the core of all social and political structures. In contrast, Islamic teachings—emphasizing human dependence on God, individual and social responsibilities, and the pursuit of spiritual perfection under divine guidance—offer a fundamentally different understanding of human identity. The central issue of this study is the analysis and comparison of the foundational principles of liberal individualism and Islamic teachings concerning the relationship between the individual and society. The research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach and draws upon Qur'anic verses and the interpretations of Muslim thinkers, especially the late Martyr Motahhari. The findings indicate that Islam views the individual and society as interdependent, asserting the necessity of simultaneous reform in both. Unlike liberal individualism, which defines personal freedom as absolute and unconditional, Islam frames freedom within the boundaries of servitude to God and the welfare of society. Moreover, in Islamic thought, the religious state plays a vital role in guiding, supervising, and ensuring social justice—an approach that contradicts the concept of the minimal state in liberalism. The study concludes that Islamic thought, as a balanced worldview, offers a synthesis of the primacy of the individual and society—where neither is sacrificed for the other. This stance stands in contrast to liberal individualism, particularly in ethical, social, and religious public spheres. It also underscores the need to rediscover religious identity and to design a socio-political system based on the Qur'an.

Keywords:

Liberal Individualism, Islamic Teachings, Primacy of the Individual, Primacy of Society, Personal Freedom, Religious State, Holy Qur'an, Social Responsibility, Islamic Ethics, Modernity, Comparative Analysis.

Introduction

One of the fundamental debates in political and social philosophy concerns the position of the individual and society and the nature of their interaction. Liberalism, as one of the prominent intellectual movements of the modern era, emphasizes the primacy of the individual, personal freedoms, and the right to choose, while minimizing the role of society in restricting these

freedoms. On the other hand, the Holy Qur'an, while recognizing individual rights, places strong emphasis on social responsibilities and the necessity of a dynamic interaction between the individual and society. This contrast in approaches has laid the groundwork for scholarly inquiry into the respective positions of the individual and society in liberal thought and in the Qur'an.

The main question of this research is: What is the Qur'anic perspective on the primacy of the individual and society, and how does this view compare to the foundational principles of liberalism? Does the Qur'an accept the superiority of the individual over society, or does it advocate a balanced approach between the two? Furthermore, how are concepts such as individual freedom, social responsibility, justice, and personal rights defined in these two intellectual systems? Investigating these questions can lead to a better understanding of the Qur'an's social and ethical foundations in comparison with liberal thought.

Numerous studies have examined various aspects of liberalism and Islam. Some scholars emphasize the relative similarities between the two in areas such as individual rights and civil liberties, while others highlight the fundamental differences in their value systems and philosophical foundations. The works of philosophers like John Locke and John Stuart Mill on liberalism, along with diverse interpretations of the Qur'an, are considered key sources in the exploration of this subject.

The methodology of this study is descriptive-analytical. Drawing on exegetical, philosophical, and sociological sources, it conducts a comparative analysis of the Qur'anic and liberal perspectives on the primacy of the individual and society. The study first reviews the theoretical foundations of liberalism and then derives the Qur'anic viewpoint through the analysis of relevant verses and authoritative commentaries. Finally, a comparative evaluation is presented to identify the points of convergence and divergence between the two approaches.

1- The Criterion of the Primacy of the Individual and Society in the Qur'anic Verses

The debate over whether the individual or society holds primacy is one of the fundamental discussions in the field of sociology and religious thought, which has long attracted the attention of scholars. In this regard, the martyred professor Morteza Motahhari, based on Qur'anic teachings, believes in the simultaneous primacy of both the individual and society. He considers these two not as opposites but as interactive and complementary entities. According to him, those who believe only in the primacy of the individual or solely in the primacy of society are unaware of the mutual relationship between individual and collective awareness, because they view awareness as something separate and self-contained (Motahhari, 1973, p. 54). Motahhari states that society shapes the individual, but the individual also shapes society through their social personality. He believes that the personality of the individual is realized within society, and the identity of society is manifested within the individual. He compares this relationship to the philosophical concept of "unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity."

In Islamic thought, the ultimate goal of creation is human perfection. The Holy Qur'an introduces the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the perfect example of a human being: "Indeed, you are of a great moral character" (Surah Al-Qalam: 4). These noble traits are manifestations of divine light

granted to worthy individuals, helping them progress both individually and socially. From the Qur'anic perspective, the human being is inherently dependent on God, and this intrinsic dependency becomes the source of divine influence in their personal and social behavior. This dependence opens the heart to divine light and aligns one's life with heavenly guidance. The concept of intercession also arises in this context—when a person comes under divine guidance, they reform their behavior and achieve both personal and social growth. This behavioral reform, in connection with others, leads individuals toward a balanced and God-centered way of life. In the wisdom of Luqman, there is an emphasis on moderation in social relationships: "My son, do not quarrel with people, for you will be hated; and do not make yourself too sweet, for you will be eaten..." (Majlisi, n.d., vol. 13, p. 429).

The Holy Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes the responsibilities of both individuals and society. For example, in Surah Al-Ma'idah it states: "Let there be among you a group who invite to good..." (Al-Ma'idah: 2). Elsewhere, it notes that divine revelations are sent down to guide the hearts of wrongdoers (Al-Hijr: 12), and these verses, by penetrating the human heart, bring about the reform of individuals and society. Historically as well, all divine prophets adopted contextually appropriate methods to promote monotheism and reform society (Jafari, 1989, p. 92). As the Qur'an says: "Messengers came to them from all directions saying: 'Worship none but Allah'" (Fussilat: 24).

Ultimately, in order to reform individual and social corruption, it is necessary to first provide legitimate avenues for the proper satisfaction of human instincts, because no negative struggle can succeed without positive measures. For instance, if the aim is to combat moral deviations, it is first essential to offer lawful and healthy means to fulfill human needs.

In the story of Adam and Eve, God initially declares all the heavenly blessings permissible, saying: "Eat and enjoy freely from the blessings of Paradise," but then forbids them from approaching a specific tree: "But do not go near this tree, lest you become wrongdoers" (Al-Baqarah: 35). This divine command demonstrates the undeniable necessity of boundaries to preserve human chastity and purity. In fact, the freer the interactions between men and women and the closer the contacts, the more likely temptations and desires will be aroused, leading to corruption and immorality within society.

In the story of Prophet Moses (PBUH) and the daughters of Shu'ayb, we find a clear example of modesty, chastity, and healthy social interaction (Majlisi, n.d., vol. 7, p. 147). When Moses approached a well, he noticed two women standing apart from the men. In response to his question, "What is the matter with you?" they replied, "We do not water (our flock) until the shepherds leave, and our father is an old man" (Al-Qasas: 23). Then one of them came to Moses with utmost modesty and said, "My father invites you to reward you for watering our flocks" (Al-Qasas: 25). From this story, we understand that:

- Maintaining respectful boundaries between men and women is valuable ("two women keeping away"),
- Brief and purposeful conversation between a man and a woman is permissible ("What is the matter with you?"),

- Women's presence in society is legitimate and beneficial if it is modest, avoids mixing, and does not involve solitude with unrelated men ("she walked modestly"),
- And that fathers must be aware of their children's behavior and intervene appropriately if needed (Qara'ati, 1996, p. 967).

From the Qur'anic perspective, the transformation and reform of society is only possible through individual and internal reform, as it states: "Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" (Ar-Ra'd: 11).

In another scene, Prophet Lot (PBUH) sought to deter his people from the evil of homosexuality by offering them a lawful alternative, saying: "O my people! These are my daughters; they are purer for you," and then urged them to have piety, saying: "Fear Allah, and do not disgrace me concerning my guests" (Hud: 78). This verse highlights that directing sexual desires toward legitimate paths is a key solution in preventing moral deviations.

2- Resolving the Conflict Between Individual and Collective Interests in Qur'anic Teachings

Humanism, which emerged from the religious reform movements and the Renaissance, valued the individual as the protector and defender of their own salvation and redemption. This school of thought, which gained more prominence in the seventeenth century, viewed humans not only as social beings but also as independent individuals, free from dependence on social groups. In this regard, Hobbes stated that humans in nature are selfish beings, engaged in a world full of conflict and struggle for survival (The Ne, 1986: 791). As a result, this view led to interpretations such as "Man is a wolf to man" and "There is no divine spirit in the human being" (The Ne, 1986: 791). These individualistic theories, based on the struggle for survival, indirectly suggested that human life is nothing but an individual's effort to secure their personal interests.

In contrast, Islam and the teachings of the Prophets regarding social justice have always urged humans to consider not only their individual interests but also the concepts of justice and rights. Imam Ali (AS) stated in a valuable saying: "Right is both something to be taken and given." In this framework, the emphasis on social justice and the need to rise against oppression and corruption in society is based not only on individual ethics but also on collective principles (Motahari, n.d.: 51-52). This Islamic perspective, alongside the emphasis on the greater jihad, focusing on inner self-reformation and combating inner enemies such as selfishness, is presented as a fundamental aspect of education. In this context, Islam interprets individualism in a way that harmonizes and balances individual and collective interests. According to Islamic views, the "greater jihad," which refers to the struggle against the ego and weakening individual selfishness, not only helps the individual in achieving spiritual perfection but also ultimately leads to the creation of a healthy and just society. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Imams (AS) always urged people to pursue the path of God and justice, rather than merely following personal interests. Martyr Sadr elaborates on this by explaining that religion, through the channels of the lesser and greater jihad, can solve the conflicts between social and individual issues. The lesser jihad, specifically referring to social and political struggles, is

seen in Islam as a means to combat oppression and social corruption. On the other hand, the greater jihad, which prioritizes the struggle against the self and inner purification, is at the forefront (Sadr, n.d.: 14-48). This process, along with internal transformation, gradually leads to the improvement of social relationships and the resolution of conflicts within society.

The Qur'an also provides examples of both the lesser and greater jihad. The verses about the lesser jihad, which refer to the struggle against the enemies of faith and society, emphasize that these struggles should aim to establish justice and prevent corruption in society (Anfal: 29). On the other hand, the verses concerning the greater jihad highlight the struggle against the self and internal reformation as the most essential form of jihad (Fajr: 27-30).

Islam, by offering these two types of jihad, shows a path in which the individual, rather than solely pursuing personal and individualistic interests, can achieve spiritual and ethical perfection. As a result, society benefits from these internal changes. Ultimately, the goal of both the greater and lesser jihad is to achieve a society where justice, human dignity, and the balance between individual and collective interests form the foundation of social life.

3- The Link Between Individual Beliefs and Social Transformations in the Qur'an

An examination of the intellectual foundations of liberalism and individualism shows that social transformations, in addition to political, economic, and cultural aspects, have a value-driven nature and transform previous values. The revolution of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) is an example of such fundamental changes, which brought about profound cultural innovation (Hosseini, 2010: 87). In Islamic philosophy, values are considered fixed and absolute principles, though their applications may change. The criterion for moral value in Islam is the ultimate perfection of humanity and closeness to God, not hedonism or material preferences (Dashti, 2019: Sermon 26; Misbah Yazdi, n.d.: 230).

Social values in the Islamic system must take into account all aspects of individual and social life and focus on securing both spiritual and worldly happiness (Zoulam, 2014: 40). These changes are particularly impactful during times when living conditions undergo transformation (Mohsenian-Rad, n.d.: 37). In a society where values are inverted, counter-values take dominance. The Qur'an refers to corruption and the distortion of values (Al-Baqarah: 205), and Imam Ali (PBUH) describes the social change in his time from goodness to evil and from justice to oppression (Nahj al-Balagha: Sermon 26). He emphasizes that a religious society must have strong social ties and be purposeful in its actions so that the true religion can eliminate deviant beliefs from society (Ibid: Sermon 196).

4- Quran's Solutions for Personal Growth and Social Trust

In Islamic teachings, trust in one's abilities, alongside reliance on God Almighty, is considered a fundamental path to human growth and perfection. These two principles are intertwined and guide individuals toward intellectual independence, responsibility, and perseverance in life.

Self-awareness and self-confidence are the starting points for the success of every individual. A person who lacks a proper understanding of themselves will face instability in critical situations and important decisions. However, a self-confident person, by recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, gains the ability to manage their emotions and direct the course of their life. Therefore, self-confidence lays the foundation for order, responsibility, and personal growth.

From the perspective of the Quran, human beings are free agents with dignity, and God has made them His vicegerents on Earth (Al-Baqarah: 30). In verses such as Ar-Ra'd: 11, the direct role of humans in changing their destiny is mentioned: "Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves." This verse emphasizes human will and choice and shows that belief in a pre-determined destiny should not lead to passivity.

Reliance on God, alongside effort and diligence, forms the basis of complete faith. Imam Ali (A.S.) says: "The faith of a true servant is not complete until their trust in what is in the hands of God exceeds that which is in their own hands." This statement reflects a precise balance between relying on God and human effort. Religious sources also refer to a concept similar to the law of attraction. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: "Think positively, and you will find it in your life." This hadith shows that a person's belief and intention have a direct impact on the realization of life's outcomes.

Along with these concepts, it is important to note that excessive self-confidence, if accompanied by neglect of dependence on God, can lead to arrogance or even polytheism. Therefore, Islam maintains a balance between self-trust and reliance on God. Moreover, trust is a reciprocal and gradual process; trust in others develops when a person's behavior and speech are accompanied by honesty, goodwill, and consistency. God also refers to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a trustworthy person due to his good character and compassion for the people (Aali Imran: 159, At-Tawbah: 61).

From the Quranic perspective, humans are social beings, and to fulfill their material, spiritual, and emotional needs, they must engage with others. In a verse from Surah Az-Zukhruf (Verse 32), the wisdom behind the economic and social differences between humans is mentioned, stating that these differences provide a basis for mutual service and social growth. In summary, Islamic teachings, with an emphasis on the value and agency of humans, call individuals to self-awareness, self-confidence, continuous effort, and reliance on God so that they can achieve their rightful perfection in both personal and social growth.

5- The Role of Personal Beliefs in Achieving Social Equality in the Quran

Social equality in Islam and the Quran is considered a unique model in human history, which the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) not only taught but also implemented in a tangible society. According to the teachings of the Quran, humans are created from one soul and have common parents (49:13), and no one is superior to another due to race, color, ethnicity, or social status; superiority is solely based on piety. In a narration from the Prophet (PBUH), it is stated: "People are equal like the teeth of a comb." This principle was reflected in the political and social behavior of the Prophet (PBUH) and his true companions, such as Imam Ali (PBUH),

who opposed ethnic, class, and racial discrimination. A clear example of this is appointing individuals like Bilal al-Habashi, Salman al-Farsi, and Suhaib al-Rumi to prominent social positions; these individuals, who were previously on the margins of society, reached high ranks in the shadow of Islam. Imam Ali (PBUH) describes them: "The five pioneers in Islam are from various tribes: Arabs, Persians, Romans, Ethiopians, and Nabateans." Islam insists that social equality stems from the inherent dignity of humans, not merely a moral or social contract. Therefore, it does not deny the outward and natural differences among humans, but rather sees them as signs of divine wisdom: "We have distributed their livelihood in this world" (43:32). God has created differences in livelihood and abilities to ensure the stability of human life. However, these differences should not lead to legal inequality or discrimination in the application of the law. The Prophet (PBUH) said: "The children of Israel perished because of discrimination in implementing God's laws." The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) firmly believed that the implementation of the law is obligatory for all, from rulers to the poor, and considered injustice the greatest threat to the survival of society. In the case of Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) being appointed as a leader, God clearly states that responsibility and divine position are not inherited or obtained through family ties, but are granted only to the worthy: "My covenant does not include the wrongdoers" (2:124). Therefore, from an Islamic perspective, social equality is not just a slogan but a reality rooted in human nature and divine justice, which flourishes through the teachings and upbringing of the Prophet and the uncompromising application of divine laws.

Conclusion

The discussions in this research have shown that liberal individualism, as one of the intellectual pillars of Western modernity, is based on principles such as the primacy of the individual, their independence from traditional and religious authorities, the precedence of rights over the good, and minimal, non-interventionist state sovereignty. In this perspective, the individual is seen as the center and the ultimate purpose of all social, political, and cultural structures, and individual freedom is regarded as an absolute and sometimes sacred value that can even take precedence over religious, ethical, and traditional foundations. This view of humans and society is based on a specific anthropology and epistemology, where humans are conceived as independent of God and free from metaphysical dependencies.

In contrast, Islamic teachings, which in this paper are examined based on Quranic verses, analyses by Muslim scholars, especially martyr Mottahari, and authoritative exegeses, offer a different view of human identity. In the Islamic perspective, humans are beings dependent on God, responsible to the Creator and society, and in the process of moving toward spiritual perfection. While Islam acknowledges the dignity of the individual and values human will and choice, it never considers humans as independent beings, free from divine guidance. Consequently, freedom in Islam is not absolute, but valuable within the framework of worship of God and the observance of social and ethical interests.

Based on Quranic verses, society and the individual are in a mutually constructive relationship with one another. The Quran addresses both individual responsibilities, such as self-purification, piety, and modesty, as well as collective responsibilities, such as enjoining good,

forbidding evil, social participation, and respecting boundaries in human relations. Quranic evidence shows that societal reform is impossible without individual reform, and individual reform can only be achieved within the context of a healthy and guided society. On the other hand, the role of the religious state in guidance, supervision, and ensuring social justice is a fundamental principle in Islamic thought, which stands in clear contrast to the liberal view of a "minimal state."

From the comparative analysis of liberal individualism and Islamic teachings, it can be concluded that the Islamic worldview presents a balanced integration of the primacy of both the individual and society—a model that neither sacrifices the individual for the collective nor the collective for individual desires. In this view, the state is not merely a tool but a part of the divine guidance system for achieving justice, ethics, and the spiritual growth of society. Thus, it becomes clear that the foundational principles of liberal individualism are incompatible with the monotheistic perspective of Islam, and there are profound structural differences between these two intellectual systems in many areas, including ethics, family, social responsibility, and the role of religion in the public sphere. These differences call upon Muslim thinkers to seriously reflect on redefining religious identity and designing a social-political system based on Quranic principles.

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