

The Notion of “*Husnu’l Zann*” or Positive Thinking in Islam: Medieval Perspective

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Abstract

Although the topic of positive thinking has been of interest to scholars throughout history, public discussion of this topic has increased markedly in the last two decades. From the Islamic perspective, Medieval Muslim scholars also gave attention to this theme, but rarely explored it deeply. Building upon their writings on the subject, this article will discuss the topic through the lens of Medieval sources drawn from Sufi, literary and rational interpretations, the tradition of Prophet Muhammad and stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses in the light of major Qur’anic exegeses. Scholars used this methodology in order to discuss *husnu’l zann* on religious, psychological and spiritual levels. From the practical point of view, a number of Islamic practices were recommended to aid both in fostering positive thought and abstaining or dealing with negative thoughts. There needs to be a comprehensive approach by modern scholars from related fields to re-examine *husnu’l zann* and *sui zann* (negative thinking) in Islamic sources.

Keywords: Positive thinking, negative thinking, Islam, Muslims, prophets

Introduction

There has been an increased academic interest in the topic of positive thinking over the last two decades. Evidence of this can be seen in the ever-increasing number of works dedicated to the psychology, philosophy and theology of positive thinking published in the West. Furthermore, the study of positive thinking is gradually becoming a major research and teaching topic in higher educational institutions. This in turn has led to a corresponding increase in public interest and media coverage. In Islamic sources, positive thinking can be defined as *husnu’l zann*, though the meaning of that Arabic expression is somewhat broader. It encompasses good intentions, thought and action towards God, the universe and human beings. Moreover, it also carries the meaning of optimism and of holding good opinion and thinking well about others.

Understanding the Islamic perspective on this topic requires a deep knowledge of the relevant Qur’anic verses and hadiths in their respective contexts. For example, the Qur’an conveys the stories of Adam and Eve and their son Abel, illustrating the fact that positive and negative thought and action have been part of human nature from the earliest times. Adam and Eve were expelled from Heaven due the deception of Satan (20:120). Nevertheless, instead of engaging in blame, they remained hopeful of God’s forgiveness while remaining critical of themselves. Similarly, when Cain wanted to kill Abel, Abel stated that he would not raise even his hand against his brother (5:27-30). This is the pinnacle of positive thinking.

There are many verses of the Qur’an and hadith that are directly or indirectly related to this research topic, as well as a breadth of scholarly interpretation and opinions beginning in the 8th century. These sources have been covered in many works devoted to the fields of Qur’anic exegesis, hadith interpretation, jurisprudence, Sufism and healing. It would be beyond the scope of a single article to comprehensively cover the topic. Instead, this article will focus on the prominent scholarly interpretations from medieval times of Qur’anic verses and hadiths related to *husnu’l zann*, positive thinking and positive action, and *sui zann*, negative thinking and negative action, and examine the various views. In terms of sources, this article will draw mostly upon the text *Ummuhat al-Tafsir* (the “Mothers of Tafsirs” or the Major Exegeses), which consists of the exegesis of al-Tabari (839-923), al-Zamakhshari (1070-1143), al-Razi (1149-1209), al-Qurtubi (1214-1273), Ibn Kathir (1301-1373) and major Sufi exegeses such as al-Qushayri (d.1074), Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and al-Jilani (1077-1166).

Islam is considered as a way incorporating every aspect of life¹, including happiness and mental health, through thought and action. In the sacred texts, sometimes the emphasis is on *huznu'l zann* (positive thinking), while other times the attention is given to *sui zann* (negative thinking), used as an indirect approach to positive thinking. Its importance is such that Prophet Muhammad regarded *husnu'l zann* as a form of worship.² On the one hand, it is a characteristic of a righteous person to view people and events with good intentions, both to see and interpret the circumstances as positive wherever possible. On the other hand, negative thinking can be considered a sin if the thoughts adversely color a person's words or affect a person's actions.

1.1 The foundations of “*husnu'l zann*” in the Qur'an

The Qur'an contains several points of view on positive thinking, in some cases commanding or encouraging it, and in other cases prohibiting negative thinking. Positive thinking is first meant to be held towards God and the Universe including all its contents and events and human beings. A person should reflect on God's being and attributes and observe their manifestations in this world. Given humankind's relationship and connection with God, thinking negatively of the Creator, Giver of Life and Bestower of Blessings (14:34),³ can lead to perdition (41:23). A number of hadiths support this view. Prophet Muhammad said, “Anyone from among you must not die without having *husnu'l zann* of God. The people who had *sui zann* perished”.⁴ In regard to Qur'anic verse (41:23) al-Tabari states, “There is no doubt that people's deeds are as weighted as their *huznu'l zann* in regards to God. The believer does *husnu'l zann* and commits good deeds, whereas the non-believers and hypocrites commit *sui zann* in regards to God and commit evil deeds.”⁵ Al-Qushayri holds that this verse was revealed in regard to hypocrites. To him, *sui zann* is an attribute of the spiritually lethargic.⁶ Al-Nasafi (d.1142) considered *sui zann* to be a major sin.⁷

Moreover, the Qur'an and sunnah, the Prophetic traditions, portray the Universe and its contents and events as overwhelmingly positive, hence commanding humans to regard it in the same way. “He has also made of service to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth; all is from Him (a gift of His Grace)” (45:13). Al-Qurtubi states that everything in the universe is created for the benefit of humankind,⁸ including things that are disliked by humans. As the Qur'an states (3:191) nothing in the universe is created in vain. “Our Lord, You have not created this (the universe) without meaning and purpose”. Humans are encouraged or even commanded in some verses to reflect on the creation and its movements, which can lead to the conclusion that there is wisdom informing every created thing, including human beings.

Al-Tabari and al-Zamakhshari support these views.^{9,10} Al-Razi goes further, stating that verse 3:191 requires humans to admire and appreciate all creation. Nothing in the universe has been created aimlessly, even though things exist which may seem strange or bizarre.¹¹ Furthermore, it does not suit God to create something pointless.¹² Al-Qushayri holds that reflecting on God's blessings increases spiritual love,¹³ which can be said to foster *husnu'l zann*. Similarly, Ibn Arabi states that because everything originates from God, reflection about creation will eventually lead a person to God¹⁴ and in the process will inspire positive thinking.

¹ For “Islam a way of life” issue, see Sayyid Abu'l Ala Mawdudi, (1967) *The Islamic Way of Life*, Markazi Maktabi Islami, Delhi

² Narrated by Abu Dawud in F. Gülen, *Nağme: Kendine Rağmen Yaşamak*, <http://herkul.org/index.php/herkul-nagme/10634-291-nagme-kendine-ragmen-yasamak>, retrieved 4.3.2012

³ All Arabic and Turkish sources quoted in the text were translated by the author, except Qur'anic verses for which Ali Unal's translation was used.

⁴ Al-Qurtubi, M. (1964) *al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Quran*, Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=5&tSoraNo=41&tAyahNo=23&tDisplay=yes&Page=2&Size=1&LanguageId=1>

⁵ Al-Tabari, J. (2000) *Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Beirut: Muassasah al-Risalah, v. 21, 456

⁶ Al-Qushayri, A. (n.d) *Lata'if al-Isharat*, Egypt: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah li al-Kitab, v. 3, 324-325

⁷ Nasafi, O. *Midaraki Tanzil wa Haqaiqi at-Ta'wil*,

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=17&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&Page=3&Size=1&LanguageId=1>

⁸ Al-Qurtubi, *ibid*, v. 16, 330-339

⁹ Al-Tabari, *ibid*, v.7, 474-476

¹⁰ Al-Zamakhshari, M. (1986) *al-Kashshaf 'an Haqa'iq Ghawamid al-Tanzil*, Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, v.1, 1452-453

¹¹ Al-Razi, F. (1999) *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, v. 9, 459-466

¹² Al-Razi, *ibid*

¹³ Al-Qushayri, *ibid*, v.1, 303-305

¹⁴ Ibn Arabi M. (2003) *Ahkam al-Quran*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, v.1, 397-399

Ismail Haqqi holds that in order to be in the highest state of *husnu'l zann* in regards to God requires the practice of *dhikr*, or remembrance of God through invocation. Through this, a person can learn the wisdom of creation. First, a person will remember God through his or her tongue, which can subsequently lead to remembrance by the heart. If a person continues this invocation, it will lead to remembrance by the spirit or soul. At this spiritual level or station, a person can reach *ma'rifatullah*, Godly closeness or divine gnosis,¹⁵ and can hold the highest degree of *husnu'l zann* in regards to God, the Universe, humans and even unlikeable animals.

Notwithstanding the presence in the natural world of dangerous or terrifying creatures which can harm or terrify humans, such as snakes, if a person chooses to think positively, he or she can come to see the positive aspects of snakes or other plant or animal species, and can go on to research possible benefits such as the use of snake skin, or venom in medicines.

Moreover, this principle of positive thinking also applies to events or occurrences throughout time. Floods caused by heavy rain do cause harm, but these can also lead to positive consequences. Said Nursi states on this point that created things possess two qualities of beauty. The first quality is called "essential beauty", because it is part of the existence of a thing. The second quality is called "relative beauty", because it brings about positive consequences. He continues to say, "There are certain events which are apparently ugly and confused, but beneath that apparent veil, they are most shining instances of beauty and order."¹⁶ Consequences are not limited to one lifetime, or to this world, but also extend to the Hereafter. Illness, for example, reminds a person of his or her mortality, which in turn can incite desires to commit good deeds during this short life, or appreciate the blessings in life. In terms of the Hereafter, if the person remains patient during the illness, it can be considered as worship and rewarded in the next life. Arguing this way, Nursi draws for inspiration upon the verse, "He Who makes excellent everything that He creates"(32:7). Al-Zamakhshari also comments on this verse, which supports Nursi's view that everything is created with a positive intention or wisdom.¹⁷ Al-Razi takes this one step further, stating that God has created everything in the best way, meaning that everything between the heavens and the earth is beneficial.¹⁸

Nursi holds that the world has three "faces". The first face acts as a mirror reflecting God's Names. The second face is turned towards the Hereafter, and regards the arable fields which will be harvested in the "World of Eternity", thereby transforming the transitory into the eternal. The first and second faces are considered "essential beauty," because they are good and beautiful in themselves. The third face looks at transient beings and acts as an arena of trial and examination. This face consists of both essential and relative beauty, and consequently may not appear beautiful at all times.¹⁹ Nursi adds that there are two dimensions to the Universe. One dimension is turned towards God and is always beautiful, while the other, which is turned toward humans, may at times be ugly or unlikable.²⁰ In his treatise on illness, Nursi lists twenty-five ways in which illness can be utilised positively.²¹ Among these are the realisations of one's relative impotence in comparison with God's greatness, as well as seeing the value of health. Therefore, although illness is generally viewed as a negative occurrence, in Nursi's view, it can lead a person to *husnu'l zann*.

Further supporting this view is the Qur'anic verse which states, "It may well be that you dislike a thing but it is good for you"(2:216). Al-Zamakhshari points to the nature of the human carnal soul (*nafs*), which is not able to perceive the good in everything because of its desire for immediate gratification, as opposed to seeking that which may be good in the long term.

¹⁵ Haqqi, I. *Ruhu'l Bayan*,

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=36&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=191&tDisplay=yes&Page=2&Size=1&LanguageId=1>

¹⁶ Nursi, S. (1991) *The Words*, trans by Sukran Vahide, Sozler Publications, Istanbul, 240-241

¹⁷ Al-Zamakhshari, *ibid*, v.3, 508-509

¹⁸ Al-Razi, *ibid*, v. 25,139-141

¹⁹ Nursi,S (1996) *The Letters*, trans by Sukran Vahide, Sozler Publications, Istanbul, 344-345

²⁰ Nursi,S. (1997) Sozler, *ibid*, 264

²¹ For detail information see, Nursi, S (2004) *The Flashes Collection*, trans Sukran Vahide, Sozler Publication, Istanbul, 266-286

For this reason, the *nafs* is not very reliable on its own.²² Illustrating this point, al-Razi presents the example of a patient taking medicine, which is not desirable or easy, but is necessary for his health. He also refers to charity as something displeasing in the present, but rewarding in the Hereafter.²³ Al-Qushayri viewed those things which are displeasing to the evil commanding soul (*nafs*) as nevertheless helpful for spiritual (or psychological) life.²⁴ In agreement with these views, Ibn Arabi asserts that people typically prefer a smaller worldly benefit in the present, over a greater otherworldly benefit in the future.²⁵

The third category of *huznu'l zann* concerns positive thinking towards people. The Qur'an directs believers to refrain from *sui zann*, negative thinking and action (49:12). The verb used in this verse is "ijtinab", which means to refrain or stay far away from something harmful, and has been used to exhort believers to stay away not only from *sui zann*, but also from the greatest sin in Islam, that of associating partners with God (16:36, 22:30). It has also been related to other major sins like giving false testimony (22:30), consuming intoxicants, and gambling (5:90). For al-Nasafi, the strength of the verb "ijtinab" demonstrates how detested *sui zann* is, since it has been used in the same grammatical form when referring to other major sins.²⁶ Moreover, the verb is used in the direct form of a command, which indicates strength and emphasis. Such evidence explains why *sui zann* is considered such a major sin.²⁷ Nursi counts *sui zann* as one of the four great spiritual sicknesses.²⁸ However, in the authentic hadith traditions, *sui zann* is not listed as a major sin. In order for Nursi to have considered it a major sin, he may have been referring to the instance of *sui zann* afflicting an entire ethnic group, religion or a nation.

The consequences of *sui zann* are what qualify it as a major sin. Negative thinking can lead one person to breach another's privacy in order to find out or confirm negative prejudices, and further lead to gossip or slander which can gradually increase disorder, major divisions and even conflicts between people.

This verb (*ijtinab*) clearly indicates that a believer must not only refrain from committing these major sins, but also avoid all paths that lead to these sins. Similarly, believers are told not only to stay far away from *sui zann* but also to avoid that which can lead to negative thinking and action.

These admonitions apply not only to negative thoughts about others, but also to negative thoughts directed inwardly towards the believer's own self. Prophet Muhammad's example emphasises this strongly. Once, he was walking with his wife who covered her face when two Companions passed by them. He asked the Companions to stop, opened his wife's face veil and stated that she was indeed his wife. The Companions were surprised and indicated that they would not think otherwise. The Prophet in return taught the Companions that it is not hard for humans to think negatively. Therefore, based on his example, a believer must refrain from acting or speaking in a way that will cause others to think negatively of him. This is actually a very responsible and mature approach and reflects the overall Islamic preference to community harmony over individualism.

As a form of sickness or sin, *sui zann* is not inherent in the *fitrah*. Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) affirms that humans are born in *fitrah*, namely, a good and pure state which inclines a person towards goodness.²⁹ Negative thoughts and emotions can be likened to birds or bees flying around the tree which represents the human mind and soul. Although they cannot be prevented from flying near the tree, they can be prevented from making nests in its branches. *Sui zann* comes through time and exposure to various negative influences. This demonstrates that the meaning of the verb "ijtinab", meaning "refrain from", points to the nature of negative thinking as originating outside of essential human nature.

²² Al-Zamakhshari, *ibid*, v.1, 257-258

²³ Al-Razi, *ibid*, v. 6, 384-386

²⁴ Al-Qushayri, *ibid*, v.1, 175

²⁵ Ibn Arabi, *ibid*, v.1, 205-206

²⁶ Al-Nasafi, *ibid*

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=17&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&Page=3&Size=1&LanguageId=1>

²⁷ Al-Nasafi, *ibid*

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=17&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&Page=3&Size=1&LanguageId=1>

²⁸ Nursi, S. *Al-Mathnawi Al-Nuri*, (2007) trans. Huseyin Akarsu, Tughrak Books, New Jersey, 87

²⁹ Griffel, F. (2012) Al-Ghazali's Use of 'Original Human Disposition' (*Fitra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of al-Farabi and Avicenna, *The Muslim World*, 102,1-32.

Consequently, Al-Qurtubi described *sui zann* as lacking a justification in evidence.³⁰ Al-Tabari adds that there is no goodness in *sui zann* in any situation.³¹ Al-Zamakshari held that without clear evidence, negative thinking about someone is unlawful (*haram*), but is permissible if that person openly commits major sins.³² Contrary to al-Zamakshari, Nursi extended positive thinking even towards transgressors, or to those who commit major sins openly, but argued that one should refrain from trusting them.³³ Al-Razi asserted that without certain evidence of wrongdoing, *husnu'l zann* is the standard to be held. He described *sui zann* as a support for sinning and the cause of enmity.³⁴

Ibn Kathir supported an attitude of caution in regard to *sui zann* with the hadith, “Stay away from *sui zann* as most *sui zann* is sinful”. In the narrations of Muslim ve Tirmidhi, the Companions asked Prophet Muhammad, “What should we do if it (*sui zann*) comes to our mind?” The Prophet replied “Do not act on it”.³⁵ In Islamic law, there is no worldly punishment for *sui zann*. Sufyan al-Thawri (716-778) followed that line and held that *sui zann* is not sinful if it remains in the mind, but is sinful when it is released in the forms of actions.³⁶ Contrary to these views, Qur’anic verse 2:284 states that humans are accountable for what [negative thoughts] come to their mind. However, Muslim exegetes assert that this verse was abrogated when 2:286 was revealed, which states that “God burdens no soul except within its capacity”, meaning that wherever negative thoughts are beyond the control of the soul, people will not be held accountable for them.³⁷

For Ismail Haqqi, sustaining *sui zann* in regards to God, His being, His attributes and His perfection is a form of sin. In the same way, *sui zann* is also a sin when held towards any prophet. The source of *sui zann* is the carnal soul (*nafs*); while by contrast, the source of *husnu'l zann* is the heart where faith resides.³⁸ One of the early Qur’anic scholars Dahhak (d.729) narrates from the Prophet’s wife, Aisha, known as the scholar of the scholars, that people are not accountable for their negative thoughts. However if a person persists in negative thoughts and ruminates on them, then he or she will face worldly spiritual consequences (which may include psychological consequences).³⁹

Al-Ghazzali wrote sensitively on this topic. For him, *sui zann* is like psychological backbiting.⁴⁰ Al-Ghazzali may be addressing those at a higher spiritual level who need to be more sensitive regarding *sui zann*, because their responsibilities are heavier as role models. Abdul Qadir Jilani recommends quitting all forms of *sui zann*.⁴¹

³⁰ Al-Qurtubi, *ibid*, v.16, 330-339

³¹ Al-Tabari, *ibid*, v.22, 303-304

³² Al-Zamakshari, *ibid*, v. 4, 371-374

³³ Nursi, S, *ibid*

³⁴ Al-Razi, *ibid*, v.28, 110-112

³⁵ Ibn Kathir, I. (1998) *Tafsir al-Quran al-‘Azim*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, v.7, 352

³⁶ Ismail Haqqi, *ibid*

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=36&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>

³⁷ Al-Razi, *ibid*

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=4&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=284&tDisplay=yes&Page=3&Size=1&LanguageId=1>

³⁸ Ismail Haqqi, *ibid*

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=36&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>

³⁹ Al-Razi, *ibid*

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=4&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=284&tDisplay=yes&Page=3&Size=1&LanguageId=1>

⁴⁰ Al- Ghazzali, M. *Ihyai Ulumud din*(n.d) trans. Mawlana Fazl-ul- Karim, v.3, 116

<http://www.ghazali.org/ihya/english/ihya-vol3-C4.htm>

⁴¹ Jilani, A. *Tafsiru'l Jilani*,

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=95&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>

At-Tusi declared *sui zann* to be a sin⁴². Ibn Jawziyyah states that it is permissible for experts like doctors or judges to hold negative thoughts, specifically suspicion, when practicing their field in order to uncover evidence.

1.2 The examples of positive thinking and positive action in the Qur'an

In the stories of the prophets, positive thinking and action are highlighted, and negative thinking is admonished by implication, in order to present lessons to believers. According to contemporary scholar Fethullah Gülen, there is a strong correlation between positive thinking and action and the ability to perceive reality clearly. Since prophets are the best at reading the Book of the Universe in order to understand reality, this quality also makes them pioneers in positive thinking and action in their time, especially given that they maintained this state when under great difficulty and persecution.⁴³ Several examples from the Qur'an will help make this point clearer.

The Qur'an refers to the struggle between those who believe in *tawhid*, One God, and those who are sternly against it, exemplified particularly in the epic stories of Adam and Eve and Satan, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and Pharaoh, Abraham and his father, Prophet Muhammad and the Meccan polytheists. The Qur'an explains that those who were against *tawhid* used every act and tool in order to inflict harm and persecute the believers in one God. According to Muslim theologians, prophets occupy a spiritual station higher than the angels. From this, Muslims must draw the lesson that they should speak well of the members of other faiths, even towards those who commit acts of injustice against God and Muslims.

The first humans as mentioned in the Qur'an, Adam and Eve, were deceived by Satan to eat fruits from the banned tree.⁴⁴ This caused their expulsion from Paradise. Although they had no evil intention when eating the forbidden fruits, Adam and Eve turned to God in repentance immediately. 'They said (straightaway), 'Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and do not have mercy on us, we will surely be among those who have lost!' (7:23). They could have cursed Satan, and asked God to punish him. According to Qur'anic exegete al-Tabari, Adam and Eve did not blame Satan, but pointed the finger at themselves.⁴⁵

The story of Abraham in the Qur'an was revealed when Prophet Muhammad faced death threats, persecution and harsh treatment at the hands of the polytheists of Mecca. Abraham's story was to serve as an example to the Prophet and his Companions on how to carry themselves when dealing with aggression and injustice.⁴⁶ Abraham told his polytheist father that he had indeed received revelations from God, knowledge which his father did not possess (19:43) and told him that belief in God would grant him immense rewards in both this life and the hereafter. Abraham concluded his preaching by warning Azar of the grave punishment he would face if he did not mend his ways (19:45). When Abraham offered his father the guidance and advice of God, he rejected it, and threatened to stone him to death (19:46). Despite such a threat from his polytheist father, Abraham was still kind in his speech and treatment towards him (19:47).⁴⁷ In al-Tabari's exegesis, Abraham's response to his father's threat was 'Even if you stone me, I will not harm you.' Ibn Kathir extends this further, adding 'I will not harm, insult or even disrespect you'.⁴⁸ Abraham even asked God to forgive him. It was only because of a promise that he had made earlier to him. When it became clear that Azar's unrelenting hatred towards pure monotheism would never be fought, Abraham dissociated himself from him (9:114).

The coverage and mention of the story of Moses and Pharaoh is the most frequently referenced narrative in the Qur'an. Pharaoh is mentioned as an extreme tyrant who committed all kinds of evil and injustice, from the killing of male children to the oppression of the Israelites. He went as far as declaring himself to be a god. Despite this, God commanded Moses and his brother Aaron to speak gently with Pharaoh. '... But speak to him with gentle words, so that he might reflect and be mindful or feel some awe (of me, and behave with humility)...' (20:43-44).

⁴² Al-Tusi, M. *Al-Tibyan, Jamiu' Ulumul' Qur'an*,

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=4&tTafsirNo=39&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=12&tDisplay=yes&Page=2&Size=1&LanguageId=1>

⁴³ Gülen, F. (2003) *Ve Gaybin Son Habercisi*, KDD, Yeni Ümit, 3-5

⁴⁴ According to Islamic theology, prophets are infallible, but may commit minor mistakes unintentionally. Adam was a prophet who made a minor mistake out of good intention.

⁴⁵ Al-Tabari, *ibid*, v.13, 326-331

⁴⁶ Al-Razi, *ibid*, v.14, 221

⁴⁷ Al-Tabari, *ibid*, v.18, 203

⁴⁸ Ibn Kathir, *ibid*, v.5, 208-209

All prominent classical and contemporary exegetes of the Qur'an agree that the two prophets followed this order, even when Pharaoh killed more of the believers and the Children of Israel. Al-Qurtubi interprets the command to mean speak gently, implying that Moses should not use any word implying hatred or animosity. He goes on to state that this is a general rule to be applied by those who seek to enjoin good and forbid evil.⁴⁹

Al-Qushayri extends this rule to cover not only a person's speech, but also their demeanour.⁵⁰ In another verse, believers are instructed to '...speak kindly and well to the people...' (2:83). Al-Tabari interprets this verse as explaining the proper way—which is to say, the way that pleases God to communicate with others. This includes speaking gently, using kind words, not being harsh, and maintaining the best of manners.⁵¹ Al-Razi stated that this verse makes it a requirement for all believers to speak gently.⁵² Ibn Kathir went further to say that the overall approach to others should be gentle and non-provoking.⁵³ This implies that even if the unjust party is as evil as Pharaoh, there is still a proper method in which to deal with them. Moreover, he also comments that even rightful anger deserves a suitable method of expression that is not harsh.⁵⁴ This is because the key for opening a heart is soft words and soft manner.⁵⁵

Also in the Qur'an, when Luqman, who is considered as a prophet or a great saint in Islam, advises his son, who was a polytheist, 'O my son, do not associate [anything] with God. Indeed, association [with Him] is great injustice' (31:13). Although associating partners with God is the greatest sin in Islam, Luqman still refers to his son as "yabunayya", my sweet little darling, in loving terms.

The traits of showing patience, and adopting appropriate actions in the face of aggression, characterize all prophets. Joseph remained patient towards his siblings even after they left him at the bottom of the well and sold him into slavery (12:15-19). He did not curse them or harm them when the opportunity came. On the contrary, he helped them when they came to seek aid (12:59) and, just like his father Jacob (12:98), he forgave them (12:92). Other prophets were known and praised for their clemency and their forgiving and non-aggressive nature against the non-believers.

The only exception occurs in the story of Noah. It was after years of warning his people and inviting them to believe in one God (71:5), both in public and private (71:8-9), and imploring them to remember God's blessings upon them (71:11-20), with the kindest of words and best manner (29:14) that he eventually sought justice in regard to their misdeeds.⁵⁶ Not only did they not listen, they rejected him and conspired against him in many ways.⁵⁷ Finally, Noah supplicated for the destruction of the disbelievers amongst his tribe (71:26). The 19th Century exegete Mahmud Alusi stated that Noah felt sorrow over his people's conditions and would weep heavily. His constant crying leads to him being called Noah, which means the one who cries a lot. Noah's original name was Abd al-Ghaffar,⁵⁸ meaning 'The Servant of the Oft-Forgiving'. Al-Qurtubi states that towards the end of his life, Noah was ordered by God to pray for the destruction of his people who rejected and harmed him and Noah followed the order.⁵⁹

The Qur'an often addresses all people as 'O humankind'. Qur'anic exegetes explain that every human being falls into this category, including polytheists, hypocrites, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Al-Zamakhshari views this address as referring to polytheists only since verses that begin with 'O humankind' were revealed during the Meccan period of revelation.⁶⁰

⁴⁹ Al-Qurtubi, *ibid*, v.11, 199-200

⁵⁰ Al-Qushayri, *ibid*, v. 2, 458-459

⁵¹ Al-Tabari, *ibid*,

⁵² Al-Razi, *ibid*

⁵³ Ibn Kathir, *ibid*

⁵⁴ Gülen, F. *Tatli Dil ve Firavunlar* <http://www.herkul.org/index.php/krk-testi/kirik-testi-arsiv/2647-Tatli%20Dil%20ve%20Firavunlar> retrieved 1.27.2013.

⁵⁵ Gülen, F. *Fitne Zamanı ve Çekirdek Toplum*, <http://herkul.org/index.php/bamteli/bamteli>, retrieved on May 22, 2013.

⁵⁶ Al-Razi, *ibid*.

⁵⁷ Al-Tabari, *ibid*.

⁵⁸ Cited in Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır, *Kur'ani Kerim Tefsiri*, <http://www.kuranikerim.com/telmalili/nuh.htm> retrieved 5.10.2012.

⁵⁹ Al-Qurtubi, *ibid*.

⁶⁰ Al-Zamakhshari, *ibid*

Al-Razi expounds that although polytheists commit the greatest sin of associating partners with God, and it was a group of polytheists who persecuted and killed the early Muslims, they are not being differentiated in this address.⁶¹

Al-Qurtubi states that while verses beginning with that address serve as warnings, the term of address in itself is kind.⁶² The Qur'an orders Muslims to refrain from insulting even the polytheists and their idols. 'And do not (O believers) revile the things or beings that they have, apart from God, deified and invoke, lest (if you do so) they attempt to revile God out of spite, and in ignorance..' (6:108).⁶³ Al-Qushayri stated not to argue with the non-believers because the carnal soul can dominate the argument, which in turn will lead to more harm and wrongdoing.⁶⁴ Al-Qurtubi commented on this verse as being timeless and an order not to offend others on account of their beliefs or harm a place of worship.⁶⁵ Ibn Kathir views defamation towards other faiths as a cause of disorder.⁶⁶ Al-Razi commented in a similar vein, saying that even if the enemy insults Islam, a Muslim is not permitted to respond in the same manner, because this will open the door to more insults. If a Muslim speaks ill of the idols, the polytheists will speak ill of God.⁶⁷ A prominent Shiite exegete al-Tabatabai (1892-1981) points to the etiquette put forth by this verse, stating that it is contrary to Islamic ethics to attack or insult the sacred values of others.⁶⁸

There are verses in the Qur'an containing strong criticism. However, Gülen states that these are aimed not so much at the individuals or groups in question, but rather at the wrong beliefs or actions committed by them.⁶⁹ Prophet Muhammad knew of these verses, but nonetheless he still acted kindly towards people. Just as there are verses in the Qur'an which criticise Christians, Jews and others, there are also verses which praise them. Gülen interprets this as the Qur'an judging groups by their actions and attributes and not by their religion, affiliation or any other defining factor.⁷⁰

1.3 Positive thinking and positive action in Sunna

Islamic scholars unanimously agree that the Qur'an is best understood and its message is best practiced and conveyed by Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how Prophet Muhammad spoke about and applied *husnu'l zann*. As with all prophets, Muhammad's aim was to establish peace in society as well in people's hearts and minds. When examining the Prophet's life, it is necessary to distinguish between the Mecca and Madina periods. In the former, he and the believers were persecuted and few in number, while in the latter, he was the head of state and Muslims held positions of power and authority.

A trader who had come to Mecca witnessed in the Zu'l Majaz Bazaar the Prophet's method of dealing with insults and hatred. Prophet Muhammad was inviting people to believe in one God. He was followed by Abu Jahl, one of the Quraish leaders, who fostered great hatred towards the Muslims. Abu Jahl yelled at the people who wanted to listen, saying that Muhammad was deceiving people about their pagan religion which involved "idol worship" and belief in many deities. He threw earth on the Prophet to insult him, but the Prophet did not respond and continued on his path with dignity.⁷¹

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=2&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=21&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

⁶¹ Al-Razi, *ibid*,

⁶² Al-Qurtubi, *ibid*.

⁶³ Unal, A. (2008) *The Qur'an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English*, Tughra Books, New Jersey

⁶⁴ Al-Qushayri, *ibid*, v.1, 494

⁶⁵ Al-Qurtubi, *ibid*.

⁶⁶ Ibn Kathir, *ibid*. v.3, 282-283

⁶⁷ Al-Razi, *ibid*, v.13, 109-111

⁶⁸ Tabatabai, M. *Tafsiral-Mizan*

<http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=4&tTafsirNo=56&tSoraNo=6&tAyahNo=108&tDisplay=yes&Page=3&Size=1&LanguageId=1> retrieved 11.9.2012.

⁶⁹ Gülen, F *Tath Dil ve Firavunlar*, <http://www.herkul.org/index.php/krk-testi/krk-testi-arsiv/2647-Tatl%C4%B1%20Dil%20ve%20Firavunlar> retrieved 12.13.2012.

⁷⁰ Saritoprak, Z. (2008) *Said Nursi's Teachings on the People of the Book: a case study of Islamic social policy in the early twentieth century*, Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, 11:3, 321-332.

⁷¹ İbn-i Hanbel, A. (n.d) *Al- Müsned*, Muassasatu Qurtuba,, Cairo, 148

In another narration, similar events occurred, this time with other people insulting the Prophet, throwing dirt on him and spitting on his face. In one instance, while he was prostrating in prayer in the vicinity of the Ka'ba, Abu Jahl dared the powerful Meccans to toss camel intestines on the Prophet's back, which was then done by Uqba ibn Abu Muait. The Prophet again did not respond but continued with his prayer. His daughter saw the situation and came crying, trying to remove the intestines and clean them off on her father. He turned to his daughter and said, "My lovely daughter, do not worry about your father. God will make your father victorious."⁷²

A few Muslims witnessed the event and were both angered and saddened to the point of tears. The Prophet called one of them and spoke of the future greatness of the Quraish as believers and worshippers, adding "If God gives you long life; you will see how they commit to worshipping God, which will make you feel that your good deeds are less by comparing with their good deeds."⁷³

Abu Qatadah and a few other Muslims were beside the Ka'ba and they saw what happened. The significance of this is that the Prophet viewed pagans as his potential future companions even in the most adverse conditions and as a result of this he did not want to deprive them by responding with positive action.

Another time, Abu Jahl put a camel's entrails on the Prophet's shoulder while he was prostrating beside Ka'ba. Abu Jahl and his friend stepped aside and began laughing. The Prophet's daughter heard this, ran to her father and removed the entrails from his shoulder. She wanted to say a few words to chasten Abu Jahl, but the Prophet did not allow her to condemn him. He consoled her by saying, "Do not worry my daughter. God will not allow them to prevail over me."⁷⁴

Abdul Rahman Ibn Awf and some other Companions came to the Prophet and said, "O Messenger of God! When we were pagans we had been granted honor and dignity by them but after believing in one God, we became despicable to them. Allow us to respond to those who are despising us." The Prophet replied, "I am commanded to forgive humans. Do not fight against those who despise and degrade you." When the following verse "(Even so, O Messenger) adopt the way of forbearance and tolerance, and enjoin what is good and right, and withdraw from the ignorant ones (do not care what they say or do)"(7:199) was revealed the Prophet asked Archangel Gabriel about the meaning of that verse. Gabriel replied, "God the Exalted commands you to maintain kinship with the one who does not maintain kinship with you, give to the one who does not give to you and forgive the one who oppress or persecutes you."⁷⁵ Knowing the situation the early Muslims were in, the Prophet strongly advised his Companion to perform their prayers in secluded or uninhabited places and avoid being seen as much as possible due to the lack of tolerance from pagans.⁷⁶

Out of many examples, this article will focus on three from the Prophet's life. It was during the most difficult years in Mecca when Prophet Muhammad sought the leaders of the sister town of Ta'if for protection. Having lost his chief protector and uncle, Abu Talib (549-619), as well as his supporter, his beloved wife Khadijah (d.619), the Prophet needed a secure place for the persecuted Muslims. He travelled to Ta'if with hope, and sincerely addressed the leaders and people of Ta'if for ten days. They mocked him, disbelieving that he was a prophet, and ran him out of the city pelting him with stones. Bloodied and weary, he took refuge under the shade of a tree out of the city limits. According to Islamic historians, an angel appeared before him asking him if he wished for the city of Ta'if to be destroyed. However the Prophet preferred that the city might be saved, out of the hope that even one person might turn out to be an ally and seek the truth.⁷⁷ He continued, "My Lord, I complain only to You of my weakness, powerlessness and my being despicable to the people. If you do not have anger against me, then I do not mind the suffering, misfortunes and difficulties that I faced."⁷⁸

⁷²Buhârî, Târih v. 8, 14, Al-Tabarânî, *Al-Mu'jamu'l Kebîr*, Maktabatul Ulum wa'l Hikam, Mosol, v.20, 342

⁷³Sâlihî, *Sübûlü'l-Hüdâ* v.4, 224

⁷⁴At-Tabarânî, *ibid*, v 3, 268; İbnü'l-Athîr, (1995) *Üsdü'l-Gâbe* v. 5,124

⁷⁵ Al-Tabari, *ibid*, v. 9, 165; İbn Kathir, *ibid*, v 3, 531

⁷⁶Buhârî, Târih v.7, 74-75; Ahmed İbn-i Hanbel, *ibid*, v 3, 306

⁷⁷ Narrated by Bukhari and Muslim.

⁷⁸Ibn Sa'd, *al-Tabaqât al-kubrâ*, v.1,211-212; Ibn Hishâm, *al-Sîrat al-nabawiyya*). Cited in

http://www.herkul.org/kiriktesti/index.php?article_id=7075 Uslupta istikamet by Fethullah Gülen. Retrieved 10.8.2012.

Towards the polytheist leaders who persecuted and killed the Muslims and harmed the Prophet through assassination attempts, direct assaults and heavy insults, the Prophet's response was only to raise his hands and say, "O Lord, I leave these to You."⁷⁹

There are many examples like this from the Prophet's life. In each situation, there are four common principles: not reacting or confronting the mischief makers; having a firm belief that there will be future believers from among the persecutors; having firm trust in God; and not seeking revenge for that which affected him personally. There were times when the Prophet could have asked for the destruction of these oppressors and persecutors, as seen above in the example of Taif, but he chose to have hope and continued to pray for them.

Despite the power gained later through their position in Madina, the Prophet and his Companions still faced great threats from the Meccan leaders, but responded with magnanimity. When Prophet Muhammad received a wound in the face by a non-believer during the Battle of Uhud, he pleaded to God, "My Lord, forgive my tribe. They do not know what they are doing."⁸⁰ Even against other Meccans including Abu Jahl, the most aggressive oppressor of Muslims, he said, "O God, I leave them to you."⁸¹ This reflects his view that in spite of their intransigence, God might eventually lead them to become good people, or punish them as He saw fit. He forgave those polytheists who had persecuted him, or killed his companions, and had expelled him and the Muslims from Mecca.⁸²

Prophet Muhammad did not call curses upon or ask for the destruction of those who caused him suffering or who had killed people from among the community of believers and members of his family. He later forgave all those who had trampled his individual rights when he conquered Mecca.⁸³ If this is how the prime role model of Islam reacted to those who threw stones at him, then this is how Muslims should also react against those who throw words of slander and accusations towards the Prophet. In both his actions and reactions, the Prophet was extremely patient, going through all proper courses of action (i.e. dialogue and diplomacy) and never turning to violence unless it was ordained by God.

Safiyyah was the Prophet's wife of Jewish background. One of the Prophet's other wives made Safiyyah feel excluded when she called Safiyyah a Jew, implying that she was not as honoured as they were. The Prophet saw Safiyyah crying, and when he learned about the situation, he advised her on a positive reply. "Tell them that your father is the Prophet Moses (spiritually), your uncle is the Prophet Aaron and your husband is the Prophet Muhammad."⁸⁴

1.4 Analysis

Every scholar is the product of his or her time. Medieval scholars interpreted sacred texts according to the needs of their time and in their historical context. In regards to their interpretation on *husnu'l zann*, it is short or not in the detail that would be desired by scholars of this time. The major Qur'anic exegetes did not dwell on how to attain or maintain *husnu'l zann* and refrain from or deal with *sui zann* in detail. Sufis gave more attention to this topic under the aim of purification of the heart and soul. In the spiritual concept of *insan al-kamil*, or the perfect human, the ideal person bears only strong positive thoughts and few if no negative thoughts.

In verse 49:12 which commands believers to refrain from *sui zann*, Medieval scholars did not interpret this verse as excluding non-Muslims, meaning that a Muslim should not foster negative thoughts towards Muslims and non-Muslims. This is striking because many of these scholars lived through the Crusades and conflicts between Muslims and Christians. As they were and still are major scholars of Islam, Islamic thought and philosophy, it would not have suited their spiritual and scholarly positions to hold strong and negative convictions against non-Muslims, especially for those who lived in multifaith communities.

⁷⁹ Müslim, v. 3, 418, Bayhaqî, Dalâil al-nubuwwa, v.2, 280, Zahabî, *ibid*, 217, cited in M. Asım Köksal, (1987) *İslam Tarihi*, Köksal Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1.359-366.

⁸⁰ Bukhârî, enbiyâ 54; Müslim, jihad 104-105 cited in M. fethullah Gülen, (2011) *Muhammed: The messenger of God*, Trns by Ali Unal, Tughras Books, New Jersey, 77

⁸¹ Ibn Seyyid al-Nass, *Uyun al-Athar*, <http://www.risaleforum.net/islamiyet-72/resulullah-aleyhisselatu-vesselam-90/117592-allahim-sen-kavmimi-bagisla.html> and cited in http://www.herkul.org/kiriktesti/index.php?article_id=3471 retrieved 2.4.2011

⁸² Gülen, F, (2000) *The Messenger of God: Muhammed, Light*, New Jersey, 247.

⁸³ Al- Tabarî, v.3,120, Ibn Athîr, v.3, 252 in M. Asım Köksal, *İslam Tarihi*, (1987) Köksal Yayıncılık: İstanbul, v.4., 424-427.

⁸⁴ Stowasser, B, (1992) *The Mothers of the Believers in the Hadith*. The Muslim World, v. 82, Issue 1-2: 1-36.

Looking at the previous examples, encouragement towards *husnu'l zann* and discouragement of *sui zann* can be divided into three categories: religious, spiritual and psychological. Religiously, *husnu'l zann* is considered an act of worship while *sui zann* is as unlawful as seen in the aforementioned verses, hadith and scholarly interpretations. By showing the consequences of *husnu'l zann* and *sui zann*, religious sources provide guidance. Spiritually, Islamic sources emphasise the need to keep busy with spiritually fulfilling activities such as invoking God's names, contemplating and reflecting, offering supplication, reading Qur'an and other beneficial material. When reflecting or contemplating the events of life or other people, believers are encouraged to look at the positive aspects or consequences or interpret it in a positive way, such as seeing illness as a means of appreciating health. This way, a person can keep from falling into a spiritual void that is ripe for negative thoughts. Scholars who focus on the inner dimension of religious life, such as the Sufis, focused more on this method and considered it a part of spiritual purification.

Psychologically, *husnu'l zann* and *sui zann* were contrasted against one another, in order to persuade people to incline towards *husnu'l zann*, to focus on the positive more than the negative, and have hope and believe that there is ease after hardship. The general recommendation is to fill one's time with good activities, such as community service, arts and poetry. A person can also recall the good things that happened in the past, which can grant a feeling of relief in the present. Medieval scholars and Sufis did not cover this aspect extensively, which was explored mainly when writing about inner purification. Nevertheless, the methods they prescribed to aid in inner peace, which can open the way for *husnu'l zann*, are similar to methods prescribed in modern times by leading scholars or practitioners. Laboratories at Harvard Medical School found when a person engages in a repetitive prayer, word, sound or phrase, and when intrusive thoughts are disregarded, a set of specific physiological changes ensue and provides a sense of calm.⁸⁵

In modern times, there are more sources or stimulants that can incline people towards *sui zann*, which might explain the multitude of sources covering positive thinking. Due to advances in technology, a person is bombarded with information and images of all types, which may leave negative traces or a build up of negativity in the mind and heart. This, in turn, fuels *sui zann*, particularly racism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and all types of prejudice and fear of "the other". Because of this, there is a great need to research the causes of positive and negative thinking and methods to increase the former and decrease the latter.

Conclusion

Humans are shaped by ideas and thoughts. A person's ways of thinking gradually forms his or her character and identity, which will affect future choices. Thirteenth century mystic and celebrated poet Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi summarised it by saying "O brother, you are what you think. As for the rest of you, you are only bone and skin. If your thought is a rose, you are a rose garden, and if it is a thorn, you are fuel for the bath-stove".⁸⁶ Nursi said "A person who sees the good in things has good thoughts, and he who has good thoughts receives pleasure from life."⁸⁷ In the same line of thought, a person who sees the negativity in everything will have negative thoughts and will not receive pleasure from life.

Positive and negative thinking and actions are a part of human nature. Happiness depends upon how well a person can manage the thoughts that occur. This changes from person to person but some principles or rules can be applied by all people. Positive thinking is a source of happiness. The strength and influence of positive thinking relies on overcoming the obstacles that make it difficult to see the positive aspects of his or her life. If a person succumbs to negative thinking and makes it a habit of life, it will affect that person's character and actions thereafter, making everything susceptible to that person's negative thinking.

As mentioned in the introduction, the topic of positive thinking as an aspect of human happiness has captured increased attention in recent times. However, on close examination it is revealed to be a complicated topic with countless variables that make it difficult to present a simple solution or easy method in order to manage negative thoughts or find a healthy balance.

⁸⁵ Benson, H. (1996) *Timeless Healing*, Fireside, New York, 63-64.

⁸⁶ Derin, S. (2010) *The Psychological Outlook in The Works Of Rumi*, Wisdom Magazine - May/Apr, Issue: 22, p 23

⁸⁷ Nursi, S., *ibid*, 546

From the Islamic perspective, the prophets were the best models for positive thinking. Their ability to “read the Universe”, or comprehend reality with its several faces, made them successful in terms of remaining positive and thinking positively. One path to success is to examine the life of successful people in detail, looking at how they thought, the steps they took, the way they reacted to events and the works they left behind.

To best benefit from religious sources that encourage *husnu'l zann* and provide ways of abstaining or struggling against *sui zann*, there needs to be a comprehensive approach which takes together the methods of modern scholars in the fields of health, psychology, spirituality, and sociology, as well as the traditions preserved by religion. Although it is debated, humans consist of a body, mind, heart and soul, so a significant contribution to the study of positive thinking needs to take into serious consideration and address the needs of these four parts. Islamic sources should be re-examined by a committee of experts in the abovementioned fields.

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