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***Fiṭrah* in Islam and *Ren Xing* in Confucianism: Their Relation to Islamic and Confucian Ethics**

Nur Suriya binti Mohd Nor*

Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of human nature in Islam and in Confucianism. The researcher makes a comparison between the concept of *fiṭrah* in Islam and its relation to Islamic Ethics or “good character”, and the concept of *ren xing* or “inherently good” of Confucianism. In order to explore both concepts vis-à-vis the human nature, the researcher employs textual analysis and comparative methodology on written materials related to the topic. The findings reveal several similarities between the two concepts – *fiṭrah* and *ren xing* – as both deal with human nature, which includes human characters and behaviours, the merits of good and the vile of evil, and the idea of mind and soul, among others.

Keywords: Human nature, *fiṭrah*, Islamic ethics, *ren xing*, Confucian ethics.

Introduction

All religions have ethics and social norms as guidelines and directives on how to treat and relate to the others. Since ethics of religions guide the religious communities on how to behave, these are also known as codes of conduct or codes of the behaviour of the religion. Religious ethics are normative ethics whereby the definition and classification of good and bad, right and wrong are determined by religions, rooted within the teachings of the religions. Religions seem to agree on what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong, and what is acceptable and what unacceptable conduct is. This common consensus among religions on what is good and what is bad, shows that there is an inborn trait or a natural disposition in every human being to naturally recognise what is right over the wrong, and what is good over the bad. In Islam, this human nature or human disposition is called as *Fiṭrah* whereas it is called as *Ren Xing* in Confucianism according to Mencius.

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The Concept of *Fiṭrah* in Islam and Its Relation to Islamic Ethics

Fiṭrah and Ethics in Islam

Fiṭrah is an Arabic word that has no exact English equivalent although it has been translated as ‘primordial human nature’¹ and as ‘instinct’ or ‘common sense.’² With ethics comes also morality. The word ‘ethics’ come from Greek *ethos* meaning habit or custom, and the word ‘morals’ come from the Latin *moralis* meaning mores and custom.³ Ethics refers to personality and dispositions, while morality relates to actions and conduct.⁴ In Islam, both ethics and morality are denoted to as *al-akhlāq* (singular: *khuluq*) while the etiquettes and social norms are called *al-adab*.⁵ Al-Qur’an mentions the word *khuluq* in two verses;

“And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character.”⁶

“There is no other than a customary device (*khuluq*) of the ancients.”⁷

In Islam, ethical conducts are characterized as ‘*amal ṣāliḥ* (good deeds). Good deeds (‘*amal ṣāliḥ*’) are those actions which are in agreement with the primordial human nature (*fiṭrah*). According to Islam, every child is born with good nature (*fiṭrah*) that disregards from immorality and instils morality, thus good morals corresponds to human nature.⁸ Allah said:

“And by the soul and He who purified it! Then He inspired to it (the ability to understand) what is good for it and what is evil for it. Successful is he who purifies his soul and failure is he who corrupts it.”⁹

¹ Abu al-Fazl Izzati, *Islam and Natural Law*, Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2002, 9.

² Frederick M. Denny, *God's Friends: The Sanctity of Persons in Islam*, in R. Kieckhefer and G. Bond (editors). *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, University of California Press, 1990.

³ Abdullah Hassan Zaroug, “Ethics from an Islamic Perspective: Basic Issues”, *The America Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, v.16, 1999, p.54.

⁴ Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, *Religion and Pluralistic Co-existence: the Muhibbah Perspective*, (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2010), p. 81.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Al-Qur’ān (henceforth, Q), 68:4.

⁷ Al-Qur’ān, 26:134.

⁸ Abdurezak A. Hashi, “Islamic Ethics: an Outline of Its Principles and Scope,” *Revelation and Science*, v.1, IIUM, p.123.

⁹ Al-Qur’ān, 91: 7-10.

Islam holds that man's nature is good and not evil. A person will not feel comfortable to do things which are not compatible with human nature such as killing, stealing, and lying. As Prophet (s.a.w) said:

“Righteousness (*al-birr*) is a kind of human disposition (*ḥusn al-khuluq*) and vice (*ithm*) is what rankles in your heart and you disapprove that people should come to know of it.”¹

Thus, actions which are in line with the primordial character of man, such as telling the truth and integrity are categorized as *ṣāliḥāt* (proper), while human conducts which are not in line with human nature, such as envy and selfishness are known as *sayyi'āt* (improper). In this regard, *akhlāq* (ethics) is associated with human nature (*fiṭrah*), unless the human nature is corrupted.²

The Qur'an likens ethics and religion in chapter 78 verse no. 4, while in chapter 30 verse no.30, the Qur'an associates human nature (*fiṭrah*) to religion (*dīn*). In this understanding, religion and ethics are part of the human primordial disposition (*fiṭrah*).³ “In Islam, having good morality is seen as a reflection of religious faith, while lack of good morality is a sign of weak religious faith; hence, proper personality is a fundamental part of faith in Islam. The Prophet (please be upon him) said: “the best among you are those who have the best manners and character.”⁴

There are two dimensions of the human personality as mentioned in the Qur'an. The first dimension includes the positive attributes of man, such as *al-bayān* (intellectual discourse), *al-'ilm* (knowledge and understanding), *al-taqwīm al-ḥasan* (natural disposition) and *al-naẓar* and *al-i'tibār* (reflective power). The Qur'an likens these attributes with the human nature (*fiṭrah*). The second dimension is the negative behaviors of man such as *da'if* and *al-ya'us* (weak and easy give up) and *ẓalūm* and *jahūl* (injustice and forgetful). According to the Qur'an, positive attributes of human personality are part of the human disposition which is granted to man by Allah (s.w.t), while the negative behaviors are ascribed to the human desires which man develops in the subsequent ages of his life.⁵

¹ Yahyā b. Sharaf al-dīn al-Nawawī, *Matn al-'Arba'īn al-nawawiyyah*, trans. Ezzedin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies, *Al-Nawawī's Forty Hadith*, (Damascus: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1977), pp. 90-91.

² Abdurezak, p.123.

³ Ibid., p.124.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Fiṭrah and Human Accountability

In Islam, man is distinguished from the rest of the creation because he has been endowed with intellect (‘*aql*) and free-will (*irādah*). The ‘*aql* enables him to distinguish right from wrong. He can use these faculties to complement his *fiṭrah* and to please Allah or to be untrue to it and displease Allah. The choice is his. The people, who do not make use of their intellect, are those who do not make use of their faculty of thought. Such are not fit to be called human beings. The Qur'an includes them among the beasts as Allah said:

“Surely the worst of beasts in God's sight are those that are deaf and dumb and do not reason.”¹

The prophets and Divine revelation are external sources of guidance to guide the intellect and will of man. The Qur'an declares that the Prophet (peace be upon him) enjoins the right and lawful things (*ma'rūf*) and forbids the wrong and unlawful things (*munkar*).² Man is responsible for his actions and is held accountable to Allah for every atom of right and wrong that he does. Allah said:

“Then shall be anyone who has done an atom's weight of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it.”³

It is in this sense of responsibility that guides man to act in line with the Divine will. It empowers him to struggle against the wrong-doing of his lower self (*nafs*) as well as the negative influences of the social circumstances. It is the social circumstances after the birth of the child that causes the individual to diverge from *fiṭrah*. Hence if someone follows a deviant path it is not because of any innate wrong within his nature, but because of the emergence of the lower self or *nafs* after birth, and negative effects in the social circumstances.⁴

The concept of *fiṭrah* as original goodness is an active inclination and a natural innate predisposition to know Allah, to submit to Him and to do right. *Fiṭrah* does not merely indicate a passive receptivity to good and right action.⁵ This is man's natural tendency in the absence of contrary factors.

¹ Al-Qur`ān, 8:22.

² Yasien Mohamed, *Fiṭrah: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature*, TA-HA Publishers Ltd, 1996. <<<http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/DefinitionFiṭrah.htm>>> Retrieved, August 20, 2017.

³ Al-Qur`ān, 99:7-8.

⁴ Yasien Mohamed, *Fiṭrah: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature*

⁵ Ibid.

Although all children are born in a state of *fiṭrah*, the influence of the environment is crucial. If there are no opposing influences, then the child will continuously manifest his *fiṭrah* as his true nature. It is precisely because of man's free-will and intellect that he is able to overcome the negative influences of the environment and attain to the highest level of psycho-spiritual development, *an-nafs al-muṭma'innah*, 'the self-made tranquil'. At this level, his inner and outer being, his soul and body, are able to conform to the requirements of his *fiṭrah*.¹

Ren Xing in Confucianism and Its Relation to Confucian Ethics

Mencius' Theory of Human Nature (*Ren Xing*)

Mencius was the first true Confucian philosopher and the first who leave the written record.² He is generally called Mengzi or Master Meng, and his real name was Meng Ke.³ He was born approximately a century after Confucius died. He became advisor to several local rulers, although none of them put his ideas into practice. His students probably compiled his book containing his conversations which simply called Mencius (Mengzi).⁴

Mencius honoured Confucius, but he differed radically in his view on human nature.⁵ Mencius' theory of human nature (*ren xing*) became the basis upon which the Confucian tradition rested after the eleventh century. The term *xing* i.e. nature of a thing, was not a major part of the philosophical lexicon in Confucius' time. Though, it had become a hot topic of philosophical debate, a century later.⁶

According to Mencius, human nature (*xing*) is inherently good, the moral inclinations are natural and unique to human beings. He said:

"Here is why I say that all human beings have a mind that commiserates with others. Nor, if anyone were suddenly to see a child about to fall into a well, his mind would always (in all cases) be filled with *alarm, distress, pity, and compassion*. This is not because he would use the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the child's parents, not because he would seek commendation from neighbours

¹ Ibid.

² Joseph A. Adler, *Chinese Religions*, Great Britain: Routledge, 2002, 37.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, Lampeter, Cambridge University Press, 2000. 72.

⁶ Ibid.

and friends, nor because he would hate the adverse reputation. From this, it may be seen that *who lacks a mind that feels shame and aversion would not be human*; one who lacks a mind that *feels modesty and compliance* would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that *knows right and wrong* would not be human. (*Mengzi*, 2A:6)¹

Reflecting on the example, Mencius believed that no human being could fail to react in some way to the sight of a child falling into a well. His statement that “one who is lacking such feelings would not be human” should be understood as it is unbelievable that any human being could lack them.

Innate Sources of Morality

According to Mencius’ theory, human nature is good does not imply that humans are always good. He believed that humans have within the inclination to do good and the innate capacities for goodness. He said that all humans have a heart or mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others, and this indicates that humans are born with innate feelings of goodness.² According to his theory, there are four innate sources of morality which he called “four beginnings” including *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*. He said:

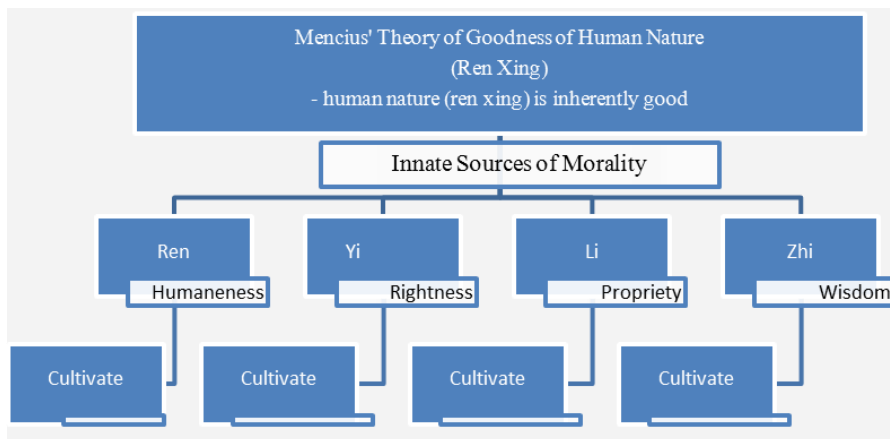
“The mind’s feeling of pity and compassion is the beginning of humaneness (*ren*); the mind’s feeling of shame and aversion is the beginning of rightness (*yi*); the mind’s feeling of modesty and compliance is the beginning of propriety (*li*); and the mind’s sense of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom (*zhi*). Human beings have these four beginnings just as they have four limbs.” (*Mengzi*, 2A:6)³

The hierarchy below illustrates four innate sources of morality according to Mencius’s theory of human nature (*ren xing*).

¹ Cited from *Chinese Religion*, p. 38.

² *Ibid*, p.75.

³ Cited from *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p.76.



However, Mencius believed that these sources are merely the beginning or seeds that need to be cultivated in order to become the full-fledged virtues of humanity, rightness, ritual propriety, and wisdom. Without cultivation, they are only “feelings” and “dispositions” (*qing*).

Thus, his theory of goodness of human nature is really of potential goodness.¹ He said:

“As far as the natural tendencies (*qing*) are concerned, it is possible for one to do good; this is what I mean by being good. If one does what is not good, that is not the fault of one’s capacities.” (*Mengzi*, 6A:6)²

According to him, human nature is not a static essence, but it is natural course of human development which distinguishes human from other animals by actualization of our moral potential.³

Good People vs. Bad People

Mencius explained that good people simply use their minds to think as to compare to bad people. He said “By thinking, one get it, by not thinking, one fails to get it.” He added that some people use their minds to think of their own moral potential and cultivating it, while others do not. This situation occurred because of the *environment*. According to him, all people have the capacity to become good, but the process needs dynamic cultivation in “an environment in which moral models are available for emulsion; in which acquiring the basic necessities of life which does not

¹ An Introduction to Confucianism, p.74.

² Cited from *Chinese Religion*, p.39.

³ Chinese Religions, p. 40.

take up all energy and time of a person; and in which a childhood environment in which a person's sense of self-worth is nourished by love."¹ Mencius mentioned that a person's innately good nature can weaken if it is not nourished and preserved.²

Confucian Ethics: Confucians Relationship as Moral Models for Proper Conduct

Mencius emphasized on the significance of family life and education in cultivating moral-ethical excellence in Confucianism. He mentioned that family is our first classroom where we were exposed to our first moral models or exemplary teachers. In this classroom, our innate tendencies to love others and respect our parents and other elders took place. This is in accordance with what Confucius said about filial piety (*xiao*) in Analects.³ He said that filial piety is said to be the "root of the Way" (1:2).⁴ The significance of family life is illustrated in the first and second types of Confucian Relationships. These relationships are between husband and wife; and between parents and children. Other than family life, Confucian Ethics also lists out the other type of relationships between members of the society, paying special attention to the senior-junior positions.⁵ These relationships are between seniors and juniors; employers and employees; as well as rulers and subjects. "Confucianism make seniors and superiors to care and be kind to juniors and subordinates, whereas the juniors and subordinates are to be respectful, obedient, and loyal to senior and superiors."⁶ As Mencius said: "If only everyone loved his parents and treated his elders with deference, the Empire will be at peace." (*Mengzi*, 4A:11).⁷

The next level of education continues outside the family. This level of education according to Mencius does not only expose a person to be an exemplary teacher, but also to the supreme examples of the sages.⁸

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cited in Chinese Religions, 40.

⁵ Kamaroniah, 83.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cited in An Introduction to Confucianism, 72.

⁸ Chinese Religions, 40.

Similarities between *Fiṭrah* and *Ren Xing*

From the above discussions, this paper underlines five similarities between *fiṭrah* in Islam and *ren xing* in Confucianism according to Mencius. Among the similarities are:

1. Islam and Confucianism believe that human beings are born with an innately good nature. This innately good nature is called *fiṭrah* in Islam, and *ren xing* in Confucianism.
2. Islam and Confucianism seem to agree on what is good and what is bad. This indicates that there is an inborn trait or a natural disposition in every human being to naturally differentiate between what is good and what is bad.
3. The concept of *fiṭrah* in Islam as original goodness does not only indicate a passive receptivity to good and right action, but it is an active inclination and a natural innate predisposition to know Allah, to submit to Him and to do right. Similarly, Mencius believed that human nature in Confucianism is not a static essence, but it is natural course of human development which distinguishes human from other animals by actualization of our moral potential.
4. Islam holds that man's nature is good and not evil. A person will not feel comfortable to do things which are not compatible with human nature. Similarly, Mencius believed that all human have a heart or mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others.
5. Both religions agreed that humans should use their intellect or '*aql*' to think, recognise their moral potential, and cultivated it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Islam offers a unique ethical system. In Islam, ethics and religion are rooted to primordial human nature which is innocent and good unless it is corrupted. Similarly, Mencius believes that human beings in Confucianism were born in an innate good nature. However, this innately good nature can weaken if it is not nourished and preserved.

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