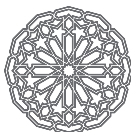


*A Thinking Person's*  
*Guide to the*  
**TRULY HAPPY LIFE**



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Foreword by Professor Sir Iain Torrance



*White Thread*  
P R E S S



TURATH  
PUBLISHING

*Also in this series, by the same author*

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*A Tentative Guide to the Themes of  
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## Introduction



### A THINKING PERSON'S GUIDES

By the grace of God, this is the third book of the series of *A Thinking Person's Guides*. This series is aimed to provide brief, clear philosophical primers about a number of important topics that concern every human being, based on the Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The series also aims to be a sensitive guide to what other religions and philosophies have written on these topics, in order to present a complete picture of each topic. People do not have time to do all the reading themselves—and in fact it takes years to do, and usually require a professional academic guide to help them through the topic—so this series aims to do all the academic and historical work for them. All that the reader is required to do is to be willing to think objectively a bit. Finally, in order to be accessible to everyone, the work contains no footnotes or endnotes and as little technical jargon as possible.

### ISLAM AND THE HAPPY LIFE

From Socrates to Seneca; from St. Augustine of Hippo to Lord Bertrand Russell; and from to David Hume to the Harvard Grant

Study, various leading Classical, Christian and post-Christian Western philosophers, thinkers, writers and researchers have thought and written about the questions of human life and happiness—and what it takes to lead a happy life. Indeed, since the 2012 UN High Level Meeting on Happiness and Well-being, the UN commissions an annual report on relative national happiness (as defined by them), and there is even now a ‘UN International Day of Happiness’ (March 20<sup>th</sup> of every year). Yet all this pondering seems to have had very little influence *from*—or *on*—the great civilization of Islam. This is surprising since, as is generally acknowledged, serious Western philosophy made a 500-year detour into the Islamic World during the so-called ‘Dark Ages’. It is more surprising considering that Islam is the second largest religion in history (after Christianity) with almost 2 billion adherents today. And it is even more surprising because Islam’s sacred ‘texts’—the Qur’an and the sayings (known as the ‘*hadith*’, pl.: ‘*abadith*’) and customary actions (known as the ‘*sunnah*’) of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ—give very clear answers to these questions. As will later be seen and discussed, the Qur’an shows the truly happy life in Islam as being the same as the ‘good life’, the ‘spiritual life’, ‘eternal life’ and even ‘Beatitude’ itself. No doubt Islamic civilization’s basing its answers to these questions strictly on the Qur’an and *abadith*, insulated it from the Western tradition (and *vice versa*). But perhaps for that very same reason, Islam’s view on what it takes to live a truly happy life is as startling and refreshing today as it was during the Revelation of the Qur’an, in seventh century Arabia.

#### CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THIS WORK

Obviously in a short work like this one, Islam’s full view on what it takes to live a truly happy life cannot be fully covered here. Literally millions of texts and commentaries on the Qur’an and *abadith* have been written over the course of Islamic history about Islamic life, true

## Introduction

happiness and spirituality, and only their surface can be scratched here. Nevertheless, what follows is a basic sketch of life and happiness and what they entail starting with their definitions from the Qur'an and the *ahadith*.

In philosophy, definitions are critical in order to understand things properly, and indeed, much of ancient and scholastic philosophy was about defining terms and ideas. Socrates says (in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 277b)—we need 'to learn how to define it as such . . . dividing it until [we] reach something indivisible'. Then it can be seen 'backwards and forwards simultaneously' (Plato, *Cratylus*, 428d). Or, in other words, as Albert Einstein supposedly said, 'If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough'.

As can be seen from the contents page, this work is divided into two halves that mirror and parallel each other, starting with the negations and then the definitions of life and happiness, respectively. Then it explains these definitions systematically starting from the other five circumstantial questions of the English language: 'why', 'when', 'where', 'how' and 'who'. These will deal with *existential*, *circumstantial*, *agential*, *affective* and *anthropological* aspects of life and happiness respectively. There are many citations in the text particularly from the Qur'an (presented in italics, with both the chapter names and numbers, and verse numbers, in brackets) and the *ahadith*—and occasionally from poetry; this is quite usual in Islamic writings—but references are placed in the text itself. After all, the truly happy life is, as will be seen God willing, itself accessible to everyone.

## A. WHAT IS NOT HAPPINESS?



The religion of Islam is meant (in principle at least) to lead to happiness. God says to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the Qur'an:

*Ta Ha. | We have not revealed the Qur'an to you that you should be miserable. (Ta Ha, 20:1-2)*

But what is happiness? Before answering this question, we have to clarify what it is not. In the Qur'an, there is a clear distinction between the quality of 'happiness' ('*sa'adah*') and the four sentiments often confused with it: 'enjoyment' ('*mut'a*'), 'joy' ('*farah*'), 'gladness' ('*surur*') and 'contentment' ('*rida*'). A close reading of the Qur'an shows that each of these terms has a deliberate, specific and non-interchangeable meaning, and is only used in an appropriate context. Understanding the differences between each of these then becomes the key to answering the all-important question: *what is happiness?* And as we will see, the answer is rather surprising.

### ENJOYMENT

In the Qur'an, enjoyment (*mut'a*) tends to denote taking pleasure (*istimta'*) in a stimulus that originates from the physical senses, or that comes via the physical senses. Human beings share this kind of pleasure with animals. God says in the Qur'an:



... *As for those who disbelieve, they take their enjoyment and eat as the cattle eat. . . .* (Muhammad, 47:12)

Though powerful, the problem with this kind of pleasure is that it is short-lived, because apart from anything else, the body—and worldly life itself—are brief. Indeed, in the Qur'an, God asks believers:

... *Are you so content with the life of this world, rather than with the Hereafter? Yet the enjoyment of the life of this world compared with the Hereafter is but little.* (*Al-Tawbah*, 9:38)

So pleasure never leads to happiness. It is a *feeling*, and it does not last. As the Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote (in his poem 'Tam O'Shanter', in 1791):

But pleasures are like poppies spread:  
 You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;  
 Or like the snow falls in the river,  
 A moment white—then melts forever. . . .

This perhaps also explains why a lot of religious rules—such as fasting—are precisely about controlling physical pleasures, or being patient in the face of their absence or their opposite (pain).

## JOY

In Christian theology the word 'joy' in English is something spiritual, both amongst people (see for example: 1 Corinthians 13:4–6 and 2 Corinthians 6:4–10) and 'in heaven' (see: Luke 15:7–24 and Matthew 25:23). Perhaps that is why the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2014) defines 'joy' as: *A feeling of great pleasure and happiness*. In the Qur'an, however, joy (*'farah'*) is something slightly different: it is a happy feeling, possibly with great pleasure, but it is not the same thing as happiness.

In fact, there are two kinds of joy mentioned in the Qur'an. One