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Joy in the Qur'an

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JOY IN THE QUR’AN

The Terms ‘Joy’ and ‘Happiness’ in English

The July 4, 1776 United States Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson, famously mentions:

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’

In this context, the Lockean phrase ‘life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’, implies that ‘happiness’ is somehow greater and more permanent than ‘joy’. This has become the de facto popular, secular understanding of these terms in English, perhaps precisely because of the Declaration of Independence. Thus today’s Oxford English Dictionary (2014 CE) defines ‘joy’ as: A feeling of great pleasure and happiness, and ‘happiness’ as: The state of being happy, indicating the transience of joy relative to happiness.

However, Christian theologians—basing themselves on the Bible—have sometimes reversed this hierarchy, treating ‘joy’ as more 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). Being more spiritual (and hence more real), and being promised in paradise, joy is then superior to—and more lasting than—(worldly) happiness (at least).

Thus in the context of the English language there is always bound to be some debate about the different relative connotations of the two words ‘joy’ and ‘happiness’.

‘Joy’ and ‘Happiness’ in the Qur’an

By contrast, the Qur’an is absolutely precise about joy, happiness and love—and indeed all emotions, as there is no tautology or redundancy in the Arabic terms used in the Qur’an. The Qur’an is for Muslims the very Word of God in Arabic. Its usage of terms like

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1 This hermeneutic principle is repeatedly declared in the Qur’an itself:

What, do they not meditate [upon] the Qur’an? If it had been from other than God, surely they would have found therein much inconsistency. (Al-Nisa’, 4:82) • [This is] a Book whose verses have been set
‘joy’ and ‘happiness’ are thus Islam’s definition of these terms, and consequently, Muslims’ understanding of them.

In what follows, we will—God willing—briefly explain how the Qur’an views joy and happiness, and also how they are related to—and rooted in—love. They differ from either the secular or religious understanding of the terms ‘joy’ and ‘happiness’ in English, but in a way combine them both.

**Two Kinds of ‘Joy’ in the Qur’an**

The word for ‘joy’ in the Qur’an, and even in modern standard Arabic, is ‘farah’. It is also a common first name for both men and women, just as ‘Joy’ is a common women’s name in English. In the Qur’an, it occurs in both a positive context and in a negative context. In a negative context, it refers to worldly joy. God says in the Qur’an:

*God expands provision for whom He will, and straitens for whomever He will; and they rejoice in the life of this world, yet the life of this world in the Hereafter, is but [a brief] enjoyment. (Al-Ra‘d, 13:26)*

*But they split into sects regarding their affair, each party rejoicing in what it had. (Al-Mu‘minun, 23:53)*

In a positive context, it refers to rejoicing in God. God says in the Qur’an:

*Say: ‘In the bounty of God, and in His mercy in that let them rejoice: it is better than what they hoard’. (Yunus, 10:58)*

*Rejoicing in what God has given them of His bounty, and rejoicing, for the sake of those who have not joined them but are left behind, that no fear shall befall them, neither shall they grieve. (Aal 'Imran, 3:170)*

There are thus two kinds of joy in the Qur’an, one positive, and one negative. It will be noted that the difference between them is not so much what the ‘occasion’ for them is, but how that ‘occasion’ is seen: in other words, when one receives something—say, a ‘provision’: food, clothing, lodging, education, transportation or any reasonable material benefit—if one rejoices in it merely for the sake increasing one’s worldly acquisitions, then that is ‘negative joy’. If, however, one rejoices in it as a gift from God and for the good it may do, then that is ‘positive joy’.

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*clear, and then detailed from One [Who is] Wise, Informed. (Hud, 11:1)  ◊  Praise belongs to God [alone], Who has revealed to His servant the Book, and has not placed it in any deviation, (Al-Kahf, 18:1)*

*An Arabic Qur’an without any deviation that perhaps they may guard themselves. (Al-Zumar, 39:28).*

*It is also shown extensively in classical works on the Qur’an like al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi’s Kitab Man’ al-Taraduf and Raghib al-Isfahani’s Mufradat Alfaadh al-Qur’an, and also in our own Love in the Holy Qur’an.*
From this a number of other consequences flow, including: (1) most material things in themselves are neither positive nor negative—it is how they are received and used that makes them positive or negative. (2) Joy is a subjective sentiment with an objective cause. (3) Joy is a reaction to an objective gift; the nature of the reaction depends on how it is understood, which in turn depends on the nature of the person reacting at that moment. (4) Whatever one receives in this world is always a gift from God, whether one realizes it or not; so one should try to bear that in mind. (5) Permanent joy is not a normal disposition in the world, which is always in a flux of loss or gain, unless one is always deeply aware of God, Who is beyond any flux.

‘Happiness’ in the Qur’an

The Qur’anic concept of ‘joy’ explains the Qur’anic conception of ‘happiness’ (‘sa’adah’). The word ‘happiness’ only occurs twice in the whole of the Holy Qur’an, both times referring to Paradise. These both occur in the following passage from Surat Hud:

*The day it comes, no soul shall speak except by His permission. Some of them will be wretched, and [some] happy. / As for those who are damned, they will be in the Fire; their lot therein will be wailing and sighing; / abiding therein for as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except what your Lord may will. Truly your Lord is Doer of what He desires. / And as for those who are happy, they shall be in Paradise, abiding therein for as long as the heavens and the earth endure except what your Lord may will, an endless bounty. (Hud, 11:105–108)*

‘Happiness’ is thus never used in the Qur’an to describe a human state in this world, and never to describe those who do not have faith in God and love for Him. The Qur’an does not deny that people can be content2 in this world. God says in the Qur’an:

*Truly those who do not expect to encounter Us, and are content with the life of this world, and feel reassured in it, and those who are heedless of Our signs…. (Yunus, 10:7)*

But it certainly implies that no one can be truly happy in this world, or rather, with the world—how can one be happy loving the world, knowing that one will inevitably die and leave it? Thus the very fact of knowing that one’s earthly contentment will end is itself an ordeal sufficient to prevent human contentment solidifying or deepening into true happiness. God says in the Qur’an:

2 The Oxford English Dictionary (2014 CE) defines ‘content’ as a verb as: ‘Willing to accept something; satisfied.’ It is thus ‘lower’ and more passive than happiness.
Every soul shall taste death, and We will try you with ill and good as an ordeal. And then unto Us you shall be brought back. (Al-Anbiya’, 21:35)

Thus in the Qur’an true happiness is a kind of permanent spiritual joy, and to apply the term ‘happiness’ to this life is technically a misnomer (though its ‘pursuit’ can still be undertaken, through a life that looks herebelow to God and forward to Paradise).

**The Cause of Joy and Happiness**

What is the cause of joy and of happiness? Earlier we mentioned that joy ‘is a reaction to an objective gift’, but this is not the whole picture, and certainly not the whole cause of either joy or happiness. For gifts only cause joy because we love them *a priori*, or because we love their givers—otherwise we would not feel joy in receiving them. It is love that is thus the real cause of joy. The gift is merely the ‘trigger’ for joy.

Loving something means giving oneself to it, and giving oneself over to the love of it. In our book *Love in the Holy Qur’an* we identified joy as one of the one hundred stages of love3 and defined human love as seen in the Qur’an as: ‘an inclination towards beauty after being pleased (i’jab) by it’4 Divine love we defined as: ‘first, the free gift of existence and of countless other favours (including beauty of various kinds) to every created thing, and, second, love of beauty as such’5. Both kinds of love—that is to say all love as such—is thus a ‘gift of

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4 ‘God says: You will never be able to be just to your wives, even if you be eager; yet do not incline altogether away, so that you leave her like one suspended… (Al-Nisa’, 4:129). And He says: Women are not lawful for you beyond that, nor [is it lawful] for you to change them for other wives, even though their beauty please you [a’jabaka]… (Al-Ahzab, 33:52). The first verse describes love after it has matured and developed. The second verse describes the beginning of love. Together they describe the beginning, development and maturity of love. Describing the beginning, development and maturity of something means describing all of it. Consequently, by putting these two verses together we can describe love as such. However, since these verses are God’s words and not human words, and since of course God is Omniscient, we can take this description of love as such a definition. We can thus define love as ‘an inclination towards beauty after being pleased (i’jab) by it.’ This definition, which we have derived directly from God’s words cited above, is not essentially different from the definitions many Muslim scholars have offered for love.’ (HRH Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad, *Love in the Holy Qur’an*, Revised Expanded Seventh Edition, Islamic Texts Society, UK, Chapter 3, p.12).
5 ‘When Moses was asked by Pharaoh about God, the following discussion occurred: He said, ‘So who is your Lord, O Moses?’ He said, ‘Our Lord is He Who gave to every thing its [particular] nature and then guided [them]’ (Ta Ha, 20:49-50). Thus God is known first of all as He who gives every thing its particular creation, and then gives them something else—His guidance (which, in the case of human beings, means beauty of soul). Therefore God’s love is knowable to human beings as, first of all, the free gift of existence and countless other favours (including beauty of various kinds) to every created thing, and, second, love of beauty as such. This is perfectly summarised in the famous Hadith of the Messenger of God: ‘God is Beautiful, and He loves beauty.’

That God ‘is Beautiful’—or rather: ‘The Beautiful’ (*Al-Jamil*) in another Hadith—means that all beauty
Thus if love is the real cause of joy, this means that giving is its secret: giving is the secret behind joy. People are joyous when they give themselves or of themselves to other people or to God, and are happy when they can permanently do this without interruption (i.e. in heaven).

This is obvious enough in generous people. Parents, for example, are always more joyful in buying gifts for their children, than their children are when receiving them. It is also obvious in people who love God, for when they receive a gift from God, they turn away from it to Him, and this abstention itself is a kind of 'gift of self to God'.

However, this is also equally true for joy in a worldly gift: those who rejoice in the world's gifts already love the world a priori, and have thus made a gift of themselves to it, in a certain manner. Giving is still the secret of their joy: they have already a priori internally given themselves to what they receive, so that when it actually comes to them as a physical object, their own a priori gift of self and their own love is the real cause of their joy. This idea shows the foolishness of worldly joy and worldly love: although we do not know it, it is not things in themselves that ever give us worldly joy; it is our own foolish enslavement to worldly things —through our own worldly love—that gives us a brief and inferior sort of joy, which will soon come crashing down on us. God says in the Qur'an:

*The likeness of the life of this world is only as water, which We send down from the heaven, then the plants of the earth mingle with it, whereof mankind eat, and cattle [eat] until, when the earth has taken on its ornaments, and has adorned itself, and its inhabitants think that they have gained mastery over it, Our command comes upon it by night or day, and We make it as reaped corn, as though the previous day it had not flourished. Thus do We detail the signs for a people who reflect.* (Yunus, 10:24)
The Greatest Joy and Happiness

It remains to be said that the greatest of all joys—the joy that is in Paradise—is first to gaze towards God. God says (referring to Paradise): Some faces on that day will be radiant, / looking upon their Lord. (Al-Qiyamah, 75:22–23). It is then to 'be' with God—the Divine Beloved—forever, in His 'Beatitude' ('ridwan'). God says in the Qur’an:

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\text{God has promised the believers, both men and women, Gardens underneath which rivers flow, to abide therein, and blessed dwellings in the Gardens of Eden, and beatitude (ridwan) from God is greater. That is the supreme triumph. (Al-Tawbah, 9:72)}
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The Prophet Muhammad explained this inexpressible, numinous Divine Beatitude as follows:

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\text{God will say to the denizens of Paradise: ‘Denizens of Paradise!’ They will say, ‘At Your service and Your pleasure, Lord; all goodness is in Your hands!’ He will say: ‘Are you content?’ They will say: ‘How could we not be content, Lord, when You have given us what You never gave any of Your creatures?’ He will say: ‘Shall I not give you what is better?’ They will say: ‘Lord, what could be better than that?’ He will say: ‘I will enfold you in My beatitude, and will never be angry with you thereafter.’}
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Thus ‘beatitude’ is to be ‘enfolded’ in the Divine Presence perfectly. It is the lover being ‘enfolded’ in the Beloved, with love, forever. This is the supreme happiness and the supreme joy. And perhaps some blessed people do experience a foretaste of it in this life through the Spirit. God says in the Qur’an:

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\text{He sends down the angels with the Spirit of His command to whomever He will of His servants, [saying]: Warn that there is no God save Me: so fear Me. (Al-Nahl, 16:2) Exalter of ranks, Lord of the Throne, He casts the Spirit of His command upon whomever He wishes of His servants, that he may warn them of the Day of Encounter. (Ghafir, 40:15)}
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7 Bukhari, Sahih, Hadith no. 6549, Kitab al-riqaq, bab sifat al-jannah wal-nar; Muslim, Sahih, Hadith no. 2829, Kitab al-jannah wa sifat na’imaha, bab ihlal al-ridwan ala ahl al-jannah.
Finally, we should mention that the archetype of all happiness, of joy, and of beatitude is of course God’s own Absolute, Infinite, Perfection and Self-Sufficient Unity. God says in the Qur’an:

*Say: He, God, is One (Ahad). / God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all (Al-Samad).*

*(Al-Ikhlas, 112:1–2)*

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we may say that the Qur’an—and hence in Islam and for all Muslims—there are two kinds of joy, a positive ‘spiritual’ joy, and a negative ‘worldly’ joy. Both kinds are the result of love, and thus of the gift of self, but spiritual joy is the result of an *a priori* gift of self to God, and worldly joy is the result of an *a priori* gift of self to the world. In order to know spiritual joy—and then also true happiness, the only happiness that is—one must give oneself to God and to others as best as one can, throughout one’s life. God says in the Qur’an:

*O you who believe, what is wrong with you that, when it is said to you, ‘Go forth in the way of God’, you sink down heavily to the ground. 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)*

And simply:

*So flee unto God…. (Al-Dhariyat, 51:50)*

And God knows best.
About the Author:

H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal (b. 1966) was educated at Harrow School; received his BA in Comparative Literature from Princeton University in 1988 *Summa cum laude*; his first PhD (in Modern and Medieval Languages and Literatures) from Trinity College, Cambridge University, UK, in 1993, and his second PhD (in Islamic Philosophy) from Al-Azhar University in Cairo in 2010. He is a Professor of Philosophy at Jordan University and *Chief Advisor to H.M. King Abdullah II for Religious and Cultural Affairs.*