

Religion and Human Nature (*Fitrah*): If Religion is Innate, Why Do People Oppose It?

If Religion and Human Nature Are in Harmony, Why Do Some Choose to Abandon Religion?

Perhaps many of us have felt, at times, a gap between our inner desires and what religion dictates. This experience raises an important question: If religion is innate, why do we sometimes feel such a conflict? Is religion incompatible with our essence, or does the issue stem from elsewhere? To answer this question, we must understand the structure of our existence more precisely. Human beings are not merely a collection of momentary desires; rather, they possess a deeper truth called pure primordial nature (*fitrah*), and religion finds its meaning exactly in connection with this truth.

From the perspective of self-knowledge, religion is not just a set of rules and commands, but a program in complete harmony with the truth of human existence. We naturally gravitate toward truth, justice, beauty, and perfection. These inclinations are not the product of education or culture; they are embedded in the very foundation of our creation. The Holy Quran points to this reality, speaking of a religion that aligns with the divine innate nature of humanity [1].

Religion does not stand in opposition to innate nature or *fitrah*; rather, it illuminates the path for humanity's inner truth to blossom. However, life

experience shows that people do not always feel this harmony. Sometimes, an inner resistance forms against a religious command. This resistance is real, but to understand its root, we must realize that we do not possess only one type of inner inclination.

Within us, two active forces are present: pure primordial nature (*Fitrah*) and material nature. Our pure innate nature drives us toward truth, goodness, and perfection, while our material nature guides us toward immediate pleasure, self-preservation, and the quick gratification of urges. Both are parts of our existence, but their roles and directions are not the same. The problem begins when these two voices are mistaken for one another.

Sometimes, what we call a "heartfelt desire" is actually the amplified voice of the material nature, not the call of innate nature. Under such conditions, if religion conflicts with this desire, it appears as though religion and human nature are incompatible. In reality, the true conflict is not between religion and human nature; rather, it is between religion and a dominant material nature. The key takeaway is that religion did not come to restrict our innate nature; it came to protect our pure primordial nature from the dominance of the material nature.

Some desires are the result of habits, social environments, or external stimuli, rather than the expression of our true existence. If this distinction is not made clear, two misconceptions arise: either religion is viewed as a restrictive factor, or every inner desire is blindly accepted as a genuine, innate truth. Both perspectives present an inaccurate picture of the relationship between religion and human nature.

The goal of this discussion is to clarify, by looking at real-life experiences, why religion and human nature are harmonious and compatible, yet why humans sometimes experience conflict.

Is Every Inner Voice the Voice of *Fitrah*?

A common error in understanding the relationship between religion and human nature is the assumption that whatever arises from within necessarily reflects our *fitrah*. Based on this notion, one simply needs to consult their inner feelings to find the right path. However, real experience shows the issue is much more complex.

The Holy Quran states: "And [by] the soul and He who fashioned it, And inspired it [with discernment between] its wickedness and its righteousness" [2]. This verse reveals that there is not just a single inclination within each person; God inspires both wickedness and righteousness. Humans possess both the capacity to move toward the truth and the possibility of deviation. This means our inner self is a battlefield of choices, not a pre-determined, error-free path.

To clarify, consider a simple example. Suppose telling a lie in a specific situation brings an immediate benefit. At that moment, the desire to lie might form within an individual. But where does this desire come from? Does it stem from the truth-seeking aspect of innate nature, or from the material nature seeking immediate gain?

Or consider the desire to be seen and validated. This desire can sometimes be rooted in a sense of talent and responsibility, but other times it is merely a hidden

form of the desire to dominate others. Distinguishing between the two is not always easy.

The Quran warns that if we follow our low desires, we lose the power to see the truth [3]. This means the problem is not just making a wrong choice; it is that humanity gradually loses the ability to distinguish right from wrong entirely. Imam Ali (Peace be upon him) also points to this reality, saying: "How many intellects are held captive under the dominion of desires" [4]! This implies that even the intellect loses its guiding function if influenced by improper urges.

The primary danger begins when the material nature disguises itself as innate nature. In this state, we assume we are answering the call of our true existence, while we are actually following amplified desires of the material nature. In such conditions, conflict with religion is mistakenly perceived as a conflict with innate nature, whereas religion and human nature stand side-by-side and are never opposed to one another.

The Role of Religion in the Conflict Between Pure Innate Nature and Material Nature

Having established that a real struggle between pure innate nature and material nature exists within humans, the question arises: What is the role of religion in this dynamic? Did religion merely come to validate what we feel inside, or does it bear a higher responsibility?

A common perception is that religion is merely a response to innate nature—meaning genuine inclinations are pre-installed in us, and religion just expresses

and strengthens them. But if we could always distinguish the right path simply by relying on our inner feelings, what need would there be for guidance, warnings, and education?

The reality is that religion is not just a validator; it helps us identify the true source of our desires and distinguish between two types of wanting: a desire rooted in innate nature, and a desire resulting from dominant material nature, fleeting impulses, or external conditions. The Quran highlights this psychological complexity: "Rather, man, against himself, will be a witness, even if he presents his excuses" [5]. This means a person can justify their behavior without correctly recognizing its true underlying source.

For instance, the desire for attention might appear under the guise of social impact or serving others, or the desire to escape responsibility might be justified under the name of freedom. In such conditions, distinguishing between innate nature and material nature becomes incredibly difficult because the desires of material nature can perfectly disguise themselves as moral values. If this trend continues, one's power of discernment gradually weakens, and they may mistake passing desires for the fundamental truth of their existence.

The Quran warns: "And do not follow desire, as it will lead you astray from the way of Allah" [6]. This warning is not just about behavioral deviation; it points to a much deeper consequence. If a person repeatedly follows improper desires, they gradually destroy their own ability to discern the truth.

Imam Ali (Peace be upon him) similarly states: "Whoever follows his vain desire, it blinds him, deafens him, humiliates him, and misguides him" [7]. This blindness is not physical; it refers to the loss of inner insight. In this state, material nature can

seamlessly present itself as innate nature, and the individual, without even realizing it, distances themselves from the path that the truth of their existence requires.

Here, the role of religion becomes brilliantly clear. Religion provides a stable anchor that is independent of changing circumstances and momentary urges. This standard and guide helps us separate the genuine desires of our innate nature from the superficial desires shaped by habit, environment, or fleeting urges. Therefore, religion does not stand against innate nature; rather, it is its ultimate supporter and protector, helping us ensure we do not lose our true path of growth and can consciously move toward perfection.

What becomes clear in this discussion is that religion and human nature are not in conflict with each other. Instead, religion protects innate nature and illuminates the path for its full realization. Many of the conflicts framed as the incompatibility of religion and human nature actually stem from mistaking the voice of material nature for the voice of our *fitrah*. Once this distinction is clear, our entire perspective on religion changes. We no longer see religion as a set of forced compulsions, but rather embrace it as a vital guide for achieving genuine growth and perfection.

Properly understanding the relationship between religion and human nature is the starting point of true education. When religion is understood as the ultimate standard for discernment, it is no longer reduced to compulsion, nor is it transformed into a matter of personal taste; instead, it reclaims its rightful position as the ultimate guide for human development.

Have you ever experienced a conflict between religion and human nature within yourself? Or do you have a different perspective on this topic? We would love to hear your thoughts—please share them with us in the comments below!

References

[1]. “So set your heart as a person of pure faith on this religion, the original nature endowed by Allah according to which He originated mankind...” (Quran, 30:30)

[2]. 91:7-8

[3]. “Have you seen him who has taken his desire to be his god and whom Allah has led astray knowingly, set a seal upon his hearing and heart, and put a blindfold on his sight? ...” (45:23)

[4]. *Nahjul Balagha*, “Letters and Sayings,” No. 211.

[5]. “Indeed, man is a witness to himself, though he should offer excuses [to justify his failings].” (75: 14-15)

[6]. 38:26

[7]. Muhammad Al-Tamimi al-Amudi, *Ghurar Al-Hikam Wa Durar Al-Kalim, Exalted Aphorisms and Pearls of Speech a Collection of Aphorisms of Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib*. Trans. Tahir Ridha Jaffer. Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2012, p. 1742.