145729 - A word about so-called reading people’s faces

the question

Is reading people’s faces haraam or is it regarded as shirk regardless?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

Some of those to whom Allah has given insight are able to work out people’s character from their facial expressions. This is referred to in the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

{[Charity is] for the poor who have been restricted for the cause of Allah , unable to move about in the land. An ignorant [person] would think them self-sufficient because of their restraint, but you will know them by their [characteristic] sign} [al-Baqarah 2:273]

{Their mark is on their faces from the trace of prostration} [al-Fath 48:29].

Or they are able to work that out from their speech, which is referred to in the verse (interpretation of the meaning):

{and you would know them by their mark; but you will surely know them by the tone of [their] speech} [Muhammad 47:30].

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said, commenting on this verse:

What is meant is that Allah, may He be glorified, affirmed that the Prophet should know about them from the tone of their speech, because knowing about the speaker and what he is hiding in his heart is more accurate than finding that out by looking at his facial features and expression,

because the words that a person utters give a greater indication of what is in his heart than the features of his face. Intuition has to do with two things: looking and listening.

Madaarij as-Saalikeen (2/483).

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al-'Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, has given many people knowledge and intuition through which they may know a person's character and circumstances based on his facial features and the way he looks at things, and from some of his words, as Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

{but you will surely know them by the tone of [their] speech} [Muhammad 47:30].

Tafseer Soorat al-Baqarah (3/368).

Ibn al-Qayyim called this intuition "intuition based on faith," and he said regarding its cause, its reality and its origin:

Its cause is light that Allah shines into a person's heart, by means of which he distinguishes between true and false, good and bad, one who is telling the truth and one who is lying.

Its reality is that it is a thought that occurs to a person which rules out the opposite. This thought springs to mind like a lion pouncing on its prey…. This intuition is commensurate with the strength of one's faith, so the one who is stronger in faith has stronger intuition.

The origin of this type of intuition is light and life that Allah, may He be exalted, grants to whomever He wills among His slaves, and his heart is revived and illuminated by that, so this intuition is hardly ever mistaken. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

{And is one who was dead and We gave him life and made for him light by which to walk among the people like one who is in darkness, never to emerge therefrom? [al-An'aam 6:122].

He was deadened by disbelief and ignorance, then Allah revived him through faith and knowledge,

and by virtue of the Qur’an and faith, He gave him light by means of which he will be able to interact with people in a proper manner, and will be able to walk through the darkness. And Allah knows best.

Madaarij as-Saalikeen (2/483-486).

Secondly:

With regard to reading faces, this is a kind of intuition that is called “intuition based on physical appearance.”

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The third type of intuition is intuition based on physical appearance, which doctors and others have discussed, and they found indications in physical appearance of a person’s attitude and characteristics, because of the connection between them that has been ordained by the wisdom of Allah, such as concluding on the basis of an extraordinarily small head that a person lacks reasoning; and concluding on the basis of a large head and broad chest that a person has a good attitude and is forbearing and easy-going; concluding on the basis of a narrow chest that a person is impatient; concluding on the basis of a dull and tired-looking eye that a person is slow-witted and impassive; concluding on the basis of extreme whiteness of the eye with some redness that a person is courageous, brave and smart, and if the eye is round with some redness and shifts from side to side that a person is treacherous and untrustworthy.

Intuition focuses mostly on the eye, because it is the mirror of the heart and indicates what it contains. Then it focuses on the tongue, for it is the messenger and interpreter of the heart. Intuition also draws conclusions about a person’s character from the colour of the eyes and any aberration in them.

Likewise, they draw conclusions from the hair, and how curly or straight it is, about a person’s intelligence and character.

The origin of this intuition is based on the idea that a regular, balanced physical image reflects a

balanced attitude and spirit, and that if a person is physically balanced, his manners, attitude and deeds will also be balanced, whereas if his physical appearance is out of the ordinary, then his attitude and deeds will not be balanced. That applies if a person is left to his own inclination and nature [without any guidance].

Madaarik as-Saaliheen (2/487, 488).

This type of intuition and reading of faces is sometimes valid and is sometimes wrong. What they say about the connection between certain facial features and certain characteristics is not necessarily true in all cases, and the mistake they make is obvious when they consistently make a connection between a particular physical feature and a particular characteristic, claiming that it never fails. That is definitely false, because a disbeliever may become Muslim, an energetic person may become lazy, a rich person may become poor, a sinner may repent, an anxious person may calm down, one who is in distress may find relief, and vice versa in all cases. And you may add to this list whatever you want of characteristics, attitudes and actions. This is something that is known, seen and experienced.

Hence Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) concluded the remarks quoted above by saying:

But the one who has an average, balanced physical appearance may, by mixing with others, acquire characteristics from those with whom he mixes and befriends, even if that person is a dumb animal, and thus he may become one of the most evil of people in character and deeds; these characteristics may become part of his nature and he will find it very difficult to move away from them.

By the same token, one who has an irregular, unbalanced physical appearance may, by keeping company with people of perfect character and mixing with them, acquire noble characteristics, manners and deeds that become second nature to him, for habits and regular deeds help a person to develop his character and attitude.

So one should reflect on this matter, and not hasten to judge someone on the basis of intuition

only, for in that case the one who passes judgement will make a lot of mistakes. These physical characteristics are mere signs and are not definitive, for they may not lead to this conclusion due to some unmet condition or some impediment.

Madaarij as-Saalikeen (2/488).

Thus it becomes clear that intuition may have to do with faith or insight, which cannot be learned; rather it is a light that Allah instils in the heart of His believing slave. As for the second type, which is general guidelines that may be learned, both Muslims and non-Muslims may learn them, and they may be right or wrong, so no definitive knowledge can be based on them; rather they are only signs and indications which may not even reach the level of probability in many cases.

As for propagating this intuition among people and charging them money for it, this is a novel type of soothsaying which takes many forms nowadays, and those who take it as a means of earning money use trickery in order to consume people’s wealth unlawfully.

And Allah knows best.