# The Virtues of the Good Muslim

Ida Zilio-Grandi

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Ida Zilio-Grandi

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**The Virtues of the Good Muslim**
Ida Zilio-Grandi

# Abstract

This book aims to offer a concise, though not exhaustive, exploration of the core virtues of the 'good Muslim', highlighting the moral foundations that are essential to the Islamic faith. It seeks to present readers with the values that Islam promotes: gratitude and patience, mercy and hospitality, tolerance and peace, protecting the weak, among others. The virtues of the good Muslim emerge from two different sources: the divine qualities, otherwise the 'Beautiful Names', which, or most of which, the believer will try to imitate to the best of his limited human ability; and the love of God, explicitly referred to in the Qurʾān in relation to certain categories of believers and their qualities. Two different frameworks, which nevertheless echo one another, since the Qurʾān, the Sunna of the Prophet and the work subsequently carried out by theologians and jurists in explaining and supporting the textual tradition arrive, from various directions, at the same affirmation that God loves those who resemble Him.
The research, often supported by linguistic analysis, involves an extensive examination of Arabic religious literature – the primary language of Islam. This includes traditional wisdom texts, as well as exegetical, theological, and juridical works from both the foundational and classical periods, along with relevant modern and contemporary perspectives. Emphasis is placed on amplifying the voices of contemporary authors, particularly those writing in Arabic, whose language barrier often limits their audience. By drawing from sources across different time periods and disciplines – all within the broad spectrum of religious literature – the book aims to showcase the diversity of viewpoints within the Islamic tradition.

**Keywords** Virtue ethics. Human values. Islamic faith. Islamic Tradition. Arabic literature.

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# The Virtues of the Good Muslim

# 1 Introduction

**Summary** 1.1 Prescription and Love. – 1.2 The Islamic Ethics of Virtue. – 1.3 The Highest Example.

Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's (d. 261/875) *Ṣaḥīḥ*, the 'Authentic' or 'Sound', one of the six canonical collections of *Ḥadīth* or Sunna – accounts of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad – contains a story known as 'the story of Gabriel' (*ḥadīth Jibrīl* حديث جبريل) because its protagonist, alongside the Prophet, is the Archangel Jibrīl, or Jabrā'īl (Gabriel), who functions in the Qur'ān as the mediator of divine revelation, just as he does in Jewish and Christian sources. The story was handed down by a notable authority, the future Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644):

> One day, as we were sitting together with the Messenger of God, may God's blessings and peace be upon him,[1] there appeared before us a man with raven hair dressed all in white. He did not appear to have come on a long journey, but none of us had seen him before.
>
> He sat down in front of the Prophet, with their knees touching, rested his hands on his thighs, and asked him: – Muḥammad, tell me of Islam. The Messenger of God answered: – It is to bear witness that there is no other god than God and that Muḥammad is His messenger; to perform our prayers, to give alms, to fast in the month of Ramadan, and, if possible, to make a pilgrimage to the Holy House of God. – That is correct – said the man. And we were surprised that it was he who put the questions and approved the answers.

1 This formulaic bow to the Prophet (*ṣallā Allāh 'alay-hi wa-sallama*), commonly rendered more simply 'peace be upon him' or PBUH, will be omitted from now on.


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> And then he asked: – Tell me of the faith [*īmān* إيمان]. He answered: – It is to believe in God, and in His angels, and in His Books, in His messengers and in the Last Day, and to believe in the divine decrees, for better or for worse. – That is correct – the man said again. And he went on: – And now tell me what it means to be good [*iḥsān* إحسان]. He answered: – It is to worship [*taʿabbud* تعبّد] God, as if you saw Him: for even though you do not see Him, He sees you.[2]

After this reply, which the angel does not comment on, the passage continues with questions on 'The Hour', that is, the Day of Judgment, and on the portents which will announce it to mankind; and it ends with the Prophet saying to ʿUmar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "That was Gabriel, come among you to teach you your religion".[3]

The story of Gabriel is especially important because it teaches the richness and the scope of full acceptance of the Islamic religion: firstly, the five 'pillars of Islam' (*arkān al-Islām* أركان الإسلام), the cornerstones of the religion, that is, the acts of worshipping (*ʿibādāt* عبادات) the one God. Then the compendium of the fundamental truths, the six 'pillars of the faith' (*arkān al-īmān* أركان الإيمان). Lastly, that 'being good' – *iḥsān* in Arabic – which is epitomised in the serenity of the faithful in the face of His immediate Knowledge of our actions and intentions, the divine Eye that observes everything and judges everything, determining the fate of everyone in this world and in the world to come. But the special relevance of the story lies above all in its equating 'goodness', *iḥsān*, with 'worship', *taʿabbud*, with genuine submission; which is to say that goodness, in one's soul and one's behaviour, is indicated as a key aspect of religion. The true believer is thus not only one who bears witness, prays, fasts, gives a portion of his wealth to the community and makes his pilgrimage to Mecca if able to do so (the *arkān al-Islām*); he is not only one who believes in God and the angels, in the Holy Books and the prophets, in the Last Day and in what God has ordained for the things of this world (the *arkān al-īmān*); he is also, must also be, a moral person, benevolent and upstanding, pure in heart and with a clean conscience.

Regarding the absolute importance of goodness, which should in no way be thought to be subordinate to acts of worship, there is another of the Prophet's sayings, quoted by the celebrated 'traditionist' (i.e. a person who records or transmits the Prophetic Sunna) Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. c. 275/819) in his contribution to Muḥammad's Tradition: "The believer will obtain, through his goodness of character [*ḥusn al-khuluq* حُسن الخُلق], the same level as he who fasts and prays".[4]

Another example, from a dictionary of the earliest converts compiled by another famous traditionist, al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971): "They asked the Prophet what is the best of actions. He replied: – Goodness of character".[5]

And a final one, from the *Ḥilyat al-Awliyāʾ* or 'The Ornament of the Saints' by the Persian historian Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038). The Prophet

2 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-īmān*, no. 1. For references to the Tradition in the present work, cf. the website `https://dorar.net/hadith` and `https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopedia-of-canonical-hadith-online`.

3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

4 Al-Sijistānī; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 4167.

5 Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*, no. 12696.

said: "You must be of good character; whoever among you has the best character is the best among you in religion [*dīn* دين]".[6]

It is necessary then, in the first place, to be intent on the good. This translates, in Islamic Law, into the primacy of the 'intention', or *niyya* نيّة, the righteous purpose without which even actions performed in compliance with the Law have no value because God does not accept them: "Actions only count according to their intention"[7] – maintains the saying placed at the beginning of another celebrated collection of *Ḥadīth*, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) – "in each man's case what matters is only what he intended to do", once again on the authority of 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.[8]

Intention is then the criterion of actions, and also underlies them and is their essence. While it is true that etymologies cannot circumscribe the overall content of words' meanings, it cannot be denied that they refine our understanding of them and reveal something of the perception that previous users have had of them. And, as the best-known lexicologist of medieval Islam, Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311), explains in his encyclopedic dictionary *Lisān al-'arab* 'The Language of the Arabs', *niyya*, or intention, is etymologically close to *nawāt* نَواة, which is the stone of a fruit or the seed of a plant.[9]

## 1.1 Prescription and Love

The tripartite division of Islamic religion into acts of worship, the essential tenets of belief and morality, as summarised in the story of Gabriel, is also present in the primary scriptural foundation of Islam, the Qur'ān. And that Book, which is distinguished by a linguistic scrupulousness that has fostered an extreme attention to its literal interpretation among Muslim theologians and jurists, clearly separates the moral from the legal component. Actions of legal significance pertain, in fact, to what God has ordained or commanded (cf. the verb *amara* أمر), to what is prescribed, or written or predetermined (cf. the verb *kataba* كتب),[10] and to what is legislated (the verb *shara'a* شرع, from which derives *sharī'a* شريعة, the religious Law).[11] The field of morality, on the other hand, is defined by the divine Love (the verb *aḥabba* أحبّ): God loves goodness, or *iḥsān*;[12] and 'piety' (*taqwā* تقوى), which is at once fear of God and control of the emotions;[13] and fairness, proper moderation, equanimity (*qisṭ* قسط or *iqsāṭ* إقساط);[14] and more,

6 Al-Iṣfahānī 1394/1974 of the Hijra (henceforth H), no. 6170.

7 In Arabic: *inna-mā al-a'māl bi-l-niyyāt*.

8 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *bad' al-waḥy*, no. 1.

9 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root n-w-y.

10 As in, for example fasting, just retribution, the freeing of slaves, due inheritance proportions, dowries for orphans, and so on.

11 Relevant in this case are observance of the Jewish Sabbath, and of religion (*dīn*, cf. Qur'ān VII,163) in the sense of a legacy transmitted through certain pre-Islamic prophets, in particular Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (XLII,13).

12 Qur'ān II,195; III,134 and 148; V,13 and 93.

13 Qur'ān III,76; XIX,4 and 7.

14 Qur'ān V,42; XLIX,9; LX,8

He loves self-purification (*taṭahhur* تطهّر), that is, physical purity and purity of intention;[15] and repentance (*tawba* تَوبة), the ability to retrace one's steps and correct one's heart and one's conduct.[16] He loves absolute faith in Him (*tawakkul* توكّل), with the security and composure that derives from it; and the 'patience-and-steadfastness' (*ṣabr* صبر) that keeps us resolute in pursuit of our goals.[17] Conversely, He does not love pride, nor vanity, nor greed,[18] nor does He love excess.[19]

From God's love to that of the Prophet; another important work in the Sunni Tradition, elaborated by al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), records how Muḥammad confided to his followers:

> Those of you whom I love best and on the Day of the Resurrection will be seated closest to me are those of you who have the finest characters; and those among you whom I hate the most and who on the Day of Resurrection will be seated furthest from me are the chatterers and the boasters, and the *mutafayhiqūn* مُتَفَيْهِقون. And they asked him: – The chatterers and the boasters we understand, but who are the *mutafayhiqūn*? – He replied: – They are the proud.[20]

According to another version, recorded by the traditionist Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855):

> The Prophet asked: – Do you want me to tell you which of you are dearest to me and which of you will be seated nearest to me on the Day of the Resurrection? – Three times he asked this, and we always answered: – Certainly, Messenger of God. – Eventually he said: – They are those who have the finest qualities of character.[21]

In Arab Islamic as in Arab Christian literature, the morally charged qualities are called simply *akhlāq* أخلاق 'characters' (sing. *khuluq* or *khulq* خُلق), term that does not refer so much to how they are performatively typified, as directly to the divine creative act (*khalq* خَلْق), to the original nature of things in accordance with the will of God; a term referring to the individual disposition as well as to 'proportion' and 'measure'.[22]

Hence, in the Prophetic Tradition, the frequent connection between the 'characters' and the Scale (*mīzān* ميزان) that will weigh human actions on the Day of Judgement. One example is the saying: "Nothing weighs more on the Scale than goodness of character".[23]

15 Qur'ān IX,108.

16 Qur'ān II,222.

17 Qur'ān III,146. In the words of the Holy Book, God also loves those who fight for His cause (LXI,4), less relevantly in this context.

18 Qur'ān IV,36-7.

19 Qur'ān VI,141.

20 Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila*, no. 1937.

21 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 6858.

22 Lane 1968, root kh-l-q; in this wide-ranging work the author reviews numerous autochthonous lexicographical sources.

23 Al-Sijistānī Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 4168.

The religious importance of the 'characters', and therefore of morality, is often expressed through images of the life to come. Among the better-known sayings of Muḥammad in Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī's *Ḥadīth* collection is:

> I guarantee a house in the purlieus of paradise for whoever forgoes a dispute although having the right to pursue it; and a house at the centre of paradise for whoever chooses not to lie; and a house in the heights of paradise for whoever has refined his own character.[24]

Another story from the Tradition or Sunna, this one from the Prophet's servant and Companion Anas Ibn Mālik (d. c. 91/709), which highlights the qualities of Muḥammad himself that made him the best of Muslims, even the best of men:

> I served the Messenger of God for ten years and he was never exasperated by me, never questioned why I had done what I had, or not done what I had not. The Messenger of God was, for his fine qualities of character, the best of men.[25]

The Prophet's superior qualities are much emphasised in the Qur'ān, which in the sura entitled *sūrat al-Qalam* 'The Pen' credits him with a 'sublime character' (*khuluq ʿaẓīm* خُلق عظيم, Qur'ān LXVIII,4);[26] and the commentators insist in their explanations on the overlap between religion and virtue, accentuating the sacredness of the moral life. Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), the renowned exegete and historian, teaches in his *Jāmi al-bayān* 'The Compendious Discourse' that the sublime character of the Prophet can be understood as his sublime religion, that is, Islam, and as his sublime Book, that is, the Qur'ān, as well as the mode of behaviour (*adab* أدب) taught him by God, which he always adhered to.[27]

Another ancient testimony is provided by the theologian and mystic Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), who illustrates more directly the Prophet's personal virtues, explaining perfection of character as a combination of justice, goodness and compassion. He cites in support another Qur'ānic passage, from the sura *Āl ʿImrān* 'The Family of 'Imrān', in which apropos of the reluctance of certain Muslims to obey, it is written:

> And by the Mercy of God, you dealt with them gently. And had you been severe and hard-hearted, they would have broken away from about you; so, pass over their faults, and pray that God forgive them. (Qur'ān III,159)[28]

**24** Al-Sijistānī Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 4169.

**25** Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila*, no. 1934.

**26** Translations from the Qur'ān are my own, the result of a combination of several English translations; cf. also *Il Corano* 2010.

**27** Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān LXVIII,4. For references to the exegetical literature, cf. `https://www.altafsir.com/`.

**28** Al-Tustarī 2004, commentary on Qur'ān LXVIII,4.

## 1.2 The Islamic Ethics of Virtue

The good qualities in the believer that God and the Prophet love can readily be linked to the branch of moral philosophy that from Aristotle onwards has been called 'the ethics of virtue', which focuses on a person's way of being, prior to, and independently of, his actions. For the western reader, the use of the term 'ethic/s' necessarily brings to mind Ancient Greece, the relativism of the Sophists, the intellectualism of the Socratics, and the various subsequent speculations on what constitutes the 'good', and the happiness of man. And it is true that a Greek substratum in the definition of virtuous behaviour and its purposes, one acquired through the translation of many Greek works into Arabic, is by no means extraneous to Islamic ethical thought. Indeed, once absorbed and meditated upon, it provided the theoretical foundations of such unquestionably 'Islamic' works, as the *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* 'The Refinement of Character', by the Persian philosopher and historian Abū ʿAlī Miskawayh (d. 421/1030),[29] or the *Adab al-dunyā wa-l-dīn* 'The Ethics of Religion and of this World' by the Iraqi al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058),[30] a theorist of institutions and one of the first to combine traditional religious ethics with philosophical reflection.

We should not, however, overstate the Greek input. To do so would be to forget the historically antecedent contribution of Persian moral thinking, the works of the talented writer and translator Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. c. 139/756) for example. And above all it would mean forgetting the fundamental contribution of the Qurʾān itself, as well as the complex background of Arab values that the Qurʾān presupposes, confirms and restates. Even later, both on the particular theme of virtuous behaviour and in other instances, Islamic thought would continue to show an extraordinary ability to entertain a quantity of extraneous elements, adapting them to a different conception of life and of the world and endowing them with new values.

Among the many stories from the Prophetic Tradition that emphasise the ethical element in Muslim preaching, while at the same time confirming a continuity in moral thinking, is the following account from Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's collection: Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. c. 32/652), keen to know what the new religion had to say, sent his brother to Mecca to listen to Muḥammad's teaching and report back to him. The brother duly went, and when he returned said: "I have seen him and he recommends the noblest qualities to us in words that are not poetry".[31] Finding this an insufficient answer, Abū Dharr decided to go to Mecca in person, and speedily converted to Islam.

Another tale, this time recorded by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, reports the Prophet's reply to another believer who asked him what was the best of actions:

> To have faith in God and to believe, to strive hard in God's path, and to make pilgrimage conscientiously. – But you have said several things – the man retorted. The Prophet continued: – And to speak gently, and to treat others with generosity, and to be of good character. The man

29 Miskawayh 2010.

30 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988.

31 Words, that is, that from an Islamic perspective were a long way from the deceptive enchantments of the poets. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb faḍāʾil al-ṣaḥāba*, no. 4527.

> protested: – But I want just one thing. – Be off with you – the Prophet said to him – and stop imagining that God is like you are.[32]

It seems clear that the references to 'noblest qualities' (*makārim al-akhlāq* مكارم الأخلاق) and to 'good character' (*ḥusn al-khuluq*), without further specification, indicate settled existing values. And the same cognizant memory of previous beliefs can be seen in the Qur'ān itself, which in its turn presupposes principles already known to and shared by the audience: it will suffice to mention the many references to goodness (*iḥsān*) or to the good (*khayr* خَيْر, *ṭayyib* طَيِّب), and generally to what is already known and agreed on (*maʿrūf* معروف), which run through the whole corpus of the Qur'ānic preaching. And this suggests that, even in the case of excellence of character according to Islam, positioning the Qur'ān as the as a *terminus post quem* is no more than a convention. It is precisely in this sense that we should read Muḥammad's saying, reported by, among others, the traditionist al-Ṭabarānī, which makes Islamic morality the coronation of what had gone before. "God sent me to perfect noble characters and to bring good deeds to their proper fulfilment".[33]

Outside of the Qur'ān and its commentators, and of the Sunna, we find an important contribution to the Islamic ethics of virtue in a literature which stands halfway between the Tradition proper and narrative: what one might call 'wisdom writing', made up of Prophetic sayings, maxims, poetical fragments and assorted anecdotal material promoting good behaviour, teaching at the same time adherence to the right and the good according to religion, and how to satisfy social norms.[34] Among the most assiduous practitioners of the genre was Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 281/894) of Baghdad; an early traditionist, jurist, ascetic, tutor to caliphs and princes, a contemporary of the greatest contributors to the Prophetic Tradition, who operated in a cosmopolitan and culturally vibrant climate. He was responsible for dozens of pamphlets on many facets of moral life: from the virtues of the intellect to the usefulness of tears, from meditating on funerary remains to the worth of gratitude, from commendable conduct in illness to the evils of intoxicating drinks, and much more. His name will feature often in the pages that follow.

Among other important writers in this vein, we find the Sunni traditionist al-Bukhārī and his *Al-adab al-mufrad* 'The Singular Code of Manners', a manual of good behaviour amidst friends and family;[35] Aḥmad al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915), another authoritative contributor to the corpus of Prophetic traditions, with '*Ishrat al-nisā'* or 'On Frequenting Women',[36] devoted especially to good relations between spouses; the already mentioned al-Māwardī with *Al-amthāl wa-l-ḥikam* 'Examples and Pearls of Wisdom',[37] notable for its abundance of poetic material; and the Persian Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), again a renowned traditionist as well as a jurist and theologian, and his *Al-ādāb* or 'The Good Behaviour', a wide-ranging work which

**32** Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad, musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 17467.

**33** In Arabic: *inna Allāh baʿatha-nī bi-tamām makārim al-akhlāq wa-kamāl maḥāsin al-afʿāl*; cf. al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-awsaṭ*, no. 7073.

**34** This kind of writing has been classed as 'religious *adab*'; see Azarnoosh 2008.

**35** Al-Bukhārī 1409/1983; cf. Al-Bukhārī 2018.

**36** Al-Nasā'ī 1408/1988.

**37** Al-Māwardī 1420/1999.

begins with respect for one's parents, and one's mother in particular, and closes with the love for God and the Prophet of those who meditate on the Qur'ān and the Sunna.[38] But the titles are beyond number: also belonging to the genre, for example, is *Al-adab fī l-dīn* or 'The Good Conduct in Religion', among the many works of the highly esteemed theologian, philosopher and mystic Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) – known as the 'Proof of Islam'.[39]

## 1.3 The Highest Example

A Muslim is one who tries to match his person to the model of Muḥammad the Prophet of Islam: this is the foundation of the Sunna, the Prophetic Tradition. Now, what isolates and ennobles morality as against actions approved by the Law is taking as a model not so much the Prophet and his goodness and righteousness, but directly God with His attributes (*ṣifāt* صِفات), the ninety-nine 'Beautiful Names' (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* الأسماء الحُسنى) that Tradition has taken from the Qur'ān and tabulated in various lists.[40] The reality of a divine rather than a Prophetic similarity is clearly stated in the Holy Book, in a verse of the sura *al-Naḥl* 'The Bees':

> Those who believe not in the world to come, theirs is the evil model [*mathal al-saw'* مثل السَوء]; God's is the highest example [*al-mathal al-a'lā* المَثل الأعلى]; He is the All-mighty, the All-wise. (Qur'ān XVI,60)

In these words, faith is significantly related to the divinity as the most excellent example and contrasted with the evil of the pagans, deniers of the afterlife. The Qur'ānic exegetes are always much preoccupied with the internal coherence of the Holy Book, and in reading this passage they naturally wonder how the affirmation of the 'highest example' or 'similarity' (*al-mathal al-a'lā*), which in so far as it is an example presupposes attainability, is to be reconciled with other verses of opposite implication, which instead affirm the absolute Transcendence of God and the impossibility of attributing His characteristics to others. For example, in the same sura 'The Bees' we read, a little further on: "So put not forward similarities to God" (Qur'ān XVI,74), that is, do not posit examples (*amthāl*, pl. of *mathal*) that invoke His being.

Regardless of their coming from different schools, all the interpreters respond in the same way, insisting, that is to say, on the uniqueness of the divine model, whose very perfection admits of neither similarities nor correspondences. And, indeed, the otherness of the divine condition is a fundamental assumption of Qur'ānic doctrine and is frequently echoed by the Traditionistic literature, and by subsequent theological reflection: if God is the one Creator, every man is his creature among the other creatures; if God is our king (*malik* مَلك) or master (*mālik* مالك), man is inescapably His servant (*'abd* عبد). However, we find in the founding literature that a way of being or acting on the divinity's part may coincide with a capacity or a disposition of man, and this is something that catches our eye when we scroll through the

38 Al-Bayhaqī 1408/1988.

39 Al-Ghazālī 2005.

40 Among the most authoritative lists is the one contained in al-Tirmidhī's collection of Prophetic traditions, *al-Jāmi'*, on the authority of the Companion Abū Hurayra.

Beautiful Names: some are evidently the prerogative of God, but many more have a potential anthropological application and also indicate attainable virtues for the faithful. Sometimes, they even remind the Muslim of his necessary attitudes, as in the case of the Name *al-mu'min* المؤمن 'the Faithful', 'the Believer', or of his legal duties, as in *al-shahīd* الشهيد 'the Witness', a Name that indicates testifying to the faith, i.e. *shahada* شهادة 'bearing witness', the primary obligation of Islam. A certain analogy between the Creator and the human creature is suggested in the Qur'ān when a given quality is attributed to God, in which case it is a Beautiful Name, but also to the true believer, when it is a human virtue. And again, a similarity can be implied in other ways by the Tradition literature, as for example when the Prophet declares that goodness of character is one of the 'characters' of God (*akhlāq Allāh*).[41] Islamic thought has therefore also illuminated the paradoxical reality of a divine model that is at once inimitable and yet followable in the way that God indicates and allows; [42] and it is in the Beautiful Names particularly that the true foundation of religious ethics should be identified.

Thus, in the past, a treatise by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, for example, devoted to the meanings of the Beautiful Names known as *Al-maqṣad al-aṣnā* 'The Most Exalted Aim [in Explaining the Beautiful Names of God]',[43] meditates on those considered 'equivocal' (*mutashābiha* متشابهة) or 'shared' (*mushtaraka* مشتركة), rooted in difference but opened to analogical reasoning (*qiyās* قِياس). Here he was to be followed, among others, by one of the great thinkers of medieval Islam, the Persian commentator, theologian and jurist Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) in his *Kitāb lawāmi' al-bayyināt* or 'The Book of Marvellous Proofs', in its turn devoted to the attributes of God.[44] The notion that the good believer should, in his moral conduct, model himself on God rather than on the Prophet is also propounded by the Neoplatonist philosopher Miskawayh in his *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*; and it is indeed this that sets him apart from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which he takes as a point of departure for his work.[45]

The idea has been taken up by both Sunni and Shiite contemporary intellectuals, concerned as often as not to motivate their coreligionists less with regard to the external manifestations of religion than to an underlying moral uprightness and the conduct that should follow from it.[46] One example would be the Syrian academic Muḥammad Rātib al-Nābulusī (b. 1938 or 1939), quite active on the European scene, whose many works[47] include a *Mawsū'at al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* or 'Encyclopaedia of the Beautiful Names of God',[48] in which he regularly emphasises the communicability of divine

41 Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rīkh Baghdād*, *ḥarf al-'ayn*, no. 811.

42 I would like to point out, however, that the Prophetic saying "conform to the qualities of God" (*takhallaqū bi-akhlāq Allāh*), although quite widespread, is not mentioned by the main collections and is mostly considered spurious.

43 Al-Ghazālī 1971, 47-59.

44 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905.

45 Together with many Platonic prompts: Miskawayh 1966, 170; cf. apropos Daiber 2018, in particular 202-3.

46 This tendency is especially evident on the Sciite side; see for example the section dedicated to moral education (*al-tarbīya wa-l-akhlāq*), on Maktabat shabakat al-batūl, which currently has 18 titles consultable online. `https://www.anwar5.net/albatoul/index.php?master=9&part=1`.

47 Among the best-known and most relevant here are Al-Nābulusī 2002a; 2004a; 2004b, all devoted to the inimitability of the Islamic canon also from a scientific point of view.

48 Al-Nābulusī 2002b.

qualities and the need for the good Muslim to 'align himself' (*takhalluq* تخلّق, cf. *akhlāq*) with the supreme model. Al-Nābulusī insists on more than one occasion that it is exactly in his morality and not in the mere observance of the letter of the Law, that the difference between the believer and the non-believer lies; and he repeatedly calls on his brethren to see the Qurʾānic allusions to the Beautiful Names as an appeal to pursue God's perfection as far as is possible for them, since at least attempting to conform to this perfection is the only way to get nearer to it.

These are interesting, even important observations, not only for those who may be reminded by them of other traditions – "Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy" (*Leviticus* 19,2), or "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful" (*Luke* 6,36) – but also and especially in thinking about Muslims residing in countries of different religious traditions, and the breadth of their identitarian self-definition, which is not to be reduced to outward manifestations alone but is also rooted in the refinement of the qualities required by their religion, and in practising them.

The scope of this book, a short, and by no means exhaustive, compendium of the principal virtues of the 'good Muslim', is to shed light on the moral element that necessarily underlies the Islamic religion, and to place before the reader the values that this religion transmits. My enquiries, often backed by lexicological considerations, consist in a wide-ranging scrutiny of religious literature in Arabic, the main language of Islam: traditional wisdom texts, or exegetical, theological or juridical ones, from the founding and classical eras, as well as, where possible and appropriate, modern and contemporary thinking – it seems to me important to make the voices of authors of our own day better known, and especially Arabic-language voices, whose linguistic medium deprives them of a wider audience. By deploying sources of differing chronology and from different disciplines, albeit all culled from the vast 'container' of religious literature, I have tried to highlight the variety of positions embraced by the Islamic vision.

# 2 Patience and Perseverance

**Summary** 2.1 *Be Patient with a Gracious Patience* (Qur'ān LXX,5). – 2.2 Resistance, Care, Serenity. – 2.3 Continuity of a Tradition. – 2.4 Patience According to the Mystics. – 2.5 Patience in Islamic Law. – 2.6 The Best and Greatest of Gifts. – 2.7 The Paradise of the Believer.

The virtues of the good Muslim emerge from two different backgrounds: the divine qualities, otherwise the 'Beautiful Names', which, or most of which, the believer will try to imitate to the best of his limited human ability; and the love of God, explicitly referred to in the Qur'ān in relation to certain categories of believers and their qualities.

Two different frameworks, which nevertheless echo one another, since the Qur'ān, the Sunna of the Prophet and to an even greater degree the work subsequently carried out by theologians and jurists in explaining and supporting the textual tradition arrive, from various directions, at the same affirmation that God loves those who resemble Him. So much is certainly true of Patience, *ṣabr* in Arabic, the virtue which above all others defines the good believer. On the one hand, in fact, the Tradition recognises *al-ṣabūr* الصبور or 'the Most Patient One' as a Name of God, appearing in ninety-ninth place in the most authoritative lists of the Beautiful Names,[1] – and it should be emphasised that this rear-guard position does not in any way imply a diminished status in so far as it immediately precedes and gives way to the supreme Name, the hundredth, that God alone knows. On the other hand, the Qur'ān is firm in emphasising God's love for those who are patient (*al-ṣābirūn* الصابرون). This from the sura 'The Family of 'Imrān':

> Many a prophet there has been, with whom thousands have fought, and they fainted not for what befell them in God's way, neither weakened, nor did they humble themselves; and God loves the patient. (Qur'ān III,146)

1 As in the above mentioned list provided by al-Tirmidhī in *al-Jāmiʿ*, relying on the authority of the Companion Abū Hurayra.


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Patience fits perfectly, therefore, into the two frameworks outlined above: the imitability *mutatis mutandis* of the divine qualities, and the lovability of man in the eyes of the Creator. Furthermore, and in fact like the more generic 'piety' (or *taqwā* 'reverence for God'), patience enjoys a particular status, which raises it above the other qualities required of the Muslim and adds to its nobility: the 'companionship of God' (*maʿiyya* معية, from *maʿa* 'together with').

## 2.1 *Be Patient with a Gracious Patience* (Qurʾān LXX,5)

The sura *al-Baqara* 'The Cow' has this to say to the faithful: "O all you who believe, seek you help in patience and prayer; surely God is with the patient" (*Allāh maʿa al-ṣābirīn*; Qurʾān II,153). And a little further on in the same sura, which rehearses the story of the pious David and the ungodly Goliath (cf. 1 *Samuel* 17,1-53), the Book reiterates:

> How often has a little company overcome a numerous company, by God's leave! And God is with the patient. And when they advanced to meet Goliath and his forces, they prayed: – Our Lord! Pour forth on us patience and make us victorious over the unbelievers. (Qurʾān II,249-50)

When applied to patience, the idea of the companionship of God – whether meaning only His support, His help in the victory over the infidels and His satisfaction with the deeds of the good, as the majority of commentators maintain, or the highest and most enduring degree of proximity to Him, as spiritual authors suggest – reappears in the sura *al-Anfāl* 'The Spoils':

> And obey God and His Messenger; and fall into no disputes, lest you lose heart and your power depart; and be patient and persevering: for God is with those who patiently persevere [*Allāh maʿa al-ṣābirīn*] […]. Now God has lightened your task for you, knowing that there is weakness in you. If there be a hundred of you, patient men, they will overcome two hundred; if there be of you a thousand, they will overcome two thousand by God's leave; God is with the patient. (*Allāh maʿa al-ṣābirīn*, VIII,46 and 66)

The persistent presence of patience in the Qurʾān, along with the commendations it receives from divine *dicta*, is clear proof of its importance in Islamic moral thought. It inevitably looms large in the case of Job/Ayyūb (XXXVIII,44), with even greater scope here than in the biblical antecedent. Patience is a regular trait of the prophets and messengers (VI,34; XLVI,35), and of Moses/Mūsā in particular (XIV,5; XVIII,69; XXI,85; XXXVIII,12), of Ishmael/Ismāʿīl, Idrīs, Dhū al-Qifl (XXI,85), Jacob/Yaʿqūb (XII,18), Joseph/Yūsuf and his brother (XII,90), Noah/Nūḥ (VIII,12), Lot/Lūṭ (XXXVIII,13), the messengers to the tribes of ʿĀd, of Thamūd and to al-Ayka (XXXVIII,12-13), and the son whom Abraham/Ibrāhīm was ready to sacrifice to God (XXXVII,102). Patience defines those who followed the Prophet in the Hijra, the move from Mecca to Medina (XVI,42 and 110); and all those who fear God and are sincere (II,177), all the devout, the generous (III,17), the grateful (XXXI,31), those who commend to one another compassion (XC,17) and truth (CIII,3). Men and women equally, as the sura *al-Aḥzāb* 'The Combined Forces' has it:

> the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women and the humble men and the humble women, and the almsgiving men and the almsgiving women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the chaste men and the chaste women, and the men and the women who constantly remember God – surely He has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward. (XXXIII,35)

Patience brings help from harm (VI,34) and victory against odds (VIII,65-6), good outcomes (VII,128; XI,49), recompense (III,80) and reward (XI,11 and 115; XVI,96; XXIX,59; XXXIX,10), even double reward (XXVIII,54), satisfaction (X,130) and the gardens of paradise (XIII,22-4; XXV,75; LXXVI,12); it stimulates the Lord's forgiveness (XI,11) and transforms enemies into good friends. As the sura *Fuṣṣilat* 'Explained in Detail' says:

> Virtue and evil are not equal. If you replace evil habits by virtuous ones, you will certainly find that your enemies will become your intimate friends. Only those who exercise patience and who have been granted a great share of God's favour can find such an opportunity. (XLI,34-5)

There is a similar message in the sura *al-Qaṣaṣ* 'The Stories': "These will be given their reward twice over, because they are patient, and repel evil with good" (XXVIII,54). Patience often figures as a metonym for the very condition of the believer, as if to say that its presence alone is enough to define the Muslim.

God repeatedly recommends patience to Muḥammad: "Be patient with a gracious patience [*aṣbir ṣabr*$^{an}$ *jamīl*$^{an}$]" as the sura *al-Maʿārij* 'The Ways of Ascent' puts it (LXX,5). The Qurʾān calls on the Prophet to be patient so that he does not despair and trusts in God who is the Supreme Judge (X,109; cf. LII,48), so that he will trust in His true promises (XXX,60; XL,55 and 77), in the announcement that the good will be rewarded and the transgressing people will be destroyed (XLVI,35); so that he look after his Companions (XVIII,28), that he not allow himself to be distressed by the plots (XVI,127) or the words (XX,130; XXXVIII,17; L,39; LXXIII,10) of the unbelievers, and that he not give way to sadness (XVI,127 again).

Also in the Qurʾān, patience features in the advice that the wise Luqmān gives to his son to help him lead a good and responsible life as well as a pious one: "My son, be steadfast in prayer. Make others do good. Prevent them from doing evil. Bear patiently that which befalls you; surely these acts require determination" (XXXI,17). This is an interesting reappearance, because Luqmān, although described in the Book as possessing the traits of the good Muslim, is a wise man (cf. *ḥikma* حكمة; XXXI,12) and not a prophet: in this case, then, patience goes beyond the sphere of religion and takes on a secular, humanistic value.

## 2.2 Resistance, Care, Serenity

Patience is the greatest virtue of the true Muslim. And yet 'patience' in Islam is more than merely a disposition that allows us to accept the reversals of fortune with moderation and equanimity. It is the resigned acceptance of adversity, just as gratitude to God (*shukr* شُكر) is its mirror image in times of prosperity (Qur'ān XXXI,31); it is a calm submission to divine justice, which is in any case a prerequisite of victory or success (VIII,66; XVIII,69; XXIII,111; LXXVI,24); it is absolute trust in God's plan, which is essentially the same as faith (*īmān*). But it is also the serene behaviour of those who are content, it is tolerance and moderation towards others (III,200); as well as commitment and steadfastness in the act of worship (II,45; XVIII,28; XX,132). To this extent, the English word 'patience' is perhaps insufficient to render the full semantic range of the corresponding Arabic term.

Translating *ṣabr* as 'patience' seems all the more inadequate when we think of the different etymological backgrounds of the two terms, on the one hand endurance and suffering (as in, for example, *passio* and πάθος), and on the other (*ṣabr*) holding back, resistance and abstention: of the tongue from complaining, of the limbs from violence, abstention too from food and from sexual relations during 'the month of patience', another name for Ramadan.[2] *Ṣabr* is also the name of the aloe, a plant capable of retaining water and of withstanding heat and drought without apparent alteration or distress. And it is in fact because it is not necessarily connected with suffering but can on the contrary coincide with impassibility, immutability and serenity that *al-ṣabūr* 'the most Patient One' can be conceived as a divine Name.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, in his book on the Beautiful Names, when commenting on *al-ṣabūr*, emphasises the appropriateness of timing and modality that characterise divine actions, but also stresses the absolute absence of suffering or aversion in God's patience. He writes as follows:

> *Al-ṣabūr* is not One to be seized by haste so as to act precipitately, before the due time; on the contrary, He causes things to happen in accordance with a given plan, and brings them about in a precise manner, without delaying through indolence their preordained end, and without impetuously anticipating their fulfilment. Instead, He makes all things happen when they should happen and how they should happen. And all this He does without sufferance [or *muqāsāh* مقاساة 'endurance'], and without contravening His own will.[3]

## 2.3 Continuity of a Tradition

The continuing importance of al-Ghazālī's work should not be underestimated. An essay on patience in the Qur'ān, *Al-ṣabr fī l-Qur'ān* (Patience in the Qur'ān), by the contemporary Egyptian theologian and preacher Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022)[4] draws heavily on al-Ghazālī's *Kitāb al-ṣabr wa-l-shukr* 'The Book of Patience and Gratitude', a section of his major work

2 As noted by Lane 1968, root ṣ-b-r.

3 Al-Ghazālī 1971, 149.

4 Al-Qaraḍāwī 1410/1989.

on the revival of religious sciences.[5] Al-Qaraḍāwī emphasises in his own work the excellence but also the mandatoriness of patience in the Qurʾān, reminds us of the figures who best embody it in the Holy Book, and provides examples of patience in different contexts, often following in this the great medieval master step by step. He does so, for example, when drawing a fundamental distinction between physical and spiritual patience, while illuminating the preeminence of the second, and enumerating its particular aspects, defining them scrupulously, sometimes by means of contrasting their opposites. Here is a passage that al-Qaraḍāwī borrows wholesale from al-Ghazālī:

> When it is dealing with the desires of the stomach and the sexual organs, it is called abstinence.
>
> When it has to do with calamity it is simply called patience [*ṣabr*], and its opposite is called bitterness and despondency […].
>
> When it concerns the management of one's wealth it is called self-control, and its opposite is called insolence.
>
> When it is in war or combat it is called courage and its opposite is cowardice.
>
> When it is a matter of suppressing anger it is called wisdom [*ḥilm* حِلم], and its opposite is rabid and excited speech.
>
> When it is reacting to the unpleasant calamities of life it is called greatness of mind and its opposite is cowardice, despondency and meanness.
>
> When it has to do with keeping something said hidden, it is called 'keeping a secret' and whoever does so is said to be a discreet person.
>
> When it regards the pleasures of life it is called renunciation, and its opposite is greed.
>
> And when it is patience towards a destiny of bad luck, then it is called acceptance and its opposite is presumption.
>
> Many of the characters of faith [*akhlāq al-īmān*] are found in patience. And that is why, when they asked Muḥammad about faith, he replied: – It is patience. For that contains the greatest and best part of our deeds.
>
> God has put these elements together and called the whole 'patience'; and He has called 'patient' [*ṣābirūn*] all those who are in sorrow, that is, in calamity; or in adversity, that is, in poverty; or in times of trouble, that is, in war […]. These then are the components of patience in relation to their pertinence.[6]

Al-Qaraḍāwī also carries over from al-Ghazālī the idea that patience is a characteristic of human beings which distinguishes them from the animals because they lack it, and from the angels on account of their perfection; as well as the idea that patience is a characteristic of adults, since children have no patience at all and in this they are like the animals. He also reiterates the notion that patience is a characteristic of the man from whose heart the angelic host has driven out the battalions of demons responsible for stoking the passions.[7] Al-Qaraḍāwī's erudition has him drawing often on the work of the early mystics, and on patience in particular he quotes

5 Al-Ghazālī 2010.

6 Al-Qaraḍāwī 1410/1989, 7-9; Al-Ghazālī s.d., *Kitāb al-ṣabr wa-l-shukr*, 4: 60-80.

7 Al-Qaraḍāwī 1410/1989, 10-11; Al-Ghazālī s.d., *Kitāb al-ṣabr wa-l-shukr*, 4: 62.

the *Qūt al-qulūb* or 'The Nourishment of Hearts', a systematic compendium of Sufi piety and practice by the renowned ascetic and preacher Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996). From the latter he quotes:

> Know that the greater part of men's faults come from two things: lack of patience with what they love and lack of patience with what they hate.[8]

## 2.4 Patience According to the Mystics

Al-Makkī, like other spiritual writers, devotes particular attention to the virtue of patience: in *The Nourishment of Hearts* he selects the most eloquent Qur'ānic verses, and quotes Prophetic sayings and stories about the "pious predecessors" (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* السلف الصالح) in support, sometimes also adding the thoughts and expressions of previous ascetics. He teaches that "patience occupies the highest rank of obedience to God", that the best kind of patience is patience in the face of disobedience, and next comes patience in devotional works; and that "the righteous [*ṣāliḥūn* صالحون] among believers are few, the sincere [*ṣādiqūn* صادقون] among the pious are few, and the patient [*ṣābirūn*] among the sincere are few", thus indicating that patience is higher up the scale than any other form of adherence to Islam, and finally that it is a virtue that fully belongs only to a fortunate few. Among the Prophetic sayings that al-Makkī rehearses in his huge hotch-potch of quotations are "patience is half of faith" and "patience lies in three things: purifying one's soul, turning away from the torment of misfortune and being content with what God has decreed for us, be it good or ill". He further explains that patience is a pillar of the faith, and that "in faith, it is like the head on the body, there is no body without its head, and there is no faith without patience"; and finally, that faith, sincere assent to the truth, wisdom and patience are all one.[9]

As a mystic, he does not overlook the significance of patience as the sublimation of suffering and renunciation. Exploring, for example the relationship between patience and gratitude, he writes that "patience belongs to the state of adversity and gratitude to the state of prosperity, therefore adversity is better because it is more painful for the soul", and "God has said that He will reward those who are patient 'without measure'" (cf. Qur'ān XXXIX,10). It is better, he goes on to say, "to patiently abstain from what requires thanksgiving, and it is better to be grateful for what requires patience"; "the patient wise man is better than the grateful wise man, because patience is given in a condition of poverty while gratitude is given in a condition of wealth". Al-Makkī teaches finally that when the Qur'ān declares that some prophets are preferred to others (XVII,55) the reference is to the patient prophets; and that God alone can provide serenity of mind (*sakīna* سكينة) since He has said: "Your patience is only by the help of God" (XVI,127).

8 Al-Qaraḍāwī 1410/1989, 14; Al-Makkī 1426/2005, 1: 306.

9 Al-Makkī 1426/2005, 1: 298-313.

## 2.5 Patience in Islamic Law

The theologian and jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), who belonged to the Ḥanbalī theological and juridical school – named after the expert in Prophetic Tradition Ibn Ḥanbal – devoted one of his maturest works, the *ʻUddat al-ṣābirīn wa-dhakīrat al-shākirīn* 'The Resources of the Patient, the Reserves of the Grateful', to patience, together with gratitude.[10] In this work we find a systematic exposition of all the many issues concerning patience according to Islam, including a detailed evaluation of its significance in juridical terms, which is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the book. He examines patience here according to the five qualifications (*aḥkām* أحكام) of Islamic Law: obligatory, recommended, forbidden, reprehensible and permitted.[11] In illuminating particularly the pragmatic side, focusing not so much on patience as a quality of the soul as the patient actions that this virtue can generate, Ibn Qayyim highlights the double face of *ṣabr*, which can spur both action and inaction, because on the one hand it describes the believer who acts with perseverance and tenacity (cf. *ṣabr ʻalā*), and on the other the one who refrains from action, who renounces and disciplines himself to avoid a given behaviour (cf. *ṣabr ʻan*). He writes:

> Obligatory patience is subdivided into three kinds: the first is the patient abstention from what is forbidden, the second the determined execution of what is commanded, and the third is to bring patience to calamities over which man has no control, such as illness, poverty and the like.
>
> Recommended patience is abstention from reprehensible things and commitment to commendable things, as well as refraining from doing to an evildoer what he has done to us:
>
> As for proscribed patience, it breaks down into various types, and the first of these is to cease eating and drinking to the extent of dying of starvation; similarly, it is prohibited to abstain from eating dead meat, blood and pork in times of scarcity, when without eating these things one will die […]. If someone asks about the patience of those who abstain from begging, whether it is allowed or not allowed,[12] he must be told that there is a difference of opinion among the Hanbalites in this regard.
>
> Forbidden too is the patience of those who give up and are too patient in the face of beasts, snakes, a fire, or faced with an unbeliever who tries to kill them. On the other hand, abstaining from taking part in a revolt in which Muslims may be killed is not only lawful but commendable, because when this question was put to the Prophet he answered: "be like the best of Adam's children" […].
>
> There are various examples of reprehensible patience, and the first is that of those who refrain from eating or drinking or dressing themselves or from having sexual relations with their wives, to the extent of damaging their own bodies; a second is that of those who abstain from sexual relations with their wives when they ask for them, unless they themselves would be damaged thereby; a third is steadfastness in pursuing

10 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989.

11 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 31-53.

12 On the basis of numerous Prophetic sayings, asking for charity is strongly discouraged. On the permissibility or otherwise of begging, cf. Zilio-Grandi 2018b.

> what is reprehensible; a fourth, conversely, steadfastness in abstaining from what is praiseworthy.
>
> As for permissible patience, it is that of those who abstain from performing actions that have two sides to them, that is, when it is good both to do and not do a thing.
>
> Generally speaking, to be patient in what is obligatory is obligatory, while tenacious abstinence from what is obligatory is forbidden; likewise, abstaining from doing what is forbidden is obligatory, while abstaining from doing what is obligatory is forbidden; and being patient in performing what is recommended is recommended, while abstaining from performing what is recommended is reprehensible; finally, abstaining from what is allowed is, instead, allowed. But God knows better than any other.[13]

Another admirable aspect of *The Resources of the Patient, The Reserves of the Grateful* is its insistence on the divide between praiseworthy and blameworthy *ṣabr*. As is not uncommon among Muslim jurists, Ibn Qayyim shows a lively interest in the spiritual aspect of Islam. As he explains:

> Culpable patience is that of those who resolutely turn away from God, His love, His will, and the drawing of their hearts nearer to Him, because this prevents them from attaining perfection and accomplishing that for which they were created. This patience, which is the most terrible, is also the greatest and most extreme, because there is no greater patience than that of one who tenaciously stays away from his Beloved, from Him without whom he would not even have had life, just as there is no greater renunciation than that of the ascetic who refrains from performing the wonders which God has prepared for His saints, such as no eye has ever seen and no ear has heard, wonders which never before made hearts beat faster.[14]

And here, once again in *The Resources of the Patient, The Reserves of the Grateful*, is a story about the mystic al-Shiblī (d. 334/945) – a ubiquitous presence in Sufi manuals for his famous ecstasies, penances and spiritual torments – and on the horror that patience aroused in him in its sense of tenaciously keeping away from the Lord:

> A man who had become his friend asked him: – What kind of patience is the hardest for those who practise it?
>
> Al-Shiblī answered: – Patience in God [*fī Allāh*].
>
> – No – said the man.
>
> – Then patience *for* God [*li-llāh*].
>
> – No – the man said again.
>
> – Then patience *with* God [*maʿa Allāh*].
>
> – No – said the man once more.
>
> Al-Shiblī esclaimed: – Well, what is it then?
>
> The man answered: – It is persistence in turning one's back on God [*ʿan Allāh*].
>
> At which al-Shiblī let out a howl as if he were dying.[15]

13 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 31-3.

14 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 44.

15 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 44.

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya dwells at length on, among other things, a conundrum, namely whether patience directed 'to God' (*li-llāh*) or 'through God' (*bi-llāh*) is better, and mentions a third type of patience, that 'with God' (*ma'a Allāh*; cf. Qur'ān II,153; VIII,46 and 66), which in his opinion is the highest form of all. In this passage he does not forget the famous 'holy speech' or 'holy tradition' (*ḥadīth qudsī* حديث قدسي or *ilāhī* إلاهي or *rabbānī* رباني) – a saying of the Prophet so called because God speaks in the first person on God's love for the good believer:

> If I love him, I am the ear with which he hears, the sight with which he sees, the hand with which he attacks, the foot with which he walks, and if he asks Me, I will certainly satisfy him.[16]

A last distinction finely drawn by Ibn Qayyim in his book on patience and gratitude is that between the patience of the noble soul and that of the craven one. The author observes that the former acts patiently, or patiently refrains from action, out of choice, while the patience of the coward is not by choice but by necessity, and if the noble man turns away from bad deeds voluntarily, because he knows well what he is doing and seeks his reward in the world to come, the coward conversely is patient because compelled to be so, as if chained and beaten; the noble is patient in obedience to God, the coward in obedience to Satan so that, of all men, he is the most tenacious in his obedience to the desires and passions of men, and equally, of all men, the least steadfast in obedience to the Lord.[17]

## 2.6 The Best and Greatest of Gifts

The great relevance of *ṣabr* to virtuous conduct stands out in the Prophetic Tradition. According to a well-known saying, it happened that one day a group of *Anṣār* 'Helpers' – those men of Medina who supported Muḥammad after the Hijra – bombarded the Prophet with questions. Muḥammad answered them many times, until he said finally:

> What good I have to give you I will not deny you; however, he who holds himself back, God sustains him; whoever is content, God will satisfy him; and he who is patient, God will comfort him. No greater and better thing has been given to anyone than patience.[18]

The reach and longevity of this Prophetic saying, which is enough on its own to illustrate the multiple contents and also the excellence of *ṣabr*, is not limited to long-distant times but is still frequently taken up by contemporaries, in sermons, teachings or systematic treatises, in more or less pastoral contexts. One such is the above-cited Muḥammad Rātib al-Nābulusī in the *Encyclopaedia of the Beautiful Names of God*, where

**16** Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 45-6. The saying is quoted, with others, in the compilation by al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-rifāq*, no. 6137.

**17** Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 52-3.

**18** Al-Bukhārī actually quotes this twice: *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-zakāt*, *bāb al-isti'fāf 'an al-mas'ala*, no. 1400, and *kitāb al-rifāq*, *bāb al-ṣabr 'an al-maḥārim*, no. 2150. Cf. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-zakāt*, *bāb faḍl al-ta'affuf wa-l-ṣabr*, no. 1745; cf. also Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1998a, 17.

the author takes his brother through stories from the Tradition and true-life instances.[19]

Another example is provided by the Saudi ʻAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn Nāṣir al-Saʻdī (d. 1956) in his *Bahjat qulūb al-abrār* or 'Splendours from the Hearts of the Faithful', a collection of 99 Prophetic sayings.[20] When it is the turn of the saying on patience as the best and greatest of gifts, al-Saʻdī refers to the Qurʾān in the sura 'The Cow', in which the believer is called upon to seek help from patience and prayer (Qurʾān II,45) and explains that patience, like prayer, is needed in every situation. Taking his cue from his early colleagues, he illustrates the difference between an active, positive and productive patience (*ṣabr ʻalā*) and an abstaining and renunciatory patience (*ṣabr ʻan*), and teaches that the former is for obtaining Favours and what one loves, and serenely accepting 'painful Decrees' (*aqdār Allāh al-muʾlima* أقدار الله المؤلمة), i.e. suffering, whether physical or spiritual; while the latter is the ability to renounce disobedience and transgression. Unlike others, however, al-Saʻdī emphasizes the possibility of refining patience, which is not given ready-made to the believer but must be honed by a process of application and exercise.

Another example by a Saudi scholar, Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid (b. 1961), is from his popular *fatwa* website IslamQA (*Al-Islām suʾāl wa-jawāb*), where he answers questions on religion and faith. In reply to a question on the meaning of the Prophetic saying "no greater and better thing has been given to anyone than patience", al-Munajjid refers to previous ancient and contemporary sources, more or less without adding personal glosses, as is his practice on this forum.[21] With the aid of these many quotes, the author points out the difference between active patience and abstaining patience and reminds his readers that the best of the patient are those who abstain (*ṣabara ʻan*) from what God has forbidden, and persevere (*ṣabara ʻalā*) in obeying Him. He frames patience as going it alone, without depending on others, as with those who refrain from harassing questions, but especially those who defer to God and wait with confidence. The Prophetic saying about the excellence of patience, he explains, "calls on the faithful to exercise restraint, and to be soberly content with what comes their way, even if it is little, because patience is also moderation, self-mastery and frugality".

## 2.7 The Paradise of the Believer

Appeals to the Islamic value of patience are frequent enough in contemporary literature of Islamic inspiration, even in fields other than theology and pastoral instruction, including among female voices.

A certain Hayā Bint Nāṣir Ibn ʻAbd Allāh al-Rāshid published in Riyadh, in 2014, a miscellany of memoirs and other non-fiction material entitled

19 Al-Nābulusī 2002b, *Ism Allāh al-ṣabūr*, lesson no. 21, 2005. `https://nabulsi.com/web/article/1461`.

20 Al-Saʻdī 1423/2002, 88-90.

21 Al-Munajjid 1997-2019, no. 201175, 19 August 2013.

*Al-ṣabr jannat al-mu'min* or 'Patience is the Paradise of the Believer'.[22] The author describes how from her youth she had observed people who found themselves in conditions of great adversity, and who had aroused the greatest respect in her because of their patience under the blows that fate inflicted on them, their steadfastness and tenacity, their perseverance in performing devotional works and keeping themselves free of sin: "Here a poor man content with his lot, there a sick one full of patience, there again a destitute grateful to God". She goes on to say that she then compared these with many similar situations in current everyday life, made up of rushing around, complaining, grumbling and resentment, "as if Satan had covered our hearts and eyes with a veil, concealing the grace that God has reserved for us and for which we should be grateful to Him". "We are too much in a hurry", she writes, "and we lack the patience to give ourselves patience".[23]

Nothing – Hayā Bint Nāṣir goes on to say in this book – is "key and salvation" as patience is, nothing is as free as patience is from regret, and though it shares its name with the bitter aloe, its fruits are sweeter than honey. As for its meaning, it does not imply surrendering to events or dodging the burdens of existence, but keeping the heart from anguish and resentment, and the tongue from complaining.[24]

Numerous first-person stories about her life, family, and friendships new and old alternate with quotes from early poets, proverbs, and popular sayings, such as "health is a crown on the head of the healthy person, which only the sick one can see", or "when a misfortune occurs, the clever do immediately what the fool does after a month". Many of the Prophet's sayings are shrewdly analysed, for example the following, where patience is displayed by the husband who gives up the best food:

> I am amazed by what God has ordained for the believer: when something good happens, he praises the Lord and is grateful to Him, if something bad happens, he praises the Lord and is patient; the believer is compensated for everything, even for the tasty morsel of food he offers to his wife's lips.[25]

Hayā Bint Nāṣir does not ignore the many Qur'ānic verses on patience, nor the teachings of the theologians and the jurists, nor the classical meditations on the divine Name *al-ṣabūr*;[26] but she adds a good number of novelties, such as the idea that patience is a medicine made simultaneously of knowledge and action, a medicine for the heart and also for the body, since for every evil God has allowed He has equally decreed an antidote.[27] Here the author no doubt has in mind, although she does not say so, the following well-known episode:

**22** Bint Nāṣir 1435/2014. As far as I have been able to establish, this is her only publication. I have not been able to find a birth date for the author.

**23** Bint Nāṣir 1435/2014, 10.

**24** Bint Nāṣir 1435/2014, 12.

**25** From Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad, musnad bāqī al-'ashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 1425.

**26** Apropos of this Name the author reminds us of a Prophetic saying about the Christian creed: "No one is more patient than God. They associate him with others, they give him a son, and despite all this He has care for them and fills them with grace"; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb ṣifat al-qiyāma wa-l-janna wa-l-nār*, no. 5022.

**27** Bint Nāṣir 1435/2014, 84.

> They asked him: – Messenger of God, is it counted a crime not to seek a cure?
>
> He answered: – Servants of God, seek for a cure, because Almighty God has not created any disease without also creating its cure, with the exception of old age.
>
> They asked him: – And what is the best thing that a servant of God can receive [from Him]?
>
> He replied: – Good character.[28]

*Patience is the Paradise of the Believer* is a valuable book, a contemporary compendium on patience according to Islam. In the non-autobiographical section, it is a breviary for the believer seeking at once sound doctrine and good advice, but the most interesting parts are the narrative ones, in which, for all that they are couched in a high style and a very refined lexicon, the daily experience of a lifetime shines through. And, in this light, all the work of the many who have reflected on patience, who have examined it and subdivided it, classified it and evaluated it, who have assigned it many names, all the rest, including the Word of God, is made actual, revived and renewed once more.

**28** Cf., among others al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-ṭibb, bāb mā anzala Allāh dāʾ illā anzala la-hu shifāʾ*, no. 3436.

# 3 Gratitude and Giving Thanks

**Summary** 3.1 Gratitude and Praise. – 3.2 Addition, Increase and Multiplication. – 3.3 Gratitude and Faith. – 3.4 Praise Be to God. – 3.5 Gratitude Towards One's Neighbour.

If patience (*ṣabr*) is necessary in the face of suffering and adversity, good fortune conversely demands gratitude (*shukr*). "Let whoever is afflicted show patience, whoever receives gifts be grateful, whoever suffers an injustice forgive, and whoever does an injustice ask for forgiveness", goes a saying of Muḥammad's which pithily encapsulates the ethics of virtue according to Islam.[1]

Gratitude, specifically, is essential for all those who wish to avoid divine disfavour; al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), one of the earliest Qur'ānic commentators and a famous preacher in his day, much quoted down the ages, declared that "God bestows his favour on whom He wishes, but towards those who are ungrateful He converts it to punishment". Thus, as the Umayyad Caliph 'Umar Ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz (d. 101/720) put it, somewhat dramatically, God's grace "must be chained and put in the stocks through the tool of gratitude".[2]

Gratitude too should be practised in imitation of God: the Name 'the Most Grateful' or 'the Most Thankful', *al-shakūr* الشكور, in its emphatic form, included in the principal lists,[3] appears in the Qur'ān (XXXV,34; XLII,23; LXIV,17) alongside 'the Most Forgiving' (in the expression *shakūr ghafūr* غفور) and 'the Forbearing' (in the expression *shakūr ḥalīm* حليم), alternating with its simple form, *al-shākir* الشاكر 'the Grateful' or 'the Thankful' (II,158; IV,147). Of particular relevance is a verse in the sura *al-Nisā'* 'The Women',

1 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 65-6.
2 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 16-17.
3 No. 36 in al-Tirmidhī's list.


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where God's gratitude is linked to that of human beings: "Why would God punish you if you are grateful to Him and believe in Him. God is grateful and all-knowing [*shākir ʿalīm* عليم]" (IV,147).

Again, in the Qur'ān, the same emphatic *shakūr* defines the good believer (XIV,5; XXXI,31; XXXIV,19; XLII,33). In man's case, gratitude goes hand in hand with patience in the expression *ṣabbār shakūr* صبّار 'very patient and very grateful' – demonstrating the indispensable coexistence of both qualities in defining the good believer; an idea confirmed by a famous saying of the Prophet's according to which faith is in two halves, half is patience and half is gratitude.[4]

As for the lovability of the grateful in God's eyes, nothing is specified in the Qur'ān, but it can be derived by contrast from the stated dislike of the proud, the vain and the miserly:

> Worship only God and associate none with Him […]. Surely God loves not the proud and boastful and those who are miserly, and bid other men to be miserly, and themselves conceal the bounty that God has given them. (Qur'ān IV,36-7)

## 3.1 Gratitude and Praise

We have noted above the divine Name *al-shakūr* 'the Most Grateful'. In so far as gratitude implies a benefit received and the desire to respond in kind, it is natural to ask ourselves in what sense can God be grateful, and to whom, questions that can only be answered by taking into consideration the fact that, like patience or *ṣabr*, the Arabic word for 'gratitude' (*shukr*) has a semantic breadth well beyond that of its English equivalent.

The entry that the medieval scholar Ibn Manẓūr dedicates to the lemma in question in *The Language of the Arabs*, arguably the most authoritative dictionary of the classical language, proves to be very useful as an introduction to the topic, both for the clarity of the author's explanations and because he directs us to its most notable appearances in the canonical literature of Islam.[5] The author attributes to gratitude both a declarative and a disclosing meaning – "it is the acknowledgement and the open admission of the benefit received" – but it is also and above all physical, tangible, practical, because, he explains, it necessarily comes 'from the hand', is openly given, unlike praise (*ḥamd* حمد) which may come 'from the hand', and also may not. The Prophet had said that "praise stands above gratitude" and that "the servant who does not praise God is not grateful to Him", writes Ibn Manẓūr, illustrating the superiority of the act of praising, "praise, in fact, contains the manifest admission and also the celebration of a grace received".[6] Praising (*ḥamd*) is broader and more inclusive than thanksgiving (*shukr*), he goes on to say, because it has to do with both the good qualities and at the same time the good actions of the benefactor, while gratitude concerns only his actions. He then gives us the Qur'ānic example of

4 This saying is reported on the authority of the Companion Ibn Masʿūd in different wordings; cf. also, for example, Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, glossing Qur'ān XXI,31.

5 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root sh-k-r.

6 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root sh-k-r.

Noah, a "very grateful servant", *'abd shakūr* (Qur'ān XVII,3; cf. XXVI,109) who had been unsuccessful in his prophetic mission but was nonetheless saved from the flood as a reward. He also gives an example from the Sunna:

> The Prophet prayed until his feet were sore and swollen. They asked him: – Do you do this, even if God has already forgiven you for past and future faults? He replied: – Should I not then be a very grateful servant?[7]

It is a much-repeated saying, transmitted in variants of differing length and detail that turn on Muḥammad's bodily mortification during prayer, all attesting to the value of an act, even – especially, perhaps – when physically performed, inherent in human gratitude to the Lord.

As for the intrinsic meaning of gratitude, the author of *The Language of the Arabs* explains that *shukr* refers to the camels fattening at pasture, of whom it is said that they 'give thanks'; dairy animals are also said to be 'grateful' when, having been given their feed, they produce milk more abundantly than before; and precisely *shakūr* – the divine Name and epithet of the good believer – is used of the quadruped which needs little food and fattens even on that, "as if it were giving thanks even though the benefit it has received is small, its gratitude consisting exactly in its visible growth, as evidence of its assimilated feed".[8] It is said too of the sky that it 'gives thanks' when it rains copiously and the effect on nature is exuberant, and also of the wind when it brings rain.

## 3.2 Addition, Increase and Multiplication

These lively, physically grounded examples, which deal with gratitude largely in a context of food, also speak of scarcity repaid with abundance, and seem thus to affirm that the true essence of gratitude according to Islam lies precisely in addition, increase or multiplication. And this is the usual way with God's gratitude, which 'increases' (*yazīdu*) and 'redoubles' (*yuḍā'ifu*), which God "redoubles for whomever He wants", in this world and in the hereafter (Qur'ān II,261): "If there is a good deed, He will double it, and out of His grace He will reward it abundantly" (IV,40; cf. II,245; XXX,39; XXXV,30; LVII,11). When God says that "He will pay them what is due to them and multiply His grace [*ni'ma* نعمة] for them" (XXXV,30) – Ibn Manẓūr further explains – this means that every work of the servant, however small, will grow and prosper with the Creator, who repays it beyond measure.

Gratitude, then, as understood in Islam, beginning with the Arabic term which expresses it, is a concrete action, a blessing deriving from a blessing; and it is also an augmentative response, a magnifying chain-reaction. On this point one cannot but insist: if everything benefits, one thing after the other must be followed by greater benefits. Thus, the gratitude of Islam presents a very happy aspect, because it implies a continuous expansion of good. This begins with God's own gratitude – as *shukr* is one of His attributes, a 'description' (*ṣifa* صفة) – which is not reciprocation, but immeasurable reward.

7 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root sh-k-r. Cf. for example, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb ṣifāt al-qiyāma*, nos. 5051-2; Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, *kitāb iqāmat al-ṣalāt*, no. 1409.

8 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, 2305-6.

Al-Ghazālī's comment on the Name *al-shakūr*, in his work on the Beautiful Names, turns precisely on the increase that is inherent in gratitude – in God's case unlimited, in man's limited: God is 'the Most Grateful', he writes, "because he compensates to a much higher degree men's small acts of obedience, and repays the work of finite days with the infinite bliss of the afterlife". What is more:

> we say that someone has shown gratitude for a good deed when he responds to it with a doubly good deed […] and if we reflect on the increase inherent in that remuneration, then the only one absolutely grateful is God; in fact, what He adds is without restriction or limit, because nothing is greater than the beatitude of heaven.[9]

Since *shukr*, as we have seen, also has a declarative sense where it signifies 'praise' (*thanāʾ* ثناء), the Name *al-shakūr* must imply God's praise of the deserving. And on this point al-Ghazālī's commentary clearly expresses the intersection between the divine and the human encapsulated in some of the Beautiful Names, as well as their circularity of meaning. The great theologian notes here that God's praise, although addressed to the actions of the faithful, is even so in a sense directed at Himself, because human actions are created by Him, whereas human praise for a benefit received can only be directed outwards. In the same way, the gratitude of man towards God can be said to originate with God himself, who alone can sanction it, and this is a further grace added on top of His grace towards the man who expresses gratitude. Man's praise of God is always insufficient, al-Ghazālī goes on to say, because the vastness of the praise due is beyond the capacity of humankind, and is certainly poorer than obedient deeds. The author maintains for this reason that the highest expression of gratitude to the Lord is to exert oneself in obedience to his commands.[10]

The thinking of the learned Ḥanbalī Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in his *The Resources of the Patient, The Reserves of the Grateful* runs along similar lines.[11] This author, who also dwells, as the title of his work suggests, on the substance and expression of human gratitude,[12] does not neglect to align the latter with God's gratitude; and in his turn notes the underlying interconnectedness of both. Taking his cue from the sura 'The Women', where it is written "if you give thanks and believe in Him […] God is All-thankful and All-forgiving" (Qurʾān IV,147) – and again in the sura *al-Isrāʾ* 'The Night Journey': "The efforts of those who faithfully strive hard for the happiness of the life to come will be thanked [*mashkūr* مشكور] by God" (XVII,19) – Ibn Qayyim draws the reader's attention to the pairing God establishes between Himself and the good believer through the use of an analogous vocabulary, and he teaches that God, too, is grateful to the obedient servant, as the servant is grateful to Him, although His gratitude is of a different order. Entirely in agreement with al-Ghazālī, Ibn Qayyim also observes that God deserves to be called 'grateful' above any other – "in all truth God is

9 Al-Ghazālī 1971, 114.

10 Al-Ghazālī 1971, 115.

11 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 111-47 and 280-3.

12 Characteristic in this context is Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 111-47, devoted to the debated superiority of either gratitude or patience over the other.

the most Grateful" – because He not only reciprocates what is offered to Him by way of gratitude, but also repays good deeds with ten times better ones. Thus, the being that He loves the most is the one most distinguished by gratitude: "God is Beautiful and loves beauty, He is the Wise One and loves the wise, and He is the Grateful One who loves whoever is grateful".[13]

## 3.3 Gratitude and Faith

In the course of his reflections on the divine Name *al-shakūr*, al-Ghazālī cites a Prophetic saying that was frequently revisited in the subsequent literature: "God is not grateful to those who are not grateful to others".[14] A notable feature of this axiom is that the subtlety of the Arabic language allows us, according to whether the Name *Allāh* is read in the nominative, as the phrase's subject, or in the accusative as its object, also to read it as "whoever is not grateful to others is not grateful to God".

Among other glosses is that of Ibn Manẓūr in his dictionary,[15] where he explains that the first reading means that God does not accept or reciprocate the gratitude that men show towards Him if they are not grateful to others for the benefits that come from them, and refuse to acknowledge them; in the second case, denying the good received from others and failing to be grateful for them also entails a denial and want of thanksgiving for the good received from God. The difference between the readings is not trivial, and in both cases it lends itself to discussion: where God is not grateful to the man who is not grateful to his brother, divine gratitude would appear to be subordinate to that among His creatures – an anthropocentrism which is at the very least anomalous in the Islamic context; in the other case, where those ungrateful to their brothers are also ungrateful to God, gratitude assumes an entirely human context, and omits the gratitude that the Creator offers the pious man, which is regularly insisted on by the Qur'ān. However that may be, between the nuances of the language and theological complexities, gratitude in action is clearly revealed to be a moment of connection between God's praxis and the behaviour that human beings owe – to Him and for Him: gratitude is, then, a connective process, plausibly a continuous one, and a highpoint of mutual contiguity.

Let us stay with Ibn Manẓūr for a moment. The religious status of gratitude, together with its auspicious content, is reflected last but not least in the definition *a contrario* the author furnishes: he writes, in fact, that gratitude is the opposite of 'denial' or 'impiety' (*kufrān* كفران),[16] thus making *shukr* synonymous with Islam itself. His note is a commonplace, and reflects the opposition between gratitude and impiety that appears several times in the Qur'ān; for instance, in the sura *al-Naml* 'The Ant' "Whoever thanks God does so for his own good. Whoever is ungrateful to God [or 'unbelieving', the verb *kafara* كفر] should know that the Lord is Self-Sufficient and Benevolent" (Qur'ān XXVII,40).

13 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1409/1989, 282-3.

14 Al-Ghazālī 1971, 115; in Arabic: *lā yashkuru llāh man lā yashkuru l-nās*.

15 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root sh-k-r.

16 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root k-f-r.

## 3.4 Praise Be to God

The Baghdad scholar Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, who had much to say on the subject of moral conduct, was the author, among other works, of a pamphlet entitled *Al-shukr li-llāh*, or 'The gratitude to God',[17] where human thankfulness to God is exemplified through Prophetic sayings sporadically supported by Qur'ānic quotations, anecdotes or poetic verses featuring pre-Islamic prophets, the learned and pious of early Islam, and a scattering of others whose example had been preserved in memory. The material is jumbled together without commentary, so that the small booklet is essentially a selection made by the author, an anthology, which does not appear to be governed by any firm criteria. It is useful nonetheless as a collection of some of the oldest writings on gratitude.

One thing we notice immediately in Ibn Abī l-Dunyā's work is that the overlapping of human and divine gratitude, so dear to such theologians as al-Ghazālī or Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, is missing entirely, and instead the one-sided nature of acts of gratitude is taken as given. The early master's purpose is to teach the substance and modality of good works: what exactly is gratitude to God, in real life? What are its expressions and due seasons? And how can we be sure of giving the Creator His due?

What gratitude means is soon told: to repeat 'praise be to God' (*al-ḥamdu li-llāh*), continuously, and particularly for the coming of the Prophet and of Islam because no speech of gratitude is sweeter than "praise be to God for having helped us and guided us on the path of religion". The answer to the question 'For what should we be grateful?' is vast, even limitless, since every thing is a gift, food and drink, new clothes, the bodies men have been given, their eyes and tongues; as the Qur'ān says: "When God brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers, you knew nothing, and He gave you hearing and sight and hearts that you may give thanks" (XVI,78).

A handsome face is a gift too: "When the Prophet looked at himself in a mirror he would say: – God be praised that he has made me regularly proportioned, and rendered my face noble and handsome";[18] And breathing likewise:

> Lord, what is the smallest gift you have given me? – the prophet David asked. He replied – Breathe! David drew a breath and He said: – There is the smallest gift I have given you.[19]

Also worthy of gratitude is our capacity for gratefulness; as the poet Maḥmūd al-Warrāq (d. c. 225/840) put it:

> If my gratitude for God's grace is His gift | for such a gift I must be grateful. | In the succession of days, in our existence that endures, | gratitude is obtained only through His favour.[20]

17 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994.

18 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 59-60; cf. 69.

19 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 50-1.

20 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 36; cf. 49.

When Moses asked God what was the best gratitude, God answered: "Be grateful in every case" (*ʿalā kull ḥāl*);[21] and in fact, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā teaches in one quotation after another, one should always be formulating one's gratitude to God because the whole length of our lives is a gift, every moment of it, happy or unhappy. They are wise who do not know whether grace lies in the good that happens to them or in the evil that does not befall them; therefore, "look at who is worse off than you and do not look at who is better off than you", the Prophet advised.[22]

*The Gratitude to God* by the early Bagdadi master also contains the occasional allusion to patience *ṣabr* – inevitably, since patience and gratitude are together required of all the faithful, Muslim or otherwise, by the vicissitudes of life. What stands out is, as always, the unparalleled extent of divine Grace; as for example in this new reference to David, a great Qurʾānic exemplar of gratitude (cf. Qurʾān VII,144):

> He exclaimed: – My God, if every hair on my head had two tongues, and every tongue, night and day, sang Your praises, I would not have repaid a single one of Your benefits.[23]

But the overflowing abundance of divine benefits should not dishearten the believer who knows he cannot reciprocate them; an ancient sage has said that "God has benefited the servants according to His measure and has asked them for gratitude according to their ability".[24] Such reassurances are continuous and God's habit of extraordinarily rewarding even the smallest of the faithful's deeds is repeatedly illustrated. The Caliph ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) said that "God's grace is linked to gratitude, and gratitude has to do with accretion [*mazīd* مزيد], and the two things proceed together";[25] no less eloquent is this conversation between two of the Prophet's Companions, in which human gratitude is summarised as a formula of grateful thanking:

> One said: – Every time that one of His servants says 'God be praised' [*al-ḥamdu li-llāh*], he has earned a blessing from God.
>
> The other asked: – And how does he repay that blessing?
>
> By again saying 'God be praised' – he replied – after which another blessing will arrive. The gifts of God are without end.[26]

The same succession of human praise and divine gifts appears in the dense prayer, especially pregnant in the finale, which al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī formulated before dedicating himself to his exegetical activity:

> Praise be to the Lord our God, may You be praised, God, who created us, blessed us and guided us on the Path, who taught us, saved us and lifted us out of adversity, praise be to You for Islam, for the Qurʾān, praise be to

**21** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 60.

**22** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 38-9; cf. 77. For the Prophet's saying, cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *kitāb musnad al-anṣār*, no. 20908.

**23** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 18.

**24** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 12.

**25** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 16.

**26** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 12; cf. 41.

> You for our families, our wealth and our restored health, to You who have given us – truthfully! – everything we have asked of You […]. May You be praised for every gift of Yours old and new, secret and known, particular and general, in life and death, presence and absence, praise be to You so that You may be satisfied, praise be unto You even when You are satisfied.[27]

Of major didactic interest in Ibn Abī l-Dunyā's work are his stories about the prophets. One example is the following dialogue between God and Moses, another emblematic figure of gratitude in the Qur'ān (cf. XXXIV,13):

> Lord – said Moses – what can Adam do to repay in gratitude what You have done for him? You created him with Your hand, You breathed Your spirit into him, sheltered him in the Garden, and made the angels bow down before him.
>
> – Moses – the Lord replied – he knew [*'alima*] that all this came from Me, and for this reason he praised Me, and that is enough to repay Me for what I did for him.[28]

The above exchange revisits what will now be a familiar theme, the two-way traffic of gifts that God and man present to one another, the reciprocal and in some way always compensatory offering that forms the substance of gratitude: if God fills man with His grace, well then, man can offer in exchange his own physical presence in the world, a source of satisfaction for the Creator as long as it is accompanied by an awareness (*'ilm* علم) of the paucity of one's offerings against the abundance of the gifts received. Very clear in this regard is a story, once again with David as the protagonist, based on the mutual exchange of gifts and on such an awareness as a sufficient form of gratitude:

> Lord – said David – how can I show my gratitude to You when I am enabled to be grateful only through Your grace?
>
> God breathed into his ear: – Do you perhaps not know that the gifts you have came to you from Me?
>
> – Of course – David answered.
>
> – And I accept that as the gratitude which comes from you towards Me – God replied.[29]

## 3.5 Gratitude Towards One's Neighbour

Islamic teaching of all ages sees the gratitude that men owe each other as an integral part of their religious obligations, so that praising and eulogising a brother for the benefits coming from him is comparable to thanking the Lord for His countless gifts. Whether God or one's brother is the benefactor, the Tradition nonetheless underlines the psychological element, and teaches that gratitude entails a full acknowledgement of the gratification obtained. According to religious thought, then, the virtuous believer is one

27 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 13.

28 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 14.

29 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1994, 11-12.

who, knowing well his debts to God, also acknowledges as much before God by honouring his debts with human society.

The work of a well-enough known traditionist, the Palestinian al-Kharā'iṭī (d. 327/939), with the title *Faḍīlat al-shukr li-llāh* or 'The Excellence of Gratitude to God',[30] an anthology of sayings and stories partly dedicated to gratitude as social duty, also focuses on these themes. The gist of the author's argument is as follows: gratitude, precisely because it is a quality of God, should also be a quality of the virtuous man, not only in relation to God but also and simultaneously towards his brother. Al-Kharā'iṭī in his turn quotes the ambiguous Prophetic saying discussed by Ibn Manẓūr, and taken up by many others ("God is not grateful to those who are not grateful to others"), and turns towards an entirely human context, immediately citing, again from the Prophet, the maxim "The men most grateful to God are those most grateful to other men",[31] thus inaugurating a line of thought on gratitude as at once a social and a religious duty.

The material collected by al-Kharā'iṭī contains the statements: "A hallmark of human gratitude is making one's gratitude known";[32] and conversely: "The worst speech is that which denies a benefit received".[33] Letting others know of some good received from another is already an adequate return on that good: whoever receives a benefit should reciprocate it, and if he cannot do so, should mention it to others because – as the Prophet taught – "remembering a benefit means being grateful for it".[34] According to a similar saying, "Whoever receives a benefit and can find nothing to give in return but prayers and praise, has reciprocated". Not very different, but more centred on awareness is: "When you receive a benefit, give something back to the benefactor, and if you cannot, call on God on his behalf until you know that you have recompensed him",[35] that is to say, when God has signalled to you that He has accepted your prayers and repaid your brother in your stead. There is a witty aphorism along the same lines:

> There are two things. The first I would not sell for anything in the world, and it is that others would say to me 'You have done well', because if you give someone a thousand gold coins and he says to you 'You have done a good thing, may God repay you well', then he has already given back more than he has taken. And the second I would not buy for anything in the world, and it is that others say to me 'You have done ill'.[36]

In these episodes, it is as if man's gratitude and that of God intermingle in a single gesture, in so far as man's thanks to his benefactor prompt the beneficial action of God which is by its nature, as we know, always augmented. Among the numerous relevant anecdotes al-Kharā'iṭī passes on, we find the advice given by Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), the sixth *imām* of the Twelver branch of Shī'ī Islam, to a friend:

30 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982.

31 In Arabic: *ashkaru al-nās li-llāh ashkaru-hum li-l-nās*; al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 61.

32 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 63.

33 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 70-1.

34 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 62-3.

35 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 63-4.

36 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 68.

> Be grateful to those who do well by you, and do well by those who are grateful to you; good deeds one is thankful for never perish, while those unappreciated will not last. Gratitude increases the good and protects us against the vicissitudes of fate.[37]

Once again, we find, translated into the realm of human relations, the circularity of gratitude, that concatenation of gifts that already characterizes gratitude between man and God. As we have already seen, praising God for His grace by simply enunciating 'Praise be to God' (*al-ḥamdu li-llāh*) is a supreme form of human gratitude; and what the believer owes to God he also owes, again for God's sake, to his brother benefactors. A couplet composed by al-Kharā'iṭī himself goes:

> No illustrious person can avoid gratitude for the grandeur of possessions or the excellence of his condition; / were this not so, God would not have commanded His servants to be grateful to Him by saying: 'Be grateful to Me, you two weighty persons'.[38]

This last expression[39] usually refers to men and jinn (cf. Qur'ān LV,31). The same overlap of gratitude and Islam – and, conversely, ingratitude and impiety (*kufr*, *kufrān*) – reappears in al-Kharā'iṭī's account of man's gratitude to his brother:

> Whoever receives a benefit from another and can return nothing but praise, then praise him, and he will have been grateful; ungrateful instead [or 'impious', the verb *kafara*] is he who has kept silent about that benefit.[40]

Another example, in the words of the Prophet:

> There are certain servants to whom, on the Day of Resurrection, God will not speak.
>
> – Who are those? – they asked.
>
> He replied: – Whoever disowns his parents […], whoever disowns his own child, and whoever receives a benefit from others and then fails to acknowledge [*kafara*] their benefit and disowns them.[41]

A last but no less relevant form of human gratitude is that between men and women, rendered thus in a story by the famous 'woman-for-women preacher', Asmā' Bint Yazīd Ibn al-Sakan (d. 30/650):

> The Messenger of God passed by us, and there were some women with me […]; I was married, and they were concubines. When they saw him, they sat down and huddled together.
>
> He said to me: – Take care, daughter of Sakan, and take care all of you, not to deny your benefactors.

37 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 66-7.
38 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 65.
39 In Arabic: *ayyuhā al-thaqalān*.
40 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 65.
41 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 70.

> I asked: – For my father and mother's sake, what does it mean to 'deny a benefactor'?
>
> He replied: – Suppose a man comes to you and, with his money, frees one of you from her condition, and she, thanks to him, finds a husband, and let us suppose that after this she becomes angry with that man and says: 'I appeal to God, I have never had anything from you'. So likewise take care you do not deny a benefactor.[42]

Al-Kharā'iṭī's work was highly valued by those that came after him; it would, for example, be followed very closely four centuries later by the well-known Ḥanbalī jurist of Damascus Ibn Mufliḥ (d. 763/1361), with some additions of his own.[43] Another saying, for example, by Ja'far al-Ṣādiq: "Nothing is sweeter to me than one helping hand followed by another";[44] or again: "One who preens himself on a benefit he has not received is like one who wears two counterfeit garments".[45]

42 Al-Kharā'iṭī 1402/1982, 71.

43 Ibn Mufliḥ 1419/1999.

44 Ibn Mufliḥ 1419/1999, 335.

45 Ibn Mufliḥ 1419/1999, 332.

# 4 Judiciousness

**Summary** 4.1 Puberty and Intellectual Maturity. – 4.2 Patience, Slowness, Calm and Fortitude. – 4.3 The Judiciousness of Abraham's Son. – 4.4 The Antidote to Stupidity and Ignorance. – 4.5 Forgiveness and Silence. – 4.6 Humility and Honour.

Among the Beautiful Names that the Qur'ān ascribes to the divinity – which is to say, among the names that, according to the Islamic perspective, God has designated for Himself when addressed by the faithful – we find *al-ḥalīm* (cf. Qur'ān II,225, 235 and 263; III,155; IV,12; V,101; XVII,44; XXII,59; XXXIII,51; XXXV,41; LXIV,17). The exegetical tradition follows the scriptural lead and accords *al-ḥalīm* a place in the principal lists of Names.[1]

It is not easy to demarcate the contents of the Name in question, nor indeed to define exactly the quality – *ḥilm* – that this Name implies. As a consequence, it is hard to arrive at an adequate translation. For the moment, we will just consider that in the various Qur'ānic occurrences of the term, the Holy Book posits a relationship between this divine quality and absolute Sufficiency, that is, the non-existence in God of deficiencies or needs (as in the expression *ghanī ḥalīm*); and also with Omniscience (as in *ḥalīm ʿalīm*); or again with Forgiveness (as in *ghafūr ḥalīm*) and with Gratitude (as in *ḥalīm shakūr*). We might also bear in mind that *ḥalīm* can denote a virtuous human being: the Qur'ān in fact attributes the quality in question to Abraham (IX,114; XI,75) and to his son in the sacrifice story, Isaac/Isḥāq or Ishmael/Ismāʿīl (XXXVII,101);[2] and also to the ancient prophet Shuʿayb (XI,87).

Once again, as with patience and gratitude, we are dealing therefore with an Islamic virtue to be pursued in imitation of God.

1 No. 33 in al-Tirmidhī's authoritative list.

2 The commentators do not agree on the son offered for sacrifice, but the majority opt for Isaac, following the biblical precedent (*Genesis* 22,1-18).


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## 4.1 Puberty and Intellectual Maturity

We have already signalled the importance of Ibn Manẓūr and his dictionary of classical Arabic *The Language of the Arabs*, with its abundance of clarifications and useful examples. Once again it proves a helpful resource.

In dealing with *ḥilm*, Ibn Manẓūr insists on the cognitive element,[3] which is an amalgam of thoughtfulness and intelligence that is the opposite of stupidity: indeed, it is precisely this quality, together with deliberation and steadfastness of purpose, that is a hallmark of the intelligent person. Among the many examples that the author provides is that of the woman who *aḥlamat*, or 'has procured *ḥilm*', when the children she gives birth to are intelligent.

This virtue seems to correspond, then, at least in broad terms, more to 'judiciousness', perspicacity of the mind and shrewdness of action, than to 'temperance' as others suggest, recalling the fourth virtue of the Western tradition, from Plato via Cicero to Saint Ambrose. Temperance is equilibrium and self-control, a sensible moderation in satisfying one's appetites, but the intellectual dimension is clearly less to the fore.

*The Language of the Arabs* once again refers to intelligence and knowledge in its examination of the Qurʾānic passage on Shuʿayb (Qurʾān XI,87), a prophet whom the unbelievers mockingly called 'judicious' (*ḥalīm*). Ibn Manẓūr notes that 'judicious' here, being used in mockery, must be taken to mean its opposite, that is, 'stupid' or 'ignorant' (*safīh* سفيه, *jāhil* جاهل). Calling another *ḥalīm* when you consider him ignorant – the author goes on to say – is especially insulting to an Arab; it is like saying: you think you are wise but to everyone else you are an idiot. Never unwilling to argue from opposites, Ibn Manẓūr takes this to reaffirm the contents of the virtue in question, which are judiciousness in the sense of sound judgment (*ʿaql* عقل) and thoughtful and resolute conduct (*anāt* أناة, *tathabbut* تثبّت), that is to say: the opposite of stupidity (*safah* سفه); and civility and proper use of the intellect, as opposed to ignorance (*jahl* جهل). Finally, *ḥilm* can be said to mirror, at least to this extent, the Greek concept of 'wisdom', or φρόνησις.

Another useful consideration in refining the meaning of *ḥilm* is its etymological relationship with *ḥulm* حُلم ('erotic dream') as well as the overlapping spelling of the two terms. Ibn Manẓūr notes this, and so introduces a new aspect of judiciousness, which has to do with the sexual sphere and the achievement of puberty. And it is exactly the latter which, as is well known, obliges the Muslim to perform acts of worship, which in their turn are only considered wholly valid for those who are fully responsible legally, having reached both physical and mental maturity.

The relationship between wisdom, puberty and legal responsibility is also to be found in the Sunna or Tradition. It is again Ibn Manẓūr who reminds us that the Prophet prescribed a complete washing every Friday for every '*ḥālim*' حالم, meaning all those having reached puberty, those who had had an erotic dream; or again that the Prophet had imposed at Medina a personal tax on all who had proved capable of sound judgement whether they had had erotic dreams or not. The pubescent boy is someone who has reached the age of comprehension, the stage of adulthood in which things are grasped,

3 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root ḥ-l-m; along the same lines but more succinctly al-Fayrūz'ābādī 1419/1998, 1096.

explains Ibn Manẓūr; and, thus, sheds light on the complex domain of sexual maturity, which is the murky locus of physical prohibitions and potential sinfulness, but also the luminous point of intellectual maturity, welcome to God and no less to men.

## 4.2 Patience, Slowness, Calm and Fortitude

In his *The Language of the Arabs*, Ibn Manẓūr offers another explanation of judiciousness, widely shared among theologians and jurists, based on the sura *al-Naḥl* 'The Bees': "If God punished men for the sins they have committed", the Book states, "no living creature would be left on earth, and instead He gives them respite for a designated term" (Qur'ān XVI,61). Ibn Manẓūr explains that the Name *al-ḥalīm* 'the Judicious One' is a synonym of *al-ṣabūr* 'the Most Patient': it means that while God does not take the recalcitrance of the disobedient lightly, He nonetheless does not allow Himself to be disturbed by anger against them; He has set the measure of all things, which end in Him.

Deferment as a feature of divine action, a sobriety of gesture that derives from imperturbability, is frequently highlighted by Qur'ānic commentators, particularly when they are explaining how God is 'forgiving and forbearing' (*ghafūr ḥalīm*), as in the sura 'The Cow' (II,225). The great Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, for example, writes in his *Compendious Discourse* that "God is the Judicious One because he does not hurry to punish the disobedient".[4] Many others have dwelt on the divine inclination to delay or defer – the Andalusian Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) for one, who writes in his *Jāmiʿ al-aḥkām li-l-Qur'ān* or 'The Compendium of the Judgments of the Qur'ān': "Judiciousness belongs in the chapter of deferral [*tawsiʿa* توسعة]";[5] or the Persian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in his *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* or 'The Keys to the Unknown': "God does not rush [*yaʿjalu*] His chastisement but rather delays [*yu'akhkhiru*] punishment of the unbelievers and the corrupt".[6] The latter, one of Islam's greatest theologians and philosophers, teaches that the true foundation of judiciousness is the calm that comes from inner composure and distinguishes himself from other commentators by noting that *ḥilm* can also mean 'tranquillity' (*sukūn* سكون) – one says, in fact, 'put the palanquin on the most judicious camel', meaning the quieter one. Nor does al-Rāzī overlook the link between judiciousness and dreaming, explaining that dreams can be called *ḥulm* because one experiences them in a state of rest.

The Qur'ānic commentators also wax eloquent in their definitions of human judiciousness. In the sura *al-Tawba* 'The Repentance', the Qur'ān teaches that Abraham realised his father's faithlessness, and regretfully abandoned him to his fate: "Abraham prayed for his father's forgiveness […]. But when it became clear to him that he was an enemy to God, he dissociated himself from him: for Abraham was most tender-hearted, judicious" (Qur'ān IX,114).

Here the "tender-hearted, judicious" (*awwāh ḥalīm* أوّاه) Abraham, grieving for his father but firm in purpose, is an emblematic example of dominating

4 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān II,225.

5 Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān II,225.

6 Al-Rāzī 1401/1981, commentary on Qur'ān II,225.

one's emotions. The same is the case in the sura *al-Ṣāfāt* 'Those Ranged in Ranks' (XXXVII, 102-7), where the patriarch before resolving to sacrifice his son is gripped by despair. Perhaps, in the context of judiciousness, it is no coincidence that here the divine command to sacrifice is conveyed in a dream. The emotional and passionate element that underpins Abraham's judiciousness, but which on this occasion he suppresses, is highlighted in the above-mentioned commentary of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, a highly skilled intra-scriptural analyst. The distinguished theologian explains in his *The* Keys *to the Unknown* that among the foundations of Abraham's *ḥilm* are a delicacy of heart, a fineness of feelings and an affectionate disposition. Nearly two centuries later the Shāfiʿī historian and jurist Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), in his *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm* or 'Exegesis of the Sublime Qurʾān',[7] reduces the scope of Abraham's judiciousness but elevates its moral weight: thinking in particular of Abraham's troubles with the idolators who went so far as to threaten his life, Ibn Kathīr explains his judiciousness as being marked by a long-suffering fortitude, which enabled him to face down malice and insolence, and associates *ḥilm* with the great Islamic virtue of *ṣabr*, the patience shown by those who repay evil with good, as the Qurʾān repeatedly enjoins (cf. LXI,34; XXVIII,54). Abraham is called *ḥalīm* because he treated well those who did him ill – Ibn Kathīr teaches – and asked God to forgive them.

Seeing Abraham's judiciousness as overlapping with patience or *ṣabr* is a commonplace among the classical commentators. But many modern and contemporary scholars take the same line: the Yemeni al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834), for example, writes in his *Fatḥ al-qadīr* or 'The Victory of the Almighty': "Part of Abraham's *ḥilm* is that, if any of his people hurt him in some way, he would answer: – May God guide you to the good".[8] Also the respected Egyptian jurist and preacher Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Shaʿrāwī (d. 1998) outlines in his unfinished commentary entitled *Khawāṭirī ḥawla al-Qurʾān al-karīm* or 'My Considerations on the Noble Qurʾān' how judiciousness is a characteristic that makes one full of patience for the adversities one suffers oneself, and full of indulgence for the faults of others.[9]

## 4.3 The Judiciousness of Abraham's Son

Where exactly, then, is borderline between judiciousness and patience? The answer must be sought in the relationship linking *ḥilm* to the age of majority: judiciousness, calm, tolerance, are to be sure a part of patience and perseverance, but they need to be leavened with good judgment and by cultural maturity, that is, freed from the failings of youth. This clarification can be gleaned from glosses on the sura 'Those Ranged in Ranks', where we read that God announced to Abraham the arrival of 'a judicious son' (*ghulām ḥalīm*):

> We gave him the glad tidings of a judicious boy. When his son was old enough to walk with him, he said: – My son, I have had a dream that I must sacrifice you. What do you think of this? He replied: – Father, fulfil

7 Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qurʾān IX,114.

8 Al-Shawkānī 1431/2010, commentary on Qurʾān IX,114.

9 Al-Shaʿrāwī 1991, commentary on Qurʾān IX,114.

> whatever you are commanded to do and you will find me patient, by the will of God. (Qur'ān XXXVII,101-2)

In this regard, the exegetes are driven to recover the link with puberty, and in turn, like the linguist Ibn Manẓūr, establish the link between sensibleness and pubescent dreams. "God announced to Abraham a son described as *ḥalīm*" explains, for example, al-Ṭabarī "and we understand this to mean: when he was grown up". The idea that God's promise to Abraham entailed the survival of his child into adulthood, in so far as children could not possess *ḥilm*, we find also in al-Qurṭubī. The Muʿtazilite commentator al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), as a proponent of man's freedom of choice according to his school of thought, takes the same line, in the name of divine justice. This writer is especially attentive to the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of the Holy Book, and as well as dwelling on the virtue in question he draws our attention to the admirable concision of the Qur'ān's phraseology, noting in his *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths* (*Al-kashshāf ʿan ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl*) how, in a brief phrase,

> God announced three things to Abraham: that he would have a male child, that the child would reach puberty and that he would be judicious – more so even than his father, because when the latter told him that he would be sacrificed, he replied: – You will find me, if God so wills, one of the steadfast [cf. Qur'ān XXXVII,102]. After which he submitted himself to God.[10]

And here we should note that the medieval commentator's exact word for 'he submitted himself to God' is *istaslama* استسلم, that is to say, 'he made himself a Muslim', a demonstration of the extent to which the exegetical tradition equated judiciousness with adherence to Islam, and how this virtue is absorbed into that religion. "There is no quality that God has bestowed upon the prophets more sparingly than judiciousness, so excellent is its possession", al-Zamakhsharī concludes.[11]

## 4.4 The Antidote to Stupidity and Ignorance

The relationship that links judiciousness to sexual and intellectual maturity is what marks the boundary between judiciousness and patience. We should add that the boundary is also marked by a prior damaging action, not misfortune but more particularly a wrong suffered, which makes judiciousness the great remedy against offences committed against us by others: if patience is the necessary analgesic, judiciousness is the active antidote.

This last aspect is continually foregrounded in the *Kitāb al-ḥilm* or 'The Book of Judiciousness'[12] by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā of Baghdad, a prolific writer – as we have seen – on moral questions. This work, like others of his, is again a chain of stories from the Tradition – over a hundred of them, in verse and prose, simply juxtaposed without commentary; it is therefore important to consider the order of the passages, since, in the absence of commentary, the

10 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXXVII,101.

11 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXXVII,101.

12 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993.

author's contribution can only be read in the choice and arrangement of his material. And at the beginning of the work, we find a saying of Muḥammad's which speaks precisely of the need for some hurdle: "There is no judicious man without an obstacle, and no wise one without a trial".[13]

A few decades later, the Khorasanian traditionist Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (d. 354/965) would revisit this saying in a great work entitled *Rawḍat al-ʻuqalāʾ wa-nuzhat al-fuḍalāʾ* or 'The Garden of the Wise, the Meadow of the Virtuous', placing it at the head of a chapter on judiciousness.[14] He interprets the saying as meaning that there can be no judiciousness if no obstacle highlights it and puts it to the test, just as there is no wisdom that is not measured against stupidity, because all perfection rests on the experience of its absence.[15]

But to go back to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, he also places a second saying of the Prophet at the beginning of his work, where the issue is one of personal commitment to the practice of virtue: "Knowledge is obtained by learning, judiciousness by making oneself judicious,[16] he who gives himself to the good will find it given to him, he who looks to guard himself from evil will be saved from it".[17]

After recalling that judiciousness is first of all something sought and practised by man, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā teaches that it is, in any case, a wonderful gift from the Creator. His third epigraph is indeed the following prayer of Muḥammad's: "My Lord, make me rich in knowledge, adorn me with judiciousness, honour me with the fear of You, make me beautiful with good health".[18]

Having introduced its material in the logical sequence we have seen – first the necessary experience of some setback, then individual commitment, which naturally is *jihād* جهاد, and then faith in the grace that makes virtue its reward – the *The Book of Judiciousness* continues with another of Muḥammad's sayings:

> The Prophet said to his followers: – Aim for the highest rank before God.
> They asked him: – What is that, Messenger of God?
> He replied: – Be reunited with those who have strayed from you, give to those who have deprived you of what should be yours, and be judicious with those who behave arrogantly towards you.[19]

An interesting saying, which testifies to the social weight of judiciousness, and confirms its scope: *ḥilm* is responding to evil with good, as Abraham did, and as his son did; it is a mature and subtle, and entirely worldly form of patience or *ṣabr*, which the good Muslim knows should be opposed in this world to those who are not good. Precisely because it is the good response

**13** In Arabic: *lā ḥalīm illā dhū ʻathra lā ḥakīm illā dhū tajriba*; Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 14-15. Cf. Al-Bukhārī 1409/1983, 199, no. 565.

**14** Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 137-42.

**15** Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 137.

**16** In Arabic: *al-ʻilm bi-l-taʻallum al-ḥilm bi-l-taḥallum*.

**17** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 16-17.

**18** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 19.

**19** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 20-1. Cf. for example: "And who is he that will harm you, if you be followers of that which is good?" (*1 Peter* 3,13).

to the bad actions of others, judiciousness has a formidable social function, namely prevention; Ibn Abī l-Dunyā has a pertinent aphorism: "If someone does ill and receives good in return, a barrier is formed in his heart which keeps him from doing similar harm on another occasion".[20]

We have seen how, in Ibn Manẓūr's dictionary, judiciousness is placed in opposition to stupidity (*safah*), and that among its components is a good use of the intellect (*ʿaql*); a qualification amply illustrated by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā who throughout his compilation is always ready to emphasise the intellectual aspect of the Islamic consciousness. As he puts it: "Judiciousness is an aptitude of the intellect",[21] adding,

> The adornment of man is submission to God [*islām* إسلام], the adornment of submission to God is intelligence, the adornment of intelligence is judiciousness, the adornment of judiciousness is restraint, the adornment of restraint is reflection, the adornment of reflection is patience, and the adornment of patience is to pause and consider what is obedience and what is disobedience.[22]

Ibn Abī l-Dunyā insists repeatedly on the contrast, the antagonism almost, between judiciousness and stupidity, as when he quotes the following two sayings of Muḥammad:

> There are three things that, if any one of them is missing in a man, his actions count for nothing. They are: the fear of God that keeps him from disobeying the Lord, the judiciousness with which he keeps the foolish at bay, and the good character that makes him live well amidst others.[23]

> When God wills the good of a people, he defers business to the wise and spoils to the generous, and when He wills the evil of a people, He defers business to the foolish and rewards to the greedy.[24]

Ibn Abī l-Dunyā thus firmly correlates judiciousness with intelligence; he also correlates judiciousness with education: "Nothing", he writes, "is better connected to another thing than judiciousness to knowledge".[25] This is simply a necessary connection: judiciousness is a virtue of the Muslim, and a Muslim is one who possesses not only reason but also, thanks to the Book, knowledge (*ʿilm*), in the very specific sense of revealed knowledge.

Some of the stories taken up by the author feature a figure whose judiciousness was proverbial, the Caliph Muʿāwiya Ibn Abī Sufyān (d. 64/680).[26] According to the Sunni historiographical tradition – but not the Shia one, which instead attributes to him a satanic cunning, similar to intelligence

20 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 43.

21 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 21.

22 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 62.

23 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 48-9.

24 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 58.

25 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 28.

26 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā actually composed an entire *Kitāb ḥilm Muʿāwiya* 'The Book of Muʿāwiya's Judiciousness': Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1424/2003.

without possessing such[27] – Muʿāwiya used to consult his contemporaries on questions of morality; and the attention that this early caliph afforded his various interlocutors, new converts and thus subscribers to values that predated Islam, clearly had, for Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, something of the perennial and undisputable validity of *ḥilm*.

Our author records, for example, that Muʿāwiya asked a certain ʿArāba Ibn Aws, a Medina notable who was dubbed *al-shammākh* الشمّاخ 'the supernal', for his exalted moral qualities, how he had governed his people. He replied: "I have been judicious towards the ignorant among them, I have rewarded the petitioners among them, and I have been prompt in responding to their needs".[28] To the further and everlasting glory of *ḥilm*, *The Book of Judiciousness* contains a saying that partly repeats and partly supplements the last wishes of the wise Luqmān, a mythical figure mentioned in the Qurʾān (XXXI,17-19):

> My son, I commend to you the good qualities; if you stick to them you will not cease to excel. Spread your wisdom widely over the near and the far, and withhold your ignorance from both the excellent and the reprehensible, sustain ties with your relatives, and let those whom you did not disparage when they broke with you, and you with them, be your brothers.[29]

## 4.5 Forgiveness and Silence

In Ibn Abī l-Dunyā's anthology, as indeed in Arabic and Islamic literature generally, and edifying literature in particular, judiciousness qualifies in the first instance as an educated and intelligent antidote to both foolishness and ignorance, and since both are chiefly understood as conduct detrimental to one's neighbour, among the components of judiciousness are both forgiveness (*ghafr* غفر, *maghfira* مغفرة) and pardon (*ʿafw* عفو), the latter being, precisely, the renunciation of inflicting punishment or exacting revenge while having the capacity to do so; as Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī observes in *The Garden of the Wise*, "no one thing sits better with another than pardon with power"; and "the best judiciousness is that which comes from one who has the power to take revenge".[30]

Let us return to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā but stay with forgiveness and pardon.

The author takes up the Prophet's assurance that among the meritorious deeds to be counted on the Day of Resurrection, is "that you have forgiven those who have wronged you and treated judiciously those who have behaved badly towards you".[31] Again from the Prophet, and again in eschatological mode:

> When God gathers together all His creatures on the Day of Resurrection, a voice will call out: – Where are the virtuous ones?

27 The judiciousness of the Caliph Muʿāwiya is proverbial in Sunni literature; on the dissidence of Shia writings on the matter, cf. Amir-Moezzi 2007, 25.

28 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 40.

29 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 46.

30 Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 137.

31 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 23-4.

And some will rise up and move quickly towards paradise.

The angels will come out to meet them and ask: – We have seen you hurrying towards paradise: who are you?

They will reply: – We are the virtuous ones!

The angels will ask: – And what are your virtues?

They will reply: – When they wronged us, we were patient, when they harmed us, we forgave them, and we were judicious when they treated us arrogantly.

The angels will cry: – Come into paradise! Beautiful are the rewards for those who have done well![32]

It is worth noting that these and other commendations of forgiveness and pardon always conceal the beneficial function of the offending action, be it foolish or arrogant; without antecedent offence, good conduct has no way or existing or reason to manifest itself, and the goodness is lost. Judiciousness is the ability to correctly evaluate contingencies, but especially negative ones; and to maintain in all cases a firm mind and calm conduct, in the certainty of a final resolution. Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī explains:

> Virtue exists only in those who do good to those who do harm to them, because doing good to those who do good to us and behaving judiciously with those who have done no harm at all, is neither judiciousness nor doing good.[33]

Without the spur of foolish or ignorant action, judiciousness does not edify its possessor and brings him no advantage; so teaches the author of *The Garden of the Wise* through the words of an ancient sage:

> If a fool treats thee foolishly, take advantage of thy judiciousness! If thou wilt only do good by him so that he will do good by thee, where is thy reward, where is thy excellency over others? If thou desirest merit, do good to him who has done thee wrong, and pardon him who has wronged thee, and benefit him who has not benefited thee, and wait for the reward that God will give thee. The perfect good deed is that of one which asks for no reward in this world.[34]

Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī goes on to cite another saying, so elliptical as to practically resist deciphering: "Without an ignoramus there can be no judiciousness".[35] And he explains that it is sometimes necessary for the judicious person to let a fool get the better of him, because judiciousness springs precisely from its opposite. He then recounts a piquant dialogue between two characters, who are foolish and judicious by turns: on the one side we have the Sunni jurist Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), eponym of the Hanafi school of law, which allows the consumption of alcohol in certain circumstances; and on the other ʿAlī Ibn al-Nuʿmān (d. 180/796 or 797), a Shiite,

**32** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 49-51; this saying is also repeated in Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1998b, 29-30.

**33** Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 139.

**34** Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 141.

**35** *Lā ḥilm*[a] *li-man lā jāhil*[a] *la-hu*: Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 141.

therefore in favour of temporary marriage (*nikāḥ al-mutʿa* نكاح المتعة) which the Sunnis condemn:

> Abū Ḥanīfa asked: – What do you think of temporary marriage?
> The other answered: – It is permissible.
> Abū Ḥanīfa said: – And would you be happy for your mother to make a temporary marriage?
> The other was quiet for a bit, but then asked: – And you, what do you think of date wine?[36]
> – It is permissible – Abū Ḥanīfa replied.
> – To drink, to buy and to sell? – his companion specified?
> – Yes – he replied.
> The other was quiet for a bit, but then said: – Would you be happy if your mother were an innkeeper? Abū Ḥanīfa was quiet in his turn.[37]

Judiciousness is keeping one's counsel and letting things pass, we also read in *The Garden of the Wise*, and if judiciousness had two fathers one would be intelligence and the other silence (*ṣamt* صمت).[38] But among many pronouncements that emphasise the inactive and passive character of *ḥilm*, al-Bustī feels the need to include a verdict offered by al-Maʾmūn (d. 218/833), a caliph famous for, among other things, promoting the translation of Greek philosophy into Arabic:

> It is good that sovereigns display judiciousness towards everyone, with three exceptions: with those who disparage a king, with those who betray a secret and with those who violate a sacred prohibition.[39]

This is a notable clarification because it insists on the relativity of virtue, and would be enough by itself to dismiss any notion that Islamic ethics is blindly prescriptive. Neither judiciousness nor any other virtue will always manifest itself in the same way but must be recognised each time, because the same behaviour may be evaluated differently according to the persons involved and the differing circumstances of life.

## 4.6 Humility and Honour

Returning again to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā and his *The Book of Judiciousness*, we see that his teaching on humility (*dhull* ذل) – which here has a positive sense of modesty and the renunciation of pride,[40] of brave and noble self-offering, humility as the mirror of judiciousness – should also be read in a relative light. The author reminds us, for example, that ʿĪsā Ibn Ṭalḥa Ibn ʿUbayd Allāh (d. 100 of the hijra), an ancient wise man esteemed for his sound morals,

**36** The Hanafi legal tradition, unlike the other three Sunni schools and the Shia tradition, permits the consumption of date wine (*nabīdh*) in modest quantities; but even for the Hanafis wine from grapes (*khamr*) is absolutely forbidden.

**37** Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 141.

**38** Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 139-40.

**39** Al-Bustī 1397/1977, 141.

**40** It can also have a negative sense of pettiness, subjugation and dishonour; we need only think of how often it is paired with *ṣaghār* 'cowardice, servility'.

answered the question "what is wisdom?" by simply saying that it is humility;[41] and the Caliph Muʿāwiya responded in the same way to a similar question.[42] Nonetheless, in his compilation of assorted examples, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā is at pains to make it clear that judiciousness, though humble and tending to silence and overlooking offence, should not be confused with the abdications of the cowardly or the – socially or morally – low, because it expresses, on the contrary, nobility (*sharaf* شرف), and is an additional source of honour.

One last source on judiciousness: the legal and political philosopher al-Māwardī. His *The Ethics of Religion and of this World*,[43] already cited above, is a wide-ranging work full of acute observations and piquant stories. Just a few examples:

> A man insulted the historian and jurist al-Shaʿbī [seventh-eighth century] and he observed only: – If I am as you say, may God forgive me, if not, may God forgive you.[44]

> A man swore to beat the Caliph Muʿāwiya about the head; when the caliph heard this, he said to him: – By all means keep your oath, but let the old men be gentle with one another.[45]

> A man said to a certain Ḍirār Ibn al-Qaʿqāʿ: – If you say a word, you will get ten back. The other replied: – If you say ten, you will not hear one back.[46]

> The anger of the foolish is in their words; the anger of the wise is in their actions.[47]

In his chapter on judiciousness,[48] al-Māwardī touches among other things on the difference between forgiveness coming from a noble spirit and that coming from the ignoble, the first a source of edification, the second perverted and corrupt. The Arabs say what enters into a house is what has gone out of it – he writes – so good will enter only if good has come out of it, while if evil has gone out, evil will come back in.[49] Similarly, he observes that even the anger of a noble spirit is noble, which he will keep in check with courageous judiciousness, whereas the coward is one who does not become angry when he should, showing little pride and a base spirit. As the wise say,

> three kinds of men make themselves known on three occasions: the generous in difficult straits, the courageous in war, and the judicious in wrath.[50]

41 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 36-7.
42 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 37.
43 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988, 357-64.
44 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988, 358.
45 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988, 358.
46 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988, 361.
47 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988, 362-3.
48 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988, 361; ch. 4, *Fī l-ḥilm wa-l-ghaḍab*, 357-69.
49 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988, 364.
50 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988, 363-4.

# 5 Mercy or Clemency

**Summary** 5.1 Mercifulness Towards Parents. – 5.2 Mercifulness Between Spouses. – 5.3 Christians, Muslims, Believers. – 5.4 Those Without Mercy Will Receive None.

Among the Names that the Qur'ān uses to indicate divinity, *al-raḥmān* الرحمن and *al-raḥīm* الرحيم are to the fore, respectively the second and third in the lists after *Allāh*. Both, which are found in the Holy Book only with reference to God, have considerable weight in Islamic liturgy because they are included in the commonest formula of invocation, called *basmala* بسملة or *tasmīya* تسمية, which opens the Qur'ānic suras and every document of religious significance, from distant times down to today.[1] Scholastic debate on the application of these two Names and their theological meaning is endless – God is *al-raḥmān* for believers only and is *al-raḥīm* for all creatures; both operate in this world but only the former in the hereafter; the former belongs to God alone, the latter can extend to others; and so on. What concerns us here though is that the Names *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm* relate to the great divine quality known as *raḥma* رحمة, 'mercy' or 'clemency', cited in the Qur'ān over a hundred times, which represents, even more than love, the designation of the relationship that binds the Creator to the world: it presupposes in particular the inferiority of the recipient, whereas love admits of at least the possibility of an equal relationship.[2] The excellence of this divine attribute is also confirmed by a very significant Qur'ānic statement, contained in the sura *al-An'ām* 'The Cattle' (Qur'ān VI,12 and 54), according to which God has ordained *raḥma* for Himself: it means that His mercy towards creatures overrides His wrath, as God Himself confided to the Prophet in a 'holy

1 Cf. apropos: Peterson 2003; Anawati 1984, 63-77.

2 On this point, cf. Rahbar 1960, 158-71.


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saying' recalled by the traditionist al-Bukhārī among others.[3] Therefore, as the commentators are unanimous in explaining, He imposed on Himself the obligation of favour and generosity towards penitents.

In English *raḥma* is usually rendered 'mercy' or 'clemency', an appropriate enough term with its connotation of disposition. These translations are well established now, but it is important to remember the extent to which they can also be misleading in so far as they have us thinking of forgiveness or of mild punishment and regarding a sin or an offence, or at least of some preexisting wrong. Equally inadequate is 'compassion' because, even if it occupies a higher station than 'sympathy', it still indicates participation in suffering (cf. the Latin *compassio*), an idea incompatible with the Islamic conception of the divinity.[4] Conversely, *raḥma*, in the Qur'ān and in later Islamic literature, can also exclude these implications and mean a general and indeterminate tenderness,[5] a completely unconditional kindness, without a specific target and without necessity. As the sura 'The Family of 'Imrān' has it, "He singles out for His mercy whom He will" (Qur'ān III,74), as to say that *raḥma* is a divine gift freely given, a free charitable act; and thus recalls consanguinity, the feeling that binds relatives, and especially the mother to the child, with the spontaneous charity that comes with it, since it refers back to the womb (*raḥim* رحم). "I am *al-raḥīm* and the mother is *al-raḥim*", goes a well-known 'holy saying' still cited even by contemporary preachers, "and I derived her name from My Own".

This breadth of meaning is highlighted by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in his work on the Names, in the section specifically devoted to *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm*. The medieval master teaches that *raḥma* is simply a divine benevolent intervention in the world, it is the 'Will for Good', and is the opposite of wrath, which is 'Will for Evil'. Nonetheless, al-Ghazālī observes, God's *raḥma* can also manifest itself in evil if it brings a good with it. To explain this, he is not afraid to liken the Creator to His creatures, that is, to deploy a human example to make what is not human more comprehensible; so, he compares God to the wise father who, in order to ensure his son's recovery, does not allow himself to be led astray by tenderness, as a mother would be, but forces him to submit to bloodletting. Expressing, therefore, a belief that is also widespread in Western culture – he affirms that evil is not evil if it prevents a greater evil, as is the case, for example, with the amputation of a gangrenous limb.[6]

In the Qur'ān, mercy or clemency is always a quality attributed to God, except in just three verses, where instead it defines a human being of good character and virtuous behaviour. Each of them shows *raḥma* in a different light: in the sura 'The Night Journey' it concerns children and their parents (Qur'ān XVII,24), in the sura *al-Rūm* 'The Romans' the relationship between spouses (XXX,21), and in the sura *al-Ḥadīd* 'The Iron' it is a characteristic of Christians (LVII,27). The Qur'ānic attribution of mercy both to God and to man is important; once again, it shows that the believer can be, within the limits decreed by God, a 'God-like' creature.

3 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-tawḥīd*, no. 6879; the saying is also picked up by the great philosopher and mystic Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240) in his *Mishkāt al-anwār* or 'Niche of Lights'.

4 Which is that God is 'passionless'. Equally unsatisfactory is the less frequent 'pity', a term with complex connotations.

5 Cf. on this Fitzgerald 2015, 62.

6 For both examples, Al-Ghazālī 1971, 68.

## 5.1 Mercifulness Towards Parents

The sura 'The Night Journey' dwells on the charitable behaviour to be shown towards one's parents: the Qur'ān enjoins the believer to be good to them, to always speak kindly to them without displaying impatience or petty-mindedness; then recommends:

> and lower to them the wing of humbleness [*dhull*] out of mercy and say: – My Lord, have mercy upon them, as they raised me up when I was little. (Qur'ān XVII,24)

This verse makes humility (*dhull*) a fruit or a component of mercy; and commentators have tended consequently to insist on humility as a component of human *raḥma*, and ended up by rather flattening the two concepts one on the other by mixing their contents. Foremost among those to do so was Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī in his *Compendious Discourse*.

In line with the majority of his fellow commentators, al-Ṭabarī explains that the good Muslim should not oppose the will or the wishes of his parents. Following the lead of an earlier scholar, Qatāda Ibn Di'āma (d. c. 117/735), he ascribes to God himself the dutiful rightness of this filial attitude: it is 'His teaching', 'His way of acting'. Al-Ṭabarī recalls how the Prophet, with a suddenly changed voice and gestures, predicted the punishments of hell for those who did not honour their parents despite being lucky enough not to be orphans like himself.[7] And here the author makes an interesting point, which is again an example of the relativity typical of Islamic morality and Islamic law generally, when he adds that the precept on filial docility is not absolute but applies only to parents who are believers. He goes on to explain that this is why some have claimed that the verse in question has been 'abrogated' (*mansūkh* منسوخ) by God, i.e. it has forfeited its validity due to a later revelation; indeed, it is said in the sura 'The Repentance': "The Prophet and the believers will not ask forgiveness for idolaters, even if they are close relatives" (Qur'ān IX, 113).[8]

A couple of centuries later, in his *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, the Mu'tazilite al-Zamakhsharī also mentions the hypothesis of abrogation (*naskh* نسخ) and the clause about parents' religious faith, but takes a less harsh line: if your parents are unbelievers, he recommends not so much asking for clemency on their behalf but praying that God guide them to conversion. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, who builds his argument around obedience, al-Zamakhsharī insists on the tenderness aroused by fathers and mothers who today need those who yesterday needed them. He appeals to the Prophetic Tradition and makes filial piety a question of acknowledging a debt that can never be paid. Here are some stories, in the order proposed by the author:

> A man said to the Messenger of God: – My parents are so old that I have to take care of them as they took care of me in my childhood. Have I not fulfilled my duty?
>
> – No – he replied – because they did so while waiting for you to live, whereas you do it while waiting for them to die.

7 Cf. for example Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila wa-l-ādāb*, no. 4634.

8 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

A man complained to the Messenger of God because his father had money from him. He sent for him and along came an old man leaning on his stick.

He questioned him and he said: – He was weak and I was strong, he needed everything and I needed nothing, and I never begrudged him anything that I possessed; and today, when I am weak and he is strong, when I need everything and he needs nothing, he is stingy towards me with his money.

The Prophet burst into tears and said: – There is no stone, no clod of the earth that would not cry to hear such things. Then, turning to the son, he exclaimed: – You and your money belong to your father, you and your money belong to your father.

There was one who complained to the Prophet about his mother's vicious character.

He asked him: – Was she vicious when she carried you in her womb for nine months?

The man replied: – But she has a vicious character now.

He asked: – And was she so when she suckled you for two years?

The man countered: – But she has a vicious character.

He asked: – Was she so when she watched over you at night, or slaked your thirst by day?

And the man said: – I have already repaid her.

– And how did you do that? – he asked.

– I took her on pilgrimage on my shoulders.

– You would not have repaid her if you carried her running – said the Prophet.[9]

Now let us hear Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the subject, in his *The* Keys *to the Unknown*. For the famous theologian and philosopher, the Qur'ānic precept on kindness towards parents translates as an instruction to provide for them generously, first and foremost in the sense of feeding. He reaches this conclusion after reflecting on the wing metaphor – "and lower to them the wing of humbleness" – observing that birds lower their wings not only when they humbly renounce the heights of the heavens, but also when they clasp their little ones to themselves to feed them. He then comes to the prayer of mercy for parents, and teaches that the good Muslim will repeat it with the utmost frequency; for while it is true that the sura 'The Night Journey' speaks only of a single invocation, and that according to the Holy Book, no iteration is required, this should not mislead the conscientious believer. He reminds his readers that when the Kufan traditionist Sufyān Ibn ʿUyayna (d. 196/811) was asked how many times it was appropriate to invoke mercy for one's parents – once a day? once a month? once a year? – the ancient scholar replied: five times a day, after each of the five daily prayers.[10]

Taking a rational approach and delving as always beyond the explicit surface meaning of the Book, al-Rāzī emphasises that the divine teaching on filial *pietas* includes the right words to be said and also the right deeds to be done, because the Qur'ān speaks of 'mercy' (*raḥma*), and this term is inclusive of all right and proper things, in religion and in the affairs of the world. The Qur'ān recommends praying to the Lord to give to parents what they

9 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

10 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

gave to their children, that is, a special kind of goodness (*iḥsān*) that signifies growth and material prosperity. Interesting glosses, which, on the one hand, associate divine mercy with human mercy, making the latter an aspect of the former, and on the other hand call into play a parental attitude on God's part, both in the sense that He sustains believers and in the sense that He nurtures affection for them. An attitude that the believer will imitate to the best of his abilities, as did the Prophet before him.

Muḥammad's own paternal role *vis-à-vis* Muslims is noted among others in *The Compendium of the Judgements of the Qur'ān* by al-Qurṭubī, where it is linked to the merciful wing of Muḥammad cited in the sura *al-Shuʿarā'* 'The Poets': "And lower your wing to the believers who follow you" (Qur'ān XXVI,215; cf. *al-Ḥijr* 'The Rocky Tract', Qur'ān XV,88). Unlike the pragmatic al-Rāzī, who understands human mercy as a matter of saying and doing, al-Qurṭubī understands it as a feeling, and he reads in the verse in question compassion (*shafaqa* شفقة), the docile and trusting acceding that children necessarily show towards their parents, as if they were good subjects or good servants. He explains that the tenderness (*rifq* رفق) of the good believer for his parents, like that which they had for him as a child, is a deeply rooted mercy, hidden deep in the soul, which is by no means fully expressed in external behaviour. He observes that filial piety is an offering that repays a gift that has come well in advance; but – al-Qurṭubī goes on to emphasise, like al-Zamakhsharī before him – reciprocation is always insufficient, which is why the Prophet said that a son could only be said to have compensated a parent if he were to find him enslaved, buy him, and give him his freedom.[11] The author deals with the issue more fully in relation to the sura *Maryam* 'Mary', and the exemplary filial figures of John the Baptist/Yaḥyā (Qur'ān XIX,12) and Jesus/ʿĪsā (XIX,33).

We can look finally at the work of the Shāfiʿī historian and jurist Ibn Kathīr, because he introduces some new considerations. He extends, in fact, the merciful indulgence due to one's parents, which he sees especially as humble behaviour towards them, up to their deaths and beyond. Among the many Prophetic sayings collected in his *Exegesis of the Sublime Qur'ān*, the following stands out:

> A convert from Medina asked the Messenger of God: – After my parents have gone, do I still owe them a debt of mercy? – Yes – he answered – there are four things you must do: pray for them, ask forgiveness for them, fulfil the commitments they made and honour their friends.[12]

Another novel element introduced by Ibn Kathīr, always on the basis of quotations from the Prophetic Tradition, is a pronounced insistence on the figure of the mother. Here are a few examples:

> I went to the Prophet and said to him: – I want to go off to war and have come to ask your advice. He asked me: – Is your mother alive? – Yes – I answered. – Then stay with her, paradise is at her feet. – And he said it again a second time, and a third.[13]

**11** Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-ʿitq*, no. 2787. Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

**12** Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, *musnad al-makkiyīn*, no. 15726.

**13** Cf. for example al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-jihād*, no. 4195.

> The Prophet said: – God commends your fathers to you, God commends your mothers to you, God commends your mothers to you [again], God has entrusted you with your relatives, from the nearest to the most distant.[14]

> A man […] went to see the Prophet and heard him addressing people thus: – The best hand is the one that gives to mother and father, to sister and brother, and to relatives and neighbours, in order of proximity.[15]

The various lines of classical exegesis on mercy are found *verbatim* or concisely summarized in contemporary commentaries, and are generally of limited interest. There is one exception, though: the Egyptian al-Shaʿrāwī's *My Considerations on the Noble Qurʾān*, which highlights better than others *raḥma* as a good force that flows in both directions between parents and children while at the same time proceeding from God towards both, beyond mere reciprocity, in perpetual triangulation. Commenting on the verse from the sura 'The Night Journey' which we have already looked at – "and lower to them the wing of humbleness out of mercy" – he writes:

> The issue here is first of humility and then of mercy for the parents; but your mercy alone will not be enough, and that is why you must ask for them the utmost mercy that comes from God […]. For your mercy for them does not suffice for what they have given you, it does not return to them all the good that they have done to you, and furthermore, he who gives first is not equal to he who returns […]. Therefore, you must pray to God to have mercy on them, so that the Most High may guarantee for you the restitution of that good, that he may be merciful to them in such a way that he may reciprocate their goodness on your behalf.[16]

## 5.2 Mercifulness Between Spouses

> And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put affection and mercy between you: verily in that are Signs for those who reflect. (Qurʾān XXX,21)

Thus goes the sura 'The Romans'. If in the verse we have been looking at, from the sura 'The Nigh Journey', mercy is a source and ingredient of humility, and is grouped by the commentators with meekness, of mind and conduct, now it is found combined with affection (*mawadda* مودّة), and from affection draws its colouring.

Al-Ṭabarī's exegesis in his commentary is meagre, hardly more than a paraphrase, but is worth paying attention to: the love and mercy mentioned in the Qurʾān, as the celebrated scholar explains, are not only between husband and wife, but also between brothers-in-law, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and

**14** Cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad, musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna, musnad al-shāmiyyīn*, no. 16855, where the mothers instead precede the fathers.

**15** Cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad, musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna, musnad al-madāniyyīn*, no. 16269. Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qurʾān XVII,24.

**16** Al-Shaʿrāwī 1991, commentary on Qurʾān XVII,24.

in-laws: God has placed between them affection by which they are bound to each other, and mercy by which they love each other.[17]

Al-Zamakhsharī's commentary in *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths* is fuller. The author remarks first on the extraordinariness of marriage, which is able to create affection and mercy between persons not bound by consanguinity or kinship, who previously did not even know each other, had perhaps never met. And he adds, from the early exegete and preacher al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), that here 'affection' is metonymy for intercourse, while 'mercy' signifies offspring; a seemingly extravagant explanation, which is clarified by thinking of the sura 'Mary', where the angel announces to the Virgin Jesus, a 'mercy' from the Lord (Qur'ān XIX,21), and where 'mercy' for Zechariah comes in the form of his son John (XIX,2). Predictable to the point of triteness is instead the observation that closes his dissertation: "Love and clemency between spouses come from God, mutual aversion comes from Satan".[18]

The idea that love signifies intercourse and mercy signifies children, where the mercy is of course God's and not man's, as in the case of John and Jesus, runs through the medieval commentaries, alongside alternative explanations. Al-Qurṭubī, for example, reads mercy as what keeps a man from harming his wife, while Ibn Kathīr's gloss is unusual, not to say bizarre:

> Had the Almighty created the sons of Adam all males and the women of some other species, jinn, shall we say, or animals, this sympathy between men and their wives would not exist; on the contrary they would be most likely irked if their wives were of another species. Therefore, that their wives are of their own species is evidence of the perfection of divine mercy towards mankind.[19]

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, instead, offers a more subtle and psychological commentary:

> Affection is a personal need, whereas mercy has to do with the need that others have for us. Let us suppose a man, who loves his son, sees his enemy in destitution and suffering; that man may take from his son and give to his enemy, but he will do so out of mercy, and surely not out of affection.[20]

Among more modern commentators, the Iraqi thinker and polemicist al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854) stands out in his *Rūḥ al-maʿānī* or 'The Spirit of Meanings' for his attention to gender equality: in fact, he explains that God has distributed affection and mercy equally between all, be they husbands or wives, without distinction, just as there is no distinction between God's messengers (cf. Qur'ān II,285).[21]

Chief among contemporaries is al-Shaʿrāwī with *My Considerations on the Noble Qur'ān*, because he astutely picks out the sequence of concepts

17 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.
18 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.
19 Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.
20 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.
21 Al-Ālūsī 1415/1994, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.

proposed by the Holy Book in this verse: first the stillness – "He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them" – then affection, and finally *raḥma*, a sequence that mirrors the natural course of human life, first the vigour that cries out to be tempered, then love in adulthood, and finally, in old age, generous compassion for the physical decline or illness of one's companion.[22]

## 5.3 Christians, Muslims, Believers

The Qur'ān contains a verse on mercy as a characteristic of Christians:

> Then We caused Our messengers to follow in their footsteps; and We caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow, and gave him the Gospel, and placed meekness and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him. But monasticism they invented – We ordained it not for them – only seeking God's pleasure, and they observed it not with right observance. (Qur'ān LVII,27)

What engages all commentators here is the difference between meekness (*ra'fa* رأفة) and mercy: some say that meekness is to lighten the burden of others, while mercy is to shoulder the whole burden; and those who say, on the contrary, that meekness is mercy to the highest degree. Recently, Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭanṭāwī (d. 1431/2010), rector of al-Azhar University and a theorist of Islam as a religion of the Golden Mean (*wasaṭiyya* وسطية), distinguishes them by their different scope, as he explains in his commentary entitled *Al-wasīṭ fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm* or 'The Mediator in explaining the Noble Qur'ān':

> 'Mercy' follows 'meekness' as the general follows the particular. Meekness is, in fact, a particular form of mercy, one that rejects wrong or harm; mercy is more extensive and general, because it is affection and compassion towards all those who need it.[23]

When reading the verse under analysis, the authors of the great commentaries, classical or contemporary, tend not to devote too much space to the moral characteristics of the followers of Jesus, focusing instead on the most striking element in the passage, the reference to monasticism (*rahbāniyya* رهبانية); nonetheless many have noted that it is precisely the quality of mercy that brings Christians closer to Muslims, themselves defined as merciful in the sura *al-Fatḥ* 'The Victory':

> those who are with him are harsh towards unbelievers, merciful one to another. You see them bowing, prostrating, seeking bounty from God and His pleasure. Their mark is on their faces, the trace of prostration. That is their likeness in the Torah, and their likeness in the Gospel: as a seed that puts forth its shoot, and strengthens it, and it grows stout and rises straight upon its stalk […] God has promised those who believe and do deeds of righteousness forgiveness and a mighty reward. (Qur'ān XLVIII,29)

22 Al-Shaʿrāwī 1991, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.

23 Ṭanṭāwī 1997-98, commentary on Qur'ān LVII,27.

Mercy therefore binds together 'those who believe' (*mu'minūn* مؤمنون), who might well be called brothers, where, in the words of the Qur'ān itself, mercy involves proximity, affinity, and even an overlapping between believers of different faiths; and at the same time confirms the perpetuity of Islam as faith in the one God.

Another verse important for Islamic morality is to be found in the sura *al-Balad* 'The City'; here we are not dealing precisely with *raḥma*, but with a closely related word, *marḥama* مرحمة (cf. XC,17), which means mercy also in the sense of kindness or favouring:

> And what will explain to you the path that is steep? It is the freeing of a slave; or the giving of food in days of hunger to an orphan near of kin, or to the poor man lying in the dust. And being with those who believe and enjoin one another to show patience, and enjoin one another to show kindness. These are the Companions of the Right Hand. But those who disbelieve Our revelations, their place will be on the left hand, and they will be engulfed in the fire. (XC,12-20)

In the work of the commentators, mercy comes to take on a more decisive character, and again paired with patience sums up the whole faith, a complete devotion to God. By way of example, here is the teaching of al-Rāzī: the author recalls the model of the 'pious predecessors', *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, giving his discourse a decidedly Salafi flavour, that is to say he identifies in the very first Muslims the best embodiment of the religion. At the same time, it is worth noting, he does not speak of those who belong to historical Islam, but of man, of human beings in general (cf. *insān* إنسان), and of the whole of creation:

> Added here to patience is the mutual recommendation of mercy: it means spurring each other on to have mercy for those who are wronged or poor, or to have clemency for those who do evil, but it also means discouraging them from doing evil, because mercy includes this too. That is to say, man must show others the way of truth and, as far as he can, he must keep them from the way of evil and falsehood. Be aware that to be among those who "enjoin one another to show patience, and enjoin one another to show kindness" is to venture on the 'steep path' [Qur'ān XC,12] in the company of that small band of people formed by the Prophet's greatest Companions, that is, the four caliphs and the others who excelled in their steadfastness in the face of the difficulties imposed by their religion, and also in mercy towards creation as a whole.
>
> In general, to enjoin patience is to exalt God's order, and to enjoin mercy is to nurture kindness towards His creatures. The whole issue of obedience to God revolves around these two principles.[24]

**24** Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XC,20.

## 5.4 Those Without Mercy Will Receive None

Glossing the verse we have just considered, which is from the sura 'The City' and deals with mercy between believers in general (Qur'ān XC,17), commentaries of traditional hue tend to quote some of Muḥammad's relevant sayings. For example, Ibn Kathīr, in his *Exegesis of the Sublime Qur'ān*, quotes the following: "God shows mercy toward the merciful: have mercy on those on earth so that He who is in heaven may have mercy on you".[25] "God shows no mercy to those who show no mercy to others".[26] "He is not of us who shows no mercy to the least among us and does not recognise what is due [*ḥaqq* حقّ] to the greatest among us".[27]

These and other expressions of traditional Islamic moral thought are to be found in the *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī faḍl al-raḥma wa-l-rāḥimīn* or 'Forty Sayings on Mercy and Those Who Show Mercy', by Ibn Ṭulūn al-Ṣāliḥī of Damascus (d. 953/1546),[28] known primarily as a historian but evidently well-versed in many fields of religious and secular knowledge. Ibn Ṭulūn's work consists almost entirely of stories about the Prophet Muḥammad, which succeed one another in no particular order and without any discernible criteria of selection. The result is a text which continuously combines magnificent examples of God's *raḥma*, which pervades heaven and earth, with modest, everyday scenarios; which alternates the words of the angels with those of ordinary people whose names have not been preserved; and which juxtaposes very short sayings with wide-ranging narratives; an 'editorial' strategy clearly aimed at variety, and at constantly amazing the reader. The theme most frequently rehearsed is God's mercy whose breadth is inconceivable to the human mind, and among the most frequent images is the number ninety-nine, which mirrors the doctrine of the Names:

> The Prophet said: – God possesses a hundred mercies. One of them He sent down to the earth and distributed among the jinn, humans, quadrupeds and insects so that through it they would love each other, have mercy on each other, and so that each animal would have affection for its cub. The other ninety-nine God kept back so that He might show mercy to His servants on the Day of Judgment.[29]

> The Prophet said that God created a hundred mercies. One He placed among His creatures and ninety-nine, a hundred minus one, He hid close to Himself. Some have said that on the Day of Judgement half of these will go to those belonging to the community of Muḥammad [...]. These form half of all the people of heaven, they are the most merciful of the communities in the world. For this Muḥammad is called 'the Prophet of mercy'; and it is feared therefore that those who have stripped mercy from their hearts cannot belong to His community.[30]

25 Cf. al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila*, no. 1843; and Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna, musnad al-mukthirīn min al-ṣaḥāba*, no. 6315.

26 Cf. for example al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-tawḥīd*, no. 6852.

27 Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila*, no. 1838. Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān XC,17.

28 Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995.

29 Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 28-9.

30 Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 30.

As suggested in the story just recounted, human mercy, the fruit and blurred mirror of the divine *raḥma*, is a condition for salvation in this world and the next. "He who does not have mercy does not receive mercy"[31] from others, including the Other *par excellence*. So much is confirmed in the following dialogue between God and Moses from the same miscellany:

> One day Moses, son of ʿImrān, was walking along a road when the Most High and Exalted Ruler of all called out to him: – Moses!
>
> Moses turned to his right and his left but saw no-one.
>
> He called him a second time: – Moses!
>
> Again, Moses turned to his right and his left; again, he saw no-one and began to tremble with fear.
>
> A third time he was called: – Moses, son of ʿImrān! I am God, there is no other god but Me, the Clement, the Merciful.
>
> He replied: – I am here for You, I am here for You. And he fell prostrate to the ground.
>
> God said to him: – Lift up your head, Moses, son of ʿImrān.
>
> Moses lifted up his head.
>
> He said: – Moses, if you wish to abide in the shadow of My Throne on the day when there shall be no shadow but Mine, Moses, be like a merciful father to the orphan, be like an affectionate spouse to the widow; Moses, son of ʿImrān, show mercy and you will be shown mercy, Moses, as you condemn, so shall you be condemned. Moses, announce to the Children of Israel that whosoever meets Me and has disowned Muḥammad, I shall introduce him into the Fire, even if he were Abraham My friend, or Moses My interlocutor […].
>
> Moses asked: – And who are those of the community of Muḥammad?
>
> He replied: – They are those who lavish praise, who heap praises in the going up and the coming down and in all circumstances, who strengthen their innermost being and purify their limbs, who fast during the day and tremble at night. From them I accept the little they have to give, and I welcome them in paradise as they testify that there is no other god but God.
>
> Moses said: – Let me be the prophet of that community!
>
> He replied: – Their prophet is one of them.
>
> He said: – Make me then one of that prophet's community!
>
> He replied: – You came first, Moses, and he will come later, but I will reunite you in the abode of Glory.[32]

The *Forty Sayings* of Ibn Ṭulūn often deal with human mercy in the context of the family, and not infrequently we find divine love coupled with maternal love:

> We were with the Prophet on a raid and passed closed by an encampment.
>
> – Who are you? – they asked.
>
> – We are the Muslims – we replied.
>
> There was a woman stoking the fire in her brazier and she had a child with her; when the flames took in the brazier, she removed the child, came to the Prophet and asked him: – Are you the Messenger of God?

**31** In Arabic: *man lā yarḥamu lā yurḥamu*.

**32** Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 48-9.

– Yes – he replied.

– For my father and mother's sake – the woman said – is not God the most clement of the merciful?

– Certainly – the Prophet answered.

– Is not God more merciful towards His servants than a mother to her child?

– Certainly – the Prophet said again.

Then the woman exclaimed: – But a mother would never throw her child into the fire!

The Messenger of God fell to the ground in tears, but then raised his head and said: – From among his servants God will only punish the stubborn and the arrogant against Him, who refuse to say 'There is no other god but God'.[33]

A group of prisoners approached the Prophet and among them was a woman who was breastfeeding. She saw another child of their number, ran, picked it up, put it to her breast and fed it too […].

– There – the Prophet said – God is even more merciful towards His servants than this woman to her child.[34]

It is only a short step from maternal love to the general manifestation of affection for all children:

The Prophet kissed al-Ḥasan, the son of ʿAlī.

Al-Aqraʿ Ibn Ḥābis al-Tamīmī, who was sitting nearby, commented: – I have ten sons and I have never kissed any of them.

The Prophet looked at him and said: – Those who have no mercy will receive none.[35]

Given the importance of mercy in morality and in defining Islam itself, the greatest censure belongs those who do not live it but feign it; as the Prophet said, "let the curse of God, of angels and of men fall on the paid mourner and the women who crowd around her".[36]

33 Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 40-1.

34 Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 22-3.

35 Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 16-17.

36 Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 73-5.

# 6 Hospitality

**Summary** 6.1 Hospitality and Giving. – 6.2 Disposition, Incorporation, Definition. – 6.3 Believers and Their Guests. – 6.4 Celebrating the Guest.

In the sura *al-Ṭūr* 'The Mount' in the Qur'ān, we come across another divine Name, *al-barr* الْبَرّ (LII,28), interpreted by the commentators as 'the Benefactor' or 'the Charitable One' (*al-muḥsin* المحسن), 'Kind to His servants' (*al-laṭīf* اللطيف), 'He who maintains His promise of paradise'. This is a Name that is also reflected in 'The Cow' sura's recommendation to the good believer. It is a celebrated passage, and with good reason:

> It is not true piety [*birr* بِرّ], that you turn your faces to the East and to the West. True piety is this: to believe in God, and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to kinsmen, and orphans, to the needy, the son of the road [*ibn al-sabīl* ابن السبيل] and to beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform your prayers, to give alms. And they who fulfil their word when they have entered into a covenant, and endure with fortitude misfortune, hardship and peril; these are they who are true in their faith, these are the truly godfearing. (II,177)

'True piety' or 'fear of God' or simply 'righteousness' are all expressions that can translate the Arabic *birr*, a very capacious term: it ranges from articles of faith through legal ethics to the domain of personal virtues, and thus bespeaks religion but at the same time the whole realm of goodness. Commentators variously explain *birr* as obedience, adherence to prophecy and covenant with God, conversion, truth, goodness and justice; some – such as al-Ṭabarī in his *Compendious Discourse* – link *birr* to praxis, *doing* what pleases God in word and deed.

Be that as it may, according to the sura 'The Mount', an element of 'true piety' is to share one's possessions with the 'son of the road' (*ibn al-sabīl*), a


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figure whom the commentators are unanimous in identifying as the wayfarer, or the guest (*ḍayf* ضَيْف), the traveller who "passes by", as al-Ṭabarī himself explains,[1] or "the guest who lodges with the Muslims", in Ibn Kathīr's formulation;[2] or again, according to the modern Yemeni exegete Muḥammad al-Shawkānī in *The Victory of the Almighty*, the traveller on an involuntary stopover.[3]

## 6.1 Hospitality and Giving

The Qur'ān recognises wayfarers as belonging to a special protected category; it thus aligns hospitality with goodness (*iḥsān*) and makes it one of the good Muslim's highest values, a cornerstone of his faith, a gateway to paradise. In the sura 'The Cow' we read:

> They will ask you what they should give in charity. Say: Whatever wealth you spend, be it for parents and the near of kin and orphans and the needy and the son of the road, and whatever good you do, God will surely know it. (Qur'ān II,215)

Also a passage in the sura 'The Women' insists on the rights of the wayfarer, and here the dutiful welcoming of a guest is a repayment or at least a return for God's generosity towards the wealthy:

> Be kind to parents, and to kinsmen, and to orphans, and to the needy, and to the neighbour who is of kin, and to the neighbour who is a stranger, and to the son of the road, and to the slave. Surely God loves not the proud and boastful and those who are miserly, and bid other men to be miserly, and themselves conceal the bounty that God has given them. (IV,36)

We have already noted how the Qur'ānic definition of a Muslim involves various heterogeneous elements ranging from legal behaviour, to belief and to the ethics of virtue: 'true piety' (*birr*) is shown by one who believes, is generous, prays, gives alms, keeps his word and is patient (II,177). Among these components, generosity towards guests has a very high moral significance: what one should give to another is not the superfluous or the insignificant, but precisely what one loves. The servants of God, says the sura *al-Insān* 'The Man',

> give food, in spite of their love for it, to the poor, the orphan, and the captive: – We feed you for God's sake only and we do not want any reward or thanks from you. (Qur'ān LXXVI, 8-9)

Charity must therefore be freely given. We call giving to others without demanding a price in return or any restitution a gift, of course, and in Qur'ānic thought, hospitality, exactly because it is a gift, does not expect reciprocity and is untouched by worldly considerations.

1 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, glossing Qur'ān LII,28.
2 Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, glossing Qur'ān LII,28.
3 Al-Shawkānī 1431/2010, glossing Qur'ān LII,28.

## 6.2 Disposition, Incorporation, Definition

Which brings us to the preferred Arabic term for 'guest': *ḍayf*. Unlike in Latin (and Latin-derived languages), the Arabic term is unidirectional and refers only to those who seek and obtain hospitality[4] – as in the classical dictionaries by such as Ibn Fāris (m. 395/1004) in his *Maqāyīs al-lugha* or 'Analogical Templates of Language',[5] and later Ibn Manẓūr in *The Language of the Arabs*.[6] Both authors proffer some interesting pointers: since verbs close to the noun *ḍayf* or 'guest' are used to indicate the setting of the sun, or its decline towards the horizon or the downward trajectory of an arrow due to the force of gravity, 'guest' has to do with tilt, curvature and deflection. Thence, these ancient lexicologists read between the lines that visiting someone to ask for hospitality is a detour from one's path, possibly involuntary and necessary like the sunset, like natural laws, because it is dictated by the law of survival. It does not take a lot of imagination to grasp the relationship between hospitality and the need to stay alive: one only need think of the immense desert spaces of the Arabian Peninsula, the scarcity of inhabited centres, the rare encampments, both in the age of Revelation and still even today. Seeking hospitality, being unavoidable, invokes the right to protection; and it may be that the legal institution known as *dhimma* ذمّة or 'protection pact', under which Islamic Law protects members of other revealed religions, can also be seen as a consequence of the duty of hospitality.

At the same time, still according to classical dictionaries, *ḍayf* or 'guest' also brings in the suggestion of addition, union and connection: the guest is said to be such because he *adds* himself to the family, because he joins them, because he receives food together with them.[7] Anyone familiar with the rudiments of the Arabic language cannot fail to think of *iḍāfa* إضافة or 'annexation', from the same verbal root, a grammatical construction by which a noun determines the meaning of another if it is added to it and put in the genitive case. This observation is not merely pedantic, because it serves to further clarify how hospitality is seen in Islamic culture: the guest is first and foremost one who deviates from his path, his deviation being, nonetheless, necessary; he is the one who temporarily adds himself to the table, that is, to someone's family; and it is he who defines the one who welcomes him in and offers him charity as an authentic Muslim, who shows 'true piety'.[8]

## 6.3 Believers and Their Guests

The Qur'ān refrains from emphasising the moral importance of hospitality, which it clearly assumes its audience will take for granted, but does nod to it on a number of occasions, almost always relating to Abraham's guests (Qur'ān XV,51; LI,24; cf. LIV,36-7; XV,68; XI,78). If we think back to the

4 The reciprocal meaning of 'one who offers hospitality' is only found much later, cf. Lecerf 1971.

5 Ibn Fāris 1399/1979, root ḍ-y-f.

6 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root ḍ-y-f.

7 Lane 1968, root ḍ-y-f.

8 This idea, of the guest as a 'discriminator', and of his presence as a 'catalyst for the definition of his host', cannot but bring to mind the speculations of Derrida 1997.

contents of hospitality we have pointed out via the suggestions of the early lexicographers and a few linguistic notes – that is, the involuntary deviation and its capacity to define virtue – it is clear that Abraham's hospitality, and then Lot's, elevate them particularly to the exalted status of 'true piety':

> Tell them about Abraham's guests who entered his house saying: – Peace be with you.
>
> And he replied: – We are fearful of you.
>
> – Do not fear – they replied – we are here to announce the arrival of a wise child.
>
> He replied: – You bring me this happy news now, when I am old? What are you telling me? (Qur'ān XV,51-4)

Thus the sura 'The Rocky Tract'. A very similar passage can be found in the sura *al-Dhāriyāt* 'The Scatterers':

> Have you heard the tale of Abraham's honoured guests? When they came in to him and said: – Peace be with you. And he answered: – Peace – and they were strangers. He withdrew into the house and returned with a fatted calf which he offered them. He asked: – Will you not eat? – and he became uneasy. – Do not be afraid – they said, and announced to him the birth of a wise child. (Qur'ān LI,24-8)

As in the Old Testament account (*Genesis* 18,1-9), the announcement concerns the belated birth of Isaac, and Abraham's guests are angels. What stands out in the Qur'ānic version of the story – and represents a substantial difference from the biblical version – is the insistence on the foreboding and fear of the worst that the arrival of the foreign travellers produces in Abraham. Since the gift of food is a formal obligation of hospitality, and its refusal may conceal an aggressive intent (cf. Qur'ān XI,70), the patriarch's initial apprehension is only reinforced by the angels' refusal, but this does not distract him from the duty of offering. In this way, the Qur'ān illuminates the truest and noblest face of hospitality: it is a pure act of trust, utterly devoid of social guarantees, which on the one hand exposes one to risk, but on the other allows the manifestation of a revelation. Paul's *Letter to the Hebrews* teaches the same lesson: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares". Where hospitality is rendered φιλοξενία, that is, 'love for the stranger' (*Hebrews* 13,2).

Following the Qur'ān, the Tradition or Sunna also focuses on the figure of Abraham in the context of hospitality, and has the Prophet Muḥammad say that Abraham himself, the father of monotheists, was also the first to give hospitality. Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, among others, reports as much in his *Kitāb qirā al-ḍayf* or 'The Book of Hospitality to Guests'.[9] The early author repeatedly states, through numerous quotations, that Abraham is a hero, a prince of hospitality: he is the one who wanted a mansion with four doors, one for each point of the compass, the more easily to welcome all wayfarers, wherever they might come from;[10] he is the one who, before his meal,

9 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 18.

10 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 18.

would travel a mile or more in search of someone to eat with him;[11] he is the one who honoured his guests personally and waited on them with his own hands, which is why the Qur'ān refers to 'the honoured guests of Abraham' (cf. Qur'ān LI,24).[12] Among the copious material he has collected, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā includes a well-known story about the poor but resourceful man to whom the Prophet entrusts a guest. This man takes the guest to his home and, when they arrive,

> his wife asks him: – Who is this?
>
> The man answers: – He is a guest of the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him.
>
> The woman says: – I swear to you on He who revealed the Qur'ān to Muḥammad, for this evening we only have left one bun, that could only feed you or me, or the guest or the servant.
>
> Her husband said: – Divide it into pieces, dress it with a little dripping and bring it to the table; then ask the servant to blow out the lamp.
>
> In the dark the man and his wife proceeded to smack their lips so that the guest would think they too were eating.
>
> The following morning […] the Prophet asked where the man was who had welcomed his guest. Three times he asked and at last the man, who had remained silent until then, spoke up: – It was me.
>
> – Gabriel – the Prophet said to him – told me that when you told the servant to blow out the lamp, the Most High and Excellent God himself laughed.[13]

Immediately after this very episode, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā teaches, God revealed a verse from the sura *al-Ḥashr* 'The Gathering':

> And those who live in the faith love those who emigrate to them, and have no jealousy in their breasts for what they are given, and give them preference over themselves, even if they are in need. And those who save themselves from their own souls' covetousness are those who will prosper. (Qur'ān LIX,9)[14]

The tales in *The Book of Hospitality to Guests* are innumerable, often informal, even pungent. For example, the following, which tells of a real generosity contest between a Companion of the Prophet, 'Abd Allāh Ibn Ja'far, and a Bedouin:[15]

> We set out with 'Abd Allāh Ibn Ja'far and camped near a woollen tent, which belonged to a Bedouin *sayyid* from the tribe of 'Udhra. While we were there, the Bedouin came over, leading a camel, stopped in front of us and said: – You, give me a knife. We handed him a knife, he slit the camel's throat and said: – This is for you.

**11** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 19.

**12** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 18-19.

**13** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 19-20.

**14** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 20.

**15** The following translations have been pared of some redundant material, and are therefore not strictly literal.

> We stayed there a second day, and again the ʻUdhri came over with another camel. You – he said – get me out a knife. We answered him that, as he could see, we still had meat from the day before, but he exclaimed: – It will never be that you eat stale meat from me, get the knife out. We handed it to him, he slit the camel's throat and then said: – This is for you, do with it what you will.
>
> We stayed a third day and again the ʻUdhri came with a camel. He stopped in front of us and said again: – You, get me out a knife. We answered him: – But don't you see that we still have meat?! He exclaimed: – It will never be that you eat stale meat from me, I will think the less of you, give me the knife. We gave him the knife, and once again he slit the camel's throat, and then as usual he said to us: – This is for you, do with it what you will.
>
> Finally, we were ready to set off again. Ibn Jaʻfar asked his young quartermaster what riches we had brought with us, and the answer was a bale of clothes and four hundred gold coins; Ibn Jaʻfar ordered him to take it all to the ʻUdhri. So, the boy returned to the woollen tent and found a young woman there. – Take these things – he told her – they are a gift from Ibn Jaʻfar. The young woman replied that they could accept no reward in return for hospitality, so the quartermaster, taking the gifts with him, returned to us and informed us of the matter. But Ibn Jaʻfar ordered him to go back one more time to the woman, and if she accepted the gifts, well and good, otherwise the quartermaster would have to leave everything in front of the tent entrance. So, the young man went back again to the woman and, as soon as she saw him, she cried out to him: – Go away, God bless you, we do not accept any reward in return for hospitality: if my husband returns and sees that I have accepted these gifts, he will surely punish me. The quartermaster, as agreed, left the bale of clothes and the bag of coins at the entrance of the tent.
>
> We resumed our journey, and had only travelled a short distance when we became aware, behind us, of something that the mirage made to seem sometimes tall and sometimes low. When it approached, we saw that it was the ʻUdhri *sayyid*, who had brought us back the bale and the bag. He threw it in our direction without a word, then turned and left. We waited watching him from behind, and do you think he turned around? Not a bit of it. Ibn Jaʻfar used to say: – No one has ever outdone me in generosity, except that Bedouin from the tribe of the ʻUdhra. [16]

A very similar tale, which again sees the Companion Ibn Jaʻfar confronted with the incomparable hospitality of the desert Arabs, puts a greater stress on the moral and cultural virtues of the nomadic woman:

> Ibn Jaʻfar set off on a pilgrimage. At a certain point he decided to go on ahead of the caravan on his camel to look for somewhere to camp. Finding a Bedouin woman who was sitting at the entrance to her tent, he dismounted from his camel to wait for his companions. When the woman saw him, she got up and exclaimed: – It must be God who has directed thee to me, to lodge in the dwellings of the virtuous. Ibn Jaʻfar, admiring her eloquence, approached the woman, who for her part handed him

**16** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 23-4.

a leather cushion; he sat down while she went off to a goat tied to the corner of the tent and in no time at all she had served him a leg of meat, which he began to eat. When his companions arrived and saw him, they too dismounted and the woman served them what was left of the goat […].

After three days Ibn Jaʿfar decided it was time to move on. He called over his steward and asked him: – Do you have some of my money with you?

– Yes – he answered.

– How much?

– A thousand gold coins – said the young man, and Ibn Jaʿfar ordered him to give half to the woman.

But she refused to accept them and kept saying: – No, no, as God is my witness, I do not want my husband to scold me – but the steward insisted so stubbornly that in the end the woman capitulated.

Ibn Jaʿfar and his companions had hardly left when they saw a camel heading for the woman's tent.

– Here comes just what the woman was afraid of – said Ibn Jaʿfar – one of you leave the caravan immediately and go back to see what is going on, without being recognised, then come back and tell me.

One of them left the caravan, and went back towards the tent. In the meantime, the woman had also seen the Bedouin arriving and had approached him, reciting in flowery verses that – she swore on her father and mother – she had done everything in her power not to accept the gifts.

– What a terrible thing you have done – the husband shouted at her – in the name of the Eternal God, you who should shelter our guests have sold your duty for this pittance! miseries!

The woman replied: – What you say is just what I feared. I was afraid you would scold me.

Then he: – Wife of mine, you feared my scolding when you should have feared the shame! Tell me what direction that traveller went in.

She pointed the way and he told her to saddle him a horse.

– What are you going to do? – the woman asked.

– I am going to catch up with those people – he answered – and if they do not give me what is due, I will fight them.

She begged him: – In the name of God, do not harm them!

But he turned on her: – You have failed in your duty.And he mounted his horse, brandishing his lance.

Ibn Jaʿfar's companion, who had witnessed the scene, spurred his own horse to ride alongside the Bedouin: – I doubt if you will be able to catch up with those people – he suggested, but the other replied that in the name of God he would reach them even if they continued to the ends of the earth, and since he went on repeating as much, Ibn Jaʿfarʿs companion tried to placate him:

– Keep calm, let me catch up with those people and tell them what you have to say. So, he hurried on ahead to Ibn Jaʿfar, and told him the whole story. Ibn Jaʿfar said to him: – You did well, it was a way to forestall a disaster.

Meanwhile the Bedouin had caught up with them. He greeted them and Ibn Jaʿfar returned his greetings and assured him that his wife had behaved very well and had done her best to refuse the gifts. But the other replied that he did not agree with him at all, and kept on talking, and arguing, and refusing, and would not under any circumstances accept all that money. When Ibn Jaʿfar saw that this was the case, he said:

– Let's try to understand what it is you want to do, but I do not want you to give back what I have given.

Meanwhile the Bedouin had risen and gone off to one side and prayed twice.[17]

When he had finished, he mounted his horse and pulled out his bow and some arrows. Ibn Jaʿfar asked him the reason for those prayers.

– In those two prayers – the Bedouin replied – I asked my Exalted and Most High Lord to inspire me as to what to do with you, whether to fight you or not.

Ibn Jaʿfar asked him: – And what did the Lord suggest?

– He pointed me – replied the Bedouin – in the righteous direction, that is, that you take back your largesse and so give us back what you owe us.

– We will do so – Ibn Jaʿfar replied at that point – and ordered everything to be taken back.

The Bedouin was about to take his leave when Ibn Jaʿfar made him a last request:

– Can we not at least give you some food for your return journey?

– And what would be the reason for that? – he answered; – I do not live far from here and you do not now owe me anything.

– There is in fact something we owe you – replied Ibn Jaʿfar.

– And what is that? – asked the other.

– Some recompense for all your wife's chiding and scolding when you tell her how badly you have behaved towards us.

The Bedouin laughed and rode off.[18]

As these quoted passages suggest, the hospitality sought, and willingly granted, is for three days, and this duration of hospitality is taken up by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā in other, more concise passages; as in, for example, the two Prophetic sayings that follow:

> Let him who believes in God and the Last Day honour his guest. Obligatory hospitality is for one day and one night; recommended hospitality is for three days – any longer and it becomes almsgiving. To stay with someone so long as to cause him embarrassment is an abuse.[19]

> The Prophet said: – It is not permissible for anyone to stay with his brother so long as to cause him to sin. – And how would we cause him to sin? He answered: – By staying with him longer than he can afford to be hospitable.[20]

Another proverbial figure in the anecdotal literature on hospitality is the wealthy Companion of the Prophet Saʿd Ibn ʿUbāda, a prominent notable among the Medina converts; and naturally his name, a byword for hospitality, also appears in *The Book of Hospitality to Guests* by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā:

**17** More precisely, he had performed two '*rakaʿa*', a term indicating a given set of movements and declarations that, reiterated several times, form each *ṣalāt* or legally valid prayer.

**18** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 24-6.

**19** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 17.

**20** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 17.

> When the dinner hour arrived, there were some who invited one poor person, some who invited two, and some who invited five. For his part, Saʿd Ibn ʿUbāda invited eighty every evening.[21]

> Every day, the Messenger of God would receive a bowl of soup from Saʿd Ibn ʿUbāda, which was brought to him wherever he was, with whichever wife he was staying the night. At the end of one of the prescribed prayers, Saʿd Ibn ʿUbāda would say: – My God, give me money to help me in my deeds, for it is only money that makes the deed pure.[22]

> I came upon Saʿd Ibn ʿUbāda, may God Most High be pleased. He was standing on his terrace and shouting: – Whoever wants fat and meat, come to Saʿd Ibn ʿUbāda! Then I came upon his son, who was doing the same, like him inviting others.[23]

## 6.4 Celebrating the Guest

To return to the Holy Book and the accounts of Abraham's guests: as in the Bible story (*Genesis* 19,1-11), the angels leave Abraham and move on to Lot to warn him of the punishment that God has prepared for the people of Sodom. And here it should be noted that the iniquity of Lot's people is presented by the Qurʾān in the first instance as a dereliction of the obligations of hospitality. The sura *al-Qamar* 'The Moon', for example, states that Lot's fellow citizens "doubted the divine warnings and wanted Lot to hand over his guests to them" (Qurʾān LIV,37). It is clear in this verse that the rejection of the angelic hosts is a consequence or symptom of a preexisting impiety (cf. "doubted the divine warnings"); the repudiation of a guest is equivalent to repudiation of the Prophet, it denies the reality of the Prophecy. In other words, Lot's people lack 'true piety' (*birr*):

> Lot said to them: – They are my guests, do not shame me; have fear of God and do not disgrace me. They said: – Did we not forbid you to welcome anyone at all? (XV,68-70)

Thus the sura 'The Rocky Tract'. To confirm that in Islamic thought rejection of a guest goes hand in hand with unbelief, while welcoming a guest is a part of faith, there is a Prophetic saying quoted again by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā in *Hospitality to Guests*: "Let whoever believes in God and the Last Day, honour his guest".[24]

The Qurʾān thus relates hospitality to religion and makes the expectations of the guest an aspect of the expectations of God. Another way in which the Holy Book affirms the religious dignity of hospitality is through the link between hospitality and the offering of food. When Abraham welcomed the travelling strangers, "He withdrew into the house and returned with a fatted calf which he offered them" (Qurʾān LI,26). The act of offering

21 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 29.
22 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 29.
23 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 29.
24 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1418/1997, 16.

is expressed here by an Arabic verb pregnant with meaning – *qarraba* قرّب: starting from the meaning of 'to approach' or 'to allow to approach', *qarraba* can mean man approaching closer to God or, conversely, God approaching closer to man, and eventually comes also to mean the offering of a sacrifice. This is the case in the Qur'ānic story of the sons of Adam, where *qarraba* is made even stronger by the copresence of a related noun that indicates precisely a sacrificial offering (*qurbān* قربان): it is said in the sura *al-Mā'ida* 'The Table Spread with Food' that Abel and Cain "sacrificed a sacrificial offering" (*qarrabā qurbānan*), one a lamb and the other an ear of corn, and that God accepted one's offering and refused the other's (V,27). Understandably, Christian Arabs employ *qarraba* to mean the celebration of the Eucharist.

The sura 'The Repentance' also speaks of approaching divinity, in this case through almsgiving:

> And some of the Bedouins believe in God and the Last Day, and believe what they expend for offerings brings them near to God, and the prayers of the Messenger. (IX,99)

Then again, and once more linking to the idea of proximity, *qarraba* can also be understood as welcoming someone into one's family; 'people of proximity' (*ahl al-qurbā* أهل القربى) is in fact the commonest way of referring to relatives. And this brings us back to hospitality and the sense of addition, inclusion and annexation. On this, Ibn Manẓūr's glosses are as useful as ever; we read in *The Language of the Arabs* that to host someone properly means: "You let someone stay with you as a guest, you let him deviate towards you and approach you, you take him in as one of the family and add him to your table".[25]

In Qur'ānic, or more generally, Islamic thought, hospitality is thus clearly understood as an act of worship, since it brings with it the approach of God and to God. Consenting to the approach of the other, and especially of a stranger, hospitality takes on the lineaments of a sacred function in which the guest is celebrated through the sharing of food. And it is precisely this last aspect, the dividing up and distribution of whatever subsistence is available viewed as a religious duty, capable of bringing about the union of the participants as if they were members of a single family, that most forcefully strikes those belonging to other cultural traditions.

**25** Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root ḍ-y-f.

# 7 Silence and Good Language Habits

**Summary** 7.1 Silence and Listening. – 7.2 Curbing the Tongue. – 7.3 Imprisonment and Preventive Detention. – 7.4 Silence and Intelligence.

When discussing the components of goodness or *ḥilm*, we have seen that our various authors have not hesitated to include silence among the highest qualities of the good Muslim. In so doing, they usually appeal to such aphorisms as 'he who has compassion receives compassion and he who is silent keeps himself safe and sound' or 'silence is itself an answer'. Or to verses of poetry, like "when the fool speaks do not answer | silence is the best retort": this, again, from the early scholar Ibn Abī l-Dunyā in his *Book of Judiciousness*.[1]

Now, the inclusion of silence among the values of Islam was by no means a given, in so far as we are speaking of a culture that has always put a high value on words, right from its founding text, the Qurʾān, which boasts an eloquence that reproduces the talk of God – as it frequently says of itself.[2] Later Arabic literature also shows an unshakeable faith in the word, to which it attributes a solid operational capability and even a redemptive values – as in the well-known case of Scheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights*.[3] Hand in hand with this high regard for speech, there is a documented disdain for silence, even bitter condemnation of it when it is a question of responding to the great Qurʾānic imperative "enjoin what is good and forbid evil" (Qurʾān III,104, 110 and 114; VII,157; IX,71 and 112; XXII,41; XXXI,17), the principle that underpins both Islamic morals and politics. The imagery of the Tradition also contains the figure of the 'mute devil' (*shayṭān akhras*

1 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 34.

2 On the relationship between the spoken word and silence in comparison with other monotheistic religions, cf. the interesting reflections of Ventura (*Il Corano* 2010, "Introduzione", LII).

3 Cf. also Ghersetti 2010.


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شيطان أخرس), a personification of *omertà*, whithholding the truth, taken up by, among others, the Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in his *I'lām al-muwaqqi'īn 'an rabb al-'ālamīn* or 'Information for Those who Write on Behalf of the Lord of the Worlds':

> What religion, what good could there ever be in one who sees God's commands violated […] and remains cold in heart and silent in tongue? He is a mute devil. Just as he who speaks falsely is a speaking devil.[4]

A negative perception of silence is already to be found in the Qur'ān, which is, incidentally, not much interested in distinguishing silence by choice from pathological or necessity-driven muteness: for example, the prophet Zechariah remains silent for three days after doubting the divine good tidings (Qur'ān III,41; XIX,10), and Mary mother of Jesus remains silent, perhaps for the same reason or perhaps because of a vow she has imposed on herself (XIX,26); in Abraham's dealings with the idolaters, silence, or the inability to speak, defines the false gods (XXI,63-5; XXXVII,92); and in the sura *al-Mu'minūn* 'The Believers', it is ordained for the damned because they have failed to believe in the Qur'ān, the word of truth:

> Were not My communications recited to you but you rejected them as lies? They will reply: – Lord, our misfortunes overwhelmed us and we were a people led astray. Our Lord, bring us forth out of here! […]. He will say: – Remain despised therein and do not speak to Me. (Qur'ān XXIII,105-8)

## 7.1 Silence and Listening

The only occasions on which the Book of Islam praises silence, bringing in the ethical dimension and making silence a quality of the good believer, is when it is adopted for listening to the Book's own contents.[5] For example, in the sura *al-A'rāf* 'The Heights', it is an indispensable ingredient of commendable behaviour: "Whenever the Qur'ān is recited, listen to it quietly so that you may receive mercy" (Qur'ān VII,204).

Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, in his *Compendious Discourse*, provides a good commentary on this passage. It teaches, he says, that the Muslim, when he hears the Book recited, should not talk over it but bend his ear to understanding its verses as well as he can, to comprehend it and ponder it, and to consider its lessons. An apparently obvious explanation which, nonetheless, in its repeated insistence on applying one's intelligence to the Text and pondering it, urges above all the good use of the intellect; and conversely frames the human word as a distracting intrusion. Al-Ṭabarī cites in support various accounts of the historical occasions to which the revelation of the passages he examines responded, and in so doing immerses the reader in the everyday world of 'the pious ancestors', in the small, even dull events that make up the life of a community. He recalls, in

4 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1411/1991, 2: 121.

5 The Arabic language, with its wealth of terminology, has three major roots expressing silence: ṣ-m-t, from which *ṣamt* and *ṣumūt*; s-k-t, from which *sukūt*; and n-ṣ-t. Only the last has moral weight, and appears in the Qur'ān twice, always in the imperative plural (*anṣitū*).

fact, how in the Prophet's time there were those who, during communal prayer, chatted about their own affairs and greeted acquaintances, those who became aroused and noisy at the mere mention of heaven or hell, and those who, arriving late at the ritual, asked others at what point they were and how much longer before the end. And there was the odd one who, out of enthusiasm and/or exhibitionism, would loudly recite the words of the imam, the prayer leader, in unison, overpowering his voice and creating embarrassment. This verse, therefore, enjoins silence both during the recitation of the Qurʾān and while the imam is preaching; as ʿAṭāʾ Ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. c. 114/732), an early Meccan jurist, advised, "silence is obligatory in two things: when reciting the Qurʾān while praying, and when the imam recites it when preaching".[6]

The idea that silence goes hand in hand with listening and also with knowing and understanding the essentials of faith reappears in the Qurʾān in the sura *al-Aḥqāf* 'The Curved Sand-hills': "Remember when We sent you a company of jinn to hear the Qurʾān; and when they were in its presence, they said to one another: – Be silent!" (XLVI,29). And here the commentators all go off on a tangent, imagining readers' many queries and answering them from the Prophetic Tradition, frequently relying on Ibn ʿAbbās (d. c. 68/687), 'the father of Qurʾānic exegesis': where was the Prophet while he was reciting, and where were the jinn? By a palm tree. How many of them were there? Fewer than ten, nine perhaps. Where did they come from? From the heavens, having been chased from there by flaming stars (cf. XV,18). Were they invisible? They were. Then how could the Prophet know they were there? Muḥammad was aware of them through divine inspiration. And what did the jinn do when they had finished listening? Perhaps they became prophets to their fellows and preached Islam. And so on. When the exhortation to silence is finally examined, there are those who translate it into a prosaic 'shhh!', those who explain that what the jinn renounced at that point was their particular way of speaking made up of murmurs and innuendos, and those who dwell on the cognitive aspect of silence and listening: the jinn knew that they would not understand the Qurʾān if they did not keep quiet and listen.

The idea that silence is linked to listening, and is therefore conducive to intellectual refinement, functions well as a key to understanding the Prophetic and the more generally ecstatic experience on which Islamic culture rests. It is dealt with, to cite just one example, by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī in his *The Nourishment of Hearts*, something of a handbook of Sufism, where the author teaches that silence is one of the four mainstays of the postulant together with hunger, wakefulness and isolation; that it is an adornment in the wise and a blemish on the ignorant; and that on its own it forms half of wisdom (*ʿilm*), the other half being knowing when to employ it.[7]

## 7.2 Curbing the Tongue

In Islamic culture, the literature on silence, or rather on the rules of speech and the broader disciplining of language, puts before the believer the great models of the past, starting of course with the Prophet himself and his conduct as handed down by the Tradition. The best known and also the most

6 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qurʾān VII,204.

7 Al-Makkī 1426/2005, 1: 169-77.

substantial work is *Al-ṣamt wa-ādāb al-lisān* or 'Silence and Etiquette of the Tongue' by an author we have already consulted several times, the traditionist and moralist Ibn Abī l-Dunyā of Baghdad.[8]

This work, like his others, is entirely composed of stories from the Tradition, offered without commentary, where the characters, settings, and even registers – from the grave and solemn to the shrewd and witty – come and go haphazardly, with a good deal of repetition. But as we read on it becomes clear that Ibn Abī l-Dunyā's concern is always the same: to arrange the stories as unpredictably as possible, to keep his readers on their toes.

There are several hundred of these tales and they have to do with the Prophet and other prominent figures from the dawn of Islam, the Companions or the caliphs dear to didactic literature, but also to other luminaries of sacred history, first and foremost Jesus, who frequently figures,[9] or Moses, Ishmael, Solomon, David, Adam, or the wise Luqmān. Amidst his potpourri of material, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā discusses the excellence of silence and the impropriety of indiscretion, the wickedness of telling lies, of duplicity, of denigrating the absent and of slander, but also quarrels and disputes, words in defence of one's brethren, punctilious speech, derision, adulation, obscenities, and much more. The work begins, appropriately enough, with the Prophet's silence as recalled by a notable from Mecca.

> I asked: – Messenger of God, tell me about Islam. I will not ask anyone but you on the subject.
>
> He replied: – Recite out loud 'I believe in God' and keep to the straight path.
>
> – And what should I beware of? – I then asked.
>
> He pointed at his tongue.[10]

Ibn Abī l-Dunyā values silence as a religious duty. On this, another saying of Muḥammad's stands out: "Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, speak well or keep silent" – which the author goes so far as to quote twice almost consecutively, in two parallel versions.[11] He attributes substantially similar words to Jesus as well; the apostles asked:

> – Tell us what we should do to enter into paradise.
>
> He answered: – Refrain from speaking altogether.
>
> They protested: – But we are not able to do that.
>
> – Then speak only the good – he said.[12]

Again on the importance of silence for good religious practice, there is a testimony by Ibn Jabal (d. 18/639), a Companion of the Prophet:

> I asked: – Messenger of God, will we be punished for what we say?

8 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989.

9 On the appearances of Jesus in the works of Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, I refer the reader to Khalidi 2003, 108-24.

10 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 47. Cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad, musnad al-makkiyyīn*, no. 15112.

11 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 63. There is an extended version in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-īmān*, no. 71

12 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 66.

> He exclaimed: – May your mother be bereaved of you! Do you think men are cast into hell, their noses to the ground, for anything other than the harvest of their tongues?[13]

Unlike the exegetical literature, moral literature emphasises the social alongside the strictly religious aspect: the discipline of speech is recommended to the believer as a way of pleasing God and therefore potentially leading to heaven, particularly because it is also pleasing to one's neighbour, like kindness or hospitality. Silence, then, lies especially in refraining from scandalmongering and other forms of verbal offence, including unsolicited and uncalled-for speech, and even irritating or complaining speech, harping on one's own misfortunes:

> A man's faith is not righteous unless his heart is righteous, and his heart is not righteous unless his tongue is righteous – the Prophet used to say – and no one enters heaven unless he has spared his neighbour the tale of his misfortunes.[14]

Sometimes stories trace a direct relationship between discipline of the tongue and hospitality. For example:

> A desert Arab asked the Prophet: Tell me what I must do to enter paradise.
> He replied: – Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, encourage good and prevent evil, and if you are not able to do that, then always hold your tongue except when saying good words.[15]

A parallel theme is the relationship between silence and generosity: "Blessed is he who gives more money and speaks fewer words", said the Prophet;[16] and again: "Hold back from saying ungenerous things to others: this is a donation [*ṣadaqa* صَدَقة] you can make to yourself".[17] Accounts of this kind, combining the religious importance of silence with its social value, form the bulk of the material collected in *Silence and Etiquette of the Tongue* – and we are not talking here about a blanket ban on speech to which the true believer must subscribe, a sort of silence fast, but more of a generic guardianship or restraint of the tongue. There is an obvious similarity here with the maxim known all over the world "speech is silver but silence is golden", which seems to have first appeared in Arabic literature – in two very similar versions, one from Ibn Abī l-Dunyā[18] and a slightly older but much more famous one from the celebrated littérateur al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868 or 869) of Basra.[19]

Another example is the following passage, whose protagonists are the Caliph Muʿāwiya and another icon of judiciousness, al-Aḥnaf al-Tamīmī (d. 67/686 or 687):

13 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 46-7; cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-anṣār*, no. 21494.

14 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 48.

15 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 72. There is a longer version in al-Bukhārī 1409/1983, no. 69.

16 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 43.

17 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 68. There is an extended version in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-īmān*, no. 122.

18 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 66.

19 Al-Jāhiẓ 1381/1961, 194. Cf. Wasserstein 1999, 247-9.

> There was conversation in Muʿāwiya's house, God rest his soul, and al-Aḥnaf was always silent.
>
> – What is the matter with you that you don't speak? – they asked him.
>
> He replied: – If I speak falsehood I fear God, if I speak the truth, I fear you.[20]

Similar is another aphorism, echoing the Qur'ānic silence in order to listen better: "Silence provides a man with two good things at the same time: one is the integrity of his religion, the other is understanding what his companion is saying".[21]

## 7.3 Imprisonment and Preventive Detention

Clearly, as far as the moral literature is concerned, silence always has a positive value while speech can be both good and evil, even at the same time. On this, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā has another of the Prophet's sayings: "The most beautiful thing and the ugliest thing that all of you possess is between your jaws, and that is your tongue".[22] On the same track are the following stories of the 'rightly guided' (*rāshidūn* راشدون) caliphs, the Prophet's immediate successors as heads of the Muslim community:

> ʿUmar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb saw Abū Bakr sticking out his tongue.
>
> – What are you doing, Caliph of the Messenger of God? - he asked him. The other replied: – This one has given me a good deal of trouble: God's Messenger himself said that there is no other part of the body that does not complain to God about the sharp tip of the tongue.[23]

> ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib said that the tongue leads the body and as long as it keeps straight the other members will do likewise, but if it runs amok no part of the body can stand up to it.[24]

Reading these accounts, it is difficult not to think of the New Testament's *Letter to James* (3,2-8):

> If anyone does not make a mistake with his tongue by saying the wrong things, he is a perfect man. It shows he is able to make his body do what he wants it to do. We make a horse go wherever we want it to go by a small bit in its mouth. We turn its whole body by this. […]. The tongue is also a small part of the body, but it can speak big things. See how a very small fire can set many trees on fire. The tongue is a fire. It is full of wrong. It poisons the whole body. The tongue sets our whole lives on fire with a fire that comes from hell. Men can make all kinds of animals and birds and fish and snakes do what they want them to do. But no man

20 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 70, on the authority of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

21 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 69.

22 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 70. This saying is poorly attested; nonetheless, cf. al-Bustī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* no. 5835.

23 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 50.

24 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 69.

> can make his tongue say what he wants it to say. It is sinful and does not rest. It is full of poison that kills.

But let us return to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, and his continuing teaching on the great care that needs to be taken of the tongue, "more even than the place where you set your foot", as one sage put it,[25] and not so much because it is an asset to be protected as because it is an evil to be kept at bay. In this connection, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā passes on an ironic if not jaundiced comment, based on the idea that human utterances, for the most part to be counted among their bad actions, do not go unnoticed by the recording angels: "If men were the ones compiling records of their deeds, they would speak little".[26]

Given the word's potential for mischief, its custody can easily be understood as a necessary concealment, an imprisonment even. And this, predictably enough, brings the interdictions of language back to those of sexuality, so that inappropriate speech can even link directly to the sin of adultery (*zinā* زنا), sometimes in very crude terms: "The Messenger of God said: – Whoever can vouch for what he has between his jaws and what he has between his legs, I will guarantee him paradise".[27] Or:

> They asked the Messenger what is the thing that most gets people into heaven.
>
> He answered: – The fear of God [*taqwā*] and goodness of character.
>
> They asked him what is the thing that most gets people into hell.
>
> He answered: – The two cavities, the vagina and the mouth.[28]

No less strong, in *Silence and Etiquette of the Tongue*, is the association of words with animals, which turns controlling one's tongue into preventive detention. An anonymous sage stated: "My tongue is a ferocious beast, and if I let it loose, I fear it will maul me".[29] Similar are: "Your tongue is a powerful dog, and if you let it get the better of you, it will devour you";[30] and a declaration from the Companion Ibn Masʿūd (d. 33/653): "I swear by God, there is no God but Him: nothing needs long imprisonment like the tongue".[31]

## 7.4 Silence and Intelligence

The material collected by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā also highlights the relationship between silence and the exercise of the intellect. He ascribes, for example, to the 'wisdom of the Family of David' the following definition of an intelligent person: he is one who recognises the opportune moment, guards his tongue, and minds his own business.[32] Among the early Muslims, the author

25 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 60.

26 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 66.

27 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 43-4.

28 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 45. This story is repeated by among others Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-zuhd*, no. 4244.

29 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 63.

30 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 67.

31 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 53.

32 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 60.

again cites Caliph ʿUmar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb – "he who speaks much, errs much"[33] and also al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: "He who does not guard his tongue has not understood his religion".[34]

This intelligent silence can take on a sense of refractoriness to others, if their usual discourses are futile and mundane: "It has been said that wisdom [*ḥikma*] has ten parts, nine parts lie in silence and the tenth is standing apart from the crowd".[35] And here it is not a question of shunning the world but of better inhabiting the world through an educated understanding of its rules, as demonstrated by the example of the Prophet and the pious ancestors. On this theme, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā offers an account of one such, featuring the well-known ascetic and mystic Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham (d. 161/778), also celebrated in other Islamic literatures for his wisdom and moral stature:

> Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham would remain silent for a long time and then, when he spoke, he would not stop.
>
> On a certain day he had been silent for a good while, so I said to him: – Suppose you were to speak?
>
> He answered: – There are four kinds of speech. One is the speech from which you hope for some advantage but at the same time you fear harm, so avoiding it means avoiding that harm. Another is the speech from which you do not fear harm but neither do you hope for an advantage, so avoiding it is of little consequence, either to the body or to the tongue. Still another is the speech from which you do not hope for an advantage and from the harm of which you are not sure you will escape; and that is enough for the intelligent person. Finally, there is the speech from whose harm you are sure to escape and from which you hope for an advantage; well, that alone is the speech you should practice.[36]

The following is similar to the above, but remarkable in that it extends the appreciation of silence to other cultures, and proposes it, in a secularized or at least religiously neutral version, as a universally shared value:

> Four kings met together, and they challenged each other to deliver a single speech. They were the king of India, the king of China, the Persian Khosrow and the Roman Caesar.
>
> The first said: – I regret what I have said but do not regret what I do not say.
>
> The second: – When I speak, the words rule me and not I them.
>
> The third: – I am amazed by those who speak when their words come back to bite them, or if not that, when they bring them no benefit.
>
> The fourth: – I answer better for what I have not said than for what I have said.[37]

**33** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 68.
**34** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 61.
**35** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 62.
**36** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 67.
**37** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 71.

# 8 Modesty, Bashfulness and Reticence

**Summary** 8.1 The Modest Gaze. – 8.2 Gaze, Seduction and Adultery. – 8.3 A Feminine Virtue? – 8.4 The Nobility of Modesty. – 8.5 A Common Virtue.

The quality of modesty, in Arabic *ḥayā'* حياء or *istiḥyā'* استحياء, is considered an essential attribute of those who follow Islam, although today its meaning is for the most part confined to women and the decency of women's clothing (and in this latter sense, it is of no small commercial importance to contemporary marketing initiatives that go under the banner of 'modest fashion').

However, unlike most European uses of the word 'modesty', *ḥayā'* is less a matter of dissimulation or the concealment of merits as the opposite of vanity and presumption, nor does it link to moderation and measure, which are the etymological prerequisites of 'modesty', deriving from the Latin *modestus*, from *modus*. Instead, it expresses, first and foremost, the discomfort, shyness, embarrassment, awkwardness even, that arise in the face of reprehensible conduct, one's own or that of others, including but not limited to contexts of social interaction or particularly those with gender aspects. The great dictionaries of classical Arabic, such as *The Language of the Arabs* by Ibn Manẓūr or Ibn Fāris' *Analogical Templates of Language*,[1] assimilate *ḥayā'* to the broad area of decency or decorum, and also of 'return' or 'repentance' (*tawba*), that is stepping back from error and offence; and make it the opposite of the no less generic shamelessness. Modesty of Islam is then, in short, a wide-ranging modesty, a respect for oneself and others that it would be wrong to reduce to circumstantial behaviour or mere outward appearance.

Against the impoverishment that has depreciated the coin of Islamic modesty in our contemporary times, we should therefore set its semantic range, and then perhaps submit its contents to a possible intercultural consensus.

1 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, Ibn Fāris 1399/1979, both root ḥ-y-y. Cf also Lane 1968, same root.


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## 8.1 The Modest Gaze

It is true that the Qur'ān, in the sura *al-Nūr* 'The Light', prescribes a discreet and sober appearance to women believers of all ages; and so, in general, it associates the Muslim woman with a certain physical concealment. Elderly women "will not sin if they lay aside their [outer] garments, without showing their adornment, but to refrain from so doing is better for them" (Qur'ān XXIV,60), and as for young women, the same sura contains the passage from which the use of the veil *(khimār* خمار) derives:

> And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to cover their bosoms [*juyūb* جيوب] with their veils [*khumur*, pl. of *khimār*]. (XXIV,31)

According to these verses, the honourable behaviour of the Muslim woman rests in the way in which she presents herself to, or rather removes herself from, the possibly prying eyes of the beholder. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the correct feminine attitude also depends, in the first instance even, on the control of her own visual faculty: "Tell the believing women to lower their gaze". That is to say, the good Muslim woman, before safeguarding herself from the gaze of others, must be careful to focus her own gaze only on what it is permissible to see, or, as Qur'ānic commentators of every age and school have stated, only on those parts of the body of others that legal convention has declared permissible. What is at issue, then, is the definition in Islamic Law of the 'zone of propriety', or 'zone of modesty' (in Arabic *'awra* عَورة), both for reasons of public decency and because its display invalidates prayer.

Glosses on the scope of this 'zone of modesty' are to be found in nearly all the Qur'ānic commentators on the above verse from the sura 'The Light'. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, for example, divides *'awra* into four kinds: that of men towards other men, which goes from just below the navel to just above the knee; that of women towards other women, largely the same as the former; that of women towards men, which makes a distinction between a woman not known or not related to the man, only whose face and arms to the elbow may be seen by him, and the wife or slave where only the genitals are taboo; and finally that of men towards women, where much the same applies. The author then raises numerous exceptions related to medical issues, circumcision, childbirth, possible evidence of adultery, and so on.[2] Among contemporary writers the views of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī in his well-known *Al-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām fī l-Islām* or 'The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam' run along very similar lines.[3]

The obligation to avert one's gaze from others' zones of modesty, like the obligation to strive for the preservation of one's chastity, also binds men, and on the same terms, as we find, again in the sura 'The Light', in the verse immediately preceding the one on female modesty in fact, in the form of a quite similar divine imperative:

2 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XIV,30-1.

3 Al-Qaradāwī 1994, 151-60.

> Tell the believing men [*al-muʾminūn*] to lower their gaze and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely God is Aware of what they do. (Qurʾān XXIV,30)

## 8.2 Gaze, Seduction and Adultery

The verses just quoted affirm the equality of the genders as far as obligations and prohibitions are concerned; and this is something that contemporary authors are also keen to emphasise: like the Egyptian al-Shaʿrāwī in *My Considerations on the Noble Qurʾān*, when he observes that men, in the same way as women, are also obliged to lower their gaze because men, like women, are a potential source of seduction (*fitna* فتنة);[4] or like his compatriot Ṭanṭāwī in *The Mediator in explaining the Noble Qurʾān*, perhaps in more nuanced tones.[5]

For men as for women, commentators of every epoch discuss the propriety of the gaze, and also its significance; and in formulating their many interpretations they make eyes breaches or openings for traffic in both directions, which on the one hand must be defended because they are open to being penetrated and invaded, and on the other hand must be controlled because they launch outwards what may inappropriately intrude on others.[6]

A historic example is that offered by the Muʿtazilite theologian al-Zamakhsharī in *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, more scrupulous than many in illuminating the form and style of the Holy Book. In commenting on the exhortation to modesty in the sura 'The Light', the author notes that in the sequence proposed by the verse, modesty precedes chastity or sexual abstinence – "to lower their gaze and guard their private parts" – and explains that this is because the gaze is wider, embraces many things, and thus has a broader meaning. Of the female gaze in particular, he writes that it is very hard to fight against, because it seeks turpitude and desires adultery.[7]

Another example is provided by the Andalusian jurist al-Qurṭubī in *The Compendium of the Judgements of the Qurʾān*. This author too observes that the precept on gaze precedes the precept on chastity, noting that this precedence appears twice consecutively, once for men and then again for women (cf. Qurʾān XXIV, 30-1), and argues that in the first case this refers the gaze of men and women together, because all occurrences of the plural masculine in the Book (cf. *al-muʾminūn*) are to be understood in that way. Everyone's eyes, therefore, are "the principal gateway to the heart, the most frequented of the paths of the senses that lead to the heart, a path on which many stumble and fall".[8] On this, al-Qurṭubī recalls a Prophetic saying that makes the human gaze a sexual act perpetrated with sight:

4 Al-Shaʿrāwī 1422/2001, commentary on Qurʾān XXIV,30-1.

5 Ṭanṭāwī 1997-98, commentary on Qurʾān XXIV,30-1.

6 On 'lowering the eyes' and 'guarding one's modesty' cf. also also Magen (2007), on another interesting scholar, Ibn al-Qaṭṭān al-Fāsī (d. 1231) in his *Aḥkām al-naẓar bi-ḥāssat al-baṣar* 'The Rulings of Looking with the Sense of Sight'.

7 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qurʾān XXIV,30-1.

8 Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qurʾān XXIV,30-1.

> For human beings God has already written down the adultery [*zinā*] that they will commit, and they will certainly commit it, because the eyes are fornicators and their adultery is the gaze.
>
> But for those who lower their gaze, God has sweetness in store in their heart.[9]

As for the feminine gaze, al-Qurṭubī's teaching holds that it is an arrow of Satan full of poison, and it opens the way to the heart just as blindness opens the way to death. Again on the subject of the concupiscence of women's eyes, the author recalls how the Prophet forbade his wives Umm Salama and al-Maymūna to remain in the presence of a blind man, and when the two women objected that he was blind, Muḥammad retorted: "And are you blind? Do you not see?".[10] Words that call to mind the very similar accounts offered by another Andalusian author, also from Cordoba, ʿAbd al-Malik Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 238/852), in one of the rare texts devoted to the female side of Muslim married life, *Adab al-nisāʾ* or 'The Ethics of women':

> The Prophet said that desire is divided into ten parts, nine parts for women and one part for men. The Companion ʿAmr Ibn al-ʿĀṣ added that the desire of women far surpasses that of men, as much as an axe stroke surpasses a needle prick; but God Most High, glory be to Him, has veiled them with modesty.[11]

## 8.3 A Feminine Virtue?

We have mentioned that the verses on a demure gaze and chastity in the sura 'The Light' (Qurʾān XXV, 30-1) have been cited, from ancient times down to our own day, as underpinning the Islamic precept of modesty. But the Qurʾān offers other passages on demure behaviour, without, to be sure, adopting the imperative mode, and thus without quite the weight of a divine command. In the sura 'The Stories', for example, there is a passage on the life of Moses, where we find a term akin to *ḥayāʾ*, that is *istiḥyāʾ*, which has a similar meaning. Having escaped from the machinations of his idolatrous people and reached the well at Midian, Moses saw that there were a large number of people there drawing water for their flocks, and with them two women standing apart, waiting for the others to leave. Moses helped them and the pair thanked him and went, but then one of them returned (cf. *Exodus* 2,16-20):

> Then there came to him one of the two women, walking bashfully. She said: – Verily, my father calls you that he may reward you for having watered our flocks for us. So, when he came to him and narrated the story, he said […]. (Qurʾān XXVIII,25)

When glossing that woman's modesty or bashfulness (*istiḥyāʾ*), the commentators go into considerable speculative detail. Al-Ṭabarī, in his *Compendious*

9 Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qurʾān XXIV,30-1.

10 This is a much-repeated story, recorded in various versions in the main works of the Prophetic Tradition. Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qurʾān XXIV,30-1.

11 Ibn Ḥabīb 1412/1992, 183.

*Discourse*, says that the woman walked about shielding her face with her robe, and that she spoke to Moses from behind the cloth because she was neither bold nor indiscreet.[12] Al-Zamakhsharī, in *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, adds that at a certain point while the young woman was conducting Moses to her father's house, a gust of wind lifted her clothing exposing her body, and that Moses then suggested that she walk behind him.[13] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, in *The* Keys *to the Unknown*, raises the stakes, from concealment to standing apart, and suggests that the woman used to walk keeping her distance from men.[14] Whatever one may think of these proposals, it is clear that the exegetes are generally content to adopt an exterior reading of modesty, as a dissimulation, as it were, of femininity. And this need not surprise us: the Qur'ān speaks of the quality in question precisely when dealing with a young woman, which shows that in the Prophet's time modesty was felt to be primarily a feminine quality; and this would leave its mark on later thought.

Not that the Qur'ān neglects male modesty. It is mentioned not only in the sura 'The Light', when it deals with the gaze of men in general, but also in the sura *al-Aḥzāb* 'The Combined Forces', when speaking of the Prophet Muḥammad:

> You who believe, […] if you are invited, enter, and, when your meal is ended, then disperse. Linger not for conversation. That would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be embarrassed [*yastaḥī*] before you; but God is not embarrassed before the truth. (Qur'ān XXXIII,53)

And it is worth noting that when the commentators illustrate the Prophet's modesty or bashfulness by appealing to the Tradition, they liken it, so as to emphasise it better, to that of a girl; and in so doing they curiously make a feminine trait a source of admiration if it appears in a man. Some of them state, for example, that the Prophet was demurer (*ashadd ḥayā'*) than a virgin behind her curtain, and that when he saw something that embarassed him, the Companions could tell as much from his face.[15]

The traditionist Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī in his *Kitāb al-zuhd* or 'The Book of Renunciation' adds a remarkable story: "The Messenger of God said: – Truly am more bashful before my dead than before the living, for the dead are able to see all that I do".[16] Once again here it is hard to confine 'modesty' or *ḥayā'* to an exterior dimension; it is more a question of a sense of shame for everything that diverges from probity, in action and in intention. A similar breadth of content can be found, for example, in another passage taken from *The Book of Renunciation* by Abū Dāwūd, where the Companion 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib Ibn al-Ḥārith, when questioned about the state of destitution into which he had allowed his two sons to fall, replied that he was ashamed before God to rely on others than God himself for their subsistence.[17]

Attributions of modesty to males literally abound in the Tradition literature. Such as modesty in dress – a quality Moses possessed, according to another saying of the Prophet:

12 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān XXVIII,25.

13 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXVIII,25.

14 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XXVIII,25.

15 Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 5664.

16 Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī 1414/1993, 340.

17 Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī 1414/1993, 339.

> Moses was a modest and reserved man, and coy enough not to leave an inch of skin uncovered.
>
> Some of the Jews spoke ill of him: – All this secrecy must surely hide a skin defect, or leprosy, or a hernia, or some injury. But God wanted to clear him of these insinuations.
>
> One day when he was alone, Moses threw his clothes over his mare, washed himself, and when he had finished, he came back to dress himself but the mare had run off with his clothes.
>
> Moses took his staff and ran after the mare, shouting: – Mare! my clothes! my clothes! – until he came upon a group of Jews who saw him naked, and he was the most beautiful thing God had created.[18]

Another of the Prophet's sayings, this time on Adam's bashfulness before God:

> Your forefather Adam was of great stature, like a tall palm tree, sixty cubits high; he had much hair, and he hid that which is not lawful to show [*ʿawra*]. He disobeyed God, became aware of his nakedness, and ran away fearfully through the Garden […]. God called after him: – Do you flee from me, Adam? – No, my Lord – he replied – but I am ashamed before You for what I have done.[19]

Also according to the Tradition, modesty or demureness was a notable trait of the third 'rightly guided' Caliph, ʿUthmān Ibn ʿAffān (d. 35/655), a man so reserved that even the angels were modest before him,[20] and also of the fourth Caliph, ʿAlī, who was not ashamed to be sweet and submissive with his wife Fāṭima.[21] An exceptional example of how modesty can transcend the genres of the human species is one which brings the divinity into the equation, His way of being and doing being often put before the believer as an unattainable model of creaturely virtues:

> The Messenger of God saw a man washing himself in front of everyone. He went up into the pulpit, praised God and glorified Him, and then said: – The Most High and Exalted God is Judicious, and Modest, and Reserved [*ḥalīm ḥayīy* حيِيّ, *sittīr* سِتِّير], He loves modesty and reticence: therefore, when one of you washes, let him too be reserved.[22]

The recourse to God, and the impulse to imitate Him also *mutatis mutandis* in modesty, demonstrates once again that, in Islamic perception, the whole question of morality goes beyond the example of the Prophet and draws directly on the divine figure Himself.

**18** Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb aḥādīth al-anbiyāʾ*, *bāb ḥadīth al-Khiḍr maʿa Mūsā*, no. 3175; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 10451.

**19** In, for example, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1416/1996, 69-70.

**20** Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-daʿwāt*, *abwāb al-manāqib*, no. 3752; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *faḍāʾil al-ṣaḥāba*, no. 364.

**21** Ibn Ḥabīb 1412/1992, 161-2.

**22** Al-Nasāʾī 1420/1999, 54-5.

## 8.4 The Nobility of Modesty

Among the numerous works of Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, his *Makārim al-akhlāq* or 'The Book of Noble Character', is perhaps the most famous, and it contains an important section on modesty.[23]

In the many stories given us by the author, modesty appears as an imprecisely circumstantiated quality and one certainly not confined to physical aspects or to the female universe, although the treatise opens with words that do in fact belong to a woman, the wife of the Prophet 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr (d. 58/678): "Modesty is the chief of good qualities".[24] A little further on in the work we find a saying of Muḥammad, also insisting on the primacy of modesty: "Among what people have learnt from the first prophecy is this: provided it does not bring you shame, do as you wish".[25] And including modesty in the earliest divine revelation (*al-nubuwwa al-ūlā* النبوّة الأولى) – i.e. the primal religion, that of Adam or Abraham – is little short of making it a natural inclination to faith and goodness: "Modesty", the Prophet said on another occasion, "is the whole of good".[26]

On modesty as a straightforward equivalent of good, we have a dialogue between the Companion 'Imrān Ibn Ḥuṣayn and the younger Ibn Ziyād (d. c. 78/697):

> 'Imrān Ibn Ḥuṣayn said: – According to the Messenger of God modesty is the whole of good. Ibn Ziyād retorted: – But we read in books that modesty also brings weakness.
>
> The other was furious: – I tell you what the Messenger of God said and you contradict me by speaking of books![27]

A good example offered by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā on the scope of modesty, both outward and inward, is the following recommendation of the Prophet to his Companions:

> Be modest towards God out of the modesty that is due to Him. Protect the head and what it includes, and the belly and what it contains, and be mindful of death and decay. Let those who hope for life in the hereafter abandon the fripperies of this world. Only those who do this can be modest towards God out of the modesty that is due to him.[28]

Several of the stories collected by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā in *The Book of Noble Character* comment on the Qur'ānic passage in the sura 'The Combined Forces' – "Linger not for conversation. That would cause annoyance to the Prophet" (Qur'ān XXXIII,53) – where Muḥammad's reticence with intrusive

23 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 62-95.

24 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 62.

25 In Arabic: […] *idhā lam tastaḥi fa-ṣnaʿ mā shi'ta*; Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 73. Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-adab, bāb al-ḥayā'*, no. 5682.

26 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 75. On modesty as an instinct, it is interesting what Ibn Manẓūr (2010) has to say, glossing the root ḥ-y-y: "The Companions of Muḥammad, hearing from him that *ḥayā'* is a branch of faith, asked him how it was possible that modesty, a natural impulse, was part of faith, an acquisition".

27 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 77.

28 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 79-81.

guests is made apparent (and contrasted with God's), modesty here being confined to the verbal sphere. For example: "The Messenger of God has said that modesty and reticence are two aspects of faith, while scurrility and gossip are two aspects of hypocrisy".[29] Or, again on the Prophet's verbal reserve: "The Messenger of God never said to anyone's face what he disliked about them".[30]

A final example of modesty as verbal reserve, and at the same time as a generic abstention from coarse and intemperate speech, is Muḥammad's exhortation to one of his Companions: "God loves the reticent who are full of modesty and the continent who hold back, while He hates the brazen and licentious, and also those who ask and are importunate".[31]

## 8.5 A Common Virtue

Let us sum up on the quality known as *ḥayāʾ* or *istiḥyāʾ*: it is undoubtedly referable to women, but not exclusively, given that it can be shared by men, and indeed is appreciated in them. It is a blend of positive attitudes and habits, conforming to or overlapping with a correct orientation of faith; it is shielding oneself from the eyes of others to preserve one's integrity, but before that it is not allowing one's own eyes to rest on others in such a way as to trespass on their personal boundaries; it is modesty in speech: it means keeping silent so as not to offend the sensitivities of others by saying hurtful things to their faces, and also keeping silent out of reserve, protecting one's moral integrity by avoiding profanity and coarseness.

Remarkably, this Islamic idea of modesty or bashfulness, which includes both modesty *of* the gaze and *from* the gaze, and also verbal modesty, is to be found in a rare example of a Christian moral treatise in Arabic, the *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* or 'The Refinement of Characters' by the Syriac philosopher and theologian Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī (d. 363/974) – a short text long believed to be the work of a Muslim on account of its lacking specifically Christian references.[32]

In *The Refinement of Characters*, we are told that modesty belongs to the family of composure (*waqār* وقار) and "means lowering one's gaze and speaking little out of embarrassment in the company of someone. And this is praiseworthy behaviour as long as it does not come from ineptitude or incapacity".[33] Despite differences of religious inspiration and methodological assumptions, Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī's work continually echoes commonplaces on modesty in Islamic literature; as, for instance, where he states that its absence "burns away the veil of decency",[34] and indicates a lack of caution or discretion, as well as covetousness, thirst for possession and greed.[35] No doubt this coincidence of ideas is due in part to the intellectual environment that constituted the backdrop to the work of this Christian author – an open and an ultra-cosmopolitan Baghdad. It serves, nonetheless, to underline the common ground shared by the different cultural traditions.

29 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 65-6.
30 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 72-3.
31 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1409/1989, 76-7.
32 Cf. Ibn ʿAdī 1994. Italian translation Ibn ʿAdī 2019.
33 Ibn ʿAdī 1994, nos. 254-5.
34 Ibn ʿAdī 1994, no. 352; cf. also nos. 108, 187 and 377.
35 Ibn ʿAdī 1994, nos. 61-8.

# 9 Beauty

**Summary** 9.1 The First Work of Art. – 9.2 Beauty and Morality. – 9.3 God Is Beautiful and Loves Beauty. – 9.4 Beauty and the Image. – 9.5 Beauty and Pride. – 9.6 Beauty and Perfume

Islamic thought understands modesty as, although not only as, concealing women's physical beauty: the Qur'ānic precept contained in the sura 'The Light' in fact calls on women to conceal their adornment, or embellishment (*zīna* زينة), because their display may lead to disobedience to God in the particular form of fornication (*zinā*). As we have read:

> Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to cover their bosoms with their veils. (Qur'ān XXIV,31)

In contrast to what a superficial reading might suggest, women's adornment is understood by commentators not necessarily as physical beauty, but in the sense of clothing, and also of anklets, bracelets, earrings and necklaces, as opposed to rings and beads that are instead considered decent and therefore 'seeable'. Al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Qurṭubī and Ibn Kathīr, and also the modern scholar Muḥammad al-Shawkānī, among others, take this line in their great exegetical works.

Regardless of whether the context is a female one, the idea that 'embellishment' or *zīna*, be it artefact and therefore the work of man or natural and therefore more directly the work of God, can turn out to be a temptation to evil, or at least a deception to the eyes and heart, runs through the Qur'ān. It is found, for example, in the sura *al-Kahf* 'The Cave', where God comforts the Prophet thus:

> Will you destroy yourself out of grief because they disbelieve this Book? That which is on earth we have made but as an embellishment, in order


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> that We may test them, as to which of them are best in conduct. And We shall surely make all that is on it barren dust. (Qur'ān XVIII, 6-8)

We find it too in the sura *fāṭir* 'The Originator', this time referring to human behaviour:

> As for one whose evil deeds have been made attractive [by God, *zuyyina*] so he considers them good, God guides or causes to go astray whomever He wants. [Muḥammad], do not be grieved because of their disbelief. God knows well whatever they do. (Qur'ān XXXV,8; cf. XLVII,14)

Nonetheless, this distrust of beauty, as an evil enchantment or a sterile delight, is matched in the Qur'ān itself by statements to the contrary, which instead praise 'embellishment' as a gift coming from divine Wisdom and Mercy. The apparent contradiction is readily explained: 'beauty' (*jamāl* جمال),[1] as seen in the Qur'ān, is subject to moral judgement in the light of religion. That is to say, the beautiful is recognised in itself and as such, but it does not necessarily coincide or merge with the good; and that, in the case of human beings, beauty, whether innate in them or produced by them, can be virtuous and good just as it can be vicious and perverse.[2] When Islamic thought has produced aesthetic theories rooted in its own cultural foundations, the intersection between the beautiful and the good has resulted in a critique of the arts, visual and otherwise, together with their purposes – a critique that has included the ethical-legal element: every work of art is first and foremost a *work*, that is, an artefact produced by human action (*'amal* عمل), and must therefore be judged according to the normative criteria of human behaviour, the five normative qualifications (*al-aḥkām al*-khamsa), from the forbidden to the obligatory.

## 9.1 The First Work of Art

An important examination of aesthetics in relation to morality is offered by the Palestinian American Ismā'īl Rājī al-Fārūqī (d. 1986). His essay *Al-tawḥīd wa-l-fann. Naẓariyyat al-fann al-islāmī* or 'Monotheism and Art. A Theory of Islamic Art',[3] is – perhaps for the first time – an attempt to understand and systematise Islamic art from its own point of view, i.e. from the perspective of the historical and philosophical thought that Islam itself has produced. From this perspective, which insists on the relationship between faith and art, the discourse cannot but start from the dogma of the inimitability of the Qur'ān (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān* إعجاز القرآن), the incontrovertible assumption that the incomparability, the miraculous nature of the Holy Book rests not only in the definitive truths it contains, but also in its formal beauty.

The Qur'ān is the first Islamic work of art – al-Fārūqī insists – and in order to grasp its exceptional nature, man clearly needs an aesthetic sensibility,

1 Or, also from the Qur'ān, *ḥilya* حلية, *zukhruf* زخرف, *qurrat 'ayn* قرّة عين or *bahīj* بهيج.

2 A modern example of the overlapping of beauty and goodness, the latter in a religious sense, is the way female beauty contests are judged in the Islamic world: for instance, 'The World Muslimah Award', a competition inaugurated in Jakarta (Indonesia) in 2011, rewards physical beauty, intellectual ability and religious piety together.

3 al-Fārūqī 1999.

a fundamental divine gift without which no believer could appreciate the Book's exquisite eloquence. He then goes on to review Islamic production in the field of figurative arts over the course of history, and homes in on calligraphy, the art form primarily tasked with expressing the transcendent divine Reality. Throughout, he emphasises the spiritual basis of Islamic art and also its essentially Arab flavour, which is hardly separable from Islam.

Along the same lines, and with a comparable sensitivity, another example of contemporary reflection is *Al-Islām wa-l-funūn al-jamīla* or 'Islam and the Fine Arts'[4] by the Egyptian Muḥammad 'Imāra (d. 2020), a member of the al-Azhar Academy of Islamic Studies, who was especially concerned with the global dimension of Islam and its attendant pressures. In this widely read work, 'Imāra analyses the visual arts and the musical arts, in particular recitations of the Qur'ān, and explains from the outset that he wants to respond to the long-standing and still ongoing controversy between supporters of the fine arts and those who, viewing them with suspicion or claiming their incompatibility with the faith, only provide ammunition for those who believe that Islam is inimical to beauty.[5] His defence of the arts, rigorously conducted on the basis of the Qur'ān and the Sunni Tradition, results in an ethical-aesthetic theory: artistic embellishment is permissible or recommended, and in some cases even obligatory, when it is intended to 'build this earth' ('*imārat al-arḍ* عمارة الأرض) and enhance its beauty as a sign of gratitude for the beauty that God Himself has scattered throughout the world, a manifestation of divine creativity offered to the believer so that he may materially benefit from it, but also so that he may reflect on it and cultivate the pious desire to embellish the world in his turn. Art, on the other hand, is rightly forbidden if it spreads wickedness and perversion.

The author repeatedly emphasises that the fine arts can truly be considered such only when they contain a message in line with the world of Islamic values. In this way, belonging to Islam and the good practice of religion help to discriminate between those who employ beauty to encourage praiseworthy character traits, whether their own or those of others, and those who do the opposite.

## 9.2 Beauty and Morality

In *Islam and the Fine Arts*, Muḥammad 'Imāra devotes ample space to his particular take on visual aesthetics.[6] Like the Palestinian al-Fārūqī, this author insists on the miraculousness of the Qur'ān, a work of art that stands at the head of a world religion, and observes that among the incomparable merits of the Book is its ability to express thoughts and concepts through images, to the extent that, when reading or reciting the Qur'ān, one continually has the impression of being confronted with vivid pen portraits and illustrations. Echoing the association between the divine Figure and the

4 'Imāra 1411/1991.

5 On the sometimes bitter disputes between supporters and detractors of the fine arts, from the reforms of the nineteenth century to the rigid convictions of reformist movements, I refer the reader to Naef (2015), where the author summarises the positions of various modern and contemporary Muslim intellectuals of differing tendencies, including the generally more relaxed Shiite view (cf. 65-113).

6 'Imāra 1411/1991, 109-43

figurative artist, typical of Islamic philosophy of Platonic tendency and not a million miles from the thought of the great al Ghazālī,[7] the author observes that the skilful Qur'ānic similes – the 'heaviness' in the ears of the unbelievers (Qur'ān XLI,44), or the flock of sheep who perceive nothing except a distant shouting (II, 171), and so on – "flesh out thoughts, sketch out reasoning and render concepts pictures that talk, can be seen with the eyes, and take shape in the imagination".[8]

'Imāra is well aware that much of the material that led to the prohibition of images is not to be found in the Qur'ān but in the Prophetic Tradition; among the best known sayings, "on the Day of Judgement, God will punish anyone who has forged an image until he has breathed spirit into it, which he will not be able to do".[9] But even in his interpretation of the Sunna, the author opposes extreme positions on rational grounds, and firmly upholds the relativity of the legal status of art: the various forms of representation, part of man's legitimate aesthetic activity, are attributed ethical-juridical connotations according to their motivation, wisdom, purpose, and also the benefit they bring to the community; it is only after taking into consideration all these elements that one can declare the lawfulness or even necessity of a given work, or on the contrary its reprehensibility, and perhaps its prohibition if it lends itself to idolatrous behaviour. For Muḥammad 'Imāra, as for Ismā'īl Rājī al-Fārūqī, the arts are only beautiful when they are both beautiful and good, that is, moral according to Islam. This is obviously a position far removed from the 'art for art's sake' that western aesthetic thought has adopted, and certainly closer to the classical ideal of καλοκάγαθία; but equally, it can only produce a knee-jerk aversion to works of non-Islamic inspiration in those who subscribe to it with unthinking fanaticism.[10]

*Islam and the Fine Arts* contains many examples of visual art from the annals of Islamic civilisation and records the divergent opinions of theologians and jurists on the issue. Among these features, another Egyptian, the modernist theologian Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1323/1905), whose thought 'Imāra certainly follows here as elsewhere. 'Abduh, a great lover of Arabic poetry of all periods and a student of the artistic heritage of peoples, had posed himself the question of the relationship between Islam and art during a trip to Sicily, where he had admired the many works that adorn churches and burial places there.[11] He concluded that images are permissible which do not undermine faith, and compared "drawing to a poem that can be seen and not heard, and poetry to a drawing that can be heard and not seen".[12]

Finally, Muḥammad 'Imāra teaches that the production of beauty and the related refinement of our aesthetic sense are part of the prime duty

**7** Cf. Hillenbrand 1994, 249-65.

**8** 'Imāra 1411/1991, 117.

**9** E.g. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-libās wa-l-zīna*, no. 3953.

**10** In other words, a belief in the necessary overlap of beauty and goodness (the latter in an Islamic reading) cannot justify acts of vandalism such as those perpetrated in Palmyra, Mosul, Nineveh or Nimrud by the so-called Islamic State, or earlier by the Taliban in Afghanistan; actions which, on closer inspection, have less to do with a lack of appreciation for works of art than with a desire to airbrush the historical epochs in which those works saw the light of day. For further reading, cf. De Cesari 2015, 22-6.

**11** As he wrote to a friend, the well-known Salafi scholar Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1354/1935); 'Imāra 1411/1991, 138.

**12** 'Imāra 1411/1991, 136-7.

of gratitude (*shukr*) to God, a duty that concerns all mankind and not only Muslims, since the love for what is beautiful is quite simply inherent in human nature (*fiṭra* فطرة). He cites the Qur'ān in support, in particular the sura 'The Heights', in which all the sons of Adam are called upon to beautify themselves when they go to a place of worship (VII,31-3). He then deals specifically with those who adhere to Islam:

> The Muslim, by virtue of his faith and religion, is called upon to conform to the qualities of God himself [...]; and he must endeavour to make the import of the Beautiful Names his own, to the extent of his ability, while remaining aware of the gulf separating the absolute from the relative. The Messenger of God taught us that among those divine Names is 'the Beautiful' [*al-jamīl* الجميل]; indeed, there is a saying of the Prophet that "God is Beautiful and loves beauty". So, the Muslim is required to distinguish himself by beauty, which means both ostensible beauty and goodness – in his actions, therefore, and inwardly – and to develop his ability to perceive the beauty that God has delivered to the world, which is both the beauty of images and the beauty of concepts. In this, for man, there lies perfection and also happiness.[13]

## 9.3 God Is Beautiful and Loves Beauty

> The Prophet said: – No one will enter paradise who has the smallest hint of pride [*kibr* كبر] in his heart.
>
> Someone objected: – But a man likes to have beautiful clothing and beautiful footwear.
>
> The Prophet replied: – God is Beautiful and loves beauty, pride means denying the truth and despising the people.[14]

In this and other Prophetic sayings, and also in contemporary aesthetic reflection, visible beauty, loved and sought after by men, is not the mere 'ornament' or *zīna*, which the Qur'ān condemns when it speaks of women (Qur'ān XXIV,31; cf. XXIV,60), but the stronger and more complex *jamāl*, which includes both physical and moral connotations: as the lexicographers of the past teach, *jamāl* embraces the propriety and pleasantness of physical features, mind, character, and general behaviour; thus, beauty and goodness and also what is appropriate.[15] *Jamāl* also contains an idea of grouping, aggregation, sum of the parts, and unity: one thinks of *jumla* جملة, a related term, employed by Arab grammarians to mean the completed sentence, noun and predicate or verb and subject; from here to the idea of beauty as the happy copresence of necessary parts, and thus as perfection and completeness, is a short enough step.

The Prophet's saying about God's beauty and God's love for beauty in the world is often taken up by pastorally inclined contemporary authors. As one, they teach that the beauty man likes and seeks, divine in its principle,

13 'Imāra 1411/1991, 20-1.

14 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-īmān*, *bāb taḥrīm al-kibr wa-bayāni-hi*, no. 134.

15 Lane 1968, root j-m-l.

is consonant with the good life, conducive, even, to self-improvement. Analogously to pride, beauty can expose one, however, to the risk of ingratitude to God when it is not recognized as His gift, when its true nature is denied – for those who do not recognize divine authority over the beauty they possess may think they are superior to others.

We looked above at the opinion of the Egyptian Muḥammad ʿImāra on the Muslim's duty to produce beauty in the world in imitation of the Creator, and on the permissibility of figurative arts that meet the requirements of morality. The Syrian intellectual Muḥammad Rātib al-Nābulusī, too, in his *Encyclopaedia of the Beautiful Names of God*, repeatedly returns to the Muslim's ethical self-refinement through the imitation of divine attributes; and the Name 'The Beautiful' is no exception. When discussing this,[16] al-Nābulusī emphasises in his turn the love of beauty (*jamāl*) that is necessarily at the head of the Islamic religion in the form of the Qurʾān, a beautiful Book whose truthfulness is confirmed from the outset by human aesthetic judgement; and he maintains that it is the Qurʾān itself that promotes a refinement of the aesthetic sense in the believer. Unlike other writers, however, the author shines a particular light on the beauty of human creatures, in both their physical traits and their moral characteristics. For there is also such a thing as a beauty of behaviour; history, says al-Nābulusī, has left us with the record of beautiful deeds even if those who performed them were far from beautiful themselves: a well-known case is that of the wise and magnanimous al-Aḥnaf Ibn Qays (d. 69/688) who encouraged his great tribe to convert to Islam, but whose physical ugliness was unparalleled.

In the midst of his many digressions, al-Nābulusī quotes a prayer of the Prophet's that plays on the necessary overlap of beauty and goodness: "My Lord, You who have made my appearance handsome, make also my character good"; and then goes on to mention the beauty of patience, and that of forgiveness, and also the beauty of eloquence versus coarseness. But since beauty must coincide with obedience to God, al-Nābulusī repeatedly warns his brothers against the bedazzlement of material, finite and perishable beauty, whereas God's beauty is infinite, absolute and perfect. But once the good beauty that is a source of happiness has been distinguished from the illicit beauty that only brings sadness, the author strongly recommends his brothers to seek the aesthetic dimension in everyday life, everywhere, in the home, in the workplace, in the clothes he wears, and to invoke God with the Name *al-jamīl*, 'The Beautiful', to receive from Him in return some reflection of His beauty.

## 9.4 Beauty and the Image

The Saudi Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid – chiefly known for the multilingual question and answer website IslamQA on which he provides answers to the many questions of the faithful – also thinks, like al-Nābulusī, that God loves beauty in the sense that He loves to see in man the sign, the result, the material trace of the grace He Himself has bestowed upon him. The Prophet said that "God loves to see in His servants the effect of His

16 Al-Nābulusī 2002b, *Ism Allāh al-jamīl*, lesson 010, 2018. https://nabulsi.com/web/article/784.

grace",[17] he reminds us, and this means that the Muslim is obliged to take care of his own appearance, in clothes and other objects of personal adornment, without skimping. Al-Munajjid too insists on the moral and spiritual dimension, on the inner facet of human beauty that is gratitude to God for benefits received, together with the fear of God (*taqwā*) that gratitude entails, because the fear of God is also an embellishment, albeit a hidden rather than overt one.[18]

Al-Munajjid holds, as do others, that God loves in man the beauty of faith, words and deeds, clothes and general appearance, just as He hates ugliness in many other things. But all this is well known, he goes on to say; what needs to be considered carefully is that in assessing beauty, many Muslims fall into error either by excess or by deficiency, especially when it comes to images. On the one side are those who affirm that God loves everything He has created, and hates nothing, because everything He has created is necessarily beautiful (*jamīl*): they are wrong, because in their depravity they come to venerate the beauty of men and women, in the conviction that this is permissible. On the opposite side stand those who say that God condemns the beauty of images in every form and everywhere.

Al-Munajjid is a staunch advocate of the *via media* (*wasaṭiyya*) as a criterion of life, believing that the correct path is usually the one that lies in the middle, and he evaluates the beauty of images on a case-by-case basis, according to the differing circumstances in which they are offered to our view, and according to the different legal status they merit: they are praiseworthy when consistent with obedience to God, with the acceptance of His word and the triumph of His religion, and they are conversely reprehensible or illicit when they promote the life of this world and the supremacy of the individual. Consistently with the ethical-legal framework of his reasoning, al-Munajjid adds that an image can also be 'indifferent' (*mubāḥ* مباح), deserving of neither praise nor condemnation.

## 9.5 Beauty and Pride

Evaluations of beauty in the context of Islamic culture are clearly not unanimous and can vary in line with the doctrinal affiliations of the authors concerned. As we have seen, there are those who view physical and material beauty unconcernedly or even with admiration, focusing on its gratifying aspect, and those who observe it more guardedly on a case-by-case basis, coming up with different evaluations. Regarding the beauty produced by man, of himself and in the world, the general assumption is that it is permissible according to religion – or even called for – as long as it coincides with an interior beauty, that is to say, provided it emanates from a desire to please the Creator and give thanks to the Beautiful One *par excellence*, the source of all beauty, and from a pious desire to conform to Him by refining one's own qualities; and that it is illicit otherwise.

Among the plethora of perspectives, there are also those who definitively reduce beauty to the decorum of our world down here, an opinion that is some way from the previous ones in terms of inspiration and doctrinal

17 Cf. al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 2764

18 Al-Munajjid 1997-2019, question no. 6652, 3 November 1999.

school, but for all that quite widespread. Such is the case of the Saudi ʻAbd Allāh Ibn Ḥumūd al-Farīḥ,[19] preacher, and author of *Ibhāj al-muslim bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* or 'The Muslim's Delight in the Explanation of Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*', a learned commentary on the great Tradition work by Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj.[20]

In this work al-Farīḥ glosses, among many others, the saying about beauty being distinguished from pride,[21] although in so doing he deals almost exclusively with pride. It is a grave sin, he explains, and then goes on to review its various categories: against God, against the Prophet, against one's neighbour; its causes: arrogance, resentment, envy, hypocrisy; its consequences: refusal to obey God, rejection of His revelation and other divine gifts, eschatological damnation; and finally its worldly effects on the sinner himself: inability to accept the truth, contempt for others and a poor relationship with one's neighbour, squandering the goods of others, conceit, prevarication.

Turning to the prescriptive aspect, al-Farīḥ teaches how one can cure oneself, God willing, of pride, which is a disease: one must call to mind the grace already received, conform to the example of the Prophet, the model of humility, think about hell and its denizens, read the biographies of the great and the wise, and finally meditate on the poverty of man's origins and condition, remembering that many have gone before us, perhaps better than we are.

Only at this point does the author address the subject of beauty, both in God and in the things of this world. Of the Name *al-jamīl* 'The Beautiful', he explains that this is an attribute of the divine Essence and that, despite what speculative theologians have thought, belief in its reality is obligatory; he adds that, of course, God's primordial, absolute beauty has no likeness or equal in creation. He then turns to the beauty that God loves in man: it is not at all the beauty of the body, which is not man's responsibility, as he has no control over it, but its embellishment. He consults the Sunna of the Prophet on the matter, citing the various references to beauty in clothing, and concludes that God loves beautiful attire and by extension anything that beautifies.

Al-Farīḥ does not forget another well-known Prophetic saying, taken by many as an admonition against avarice and sterile accumulation: "God loves to see in His servants the effect of His grace". And he wonders if there is not a contradiction here with another comment of Muḥammad's, according to which "untidiness [*badhādha* بذاذة] is part of faith",[22] a degree of scruffiness being a form of humility. The answer he offers is as follows: the approved embellishment, a manifestation of Grace, is that which is devoid of excess, without self-importance, dictated only by gratitude to the Creator and the desire for His pleasure; as for the Prophet's praise of humility in dress, it means that the Muslim should not throw himself headlong into the beauties of this world, nor flaunt his means.

It should be noted that in this author's take on the issue, the aesthetic element endorsed by religion touches only tangentially on the qualities of the soul and goodness of behaviour, and is confined to external embellishment, to the 'ornamentation' (*zīna*) that man may deck himself out with; and that, here too, the aesthetic experience soon turns morbid and vicious when it is

19 I was unable to ascertain the author's date of birth.

20 Al-Farīḥ 1436/2015.

21 Al-Farīḥ 1436/2015, 132-8.

22 For example, Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-tarajjul*, *bāb al-nahy ʻan kathīr min al-irfāh*, no. 3632.

accompanied by haughtiness, which impinges on the rights of God and on those of one's brother.

## 9.6 Beauty and Perfume

Finally, a few words on the relationship between beauty and fragrance, mostly based on a fairly recent publication, *Al-hadī al-nabawī fī l-ṭīb* or 'The Prophetic Guidance on Perfume', by Islām Yāsīn and Rūḥayzān Bārū, researchers at Al-Sulṭān Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn Islamic University in Malaysia.[23]

The authors begin by noting that "Islam is the religion of beauty in all its aspects, both material and moral" and that "it exhorts the Muslim to smell good in every situation and continuously". They review the meaning of *ṭīb* طيب 'perfume' according to some of the main classical dictionaries (Ibn Manẓūr, Ibn Fāris), *ṭīb* being the most common term for perfume in the early sources. They then highlight the importance of the spice and perfume trade to and from the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam, before proceeding to focus, as their title indicates, on the Prophetic example, which is to say, on the stories contained in the Sunna.

First of all, the authors claim perfume as a natural attribute of Muḥammad. Among the many sayings in support of this, there is one from the Companion Anas Ibn Mālik: "I have never smelled amber or musk or anything else more fragrant than the Prophet's odour". A later scholar, the Egyptian judge and historian Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449), explains in a commentary that Muḥammad was the most perfect of human creatures in every attribute, physical as well as moral.[24] Again on fragrance as a physical quality of the Prophet: one of his wives, Umm Sulaym, apparently used to collect his sweat to perfume the people of her house. When he went to her quarters for a nap, she would lay out a leather rug for him to sleep on; then she collected his sweat, mixed it with her own perfume and kept it in a glass container.[25] Also from Anas Ibn Mālik: "I have never touched a silk or a brocade softer than the palm of the Prophet's hand, nor have I ever smelled an odour sweeter than the Prophet's".[26]

Obviously, the Prophet cannot be emulated in that peculiarity, which was the natural personal scent emanating from his body; however, Muslims are encouraged to use perfume and make themselves pleasant to others, a habit the Prophet himself loved as much as he hated bad smells: famous is his recommendation to the faithful not to eat onion or garlic when they had to go to the mosque; "whoever has eaten onion or garlic", he declared, "stay away from us and our mosque".[27]

In so far as imitating the Prophet has to do with the Law, using perfume has to do with the Law too.

As we know, from a juridical perspective, actions are divided into five legal categories from obligatory to prohibited. According to the Tradition,

23 Yāsīn, Bārū 2017. Worth mentioning another recent study, which is broader but more 'secular' in orientation, al-Jannābī 2015. Worthwhile too is Bursi 2020.

24 Yāsīn, Bārū 2017, 135; the story is on the authority of Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj.

25 Yāsīn, Bārū 2017, 136; again on the authority of Muslim.

26 Yāsīn, Bārū 2017, 135 (from al-Bukhārī).

27 Yāsīn, Bārū 2017, 136 (from Muslim).

perfuming oneself is not obligatory, and the reason is clear: one of the main principles of Islamic Law is not to impose a greater burden than any person can bear, and perfume, being an expensive accessory, cannot be imposed on those who cannot afford it. Perfume is therefore mostly considered 'recommended', in particular in the following cases: in the times and places where people gather, that is on Fridays and on the main feasts of the Islamic calendar; before lovemaking, a recommendation that applies to both spouses; before entering the 'state of purity' (*iḥrām* إحرام) needed to perform the Pilgrimage; and during the ritual washing of corpses. Perfume is also recommended to women at the end of their menstrual period.[28] In certain cases, perfume is instead forbidden and subject to strict proscription: during the 'state of purity', applying to men and women alike; for the woman after the death of her husband, in the required waiting period before remarriage; for the woman who leaves home alone. A last prohibition is the following: a man must not use the perfumes for women, nor a woman perfumes for men, part of a more general interdiction, that of gender confusion in behaviour.[29]

The two Malaysian authors' informative work also contains an interesting overview of the fragrances used in Muḥammad's day – musk, sorghum, amber, camphor, incense etc. – as recorded in the main collections of Prophetic Tradition.[30]

**28** Yāsīn, Bārū 2017, 140-2.

**29** Yāsīn, Bārū 2017, 142-6.

**30** Yāsīn, Bārū 2017, 138-40.

# 10 Repentance and Conversion

**Summary** 10.1 God's Forgiveness and Man's Repentance. – 10.2 The Muslim's Turning Back. – 10.3 God's Turning Back. – 10.4 Return to the Eternal Law. – 10.5 The Magnitude of Conversion.

We have already seen a number of times how often the virtues and values of the good Muslim correspond, with due allowances, to the 'Beautiful Names' that Tradition has bestowed on God on the basis of the Qur'ānic revelation; and, again according to Tradition, that God loves those who resemble Him, that is, those who attempt to align themselves with His attributes and conduct. This applies to another quality, called *tawba* (or *tawb* تَوب), which has the general sense of 'conversion' and expresses the purification of intention and the amendment of conduct.

One wonders how this quality, entirely appropriate to the human creature, can be predicated on God, for whom purification and amendment, let alone conversion, would appear to have no meaning. In answer to this question, let us hear the early lexicographers. Underlying *tawba* and the verb from which it derives, *tāba* تاب, – they are unanimous in explaining – there is the idea of return (*rujū* رجوع), together with the notion of reversion (*ʿawd* عَود) and also of recovery, that is, replacement understood in terms of a retracing of steps (*ināba* إنابة). And in this ample receptacle, they identify two different but related areas, depending on whether the action comes from man or from God: in the case of human action, the return is orientation, search and request (cf. *tāba ilā*), while in the case of God it is generous concession (cf. *tāba ʿalā*). It may help to take a closer look at what Ibn Manẓūr has to say in *The Language of the Arabs*.[1]

The author says that *tawba* means a retreat from guilt and thus repentance, or regret, or remorse; and relies for this on the well-known Prophetic

1 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root t-w-b; cf. Al-Fayrūzʾābādī 1419/1998, 64; Lane 1968, root t-w-b.


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saying: "Repentance is conversion".[2] Then he passes on to conversion when it is God's action, and he provides a meaning for this too: it means granting man success in his own conversion; as if to say, along the lines of the popular interpretation of *Proverbs* (16,33), "the lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" – or: man proposes, God disposes. Ibn Manẓūr proceeds along the same lines with another important noun, the intensive *tawwāb* تَوّاب 'one who greatly reverts'. First he applies this to man: it means 'he who turns back to God', and therefore repents; then he applies it to God, when it means 'He who turns back to His servant', and therefore forgives. For the latter case, he offers a Qur'ānic passage in support: "He who forgives sins and welcomes repentance" (Qur'ān XL,3).

After teaching that man is reconciled when he repents and that God is reconciled when He forgives, Ibn Manẓūr offers an afterword on the interdependence of these transactions: the divine Name *al-tawwāb* means that God returns to His servant when the latter has turned back to Him out of his sense of guilt. The ambivalence but also the overlap of conversion's meanings stands out in the commentary al-Ghazālī dedicates to the Name *al-tawwāb* 'The Incomparably Indulgent',[3] in his work on Names. He writes:

> God is the One who time after time returns to render more apparent to His servants the motives for conversion, making His signs evident to them […] until they, when they discover the disastrous consequences of guilt through His teaching, feel fear through the alarm He has kindled in them and thus return to conversion, when God's favour will also return to them, and at the same time His acceptance.[4]

## 10.1 God's Forgiveness and Man's Repentance

While the Qur'ān speaks of conversion or *tawba* in terms of the action of the Creator together with that of His creature, insisting on the overlap of those two actions, with many theological nuances – and an unquestionable rhetorical power – the exegetical works, in the vast majority of cases, perform on the other hand an as-it-were 'corrective' operation, determinedly splitting the process into forgiveness (*maghfira* or *ghufrān* غفران) and repentance (*nadam* ندم), thus maintaining divine otherness.

The corrective operation performed by the exegesis is evident in the explanation of the sura 'The Cow' where it is said: "Then Adam received some words from his Lord, and He turned towards him [*tāba ʿalay-hi*]. Indeed, it is He is the Oft-Returning, The Merciful [*al-tawwāb al-raḥīm*]" (Qur'ān II,37). While the Qur'ān treats Adam's repentance as one with God's forgiveness, forgiveness moreover followed by 'words' and thus with a potential Prophetic charge, the commentaries, even those of earliest date, show very clearly a divergence of meanings: among them, a work entitled *Gharīb al-Qur'ān* or 'Rare Expressions in the Qur'ān' by the fourth Shii Imam Zayd Ibn ʿAlī (d. c. 122/740),[5] where God's 'conversion' is aid and support, while

2 In Arabic: *al-nadam tawba*; Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-zuhd*, *bāb dhikr al-tawba*, no. 4250.

3 No. 80 in the principal lists of Names.

4 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root t-w-b.

5 Ibn ʿAlī, s.d., commentary on Qur'ān II,37.

for man it is the reversal of culpable action, renunciation of similar infractions and finally repentance; or the *Tafsīr ʻAbd al-Razzāq*, a commentary by the early scholar ʻAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʻānī (d. 211/827), which illustrates the divine priority over human actions with a dialogue between God and Adam:

> Adam asked: – Lord, did You prescribe this sin for me before You created me, or did I invent it on my own?
>
> He answered: – Not at all, I prescribed it for you before I created you.
>
> Then Adam said: – Since You have prescribed it for me, then forgive me.[6]

A story from the life of the mystic Rābiʻa al-ʻAdawiyya (d. 185/801), an important, almost legendary figure, illustrates the priority of *tawba* which is always to be traced back to God:

> Once a man came to her and asked: – If I turn to God, will He turn to me? To his surprise, she replied: – No. Then she immediately qualified her negation by adding: – However, if He turns to you, you will turn to Him.[7]

In al-Ṭabarī's *Compendious Discourse*, the splitting of *tawba* into divine Forgiveness and human repentance is by now well established; but the distinguished commentator does not ignore the terminological overlap that is so evident in the Qurʾān. Balancing his discourse between restoration and reinstatement, al-Ṭabarī explains man's conversion as a return (or *awba* أوْبة 'homecoming') from culpability, and God's conversion as a gift (*rizq* رزق), or, again, as a return (once more, *awba*), from wrath to contentment and from punishment to forgiveness. Al-Ṭabarī appears to take for granted another conviction, previously mainly to be found among mystics – one destined to loom large in the later literature of every era and tendency, and in fact also present in Ibn Manẓūr's dictionary – namely that the divine *tawba* should be read first and foremost as God's acceptance of human conversion.[8]

But this is also an idea that can be found in the Qurʾān itself, and more than once: in the sura 'The Repentance' it is said that God is "the One who accepts repentance from His servants [*qābil al-tawb*]" (Qurʾān IX,104); in the sura *ghāfir* 'The Forgiver God', He is "the Forgiver of sin, the Acceptor of repentance" (XL,3); and in the sura *al-Shūrā* 'The Consultation', "it is He who accepts the repentance of His servants, forgives their evil deeds" (XLII,25).

On the many aspects of 'conversion' or *tawba*, the most remarkable exegetical work is that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in *The* Keys *to the Unknown*. His commentary on the sura 'The Cow', when it deals with God's 'turning back to' Adam (II,37), is nothing short of a treatise on *tawba*.[9] The author engages with the definition and modalities of human conversion, quoting excerpts from al-Ghazālī's *Al-tawba ilā Allāh wa-mukaffirāt al-dhunūb* or 'The Conversion to God and the Atonement of Guilt', a section of the great *Iḥyāʾ ʻulūm al-dīn* or 'The Revival of the Religious Sciences'.[10] From al-Ghazālī he takes, for example, the latter's subtle analysis of human *tawba* articulated

6 Al-Ṣanʻānī 1419/1988, commentary on Qurʾān II,37.

7 Cf. Atif Khalil (2023, 169) quoting Al-Qushayrī 2002; cf. also Khalil 2018.

8 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qurʾān II,37.

9 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qurʾān II,37.

10 Al-Ghazālī 1407/1987.

in three distinct phases – the first being acknowledgement (*ʿilm*) of the harm produced by guilt, and of the 'veil' that it weaves between the believer and divine Clemency, distancing man from the object of his desire: this gives man a sorrow or suffering to which he gives the name of repentance (*nadam*). The second phase is when man formulates his resolve (*ʿazm* عزم) to abandon his past culpable behaviour including in such future as remains to him, and the final stage is the amendment of his ways. Still following al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī teaches that repentance sums up all three phases of *tawba* in the sense that the knowledge which precedes it is its premise, while the abandonment of culpability and guilt is its result, so that repentance, which connects both with the knowledge that comes first and the renunciation that comes later, is in the middle, embraced by the two sides, and is both the fruit and that which bears fruit; this explains why the Prophet said that repentance is reconversion.[11]

But whereas al-Ghazālī thinks that human repentance is by 'divine custom' (*sunnat Allāh* سُنة الله), almost a natural law, al-Rāzī is on the other hand a firm believer in God's freedom and His ceaseless intervention in the world, and thinks that knowledge of culpability and the harm it causes have little to do with man's own ability and initiative, but instead come directly from God's will. Al-Rāzī explains that conversion (*tawba*) brings the believer and his Lord together: the former is like a runaway servant who returns to his master, and the Other like a king who, however reluctantly, welcomes the servant out of mercy; but unlike an earthly king, who is outraged by his servant's misbehaviour and welcomes him back at most once, the Most High continually welcomes back the faithful with genuine goodness and kindness, should they sin and repent at any point throughout their lives.

One last consideration. Al-Rāzī, as we have seen, is a great admirer of al-Ghazālī; but he does not subscribe to the older master's notion that human *tawba*, like divine *tawba*, also involves forgiveness, and not only repentance. Reflecting on the Name *al-tawwāb* in his work on the Beautiful Names, al-Ghazālī in fact maintains that human conversion or repentance is not only towards the Lord, but also towards one's brother: "Whoever, time after time, listens to excuses of sinners, whether subjects, friends or acquaintances", he writes, "is conforming to a divine quality, and that will shape his destiny".[12] Thus he traces a clear convergence between God's behaviour and man's, in a common vocation to forgiveness.

## 10.2 The Muslim's Turning Back

In certain verses of the Qurʾān, the verb *tāba* 'to return', 'to reconvert' appears repeatedly, first referring to man's action and then as God's or, vice versa, first God's and then man's. These passages present the reader with movements of mutual conversion that are in many ways comparable: man turns back by withdrawing from his present state, and God also recovers His former favourable inclination towards the believer, between Creator and His creature almost a duplication of intentions and behaviour. The first example comes from, again, the sura 'The Cow':

11 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qurʾān II,37.

12 Al-Ghazālī 1971, 150-1.

> Except those who repent and make amends and openly declare [the Truth]: To them I turn; for I am Oft-returning, Most Merciful. (Qur'ān II,160)

This verse suggests the temporal priority of human turning back, as if to say that God forgives only those who are already repentant. Al-Rāzī, however, concerned as always to emphasise God's freedom of action, maintains that His acceptance of human repentance is not rationally necessary. God speaks here of forgiveness in order to compliment Himself, he observes, and if forgiveness were a necessary thing, the compliment would be meaningless or would not be one; this means that God accepts repentance not out of necessity but out of clemency (*raḥma*).[13]

Ibn Kathīr takes another view in his *Exegesis of the Sublime Qur'ān*: "When the supporters of unbelief or ungodly innovation reconvert to God", this author writes, "God turns back to them"; his is a hypothesis of reality, a conditional future, but a certain one. And he adds that this guaranteed divine turning back is unique to Islam because before, among the antecedent communities, God did not welcome the conversion of unbelievers and innovators.[14] And here we must remember that Ibn Kathīr, when he speaks of unbelief or innovation, is thinking only of theological aberrations, because he is well aware that God's forgiveness is denied to the apostate; as the Qur'ān says in the sura 'The Family of 'Imrān', "surely those who disbelieve after they have believed and then increase in unbelief – their repentance [*tawba*] shall not be accepted" (Qur'ān III,90).

In support of the notion that only the Muslim's 'conversion' is necessarily accepted by God, the author relies on the well-known Prophetic saying, as follows:

> The adulterer is not a believer while he is committing adultery, the thief is not a believer while he is stealing, the drinker who drinks of wine is not a believer while he is drinking wine, the plunderer is not a believer while he is plundering […] because, at those moments, faith abandons him. If he turns back, then God turns back to him.[15]

Ibn Kathīr is thus able to affirm that Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, is "the Prophet of conversion, the Prophet of mercy";[16] and again, in highlighting the relationship between conversion and mercy, he draws our attention to a cornerstone of Qur'ānic thought on *tawba*: for it is true that the Name *al-tawwāb* 'The Oft-Returning', 'The Indulgent', always occurs in the Qur'ān paired with the Name *al-raḥīm* 'The Clement' or 'The Merciful' (except on one occasion, Qur'ān XC,3, when it appears alone).

**13** Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān II,160.

**14** Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān II,160.

**15** Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-maẓālim*, *bāb al-nuhbā bi-ghayr idhn ṣāḥibi-hi*, no. 2475; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-īmān*, *bāb bayān nuqṣān al-īmān bi-l-ma'āṣī*, no. 57; both on the authority of Abū Hurayra.

**16** Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān II,160.

## 10.3 God's Turning Back

Another important verse, in the sura 'The Repentance', suggests that it is God's return that prompts human return, in a logical sequence contrary to what we have seen hitherto:

> And to the three who were left behind […] when they knew it for certain that there was no refuge from God but in Him; then He returned to them that they might turn back to Him; surely God is the Oft-returning, the Merciful. (Qur'ān IX,118)

The commentators are unanimous in explaining that the three were converts from Medina who were reluctant to go into battle with the Prophet, so they hesitated, lagging behind the others, and were therefore late in 'converting', and God was equally late in forgiving them. Like many, al-Rāzī, in *The* Keys *to the Unknown*, organises his commentary around deferral and postponement, which he naturally considers an expression of divine freedom. Here in essence is his teaching, set out concisely, point by point.

Firstly: "He returned to them that they might turn back to Him" means that the servant's action is created by God. Secondly, God's returning precedes in time, for "He returned" is in the past tense while "that they might turn to him" indicates an action in the future. Thirdly, since the basis of conversion is turning back, the verse describes the return of the three Medinans to their proper condition, that is, belonging to the ranks of believers. Fourthly, this also involves their persevering in their return and avoiding the repetition of their misdeeds. Lastly, «that they might turn back to him» means: that they might benefit from their return and derive satisfaction from it; but these two outcomes, benefit and satisfaction, are subordinate to God's returning to them which – the author never tires of repeating – is in no sense due but occurs through His clemency and magnanimity.[17]

The same emphasis on divine freedom and the error of those who think otherwise is to be found in the following summary by an early sage, taken up by al-Qurṭubī in *The Compendium of the Judgements of the Qur'ān*, again commenting on the sura 'The Repentance' (Qur'ān IX,118):

> With God the Most High I have erred about four things. I thought that as soon as I loved Him, He would love me too, because He said: "a people whom He will love and they will love Him" [V,54]; I thought that as soon as I was pleased with Him, He would be pleased with me too, because He said: "God is pleased with them and they with Him" [V,119]; I thought that as soon as I remembered Him, He would also remember me, because He said: "certainly the remembrance of God is the greatest" [XXIX,45]; and I thought that as soon as I return to Him, He also returns to me, because He said: "To them I turn; for I am Oft-returning" [II,160].[18]

A good example of the complexity of Islamic thought is provided by al-Zamakhsharī in his *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, for this Muʿtazilite theologian instead speaks of the necessity of divine forgiveness and the

17 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XI,118.

18 Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XI,118.

human responsibility in repentance; and he sketches a profile of the three characters mentioned in the sura 'The Repentance' that emphasises their active participation in the process. Relying on an opinion of the early writer al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, he writes:

> There was a man who had a walled garden that was better than a hundred thousand pieces of silver; he said: – My garden, what has kept me back is only your shade, and the expectation of your fruit, but now I leave you to God.
>
> Then there was another who had only his wife; this one said: – My wife, what has made me linger […] is surely only the attachment I have for you; however, I appeal to God, I will endure the distance separating us and I will reach the Prophet. And he mounted his horse and went.
>
> The last man had only himself, and neither wife nor wealth.
>
> He said: – My soul, what has made me stay behind is only your love of life; however, I appeal to God, I will endure every adversity and I will reach the Prophet. So, he took some provisions, tucked them under his arm, and reached him.[19]

## 10.4 Return to the Eternal Law

Behind the double sense of conversion, or turning back – repentance for man and forgiveness for God –, there clearly lurks the notion that the past is better than the present. It is an idea that recurs in the Qurʾān, and is particularly evident in a passage from the sura 'The Women'. At the end of a legal discourse on the categories of brides allowed to the believer and those that are instead unlawful (*maḥārim* محارم), we read:

> God desires to guide you, and to explain to you the ways of those before you, and to return [*yatūbu*] to you […]. God wants to return [*yatūbu*] to you, but those who follow their evil desires seek to lead you astray. (Qurʾān IV,26-7)

It is a potentially trappy passage for exegesis because, on "those before you" (*min qabli-kum*) ought to mean the pre-Islamic generations, not yet enlightened by the Qurʾān. And indeed, many commentators think that the lesson of these verses is a negative one: that the predecessors are cited to ensure that Muslims do *not* follow in their footsteps by marrying their mothers, daughters and sisters without regard to consanguinity and the interdictions attached to it.

But the majority view is another, based on the convergence of monotheistic Laws regarding the same interdicts: "those before you" to be followed in methods and procedures are then rather the many pious people who lived before Islam, first of all the prophets, bearers of similar juridical views. This is a conviction that runs through the entire history of Islamic thought, and in modern times becomes even more pronounced. But let us proceed in order and review the main exegeses.

Some authors float a relationship between the habits of ancient believers and the habits of God, which according to the Qurʾān do not change

19 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qurʾān XI,118.

or vary (cf. e.g. XXXIII,62 or XXXV,43). They initiate thereby a discourse on the perpetuity of Revelation, as essentially identical always and for all. Here, for example, in a close paraphrase, is Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's commentary on this passage.

In the verses preceding the ones under analysis (i.e. IV,26-7), God has explained to Muslims the existing obligations in matrimonial matters, differentiating what is permissible from what is not, the good from the bad. Then He says "to explain to you the ways of those before you", which can be understood in two ways: the marriage obligations that God is now prescribing for Muslims are those he had previously prescribed to all religious communities; or, alternatively, that God had also explained to the ancients the usefulness of marriage regulations, although He then gave them different ones. In either case, it means that the Laws, of Muslims and others, converge in the sphere of public interest (*maṣlaḥa* مصلحة). Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī thus affirms the unanimity of the heavenly Books and the existence of an Eternal Law behind the different codifications.[20] We see here again the great Islamic motif of *fiṭra*, the 'original nature', the faith of Adam and Abraham, the natural vocation to monotheism, God's plan for mankind from the beginning.

A modern commentary, the *Tafsīr al-Manār* or 'The Beacon', by two Egyptian reformers, Rashīd Riḍā and Muḥammad 'Abduh,[21] also insists on the perpetuity of the primordial creed, remaining unaltered through its various historical manifestations. Glossing the verses on marriage regulation in the sura 'The Women' (Qur'ān IV,26-7),[22] the authors observe that every community in the past had its own religion, its own Law, adapted to the society of the times; indeed, it is said in the Qur'ān: "To each among you, We have prescribed a law and a clear way" (V,48). Nonetheless, there is a broad equivalence between the obligations that God has prescribed for Muslims and those reserved for other observant communities (*milal* مِلل) throughout history; that is to say that, through their prophets, the ancients also conformed to the original religious vocation (*fiṭra*). Thus, the religion of all the prophets has always been one under the monotheism – a spirit of submission to God, and purity of soul obtained through actions that rectify and refine character. Subsequently, reflecting on the double quotation of the divine return – "and to return [*yatūbu*] to you […] God wants to return [*yatūbu*] to you" (IV,26-7) – the *Manār* commentary teaches that the repetition does not have a mere reinforcing sense, but actually expresses two different actions of God, one connected to the other: the first divine conversion, historicised and in a particular sense, concerns the amnesty of marriages already ratified by the very first Muslims, still unaware of the prohibition against incest, with the obligation, however, to withdraw from those empty and defective marriages; while the second 'return' is general and timeless: what God wants from believers is that they observe these Laws forever, pure in soul and heart, and reformed in their condition.[23]

If in the *Manār* commentary the idea of history is to some extent a secularised idea, in other Salafist commentaries the past is resolved within

**20** Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān IV,26-7.

**21** Riḍā, 'Abduh 1366/1947.

**22** The considerations summarised below are largely taken from Muḥammad 'Abduh's lectures at al-Azhar University, as is the entire commentary of the *Manār* up to Qur'ān IV,125.

**23** Riḍā, 'Abduh 1366/1947 on Qur'ān IV,26-7.

sacred history: the reference to the pre-Islamic prophets does not concern actual concrete communities, and the return to the perennial Law does not at all imply a positive image of the other 'People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb* أهل الكتاب). A contemporary example is *Aysar al-tafāsīr li-kalām al-ʿalī al-kabīr* or 'The Simplest Interpretation of the Words of the Exalted Almighty' by the Algerian Jābir al-Jazāʾirī (d. 2018), a long-time lecturer in Islamic Sciences at the University of Medina. In the name of the perpetuity of the Qurʾānic word, al-Jazāʾirī reads the verses under analysis as an exhortation directed to today's believers, and therefore offers a modernising interpretation: "those before you" would not then be the pre-Islamic communities but the first converts, the 'pious ancestors' or *salaf*, whose integrity must protect the Muslim from the 'ignorance' (*jāhiliyya* جاهلية) of his own time, hardly dissimilar to the ignorance of the pagans. According to al-Jazāʾirī, the example to be followed is that "of the upright believers who have gone before you, so that you may follow in their footsteps, purify yourselves, perfect yourselves and prosper like them". As for the divine will to turn back to the faithful, it means that He "wants to lead you back from the error of ignorance to the right guidance [*hudā* هدى] provided by Islam".[24]

In this perspective, Jews and Christians no longer share with Muslims the primordial vocation or *fiṭra*, but find themselves unceremoniously deposited among "those who follow their evil desires" and "seek to lead you astray", along with incestuous fornicators (cf. Qurʾān IV,27). The identification of other 'People of the Book' as models to be shunned is not new to the exegetical tradition – it can already be found in al-Ṭabarī's commentary. But, as we have seen, other convictions, even among the Salafis themselves, go in a different direction.

## 10.5 The Magnitude of Conversion

In amongst the panoply of his works, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā of Baghdad has also left us a pamphlet entitled *Kitāb al-tawba* or 'The Book of Conversion';[25] a work that would influence many later writers, among them the Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223) in his more exhaustive and systematic *Kitāb al-tawwābīn* or 'The Book of Penitents'.[26]

The material assembled by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā – in the form of Prophetic sayings and stories – embraces repentance and the request for forgiveness from God, grief and regret for the ugliness of one's sins, more or less serious, the fear of punishment and the necessary atonement on earth and in the hereafter, sometimes echoing al-Ghazālī's notion of the human *tawba* as the acceptance and pardoning (*ʿafw*) of one's neighbour's misdeeds, in imitation of the divine *tawba*. One example is the following, on the first Muslim to have his hand amputated after committing a theft:

> The man was a convert from Medina. They took him to the Prophet and told him that he had stolen. He replied: – Take him away and amputate him. But then his face clouded over.

24 Al-Jazāʾirī 1424/2003, glossing Qurʾān IV,26-7.

25 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d.

26 Al-Maqdisī 1407/1987.

> Someone sitting next to him asked him: – Does this trouble you, Prophet of God?
>
> He answered: – Do not behave as Satan's henchmen! When a ruler is presented with a criminal case [*ḥadd* حدّ],[27] he can do nothing but impose the punishment. But God is the One who pardons, and He loves pardon. And he recited: "But let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish that God should forgive you? God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate" [Qur'ān XXIV,22].[28]

Another story from *The Book of Conversion* by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, where the reciprocity of conversions is quite explicit, along with the perpetuity of faith and the Law, is the following:

> God inspired a prophet that punishment was imminent. That prophet conveyed the message to his people and summoned the best among them to turn back to God. Three of them went out before the people.
>
> The first said: – Lord, You have commanded us in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses not to refuse the request of one who presents himself at our door; now, we present ourselves at one of Your gates: refuse not our request.
>
> The second1 said: – Lord, You have commanded us in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses to pardon those who wrong us; now, we have wronged ourselves: pardon us.
>
> Said the third: – Lord, You have commanded us in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses to set our slaves free; now, we are Your servants and slaves: set us free.
>
> God inspired the prophet to tell them that He had granted their requests and pardoned them.[29]

Sometimes sympathy for others is best expressed by asking God to forgive them; as the Companion Ibn Masʿūd said, "if you see that one of you does something wrong, do not inveigh against him, do not insult him, but pray to God to forgive him and return to him".[30]

Here is an example of such a prayer: "My God, if we have done wrong to someone, repay him in kind for our fault and forgive us; and if anyone has done wrong to us, repay us in kind for his fault and forgive him".[31] And here is another interesting passage on human solidarity, again from *The Book of Conversion*:

> The prophet David, before himself falling into sin, railed against sinners. When he had sinned in his turn, he said: – Lord, forgive the sinners, perhaps together with them you will also pardon me.[32]

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**27** *Ḥadd* refers to the punishments of certain acts forbidden or sanctioned by punishments in the Qur'ān and the Sunna, and thereby become crimes against religion.

**28** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 43.

**29** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 114.

**30** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 99-100.

**31** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 95.

**32** Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 125.

A last quotation, of some subtlety, makes forgiving one's neighbour a gift offered to God; it features again the mystic Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, who used to say: "Lord, I have given You the gift of him who has wronged me, You ask the gift of me from him whom I have wronged".[33]

An insistence on return and conversion as cornerstones of the Islamic religion is very much alive among today's preachers: there is a contemporary *Al-tawba* 'Book of Conversion', for example, by the already mentioned Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Shaʿrāwī.[34] It is not a long work but a wide-ranging one, which brings together under the common heading of *tawba* a multitude of different elements, cultural, theological, legal, liturgical, ethical-moral, social coexistence, and more besides. Al-Shaʿrāwī is not writing like al-Ghazālī for the spiritual postulants, still less for Ibn Abī l-Dunyā's patricians or courtiers; as is obvious from his opening lines, he is addressing a brother Muslim who is largely unversed in the doctrinal and even the ritual basics of his religion, and perhaps a little shaky in his moral principles, who, in order to reconvert to God, needs explicit and all-round instruction. The author therefore sets out to teach him the connection between man's morality and God's being and doing, without prejudicing the divine incomparability of course; and he equates, among other things, divine clemency with the spontaneousness of a mother's love;[35] or the apprehension of a concerned father:

> like when you have a child of school age who sits up studying for many hours until sleep begins to overcome him, but continues to resist it while the book falls from his hand again and again, until finally you get up, take his book and tell him to go to bed.[36]

Al-Shaʿrāwī repeatedly quotes the well-known Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), and like him attaches great importance to intra-Islamic solidarity. And, like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī many centuries earlier, he comments on the verse that says "and lower your wing to the believers", in the sura 'The Rocky Tract' (Qur'ān XV,88), teaching that, like the bird that spreads its wings wide in flight but then folds them tenderly as it approaches its young, similarly the good Muslim will approach his neighbour with humility and in a spirit of service, knowing that when he lowers his wing on his brother, the other will lower two wings on him.[37]

Islam – al-Shaʿrāwī teaches – has not instilled the qualities of ruthlessness or pride in the Muslim, for in that case he would be ruthless and proud even with his brethren. Islam wants him rather to be ruthless and proud when necessary and, when necessary, gentle; everything to its season.[38]

33 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 96.
34 Al-Shaʿrāwī 1422/2001.
35 Al-Shaʿrāwī 1422/2001, 127-8.
36 Al-Shaʿrāwī 1422/2001, 156.
37 Al-Shaʿrāwī 1422/2001, 156-7.
38 Al-Shaʿrāwī 1422/2001, 159.

# 11 Tolerance

**Summary** 11.1 The Origins of Islamic Tolerance. – 11.2 Islamic Tolerance and European Intolerance. – 11.3 Universal Tolerance. – 11.4 Beyond Tolerance.

In recent times, particularly since 9/11 but also earlier, many Muslim intellectuals have debated the existence and eventual form of an Islamic tolerance. Among them: the theologian ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Ibrāhīm Maṭaʿnī (d. 2008), of al-Azhar University, who as early as 1993 published in Cairo *Samāḥat al-Islām fī l-daʿwa ilā Allāh wa-l-ʿalāqāt al-insāniyya manhāj*$^{an}$ *wa-sīra* or 'The Tolerance of Islam in the Appeal to God and in Human Relations, as a Method and a Way of Life';[1] the Saudi ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Laḥīdān, of the Imām Muḥammad Ibn Saʿūd University in Riyadh, with his *Samāḥat al-Islām fī muʿāmalat ghayr al-muslimīn* or 'The Tolerance of Islam in Relations with Non-Muslims';[2] Muḥsin al-ʿAzzāzī, with *Samāḥat al-Islām wa-nabdhi-hi li-l-ʿunf* or 'Islam's Tolerance and Its Rejection of Violence';[3] and two homonymous texts, entitled *Al-yusr wa-l-samāḥat fī l-Islām* or 'Facilitation and Tolerance in Islam', one by Fāliḥ Ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr[4] and the other by Muḥammad Ibn ʿUmar Bāzmūl;[5] and again, ʿAbd al-Wāsiʿ al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Saʿd, of the Yemeni University of Judayda, with their *Al-tasāmuḥ al-islāmī. Qirāʾat fī muʿṭayāti-hi al-fikriyya wa-āthāri-hi al-wāqiʿiyya fī ḍawʾ al-Kitāb wa-l-Sunna* or 'Islamic Tolerance: An Interpretation of Its Speculative Aspects and Practical Effects in the Light of the Book and the

1 Maṭaʿnī 1993.
2 Al-Laḥīdān 2014.
3 Al-ʿAzzāzī 2015.
4 Al-Ṣaghīr 2016.
5 Bāzmūl s.d.


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Sunna';[6] and 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ Ibn Yūsuf al-Gharīb with *Tasāmuḥ al-Islām maʿa ghayr al-muslimīn* or 'Islam's Tolerance towards Non-Muslims'.[7]

The authors of these various works employ the Arabic term *samāḥa* سماحة for tolerance; or the related *tasāmuḥ* تسامح, which embraces a sense of reciprocity and comes to mean 'mutual tolerance'. And if we consult the dictionaries, ancient or modern, we see that the terms chosen by contemporary Muslim intellectuals to denote tolerance – specifically the Arabic words *samāḥa* and *tasāmuḥ* – speak primarily of generosity and nobility of spirit, forbearance and kindness. The modern dictionaries have added 'simplification' or 'facilitation' (*taysīr* تَيْسير), and gloss the expression 'the tolerance of Islam' (*samāḥat al-Islām*), for example, as 'facilitation in religion'. They also often employ as a synonym the term *yusr*, which means easiness but also abundance, comfort and wealth. Clearly there is no trace in these Arabic terms of the idea of endurance, and they have nothing to do with suffering and affliction as is the case in Latin *tolerantia*: their scope touches rather on the great Islamic value of mercy or clemency, *raḥma* – the will to good that, as we have seen, necessarily proceeds from the greater to the lesser. They are not far from judiciousness or *ḥilm*, which is first and foremost the ability to meet evil with good and not to take revenge when given the chance. Islamic tolerance is also nourished by goodness, in spirit and in action, what Muslims of all periods have called *iḥsān*.

## 11.1 The Origins of Islamic Tolerance

Islamic thought invariably takes its cue from the foundational literature; and this is the case even today for tolerance. In the Qur'ān, the two Arabic terms just considered – *samāḥa* and *tasāmuḥ* – are nowhere to be found, nor in fact is their verbal root; yet the notion of tolerance is by no means alien to the Holy Book. Among the passages most often quoted by contemporaries in support of their theses are: "To you be your religion and to me my religion", from the sura *al-Kāfirūn* 'The Disbelievers' (Qur'ān XCIX,6); and, from the sura *Yūnus* 'Jonah': "Had your Lord wished, the whole of mankind would have believed in Him. Would you force people to have faith?" (X,99-100). Also frequently quoted, from the sura 'The Cow' is the verse that says: "Let there be no compulsion in religion [*lā ikrāh fī l-dīn*]" (II,256), brandished as an iconic declaration of tolerance according to Islam,[8] to the extent that it appears in the various declarations that Arab and Islamic countries have formulated since the 1980s in response to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Tolerance recurs regularly in the Prophetic Tradition:

> A man came to the Prophet and asked him: – Messenger of God, who is the best believer in his faith? He answered: – He who has the finest character qualities.
>
> The man asked again: – And what is the best part of faith? He answered: – Patience and tolerance [*al-ṣabr wa-l-samāḥa*].[9]

6 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd 1434/2013.

7 Al-Gharīb s.d.

8 Today, but not in the past: cf. Zilio-Grandi 2008.

9 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Muṣnad, muṣnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 19002.

Another famous example, again from the Sunna, belongs to the already mentioned category of Prophetic sayings that the Tradition calls 'holy' (*qudsī*) because, as in the Qur'ān, it is God who speaks to the Prophet in the first person. According to the story in question, God, ever the Most Merciful of the merciful, promised the Prophet He would welcome all obedient monotheists into paradise and, once that was done, that he would also bring up out of hell the disobedient who had nevertheless showed tolerance towards their neighbours. He will command the angels: "Be tolerant with this servant of Mine as he has been tolerant with My servants".[10]

Again according to the Tradition, when the ancient jurist Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) saw a naked man washing his genitals and anus in the ritual ablution basin, he told him: "Go ahead with your ablutions, religion is tolerance, and the Prophet used to say 'be tolerant towards others that they may be tolerant towards you'".[11] The Prophet's own tolerance was proverbial: his Companion Anas Ibn Mālik testified that Muḥammad was among the most tolerant of men, and also among the best and most courageous.[12]

Another saying from the Tradition, important because it refers to the typical criterion of Islamic ethics of virtue, which is divine love: "God loves tolerance in selling, tolerance in buying and tolerance in judging".[13] And lastly a negative example: the Prophet described one of his bitter enemies, the apostate al-Aswad, as a man devoid of tolerance and courage.[14]

The accounts of the Prophet's life dedicated to tolerance, not infrequently combined with courage and therefore indicating indulgence and not deference, let alone cowardice, are numerous, and they all allude to a practical tolerance, which is in the last resort the ability to live with others without creating complications. As in the following story reported by a Companion:

> While I was walking with the Prophet who was wearing a Najrani outer garment with a thick hem, a Bedouin came upon the Prophet and pulled his garment so violently that I could see the impress of the hem of the garment on his shoulder, caused by the violence of his pull. Then the Bedouin said: – Order for me something from God's fortune which you have. The Prophet turned to him and smiled, then ordered that a gift be given to him.[15]

Tolerant behaviour is therefore a cornerstone of Islamic ethics according to both the Qur'ān and the Prophetic Tradition, and contemporary authors continually remind us of this: whatever their doctrinal standpoint, the method they all share is a continual reference back to the foundational texts, the Qur'ān and Sunna, however variously explained and interpreted. In so doing, of course, the authors confine their investigations to accounts of the early Islamic community, ignoring later history. And here we should remember

**10** Al-Isfarā'inī, *Mustakhraj*, no. 329.

**11** 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣnad*, *kitāb al-ṭahāra*, no. 233.

**12** Al-Ṭabarī, *Tahdhīb al-āthār*, no. 125.

**13** Al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *Al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, no. 2275.

**14** Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-awsaṭ*, no. 4193.

**15** E.g. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb farḍ al-khumus*, *bāb mā kāna al-nabī [...] yuṭī al-mu'allafat qulūbu-hum [...] min al-khumus*, no. 3149; on the authority of Anas Ibn Mālik. English Translation on `https://sunnah.com/bukhari:3149`.

that the exclusive focus on origins, a remarkable peculiarity from a comparative point of view, is actually quite unsurprising, in the case of tolerance as in other cases: the idea that 'true Islam' is the 'original Islam' goes beyond the so-called Salafist doctrine, which insists on the good example of the ancestors, or *salaf*, the first three generations of Muslims, as the best embodiment of the religion. It has, on the contrary, always been present in Islamic thought on man and the world. Hence the absence of a historical perspective in Muslim theological thinking: history has its importance, but it concerns historians, and not theologians or preachers. From a theological perspective, history is merely a sequence of cases that conform or fail to conform to the Islam of the origins. Investigating individual dynasties, or governments, or even individuals in the light of their obedience or disobedience to fundamental criteria, might well prove useless, or at least redundant, for the edification of the mass of Muslims.

## 11.2 Islamic Tolerance and European Intolerance

Apart from the temporal limitation deriving by the exclusive use of foundational literature, most contemporary Islamic works on tolerance share the same intent, which is apologetic and defensive, not infrequently accompanied by accusations against European countries and the United States. A good example of this line is offered by the Egyptian ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Ibrāhīm Maṭaʿnī. His book *The Tolerance of Islam in the Appeal to God and in Human Relation*s seeks precisely to respond to those in Europe who accuse Islam of being

> a bloodthirsty, terrorist and violent religion, which disallows liberty and for which the only alternative to conversion is death […], a creed that has trained its followers in aggression, so that Islam has become the enemy of humanity and human civilisations and should therefore be defeated or eliminated altogether.[16]

But the strange thing is, the author continues, becoming quite heated, that Europe, while describing Islam in such a scathing manner, forgets or pretends to forget the blood it has shed everywhere throughout history and even in modern times: Maṭaʿnī then enumerates the Crusader expeditions, Zionism, communism, the Balkan wars and the violence perpetrated against the Bosnians. "Shamelessly amnesiac", Europe accuses Islam of being the religion of terrorism and violence, of "confiscating liberties" if not of "total inhumanity",[17] he writes, and notes that some of his own compatriots, Arabs and Muslims of Egypt, side with these European beliefs and air them in the media. In response to these attacks, the author is at pains to illustrate for a good portion of his book that, on the contrary, the call to Islam involves non-violent methods and that the religion allows little or no space for coercion and killing. He also strongly emphasises the importance of patience and forgiveness, as well as Islam's fundamental conformity to tolerance and mercy towards all mankind and not just towards believers. He concludes

16 Maṭaʿnī 1993, 3.

17 Maṭaʿnī 1993, 3-4.

that relations between Muslims and others have, from the beginning, been those of peace and not war:

> Any killing that took place between Muslims and non-Muslims during the Prophetic era, the period to which we have limited this study, was caused by the belligerence of non-Muslims towards Muslims, and not simply by their unbelief […], as those who claim that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is one of war and not peace, would like to believe.[18]

## 11.3 Universal Tolerance

Of a different orientation is the work by the Yemenis ʿAbd al-Wāsiʿ al-Ghashīmī and Amīr Fāḍil Saʿd, published in Kuwait in 2013 under the title *Islamic Tolerance*: *An Interpretation of Its Speculative Aspects and Practical Effects in the Light of the Qurʾān and the Sunna*, referred to above.

The authors' intention is no longer defensive but instead proactive and dynamic – to promote Islamic tolerance, to illuminate its rational principles and not only its traditional ones, with the concrete aim of building a shared humanitarianism, the heritage of all beyond or despite the confessional perspectives of each. The book's structure is also less traditional and more rational: to be sure, these authors also continually invoke the Qurʾān and Sunna as keystones, but their discourse often proceeds autonomously, with quotations from diverse theologians and philosophers, medieval and also contemporary, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

It is a nimble but at the same time a rigorous work, reviewing the etymology and definitions of tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), its religious bases, its legal regulation, its practical aspects and real-life applications, as well as its effects on individuals and communities. The authors also make a point of insisting on the tolerance always shown by Muslim thinkers for the philosophical ideas of others. As prerequisites for this all-too-rare perspective, the authors identify on the one hand humanity, that is, the fact of being human, with the characteristics that necessarily predispose us to humanitarianism, and on the other hand "the fullest self-realisation of man".[19]

Alongside the familiar "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Qurʾān II,256), al-Ghashīmī and Saʿd quote a passage from the sura *al-Ḥujurāt* 'The Dwellings': "O mankind, We have made you […] races and tribes, that you may know one another, but the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you" (XLIX,13); in their commentary on this verse, they highlight that the reference is to people in general (cf. *yā ayyuhā al-nās*), and not to Muslims alone. Inserting themselves neatly into the field of contemporary religious pluralism,[20] and in particular into the sphere of interreligious dialogue, they also draw attention to the well-known verse that calls other monotheists – 'the people of the Book' – to "a common word

18 Maṭaʿnī 1993, 167.

19 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd 1434/2013, 31-6.

20 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd 1434/2013, 34-5. It might be opportune here to add a further terminological note: when Arab authors speak of 'pluralism', they employ the expression *taʿaddudiyya*, which does not, in itself, mean the belief that reality is formed by equally valid first principles, but rather, simply, plurality, multiplicity, the fact of being many and diverse; moreover, *taʿaddudiyya* can even mean increase and growth, without any value content.

[*kalima sawāʾ* كلمة سواء ] between us and you" (Qurʾān III,64);[21] and they add that it is precisely that crucial Islamic trait which is tolerance that has inspired many Western thinkers and writers. They point among others to the example of the German Enlightenment scholar Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (d. 1781) who, struck by the rationality of Islam and in particular of its tolerance, is said to have devoted himself to promoting that faith.[22]

Thanks not least to its speculative content and use of non-Islamic sources, al-Ghashīmī and Saʿd's work marks a successful departure from the restricted classical reading of Islamic tolerance as forbearance and facilitation, to the recognition of the dignity and rights of all, an interpretation of tolerance more common in Western thought.

## 11.4 Beyond Tolerance

The Tradition, or Sunna, records that in 390 CE the Prophet Muḥammad, well before the Prophetic vision that occurred in 610 marking the beginning of the Qurʾānic revelation, signed, together with some notables of his powerful tribe the Quraysh, a pact called the 'alliance of virtues' or 'of the virtuous' (*ḥilf al-fuḍūl* حلف الفضول) with the aim of healing the hatred and violence stirred up by previous intertribal conflicts. In memory of this ancient accord, the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, based in Abu Dhabi, in 2018 hosted a conference in Washington entitled 'Alliance of Virtue for the Common Good', attended by more than four hundred delegates representing the three Abrahamic religions. Largely responsible for this initiative was a prominent figure in the contemporary Islamic world, Abdallah Bin Bayyah (ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Maḥfūẓ Ibn Bayya), born in Mauritania in 1935.

The Washington discussions resulted in a document, *Alliance of Virtue for the Common Good. The Washington Declaration* (7 February 2018),[23] which proposed "a renewed alliance of virtue, global in nature, open to men and women of all faiths, ethnicities and nationalities, dedicated to joint action for the sustainability of peace, justice, compassion and mutual respect". The signatories recognised that the values shared by the three monotheisms are, especially in today's world, more important than their respective formal differences, and that it was therefore necessary to disseminate and support the ethical convictions central to all three traditions by opposing attempts to misrepresent or vilify different cultures and ethnicities. To this end, the Declaration urgently called on every sector, public service, religion, business, academia, civil society, and the arts, to share responsibility for fostering international and intercultural understanding, with a view to reconciliation that, working across denominational divides, went beyond mere tolerance.

The Declaration expressly claimed continuity with a slightly earlier conference held in Marrakesh in 2016 under the auspices of King Mohammed VI and in cooperation with Morocco's Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Once again,

21 Al-Ghashīmī, Saʿd 1434/2013, 33-4.

22 On Lessing's actual attitude towards Islam and religions in general, cf. the recent study by Jan Loop (2019, particularly 16-17).

23 The original text is on `https://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/WashingtonDeclaration-Final-02-12-18.pdf`.

the meeting took place at the initiative of Bin Bayyah and was global in reach, albeit limited to the Muslim world. The proceedings centred around the rights of religious minorities in majority-Muslim countries and their full recognition, but also pressed for the development of an Islamic jurisprudence certainly rooted in Tradition and its principles, but responsive to global changes and based on the concept of citizenship (*muwāṭana* مواطنة). On this occasion too, the work of the conference culminated with the signing of a document, *The Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in the Muslim World*, which emphasised the need to move well beyond mere tolerance for religions and cultures other than Islam, going also beyond the notion of respect (*iḥtirām* احترام) – a more mature and complex form that includes effective recognition – and rather enjoined cooperation (*taʿāwun* تعاون) which is shared action and mutual support, together with a commitment on the part of culture, the arts, and civil society as a whole, to work on the basis of the Family of ʿImrān sura's 'common word', *kalima sawāʾ* (Qurʾān III,64) for the necessary affirmation of the rights and freedoms of all, without constraints, without fanatical intransigence and without arrogance. The document closed with the uncompromising assertion: "The use of religion to justify any claims that violate the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries is inadmissible". As was the case later in Washington with the 'alliance of virtue', here too reference was made to that ancient 'Charter (*ṣaḥīfa* صحيفة) of Medina', that some today see as an expression of protoconstitutionalism.

It is worth recalling that Bin Bayyah, promoter of both the above-mentioned Declarations – Marrakesh (2016) and Washington (2018) –, was among the most convinced signatories of another pivotal document, the *Amman Message* (2006),[24] in which two hundred of the most respected Muslim scholars agreed first of all on the definition of 'Muslim', and affirmed the legitimacy of the main Islamic schools of thought[25] – prohibiting their murder, anathemas (*takfīr* تكفير), the dishonouring or financial disadvantaging of any of their members. Evoking a well-known saying attributed to the Prophet about divine mercy being the basis of divergence – "divergence in my community is Mercy"[26] – the drafters of the Message also insisted on the rightness of internal diversity. The document concludes with a call for its decisions to be widely disseminated, via their inclusion in the educational curricula of imams and in sermons at mosques; quoting in support a passage in the sura 'The Women', where it is said:

> There is no good in most of their private conversations [*najwā-hum*] but only in the enjoining of charity [*ṣadaqa*] or of what is known to be right [*maʿrūf*], or reconciliation [*iṣlāḥ* إصلاح] between people; and whoever does this seeking God's pleasure, We will give him a mighty reward. (Qurʾān IV,114)

**24** Cf. `http://ammanmessage.com/?lang=ar`; an English version – not always entirely consonant with the Arabic one – is also available at `https://ammanmessage.com/?option=com_content%20&task=view&id=74&Itemid=42`.

**25** The four Sunni legal schools, and then the Jaʿfarī, Zaydī, Ibāḍī and Ẓāhirī.

**26** In Arabic: *ikhtilāf fī ummatī raḥma*.

# 12 Peace

**Summary** 12.1 Health and Salvation. – 12.2 Greetings and Farewells. – 12.3 The Ways of Peace.

The sura 'The Gathering' closes with a passage that has had a profound influence on Muslim piety:

> He is God; there is no other god but He. He is the knower of the unseen and the seen; He is the All-merciful, the All-compassionate. He is God, there is no other god but He, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Peace [*al-salām* السلام], the Bestower of Faith, the Overseer, the Exalted in Might, the Compeller, the Supreme. Exalted is God above whatever they associate with Him. He is God, the Creator, the Inventor of all things, the Bestower of forms. To Him belong the Beautiful Names, and everything that is in the heavens and on the earth glorifies Him. And He is the All-Mighty, the All-Wise. (Qur'ān LIX, 22-4)

On this passage, and others like it, is based the doctrine of the Beautiful Names, and the list it proposes includes 'the Peace' (*al-salām*), the definite article being a way of insisting on divine absoluteness.

As in the case of other Names and the corresponding Islamic virtues, it is worth asking to what extent the contents of the Arabic *salām* correspond to those of the English 'peace'. We can turn once again to the great medieval dictionaries, and note that the contents of *salām* include first of all salvation and safety, and then immunity or freedom from faults, defects and vices. The English 'peace', on the other hand, deriving from the Latin *pax* via the Old French *pais*, refers to ideas of binding, connecting and welding; and then too, *pax* is akin to *pactum*. Thus, in its most immediate contents – which are the absence of war and conflict, concord and harmony of purpose – 'peace' is not entirely superimposable on *salām*; the latter is


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closer to the Latin *salus*, meaning soundness and wellbeing. The Qur'ānic commentators teach, in fact, that God is *al-salām* not because He possesses or bestows peace in the usual sense of the word, but because of His perfection – because He is healthy and free of vices, deficiencies, and infirmities,[1] and therefore the Perfect One; but also because He takes care that His creatures are unharmed by any injustice on His part; and, again, because He is the One who greets the blessed in paradise.

The sura *Yā-Sīn* puts it thus:

> Those who merit paradise on that day will be happily employed, they and their spouses, reclining upon couches, in the shade. They will have therein fruits, and all that they ask for. And 'Peace!' – such will be the greeting from an All-compassionate Lord. (Qur'ān XXXVI,55-8)

God is thus the Peace, but He is also 'the One who greets' (*al-musallim* المسلّم) wishing, or rather confirming, the salvation earned by the obedient.

In agreement with his colleagues before and since, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī explains in his book on the Names that God is *al-salām* in the sense that He is, in His essence, sound (*sālim* سالم), being free from every imperfection, and free in His attributes from every deficiency, and in deeds from any baseness; and he teaches that all existing soundness (*salāma* سلامة) must necessarily be ascribed to Him because it can only derive from Him. In the firm conviction that the Names are reflected in His creatures in the form of virtues, al-Ghazālī declares that there exist among men some who come close to this authentic healthfulness that is without equal or peer, and these are those who are sound in heart from all deceit, hatred, envy or evil intentions, sound in body from all sin or iniquity, and sound enough in their characters that they will not change by allowing their intellect to succumb to desire and anger, making them the opposite of what they are.[2]

The idea of peace is also for al-Ghazālī essentially an idea of adequacy and perfection, since its opposite is not exactly the violence of confrontation but rather disease, that risks becoming virulent, or imperfection understood as vice or inadequacy, even in a physical sense. From this perspective, the man at peace – or the community or society, for it is clear that peace as a divine gift is inseparable from peace as a political objective – is close to God in the sense of having some degree of likeness to Him, but at the same time is in the most ordinary and natural condition, one of soundness. The idea that follows from this is a remarkable one: to the Islamic mentality, reconciliation does not only mean reaching and observing an agreement, as in the Western tradition that associates peace with relations under the law, and connects *pax* to *iustitia*; but also, and most importantly, healing from a sickness in the heart and in behaviour. Western 'peace' and Islamic *salām* imply, then, almost opposite visions of man and the world: *salām* is normality, interrupted by pathology, while *pax* is a happy eventuality, brought about by contract.

1 On the meanings of *salām*, cf. also Larcher 2012, 68-72.

2 Al-Ghazālī 1971, 69-70.

## 12.1 Health and Salvation

The term *salām* occurs in the dozens of times; and to these we should add the less numerous but by no means insignificant recurrences of the quasi-synonyms *silm* سِلم, *salm* سَلْم and *salam* سَلَم. But unlike the latter, which can readily appear in a context of belligerence, making peace the immediate correlative of war, *salām* embraces a much wider and more significant content.

Bearing in mind the internal chronology of the Book of Islam, whose revelation was spread over more than two decades – from 610 to 632 CE – the oldest reference to peace we find in the sura 'The Night of Destiny' – or 'of the Decree', or 'of Power' (*laylat al-Qadr* ليلة القدر) –, when, according to classical exegesis, the Qur'ān was revealed:

> We revealed it on the Night of Destiny. Would that you knew what the Night of Destiny is! The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months. It is when the angels and the Spirit [*rūḥ* روح] descend, by the leave of their Lord, upon every command. That Night is peace [*salām*] until the break of dawn. (Qur'ān XCVII,1-5)

Here, the commentators read *salām* not as the absence of conflict but as wide-ranging healthfulness or integrity: this was a night free from evil, they explain, a night of goodness, where the good is of course the Qur'ānic revelation and the salvation it brought with it.

An interesting suggestion, and not an isolated one, is that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in *The* Keys *to the Unknown*: the 'night of peace' means that the angels, on that precise night of the year, descend from the heavens in ranks and ceaselessly greet the believers; the author recalls the greeting (*salām*) addressed by the angels to Abraham when they asked him for hospitality (XI, 60; XV,52; LI,25), which procured that patriarch happiness and God's favour – and the same, declares al-Rāzī, is what happens to believers on the Night of Destiny.[3]

In fact, the most frequent Qur'ānic occurrences of *salām* are found in the context of greetings, corresponding to 'best wishes for salvation'. Consequently, the Islamic greeting *par excellence*, *al-salām 'alay-kum* (normally translated 'peace be upon you'), is in fact a far more powerful wish for good in general, with not only immediate but also eschatological relevance; it is not simply an offer of peaceful relations, with the promise of eschewing any hostility, but is a wish for salvation from all evil now and forever. This aspect is found in the many greetings that, still according to the Qur'ān, believers are expected to address to one another. An example from the sura 'The Cattle' combines the peace greeting with an invocation to God to grant the other Mercy and Forgiveness:

> And when those who believe in Our revelations come to you, say 'Peace be upon you'. Your Lord has prescribed for Himself mercy. To whosoever of you does evil in ignorance, and thereafter repents and makes amends, He is All-forgiving, All-compassionate. (Qur'ān VI,54)

The many heavenly greetings, whether between the angels and the blessed or between the blessed and one another (which, added to the greetings that

3 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XCVII,5.

God himself pronounces, resound up above everywhere and continuously) are to be understood precisely in the sense of confirming the attainment of salvation from eschatological punishment. That is why Paradise is called *dār al-salām* دار السلام (VI,127; X,25), that is, the abode of peace, or of salvation, or, no doubt, the abode of greeting.

We can also read in a similar fashion the many greetings that God addresses to the prophets in the Qur'ān, whether as a group (XXXVII,181), or individually to Noah, Abraham, Moses and Aaron, Elijah (XXXVII,79 ff.), to the Prophet Muḥammad (XXXVI,56), of course, and also to Jesus son of Mary, the only one in the Qur'ān who openly addresses the greeting to himself:

> He said: – I am God's servant; God has given me the Book, and made me a Prophet. And He has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and has enjoined on me Prayer and Charity as long as I live. And He has made me dutiful toward her who bore me, and has not made me arrogant or unblest. Peace on me [*al-salām 'alayya*] the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive. (XIX,30-3)

Another remarkable passage on greeting and wishing for peace is found in the sura *Ṭā-Hā*, where God commands Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh to convert him and convince him to let the Israelites go free:

> – Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed, and speak to him with gentle speech, perhaps he may accept admonition or fear God.
>
> The replied: – Our Lord, indeed we are afraid that he will hasten to do evil to us or that he will transgress further.
>
> And God said: – Fear not, surely I shall be with you, Hearing and Seeing. So go you both to Pharaoh, and say 'We are the Messengers of your Lord, so send forth with us the Children of Israel and do torment them; we have brought you a sign from your Lord; and peace be upon him who follows the Guidance. (XX,43-7)

Since the salutation refers first of all to eternal salvation, it must be subordinate to Guidance (*hudā*), to conformity to the divine precepts; and this is not the case with Pharaoh. This is why Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, recalling the opinion of some ancient commentator, goes so far as to suggest that the invocation for peace or salvation uttered by Moses was not at all addressed to the unbelieving and rebellious Egyptian, but by Moses to himself, and was the particular way in which the prophet of the Hebrews declared himself to be guided by the Lord and therefore upright and virtuous.[4] Al-Qurṭubī, too, in *The Compendium of the Judgements of the Qur'ān* teaches that only those who follow His Guide are saved from God's wrath; consequently, in his view, the greeting from Moses and Aaron was by no means meant to be such, nor can it be understood as a mere formula of the kind used when meeting or when addressing a letter; on the contrary, it was a warning, no less.[5]

4 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XX,47.

5 Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XX,47.

## 12.2 Greetings and Farewells

Be that as it may, the Qur'ān teaches that the greeting should be extended even to those who do not believe, as Abraham did to his father according to the sura 'Mary'; when his father threatened to stone him and cast him out because he refused to worship his gods, Moses replied: "Peace be upon you, I will ask forgiveness for you from my Lord who has always been benevolent towards me" (Qur'ān XIX,46-7).

In other cases, the *salām* salutation appears to be instead a manifestation of indifference, and may even adopt an impatient tone or one close to an ultimatum, in the end having more to do with hoping of preserving one's own wellbeing against the evil of others – a wellbeing that requires a certain distancing. This is the sense, for example, of a verse in the sura *al-Zukhruf* 'The Ornaments': "And the Prophet said: – O my Lord! These are a folk who believe not. Then turn away from them, and say 'Peace!'. Soon shall they know" (XLIII,88-9). And, again, in the sura 'The Stories': "And when they hear vain talk, they withdraw from it and say: – To us our deeds, and to you your deeds. Peace be upon you. We seek not the ignorant" (XXVIII,55).

Along similar lines to the previous passages there is a verse in the sura *al-Furqān* 'The Criterion': "The servants of the Beneficent God are those who walk humbly on the earth and when addressed by the ignorant ones, their only response is 'Peace be upon you'" (XXV,63). The meaning is perfectly clear here and implies no restrictions. In fact, al-Ṭabarī explains that the answer '*salām*' is characteristic of believers, who, unlike the ignorant, are 'judicious', an observation that is all the more telling when we remember that in the Islamic perception a judicious (*ḥalīm*) man is one who responds to evil with good.[6] But this is not the only possible viewpoint. Al-Zamakhsharī, in *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, for example, takes a more neutral stance: that *salām* implies neither friendship nor enmity, neither good nor bad, existing between the greeter and the greeted.[7]

And little more than a century later, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī makes a clear distinction between *salām* understood as good wishes for health and salvation and *salām* as a final farewell, and teaches that in the above verse from the sura 'The Criterion' (XXV,63), 'Peace be upon you' is evidently an example of the latter. Furthermore, al-Rāzī notes that according to some, this verse was abrogated (*mansūkh*) by the 'verse of combat' (*āyat al-qitāl* آية القتال), a passage in the sura 'The Repentance' (IX,29) that decrees war against the infidels.[8] However, the distinguished theologian dissociates himself from such a reading: in his view, showing indifference and not responding in kind to the stupidity of others is more in line with the Law, good sense, and also the integrity (*salām*) of honour and the fear of God.[9]

6 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān XXV,63.

7 Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXV,63.

8 Cf. Qatāda Ibn Diʿāma according to the Hanbali Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200): "Everything in the Qur'ān advising avoidance of conflict with the disbelievers is abrogated by the *āyat al-sayf* [the 'verse of the sword', Qur'ān IX,5] and *āyat al-qitāl* [IX,29]".

9 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XXV,63.

## 12.3 The Ways of Peace

The sura 'The Table Spread with Food' contains a powerful call for the conversion of those who have received their own heavenly Book:

> People of the Book [...], there has come to you from God a light, and a clarifying Book wherewith God guides whosoever follows His pleasure in the ways of peace, and brings them forth from the shadows into the light by His leave; and He guides them to a straight path. (Qur'ān V,15-16)

In this passage, we find a concomitance between "the ways of peace" (or 'of salvation', *subul al-salām* سبل السلام), and a "straight path" (*ṣirāṭ mustaqīm* صراط مستقيم), a coincidence that takes on its proper significance when we remember that the straight path *par excellence* is the one indicated by the Qur'ān, as stated in the sura *al-Fātiḥa* 'The Opening', the short invocation that opens the sacred Book (I,6). Thus, it comes as no surprise when the commentators read peace or salvation, in this world and the next, as a condition of grace reserved exclusively for those who answer the call of Islam.

Another authoritative example is provided by al-Ṭabarī. When he reads "the ways of peace", the early exegete thinks of the doctrine of the Beautiful Names and, since *al-salām* is a Name of God, he explains the ways of peace as the ways of God; but he specifies that these are for Islam alone, to the exclusion of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. The idea that salvation (*salāma*) can be achieved only through the Islamic religion is found, with varying degrees of emphasis, in almost all the medieval commentaries. But let us fast forward over eleven centuries of history, and look at the Islamic thought of our time; we might start by looking at Muḥammad Rātib al-Nābulusī's *Mawsūʿat al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* 'Encyclopaedia of the Beautiful Names of God', under the entry '*al-salām*'.[10]

In accordance with the exegetical tradition, al-Nābulusī thinks of the paths of peace in the sura 'The Table Spread with Food' and reads peace (*salām*) as salvation (*salāma*) but also as the natural wellbeing (*salāma* again) of the person. He explains that this peace or salvation or wellbeing is a characteristic of the 'first nature', *fiṭra* (cf. Qur'ān XXX,30), that genuine form of submission to God (*islām*) that transcends all historical religions because it precedes their formulation; peace is therefore an inherent element of man in general (*insān*), and not just the Muslim. Turning to the possible impact of the Name *al-salām* on the believer's actions and his inner being, al-Nābulusī teaches that to first of all follow the original nature in the 'peace' element of it is to adopt 'God's method' (*manhaj Allāh* منهج الله), that is, to proceed on the path exemplified by Him. This method involves in the first instance peace with oneself:

> if you adopt God's method you will be at peace with yourself. If instead a man ignores his original nature, he will bring on himself a harsh retribution: he will live in a state of self-loathing, guilt and inner degeneration.[11]

10 Al-Nābulusī 2002b, *Ism Allāh al-salām*, lesson no. 06, 2005; cf. `https://nabulsi.com/web/article/784`.

11 Al-Nābulusī 2002b, *Ism Allāh al-salām*, lesson no. 06, 2005.

At the same time, 'God's method' will bring you peace with others:

> if, on the other hand, you build your glory on the wreck of others', and your wealth on their poverty, and your security on their fear, and your life on their death […], you will find yourself in the condition that is called self-loathing, and inward imbalance. On the contrary, the observance of the method of the Most High and Exalted God will bring you peace with yourself, peace with your Lord, and also peace with those around you […].
>
> Dear brothers, if the original nature of the human being were not wholesome and intact [*salīma* سليمة], man would not suffer, but instead he suffers because God has given him a wholesome and unblemished nature, and when he betrays those foundations, or when he harms the creatures of the Most High and Exalted God, he punishes himself, it is his own soul that chastises him.[12]

As proof of the concomitance of peace with natural submission to God (*islām*), al-Nābulusī coins the expression 'the pillars of peace' (*arkān al-salām* أركان السلام), which plays on the near homophony with 'the pillars of Islam' (*arkān al-islām*) – which are the five fundamental obligations of the believer. In this author's teaching, the reference to universal peace is very clear: for example, when he declares that the inner peace resulting from adopting God's method is nothing other than the feeling of being loved by Him for the good one does to His creatures: "the whole of creation is God's family", he declares, recalling, but also slightly recasting, a well-known saying of the Prophet: "And he whom God loves the most is the one who does best to His family".[13]

As we have seen with the classical exegesis, the voices of contemporary Islam are many and not always in agreement, and it has to be said that al Nābulusī's, though remarkable, would seem to be among the least followed. A good reason, then, to give it a little more space with the following quotations, aimed particularly at those looking at Islam from a Western perspective:

> The Prophet said that the Muslim is he by whose tongue and hand Muslims are preserved [*salima*]. This evidently means that the Muslim does not harm other Muslims, but the meaning goes deeper than that; it also suggests that the authentic Muslim is one by whose tongue and hand the *reputation* of Muslims is preserved. Now, if a Muslim harms another Muslim, the latter will say that someone did this and that; but if a Muslim harms a non-Muslim, the other will say that Muslims did this and that and, ignoring who personally harmed him, he will discredit the religion of Islam […]. In truth, Islam is often tarnished by its own followers […].
>
> If you harm a non-Muslim and live in a Western country, if you sign a false declaration, if you cheat, if you take what does not belong to you, this behaviour not only harms yourself, but all Muslims, and brings Islam into disrepute; instead, every Muslim must be ready to be an ambassador for all Muslims […].

**12** Al-Nābulusī 2002b, *Ism Allāh al-salām*, lesson no. 06, 2005.

**13** In fact, the saying in question, which is recorded in various versions, including one by al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-daʿwāt*, no. 3859, talks of the goodness of those who do best by their own families, rather than 'God's family'.

Before you speak, before you sign a declaration, before you do anything with a non-Muslim, think twice: you are an ambassador of the Muslims, and the ambassador must hold himself to the highest standards. If you believe in the Name *al-salām*, you must yourself be a source of peace for those around you […].

The Most High and Exalted God has spoken of a clarifying book with which He "guides […] in the ways of peace" [Qur'ān V,16]. So, you are at peace. Peace is one of the most critical Names, and one of the dearest to the Muslim believer; but then there is no man in the world who does not seek peace.[14]

**14** Al-Nābulusī 2002b, lesson no. 06, 2005.

# 13 Kindness

**Summary** 13.1 God Is Kind and Loves Kindness. – 13.2 Kindness towards the Weak.

Islamic thought holds that there is a direct relationship between the social conduct of the individual and God's dealings with him: "God is with you in the same way as you are with His servants" – according to an aphorism by the renowned Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya,[1] who then goes into greater detail, paraphrasing and supplementing:

> The Most High is compassionate and loves the compassionate, and in truth God has compassion for the compassionate among His servants. God is considerate and loves those who are considerate towards His servants. He forgives, and loves those among His servants who forgive others; He is gracious and loves those among His servants who are kind to others while He detests those who are coarse or harsh or hard [...]. He is kind [*rafīq* رفيق], and He loves those who are kind to His servants; He is judicious, and He loves judiciousness; He is charitable, and He loves the charitable; He is just, and He loves those who are just; He accepts remorsefulness, and He loves those who accept the remorse of His servants.
>
> God treats His servant reciprocally according to the presence or absence of these qualities: whoever condones, He condones him; whoever forgives, He forgives him; whoever is tolerant, He is tolerant towards him; and to whoever questions what is due to Him, He does the same in return. Whoever is kind to His servants, God is kind to him; whoever has compassion on them, He has compassion on him; whoever does good to them, He does good to him; whoever is generous with them, He

1 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1405/1985, 55.


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> is generous with him; whoever is helpful to them, He is helpful to him; whoever protects them, He protects him; and whoever forgives their offences, He forgives his.
>
> But whoever encroaches on their privacy, God will encroach on his; whoever offends their reputation, He will offend his and shame him before everyone; whoever deprives them of their goods, He will withhold from him His own; whoever turns away from them, the Most High God will turn away from him; whoever deceives, He will deceive; and whoever cheats, He will also cheat. In short, whoever behaves in a given way with His creatures, God will behave in the exact same way towards him, in this earthly life and in the hereafter.[2]

Kindness, in Arabic *rifq*, is thus also among the capital virtues of the good Muslim: it refers to a quality of God, and indeed gives rise to one of his Names, *al-rafīq* 'The Kind', 'The Gentle', 'The Gracious';[3] and God loves it in creatures. As we have already seen a number of times, when moving from one language to another, terms do not always find an exact correspondence, and translating the Arabic *rifq* with the English 'kindness' is not entirely satisfactory. In fact, kindness, being etymologically related to 'kin', refers first and foremost to family and familiarity, which is foreign to the Arabic term. This disconnect strikes us particularly when we browse through the great dictionaries of the past such as *The Language of the Arabs* by Ibn Manẓūr, which, as we have seen, is able to constantly back up linguistic arguments with the most lofty and correct phrases and idioms – also the most current of his time. And to illustrate kindness, this author points to at least three semantic areas.[4]

The first of these concerns polite and amiable manners: the opposite of brutality, roughness or even clumsiness, kindness is gentleness in manners, benevolence, and ease in relating to others; Ibn Manẓūr recalls, from the Prophet, that "kindness, in whatever it is found, beautifies it".[5]

The second element of kindness according to *The Language of the Arabs*, is solicitude or care, the caring help given to others to comfort them, or lend support; tellingly, a term close to *rifq* indicates the elbow, the part of the body one leans on like an armrest or cushion. Here again the author cites the Prophetic Tradition – Muḥammad, in reply to someone who had offered to treat a cyst on his back, declined, saying: "God is the Physician, but you are kind";[6] – and he goes on to teach that 'kind' is an expression generally applicable to those who practise the art of medicine.

Finally, Ibn Manẓūr's great dictionary identifies a further component of kindness in the sharing of traits and experiences, in the feeling of participation in or belonging to a group, and in solidarity, all of which may merge into friendship. In fact, *rafīq*, 'kind', is used to qualify a travelling companion, particularly an inseparable one, stopping or pausing at the same points, and similar terms are used for a united, compact and mutually supportive

2 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1405/1985, 55-6.

3 A name which appears, however, only in some lists and not in others.

4 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root r-f-q.

5 E.g. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila wa-l-ādāb*, *bāb faḍl al-rifq*, no. 4698.

6 E.g. *al-Ṭabarānī*, *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*, *bāb al-yāʾ*, no. 18202. In Arabic: *Allāh al-ṭabīb bal anta rajul rafīq*.

group of people on the road; on *rafīq* in this travelling companion sense, Ibn Manẓūr recalls an adage: "Before a journey, choose well your travelling companion".[7]

The transition to solidarity between believers, imagined as a single group on their way to the Last Day, is not novel. Ibn Manẓūr cites a passage in the sura 'The Women' (Qur'ān IV,69) where *rafīq*, 'kind' or 'companion', stands for the 'goodly company', denoting the ensemble of prophets, saints, martyrs and the righteous who await the arrival of the blessed in paradise. Again, our author has a story, this time about the Prophet on his deathbed, when he is said to have confided to his wife 'Ā'isha that he preferred 'the supreme companion' or 'companionship' (*al-rafīq al-aʿlā*) to remaining in the world. From communal solidarity to marital solidarity: *rafīq* is a man to his wife and also a woman to her husband.[8]

## 13.1 God Is Kind and Loves Kindness

We have seen that Ibn Manẓūr exemplifies all three components of kindness – politeness, solicitude and solidarity – with a direct appeal to the literature of Tradition. The latter does indeed represent an important substratum in *The Language of the Arabs*, but for obvious reasons the quotations are short and limited in number; a little amplification may therefore be helpful.

In its full version, 'Ā'isha's account of the Prophet's dying goes like this:

> When one of us was in pain, the Messenger of God massaged his right hand and said: – Remove the evil, God of people,[9] and heal, You are the Healer, there is no other healing than Yours, a healing which no disease can elude.
>
> When the Prophet himself fell gravely ill, I took his hand to do as he had done, but he took it from me and said: – God forgive me and join me to the supreme companionship.
>
> I looked again, and he was dead.[10]

Another amplification, a memory of a Companion only hinted at in *The Language of the Arabs*, and now proposed here in its full version, speaking of solicitude, and of medical care in particular:

> When I was a boy, I went to the Prophet along with my father. My father said to him: – I am a physician, show me this cyst you have on your back. – What do you want to do with it? – he asked him.
>
> – I want to remove it – my father replied. Then the Prophet said: – You are not a physician, but you are a kind man. The physician for my cyst is He who put it there – or he may have said: – He who created it.[11]

7 In Arabic: *khudh al-rafīq qabla al-ṭarīq*; quoted by, among others, al-Shaʿrāwī 1991 in his commentary on Qur'ān IV,69.

8 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root r-f-q.

9 In Arabic: *adhhib al-ba's rabb al-nās*.

10 Cf. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-salām*, *bāb istiḥbāb ruqyat al-marīḍ*, no. 4068.

11 See Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 6934.

In the Sunna of the Prophet, there are numerous references to kindness. Among them, the most famous, reported in all the great works of Tradition, concerns divine love for kindness "in everything".[12] According to a popular version, some Jews went to the Prophet and greeted him saying: 'May poison (*samm* سمّ) be with you' (instead of: 'May peace, [*salām*] be with you'). The young ʿĀʾisha heard them and replied: 'May the poison be with you and curses too'. For his part, the Prophet returned a simpler 'and to you too' and corrected his wife by observing that God is kind and loves kindness in everything.[13] It is a question here of polite behaviour, the first sense in Ibn Manẓūr's proposal; but it is also true that the broadening to 'in everything' raises kindness to an unconditional level. In other accounts of Muḥammad's life, too, the reminder about kindness is without limits or restrictions, for instance when it simply coincides with good (*khayr*), as in the following Prophetic saying, which opens the chapter on kindness in Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's work on Tradition: "He who is without kindness is without good".[14]

Much the same formula can be found in a Shiite work, *Al-Kāfī* or 'The Sufficient' by al-Kulaynī – or Kulīnī (d. 329/940): "In kindness there is growth and blessing, and he who is deprived of kindness is deprived of all goodness". In addition to the generic relationship between kindness and good, al-Kulaynī also notes a relationship between kindness and faith (*īmān*): "Everything has a lock [*qufl* قفل], and the lock of faith is kindness"; or: "He who has received his share of kindness has received his share of faith". Another aspect of kind behaviour according to al-Kulaynī is the material benefits it brings with it; the author maintains, for example: "He who is kind gets what he wants from his neighbour"; or again, more elliptically: "Kindness is half of sustenance".[15]

A similar suggestion that kindness generates prosperity appears in a work on the Names put together by Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, in a summary of what constitutes good behaviour:

> The Prophet said: – Kindness is good fortune [*yumn* يُمن] and uncouthness is bad luck [*shuʾm* شؤم], and when God wants the good of the inhabitants of a house, he brings kindness into it. Kindness, in whatever it is found, beautifies it, and uncouthness in whatever it is found makes it ugly.[16]

Another interesting Prophetic saying is recalled by the already mentioned al-Kharāʾiṭī, one of the most conscientious authors in the moral field, in a work entitled *Makārim al-akhlāq wa-maʿālī-hā* or 'The Good Qualities and Their Merits': "God's kindness", he writes, "is His demonstration of affection for men, and it is also His appeal to them".[17] Also of interest, finally, in the same work, is the inclusion of kindness in the framework of the intellectual faculties: "Kindness leads wisdom".[18]

12 In Arabic: *fī l-amr kulli-hi*.

13 Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-adab, bāb al-rifq fī l-amr kulli-hi*, no. 5592.

14 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, bāb faḍl al-rifq*, nos. 4694-6.

15 Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī, kitāb al-īmān wa-l-kufr, bāb al-rifq*, nos. 7-16.

16 Al-Bayhaqī 1413/1993, 1: 396.

17 Al-Kharāʾiṭī 1427/2006, 1: 1612, no. 242.

18 In Arabic: *al-rifq raʾs al-ḥikma*. al-Kharāʾiṭī 1427/2006, 1: 1550, no. 214.

## 13.2 Kindness towards the Weak

To continue with our survey of the Prophetic Tradition on the theme of kindness: according to another great Sunni collection, that of al-Tirmidhī, God protects and welcomes into paradise those who are kind to the weak, along with those who are loving to their parents and treat their slaves or subjects well.[19] He includes in kindness being gentle towards women and tender-hearted with children. Apropos of the latter, another important author, Ibn Ḥanbal reports in his collection of Traditions that one day, while Muḥammad was prostrating himself at prayer, little al-Ḥasan, his grandson, the son of Fāṭima and ʿAlī, jumped on his back. The Prophet welcomed him kindly and when he had finished his prayer, he embraced and kissed him.[20] Other versions include his other grandson, al-Ḥusayn: the two children both climbed on his back and when the Prophet finished his prayer he lifted his head, grabbed them from behind with kindness and put them back on the ground; but as soon as he started praying again, they came back. The Companion Abū Hurayra (d. c. 58/678) asked him to send them away and at that moment a lightning flashed in the sky. Muḥammad told them then to return to their mother.[21]

The Tradition, in fact, also includes animals among the weak. According to a fairly well-known Prophetic saying, when the land is fertile, travel sparingly and give your mounts the food they deserve, God is kind and loves kindness. And when the land is dry spare them as much as you can, and travel by night.[22]

19 Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ, kitāb ṣifat al-qiyāma*, no. 2431.

20 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad, musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 10435.

21 E.g. al-Ṭayālisī, *Musnad*, no. 907.

22 E.g. Abū Bakr al-Bazzār, *Al-baḥr al-zahhār*, no. 1070.

# 14 Care for Animals

**Summary** 14.1 Islamic Antecedence. – 14.2 Animal Ethics and Religion.

The Prophetic precept about 'kindness in everything' is to be understood as kindness for the whole of creation, and includes therefore the animal world. And indeed, a strong sympathy for animals, which are also considered believers and servants of God, gathered together in communities (*umam* أمم) like humans (Qur'ān VI,38),[1] runs through the sources of Islam, the Qur'ān – from the ants that made Solomon smile (XXVII,18), to the bees that are recipients of divine inspiration (XVI,68) – and even more so the Sunna, where examples of respect for fauna abound: from the tale about the Prophet who ordered his Companion Ibn Masʿūd to return the chicks taken from their mother, to the one about the Jewish prostitute who came across a dog dying of thirst at the lip of a well; the woman took off her shoe, fastened it firmly to her veil and drew up some water for the animal.[2] Another version of the story features a man:

> The Prophet related that while a man was walking, thirst assailed him, so he went down to a well, drank and was about to leave when he saw a panting dog, so thirsty that it ate mud. The man said to himself: – This dog's thirst is the same as mine. So, he went down into the well again, filled his shoe with water, held it between his teeth as he came up, and gave the dog to drink. God was grateful to that man and forgave him his sins.
>
> They asked: – Messenger of God, shall we then have a reward for what we do to the animals? He replied: – There is a reward for every moist liver [i.e. for every living being].[3]

1 On this cf. especially Lory 2018, 43-82. This excellent work also considers the mystical literature.

2 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-salām*, *bāb faḍl saqy al-bahā'im* [...], no. 4171.

3 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-salām*, *bāb faḍl saqy al-bahā'im* [...], no. 4169.


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According to another well-known story,

> when a camel saw the Prophet, it cried and its eyes flowed with tears. The Prophet approached it and wiped away its sweat. He then asked: – Who is the master of this camel? Whose camel is this? A boy from the Anṣār came and said: – This is mine, Messenger of God. He said: – Do you not fear God with regard to this beast, which God has put in your possession? It has complained to me that you keep it hungry and burden it.[4]

This same consideration for animals underlies, for example, the 'right to drink', or 'right to thirst', guaranteed to them by Islamic legal doctrine.[5]

The animal welfare aspect of Islam is emphasised by many contemporary intellectuals – for instance by a Shiite author, Abū Zulfā al-Khuzāʿī,[6] who devotes part of his *Al-rifq fī l-manẓūr al-islāmī* or 'Kindness from an Islamic Perspective'[7] to this theme. He takes up the exhortation to kindness in everything, and offers an overview of the Tradition according to the collections recognised by Shia Islam. Here are some of the more significant stories:

> The Messenger of God said: – Keep these beasts from harm when you ride them, and place them safely under cover, and do not treat them as your seats in your conversations along the road or in the marketplace. It may be that a ride is better than its rider, and dearer to the remembrance of God.[8]

> The Messenger of God said that a master must do six things for his mount: forage it during stops, provide it with plenty of water when it passes by water, strike it only with good reason, do not load it beyond its capacity, do not force it to journey excessively, and never linger on its back.[9]

Still referring to Prophetic sayings, al-Khuzāʿī considers solicitude towards cats, dogs or birds, and recalls the Prophetic prohibition against killing animals without good reason – "they will testify against you on the Day of Judgment"[10] – unless they are harmful; and reminds his readers of their duty to be compassionate during the legally prescribed slaughtering.

## 14.1 Islamic Antecedence

Similar in inspiration and tendency are contemporary Sunni-oriented texts. For example, *Ḥuqūq al-ḥayawān wa-l-rifq bi-hi fī l-sharīʿa al-islāmiyya* or 'The Rights of Animals and Kindness to Them According to Islamic Law' by the Iraqi author Aḥmad ʿUbayd al-Kubaysī (b. 1934), published in Medina in 1976,[11]

4 From the collection of Abū Dāwūd. Cf. Poya, Schatzschneider 2022, also for the English translation.

5 Stilt 2018; Wescoat 1995.

6 I have not been able to find a birth date for this author.

7 Al-Khuzāʿī 1426H, 39-47.

8 Al-Khuzāʿī 1426H, 41.

9 Al-Khuzāʿī 1426H, 43.

10 Al-Khuzāʿī 1426H, 44-5.

11 Al-Kubaysī 1396/1976.

contains well-known Prophetic sayings on the prohibition of killing ants, bees, swallows and frogs, and on the reward due to the believer for every kindness done to warm-blooded beings; and also references to doves, donkeys, sheep and hens. This small book – which incidentally references the Italian Enrico Insabato (d. 1963), physician, politician and orientalist, who controversially maintained that Islamic Law was superior to European law[12] – is a key text in animal-centred thinking in contemporary Arabic literature.

The author's engagement pervades every page, beginning with the theme of 'Islamic antecedence', on which he writes:

> In 1824, the first association for the charitable treatment of animals was founded in England, a tradition that later spread to many parts of the world. But all such associations are based on purely ethical principles and broad humanitarian rules, which have no basis in law […]. These associations are, besides, voluntary in nature, and therefore do not reward those who align with them or punish those who oppose them. What, on the other hand, does Islamic Law do in this regard?[13]

If such and so many are the rights of animals in Islam, al-Kubaysī asks, what about the rights of humans?[14] But the most remarkable element, which already strikes one in the title of the work, and which characterises much of today's Islamic texts on animal rights, lies in the continuous overlapping of animal rights with kindness or solidarity (*rifq*), a quality that, as we have seen, their religion prescribes for Muslims. This makes animal rights not so much subordinate to our duties towards them, but to the robustly holistic view that animals, like human beings, also have their place in the world through God's will. The approach to animal rights, therefore, confirms the typically Islamic conception of a 'right' (*ḥaqq*) which does not start from the individual's claims or demands but from the universal and eternal project that God, the only source and sole effective holder of rights, has mapped out for nature from the beginning. So much clearly emerges from al-Kubaysī's words when he champions Islamic Law against secular codes, all of which are marred, from his point of view, by a radical anthropocentrism. Indeed, he writes:

> Man and all that he owns belongs to God; hence, the restrictions on the exercise of his rights, which end precisely where the rights of others, including those of animals, begin. Meanwhile, the most ancient secular codes make individuality the measure of generality; even Roman law, in its initial stages, is built on the despotism of the one who possesses a right in an area that he considers to be his by right. Generally speaking, secular codes maintain that the right of the individual is his natural right […], and in the absolutism of these individual rights the rights of others – those of animals among them – have been lost sight of.[15]

Very much along the same lines is a more recent work by the Jordanian Aḥmad Yāsīn al-Qarāla, *Ḥuqūq al-ḥayawān wa-ḍamānātu-hu fī l-fiqh al-islāmī*

12 Al-Kubaysī 1396/1976, 22.
13 Al-Kubaysī 1396/1976, 23.
14 Al-Kubaysī 1396/1976, 34.
15 Al-Kubaysī 1396/1976, 22-3.

or 'The Rights of Animals and their Guarantee in Islamic Jurisprudence',[16] in which he opens his discourse by praising Islamic Law for its concern for the rights of animals: the Law guarantees the protection of their lives – writes the author – and also the category they belong to, so that they can fulfil the function for which God created them; the Law forbids man to inflict suffering on animals or to go beyond the fact of their 'subjection' (cf. Qur'ān XIV,13). And, like al-Kubaysī before him, al-Qarāla too observes:

> Anyone who examines the rights of animals in Islam will be seized by the doubt that these can actually be animal rights, and will ask: if this is the inviolability of the animal, what can the inviolability of man be?

Thus, in dealing with animal rights, the author feels the need to touch also on human rights.[17]Al-Qarāla's work merits our attention for several reasons, not least for its aims and methodological assumptions: firstly, because it recognises the actual impossibility of speaking generically of 'Islamic Law', a concept that is not unambiguous, given on the one hand the existence of different schools of thought, and on the other the changing conditions of human life through history; and secondly because, as he notes, among the many books on religious precepts relating to animals and the kindness to be shown towards them following the lead of the Prophet, there are actually few that deal with rights from a legal point of view, and even fewer that address the issue of drafting a written code of such rights. Everyone forgets the question of how they might be guaranteed, he observes, and when a right is not guaranteed, it is an empty right. The author therefore endeavours to fill in the gaps himself, dealing not only with religious sources on the rights of animals (*ḥayawān* حيوان) – defined as "every being endowed with a spirit [*rūḥ*] except man" – but also with jurisprudence and the diverse forms of guarantee suggested by the ancient literature. And finally, he drafts a code of animal rights that deals both with the duties of their owners and those of the state.

There also exists a code of animal rights in a Shiite text, *Ḥuqūq al-ḥayawān fī l-Islām* or 'The Rights of Animals in Islam', by the Lebanese Jaʿfar Murtaḍā al-ʿĀmilī (d. 2019),[18] who adopts as a starting point an almost anthropomorphic view of animals, in so far as he assigns them character qualities as well as observable behaviour, emphasising their variety: positive character traits make them similar to prophets, while negative traits make them comparable to devils and jinn.[19] He then proceeds to illustrate the disparity between animals in terms of their capacity for feeling and understanding.[20] He concludes his work with a rather congratulatory hymn to the regulations, precepts, good advice and directives from the Tradition of the Prophet and the imams, which have determined the Islamic view of creation and shown Muslims how to behave in different circumstances, but which are only the tip of the iceberg in relation to the riches the texts have to offer.[21]

16 Al-Qarāla 1430/2009.
17 Al-Qarāla 1430/2009, 23.
18 Al-ʿĀmilī 1425/2004.
19 Al-ʿĀmilī 1425/2004, 9-12.
20 Al-ʿĀmilī 1425/2004, 12-20.
21 Al-ʿĀmilī 1425/2004, 90.

## 14.2 Animal Ethics and Religion

Solidarity with the animal world, based on the similarity of all living beings and their common fear of the one God, is to some extent countered by a settled conviction of the superiority of man over animals. The sources invoked in this case are the Qur'ānic passages on Adam, appointed by God as His vicegerent (*khalīfa* خليفة) in this world (Qur'ān II,30; XXXVIII,26); or the sura 'The Cow' where it is said that "He created for you all that is on the earth" (II,29); or again the sura *al-Jāshiya* 'The Crouching': "He has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and on the earth" (XLV,13). Such statements have always been understood by commentators as consent to profit from nature, but certainly not as authorisation to dispose of animals as one pleases.

The idea that the Qur'ān supports an anthropocentric vision justifying the dominion of the human species over nature, a leitmotif of Qur'ānic exegesis through the ages, is tempered today by those who think that the Holy Book does not affirm man's dominion so much as his responsibility.[22] A persuasive voice is that of the American scholar Sarra Tlili (b. 1964), who criticises the Islamic literature dealing with animals as having been responsible, in her view, of overemphasising human exceptionalism.[23] In fact, she writes, the Qur'ānic vision can only be considered 'anthropocentric' in the sense that the Book is addressed to human beings, but remains generally above all *theocentric* since humans and animals all are subject to God's commandments, to fulfilling His will and to retribution in the afterlife. Moreover, she observes, animals are answerable for their actions to God, and certainly not to man.

Another pertinent contemporary text is that of the Iraqi 'Abd al-Qādir al-Shaykhalī (b. 1955) *Ḥuqūq al-ḥayawān wa-ri'āyatu-hu fī l-Islām* or 'The Rights of Animals and Their Care in Islam'.[24] The work begins by outlining a hierarchical structure of creation, with the angels at the top, ceaselessly praising God, then man, created to worship his Lord, to protect and build on the earth, then the animals, created to serve man and maintain the balance of nature, and finally the plants, at the service of man and animals equally. The author's aim is to deal only with domestic animals, as friends and servants of mankind, whom man must take care of because they were created by God to make his life easier and pleasanter. As God's creatures, animals too possess rights, protected by the 'law of original monotheism' (*al-shar' al-ḥanīf* الشرع الحنيف). Illustrating Islam's consideration of animals, al-Shaykhalī cites the main zoological literature – such as the works of al-Jāḥiẓ (ninth century CE) and al-Damīrī (d. 808/1405) – as well as some reflections on name-use, putting forward the lion and the ant as examples.[25]

He then laments that criticisms of Islam, whatever their point of departure, all agree on one thing, which is cruelty to animals, homing in on ritual slaughter. He points instead to the savageries of Westerners generally and Europeans in particular (cockfighting, bullfighting, and so on) and also to those of Far Eastern cultures, and observes that while Islam has preached

22 Cf., for example, Gharebaghi et al. 2007.

23 Cf. Tlili 2010; 2015; 2018.

24 Al-Shaykhalī 2006.

25 Al-Shaykhalī 2006, 5-7.

the protection of animals from its very beginning because it insists on goodness and charity (*iḥsān*) in all behaviour, the first Western animal protection societies only came into being in the nineteenth century. The aim of his work is therefore to refute on straightforward factual grounds those who accuse Islam of mistreating animals.

One last example of Arabic Islamic production on the subject, again fuelled by the general apologetic theme of 'Islamic antecedence': *Min ḥuqūq al-ḥayawān fī l-Islām* or 'On Animal Rights in Islam', by the Moroccan historian ʿAbd al-Wāḥid Būshdāq,[26] is a remarkable essay, in that it has no hesitation in aligning animal rights with human rights, and again because it assimilates kindness (*rifq*) with mercy or compassion (*raḥma*). Here are a few excerpts from his argument, in which the theme of 'Islamic antecedence' crops up again:

> An animal's right to compassion is like a man's right, because the animal's properties, natural characteristics and capacity for feeling are not inferior to those of man […]. The right of animals to kindness and compassion is like the analogous human right: compassion is a magnificent quality, which leads those who exercise it to paradise […]; and since compassion towards animals is a quality of character that earns God's forgiveness, conversely, harshness towards them will lead a man to hell […]. Compassion towards animals is an icon of Islamic civilisation, which has also, in this case, historical antecedence. Islam is a religion consisting entirely of benevolence [*ra'fa*] and compassion – towards man, towards animals and towards all things at the same time, and indeed there is scarcely a page in the Qur'ān that does not speak of it, if not expressly at least by implication. This means that the moral system of this religion rests firmly on the principle of compassion.[27]

26 Būshdāq 2017 (I have not been able to find a birth date for this author).

27 Būshdāq 2017.

# 15 Environmentalism and Sustainability as an Expression of Islamic Morality

**Summary** 15.1 Environmental Sustainability and Islamic Law. – 15.2 Environmental Corruption. – 15.3 Islamic Antecedence and the '*Muḥtasib*'. – 15.4 From the Prophetic to the Divine Example.

There is no need to repeat once again that when we cross from one language into another we never say quite the same thing, and so much is evident from the etymology of words. Let us consider, as a last example, 'environment', and its derivative 'environmentalism', and the Arabic equivalent *bīʾa* بِيئَة.[1] 'Environmentalism', in the ecological sense, derives from the French *environnement* which describes the action of surrounding something; and the etymology is similar in most European languages: for example, the Italian *ambiente*, from the Latin verb *ambīre* 'to encompass', or the German *Umwelt*, composed of *um* 'around' and *Welt* 'world'.

Diversely, the Arabic *bīʾa* signifies a place of residence, a home, wherever it is that we return to. The term *bīʾa* does not appear in the Qurʾān but the verbal root from which it derives does often occur, as when it is said, for example, that the Jews settled in a 'safe haven' according to God's will (Qurʾān X,93), or that the Prophet's Companions, having been persecuted by the Meccans, found a warm welcome in Medina, or in Abyssinia (XVI,41), or that the blessed abide in paradise among a thousand delights (XXIX,58); or again, that Abraham was given an abode in the precincts of the House of God, that is, in the Kaʿba (XXII,26). Furthermore, the early lexicographers tell us that *bīʾa* could also mean equal restitution or fair exchange, or even have to do with vendettas or blood money.[2]

In any case, 'environment' and *bīʾa* presuppose two different conceptions of being a person in the world. In one, he or she is at the centre as a sort of

1 Frequent in the constructions *difāʿ* or *munāṣarat* or *riʿāyat al-bīʾa*, all meaning 'defence or care of the environment'.

2 Lane 1968, root b-w-ʾ.


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absolute, surrounded by everything else, which is nevertheless external to him; in the other, he is within a world, in which he has been put and which welcomes him in, and which is also of equal weight to him: they deserve each other, as it were.

More eloquent still is the comparison between *sustainability* and *istidāma* استدامة, the latter being the term most commonly used for the former in Arabic, both in the environmental and in other senses. Sustainability derives, ultimately, from the Latin verb *sustĭnēre*, whose prime meaning is 'to hold something or someone up, bearing the weight from underneath'. In the neo-Latin languages, and others, the derivatives of *sustĭnēre* insist on effort and difficulty, on holding out against adversity, or an enemy: what is being sustained is an unwelcome weight, an encumbrance, most often a material one. Sustainability is then the capability of bearing something, and has to do with weighty commitment and suffering.

Let us now look at *istidāma*. Again, the word does not appear in this form in the Qurʾān, but we do find there its root, indicating persistence and insistence (Qurʾān III,75), the enduring nature of a state of affairs (V,54), permanency (XI,107-8; XIII,35). Medieval Arabic dictionaries record the term *istidāma* as having the same connotations, and they gloss it with reference to the whole semantic range of duration: continue, exist or remain for a long time, incessantly, constantly, always, in perpetuity.[3] While in practice resulting in symmetrical procedures and comparable courses of action, sustainability and *istidāma* also testify to two different visions of man in today's world and the role he plays in it: whereas sustainability implies that we must take on the burden of our surrounding abused and worn-out environment, *istidāma* speaks of a possibly unchanging nature, which it is our duty to leave as we find it. And whereas sustainability starts now, and concerns future generations from here on, *istidāma*, characterised by a long view of time, contains also a retrospective element and looks simultaneously to the past and the future, one generational cycle after another, in the essential immobility of a perpetual present which is God's time. The medieval lexicologists point out that its root also expresses a circular movement, which is relatively maintaining one's position, and give as an example the vulture which '*dawwama*' دوّم when it circles above its prey; while *istadāma* استدام indicates the kind of flight that exploits the air currents and allows the wings of a bird to remain immobile.[4]

## 15.1 Environmental Sustainability and Islamic Law

According to a number of contemporary authors from various religious backgrounds and schools of thoughts, the environmental degradation which we have to deal with today can be traced back to the foundational texts of Western civilisation, to the biblical heritage in fact, and specifically to the 'dominion' over nature which God conceded to man according to the first chapter of Genesis (1,28). This observation might easily be extended to the Qurʾānic tradition, except that this Holy Book tempers the anthropocentrism by constantly reaffirming the divine lordship over all things, alongside

3 Lane 1968, root d-w-m.

4 Cf. again Lane 1968, root d-w-m.

a human 'vice-regency' (*khilāfa* خلافة), entailing man's right to benefit from creation as a usufruct or trusteeship.

Those Muslim scholars who regard environmental sustainability through a religious lens and consequently insist on the conservation of the natural world as an Islamic duty, are increasingly numerous. Among them, we find a female voice, that of the Algerian economist Ṣalīḥa 'Ashī, in a 2019 essay entitled *Ḥimāya wa-ri'āyat al-bī'a fī l-Islām* or 'Protection and Care of the Environment',[5] in which the author examines in an environmental light certain general principles of classical Islamic Law; for example: 'neither mutual harm or damage', the well-known saying of the Prophet governing the individual's freedom to dispose of his own property; 'avoiding damage takes precedence over obtaining a return'; 'a harm is not cancelled by a comparable one; 'a minor harm should be accepted if it leads to the elimination of a greater harm'; or 'what results in something unlawful is itself unlawful'.

Also recent, but much wider in scope, is an essay by the Kuwaiti Jābir al-Wanda, *Mawqif al-sharī'a al-islāmiyya min al-istidāma al-bī'iyya* or 'The Position of Islamic Law on Environmental Sustainability',[6] which emphasises the contribution of Islamic Law to the achievement of the seventeen goals detailed in the UN's 2030 Agenda. His text is representative of others and is worth summarising here. Taking his cue from various passage in the Qur'ān and a number of Prophetic sayings, al-Wanda maintains that the natural environment is a divine 'bounty' (*ni'ma*, cf. Qur'ān XXXI,20), and for that reason demands the utmost safeguarding. The Muslim should avoid any abuse or excessive exploitation of natural resources (VII,31; XV,19), and must not alter the perfect measure and proportion (XIII,18), or disturb the perfect equilibrium of the environment that surrounds him, bearing always in mind that Islam is a religion of moderation and equanimity. The perfection of creation is mirrored in its beauty, which man is able to appreciate (cf. XXXV,27-8; XXV,61) because an aesthetic sensibility has been wired into his soul. Caring for the environment also meets the Islamic principles of benevolence and goodness.[7]

Turning to the specific prescriptions of Islamic Law, al-Wanda observes that it, as well as fostering in the believer an awareness of the environment he lives in, provides him at the same time with all the indications necessary to maintaining the *status quo* and even instructs him in different methods of conserving and caring for the Earth. Point by point, and always scrupulously backing himself up with quotations from the Qur'ān and the Sunna, the author explains that environmentalism forms an important part of the ethical values and behaviours instilled by Islam;[8] that the principles and methods of the Law (*fiqh* فقه), augmented by the practical experience of the jurists, are sufficient to resolve all the great ecological issues;[9] and that the conservation of the environment fits perfectly with the five fundamental pillars of the religious Law – which are: the safeguarding of the faith, the person, the intellect, lineage and property.[10] He closes his discussion with the

5 'Ashī 2019.
6 Al-Wanda 2019.
7 Al-Wanda 2019, 163-4.
8 Al-Wanda 2019, 165-6.
9 Al-Wanda 2019, 166-7.
10 Al-Wanda 2019, 169.

hope of a greater involvement of religious institutions in the search for solutions appropriate to the challenges of our time, with an emphasis on the concept of 'social responsibility'.[11]

## 15.2 Environmental Corruption

In pursuing his theme, al-Wanda dwells on the Qur'ānic contrast between 'reformation or amendment' (*iṣlāḥ*), and 'corruption' (*fasād* فساد or *ifsād* إفساد), the latter a term frequently used nowadays to cover environmental degradation, as also pollution (technically *talawwuth* تلوّث); and cites the prohibition of wreaking 'corruption upon the earth', referencing, among others, the sura 'The Heights': "Cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation" (Qur'ān VII,56). By giving both terms, 'corruption' and 'reformation', a deftly ecological reading – bypassing, as many contemporary commentators are prone to do, a long exegetical tradition that interprets them principally in relation to faith, as acceptance or refusal of the divine Word – al-Wanda manages to comfortably include the conservation of the environment among the ethical imperatives of the Islamic religion.

There is another quite recent essay on the same themes by the Egyptian educationalist and linguist Muḥammad Jābir Qāsim, *Al-tarbīya al-bī'iyya fī l-Islām* or 'Environmental Education in Islam',[12] where what strikes one particularly, as indeed in many other cases, is the vast expansion of the notion of 'environment' (*bī'a*):

> it embraces the sum of things that surround man, from the earth that sustains him to the heavens that overarch him, including every force and agent between the two, everything that penetrates deeply into the human soul [...]. This is so, because Islam is not limited to material things and their exterior forms, but makes them instruments for the purification of the soul – and here lies the uniqueness of Islam! – that soul which, as God has promised, "he who makes pure will have success, and he who corrupts will fail". (Qur'ān XCI,9-10)[13]

The environment – Muḥammad Jābir Qāsim continues – is a living, vibrant entity, equipped with emotions and feelings, and perfectly balanced in its proportions. God has placed man in this environment and instructed him not to abuse it because disturbing its order and equilibrium will damage not only the environment itself but also man who is part of it. The importance which Islam attributes to the environment derives from the sanctity of Him who created it, He who stands behind the sanctity of Islamic sources, of the principles which underlie the religion and the creed rooted in the hearts of believers. On the basis of this sanctity, respect for the environment is a constituent element of the faith.[14]

Another interesting aspect of Qāsim's work is his extension of the concept of 'pollution' (*talawwuth*). In the scheme proposed by the author, pollution

11 Al-Wanda 2019, 170.
12 Qāsim 2007, 117-37.
13 Qāsim 2007, 120.
14 Qāsim 2007, 122.

can be subdivided into water, atmospheric, food, aesthetic and noise pollution. Especially worthy of mention is his treatment of food pollution, which, in taking the reader to the heart of Islamic Law, and to the fundamental legal categories, underlines its holistic nature:

> Whether it be of animal or vegetable origin, God has allowed what is good, and forbidden what is bad [cf. Qur'ān II,172-3]. Islam also forbids the adulteration of foodstuffs and the sale of expired products. Deaths resulting from food poisoning, being the consequence of 'corruption upon the earth', are regarded as homicides.[15]

As far as aesthetic pollution is concerned, Qāsim too returns to the beauty and harmony of creation, man's ability to perceive that beauty and the joy it kindles in him. He notes that man should not compromise the beauty of the world, which includes his own, and explains that among the elements that make up human beauty are the cleanliness and purification of one's person. By this route he doubles back to the ethical/juridical sphere, to the legal purity demanded of the Muslim before any devotional act, to the necessity of full ablution every Friday, and thence to the cleaning of clothes, houses and streets, so that they are pleasing both to man and to the Lord.[16]

Also of relevance to Qāsim's work is the famous Qur'ānic passage on Adam's vice-regency:

> And when thy Lord said to the angels: – I am setting in the earth a vice-regent – they said: – Will You place therein one who will wreak corruption [*yufsidu*] therein and will shed blood? […] He said: – Surely, I know that which you know not. And He taught Adam the names of all things and he presented them unto the angels and said: – Now tell Me the names of these, if you speak truly. (Qur'ān II,30-1)

The author reminds us of the perfection of the divine knowledge and explains that God, well aware that man would in due course corrupt the earth, had instilled in him some fragment of his own knowledge so that he might use it one day to amend (cf. *iṣlāḥ*) what he had ruined (cf. *fasād*). Seen thus, environmental degradation can itself be understood as part of the divine plan, and that man's knowledge, superior to that of the angels as God had willed it, would provide the means of resolving the problem.[17]

## 15.3 Islamic Antecedence and the '*Muḥtasib*'

Again devoted to 'corruption upon the earth' is an essay by the Moroccan sociologist and educationalist Mawlay al-Muṣṭafā al-Barjāwī published in 2011, *Mawqif al-Islām min al-'abth bi-l-bī'a* or 'Islam's Position Vis-à-vis the Maltreatment of the Environment'.[18] His is an even broader understanding of what constitutes 'the environment', which includes the fields of economics,

15 Qāsim 2007, 129-30.
16 Qāsim 2007, 131.
17 Qāsim 2007, 122.
18 Al-Barjāwī 1433/2011.

politics and technology; and similarly wider is his definition of pollution as "the occurrence of any change in environmental wellbeing through corruption, excess, waste, devastation and disfigurement". But essentially the emphasis is on a vision of the pervasiveness of religious Law, which oversees both the exterior and interior aspects of man, to the extent that the author ends by putting environmental pollution and climate change on the same plane as moral corruption, desertification and deforestation as deceit and treachery, the exploitation of the earth's resources as gambling and usury, everything bundled together under the umbrella of 'excess' (*isrāf* إسراف), that is, exceeding and transgressing the limits laid down by God. All of this reflects a fiercely negative view of the impact of man – especially Western man – on the world of today, and continually insists, often in quite polemical tones, on 'Islamic antecedence' in environmentalist terms. Al-Barjāwī writes, for example:

> The West boasts […] of having […] led the way with its concern for environmental issues. Yet, whoever has studied the Book of God and the Sunna of the Prophet will see that Islam with its prescriptions was actually the first to lay the foundations and build brick by brick a response to all environmental questions, great and small, about which environmental and intergovernmental organisations continue from morning to night to emit slogans and hold conferences – the Tbilisi Conference, the Rio di Janeiro Conference, the Kyoto Conference, the Johannesburg Conference – all in vain.

Respect for the environment, al-Barjāwī concludes, does not mean that the Muslim is called upon to live in the wild, turning his back on civilisation and scientific progress, but that he should respect the preordination and proportions of the world and treat nature in a disciplined and gentle way.[19]

Islam's claim to antecedence in environmental matters, together with denunciations of the Western way of life – considered to be at the root of the widespread contemporary ecological degradation – are threads running through many works; among them a fine essay by the Yemeni economist ʿĀdil ʿAbd al-Razzāq focusing on the Sunna of the Prophet: *Al-manhaj al-nabawī fī taʿzīz al-sulūk al-ījābī tujāh al-bīʾa* or 'The Prophetic Way of Promoting Positive Behaviour towards the Environment'.[20]

The author maintains that the reason why Muslim societies are (also) afflicted by environmental problems is that they blindly imitate the failings of others, thus betraying the respect for the Earth required by Islamic Law. It is essential therefore to return to the 'Prophetic way' and reclaim the benefits that come with it; to promote an environmentally educational methodology based on the teachings of the Prophet, which could call itself truly Islamic. Applying such a methodology would not in fact be difficult – he argues – since it is fundamentally a religious obligation.[21]

In ʿAbd al-Razzāq's essay there is a stimulating section dedicated to the duty of every individual to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong (cf. Qurʾān III,104,110 and 114; VII,157; IX,71 and 112; XXII,41; XXXI,17) – the so-called *ḥisba* حسبة – as a system of control, as 'environmental monitoring'.

19 Al-Barjāwī 1433/2011.

20 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 148-82.

21 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 176-9.

Taking his cue from the early Aleppo jurist al-Shayzarī (d. 589/1193) and the Egyptian traditionist Ibn al-Ukhuwwa al-Qurashī (d. 729/1329), the author directs our attention to the legal personage who was essentially the incarnation of the aforementioned duty, the *muḥtasib* محتسب, a municipal functionary charged with overseeing the moral behaviour of the citizenry, particularly with regard to bazaars and trade. He details the practical and technical responsibilities of this official, and his different competencies, at once administrative and religious: alongside keeping an eye on weights and measures and on prices, being alert to fraudulent practices and ensuring unimpeded circulation on the roads, the *muḥtasib* also, for example, subjected bakers to a strict regime of personal hygiene on top of requirements for the cleanliness of their premises, their ingredients and the tools of their trade; he obliged keepers of animals to give them sufficient fodder and rest, and not burden them with excessive loads; he saw to it that butchers and farriers did not cause animals unreasonable suffering and forbade castration; he also barred ram- and cockfighting. ʿAbd al-Razzāq thus proposes a reinvention of the *muḥtasib* in modern guise, a 'sustainability officer' charged with monitoring the environment and seeing that the Prophet's teachings are respected in the ecological sphere.

## 15.4 From the Prophetic to the Divine Example

Islamic Law – writes ʿAbd al-Razzāq elsewhere – "asks us to treat nature with the maximum courtesy […] in all its parts, and to be good towards her, to be alive to her sufferings and to love her as she loves us".[22] He reminds us of man's assimilation into his environment quoting the famous Prophetic saying "The palm tree is like the Muslim", and also the well-known 'story of the ship' (*ḥadīth al-safīna*) which compares those who exceed the limits set by God to one who, in order to obtain some seawater more easily, makes a hole in the hull, bringing disaster to himself and his fellow passengers, themselves at fault for not having stopped him.

The many sayings quoted by the author, commented on and applied to modern life by utilising 'analogy' (*qiyās*) – the legal principle based on similarity of circumstances – often have a general import, for example: "God has ordained goodness in all things", "the Earth has been entrusted to me like a mosque and like purification", and "there is a reward for every moist liver", the already mentioned saying that enjoins compassion for all living things.[23] But others are more specifically focused on the protection and fair distribution of the water supply, respect for animals, cleanliness of the streets, the fight against disease and epidemic, including the imposition of quarantines, and noise pollution. Some examples: "Removing a hazard from the street is one of the branches of the faith", "Do not corrupt water, though you be at a flowing river", "Do not curse the wind", or "Do not curse the cockerel" when it crows early in the morning.[24]

Among the numerous sayings reviewed by ʿAbd al-Razzāq from an environmental perspective, two in particular stand out because they reference

22 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 169.

23 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 149-62.

24 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 163-76.

the 'Beautiful Names', specifically: "God is the Beautiful and he loves beauty", and "God is the Kind and he loves kindness". The author, then, by means of the Prophet's words, calls on the believer to respect the beauty and fragility of the world, pointing out the example of God himself – a distinction worth noting because by so doing, even if he doesn't labour the point, he places environmentalism squarely within the framework of the Islamic ethics of virtue.

Also to be found among the divine Names is *al-ḥafīẓ* الحفيظ,[25] 'He who preserves many things', 'the Protector' or 'the Guardian'; the Qur'ān employs it several times in relation to God (Qur'ān XII,64; cf. XI,57; XXXIV,21; XLII,6), but also applies it to human beings: among men dubbed 'protectors' or 'guardians' are the Prophet (IV,80; VI,104 and 107; XI,86; XLII,48) and Joseph son of Jacob, the "wise guardian" of the Pharaoh in Egypt (XII,55); also 'guardians' are the blessed in paradise (L,32), because they have been able to defend their own adherence to the faith.

When glossing *al-ḥafīẓ* in his famous work on the Names, the medieval thinker al-Ghazālī pens a hymn to the biological, chemical and physical perfection of the environment. He tells us that the divine 'protection' or 'guardianship' means that God preserves on the one hand the existence and permanency of things, and on the other He sustains natural enemies and opposites, each against the power of the other, like water and fire, or heat and cold, or the wet and the dry, which, but for divine intervention, would obliterate one another. As for the man, al-Ghazālī teaches his readers that he is one who guards himself, in his body and his heart, observing his religion, preserving himself from the deceits of the animal soul and the machinations of devils.[26]

The other eminent medieval theologian who concerned himself with the divine Names and their potential transmission to the virtuous man, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, offers another interpretation of divine tutelage, which is preservation from oblivion, linked to the divine knowledge; al-Rāzī explains that God is 'The Guardian' not only because He protects things from dissolution but also because He remembers everything, and therefore knows everything permanently, both in general and in particular. He then describes the man as one who safeguards his own rational capabilities from suspicion and heresy, and his practical capabilities from the twin assaults of lust and anger, knowing that virtue lies in the middle way.[27]

An ethical-ecological interpretation of the Name *al-ḥafīẓ* is to be sure a long way from the medieval and early modern theological sensibility, nor indeed is there much sign of it even today. And yet, its possible translation into the Islamic virtue of 'environmental awareness' is actually simple enough.

25 No. 38 in the most widely recognised lists.

26 Cf. al-Ghazālī 1971, 119-23.

27 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, 1: 263-6.

# Conclusions

As we reach the end of our short journey, the reader will have noted that the ethical values underlying the Islamic path are, in essence, already shared or entirely shareable by those belonging to different religious traditions, allowing for a degree of nuance or some different shades of meaning due to inevitable cultural singularities: such as patience, which is more like constancy, in purpose and action; or gratitude, something concrete linked to increase; or mercy, the will to good that connects to a mother's love; or peace, which is first of all soundness and salvation; or repentance, which is not about punishment but about turning back and forgiveness. From gratitude to generosity and the goodness of giving, caring for the poor and the weak, caring for our planet, leafing through Islam's Holy Book, the Qurʾān and the Prophet's Tradition, or Sunna, with the subsequent elaborations of theologians and jurists, medieval and contemporary, one finds the same ideals that are recognised by other traditions; values that, although dependent on a different theoretical system based on an imposed heteronomy of ethics, would nonetheless appear to be reconcilable with a secularised or simply humanist world view. Pondering with an open mind the moral principles on which Islam rests is very important in our troubled times, because to build peaceful coexistence in today's world what we need is not so much compatible contingent rules and guidelines as a compatibility of the values underlying those rules, which can then further underpin generally accepted behavioural norms. Precisely in the light of our awareness of the impossibility of moral norms ever completely coinciding with the rule of law, or of good intentions with actual behaviour, or of ethical premises with the realities of history, morality – an inescapable part of the Islamic religion, as of others – is a foundation that we can all build on.

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This book offers a concise exploration of the core virtues of the 'good Muslim', emphasizing the moral foundations of Islam such as gratitude, patience, mercy, hospitality, tolerance, peace, or compassion for the weak. These values stem from two main sources: the 'Beautiful Names' of God, which believers strive to emulate, and the love of God, highlighted in the Qurʾān in relation to certain believers. The research draws on a wide range of Arabic religious literature spanning from foundational to contemporary exegetical perspectives. Particular attention is given to modern Arabic-speaking authors to showcase the diversity of interpretations within the Islamic tradition.

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