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ISLAMIC ETHICAL VISION

The essence of the Islamic approach to ethics is contained in the very name of the religion, *Islam*. Faith is a submission of the human will to that of God, performing those deeds which God has commanded and avoiding everything which He has forbidden. Thus, the source and basis of ethical vision for Muslims is what God has taught and commanded, in other words, God's moral will for humankind as it is to be lived in the personal, familial, social, economic and political spheres.

1. The Foundations of the Islamic Ethical Vision

Muslims discover the ethical directives by which they should live, above all, in the Qur'an. They believe the Qur'an to be God's direct revelation. His eternal Word in final and definitive form, the very speech of God in that the Qur'an is accepted to have been revealed literally. As such, the Qur'an is the primary source of the Islamic way of life, the *shari'a*.

In addition to this divine source of ethical vision, there is also the prophetic source: the *sunna* of Muhammad. Muhammad is regarded by Muslims not only as the messenger who brought the final and perfect revelation from God, but also as the model Muslim, the first hearer and practicer of Qur'anic revelation. For Muslims, therefore, it is extremely important to know what Muhammad taught, how he acted, and what decisions he gave on questions which were proposed to him. These words, deeds, and decisions of Muhammad have been reported by his Companions and the first generations of Muslims.

In the early centuries of Islam, there were many oral reports of Muhammad's sayings and deeds (called in Arabic *hadith*), most of which were spurious. If Muslims were to take Muhammad's behaviour and teaching as the basis for religious and ethical life, it became essential to distinguish between the sound *(sahih)* reports and those which were false. Muslim scholars developed a science for determining which of the many reports about Muhammad were trustworthy, and these sound *hadiths* were codified in books which are still carefully studied by Muslims.

The sound *hadiths* from Muhammad form the *sunna* of the prophet, which complements and completes the divine message found in the Qur'an. The vast majority of Muslims in the world today identify themselves Sunni Muslims, that is, those who follow the *sunna* of Muhammad. A minority of Muslims, called Shi'a, accept yet another definitive font for religious and ethical practice, the writings of the Imams, who as infallible teachers provided inerrant and normative commentaries on the teaching of the Qur'an and prophetic *sunna*. While most Shi'a accept 12 Imams in direct descent from Muhammad, a minority, called Isma'ilis, accept a line of seven infallible teachers.

As time went on, it became clear that new situations were arising which had not been explicitly discussed in the Qur'an and sunna. Thus, a third source came to be accepted as a basis for religious practice and ethical values, the communitarian basis called *ijma'*. *Ijma'* indicates the consensus of the Islamic community and holds that whenever the community is in agreement on a certain question, it cannot be in error.

In time, a fourth source of Islamic behavior was seen to be necessary, the individual effort of the well-informed Muslim scholar, called *ijtihad*. This principle holds that when confronted by a question for which no clear indication is given in the Qur'an and sunna, and on which there is no consensus among the scholars, an individual who is well-versed in the Islamic tradition, can study the matter, weigh the various arguments, and arrive at his own conclusion. The *mujtahid* (one who does *ijtihad*) can thus propose his interpretation to the community and is free to follow his own opinion on the matter.

It is clear that the principle of *ijtihad* makes the *shari'a* an open-ended and flexible basis for arriving at ethical judgments in accord with Islamic faith. *Ijtihad* gives no assurance of correctness; it remains always the well-informed, considered opinion of a scholar.

2. The Classical Formulation of Moral Norms

Because of the possibility of error, most Muslim scholars in medieval times held that "the door of *ijtihad* was closed," that is, that the *shari'a*, had been exhaustively studied, the principles of jurisprudence laid down and defined, and the Islamic way of life codified

into a fixed body to be followed by Muslims. Discussion was permissible only on details of the Law, which was elaborated in four mutually acceptable *madhhabs* or legal traditions. Ordinary Muslims should accept and obey what was taught by the scholars without questioning; this blind following of tradition was called *taqlid*.

The legal scholars attempted to categorize all human actions within a five-fold pattern, *al-ahkam al-khamsa*, "the five categories."[1]

1. Some actions are *obligatory*, and their omission is sinful. (e.g., caring for aged parents, paying the *zakat*, a tax on possessions and income to be used for the poor, fulfilling the terms of contracts.)

2. Other acts are *recommended*, but their omission is not sinful. (a wide range of devotional and moral practices, ranging from the duty of hospitality to strangers, giving alms to beggars, freeing slaves, modesty in dress and ornamentation etc.)

3. Many human acts are *indifferent*, bearing neither reward nor punishment. (e.g., eating permitted foods, sleeping.)

4. Some acts are *reprehensible* and hence to be avoided, although not absolutely prohibited. (e.g., divorce, smoking.)

5. Some deeds are absolutely *forbidden*, such as adultery, theft, homicide, rebellion, interest-taking.

It is to be noted that these five categories apply to *all* human acts, not only those which ethicists would classify as having a moral basis. They also apply to ritual activities (e.g., the five daily prayers, the Ramadan fast, and the pilgrimage to Mecca are obligatory; many other devotions and fasts are recommended but not obligatory; eating unwashed food is indifferent; performing one's ritual prayer late is reprehensible; eating pork and drinking alcoholic beverages are forbidden.

These categories admit of extenuating circumstances. A person in poor health or engaged in heavy manual labor has no obligation to fast. Someone whose economic or familial situation does not permit it is not obliged to make the pilgrimage. If one has sufficient reason, such as job requirements, one may perform the prayers late. The basic principle

1. J. Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 121.

is that no one is to be burdened with duties which would cause them or those dependent upon them harm (e.g., an expectant mother should not fast, since the unborn child needs the regular nourishment.)

This principle the Muslim scholars call the rule of "resoluteness and relaxation" (*azima* and *rukhsa*).[2] Depending upon the circumstances, a Muslim might have to consider permitted or indifferent acts impermissible, and vice versa. For example, free-will almsgiving is always recommended, but when others are in danger of death, it becomes obligatory. Conversely, for one who, for health reasons, has been warned by his doctor to avoid certain foods, eating those foods, which would ordinarily be an indifferent act, becomes reprehensible or even forbidden.

3. The Development of Islamic Jurisprudence

In order to arrive at judgments on the moral status of human acts, the science of Islamic jurisprudence (*figh*) was developed. The purpose of this religious science was to examine the fonts of the *shari'a* and produce techniques for applying them. Which teachings are to be plied broadly and which in a narrow sense? Which teachings are abrogated by others? How does one decide in cases of apparently conflicting obligations? The jurists proposed a wide range of legal principles and techniques, such as analogy, duress, and the welfare of the community, by which the scholars could arrive at a sound judgment on the nature of any given human act.

One can see that this understanding of the *shari'a* could easily develop into an external, formalistic ethic, a "pharisaic" preoccupation with conformity to legal details of the type condemned in the Gospels. It is noteworthy that throughout history Muslim scholars have themselves been aware of this danger and have rejected this as a false understanding of *shari'a*. Although the *shari'a* contains elements of a legal code, it is rather to be understood in the sense of an elaboration of the moral ideals by which Muslims hope to structure Islamic societies in accord with God's will.

With this background, one can more easily understand the difference between the *shari'a* and the law codes drawn up by civil societies. With the exception of a few serious crimes against society, no punishments are laid down for infringement of *shari'a* regulations. Moreover, a Muslim does not need the permission of anyone else to exempt

2. I Goldziher, "Azima," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* [2nd ed.], I: 846.

himself from a requirement, if he judges that circumstances demand that he not fulfill that duty. Moreover, no other Muslim may question his judgment on the matter. For example, a person who, because of his occupation or state of health, judges that keeping the Ramadan fast would be detrimental to him, may and should exempt himself, and no other person is entitled to accuse him of wrongdoing.

In the 12th century, the famous theologian, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali inveighed against the practice of *taglid*. He stressed that the Islamic ethical vision was not that of blind obedience, but rather the active effort to internalize Islamic teaching, to understand the interior, spiritual reasons for ethical and ritual precepts, and to conform one's life to God's will not solely in externals but also in the depths of one's religious experience. In this way, Al-Ghazali brought together the ethical ideal with the mystical quest for union of will with God, the Highest Good.[3] He is aware that by his unaided efforts, the human person cannot attain this goal; it is only possible through the grace-filled intervention *(tawfig)* of God.

In the 14th Century, the great Hanbali scholar, Ibn Taymiyya, argued forcefully that "the door of *ijtihad*" was not closed and that it was incumbent upon Muslims to extend, by the conscientious and consistent practice of *ijtihad*, the *shari'a* to every aspect of human life. Ibn Taymiyya understood the Qur'an as having revealed God in two principle roles: Creator of the universe, and Commander of the *shari'a*. Just as God was ontologically supreme as Creator, so in the ethical sphere He was supreme as Commander.[4] As at the metaphysical level, no being was outside God's creative activity, also in ethical matters, no conceivable human action could be considered independently of God's commanding will.

4. Ethical Ideals in Early Islam

From the beginning, the Islamic community was exposed to other ethics than that founded in the Qur'an. Muhammad and his companions were heirs to a pre-Islamic Arabian ethic, with its emphases on a this-worldly "manliness" *(muruwwa)*, encompassing the virtues of courage,

3. Abdul Khaliq, "The Ethics of Al-Ghazali," *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963, I: 625.

4. T. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity*, Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1984, pp. 54–55.

loyalty, personal honor, patient endurance, generosity, self-control, and hospitality.[5]

Another aspect of the "tribal ethic" which would have great influence on later developments in the Islamic community was the "horizontal," communitarian nature of authority. Decisions were to be made through consultation *(shura)*, and the power to govern derived less from inherited rank than from leadership qualities rising naturally to the fore. Conformity to community standards was strictly enforced and deviations from the norm severely punished.

The Qur'an, in what today would be called "a dialogue with culture," affirms and reinforces some of these values, at the same time that it reorients and redefines others, while explicitly rejecting some qualities of the pre-Islamic ethic. However, the horizontal rather than vertical or hierarchical orientation of religious society remains until today one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Islamic community. One becomes a member of the *ulama*, for example, by community acceptance rather than through ordination, appointment, or academic degree.

Moral standards continue to be transmitted and imposed primarily by community agreement and pressure. As sociologists and Muslim preachers have often noted, this can cause problems when Muslims emigrate out of Muslim societies, where moral values and imperatives find strong social reinforcement, to regions, such as Western Europe or North America, where ethical values are mainly regarded as individual choices.

The conquest of Iran in the first Islamic century and the eventual conversion of Iranians to Islam introduced Muslims to an ancient and living Persian ethical tradition.[6] After entering Islam, Iranian litterateurs continued to produce writings in the same tradition, which was slowly Islamized, with a consequent deemphasis of opportunistic elements and the strategic value of polite manners in favor of moral uprightness *(salah)* and goodness *(ihsan)*.

Very early on, an entirely different ethic came to be proposed by Muslims of the Sufi tradition. Sharply distinguishable both from the

5. The best treatment of the pre-Islamic Arab ethic of *muruwwa* is still the early work of Goldziher [1889], "Muruwwa and Din," in *Muslim Studies*, Chicago: Aldine, 1967, pp. 11–44.

6. R. Walzer, "Akhlak," *Encyclopaeida of Islam*, [2nd ed.], I: 326.

pre-Islamic as well as that of Iran, the Sufi ethical ideal emphasized ascetical qualities of abstinence, self-denial, simplicity of life, humility, and fear of God as well as the virtues of piety such as trust in God, awe, thirst for God, and brotherly love. One of the 9th Century Persian ascetics put it: "Who wants to attain to highest honor should prefer seven to seven: poverty to wealth, hunger to satiety, lowliness to prestige, humiliation to honor, modesty to pride, sadness to joy, death to life."[7] It is significant that the ethical model in the Sufi tradition was very often the Islamic prophet Jesus, whose evangelical and extra-evangelical sayings were handed down for centuries in Sufi circles.

5. Rationalist Ethics and Muslim Theology

As the Islamic tradition came into contact very early with Hellenist thought, the question arose of the agreement of the Islamic way of life with natural ethics. Already by the 8th Century (3rd Century of the *hijra*), Greek ethical treatises, including those by Plato and Aristotle, were translated into Arabic and commented upon by Muslim scholars. These works presented serious challenges to Muslim thinkers, who undertook to answer or integrate the problems raised.

Greek ethics, based on a presumption of human free will and the power to choose freely between various differing alternatives, seemed to contradict Qur'anic teaching concerning God's omnipotence. If the human person has the power to freely choose and thereby determine his destiny, human actions would seem to be outside the creative activity of God. Muslim theologians tended to favor the view, therefore, that human actions, like everything else that happens in the universe, are determined by God.

Moreover, Greek thought held that the moral nature of a human act was determined by its conformity to nature. There is a consistency and order to the universe with which human actions must be in conformity. Through the study of first principles, it was possible to arrive at a knowledge of this natural law by use of reason and to construct accordingly an ethical system whose validity could be checked, not by recourse to divine revelation, but by its being a faithful reflection of the nature of the cosmos.

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7. A.M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: U. of No. Carolina Press, 1975, p. 35.

For Muslims, this raised the question of whether the moral teachings of the Qur'an and *sunna* simply confirmed what could be known through ethical philosophy or whether Islamic teaching revealed the divine will in a way which transcended the possibilities of human effort.

On this question, the theological school of the Mu'tazila sought to show that Islamic teaching affirmed perfectly what could be known by natural ethics. Acts were not good or evil *because* God had determined them to be so, but God in His wisdom knew perfectly the natural order and taught mankind to act in those ways which were in conformity with it. Thus, the moral injunctions of the Qur'an *describe* rather than determine the ethical qualities of human actions. Furthermore, God who is infinitely good must desire what is best for humankind and could thus *only* teach what is proper and just.

This view, to other Muslim theologians, seemed to place limits on God's revelatory powers. In asserting unlimited divine freedom, they held that acts were good or evil by God's having commanded some and having forbidden others. Homicide or adultery were not evil *in se*, but rather because God had prohibited them. Piety, faithfulness, distributive justice, and charity were good because God had commanded them. Had God wished, it was well within His power to have commanded adultery and forbidden justice, but He did not will to do so.

This view, which is intended to preserve God's prerogatives, was proposed with some modifications by the Ash'arite school of theology (*kalam*). To the Mu'tazila, this view seemed to reduce God's will to a set of random, arbitrary commands and to cut off morality from its rational bases, turning it into a simple obedience to the divine will. The internal ethic of an informed, religiously committed person would be replaced by a set of externally-imposed moral imperatives. Moreover, they claimed, the Ash'arites left no room for the "rightness," the justice of God's ordering all things for good in His wisdom.

Their position on the question of natural morality directed the response they proposed to a related problem, that of reconciling human freedom with divine omnipotence. The Mu'tazila held that any genuine ethics demanded an agent who was free to choose between alternative actions. If human actions were predetermined by God, human

freedom was merely illusory. Furthermore, if the divine will predetermined human acts, such as the decision to do good or to do evil, humans were not really responsible for their actions, so that God would not be just if He were to reward some with heaven and condemn others to hell on the basis of their deeds.

Al-Ash'arī and those who followed him countered with the argument that even though in reality there existed no independent human power to choose, in the very act of performing a good work, a person acquired *(kasb* or *iktisab)* responsibility for that deed. God, who judged according to the acts performed, was therefore just in rewarding good deeds and sentencing to punishment those who were responsible for evil actions.

The weakness of the Mu'tazili argument, from an Islamic point of view consisted in the limits which it placed on God's prerogatives as creator. The Mu'tazila were accused by Ash'arites and others of being dualists, of positing a divine creator as well as a human creator of human acts. In their desire to defend and preserve the justice of divine judgments, the Mu'tazila were considered to have compromised God's omnipotence. Many Muslim scholars were further convinced by Al-Ash'ari's accusation that the ethical position of the Mu'tazila did not even save the just nature of God's judgments.

To Al-Ash'ari is attributed the famous story of the three brothers, oft repeated with many elaborations and variations. There were three brothers, one who died as a child, a second who lived longer and did good deeds, and a third who did evil. The second brother was given a higher place in heaven than the first. The one who died as a child complained that his brother had a higher place. God explained that his brother had done many good deeds and God had rewarded him justly. The "child" then asked why he had not been allowed to live longer so that he also could have done good deeds. God answered that He foresaw the child would grow to be a sinner and so, doing the best for the child, took his life before he had done acts worthy of eternal punishment. At this point, the third brother cried out from the depths of hell, "Then why didn't you allow me to die as a child before I became a sinner ?"[8]

8. This story has been repeated often. A useful analysis is found in W.M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Edinburgh, University Press, 1973, p. 305.

6. Later Developments

Unfortunately, over the centuries the position of the dominant Ash'arite school moved increasingly towards a complete denial of the link between cause and effect, an "ethical atomism" whereby each instant of time, and hence every human act was created anew directly by God. Human responsibility for one's deeds was defended through complex formulations of the concept of acquisition *(iktisab)*, an explanation no more convincing despite its ever-increasing subtlety.

Al-Ghazali's response to the malaise which affects religious life when human responsibility is effectively denied was to retain the theological formulations and to embue them with new life through the infusion of virtues derived from the Sufi ethic. The *shari'a* regulated external behavior, but needed to be interiorized in order to affect a spiritual transformation of the person. He thus recalled Muslims to a Sufi ideal of union of love and will with God, which was to be attained through the personal appropriation of the ethical qualities inherent in the practices of the Islamic way of life *(shari'a)*.

Ibn Taymiyya's subsequent response to the ethical dilemma posed by the theologians of the Mu'tazili and Ash'arite traditions was more radical. Dismissing the Mu'tazila as ethical dualists, he maintained that the determinism of the Ash'ariyya drained religious conviction of its dynamic, active quality. What was needed was not new formulas to define human ownership of divinely caused human acts, but rather a return to a pre-theological Qur'anic élan. The Qur'an teaches clearly that God is the Creator of all things, but the Holy Book affirms just as strongly that human beings are truly responsible for how they live on this earth. Central to Islamic faith is an activist commitment to build a human society according to God's will, with the *shari'a* forming and informing every aspect of human life.

The Mu'tazila were widely rejected in the Islamic world as unorthodox. Ibn Taymiyya's view found some support during his lifetime and in the next generations after his death (1328), but his critique of *kalam* ethics could not supplant the Ash'arite theological position. A third theological tradition, that of Al-Maturidi, which allowed more room for human ethical responsibility, was limited in its influence to Turkish-speaking regions of the Muslim community. Sufism continued to spread and, due to the strong missionary efforts of the Sufis, Islam was brought to

new regions of Asia and Africa. However, on the question of divine omnipotence and human acts, the Sufis tended to preach and teach an Ash'arite determinism.

As the Islamic community approached the modern age, the malaise which gripped theology and ethics was symbolized by the loss of independence of one Muslim region after another to the previously discounted European powers. Jurisprudence was reduced to discussions of minute details of differences among the four *madhhabs*. Sufism was widely diffused but was all too often in a state of decadence which differed little from popular magic, fortune-telling, and preoccupation with preternatural wonders.

In this situation, from a remote part of the Islamic world, came a call for reform. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, living in the Naid in central Arabia, discovered in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya a way out of the impasse, a return what he saw to be the activist ethic of the early generations of Islam. The Muslim world was reduced to a backward and subservient state, he claimed, because of its abandonment of the pristine values of the original community. Over the centuries, many "innovations," departures from the spirit and practice of the early generations (*salaf*), had crept into the Muslim community. These innovated practices, he held, had weakened the community by turning it away from the original goals which God had set for Islam in the Qur'an and sunna.

Muslims had to return to the original spirit of the religion by eliminating even time-honored practices if they were judged inconsistent with the original message. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's program for reform thus carried with it a strong critique of the Islamic tradition as it had developed over the centuries. The Wahhabis, as those who took up the reformist ideas of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab were called, were equally critical of popular Sufism, classical *kalam* theology, and the dry formulations of the legal scholars.

One might say that the great "internal debate" going on within the Muslim community for the past 150 years has been that between proponents of classical "traditional" Islam and those who advocate a more or less radical reform. On the one hand, the solutions proposed by the reformers have been considered by many Muslims to be too disruptive of Islamic life as it has developed over the centuries. On

the other hand, the reformers criticize traditional leaders for allowing Muslims to fall into patterns of religiosity which they judge passively complacent, fatalistic, and syncretistic.

The rapid changes which have swept the Muslim world since the end of World War II, with the rise of independent nation states, the clash of conflicting political and economic ideologies, the introduction of alien moral values and behavior patterns through increasing mobility and the pervasiveness of communications media, and the varying degrees of participation in the benefits of modern society, have all offered challenges to both traditional and reformist understandings of Islam, Muslim thinkers have produced a wide variety of responses to the new challenges.

In all this there are ethical implications. There is the question of the human rights and responsibilities of individuals and the relation of these rights to those of society. An important issue concerns the role of the state in regard to the obligation of Muslims to live according to the *shari'a*. Should the state consider this an exclusively religious duty whose fulfillment is the personal responsibility of the believer, or does the state have the role of encouraging adherance to the *shari'a* through civil enforcement of its regulations? How are Muslims to live in societies of a pluralistic nature, whether they be in the majority or a minority group, with those whose moral standards and religious commitment are not that of Islam? How can moral values, historically transmitted in the context strong extended family relationships, be communicated through national school systems in traditionally Islamic regions, as well as those of areas where educational and social practices are determined by non-Muslim beliefs and values? It is within the framework of such questions that the "internal" ethical debate in the Islamic community is today being carried out.