

Author Biography

Yasien Mohamed is Senior Professor of Arabic and Islamic Philosophy, Department Foreign Languages at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. He is a founding member of the International Society of Islamic Philosophy and received an award from the Islamic Republic of Iran for his book *The Path to Virtue*.

***Disclaimer:** The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2019. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Introduction

A worldview is a comprehensive philosophical view of the world we live in and interact with and it encompasses all aspects of reality, physical and metaphysical. A worldview represents one's most fundamental beliefs and assumptions about the universe one inhabits. It is the perspective from which one sees and interprets life and it is the way one finds meaning and purpose in life. It answers questions such as "Who am I?" and "Where do I come from?"

Wilhelm Dilthey defined a worldview as a global conception that combines a picture of reality, a sense of meaning, and principles of conduct that correspond to thinking, feeling, and will. Accordingly, there are three main types of worldview: religious, artistic, and philosophical. Although one type may predominate, it rarely excludes the others.¹ Thus, although we are dealing mainly with the philosophical/ethical worldview of the Qur'ān, which pertains to principles of conduct, we cannot divorce it from the other two dimensions of a worldview, namely the religious and artistic. These three dimensions should then provide the criteria for evaluating the permissibility of any moral action and serve as a guide for decision-making when faced with various moral dilemmas confronting people in the contemporary context.

The Islamic worldview is a philosophical view of the world rooted in the Islamic vision of life and reality. It provides a comprehensive Islamic framework of concepts and perspectives regarding the Oneness of God (*tawhīd*) and His relationship with the world, man as the vicegerent on earth (*khalīfah*), human free will and responsibility, divine destiny, and the ultimate abode in the hereafter. The ethical worldview of the Qur'an is an Islamic worldview, but with emphasis on the ethical dimensions. The Qur'an is a book of guidance (*hudā*) for humanity and a criterion (*furqān*) to distinguish between good and bad actions. It is only with

¹ Hodges, H. A. (1952) *The Philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, p. 92. Also see Dilthey, W. (1960) *Gesammelte Schriften, Band VIII* (Weltaushauunslehre), Stuttgart: Abhandlung zur Philosophie der Philosophie.

proper guidance that one is able to surrender to the will of God, and not the whims of man.

The Islamic ethical worldview, although primarily religious because it is based on the ethical and metaphysical teachings of the Qur'an, is also philosophical in orientation and, therefore, for a fully integrated Islamic ethical worldview, we need to also apply reason to our understanding of the Qur'an. Although there is much work ahead of us in this respect, most of the groundwork in the area of Islamic ethics has already been accomplished by classical Islamic philosophers of the eleventh century, including: Miskawayh (d. 1030), author of *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* (Refinement of Character), al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1060), author of *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah* (The Means to the Noble Qualities of the Revealed Law), and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), author of *Mīzān al-'Amal* (The Scale of Action) and the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences). These Islamic philosophers have shown us how to integrate revelation and reason. They were open-minded representatives of Islam and were not afraid to integrate foreign philosophical sources of knowledge into the ethical worldview of the Qur'an. Al-Iṣfahānī and al-Ghazālī developed an ethical philosophy, which can be regarded as religious, because it is based on the Qur'anic revelation. A mere glance at al-Iṣfahānī's ethical treatise shows the extent to which he cites verses from the Qur'an on every page.

Ethics are concerned with a rational examination of principles and rules that guide appropriate moral conduct. The Arabic word for morality is *akhlāq* (good character), which is etymologically related to *al-Khāliq* (the Creator), and *makhlūq* (the created), which assumes a good relationship between human beings and God, and a good relationship between human beings. Islamic ethics is not exclusively philosophical, but is multi-disciplinary, as it connects with other disciplines, including jurisprudence, theology, and Sufism. Majid Fakhry divides ethical theories in Islam into four categories: scriptural morality, theological theories, philosophical theories, and religious theories.² Although this essay will focus on scriptural morality, which is based on the ethical pronouncements of the Qur'ān

² Fakhry, M. (1991) *Ethical Theories in Islam*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, pp. 6-7.

and Prophetic Traditions (*aḥādīth*), it cannot be divorced from the other categories as the commentators of the Qur'an inevitably bring to bear their own orientations upon their ethical interpretations, whether they lean towards theology (*kalām*), philosophy (*falsafah*), or Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). The aim of this and subsequent essays is to demonstrate how these various orientations have shaped the ethical theories of the classical Islamic ethicists such as Miskawayh, al-Iṣfahānī, and al-Ghazālī.

The primary sources for all of these ethical thinkers are the Qur'an and the Prophetic *sunnah*, although Islamic philosophers like Miskawayh were more dependent on the ancient Greek tradition, especially Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nevertheless, such Islamic philosophers never ignored the Qur'an as a source of inspiration in the formulation of the general Islamic ethical worldview. The Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions are not philosophical works, but they have provided a framework for the philosophical and theological explication of Islamic ethics.

As already mentioned, the early classical Islamic philosophers were open-minded representatives of the intellectual Islamic legacy and were not afraid to integrate knowledge from foreign philosophical sources into the moral worldview of the Qur'an. For example, they adopted the tripartite division of the soul into the rational, concupiscent, and irascible faculties, and the cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice that emerge from the balance of these three faculties under the predominance of the rational faculty. Islamic philosophers adopted this Platonic-Aristotelian psychological paradigm and integrated it into an Islamic *Weltanschauung*. Such models of the integration of knowledge inspired the Christian Thomas Aquinas and the Jewish Maimonides, who both quoted extensively from the works of al-Ghazālī. Thus, a worldview implies a certain philosophical influence, and any formulation of a particular worldview typically involves a selective and judgmental response to lived experience. To integrate experience into a coherent worldview we are expected to filter out certain aspects of reality. That is to say, we need to apply a certain value-judgment to achieve such coherence. It is therefore inevitable that these ethical Islamic thinkers, although inspired by the Qur'an as a common source, would end up with different

value-judgments. They were inspired by the ancient philosophical tradition of their time but constructed it in accordance with their own theological, philosophical, or Sufi orientations. While the early Islamic philosophers were more faithful to the Greek tradition, later scholars, including al-Iṣfahānī and al-Ghazālī, integrated the philosophical with the religious tradition. Al-Iṣfahānī developed an Islamic ethics that is fully integrated into Qur'ānic teachings and inspired al-Ghazālī to do the same, except that al-Ghazālī's ethics took on an explicitly Sufi orientation.

The Qur'an is a book of guidance that appeals to both the mind and heart and lays down a unified ethical system anchored in eternally valid and life-enriching moral principles. A feature of the Qur'an is the blending of law and morality, as in the message on divorced women: "And so, when you divorce women and they reach the end of their waiting term, then either retain them in a fair manner or let them go in a fair manner. And do not retain them to their hurt or by way of transgression; whoever will do that will indeed wrong himself. Do not take the signs of God in jest and remember God's favor upon you."³

Thus, moral action is not only a personal matter but also a social concern and always connected to belief in God:

*Piety is not to turn your faces towards the East and the West; piety is he who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book and the Prophets; who gives of his money, in spite of loving it, to the near of kin, the orphans, the needy, the wayfarers and the beggars, and for the freeing of slaves. [And truly pious] are those who keep their word whenever they promise, and are patient in misfortune and hardship and in times of peril; it is they that have proved themselves true, and it is they who are conscious of God.*⁴

Given the prominence of 'right action,' Muslim scholars have emphasized this theme and developed an extensive body of laws based on moral action and categories of actions that are obligatory, recommended, or simply permissible. With the current emphasis on human rights, there seems to be a need to review certain legal aspects of the Qur'an; our focus will be rather on moral principles and some key ethical concepts that are important for a coherent and integrated

³ Qur'an 2:231.

⁴ Qur'an 2:177.

framework. Values such as justice and benevolence are key virtues that shape the content of the moral world of Islam, and they are also broad and flexible enough to apply to the concrete situations of today. These moral values are voluntary in nature, and so they are free expressions of the human soul. For al-Iṣfahānī, acts of worship (*ibādāt*) are compulsory for every Muslim, but the moral virtues, which are supererogatory (*nawāfil*) and based on one's own volition, are additional to worship and define who is truly fit to become a vicegerent of God (*khalīfat Allah*), or a friend of God (*walī Allah*).

These virtues are the keys to happiness in this world and the next and must be conceived within the ethical worldview of the Qur'an, where God is the center of all things. By virtue of God's attributes such as Justice, Mercy, and Generosity, He permits all things, and empowers and guides everything. The Qur'anic worldview is theocentric and directs humankind towards human salvation. The stamp of *tawḥīd* (the Oneness of God) is an intrinsic part of human nature (*fiṭrah*) and actions in obedience to God reflect His Oneness.

Man has been granted a trust (*amānah*), which is his free will. However, the heavens and earth refused to accept this trust: "Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Lo! He hath proved a tyrant and a fool."⁵ Thus, Islam recognizes the liberty of the individual but there are limits to this liberty, as in the prohibition of suicide and abortion.

I discuss below the main principles that make up the moral worldview of the Qur'an: responsibility and accountability; justice and benevolence; sin and repentance; and intention and sincerity. I have selected what I believe to be the most important moral concepts that shape the ethical worldview of the Qur'an. These are not isolated concepts but are connected to one another and fit within the metaphysical worldview of the Qur'an. The metaphysical worldview of the Qur'an provides the basic vision and mission set out for humankind. Imam al-Iṣfahānī, the eleventh-century Islamic moral philosopher, and precursor to Imam al-Ghazālī, sets out the purpose of man as involving three duties: the duty of *khilāfah*

⁵ Qur'an 33:73.

(vicegerency), the duty of *imarah* (the cultivation of the earth), and the duty of *ibadah* (worship). Al-Iṣfahānī states in his ethical treatise:

Man was created for three purposes. Man's first purpose is in the cultivation of the earth, as is implied in the verse: He brought you out from the earth and made you inhabit it (Q. 11:61). So man must earn his livelihood, for his own sake and for the benefit of others. Man's second purpose is to worship God. As He says: I have not created jinn and mankind except to worship Me (Q. 51:56). This means that man should obey God's commandments and prohibitions. Man's third purpose is his vicegerency, referred to in: He will make you successors in the land and then observe what you will do (Q. 7:129), and in other verses. Vicegerency is the imitation of God in accordance with one's ability to rule by applying the noble virtues of the Law: wisdom, justice, forbearance, beneficence, and graciousness. These virtues draw Man to Paradise and close to God Most High.⁶

If man pursues these three duties, he will attain happiness in this world and the next world. Happiness in this world too, as Islam is not monastic but world-affirming and requires of the human person to play his role in the cultivation of the earth and the development of society. These three duties should be kept in mind when undertaking any moral action, which is not merely being good for the sake of being good, but has a higher purpose in this world, and which ultimately brings man close to God. As noted from the quoted passage, for man to attain the high status of vicegerency, he would first have to perform his duty of worship and submission to God, and this is the very foundation of ethics in Islam. Without worship, man's ethical conduct and the internalization of the virtues would not have a higher purpose. And without the virtues, the believer would remain at the level of servitude to God, but could not possibly attain to the high level of vicegerency. Thus, there is a hierarchy with respect to the duties of man, and the lower duties are prerequisites for the higher functions of human life.⁷

It should be borne in mind that the virtues of the soul, such as temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice, are supererogatory practices, and only acceptable after the believer has practiced the acts of worship that are obligatory. It is through such

⁶ Iṣfahānī, R. (1987) *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, Cairo: Dār al-Wafā', pp. 91-92.

⁷ Mohamed, Y. (2006) *The Path to Virtue*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, p. 214.

virtues that man can function as a vicegerent of God. Vicegerency is defined as: “The imitation of God in accordance with man’s ability to rule by the application of the noble qualities of the revealed law.”⁸ Mohamed sums it up as follows: “Moral virtues require obedience to God through worship; it leads to vicegerency, which is the imitation of God. They are not to be pursued for their own sakes, but for a higher goal, for happiness in paradise and proximity to God. This is not the mere intellectual pursuit of the Platonic virtues, but combines the practice of religion, and is directed at happiness in this world and the Hereafter.”⁹

As we can see, the virtues of Western secular ethics are far removed from Islamic ethics and that is why there is a need for the ethical worldview of the Qur'an to be formulated in such a manner that we are able to distinguish it clearly from secular ethics. This is not the place to elaborate on all forms of secular ethics, but let us just take the example of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, as espoused by Jeremy Bentham (d. 1832) and John S. Mill (d. 1873) focused on utility, pursuing that which causes pleasure and avoiding that which causes pain. Actions are judged as good and bad purely in terms of their pleasurable or painful consequences. Thus, those actions that produce pleasure are considered good and right in accordance with the utilitarian principle. Even if Mill holds that there are higher pleasures such as justice and love, these pleasures are for their own sakes, and not a means to nearness to God and the happiness of the hereafter. Unlike utilitarianism, the worldview of the Qur'an is not only concerned with public welfare, but also individual morality; not only with material pleasure, but also with spiritual pleasure in this world and the next.

Islam is therefore just as concerned with social welfare, and it is prepared to respond to the new challenges facing the *ummah*. The conceptual framework for Qur'anic ethics should form the basis for the integration of new knowledge. The interpretation of the Qur'an is an ongoing activity in light of new challenges that constantly arise as time progresses. These challenges include bioethics, environmental issues, human rights, and consumerism. The Qur'an even has the potential to make positive contributions to the social concerns of biomedical and

⁸ Işfahānī, R. (1987) *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, p. 59.

⁹ Mohamed, *The Path to Virtue*, p. 215.

environmental issues, not only because it is the main source of the rich Islamic intellectual legacy, but also because of its powerful methods of communicating moral truths through stories and metaphors. The challenge for contemporary Islamic thinkers is to extract the moral content of Islam and to rearticulate it in an intelligible manner to modern people so that it can provide guidelines to solve practical problems that affect the whole of humanity. The moral content of the Qur'ān could also be of practical benefit to non-Muslims, but for Muslims it will always have intrinsic value because of its Divine Source.

Morality in the Qur'ān

Early Islamic ethical trends modified the old Arabian ideal of *murū'ah* (chivalry) into a new ideal of virtuous happiness in this world and the hereafter. Morality refers to the degree to which society conforms to moral principles. Good manners and morality provide the materials for building a noble character. Sins that are committed under the impulse of man's lust conflict with Islamic morality and human nature, especially the element of shame (*ḥayā'*), which prevents one from doing wrong. Islamic education nurtures this sense of shame.

Pre-Islamic Arabia was the 'age of ignorance' (*jāhiliyyah*), which connotes the 'reckless temper' of the pagan Arabs and is the antithesis of forbearance (*ḥilm*). The pagan Arabs were torn between ignorance and forbearance; while they lost their temper easily and were prone to violence, they admired the qualities of forbearance and self-control.¹⁰ The Qur'ān responded to the haughty spirit of the pagan Arabs that inspired many blood feuds:

When the unbelievers instilled in their hearts fierceness, the fierceness of paganism (ḥamiyyat al-jāhiliyyah), Allah then sent down His serenity upon His apostle and upon the believers, and imposed on them the word of piety, they being more deserving and worthier. Allah has knowledge of everything.

¹¹

¹⁰ Goldziher, I. (1967) *Muslim Studies*, vol. 1, London: George Allen and Unwin, p. 202f.

¹¹ Qur'an 48:26.

Connected to this blind anger is the pagan notion of masculinity, which also subsumed under it the qualities of generosity (*jūd*) and honor (*karam*).¹² The Qur'ān transformed the tribal morality of the Arabs into a personal morality: “No burdened soul shall bear the burden of another, and every person will be accountable on the Day of Judgment for himself.”¹³ It favored a universal brotherhood in which kindness and equity were more important than custom and law. The morality of the Qur'ān may be summed up as, “Believe and do right.”¹⁴ Belief in One God is fundamental to Muslim ethics and is the foundation of man's accountability to God, as well as of his happiness in this world and the next.

The ethical dimensions of the Qur'ān are integral to the social context of the pagan Arabs and the early companions of the Prophet ﷺ. Of all the social virtues, the Qur'ān insists most frequently on benevolence to the poor, the needy, the stranger, the slave, and the prisoner. This is, in fact, true piety as suggested in Surah 2, verse 177, quoted above. These acts of benevolence are primarily expressed in the form of compulsory alms-giving (*zakāt*), but, more importantly, in the form of voluntary charity (*ṣadaqah*). These social and moral obligations are also religious obligations, as they are subsumed under God's will. People obey God because He is Good, but also because their innate nature (*fiṭrah*) predisposes them to do good.

Forbearance is a key virtue in the Qur'ān, and it is contained in Luqmān's advice to his son:

*O my son, perform the prayer, command the honorable and forbid the dishonorable and bear patiently what has befallen you. ...Do not turn your face away from people and do not walk in the land haughtily. Allah does not love any arrogant or boastful person. Be modest in your stride and lower your voice; for the most hideous voice is that of asses.*¹⁵

The term goodness (*khayr*) is used comprehensively, covering the material and religious. It also connotes wealth; “Whatever bounty (*khayr*) you give is for parents, the near of kin, the orphans, the needy, and the wayfarer. And whatever

¹² Izutsu, T. (1959) *The structure of the ethical terms in the Koran*, 23f.

¹³ Qur'an 13:89, 31:32.

¹⁴ Qur'an 18:105.

¹⁵ Qur'an 31:17-19.

good (*khayr*) you do, Allah is fully cognizant of it.”¹⁶ It also refers to pious work: “Perform the prayer and give the alms-tax. Whatever good (*khayr*) you do for your own sake, you will find it with Allah, surely Allah is cognizant of what you do.”¹⁷

The Qur'an recognizes the innate goodness within human nature. No matter our failings, we naturally admire the virtues of others. We also naturally detest the vices of others. The thief finds it abominable for someone to steal his goods. More than forty-five references in the Qur'an appeal to man's universal moral conscience and his innate sense of good and evil; e.g., Qur'an 7:157; 16:90; 7:28; and 7:33.¹⁸

Responsibility

A person with *taqwa* has moral responsibility as he fears divine displeasure and divine justice. Such a person is deserving of the status of *khalīfah* (vicegerent of God). The vicegerent is capable of the responsibility of stewardship of the world granted to man because of his reason and free will. The proper employment of this free will and reason is to fulfill the trust (*amānah*) God has given man. Since we are potentially capable of fulfilling this trust, God has made us vicegerents¹⁹ and taught us “all the names”²⁰ to make meaning of the world around us. We are responsible for guarding human life and preserving the natural resources of this earth. However, in order to manage the world and its inhabitants, it is important to change oneself first. That is to say, one should inculcate within oneself all the virtues that the Qur'an emphasizes: righteousness, justice, truthfulness, piety, patience, and compassion. This is why the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ emphasized that the greatest struggle (*jihād al-akbar*) is the struggle of the self (*jihād al-naḥs*).

Responsibility implies voluntary action. A person who acts voluntarily acts with his free will, and so has the choice to act virtuously or viciously. This is what makes him responsible for his action. But should his actions be a result of

¹⁶ Qur'an 2:211.

¹⁷ Qur'an 2:104.

¹⁸ Draz, M. A. (2011) *Introduction to the Qur'an*, London: I. B. Taurus, p. 63.

¹⁹ Qur'an 2:30.

²⁰ Qur'an 2:31.

compulsion, ignorance, or insanity, then he cannot be held responsible for them. Aristotle agreed that the principle of voluntary action must be internal to the agent. Muslim philosophers, however, were not only concerned with the dialectical relationship between human freedom and responsibility but also the relationship between divine power and human action. The standard argument is this: if God determines man's fate, then how can man be responsible for his own actions? The attempts by theologians to reconcile this apparent contradiction have already been noted.

Man is free and responsible and he has choices: to believe or not to believe, to accept God's revelations or not to accept them. In secular humanistic philosophy, man is also free and responsible for his actions but he is responsible only to himself. By contrast, in the ethical worldview of the Qur'an, man is ultimately responsible to God. He is free to accept or reject the truth from God; but, whatever his choice, he will be responsible for it on the Day of Judgment.

The following verses further confirm man's freedom of choice:

*The truth is from your Lord. Whoever wishes, let him believe; and whoever wishes, let him disbelieve.*²¹

*O Children of Adam, when apostles from your own people come to you reciting to you My revelations, then those who fear God and mend their ways have nothing to fear and they will not grieve. But those who deny Our revelations and reject them arrogantly—those are the people of the Fire; therein they shall abide forever.*²²

These verses imply that man has free choice to believe in God's message or not. Yet, there are verses that suggest that God seals people's hearts, or does not guide them: "God will not guide those who reject His signs"²³; "God will only lead astray those who are wicked"²⁴; and "God will only seal up those hearts that are arrogant."²⁵ However, the Qur'an repeatedly states that every man is responsible

²¹ Qur'an 18:29.

²² Qur'an 7:35.

²³ Qur'an 16:104.

²⁴ Qur'an 2:24.

²⁵ Qur'an 40:37.

alone for what he does—a doctrine that underlies the Qur'ānic rejection of the Christian doctrine of redemption. The Qur'ān also states: “Man gets nothing but what he strives for,”²⁶ which means that man must make an effort to achieve his goal.

Another thought-provoking verse is that, “God does not change what is in a people until they change what is in themselves.”²⁷ This verse could mean that God will not withdraw His blessings from man as long as man remains good. It could also mean that God will not bless man unless he changes his inner state to become a recipient of God's grace.²⁸ The first meaning corresponds with the views of Ibn Kathīr, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Jawzī, and al-Qurṭubī.²⁹ It also corresponds with the view of the contemporary scholar, Mufti Muhammad Shafi, who states:

*It means that 'Allah Ta'alla does not change the state of peace and security enjoyed by people into a state of distress and instability until such time that those people themselves change their deeds into evil and disorder.*³⁰

People are actively protected by God but if they disobey Him and are ungrateful for His blessings, He will withdraw His blessings and protection.

In the end, how are we to know the extent of God's intervention in our actions and the extent of our own free will? We will never really fully understand the mystery of God's workings. We do have free will, and act as though we have it, all the while knowing that there is a higher divine power that determines all actions. Without this divine power, no action can take place, whether good or evil. God never desires evil but grants us the power to perform evil deeds. We alone desire evil and are responsible for it. Draz states:

When we act, we have no intentions of acting as instruments of God's Holy will, since we know nothing of this divine will in advance. Leaving all other considerations aside, we accept it pure and simply as our own and thereby

²⁶ Qur'an 53:39.

²⁷ Qur'an 13:11.

²⁸ Asad, M. (1980) *The Message of the Qur'an*, Gibraltar: Darul Andalus, p. 360.

²⁹ Idris, G. S. (1983) *The Process of Islamization*, USA: Muslim Students Association of America and Canada, pp. 3-5.

³⁰ Shafi, M. *Ma'arif al-Qur'an*, trans Muhammad Shamim, Maktaba e Darul-Uloom, vol. 5, p. 200.

sign our agreement. So man becomes responsible in doing so, as if he becomes a debtor as soon as he surrenders his surety. We can now see why the Qur'an insists on proclaiming our responsibility before God. The human will seems entirely [subject] to divine will, [as the Qur'an states: 'And you shall surely be questioned about that which you used to do.' (Qur'an 16:93)

31

Man is responsible for his actions, because he will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment and will be rewarded or punished in accordance with what he has earned in this world. God states, "God made the heavens and the earth in truth, so that each soul could be rewarded for what it had earned."³² Also: "He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in six days—and His throne was upon the water—that He might test you as to which of you is best in conduct."³³ Divine justice implies that no one is exempt from being questioned for his deeds on the Day of Judgment.

The Qur'an also reserved a place for moral responsibility and sets up the tribunal of conscience. Human conscience will testify before God for what it has done. Human conscience in this context is not the Freudian superego, which, according to Freud, is the product of parental indoctrination. It is the *al-nafs al-lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching psyche), which is not merely socially determined, but inspired by *fiṭrah*, the innate inclination towards God and all that is virtuous. The Qur'an states: "Today, your own self is reckoner enough against you"³⁴; "That each soul will know what it has done"³⁵; "On this day, every soul will be repaid for what it has earned."³⁶

Thus, man is responsible for his own actions. No force of nature, whether internal or external, can undermine the inner workings of man's will. Nature can deprive us of the material conditions for executing our decisions but we have the freedom to either yield to or resist the external constraints of nature. However, it is always

³¹ Draz, M. A. (2008) *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, trans. D. Robinson and R. Masterton, London: I. B. Tauris, p. 108.

³² Qur'an 45:22.

³³ Qur'an 11:7.

³⁴ Qur'an 17:14.

³⁵ Qur'an 81:14.

³⁶ Qur'an 31:32.

wiser to submit to the inevitable constraints of nature, such as death, terminal or incurable illness, and old age. We cannot alter these conditions, but we have the choice to either resign to or fight against them. If we resign to them, it means we have accepted inwardly the inevitable consequences of our fate.

This may not remove the suffering, due to the loss of a dear one or some sickness inflicted upon us; but by accepting God's destiny, we will be able to bear the suffering, and cope with it with meaningfulness and hopefulness. However, we are absolved should our wrong actions be a result of external factors beyond our power. In the case of the person who denies his faith verbally to avoid violence against him, the Qur'an states: "Whoso disbelieves in God after his belief—except for him who is forced to do so and whose heart is still content with faith—but who finds ease in unbelief, on them is the wrath of God."³⁷ A believer is also permitted to eat forbidden food out of necessity to save his life. Even prostitution could be forgiven should a despot compel it, as God states: "Do not force your slave girls to prostitute themselves if they desire to be virtuous women out of your desires for the pleasures of this world. If they are forced, then afterwards God is Ever-Forgiving, Most-Merciful."³⁸

Thus, if an action is wrong but was done in a disturbed state of mind, or forced upon one, then such an action is not really blameworthy and the victims of such actions should be pitied rather than blamed. If there is no consent of will, then there is no mortal sin, only a venial sin. A person who commits such an action can always turn to God in repentance and renew his good will. However, in the opinion of Professor Draz, who taught Qur'anic studies at al-Azhar, venial sins do not apply to premeditated murder, rape, or theft. Nobody has the right to murder or rape, even if he must pay with his own life for refusing to do so. A person coerced to perform murder has violated the right of another human being, while a person coerced to unlawful intercourse has not violated the rights of any other human being, as unlawful intercourse is a violation of the rights of God.³⁹ If we take the Islamic legal principle of the lesser of the two evils, then it is less evil to succumb

³⁷ Qur'an 16:106.

³⁸ Qur'an 24:33.

³⁹ Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, p. 100.

to prostitution than to give up one's life and it is less evil to sacrifice one's life than to commit murder. Some classical scholars, however, differ regarding forced prostitution; they hold the opinion that although a coerced person is absolved of the crime, it is morally preferable to accept death than commit adultery.

The verse, "God misguides whom He wills and guides whom He wills"⁴⁰ appears to suggest that God's Will is arbitrary. However, the Divine Will is regulated by Divine Knowledge and Justice. God will only favor those who are worthy and who are grateful to Him. As for those who shut their eyes to the light, God will leave them to their blindness. That is to say: He leaves those who are misguided to grope in their darkness and guides with the light of guidance those who turn to Him.

Sin and repentance

I have already discussed the question of man's responsibility for his own sins. However, will God forgive us for our sins? Yes, indeed, the God of the Qur'an is Merciful and every chapter but one of the Qur'an starts with a statement of God's Mercy. God is a personal God and the believer can therefore turn to Him in repentance. There is no such thing in the Qur'an as redemption in the Christian sense of accepting Jesus as one's savior: every person carries his own sins but he can turn to God in repentance. In the Qur'an, Adam succumbed to the seduction of Satan but turned to God in repentance. His disobedience towards God is indicative of his free will and responsibility. The Qur'an rejects the concept of original sin because Adam was forgiven for his sins after he had received his Lord's words: "Then Adam received words [of guidance] from his Lord, and God accepted his repentance: truly, He is the Acceptor of Repentance, the Compassionate."⁴¹ God forgives those who repent sincerely and act with righteousness: "I am, indeed, All-Forgiving unto him who repents, does righteous deeds and is well guided."⁴² Man is born with an innate good nature (*fiṭrah*) but negative socialization causes him to deviate from this original natural disposition. Adam's sin was due to an insufficient effort to observe his duty but he did not become so corrupt that it

⁴⁰ Qur'an 16:93; 35:8.

⁴¹ Qur'an 2:36-37.

⁴² Qur'an 20:84.

required the intervention of a redeemer other than himself. It was enough for him to acknowledge that he had sinned and then repent. Satan tempted Adam عليه السلام and disobeyed God but Adam was remorseful and repentant and God forgave him. God then assured Adam that He would grant his progeny guidance but that those who did not follow His guidance would be miserable and those who followed it would be happy.

The concept of *fiṭrah* is a key concept in Islam and is in sharp contrast to the Christian concept of original sin, which implies the need for a redeemer; thus, his good deeds will not secure him salvation, and he would have to turn to a savior to redeem him of his innate wicked state. The concept of *fiṭrah*, rather, implies that sin is a result of human choice and not an innate condition. The Qur'anic version of Adam and Eve is different from the Biblical version. In the Qur'an, Adam and Eve were equally responsible for their sins and they both succumbed to Satan's temptation. They both repented and God forgave them both. To be sure, those who have faith and act righteously will attain the highest reward, but those who stoop low in their unbelief and wicked deeds will stoop to the lowest level, as God states: "We created man in the finest mold. Then We reduced him to the lowest of the low, except for those who believe and do right actions: they will have an unfailing reward."⁴³

Although Satan is the enemy of man, God granted him the freedom to play his cosmic role of leading man astray until the Day of Judgment. Thus, Satan says: "You see this being you have honored above me? If you reprieve me until the Day of Resurrection, I will lead all but a few of his descendants by the nose."⁴⁴ Thus, God knew that Adam was going to cause mischief and yet He created him with the freedom to choose between good and evil; and if he chose evil, he was granted the opportunity to repent. Thus, humans are allowed freedom to make mistakes and this is how they have "a taste of the consequences of their own actions."⁴⁵ This is to show them the error of their ways, and to learn that God has planned better ways

⁴³ Qur'an 95: 4-7.

⁴⁴ Qur'an 17:62.

⁴⁵ Qur'an 30:41.

for them.⁴⁶ Nursi urges the believer to use his limited freedom to act with responsibility; to use one hand for supplication, and the other for repentance:

And give his other hand to the seeking of forgiveness so that it may be short for evil deeds and will not reach the Zakkum tree of Hell, which is one fruit of that accursed tree. That is, just as supplication and reliance on God greatly strengthen the inclination to good, so too repentance and the seeking of forgiveness cut the inclination to evil and break its transgressions.⁴⁷

Morality is primarily concerned with the inner self and inner intentions, not purely physical actions. However, when it comes to a mortal sin such as murder, the courts will sentence the criminal for his crime but he has the opportunity to repent for his sins and thereby redeem himself spiritually. However, when it comes to punishment, it is not the inner intention that counts alone, but the physical expression of it. If a person has intended to murder, and has put into effect his intention, then he is legally responsible for his action and punishment has to take its course. To justify retribution for a crime, the judge must be convinced of clear evidence pointing to the wicked intention of the criminal. However, it is the inner self, the human conscience, that will know if it is really responsible. The court's verdict may be innocent but the person's conscience knows that he is guilty. Since man is born in a state of *fitrah*, he is naturally inclined towards good actions and he is naturally averse to evil. This is provided that his good innate nature has not been obscured or blocked because of his environment or socialization. Conscience is not only a product of parental socialization, as Freud would have us believe, but it is embedded within our created innate nature. That is why even a non-Muslim can be moved by an innate moral sense. Raskolnikov, a character in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, was moved by his conscience because of the murder he committed. He confessed to his crime, not because of the law, but because of his conscience.

Conscience is man's internal judge. God has created within man an innate judge which is the self-reproaching soul (*al-nafs al-lawāmmah*). God states: "By the Day

⁴⁶ Haleem, M. A. (2011) *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Styles*, London: I. B. Tauris, pp. 139-140.

⁴⁷ Nursi, S. (1997) *The Words*, vol. 2, Izmir: Kaynak, p. 483.

of Resurrection and the self-reproaching soul!”⁴⁸ This is his innate conscience, his natural *fiṭrah* that is inclined to good and averse to evil. It is because of this innate moral sense that we tend to pass judgment on our own actions. The self-evident judgments we have are the moral principles of human conduct. The dictates of the conscience are practical, not theoretical. They tell us which actions are bad and which are good. Our conscience enables us to know when we are offending others and when we are offending God. This internal source of guidance is confirmed by the Qur'an, which is the external source of guidance.

Our conscience, however, is not always correct; we can also be misguided through ignorance and feel guilty for something that we believe to be sinful, when it is actually not sinful according to the *Sharī'ah*. We therefore have to make a distinction between a true conscience and a false conscience. A conscience that is too strict, too lax, or too scrupulous is a false conscience. A person with a strict conscience tends to make a person feel very guilty for a venial sin, thinking that it is a mortal sin. Such a person may act in good faith and with religious conviction, but his action is based on ignorance about the revealed law. He can overcome his ignorance through Islamic education and a proper study of the divine law. Otherwise, he will be plagued by his conscience and will develop an unhealthy neurosis.

However, when it comes to a mortal sin such as murder, the courts will sentence the criminal for his crime. However, this does not mean that there is no room for repentance and rehabilitation. The Qur'an promises many beautiful things for those who repent, but this does not mean escape from retribution, especially if the crime is serious, such as rebellion against justice, which is punishable by death, amputation, or exile. The Qur'an states: “Except for those who repent of their rebellion before you gain power over them. Know that God is Ever-Forgiving, Most-Merciful.”⁴⁹ According to Draz, Imam Shāfi'ī originally established from this verse a universal principle that repentance prevents punishment but he abandoned this opinion when he moved to Egypt. He nevertheless distinguished between two kinds of responsibility: “One rules in this life on earth, the other concerns the supreme

⁴⁸ Qur'an 75:1-4.

⁴⁹ Qur'an 5:33-34.

judgment in the life beyond. Repentance may be universally effective on the religious level without necessarily being so in the social realm.”⁵⁰ Thus, remorse and repentance may rehabilitate the guilty person and re-establish his respect for the law, but they do no justice to the victims or the family of the victims who suffered due to crimes, such as murder or rape, that were committed by the perpetrators. There has to be some form of reparation. A contemporary example is the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) at the inception of the South African democracy. The White perpetrators confessed to their crimes and the victims forgave them. They received state pardon. In principle, this is a good thing, as it is a way of healing the nation at a difficult time of transition into the new democracy. Unfortunately, the TRC as spearheaded by Bishop Desmond Tutu failed, as the focus was not on justice. If it was a question of material justice, the post-Apartheid government would have granted the victims material compensation for their losses and suffering. This did not happen. Ethical and spiritual rehabilitation is psychologically therapeutic and most beneficial but, for peaceful reconciliation to occur, the minimal justice must be done in the form of compensation.

Intention and sincerity

Intellectual curiosity in classical *kalām* (theological discourse) was not seen as having a powerful effect upon the purification of the inner self. This was al-Ghazālī's main critique of *kalām*. He did, however, see its value in the defense of Islamic belief and in the rational exposition of faith. The key to self-purification is the practice of faith through moral action.

What is important for moral action is to have the correct intention. The will has the capacity for action and no force of nature, whether internal or external, can stop the inner workings of it. If we yield to an external constraint, we do so freely, after some deliberation. Moral responsibility in the Qur'ān is an individual principle that does not admit to heredity or collective responsibility. There is no redemption

⁵⁰ Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, p. 112.

through a savior, only through faith and righteous actions and, ultimately, the grace of God.

Intention (*niyyah*) is a fundamental precondition for considering an action to be moral. Intention means a more or less firm decision (*'azm/qaṣd*). An intention has three elements: understanding what one is doing, wanting to do it, and wanting to do it because it is commanded.⁵¹ The question that should be posed is: when a moral action is performed, does primacy belong to the action or the intention? An action performed unconsciously or independently of one's will cannot be considered to be a moral action. An action is owned in proportion to the degree of intention with which it is performed and cannot be divorced from our psychological reality. The Qur'ān requires us to be aware of what we are doing. In the early stages of the revelation, believers were required to be sober when they began prayer. In the later stages of revelation, intoxicants were completely forbidden. A moral action is a fully conscious action and it must be done with sincerity of intention. So, when we give charity, it is not merely an outward duty but comes from the heart. Prophetic tradition states:

*Actions are but by intention and every man shall have but that which he intended. He who migrates for God and His messenger does so for God and His Messenger. But he who migrates for a worldly gain or a woman to wed migrates to whatever he migrates to.*⁵²

Thus, migration should be for the sake of God alone and not for any ulterior motive which would bring into question the person's intention. If multiple motives accompany the migration—that is, if the migration is not primarily for the sake of God—the person's sincerity comes into question.

However, this does not mean that the intention can be pure while the action is contrary to the revealed law. For instance, one cannot raise funds for charity by selling wine. The action itself must also be permissible in Islam. However, this is not always possible. A person may order grape juice but is served wine. He drinks

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 176.

⁵² *Sahih Bukhari* (1). Also see, Ibrahim, E. and D. J. Davies, trans. (1979) *Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*, Lahore: S. H. Ashraf, p. 26.

the wine, thinking it is grape juice. Such an action is valid because his intention was sound. But, on the other hand, if a person orders wine and they serve him grape juice, and he drinks the grape juice, thinking it is wine, his action is not valid.

It may not be possible to fulfil the strict duty of the law in all circumstances; we are not required never to fall into error. A simple error made in good faith can be excused. Moral action is neither purely an internal state nor an external state of duty for the sake of duty, but a combination of these two, and both are united within our conscience. Draz states:

*Volition is the orientation of the ideal towards the real; and it is along this trajectory, from the inside to the outside, from conscience to experience, that the moral deed is found. It is not a static state, a solitary act of worship enclosed within the sanctuary of the heart; it is a living force, a movement of expansion which has its point of departure at the center, and its point of arrival at the outside. Thus, not only does intention call for action and wait to be followed by it, but it contains it in the form of a seed, if not in a nascent state.*⁵³

According to al-Ghazālī, a person's action can be governed by more than one motive. He has only one motive when a wild animal attacks him: to flee from the animal. His intention is pure and sincere (*ikhhlāṣ*). Actions can also have two motives. A person may give charity to a poor person, both because he is poor and because he is a relative.⁵⁴ Most actions, it seems, are driven by more than one motive. People may give charity for the sake of the poor but also out of sentiment to help a poor relative. Religious people give charity for the sake of God and for a heavenly reward. This is a powerful driving force of good action. People do not only do good because of moral duty or because of rationality; they are also motivated by what is in their hearts. Thus, al-Ghazālī states that the soul's inclination towards otherworldly acts of goodness and its renunciation of worldly acts leave it free to invoke and contemplate God. This is only established through

⁵³ Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, p. 187.

⁵⁴ Shaker, Anthony F (2016) *Al-Ghazālī: On Intention, Sincerity, and Truthfulness, Book XXXVII of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Translated with an introduction and notes by A. F. Shaker, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, pp. 14-16.

acts of piety and avoidance of sins.⁵⁵ Thus, the effect of all pious actions is on the heart, not just the body. Thus, placing the forehead on the ground should create humility in the person; it is not merely a mechanical exercise of the body. In addition, a person who strokes an orphan's head and kisses him will establish in his heart tenderness towards the orphan. Action without intention is useless. If a person strokes an orphan's head with an inattentive heart, as if he is stroking a garment, his actions will not affect his heart and thus will not establish a feeling of tenderness for the orphan.⁵⁶

Thus, a complete moral deed is not only the performance of a physical act but involves also a heart that rejoices and an intellect that reflects. According to Rahman, *taqwā* (fear of God, or piety) is the most central ethical concept of the Qur'ān.⁵⁷ Concerning ritual sacrifice during the pilgrimage, God states: "The flesh [of these sacrificed animals] never reaches God, nor does their blood, but *taqwā* on your part does reach Him."⁵⁸ Thus, the term *taqwā*, which appears more than 220 times in the Qur'ān, refers to both the physical and moral aspects of actions. The rites of pilgrimage could easily become mechanical exercises but, through *taqwā*, deep faith and purity of intention will accompany those physical acts. This applies to all the acts of worship in Islam, which have both an external and an internal dimension.

For al-Ghazālī, piety is the quality of the heart that has turned away from the love of this world and sacrificed it for the love of God. This detachment from the world and directing attention to God is what purifies the intention and all actions that follow it.⁵⁹ Thus, the believer does not obey God as a rational idea. Moral actions are not mechanical acts devoid of spirit, but are filled with pure intentions and obedience to God. It is good to conform to the revealed law, but better still is to conform with actions based on understanding and purely for the sake of God. Thus, the truly pious man is "[he] who gives away his wealth to make himself pure, and not to return a favor to anyone, but to seek the Face of his Lord Most High, and he

⁵⁵ Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, p. 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ Rahman, F. (1983) "Some key ethical concepts of the Qur'ān," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 11(2): 170-185.

⁵⁸ Qur'an 22:31.

⁵⁹ Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, p. 200.

will be satisfied.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, ‘And drive not away those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face.’⁶¹ The metaphor ‘Face of God’ refers to a sense of piety (*taqwā*), which marks a true believer who is fully aware of the presence of God; it also refers to the sincerity of the Prophet’s followers. One has to consider the context of this verse. The prominent Meccans wanted to be seated in the circle of the Prophet ﷺ, but were averse to sitting among the poor believers of lower rank. The Prophet ﷺ refused to drive the poor followers away but agreed to have them depart temporarily. God revealed Surah 6, verse 52 to stop the Prophet ﷺ from driving his sincere followers away.⁶²

The metaphor of the ‘Face of God’ is connected to *iḥsān*, which the Prophet ﷺ defined as “To worship God as though you are seeing Him, for [even] if you do not see Him, He sees you.” The verses that refer to the doing of something for the sake of God’s Face (Qur’an 2:72; 6:52; 13:22; 18:28; 30:8-39; 92:20) suggest that a moral action should be performed sincerely and not for any utilitarian motive. Such metaphors make a powerful impression on our minds and encourage us to act morally with a pure heart directed to God alone.⁶³ It is interesting to note that the metaphor is mentioned a few times in the Qur’ān in the context of giving wealth to the needy:

*So give their due to the near relative, the needy, and the wayfarer—that is best for those whose goal is God’s Face: these are the ones who will prosper. Whatever you lend out in usury to gain value through people’s wealth will not increase in God’s eyes, but whatever you give in charity, in your desire for God’s Face, will earn multiple rewards.*⁶⁴

*[God’s servants] give food to the poor, the orphan, and the captive, though they love it themselves, [saying] ‘We feed you for the sake of God’s Face alone. We seek neither recompense nor thanks from you.’*⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Qur’an 92:17-20.

⁶¹ Qur’an 6:52.

⁶² Nasr, S. H. (1981) *Islamic Life and Thought*, London: Allen and Unwin, p. 358.

⁶³ Haleem, M. A. (2011) *Understanding the Qur’an: Themes and Styles*, pp. 115-116.

⁶⁴ Qur’an 30:38-39.

⁶⁵ Qur’an 76:8-9.

Thus, every action, no matter how mundane, performed for the sake of God, is an act of worship. It brings the believer closer to God. That is to say, if the worship or the good deed is not performed out of compulsion or in a ritualistic manner, it will bring the believer nearer to God. All good actions should have good intentions. To draw close to God, one has to perform actions with earnestness, for the sake of God's pleasure. It is not a matter of duty for the sake of duty, or doing something voluntarily merely because it is done out of one's free choice. It is all done in submission to God, not because of mere fanciful feeling; even it comes from one's own free will. A woman may wear *hijab* just because she feels like doing it but this is not a good enough motivation. If she is merely following a whim, she could easily revert back to her earlier habits of not wearing *hijab*. But if her intention is to please God, it is less likely that she would give up the *hijab*. As for fasting, some people may do it for the sake of losing weight. However, once they have lost the weight, they could easily stop fasting. However, if their motive for fasting is out of obedience to God's law, they would continue to fast, whether they have achieved the weight loss or not. Al-Ghazālī states:

All this enables one to draw close to God, since any means that preserve the body and free the heart of the body's requirements are an aid to religion. He who intends by eating to protect his acts of worship and by physical union to fortify his religion to gratify his family's hearts, and to beget a righteous child who worships God after him, and through him increases the community of Muhammad, is obedient in both food and marriage.⁶⁶

The sincere person is the one whose only motive is to draw near to God and this is only possible if a person is fond of God. This sincerity is rare. The sincere person is to be so engrossed in the hereafter that the love of this world has no sway over his heart, to the point that he has no liking for food and drink. He only drinks or eats to provide himself with enough strength to worship God.⁶⁷ According to al-Ghazālī, this is a rare state and one's actions are rarely disengaged from temporal concerns. Al-Ghazālī states:

⁶⁶ Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, p. 33.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

He may perform ablution to cool himself off; wash to give himself an agreeable scent; ...live secluded in a mosque to avoid renting a dwelling, fast to spare himself from frequent cooking of food, ...give alms to a beggar to end his wearisome begging; visit an ailing person, that he, in turn, be visited should he fall ill; attend a funeral that the funerals of his own family be attended. He may do any of these just to be known by his good works, remembered and regarded for his probity and dignity.⁶⁸

It is also possible for a disbeliever to act with benevolence as an expression of his innate natural predisposition (*fiṭra*). This action has no spiritual value; it is not done out of obedience to God's command. The Qur'an states: "Allah is to be the sole aim of your charitable deeds."⁶⁹ There are Muslims who worship God out of desire for the reward of paradise or out of fear of punishment. There is nothing wrong with this, but their level of worship is of a lower level, as al-Ghazālī states:

Although it is of an inferior degree in relation to the former [higher level of intention], it is acceptable all the same. Those people resemble bad merchants but their level is that of those who have simple understanding.⁷⁰

Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah (d. 185/801), one of the earliest mystics in Basra, was a critic of the rhetoric of fear of God. She never married, as she held that there was no place for anyone in her heart but for God. It has been narrated that she used to walk the streets with a broom in the one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When questioned about her behavior, she said, "I want to set fire to paradise and pour water onto hell, so that these two veils disappear. Then it will become clear who serves God out of love, and not out of fear of hell or hope of paradise."⁷¹ Since the Qur'an does use the rhetoric of fear in its description of hell, one cannot say it is wrong to be motivated by fear, but for Rābi'ah, a higher form of worship is not to worship God through fear, but through love. Thus, pure intention and sincerity are connected. To overcome an insincerity of intention, one has to arrest the gratification of the self, end the craving of this world, and be exclusively

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

⁶⁹ Qur'an 2:272.

⁷⁰ Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, p. 224.

⁷¹ Wild, Stefan (2006) 'Hell' in *The Qur'an: an Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman, London and New York: Routledge, p. 262.

devoted to the hereafter. This requires detachment from the material matters of this world. This attitude of detachment will be discussed further in a separate essay.

Justice and benevolence

Justice in the Qur'ān is linked to the concepts of balance and just measure in the actions of both God and humanity. “You who believe, stand in front of Allah as witnesses of equity (*shuhadā' bi al-qist*); [do not allow] your hatred for other men to turn you away from acting justly (*'alā allā ta'dilū*). Acting justly (*i'dilū*), this is nearest to piety.”⁷² Justice should be implemented to secure law and order in society. Al-Iṣfahānī supports justice fully when he cites the verses, “But if you judge, judge between them justly”⁷³ and “God commands you to deliver trusts to their owners and, if you judge between people, to judge justly.”⁷⁴ Al-Iṣfahānī holds that, when reason controls the two lower faculties of the soul, the concupiscent and irascible, then temperance, courage, and wisdom emerge. This is the justice of the self. When these three faculties are in balance, the virtue of justice emerges. This is not only the justice of the self but also the justice of society. Al-Iṣfahānī integrates these two forms of justice, that of the self and that of society. The justice of society is the legal justice that is carried out through the courts. Legal justice is important for social order. Those who commit theft and murder disrupt the order of the society and must face legal retribution. It is not the prerogative of the judge to forgive them. This coheres with justice in the Qur'ān, indicated by verse 5:8, cited above. One should act with justice in mind, even if it goes against one's own desire or one's hatred of others. The Qur'ān states that justice approximates piety. Justice and religiosity are connected. Social ethics cannot be separated from a transcendent God or from the worldview of *tawḥīd*. Thus, ethics and transcendent metaphysics are inseparable in the ethical worldview of the Qur'ān.

When a personal right has been violated, such as when a robber steals one's money, then the victim has the right to forgive such a person before it reaches the courts because it is not within the jurisdiction of the judge to forgive. Forgiveness

⁷² Qur'an 5:8.

⁷³ Qur'an 5:42.

⁷⁴ Qur'an 4:58.

is an act of benevolence and grace as apparent in the verse: “To forgo it is more righteous. And do not forget to be bountiful to each other. God sees what you do.”

⁷⁵ In a society of strangers, the judgment of the courts should take its course. There should be no place for mercy, except when mitigating circumstances warrant it. That is to say that, although punishment for a crime may be reduced because of mitigating circumstances, the punishment must still take place, whether it is a fine or a prison sentence.

When it comes to friends and relatives, one has to try to maintain friendship or keep family ties. So if a wrong is committed against a family member, it is better to forgive, for demanding one's rights can destroy the relationship, which is reprehensible in Islam. Al-Isfahānī states that friendship is founded on grace (*fadl*), not on justice; grace leads to intimacy and justice leads to separation. There is nothing wrong with justice, for every man has a right to what is due to him, but God elevates those who act with benevolence and grace: “To those who do good is the best reward and more.”⁷⁶ The word ‘grace’ refers to God's favor and mercy and man's generosity and benevolence. To act with gracefulness is to imitate the divine quality of grace, for God is *al-Raḥmān* (the Merciful), a term which appears 170 times, *al-Raḥīm* (the Compassionate) which appears 227 times, *al-Ghaḥfār* and *al-Ghaḥūr* (the Forgiving), which appear 97 times in the Qur'an. Thus, God is both Just and Merciful, but mercy is His predominant quality:

*He is God, other than Whom there is no god. He knows the unseen and the seen. He is the Merciful, The Compassionate. ...To Him belong the most beautiful names. Whatever is in the heavens and on Earth glorifies Him and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*⁷⁷

God's Benevolence, Grace, and Mercy encompass the whole of creation, including even the worst of sinners (Qur'an 7:156; 30:33; 30:36; 30:46; 40:7; 42:28). Divine Grace is the source of all good, even of our ultimate destiny in the hereafter. Although faith and good deeds are important requirements for salvation, we are still dependent on Divine Grace. God is Just, and will forgive those who seek His

⁷⁵ Qur'an 2:237.

⁷⁶ Qur'an 10:26; Isfahani, 1987, p. 356.

⁷⁷ Qur'an 59:23-24.

Mercy, and He will forgive those who turn to Him sincerely in repentance. All people, whether sinful or not, should be grateful to God. The pious man should not be proud of his piety but must be humble before God Who is the real Power behind all actions. The good that he does also depends on God's Grace, so he should be repentant and hope for paradise.

Just as God is Benevolent and Compassionate towards His servants, His servants are required to be benevolent and compassionate amongst themselves: "They are compassionate towards each other."⁷⁸ In the same way that God is Just, so should His servants be just towards people. Justice is the basic requirement of the law and is important for order in society. Justice means to give a person his due. When a wrong is done to a person, justice also involves punishing the wrongdoer. Greater than justice is benevolence. That is, to be kind and charitable and to give a person more than his due is better than being just. It also means forgoing one's right to justice and forgiving the person who caused the harm. Benevolence transcends justice. Dividing an apple equally is justice; dividing it unequally is injustice; and voluntarily forgoing one's share is benevolence.

Al-Iṣfahānī compares benevolence (*faḍl*, or *tafaḍḍul*) with justice (*'adl*). Justice is a legal quality, but benevolence is a spiritual one because it is a voluntary action of the soul. Benevolence is not justice because the former implies excess, while justice implies equality. Benevolence is nobler than justice because it is from oneself, but justice is through the courts. As mentioned, benevolence is to forgo one's right to justice and forgive a person who has done wrong.⁷⁹ One cannot forgive a tyrant who must be punished for his oppression but one can forgive an individual who has wronged one personally.

Conclusion

I have discussed major ethical concepts in the Qur'ān, such as the concept of responsibility, the concept of sincere intention, and the concept of sin and repentance. These key ethical concepts make up the main content of the Islamic

⁷⁸ Qur'an 14:48.

⁷⁹ Iṣfahānī, R. (1987) *al-Dharī'ah ilā Makārim al-Sharī'ah*, p. 355.

ethical worldview, which primarily stems from *tawhīd* or the Oneness of God. I have tried to extract the Qur'an's general ethical principles so that we may have a clear picture of the ethical law of the Qur'an as a whole. It was not my intention to deal with specific moral actions, but only with key ethical ideas that help in the shaping of the ethical worldview of the Qur'an. For the sake of brevity, I have omitted some important ethical principles in the Qur'an, but will include them in separate essays in the near future.

The ethical worldview of the Qur'an should be the point of departure for the integration of new knowledge and for reinterpreting the Qur'ān in the light of contemporary challenges. This is the intellectual effort or *ijtihad* that is needed. Traditional and modern scholars must work together to respond to the new challenges in accordance with the objectives of the revealed law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*).

The ethical worldview of the Qur'ān is not static but can expand, provided we draw upon the two main sources of knowledge in Islam, revelation and reason. Classical Muslim moral philosophers have shown us how we can harmonize these two sources of knowledge. The ethical work of al-Iṣfahānī is a good example of how philosophical knowledge can be integrated into the worldview of the Qur'an. There has been some effort by Muslim theologians and jurists to address the challenges of modern biotechnology, artificial intelligence, environmentalism, and human rights, but for an adequate response to these challenges we need to go beyond a mere philological and legalistic interpretation of the revealed text.⁸⁰

Philosophical and Sufi-inspired interpretations of the Qur'ān have given much attention to the ethical dimensions of the human self and we should continue to pursue this. It is hoped that in the ethical worldview of the Qur'ān we shall find a basis for cultivating virtue in our individual lives and for rearticulating the Qur'ānic principles of human dignity and human justice for our contemporary social context. Western secular ethics is one-sided; it places too much emphasis on human rights and social welfare, neglecting individual morality and spirituality.

⁸⁰ Knysh, A. (2007) "Multiple areas of influence," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 211-212.

We need the ethical worldview of the Qur'an so that we have a criterion to judge whether we are moving too far in the one direction of social justice at the expense of the direction of individual justice. By individual justice we mean the balance of the three faculties of the soul, where reason, guided by revelation, prevails over the two lower faculties of the soul.

To be sure, Muslims ought to follow Islamic legal prescriptions, but the spirit of the Qur'ānic worldview requires us to internalize these prescriptions and make them part of our own choices and inner convictions and not merely to conform to external rules. Purity of intention is important for making an action pleasing in the sight of God. However, one may wonder how the internalization of these virtues and prescriptions is going to improve Muslim societies and Muslim governments. The crisis of the Muslim world is fundamentally a moral crisis. The ethical worldview of the Qur'an will provide us with moral direction towards becoming a middle community, characterized by justice to the self and justice to society. We need to maintain a healthy balance between these two levels of justice so that the pursuit of individual justice is supportive of social justice, and the pursuit of social justice is supportive of individual justice.