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Islamic Ethics
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Reference

Abstract

The Ethical Tradition in Islam is a study of diverse approaches to ethical and moral values. The different traditions in Islam that we see today emerged as a result of these varying emphases and approaches. With ethical and moral duties of individuals to each other within the community as well as relations with other communities being formed and shaped by earlier philosophical, theological and pragmatic considerations. These actions later evolved to form legal and moral expressions of different schools of thought. The article ends with an acknowledgement of the diversity of the ummah and stresses the importance of 'remaining open to the possibilities and challenges of new ethical and moral discoveries'.

Introduction

Islam is among the youngest of the world's major religions, belonging to the family of monotheistic faiths that also includes Judaism and Christianity. From its beginnings in what is now Saudi Arabia over 1,400 years ago, it has grown and spread to include almost a billion adherents, living in virtually every corner of the world. Though the majority of Islam's followers, called Muslims, are found in the continents of Africa and Asia (including the Asian republics of the (former) Soviet Union and north-west China), there has been a substantial increase in the number of Muslims living in the Americas, Australia and Europe in the last quarter of the Twentieth Century. More recently, the various nation-states and communities that constitute the global Muslim *ummah* (community), are expressing a need, in varying degrees, to relate their Islamic heritage to questions of national and cultural self-identification. Where this phenomenon has become allied to domestic or international reaction and conflict, it has caused a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding regarding the role of Islam. It is therefore important to develop historical insight into how the whole spectrum of Islamic values and their underlying moral and ethical assumptions have been shaped in the course of Muslim history, in order to appreciate the diversity of Islam's heritage of ethical thought and life.

Beginnings and Development: Foundational Values

The norms and assumptions that have characterised belief and action in Islam have their initial inspiration in two foundational sources. One is scriptural, embodying the message revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) and recorded in the Qur'an. The second is the exemplification of that message in the perceived model pattern of the Prophet's actions,

sayings and norms, collectively called the *Sunnah*. Muslims regard the Qur'an as the ultimate closure in a series of revelations to humankind from God, and the *Sunnah* as the historical projection of a divinely inspired and guided human life in the person of the Prophet Muhammad, who is also believed to be the last in a series of messengers from God.

Foundational Sources of Islamic Belief

The late Fazlur Rahman, noted University of Chicago scholar of Islamic thought and modernist Muslim thinker, argued that in its initial phase Islam was moved by a deep rational and moral concern for reforming society, and that this moral intentionality was conceived in ways that encouraged a deep commitment to reasoning and rational discourse. Like other relgious traditions, and particularly Christianity and Judaism, Islam, in answering the question 'What ought or ought not to be done?' thus had a clearly defined sense of the sources of moral authority. While revealing His will to humankind in the Qur'an, God also urges them to exercise reason in understanding revelation. One part of this rational inquiry into the meaning of revelation led Muslims to elaborate rules for ethical behaviour and the principles upon which such rules could be based. In time, the relationship between the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet, as a model of behaviour, would also be elaborated, to extend the framework within which values and obligations could be determined. The process of determination and elaboration, however, involved the application of human reasoning, and it is this continuing interaction between reason and revelation, and the potential and limits of the former in relation to the latter, that provided the basis for formalised expressions of ethical thought in Islam.

Qur'an and the *Sunnah*

In one of the chapters of the Qur'an, entitled The Criterion (*Furqan*: Sura 25) revelation - to all humanity - becomes the point of reference for distinguishing right from wrong. The same chapter goes on to cite examples of past biblical prophets and their role as mediators of God's word to their respective societies. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam's beginnings are thus rooted in the idea of the divine command as a basis for establishing moral order through human endeavour. (See Article 46. *How Could Ethics Depend on Religion?*) Elsewhere in the Qur'an, the same term also indicates the concept of a revealed morality that presents humanity with a clear distinction between right and wrong which is not subject to human vicissitude. By grounding a moral code in divine will, an opportunity is afforded to human beings to respond by creating a rational awareness that sustains the validity of revelation. Thus a wider basis for human action is possible, if rationality comes to be applied as a result of revelation to elaborate criteria for encompassing the totality of human actions and decisions. These themes are played out in the Qur'anic telling of the story of Adam's creation and regress.

The interaction between revelation and reason

Adam, the first human, is distinguished from existing angels, who are asked to bow down to him, by virtue of his divinely endowed capacity to 'name things', that is to conceive of

knowledge capable of being described linguistically and thereby codified, a capacity not accessible to angels, who are seen as one-dimensional beings. This creative capacity carries with it, however, an obligation not to exceed set limits. Satan in the Qur'an exemplifies excess, since he disobeys God's command to honour and bow before Adam, thus denying his own innate nature and limits. In time, Adam too fails to live within the limits set by God, loses his honourable status, which he will have to recover subsequently by struggling with and overcoming his propensities on earth, the arena that allows for choice and action. Ultimately he does recover his former status, attesting to the capacity to return to the right course of action through rational understanding of his failure and by transcending the urge to set aside that rationality and test the limits set by divine command. Adam's story therefore reflects all of the potential for good and evil that is already built into the human condition and the unfolding saga of human response to a continuous divine revelation in history. It exemplifies the ongoing struggle within humanity to discover the mean that allows for balanced action and submission to the divine criterion. It is in that sense that the word Islam stands for the original revelation, requiring submission to achieve equilibrium, and that a muslim is one who seeks through action to attain that equilibrium in personal life as well as society.

What is *Taqwa*?

The human quality that encompasses the concept of the ideal ethical value in the Qur'an is summed up in the term *taqwa*, which in its various forms occurs over two hundred times in the text. It represents, on the one hand, the moral grounding that underlies human action, while on the other, it signifies the ethical conscience which makes human beings aware of their responsibilities to God and society. Applied to the wider social context *taqwa* becomes the universal, ethical mark of a truly moral community:

"O humankind! We have created you out of male and female and constituted you into different groups and societies, so that you may come to know each other - the noblest of you, in the sight of God, are the ones possessing taqwa." (49: 11-13)

More specifically, when addressing the first Muslims, the Qur'an refers to them as 'a community of the middle way, witnesses to humankind, just as the Messenger (i.e. Muhammad) is a witness for you' (2: 132).

Islam as a way of life

The Muslim *ummah* or community is thus seen as the instrument through which Qur'anic ideals and commands are translated at the social level. Individuals become trustees through whom a moral and spiritual vision is fulfilled in personal life. They are accountable to God and to the community, since that is the custodian through whom the covenantal relationship with God is sustained. The Qur'an affirms the dual dimension of human and social life - material and spiritual - but these aspects are not seen in conflictual terms, nor is it assumed that spiritual goals should predominate in a way that devalues material aspects of life. The Qur'an, recognising the complimentarily between the two, asserts that human conduct and aspirations have relevance as acts of faith within the wider human, social and cultural

contexts. It is in this sense that the idea that Islam embodies a total way of life can best be understood.

An illustration of one aspect of such a vision is the Qur'an's emphasis on the ethics of redressing injustice in economic and social life. For instance, individuals are urged to spend of their wealth and substance on:

1. family and relatives

2. orphans

3. the poor

4. the travelling homeless

5. the needy

6. freeing of the enslaved.

Such acts define a Muslim's responsibility to develop a social conscience and to share individual and communal resources with the less privileged. They are institutionalised in the Qur'an through the duty of *zakat*, a term connoting 'giving', 'virtue', 'increase' and 'purification'. In time, this became an obligatory act, assimilated into the framework of the ritual pillars of the faith, including prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. The Qur'an also sought to abolish usurious practices in the mercantile community of Mecca and Medina, stigmatising such practices as reflecting the lack of a work ethic and an undue exploitation of those in need.

At the social level, the Qur'an's emphasis on the family includes a concern for ameliorating the status of women, through the abolition of pre-Islamic practices such as female infanticide and by according women new rights. Among these were the rights of ownership of property, inheritance, the right to contract marriage and to initiate divorce, if necessary, and to maintain one's own dowry. Polygyny, the plurality of wives, was regulated and restricted, so that a male was permitted to have up to four wives, but only if he could treat them with equity. Muslims have traditionally understood this practice in its seventh-century context, as affording the necessary flexibility to address the social and cultural diversity that arose with the expansion of Islam. Some modern Muslims, however, maintain that the thrust of the Qur'anic reform was in the direction of monogamy and an enhanced public role for women. They also hold that the development and occurrence of customs and practices of seclusion and veiling of women were a result of local tradition and customs, occasionally antithetical to the spirit of emancipation of women envisaged in the Qur'an.

Since Muslims had been privileged by the Qur'an as the 'best of communities', whose function it was to command the right and prevent wrong, the Prophet Muhammad's mission, like that of some past prophets, involved the creation of a just, divinely ordained polity. The struggle towards this goal involved Muslims in warfare, and the term in the Qur'an that encompasses this effort as a whole is *jihad*. Often simply and erroneously translated as 'holy

war', *jihad* carries a far wider connotation that includes striving by peaceful means, such as preaching, education, and in a more personal and interiorised sense, as struggle to purify oneself. Where it refers to armed defence of a justly executed war, the Qur'an specifies the conditions for war and peace, the treatment of captives and the resolution of conflict, urging that the ultimate purpose of God's word was to invite and guide people to the 'ways of peace'.

Individual duties in a Muslim polity

As the Muslim polity took shape it also became necessary for it to address the question of its relationship and attitude towards non-Muslims with similar scriptural traditions, particularly Jews and Christians. In the Qur'an they are referred to as 'People of the Book'. Where they lived among Muslims, as subjects, they were to be granted `protected' status through a mutual agreement. They were to be subject to a poll tax and their private and religious property, law and religious practices were to be protected. They could not, however, proselytise among Muslims. While recognising the particularity of the Muslim community and its pre-eminent status, the Qur'an encourages a wider respect for difference and otherness in human society, while favouring common moral goals over mutually divisive and antagonistic attitudes:

"For each community, we have granted a Law and a Code of Conduct. If God wished. He could have made you One community, but He wishes rather to test you through that which has been given to you. So vie with each other to excel in goodness and moral virtue." (5: 48)

Legal and moral expressions

The need for congruence between the divine moral imperative and human life is also reflected in the preserved Prophetic tradition, which is perceived as explaining and confirming Qur'anic values and commands. The recording of episodes of the Prophet's life, his words, actions and habits, came in time to represent for Muslims a timeless model pattern for daily life. It also assumed an authoritative role in explaining and complementing the Qur'an. His personal character, struggle, piety and eventual success, enhance for Muslims Muhammad's role as the paradigm and seal of prophecy. A rich tradition of poetry in praise of the Prophet exists in virtually all the languages spoken by Muslims, enhancing both the commitment to emulate his behaviour and a sense of personal affinity and love for his person and family. For Muslims, the message of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet's life thus remain inseparably related through all of history as paradigms for moral and ethical behaviour. They formed the basis for Muslim thinkers subsequently to develop legal tools for embodying moral imperatives. The elaboration of the legal sciences would lead to a codification of norms and statutes that gave form to the concept of law in Islam, generally referred to as the *Shari'a*. Among the forms that developed to encompass the moral imperative are the various schools of law in Islam, each of whom, through the legal discipline of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), elaborated legal codes to embody their specific interpretation of how Muslims should respond to God's commands in conducting their daily lives.

Parallel to the developing legal expressions, there also emerged a set of moral assumptions that articulated ethical values, rooted in a more speculative and philosophical conception of human conduct as a response to the Qur'an and the Prophet's life. Groupings in Islam, as well as schools of law, were not as clearly circumscribed in the first three centuries of Muslim history as is generally thought. Most were still crystallising and their subsequent boundaries and positions were yet to be fully defined and elaborated. Public, legal and educational institutions in the Muslim world of the time had not achieved the classical forms or purposes that came to be associated with them. A key to this process of definition and distinction is the nature of public discourse that characterised the growing Muslim society in its first three centuries. Muslim conquest and expansion had resulted in contact with cultures whose intellectual heritages were in time selectively appropriated by Muslims, then refined and further developed. The integration of the intellectual and philosophical legacies of Greece, India and Iran among others, created conditions and a tradition of intellectual activity that would lead to the cosmopolitan heritage of an emerging Islamic civilisation. Christian and Jewish scholars, who had already encountered the above legacies in varying degrees, played a crucial mediating role as 'translators', particularly since they were also aware that the moral disposition of Muslims, like theirs, was shaped by common monotheistic conceptions based on divine command and revelation. The term *adab* has come to be used to define the wide connotation of meanings implied by the moral, ethical, intellectual and literary discourse that emerged. It was also during this period, from the eighth to the tenth centuries, that we see the emergence of what later came to be clearly identifiable theological and intellectual positions, within the Muslim community identified with traditions such as the Sunni, Shi'a, Mu'tazila and the Muslim philosophers.

The main features of the moral environment and perspective based on the Qur'anic message are defined by general ethical stances that came to be regarded as normative through their expression in legal language and terms. In the early period of Muslim intellectual history, these values also provided a frame of reference for the selective appropriation and development of philosophical, moral and ethical assumptions from other traditions, such as the Hellenistic, and served as a basis for widening the scope and application of an Islamic frame of reference to articulate ethical and moral values outside of merely juristically defined values. Since clear-cut distinctions in Islam between religion, society, and culture are hard to sustain, it seems appropriate, in discussing Muslim ethics, to let the whole spectrum of tendencies, legal, theological, philosophical and mystical, act as resources for disclosing moral assumptions and commitments in order to appreciate both development and continuity across the whole spectrum of Muslim thought and civilisation.

Theological and traditionalist approaches

The transition towards what Marshall Hodgson has termed the `Islamicate' civilisation marked two types of moral and intellectual beginnings. Both derived their inspiration from Islam's foundational texts and the unfolding of self-reflexive rational processes. The first involved, on the part of the early Muslims, a shift from a pre-Islamic Arab culture bound primarily by local, oral tradition, to one based on a revealed text, whose preservation and recording, in Arabic, created the conditions for the emergence of a new Islamic culture, based on the Qur'an and incorporating and extending the monotheistic imperative reflected in Judaism and

Christianity. The second 'beginning' was influenced in part by the translation into Arabic and study of works of ancient philosophy, medicine and the sciences (to a lesser extent including those of ancient Iran and India). The moral discussions and intellectual forces that emerged from the juxtaposition and integration of these into fresh beginnings, facilitated to a certain extent by the presence of Jewish and Christian scholars, stimulated a concern for how moral and religious perspectives could be reconciled with intellectual modes of inquiry.

The emergence of an intellectual tradition of inquiry based on the application of rational tools as a way of understanding Qur'anic injunctions led to the use among Muslims of a formal discipline devoted to the study of *kalam*, literally speech i.e. the word of God. The goals of this discipline were theological, in the sense that the application of reason was to make comprehensible and justify the word of God. The discussions involved Muslims in the elaboration and definition of certain ethical concerns, namely:

1. the meaning of Qur'anic ethical attributes such as 'just', 'obligatory', 'good', 'evil', etc.

2. the question of the relationship between human free will and divine will

3. the capacity of human beings to derive, through reason, the knowledge of objective ethical norms and truths.

Without doing too much injustice to the process of debate and discussion among various Muslim groups, it can be maintained that, in general, two clear positions emerged; one associated with the *Mu'tazila* and the other a traditionalist approach (generally associated with the Sunni tradition in Islam).

Mutazila Approach

The Mu'tazila argued that since God is just and rewards and punishes within that context, human beings must possess free choice in order that they might be held fully accountable. They denied that acts could therefore be predestined. Secondly, they maintained that since ethical notions had objective meaning, human beings possess the intellectual capacity to grasp these meanings. Reason therefore was a key attribute capable, independently of revelation, of making empirical observations and drawing ethical conclusions. Natural reason, however, must be supplemented and confirmed by divine revelation. Related to this was another Mu'tazili conviction, that God's just nature precluded any belief that he might deliberately lead believers to sinful acts.

Historically, the Mu'tazila school of thought died out and its views were not deemed acceptable to the majority of the traditionalists. The latter's refutation of the main points suggest a differing orientation towards the sources from which ethical values are derived, and the context of faith in which they have meaning. The traditionalist position, as embodied, for example, in the classic work of one founder of a Muslim juridical school, al-Shafi'i, was that the foundations of faith were a matter of practice, not speculation. Over against the Mu'tazila belief that natural reason enabled good and evil to be determined, al-Shafi'i emphasised revelation as the ultimate source of definition. Since the principle of human accountability was also the cornerstone of juridical thought - obligations implied the capacity to undertake

them - good and evil were to be determined on the basis of textual proof - Qur'anic and, by extension, that contained in Prophetic tradition. Acts and obligations were good and evil ultimately because divine commands defined them as such.

On the question of human freedom for action, the Mu'tazili portion was combated, in one respect, through a notion of 'acquisition'. It was argued that the human power to perform acts was not one's own, but came from God. Human beings 'acquire' responsibility for their actions, thus making them accountable. It must be underlined that traditionalist thinkers were not opposed to the use of reason, quite the contrary: they parted company with rationalists only over the value placed on reason. They regarded it as an aid and tool for affirming issues of faith, but purely secondary in its relation to the definition of ethical obligation.

Sunni Approach

In summing up the traditionalist position, George Makdisi has emphasised that the final basis for moral obligation, from its perspective, was the data of Islam's foundational texts, the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, elaborated and applied as God's commands and prohibitions, conceived as the *Shari'a*, formulated through the respective Muslim juridical schools. Such formulations of commands and prohibitions in Muslim books of law are expressed in ethical terms. Five categories are employed for evaluating all acts:

1. Obligatory acts, such as the duty to perform ritual prayer, paying of *zakat* and the practice of fasting.

2. Recommended acts, which are not considered obligatory, such as supererogatory acts of charity, kindness, prayer, etc.

3. Permitted actions, regarding which the law adopts a neutral stance, that is there is no expectation of reward or punishment for such acts.

4. Acts that are discouraged and regarded as reprehensible, but not strictly forbidden; Muslim jurists differ about what actions to include in this category.

5. Actions that are categorically forbidden, such as murder, adultery, blasphemy, theft, intoxication, etc.

These categories were further set by jurists within a dual framework of obligations: towards God and towards society. In each instance transgression was perceived in both legal and theological terms, as constituting a crime as well as a sin. Such acts were punishable under the law and the jurists attempted to specify and elaborate the conditions under which this could occur. For example, one of the punishments for theft or highway robbery was the cutting off of a hand and, in minor instances, flogging. Traditionally, jurists attempted to take into account active repentance to mitigate such punishment, following a tradition of the Prophet to restrict the applicability of such punishments to extreme cases.

Some of these categories have received attention in several Muslim countries in recent times, where traditional juristic procedures have been reinstated, but there is a great deal of divergence in the Muslim world about the necessity and applicability of some of these procedures. Where applied, such punishment is meted out through *Shari'a* courts and rendered by appointed Muslim judges. Jurists or legal experts also function as interpreters of the *Shari'a* and are free to render informed legal opinions. Such opinions may be solicited by individuals who wish to be certain about the moral intentionality of certain acts, but among most Muslim schools of law such opinions need not be binding. The four major Sunni schools of law consider each other to reflect normative stances on matters of legal and ethical interpretation. For these Muslim jurists, both law and ethics are ultimately concerned with moral obligations, which they believe are the central focus of the Islamic message.

Philosophical approaches

The integration of the philosophical legacy of antiquity in the Islamic world was a major enabling factor in the use of philosophical tradition among Muslim intellectuals. It gave rise to figures such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and others, who became well-known to mediaeval Europe as philosophers, commentators and exponents of the classical tradition going back to Plato and Aristotle. The public discourse of *adab*, grounded in philosophical and moral language and concerns, represents a significant part of the cosmopolitan heritage of ethics in Islam and reflects efforts to reconcile religiously and scripturally derived values with an intellectually and morally based ethical foundation. The Muslim philosophical tradition of ethics is therefore doubly significant: for its value in continuing and enhancing classical Greek philosophy and for its commitment to synthesising Islam and philosophical thought.

Al-Farabi (d. 950 CE) argued for harmony between the ideals of virtuous religion and the goals of a true polity. Through philosophy, one is able to arrive at an understanding of how human happiness is to be achieved, but the actual recourse to moral virtues and acts involves the instrumentality of religion. He compares the founding of religion to the founding of a city. Citizens ought to acquire the traits which enable them to function as residents of a virtuous polis. Similarly the founder of a religion establishes norms that must be upheld through action, if a proper religious community is to be established. The thrust of Farabi's argument, particularly as it is articulated in his classic work, *The Virtuous City*, suggests a communal framework for attaining ultimate happiness, and therefore significant social and political roles for religion as well as an engagement in similar concerns by politicians. In this respect, the emphasis on virtue and its ethical connotations suggests a common focus for both Greek and Muslim philosophy, namely the application of such standards and norms to political societies. The greater the wisdom and virtue of the rulers and the citizens, the greater the possibility of attaining the true goal of philosophy and religion - happiness.

Ibn Sina (d. 1037) develops the argument that the Prophet embodies the totality of virtuous action and thought, the best of which is reflected in the attainment of moral virtue. The Prophet has acquired the moral characteristics needed for his own development which, having resulted in a perfect soul, not only imbues in him the capacity of a free intellect, but also makes him capable of laying down rules for other people, through laws and the establishment

of justice. This implies that the Prophet goes beyond the philosopher and the virtuous ruler, who possess the capacity for intellectual development and practical morality, respectively. The establishment of justice is, in Ibn Sina's view, the basis for all human good. The combination of philosophy and religion encompasses harmonious living in both this world and in the hereafter.

Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) was faced with the daunting task for a Muslim philosopher of defending philosophy against attacks, the most well-known being by the great Sunni Muslim theologian Al-Ghazali (d. 1111). The latter, through a work entitled *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, had sought to represent philosophers as self-contradictory, anti-scriptural and in some cases as affirming heretical beliefs. Ibn Rushd's defence was based on his contention that the Qur‘an enjoined the use of reflection and reason and that the study of philosophy complemented traditionalist approaches to Islam. He asserted that philosophy and Islam had common goals, but arrived at them differently. There is thus a basic identity of interest between Muslims who adopt philosophical frames of inquiry and those who affirm juridical ones.

In summary, the various Muslim philosophers in their extension and occasional revision of earlier classical notions linked ethics to theoretical knowledge, which was to be acquired by rational means. Since human beings were rational, the virtues and qualities that they embraced and practised were seen as furthering the ultimate goal of individuals and the community. This goal was the attainment of happiness.

Shi‘a and Sufi perspectives

Among the Shi'a, who differed from the Sunni group in attributing legitimate authority after the Prophet Muhammad's death to his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali, and subsequently to his designated descendants, known as Imams, there developed the notion of rationality under the guiding instruction of the Imam. The Imam, who was believed to be divinely guided, acted in early Shi'a history as both custodian of the Qur‘an and the Prophet's teaching, and interpreter and guide for the elaboration and systematisation of the Qur‘anic vision for the individual as well as society. Shi'ism, like the early theological and philosophical schools, affirmed the use of rational and intellectual discourse and was committed to a synthesis and further development of appropriate elements present in other religions and intellectual traditions outside Islam.

An example of a work on ethics by a Shi'a writer is the well-known *Nasirian Ethics* by Nasir al-din Tusi (d. 275). Developing further the philosophical approaches already present among Muslims and linking them to Shi'a conceptions of guidance. Tusi draws attention to the need for ethical enactments to be based on superiority of knowledge and preponderance of discrimination, i.e. by a person 'who is distinguished from others by divine support, so that he may be able to accomplish their perfection' (Tusi, 1964, pp. 191-2). Wilferd Madelung has tried to show that Tusi blended into his ethical work elements of Neo-Platonic as well as Shi'a Ismaili and Twelver Shi'a philosophical and moral perspectives.

The Twelver Shi'a are so-called because of their belief that the twelfth in the line of Imams they recognised had withdrawn from the world, to reappear physically only at the end of time to restore true justice. In the meantime, during his absence, the community was guided by trained scholars called *mujtahids* who interpreted for individual believers right and wrong in all matters of personal and religious life. In the Twelver Shi'a tradition therefore, such individuals, called *mullahs* in popular parlance, play a significant role as moral models and, as in recent times in Iran, have assumed a major role in the political life of the state, seeking to shape it in line with their view of a Muslim polity.

Among Ismaili groups that give allegiance to a living Imam, the Imam's presence is considered necessary to contextualise Islam in changing times and circumstances and his teachings and interpretation continue to guide followers in their material as well as spiritual lives. An example is the role of the current Imam of the Nizari Ismailis, the Aga Khan, who leads a worldwide community.

Among the Shi'a continuity with Muslim tradition and values thus remains tied to the continuing spiritual authority vested in the Imam or his representatives.

Muslim ethics in the contemporary world

Sufism is the mystical and esoteric dimension of Islam, emphasising the cultivation of an inner personal life in search of divine love and knowledge. Since a major part of Sufi teaching was to enable an individual Muslim to seek intimacy with God, it was felt that such seekers must embrace a commitment to an inner life of devotion and moral action that would lead to spiritual awakening. The observances of the Shari'a were to be complemented by adherence to a path of moral displine, enabling the seeker to pass through several spiritual 'stations', each representing inner, spiritual growth, until one had understood the essential relationship of love and union between seeker and God. Since the inner meaning of action was a significant aspect of Sufi understanding of ethical and moral behaviour. Sufis emphasised the linkage between an inner, experiential awareness of morality and its outward expression, so that a true moral action was one embracing and penetrating the whole of life.

In institutional settings organised Sufi groups taught conformity to traditional Muslim values but added the component of discipline and inner purification. Since the practices that instilled discipline and moral awareness varied across the range of cultures and traditions encountered by Islam, many local practices were appropriated. These included, for example, the acceptance of the moral customs and practices adhered to in local tradition, such as in Indonesia and other countries, where large scale conversions had occurred. Sufi ethical practices thus provided a bridge for incorporating into Muslim moral behaviour the ethical values and practices of local traditions illustrating the universality of Sufi Muslim perspectives on the oneness of the inner dimension of various faiths. Al-Ghazali, the Sunni jurist and theologian mentioned earlier, became a supporter of Sufi thought, but sought to synthesise the moral perspectives of the Shari'a with the notion of inner piety developed by Sufis. He conceived of divinely ordained obligations as a starting point for cultivating a moral personality, provided that it led to an inwardly motivated sense of ethics in due course. He

was, however, reluctant to accept the emphasis of some Sufis on a purely experiential and subjectively guided basis for moral action.

The practice and influence of the diverse ethical heritage in Islam has continued in varying degrees among Muslims in the contemporary world. Muslims, whether they constitute majorities in the large number of independent nation states that have arisen in this century, or where they live in significant numbers and communities elsewhere, are going through an important transitional phase. There is growing self-consciousness about identification with their past heritage and a recognition of the need to adapt that heritage to changing circumstances and a globalisation of human society. As with the rest of the issues, ethical questions cannot be reflected in unified and monolithic responses. They must take into account the diversity and pluralism that has marked the Muslims of the past as well as the present.

Ethical criteria that can govern issues of economic and social justice and moral strategies for dealing with questions of poverty and imbalance have taken up the greater share of Muslim attention in ethical matters. Whether such responses are labelled 'modernist' or 'fundamentalist', they all reflect specific readings of past Muslim symbols and patterns and in their rethinking and restating of norms and values, employ different strategies for inclusion, exclusion and encoding of specific representations of Islam. In terms of broad moral and ethical concerns, this ongoing discourse seeks to establish norms for both public and private life, and is therefore simultaneously cultural, political, social and religious.

Since the modern conception of religion familiar to most people in the West assumes a theoretical separation between specifically religious and perceived secular activity, some aspects of contemporary Muslim discourse, which does not accept such a separation, appear strange and often retrogressive. Where such discourse, expressed in what appears to be traditional religious language, has become linked to radical change or violence, it has unfortunately deepened stereotypical perceptions about Muslim fanaticism, violence, and cultural and moral difference. As events and developments in the last quarter of the twentieth century indicate, no one response among the many Muslim societies in the world, can be regarded as normative for all Muslims.

In the pursuit of a vision that will guide Muslims in decisions and choices about present and future ethical matters, the most important challenge may be not simply to formulate a continuity and dialogue with its own past ethical underpinning but, like the Muslims of the past, to remain open to the possibilities and challenges of new ethical and moral discoveries.

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