REOPENING MUSLIM MINDS

A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance

MUSTAFA AKYOL

ST. MARTIN'S
ESSENTIALS
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To my beloved sons, Levent Taha & Efe Rauf,
so that they may grow up with both Islamic faith & universal ethics

Political Islam is only an aspect of the overall problem of Islam in the modern world.

—Ali A. Allawi, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization,* 2010

The task before the modern Muslim is, therefore, immense. He has to rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past.

—Muhammad Iqbal,
The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, 1930

INTRODUCTION

A NIGHT WITH THE RELIGION POLICE

> Anyone who can liberate the Malay Muslim mind is a dangerous threat. That is why the authorities had to censure Mustafa Akyol. They detained him, interrogated him and made his immediate future uncertain.
>
> —Mariam Mokhtar, Malaysian journalist, Oct 2017[1]

On September 21, 2017, I took the very long journey from the small town of Wellesley, Massachusetts, to Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, with no clue about what awaited me in this far end of the world.

At that time, I was a visiting fellow at the Freedom Project at Wellesley College—an initiative aimed at cherishing classical liberal values, such as freedom of speech within American academia. What took me to Malaysia was also a liberal initiative, albeit one that operated within a very different milieu. Named Islamic Renaissance Front, or IRF, this was a small but vocal organization founded by faithful Malay Muslims who challenged the oppressive and intolerant interpretations of Islam in their country—with arguments from Islam itself.

My acquaintance with the IRF had a history. The organization had hosted me in Malaysia three times before, organizing seminars at universities, institutes, and other public venues. In 2016, it also published the Malay version of my 2011 book, *Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty.* The founding leader of IRF, Dr. Ahmad Farouk Musa, was energized with the attention Malay Muslims were giving to foreign voices

like mine. He just had a concern with the "Inquisition," the seriousness of which I had not yet grasped.

On this trip, the first event on my schedule was a panel on how rational theology and philosophy flourished in early Islam and how their later decline marked an "intellectual suicide" that still haunts us—as we shall also see in this book. To an attentive audience, I argued that we Muslims need to revisit some of the ideas that have been banned to us as "heresy" for about a thousand years.

The next day, at another public venue in Kuala Lumpur, I spoke at the second panel on my schedule, which probed a sensitive topic: apostasy from Islam.[2] It is a sensitive topic, because while you may think that anybody has the right to change his or her religion, quite a few Muslims believe that if the abandoned religion is Islam, the apostate deserves a death penalty. This punishment is applicable in about a dozen "Islamic" states, such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, where Malaysians are proudly more "moderate." So, instead of executing the apostates, they send them to rehabilitation centers, where people can be held for six months, so that they can be "educated" and "corrected."[3]

In my speech, I argued that apostates should be neither executed nor "rehabilitated," but just left alone with their conscience. I referred to Islamic scholars who have reformist views on this matter, and also I reminded my audience of a Qur'anic phrase: *La ikraha fi al-din,* or "There is no compulsion in religion."[4] Yes, apostasy was condemned as a capital crime in classical Islamic law, I explained, but this only reflected the medieval norms according to which leaving the religious community also implied political treason. Times have changed, I noted, and our laws and attitudes must change as well.

In the same speech, I also added that if a Muslim loses faith in the religion, dictates would achieve nothing. For faith is a sincere conviction in the heart and mind that cannot be imposed from the outside. "Faith," I emphatically said, "is not something you can *police.*"

Well, speak of the devil, as the saying goes, and he shall appear.

As the panel ended and I was getting ready to leave, a group of serious-looking men approached me. "Are you Mustafa Akyol?" asked one of them. I said, "yes," wondering who he was. "*As-salamu alaykum,*" the man said.

"We are *the religion police*." Then he showed me his card, which defined his job really as "religion enforcement officer."

The officers just wanted to "ask a few questions." Supposedly, they had heard "complaints" about my speech, and now they were to investigate what I had said. "We got the recorded video of your talk," the senior officer said. "We will watch it and then inform you about the next step." He also asked me if I really quoted the Qur'anic phrase "There is no compulsion in religion"? I affirmed, "yes," wondering why that could be a problem.

The officers also noted that they didn't like my lecture planned for the next day—a conversation on my more recent book, *The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of the Muslims*. Apparently the problem was the event's subtitle, which read, "Commonalities Between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam." "We don't like that kind of stuff," the senior officer plainly told me, making me recall the obsession in the country of drawing sharp boundaries between Abrahamic religions—to the absurd extent of banning Christians from using the word "Allah," which Arab Christians have used for centuries without any question.[5]

Then, after this short interrogation, the religion police let me go, and I thought that was it.

The next morning, however, I woke up in my hotel room to read in the Malay media that I had been summoned to their headquarters—to the government ministry called Federal Territories Islamic Affairs Department, or, shortly, JAWI. My hosts suggested that we should cancel my last lecture and I should leave the country as soon as possible, to deal with JAWI's questions through a lawyer and from afar. Following this advice, I packed my bags, bought souvenirs for my wife, and headed to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Around 8 P.M., I checked in and got my boarding pass. When I arrived at the passport control area, however, I realized that my adventure in Malaysia wasn't yet over.

A VISIT TO THE "INQUISITION"

The female officer who looked at my passport turned a bit nervous when she put my name in her computer. "You need to wait, sir," she said. She then called some police officers, who called other police officers, who soon escorted me to the police unit at the airport. There I learned that JAWI had

issued a nationwide arrest order for me, to make sure I didn't leave the country.

That was the beginning of a very long night. I was taken from the airport to a nearby police station, then to another official building, going through sluggish processes and also long distances around the unfamiliar Malay capital. Finally, toward 5 A.M., I was taken to the JAWI headquarters, where I was locked up in a detention room. No one was rude or harsh toward me, but the many unknowns were nevertheless distressing. I kept thinking about my children and my wife, who had given birth to our second son just weeks before my arrival in Malaysia.

In the morning, around 8 A.M., my door was unlocked and I was told that we were heading to the "Sharia court." Finally, after another long drive and some waiting, I entered the court, which must have been the "Inquisition" that Dr. Musa had been talking about. I found two young veiled female officers sitting next to an older religious scholar with a long beard—a *Hakim Syarie,* or "Sharia Judge." For two hours, they questioned why I came to Malaysia, who "abetted" me, and why I did not seek "permission" from the authorities in order to "teach Islam." They were respectful, but also stern. And, astonishingly, they asked again with what authority I quoted the Qur'anic phrase "There is no compulsion in religion."

Finally, there came the happy ending to this dark episode. I rejoiced to hear the sentence "We will release you." "This is a lesson," added one of the female officers, "so don't come back to Malaysia again and teach Islam without permission."

Soon, after eighteen hours under detention, I was let go. The first thing I did was call my wife, Riada. From her, I learned that what saved me was not mere luck. After Dr. Musa notified her of my arrest via phone, she immediately called Istanbul to alarm my father, Taha Akyol, who is a prominent Turkish public intellectual. He sought help from a few of his influential friends, the most prominent of which was Abdullah Gül, Turkey's former president and a rare Muslim liberal democrat. Mr. Gül's Istanbul office immediately got in touch with the office of His Royal Highness Sultan Nazrin Shah, a key ruler in Malaysia's complex federal monarchic system. The Sultan's advisor, Dr. Afifi al-Akiti, a scholar at Oxford University, soon contacted the court's officials. Whatever was said

apparently worked. Hours later, Dr. al-Akiti even kindly escorted me to my plane, on which this time I boarded without any trouble.

Yet still, days after my departure, the Malaysian government banned my book *Islam Without Extremes* along with its Malay edition, *Islam Tanpa Keekstreman.* The decision was announced by then deputy prime minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who said the book was "not suitable to the societal norms here."[6] That initiated a long legal process, as the Islamic Renaissance Front went all the way up to the nation's High Court to get the books unbanned. But in April 2019, the High Court upheld the government's prohibition. In return, the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., which I joined in September 2018 as a senior fellow focusing on Islam and modernity, offered the Malay edition of the book for free, soon to be downloaded by thousands of Malay readers.[7] The Malaysian authorities were not giving up, so we would not give up, either.

"NO COMPULSION"—AND ITS LIMITS

What was it that alarmed the Malay authorities so much about my message? That question was in my mind right from the moment I was let go by the religion police. While seeking an answer, I recalled the bizarre detail in the interrogation: that they were annoyed at me for quoting the Qur'anic phrase "There is no compulsion in religion." It is in a longer verse of the Qur'an, which, in its entirety, reads as follows:

> There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break. God is all hearing and all knowing.[8]

While this verse has always been present in the Qur'an, the short clause at its very beginning took a life of its own in the modern era, providing a universal motto for liberal-minded Muslims. For in just a few simple words, it seemed to rule out any coercion in religious matters. True, the rest of the verse moved on to renounce "false gods" and to proclaim monotheism as "true guidance." That is what religions do: they make a truth claim. But this truth claim remarkably came with a proclamation of "no compulsion," or, in other words, freedom.

However, not all Muslims liked this Qur'anic freedom. I had seen some Saudi translations curtail it by inserting a few extra words, in parentheses, into the "no compulsion" phrase.[9] When I checked the website of JAKIM, the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development, I found out the same thing. The "no compulsion" phrase was written like this:

There shall be no compulsion in religion (in becoming a Muslim).[10]

This little insertion in parentheses had huge consequences, for it reduced the "no compulsion" clause merely to allowing non-Muslims to stay outside of the faith. Those who are already Muslim, however, had no right to leave. They were also subject to coercion in the practice of the faith. This little stroke of a pen, in other words, gave the religion police its very authority to dictate Islam—the very authority I had challenged.

Yet, to be fair, this little stroke of a pen was also not unwarranted, because the "no compulsion" clause in fact had a limited meaning in the eyes of the premodern exegetes of the Qur'an, who built the mainstream Islamic tradition. Some argued that the verse was simply about a specific historic incident without any broader implications. Others suggested that the verse was only about not forcing Christians and Jews to accept Islam, but nothing more. Some even held that the "no compulsion" clause was "abrogated" by other verses of the Qur'an, which commanded war against "those who do not believe in God or in the Last Day."[11] Forcing people to accept Islam "with the sword" does not even count as compulsion, some also argued, because it is only for their own good.[12]

Moreover, a hadith, a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, further marginalized the spirit of the verse. "Whoever changes his religion," it bluntly read, "kill him."[13] Whether the Prophet of Islam really said this is a good question we will probe in later chapters. But classical scholars took it at face value, reaching a "consensus," or *ijma,* that the apostate must be executed—only after being given a few days to recant.

That is why the Malaysian authorities weren't totally making things up by "editing" the translation of the "no compulsion" clause in order to limit its scope to only those who aren't Muslim yet. They had the whole weight of the Islamic tradition behind them. In return, liberal Muslims like myself were pushing for something new.

This story is not meant to discredit Malaysia. It is a beautiful country for which I still have a heart, a country that I would encourage anyone to visit. I also feel lucky that I had this experience there—and not in countries with much harsher laws, such as Saudi Arabia or Iran. Malaysia is indeed more "moderate" when compared to such religious dictatorships, where liberal critics can go through much darker experiences.

The problem isn't about Malaysia, though. It is not about any other specific country, either. It is about an interpretation of Islam that is, by modern standards, authoritarian and intolerant. It manifests itself in laws and institutions that force women to cover their heads, or consider them lesser than men. It jails, flogs, or kills people for criticizing Islam and for even offering alternative interpretations of it. It demonizes Christians, Jews, and others, or even fellow Muslims who happen to be from a different sect.

Mind you: this is a separate problem from terrorism in the name of Islam, as practiced by armed groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, or Boko Haram. Those terrorists are really "extremists," in the sense that their wanton violence, which targets many fellow Muslims, as well, finds a very marginal support in the Muslim world. The problem of religious illiberalism, however, is not marginal. Suffice it to say that more than 60 percent of all Egyptians or Pakistanis believe that apostates must be executed or adulterers must be stoned.[14]

In the West, especially in the past few decades, this problem has attracted a great deal of attention, but its nuances often get lost in the tug-of-war between two opposite camps.

On one side, there are the apologists, who argue that there is simply no problem within Islam today. There are only a handful of extremists, they say, whose zealotry has "nothing to do with Islam." They often have the good intention of defending Muslims from bigotry, but they do this by deflecting attention from real problems.

On the other side, there are Islamophobes, who cherry-pick all the problems within Islam today in order to depict the entire religion in darkest terms. They not only draw an unfair picture of the reality but also promote bigotry against Muslims, which helps only deepen the problem at hand.

So a more fair take on Islam is necessary, which can be helped greatly by a historical and comparative perspective.[15] Islam is the last of the three great Abrahamic religions, and most problems we see in it today have also been present in the other two—Judaism and Christianity. The history of the latter, in particular, includes many episodes of coercion and violence in the name of God. It was only a few centuries ago that "heretics" or "witches" were burnt alive in Europe, and Catholics and Protestants shed each other's blood. In those premodern times, Islam in fact proved to be a more lenient religion. That is why Sephardic Jews migrated to Muslim lands in 1492 to flee the persecution of Catholic Spain. That is why French philosopher Jean Bodin (d. 1596), who pleaded for religious tolerance, praised "the great emperour of the Turks," who "permitteth every man to live according to his conscience."[16]

Things began to change dramatically, however, with the Age of Enlightenment and its brightest creation: liberalism. New values, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or equality before law, emerged, establishing a sense of human rights unmatched in any premodern civilization. Compared to them, the norms of the Islamic civilization looked growingly archaic.

To be sure, since the nineteenth century, some Muslims have taken significant steps to catch up. Recently, British historian Christopher de Bellaigue has summarized these efforts as the "Islamic Enlightenment."[17] Yet this very drive—including its authoritarian strains—provoked "Islam's counter-Enlightenment."[18] This is a reaction spearheaded by those whom scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl calls "puritans"—a wide range of Salafis, Islamists, and rigid conservatives—who act as the defenders of the Islamic orthodoxy against modern liberal values. For worse, they are often more assertive than the orthodoxy itself, due to both their reactionary nature and the newfound powers of the modern bureaucratic state.

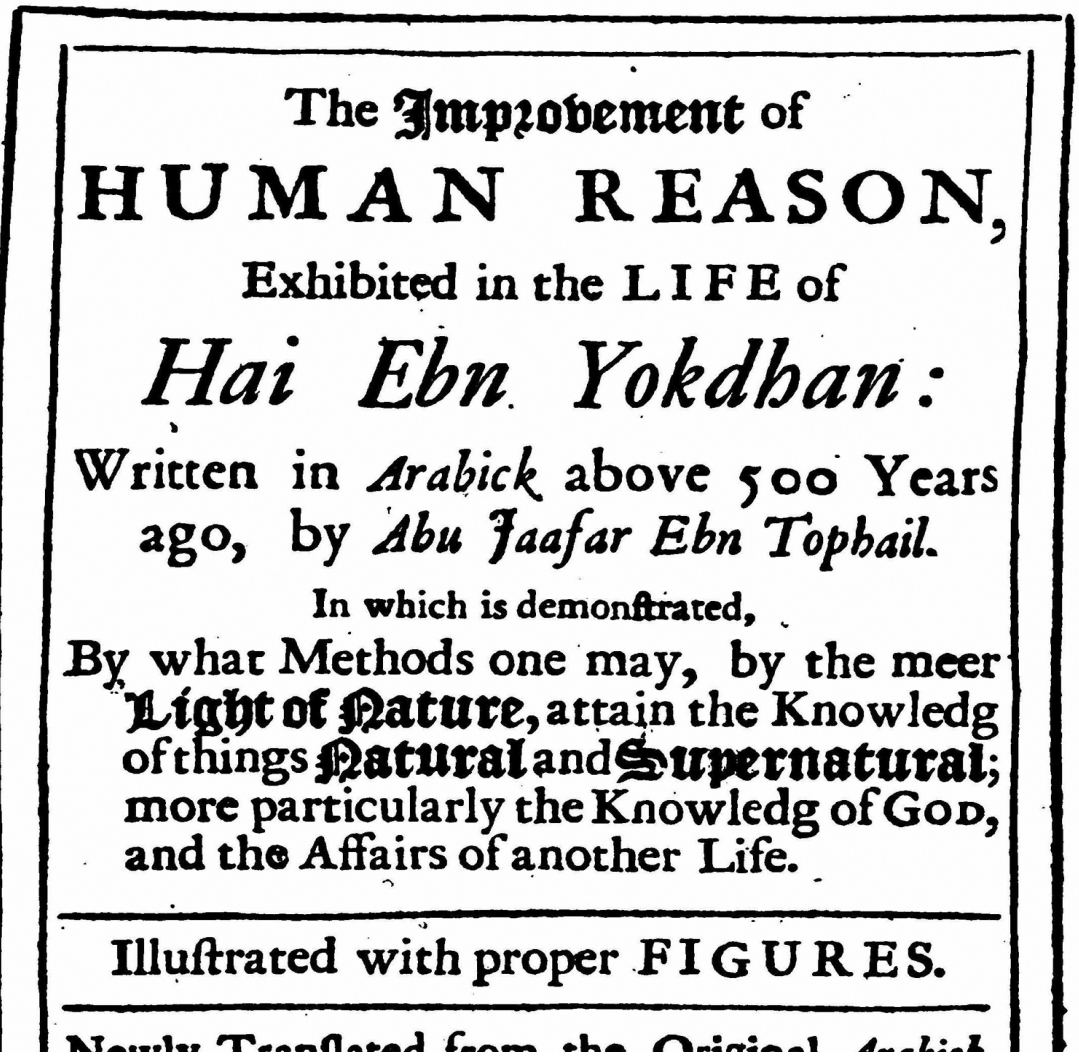
This book is meant to be an intervention into this big crisis of Islam. It aims to help advance the Islamic Enlightenment, by presenting a comprehensive argument for it—and, perhaps more importantly, by dismantling the theological roadblock that obstructs it.

Yet I have an important point to stress: By "Islamic Enlightenment," I really mean *Islamic* Enlightenment. In other words, I am not speaking about a wholesale adoption of Western Enlightenment, which had some dark spots

of its own, such as Eurocentrism, racism, "white man's burden," or the illiberal secularism that grew especially in France. I am rather speaking about finding Enlightenment values—reason, freedom, and tolerance—within the Islamic tradition itself.

Luckily, those values really do exist within the Islamic tradition—yet often only as uncultivated seeds, forgotten paths, or even muted voices. And, as a great irony of history, those muted voices have been more impactful on another civilization: the Western world.

And right from that irony, now, we will begin *Reopening Muslim Minds.* We will go back to early modern Europe and look into a philosophical novel that fascinated British, French, German, and Dutch thinkers — a philosophical novel that was written centuries before by an Arab philosopher from Muslim Spain.



The Improvement of

HUMAN REASON,

Exhibited in the LIFE of

Hai Ebn Yokdhan:

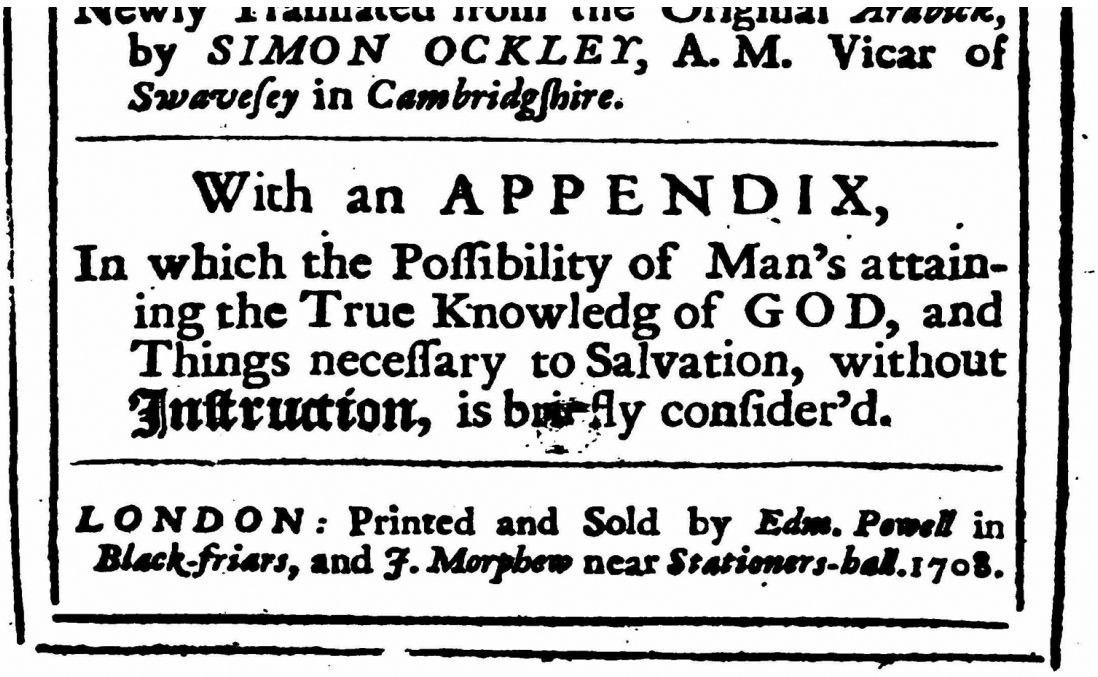
Written in *Arabick* above 500 Years ago, by *Abu Jaafar Ebn Tophail.*

In which is demonstrated,

By what Methods one may, by the meer Light of Nature, attain the Knowledg of things Natural and Supernatural; more particularly the Knowledg of God, and the Affairs of another Life.

Illustrated with proper FIGURES.

Newly Translated from the Original *Arabick*


Newly Translated from the Original *Arabick*,
by *SIMON OCKLEY*, A. M. Vicar of
Swaveſey in *Cambridgſhire*.

With an APPENDIX,
In which the Poſſibility of Man's attaining the True Knowledg of GOD, and Things neceſſary to Salvation, without **Inſtruction**, is briefly conſider'd.

LONDON: Printed and Sold by *Edm. Powell* in *Black-friars*, and *J. Morphew* near *Stationers-hall*. 1708.

The cover of the 1708 edition of Simon Ockley's English translation of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*.

1

A SELF-MADE MAN: HAYY IBN YAQZAN

> Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another.
>
> —Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" (1784)

In 1671, Edward Pococke, the son and namesake of a famous Arabist at Oxford University, published a book titled *Philosophus Autodidactus,* or *The Self-Taught Philosopher*. This was the Latin translation of an Arabic-language manuscript that his father had encountered some forty years ago in Aleppo, where he worked as a chaplain to the Levant Company. At first sight, the book read like an adventure novel, but it was also a philosophical treatise demonstrating the power of human reason.

What Pococke expected from his translation, that we don't know. But we do know that the book turned out to be a hit. Scholars visiting Oxford soon began begging for copies on behalf of colleagues abroad who had heard of it. The secretary to the British embassy in Paris, who introduced the book to scholars at the Sorbonne who "all read and approved it," regretted that he ran out of copies to distribute. A Swiss colleague of Pococke's asked for a copy for a French bishop who "impatiently expected it."[1]

No wonder several reprints and other translations followed. In 1672, a year after Pococke's Latin translation, the book came out in Dutch. Two years later, an English translation by a Scottish theologian was published, only to be followed by another English translation by a Catholic vicar in

1686, and finally a third translation from the Arabic original in 1708 by Simon Ockley, a professor of Arabic at Cambridge University. In 1726, the book also was published in German.

Philosophus Autodidactus did so well because it fascinated its readers. These included, even much before Pococke's translation, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the key philosopher of the Renaissance who wrote the famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man.*[2] Later fans of the book included "natural philosophers," or scientists, as they were called at the time, such as Robert Boyle, who is largely regarded today as the first modern chemist, along with Enlightenment thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Some scholars think that the book may have inspired John Locke, the father of political liberalism, for his notion of *tabula rasa,* which envisions a free and self-authored human mind.[3] Some also suspect an influence on the author Daniel Defoe, who, in 1719, published what is commonly known as the first English novel: *Robinson Crusoe.*[4]

In fact, some connection between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Philosophus Autodidactus* seems evident, because both books are about lone men living on uninhabited islands. The latter was just more philosophical, was written some six centuries earlier, and its author had a name less familiar to Western ears: Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abd al-Malik ibn Muhammad ibn Tufayl.

AN INDIVIDUAL PATH TO WISDOM

Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185/86), as he is shortly called, was an Arab Muslim polymath from Al-Andalus, the medieval Muslim kingdom in southern Spain. He penned treatises on medicine, only one of which survived, and also astronomy, in which he raised serious objections against the Ptolemaic system, which was the dominant model of his time. None of his works, however, have been as influential as the novel that would later make its way into Europe as *Philosophus Autodidactus.* The book's original name, which was also the name of its hero, was *Hayy ibn Yaqzan,* or, literally, "*Alive, The Son of the Awake.*"

Hayy's story, which we will now briefly see, begins on a wondrous Indian island, which "enjoys the most equable and perfect temperature of all places on the Earth."[5] It is full of beautiful plants and animals, but the

first human who ever appeared on it, as a little baby boy, is Hayy ibn Yaqzan. Regarding his origin, which the author left unclear, we are introduced to two alternative theories. One is that men could come into life on this island "spontaneously without the help of father and mother." The other theory is that a princess on a nearby island feared for the life of her baby and set him aloft—just like baby Moses—to reach a safe shore.

No matter how he appears on the island, the baby Hayy begins his life there all alone, only lucky to be suckled and adopted by a gazelle that we meet as "Mother the Roe." As Hayy grows up, he begins to examine the natural world around him and to draw conclusions. He initially envies the animals for all the defensive weapons that they have but that he himself lacks—horns, teeth, hoofs, spurs, and nails. But then he realizes he has other gifts. His hands are capable of using tools, or making shoes and dresses from the skins of dead animals. He also realizes that he has the power to think, aim, and strategize.

When he is at the age of seven, his mother, Roe, the gazelle, gets fragile and finally dies. Devastated by grief, Hayy wants to do something to bring her to life, and, to that end, he wants to understand why she died. Finding no visible defect on her body, he decides to do that which had been a big taboo throughout the Middle Ages: an autopsy. He uses a sharp stone to dissect the body, and goes all the way to the heart and examines its cavities. Although he can't bring Roe back to life, he figures out how the heart and the blood system work. By analogy, he begins to map out his own anatomy as well. When the body of Roe begins to decay, Hayy also learns from the ravens how to bury it—evoking the Qur'anic story of Abel and Cain.[6]

As he grows up, Hayy gets wiser and wiser, going through seven-year-long phases of maturation. He discovers more and more about the natural world through his evolving capacity for reasoned inquiry. He studies the limbs of animals and classifies them into kinds and species. He also begins to utilize the natural world by controlling fire, spinning wool, building himself a house and a pantry, domesticating birds to help him for hunting, or taming wild horses and asses. Thanks to all his observations and experiments, he acquires "the highest degree of knowledge in this kind which the most learned naturalists ever attained to." In the words of an early twentieth-century French Orientalist, "This part of the novel forms a very interesting and ingeniously arranged encyclopaedia."[7]

Then, at the age of twenty-eight, Hayy begins to focus on physics. He observes how water becomes vapor, discovering the transition from one form to another, recognizing that every transformation and motion must have a cause. Then he gets to the physics of the heavenly bodies. "He considered the motion of the moon and the planets from West to East," we read, "till at last he understood a great part of astronomy."

After all this, Hayy, who is now well in his middle ages, begins to ponder philosophy. What is the origin of all this amazing natural world? he asks himself, and entertains the two grand theories that were bitterly opposed at the time: that the universe was either created ex nihilo, or that it existed since eternity. "Concerning this matter he had very many and great doubts," we read, "so that neither of these two opinions did prevail over the other."

Not being a dogmatic person who would jump to conclusions without evidence, Hayy doesn't end up with a verdict. "He continued for several years, arguing *pro* and *con* about this matter," Ibn Tufayl tells us, as "a great many arguments offered themselves on both sides, so that neither of these two opinions in his judgment over-balanced the other." So, on the question of the origin of the universe, Hayy remains skeptical, keeping a position of well-thought uncertainty that you would not see very often in the middle ages—and, well, not today, either.

Hayy does not end up skeptical on the question of God, though. He reasons that both of the cosmologies he considers point to the existence of a deity. If the universe was created ex nihilo, it certainly must have had a Creator. And even if it always existed, it still had to have a Prime Mover—a concept advanced by none other than Aristotle. So, eventually, Hayy gets convinced that there is a "necessarily self-existent, highest and all-powerful Being," which he discovers not through any revelation, prophet, or tradition, but merely his own reason. He becomes a "knower," in other words, more than a "believer."[8]

Finally, Hayy develops a sense of ethics, too. Since there are no humans on the island, this comes out as care for the environment. He strives to attain the Creator's compassion to living beings, by adopting an ascetic vegetarian diet and even caring for the well-being of plants. When he eats fruits, he always preserves their seeds. He also chooses "that sort of which

there was the greatest plenty, so as not totally to destroy any species." Such were the ethical rules, we read, "which he prescribed to himself."[9]

A DISAPPOINTMENT WITH THE RELIGIOUS

When Hayy reaches the age of forty-nine, we come to an unexpected twist in the story: a surprise guest from another island.

This other island is not too far from Hayy's secret paradise. But unlike the latter, it is full of human beings who have a religion of their own—a "Sect," as Ibn Tufayl calls it. We are introduced to two men from this island—Salaman, who is the very prince of the place, and Asal, his good friend. The two men are fond of each other, but they are different. Asal is inclined to philosophy, "to make a deeper search into the inside of things," as he also thinks that the scripture of his people's Sect has hidden meanings that require interpretation. Salaman, in contrast, is a more simple man. He follows the scripture faithfully, keeping "close to the literal sense," never troubling himself with different interpretations, and "refraining from such free examination and speculation of things."

As his preference for solitary contemplation over the chatter of society grows, Asal finally decides to change his world. He hires a ship to take him to the uninhabited island of whose beauty he has heard before—the very island of Hayy. Soon after Asal lands ashore, the two men run into each other and both get very surprised. Hayy is all the more surprised, because he has never seen a human before.

The two men become friends. Asal teaches Hayy human language. When he learns his friend's whole story, including the contemplations through which he discovered God, Asal is amazed, for he sees that "the teaching of reason and tradition did exactly agree together."

Asal then tells Hayy his own story and the story of the people on his island. He tells about "the Sect," or religion, his people believe in, whose teachings and practices all make sense to Hayy, who gets eager to see all those curious human beings. While Asal worries that this may not be the best idea, he can't turn down his friend. Luckily, right at that moment, a wayward ship hits the island, giving the two men a chance to go to Asal's homeland.

When they arrive at the city, Asal introduces Hayy to the people, telling his amazing story and praising his deep wisdom. Hayy sees that these common people are quite observant, that they keep "the performance of the external rites" of religion, but this does not stop them from "indulgence in eating" or other things he would consider immoral or unwise. So he begins to share his philosophical insights with the people of the island, only to find them too crude to understand. "He continued reasoning with them mildly night and day, and teaching them the truth, both in private and publick," we read, "which increased their hatred towards him, and made them avoid his company." The islanders were not bad people, Ibn Tufayl explains, but still,

> Through the defect of their nature, they did not pursue it by the right path, nor ask for it at the right door, nor take it in the right manner; but sought the knowledge of it after the common way, like the rest of the world.

Hayy finally realizes that these people are hopeless, as "disputing with them" only "made them the more obstinate." He also decides that the right guide for them is not their reason but their Sect. The ruler, Salaman, should continue keeping them "within the bounds of the law, and the performance of the external rites," as it is better for them to "follow the examples of their pious ancestors and forsake novelties."

At the end of this disappointing exposure to a religious society, both Hayy and Asal decide to leave it in this state of mediocrity, and go back to Hayy's world. "Thus they continued serving God on this island," Ibn Tufayl writes in closing, "till they died."

THE "INWARD LIGHT" IN THE WEST

Hayy ibn Yaqzan, as a tale, was a good read, but that is not why it was important. Like some other powerful works of literature, such as *Utopia* by Thomas More or *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, it was a philosophical novel. It is, in fact, widely recognized as the very first philosophical novel ever written. Its purpose was to elucidate an idea—that man, through reason and inquiry, can both explore and utilize nature, while also figuring out the big questions about existence and ethics. The book was also a tribute to the individual—the rational individual—showing that he or she can find truth,

in the words of a modern-day translator of the book, "unaided—but also unimpeded—by society, language, or tradition."[10]

To some modern readers, these may not sound like spectacular ideas, and that is precisely because they are modern readers. We are living within modernity and are often taking its philosophical presuppositions as given. When Ibn Tufayl wrote his story, however, these precepts were quite unusual, if not revolutionary.

Their impact would be revolutionary, too. To get a sense of this, let's take a closer look at Hayy's path to the Anglo-Saxon world. The first English translation of the book, three years after Pococke's Latin text, was penned by a Scottish Christian named George Keith. In his foreword to what he entitled as *An Account of the Oriental Philosophy,* Keith praised Ibn Tufayl, who, despite being an infidel, "hath been a good man, and far beyond many who have the name of Christians."[11] A few years later, in 1678, Keith's friend and student Robert Barclay, in his book *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity,* also praised the story of "Hai Ebn Yokdan … a book translated out of the Arabick."[12]

Neither Keith's nor Barclay's admiration for the book was accidental. They were missionaries of a new Protestant sect called the Religious Society of Friends—or, as they became more commonly known, the Quakers.[13] A key element in the Quaker creed was, as it still is, the emphasis on the "inward light," which "teaches us the difference between right and wrong, truth and falseness, good and evil."[14] Every human being had this inner light, Quakers believed, regardless of sect, religion, or race. Every human being, therefore, was equally valuable—an idea whose roots went back to the "Christian humanists" of the Renaissance.

For some other Christians at the time, who believed that light shines only within their church, this universalism was not appealing. When they saw the reference to *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* in Barclay's *Apology,* they happily spotted the origin of the heresy. "Certain adversaries of Quakerism," notes a contemporary Quaker source, "declared that Barclay drew his doctrine of the Universal and Saving Light from this work, a charge which one would think carried its refutation with it."[15] That is why Barclay's reference to "*Hai Ebn Yokdan*" was removed from the later editions of the *Apology.* The "inward light" theology would continue without references to alien sources.

The theology did continue, though, quite successfully, making the Quakers the champions of what we today call human rights. William Penn, a Quaker leader, founded in 1681 the Province of Pennsylvania, which proclaimed religious freedom to all its residents, laying a prototype for the American Bill of Rights. In the next century, Quakers spearheaded the first antislavery organizations on both sides of the Atlantic. Under the leadership of one of their prominent friends, Benjamin Franklin, they became the first to petition the United States Congress for the abolition of slavery. Quakers also played a key role in establishing women's rights, with their rigorous defense of education of girls and women's right to vote. More recently, they have also been instrumental in setting up human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.

In contrast, we Muslims abolished slavery only thanks to the encouragement, even pressure, from Western governments—as we shall see in a later chapter. We still have a hard time accepting religious freedom—as the Malaysian religion police kindly reminded me. Some of us still frown upon the idea of equal rights for women. While our conservative scholars condemn "human rights-ism," our authoritarian leaders who persecute their dissidents despise organizations like Amnesty International for interfering with our supposedly wonderful "domestic affairs."

One wonders why. Why did the ideas articulated in *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* help trigger an intellectual revolution in Europe, whereas they remained feeble in the Muslim world?

To find an answer, we have to look deeper into the world of Ibn Tufayl, the world of medieval Islam. We have to see what this Muslim philosopher was trying to do with his novel and what the odds he was struggling with were. We have to see, more precisely, the stormy sea of theology on which he was trying to steer a battered ship of philosophy.

2

WHY THEOLOGY MATTERS

[In Islam] legal theory departs from the point where theology leaves off.

—Wael Hallaq, scholar of Islamic law[1]

If you ask a random Muslim today what brand of Islam he or she follows, the answer will probably come as either "Sunni," or "S"hiite." The former answer is just nine times more likely, because nearly 90 percent of the world's 1.6 billion contemporary Muslims are Sunni.

And how do the Sunni and Shiite visions of Islam differ? To outsiders, the answer may be surprising. For the big difference is not about the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad, which are held sacred equally by all Muslims. It is rather about who really was the rightful heir to the Prophet Muhammad as his first caliph, or "successor." Sunnis approve what actually happened in history, honoring the first four caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali. Shiites, in contrast, accept the legitimacy of only Ali and his later descendants. The big difference between them, in other words, is different versions of *political history.*

If you want to dig deeper, Sunnis, on which we will mostly focus in this book, can also tell you their specific *madhhab,* or "school": Hanafi, Shafiʿi, Maliki, or Hanbali, all named after their founders, who all lived more than a thousand years ago. How do they differ? To outsiders, the answer may be again surprising. For these schools differ on things like whether shellfish is eatable or where hands should be placed during prayer—the *practice* of Islam, in other words, in all its minute details. Because they are schools of

fiqh, or "jurisprudence," which is the human effort to interpret the Sharia, or the divine law.

To be sure, there is more to Islam than political history and jurisprudence. There are also beliefs, or *aqaid,* about God, His attributes, His relationship with the world and human beings, and the latter's place in the divine scheme. There is also a discipline that studies these beliefs called *kalam.* It literally means "speech," but it roughly corresponds to the Christian concept of theology.

Yet *kalam* has little presence in Muslims minds today. If they are asked about it, most Muslims would be taken by surprise. They may vaguely know themselves as "Ashʿari," or "Maturidi," but with little sense of what these terms entail. Worse, if they try to learn more about *kalam,* religious leaders may advise them to avoid it. "Leave those debates to the *ulama,*" or "scholars," one such scholar says. "Just hold on to the *kalima,*" which is the simplest declaration of the faith: "There is not god but God, and Muhammad is His messenger."[2]

This faintness of theology, as we will call *kalam* from now on, among Sunnis is not an accident. Because, after the initial centuries of Islam, which were intellectually diverse and vibrant, there happened a "significant decline and marginalization of kalam among Sunnis."[3] Instead, jurisprudence became the primary discipline. As a result, Islamic culture became a "legal culture," focusing on "proper behavior rather than proper belief."[4]

Today, most Muslims are living within this legal culture, which entails a plenitude of dos and don'ts regarding prayer, fasting, almsgiving, ritual hygiene, dress code, dietary laws, family laws, and, most controversially, criminal laws. Non-Muslims also focus on this legal culture, because some of its rules conflict with the modern standards of human rights.

That gap between Islamic jurisprudence and human rights has led, for more than a century now, to various efforts at "reinterpreting" or even "reforming" Islam. Yet, while some steps have been taken, these efforts ultimately hit a rock-solid wall: the divine will, as decreed by the Qur'an and exemplified by the Prophet. Any discussion on whether Muslims should give up corporal punishments, respect free speech, or accept gender equality, for example, faces a strong "no." No, because God and His Prophet said so and so.

But can we try to understand *why* God and His Prophet said certain things in a certain context? Can we figure out their *intentions* and then try to realize them in some other way, if we are in a different context? Moreover, besides religious texts, do we humans have a rational capacity to figure out what is right and wrong? And if we say "no" to this latter question, then how can we know the truth of religion in the very first place?

Such questions will take us from the realm of jurisprudence to what really lies beneath it, which is theology. The very realm, in other words, to which Muslims stopped paying attention centuries ago—although it still silently holds the barriers in their minds.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Islam, as the historical religion we know today, was born in the Arabian city of Mecca in the year AD 610. One night, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, a prominent merchant from the wealthy tribe of Quraysh, heard a strange voice in a cave that told him, "Recite." First he was terrified, but thanks to his wife, Khadija, he got convinced that the voice was that of an angel. New revelations confirmed that he was chosen by God to share a dangerous message with his people: that their idols were all false gods. The only true God was "the Lord of the heavens and earth and everything between," and who had sent other messengers before—men such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, or Jesus.[5]

This monotheist campaign soon put Muhammad and his small group of believers into trouble with the polytheist leaders of Quraysh. Hence, the thirteen years in Mecca, the first phase of Muhammad's mission, passed under fear and persecution. The next phase began when the Prophet fled to Medina, another Arab city that welcomed him, in the year AD 622. The battles between the Muslims of Medina and the revengeful polytheists of Mecca, besides conflicts with shifting allies, went on almost until the very end of the Prophet's life.

Hence, neither Prophet Muhammad nor his fellow believers had the time or the means to produce any literature. The only text that they left behind, besides a few short political treaties, was the Qur'an. After the Prophet, though, Muslim armies poured outside of the barren Arabian Peninsula to take over the more sophisticated centers of the ancient world,

such as Palestine, Syria, Iraq, or Egypt, which had rich cultural and intellectual traditions. Eastern Christians in particular had a lot to offer. Their church fathers had wrestled with theological questions that would soon intrigue Muslims as well.

One of these questions soon turned out to be the first big theological controversy in early Islam: Did God create humans with free will? Or did He predestine their fate?

The Qur'an's answer wasn't very clear, but due to the enduring influence of pre-Islamic Arab beliefs, there was "a large element of fatalism or belief in predestination."[6] It was doctrinally defended by scholars who were ultimately called Jabriyyah, or "Compulsionists." For them, all human acts occurred under the "compulsion" of divine predestination. God had simply created some for heaven, others for hell, and each were like "a feather hung in the wind."[7]

But a minority of scholars disagreed, insisting that God gave humans free will—or *qadar,* meaning "power." Their premise was God's justice, which is reiterated throughout the Qur'an. To deprive humans from the freedom to choose and then to reward or punish them for their deeds, they argued, would be injustice, which God would not do. They were called Qadariyah, because they defended human "power" to act independently of God. (Yet later, the term *qadar* was associated with the power of God and became synonymous with predestination, so beware of confusion here.[8])

The tension between these theologies was reflected in an interesting correspondence between Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), a highly respected scholar, and Caliph Abd al-Malik, a member of the Umayyad dynasty, which dominated Islam after the first four caliphs. The Umayyads were staunch supporters of Compulsionism. Hasan al-Basri, in contrast, was a defender of free will. "News has reached the Commander of the Faithful," the caliph thus wrote, referring to himself, "that you would have made statements about the divine decree which are unheard of amongst those who have gone before us." So he ordered, "Write to the Commander of the Faithful, explaining your position and whence you derive it."[9]

A letter like that from an absolute monarch would give chills to most people. But Hasan al-Basri didn't falter. He greeted the caliph with respect, then made his case. "God rewards His servants only on the basis of their

works," he wrote, explaining why this requires free will. Then he referred to the Qur'anic verses used by the predestinarians, adding:

> However, Commander of the Faithful, things are not as these ignoramuses, in their error, maintain. Our Lord is too merciful and just and generous to behave like that with His servants. How could He act in this way, if we can read that, "God charges no soul save to its capacity; standing to its account what it has earned, and against its account what it has merited."[10]

This correspondence between Hasan al-Basri and Caliph Abd al-Malik is the earliest document in Islam that deals with the controversy over free will.[11] Some scholars doubt its authenticity and suggest that it may be apocryphal.[12] Even if that is the case, it is an important text showing the early theological battle lines—and that the caliphate had a stake in them.

ARE TYRANTS PREDESTINED BY GOD?

We do not know how Caliph Abd al-Malik reacted to Hasan al-Basri's response to his letter, if he had really received it at all. But we do know that the Umayyad caliphs, with a few exceptions, continued to promote the doctrine of predestination as a part of a "state sponsored orthodoxy."[13]

Some scholars who defied this orthodoxy paid a heavy price. One of them was Mabad al-Juhani, who was executed by crucifixion around the year 700 for promoting free will, along with his role in an insurrection. Another one was Ghaylan al-Dimashqi, who had begun his theological work in the Umayyad court, only to become the "arch heretic" in early Islam. For the sole crime of championing free will, he was brutally executed in the year 743. First his hands and feet were amputated, according to one account, then he was hanged.[14]

One wonders why the Umayyad rulers were so obsessed with a deeply theological question. The answer is what you may guess: this theological question had political implications. Unlike the first four caliphs, who had come to power with some consultation in the community, the Umayyads had come to power by sheer force. Their founder, Muawiyah I, had fought with Ali, the fourth caliph, in the first *fitna,* or "civil war." Muawiyah's son, Yazid, brutally killed Ali's son, Hussein, along with all his family members,

in the horrendous massacre at Karbala. With all this violence, along with their corruption, nepotism, hubris, and Arab supremacism, Umayyads made many enemies.

In return, they needed all the support they could enlist—and there was no better supporter than God. First, they began to call themselves "Caliph of God," instead of the more modest title, "Caliph of the Prophet." Second, they used Compulsionism to insinuate that their rule was predestined by God. "These [Umayyad] kings," as their victim al-Juhani said with contempt, "shed the believers' blood, take their money, and then say, 'our actions are ordained by God.'"[15] One of these "kings" executed an innocent man, only to claim that he did "as was written in the book of fate."[16] Compulsionism was a perfect cover for all their misdeeds. Therefore, in the words of contemporary scholar Suleiman Ali Mourad:

> In order to disseminate this ideology, the Umayyads enlisted in their service a number of religious scholars and poets whose task was to provide a religious defense of the predestination doctrine. It was these scholars who furnished a number of hadiths that depict the prophet Muhammad and his companions defending predestination and condemning freewill.[17]

In contrast to predestination, belief in free will led to the questioning of political authority: "If individuals were accountable for their actions, then were so governments."[18] That is why, throughout the Umayyad rule, the doctrine of free will was often connected with "agitating for a new political order."[19]

The Umayyads ruled for about ninety years. After their fall, Compulsionist doctrine lost some of its impetus. Mainstream Sunni Islam, as we shall see, tried to develop a difficult middle position between predestination and free will—that there is predestination, but humans still "acquire" it with their free choice. "Human beings *perform,*" in other words, "the actions which God *creates.*"[20] Yet this painstaking theological mishmash was necessitated by the invention of Compulsionist texts, especially hadiths by the Umayyads and their allies.[21]

Compulsionism would be used again and again, in different phases of Muslim history, including the modern times, to promote a fatalistic

worldview that often helped those in power.[22] These include Arab dictators such as Jamal Abd al-Nasser or Saddam Hussein, who, while owning their successes, repeatedly referred to fate "to rationalize defeat."[23] In face of the traumatic Arab defeat by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967, Nasser had publicly evoked an Arab proverb, *La yughni hadharun an qadar,* or "Precaution or alertness does not change the course of fate."[24] As Arab scholar As'ad Abu Khalil observes, such "invocation of the notion of the inescapability of destiny" only helped "the absolution of Arab regimes and armies from any responsibility for the defeat at a time of mounting public criticism."[25]

Meanwhile, in contrast to Sunnis, the Shiites, who also had predestinarian views in the beginning, growingly found them dissuasive. The reason, again, had something to do with politics: "The fact that they were not in power" implied to them "that there is no such thing as complete predestination."[26]

There is a lesson that must be taken from this very first doctrinal war in Islam: Islamic theology, and all the clashes and schisms within it, did not develop in a vacuum. It developed under the tutelage of despotism, which dominated Islam since its very first century and influenced it for its earthly goals and ambitions—a crucial fact to which we shall return.

A THEOLOGY OF JUSTICE, FREEDOM, AND REASON

One of the pupils of Hasan al-Basri was a man named Wasil ibn Ata (d. 748). He embraced his master's defense of free will and its basis in God's justice, but he disagreed with him on other matters. Ultimately, he decided to "withdraw" and establish his own school, which soon became known as "those who withdraw," or Muʿtazila.[27] It was a school that would soon spark the greatest theological controversy in early Islam, one whose repercussions are still felt today.

Muʿtazila scholars, some of whose important works came to light only in the late twentieth century, were not always uniform in their views, but they all held certain tenets that offered a systematic theology upholding human *freedom* and *reason.*

The first principle in this theology was God's *justice.* This was, according to the Muʿtazila, the most definitive attribute of God—even more

so than His omnipotence. Yes, God was all-powerful, but His power was not arbitrary; it was rather constrained with the principles of justice. As Mankdim Shashdiw (d. 1034), a Muʿtazila scholar from the Zaydi tradition, put it:

> His acts are all good, He does not do evil, He does not fail to perform what is obligatory on Him, He does not lie in His message nor is He unjust in His rule. He does not torment the children of pagans for the sins of their fathers. He does not grant miracles to liars, and He does not impose on people obligations that they can neither bear nor have knowledge of.… If obligation is imposed on a person and he fulfills it as he is bidden to, then He will necessarily reward him.[28]

The controversial suggestion here was that there were "obligatory" and "necessary" things for God, such as doing what justice, as we humans understand it, would entail. This implied that God was "bound by the same code of value as human beings," which was the Muʿtazila's very point—but also, in the eyes of their opponents, their very heresy.[29]

From God's justice came the principle of man's freedom. Since God promised humans reward or punishment in the afterlife, He must have given them free will. So humans are autonomous in their choices, the Muʿtazilites insisted, to the extent that they are the "creators of their own acts." Abu'l-Qasim al-Balkhi (d. 931) put it this way:

> [God] does not create the acts of human beings, but it is the latter who do the acts they have been commanded to do and prohibited from doing, by virtue of the capacity for action [*qudra*], which God has created for them and instated within them, that they may obey through it and desist from disobedience.… And He willed—great and exalted is He—that they might come to believe out of their own accord and not by compulsion, that they may thus be tried and tested.[30]

From the principle of man's freedom, there came the Muʿtazila emphasis on *reason.* Human reason, they argued, was a gift of God to find truth—even when there is no revelation. Yes, God had told us via revelation

that murder is wrong and that saving an innocent soul is right. But revelation was not *constituting* such truths, it was only *indicating* them.[31]

From the principle of reason, there came the need for allegorical interpretation of revelation. There could be tensions between reason and the text of the Qur'an, the Muʿtazila realized, and in this case the latter had to be interpreted. The Qur'an itself, no wonder, had made a distinction between its "definite" and "ambiguous" verses.[32] For the Muʿtazila, the main concern here was some of the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur'an—such as His "hands," "face," or "throne," which they insisted to take as allegorical rather than literal. But they were opening a door of figurative interpretation that could get wider over time.

Finally, the Muʿtazila had a strong position on a peculiar question on the nature of revelation: Is the Qur'an "created" or "uncreated"? The defenders of the latter view held that the Qur'an, as God's speech, was coeternal with God Himself—only to come down to seventh-century Arabia to become a physical book. (Like the divine Logos in Christianity, which was "with God at the beginning," only to come down to first-century Judea to become flesh.[33]) Worrying that this would compromise Islam's staunch monotheism and would also require predestination, the Muʿtazila insisted that the Qur'an was "created." It was God's speech, for sure, but God had spoken "in time."

With such views on God, man, and scripture, which we will explore more deeply in the chapters ahead, the Muʿtazila was offering not just a rational theology but also a dignified anthropology. God had created human beings, but only to give them freedom and reason. Hence their doctrine of free will was also called *tafwid,* or "delegation," meaning that "God has delegated to men power and authority to act independently of himself."[34] This was a theology that empowered human beings, in stark contrast to the Compulsionist doctrine that intentionally disempowered them.

Lenn E. Goodman, one of America's foremost historians of philosophy, makes good sense of what this all means. "Although the Muʿtazilites were hardly liberals," he reminds us, "their *kalam* is, in many ways, a form of humanism"—because it preserves human free will and "deems human reason competent to judge justice and injustice, even on God's part."[35]

This is not because Muʿtazilites were secular "freethinkers," as some early Orientalists had wrongly thought, and some Muslims still wrongly assume. They were rather sincere believers in Islam, and, in fact, even often

"persons of uncommon piety."[36] No wonder their ultimate aim was to defend Islam rationally in the face of the puzzling questions from other traditions. They were "missionaries on the frontiers of Islam," in other words, who realized that a powerful faith should first make rational sense.[37]

THE BIRTH OF MUSLIM PHILOSOPHY

In the year AD 750, the Umayyad dynasty was overthrown with a violent revolution led by a rival Arab family, the Abbasids. The latter had gathered the support of many disenfranchised groups, ranging from Shiites to non-Arabs and even non-Muslims. They seized the caliphate, moved its center from Syria to Iraq, and, like most revolutionary movements do in the beginning, initiated a brighter era. But again, like in the history of most revolutionary movements, the brightness would not last for too long.

The Muʿtazila, whose forerunners were persecuted under the Umayyads, found first freedom under the Abbasids, then even endorsement. The latter crystalized under the rule of Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813–833), who is one of the most interesting political figures in Islamic history—a kind of enlightened despot, who was eager to pursue knowledge, from the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphs to the exact size of the earth.[38] He embraced the Muʿtazila doctrine of the created Qur'an, and while that in itself would have been fine, he also imposed it. He initiated *mihna*—which means "trial" but is also dubbed as "inquisition"—to force all scholars to accept that the Qur'an is created. This authoritarian policy would prove disastrous and would only help delegitimize the Muʿtazila, although they probably weren't directly responsible.[39]

Meanwhile, the same al-Ma'mun supported another institution, a better one: *Bayt al-Hikma,* or "House of Wisdom," which was originally founded by his father, Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Established in Baghdad—the new, slick, and splendid Abbasid capital whose circular design was a tribute to geometric teachings of Euclid—this was an institute devoted to studying *ulum al-awa'il,* or "sciences of the ancients." Thanks to a diverse team of experts, including many Christians, Greek classics that were lost in Europe but preserved in Eastern churches were translated into Arabic. These included the works of mathematicians like Pythagoras and Euclid, physicians like Hippocrates and Galen, thinkers like Plato and Plotinus, and

most important, Aristotle, who is widely considered the father of Western philosophy.

One of the scholars hosted at the House of Wisdom was al-Kindi (d. 873), the first Arab philosopher who penned an impressive literature on astronomy, medicine, chemistry, mathematics, metaphysics, and music. "We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from," he wrote, "even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us."[40] He was followed by al-Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Sina (d. 1037), both from Central Asia, who advanced what is now called the "Peripatetic Arabic School," in reference to the Peripatetic School in Ancient Greece.

For these medieval Muslim thinkers, as well as their counterparts in the West, "philosophy" had a much broader meaning than it has today. It covered all the diverse areas of human knowledge that we would now categorize into diverse disciplines. The term "PhD," which means "Doctor of Philosophy," and which you can get in almost every academic field, is a relic from this all-encompassing meaning of the term.

The Muʿtazila was the very first school in Islam to be influenced by the Greek philosophical heritage—but by its "method or technique, rather than of substance or content."[41] That is why they were *mutakallimun*, or "theologians," and not *falasifa,* or "philosophers." But these two intellectual trends in early Islam had a commonality in championing human reason as a source of wisdom independent from revelation. That is why they would soon be lumped together, and delegitimized forever, as the deviant branches of the true faith.

THE FIDEIST COUNTERATTACK

While Islam's rationalists were enjoying the support of the early Abbasid caliphate, the more conservative forces were regrouping. They were concerned both with rational theology and its influence on jurisprudence. Since they wanted to minimize the scope of reason and fill the void with hadiths, or sayings attributed to the Prophet, they became known as *Ahl al-Hadith,* or the "People of Hadiths."

The standard-bearer of this movement was Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), who wrote one of the first books of hadith: the *Musnad,* a collection

of some twenty-seven thousand reports, which he reportedly chose from a staggering pool of seven hundred thousand. Not surprisingly, most of these hadiths reflected Hanbal's own theological views, which were, on almost every single issue, the exact opposite of those of the Muʿtazila. For Hanbal, God's justice was beyond our comprehension, Qur'anic statements about God's attributes had to be accepted "without asking how," and the Qur'an itself was "uncreated"—a view that Hanbal defended, heroically as one must grant, despite the persecution he went through under al-Ma'mun's *mihna.*

Hanbal's collection also included the narrations that the Compulsionists had put into circulation to vindicate predestination. One of them read:

> God, Almighty, took a handful of mud and said: "These are [the people] in paradise and I do not care." He took another handful and said: "These are [the people] in Hell and I do not care."[42]

This not-so-dignified view of human nature did not grant much authority to reason. Reason, for Hanbal and his followers—the Hanbalites—was only good for comprehending God's commandments, not to speculate on them, let alone to search for truth independently. Hence they renounced the very notion of *kalam,* the discipline of theology, as a heretical "innovation," or *bid'a*. The fact that neither the Prophet nor his companions engaged in theology, for them, was enough of a reason to reject it. With this rigid dogmatism, the Hanbalites were building the far-right—or ultraorthodox—end of the Sunni spectrum, which would be revived in the modern era under the banner of Salafism, and its specifically Saudi version, Wahhabism.

Yet the real challenge to the Muʿtazila soon came from a more refined version of Hanbalism, which would ultimately form the backbone of Sunni Islam. It was founded by a scholar named Abu al-Hasan al-Ashʿari (d. 936), and thus would be called Ashʿarism. Interestingly, al-Ashʿari was initially a Muʿtazilite. Around the age of forty, however, he had a Road to Damascus moment. Word has it that in his dreams he saw Prophet Muhammad, who told him repeatedly three times to "support what is related from me," meaning the hadiths. This made al-Ashʿari jump on the Ahl al-Hadith

bandwagon, and to vehemently oppose the Muʿtazila doctrines that he knew well.

In literature, it is sometimes said that al-Ashʿari developed "a middle position" between the rational Muʿtazila and the anti-rational Hanbalites, but that is not very accurate. What he really did was to use the Muʿtazila method of rational argumentation to defend the Hanbali doctrines. "We hold firmly, professing what Ibn Hanbal professed," al-Ashʿari himself had affirmed, "because he is the excellent imam and the perfect leader."[43] Ironically, though, the very fact that he engaged in *kalam,* a deviant "innovation," still made al-Ashʿari a heretic in the eyes of the Hanbalites, who went as far as overturning his tombstone in the graveyard at Baghdad.[44]

In *Islam: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation,* modern-day academic Imran Aijaz makes a useful classification of these early theological schools. Accordingly, the Muʿtazila corresponds to "theistic rationalism," which seeks harmony between faith and reason, both of them being independent sources of knowledge. In contrast, Hanbalism and Ashʿarism are stricter and milder versions of "fideism."[45] The latter term, which comes from the Latin word *fides,* or "faith," literally means faith-ism. "Faith does not stand in need of rational justification," it holds; "faith is rather the arbiter of reason and its pretensions."[46]

The late George F. Hourani, the British-born Lebanese scholar and one of the towering experts on classical Islamic thought, also had offered a helpful schematization. In his definition, the Muʿtazila had accepted two sources of knowledge: "Revelation and independent reason." For the Ashʿarites, the formula was: "Revelation supplemented by dependent reason." And for the Hanbalites, it was: "Revelation alone."[47]

A SOLDIERLIKE OBEDIENCE

These millennium-old formulations in Islam are still very important—because they are still very definitive. Most Muslims, under their influence, still value reason only, at best, as "dependent reason."

To see what this means, let's take a look at the writings of Sayyid Abu al-A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979), the Pakistani Sunni thinker who had a profound influence on Islamist movements all across the globe. His take on reason

was quite interesting. On the one hand, he eagerly appreciated reason and its use for Islam, in articles such as "Islam is a Scientific and Rational Religion," and "Rational Proof of the Muhammadan Prophethood." He repeatedly argued that human reason, when rightly applied, would bring all reasonable humans to the truth of Islam.

Once people arrived at the truth of Islam, however, things would dramatically change. Reason was not a guide anymore, for Mawdudi, but rather a devious voice to restrain. In an article aptly titled "The Deception of Rationalism," he wrote that a person is either a Muslim or a non-Muslim. If he is a Muslim,

> this means that he has surrendered to God and to the Prophet as the prophet of God. It also means that he accepts that if God's Prophet communicated a certain law from God, he will obey it without asking "how and why." He has no right to require a rational proof for each individual law. As a Muslim, he has only to ascertain whether the Messenger of God promulgated a certain law or not. If the law is proven by a traditional proof, he must obey it immediately. He can seek a rational proof in order to attain repose of the heart and further insight. But until then, he must bow his head, obey orders and consider the traditional proof as [sufficient] proof for acquiescence.[48]

Mawdudi also used the example of a soldier in an army. No army could exist, he noted, if each soldier questioned the rationale behind the orders issued by the commanding generals. The soldiers, rather, had to obey the orders, fully and immediately, without asking "how and why."[49]

Mawdudi was not an outlier. His notion of a soldierlike obedience to religious texts reflects the mainstream religious mindset in broad parts of the Muslim world today. Conservative scholars emphatically advocate it, saying, "We hear and we obey, whether we understand or not."[50] For them, this is the true expression of Muslim piety.

Yet, as we saw, there was an alternative piety in Islam. It appreciated reason not only as a vehicle to bring outsiders to the religion but also a guide for the insiders to think critically. Now we will take a closer look at this latter view. We will especially focus on a crucial dilemma that marked

the deepest gap between the Muʿtazila and the Ashʿarites—a dilemma that still holds the key to the biggest padlock on many Muslim minds.

3

ISLAM'S "EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA"

> Does the divine law define justice or does justice define the divine law?…
> If the divine law is prior to justice, then the just society is no longer about rights of speech and assembly, or the right to explore the means to justice, but simply about the implementation of the divine law.
>
> —Khaled Abou El Fadl, contemporary Muslim scholar[1]

As I was writing this book, I was blessed with the joy of raising two little lovely sons, the five-year-old Levent and the three-year-old Efe. While I gave them all my love, I also had to educate them sometimes with warnings. When one grabbed his brother's toys, for example, I had to tell him, "No, don't do that." Or when one yelled at the dinner table making everyone annoyed, I again had to tell him, "No, don't do this."

In one such parental guidance moment, my younger son turned to me with some cute frustration and asked the magical question: "Why?"

In return, I had two options. I could either explain why it was wrong to grab his brother's toy or to disrupt a family dinner. I could explain that by doing these, he would upset the people that loved him, and therefore his act would be *wrong in itself.* Or, I could issue a more simple dictum: "Don't do this, *because I say so*!" In this case, what made the act wrong would be not something inherent in it, but rather my authoritative *command* about it.

To put things in a theoretical framework, let's call this second approach —the "because I say so" approach—the *parental command theory.* To children, it implies that elders establish what is right and wrong, and hence

good kids should always obey their parents' commandments. In contrast, let's call the first approach—where you explain to your kid why it is wrong to monopolize toys or disrupt a dinner—the *ethical objectivism theory.* To children, it implies that there are objective rights and wrongs out there in the world, about which their more knowledgeable parents are educating them but which the kids can also figure out by themselves.

Probably all parents who are reading these lines are familiar with both approaches, and they may be using both of them depending on the circumstances. For there certainly will be moments where you need the swift "because I say so" approach, for example, to protect your child from imminent danger.

However, a child raised mainly with the parental command theory instead of the ethical objectivism theory may end up being an immature person—as studies already indicate.[2] This is because the parental command theory will not help the child develop an inner conscience based on ethical values such as respect, fairness, or honesty. It can only teach him a set of rules, which will never be enough to account for all the complex situations the child will face in the ever-expanding life experience.

It can even make the child a little literalist hypocrite. He can grab his brother's chocolate cake, for example, and when you chide him for that, he can respond, "Well, you said, 'Don't take his toys.' You did not say anything about chocolate cakes!"

DIVINE COMMAND AND HUMAN REASON

This book, of course, is not about pedagogy. Also, no example is perfect when it comes to comparing God with His creatures. Yet still, the example above can help give a sense of the theological puzzle that we will now probe. You should just replace parents with God, and replace children with humans. And you should also replace *parental command theory* with *divine command theory.*

The puzzle is this: When God tells us "do this," or "don't do this," does He educate us about objective values in the world that we could also understand on our own? Or, does He merely give us bare commandments whose very value comes from nothing but God's own authority?

This is a question that long predates Islam. As far as we know, it was first addressed by Socrates, in his famous dialogue with a man named Euthyphro. Accordingly, the two Athenians, while both waiting for their hearings at the city's court, discussed what "piety" means. "Piety," argued Euthyphro, "is what is pleasing to the gods." In response, Socrates asked him, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved?"[3]

In other words, was piety defined subjectively by the gods' will? Or rather, was gods' will defined objectively by what piety is? The question became known in philosophy as the "Euthyphro Dilemma."

Socrates lived in a polytheistic culture of "gods," but the dilemma proved relevant for monotheists as well. In Christianity, scholastic theologians like William of Ockham (d. 1347)—whose "razor" became famous as a principle of logic—took the side of the divine commandment theory. A like-minded theologian, Pierre d'Ailly (d. 1420) also believed that God "does not command good actions because they are good, or prohibit evil ones because they are evil." Quite the contrary, he argued, "these are good because they are commanded, and evil because prohibited."[4] This view also became known as *voluntarism,* because of its emphasis on God's will, or *voluntas.*

Other Christian scholars disagreed. Perhaps the most important was Saint Thomas Aquinas, who accepted that behind God's commandments there are objective moral values, "to which all men are forced to give their assent."[5] This view, in contrast to voluntarism, became known as *intellectualism,* implying that God's commandments are intelligible.

Intellectualism led to the concept of "natural law," which presumes that there are inherent ethical qualities, and also "rights," in nature that are knowable by human reason. The concept became quite popular during the Enlightenment, influencing thinkers such as the German philosopher Gottfried W. Leibniz. "It is generally agreed that whatever God wills is good and just," he wrote, adding:

> But there remains the question whether it is good and just because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good and just; in other words, whether justice and goodness are arbitrary or whether

> they belong to the necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things.[6]

Leibniz himself was on the side of "necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things." So were most other Enlightenment thinkers, including John Locke, the father of classical liberalism, who wrote, "God himself *cannot* choose what is not good."[7] French thinker Montesquieu (d. 1755), who had a big impact on liberal political theory and even the United States Constitution, made the same emphasis in his landmark book *The Spirit of Laws*. Laws arise from "the nature of things," he argued, and it is absurd to think "there is nothing just or unjust but what is commanded or forbidden by positive laws."[8]

THE GAP ON *HUSN* AND *QUBH*

The Euthyphro Dilemma divided early Islam, as well: the Muʿtazila and the philosophers championed intellectualism, while the Hanbalites and the Ashʿarites defended voluntarism.

This is evident in the long debates that the Muʿtazila and the Ashʿarites had over the matter of *husn* and *qubh,* or "good" and "evil." Muʿtazila scholars insisted that acts such as "thanking a benefactor" (*shukr al-mun'im*) or "pursuing fairness" (*insaf*) were "good in itself," and this was knowable to all humans through reason. Similarly, acts such as lying, theft, or murder were "bad in itself," and this was also knowable through reason. This example of theirs was a case in point:

> One who finds a sick blind man on the verge of death in a desolate desert will know by reason alone that he is obligated to help, even where he expects that his help will only burden him and not benefit him in any way.[9]

Here we can sense that this "reason" of the Muʿtazila included what we would today call "moral intuition." Hence, one of the modern scholars who studied Muʿtazila ethics, George F. Hourani, likens it to "British intuitionism," whose advocates include G. E. Moore, W. D. Ross, and the famous C. S. Lewis.[10] The last, while being a faithful defender of Christianity, believed that morality was intuitive for all humans. Hence he

disagreed with some other Christians who believed "the world must return to Christian ethics in order to preserve civilization." That is not needed, C. S. Lewis explained, because the "natural moral code" is universal.[11]

Since there is such a natural moral code, the Muʿtazila similarly argued, values existed "before the existence of revelation" (*min qabla wurud al-shar'*).[12] Even without religion, therefore, there would be morality. Only the rituals of religion, such as fasting, praying, or dietary requirements, the Muʿtazila argued, were knowable solely by revelation.[13]

Religion, in this view, did not claim to redefine the whole world, but rather operated in a world of objective facts and truths. The Sharia, argued one of the most astute Muʿtazila scholars, Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025), "does not change the facts," as "will or intention … has no effect upon the truth of things."[14] The Sharia rather only "indicates" what is objectively right and wrong. In the words of al-Jabbar:

> Prohibition from the Exalted [God] is an indication that something is evil, as *the indicator indicates the thing as it is* … not that it becomes what it is by indication.[15]

In strong contrast to this ethical objectivism, there was the divine command theory of the Ashʿarites. For them, all the good acts such as "thanking a benefactor" or "pursuing fairness" were not good in themselves. Neither bad acts such as theft or murder were bad in themselves. They were categorized as such only because God says so—and not by "the mind's intuitive judgment."[16] Al-Kiya, an Ashʿarite from the twelfth century, put their position very clearly:

> We refuse to say that its being good or being bad is grounded in any essential property [of the act] … Good and bad are grounded simply in God's command and prohibition.[17]

Another prominent Ashʿarite, al-Baqillani (d. 1013), also put it quite clearly: "All acts are evil only because they are evil by way of revelation. If revelation did not make them evil, they would not be evil."[18]

Therefore, if revelation said something totally different, then all the moral values would be totally different. "Lying is wrong, since He declares

it to be wrong," al-Ashʿari, the very founder of the school, argued. "[But] if He were to command it, there would be no argument to the contrary."[19]

The Ashʿarites did not disagree with the Muʿtazila that Allah is a just God. But His justice did not mean much for them, because since there were no objective values in the world, whatever God does would be, by definition, just. In contrast, the Muʿtazila believed that God is "necessarily just in the same sense that our reason understands justice."[20]

With its theology of an arbitrary God, Ashʿarism was saving itself from wrestling with what traditionally has been the greatest intellectual challenge to any theistic religion: the problem of evil. Because as good and evil lost their objective meanings, asking why there is evil in the world became a meaningless question.[21]

Yet with this slavish fideism, Ashʿarism was sacrificing other things. One was the very goodness of God, for which there was no criteria left. This was a God that could even "make harmless animals, children and insane persons suffer—and not compensate them."[22] As put by the great philosopher and mystic Frithjof Schuon—also known as Isa Nur al-Din—this "arbitrary and willful God" was not really "lovable."[23]

WHAT DOES THE QUR'AN SAY?

In Islam, on any issue, the primary source is the Qur'an, the Book of God. So the rift between the divine command theory and ethical objectivism must be judged by the Qur'an as well. And, at first, a simple clarification must be made: the very fact that the Qur'an includes divine commandments does not mean that it supports the divine command theory. This is a wrong assumption that both Muslims and non-Muslims can unconsciously make. The late Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), one of the key pioneers of modernist Islamic thought, had criticized this assumption when he noted:

> There is a fairly common view among modern scholars, according to which this uncompromisingly transcendentalist picture of God, entailing a denial of trust in natural properties … and freedom of the human will, is to be based squarely on the Qur'an or is, at least, the most logical development of its teaching. This judgment, examined

in the light of the Qur'an itself, seems considerably less than a half-truth.[24]

Finding divine command theory in the Qur'an would be indeed "less than a half-truth," arguably even less, because the Qur'an itself often presents divine commandments with intelligible reasons. It bans "strong drink and games of chance," *because* they would "cast among you enmity and hatred."[25] It bans "the flesh of swine," *because* "that surely is unclean."[26] Or while commanding Muslims not to insult pagan gods, it says, "Revile not those unto whom they pray beside God, *lest* they wrongfully revile God through ignorance."[27]

Moreover, in many verses, the Qur'an commands Muslims to do *adl* (justice) or *khayr* (goodness), or to refrain from *zulm* (transgression) or *sharr* (evil), without further explaining what such ethical concepts entail. In the words of contemporary Islamic scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl, this means "the Qur'an presumes that its reader has a degree of moral sense." The Qur'an also describes itself as a "reminder," reminding people "of the truth and values that should be innately known to them."[28]

Another key concept in the Qur'an which seems to support ethical objectivism is *ma'ruf*. In dozens of verses, Muslims are called upon to "do the *ma'ruf*," which is often translated as "doing good." Yet the exact meaning of the term is not "good" but "known." From this, A. Kevin Reinhart, a contemporary scholar on Islam, in an impressive linguistic and scriptural study of the term, infers an important conclusion: "The Qur'an assumes that some part of the good enjoined by the Qur'an is known without revelational stipulation."[29] There is, in fact, wisdom in the Qur'an's repeated use of "unspecified terms for good," for it is "a goad to ethical reflection and the open-textured search for ethical knowledge."[30]

Unfortunately, Reinhart adds, the Islamic tradition gave very little attention to this open-ended sense of the *ma'ruf*. In commentaries of the Qur'an, it remained "a plain-Jane word that seems to compel little interest."[31] In Islamic jurisprudence, it was reflected only by recognizing the *urf*—a term that comes from the same root of "knowing" but which implies only local customs and traditions of societies. However, "known" could be much more than that, opening a door to all kinds of human knowledge.

One must add to all this the very basic fact that in the Qur'an, the term "reason," or *aql,* is always used with positive connotations. The aspect of human nature that the Qur'an does warn against is not reason, but *hawa,* or "whimsical desire." It is quite telling, though, that the fideist movement in early Islam went as far as seeing reason itself as *hawa.* That is why they labeled the Mut'azila, along with more rational jurists, as *ahl al-ahwa,* or "people of desires."[32]

In short, while the post-Qur'anic Islamic tradition is another story, on the Euthyphro Dilemma, we can see the Qur'an as on the side of ethical objectivism. Scholar of religion Daniel Brown, who sees a problem with "extreme theological voluntarism" in Islam, also agrees with this verdict, granting: "the voluntarist position seems to have only weak support in the Qur'an."[33]

But weak support does not mean no support. The Ashʿarites referred to the Qur'anic verses that emphasize God's omnipotence and His unbounded will. They also referred to a prophetic story that is all too familiar to not only Muslims, but also all their Abrahamic relatives, Jews and Christians, as well.

MAKING SENSE OF ABRAHAM'S KNIFE

It is one of the most dramatic stories of the Bible. Abraham, God's chosen, is blessed in his late age with a child named Isaac, who becomes a much beloved son. Yet Abraham receives one day a chilling commandment from God to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. He obeys the Lord, takes the poor child to Mount Moriah, and bounds him on an altar, with a knife in his hand. Yet at the last moment before Isaac is slaughtered, an angel stops Abraham, telling him, "Now I know that you fear God."[34] Then a miraculous ram appears, which Abraham sacrifices instead of his son.

What is the moral lesson of this story? It is a tough question discussed for centuries in the Jewish and Christian traditions. For ethical objectivists, who believe that God commands only what is objectively good, the story has "often been an embarrassment." In contrast, fideists have celebrated the story as an illustration of "unquestioning obedience to the divine command."[35] One of the most sophisticated voices in this camp was the Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855), who, in his

famed book *Fear and Trembling*, saw in the sacrifice story a justified "suspension of the ethical" based on trust in God.[36]

On the other hand, for the Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant (d. 1804), Abraham's blind obedience to a divine command for murdering his own child was not an example to follow but an error to avoid. This was, alas, the mindset behind religious fanaticism. It was the very mindset, Kant warned, of the "Grand Inquisitor," which tortured heretics for the sake of God, and of the holy warriors who wielded the sword "to raze all unbelievers from the face of the earth."[37]

A somewhat similar dispute on the sacrifice story took place in Islam as well, because the same story, albeit with some nuances, also exists in the Qur'an. There, too, Abraham has a beloved son—who is unnamed but was later identified in the Muslim tradition as Ishmael. There, too, Abraham comes close to slaughtering his own son, just to obey God, but is stopped at the last moment by an angel and a miraculous ram. The story is also very central to Muslim practice: one of the two major religious holidays in Islam is the Eid al-Adha, or the "Feast of Sacrifice," where all able Muslims are called to sacrifice a lamb, at least, to walk in the footsteps of Abraham.

So what are Muslims supposed to understand from this chilling story? The Ashʿari view was articulated by great Qur'anic exegete Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210). According to him, God had first commanded Abraham to sacrifice his own son, but then later "abrogated" this command with a second one that saved the child. But did the initial commandment, to slaughter an innocent child, amount to something evil? Razi declined to concede that, because for him, "to judge the Divine command on the basis of what seems good or evil to human reason [was] invalid."[38]

The Muʿtazila, as one could expect, could not accept this explanation. We know this from Razi himself, who writes in his exegesis that the Muʿtazila struggled to find an alternative explanation to the story. They suggested, "Abraham was actually never commanded to carry out such a sacrifice." He was only commanded with making preparations, to "be ready to follow the command to sacrifice *if* it were given."[39] Razi seems to think that this was too much hairsplitting, which it really was.

Yet one of the most articulate Muʿtazila scholars, Abd al-Jabbar, came up with a better solution, based on a careful reading of the Qur'anic sacrifice story, which has a significant difference from the Bible. In the

latter, Abraham receives an explicit commandment from God to sacrifice Isaac. In the Qur'an, though, Abraham only has a dream in which he sees himself sacrificing his son. He then consults his son, and they together decide that this is a commandment from God. But this was a wrong interpretation of the dream, Abd al-Jabbar argued, as dreams are not necessarily revelations. "How can it be a command from Allah," he asked. "He could see anything in his dreams."[40]

Two centuries after al-Jabbar, a towering name from the Sufi tradition, the scholar and mystic Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240), would offer the same interpretation. Accordingly, Abraham's dream was not a divine commandment to sacrifice his son. Abraham had just misinterpreted the dream's lesson, and God had "rescued his son from Abraham's misapprehension."[41]

Today, more than a billion Muslims around the world recall Abraham's ordeal every year in the Eid al-Adha. Only very few of them are, however, aware of this alternative interpretation of the story. For just like various other gems within the Islamic tradition, it got lost under a thick layer of orthodoxy.

THE ASHʿARITE VICTORY AND ITS AFTERMATH

Today, if you read a standard mainstream Sunni text about different sects and schools in early Islam, you are likely to see the Muʿtazila listed as one of the "deviant sects" that luckily died out. You may also see that Ashʿarism is praised as the main pillar of the true faith. The obvious reason for that is that the big war of ideas between these two schools of theology gradually ended with the victory of the Ashʿarites. The winners, naturally, established themselves as the guardians of truth and depicted their rivals as the misguided. They even burnt the latter's books.[42]

That is why our knowledge about the Muʿtazila is in fact quite limited. It was even more limited until 1951, when the lost writings of Abd al-Jabbar and two of his students were found in an ancient library in Yemen, where vestiges of Muʿtazilism had survived within the Zaydi tradition. Besides such rare original texts, what we know about the Muʿtazila comes from mainstream Sunni sources who summarized their views only to refute them.

A particularly important figure in this Ashʿarite victory was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who, by most measures, goes as the most influential Sunni theologian of all times. He left behind a complex literature that showed nuances over time, but he clearly opposed the rationalism of both the Muʿtazilites and the philosophers while adopting some of their tools. Hence, he was more open to reason than stricter Ashʿarites—some of which blamed him for "swallowing" too much philosophy—yet he still allowed it only as *dependent* reason.[43] "The intellect only demonstrates the truthfulness of the prophet," he wrote in his last and greatest work on law, *Al-Mustasfa*, "and then absolves itself."[44]

Al-Ghazali was among what scholars call "late Ashʿarites," who were more refined than earlier ones.[45] They admitted that acts, by looking at their effects, could be defined as "good" and "bad"—but only in matters not judged by religion. They still refused, in other words, to link objective moral values to Islamic jurisprudence.[46] The most rational of them was probably Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, who turned "increasingly eclectic and independent of traditional Ashʿari thought," going as far as arguing that when revelation and reason contradict, the latter must reign supreme.[47] Meanwhile, even within Hanbalism, there appeared a rationalist strain—a "middle position between Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism"—which seems to be allowed by the very vacuum created by the sect's original rejection of all theology.[48]

More significantly, there emerged another school of Sunni theology offering an even bolder middle position between Ashʿarism and Muʿtazila. Named after its eponymous founder, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944), a scholar from modern-day Uzbekistan, this school mitigated Ashʿari doctrines: that humans had more power in the "acquisition" of acts created by God, and also that "good and bad" were knowable by reason to some extent. Al-Maturidi also described a more reasonable God. To questions such as "Can God punish one who obeys Him?" or "Can God hold man responsible for what he cannot do?" his answers were "no," in contrast to the Ashʿari "yes."[49] The Maturidi school spread among Turks, Persians, and other Central Asians, in tandem with the Hanafi school of jurisprudence endorsed by the Ottoman Empire.

All these nuances and divergences mean that all Sunni Islam cannot be labeled as fully fideist. Rational approaches never fully died out, and they

popped up in unexpected places. There were schools with nuanced positions, and scholars who went against their purported traditions.

Yet still, it is fair to say that the Sunni worldview has been defined primarily by Ashʿarism—and certainly not by the Muʿtazila. As Fazlur Rahman, the eminent Muslim modernist, lamented, even Maturidism, which held "more reasonable views than Ashʿarite theology … was eventually drowned by Ashʿarism in medieval Islam."[50] This is true even for the Ottoman tradition, whose Maturidi affiliation was for a long time eclipsed by Ashʿarism.[51] Meanwhile, Shiite Muslims, despite their relative openness to Muʿtazila influence, also denied that good and evil are discernible by individual human reason, and instead "postulated an infallible imam as the source of sure knowledge."[52] Sufis often attached a similar infallibility to the master, or shaikh, of their particular order.

An interesting attempt to reopen the discussion was by the great Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, also known as "The Conqueror" for seizing Constantinople in 1453 from the Byzantines. In line with his liberal spirit of interest in arts and sciences, along with his tolerance to Christians and Jews, Mehmed II also wanted to open some closed doors in Islam. Among these was the old question, "Can reason know the goodness of good and the badness of bad?" He ordered a team of prominent scholars to write separate treatises on the matter, to be discussed at his court. The manuscripts, which were sitting for centuries at the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul, were studied only in the 2010s by Turkish academic Asım Cüneyd Köksal.[53] From them, we know that one of the most prominent Ottoman sultans found the discussion crucial and wanted to revitalize it. But we do not know whether this effort had any significant influence.

Today, opinion polls held in the Muslim world indicate how powerful divine command theory still is. To the question "Is it necessary to believe in God in order to be moral and have good values?" 99 percent of all Egyptians say "yes." They are followed by 98 percent of Indonesians, 97 percent of Jordanians, 90 percent of Bangladeshis, and 88 percent of Pakistanis. (In comparison, the same question is answered affirmatively only by 10 percent of Swedes, 39 percent of Germans, and 57 percent of Americans.)[54] Overwhelming majorities in Muslim societies, in other words, cannot imagine that morality may have a source other than religion—such as human intuition and reason.

What has been the practical results of this worldview? In the next few chapters, we will investigate this question.

For a heads-up, let's just recall the example related in the beginning of this chapter—the example of raising children mainly with a "parental command theory" and its dos and don'ts. I suggested that it would not help children develop an inner conscience based on ethical values, and could rather make them immature, literalist, and even at times hypocritical. So let's see whether the divine command theory had similar effects on Muslim societies.

4

HOW WE LOST MORALITY

Since they have a religion, they act like they don't need morality anymore.

—Amin Maalouf, Lebanese-French author[1]

Woe to you, teachers of the law.… You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

—Jesus of Nazareth[2]

I have spent most of my life in Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country. I have also lived through the grand political revolution that Turkey went through in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It was a revolution that replaced the almost century-long hegemony of the more secular Turks with the hegemony of religious conservatives. From politics to bureaucracy, from business to the media, in almost all walks of life the conservatives replaced their enemies and "took their country back."

In the early stages of this story, it seemed quite promising, giving hope to many, including myself, that a Muslim liberal democracy was in the making, as I argued in an optimistic chapter on Turkey in my 2011 book, *Islam Without Extremes*. The reason was because, at that point, the religious conservatives in power had been implementing the political reforms the European Union required and the tiny band of Turkish liberals always aspired. Soon after that, however, as religious conservatives consolidated power, the mood began to change. It became gradually obvious that the liberal reforms of the earlier years were just to disempower the old secular establishment, especially the overbearing military, notorious for its coups against elected governments. Worse, the new ruling elite soon began to

adopt the authoritarian ways of the old ruling elite—often only with more fervor.

In short, the dreams of a free, open, and democratic "New Turkey" fared badly, at least for that moment, against a grim picture of authoritarianism. Meanwhile, the unabashedly Machiavellian tactics of the new ruling elite initiated a new discussion in the country about what kind of people these religious conservatives really are. For they had ended up doing everything that they themselves used to condemn as unjust and cruel—only more aggressively. This included jailing political dissidents with trumped-up charges. It included creating a venomous media, which intimidated and slandered anyone who dared to criticize those in power. The religious conservatives also plundered state resources, with unforeseen levels of corruption, cronyism, and nepotism. A cultish group among them—called "Gülenists"—systematically cheated on exams to advance its members in the bureaucracy, fabricated evidence to put opponents in prison, and even attempted a failed coup, as a part of an intra-conservative power struggle.[3]

A CASE OF IMMORAL PIETY

Most Turks who despised this sea of *ahlaksız dindarlık,* or "immoral piety" were the secularists, who kept telling the liberals, "We had warned you about these people," despite the fact that their own history wasn't much better. Meanwhile, there were also some rare conservatives who had the conscience, and the spine, to speak out. One was Mustafa Öztürk, a popular theologian and opinion writer. "For the next 40 to 50 years, we Muslims will have no right to say anything to any human being about faith, morals, rights and law," he wrote in 2017. "The response, 'We have seen you as well,' will be a slap in our face."[4] Another prominent theologian, the former mufti of Istanbul, Mustafa Çağrıcı, also lamented about "the growing gap between religiosity and morality." In the past, he recalled, conservatives like him would typically argue, "There could be no morality without religion." But now, he wrote, he had to argue, "There *should* be no religion without morality."[5]

What was the exact problem here? For some, the problem was the usual corruption that comes with power. It was also the age-old problem of hypocrisy. The religious conservatives, according to this view, were just

failing to live up to their highest ideals—which is a problem one can see in every tradition, every society.

For those who could read between the lines, however, the problem involved something different, something deeper. Because for all the immoral things they did, the conservatives had found religious justifications. Prophet Muhammad had reportedly said, "War is deceit," and since they were at a political war—with secularists, rival groups, "imperialists," or "Zionists"—they could use all kinds of tricks, lies, and libels.[6] A verse in the Qur'an said, "Relatives have prior claim over one another," so packing the bureaucracy with your own relatives was just fine.[7] Or while the Sharia had condemned *riba,* or interest, it had no clear rules about public tendering, which the religious conservatives in power twisted repeatedly—a staggering number of 186 times over a period of sixteen years—for the immediate benefits of their cronies.[8]

In other words, the problem was not that the religious conservatives were not pious enough. The problem was that theirs was a piety that did not make them moral people.

I have seen this problem in my native Turkey, but it is certainly not limited to it. The late Egyptian scholar Nasr Abu Zayd also observed a "religiosity devoid of ethics" in his nation, where "mosques are full, but corruption is rampant."[9] The Iraqi statesman Ali A. Allawi also has experienced an Islam that is "increasingly devoid of any deeply ethical content."[10] Qatar-based academic Omar Edward Moad also witnessed "outward religiosity without moral conscience."[11]

In Turkey, one of the prominent critics of this problem was theologian Ali Bardakoğlu, who served as the country's top cleric at the Directorate of Religious Affairs in the early years of the conservative ascendance, when things still looked promising. In a 2017 article, Bardakoğlu admitted that there is "a serious problem with morality" in his own country, only to add that "the lack of virtues and morals is rampant" in the whole Muslim world. He then nailed the origin of the problem: in a long historical process, Islamic jurisprudence had become "a pile of rules," among which morality had "evaporated."[12] "Of course," Bardakoğlu added, "this is related to the connection between religion and reason, with the issue of *husn* and *qubh* [good and bad]."[13]

TWO MEASURES OF LEGITIMACY

Bardakoğlu's intuition was right on point, because the "immoral piety" we see in the contemporary Muslim world is rooted in Ashʿarism and its equation of ethical value with divine commandment. This worldview equates morality with religious law. So, by definition, whatever the law bans becomes immoral, as whatever the law permits becomes moral. The question whether the law's verdicts are moral or not is hardly asked—simply because there is no independent moral criteria left to judge the law.

As a stark example, consider the case of child marriage. To many of us today, a "marriage" between a nine-year-old girl and a sixty-year-old man would seem deeply abusive. But for an ultra-conservative Muslim thinking on Hanbalite or Ashʿarite precepts, it may be simply *halal,* or "permissible." That is because in the classical age of Islam, there was no clear definition of the marriageable female age, and menstruation was typically seen as the legitimate age for consummation. This was, arguably, normal for premodern times, when most societies equated puberty with adulthood. Today, however, thanks to a plenitude of experiences, reports, and studies, we know that child marriage is absolutely disastrous for little girls. We also have a better alternative for their teen years, which is called "education." But who cares about all that, if your only criteria for judging the "good" and the "bad" are the millennium-old rules of Islamic jurisprudence?

In classical Islam, the first warning sign for this problem was the emergence of *hiyal,* or "legalistic trickery." This referred to the solutions jurists offered to circumvent the prohibitions of the law while still observing the letter of the law. The charging of interest was banned by the Sharia, for example, but you could still charge interest without calling it as such. (A borrower could "sell" some property to a money lender and then buy it back immediately for a higher price.[14]) While such tactics offered some helpful pragmatism in the face of rigid rules, they also opened the way for sheer hypocrisy. A famous case was that of a rich man who "granted" much of his wealth to his little children right before the annual date of the zakat tax, only to get it back after paying his taxes.[15] This wasn't moral but it was legal. And the latter was what really mattered.

The problem became more acute over time, especially with modernity: modern life produced many new areas of human activity and knowledge, whereas Islamic jurisprudence kept offering the same old rules that were now too archaic or too inadequate. The ethical rules humanity developed for these new areas were "un-Islamic," so they were unaccepted. The result was ethics-free zones in which one could surf at will.

Take, for example, the notion of "ethical journalism." It includes principles such as "truth and accuracy," "independence," and "fairness and impartiality." When you present a point of view, accordingly, you should also give voice to alternative views. When you criticize somebody, you should give them a right to respond. But I remember reminding these to an Islamist Turkish journalist, only to get a dismissal of "all this Western blah-blah." For him and his comrades, there was simply nothing *haram* (religiously banned) about what they were doing: war propaganda against the enemy. It was even an act of piety.

Perhaps the same Islamist Turkish journalist would be in favor of ethical journalism if he himself were the target of smear campaigns—as was really the case in Turkey in late 1990s, when secularists had the upper hand. But this would be a mere tactic, as it really turned out to be, revealing not any real ethics but rather the lack thereof.

Ali Bardakoğlu, the wise theologian, pointed out this double standard problem as well in his 2017 book, *Facing Our Muslimhood in the Light of Islam*. Quite a few Muslims in the world today, he observed, are "two-world-ed." This means, he wrote:

> Muslims have two measures of legitimacy in their minds, two separate ways out. When it is convenient, there is the law of the [secular] state, the order of society, there are bylaws, there are regulations. But if these do not work, the legitimacies in your mind come into play—a [religious] permit that you gave to yourself or that you have taken from someone opens your way. Furthermore, if you belong to a *tarikat* [a religious order or cult], you will have even a third measure of legitimacy, a third way out. [Yet] it is impossible for a person with three different measures of legitimacy to appear as a trustable person.… For nobody can have a guarantee on which

measure of legitimacy that person will use to proceed at any given moment.[16]

The solution to this grand problem lies in harmonizing the "two worlds." That means accepting that besides Islam's own specific principles and rules that bind its own believers, there are also universal principles and rules that bind all people—and the two are not alternatives. But that in itself requires removing the theological roadblock on defining the "good" and the "bad" with human reason.

THE OVERINCLUSIVE WORLD OF FATWAS

While one consequence of Ashʿarism has been the rejection of ethical values that come from the outside, another consequence has been the growth of a dry legalism within.

American Muslim scholar Sherman Jackson is among those who captured the nature of the problem here. The Ashʿarites, he writes, defined revelation as "the only source of moral value." From this came the inevitable result: "Every question human beings might pose in moral terms could be addressed as such on the basis of scripture."[17] Therefore, "in the aftermath of the Muʿtazila defeat," an "over-inclusive scripturalism" dominated the Islamic world.[18] It was a scripturalism that turned even trivial questions into religious problems. Muslims began to worry about things like, "Should one wear one's wrist-watch on the right wrist or on the left wrist?"[19]

To see what this looks like in practice today, one has to take a look at the world of fatwas. The term, which entered Western parlance with the infamous 1989 "death fatwa" of Ayatollah Khomeini on author Salman Rushdie, of course merely means "legal opinion." It is typically a statement by a trained Muslim mufti, or a "fatwa giver," on a question that often comes from an ordinary Muslim. What is stunning is the scope of the minute details of life that fatwas cover. A quick research on popular "online fatwa" services shows that ordinary Muslims are curious about questions such as these:

"Is it permissible to shower while standing?"

"In cutting fingernails, [do] we need to start in the index finger of the right hand followed by the rest of the fingers?"
"Can you be naked in front of animals like birds?"
"How can a person conceal himself from the *jinn* [genies] when in the toilet?"[20]

Most such questions receive detailed, serious answers from scholars. When it is asked, "Is it permissible to urinate while standing?" the answer is, "It is allowed, but disliked." Then comes a long explanation of how the Prophet Muhammad himself urinated.[21] There are even reported hadiths on this matter: "If anyone tells you that the Messenger of Allah urinated while standing, do not believe him, for I (always) saw him urinating while sitting down."[22] Such things are seen as important, because "imitating" exactly what the Prophet did in all such mundane details of life—from how to eat food, drink water, or leave a beard—is seen as a "morally praiseworthy act independent of the contents of the action."[23]

Then there are matters of sex. A question comes from a Muslim who is "confused about suckling wife's breasts." The fatwa comforts him: "You may suck your wife's breasts. If the milk flows and you drink, this does not affect the marital relations. Only the suckling that takes place during the first two years is considered in the Sharia."[24]Another Muslim wonders if bestiality—sex with an animal—invalidates one's *Hajj*, or pilgrimage, or Ramadan fasts. The answer is that bestiality is impermissible, but according to most scholars, "committing bestiality does not invalidate the *Hajj* or fasts."[25]

The point in fatwa culture is to legislate every minute detail of life and every possible question, so nothing is left for individual Muslims to decide on their own. And while muftis offer all this extreme legalism, conservative lay Muslims ask only more of it. Instead of struggling with "the pangs of personal conscience," in the words of Abou El Fadl, "the average Muslim projects the burden of morality onto the law."[26]

The obvious danger here is that once you have the right fatwa, you can easily justify things that are objectively unethical. Shaikh Hamza Yusuf, a prominent Muslim scholar in the West, frankly admitted this problem in an intra-Muslim conference in 2018. "Some fatwas are dangerous," he said; others "are ridiculous."[27] But on what basis could Muslims question and

oppose such bad fatwas? Could they, for example, rely on their consciences?

THE SHAKY GROUNDS OF CONSCIENCE

"Conscience" is a term that comes from the Latin word *scientia,* or "knowledge." With the prefix *con,* it means "knowing with." It implies that we humans have an internal source of knowing what is right and wrong, even if we aren't guided by outside sources such as religion and culture.

The origin of the concept goes back to Socrates, who spoke of a *daimonion,* or an "inner voice," which turned him away from doing wrong things. It found a strong basis in Christianity, thanks mainly to Saint Paul, who wrote that while the Gentiles didn't know God's written law, "the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness."[28] Enlightenment thinkers further elevated conscience as the source of "the individual's moral autonomy," while also coining the political term "freedom of conscience."[29] More recently, scientists have presented evidence that there is really something innately moral in human nature, as our brains are "configured to form bonds, to cooperate, and to care."[30]

But what is the place of conscience in Islam?

Contemporary Muslims can think that we have the exact same notion—in Arabic, "conscience" is called *damir,* and in some other languages, such as Turkish, it is called *wijdan.* However, research shows that these two terms acquired the meaning of "conscience" only in the nineteenth century, and with the influence of translations from Western literature, sometimes by Arab Christians.[31] In contrast, in the classical era, *wijdan* was used by Sufis to designate "encounter with God," and *damir* was used to refer to "innermost, secret thoughts," which were not necessarily virtuous.[32] Al-Ghazali, for example, wrote that God sent His prophets to cleanse people's *damir* "from the seductions of the deviant."[33]

That is why some prominent modern Muslim scholars—Fazlur Rahman and Farid Esack—argued that the Islamic term for conscience must rather be the Qur'anic term *taqwa.*[34] This makes sense in the light of the very first mention of the term in the Qur'an: it says that after creating the "soul," God inspired to it "its wickedness and its *righteousness,*" the latter being

taqwa.[35] However, as anyone familiar with the Islamic tradition may know, what *taqwa* came to mean in Islam is "God-fearing piety," often expressed as meticulous observation of the Sharia.[36] *Taqwa*, in this more established sense, is an internal drive for *doing* the right thing, but not a capacity for *figuring out* the right thing.

The truth is that, in mainstream classical Islam, there really was no well-defined concept of conscience as an independent source of moral authority.[37] Such a moral authority was precisely what the "intuitionist" ethics of the Muʿtazila entailed—but Muʿtazila itself was precisely the road not taken. Conscience still remained in the air, naturally, but to act only implicitly. Hence, when jurists followed the "call of conscience," they had to "construct a fortress of juridical reasoning and legal language to create the impression that they are not ruling according to the dictates of philosophy or ethics, but law."[38]

Meanwhile allusions to conscience in the founding texts received only limited attention. One of them is a remarkable hadith in which the Prophet gets asked by his companion, Wabisah ibn Ma'bad, on what it means to be a good person. In return, the Prophet says:

> *Consult your heart.* Righteousness is that which makes the soul feel tranquil and the heart feel tranquil. And sin is that which makes the soul waver and the breast uneasy.[39]

An exceptional voice in classical Islam that embraced this message was the great Sufi master Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273). "You have a spiritual organ within," he wrote, "Let it review the fatwa of the muftis and adopt whatever it agrees with."[40] But muftis themselves, and the orthodoxy they upheld, were not impressed. Some, including al-Ghazali, argued that the advice "consult your heart" was valid only for Wabisah himself. Others said it can't be that narrow, but it must be still valid for only people like Wabisah, whom the Prophet "knew to be a person of faith and understanding."[41] Sunni sources still quote this hadith only by taking great pains to emphasize that the heart can't actually override the law.[42] They say that the hadith is valid only "if the person giving the ruling does not have any strong [textual] evidence to support his conclusion." And even in that

case, those who can trust their hearts are only "who are true believers and who are knowledgeable of the Shariah."[43]

All this legalism is justified with an understandable concern: that humans can tilt the law out of *hawa,* or "whimsical desire." But the opposite risk, that law itself can be used to serve immoral ends, is often overlooked. Conscience, which can balance the law, does not count as a moral authority. It can even be suppressed as *waswasa,* or "the whispering of devils," which is precisely what a former extremist regrets to have done during his radicalization.[44]

THE NEED FOR A MORAL REVIVAL

What do Muslims think of this law-versus-conscience dilemma today? There are no polls that I am aware of, so I decided to carry out my own little poll among my fellow Turks in January 2019. To some 450,000 followers on Twitter, I posed the question "If a jurisprudential verdict conflicts with your conscience, which one would you question?"[45] Among the 5,500 people who answered, 37 percent said that it is conscience that must be questioned. One of them, to make his case, even referred to Abraham's sacrifice story, which we examined in the previous chapter: "Abraham listened to God's commandment," he reminded me, "not his conscience."[46] He gave me, in other words, a crash course in Ashʿarism, whose grip on the mind of the more conservative Turks was evident.

This strong belief in divine command ethics, which may be stronger in much of the Arab world than in relatively more secular Turkey, is also a constant source of religious authoritarianism. For if morality equals obedience to divine commands, all you can do to uphold morality in a society is to *enforce* those commands. That is why Islamist movements aspiring for a "moral revival" in Muslim societies focus on establishing the Sharia, as they understand it, with dictates such as forcing all women to veil themselves, banning alcohol or nonmarital sex, or enforcing public prayer and other Islamic observances.

In fact, Muslim societies do need a "moral revival"—but of a different kind. What is needed is to revive objective ethical values and "to liberate the captive conscience," as the late Egyptian scholar Gamal al-Banna (d. 2013) put it.[47] This requires a whole new approach to education, and a new

genre of art and literature—like the works of the great Egyptian authors of the mid-twentieth century Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, Khalid Muhammad Khalid, and M. Kamel Hussein, who elucidated conscience as the "inner voice of God."[48] With such new inputs to society, we need a new culture in which morality doesn't "evaporate" among jurisprudential rules, but rather interprets them—and, if necessary, reforms them.

What is also needed is to open up and reconnect with the rest of humanity, because since ethical values are universal, there may be things to learn from other cultures who may have cultivated the same values in their own traditions. They may have developed, for example, concepts such as ethical journalism, academic integrity, business ethics, legal ethics, even sexual ethics, as contemporary scholar Kecia Ali has argued well.[49] They may also have their own flaws and shortcomings, to which our tradition may help—but only if we can connect it to universality.

This may come as a shocking proposal to the Islamists, who typically believe in the exact opposite, thinking that "immorality" pours in from the outside, especially the West, against which Muslim societies should seal their gates. But that is because by morality they mean nothing other than divine command ethics. It is also because their predecessors were the very ones who shut the gates of Islam to universality in the first place. We will now see how that happened—and what its cost has been.

5

HOW WE LOST UNIVERSALISM

> The tension between divine command ethics and philosophical ethics in Islam … overlaps with the one between revelation-based communitarianism and reason-based universalism.
>
> —Oddbjørn Leirvik, comparative theologian[1]

> Reason without Islam cannot, on its own, tell good from evil.… [Hence] there is no source of justice or truth outside of Islam.
>
> —Necmettin Erbakan (d. 2011), Turkish Islamist politician[2]

"A wise visitor from outer space who dropped in on Earth a millennium ago," an American journalist once suggested, "might have assumed that the Americas would eventually be colonized not by primitive Europeans but by the more advanced Arab civilization."[3] That is because a millennium ago, the civilization of Arabs—or, more precisely, Muslims—was clearly "the most advanced in the world."[4] Muslims were the leading figures in astronomy, physics, mathematics, medicine, and optics, in addition to philosophy, law, economy, architecture, urban planning, and even music. In comparison, Christendom was lagging behind the Muslim world by all measures.

Today, it is common among Muslims to long for this "golden age" of Islam. But there is not enough introspection about how it came to be and why it faded away. For many pious believers, there is a simple explanation found in piety itself. Accordingly, early Muslims were so successful because they were zealous for their religion, and hence God rewarded them with wisdom, power, and glory. But then Muslims turned sinful, and this time God punished them by empowering their enemies. So, the same

reasoning goes, Islam's majesty will come back only when Muslims turn devout again, only when they become "real Muslims."

Yet this romantic explanation has little basis in facts, which do not show any evidence of Muslim societies becoming less religious over time. In fact, as the late great Turkish intellectual Erol Güngör once pointed out, there are reasons to think that Muslim societies turned often more religious in times of decline—not as the cause of any defeat, but to find moral strength against it.[5]

If we stick to facts, on the other hand, we can find a different explanation to the majesty of the early Islamic civilization: that it was unusually cosmopolitan—"even more cosmopolitan than the Hellenistic and Roman world had ever been," in the words of Italian historian Giorgio Levi della Vida.[6] While we call it "Islamic," Muslims did not constitute its majority until the eleventh century, and they also proved open to the learning from all the diverse cultures they ruled, inherited, or even merely heard of.[7] As Vartan Gregorian, an Iranian-born Armenian American academic, aptly summarized:

> Not merely translators, the Abbasids collected, synthesized and advanced knowledge, building their own civilization from intellectual gifts from many cultures, including the Chinese, Indian, Iranian, Egyptian, North African, Greek, Spanish, Sicilian and Byzantine. This Islamic period was indeed a cauldron of cultures, religions, learning and knowledge—one that created great civilizations and influenced others from Africa to China.… There was just one science—not a separate "Christian science," "Jewish science," "Muslim science," "Zoroastrian science" or "Hindu science"—for the Abbasids, who were apparently influenced by numerous Qur'anic references to learning about the wonders of the universe as a way to honor God. Thus, reason and faith, both being God-given, were combined, mutually inclusive and supportive; Islam was anything but isolationist.[8]

This "exceptional absorptive quality" was really the secret of early Islam.[9] No wonder other civilizations that have shown the same quality,

such as ancient Rome or modern-day America, have also flourished remarkably well.

Yet this cosmopolitan spirit did not last for too long, because its theological basis came into question. Those who championed reason—first the Muʿtazila and then "the philosophers"—were blamed for heresy. Fideist theologies that dominated the scene allowed, at best, "dependent reason," radically minimizing the sources of wisdom that Muslims could learn from. If reason by itself could not find any truth, why would Muslims care about what the Greeks or other infidels said about the nature of things?

Therefore, it is not an accident that cosmopolitanism flourished in Islam only before the full consolidation of Sunni orthodoxy. The first wave was the "Abbasid golden age" mentioned above, roughly from the mid-eighth to the mid-ninth centuries. Another "humanist renaissance" took place under the Buyids, a Shiite dynasty that ruled from the mid-tenth to the mid-eleventh centuries. Persian Muslim thinker Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030), a student of Christian scholar Yahya ibn Adi, developed a virtue ethics inspired by the Greek notion of *eudaemonia*, or human happiness and flourishing.[10] Like the Muʿtazila, Ibn Miskawayh considered reason as "the vicegerent of God in man."[11] From this premise, he developed a notion of *insaniyya,* or "humanity," "a universalist term that was coined precisely in this period."[12] He believed that Muslims should be educated by both the Sharia and also universal norms of ethics. Yet he left little trace in the Muslim world. "Rarely in the later history of Islamic ethics" would such "humanistic views and speculative excursions be seen again."[13]

TWO VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE

A key matter at hand here was whether Muslims should see an affinity with all humans—or only with other Muslims. Both views existed in early Islam, but the latter proved more definitive.

This can be seen in the different attitudes toward *adamiyyah*—another term for "humanity," deriving from the name of Adam, the first man. It is rooted in the Qur'an, which says, "We have honored the children of Adam," implying an honor given to all humanity. This basis allowed the rise of a "universalistic school" in Sunni Islam—most popular among the Hanafis—which conceptualized universal *huquq al-adamiyyin,* or "human rights."[14]

But the bulk of the Sunni tradition was defined by the "communalistic school," whose theological basis was Ashʿarism. Accordingly, humans had rights only if they were Muslims, or if they were granted "protection" by Muslims as subdued *dhimmis* or contracted *maahids.* Other non-Muslims counted as *kafir harbi,* or "enemy infidel," who had no inherent rights thanks to their mere humanity.[15]

In fact, for all Muslim schools of thought, the Qur'anic notion of *fitra,* or the primordial "human nature," could have been a strong basis for humanism.[16] But a hadith was used to close that door. "Every child is born on *fitra,*" it read, "but his parents convert him to Judaism, Christianity or Zoroastrianism."[17] From this statement, many concluded that *fitra* equals Islam. Therefore, instead of imagining a common human nature they share with other people, Muslims began seeing other people as corrupters of their nature. That is why today some English translations of the hadith above don't even use the term *fitra* and write it simply as "true faith of Islam." For the same reason, converts to Islam are told that they are in fact "reverts"—reverts back to their own nature.

Yet the famous *fitra* hadith had an earlier version that put it in a context—and also a different sense. Accordingly, in a campaign against Arab polytheists, some Muslim soldiers had killed the former's children, thinking, "Are they not the children of polytheists?" But the Prophet admonished them, saying, "Every individual is born with the same predisposition (*ala al-fitra*) until his tongue is made Arabic, and his parents make of him a Jew or a Christian."[18] This could well mean that children are born neutral—without any language or religion. And the point was their innocence, not their Muslimness.

No wonder there have been dissenters to the view that *fitra* equals Islam. One was the eleventh-century Iberian scholar Ibn Abd al-Barr, who wrote that babies are born not *ala al-Islam* (on Islam) but rather *ala al-salama* (on peace), the latter meaning, "a state of perfection, devoid of both good and evil, of belief and unbelief, a neutral state, but with the potential to become a Muslim."[19] In the twentieth century, Tunisian scholar Ibn Ashur developed the idea, defining human nature with universal traits such "reasoning" and "moral and sound judgement." He even added "civilization building," as reflected by "the attempts of small children to construct tombs

out of sand."[20] But such universalist definitions of human nature have remained marginal, even unheard of.

Contemporary Muslim thinker Abdulaziz Sachedina offers some helpful insights about the problem here. "In line with the Ashʿarite theological voluntarism," he explains, most Sunni scholars denied "the innate moral worth of humanity." Consequently, these scholars rejected "a natural system of ethics," seeing it as "alien" and "un-Islamic." This also meant that Islam could not "participate" in a universal moral order; it could only aspire to build its own.[21]

That is why, after the initial centuries of cosmopolitanism and creativity, Muslim thought growingly became insular and self-referential. Hence, Islamic civilization lost the very "exceptional absorptive quality" that made it great in the first place. What emerged, rather, was a pervasive "lack of curiosity" about the rest of the world, which impeded progress in the late Islamic civilization.[22]

LESSONS OF SLAVERY AND ABOLITION

Before modernity, the insularity of Muslim thought did not appear as a burning problem. Islam had its own values and systems that worked for its time. By some measures, it was even ahead of its time. In that Islamic universe, there was a notion of common humanity, and also human rights, but only in a hierarchical sense: At the top of the pyramid, there were free Muslim men. They were followed by Muslim women, Muslim slaves, non-Muslims *dhimmis*, non-Muslim slaves, and finally the *zanadiq* and the *murtaddeen*, or "heretics" and "apostates," who had no rights at all.

With modernity, however, there emerged in the West new ideas about human rights. One of them was the revolutionary creed that all men are created equal, and thus none of them deserved to be slaves. It was championed by the abolitionist movement that was born in late-eighteenth-century England and which soon spread to America and other Western nations. In a long battle that lasted for almost two centuries, slavery was banned in all countries in the world, marking "the most important libertarian accomplishment in history."[23]

So, where did we Muslims stand in this history?

Let's see. Like most civilizations, the Islamic civilization had slavery. It had "moderated the institution and mitigated its legal and moral aspects," and in practice Islamic slavery was often "milder than its Western counterparts."[24] But it was still slavery. During the Ottoman Empire, slave traders were hunting people, often women, with raids among non-Muslim peoples in Africa, Circassia, and Georgia, to sell them in the slave markets of Istanbul, Basra, or Mecca. The prices for white females were often higher than black ones. Among male slaves, the most pricey were the eunuchs, whose sexual organs were removed with extremely painful and risky operations, so they could take care of their master's women without posing a sexual risk.[25]

The movement to eradicate this social evil began not in Istanbul or Cairo, but in London.[26] In the late 1830s, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which had spearheaded emancipation throughout the British Empire with the Abolition Act of 1833, began lobbying Her Majesty's government to push on other governments, including the Ottomans. Soon the British ambassador in Istanbul, Lord Ponsonby, began talking to Ottoman officials about this new strange idea that all slaves must be freed. Not getting a very enthusiastic response, he wrote back to London in December 1840:

> I have mentioned the subject and I have been heard with extreme astonishment accompanied with a smile at a proposition for destroying an institution closely interwoven with the frame of society in this country, and intimately connected with the law and with the habits and even the religion of all classes, from the Sultan himself down to the lowest peasant.… I think that all attempts to effect your Lordship's purpose will fail, and I fear they might give offence if urged forward with importunity. The Turks may believe us to be their superiors in the Sciences, in Arts, and in Arms, but they are far from thinking our wisdom or our morality greater than their own.[27]

But honestly, on this particular matter of slavery, the British wisdom and morality had indeed become superior to those of the Turks. To his credit, Abdulmejid I, a reformist Sultan who introduced many great reforms

during his definitive reign, 1839–1861, didn't prove obstinate and complied with the British calls. In 1847, he issued an imperial edict banning African slave trade in the Persian Gulf and also abolishing the Istanbul slave market. In the next two decades Ottoman authorities actively suppressed the slave trade in Africa, the Mediterranean, Circassia, and Georgia.[28] Meanwhile, a new genre of Ottoman intellectuals, who were grounded in Islam but also influenced by Western liberalism, produced a new literature that generated a new conscience. One of these was *Sergüzeşt* by Samipaşazade Sezai, a novel on the touching story of a Caucasian female slave, which had an impact on Ottoman readers similar to that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on American ones.[29]

At the same time, Tunisia, an exceptionally bright spot in the whole Muslim world, both then and now, officially abolished slavery in 1846. In 1863, the mayor of Tunis, Husayn Pasha, even wrote a letter to the US consul general in town to urge the Americans to join the slavery-free world.[30]

Yet not all Muslims welcomed the movement against slavery, and those who opposed it had a strong case—that it was sanctioned by religion. One of them was the grand sharif of Mecca, Abd al-Muttalib ibn Ghalib, who launched a rebellion against the Ottomans in 1856, partly in defense of slavery, declaring "the Turks have become apostates."[31] Ottomans subdued the revolt, but slavery persisted on the Arabian Peninsula for many decades to come. In Saudi Arabia and Yemen, it would be abolished only in 1962. In 1981, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania would become the last country on earth to accept abolition.

The emancipation process was so stalled, partly because conservative clerics "felt uneasy about jettisoning too much of what their illustrious predecessors had elaborated."[32] There were pioneering scholars, such as the prominent Indian Muslim reformist Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), who wrote many articles on *ibtal-i ghulami,* or "abolition of slavery," by relying on the Qur'an's "freedom verses."[33] But more conservative groups in the subcontinent, such as the Deobandis of Pakistan, were still defending slavery, on Islamic grounds, in the mid-twentieth century.[34] In Mauritania, as late as in 1997, a scholar declared that abolition "is contrary to the teachings of the fundamental texts of Islamic law."[35] In Saudi Arabia, as late as in 2003, Shaikh Saleh al-Fawzan, one of the highest-ranking jurists,

argued that slavery is lawful in Islam and it should be legalized. He also accused Muslim scholars who condemned slavery as "ignorant" and even as "infidels."[36]

Today, there are hardly any Muslim authorities left that defend slavery—except the horrendous ISIS, the terrorist group which reestablished slavery in the middle of Iraq and Syria in the mid-2010s. But we Muslims should think about why it has been that difficult to come to this point.

The answer is not simply because slavery exists in the Qur'an. It exists in the Bible, too, but this didn't stop some Christians from becoming champions of abolition. Moreover, the Qur'an's treatment of slavery could in fact be understood as an inspiration for abolition, as Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, who led French missions in Muslim Africa, wrote in 1888:

> The Qur'an does not enjoin slavery, but merely permits it. Indeed, the Qur'an goes further, because it places the liberation of captives at the top of the list of merciful deeds, through which believers may be worthy of heaven. Strictly speaking, nothing would prick the consciences of Muslims in the abolition of slavery. However, habits are there, and have acquired a sacred character through their very antiquity.[37]

So, the problem wasn't the Qur'an but a certain mindset that couldn't imagine the Qur'an's praise of manumission, or "freeing a neck," as an inspiration for universal emancipation. It was a mindset that also stuck to tradition and couldn't imagine a new world where all human beings could be free. And when such a new world was presented by the West, the same mindset rejected it on principle. Because non-Muslims, by definition, couldn't have any moral wisdom.

Today, the resistance to abolition is a faded memory among Muslims, but the same mindset resists other liberal values that are promoted again often by the West—values such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or gender equality.

Of course, the same West has come to us, Muslims, not always with humane ideals but also inhumane deeds, such as colonialism, occupation, plunder, and domination. That has been a big part of the problem, as it is really hard to appreciate modernity when it comes to you at the barrel of a

gun—even as a pretext for that gun. With all that imperialism, which has served their narrow *interests,* modern Western powers have repeatedly betrayed their better *values*. The history of this Western hypocrisy cannot be criticized enough.

Yet there is another part of the problem, which is the focus of this book. It is the Islamist resistance to modern liberal values, which often uses "anti-imperialism" as its own pretext for illiberalism. Scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl observes how this resistance works today, with the help of cultural relativism:

> Islam, it is argued, has its own set of standards for justice and righteousness, and it is of no consequence if those standards happen to be inconsistent with the moral sensitivities of non-Muslims. This argument was repeated often in the context of justifying and defending the Salman Rushdie affair, the destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan, and the treatment of women by the Taliban.[38]

So, how does one argue against that? "I think that any effort to deal with this issue," Abou El Fadl suggests, "must start by acknowledging that Islam itself, like all religions, is founded on certain universals, such as mercy, justice, compassion, and dignity."[39] That is absolutely right. But how can we do that, if we are stuck with a theology that insists that values such as mercy, justice, compassion, and dignity have simply no meaning other than what the Sharia decrees?

HUMAN RIGHTS VS. ISLAMIC RIGHTS?

This background may help explain why some Muslims have been uncomfortable with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or UDHR, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, in the aftermath of the horrors of World War II. The document proclaimed "the inherent dignity and … the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family," and referred to the "conscience of mankind" as an implicit source for these values.[40]

But not everyone could fully accept these notions. One of them was the Pakistani Islamist Mawdudi, who penned in 1976 an alternative text to the UDHR titled *Human Rights in Islam.* The book proclaimed human equality

"irrespective of any distinction of color, race or nationality." It conspicuously excluded gender and religion, which are, of course, the real contentious issues regarding Islamic law.[41]

This work was followed by joint Muslim declarations such as the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, which was presented by a Muslim NGO in 1981, and the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, which was signed by most Muslim-majority governments in 1990.[42] Both of these texts affirmed many of the rights proclaimed by the UDHR, but also offered some serious limitations. While the UDHR affirmed the "freedom to change [one's] religion or belief," for example, the Cairo Declaration not only skipped that freedom but also condemned "exploiting ignorance" to make people choose a religion other than Islam.

What is also significant in both of these "Islamic" documents is that they root the notion of human rights in nothing but the divine law. In the Cairo Declaration, in particular, "all the rights and freedoms" are declared to be "subject to the Islamic Shari'ah." We read, for example, "every man shall have the right to free movement," but only "within the framework of the Shari'ah." Everyone also has the "right to express his opinion freely" as well, but again only "in such manner as would not be contrary to the principles of the Shari'ah." Islamic law, in other words, is the basis, and the limit, to all human rights.

At this point, some Muslims can wonder what is wrong with this. What is wrong for believers to derive human rights from the divine? There is nothing wrong, but there is something missing: while there is a strong sense of God-given human rights that we understand through divine law, there is no sense of God-given human rights that we can understand through human faculties such as reason and conscience. The Muʿtazila and the philosophers of Islam had the latter vision. So had the Founding Fathers of the United States who found it "self-evident," in a historic assembly in 1776, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."

Yet if reason is not a guide for anything, that it cannot establish any value, then there is simply no need—in fact, no justification—to look beyond the borders of revelation.

Ebrahim Moosa, a leading scholar of contemporary Muslim thought, explains in a critical essay how this mindset works among contemporary

Muslims. "Muslims can engage in discourses of justice, egalitarianism, freedom, and equality," he observes, "only if there is some semblance that the scripture or the Prophet or some of the learned savants (imams) of the past endorsed, hinted, or fantasized about the possibility of such discourses."[43] This has led to the development of a particular intra-Muslim rhetoric, he adds, where justification comes only from classical texts:

> In order to persuade people in public discourse today, the most effective psychological trick to play on unsuspecting Muslim audiences is to say that some past authority—Tabari, Abu Hanifa, or al-Shafiʿi—held such an enlightening position on matter X, so why do you lesser mortals not adopt it? The greater the vintage of the authority, the more persuasive the argument will sound to folks, even if the rationale of the argument and its substance make no sense at all. These may sound like anecdotal stereotypes, but this happens repeatedly in Muslim communities, even among secularly educated lay Muslims.[44]

But what if we can't find any exceptionally "enlightening position" in the past, especially on issues that our forbearers have never encountered? Can we take steps based merely on our reason? Unfortunately, Moosa says, quite a few Muslims are hesitant to do that, as they "discredit the legitimacy of their experience in the present and refuse to allow this experience to be the grounds for innovation, change, and adaptation."[45] As a result, as another Muslim scholar, Muqtedar Khan, points out, "most Muslims understand Islamic scholarship as knowledge of past opinions about Islam rather than new thinking.… They live under the tyranny of past opinions."[46]

THREE STRATEGIES: REJECTION, APOLOGY, AND INSTRUMENTALISM

Of course, all cultures do change and evolve, and Muslim cultures have been changing and evolving as well, especially in the past two centuries. Ideas of individual freedom, religious liberty, or gender equality have been making inroads all across the Muslim world, bringing in new attitudes and new laws. The almost-universal acceptance of the abolition of slavery, which we saw, shows that progress does take place. The same can be said for novelties such as constitutional government, popular elections, or

modern education, which have gained at least widespread acceptance in many parts of the Muslim world.

But there is also a powerful obstacle in the same world that slows, halts, and even sometimes reverses progress: the "puritans," meaning Salafis, Islamists, and other rigid conservatives.[47] They are determinedly loyal to the "no-value-in-the-absence-of-revelation" tradition.[48] So, they are determinedly trying to prevent or undo all the "un-Islamic" inputs the Muslim world has amassed in the past two centuries. The evils they condemn typically include "rationalism," "liberalism," and "feminism." Some even include "human rights-ism."[49]

Yet even these "puritans" are not monolithic, and the positions they take regarding universal values fall into a spectrum. Based on my own observations over the decades, I believe there are three main strategies on this spectrum.

The first one is outright *rejection* of the universal, which is the strategy of hard-liners. For them, all the values Muslims need come from the Sharia, whereas all "man-made" ideas are by definition "falsehood." A key ideologue of this trend was the Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), who had labeled everything outside of Islam, even mere secular knowledge, as aspects of *jahiliyya,* or the pre-Islamic "ignorance" that Prophet Muhammad had come to eradicate. His targets included "philosophy, the interpretation of human history, psychology, ethics, theology, comparative religion, sociology."[50]

Such ideas, we must note, have real consequences. "Today, many Muslim puritans come to the West," observes Abou El Fadl, "to learn the Western physical sciences while hoping to insulate themselves from the influence of Western culture by refusing to study the humanities or social sciences."[51]

In contrast to such hard-liners, there is the opposite end of the spectrum, the strategy of the moderates, which is *apology*. According to them, the modern world has really produced some good values and systems, but we shouldn't forget that all these were already and fully established by Islam. Is democracy a good thing? Yes—and Islam already introduced the best democracy with the "consultation" principle of the Qur'an, and the "election" of the first four caliphs. Are human rights good values? Yes—and Islam already enacted the best human rights standards fourteen

centuries ago. What about slavery? Well, Islamic slavery was quite gracious, and modern humans are "slaves" to money anyway. While the defenders of this approach may have their hearts in the right place, their superficial arguments often avert an honest reckoning with reality.

Then somewhere between rejection and apology, there lies the third and most popular strategy, which is *instrumentalism.* Its adherents, just like the hard-liners, do not believe in universal norms, but they also see no problem in making use of them as long as they are helpful. Their unprincipled pragmatism can bear some helpful moderations, but it also can add to the problem of immorality, which we addressed in the previous chapter. It is the very problem Turkish theologian Ali Bardakoğlu describes regarding the Muslims who have "two measures of legitimacy," and who can freely "surf" between them.[52]

What we really need is to build harmony between the tenets of Islam, which need some fresh interpretations, and the universal values of humanity. (To use an academic genre, what we need is not "Islamization of knowledge," but "integration of knowledge."[53]) Those universal values of humanity are a work of cumulative conscience that has evolved over time with big trials and errors, big efforts and sacrifices. Islam, too, played an important role in this global history. The Qur'an proclaimed the sanctity of human life, for example, by condemning female infanticide—a horrific custom in pre-Islamic Arabia. Or it was Islam that introduced an egalitarian culture to India, whose caste system had degraded large swaths of people to subhumans. But the British also served the same purposes by banning *sati* or "wife burning," another horrific custom among Hindus, or, earlier, by building the foundations of democracy with the Magna Carta. Christianity eradicated horrendous traditions of human sacrifice among pagan peoples, and the American civil rights movement won a victory against the venomous racism among the whites. Moral progress, which we can detect with our inherent conscience, took place in various episodes in human history, sometimes thanks to religious texts, sometimes thanks to reason, and sometimes with a combination of both.

So instead of seeing anything outside of Islam as darkness, we Muslims should accept that there are objective values of "good" and "bad," and the human struggle to discover, articulate, and advance them is a universal

cause in which we have a place—but not the only place. Only then can we break our self-containment and reconnect with the rest of humanity.