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ETHICS AND THE QUR'ĀN: COMMUNITY AND WORLD VIEW

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The first thing that must be said about ethics and the sacred book of the Muslims is that the Qur'ān is neither a work of systematic theology nor an essay in the science of moral discourse. Like the Bible of the Jews and Christians, the Qur'ān is a sourcebook for faith and order and not a textbook of definition and regulation. Because of this, the Qur'ān is not to be equated with the subsequent developments of Islamic thought and practice connected with theology, law, or ethics. There is, however, a persistent tradition or pattern of thinking down through the Islamic ages which insists that the fundamental authority in all matters is the revelation as it is contained in the Qur'ān. But often the Qur'ān has been the prisoner of the interpreters rather than their source and guide. Perhaps it is because of this that the Qur'ān has not been as prominent a source for Islamic ethics as might be expected by someone coming to the subject for the first time within the Islamic context.

Over the past twenty or so years several studies of Qur'ānic ethics have appeared in English which have focused on the terminology of the Qur'ān. Two major works by Toshihiko Izutsu have quite thoroughly explored the semantic range of Qur'ān terms and concepts bearing on the subject.¹ The painstakingly detailed work of Daud Rahbar, *God of Justice*, went in a different direction to find the central theme of the Qur'ān and to demonstrate how the other themes were subordinate to the divine justice.² A more recent study by Fazlur Rahman³ implicitly rejects the Rahbar

Unless otherwise indicated, the Qur'ān translation used in quotes is that of Richard Bell, *The Qur'ān* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937; repr. 1960).

¹*Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964).

²*God of Justice: A Study of the Ethical Doctrines of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960).

³*Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Minneapolis and Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980).

thesis by showing how God's mercy creates, informs, and animates the universe. In Rahman's profound discussion in *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* the divine justice is certainly not minimized, but neither is it held up as the final attribute of God. A much more recent article-length study by George Hourani, "Ethical Presuppositions of the Qur'ān,"⁴ clearly and convincingly demonstrates that the Qur'ān does teach that "ethical value has an objective reality and is not reducible in essence to the commands and prohibitions of God." Hourani is quick to affirm that "the chief source of ethical knowledge is revelation, particularly the Qur'ān."⁵ Izutsu, Rahman, and Hourani all hold that the Qur'ān is the fundamental source of authentic Islamic value formation, including ethics, and that it is far more subtle and nuanced in both its prescriptive and descriptive dimensions than the simplistic ethical voluntarism of the later Sunni law schools, which have for better or worse dominated and, to specify what I said earlier, imprisoned the revelation.

Although the working out of a detailed Qur'ānic ethics has yet to be accomplished for the modern period, the semantic and theological and presuppositional foundations for such a task have been essentially completed in the work of Izutsu, Rahman, and Hourani. The last scholar has profitably reopened the whole Mu'tazilite approach to Qur'ānic ethics, and it will be interesting to see whether and to what extent other scholars—whether Muslim or not—will be inspired to return to a rationalist interpretation and application of the revelation. It is not my goal to rehearse further what has already been achieved in the way of ethical analysis of the Qur'ān. I will not attempt to discern once again the basic categories of value or to demonstrate the continuities, transitions, and transformations that occurred between the Jāhiliyya and Islam's establishment as the dominant religious and value system in Arabia. These tasks have fairly well been completed and what remains to be done is on the more specific levels of how the Qur'ān was itself appropriated and applied within the developing elaboration of law and theology over the early Islamic centuries. But this enterprise is both too ambitious and too detailed to pursue in the present context. What I have set as my task here is to show that Qur'ānic ethics can profitably be viewed as the basic value dimension of a living, dynamic community ideal whose structure and function are adumbrated in the Qur'ān overall and in certain respects specifically prescribed. What I am talking about is the Ummah, whose essential characteristics are laid out in the Qur'ān and put into a mythic and symbolic context that moves from Abraham, through Moses, to the bold affirmation that the Muslims are the "best community" of all time.⁶

⁴*The Muslim World*, 70, no. 1 (January 1980), 1-28.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶See Frederick M. Denny, "The Meaning of *Ummah* in the Qur'ān," *History of Religions*, 15, no. 1 (August 1975), 34-70. In this paper, as elsewhere, I have distinguished between

The beginnings of the Ummah as an independent and encompassing human social and political order under religious authority are in Medina, although the indispensable antecedents are to be found in the small, exclusive movement of Mecca, which as a religious reformation failed (in the short run) but which, enduring persecution, became prepared for the challenges to come. The important Constitution of Medina, which has been transmitted to us by Ibn Ishāq (in his *Sīra*) provides a rudimentary outline of the type of agreement reached among the parties of the oasis at Yathrib toward the end of a stable and secure public order. The Constitution is of the greatest value for any effort of historical reconstruction, for it specifies in a convenantal, and, in fact, a legally contractual sense what the Qur'ān tends to treat in an oracular and disjointed manner concerning the specific articles, sanctions, and parties of the arrangement.⁷ The Qur'ān, however, does in its unique way provide the authentic, original background and theory for what it meant for Muhammad and his people to establish a new order.

The Ummah, as we should define it today, is highly influenced and conditioned by post-Qur'ānic developments, interpretations, and constructions, blended with later cultural, political, juridical, and religious elements. Islam and the Ummah, as has often been said, are both *dīn* and *dawlah*, "religion" and "state," under God's legislation, the holy *sharī'ah*, which prescribes how the believers shall live in community obediently and successfully and how they shall anticipate their destinies. The Ummah has in all times and places been regarded by Muslims as one of the central coordinates of their belief and of their social and political well-being. It is a complex, dynamic reality which by its charismatic nature cannot be fully defined within the Qur'ānic context alone. A comprehensive understanding of the Ummah in history and in the present requires a grasp of the sweep of Islamic experience and self-interpretation of profound depth and breadth.

The Ummah is the entire Muslim community as it exists at any point in time, considered on the simplest level of generalization. An illustration has been fashioned, in triangular terms, with the angles Culture, Doctrine, and History all joined by sides which together encompass the concept of the Ummah. It is interesting to observe the primacy of the sociological in a Muslim's own heuristic model.⁸ The Ummah, then, is not simply the Muslim

Ummah as the Muslim community, and *ummah* as an Arabic technical term, which may refer to other communities, as well. In effect Ummah has become in recent years an English proper noun, at least among scholars of Islam. It is analogous to Church, for the Christian community, and Samgha, for the Buddhist monastic community.

⁷See Frederick M. Denny, "Ummah in the 'Constitution of Medina,'" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 36, no. 1 (January 1977), 39-47. Also, by the same author, "Some Religious-Communal Terms and Concepts in the Qur'ān," *Numen*, 24, no. 1 (February 1977), 26-59, for a consideration of covenant and related topics.

⁸I was introduced to this model in a faculty seminar given by Professor Yusuf Ibhish at Dartmouth College, Autumn 1966.

community in a gross empirical sense; it is the community being the community in specific ways. There is a normative quality inherent in it, because it is a holy community with a transcendent origin and purpose, enlivened and sustained by a transcendent power.

C. A. O. van Nieuwenhuijze has written of the "poly-interpretability" of the concept of the Ummah and the problems of definition of the term.⁹ Muhammad was engaged in the virtual remaking of Arab society along the lines of religion, in which the converts, the Muslims, were called to be a community in which dīn would replace the traditional virtues and customs of Arab tribalism as value center and basis for social and political order. What W. Montgomery Watt has termed "tribal humanism"¹⁰ (which was in fact giving way to the sometimes cruel and callous practices of an emerging mercantile order dominated by the Meccan oligarchy), based on kinship and traditional values, would be replaced by a religious orientation in which all Arabs and all mankind, potentially and ideally, would form the community, the Ummah of Islam. But this was not to occur in a sudden, drastic shift; a great struggle would ensue before religion would even superficially predominate in the Arabian Peninsula alone. Asserting that the new dispensation did not require a repudiation and dissolution of all former affinities and values, "a complete changeover of social *Angehörigkeit*," van Nieuwenhuijze writes:

"... *ummah* was the sort of word that could be given a new shade of meaning; it was also capable of further development subsequently."¹¹ After all, in order to attain longevity and achieve a lasting impact as one of the central coordinates of an ever-expanding community, a concept needs nothing more than poly-interpretability. Definitions are definitely less important. If the neologism *ummah* was to have any operational significance during the period (sc. in the process) of its formation, it must have been that of being the abstract entity (the rationalization, the concept) standing for (or symbolizing) the cohesion of all Muslims as Muslims, as a conscious cohesion made explicit. Once it had come into existence as an abstract entity, a living concept in its proper linguistic setting, it could, reversely, act as a force maintaining and stimulating this same cohesion. Therefore, symbol of cohesion and cohesive force all at once.¹²

If it assumes a great deal on the part of Muhammad as a conscious coiner of axial terms, the passage does make clear the peculiar quality of the term

⁹"The Ummah—an Analytic Approach," *Studia Islamica*, 10 (1959), 5-22.

¹⁰*Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 24.

¹¹Quoted from W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 240.

¹²"The Ummah—an Analytic Approach," p. 13.

"ummah" and some of its effects. The Muslim community is both a social, historical reality and an ideal toward which to strive. There is a sense of becoming entailed in it; it somehow is what it is becoming and becomes what it is, or rather becomes what and as it *intends*. Because the Ummah is an intentional, moral community, any definition must characterize it as both ideal and somewhat abstract as well as practical and functional: a "symbol of cohesion and cohesive force" at the same time, which at its truest and best reflects a community which is "in a bond of God, and a bond of the people" (3:112).

Although no suggestion is made that the specifically Qur'ānic doctrine of the Ummah exhausts its meaning, for it clearly does not, it is a valid project to consider the Ummah's germinal phases as a moral community in the Qur'ānic record. If the Qur'ān does not provide the sources or rationale for a complete understanding of the Ummah and Islamic ethics, it does contain the most authentic clues concerning their essentially religious orientation, which is markedly soteriological. If the Ummah, then, is more than a strictly Qur'ānic definition can encompass, taken even in a generously impressionistic sense, it is at the same time never less than what the Qur'ān holds it to be: the righteous community of *falāḥ* (better translated as "success" than "salvation"). Concerning this central aspect of Muslim reality, as in all the vital dimensions of Muslim self-understanding and interpretation, the Qur'ān is normative and regulative, although not descriptively exhaustive.

Muslims do not deny a soteriological dimension in their religion, although the terms "salvation" and "soteriology" are not commonly encountered in Muslim discourse. This fact does not mean that the concept is lacking, but simply that Western and especially Christian terminology, or Eastern and Buddhist terminology, for that matter, do not apply. In short, Islam does not embrace a strong rhetoric of salvation.¹³ But the best proof of the centrality of the concept is found through the Qur'ān itself, which is deeply concerned with the human predicament and how we may be delivered from it or, to use a more characteristic Islamic expression, how we may "triumph" over it, how we may be among the "successful" (*al-muflīḥūn*), and receive saving "guidance" (*hudan, hidāya*) and avoid "loss."

There is, of course, no redeptorist soteriology in Islam, predicated on a fallen mankind as in Christianity, at least not in the Sunni tradition. And there is no doctrine of original sin,¹⁴ although there is a clear sense of man's sinfulness and willful perversity in being ungrateful and insolent toward

¹³For a more detailed treatment, with references, see Frederick M. Denny, "The Problem of Salvation in the Qur'ān: Key Terms and Concepts," in A. H. Green, ed., *The Quest for an Islamic Humanism: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi*, in press.

¹⁴See Georges Anawati, "La notion de péché originel existe-elle dans l'Islam?" *Studia Islamica*, 30 (1970), 29-40.

God (a very common theme throughout the Qur'ān). If the Muslim's idea of sinfulness is not as radical in the ontological sense as a Christian doctrine inevitably and perhaps necessarily is, it may be that the evil ways of basically good people are even more mysterious. There is little to be gained theologically or scientifically by a search for the greater sin; but it is a reasonable activity to seek to understand the ways in which religious people have symbolized and internalized their sense of wrong and wrong-doing.

Muslim, or to be more specific, Qur'ānic ideas of salvation (the distinction is often necessary, as has already been suggested concerning the meaning of the Ummah itself) are characterized in very positive terms as entailing a successful outcome to life in this world, with happiness and the sense of being part of an upright and just fellowship uppermost in the minds of the believers. Although the present life may be just "a sport and a pastime" (6:32), and the world to come, *al-ākhirah*, with its promise of paradise or damnation, a keenly anticipated reality, there is a clear sense in which Muslim soteriology includes success, transformation, and reward in this life, too, particularly on the level of the Ummah (e.g., 3:103: "And remember Allah's favour unto you: how ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that ye became brothers by His grace; and (how) ye were upon the brink of an abyss of fire, and He did save you from it—Pickthall trans.). The optimistic linking of salvation as success with the very identity of the Muslim community is a result, in part, of the great achievements of Muhammad and his people. This fact is at the center of Islamic reflection on the Battle of Badr, in A.H. 2, (March 624 C.E.), when Muhammad and his greatly outnumbered band of Medinans carried the day against the invading Meccans. This day is called, in 8:42, *yaum al-furqān*, the "Day of Deliverance" or "Day of Discrimination," depending upon how the term *furqān* is interpreted here, for mere translation is not sufficient. On this great day was accomplished, in the words of Richard Bell, "the deliverance of the Muslims and their separation from the unbelievers, the assurance of divine approval, the establishment of the Muslims as a distinct community."¹⁵

The ethical dimension of the Qur'ānic message is very much intertwined with the vision of the holy community in its intimate relation with God and his Prophet. To be sure, the various and interconnected ritual, legal, social, and moral obligations and regulations are all part of a deontology in which obedience to God's will is fundamental, however inscrutable that will may be. But there is also a teleological dimension which envisions a people obeying God because He is good and seeking by means of a given natural constitution (*fiṭra*) to progress in the direction of felicity and common life as "the best community" yet brought forth for humankind. The Qur'ānic

¹⁵W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, Islamic Surveys, 8 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), pp. 146-147.

ethic is neither wholly voluntaristic nor objective-rationalist. It is, in fact, covenantal and entails mutual rights and obligations within an unfolding and suspenseful historical process. — The remainder of this paper will explore this by means of three central themes which seem to me to bring together essential elements of the Qur'ān's ethical teachings as they relate to the community. The three themes are: (a) the Abrahamic component of Qur'ānic religion; (b) the concept of an *ummah muslimah*; and (c) the Muslims as the best *ummah*.

(a) The Abrahamic Component

The spiritual and historical model for the Muslim *ummah* is Abraham.¹⁶ In 16:120 and 121, obedience, *ḥanīfī* piety, and the abjuration of polytheism, together with thankfulness for God's blessings and bounty, ensure that one will be on "the straight path." Muhammad was told to follow the "religion" (*millah*) of Abraham (16:123) and this, in turn, would be the way for his people, who would follow the archetypal predecessors as the new, Arab, *ummah muslimah*. In 2:134 and 141 the Jews and Christians are told: "That is an *ummah* [i.e., Abraham through Jacob] which has passed away; to it what it has earned and to you what you have earned. And you will not be asked of what they used to do" (trans. adapted from Bell). The Muslims are commanded to follow the example of the primordial *ummah* of Abraham which was prior to and independent of the Jews and the Christians. But the new community would neither benefit from the good which the first *ummah* did (except as a model) nor be held liable for the bad; each was to be judged according to its own acts. This probably means that Abraham could not intercede in any way for the Muslims of Muhammad's time, on the one hand; on the other, it seems that God comforted the new Muslims by granting an entirely new beginning, but with the old and primordial value system.

So the Muslim *ummah* would not be tied to the past, although it certainly might be guided by it through the example of Abraham. Salvation history¹⁷ is one in which God respects His creatures and does not doom the descendants of evil-doers nor reward those who only nominally follow such paradigms as Abraham. Thus neither the Jews nor the Christians had a

¹⁶For a thorough examination of Abrahamic dimensions of the Qur'ānic message, see Y. Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran*, Études Musulmanes, 5 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958).

¹⁷While it could be objected that this term, from the German *Heilsgeschichte*, is so freighted with Christian biblical-theological assumptions as to be irrelevant to Islam, I would argue that it is a useful and appropriate phrase from the Qur'ānic perspective, so long as no specific theological position is assumed along with it. The Qur'ān views itself as the final record of God's ways with humankind, authenticating the scriptural warnings and promises to former peoples and correcting their errors and distortions so as to keep the original and enduring message intact.

special claim on salvation or success simply because they were descended from Abraham. The same is true for the Muslims of Muhammad: They must follow the right path and stand before God's judgment with no appeal beyond their acts and their belief.

They [the Jews and Christians] say: "Be ye Jews or Christians and ye will be guided"; Say (thou): "Nay, the creed [*millah*] of Abraham, who was a Ḥanīf, but was not one of the idolaters." Say ye [O Muslims]: "We have believed in Allah and what has been sent down to us, and what has been down to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Patriarchs and what has been given to Moses and Jesus and what has been given to the prophets from their Lord, making no distinction between any of them; and to Him are we submissive [*wa nahnu lahu muslimūn*]. So if they believe in something like what ye believe in, they have been guided; but if they turn away, it is they who are in schism; Allah will attend to them for thee, He is the one who hears and knows." (2:135-137)

The Qur'ān certainly does not deny "success" to peoples other than those to whom Muhammad was sent; but schism and turning aside from the primordial religion are damnable acts. More than that, the claim is made in the foregoing passage that the Muslims believe not in Abraham's way simply, but "in Allah and what has been sent down to us," as well as the revelations to prior prophets of God. So Muhammad connects his people horizontally and humanly with the past back to Abraham, and vertically in the present with God in a direct relationship. This is a real *Heilsgeschichte*, which shows forth God's relations with His creatures as a continuing theme down through the generations. That is, God brings the same truth and guidance always, but humans pervert it and refuse it and go astray ("but if they turn away, it is they who are in schism"). God warned and heard and observed in the past, and He does the same now. The Abrahamic emphasis in the Qur'ān was the crucial historico-theological foundation for the Muslim ummah, and as such it was an ideological triumph as well over the "cultured despisers"¹⁸ of Muhammad's message and of his activity of forming a new religious community.

But even with the "over-againstness" which the ummah of Muhammad was to feel with regard to the People of the Book there was a willingness to recognize common convictions (see 3:64, "O People of the Book, come to a work (which is) fair between us and you (to wit) that we serve no one but Allah . . ."). It does not appear that the Muslims felt that they should

¹⁸The Jews of Yathrib. Friedrich Schleiermacher's famous epithet does not apply completely here if compared with its original context of late Enlightenment Germany. But Muhammad did have a difficult task in dealing with a people with a long and learned religious and cultural tradition.

liquidate the Jews and Christians as such; in fact, in the Meccan and Medinan periods there was considerable toleration of them, and also for the Meccan heathen (see 45:14: "Tell those who believe to forgive those who hope not for the days of Allah; in order that He may requite folk what they used to earn"—Pickthall trans.). The Ummah is a forgiving and just community; and in this fact lies its capacity to mediate between people and to show forth in its very existence the forgiveness and justice of God. This is seen especially in the *ummah wasat*, "midmost community," of 2:143. In 60:7-9 there is expressed the proper balance between forgiveness and resistance. This was delivered before the great expedition to Mecca:

It is possible that Allah may appoint that there shall be love between you and those of them with whom ye have been at enmity; Allah is powerful, and Allah is forgiving, compassionate.

Allah does not forbid you to act virtuously towards those who have not fought against you in the matter of religion, and have not expelled you from your dwellings, or to deal fairly with them—Allah loveth those who deal fairly.

Allah simply forbids you to make friends of those who have fought against you in the matter of religion, and have expelled you from your dwellings, or have backed up your expulsion; whosoever makes friends of them—these are the wrong-doers.

There is no easy friendship between the Ummah and those outside, however. In fact, believers are not to have association with unbelievers, at least in a state of *jihād*, as seen above. As the years passed in Medina, the attitude toward the idolaters became increasingly severe in contrast to the earliest Meccan period, which really does not contain an attack upon paganism as such. But Muhammad and the Qurʾān took over many aspects of Arabian paganism and adapted them to the new religion. This was significant in that it provided a sense of continuity for the Ummah in relation to its Arabian ground, but subsumed all the features of the former times under the authority and sovereignty and especially the oneness of Allah.¹⁹

¹⁹See Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, p. 313, where the author explains the preservation of belief in angels, jinn, demons, and so forth on the basis of their native "deep-rootedness" and "social utility." These two reasons are not to be denied, but the evolving cultus of Arabian Islam cannot be explained in these terms only, for to do so would be superficial and facile in a crudely functionalist manner. The arabization of Islam was not a purely calculated accomplishment. It was at least as much a fortuitous eventuality in which strong religious conviction concerning the divine will and activity was centrally operative. God conquered and subdued paganism through his prophet and through the emerging Muslim community, but he did not demolish the symbol system of pre-Islamic Arabia. Rather, he reoriented it and provided it with a new grounding. The making of a gracious land out of

(b) An Ummah Muslimah

Abraham, according to 2:127-129, when he raised the foundation of the Ka'ba along with his son Ishmael, prayed: "O our Lord, make us to be submissive to Thee, and of our posterity a community submissive to Thee [*wa min dhurriyyātina ummatan muslimatan laka*], and show us our rites, and relent towards us." A community submissive to the Lord was what Muhammad as prophet was gathering together. The mythic charter of the Ummah of Islam, the ummah muslimah, was seen to have been contained and expressed in Abraham's prayer. This term, ummah muslimah, designates Abraham's people in their formative context, as understood by the Qur'ānic record; but Abraham's people in this record are also Muhammad's people, and Muhammad's people are Abraham's people in the sense that they are the descendants who have risen upon God's guidance to fulfill the prayer of being a submissive community.

Submission to God entails a radical break with the customary psychological and ethical posture of the Arabs, who were a proud and passionate people, not given to humility and meekness. The taking on of the duty of absolute submission entailed a total turning over, or even a turning inside out of the self. This radical reversal of role and intention and customary behavior is expressed in terms like *tawbah*, "repentance," which is an important aspect of the act of *islām* and the preparation for *īmān* on the one hand, and the term which expresses in an affecting manner the quality of God's forgiveness, on the other. That is, God also "repents," not of course from weakness or error, but toward the benefit of His creatures. He relents, rather, or reverses His wrath (e.g., 9:15: "Allah relenteth [*yatūbu*] toward whom He will"—Pickthall trans.) because He wills mercy and forgiveness. This concept of repentance is important, then, both for the individual and the community, but also as divine activity. It is personal and volitional, and finally superior to justice, being an expression of mercy.²⁰

Izutsu has argued that the Qur'ānic preaching brought about a revolution in the specification of what an authentic human life should consist in.²¹ The pre-Islamic Arabs had been characterized by a basic dichotomy in personality

a contentious and fractious one was not achieved simply by recognizing "deep-rootedness" and "social utility." For example, the keeping of the Ka'ba, without idols, was not a consolation prize for the defeated Meccans; it was an act of triumph, but a magnanimous triumph which meant not destruction but life and new beginnings. It also demonstrated God's authority over the past as well as the present and future, for the cleansing of the Ka'ba by Muhammad was a rededication of it as the archetypal sanctuary reaching back to Abraham.

²⁰See Frederick M. Denny, "The Qur'ānic Vocabulary of Repentance: Orientations and Attitudes," in Alford T. Welch, ed., *Studies in Qur'ān and Tafsīr* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1980), pp. 649-664.

²¹*God and Man in the Koran*, chap. 8, "Jahiliyya and Islam."

and character between the concepts of *jahl* and *ḥilm*, between hot-blooded impetuosity and barbarousness, on one side, and calm self-control on the other.²² These two traits were in a polar relationship in pre-Islamic times; after Muhammad, they were not totally eradicated, but rather transformed into the new polarity of *kufr-islām*. What the *jāhil* was in pre-Islamic times the *kāfir* was to be after Islam.²³ The *jāhil* was hostile and impetuous, blindly jealous of his honor (*ʿird*); the *kāfir* is similarly wrapped up in himself and devoted to less than ultimate issues. The fact that this latter term also means "ingratitude" is significant: The one who is narrow and unbelieving and insensitive to the signs of God is, in sum, "ungrateful" to the Lord of his life and his reward. He is a churl. The *ḥalīm* person, however, is self-controlled and moderate as well as generous, a superior type whose virtue is a function of his power of character and personality.

Izutsu regards *ḥilm* as still operative and perhaps even dominant in the Qurʾān with regard to recommended relations between man and his fellows. But *ḥilm* cannot be recommended as man's proper attitude to God, anymore than *jahl* can. It is impossible to regard God from a *jāhili* standpoint and be in a proper relationship with Him, for obvious reasons. But what about the alternative for the pre-Islamic Arab: *ḥilm*? It is not immediately apparent, perhaps, why *ḥilm* should also be rejected as a recommended attitude toward God. After all, this was the virtue of the superior man before Islam. Its use in poetry shows it to have been a noble and thoroughly admirable human trait.

Izutsu rightly considers the fundamental relationship between God and man to be the Lord-servant relation, God as "Lord" (*rabb*) and man as His "servant" (*ʿabd*).²⁴ The *ḥalīm*, however noble and admirable in his

²²For a discussion of these and related terms and concepts, see Ignaz Goldziher's two classic articles in his *Muslim Studies*, Vol. I, trans. S. M. Stern (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1966): "*Muruwwa* and *Dīn*," pp. 1-44, and "What is Meant by 'al-Jāhiliyya,'" pp. 201-208 (originally published in 1889.) Goldziher argued that *jahl* did not mean "ignorance" primarily, but "barbarism" and "arrogance." Edouard (Bishr) Farès, *L'Honneur chez les arabes avant l'Islam* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1932), contains a thorough discussion of the pre-Islamic concern for honor (*ʿird*), and concludes that it was (and continued to be in tribal regions) the most important force for community life, not excluding Islam. The fullest and most satisfactory examination of *jahl*, *ḥilm*, and other terms is that of Izutsu, cited in the preceding note, upon which this discussion has drawn heavily.

²³To a degree, at least. Actually, acting in a *jāhil* manner was not always to be despised in the old days, as long as it was not dominant in the life of an individual or group. Recall Goldziher's discussion: "*Jahl* thus was neither a virtue to the Arabs of an older time—it was appropriate to a young and impetuous character—nor was it entirely condemned. Part of the *muruwwa* ['manliness'] was knowing when mildness was not befitting the character of a hero and when *jahl* was indicated: 'I am ferocious (*jahūl*) where mildness (*taḥallum*) would make the hero despicable, meek (*ḥalīm*) when ferocity (*jahl*) would be unfitting to a noble.'" *Muslim Studies*, Vol. I, p. 205.

²⁴*God and Man in the Koran*, p. 198.

self-control and balanced judgment, is no "servant," whether in relation to God or to his fellows:

Ḥalīm is a man who knows how to smother his feelings, to overcome his own blind passions and to remain tranquil and undisturbed whatever happens to him, however much he may be provoked. . . . ²⁵

But *ḥilm* is not humble meekness, a passive virtue, the only recourse for the weak:

On the contrary, it is a positive and active power of the soul that is strong enough to curb her own impetuosity that may drive the man headlong to folly, and calm it down to patience and forbearance. It is a sign of the power and superiority of the mind. ²⁶

Izutsu continues by illustrating that there must be power to produce *ḥilm*:

It is essentially a quality of a man who governs and dominates others, and not of those who are governed and dominated. A naturally weak and powerless man is never called *ḥalīm*, however much he calms down his anger when insulted: he is "weak" simply. ²⁷

We can now perhaps understand why man does not regard God with *ḥilm*. Before Him man has no power, only weakness. However, that is no shame. God, on His side, is *ḥalīm* towards man (*al-Ḥalīm* is the thirty-third of the "most beautiful names of Allah").

The word *ḥilm* is actually missing from the Qurʾān, although the concept is clearly there. God (2:225, 235, 263; 3:155 and *passim*), Abraham (9:114; 11:75), Ishmael (37:101) and Shuʿayb (11:87) are all termed *ḥalīm*, but as Pellat has observed, ²⁸ these instances mean "long-suffering," "patient," "gifted with tolerance," "slow to punish," all clearly Islamic virtues. Following Goldziher ²⁹ in this matter, Pellat argues that *ḥilm* "must be the central feature of Islam," ³⁰ a judgment with which Izutsu agrees with respect to the Qurʾān's teaching concerning man's relation with his fellow men:

In a certain sense the Koran as a whole is dominated by the very spirit of *ḥilm*. The constant exhortation to kindness (*iḥsān*) in human relations, the emphasis laid on justice (*ʿadl*), the forbidding of wrongful

²⁵Ibid., p. 205.

²⁶Ibid., p. 207.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Charles Pellat, "Ḥilm," *Encyclopedia of Islām*, New Edition, 4, 390-392. See also the same author's "Concept of *Ḥilm* in Islamic Ethics," *Bulletin of the Institute of Islamic Studies* (Aligarh Muslim University), nos. 6 and 7 (1962-1963), 1-12.

²⁹*Muslim Studies*, Vol. I, p. 207 f.

³⁰"Ḥilm," *EI*, 4, 390-392.

violence (*ẓulm*), the bidding of abstinence and control of passions, the criticism of groundless pride and arrogance—all are concrete manifestations of this spirit of *ḥilm*.³¹

It is *ḥilm*, implicitly, of which the following passage speaks:

The servants of the Merciful are those who walk humbly upon the earth, and, when the ignorant address them, say: "Peace." (25:63)

God is *ḥalīm* towards man, and the servants of the *Ḥalīm* are also, in turn, *ḥalīm*, but not toward God. Toward God, the servants are submissive, *muslims*. *Ḥilm* becomes the great ethical virtue of the ummah on the horizontal dimension, whereas on the vertical dimension, oriented toward God, there can only be *islām* and *īmān*, *shukr* and *taqwā*, and related expressions of man's subordinate and dependent position as creature and servant. In the days of the *Jāhiliyya*, men tended toward *jahl* or *ḥilm* in their interrelationships. But man was very much at the center of things, with no place for God. When Islam arose, this old polarity was challenged and replaced. Men were called to be servants (*ʿābidūn*), not of each other, but of a superior, overarching Power. The *jāhil* and the *ʿabd* are clearly contradictory types. But when *jahl* was banished as unsuitable in man's behavioral and attitudinal repertory, all that remained was its opposite, *ḥilm*.³²

Ḥilm, as has been observed, is based on power, the superior mental and spiritual power of the individual human. But before the Lord, the *ḥalīm* man looks ludicrous. *Ḥilm* before God is, like *jahl*, the sin of *istikbār*, "arrogant pride" (e.g., see 71:7). Directed toward God, *ḥilm* is a form of *kufṛ*, not at all submissive or thankful. So *ḥilm* is an Islamic virtue only in interhuman relations, and thus is at the core of ethics. With respect to God, it was superseded by Islam; or according to Izutsu, *ḥilm* was in a sense the "pre-religious, pre-Islamic form of *islām*."³³ Not only can the man of special strength extend *ḥilm* to others for the promotion of serenity and stability; with Islam the *ʿabd* of God can also lay claim to *ḥilm*, because of the dignity and status which those who obey the Lord inherit—not the reserves of strength and courage which the unusual noble man possessed in *Jāhiliyya* times, but the courage and strength and substance of the Muslims which come in the covenant relationship with God. The Ummah is *ḥalīm*. It can afford to be, not because it possesses self-generated virtue (although it could be argued on functional grounds that it does),³⁴ but because it possesses

³¹*God and Man in the Koran*, p. 216.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 217.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁴See, for example, Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist*, 58 (1956), 264-281.

charismatic power. "The servants of the Merciful are those who walk humbly upon the earth, and when the ignorant [*al-jāhilūn*] address them, say: 'Peace'" (25:63). True ḥilm, then, is possible only when the strength of God is possessed. No longer adequate was the rugged and often quite admirable force of character of individual noble Arabs, for as 96:3 asserts: "*Iqra' wa rabbuka-l-akram*" ("Recite: Thy Lord is the Most Noble").³⁵ In a world without God, as ancient Arabia may be characterized, human life was arranged and lived along lines of custom, with personal power and courage prime requisites for survival. It could be said that in those days the development of ḥilm and its universal admiration contributed to a sort of *praeparatio Evangelica*, a moral climate which could receive the news of God's ḥilm when it was understood, as it was, how great also was His power. The ummah muslimah, because of its servanthood to God, is thereby filled with ḥilm, for it is in covenant with ultimate power and generosity. Only the Muslim Ummah under Muhammad could have conquered Mecca and decide not to take terrible bloody vengeance on Quraysh. That was the act and the proof par excellence of ḥilm: the ḥilm of God and his people towards the ends of peace and salvation.

The ummah muslimah (and *wasat*) is not submissive to the things of this world, however.

O ye who have believed, what is the matter with you? When one says to you: "March out in the way of Allah," ye are weighed down to the ground; are ye so satisfied with this nearer life [*ad-dunyā*] as to neglect the Hereafter [*al-ākhirah*]? The enjoyment of this nearer life is in comparison with the Hereafter only a little thing. (9:38)

Marching out in the Way of Allah is hardly submissiveness with respect to the world. It is the expression of the will to subdue the world and bring it to the service of God. Before God the Ummah is submissive; but before the world it is active. The "Peace" which the "servants of the Merciful" announce to the ignorant and barbarous is not the capitulation of the weak, but the assurance of the strong. Those who join this ummah will enjoy *salām* in this world and the "reward most fair" in the next. The ummah muslimah, and *wasat* then, is the community of *falāḥ*, the safe refuge of those who hold steadfastly to the "cable of Allah, and do not separate" (3:103) (Pickthall trans.), the covenant fellowship who believe they are destined for the eternal *dār as-salām*.

³⁵I am indebted for this rendering to the late Professor Mohamed al-Nowaihi, who suggested that "most noble" is preferable to "most generous," because the former includes the latter while at the same time asserting a natural superiority. The proud Arabs with the bluest bloodlines still could not be in any way compared to God, who alone is essentially and uniquely *karīm*.

(c) The "Best Community"

The Ummah as community of *falāḥ* is not an entity comprised of those who have only nominally submitted, whatever developed concepts after the Qur'ān might hold. Islam requires more than nominal affirmation; it requires right action and life. Being an ummah is not in itself sufficient for the salvation of a people. There have been many ummahs, according to the Qur'ān, some of which have perished after having been found lacking. But Muhammad's people are not an ummah muslimah only; they are the "best community ever produced for the people, urging what is reputable and restraining from what is disreputable, and believing in Allah" (3:110b). This "best community" is not the small sect of Meccan times, whose basic footing was in the pagan society of Qurayshi dominated life. It is the Ummah of Medina which was a complete social-political-religious system.

This essay has not seen as its task the investigation and analysis of the social and political structure of the Ummah of Medina as reflected in the Qur'ān or other sources. But it is necessary to point out that this ummah was not simply an ideal concept, as some of the terms which have been discussed might suggest; it was a *real* entity, also, and possessed the complexity and ambiguity of actual communities, religious or otherwise. Although the Qur'ān provides no systematic legal corpus, there is much in it pertaining to how humankind should rightly live in the Ummah: marital relations and family life, inheritance, commercial activities and relations, social welfare (e.g., *zakāt*), slaves, punishment for crimes, and so on, all of which and more are to be understood as implicit in the "urging what is reputable and restraining from what is disreputable," a key phrase for Qur'ānic ethics.

"You are the best *ummah*" (3:110) seems to have been revealed when Muhammad was having difficulties in Medina with the People of the Book, especially with the Jews. The context indicates this and the view is supported by classical scholars as well. The meaning, or at least part of the meaning, is that the Muslims are a more righteous people than those who have come before, particularly the Jews. The old ummahs fell into variance and were torn internally by dissension and strife (3:105). The "best *ummah*" is the ummah muslimah, which enjoins right conduct (*ma'rūf*) and forbids what is disreputable (*munkar*),³⁶ that is, it sees as of central importance a moral, legal, and juridical function, combined with sanctions derived from God's authority.

³⁶On *ma'rūf* and *munkar*, see Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, pp. 213-217. Also, Hourani, "Ethical Presuppositions," pp. 14 f. The two terms seem to have meant, respectively, "what is recognized" and "what is rejected," either by pre-Islamic Arabian society, or by the Qur'ān, where, as Hourani suggests, "they appear to mean simply 'right' and 'wrong,' but they may have acquired fresh meanings of divine recognition and rejection."

The Muslim Ummah is considered the "best community" also perhaps because it is envisioned as a total community with a comprehensive world view comprising the social, political, economic, legal, cultural, and military aspects under a *religiously* grounded conception of order, security, and destiny, something which the previous ummahs never achieved. The ummah muslimah was not conceived as an *ekklesia*, a congregation "called out" of the large world (except perhaps in Mecca, before the Ummah proper was established by Muhammad). As the Constitution of Medina stated at the outset, "They [the believers] are a single *ummah* distinct from (other) people"; and the document clearly indicates that this community was to be a total social, political, and religious entity, a closed group not sharing open relationships of a significant nature (other than occasional bipartite treaties, though never alliances) with those outside, but always seeking to be unified, integral, and self-sufficient.

Maurice Causse has argued convincingly that Muhammad's message began in the early Meccan period as a "théologie de rupture" and evolved gradually by the Medinan period into a "théologie de la communauté."³⁷ The "théologie de rupture" was concerned with the orphan, the persecuted, the poor, in a denunciation of the present corrupt age upon which the light of God's greatness, mercy, and justice was being trained. The disvaluation of *ad-dunyā* as a transitory and perishable state is seen vividly in suras like 81, *At-Takwīr*, which apocalyptically judges the present order and foresees doom:

When the sun shall be darkened,
 when the stars shall be thrown down,
 when the mountains shall be set moving,
 when the pregnant camels shall be neglected,
 when the savage beasts shall be mustered,
 when the seas shall be set boiling,
 when the souls shall be coupled,
 when the buried infant shall be asked for what sin
 she was slain,
 when the scrolls shall be unrolled,
 when the heaven shall be stripped off,
 when Hell shall be set blazing,
 when Paradise shall be brought nigh,
 then shall a soul know what it has produced.

(81:1-14—Arberry trans., italics mine)

³⁷"Théologie de rupture et théologie de la communauté," *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse*, 44 (1964), 60-80.

Max Weber has declined to call Islam a religion of salvation because it lacks a "tragic sense of sin."³⁸ He argues that Islam, in its early development and during the conquests, especially, was primarily a religion of political and economic concerns, with the Arab warrior class providing the ideal of leadership and manhood, after the charismatic model of Muhammad. The new military élite was armed with the conviction of superior virtue and the backing of a sovereign god who offers prosperity and success in this world and the assurance of a personal afterlife of a hedonistic sort, a "soldier's paradise." There is some value in Weber's all too brief treatment of Islam, but the failure to discern the peculiar quality that permeates the definitive Qur'ānic period of the Ummah's founding and early development is a serious error, caused mainly, it appears, by his preoccupation with religious disvaluations of the world, which he had analyzed in Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism. Weber's "tragic sense of sin," however real and important in religious history, is insufficient to serve as the *sine qua non* of all salvation doctrines. Weber designates the sin of the Arab context as basically connected with "feudal morality." It is true that ideas of right and wrong were closely linked with relationships among groups of people, for example, tribes. "Feudal morality" is a conspicuous feature of the Constitution of Medina, as it defines behavior in terms of loyalties and mutual defense; and the arrangement of arbitrations and sanctions is all finally linked to Muhammad as *rasūl Allah*, who himself was a sort of "vassal" of God. But the Qur'ānic record provides far greater richness and subtlety concerning the complexities of the human predicament and the ways in which man avoids acknowledging both his plight and his hope. "Feudal" man is still human and Causse's "théologie de rupture" is anything but an affirmation of the status quo. On the contrary, it is prophecy of a classical kind, speaking forth about man's condition and God's disposition.

No Arab would have ever thought of neglecting his she-camel in her time of parturition, not because of a sentimental attachment to the maddening but curiously beloved beast, but because the camel was one of the most important sources of wealth in that society. Fittingly, in the prophetic symbolism, the neglect of camels as envisioned in "The Darkening" (Sura 81) functions as an eschatological sign of reversal of the accepted "feudal morality," when there would be no time for an "interim ethic." The quoted passage takes on special poignancy, even tragedy, in the line about the girl infant who, at the Last Day, will be asked for what sin (*dhanb*) she was slain. The point is that she was slain for no "sin" at all, but

³⁸*The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 262 ff.

rather for a perverse reason somehow tied in with traditional tribal morality.³⁹ When all the signs have been revealed, including the one which indicates men's actions as having been tallied on concealed scrolls, "then a soul shall know what it has produced." This passage from *At-Takwīr* is far from an expression of feudal morality, and it would be easy to multiply examples of other passages like it. Muhammad's preaching, his theology of "rupture," again to use Causse's term, was designed to *pene-trate* the old feudal morality of Mecca as well as the unjust social context in which even the good aspects of "tribal humanism," to use Watt's more sophisticated term, were deteriorating. The apodosis, "then a soul shall know what it has produced," is a dramatic statement of the individual's radical moral accountability, over which God's justice is supreme. The sin which Muhammad knew to be in the hearts of his fellow Arabs has been graphically illustrated in 68:51:

The unbelievers well nigh strike thee down with their glances, when they hear the Reminder, and they say, 'Surely he is a man possessed!' And it is not but a reminder to all beings. (Arberry trans.)

Whether or not it was a tragic sense of sin, Muhammad certainly had a great concern for sin, ritual and moral. The Qur'ān contains a variety of terms and several types of sin of varying degrees of seriousness.⁴⁰ All sins, however, may ultimately be grouped under the general one of kufr, "un-belief," which, as we have seen, includes the notion of ingratitude to God.⁴¹ Muhammad was convinced that the end of the world was at hand, at least the Qur'ān seems to express such a conviction at times (e.g., 21:2; 17:72); but by the Medinan period he was obviously more concerned with

³⁹This is a vexed issue. See the extensive note in W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, with additional notes by the author and by Ignaz Goldziher, ed. Stanley A. Cook (Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.; based on the London edition of 1903), pp. 291-296, which contains among other things an attempt to explain the possible reasons behind Cais's murder of his grown daughter, which seems not to have been the usual one of penury, but possibly some fear of disgrace. See also Gertrude H. Stern, "Muhammad's Bond with the Women," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 10, Part I (1940-42), 193 f., where the author discredits Lammens's contention (in *Études sur le règne du Calife Omayyade Mo'awia I^{er}* [Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1906-1908], p. 77, n. 3) that "Muhammad wished to acquire for himself the merit of abolishing the custom which was actually not wide-spread." The custom certainly was common enough, but by the time of Muhammad not general. The Qur'ān mentions the killing of children in 6:138, 16:58, 17:31, and 60:12, in addition to 80:8, where female infanticide is specified.

⁴⁰For a brief summary of terminology, see Helmer Ringgren, "Sin and Forgiveness in the Koran," *Temenos*, 2 (1966), 98-111. A fuller study is W. R. W. Gardner, *The Qur'ānic Doctrine of Sin* (Madras: S.P.C.K. Press, Vepery, 1914). The most detailed recent discussion is that of Izutsu in *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, chaps. 7 and 8.

⁴¹Izutsu's position in *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, chaps. 7 and 8.

the establishment of a godly social order.⁴² The period of "théologie de rupture" did call for conversion, but there was included in the teaching a strong sense of God's activity on behalf of humans as well.

Causse further argues, as have others, that the chief model for Muhammad among the prophets included in the Qur'ān was Moses. This is not to say that Abraham is less important in the total picture. Rather, Abraham is the model for the believers, whereas Moses is the model for prophecy, and especially for Muhammad's personal prophetic career.⁴³ The "hijra" (Exodus) of Moses (see Suras 20 and 26, especially) preceded, according to the Qur'ānic chronology, the actual *hijrah* of Muhammad and the Meccans among his followers. In Medina, the hijrah is explicitly connected with the Exodus, as may be seen in the Medinan suras which contain narratives of Moses (e.g., 2 and 7), so much so that we might call Muhammad "the Moses of the Arab people."⁴⁴ There is also an Abrahamic hijrah, a "going out" to a place where one is totally dependent upon God and where one has given up the supports of family, land, and tradition as being neither authentic nor lasting. Causse has considered all three hijrahs as responses to a spiritual requirement: "l'hégire est une loi de l'action prophétique et de l'oeuvre divine."⁴⁵ The requirement of hijrah is thus a communal *rite de passage*. One must be separated from this world in a kind of symbolic death, throwing oneself wholly on the resources of God, dwelling in tents as it were, before there can be a *réagrégation*.⁴⁶ Rupture is a liminal phase, absolutely essential before there can be a new life, in this case a life in a new community, a kind of rebirth into a society bent on success in covenant with God.

Watt has written that there is no real *rite de passage* into the Ummah on the individual level, either in the Qur'ān or in later Islam.⁴⁷ It could be argued, however, that the coming into being of the Ummah of Islam was itself a *rite de passage* for humankind, which Muhammad and the early heroes of the faith underwent to carry out God's will of bringing the "best community" into being, thus making possible authentic life through participation in a new social-religious and moral order.

⁴²For a treatment of the Qur'ān message as a thoroughgoing eschatology, see Paul Casanova's interesting (but largely rejected) thesis, *Mohammed et la fin du monde* (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1911-1924), which argues that Muhammad was influenced by a Christian sect with a doctrine of the nearness of the end of the world.

⁴³Causse, p. 62.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶See Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and B. L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960; originally published in 1909).

⁴⁷W. Montgomery Watt, "Conditions of Membership in the Islamic Community," *Studia Islamica*, 21 (1964), 12.