



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*

© 2000 The Institute of Ismaili Studies



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

### **Foundational Sources of Islamic Belief**

The late Fazlur Rahman, noted University of Chicago scholar of Islamic thought and modernist Muslim thinker, argued that in its initial phase Islam was moved by a deep rational and moral concern for reforming society, and that this moral intentionality was conceived in ways that encouraged a deep commitment to reasoning and rational discourse. Like other religious traditions, and particularly Christianity and Judaism, Islam, in answering the question 'What ought or ought not to be done?' thus had a clearly defined sense of the sources of moral authority. While revealing His will to humankind in the Qur'an, God also urges them to

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



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

### **What is *Taqwa*?**

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

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

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

### **Islam as a way of life**

The Muslim *ummah*

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



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

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

1. family and relatives
2. orphans
3. the poor
4. the travelling homeless
5. the needy
6. freeing of the enslaved.

Such acts define a Muslim's responsibility to develop a social conscience and to share individual and communal resources with the less privileged. They are institutionalised in the Qur'an through the duty of *zakat*

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



war', *jihad* carries a far wider connotation that includes striving by peaceful means, such as preaching, education, and in a more personal and interiorised sense, as struggle to purify

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



Parallel to the developing legal expressions, there also emerged a set of moral assumptions that articulated ethical values, rooted in a more speculative and philosophical conception of human conduct as a response to the Qur'an and the Prophet's life. Groupings in Islam, as well as schools of law, were not as clearly circumscribed in the first three centuries of Muslim history as is generally thought. Most were still crystallising and their subsequent boundaries and positions were yet to be fu

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



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

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

1. the meaning of Qur'anic ethical attributes such as 'just', the study of

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



them -

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*





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

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



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

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

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

### **Shi'a and Sufi perspectives**

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

An example of a work on ethics by a Shi'a writer is the well-known *Nasirian Ethics* by Nasir al-din Tusi (d. 720). Developing further the philosophical approaches already present among Muslims and linking them to Shi'a conceptions of guidance. Tusi draws attention to the need for ethical enactments to be based on superiority of knowledge and preponderance of discrimination, i.e. by a person 'who is distinguished from others by divine support, so that he may be able to accomplish their perfection' (Tusi, 1964, pp. 191-2). Wilferd Madelung has tried to show that Tusi blended into his ethical work elements of Neo-Platonic as well as Shi'a Ismaili and Twelver Shi'a philosophical and moral perspectives.

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



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

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

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



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

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

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

Since the modern conception of religion familiar to most people in the West assumes a theoretical separation between specifically religious and perceived secular activity, some aspects of contemporary Muslim discourse, which does not accept such a separation, appear strange and often retrogressive. Where such discourse, expressed in what appears to be traditional religious language, has become linked to radical change or violence, it has unfortunately deepened stereotypical perceptions about Muslim fanaticism, violence, and

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



Hodgson, M.

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*



Mottahedeh, R.: *The Mantle of the Prophet* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

Nanji, A.: 'Medical ethics and the Islamic tradition' in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*, 13 (1988), pp 257-75.

Nasr, S. H.: *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1972).

Walzer, R., trans.: *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1985).

*This material is reproduced by permission from Blackwell Publishers from A COMPANION TO ETHICS edited by Peter Singer. Please visit the Blackwell Publishers website at [www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk](http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk) for publication details and information on how you can order this book. This material must not be photocopied or reprinted without prior permission from Blackwell Publishers.*