

Sin as Self-Destruction

If the purpose of life is to grow in the virtues that reach their perfection in God so that we may receive and experience His attributes to ever greater degrees—to grow nearer to God in this sense—and if virtuous deeds promote this growth and evil deeds undermine it, then it would follow, as we have already observed, that the one who stands to gain or lose the most from a good or evil act is its doer. This idea is stated explicitly in many places in the Qur'an. Recall, for example:

Taste suffering through fire in return for what your own hands have wrought—for never does God do the least wrong to His creatures. (3:182; 8:51)

Enlightenment has come from your God; he who sees does so to his own good, he who is blind is so to his own [hurt]. (6:104)

And whosoever is guided, is only (guided) to his own gain, and if any stray, say: "I am only a warner." (27:92)

And if any strive, they do so for their own selves: For God is free of all need from creation. (29:6)

We have revealed to you the book with the truth for mankind. He who lets himself be guided does so to his own good; he who goes astray does so to his own hurt. (39:41)
(Also see 10:108; 17:15; 27:92)

The statements in the Qur'an and in the traditions of the Prophet that state that an evildoer's heart (his spiritual and moral sense) becomes dark, veiled, rusted, hard, and hence impenetrable, and that the hearts of the virtuous become soft, sensitive, and receptive to God's guiding light, immediately come to mind.²⁴ The verses in the Qur'an that convey this idea most powerfully are those that assert that the sinners destroy themselves by their wrongdoing—that they commit *zulm* (sin, wrong, harm, injustice, oppression) against themselves.

To Us they did no harm, but they only did harm to themselves. (2:57; 7:160)

²⁴ See note 20 and, for example, 2:74; 5:13; 9:87; 18:57; 22:46; 22:54; 26:89; 33:53; 39:23; 64:11; and 83:14.

If any transgress the limits ordained by God, then these, they wrong themselves. (2:229; 65:1)

And God did not wrong them, but they wronged themselves. (3:117)

And so it was not God who wronged them, it was they who wronged themselves. (9:70; 16:33; 29:40; 30:9)

It was not We that wronged them: They wronged their own selves. (11:101)

Oh My servants who have sinned against yourselves, never despair of God's mercy. Surely God forgives all sins. (39:54)

Therefore sin, in reality, is a form of self-destruction. When we commit it, we oppress and do injustice to ourselves, for we bar ourselves from spiritual progress and deprive ourselves of that which has real and lasting worth. As we saw earlier, and as the last verse (39:54) indicates, the damage from wrongdoing does not have to be permanent, for the way to reform is open. Personal reform involves repentance and making amends, yet we should not lose sight of the most important element of all: God's forgiveness.

When God forgives, He does much more than ignore or efface our sins. He responds to our repentance and comes to our aid (3:30), He helps us repair the harm that we inflicted upon ourselves (33:71), and guides us to spiritual restoration (57:28). In the Qur'an, the Divine Name "the Forgiving" is almost always paired with "the Compassionate," and thus God's forgiveness involves embracing the penitent with His compassion, which soothes the self-inflicted wounds. The verb *tawbah* (to turn toward) from the root *TWB*, brings out the chemistry between repentance and forgiveness, for it is used with various prepositions to describe both in the Qur'an. When we repent, we *turn toward* God in repentance, seeking His mercy and help, and He then turns *toward us* in His mercy, kindness, and forgiveness. Thus God is described as *al Tawwaab*, the one who turns toward others. God's forgiveness is His personal response to the sinner, as in the saying of the Prophet which was quoted above: when we go toward God walking, He comes toward us running.

The initiative, however, must come from the sinner. The first step toward reform is the admission of wrongdoing, for we have to realize

and acknowledge the wrongfulness of our behavior and admit our need for God's help in order to begin our recovery. This is similar to what Alcoholics Anonymous counselors tell the desperate families of drug addicts: Unless the addict admits that he has a problem and needs help, no one can reform him. Sincerity is the key here. Recuperation from sin is often a hard and painful process assisted by God's forgiving involvement. It means starting over, going through the pains of growth again, and entails work and effort. It is not a singular moment or formula that repairs us, but our honest commitment to turn our lives around and better ourselves. Thus the Qur'an states that repentance at the last moment of life in order to escape suffering in the next is ineffectual, because it is not motivated by a sincere desire to reform and there is no time left for self-betterment.

And repentance is not for those who go on doing evil deeds, until when death comes to one of them, he says: Now I repent; nor for those who die while they are ungrateful rejectors [of God]. For such we prepared a great chastisement (4:18).

Pharaoh provides the archetypal case:

And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea. Then Pharaoh and his hosts followed them for oppression and tyranny, till, when drowning overtook him, he cried: I believe that there is no god but He in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am of those who submit! What! Now! And indeed before this you rebelled and caused depravity! (10:90-91)

Not only is such last-second repentance vain and illustrative of a complete lack of understanding of the purpose of life and of repentance, but it incriminates the sinner all the more, because it proves that he was always conscious of the existence of God, or at least of the possibility of His existence, but preferred to live a selfish and destructive life rather than seek a relationship with Him.

Three Signs

And indeed He has created you by various stages. (71:14)

The Qur'an presents three related analogies which have a bearing on the meaning of human earthly existence. These are the *life in the womb—life on earth, birth—resurrection, and death—sleep* analogies.

Life in the womb—Life on earth

The Qur'an parallels two stages in our creation: our prenatal development and our maturation after birth.

Then certainly We create man of an extract of clay, then We place him as a small quantity (of sperm) in a safe place firmly established, then We make the small quantity into a tiny thing that clings, then We make the tiny thing that clings into a chewed lump of flesh, then We fashioned the chewed flesh into bones and clothed the bones with intact flesh, then We cause it to grow into another creation. So blessed be God, the best of creators! Then after that you certainly die. Then on the Day of Resurrection you will surely be raised up. (23:12-16)

O people, if you are in doubt about the Resurrection, then surely We create you from dust, then a small quantity (of sperm), then from a tiny thing that clings, then from a chewed lump of flesh, complete in make and incomplete, that We may make clear to you. And We cause what We please to remain in the wombs until an appointed time, then We bring you forth as babies, then after that you grow to maturity. (22:5) (Also see 40:67.)

Does man think that he will be left aimless? Was he not a small quantity (of sperm) emitted? Then he was a tiny thing that clings (in the womb), and then He created (him), and then made him perfect. (75:36-38)

This parallel leads to a number of important insights. While our prenatal growth is primarily physical, our earthly development is principally moral and spiritual. As our birth into this life fully manifests our physical maturation in the womb, our resurrection into the next life fully manifests our current spiritual maturation in an analogously objective way. Thus we find symbolic descriptions of the Day of Judgment that indicate that our moral and spiritual doings on earth will be manifested by our very being in the next. Our deeds will be fastened to our necks (17:13; 34:33; 36:8).

Our tongues, hands, and feet will bear witness to our doings (24:24; 36:65). We will eat the fruits of our deeds (37:39-68). The spiritually blind in this life will be raised without vision in the next (17:72). Those who lived in God's light in this life will have their lights shine before them on the Day of Resurrection (57:12; 66:8). Every deed of ours will show its effect (99:7-8).

It is important to note that our creation is not presented as a single moment in time, but as one that proceeds in stages. Our physical development in the womb prepares us for our spiritual growth in the next stage, which will determine the state of our being as we enter the hereafter. Will there be opportunities for further growth in the next life? Perhaps, for the Qur'an has the believers in heaven ask God to "perfect for us our light" (66:8).

A popular American saying states that "you are what you eat." In other words, one's diet greatly affects his or her physical well-being. A Muslim might extend this to two more general truisms: "What you do in this life determines what type of person you are," and, "in the next life on the Day of Resurrection, you will be according to what you do right now."

Birth-Resurrection

And people say: When I am dead, shall I truly be brought forth alive? Does not man remember that we created him before, when he was nothing? (19:66-67)

The Qur'an contains an interesting reference to the two deaths which we all experience:

They say: Our Lord, twice you made us die, and twice you gave us life, so we confess our sins. (40:11)

Some Qur'an exegetes felt that the first death corresponds to the termination of non-existence at conception, but this is a strained interpretation, since a death must naturally be preceded by a life. Others believed that the first death represented the termination of life in the womb at the moment of birth. This explanation seems much more plausible, especially in light of the verses we just considered and from what embryologists now know about the vast differences between pre- and post-natal existence. (Even our circulatory system reverses itself seconds after birth!) The latter viewpoint also complements the last parallel, for both deaths

are transitions to other levels of existence that are tied to our previous developments.

Both stages of development—in the womb and in life—and the corresponding ends of these stages involve pain and suffering. A mother definitely experiences pain and suffering during pregnancy and intense pain during birth. The fetus also experiences times of discomfort in the womb and certainly undergoes great hardship at birth.

What I find remarkable is that only minutes after the birth, the mother, and even much more so the child, appear to forget the tremendous agony that they have just endured. I recall how exhausted and drained I was after each of my daughters' births and yet how quickly my wife and daughters recovered, even though their suffering was incredibly more severe. My children appeared to have no recollection or after effects from the ordeal. Perhaps there is a sign in this concerning those who enter a state of paradise in the next life. Will all their earthly agony and hardship suddenly seem to them like an illusion, a dream, even though it was all very real? The next parallel we consider suggests that this may be so.

Death-Sleep

God takes souls at the time of their death, and those that do not die, during their sleep. Then He withholds those on whom has passed the decree of death and sends the others back till an appointed term. Truly there are signs in this for a people who reflect. (39:42)

The Resurrection moment, as pictured in the Qur'an, is very much an arousal from a deep slumber. A trumpet blast will awaken the dead (6:73). The disbelievers will rush from their graves, which the Qur'an refers to as their "sleeping places," in terror. People will be groggy and swoon (39:68). They will be disoriented. Their earthly lives will seem like an illusion (27:88). There will be mass confusion over the time spent on earth: to some it will seem like ten days and to others like a day or even less (20:103-104; 23:113), just like when one recollects a dream, details will be very hazy. Peoples' sight will be confused, like when one arises from sleep (75:7), and then their vision will sharpen and they will have a keen grasp of reality (50:20). The righteous appear to have only faint recollection of their earthly struggles, and the damned have only faint recollection of their earthly pleasures. A well-known saying of Muhammad states that if one of the faithful is immersed in Paradise and is then asked about all his suffering on

earth, he will not be able to recall any of it, and if one of the sinful is immersed in Hell and then is asked about all his earthly pleasures, he will not remember any of them.²⁵

Hence our lives on earth will seem like a dream. All the pain, struggle, and agony, which appeared so hard and enduring, will be no more than a vague, distant, brief memory, something like when one awakens from a nightmare. A bad dream is very real while we are experiencing it, but when we awake, we feel immediate relief because we are now conscious of a greater reality. It seems that the resurrection of the righteous will be a somewhat similar but more intense experience. Our earthly lives are not dreams nor illusions; what we experience is very real and the consequences of our deeds will become marked upon our souls—written and recorded upon our being—but, by the mercy of God, the hardships true believers endured will be erased from their recollection (35:35). Like the newborn child, their previous existence is forgotten, although they carry with them into the next life their earlier development.

“Except That They Should Worship Me!”

Say: Truly my prayer and my sacrifice and my living and my dying—all belong to God, the Lord of the worlds. (6:163)

Islam's concept of worship complements its view of life. I recall a conversation I had not long ago with a friend who asked me how Muslims worship. I told her that we go to work to provide for our families, attend school functions that our children are involved in, take a few pieces of cake we just baked over to our neighbor next door, drive our children to school in the morning.

“No! No!” She said. “How do you worship?”

I said we make love to our spouses, smile and greet someone we pass on the street, help our children with their homework, hold open a door for someone behind us.

“Worship! I'm asking about worship!” She exclaimed.

I asked her exactly what she had in mind.

“You know—Rituals!” She insisted.

I answered her that we practice those also and that they are a very important part of Muslim worship. I was not trying to frustrate her, but I

²⁵ From *Sahih Muslim* as translated in *Riyad as Salihin* of Imam Nawawi, 103.

answered her in this way in order to emphasize Islam's comprehensive conception of worship.

A famous tradition of the Prophet states that a Muslim is responsible for at least one *sadaqah* daily for every joint in his/her body. The word *sadaqah* is often translated as “charity.” It is derived from the same root as the Arabic verb “to be truthful or sincere” and thus most generally signifies an act of fidelity or sincerity towards God. Hence, to Muslims, an act of *sadaqah* is a form of worship.

When Muhammad made this statement to his Companions, they felt overwhelmed, for how can anyone perform so many acts of piety each day? He responded to them that to act justly is a *sadaqah*, to help a rider on his mount is a *sadaqah*, and to remove a stone from the road to ease the way for other travelers is a *sadaqah*.²⁶ On other occasions, he mentioned that smiling at another person, bringing food to one's family, and making love to one's spouse are all pious acts.

Muhammad's Companions expressed shock at the last of these, since it brings such carnal satisfaction. So he asked them if they did not consider adultery sinful and harmful, and when they responded that they did, he asked them why were they surprised that marital romance was a meritorious act in the service of God.²⁷ The Prophet's followers wondered what, then, were the greatest acts of faith? He included on different occasions: fighting in a just cause, standing up to a tyrant, taking care of your parents in their old age, giving birth to a child—and if a mother should die while giving birth, then she ranks amongst the highest witnesses of faith.

To the Muslim, almost every moment of life presents an opportunity for worship, and he or she aspires to transform all of his/her earthly life into a type of continuous prayer as verse 6:163 has the Muslim say: “Truly my prayer and my sacrifice and my living and my dying—all are to God.” This idea is ingrained deeply in the Muslim character, and so we find believers dedicating even their simplest actions to God with the formula, “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.”

An Egyptian cab driver about to start his car, a Moroccan mother reaching to pick up her crying child, and a Pakistani worker raising a glass of water to his lips, will pronounce “*bismillah-ir-rahman-ir-raheem*” (In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate). Every healthy and wholesome activity has the potential to be a worshipful act. Any good deed,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

performed by one who strives to surrender his/her life to God, can become a moment of devotion. A believer knows that his/her inner peace, happiness, growth, and prosperity correspond to the level of self-surrender he/she attains. To him or her, worship then becomes synonymous with doing what is good and ultimately personally beneficial.

Many western scholars of Islam have objected to the verse in the Qur'an where God states "I have not created *jinn* (beings beyond human perception) nor man except that they should worship me" (51:56), seeing an infinitely jealous and capricious narcissism—the worst side of the Old Testament depictions of God. Yet a Muslim, possessing his/her understanding of the purpose of life and possessing this very general and broad concept of worship, will read the very same verse and respond: "But of course, for what other purpose could there possibly be?"

Additional Questions

We have traveled far, yet in some ways, it seems as if we never needed to leave. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, we had to venture over the rainbow in order to discover that the key to happiness is within ourselves. To many of those who have recently accepted Islam, its view of life is so holistic and natural that they are astonished that they had not conceived of it themselves.

We saw that the Qur'an claims that earthly life is an essential stage in our creation. It represents a learning stage in which we can develop our intellectual and spiritual qualities and increase in our capacity to know, receive, and experience the attributes of God so that we can enter into a relationship of love with Him that no human relationship could approximate. We observed that human reason, choice, and suffering are key ingredients in this stage and that our relationship with others is organically linked to our relationship with God. We witnessed that human error, sin, and repentance, together with God's forgiveness and His continuous, pervasive influence, aid us in our growth. For many of us, most of the objections we raised initially have dissolved along the way and, although we may still have unanswered questions, we are coming to realize that they are due to the limitations of our own reasoning—our inability to fully comprehend the truth before us—and that given enough time, thought, and study of the Qur'an, we may be able to find satisfactory answers.

We are not at our journey's end. The remainder of the book is devoted to sharing as best its author can the rest of that travel to Islam in America. Ahead, we will meet the inevitable decision that the Qur'an demands of us. Then we will consider the five pillars of Islam and the support they provide to those who have made the decision to convert. We will also meet the community of believers and the tests that its members can bring to one's sincerity. Finally, we look briefly at the future of Muslims in America. Before we continue on, however, we will consider a few more of the theological questions that are often raised by modern-day Muslims and non-Muslims interested in Islam. I chose to discuss those about which I am most often asked. Answers to some of them follow as easy corollaries of what is already discovered, while others require a fresh look at the Qur'an from different angles. Some of them are discussed elsewhere,²⁸ and I will repeat sometimes word for word—what I wrote there. They are included here for the sake of completeness.

On Omnipotence

If God is all-powerful, can He become a man, terminate His existence, tell a lie, be unjust, or create a stone too heavy for even Him to move? These somewhat silly riddles most often arise from imposing unnecessary and contradictory assumptions on certain attributes of God or by assigning unwarranted additional attributes to Him. For example, the Qur'anic concept of omnipotence is not that God can do any arbitrary thing at all, even though it defies all laws of logical truth. Instead the Qur'an states that God "has power over all things" (2:20; 3:29; 55:17; 6:17; 16:77; 67:1) and that it is impossible that a created object could exist beyond or independent of His power, such as a stone too heavy to be moved.

Creation is also subject to and in harmony with His attributes. When God does "whatsoever He wills" (2:253; 5:1; 11:107; 22:14), what He wills is not arbitrary or capricious but in accord with His Most Beautiful Name. Hence, it is outside of His perfection to do ridiculous or stupid things. Similarly, His attributes are not in conflict with each other. If omnipotence included the ability to become a man, to terminate oneself, to lie, or to be unjust, then His name the All-Powerful would be in conflict with the name the Absolute (*al Samad*), the Everlasting (*al Qayyum*), the Truth (*al Haqq*), or the Most Just Judge (*al Hakeem*), respectively. Therefore, the obvious

²⁸ Lang, *Struggling to Surrender*.

answer to each of the above riddles is that the Qur'anic concept of omnipo-
tence does not include these acts.

The problem of predestination involves similar but more subtle logical
traps that arise from imposing time constraints on God.

Predestination

The concepts of time and eternity and their relationship to God have
been the subject of diverse philosophical speculation throughout the
history of religion. This is amply demonstrated in Muhammad Iqbal's
Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam,²⁹ where he attempts a
new interpretation in conformity with modern thought and doctrinal
sources of Islam. The attempt itself has been widely praised by Muslim
and non-Muslim scholars, although there is considerable disagreement
in both camps about the validity of his ideas. We should, Iqbal asserts,
not underestimate the importance of such efforts, since many theologi-
cal paradoxes arise from our understanding of these concepts. On the
one hand, we cannot, as scriptures themselves cannot, resist relating
time to God. On the other hand, we must alert ourselves to the defi-
ciencies of our understanding.

The greatest perplexities arise by attributing to God human restrictions
in relation to time. As God transcends space, we naturally would not asso-
ciate with Him spatial limitations. For instance, we would not say that God
literally descends to earth or walks in the garden. Equally, we would not
insist that God is a three-dimensional being or that He travels from one
point in space to another. In the same way, we should not demand that God
have a past, present, and future, for this assumes that His existence is as
ours, *in time*, and again this conflicts with His transcendence. Even the
most rabid atheist, in an effort to prove the illogic of the concept of God,
would not suppose that God might be on a bus from Chicago on His way
to New Orleans, because he knows that such a hypothesis is unacceptable
to a believer. It is equally erroneous to assume God's being was confined to
a particular point or interval of time.

We have little difficulty accepting the idea that God's knowledge can
encompass two different points in space simultaneously. This is perhaps
because we assume that the attribute of transcending space implies a unique
vantage point. We could compare it, however imperfectly, to the experi-

²⁹ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, Pak-
istan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publ., 1982).

ence of being high above the ground and having simultaneous knowledge
of very distant events. With respect to time, unlike space, we are immobile.
We can not travel forward or backward in time. An hour from now, we will
be at an hour from now. That can not be changed. Therefore, it is more dif-
ficult to comprehend that God's existence is independent of or beyond time,
as indeed it must be, for it is impossible to conceive that His being is con-
tained within or constrained by any of the dimensions of the very space-
time environment that He created for us to live and grow in. Once again,
because of His unique vantage point, His knowledge encompasses all
events, regardless of their distance in space or time.

Another key point, well established in the Qur'an, is that our perception
of time is not objectively real. As noted earlier, the Day of Judgment is por-
trayed as a different order of creation, one in which we suddenly compre-
hend that our former perceptions of time are no longer valid.

The Day they see it, (it will be) as if they had tarried but a
single evening, or the following morning. (79:46)

One Day He will gather them all together: (it will seem) as
if they had tarried but an hour of a day. (10:45)

It will be on a Day when He will call you, and you will
answer with His praise, and you will think that you tarried
but a little while. (17:52)

In whispers will they consult each other: "You tarried not
longer than ten (Days)." (20:103)

"You tarried not longer than a day." (20:104)

He will say: "What number of years did you stay on
earth?" They will say, "We stayed a day or part of a day:
ask those who keep account." He will say: "You stayed
not but a little, if you had only known!" (23:112-13)

On the Day that the Hour will be established, the trans-
gressors will swear that they tarried not but an hour: thus
were they used to being deluded. (30:55)

Interpreters will always render all references to the Day of Judgment in
the future tense, because from our perspective that is when it will take
place. Several of the passages, however, actually employ the present and
past tenses. Commentators assert that this is a literary device that stresses

the inevitability of these happenings, but it seems that the use of the present and past tenses in referring to the Day of Judgment also reinforces the notion that it will take place in a very different environment, one in which our current conceptions of time and space no longer apply.

The illusory character of time is further supported by the Qur'an's comparisons of the "days of God" with earthly days, where a "day of God" is said to be as "a thousand years of your reckoning" (32:5) and like "50,000 years" (70:4). I will not attempt here to provide a model or to interpret the precise relationship between God and time, or for that matter God and space, but rather I suggest the futility of such an endeavor. It cannot be otherwise, since our perceptions of time are not objectively real. Conflicts arise precisely because a given interpretation is assumed.

The question "What is the value of prayer if God has already predestined the future?" assumes that in some way God has a future. That is, it assumes that God is situated in time, as we are, and that as we pray, He is peering into a preordained future. But in order to have a future, one's existence must be contained within—and hence finite—in time. The reason this question leads to contradictions is that it assumes a contradiction in the first place: that God both transcends and is finite in time.

Any question that assumes two mutually incompatible premises will always result in conflicting conclusions. Assume, for example, that a circle is a square. We may ask if a circle has corners. If we emphasize the circle's roundness, the answer is no. If we concentrate on the properties of a square, the answer is yes. When two assumptions lead to a contradiction, at least one of them must be false. Thus, in such a situation, it should be asked if the question itself makes sense and if all premises are necessarily true.

The word "predestination" is itself problematic. If we mean by it that God in the past had programmed the events of the future, the assumption is that God exists in time. If instead we mean that God's wisdom, knowledge, and power encompass all and nothing in creation can conflict with that, then that has to be admitted. However, this is not the primary sense of "predestine," which means "determine in advance," and it does not conflict with the notion that God responds to our prayers.

The words *qadar* and *taqdir* in the Qur'an have come to mean, for many Muslims and Orientalists, the "absolute decree of good and evil by

God." That is, that God has preordained all our acts, even our moral choices. But as Muhammad Ali argues, this doctrine is

neither known to the Holy Qur'an, nor even to Arabic lexicology. The doctrine of predestination is of later growth, and seems to have been the result of the clash of Islam with Persian religious thought.³⁰

According to Raghīb,³¹ *qadar* and *taqdir* mean "the making manifest of the measure of a thing" or simply "measure." In the Qur'an they signify the divine laws regulating and balancing creation.

Glorify the name of your Lord, the Most High, Who creates, then makes complete, and Who makes things according to a measure (*qaddara*, from *taqdir*), then guides them to their goal. (87:1-3)

Who created everything, then ordained for it a measure (*qadar*). (54:49)

And the Sun runs on to a term appointed for it; that is the law (*taqdir*) of the Mighty, the Knowing. And as for the moon, We ordained (*qaddarna* from *taqdir*) for it stages. (36:38-39)

Of what thing did He create him [man]? Of a small life-germ He created him, then He made him according to a measure (*qaddarahu*). (80:18-19)

This is not to claim that God has subjected the universe to certain scientific laws and abandoned it to let it run its course. No reader of the Qur'an gets this impression. In the Qur'an, God is *al Rabb*: the Sustainer, Cherisher, Regulator, and Governor of all. He is the omnipresent source of the harmony and balance of nature. His influence and sway over creation is continuous and all-pervading. However, none of this conflicts with the fact that we are empowered to make moral decisions and to carry them out or that God comes to our aid when we seek Him.

³⁰ Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam* (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 317-18.

³¹ Ibid.

On the Origins of Evil and Temptation

Where does evil come from? If it comes from God, then it implies that God is imperfect; if it does not, then it implies that something can come into existence independent of Him. Since we already touched on this question when we considered human choice, we will summarize quickly our earlier observations and include some additional comments.

As we have seen, evil is not absolute, existing independent of and in eternal conflict with God. It arises from human nature, which is suited to moral and spiritual growth. What we consider to be evil—tyranny, oppression, deceit, injustice, greed, indifference to the suffering of others—is an outcome of human choice. It is a rejection of and opposition to the divine attributes and our own best interests. This helps explain the Qur'an's description of the disbelievers as *kuffar*, a term that connotes one who shows ingratitude or rejects a gift. Human intelligence and volition, when confronted with the challenges presented by earthly life, frequently will choose evil. However, the same key ingredients combine in some of us to produce remarkable exemplars of goodness. As the Qur'an states, man's capabilities—in particular, his ability to sin and do evil—are from God. He empowers us to choose evil just as He empowers us to choose good. But the choice is ours, and it is in that choice that good or evil occurs:

Say: "All things are from God." But what has come to these people, that they fail to understand a single fact? Whatever good befalls you is from God, but whatever evil befalls you, is from yourself. (4:78-79)

To choose evil is self-defeating, as the wrongdoer sins—commits *zulm*—against himself. But the damage does not have to be permanent, for through sincere repentance, making amends, and with God's forgiveness and help, we can learn and grow from our mistakes. The existence of and our ability to choose evil as well as good is an essential element of this learning phase of our creation. Evil in this life is not in conflict with God, but rather serves His purposes for mankind. The same could be said about the existence of temptation.

Our decisions are based not only on sensory data. All peoples of all times have been aware of extrasensory influences that introduce subtle suggestions into the human mind. In the past, the study of these forces fell exclusively within the province of religion, while today, modern psychology dominates their study. Religions tended to view these psychic influences as independent from man, but modern science believes them to

belong to a subliminal region of our minds. I will not attempt here to resolve this difference in viewpoint or to harmonize Islam with any recent theories of psychology. My interest is not in the precise origin, development, or location of these influences—frankly, I believe that this will always be a mystery to science—for my aim is only to discuss the role of temptation in man's development. Of course, the Arabs of the Prophet's era had their own pneumotology and vocabulary for describing psychic phenomena and, quite naturally, the Qur'an adopted and adapted this system to its calling. In order to better understand the purpose of temptation, it will be helpful to review some terminology.

The word *jinn* was to the ancient Arabs a comprehensive term for beings and powers outside of their immediate experience or perception. It is derived from the Arabic verb *janna*, meaning "to cover, conceal, hide, or protect." To Muhammad's contemporaries, it denoted "a being that cannot be perceived with the senses."³² The Arabs, as pointed out by Muhammad Ali, commonly referred to other humans as *jinn*. He quotes famous Muslim lexicologists who explain that it could be used to designate *mu'zam al nas*, i.e., "the main body of men or the bulk of mankind."³³

In the mouth of an Arab, the main body of men would mean the non-Arab world. They called all foreigners *jinn* because they were concealed from their eyes.³⁴

Through the centuries a tremendous amount of superstition and folklore grew around this word in the Middle East and the Far East, as well as the two other terms that we are about to discuss. Although these developments make it difficult to know exactly what it meant to the Qur'an's first hearers, it appears that any imperceptible being might be referred to as a *jinn*. From its use in the Qur'an and the Prophet's traditions, however, it seems that the term was used most often to refer to a world of spirits, one of sentient beings who were invisible to mankind but yet influenced and sometimes interacted with men.

A close relative of *jinn* is the word *shaitan*, usually translated as "satan." In general, *shaitan* stands for any rebellious being or force. In his famous commentary on the Qur'an, al Tabari states that

³² Ibid., 188.

³³ Ibid., 191.

³⁴ Ibid., 191-92.

³⁵ Al Tabari, *The Commentary on the Qur'an*, trans. by J. Cooper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1:47.

Shaitan in the speech of the Arabs is every rebel among the *jinn*, mankind, beasts, and everything The rebel among every kind of thing is called a *shaitan*, because its behavior and actions differ from those of the rest of its kind, and it is far from good.³⁵

It derives its meaning from a verb which means to be remote or banished.

It is said that the word is derived from [the use of the 1st form verb *shatana*] in the expression *shatana dar-i min dari-k* (=My home was far from yours).³⁶

As al Tabari points out, *shaitan* can be applied to humans. He quotes Ibn 'Abbas in his commentary on 2:14:

There were some Jewish men who, when they met one or several of the Companions of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, would say: "We follow your religion." But when they went in seclusion to their own companions, who were their satans, they would say: "We are with you, we were only mocking."³⁷

He also quotes Qatadah and Mujahid, who claimed that these satans were "their leaders in evil" and "their companions among the hypocrites and polytheists."

The key difference between a *jinn* and a *shaitan* is that while the former could be benign or destructive, the latter is always evil. In particular, in the pneumatic realm, a *shaitan* is an evil or rebellious *jinn*. However, the power of Satan in the Qur'an is rather limited: He is a source of evil suggestions that enter a person's hearts (114:4-6) and the notorious tempter, but beyond that the Qur'an states that he has no authority over man (14:22; 15:42; 16:99; 17:65) and that his guile is weak (4:76).

And Satan will say, when the matter is decided: Surely God promised you a promise in truth, and I promised you, then failed you. And I had no power over you, except that I called you and you obeyed me; so don't blame me, but blame yourselves. I can not come to your help, nor can you come to my help. I reject your associating me with God

³⁶ Ibid., 47.

³⁷ Ibid., 131.

before. Surely for the unjust is a painful chastisement. (14:22)

Satanic temptation is counterbalanced in Islamic pneumatology by angelic inspiration. The angels (in Arabic, *mala'ikah*; sing. *malaak*), among other things, encourage and support virtuous deeds in men and women. From the Qur'an, the sayings of the Prophet, and ancient dictionaries, it seems that, unlike the two previous terms, the word *malaak* (angel) applied only to spiritual beings. The Arabs also had a number of firmly held beliefs concerning angels that the Qur'an rejects: that angels are daughters of God (16:57) and hence semidivine, or that angels are female creatures (17:40; 37:150; 53:21).

These three terms characterize the pneumatic powers that influence the psyche. Angels, satans, and *jinn*s account for many of the virtuous, harmful, and ambivalent psychic urgings to which we are exposed. Angels inspire magnanimity and self-sacrifice. Satans are a source of evil and self-destructive suggestions. The influence of *jinn*s could be either positive or negative depending on how we deal with them, for they excite our lower or more animalistic tendencies, such as our drives for self-survival, power, wealth, security, and the respect of others. Their relationship and function is described succinctly in a well-known saying of Muhammad. He stated that every human is created with a companion *jinn*, who excites his lower passions, and a companion angel, who inspires him with good and noble ideas. When Muhammad's audience asked if he too had a companion *jinn*, he responded, "Yes, but God helped me to overcome him, so that he has submitted and does not command me to anything but good."³⁸

The virtuous and base promptings we receive could balance and complement each other. Magnanimous urgings, which stimulate our moral and spiritual growth, would, if surrendered to completely, be self-destructive, for they would cause us to ignore our personal needs. Base desires are necessary for our earthly survival, but if we gave in to them entirely, we would become utterly selfish. The two work together to stimulate our moral and spiritual growth, since what makes an act virtuous is that it involves overcoming or putting aside our lower needs for a while. The successful person, as Prophet Muhammad's saying shows, is the one who can discipline these lower (*jinnic*) influences and balance them against angelic ones. Then both serve his growth in goodness.

³⁸ Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Al Musnad* (Cairo: al Maimanah Press, n.d.), 1:385, 397, 401.

When a person inclines too far towards these lower (*jinnic*) suggestions, he makes himself or herself easy prey to evil (satanic) influences. For example, our need to survive gives way to exploitation of others and avariciousness, our need for power gives way to tyranny, our need for wealth gives way to greed, our desire for security gives way to violence, and our wish for respect gives way to arrogance. Such a person, as we saw earlier, becomes spiritually self-destructive, thereby making satanic influences an "obvious enemy" to man (2:168; 7:22; 12:5; 35:6).

These three psychic influences usually act upon us simultaneously. Thus they pinpoint and heighten the morality of many decisions and together provide a stimulus and catalyst for spiritual development. From the standpoint of Islam, what we call temptation is only one type of extra-sensory influences to which we are exposed, and, in combination with the others, it perpetuates and hastens our growth. Like all other aspects of our earthly lives, it is in harmony with God's plan for us.

It has been pointed out to me on occasion that this outline compares to certain theories in modern psychology, in particular, to Freud's description of the id, ego, and superego. This may be the case, but I find it neither surprising nor something to be excited about. First of all, if there are similarities between the two systems, there are obviously major differences. Second, I do not consider Freud's ideas to be truly modern nor a discovery in the strictest sense, because the viewpoint just presented is part of ancient wisdom and is contained in many religious traditions. What Freud attempted to do was to construct a secular context for explaining and investigating psychic influences. I, on the other hand, am writing as a convert to Islam from a definite religious perspective.

Don't We Need Another Prophet?

This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favor to you and chosen for you Islam as a religion. (5:3)

Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the Seal of the prophets. And Allah is ever Knower of all things. (33:40)

The second verse, revealed in the fourth year after Muhammad's emigration to Madinah, turned out to contain a prophecy as well as a statement of current fact. Muhammad would leave no male heirs and thus no natural candidate to whom the community might look as inheritor of the

prophetic mantle. The deep emotional and psychological need for such a person was indeed felt. On the day of the Prophet's death, Umar, one of his leading Companions, and many others refused to accept that the Prophet had truly passed on until Muhammad's closest friend, Abu Bakr, brought them to their senses. In the succeeding years, there were many others who sought from Muhammad's family a divinely guided leader, one who, through kinship, would be endowed with charismatic authority. But the Qur'an, history, and the Prophet's decisions in his last days made such a search difficult.

Not only did he leave no sons, but Muhammad outlived all of his daughters except Fatimah, the youngest, who died very shortly after he did. Had the Prophet designated Fatimah's husband and his nephew, Ali, as his successor, he might very well have been raised to divinely ordained status in the eyes of most of the Muslims. Muhammad, however, apparently left it to the community to select their next leader, and Ali would not be elected until three political successors to Muhammad (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman) had already reigned and then died. Either of Ali and Fatimah's two sons would have been likely candidates, but both of them died—the younger, tragically, while opposing the sixth ruler after Muhammad—without attaining political rule. Nonetheless, various lines of descent from Ali came to be viewed by a significant Muslim minority as inheriting a prophetic charisma, although most viewed the leadership of Muslims as simply a political appointment having religious significance and responsibilities but no divine mandate.

If Muhammad had been outlived by a son or perhaps a daughter—for the Arabian peninsula had known queens in pre-Islamic times—for a sufficient length of time, or if a grandchild of his had obtained political leadership, Muslim political history could possibly have been very different. But as it was, Muhammad's refusal to appoint a political successor and the fact that no direct descendent rose to power in the first few decades after his death, helped to insure that the majority of Muslims would understand the designation, "the Seal (*al khaatam*) of the Prophets," in the most obvious and conservative sense.

The Qur'an states that from every people God chose at least one prophet at some time in their history (10:47; 13:7; 16:36; 35:24). It also contains examples of nations to which prophets were sent repeatedly, because the divine message they conveyed would inevitably be distorted or forgotten. In some traditions of Muhammad, the number of prophets chosen by God for mankind is said to number as many as one hundred thou-

sand. We are told that Muhammad's mission was also corrective and restorative: the revelation he communicated confirms the fundamental truths contained in other sacred books—principally the Jewish and Christian scriptures—and corrects key errors (2:91; 6:92; 35:31).

This is a rather pessimistic appraisal of mankind's spiritual and moral resolve. Since its very beginnings, the human race has been consistently guilty of forgetfulness and perversion as well as of an inability to preserve and adhere to God's revelations. So that even if the Qur'an, as Muslims claim, is the same revelation proclaimed from Muhammad's lips, preserved in its original language, and free from later editing and revision, are we not, like most of humanity throughout history, in need of another prophet? In other words, does it make sense that God would suddenly leave humanity, with its proven propensity for deviation from revelation, to itself until the end of creation after guiding man so directly up to and including the time of Muhammad?

The Muslim might counter that the Qur'an is distinguished from all other sacred scriptures by its purity; others may contain sayings close to what earlier prophets preached—maybe even some verbatim statements—but these are mixed so thoroughly with folklore, poetry, interpretation, commentary, along with errors in translation, copying, editing and transmission, and with other accretions, that sifting out the actual revelation has long been impossible. The Muslim insists that the Qur'an, on the other hand, contains nothing but the words proclaimed by Muhammad during the times when revelation descended upon him. Most modern non-Muslim scholars of Islam are willing to admit this much, or at least something very close to this. Thus, this argument goes, we now possess the unadulterated word of God to guide us, making another revelation or prophet unnecessary. Other religions, of course, have developed viewpoints on the purpose and means of revelation and scripture quite different from the Muslim understanding. It is not my intention to contrast or debate them; I only wish to present a common explanation for the finality of Muhammad's mission.

Does this explanation fully answer the above question? What about the need to interpret and apply the revelation in an ever-changing world and the many difficulties which are bound to arise in time not explicitly addressed by the scripture? The Muslim replies that we have the Prophet's life example, his *Sunnah*, the multitudinous recollections of his sayings and doings that were collected, collated and subjected to meticulous historical criticism during the first three Islamic centuries.

Yet certainly we will encounter situations not dealt with in the Prophet's lifetime—after all, it has been over fourteen hundred years since his demise. How do we respond correctly to these? The Muslim answers that we have the sacred law, the Shari'ah, based on the Qur'an and the Prophet's *Sunnah*: a complete code of living, developed over several centuries by jurists to meet every possible contingency.

Is it any longer tenable to claim that the ancient jurists foresaw every possible future problem? Of course not, admits the Muslim, but we can study their methodologies, repeat their effort, and derive Islamic rules and regulations to address our current circumstances.

This is the inevitable response, but the farther we move away from the Qur'an, the greater our dependence on human choices and judgments, which, it seems, are bound to differ and to include errors. Today, Muslims are debating and often quarreling among themselves over hundreds of issues as they strive to adapt to modern living. Admittedly, these arguments are not over concepts central to Islam—they involve almost exclusively what non-Muslims would regard as mundane issues: men's and women's roles in the community, banking and investment practices, relations with non-Muslims, Muslim involvement in western political systems and similar concerns—but they are extremely important to the community. Such controversies create a great deal of strain and dissension. As one Muslim student attending the University of Kansas once told me, "If only the Prophet, peace be upon him, were here today to settle these issues for us!" From this perspective then, do we not need another prophet?

Any answer is purely speculative, because the Qur'an does not explicitly respond to this question. There very well may be many reasons rather than a single rationale. It is possible that the collective attempt to work out a program of living guided by the Qur'an and Muhammad's life example is in itself a valuable social, intellectual, and spiritual exercise requiring cooperation, tolerance, humility, and sincerity. The possibilities for growth that such an endeavor holds may outweigh the benefits of having a prophet to decide every small point of difference.

Another factor might be that the current environment is incapable of producing an individual having the level of purity and simplicity needed to be a prophet. Perhaps life has become so complicated and corrupting that no one of us is any longer capable of attaining the spiritual sensitivity and

³⁹ *Sahih al Bukhari: The Early Years of Islam*, trans. and explained by Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar: Dar al Andalus, 1981), 19.

receptivity of Moses, Jesus or Muhammad. This interpretation brings to mind the many traditions of the Prophet that predict that life will become increasingly corruptive, such as, "The best of my community is my generation, thereafter those who follow them, thereafter those who follow them. Then will come [such] people that one's testimony will outrun his oath, and one's oath his testimony."³⁹ Recall also the statement in the Qur'an that asserts that while many in Muhammad's era excel in faith, very few will do so in later times (56:10-14) and the verse that predicts that many Muslims will someday shun the Qur'an (25:30).

Further insight into this question might be gained by examining more closely what the Qur'an states necessitated Muhammad's prophethood.

The Qur'an presents itself and Muhammad's apostleship as the culmination and completion of God's direct communication to mankind through divinely inspired persons. Its many narratives about former prophets confirm and reinforce Muhammad's mission. The Qur'an's descriptions of the trials and obstacles faced by these previous messengers very often parallel events in Muhammad's own struggle, and the proclamations they make to their communities echo pronouncements made elsewhere in the Qur'an. This shows that the battle fought by all prophets between good and evil, revelation and rejection, truth and falsity, has always been the same.

The single most important fact governing all creation and preached by all of God's messengers is that "there is no god but God" (in Arabic, *la illaha illa Allah*). It implies that the many different objects of worship chosen by men have no real authority or power and that the divisions and hatreds to which such misdirected veneration lead are totally unnecessary and a result of nothing more than evil and self-destructive man-made illusions. It means there is but one spiritual and moral standard governing humanity and but one measure of a person's worth.

O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female
and have made you nations and tribes that you may know
one another. Lo! the noblest among you in the sight of
God is the best in conduct. (49:13)

Most importantly, it implies that the barriers we set up between ourselves and others are fallacies, because we all must answer to the same supreme God.

In seventh-century Arabia, each tribe had its own deity from which it sought protection and favoritism and to which it appealed in the self-perpetuating intertribal strife. It took Islam's monotheism to unite the warring factions as the Qur'an so poignantly reminds them.

And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah, and do not separate. And remember Allah's favor unto you: how you were enemies and he made friendship between your hearts so that you became as brothers by his grace; and (how) you were on the brink of an abyss of fire; and he did save you from it. (3:103)

Islamic monotheism not only demands that we accept that there is only one God, but also that we accept its natural corollary: All men and women are in fact equal under God's authority. These two demands, the oneness of God and the unity of humanity, have throughout history been difficult to uphold in any religious tradition, as the cases of Judaism and Christianity so powerfully demonstrate in the Qur'an.

The story of the Children of Israel is of a people who are uniquely receptive throughout much of their history to monotheism despite their existence within a predominantly pagan milieu. Outside influences frequently penetrate their community and cause them to waver at times from the teachings of their prophets. In the Qur'an, they appear as a nation in constant struggle between pure monotheism and heathen pressures, and this in part explains their need to insulate themselves from their social surroundings and their attempt to preserve and protect their racial and cultural purity. But they came to see themselves as God's chosen people, to the exclusion of others, and as sons of God in the Old Testament sense. As a result, they could never accept the final messenger of God because of his non-Jewish origins, even though he confirmed the essential message in their scriptures. The Qur'an continuously blames them for their refusal in this regard. In short, Judaism, although successful in preserving the belief in one God, was unable to accept the oneness of man under God.

Christianity goes back to the same biblical roots. But much more than Judaism, it is a universal religion. Its coherence derives from an intense spiritual yearning to know and be loved by God. Thus, while the Jews and the pagans of the Arabian peninsula were stubbornly closed to a message that departed from their traditions, Christians are shown to be more easily affected by its spiritual force (4:85-89).

The biggest difficulty encountered by such universal faiths is the great diversity of peoples they absorb. Converts bring their own languages, ideas, symbols, and cultural practices, all of which could potentially distort the universal faith in question. From the Muslim view, such was the case with Christianity: Although it eagerly embraces all mankind, its tenets compro-

mise pure monotheism and lend too easily to associating others with God. In this way, the Judeo-Christian experience exemplifies the dilemma faced by all world religions: Monotheism or universalism were invariably compromised in attempting to preserve one or the other.

Islam also struggled—and still struggles—with these internal tensions. Eventually, extreme measures were taken by the mainstream to protect both implications of monotheism. Philosophical and mystical speculation were discouraged, all aspects of life were systematized into religious law, and innovative thought was forbidden through the adoption of *taqlid* (unquestioning acceptance of earlier scholarly opinion). Pressures continued to rise, but Islamic orthodoxy, for the most part, succeeded in placing the major sources and ideas of early mainstream Islam on ice, preserved in a type of suspended animation, that eventually would be transferred to modern man intact. Whatever the cost to Muslim civilization of the severe steps taken by these Muslim scholars, the two major features of Islamic monotheism—the oneness of God and the oneness of humanity—were united successfully in Islam and passed on to future generations. For Muslims, this is one example of how God, through Islam, completed His favor unto mankind (5:3).

This concern with preserving both aspects of monotheism helps to explain the termination of prophethood with Muhammad. As long as a religion anticipates a future revelation, the door is left open to false prophets. Deceivers and self-deluded individuals invariably emerge to mislead others and divide the community. A powerful source of schism threatens the unity of the believers much more deeply and permanently than any legal disputation. Every major religion, including Islam, has known this danger, but the termination of prophethood with Muhammad has greatly restrained this tendency. A Muslim leader today may gain the admiration and allegiance of very many followers, but it is nearly impossible to obtain their unconditional trust—that type of absolute loyalty obtained by a perception of divine guidance. The moment a leader claims such a status, his movement is invariably doomed to become a relatively insignificant cult disconnected from the community of Muslims.

Recently, many Muslims were very curious about Rashad Khaleefah's organization in Tucson, Arizona. When he declared himself to be another messenger of God, however, virtually all Muslims dismissed and ignored him, and he died with only a handful of disciples. Many Western scholars refer to similar disenfranchised movements, such as the Bahai's or Qadianis, as Islamic sects, although the designation is inappropriate and

misleading. The Muslim world does not consider these groups to be alternative or even heretical perspectives within the Islamic community; they are considered entirely outside of Islam. No such movement has attracted a significant number of Muslims, although they may win converts from other populations, because the belief in Muhammad as the last and final prophet is one of Islam's principal dogmas.

The *shahadah* (testimony of faith) is the nearest thing to a creed in Islam. It is recited at least nine times a day by observant Muslims in their prayers. In the first half of the *shahadah*, a Muslim bears witness that "there is no god but God" (*la ilaha illa Allah*), while in the second half he or she testifies that "Muhammad is the messenger of God" (*Muhammadan rasulu-Allah*). By the second statement, the Muslim understands not only that Muhammad is God's messenger, but also that he is the last prophet and the only one he should follow. Thus, the *shahaddah* connects Islamic monotheism to the finality of Muhammad's mission. From the viewpoint of Muslims, his prophetic vocation was necessitated by the need for a continual witness on earth to both implications of monotheism—the oneness of God and the oneness of humanity under God—and the sealing of prophethood with him was necessary in order to preserve and safeguard that witness from later fragmentation.

CHAPTER 3

THE DECISION

Umar ibn al Khattab⁴⁰ could be your most loyal, valuable friend or your most frightening, merciless adversary. A towering, muscular man in his early thirties, he commanded almost everyone's fear and respect. He was a volatile combination of brilliance and hot-temperedness, perspicacity and impetuosity, so that while others were still struggling to get their facts right, he would have already committed himself to an appropriate course of action. He could execute his judgements with numbing speed and austerity, making them seem more like reflexes than decisions.

To Umar, the matter was completely clear: there could be no compromise—Makkan society as they knew and honored it and the movement of Muhammad could never coexist. Of course, he was well aware of the threat of revenge, of long and costly blood feuds, and that Makkah could easily become another Yathrib, but Muhammad posed a much greater danger and he had to be stopped immediately before it was too late.

The air was hot and dry as Umar marched down the dusty, dirt road that led to the area of town where Muhammad and his associates were meeting. The streets were empty, as all were in their homes under cover from the noonday sun.

How was it that "the truthful one" had become such a menace? he thought to himself. He was always somewhat of a loner, but he never showed any political ambition or signs of instability. And what could have seized the minds of the sons of Quraysh who now followed him?

"O Umar! O Umar!"

⁴⁰ Umar ibn al Khattab came to be one of Muhammad's most devoted and closest followers. The sources report several different variants of his conversion to Islam. Muhammad H. Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. by Ismail Faruqi (Indianapolis: North American Trust, 1976), 103-104.

Of all the tribes of Arabia, Umar wondered, how can its proudest and most powerful one produce this shame? What could have gotten into...

"Umar!!! Stop!! Where are you heading in such haste!!"

Umar turned towards the voice that was scurrying to catch up with him. "What do you want?!" He blurted out abruptly.

It was Nuaym ibn Abdullah, also of the tribe of Quraysh. With sweat dripping down his face he panted, "Where are you rushing to?"

Umar resumed his march as Nuaym hurried to keep pace with him.

"I am going to put an end to this plague that grips our city," he answered, his eyes fixed firmly on the mission ahead of him. "I am going to kill Muhammad."

Nuaym tried to warn him of the obvious risks, but Umar was determined. "Then perhaps you should put your own house in order first!" Nuaym gasped, "because your sister and her husband are among his followers!"

Umar stopped dead in his tracks. He felt an ache in the pit of his stomach and his chest and neck tightened. His face was livid. "If you're lying...!" he shouted furiously.

"Ask anyone! Everyone knows!" Nuaym pleaded as he retreated several steps, unsure of what to expect next.

Without another word Umar stormed toward his sister's house, his anger increasing with every stride. By the time he got to her home he had reached the peak of jahl, the term the Arabs used to describe uncontrollable passions. As he approached its entrance he had his worst fears confirmed in what for him was the worst possible way: he heard his sister and her spouse reciting from a piece of parchment some of the verses which Muhammad had claimed were from God.

Umar burst into the room. He demanded to see the parchment. His sister refused. A scuffle broke out. Blows were thrown. His sister fell to the floor. Blood and tears flowed down her cheek where Umar's fist had just landed.

The sight of his injured sister jolted Umar. He begged her to forgive him. He didn't know what he was doing . . . The rumors . . . Their reputations . . . Their family honor . . . Their futures . . . Her best interest . . . Her husband should know better . . . This will all pass.

"Can I at least see the parchment?" he asked, having finally calmed down a little.

Umar took the parchment and began to read it as he slowly walked over to another corner of the room. He stopped there, alone, standing,

motionless, staring at the words before him. His breathing slowed and his shoulders relaxed. His countenance changed, as he now showed no traces of the violence that had just erupted. The confusion in his eyes was gone and they were now distant and deep in thought. He then glanced over toward his sister, but said nothing, and neither did she nor her husband. He looked down again at the parchment for a few more minutes as he slowly wandered in a small circle. He then walked back across the room. He stood for a moment before his sister, looking again as if he had something he wanted to say. He handed her the parchment and excused himself, stating only that he had to leave.

The next day, Umar set out again in search of Muhammad, but this time his purpose was not to put him to the sword, but to join him, and he would become one of his greatest followers.

Muslim history records many great conversions, but Umar's was certainly one of the most dramatic and important. It was a turning point in Muhammad's movement. It changed the image of Islam in the eyes of the Quraysh from an annoying, mostly discreet cult, to an open, defiant challenge to the establishment. The pagan Quraysh responded with severe persecution of Muhammad and his followers, which led to the Muslim emigration to Yathrib.

It would not be long, however, before conversion to Islam became much easier. Islam quickly spread throughout Arabia and within a few generations after the death of the Prophet, the Islamic empire stretched from the Atlantic coast of northwest Africa to the Punjab region of India. The Arab conquerors were in no hurry to win converts to their faith, and conversion proceeded at a slow but steady pace. But there were now definite protections and advantages for those who embraced Islam. Islamic civilization grew and came to lead the world in science, material prosperity, and learning, so that throughout the greater part of Muslim history, wherever Islam spread, it was perceived as the religion of a superior culture.

The situation of western converts to Islam is quite different from this today. When Europe sank into its Dark Ages, Islamic civilization ascended to its Golden Age; the West eventually recovered, while Muslim culture slipped into a long decline. Thus, the relative positions of the two civilizations at the beginning of this century was almost the reverse of what they had been during the Middle Ages. Many westerners, and Muslims too, see the modern Islamic world as backward and inferior to European and

American civilization. In addition, over a thousand years of tension, conflict, distrust, and built-up prejudice and ignorance now distance the two peoples, with each seeing the other as demonic and decadent. Their media portray each other as their greatest current threat and set the stage for what may turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The American or European who embraces Islam enters the religion in a milieu largely hostile to his or her choice, an environment that compares more with Makkah in the first twelve years of Muhammad's mission than to any other that produced proselytes to Islam.

Conversions to Islam in the West may not pose as great a threat to their societies as Umar's did to his, but they often elicit similar negative reactions on the parts of families and associates. I have never met a western convert to Islam, or anyone even considering conversion to it, who did not hesitate to embrace this religion because of fears of society's reaction. As the West is perceived to be so anti-Islam, conversion is most often a very slow and gradual process. Very few Americans or Europeans jump into the religion, and when they do, they are not usually Muslims for very long. Most converts recall many key turning points on the road to conversion, long before the final decision to embrace Islam. The following two cases, although they represent persons of very different backgrounds, are typical in this sense.

"Malcolm, don't eat any more pork and don't smoke any more cigarettes. I will show you how to get out of prison."

Who could conceive that this short note at the end of Reginald Little's letter to his older sibling would have such an impact, not only on his brother, but on the lives of so many African-Americans as well? In prison, they nicknamed him "Satan" because by this stage in his life he had become evil incarnate to those who knew him. This brief instruction, however, fanned a flicker of hope that even he had not yet extinguished. Incarcerated, where every detail of one's life seems in someone else's control, "Detroit Red" discovered freedom and self-respect in following these instructions, and he would later remember this letter as his first step in a tempestuous and courageous journey that first brought him to the Nation of Islam as Minister Malcolm X, then to the Pilgrimage to Makkah where he discovered what for him was true Islam, and finally to his violent assassination—which he both anticipated and was resigned to—at the age of forty for refusing to back down from or to compromise what he perceived to be the truth. Malcolm X blazed a trail that many African-American Muslims would eventually follow: he went from the

*radical teachings of Elijah Muhammad to the prevailing viewpoints of traditional Islam.*⁴¹

In a modest castle in a tiny village along a snow covered mountain pass between Herat and Kabul, Afghanistan, the after-dinner conversation turned to the story of David and Goliath.

"David was small, but his faith was great," remarked the host. Leopold Weiss, Middle East correspondent for the Frankfurter Zeitung, responded: "And you are many, but your faith is small."

Leopold was not referring specifically to his three companions, but the world Muslim community. Embarrassed that he probably insulted his host, he began a lengthy apology, explaining how if Muslims had remained true to their faith, they would, in his opinion, never have experienced such a miserable decline.

"But you are a Muslim," his host whispered.

Leopold laughed and replied: "No, I am not a Muslim, but I have come to see so much beauty in Islam that it makes me sometimes angry to watch you people waste it."

His host disagreed: "No, it is as I have said: you are a Muslim, only you don't know it yourself."

*In his many years of study of the people of the Middle East, he had explored Islam so deeply and personally, that it was now apparent even to strangers that his way of thinking and living was imbued with the religion. The words of his Afghan host never left him in the months that followed and they served to awaken him to the choice he had to face. Within a year, Leopold Weiss would make the shahaadah (testimony of faith). Today, he is best known as Muhammad Asad, whose writings have greatly influenced many Muslims worldwide.*⁴²

Neither of these men described their conversions to Islam as leaps of faith. For both of them, their coming to Islam was a long development spanning many years.

Many western converts report that they had become rationally convinced of the truth of Islam before they embraced it. Maryam Jameelah, in her letters to Maududi, describes the intellectual appeal that Islam held for

⁴¹ Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Publ., 1966).

⁴² Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca* (Gibraltar: Dar al Andalus Publishers, 1984).

her.⁴³ Marmaduke Pikhall's conversion involved an intellectual maturation and discovery similar to Asad's.⁴⁴ Aminah Assilmi and Nancy Ali, well-known speakers at American Islamic conferences, describe their choices to become Muslims in essentially rational terms.⁴⁵ Gary Miller, best known for his participation in Muslim-Christian dialogues, tells how he became rationally convinced of Islam after reading a copy of the Qur'an that he came upon one day in a bookstore in Canada.⁴⁶ Nuh Ha Mim Keller, writer for *The American Muslim* magazine, mentions how his prolonged study of modern philosophers helped him to become a Muslim.⁴⁷

Some other impressions about converts that I have obtained from personal interviews and autobiographical accounts deserve mention. Most often the western convert was not on a spiritual quest when he or she became interested in Islam, or at least not on one of which he or she was aware. There may be several reasons for this. First, Islam does not view faith as principally a spiritual experience. As we saw earlier, the spiritual side of Islam is only one aspect of a comprehensive and holistic understanding of life. Second, Islam does not offer persons instant sainthood: spirituality matures by patiently sticking to a religious program and discipline. Third, the stress Muslims place on abiding by Islamic law may discourage those who emphasize the spiritual side of faith; they may consider Islam to be overly legalistic.

Most American and European converts were initially curious about the beliefs and practices of the Muslims they had met. Often they mention that the media's portrayal of Muslims and the perceptions they obtained through personal contact with them were very different and that this served to heighten their interest in the religion. Many admit that they were influenced greatly by Muslim friends or romantic interests, but they often add that while they were encouraged strongly to learn about the religion, they were usually discouraged from accepting it without being totally convinced (The

⁴³ *Correspondence between Abi-L-'la Al-Maududi and Maryam Jameelah*, printed and distributed by IFTA, Islamic Trust, 1982.

⁴⁴ Peter Clark, *Marmaduke Pikhall: British Muslim* (London: Quarter Books, 1986).

⁴⁵ Amina Assilmi, *Islam in My Life—Sixteen Years as a Muslim*, Ghazali Islamic Video, No. 231, 1993; Nancy Ali, *My Journey From Islam to Christianity*, Ghazali Islamic Video, No. 141, 1990.

⁴⁶ Gary Miller, *Impressions on the Christian-Muslim Debate*, Ghazali Islamic Video, No. 207, 1993.

⁴⁷ Nuh Ha Mim Keller, "Becoming Muslim," *The American Muslim Magazine* II, No. 11-12 (1994):17-21.

general feeling among Muslims is that a hypocrite is more dangerous to himself and the community than a truthful disbeliever).

Many converts characterize their entry into Islam as an acquiescence to a perceived truth. Very often their decision to become a Muslim is seen as a choice between their material and social interests on the one hand and their relationship with God on the other.

Typically, modern western converts to Islam were non-conformists before entering the religion. Men rejected or were disillusioned by their society's worldview and its goals and dreams. They often associated and identified with unpopular individuals, preferring to avoid the lime-light. Many converts describe themselves as being loners before their joining the Muslim community. They frequently are idealists: wealth, popularity, and power are not as important to them as personal freedom and ideals. Most often they leaned toward the liberal or even radical left end of the political spectrum before conversion. They are usually self-confident individuals who are strongly opinionated and adventurous in their thinking. They are often inquisitive and open to new ideas, yet tend to seem dogmatic and uncompromising in tone. A few converts, like Maryam Jameelah, report having suffered an emotional crisis shortly before becoming interested in Islam, but this does not appear to be the norm.

Many converts to Islam were formally atheists or agnostics. Murad Hofmann, Maryam Jameelah, Muhammad Asad, Malcolm X, Nuh Ha Mim Keller, and myself were in this category. In America, a large number of white American converts seem to come from Catholic families. This was my situation as well as better known converts such as Gary Miller, Steve Johnson, Jamaal Zarabozo, Nancy Ali, Aminah Assilmi, Murad Hofmann, and Nuh Ha Mim Keller. Among African-American converts, religious backgrounds appear to be in line with the demographics of the larger non-Muslim black American community.

The following is an attempt at a personality profile of the potential western convert to Islam: Relatively young, between the ages of twenty five and forty. Idealistic. Self-sacrificing. Non-conformist. Periodically reclusive. Prefers the company of society's disenfranchised. Nonmaterialistic to ascetic in nature. An activist. Liberal to radical politically. College educated. Capable of sudden drastic changes in viewpoints. Very curious. Highly opinionated. Stubborn. Argumentative. Confident. Contemplative. Tends toward rationalism as opposed to spiritualism in religion. Critical of others. Loyal to overzealous in commitments.

Some of these qualities can work against an individual once he or she enters the Muslim community. The great emphasis the community puts on emulating the Prophet's habits can be at odds with a non-conformist personality. What many converts perceive as a prevailing misogyny among Muslims will conflict with a liberal western outlook (It is very interesting to note that quite a large number of female converts were feminists before embracing Islam.) The modern Muslim community is quite suspicious of philosophy and is uncomfortable with what it often sees as an overly rational approach to religion among converts.⁴⁸ Even though the Muslim community in the West is now fairly large (there are about five million Muslims residing in North America alone), it is still quite politically timid and converts tend to become frustrated by what they see as the Muslim community's extreme passivity.

As already mentioned, the decision to convert formally to Islam is seldom an easy one. However, it seems that the greater the difficulty in coming to that decision, the more steadfast is the convert in his or her commitment to Islam. Perhaps this is because such persons already have considered and accepted most of the difficulties and problems that come with being a Muslim in America or Europe. The time spent studying Islam before actual conversion was long for all of the above mentioned individuals but one, who may be the exception that proves the rule, or maybe not.

At first glance, it appears that the conversion of Malcolm X was a sudden impulse. He seemed to embrace Islam in prison on the spot, after reading his brother Reginald's letter. But this would be a wrong conclusion. Malcolm X's conversion to what he eventually saw as authentic Islam was actually a very long development, lasting more than a decade, that was crowned on his pilgrimage to Makkah. What makes his conversion so outstanding is the resoluteness with which he submitted to Islam: He was fully conscious of the great personal risks that he was taking, but once convinced, he showed virtually no hesitation.

What then are the most salient obstacles to conversion to Islam in the West? What are the main reasons that cause people to hesitate to embrace this religion, even when it appeals to them? For Muslims living in the West, many of whom feel it is their duty to bear witness to their religion,

⁴⁸ For the history of rationalism and philosophy in Islam see Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (1979), 95-100; H. P. Cobb, *Mohammedanism*

these are important questions—yet ones that are seldom asked of converts. If potential converts anticipate harm from their societies, perhaps the Muslim community could help allay or address these fears. If certain actions or behaviors of Muslims are discouraging potential converts, then one would think that the Muslim community would want to know what these are.

Islam in the West

I lay in bed—in the dark—on my back—unable to sleep—staring at the ceiling. I could never tolerate loose ends: a trait I had inherited from my mother. I needed to get this over with. I could not handle another sleepless night. I could feel my heart beating as I switched on the lamp beside my bed. I felt a little queasy as I began to dial the ten digit number. The conversation went uneasily. I was nervous and uncomfortable. "What's wrong, Jeff," my mother finally asked me.

She was the religious pillar of our family. When we were kids my mom dragged the rest of us to church every Sunday, enrolled us in Catholic schools up through high-school, donated weekly to the church, cared for the sick and elderly in our neighborhood, never uttered a profanity, and with the most powerful love, she fought tooth and nail to keep her sons from going down the self-destructive paths that cities like Bridgeport, Connecticut offer children. She was more than a mother to me: she was my friend and hero. I had only disappointed her once before. She always said how much she admired and respected me.

"Mom, I did something and I thought you should be the first to know."

I sounded and felt like I was divulging something that I should have been ashamed of, as if I was confessing some crime or sexual perversion.

"I became a Muslim."

She was shocked and deeply hurt. For the next quarter of an hour I felt pinned into a corner, groping for an explanation for how I could come to do such a thing. I could only think of how ridiculous I must have sounded: how this was so unlike me! I tried to calm her fears, to demonstrate with a few jokes that I had not really changed. But I had changed and I knew it. I then pretended to be surprised by her reaction.

"I was an atheist!" I told her. "I thought you would be pleased that I finally came to believe in God."

"But how can you worship Muhammad?!" She exclaimed. "How can

With my mother's question I suddenly saw an opening. Until then, I had been assailed by feelings of embarrassment and guilt for what I had done to my culture, my heritage, my mother. I was overly concerned with how I would be perceived—with how I would be associated with the many misconceptions and prejudices Americans have of Muslims. But the tables had suddenly turned—now we were on my turf—and I felt a surge of confidence.

I seized the moment and fired back: "I believe we have our roles reversed," I answered her. "Muslims do not worship Muhammad. And should not I be asking that type of question of you?"

For the rest of the conversation, the momentum was on my side and I was in control. My mother and I went several more rounds when I flew to Connecticut over the semester break, but as long as I stuck with my reasons for becoming an atheist at sixteen and then embracing Islam at twenty-eight, I had the upper hand. Eventually, our religious warfare turned into dialogue and we both came to respect each other's perspective.

My mom became very curious about my religion. She asked me to send her videotapes of the public lectures I had given on Islam. On one of her visits to Kansas, she asked me if she could attend a talk on Islam I was scheduled to give at the university.

As we drove home from the lecture, she began to explain to me that most people need to stay in one of the religions of their culture, that not everyone could make the transition I did, and that she was sure that God in His mercy would understand this. What she said caught me off guard. I was not sure what to say and I kept silent.

Looking out the car window she remarked: "I believe that your religion might make more sense than mine, and I understand how Islam would appeal to someone who thinks like you do, but I could never become a Muslim."

"I didn't even suggest . . .," I quickly began to explain.

"I know," she interrupted me, "I know you didn't."

The biggest obstacle to acceptance of Islam by potential converts is anxiety over society's response to that decision. The questions I am asked most frequently by non-Muslims considering conversion to Islam are about my family's and friends' reactions to my becoming a Muslim.

The first reactions of relatives and friends to new converts to Islam in the West almost always involve some degree of shock and dismay. Some

been rare cases where parents or friends sever all relations with the convert; but most often the parents and friends come to accept the convert's choice, and quite frequently to respect it, especially if he or she seems happier and more at peace with him/herself in the new-found faith. Usually, if the relationship between a parent or friend and a convert was close before Islam, it will remain so after conversion. In addition, converts can help to reduce tension by being reasonable and non-aggressive when discussing Islam. The latter is no small feat, because the attitudes that confront new Muslims are often prejudiced and combative, making it all too easy to respond in kind. However, the Qur'an disapproves of such tactics:

And indeed He has revealed to you in the Book that when you hear God's messages rejected and mocked at, do not sit with them until they enter into some other discourse, for then indeed you would be like them. (4:140)

Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and the best of speech; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious. (16:125).

And do not dispute with the People of the Book except with means better, unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong. But say, "We believe in that revealed to us and revealed to you; Our God and your God is One and it is to Him we have submitted ourselves." (29:46)

The requirement to use "wisdom and the best of speech" when representing Islam is well served by broadening one's knowledge of Islam as well as the other world religions. In this way, arguments about issues over which there is already substantial agreement can be avoided and the discussions can focus more clearly on shared values and viewpoints as well as on true points of difference.

Many converts fear job discrimination and keep their faith secret from their employers and co-workers. In my case, some colleagues have displayed ill-feeling and disapproval about my commitment to Islam, but I do not believe it has greatly affected my career. Others have endured much worse, especially women who embrace Islam in the West.

A man can become a Muslim without substantially altering his outer appearance and hence can conceal his religious identity whenever he chooses. The Muslim community, however, puts tremendous pressure on

Islamic dress, even though it often leads to terrible hardship and makes them easy targets for threats and insults. My wife is not a convert, but she has been chased, screamed at, cursed, struck, and refused employment because of her dress.

When a man converts to Islam he may be considered eccentric, a little strange, an independent thinker, a rebel, perhaps even brave; but when a woman converts, the hand that rocks the cradle commits cultural treason. Every society seems to pin its honor, traditions, and stability on its women, so that when a female steps out of line, all hell breaks loose. The female convert to Islam, much more than her male counterpart, becomes caught in a cultural tug of war in which she becomes the rope, as both societies—the dominant western and the traditional Islamic subculture residing in it—fight to assert themselves in opposing directions through her. This felt pressure from both sides causes many women who see much that is positive in Islam to remain non-Muslim and many others who embrace the religion to keep apart from the Islamic community.

The Muslim community in western countries can do much to counter the pressures felt by newcomers to their religion. First and foremost, they could take a much more active role in fighting discrimination. Up to now, the Muslim community is one of the most passive and disorganized minorities in the West. If an American or European Muslim chooses to fight discrimination, it is usually a solitary battle.⁴⁹

Second, the Muslim community in the West should put less pressure on its female members to adhere to strict traditional dress codes. The dangers and hardships that some of these women face can be very severe, and there is no social system established to support and protect them. The enjoining of modest dress and behavior for both sexes should suffice for now.

Third, the mosque must become much more of a haven and buttress to new Muslims—a place where they can turn for comfort and encouragement. In the time of Prophet Muhammad, the mosque certainly served this function; today, however, new Muslims not only feel estranged from their own western cultures, but often from what should be the very center of Muslim community life. This is especially the case with female converts, for they—and women in general—are often made to feel unwelcome in the mosque.

⁴⁹ However, I must commend the efforts of the American Muslim Council (AMC) and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) for their outstanding efforts in fighting prejudice and discrimination against Muslims.

I know of one young lady in California who went with her mother to a mosque in order to learn more about Islam. When the man who opened the door saw the two American women standing in front of him, he slammed the door in their faces. A Muslim student at the University of San Francisco once announced that if he saw any women praying in the mosque, he would throw them out bodily. His threat was taken seriously by some recent female converts, and they abruptly stopped attending the evening prayer rituals.

As noted, estrangement from friends and relatives and job discrimination seem to be the two biggest worries that initially confront potential converts to Islam in the West. Overcoming these anxieties can be very difficult. While most converts attest that reactions to their decision to adopt Islam were mostly cool, they also admit that their worse fears were never realized. Surmounting these anxieties is only one of the social obstacles to becoming or remaining a Muslim. Many western apostates—and there have been many—claim that the Muslim community presents a greater problem.

Confirming Misconceptions

You are the best nation raised up for mankind: you enjoin good and forbid evil and you believe in God. (3:110)

Western culture has very definite preconceptions about Islam and its followers that are rooted deeply in its own long experience as the principal rival of the Muslim world.⁵⁰ A person in search of God may be ready to concede the possibility of false personal prejudice against a religion and to put them aside for a while, but it does not take much on the part of the faithful to confirm and ignite earlier predispositions, regardless of the religious or non-religious basis of the community's behavior. What follows is a discussion of what I believe are some of the major problems that persons sincerely interested in Islam often have with the Muslim community.

An Arab Religion

And We sent you to mankind as a messenger. And God is sufficient as a witness. (4:79)

⁵⁰ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West, The Making of an Image* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1993).

O mankind, the messenger has truly come to you with truth from your Lord, so believe, it is better for you. (4:170)

Say: O mankind, surely I am the messenger of God to you all. (7:158)

This is a message to mankind that they may be warned thereby and that they may know that He is one God, and that persons of understanding may bear it in mind. (14:52)

And We have not sent you except as a bearer of good news and as a warner to all mankind, but most men do not know. (34:28)

There are many references in the Qur'an to the universal character of Islam, and its many addresses and exhortations to all mankind (in Arabic, *insaan* and *naas*) make it obvious that the Qur'an addresses its message to all humanity. Of course, Muhammad's immediate audience was the Arabs, and thus, as the Qur'an explains, the revelation is naturally in Arabic (12:2; 26:195; 42:7; 43:3; 46:12). The unprecedented success that the early community had in protecting and preserving the revelation in its original language and in compiling thousands of details about Muhammad's everyday sayings and happenings assured that Arabic and seventh-century Arabian culture would influence Muslim life forever. Every new Muslim needs to learn at least some Arabic, however little, if only to participate in the ritual prayers, since Arabic is the liturgical language of Islam. In striving to develop an Islamic lifestyle in western countries, many new Muslims also feel it advantageous to study Arabic grammar in some depth in order to have first-hand access to the revelation and to the Prophet's *Sunnah* (the Prophet's life example), the two primary sources of guidance for the community.

Although a few short passages of the Qur'an need to be memorized in Arabic in order to perform the ritual prayer, and more extensive knowledge of Arabic is required for scholarly study of Islam's textual sources, by no means should this imply that Islam is strictly an Arabian religion, which is the common perception in the West. Actually, the majority of Muslims throughout the world (about 85 percent) are not Arabs and know virtually no Arabic. Yet this false perception of Islam may be more the fault of Muslims than non-Muslims.

Middle-Eastern Arabian culture appears to dominate the Muslim com-

piety demand. At the many Islamic conferences held in western countries, men and women are segregated, many participants dress in middle-eastern costumes (especially the converts), and many speakers frequently interject Arabic words into their lectures, even though the majority of listeners do not speak Arabic and English translations are available and well known. The same often occurs at lectures about Islam presented for the general public and sponsored by Muslim organizations.

I recall a lecture I attended at a university when I first became interested in Islam. The speaker, an American convert dressed in something similar to Saudi Arabian attire, continuously inserted poorly pronounced Arabic terms into his presentation, as if the entire audience should be familiar with them. This created so many gaps in my understanding that his speech became, for me, practically unintelligible. I left the lecture with the feeling that in order to become a Muslim one needed to become an Arab or at least a foreigner. This seems to be the message many non-Muslims are getting, whether or not the Muslim community intends to convey it. Steve Johnson, an American convert who used to lecture extensively on Islam, once related that he overheard his brother say to a friend, "O yeah! My brother Steve became an Arab!" This confusion is understandable.

Most converts take on Arabic names, even though early non-Arab converts to Islam like Salmon the Persian and Bilal from Ethiopia kept their non-Arabic names, with the approval of the Prophet. I also met quite a few converts who developed foreign accents in no time at all, yet they had never left America nor learned a foreign language. On one occasion, I took a Muslim friend of mine from Yemen to a lecture given at our local Islamic center. As we were listening to the speech, he leaned over to me and whispered, "I traveled through India and Pakistan and I recognize that accent. Is the speaker Pakistani?" "No!" I told him. "I know the speaker well. He is a fifth generation American of Scandinavian descent from San Diego."

When devout American Muslims appear in the news, they are usually dressed in middle-eastern garb. The defendants in the World Trade Center bombings trial and their supporters were almost always seen in foreign dress, even though a fair number of them were Americans. Cat Stevens, now Yusef Islam, seems to always appear in public in a turban and long gown. Recently, in Lawrence, Kansas, an American convert with an Arabic name led a hunger strike against the Hallmark Corporation for distributing a greeting card he felt was offensive to Muslims. He appeared frequently

offending card showed a neurotic American woman convert to Islam, veiled in the traditional Iranian manner, who changed her name to Yasmeen and moved to Tehran. Muslims had every right to protest the card, which involved the word "Mecca" in a tasteless pun, but ironically, the much publicized furor continued to *visually* reinforce the stereotype that the card presented: to be a Muslim one needed to become a middle-easterner.

Melting Pot

There are a number of factors that contribute to the predominance of middle-eastern—primarily Arabian and Pakistani—culture in the Muslim communities of the West. First and foremost is the fact that the majority of Muslims currently residing in western countries are Arab, Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, and Turkish immigrants. They are naturally proud of their own cultures and eager to preserve that heritage within their families and communities. As is the case with other immigrants from non-western lands, western society could often seem to them strange and frightening, which only heightens the need to cling to one's roots.

Islam is a powerful social force in the immigrants' homelands, where, over time, religion and culture have become fused. Thus each immigrant is likely to view his particular culture's understandings and applications of Islam as the truest expression of the faith and to be uncomfortable with Muslim perspectives that differ from these.

We might expect that if the majority of members of a local Islamic community or an Islamic organization come from a certain common culture, then its policies and regulations would reflect that cultural background. Yet this is not always the case. In order to avoid internal conflicts, a Muslim community or organization will often enforce the most conservative cultural option advocated, even if only a minority of its members support it, for, on the whole, Muslims prefer to err on the conservative side. The result is that the subculture of the local Muslim community becomes even more remote from the western culture that surrounds it.

Almost all Muslim communities in America and Europe now include home-grown converts, but their influence on the practices and viewpoints of their communities is usually negligible. In most mosques and Islamic centers, the number of converts is still very small. Also, the criticism converts make of the practices or views of Muslim immigrants are often dismissed as essentially western and, hence, un-Islamic.

Twenty years from now this may all change, since the majority of Muslims in the West will most probably no longer be immigrants or con-

be citizens from birth of western countries as well. As they assimilate both cultures, their expression of Islam will likely display strong influences from each. Ideally, they might harmonize their faith with their western cultural backgrounds, but that depends very much on their parents open-mindedness, adaptability, and knowledge of the religion. The more culturally rigid a parent's understanding of Islam is, the more difficulty his or her child will probably have in living as a Muslim in the West.

Imitating the Prophet

Another major element adding to the middle-eastern character of modern Islamic communities in the West is the current prevailing attitude among Muslims toward the Prophet's *Sunnah* (his life example). Muslims have always revered Muhammad and have considered his life to be the perfect exemplification of self-surrender to God. Many Muslims (Ibn Umar is one of the earliest and best known examples) so highly honored the Prophet's habits that they considered the imitation of his most quotidian deeds to be of great spiritual benefit. Thus they would strive to walk, sleep, part their hair, dress, laugh, and so on, exactly as he did, even though these acts are not directly related to ritual or legal concerns. This intensive type of imitation of Muhammad became quite common among Muslims, and it appears to have many zealous advocates today in the Muslim communities of the West. It is often inspired by more than only reverence for Prophet Muhammad.

The Muslim community in America is made up almost entirely of foreign immigrants and African-American converts. Each, in different ways, has felt humiliated and violated by western civilization. African-Americans were the victims of a brutal system of slavery in America, and after emancipation they were long denied even the most basic human rights. Muslim immigrants not only suffer from the dislocation and shock that most newcomers to the West experience, but also from intense feelings of humiliation that come from being surpassed and now dominated by a Judeo-Christian West that has relegated and reduced them to Third World status. This has helped to trigger a passionate desire, in both groups of Muslims in America, for an alternative culture. The wearing of distinctive dress, the possession of non-Jewish and non-Christian names, the frequent use of Arabic words, and the observance of customs that go against the American mainstream become a religious rejection and protest against the dominant western culture and a return to, or at least a reminder of, a more stable and glorious past when God, through his prophet Muhammad,

brought greatness first to the Arabs and then to other peoples who would later embrace Islam.

For many Muslims, the revival of Muhammad's daily habits has a profound spiritual benefit. But it also has psychological and social dimensions, for it instantly provides Muslims with a distinctive culture, history, and tradition. For immigrants, it is a culture with which they have obvious links, and for many converts, it is a culture into which they can enter rather easily by learning a surprisingly small number of expressions and mannerisms. A rational argument cannot be made against this strict and literal application of Muhammad's life example. The fact that so many Muslims gain strength, inner peace, group solidarity, and heightened spirituality through this approach argues for its legitimacy. It is one thing, however, to maintain the appropriateness of meticulously imitating the Prophet's lifestyle, down to his everyday habits, but quite another to insist that any other response to his *Sunnah* is wrong. Yet this is a common stance among Muslims.

A minority of Muslims—and I must confess that I am one of them—believes that we must remain cognizant of the historical context of Muhammad's actions and sayings and that if we are to apply his example correctly, we must be alert to the many differences that exist between his time and ours. These people prefer to search for general ethical and spiritual lessons through the study of the Prophet's biographies, rather than to copy his daily routines. The main assumption behind the stricter approach is that the best and most efficient way to derive moral and spiritual benefit from Muhammad's life example is by imitating him as closely as possible. The principle aim of the more liberal approach is to understand the intentions behind and effects of the Prophet's actions and to duplicate them. This less conservative application of the *Sunnah* seems self-serving and disingenuous to stricter Muslims. The more conservative approach seems illogical and overly restrictive to more liberal believers, who feel that we can easily produce the opposite of what Prophet Muhammad intended by ignoring the historical and societal background of his acts.

I recall an Islamic conference where a member of the audience asked a Muslim speaker, dressed in a business suit, if he was not selling out to the West by wearing European clothing instead of the *Sunnah* (style of clothing worn by Muhammad). The question apparently startled and embarrassed him, for he was unable to formulate a coherent reply. However, his wearing of modest western clothing while lecturing in America could very

dressed in the style of his culture. He did not suddenly appear before his contemporaries dressed in foreign or radically unfamiliar clothing. If he had, it probably would have created for them an unnecessary obstacle to considering his message.

I attended a lecture in a mosque in San Francisco in which a speaker stressed the extreme importance of following the *Sunnah* by always and only using your right hand when eating. During the discussion that followed, I asked him in jest what one should do when eating with a knife and a fork. To my surprise, not only did he not laugh, but a serious debate arose over my question. Some advocated holding the knife in the right hand, since it is gets more use than the fork; others felt that the fork belonged in the right hand, since it touched one's mouth more often; some said it did not matter; and still others believed it preferable to not use eating utensils at all, since it was not part of the Prophet's *Sunnah*.

In seventh-century Arabia, much like today, people used their left hand to clean themselves after relieving themselves. They also used water if available, otherwise, a few stones, some smooth bark, or even dry sand. Since the Arabs also ate with their hands from a common dish, it was considered proper etiquette to use only the right hand when dining and to only eat from the food on the platter directly in front of oneself. Many of Muhammad's followers were rough-and-tumble Bedouin, and he often instructed them in proper hygiene and manners.

In the West, people normally eat from their own plates with knives, forks, and spoons and serve themselves with special utensils, so that their hands do not come in contact with the food. This form of dining is both hygienic and polite—matters that greatly concerned the Prophet—but whether to hold the fork with the right or left hand in such a context is of no great consequence. The Prophet might very well have endorsed this eating style if it was well known to and practical for the Arabs. If a Muslim were to insist on eating with his hands while dining with non-Muslims in the West, the latter may be quite offended, especially since a more sanitary option is readily available.

Failing to Communicate

At the Islamic center one evening, I was greeted by an American Muslim who asked me how things were going.

"Very well, thank God. And how are you?" I responded.

"Al hamdu-lillah!" (All praise belongs to God!) he answered. "And how are you?" he asked me again.

He looked dissatisfied and a few seconds later repeated his question, and I repeated my answer. Another few seconds of conversation, and then the same question and answer. I realized he would not give up until he received a satisfactory reply. I held on a little longer but finally gave him the answer he wanted: "Al hamdu lillah," I sighed.

With an approving look on his face he nodded, "Al hamdu lillah."

It is not that I mind practicing well-known, traditional, Arabic formulas, which are popular among Muslims, but often I prefer, for emotional and even spiritual reasons, to speak in my own language, since this is more natural for me, especially when I am talking to fellow Americans. However, the use of a few specific Arabic expressions has become one of a number of external measures of a convert's progress in the faith.

A friend of mine, who for a while was very interested in Islam, once remarked to me that he discovered the key to becoming a fully accepted member of the Islamic community. He said: "Wear a middle-eastern cap, grow a long beard, and say 'al hamdu lillah' (all praise belongs to God), 'ma sha'a Allah' (as God wills), 'as salaamu alaikum' (peace be upon you), and 'jazaka Allah khairan' (may God reward you with blessings) in certain standard situations." Another friend and convert to Islam commented to me on one occasion that Muslims seem to think that God only understands Arabic.

Since Arabic is the the language of the Qur'an and Islamic rituals, and is in some sense the lingua franca of Islam, all Muslims should try as best they could to learn Arabic. But, this should not be confused with memorizing a few badly pronounced and poorly understood phrases to be parroted automatically in a finite number of well-rehearsed situations. In particular, if persons with whom one is trying to communicate do not know Arabic, then it is better not to use Arabic words they do not understand. The Prophet exhorted his followers to speak plainly to people and to avoid using confusing or misleading language.⁵¹

Superficialities

Two of the most conservative Muslim groups in the West are the Jamaat Tableegh (a movement that originated in India and Pakistan) and the Salafi movement (based in Saudi Arabia). A main plank of both groups

is a strict return to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. However, the practices that differentiate members of these organizations from other observant Muslims are very small in number and have mostly to do with matters of dress, grooming, dining habits, and separation of the sexes.⁵² Although most Muslims residing in America and Europe do not usually follow the practices promoted by these groups in their day-to-day living, they often admit that it is preferable to do so, and some feel guilty for neglecting them. Persons who do adopt the stricter practices of these organizations are considered by their fellow Muslims to be the most religious of the faithful, and they often rise to leadership positions in their local communities.

With the widespread deference paid to the most conservative viewpoint, and since conservative Muslims usually control the mosques and Islamic organizations in the West, it is not surprising that outsiders and newcomers to the Islamic community come to regard such practices as wearing middle-eastern dress, growing a beard, eating on the floor without utensils, separation of men and women, and taking an Arabic name as essential to Islam. It is also not surprising that many non-Muslims come to think of Islam as an exclusively middle-eastern or foreign religion. Although Muslims say Islam is for all times and places, a non-Muslim can easily get the impression that Muslims want all people to squeeze themselves into a singular moment and place in history.

Religion and Culture

Another element that encourages the western perception of Islam as an exclusively middle-eastern religion is the tendency among Muslims from Islamic societies to attribute various customs from their homelands to Islam. A Muslim graduate student once told me that adultery, when committed by a woman, is a much greater sin in Islam than when committed by a man. His culture may see it this way, but his statement blatantly contradicts explicit pronouncements in the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings. Recently, a young Saudi Arabian man insisted to me that Islam forbids

⁵² There are many behaviors of the Prophet which are well documented and quite practicable but which are either unknown to most Muslims or simply ignored. For example, Muhammad was well known to never have raised his voice or his hand to his wives, yet wife abuse is quite common among even religious Muslims. The Prophet was also known to be very punctual, while Muslims today are notoriously dilatory. The Prophet also fought hard against the entrenched pre-Islamic prejudice that sons were a source of great pride while daughters were, for the most part, a liability and a potential source of family dishonor; but it seems that his teachings on this matter never quite caught on. It is easy to produce many

women to drive cars. I told him that I knew this was a commonly held opinion in his country, but most Muslims around the world would disagree with him. And not long ago, an American convert blamed me for not dressing according to the Prophet's *Sunnah*. I replied to him that what was good for the goose was good for the gander, because the Moroccan outfit he was wearing was quite different from the style of dress worn by Hijazis (the people of western Arabia) in the lifetime of Muhammad. In fact, I have rarely seen Muslims dressed in seventh-century Hijazi attire.

The mixing of culture and religion is nothing new, unusual, or always undesirable. To some extent it is unavoidable, especially when believers attempt to construct a comprehensive code of proper conduct, for our mores are culturally oriented. One often hears American and European Muslims declare that Islam guaranteed women the rights to vote, to contract and dissolve their marriages, to hold positions in government, and to work centuries before western women won these privileges. Yet on visits to the Arabian Gulf, I discovered that many, if not most, scholars there insist on exactly the opposite. Clearly, the cultural orientations of the western and Gulf states' scholars influence their interpretations. I am not claiming that one set of scholars is wrong and the other right, or that one viewpoint is only culture and the other true Islam; I believe that religion and culture inform both standpoints.

A religious judgement can be appropriate in one cultural context and not in another. Many Saudi Arabian scholars maintain that, in accordance with Islam, women should cover their faces in public. Since there are no explicit pronouncements in either the Qur'an or authenticated traditions of the Prophet to this effect, they base their arguments on somewhat strained analogies and rationalizations about the social disruption that will occur from adopting a less strict dress code.³³ Saudi scholars know best their culture and are in the best position to predict the effects of loosening this standard on Saudi society. However, people in the West will have difficulty relating to many of the points Saudi scholars raise. For example, I doubt that most Westerners, Muslim or otherwise, would agree with the argument that men will become overexcited by the sight of womens' eyes and that this will inevitably lead to extreme jealousy and social unrest. On the other hand, I feel that western men and women will easily accept the counter-

³³ It is interesting that in general this type of reasoning is rejected by the Hanbali legal school, the school to which most Saudi scholars belong.

argument that veiling the face is harmful to women because it impairs their vision.

"How do we separate culture from religion?" I am often asked this question by young Muslims in America. I tell them that this is very hard to do. While it is important to watch out for the presence or penetration of cultural influences that run counter to the religion, we must expect that Muslim understanding and behavior will never be completely free of culture. The indigenous culture will inform Muslim religious attitudes, and Islam will influence their own cultural or subcultural development.

These days, when a Muslim living in the West questions a ruling of classical Islamic law or a well-established Muslim custom or perception, he or she will usually be confronted with the accusation: "You are trying to change the religion!" There is a pervasive fear among Muslims living in the West that the surrounding non-Muslim culture will permeate and contaminate their practice of Islam. Yet it is often precisely the same concern that has some of the faithful reexamining long established Muslim viewpoints and conventions: They fear the community may be harming itself by clinging unnecessarily to pre-Islamic ideas and practices that had penetrated the Muslim community long ago. Both are legitimate worries. The most effective way to counter either danger is not to discourage questioning and criticism, but, on the contrary, the Muslim community should encourage both. We are most prone to err when we refuse to be self-critical.

Among all systems of thought, religion is the most vulnerable to the idealization of customs and opinions. In religion, the difference between textual source and interpretation is frequently missed. Too often we equate our understanding of a matter with truth itself and dogma with revelation. There is a tremendous difference in authority between the two statements: "According to Islam, there is no god but the one God" and "According to Islam, women must be segregated from men." Yet many Muslims refuse to see any essential difference.

A Misogynous Religion

I was shopping with my family in Khobar, Saudi Arabia. It was Wednesday—the last day of the workweek. It was just before sunset. The air was thick with dust and humidity and it was still very hot outside, about as hot as the hottest Kansas summer day.

People of every race and color filled the sidewalks. Their mood was sober, determined. These were very serious shoppers, absorbed in the pursuit of bargains. They reminded me a little of gamblers at a sporting event.

I noticed that husbands and wives kept a certain distance from each other here; they did not hold hands nor even exchange affectionate glances in public. I saw pairs of men walking with their arms around each other and women holding hands, but I saw no tenderness between spouses.

I was also struck by the contrast between men's and women's attire. All of the women wore black abayas—elegant, long, black cloaks—that covered the entire body except the hands and head. Most of the ladies wore black scarves that covered their hair. Many Saudi women wore black veils that hid their faces and some of them also wore black gloves. A few American and European women risked leaving their heads uncovered. Most of the men wore western clothing—dress shirts and slacks—except the Saudis, who wore thobes—the finely tailored, sharp looking, long, white gowns that have become the national dress of Saudi men. The children all wore western styles: mostly jeans, T-shirts, sneakers, shorts, short skirts and dresses.

Saudis, Asians, Africans, Europeans, Americans, and American soldiers were moving quickly up and down the sidewalks, stepping in and out of small, disorganized shops, haggling, in Arabic and English, over all kinds of merchandise. Almost anything you might want could be bought in Khobar's shopping district—clothing, electrical appliances, sports equipment, jewelry, housing goods, hardware, watches, eyeglasses, toys, groceries, audio and video tapes, calculators, computers—except books, for book shops had a very limited inventory, even in Arabic.

Cars, half of them luxury, the other half old, beaten-up economy, crawled along the narrow streets beeping their horns to clear a path through oblivious, preoccupied pedestrians.

Suddenly, above the din, rose the call of the adhan from a loudspeaker from a nearby mosque. Then another adhan rang out from another loudspeaker from another mosque a few blocks down the street, then another adhan, and another, and another, from the many mosques scattered throughout the neighborhood. A chorus of adhans rose above the hustle and bustle of the shoppers.

The streets quieted, the shops emptied themselves of patrons, shop doors closed, and iron grills were pulled down and locked. The Muslim men, all of them, immediately made for the mosques, like persons heading for a designated shelter during an air-raid. Non-Muslim men and women, knowing well the drill, took positions outside on the sidewalks, leaning on walls and lampposts, sitting on curbs. Some smoked, some chatted, all waited.

To my surprise, for I had just arrived in the Middle East only a short time ago, the Muslim women did not go to the mosques; instead, they bided their time like the non-believers. While their male counterparts hastened to the prayer, the Muslim ladies stood outside the shops on the sidewalks or sat in their cars and waited for the maghrib prayer to end.

When we reached the mosque, my wife and three daughters entered the ladies' section—a very small, dark room, with a dark plexiglas window that looked out upon the area of the mosque where the men prayed. After I dropped my family off, I entered the men's section of the mosque through the main door. The men's area was huge, packed with row after row of male worshippers. It was brilliantly lit by hundreds of glimmering chandeliers; beautiful, luxurious, thick, red patterned oriental carpets covered the floor; marble pillars, forty feet in height, supported the expansive white ceiling. I took a position in the last row.

When the prayer was over, I met my wife and children outside by the entrance to the ladies' section; about twenty-five other women had prayed with them. My daughters looked confused and a little frightened. My youngest daughter had cried during the prayer: she thought I had gotten lost.

My wife and some of her friends sat chatting on the bus ride back to Dhahran. I was sitting across the aisle with my three daughters; the four of us huddled into two adjoining seats. I leaned over toward the ladies and asked them the question that had been bothering me since the maghrib prayer: Why did so few Muslim women perform the prayer, while virtually all the Muslim men did? In the States, I was always told that the ladies did not come to our mosque because there were hardly any women in our Lawrence, Kansas, community and that the few we did have had small children to care for. My wife had always told me that it was cultural. Now I wanted to get the perspective of these women, who came from several different Muslim countries.

One of my wife's friends mentioned that Muslim women are excused from prayer during certain times of the month. But, I answered, that would only account for less than one-fourth of the Muslim ladies present whereas at least ninety-five percent just skipped the Maghrib prayer.

Another of her friends told me that the mutawwa' (religious police) forced the men to go but not the women. When I asked her why that was so, she smiled shyly and said that the women might have an excuse and the mutawwa' have no way of checking it. I mentioned that most of the men seemed eager to get to the mosque for the prayer.

Another lady, sitting in the seat behind my wife, said that most Muslim women hardly ever go to the mosque, for, unlike their brothers, they are not encouraged to go when they are children. The lady sitting next to her added that the women are in fact encouraged not to go, for it is better for them to pray at home. She said that there is a *hadith* that discourages women from praying in the mosque.

I said that I knew of the *hadith*, but that I had not found any versions of it in the most respected sources. I said that even if it had been judged authentic at one time, I would still doubt that the Prophet discouraged his female companions from attending prayers at the mosque, for there are a large number of reports in the most respected *hadith* compilations that show that, throughout his prophethood and the reign of his first four political successors, his female companions attended the prayers in large numbers and were very active in the mosque. I said that it is hard for me to believe that these women, who risked their lives, their wealth, and the love of their families to follow Prophet Muhammad, would so casually ignore his advice to them to make their prayers at home.

A lady on the bus commented in a bitter and defiant tone: "I always felt that God must hate women, because He gave everything to men and almost nothing to us. He even gave His houses of worship to the men!"

In the past fourteen years, I have witnessed many persons who were genuinely interested in Islam and in search of faith turn away from this religion because of disillusionment over Muslim attitudes about women. I have observed this so often that I am inclined to say that this may indeed be the biggest barrier to the spread of Islam in the West.

Of all of the topics related to Islam, the position of women in the Muslim community is among the most written about and debated. On this subject there is a vast range of viewpoints. Among non-Muslim authors, opinions run from Islam "left woman forever inferior to man"⁵⁴ to "the Koran's pronouncements on the subject of all women can be recognized as truly revolutionary"⁵⁵ to "in their rights as citizen—education, suffrage, and vocation—the Koran opens the way to woman's full equality with man."⁵⁶ Islamic scholars seem to be in agreement that Muslim women have a status that is on a par with that of Muslim men, but almost all view the roles

and privileges of the two sexes as very different. Moreover, there are many differences of opinion about what these roles and privileges are. If nothing else, the great disparity of interpretations and points of view indicates that the position of women in the Islamic community has not been, nor need be, static. The history of Muslim women shows that their roles in the Islamic community have varied greatly over time and place, and there are indications that further—and perhaps dramatic—change is ahead.

A large number of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars concede that there is nothing fundamental to Islam that should prevent Muslim women from attaining the same or even greater rights than those possessed by modern-day women in other societies. If this is correct—and I believe it is—then why are so many searching western individuals discouraged by the treatment of women in the Muslim community?

It seems that I am heading toward a lengthy dissertation on women in Islamic law, but I am not. My first book includes such a discussion, and I have very little to add.⁵⁷ Also, I do not feel, for reasons stated in the previous paragraph, that Islamic law is a major deterrent to so many western seekers of faith. Rather, I believe that pervasive Muslim attitudes about women are dissuading them.

Gender Differences

When my family and I spent a year in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, my three daughters had to attend an Islamic school for girls. On the opening day of classes, the school's principal delivered a brief speech exhorting her students to respect their teachers and work very hard and then reminded them of the *hadith* that states that women are of a lower intelligence than men.⁵⁸ The only point my children got from the principal's lecture was that no matter how hard they worked, they could never compete intellectually with men.

On many occasions, I have heard Muslim speakers claim that women were on a lower moral and spiritual plane than men. There is nothing in the Qur'an to suggest this and very little in the *hadith* collections; it also seems to defy common knowledge and experience. As one Muslim foreign student said to me after we listened to a lecture on the greater sinfulness of women, "I just don't buy it! The women in our societies back home are much better than the men and everybody knows it!"

⁵⁴ Nabia Abbott, *Aishah the Beloved of Mohammed* (Al Saqi Books, 1985), 107.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth W. Fernea and Basima Qattan, eds., Berzigan, *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, p. xxiii of the introduction.

⁵⁶ Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 245.

⁵⁷ Lang, *Struggling to Surrender*, 151-92.

⁵⁸ For a discussion on this *hadith*, see *ibid.*, 153-55.

The irrational nature of females is taken for granted by most Muslim men. It is a common belief among Muslims that women especially lose control of their senses during their periods. Arguments that women should not be placed in leadership positions or that their testimony could not be relied on in a court of law often exploit this perception. I recall a well-attended public lecture entitled "Women in Islam" at the University of San Francisco, in which a Muslim speaker made such an argument. To support his contention that women became incoherent during menstruation, he cited a criminal trial in France, in which a judge dismissed a woman's testimony after he discovered that she was menstruating when she was supposed to have witnessed the crime. A non-Muslim in the seat next to mine commented to his friend: "The only thing that proves is that some Frenchmen are as sexist as Muslims!"

In the eyes of Westerners, the treatment of Muslim women by Muslim men and vice versa is often demeaning and offensive. Muslim men and women generally refuse to greet each other when they pass each other on the street, even though the Prophet always would bid *salaam* to passers-by of either sex.⁵⁹ Women are usually discouraged from going to the mosque, although in Muhammad's time they attended the mosque regularly. Some Muslim female friends of mine were told explicitly not to attend the prayers at the mosque, as if, as one of the women put it, "it is some kind of men's club."

Most non-Muslims and many western converts to Islam find the practice of female seclusion extremely degrading to both sexes. At a dinner at a Muslim friend's house, the wife of my host accidentally pushed open the door from inside the room where the women were secluded, just as I was passing by. She glared at me and then let out a loud, shrill scream and slammed shut the door. She must have acted this way for the benefit of her

⁵⁹ We should be careful here to note that what Westerners interpret to be insulting may not be viewed that way by Muslims. For example, Westerners feel that the scarf worn by a Muslim woman degrades her, but many Muslim women consider wearing it a source of dignity and pride. On the other hand, Muslims find that many western fashions debase women. Similarly, many middle-eastern Muslim women would be greatly insulted if a strange man saluted them on the street, as if he were somehow familiar with them. Women from some of the stricter Muslim countries view seclusion as a protection and an opportunity to relax away from men, while Westerners find it humiliating. I am not arguing that these practices are indeed demeaning, but rather that they may be to the larger culture in which Western Muslims live. Muslims should be aware of this when they consider imposing their customs on others, especially since they could be promoting a practice in the name of religion that offends others and is not truly necessary from the standpoint of Islam.

female guests, because I had passed her in public many times without her ever once panicking.⁶⁰

Young Muslim women growing up in America have complained to me that their brothers are given much more freedom than they are. One described the condition of post-pubescent Muslim girls as one of being placed under house arrest by their parents.

Every culture has had its share of false and demeaning beliefs about men and women, and, until quite recently, the Christian West was one of the worst in this regard. Dramatic change in western society has brought about a change in perceptions. The industrial revolution and the two world wars sent women from the home into the outside work force, where they proved that they could compete effectively with men. As western women obtained more and better opportunities for education, many stereotypes about the female intellect were shattered. In what were once considered strictly male academic domains, like business, mathematics, and medicine, western women are performing on a par with men. Women are no longer believed to be more emotional than men, but are now believed to display and deal with their emotions differently. Men resort to shouting

⁶⁰ Verse 33:53 in the Qur'an tells Muhammad's Companions, male and female, not to barge unannounced into the apartments of the Prophet's wives, as was the habit of some of them. Classical commentators on this verse report that a few embarrassing moments occasioned its revelation. The verse then tells the Prophet's Companions that when they need to speak to the Prophet's wives, they should remain outside of their apartments and address them while leaving the curtain at the entrance to their living quarters closed.

Some Muslims argue that this verse instituted the general practice of female seclusion during Muhammad's time. However, this argument has several weaknesses: First, it is not clear that the verse is enforcing the type of strict segregation that is practiced today, even with respect to Muhammad's wives. It may only be protecting Muhammad and his family from uncomfortable situations by assuring them of at least some degree of privacy. It should be kept in mind that, at this stage in Muhammad's mission, there were almost always swarms of people in the courtyard just outside his living quarters; second, the tone of the Qur'an does not suggest a general precept, for the same *surah* contains several regulations that apply specifically and exclusively to the Prophet and his wives; third, we learn from the hadith reports that female seclusion was not practiced by many of the Companions. If some did observe it, that only shows that it was practiced irregularly at best; and fourth, Imam Malik states in his *Muwatta*, written toward the end of the second Islamic century, that he sees no problem with men and women sitting together as long as the women are accompanied by a male relative, for example a father or uncle. He states that this is the long-established custom of Madinah, with the words "this is our *Sunnah*" (In Imam Malik's time, the word *Sunnah* stood for the well-established local practices. In later years, it would come to designate, almost exclusively, the Prophet's sayings and doings).

and acts of violence more often than women, which accounts for the fact that the majority of violent crimes and crimes of passion in America are committed by men.

The West's revision of attitudes about the sexes was brought about almost entirely—if not entirely—by changes that occurred within western culture; there was little foreign stimulus. Traditional viewpoints concerning the sexes are now being challenged and reexamined in the Muslim world, but here the importation and confrontation with western culture is playing a big role. Since modern technology and western concepts have penetrated Muslim societies only recently, we should expect that traditional male and female stereotypes will persist for some time. Also, strong anti-western sentiments in the Muslim world have made the Muslim masses extremely suspicious of western notions. The call for women's rights is often seen as a distinctly western phenomenon and an outside attempt to subvert Islamic culture. Throughout the Muslim world, there is currently a strong counter-action against the modern women's movement, and traditional attitudes about men and women are asserting themselves and should continue to prevail in Muslim society for the immediate future.

The majority of western converts to Islam are socially and politically liberal. This is not surprising, since few conservatives would contemplate something so radical as becoming a Muslim. Many converts—men as well as women—were feminists before conversion, and many continue to be so after becoming Muslims. Their entry into the Muslim community creates a volatile situation.

One of the chief charges western apostates make is that the Muslims are hateful of women. As long as the Islamic community continues to ignore this complaint or to whitewash it with idealized lectures on the superior position of Muslim women, the vast majority of Americans and Europeans will not be inclined to look at Islam favorably. I am not advocating compromising the religion to win converts, but rather the opinion that Muslims need to reconsider those attitudes and practices toward women that are essential to Islam and that may be inessential and barriers to sincere seekers of faith.

A Fifth Column

Approximately two months after I had converted to Islam, the Muslim students at the university where I was teaching began to hold lectures on Friday evenings in the mosque. The second lecture was given by Hisham, a very bright medical student who had been studying in America for almost ten years. I liked and respected Hisham very much. He was rather round

and jovial and had a very kind face. He was also a passionate student of Islam.

Hisham spoke that night about a Muslim's duties and responsibilities. He talked at length about the rituals and a believer's ethical obligations. His speech was very moving and had been running about an hour when he closed it with the following unexpected and stern remark.

"Finally, we must never forget—and this is extremely important—that as Muslims, we are obligated to desire, and when possible to participate in, the overthrow of any non-Islamic government—anywhere in the world—in order to replace it by an Islamic one."

"Hisham!" I interrupted. "Are you implying that Muslim American citizens are to commit themselves to the destruction of the U.S. government?—That they are to be a fifth column in America—a secret revolutionary group seeking to overthrow the government? Do you mean that when an American converts to Islam he must commit himself to political treason?!"

I thought that by presenting Hisham with a very extreme scenario, it would force him to soften or qualify his statement. He looked down at the floor as he pondered my question momentarily. Then he looked at me with an expression that reminded me of a doctor about to break the news to his patient that his tumor is malignant.

"Yes," he said, "Yes, that's true."

The belief that Islam promotes violence is so deeply ingrained in the western experience that it can be called a cultural axiom. Almost no one in the West would challenge the notion that Islam encourages Muslims to use force in order to spread the religion. For many centuries this was the perception—or perhaps one should say the fear—of a civilization that was on the defensive, both militarily and culturally.

Shortly after Prophet Muhammad died in 632 C.E., Arab armies surged forth from the Arabian peninsula in one of history's most rapid and startling conquests. By 637 C.E., Syria and Iraq had fallen to the new Muslim state, and then Egypt in 642 C.E. Muslim forces continued to push westward and eastward and, before the end of the first Islamic century, not only would the Islamic empire stretch from the Atlantic across North Africa through the former Persian empire and into India, but it would also include Spain and southern France. Thereafter, Muslims and Europeans would meet repeatedly in battle—with the Muslims having the better of it for several centuries.

Europe made a slow-but-sure comeback and eventually caught up to and surpassed Islamic civilization in science, technology, and military power. The expulsion of the Muslims from Spain in 1492 marked a decisive turning point and served as a notice of things to come. With the occupation of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798, the European colonialist era began. Ultimately, most of the Muslim world fell under European control. After the Second World War and a bitter and sustained struggle, Muslims around the world began to wrestle political independence from their colonizers, which led to the creation of a large number of independent Muslim states. The experience of colonization by the West has left deep wounds of humiliation and resentment in the hearts of many of today's Muslims.

Originally, the western conception of Islam as a religion urging armed aggression might have been mostly an emotional reaction to the threat of a Muslim takeover of Europe. At times, the possibility of such an occurrence must have seemed great (recall that Muslim armies threatened Vienna as late as the seventeenth century). However, during Europe's colonialist era, the portrayal of Islam as a violent faith and of Christianity as a gentle one became one of the Christian missionaries' main tactics in their effort to win converts among the Muslim populations of Africa and Asia. The incongruity of this claim must have been evident to even the most simple-minded Muslims, for it was like having someone hold you at gun point while he insists to you that he is opposed to all use of force.

Today, some western historians are questioning the notion that Islam encourages violence, because the history of Muslims has not been any more violent than that of most other cultures.⁶¹ While most Christians probably would not describe Christianity as a violent faith, it would indeed be very difficult to argue that the history of the Christian West has been more peaceful than that of the Muslim world. The number of atrocities committed by Christian governments and armies in the name of God are legion. The same could be said for the number of forced conversions to Christianity. There were times in history when Muslims were also guilty of religious persecution, but western historians have shown that, on the whole, the record of Muslims compares very favorably with that of Christians in this regard. In particular, state-sponsored persecution or forced conversion of non-Muslims was quite rare in the Islamic world.⁶²

⁶¹ See, for example, the introduction to Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) 3-4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 27-62.

Many western writers, past and present, have pointed to the division in classical Islamic Law of the world into *dar al harb* (the abode of war) and *dar al Islam* (the abode of Islam or peace) as evidence of the essentially aggressive nature of Islam. This legal-political formulation separates the world into two mutually exclusive territories: *dar al Islam*, the lands ruled by Muslims according to the Shari'ah (Islamic law), and *dar al harb*, the lands not under Muslim control which must be subjected, by conquest if necessary, to Islamic rule. According to this theory, a perpetual state of war exists between Muslim and non-Muslim territories. Many in academia and the western media claim that this demonstrates the warlike character of Islam.

This argument is not so easy to dismiss. Muslims can remind Westerners that past Church officials often defended aggressive and brutal government policies on religious grounds. But one can counter that those policies were not essentially Christian, since Church leaders would not endorse them today. Almost all Muslim religious leaders, however, still uphold the classical *dar al Islam/dar al harb* concept (hereafter abbreviated *DIH*), which makes it appear to be fundamental to Islam. This poses a very difficult personal dilemma for many converts, because it seems to them that to become a Muslim, they are required to become enemies of their own countries. We will now explore this issue more carefully.

The taking of another person's life has always been, for almost all people, an extremely grave and terrible act.⁶³ Therefore, people of virtually every time and place found it necessary—and still do—to find or create moral or religious arguments for their military actions.

As Muslim legal scholars began to elaborate a religious-political theory of warfare, they had to address two great facts: the great Muslim conquests of the past and the persistent threat of hostilities along the boundaries of the Islamic empire. I think it can be said that until perhaps quite recently, every great political power perceived itself to be in a conquer-or-be-conquered situation; that is, if your territory is not expanding, then it is in grave danger of shrinking. Muslim legal scholars pointed to the Prophet's military campaigns and the conquests of Umar as support for the *DIH* theory. They also detailed a comprehensive code of wartime ethics that forbade killing or harassing noncombatants, greatly restricted the destruction of enemy lands and property, prescribed humane treatment of captives, and prohibited the use of excessive force and forced conversion. One of the guiding

⁶³ The Qur'an compares an unjustifiable homicide to the murder of all mankind (5:32).

objectives of the Muslim jurists was to bring non-Muslim lands under the authority of the Shari'ah while minimizing destruction and the loss of life. They were also fully convinced that the Shari'ah offered a system of government far superior to any other and that it provided the conquered people a better and more just way of life, not to mention that it allowed them to be exposed to, and hence to consider, the truth of Islam. H. G. Wells, in *The Outline of History*, makes almost the same case:

And if the reader entertains any delusions about a fine civilization, either Roman or Persian, Hellenic or Egyptian, being submerged by this flood, the sooner he dismisses such ideas the better. Islam prevailed because it was the best social and political order the times could offer. It prevailed because everywhere it found politically apathetic peoples, robbed, oppressed, bullied, uneducated and unorganized, and it found selfish and unsound governments out of touch with any people at all. It was the broadest, freshest and cleanest political idea that had yet come into actual activity in the world, and it offered better terms than any other to the mass of mankind.⁶⁴

I am not about to defend the *dar al Islam/dar al harb* theory, nor, for that matter, to dispute it. My purpose is not to decide if this formulation by classical jurists was right—although I think that would be a useful exercise—but rather to argue against transcendentalizing it, something that is done by both Muslims and many critics of Islam. By this I mean that many non-Muslim scholars who decry Islam as inherently violent, and also many modern Muslim leaders and scholars, claim that this classical political-military theory is fundamental to the religion and that, from the standpoint of Islam, it must be valid for all times and places. Both groups, but with very different motives, claim that to doubt that this classical formula is appropriate for our time is equivalent to a denial of the validity of Islam. The two main questions that I believe both sides should reconsider are: Is this political-legal construct really essential to Islam? and Is it right for this day and age? Since for Muslims, an affirmative answer to the first question implies the same for the second, we will begin with the first question.

The Qur'an does not preach passivity. While it encourages the believer to be forgiving (2:109; 7:199-200; 42:37; 42:40; 45:14), it also

⁶⁴ H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History*, 613-14.

asserts that warfare is sometimes necessary. For example, the Qur'an maintains that a war fought in self-defense is justified:

To them against whom war is made wrongfully, permission [to fight] is given—and truly, God has indeed the power to defend them—: those who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, "Our Lord is God!" For if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, all monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques—in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled—would surely have been destroyed." (22:39-40)

The Qur'an also exhorts the believers to fight tyranny and oppression:

What ails you that you will not fight in the cause of the utterly helpless men, women and children who are crying, "O our Lord, lead us forth out of this land whose people are oppressors, and raise for us, out of Your grace, a protector, and raise for us, out of Your grace, One who will defend us." (4:175)

But it seems to me extremely difficult to justify, based on the Qur'an, a war that is waged for any reason other than self-defense or on behalf of the oppressed and persecuted.

As Muhammad and his Companions battled the pagans of Makkah for eight years, many verses were revealed during this period concerning warfare and relations with non-Muslims. The great majority of them are very explicit in allowing warfare only for the reasons just stated.

Fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you; *but do not commit aggression, for truly, God does not love aggressors*. And slay them wherever you catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for sedition is worse than killing . . . *But if they cease, God is Ever-forgiving, Most Merciful*. (2:191-192)

And fight them on until there is no more sedition and religion is for God alone; *but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression*. (2:193)

Their shall be no coercion in matters of faith. (2:256).

Others you will find that wish to gain your confidence as well as that of their people. Every time they are sent back to temptation, they succumb to it. *If they do not let you be, and do not offer you peace, and do not stay their hands, seize them and slay them whenever you come upon them: and it is against these that We have empowered you.* (4:91)

But if the enemy inclines toward peace, then you [too] incline towards peace, and trust in God: for He is the One that hears and knows. (8:61)

The above passages clearly allow fighting only in self-defense or in defense of victims of tyranny or oppression. It is significant that three of them occur in the second *surah*, which is believed by many Muslim scholars to be a recapitulation of the Qur'an's major themes. Verses 22:39-40 quoted above may best illustrate the Qur'an's attitude towards war: cautionary, circum-spect, and realistic. But one finds little support in the Qur'an for the use of aggression as a means to force non-Muslim states to accept Islamic rule.

The so-called Verse of the Sword (9:5) is often used to argue that Islam encourages military expansion. All exegetes agree on the occasion of its revelation: Seven years after the Muslim exodus to Madinah, the Prophet negotiated a truce with the pagan Quraysh, known as the Treaty of Hudaibiyah. A year later, the Quraysh violated the terms of the treaty and the following verse, which ordered the Muslims to attack the pagans, was revealed:

And so when the sacred months are over, slay those who ascribe divinity to other than God wherever you may come upon them, and take them captive, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they repent, and take to prayer, and render the purifying dues, let them go their way: behold, God is much forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (9:5)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ One of the crucial points to recall about 9:5 is that it actually prevented bloodshed. It was well known at that time that the pagan Quraysh had many informants in Madinah, and that these people would relay immediately any information they could obtain of the Prophet's political plans (Muhammad, in fact, turned this to his advantage several times). When the Quraysh learned of this very threatening declaration of war, they were so frightened that they immediately sent emissaries to the Prophet to negotiate their own peaceful surrender. This resulted in the bloodless conquest of Makkah, after which Muhammad declared a general amnesty for his former enemies. Apparently, one of the main reasons for the extremely bellicose tone of 9:5 was to intimidate the Quraysh into surrendering.

A quick glance at the context shows that this passage is directed against those who, through treachery, break their treaties with the believers. The preceding verse reads:

[But treaties] are not dissolved with those pagans with whom you have entered an alliance and who have not subsequently failed you in aught, nor aided any one against you. So fulfill your engagements with them to the end of their term: for God loves the righteous. (9:4)

And later,

As long as they remain true to you, stand true to them: for God loves the righteous. (9:7)

It would seem then that there is absolutely no conflict between 9:5 and the other verses just cited (2:191-93; 2:256; 4:91; 8:61), which prohibit military aggression; verse 9:5 deals with the issue of an opponent's treaty violations and is not a permission to engage in military expansion.⁶⁶

Yet many Muslim commentators feel that this verse does indeed permit military aggression against a government that refuses to surrender to Islamic rule. In order to reconcile the apparent conflict between this interpretation of the Verse of the Sword and the other verses that forbid aggression, a large-scale abrogation of verses is proposed. As one advocate for this position puts it (see the citation below): "114 verses spread among 54 *surahs* advocating peace were revoked by 9:5."

Muhammad 'Abd al Salam Faraj, who was executed on 15 April 1982 along with others accused of assassinating President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, writes in his *The Neglected Duty*:

Most commentators on the Qur'an have said something about a certain verse they call the Verse of the Sword (9:5). Here is the verse: "When the holy months are over, kill polytheists wherever you find them; capture them, besiege them, ambush them."

⁶⁶ Verses from the ninth *surah*, such as 9:123 and 9:29, are sometimes employed to justify conquest of non-aggressive states in order to subject them to Islamic rule. Not only does their use in this way also imply a blatant contradiction of the verses just cited, and thus recourse to hypothesizing a large-scale abrogation, but as Muhammad Ali exhaustively argues, it again ignores both historical and revelational contexts. Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 405-43.