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## Foreword

When, in 1996, I attended the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America in Columbus, Ohio, I ran into Dr. Jeffrey Lang's book *Struggling to Surrender* at the **amana** bookstand. At first I thought that it was just another "confession"—popular since St. Augustine and Abu Hamid al Ghazali—in which converts (or reconverts) enthusiastically explain their very special way to their very special religion.

How astonished I was when I realized that this book was of major general import, very well written (as one might not expect from a math teacher) and well researched. Yes, it was a vivid description of how Jeffrey Lang, almost torn apart in the process, felt irresistibly drawn to Islam. But the book also offered a solid, well reasoned platform for all other Americans who, like him, require considerable depth of rational inquiry before surrendering to Allah's call.

*Even Angels Ask*, Dr. Lang's second book—not without significance, written after a year's stay in Saudi Arabia—shows the very same virtues: Total honesty, common sense, a rigorous level of theological investigation, and a thrilling oscillation between gifted story telling and exposition of doctrine. Again, the author demonstrates that (if only as a mathematician) he can only believe in a religion that he finds compelling—rationally, intellectually and spiritually—and that the religion is Islam: A thinking man's faith.

When the author alleges that (Christian) religious dogmas in modern times are only deepening the crisis of faith and religion, he echoes a prediction made by Muhammad Asad (author of *Islam at the Crossroads* and a leading Muslim intellect of the 20th century) in 1934 when he foresaw that the doubts raised by the Nicene Creed, especially the notions of incarnation and trinity, would not only alienate thinking people from their churches but from the belief in God as such. Dr. Lang is also in line with an observation made by Karen Armstrong (author of *On God*) according to which Judaism suffered from closing itself off (by considering itself as the "Chosen People") while Christianity suffered from the opposite, its univer-

sality (by absorbing a multitude of traditions into itself). Islam, according to Dr. Lang, is positioned to avoid both pitfalls, and I agree with him.

In Saudi Arabia, the author came to realize that for him “there was no escape from being an American,” i.e., an “investigative Muslim,” whose way of inquiry into the basis of Islam was considered dangerous, even suspected of leading to “innovation” and even heresy. (To be sure, there is not a single instance in which the author’s approach leads to even the slightest deviation from the tenets of Islam.) The conservative attitude that Dr. Lang encountered overseas, had years earlier also affected Muhammad Asad (alias Leopold Weiss). From my association with him I am certain that he would have endorsed both of the author’s books wholeheartedly.

Given this background, the book’s title is not just an opening gambit but a program: According to the Qur’an, *surat al Baqarah ayah 30*, even the angels (who are never rebellious) were moved to question God’s wisdom of creating man (who is rebellious and mischievous). Thus, Muslims too must never stop asking pertinent questions about God, the world and themselves. Nevertheless, in view of the opposite orthodox view, it takes some courage for Dr. Lang to propose that every generation of Muslims is obliged to reinvestigate the foundations of its faith “since knowledge grows with time.” As a matter of fact, he holds that it would be a grave error, indeed, to rely blindly on past judgments and to “dogmatize opinion,” unless one is willing to accept “atrophy and decay.”

This, of course, the author certainly does not accept. On the contrary, he tackles head-on many rather delicate issues, like questions about predestination and theodicy. He offers no solutions to these problems but points out, like Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*) before him, that they cannot be solved because of man’s captivity in his mind’s categories of time and space, proper to him alone. Thus the author lifts unsolvable problems to a higher level of awareness. More cannot be asked.

Even more important is, however, his substantiated critique of Muslim shortcomings, both inside the United States and abroad. In particular, he denounces

- subculture trends within the American Muslim community;
- the lack of tolerance between Muslim schools of thought;
- the dominance of Middle Eastern and Arabic features of merely cultural, not religious significance;
- traditional Muslim attitudes toward women that violate Qur’anic norms often causing Muslim women to feel unwelcome in mosques;

- over-focusing on nonessential, marginal aspects of the Islamic way of life, instead of looking for the general ethical and spiritual lessons of the Prophet’s Sunnah; and

- the systematic distrust shown by “native” Muslims toward contributions by Western converts.

Jeffrey Lang wrote this book first and foremost for his children—leading them through the Qur’an in an eye-opening way and introducing them to the five pillars of Islamic worship in a manner which stresses spirituality rather than legalistic routine. In that, he has done a tremendous service once more to *all* Muslim parents in the United States who are often wondering, worrying and fretting whether in a permissive, consumer and drug-oriented society it is possible to transmit their faith to the next generation. In this respect, the author seems to be somewhat pessimistic. I, however, am inclined to see things in a more optimistic light—if only for one reason: There are two good books that just might move the scales in favor of Islam—*Struggling to Surrender* and *Even Angels Ask* by Jeffrey Lang.

Murad Hofmann  
Istanbul, April 1997

## Preface

Summer has become my favorite season, with its sunshine, warmth, long days and long walks in the late afternoon; but when I was twelve, it was definitely winter, with its blizzards and snowball fights, ice-football, sled riding and ice hockey! It was also the time of year in which I could steal a few hours alone with my father every once and a while, because the rest of the year he had to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week, at his one-man refrigeration and air-conditioning business. On certain Sundays we would take our German shepherd for a walk along the beach. My father always picked the most bitter days: stormy ones, bleak and gray and frigid, that remind me now of the prize-winning photographs and paintings he had made when he was younger. On one of these walks, we had almost reached the point where we would usually turn back, when I looked up at him and asked, "Dad, do you believe in heaven?"

I knew that I could depend on a straight answer with no punches pulled. My mom would carefully estimate the possible effects of her answers to such questions before she finally framed one, while my father's response would be the same irrespective of the questioner. But he would not answer thoughtlessly, nor for that matter dispassionately; he would personalize and internalize the issue.

He showed no reaction and kept on walking. We continued on into the cold, damp, pounding gales that were blowing back his thick, graying hair and stinging my face. I began to wonder if he had heard me, for it must have been a half mile ago when I had asked him, then he slowed to a stop and turned towards the shoreline. He was looking out past Long Island when he said, almost to himself, "I could believe in Hell easily enough, because there's plenty of that here on earth, but heaven"—he paused for a few seconds and then shook his head—"I can't conceive of it."

I was not entirely surprised, even at that young an age. My father was extremely sensitive and already I understood that life had robbed him of his goals and dreams. Every night after work he would try to numb his anger, but more often than not it would lead to violent eruptions of his frustrated

passions. Anguish is contagious, and his angry, dark and cynical view of life infected all of us—after all, we were only children and we were emotionally defenseless. When others of my generation felt cheated by the Kennedy assassinations or Vietnam or Watergate, I was hardly moved; they were only confirmations of what I had already learned.

Religious types will criticize my father for opening a door, but it had been unlocked for some time or I would not have asked the question. If anything my father's answer slowed my inevitable progress towards atheism, for he was not an irreligious man. The fact that he had doubts seemed entirely natural—how can any sane and rational mind not have them?—but he was nonetheless a believer and he must have had some reason to believe. Whatever it was, I never found out.

I continued to have problems with heaven, because every time I imagined that it was within God's power to create such a world, I had to wonder why He created this one. Why, in other words, did He not place us permanently in heaven from the start, with us free of the weaknesses for which He would punish us with earthly suffering? Why not simply make us into angels or something better? Of course, I heard all the talk of God's infinite sense of justice; but *I* did not choose my nature; *I* did not create temptation; *I* did not ask to be born; and *I* did not eat from the tree! Did it occur to no one that the punishment far exceeded the crime?! Even if only an allegory, it does tell us something of the divine nature, something that is extremely difficult to reconcile with "love" and "mercy."

How I came to despise these words! They made me sick with revulsion. Not only were we here for no good reason, but an infinitely innocent sacrifice and acceptance of a blatant contradiction were required before admitting us into paradise. The rest of us, not lucky enough to be born into the right creed or unable to suspend our reason, were destined to be consigned to eternal damnation. Would it not, for goodness sake, have been better to simply leave us as a bad idea never realized?

It was all the sugar-coating that made belief for me so unpalatable. I used to conceal my disregard behind an emotionless exterior as I listened to assurances of divine love; like when you halfheartedly humor someone you feel has lost his mind. When it was clear that I was hopeless, we would invariably revert to the real issue: The Divine Threat! "But what if you are wrong?" I was told; as if you should believe on a hunch, in order to hedge your bets in case this brutal, monstrous vision is a reality.

"Then if I am wrong, I will still be right: for refusing to surrender to the irrational demands of an infinite tyranny, for refusing to indulge an un-

quenchable narcissism that feeds on helpless suffering, and for refusing to accept responsibility and repent for a grand blunder which I did not commit. In the end, I will be an eternal victim of the greatest injustice and in this way, I will forever represent a higher sense of righteousness than the One that brought us into being. It may not ease my suffering in the everlasting torture chamber, but at least it will give it meaning."

### "So how in God's name did you become a Muslim?"

This book is not meant to be an explanation, but the reader should be able to piece together a rational one, perhaps something of an emotional, psychological and spiritual one as well. Frankly, I am not entirely sure exactly how it happened. So much of it seems to have been outside my control, manipulated according to certain key decisions I made along the way. For the curious, they should know that to become a Muslim requires simultaneous commitment to three interrelated principles: the first, *there is no god*; the second; *but God*; the third, *Muhammad is the messenger of God*. What I have written so far outlines how I came to the first of these.<sup>1</sup>

This book, however, has other motivations. It, like my first one, is written first and foremost to my children, with the hope that my struggle may somehow help them in their search for meaning. I want them to understand where I am coming from: that this subject was never for me an academic curiosity—an exercise in rational thought; that I have much more than an interest in it; that it is part of my past, present, and future, part of my seeking, suffering, and desire. The question I asked my father burned inside me, as does what I have learned from it, and I cannot but share that with them. Yet I would hate to see that their search end with mine. My greatest hope is that they begin where I leave off, because no human has a complete and final answer. To rely on someone's past insights is the gravest error; for our knowledge grows with time, and to dogmatize an opinion is to stop our progress towards the truth and to make way for atrophy and decay.

I take no credit for whatever is good in the pages that follow—I did not find it, but it finds me—and for that which is not, I rely on the forgiving kindness of one whose wisdom illuminates our deeds according to our intentions.

<sup>1</sup> I explain—or perhaps I should say interpret—my conversion to Islam in greater detail in my first book: Jeffrey Lang, *Struggling to Surrender* (Beltsville, MD: *amana publications*, 1994).

**REMARK:** I am concerned that the nature of this book may lead the non-Muslim reader to an erroneous and one-sided image of Muslims. Perhaps the western media's continued demonization of Muslims and their religion has caused me to be oversensitive about this matter.

The reader should keep in mind that this book is written primarily for Muslims by one who was once outside their community, who tried, especially in chapters three, five and six, to discuss those behaviors and conceptions of modern believers that he has had difficulty understanding, adjusting to, or accepting. It therefore contains a fair amount of criticism of Muslims. I also have shared with the reader many of the setbacks I have suffered in my own struggle to achieve surrender to God, and I fear that my example may be more discouraging than most.

Let me take this opportunity then to assert that in the past twenty years I have met a multitude of virtuous, warm, noble, magnanimous, deeply religious Muslims, from whom I have gained so much in knowledge and friendship. If I wrote a book about the inspiring examples of Muslims I have known, and someday I may, it would be of greater length than this one. Similarly, if I wrote a critique of other communities to which I belong—for example, the American, the white Anglo-Saxon, or the academic—I am sure it would include far more numerous and more severe criticisms than this book contains.

**REMARK:** It is a long established and cherished tradition among Muslims to follow the mention of a prophet's name by the benediction "may peace be upon him." In time, this practice was adopted in writing, although the most ancient extant manuscripts show that this custom was not adhered to rigidly by Muslim writers in the first two Islamic centuries. To avoid interrupting the flow of ideas, I have not followed the customary practice. I will simply take this occasion to remind the Muslim reader of this tradition.

**REMARK:** The transliterations of Arabic words in this book are my own approximations. Each introduction of a transliterated term in the text is followed by an English translation in parenthesis. Experts should be able to discern the corresponding Arabic terms and the transliterations should pose no disadvantage to non-experts.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### "Brothers, I Lost Him"

The most recollected image from William Somerset Maugham's novel *Of Human Bondage* has to be the Persian rug,<sup>2</sup> the one that Philip, the main character, repeatedly contemplates, following the advice of a friend, in an effort to discover the meaning of life. Upon reaching an especially low point in a young existence filled with terrible and senseless tragedies, lived and observed, he wanders the streets of London. And, once again, the oriental rug possesses his mind. As Philip contemplates its intricate designs, he is suddenly seized by a wondrous insight: the carpet does indeed contain the answer to the riddle that has vexed him. He finally sees that life, like the interwoven patterns of the rug, is always complex, sometimes beautiful and sometimes bewildering—but, in the end, utterly without meaning or purpose.

It was difficult for many critics to empathize with Philip's subsequent contentment at his discovery, and this, I believe, contributed to the book's mostly ambivalent initial reviews. However, those who reached the same conclusion as Philip after their own conservative religious upbringing could surely understand.

*Of Human Bondage* is a very western novel, part of a genre of literary works that explored the same difficult issues and often arrived at similar conclusions. Not that other cultures entirely bypassed conflicts of faith and reason, but western civilization seems to have been at the front the longest, battling such problems for well over two thousand years. While the declarations of victory for science and rationalism some twenty-five years ago were probably premature, it does appear that religion has had the worse of it and may lose even more of what little ground it still possesses. The ways

<sup>2</sup> William S. Maugham, *Of Human Bondage* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

we live our lives are shaped by the meanings we read into them, and the course of this battle has greatly informed our society's viewpoint. The question of the purpose of life is fundamental, and we can hardly know a person or a society until we understand how this question is treated.

It is common these days to hear psychologist discuss the modern crisis of meaning. C. G. Jung, one of the first to recognize and publicize it, remarked that most of his patients over the age of forty were suffering from it in one form or another.<sup>3</sup> Where the answers supplied by religion once satisfied a largely illiterate western Europe, in modern times religious dogmas are only deepening the crisis and alienating many from spiritual considerations. Some reject religion entirely, and many who preserve some ties to a faith may find it in conflict with their rational thinking. The result is that religion is pushed ever farther towards the back of the shelf and substitutes must be found for the answers and services that belief once provided. Jung, and many others after him, claimed that this trend will continue unless faith can be made to conform with current knowledge and experience. This is seldom seen as a positive trend, because it appears that human nature includes spirituality and that this can not be ignored in what seems to be our instinctive need to see our lives as meaningful. Victor Frankl frequently states that if one can provide man with a positive "why" to live, he or she will inevitably find a positive and productive "how" to live. But it cannot be just any "why"; it must be one that he or she finds compelling rationally, intellectually, and spiritually.<sup>4</sup>

Enter the Muslim. The last three decades have witnessed a sudden growth in the American Muslim community, spurred mostly by immigration and African American conversion since the civil rights era. The Muslim also finds himself being drawn into the same conflict. With full confidence he critiques, "I don't think that the two major religions in America make much sense."

He receives the reply, "I don't think that any religion makes much sense. For example, from your religion's viewpoint, what is the purpose of life? Why did God create us to suffer here on earth?"

The Muslim thinks back on what he was taught as a child. "I believe He created us to test us."

<sup>3</sup> C. G. Jung, *An Answer to Job*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (New York: Meridian Books, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. by I. Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

Of course he is then asked, "So your religion rejects the omniscience of God, for otherwise, what could He possibly learn from testing us that He does not already know?"

The Muslim feels cornered and searches his past for the universally accepted answers he was forced to memorize. "No, that is not quite it. Ah! Yes!! We are created to worship Him!"

With a sly smile his opponent inquires, "Then you must believe that God has needs and weaknesses, for why else would He demand our worship? When a human demands our devotion, we label him a tyrant or psychopath. Do you hold that God has character flaws?"

The Muslim's head is now spinning in ill-defined questions and doubts. He gropes for a clue from his childhood. It comes to him! "Adam sinned and his punishment was this earthly life!"

His adversary has the cool, calculated look of one about to say "Check-mate! Putting aside scientific difficulties, it appears that you believe that God is unjust; for why punish all of Adam's descendants for *Adam's* sin? Why not give each his own chance? Do you Muslims also believe in original sin?"

"No! No! Of course not!"

The game is over.

A Muslim living in America may have to confront these questions many times; for they are part of the intellectual basis of western civilization. Sometimes the result may be a loss, even an abandonment, of faith. Salmon Rushdie is, for many Muslims, the archetypal case. He confessed in an interview that he had been a very religious child. However, during his education in England, his faith was shaken severely by western attitudes toward religion and Islam in particular. His case is not unique. I have met many university professors in America with Muslim names who disavow any belief in Islam and quite a few who go out of their way to make a point of it.

Most often, however, the faith of a Muslim immigrant will remain intact. He may feel a bit rattled or he might retreat slightly from his belief that "Islam makes sense" to the position that "Islam makes more sense," but the fervor of his commitment, for the most part, will abide, because it is grounded in the life-long experience of being a Muslim. Born into an environment where Islam is practically universally accepted—where it is to one's disadvantage to be a non-Muslim—his faith has had the opportunity to take root and grow unimpeded. Through many years of steady participation and practice there came security, pride, meaning, community,

and perhaps, awe inspiring, spiritual encounters—maybe even perceived miracles—that together made the sweetness of faith more real and powerful than any challenge some logical sleight of hand could provide.

The convert's state is more precarious, and there has been a somewhat high rate of apostasy among them in recent years. Whether a convert will remain a Muslim for long usually depends on what originally brought him to the decision and whether that initial need continued to be met long enough to root him in the religion. Frequently, if the initial motivating factor fades and the convert finds that certain negative aspects of being a Muslim outweigh the perceived benefits, the option to leave the community is taken. *Like the immigrant, the convert's commitment to the religion will depend on his or her personal, emotional, and spiritual faith experiences; the same could be said of any religion in the West.* As the convert is fully part of the surrounding society and subjected to its intellectual challenges and criticisms from the very start of his entry into Islam, questions of faith and reason may have greater influence on his religious choices than they do for immigrant Muslims.

Yet the future of Islam in the West, and America in particular, is not primarily about immigrants and converts; it is about children, and the "success" of Islam in Europe and America will be measured by the religiosity of their descendants. The grandchildren of today's Muslims in the West will undoubtedly be western in their attitudes and thinking—their survival depends on it—but to what degree they will claim allegiance to Islam or the worldwide Muslim community is far from certain.

At the 1993 ISNA meeting in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Dr. Jamal Badawi recalled how, during a recent visit to Australia, he saw a good number of buildings that resembled the mosques that one sees in Muslim lands. However, they were being put to secular uses, such as office space, meeting halls, and the like. He was informed that there was once a large population of Afghani immigrants to Australia and that the now-converted mosques are the last remnants of a community that had been completely assimilated by the dominant culture. Dr. Badawi used this example to highlight the urgent need for Islamic schools in America.

Islamic schools may help Muslim children preserve their religious identity, but there looms the larger issues of what and how they are taught. Many an agnostic or atheist today attended church or synagogue schools as children. If a religious community is to produce leading scholars and scientists, its approach towards education will have to be compatible with modern critical analytical methods of study; this, I feel, is absolutely nec-

essary. It requires an environment of free inquiry and expression, where self-criticism and objectivity are encouraged and questioning and doubt tolerated. If the approach to general education conflicts with that of religious education, then the students will be left with a choice, perhaps a perpetual one, between alternative modes of thinking. In this way, religion for its children will be delimited—westernized, so to speak; it will become a compartment of thought to be entered into in limited situations and abandoned in others.

For Muslim children, this dilemma is particularly acute. If Islam can not be shown to be in harmony with rational thought, then faith for the western Muslim, like many adherents to other religions in the West, becomes solely a personal, experiential, and spiritual matter. It loses much of its persuasiveness. Reasoning can be communicated quite effectively, but not spiritual experiences. We cannot really share our mystical encounters; we can only interpret and approximate them. I am not saying that faith can exist on an exclusively rational level or that it cannot exist in disharmony with reason. What I am saying is that if a rationally compelling case is not made for Islam, one that Muslim young people in the West can relate to, then Islam will be seen by many of them as just another religion, a religious option among more or less equal options. In addition, in an environment where their religion is greatly feared, where of all the great world religions theirs is the most despised, where its rituals and practices are the most demanding, where its constraints seem to go against the larger society's trends and lifestyles—in such an environment, we should not at all be surprised if a significant fraction of children born to Muslim parents leave aside the faith they inherited.

A few years ago, I read an article in a Muslim American magazine that stated, according to a study it had conducted, that nine out of ten children born to Muslim parents in America either become atheists or claim allegiance to no particular religion by the time they reach college age. The article did not state what statistical methods were used to obtain this fraction, so I doubted its reliability. But even if only half as many of these children ultimately leave Islam, it will still be a crisis for Muslims in America. Yet perhaps such a statistic should not be such a shock. Why should American children born of Muslim parents be very different from those born of Buddhist or Hindu parents or of any religion unfamiliar to the West, especially in consideration of some of the above-mentioned special obstacles they face?

It is said that it takes about three generations before an immigrant family becomes fully assimilated into American society. I have not conducted a scientific study, but I have met through my teaching at the university a good number of third-generation Americans of Muslim descent, and so far, I have not found a single one who professes belief in Islam. When I ask these students if they are Muslims, the typical response I obtain is "My parents are," which is exactly the same answer I used to give when asked if I was a Christian. This may paint an excessively pessimistic picture, since the grandparents of these young people were part of an infinitesimally small Muslim minority group. Now that there are suddenly several million Muslims in America and Canada, we should expect that a large number of their grandchildren will identify themselves as such, although it remains to be seen to what extent this will reflect an active religious commitment. In my travels to various Islamic conferences in America, I always ask about the participation of young people in the local Muslim communities; I inevitably find that it is extremely small.

I first became interested in the relevance of Islam to American Muslim children a little over ten years ago when I lived in San Francisco. One night, after the evening ritual prayer, about a dozen of us sat in a circle on the floor of the *masjid* engaged in chitchatting. We had been led in the prayer that night by Muhammad, who, at forty, was the oldest among us and one of the most loved and respected members of our community. Someone asked him how his son was doing, as we had not seen him in some time. He answered that he had turned sixteen that day, and the little room was immediately filled with smiles, laughter, and congratulations, for our *oldest* boy had become a man. However, Muhammad was not sharing in our joy, and we suddenly all fell silent, because we saw large, round teardrops falling from Muhammad's downcast face. He looked up and his voice cracked as he exclaimed, "Brothers, I lost him—I lost my son!"

No explanation was necessary. We had seen or heard of too many similar cases in the neighboring communities. If his son, at sixteen, was still attached to the religion, he would have been an exception; it was only that our confidence and esteem for Muhammad was so great. All we could do was sit there, speechless, belittled by an irresistible and unfeeling power.

As I drove home from the *masjid* that night, I could not rid myself of the expression on Muhammad's face or the desperation in his plea. I thought about my first child, who was soon to be born, and how I would be feeling sixteen years from now. The more I thought about the whole matter, the less I found myself in agreement with Muhammad. I was not con-

vinced that he had lost his son, because I was not sure that he had really found him.

Muhammad was a truly devout Algerian Muslim who had done everything to raise a good Algerian Muslim son. But his son was not an Algerian; he was as American as apple pie, and whatever used to work back in Algeria had failed in America, as it did for so many others.

We used to remark how very quiet Muhammad's boy was at our community functions. A child's silence may be a sign of respect or assent, but it could also represent indifference to what is being said. I wondered if Muslim American children had as much difficulty relating to the perspectives and traditions of the mosque as I did.

Through the years, conversations with Muslim children and parents supported this suspicion and led me to conjecture that if the Americanness that I shared with Muslim young people was alienating many of us from the viewpoint of the mosque, then perhaps at some stage in their lives these children may come to relate to what other Americans and I discovered in Islam. As I discussed the matter with other converts, it emerged that our reflections intersected at many key points that approximate a certain characteristic path to Islam. Therefore, I would like to take you, the reader, along that path. I would like to invite you to a journey: *A Journey to Islam in America*.

You need to know what to pack and how we will get to our destination. To the first of these the answer is: as little as possible. You are requested to leave behind as much religious baggage as you can; ideally, you should pretend you are an atheist, with perhaps many objections to belief in God, yet open-minded enough not to dismiss a point of view without at least considering it. As for the second question, our guide will be the Qur'an, the principle source of guidance and spiritual compass of billions of Muslims, and, for many newcomers to Islam, their main introduction to the faith.

## CHAPTER 2

# Setting Out

### Approaches to the Qur'an

It would probably be better to delay this discussion for the appendices, so as not to lose many readers before even getting started, because I expect that the majority will be Muslims and that many of them find this subject upsetting. It has to do with the role of symbolism in revelation. The appendices may be more appropriate, because the main conclusions reached in this chapter will hardly be affected by these remarks, but my principle concern is with a smaller readership, which, while attempting to reconcile religion with modern thought, might be dissuaded by its own excessive literalism.

Muslims assert that the Qur'an is a revelation appropriate for all persons, times, and places, and it is not difficult to summon Qur'anic verses to support this claim. If they held to the opposite, there would not be much point in considering their scripture. In order to entertain this premise sincerely, we certainly should allow for, even anticipate, that the Qur'an would use allegory, parables, and other literary devices to reach a diverse audience. The language of the Qur'an would have to be that of the Prophet's milieu and reflect the intellectual, religious, social, and material customs of the seventh-century Arabs. But if the essential message is universal, then it must transcend the very language and culture that was the vehicle of revelation. Since a community's language grows with and out of its experiences, how then are realities outside that experience communicated? There appears to be only one avenue: through the employment of allegory, that is, the expression of truths through symbolic figures and actions or, as the famous Qur'an exegete Zamakhshari put it, "a parabolic illustration, by means of something which we know from our experience, of something that is beyond the reach of our perception."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al Andalus, 1980), 989-91.

For example, the Qur'an informs us that Paradise in the hereafter is such that "no person knows what delights of the eye are kept hidden from them as a reward for their deeds" (32:17). Yet it also provides very sensual images of Paradise that are particularly suited to the imagination of Muhammad's contemporaries. These descriptions recall the luxury and sensual delights of the most wealthy seventh-century Bedouin chieftains. If the reader happened to be a man from Alaska, he may be quite apathetic to these enticements. He may prefer warm sandy beaches to cool oases; sunshine to constant shade; scantily clad bathing beauties to houris, with the issue of whether or not they are virgins of no real consequence. This reader will probably take these references symbolically, reinforced by the Qur'an's frequent assignment of the word *mathal* (likeness, similitude, example) to its eschatological descriptions.

Similarly, though God is "sublimely exalted above anything that men may devise by way of definition" (6:100) and "there is nothing like unto Him" (42:11) and "nothing can be compared to Him" (112:4), the reader nonetheless needs to relate to God and His activity. Thus we find that the Qur'an provides many *comparative descriptions* of God. For instance, while human beings are sometimes merciful, compassionate, generous, wise and forgiving, God is The Merciful, The Compassionate, The Generous, The Wise, and The Forgiving. The Qur'an mentions God's "face," "hand," "throne" and other expressions

which at first sight have an almost anthropomorphic hue, for instance, God's "wrath" (*ghadab*) or "condemnation"; His "pleasure" at good deeds or "love" for His creatures; or His being "oblivious" of a sinner who was oblivious of Him; or "asking" a wrongdoer on Resurrection Day about his wrongdoing; and so forth.<sup>6</sup>

To disallow the possibility of symbolism in such expressions would seem to imply contradictions between some statements in the Qur'an. To do so is entirely unnecessary, especially in consideration of the following key assertion:

He it is Who has bestowed upon you from on high this divine writ, containing messages clear in and of themselves (*ayat muhkamat*)—and these are the foundation of

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

the divine writ—as well as others that are allegorical (*mutashabihat*). Now those whose hearts are given too swerving from the truth go after that part of it which has been expressed in allegory, seeking out confusion, and seeking its final meaning, but none save God knows its final meaning. (3:7)

Therefore the Qur'an itself insists on its use of symbolism, because to describe the realm of realities beyond human perception—what the Qur'an designates as *al ghayb* (the unseen or imperceptible)—would be impossible otherwise. This is why it would be a mistake to insist on assigning a literal interpretation to the Qur'an's descriptions of God's attributes, the Day of Judgment, Heaven and Hell, etc., because the *ayat mutashabihat* do not fully define and explicate these, but they relate to us, due to the limitations of human thought and language, something similar. This helps explain the well-known doctrine of *bila kayf* (without how) of al Ash'ari, the famous tenth-century theologian whose viewpoint on this matter became dominant in Muslim thought. It states that such verses reveal truths, but we should not insist on, or ask, how these truths are realized.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout Muslim history, the literalist trend in Qur'an exegesis was one among a number of approaches. Today, in America and Canada, it has emerged as the most prevalent. It appears that the majority of Muslim lecturers in America tend to take every narrative or description in the Qur'an as a statement of a scientific or historical fact. So, for example, the story of Adam is assumed to relate the historical and scientific origins of Homo Sapiens. This tendency is reinforced by the current widespread excitement over recent Qur'an and Science studies, where many, if not most, of the discoveries of modern science are believed to have been anticipated by the Qur'an.

It is true that some of the descriptions in the Qur'an of the "signs" (*ayat*) in nature of God's wisdom and beneficence bear a fascinating resemblance to certain modern discoveries, and it is also true that none of these signs can be proved to be in conflict with science. But part of the reason for this may argue against attempts by Muslims to subject the Qur'an to scientific scrutiny.<sup>8</sup> The Qur'an is very far from being a science textbook. Its lan-

<sup>7</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam, An Introduction* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 78-81.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Malik Bennabi, *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*, trans. by A.B. Kirkary (Plainfield, IN: American Trust Publications, 1983); Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, the*

guage is of the highest literary quality and open to many different shades of meaning. The descriptions of many of the Qur'an's signs that are believed today to predict recently established facts appear to be consistently and intentionally ambiguous, avoiding a degree of explicitness that would conflict with any reader's level of knowledge of whatever era. If the Qur'an contained a precise elaboration of these phenomena (the big bang theory, the splitting of the atom, the expansion of the universe, to name a few), these would have been known to ancient Muslim scientists. A truly wondrous feature of the Qur'an is that these signs lose nothing of their power, beauty, and mystery from one generation to the next; each generation has found them compatible with the current state of knowledge. To be inspired with awe and wonder by the Qur'anic signs is one thing; to attempt to deduce or impose upon them scientific theories is another and, moreover, is contrary to the Qur'an's style.

The relationship between the Qur'an and history is very much the same. Anyone familiar with the Bible will notice that there are many narratives in the Qur'an that have Biblical parallels. In the past, Orientalists would accuse Muhammad, whom they assumed to be the Qur'an's author, of plagiarizing or borrowing material from Jewish and Christian sources. This opinion has become increasingly unpopular among western scholars of Islam. For one thing, where Biblical parallels do exist, the Qur'anic accounts almost always involve many key differences in detail and meaning. Equally important is the fact that the Qur'an itself assumes that its initial hearers were fairly well acquainted with these tales. It is therefore very probable that through centuries of contact, Jews, Christians, and pagans of the Arabian peninsula adopted, with modifications, each other's oral traditions. It also would not be at all surprising that traditions shared by Jews and Arabs of the Middle East would go back to a common source, since

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*Qur'an and Science* (Paris: Seghers Publishers, 1977); and Keith L. Moore, *The Developing Human* (appendix to 3d edition) (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co., 1982). As I remarked in *Struggling to Surrender*, this topic is interesting and sometimes fascinating, but it too often requires complicated and unobvious extrapolations in interpreting certain words and phrases.

This trend exists in other religious communities as well. A speaker informed his audience that the New Testament contains the big bang theory of creation, for in John it states that in the beginning was the "word." Since a word is a single entity in the universe of language that when voiced produces a vibration of sound, we obtain by some isomorphism to the physical universe the theory of a single original point mass of infinite density that explodes!

they shared a common ancestry. Hence, the conjecture that the Qur'an borrows from the Bible is inappropriate.

In addition to biblical parallels, the Qur'an contains a number of stories that were apparently known only to the Arabian peninsula and at least one of mysterious origins.<sup>9</sup> A striking difference between all of the Qur'anic accounts and the biblical narratives is that while the latter are very often presented in a historical setting, the former defy all attempts to do so, unless outside sources are consulted. In other words, relying exclusively on the Qur'an, it is nearly impossible to place these stories in history. The episodes are told in such a way that the meaning behind the story is emphasized while extraneous details are omitted. Thus, western readers who know nothing of the Arabian tribes of 'Ad and Thamud readily understand the moral behind their tales. This omission of historical detail adds to the transcendent and universal appeal of the narratives, for it helps the reader focus on the timeless meaning of the stories.

The Qur'anic stories are so utterly devoid of historical reference points that it is not always clear whether a given account is meant to be taken as history, a parable, or an allegory. Consider the following two verses from the story of Adam:

It is We Who created you, then We gave you shape, then We bade the angels, "Bow down to Adam!" and they bowed down; not so Iblis; he refused to be of those who bow down. (7:11)

And when your Lord drew forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying) "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, truly we testify." (That was) lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: "Lo! of this we were unaware." (7:172)

Note the transition in 7:11 from "you" (plural in Arabic) in the first two clauses to "Adam" in the third, as if mankind is being identified with Adam. These verses seem to demand symbolic interpretations, otherwise from the first we would have to conclude that *we* were created, then *we* were given shape, then the command was given concerning the first man! As for 7:172, I would not even know how to begin to interpret this verse

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<sup>9</sup> See the discussion on page 14 concerning Dhul Qarnain.

concretely, and it should come as no surprise that many ancient commentators also understood it symbolically.

The Qur'an's eighteenth *surah*, *al Kahf*, relates a number of beautiful stories in an almost surrealistic style. For example, verse 86, from the tale of Dhul Qarnain reads,

Until, when he reached the setting of the sun, and he found it setting in a muddy spring, and found a people near it. We said: "O Dhul Qarnain! Either punish them or treat them with kindness." (18:86)

This verse has puzzled Muslim commentators, many of whom searched history for a great prophet conqueror that might compare to Dhul Qarnain, who reached the lands where the sun rises and sets. The most popular choice was Alexander the Great, which is patently false since he is well known to have been a pagan. Since the sun does not literally set in a muddy spring with people nearby, a less-than-literal interpretation is forced upon us.

Rather than belabor the point, let me summarize my position. On the basis of the style and character of the Qur'an, I believe that the most general and most cautious statement one can make is: The Qur'an relates many stories, versions with which the Arabs were apparently somewhat familiar, not for the sake of relating history or satisfying human curiosity, but to "draw a moral, illustrate a point, sharpen the focus of attention, and to reinforce the basic message."<sup>10</sup> I would advise against attempts to force or decide the historicity of each of these stories. First of all, because the Qur'an avoids historical landmarks and since certain passages in some narratives clearly can not be taken literally, such an insistence seems unwarranted. Furthermore, imposing such limitations on the Qur'an may lead, unnecessarily, to rational conflicts and obstructions that distract the reader from the moral of a given tale. The Qur'an itself harshly criticizes this inclination in *Surat al Kahf*:

Some say they were three, the dog being the fourth among them. Others say they were five, the dog being the sixth—doubtfully guessing at the unknown. Yet others say seven, the dog being the eighth. Say, "My Lord knows best their

<sup>10</sup> G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, *Approaches to the Qur'an* (New York: Routledge, 1993), from the article by Ismael K. Poonawala, "Darwaza's principles of modern exegesis," p. 231.

number, and none knows them, but a few. Therefore, do not enter into controversies concerning them, except on a matter that is clear." (18:22)

Moreover, it would be humanly impossible to definitively decide the historic or symbolic character of every tale; no one has the requisite level of knowledge of history and Arab oral tradition—not to mention insight into the intent and wisdom of the author—to make such a claim. Personal ignorance should be admitted, but it should not be allowed to place limits and bounds on the ways and means of revelation.

As we set out on our journey, we will be approaching the Qur'an from the standpoint of meaning; seeking to make sense of and find purpose in the existence of God, man, and life. We are now ready to embark. We have made our preparations and have broken camp. With the Qur'an before us, we enter the first page.

## An Answer to a Prayer

In the Name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate

1. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds;
2. The Merciful, The Compassionate;
3. Master of the day of Requit;al;
4. You do we serve and You do we beseech for help;
5. Guide us on the straight path;
6. The path of those whom you have favored;
7. Not those upon whom is wrath and not those who are lost. (1:1-7)

Volumes upon volumes have been written on the Qur'an's opening *surah*, even though it consists of only seven short verses, but we, my fellow travelers, have only time enough to pause for a few very brief observations.

The first verse indicates a hymn of praise, to God, "the Lord of the worlds." The divine names, "The Merciful, The Compassionate," appearing in the second, head every *surah* but one (the ninth) and are among the most frequently mentioned attributes of God, both in the Qur'an and by Muslims in their everyday speech. The mood abruptly changes in verse two as it reawakens deep-seated anxieties and conflicts. No sooner are God's mercy and compassion emphasized than we are threatened with the "Day of Requit." Would it not have been more tactful to postpone such considerations, to wait until the reader is a little more comfortable with and confident in the Qur'an? Assertions about God's mercy, compassion, gentle-

ness, or love never drove us from religion, but warnings of a Day of Judgment, of Hell, of eternal damnation that we found impossible to harmonize with mercy and compassion, did.

The fourth verse goes even deeper into the quagmire as it reminds us that service is rendered and pleas for help are directed to the very creator of the predicament from which we seek salvation. Far from allowing us to warm up to its message, the scripture wastes no time recalling our complaints against religion. We will discover that this is a persistent tactic of the Qur'an; that it repeatedly agitates the skeptic by confronting him with his personal objections. We will soon see that this Qur'an is no soft sell nor hard sell; that in reality it is no sell at all; that it is no less than a challenge, a dare, to fight and argue against this book.

We can relate to the last three verses all too readily. Life is a chaotic puzzle, a random and confusing maze of paths and choices that lead no where but to broken dreams, empty accomplishments, unfulfilled expectations, one mirage after another. Is there a right path, or are all in the end equally meaningless? Note the transition from personal to impersonal in verses six and seven, as if to say that to obtain the "straight path" is a divine favor conferred on those who seek and heed divine guidance and that those who do not follow divine guidance are exposed to all of life's impersonal, unfeeling wrath, and utter loss and delusion. This wrath and loss we know well, for we have absorbed life's anger and aimlessness and made it our own; it is our argument for the nonexistence of a personal God and the foundation of our philosophy.

We moved through the seven verses quickly. There was a subtle shift in mood from the first four that glorified God to the last three that asked for guidance. More than likely our first reading of them was so casual that we did not observe the change. It was not until we had finished the opening *surah* that we realized that we had just involuntarily and semiconsciously made a supplication. We were almost tricked into it before we had a chance to resist. The beginning of the next *surah* will inform us that whether we consciously intended it or not, our prayer has reached its destination and that it is about to receive an answer.

## That Is the Book

In the name of God, the Merciful, The Compassionate

1. *Alif lam mim*

2. That is the book, wherein no doubt, is guidance to those who have fear,

3. Who believe in the unseen, and are steadfast in prayer and spend out of what We have given them,
4. And who believe in that which is revealed to you and that which was revealed before you, and are certain of the hereafter.
5. These are on guidance from their Lord, and these, they are the successful. (2:1-5)<sup>11</sup>

*Alif lam mim* is a transliteration of the three Arabic letters that open this *surah*. Twenty-nine *surahs* begin with such letter combinations of the Arabic alphabet. They continue to be a mystery to Qur'an commentators, and opinions differ as to their meaning. Most believe they are abbreviations of words or mystic symbols, but we will leave such speculation aside.

The second verse declares to us that *that* book, the Qur'an—that we have before us—is without doubt the answer to the prayer we had just recited. The tenor of the Qur'an from here on is different from that of the opening *surah*. In the first *surah*, it was the reader humbly petitioning God for guidance, while the perspective of the remainder of the Qur'an, as this verse insists, will be God, in all His supreme power and grandeur, proclaiming to the reader the guidance that he sought, whether consciously or unconsciously, knowingly or unknowingly. Also observe that doubt and fear are accentuated in this verse. We should not exclude ourselves so hastily from these attributes, even though we do not fit the full description continued in verses three through five. We do have doubts, not only about God's existence but also about our denial of it. If we were absolutely certain of our atheism, we would not be reading this scripture. As much as we hate to admit it, we are not quite sure of ourselves; there exists in us at least a glimmer of doubt—and of fear. The word *muttaqin*, translated as "those who have fear," comes from the Arabic root which means to protect, to guard, to defend, to be cautious. It implies an acute alertness to one's potential weaknesses, a person on his toes, a self-critical awareness. We may not be believers, but we are definitely guarded, defensive and cautious when it comes to religion, otherwise we would

<sup>11</sup> The interpretations of verses from the Qur'an in this book are for the most part my own, although I have relied heavily on a number of well-known interpreters to guide me: Asad, *Message of the Qur'an*; Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, Text, English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore, Pakistan: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1973); Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an, New Edition with Revised Translation, Commentary* (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 1989); Marmaduke W. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (New York: Muslim World League, 1977).

not be atheists; we would have simply accepted what we inherited from our parents. These are the same qualities that brought us to this journey, because we suspect that we might be wrong, that there is at least a chance that there is a God and if there is, then we are ignoring what would have to be the most important fact in our being.

Verse two also begins a description of the Qur'an's potential audience. Like many a book of knowledge, it describes the prerequisites and predisposition necessary to fully benefit from its contents. The most sincere in their belief in God (2:2-5) will profit the most. They believe in realities beyond their perceptions and are devout and are kind to their fellow man. They have faith in what is currently being revealed to them, which are the same essential truths of all ages.

Verse six refers to the rejecters, who refuse to even consider the Qur'an. The Qur'an in turn promptly dismisses them in the next verse. Verse eight begins a relatively lengthy discussion (2:8-20) of all those in between, who waver between belief and disbelief, often distracted and blinded by worldly pursuits. From the standpoint of the Qur'an, we may be towards the boundary of this category. Verses twenty through twenty-nine outline some of the Qur'an's major themes: Man's need to serve the one God, the prophethood of Muhammad, the hereafter and final judgment, the Qur'an's use of symbolism (2:26), the resurrection of man, and God's ultimate sovereignty.

Verse thirty begins the story of man. We will proceed slowly here, line by line, since this has a strong bearing on our questions. The ancient Qur'anic commentators would endorse such an approach, for they used to speak of the *ijaz* of the scripture—its inimitable eloquence that combines the most beautiful and yet most economical expression. They would advise us not to rush hastily, but to allow each verse, each word, each sound, to penetrate our hearts and minds in order to reap its greatest possible benefit. Otherwise, we may deprive ourselves of essential keys to unlocking truths buried deep within us.

Behold, your Lord said to the angels: "I am going to place a vicegerent on earth." They said: "Will you place therein one who will spread corruption and shed blood? While we celebrate your praises and glorify your holiness?" He said: "Truly, I know what you do not know." (2:30)

The opening scene is heaven as God informs the angels that He is about to place man on earth. Adam, the first man, has not yet appeared. From the

verses that follow, it is clear that at this point in the story Adam is free of any wrongdoing. Nevertheless, God plans to place him (and his descendants [6:165; 27:62; 35:39]) on earth in the role of vicegerent or vicar (*khalifah*). There is no insinuation here that earthly life is to serve as a punishment. The word *khalifah* means "a vicar," "a delegate," "a representative," "a person authorized to act for others." Therefore, it appears that man is meant to represent and act on behalf of God in some sense.

The angels' reply is both fascinating and disturbing. In essence it asks, "Why create and place on earth one who has it within his nature to corrupt and commit terrible crimes? Why create this being, who will be the cause and recipient of great suffering?" It is obvious that the angels are referring here to the very nature of mankind, since Adam, in the Qur'an, turns out to be one of God's elect and not guilty of any major crime. The question is made all the more significant when we consider who and from where it comes.

When we think of angels, we imagine peaceful, pure, and holy creatures in perfect and joyous submission to God. They represent the model to which we should aspire. In our daily speech, we reserve the word "angel" for the noblest of our species. Mother Theresa is often called an "angel of mercy" by the press. Of a person who does something very kind we say, "He is such an angel!" When my wife and I look in on our daughters at night, sleeping so beautifully and serenely, we remark to each other, "Aren't they angels?" Our image of an angel is of the perfect human being. This is what gives the angels' question such force, for it asks: "Why create this patently corrupt and flawed being when it is within Your power to create *us*?" Thus they say: "While we celebrate your praises and glorify your holiness?" Their question is given further amplification by the fact that it originates in heaven, for what possible purpose could be served by placing man in an environment where he could exercise freely his worst criminal inclinations? All of these considerations culminate in the obvious objection: Why not place man with a suitable nature in heaven from the start? We are not even a single verse into the story of man and we have already confronted our (the atheists') main complaint. And, it is put in the mouths of the angels!

The verse ends not with an explanation, but a reminder of God's superior knowledge, and hence, the implication that man's earthly life is part of a grand design. Many western scholars have remarked that the statement, "I know what you do not know," merely dismisses the angel's question. However, as the sequence of passages will show, this is not the case at all.

Our initial encounter with the Qur'an has been anything but pleasant; it has been distressful and irritating. Either the author is completely unaware of possible philosophical problems and objections, or else he is deliberately provoking us with them! We are a mere thirty-seven verses into the Qur'an and our anxiety and resentment has been aroused to a fever pitch. We ask, "Why indeed subject mankind to earthly suffering? Why not remove us to heaven or place us there from the first? Why must we struggle to survive? Why create us so vulnerable and self-destructive? Why must we suffer broken hearts and broken dreams, lost loves and lost youth, crises and catastrophes? Why must we experience pains of birth and pains of death? Why?" we beg in our frustration. "Why?" we plead in all our sorrow and emptiness. "Why?" we insist in our anguish. "Why?!" we scream out to the heavens. "Why?!" we plead with the angels. "If You are there and You hear us, tell us, why create man?!!!"

### And His Lord Turned toward Him

We move now to verse thirty-one, where we find that the Qur'an continues to explore the angels' question.

And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said, "Tell me their names if you are right." (2:31)

Clearly, the angels' question is being addressed in this verse. Adam's capacities for learning and acquiring knowledge, his ability to be taught, are the focus of this initial response. The next verse demonstrates the angels' inferiority in this respect. Special emphasis is placed on man's ability to name, to represent by verbal symbols, "all things" that enter his conscious mind: all his thoughts, fears, and hopes, in short, all that he can perceive or conceive. This allows man to communicate his experience and knowledge on a relatively high level, as compared to the other creatures about him, and gives all human learning a preeminent cumulative quality. In several places in the Qur'an, this gift to mankind is singled out as one of the greatest bounties bestowed on him by God.<sup>12</sup>

They said: Glory to you: we have no knowledge except what You taught us, in truth it is you who are the Knowing, the Wise. (2:32)

<sup>12</sup> See p. 26.

In this verse, the angels plead their inability to perform such a task, for, as they plainly state, it would demand a knowledge and wisdom beyond their capacity. They maintain that its performance would, of course, be easy for God, since His knowledge and wisdom is supreme, but that the same could not be expected of them. In the next passage, we discover that Adam possesses the level of intelligence necessary to accomplish the task and hence, though his knowledge and wisdom are less than God's, it is yet greater than the angels.

He said: "O Adam! Tell them their names." When he had told them their names, God said: "Did I not tell you that I know what is unseen in the heavens and the earth and I know what you reveal and conceal?" (2:33)

Here we have an emphatic statement that man's greater intellect figures into an answer to the angels' question. We are informed that God takes all into account, in particular, all aspects of the human personality: man's potential for evil, which the angels' question "reveals," and his complementary and related capacity for moral and intellectual growth, which their question "conceals." To drive home this point, the next verse has the angels demonstrate their inferiority to Adam and shows that man's more complex personality makes him a potentially superior being.

And behold, We said to the angels, "Bow down to Adam" and they bowed down. Not so Iblis: he refused and was proud: he was of the rejecters. (2:34)

We also find in this verse the birth of sin and temptation. The Qur'an later informs us that Iblis (Satan) is of the *jinn* (18:50), a being created of a smokeless fire (55:15) and who is insulted at the suggestion that he should humble himself before a creature made of "putrid clay" (7:12; 17:61; 38:76). Satan is portrayed as possessing a fiery, consuming, and destructive nature. He allows his passions to explode out of control and initiates a pernicious rampage. We are often told that money is at the root of all evil, but here the lesson appears to be that pride and self-centeredness is at its core. Indeed, many terrible wrongs are committed for no apparent material motive.

And we said: "O Adam! Dwell you and your spouse in the garden and eat freely there of what you wish, but come not near this tree for you will be among the wrongdoers." (2:35)

Thus the famous and fateful command. Yet, the tone of it seems curiously restrained. There is no suggestion that the tree is in any way special; it almost seems as if it were picked at random. Satan will later tempt Adam with the promise of eternal life and “a kingdom that never decays” (20:121), but this turns out to be a complete fabrication on his part. There is not the slightest hint that God is somehow threatened at the prospect of Adam and his spouse violating the command; instead, He voices concern for *them*, because then “*they* will be among the wrongdoers.”

This is probably an appropriate place to reflect on what we have learned so far. We saw how God originally intended for man to have an earthly life. We then observed a period of preparation during which man is “taught” to use his intellectual gifts. Now, Adam and his spouse are presented a choice, of apparently no great consequence, except for the fact that it is made to be a moral choice. It thus seems that man has gradually become—or is about to become—a moral being.

But Satan caused them to slip and expelled them from the state in which they were. And we said: “Go you all down, some of you being the enemies of others, and on earth will be your dwelling place and provision for a time. (2:36)

Once again the Qur’an seems to have a penchant for understating things. The Arabic verb *azalla* means to cause someone to unintentionally slip or lose his footing. But how can one of the most terrible wrongs ever committed be described as a momentary “slip”? Yet perhaps we are letting our own religious backgrounds, even though we rejected them, distort our reading. Perhaps the Qur’an considers this sin as nothing more than a temporary slip. After all, it *is* only a tree! Its only significance may be that it signals a new stage in man’s development, that it causes man to depart from a previous state.

The words “some of you being the enemies of others” apparently refer to all mankind and echo the angels’ remark concerning man’s earthly strife.

Under normal circumstances, we would know now what to expect. We have been terrified by it ever since we were children. It shook us from our sleep and required our mothers to calm our fears and, unlike other nightmares, it never went away when we awoke, because it was confirmed by everyone we trusted. We know that there is about to be unleashed on mankind a rage, a violence, a terror, the like of which has never been known either before or since. Like a huge, thundering, black, and terrifying storm cloud, looming on the horizon and heading straight for us, mankind

is about to be engulfed by an awesome fury. And when the smoke clears, man will find himself sentenced, TO LIFE, on earth, where he and all his descendants will suffer and struggle to survive by their sweat and toil. There they will experience illness, agony, and death. There they will suffer endless pain and torment and, in all probability, more of the same and worse in the life to come.

And the WOMAN!!!! To her belong the greater punishment and humiliation, for it was she who duped Adam with her beauty and her charms. It was she who allied herself with Satan—an alliance for which Adam was, of course, no match. It was she who corrupted his innocence and exposed his weaknesses. So it is she who will ache and bleed monthly. It is she who will scream out in her labor pains. It is she who will bare the brunt of greater humiliation and drudgery, because the man will be made to rule over her, in spite of the fact that he is obviously her intellectual inferior, since he was unequal to her cleverness and guile.

So we wince and shudder as we turn to the terror we have always known. We cringe and cower as we peek to the next verse.

Then Adam received words from his Lord, and He turned to him (mercifully). Truly He is Oft-returning, the Merciful. (2:37)

What is this? What is this talk of mercy and turning compassionately towards man? Where is the passion, the jealousy, the anger, erupting out of control?

In this verse, those that follow, and others in the Qur’an that relate the same episode (see, for example, 20:116-24), the tone is first and foremost consoling and assuring. God immediately pardons Adam and Eve, with no greater blame assigned to either of them. Adam receives “words,” which some commentators interpret to be words of inspiration and others see as divine assurances and promises. The next verse supports the latter viewpoint, while there are others that include him in the community of prophets (for example, [3:32]) which sustain the first.

We said: Go down from this state all of you together; and truly there will come to you guidance from Me and whoever follows My guidance, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. (2:38)

The command issued in 2:36 is repeated here, but this time with special emphasis put on God’s assurances and promises to mankind, thus fur-

ther precluding the interpretation that man's earthly life is a punishment. This explains why the Qur'an has man remain on earth even though Adam and Eve are immediately forgiven. Nonetheless, the Qur'an will insist, as we read through it, that life serves definite aims and, as the next verse warns, it has grave consequences and must be taken seriously.

But those who are rejecters and give the lie to our signs,  
these are the companions of the fire; they will abide in it.  
(2:39)

The story of Adam ends here to be taken up in bits and pieces later. Many questions and problems have been raised, but we have obtained only some clues and clarifications. This is another characteristic of the Qur'an: It interweaves themes throughout the text, rather than provide several distinct and complete discourses on various topics. In this way it baits the reader, luring him or her into its design, so that its different approaches are allowed to exert their influence frequently and repeatedly. It would be naive of us to expect long uninterrupted dissertations on metaphysics or theology, for such would be understandable to few and of interest and inspiration to far fewer. On the other hand, if the Qur'an is a guidance, as it claims to be, then we should anticipate suggestions, guideposts, and touchstones that help us along the way. Be assured, the Qur'an will not simply translate us to our goal; it will provide directions at different stages, but the traveling and the discovery will have to be ours, because the questions we ask are not only about God—they are about ourselves as peculiar individuals and we are the only persons who have real access to our souls. Thus, as the Qur'an might say, we must be willing not only to search the horizons, but also our own selves, until we know as much as we can grasp of the truth (41:53).

### “When Will God's Help Come?”

Although the picture is still far from clear, some themes that invite further reflection and elaboration have emerged. The most striking fact that we observed is that the Qur'an does not maintain that life on earth is a punishment. Long before Adam and Eve enter the story, the angels raise the troublesome question: Why create man? A series of verses supplies pieces of an answer. Man has a relatively higher intelligence than other creatures. His nature is more complex and he has a greater degree of personal freedom. Thus, he has not only potential for growth in evil but, reciprocally, he has the potential for growth in virtue. We witness a

period of preparation, wherein man learns to use his intellectual strengths. Adam and Eve are then ready to become moral beings. They are presented with a somewhat innocuous—although from the standpoint of their development critical—moral choice. They slip and enter a moral phase in their existence, which is symbolized in other Qur'anic passages that have the couple now conscious of sexual morality and modesty (7:19-25; 20:120-23). Thus they depart from a state of ignorance, innocence, and bliss. Man's higher intellect, freedom of choice, and growth potential will inevitably involve him in conflict and travail. The last of these is the focus of the angels' question. As we continue along our journey, the Qur'an will stress repeatedly these three features of the human venture: reasoning, choice, and adversity. We will consider each separately.

*Reason.* That the Qur'an gives a prominent place to reason in the attainment of faith is well known and frequently mentioned by western Islamicists. Many western scholars view this as a defect, because they see faith and reason as being inherently incompatible. For example, H. Lammens sarcastically states that the Qur'an “is not far from considering unbelief as an infirmity of the human mind!”<sup>13</sup> His reaction, however, is more cultural and emotional than rational, having its roots in the West's own struggle with religion and reason. Yet not all western scholars are so cynical. While certainly no advocate for Islam, Maxime Rodinson sees this aspect of the Qur'an as somewhat in its favor and writes:

The Koran continually expounds the rational proofs of Allah's omnipotence: the wonders of creation, such as the gestation of animals, the movements of the heavenly bodies, atmospheric phenomena, the variety of animal and vegetable life so marvelously well adapted to men's needs. All those things “are signs (*ayat*) for those of insight” (3:187-190) . . . Repeated about fifty times in the Koran is the verb *'aqala* which means “connect ideas together, reason, understand an intellectual argument.” Thirteen times we come upon the refrain, after a piece of reasoning: *a fa-la ta'qilun* “have ye then no sense?” (2:41-44, etc.) The infidels, those who remain insensible

<sup>13</sup> H. Lammens, “Caractéristique de Mohomet d'après le Qoran,” *Recherches de science religieuse*, no. 20 (1930): 416-38.

to Muhammad's preaching, are stigmatized as "a people of no intelligence," persons incapable of the intellectual effort needed to cast off routine thinking (5:63-58, 102-103; 10:42-43; 22:45-46; 59:14). In this respect they are like cattle (2:166-171; 25:44-46).<sup>14</sup>

The Qur'an insists that it contains signs for those who are "wise" (2:269), "knowledgeable" (29:42-43), "endowed with insight" (39:9), and "reflective" (45:13). Its persistent complaint against its rejecters is that they refuse to make use of their intellectual faculties and that they close their minds to learning. The Qur'an asks almost incredulously: "Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts may thus learn wisdom?" (22:44), "Do they not examine the earth?" (26:7), "Do they not travel through the earth and see what was the end of those before them?" (30:9), "Do they not look at the sky above them?" (50:6), "Do they not look at the camels, how they are made?" (88:17), "Have you not watched the seeds which you sow?" (56:63).

Muslim school children throughout the world are frequently reminded of the first five verses of the ninety-sixth *surah*:

Read in the name of your Lord, who has created—created man out of a tiny creature that clings! Read and your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know. (96:1-5)

These verses are believed to comprise Muhammad's very first revelation. "Read!" It commands, as the skill of written communication is presented as one of the great gifts to mankind, because it is by use of the pen that God has taught man what he did not or could not know. Here again, the Qur'an highlights man's unique ability to communicate—this time in writing—and to collectively learn from the insights and experiences of others.

Repetition is indicative of the importance given to certain topics. It should be observed that the Arabic word for knowledge, *'ilm*, and its derivatives appear 854 times in the Qur'an, placing it among the most frequently occurring words. It should also be noted that in many of its stories, where the Qur'an presents a debate between a believer and disbeliever, the believer's stance is inevitably more rational and logical than his opponent's.

<sup>14</sup> Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism* (Penguin Books, 1974), 79-80.

*Choice.* The Qur'an presents human history as a perennial struggle between two opposing choices: to resist or to surrender oneself to God. It is in this conflict that the scripture immerses itself and the reader; it could be said to be the very crux of its calling. This choice must be completely voluntary, for the Qur'an demands, "Let there be no compulsion in religion—the right way is henceforth clearly distinct from error" (2:256). The crucial point is not that one should come to know and worship God, but that one should freely choose to know and worship God. Thus we find the repeated declaration that God could have made all mankind rightly guided, but it was within His purposes to do otherwise.

Had He willed He could indeed have guided all of you. (6:149)

Do not the believers know that, had God willed, He could have guided all mankind? (13:31)

And if We had so willed, We could have given every soul its guidance. (32:13)

Had God willed He could have made you all one community. But that He may try you by that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God you will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ. (5:48)

The Qur'an categorically affirms that God is not diminished nor threatened by our choices, yet they do carry grave consequences for the individual, as the primary beneficiary of a good deed and the primary casualty of an evil act is the doer.

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)

Indeed they will have squandered their own selves, and all their false imagery will have forsaken them. (7:53)

And they did no harm against Us, but [only] against their own selves did they sin. (7:160)

And so it was not God who wronged them, it was they who wronged themselves. (9:70)

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).)

These statements are hardly easy on the reader. At first glance they seem to indicate a detachment from and indifference to man's situation. Philosophically, such a stance may be consistent with God's transcendence, but only at the expense of attempting any possible relationship with God. Yet such an interpretation would be inappropriately severe. The Qur'anic God is anything but impartial to mankind's condition. He sends prophets, answers prayers (2:186; 3:195), and intervenes in and manipulates the human drama, as in the Battle of Badr (3:13; 8:5-19; 8:42-48). All is under His authority, and nothing takes place without His allowing it (4:78-79).

The Qur'an's "most beautiful names" of God imply an intense involvement in the human venture. These names, such as The Merciful, The Compassionate, The Forgiving, The Giving, The Loving, The Creator, etc., reveal a God that creates men and women in order to relate to them on an intensely personal level, on a level higher than with the other creatures known to mankind, not out of a psychological or emotional need but because this is the very essence of His nature. Therefore, we find that the relationship between the sincere believer and God is characterized consistently as a bond of love. God loves the good-doers (2:195; 3:134, 3:148, 5:13, 5:93), the repentant (2:222), those that purify themselves (2:222; 9:108), the God-conscious (3:76; 9:4; 9:7), the patient (3:146), those that put their trust in Him (3:159), the just (5:42; 49:9; 60:8), and those who fight in His cause (61:4). And they, in turn, love God.

Yet there are men who take others besides God as equal (with God), loving them as they should love God. But those who believe love God more ardently. (2:165)

Say: "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you, and forgive you your faults; for God is The Forgiving, The Merciful. (3:31)

O you who believe! If any from among you should turn back from his faith, then God will assuredly bring a people He loves and who love Him. (5:54)

On the other hand, tyrants, aggressors, the corrupt ones, the guilty, rejecters of faith, evil-doers, the arrogant ones, transgressors, the prodigal, the treacherous, and the unjust will not experience this relationship of love (2:190; 2:205; 2:276; 3:32; 3:57; 3:140; 4:36; 4:107; 5:64; 5:87; 6:141; 7:31; 7:55; 8:58; 16:23; 22:38; 28:76; 28:77; 30:45; 31:18; 42:40; 57:23).

There are Muslim and non-Muslim scholars who view God in the Qur'an as virtually indifferent to humanity, establishing the cosmos with fixed laws of cause and effect in all spheres (physical, psychological, spiritual, etc.), and then setting it to run subject to them. Others have seen Him as so completely involved in and in control of creation that all is totally determined, even our choices. Many believe that shades of both viewpoints are present and that they may be irreconcilable. The latter is perhaps closest to the truth, although the irreconcilability is not necessary. Certainly, the Qur'an maintains God's absolute sway over all creation, which He ceaselessly and continuously sustains, maintains, and influences. Nothing exists or takes place without His permission. Yet He empowers us with the ability to make choices, act them out, and see them, most often, to their expected conclusions. In fact, He frequently leads us to such critical choices. In particular, He allows and enables us to make decisions that are detrimental to ourselves and others:

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)

The assertion here is that our ability to experience true benefit or harm comes from God, but to do real injury to ourselves, in an ultimate and spiritual sense, depends on *our* actions and decisions, which God has empowered us to make.

As noted above, our acts and choices in no way threaten God and it is the individual who gains or loses by them. However, on the collective level, the Qur'an shows that God intends to produce through this earthly experience persons that share a bond of love with Him. While any individual may or may not pursue this, the Qur'an acknowledges that there will definitely

be people who will, and their development is apparently the very object of man's earthly life (15:39-43; 17:64-65).

Our vision is still quite blurry, but it seems somehow a little clearer than when we started, although we still have far to go. Questions persist about the need for this earthly life as well as the roles of human choice, intelligence, and suffering in the creation of individuals. It also feels as if we are slipping into the difficult topic of predestination. We will reserve that subject for the end of this chapter, for it will take us too far afield at this stage. However, we need to discuss one more Qur'anic statement that relates to divine and human will, because it is very often misunderstood and has a strong bearing on the theme of human choice.

The Qur'an frequently states that God "allows to stray whom He will, and guides whom He will" (2:26; 4:88; 4:143; 6:39; 7:178; 7:186; 13:27; 14:4; 16:93; 35:8; 39:23; 39:36; 40:33; 74:31). This phrase is typically rendered in most English interpretations as "God misleads whom He will, and guides whom He will." Grammatically, both renderings are possible, because the verb *adalla* could be used in either sense. It could mean either "to let someone or something stray unguided," or equally, "to make someone or something lose his/its way." Ignaz Goldziher, the famous Orientalist and scholar of Arabic, strongly argues in favor of the first rendition. He writes,

Such statements do not mean that God directly leads the latter into error. The decisive verb (*adalla*) is not, in this context, to be understood as "lead astray," but rather as "allow to go astray," that is, not to care about someone, not to show him the way out of his predicament. "We let them (*nadhruhūm*) stray in disobedience" (6:110). We must imagine a solitary traveler in the desert: that image stands behind the Qur'an's manner of speaking about guidance and error. The traveler wanders, drifts in limitless space, on the watch for his true destination and goal. Such a traveler is man on the journey of life.<sup>15</sup>

His observation is given further support by the fact that almost all of the statements in the Qur'an of this nature are immediately preceded or followed by others that assert that God guides or refuses to guide someone

<sup>15</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 79-80.

according to his/her choices and predisposition. We find that "God does not guide the unjust ones," "God does not guide the transgressors," and God guides aright those who "listen," are "sincere," and are "God-conscious" (2:26, 258, 264; 3:86; 5:16, 51, 67, 108; 6:88, 144; 9:19, 21, 37, 80, 109; 12:52; 13:27, 16:37, 107; 28:50; 39:3; 40:28; 42:13; 46:10; 47:8; 61:7; 62:5; 63:6). Thus we find that "when they went crooked, God bent their hearts crooked" (61:5). This demonstrates that receiving or not receiving guidance is affected by sincerity, disposition and willingness; it recalls the saying of Muhammad: "When you approach God by an arm's length, He approaches you by two, and if you come to Him walking, He comes to you running."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the phrase "God allows to stray whom He wills" illumines what we have already concluded: while God, according to the Qur'an, could guide all mankind uniformly, He has other purposes and hence does not. Instead, He has created man with a unique and profound ability to make moral decisions and He monitors, influences, and guides each individual's moral and spiritual development in accordance with them.

*Suffering.* The great divide between theist and atheist is their reactions to human suffering. Often the first views it as either deserved or an impenetrable mystery, while the second sees it as unnecessary and inexcusable. The Qur'an advocates neither viewpoint. Trial and tribulation are held to be inevitable and essential to human development and both the believer and unbeliever will experience them.

Most assuredly We will try you with something of danger, and hunger, and the loss of worldly goods, of lives and the fruits of your labor. But give glad tidings to those who are patient in adversity—who when calamity befalls them, say, "Truly unto God do we belong and truly, unto him we shall return. (2:155)

Do you think that you could enter paradise without having suffered like those who passed away before you? Misfortune and hardship befell them, and so shaken were they that the Messenger and the believers with him, would exclaim, "When will God's help come?" Oh truly, God's help is always near. (2:214)

<sup>16</sup> From *Sahih al Bukhari* as translated in Imam Nawawi, *Riyad al Salihin*, trans. by Muhammad Zafrullah Khan (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1975), 28.

You will certainly be tried in your possessions and yourselves. (3:186)

And if we make man taste mercy from Us, then withdraw it from him, he is surely despairing, ungrateful. And if we make him taste a favor after distress has afflicted him, he says: The evils are gone away from me. Truly he is exultant, boastful; except those who are persevering and do good. For them is forgiveness and a great reward. (11:9-11)

Every soul must taste of death. And we try you with calamity and prosperity, [both] as a means of trial. And to Us you are returned. (21:35)

O man! Truly you've been toiling towards your Lord in painful toil—but you shall meet Him!(84:6)

Man, however, does not grow only through patient suffering, but also by striving and struggling against hardship and adversity. This explains why *jihad* is such a key concept in the Qur'an. Often translated as "holy war," the word *jihad* literally means "a struggle," "a striving," "an exertion," or "a great effort." It may include fighting for a just cause, but it has a more general connotation as the associated verbal noun of *jahada*, "to toil," "to weary," "to struggle," "to strive after," "to exert oneself." The following verses, revealed in Makkah before Muslims were involved in combat, bring out this more general sense.

And those who strive hard (*jahadu*) for Us, We shall certainly guide them in Our ways, and God is surely with the doers of good. (29:69)

And whoever strives hard (*jahada*) strives (*yujahidu*) for his self, for God is Self-Sufficient, above the need of the worlds. (29:6)

And strive hard (*jahidu*) for God with due striving (*jihadihi*). (22:78)

So obey not the unbelievers and strive against them (*jahidhum*) a mighty striving (*jihadan*) with it [the Qur'an]. (25:52)

The last verse occurs in a passage that encourages Muslims to make use of the Qur'an when they argue with disbelievers.

The Qur'an's attitude towards suffering and adversity is not passive and resigned, but positive and dynamic. The believers are told that they will surely suffer and to be patient and persevering in times of hardship, but they are also to look forward and seek opportunities to improve their situation and rectify existing wrongs. They are told that while the risks and struggle may be great, the ultimate benefit and reward will be much greater (2:218; 3:142; 4:95-96; 8:74; 9:88-89; 16:110; 29:69).

Those who believed and fled their homes, and strove hard in God's way with their possessions and their selves are much higher in rank with God. And it is these—they are the triumphant. (9:20)

Life was never meant to be easy. The Qur'an refers to a successful life as an "uphill climb," a climb that most will avoid.

We certainly have created man to face distress. Does he think that no one has power over him? He will say: I have wasted much wealth. Does he think that no one sees him? Have We not given him two eyes, and a tongue and two lips and pointed out to him the two conspicuous ways? But he attempts not the uphill climb; and what will make you comprehend the uphill climb? [It is] to free a slave, or to feed in a day of hunger an orphan nearly related, or the poor one lying in the dust. Then he is of those who believe and exhort one another to patience and exhort one another to mercy. (90:4-17)

## Wishful Thinking

"Why create man?" The angels' question echoes through our reflections. We can at least attempt a partial explanation based on what we have learned from the Qur'an so far.

It seems that God, in accordance with His attributes, intends to make a creature that can experience His being (His mercy, compassion, love, kindness, beauty, etc.) in an intensely personal way and at a level higher than the other beings known to mankind. The intellect and will that man has been given, together with the strife and struggle that he will surely face on

earth, somehow contribute to the development of these individuals, this subset of humanity that will be bound to God by love.

We need to travel on and delve deeper in this direction in order to gain greater insight. But before we do, we should consider the possibility that we may be deluding ourselves. By this I mean that we may have been reading into the Qur'an something that is not really there; we may have been projecting onto the scripture our own personal conflict, one that the Qur'an never insists on explicitly nor even intentionally raises the issue of an ultimate purpose behind the creation of man. Yet here again we meet with the persistently provocative method of the scripture. Just when we are prepared to doubt our first impressions and to revert to the familiar and comforting corner of cynicism from which we have come, the Qur'an reopens the topic.

Those [are believers] who remember God standing and sitting and lying down and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth [and say]: Our Lord, You did not create all this in vain. (3:191)

We have not created the heaven and the earth and whatever is between them in sport. If We wish to take a sport, We could have done it by Ourselves—if We were to do that at all. (21:16-17)

Do you think that We created you purposely and that you will not be returned to Us? The true Sovereign is too exalted above that. (23:115)

We did not create the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, in play. (44:38)

So for us there is no easy escape. The Qur'an apparently will not back out of the challenge. It is up to us to either continue on in this search or to resign and avoid a decisive engagement. Our numbers now are almost surely less than when we started. For those willing to continue, we should consider what would be the next natural step. Since the Qur'an undoubtedly claims that life has a reason and since, as we observed, it has to do with the nurturing of a certain relationship between God and man, it would seem quite appropriate to seek more information about the nature of man and what the Qur'an requires of him as well as about the attributes of God and how mankind is affected by them.

## Except Those Who Have Faith and Do Good

The key to success in this life and the hereafter is stated so frequently and formally in the Qur'an that no serious reader can miss it. However, the utter simplicity of the dictum may cause one to disregard it, because it seems to ignore the great questions and complexities of life. The Qur'an maintains that only "those who have faith and do good" (in Arabic: *allathina aaminu wa 'amilu al saalihaat*) will benefit from their earthly lives (2:25; 2:82; 2:277; 4:57; 4:122; 5:9; 7:42; 10:9; 11:23; 13:29; 14:23; 18:2; 18:88; 18:107; 19:60; 19:96; 20:75; 20:82; 20:112; 21:94; 22:14; 22:23; 22:50; 22:56; 24:55; 25:70-71; 26:67; 28:80; 29:7; 29:9; 29:58; 30:15; 30:45; 31:8; 32:19; 34:4; 34:37; 35:7; 38:24; 41:8; 42:22; 42:23; 42:26; 45:21; 45:30; 47:2; 47:12; 48:29; 64:9; 65:11; 84:25; 85:11; 95:6; 98:7; 103:3). This statement and very similar ones occur so often that it warrants careful analysis.

*Wa 'amilu al saalihaat* (and do good). The verb *'amila* means "to do," "to act," "to be active," "to work," or "to make." It implies exertion and effort. Thus the associated noun *'amal* (pl. *a'maal*) means "action," "activity," "work" or "labor," as in the verse, "I waste not the labor (*'amala*) of any that labors (*'amilin*)" (3:195). The noun *al saalihaat* is the plural of *saalih*, which means "a good or righteous act." But this definition does not bring out its full meaning. The verbs *salaha* and *aslaha*, which come from the same Arabic root, mean "to act rightly and properly," "to put things in order," "to restore," "to reconcile," and "to make or foster peace." Hence the noun *sulh* means "peace," "reconciliation," "settlement" and "compromise." Therefore, the phrase *'amilu al saalihaat* ("do good") refers to those who persist in striving to set things right; to restore harmony, peace, and balance.

From the Qur'an's many exhortations and its descriptions of the acts and types of individuals loved by God, it is not difficult to compose a partial list of "good works." Not unexpectedly, it will consist of those acts and attributes that are universally recognized as virtuous. One should show compassion (2:83; 2:215; 69:34), be merciful (90:17), forgive others (42:37; 45:14; 64:14), be just (4:58; 6:152; 16:90), protect the weak (4:127; 6:152), defend the oppressed (4:75), seek knowledge and wisdom (20:114; 22:54), be generous (2:177; 23:60; 30:39), truthful (3:17; 33:24; 33:35; 49:15), kind (4:36), and peaceful (8:61; 25:63; 47:35), and love others (19:86).

Truly those who believe and do good will the Most Merciful endow with love and to this end have We made this

easy to understand in your own tongue, so that you might convey a glad tiding to the God-conscious and warn those given to contention. (19:86)

One should teach and encourage others to practice these virtues (90:17; 103:3) and, by implication, learn and grow in them as well. The stories of the prophets have God's messengers bidding their communities and families to adopt such ethics, although many of them remain contemptuous.

It is not surprising that the Qur'an upholds the so-called golden rule. Many do feel that it is better to give than to receive, to be truthful rather than to live a lie, to love rather than to hate, to be compassionate rather than to ignore the suffering of others, for such experiences give life depth and beauty. I believe that in the winters of our lives, our past worldly or material achievements will seem less important to us than the relationships we had, loves and friendships that we shared, and times we spent giving of ourselves and doing good to others. In the end, according to the Qur'an, these are what endure.

But the things that endure—the good deeds—are, with your Lord, better in reward and better in hope. (18:46)

And God increases the guided in guidance. And the deeds that endure—the good deeds—are, with your Lord, better in reward and yield better returns. (19:76)

These are the themes of songs, poems, novels, plays, and films not only because of their sentimental appeal, but because they are part of our collective human experience and wisdom. Some would say that life is really not about taking, but about giving and sharing, and that this is what gives life meaning and purpose. The Muslim, however, would not fully agree. If human intellectual, moral, and emotional evolution was the sole purpose of life, then belief in God might be helpful, but not entirely necessary, for a humanistic ideology may suffice. But the Qur'an does not state that the successful in life are only "those who do good"; rather, they are only those who unite faith with righteous living, those who "have faith and do good."

*Illa-l lathina aamanu* (except those who believe). The verb *aamana* means "to be faithful," "to trust," "to have confidence in," and "to believe in." It is derived from the Arabic root, *AMN*, which is associated with the ideas of safety, security, and peace. Thus *amina* means "to be secure," "to feel safe," "to trust"; *amn* means "safety," "peace," "protection"; *amaan* means "safety," "shelter," "peace," and "security." The translation of

*aaminu* as "believe" is somewhat misleading, because in modern times it is usually used in the sense of "to hold an opinion" or "to accept a proposition or statement as true." The Arabic word has stronger emotional and psychological content, for "those who believe" implies more than an acceptance of an idea; it connotes a personal relationship and commitment and describes those who find security, peace, and protection in God and who are in turn faithfully committed to Him.

Like the phrase we are analyzing, the Qur'an maintains the utter indivisibility between faith and good works. The mention of the first is almost always conjoined to the second. Faith should inspire righteous deeds, which, in turn, should nurture a more profound experience of faith, which should incline one to greater acts of goodness, and so on, with each a function of the other, rising in a continuous increase. From this viewpoint, all of our endeavors acquire a potential unity of purpose: ritualistic, spiritual, humanitarian, and worldly activity are all brought into the domain of worship. Good deeds become simultaneously God-directed and man-directed acts. For example, the spending of one's substance on others becomes an expression of one's love of God.

But piety is to . . . spend of your substance out of love for Him. (2:177)

Hence the relationship between God and man is inextricably bound to man's relationship with fellow man.

Repeatedly, we come upon the Qur'anic exhortation, "Establish salah [ritual prayers] and pay zakah [the annual financial tax]." We normally think of the first as God-directed and the second as community, and hence man, directed. While this may be so, the line between them is extremely faint in Islam, for both are ritual obligations and both require and contribute to a high level of community discipline and cohesion.

Many a non-Muslim has been impressed with the synchronous, almost military, precision of a Muslim congregation in prayer. At the call to the prayer, the congregation quickly arranges itself in tight formation, with no one possessing a fixed or privileged position, so that even the prayer leader is frequently elected on the spot from those present. In this way, the prayer becomes not only a powerful spiritual exercise, but, secondarily, also trains the community in leadership, organization, cooperation, equality, and brotherhood. The physical and hygienic advantages of preparing for and performing the ritual prayer have also been noted frequently by outsiders. This is not to say that Muslims would list these

gains as the primary benefits of prayer—indeed they would not—but it does exemplify how the spiritual and worldly intersect and complement each other in Islam.

The ritual of *zakah* illustrates the same point but from the reverse angle. It is the yearly tax—something like a social security tax—on a Muslim's wealth, which is distributed to the poor and needy and others as stipulated in the Qur'an (9:60). The social concerns behind this tax are obvious, but the Qur'an underlines its personal and spiritual sides as well. The word *zakah*, which means "alms" or "charity," is associated with the Arabic verbs *zakka* and *tazakka*, which mean "to purify" or "to cleanse." Muslims have long understood that through its payment one may attain to higher levels of spiritual purity. This is not a coincidental or forced association, because the Qur'an clearly makes the connection between almsgiving and self-purification.

So take of their wealth alms, so that you might purify (*tuzakkeehim*) and cleanse them. (9:103)

But the most devoted to God shall be removed far from it: those who spend their wealth to purify (*yatazakka*) themselves. (92:18)

The Qur'an's recurring summons to establish *salah* and pay *zakah* is indicative of its general attitude towards faith and good deeds: They are interconnected and mutually enriching. The ultimate goal is to perfect harmony between both types of activities, as each is indispensable to our complete development. Thus, giving of oneself strengthens the experience of faith, or, as the Qur'an says, spending in God's way and doing good brings one nearer to God and His mercy.

And some of the desert Arabs are of those who believe in God and the Last Day and consider what they spend as bringing them nearer to God and obtaining the prayers of the Messenger. Truly they bring them nearer [to Him]; God will bring them into His mercy. (9:99)

And it is not your wealth nor your children that bring you near to Us in degree, but only those who believe and *do good*, for such is a double reward for what they do, and they are secure in the highest places. (34:37)

The vision of the "face of God" refers to the intense mystical encounter obtained in the hereafter by those who attain the highest levels of spirituality and goodness. Here too the Qur'an connects this divine vision with our concern and responsibility towards others.

So give what is due to kindred, the needy and the wayfarer. That is best for those who seek the face of God, and it is these, they are the successful. (30:39)

As these verses show, virtuous acts augment faith and spirituality. More than acceptance of dogma or a state of spiritual consciousness, faith in Islam is comprehensive, an integrated outlook and way of living that incorporates all aspects of human nature and that increases with the level of giving and self-sacrifice.

By no means shall you attain piety unless you give of that which you love. And whatever you give, God surely knows it. (3:92)

Those who responded to the call of God and the Messenger after misfortune had befallen them—for such among them who do good and refrain from wrong is a great reward. Men said to them: surely people have gathered against you, so fear them; but this increased them in faith, and they said: God is sufficient for us and He is an excellent guardian. (3:172-173)

When the believers saw the confederate forces, they said: "This is what God and His messenger had promised us, and God and His messenger told us what was true." And it only increased them in faith and in submission. (33:22)

Conversely, the spiritual experiences of faith should intensify one's commitment to goodness:

And those who give what they give while their hearts are full of awe that to their Lord they must return—*These hasten to every good work and they are foremost in them.* (23:60-61)

The believers are those who, when God is mentioned, feel a tremor in their hearts, and when His messages are

recited to them they increase them in faith, and in their Lord do they trust; who keep up prayer and *spend out of what We have given them*. These, they are the believers in truth. (82:3-4)

Doctrine, ethics, and spirituality overlap to such a degree in the Qur'an, that they are frequently interwoven in its definitions of piety and belief.

Piety is not that you turn your faces towards the East or West, but pious is the one who has faith in God, and the Last Day, and the angels, and the scripture, and the messengers, and gives away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask and to set slaves free and keeps up prayer and practices regular charity; and keep their promises when they make a promise and are steadfast in [times of] calamity, hardship and peril. These are they who are true [in faith]. (2:177)

The sacrificial camels We have made for you as among the symbols of God: in them is (much) good for you: then pronounce the name of God over them as they line up (for sacrifice). When they are down on their sides (after slaughter), eat thereof and feed such as those who live in contentment and such as beg in humility: thus have We made animals subject to you that you may be grateful. It is not their meat nor their blood that reaches God: It is your piety that reaches Him. (22:36-37)

Prosperous are the believers, who are humble in their prayers, and who shun what is vain, and who are active in deeds of charity, and who restrain their sexual passions—except with those joined to them in marriage, or whom their right hands possess, for such are free from blame, but whoever seeks to go beyond that, such are transgressors—those who faithfully observe their trusts and covenants, and who guard their prayers. (23:1-9)

The second passage refers to the day of sacrifice at the annual pilgrimage to Makkah. The pilgrimage is one of Islam's five ritual "pillars" and it is, even today, perhaps the most physically demanding of all of them. It is

stunning in its religious imagery, emotion, and drama. And yet, here too, the Qur'an interconnects its social and spiritual benefits.

Non-Muslims are often surprised by the spirit of optimism and celebration that pervades Muslim rituals, especially during Ramadan (the month of fasting) and the pilgrimage, which they assume are performed mostly as atonement for past sins. Muslims, however, perceive their rituals positively—as spiritually and socially progressive. They understand them to be a challenge and an opportunity, as is life itself.

*Islam* means "surrender" or "submission," a giving up of resistance, an acquiescence to God's will, to His created order and to one's true nature. It is a lifelong endeavor and trial, an endless road that opens to boundless growth. It is a continuous pursuit that leads to ever greater degrees of peace and bliss through nearness to God. It engages all human faculties and its terms are unconditional. It seeks a voluntary commitment of body and mind, heart and soul. Its comprehensives may be brought to light by examining one of the great questions of Christianity: "Is salvation obtained by faith or good works?"

First, the question needs to be rephrased, because it is unnatural to Muslims. Islam has known nothing similar to Christianity's soteriology. If a Muslim is asked: "How do you know you are saved?" he or she will likely respond: "From what or from whom?" Earthly life for Muslims is an opportunity, a challenge, a trial, not a punishment from which one must be rescued. In the Qur'an, all creation, knowingly or unknowingly, serves God's ultimate purposes. Thus it would not be obvious to a Muslim that we needed to be saved from some entity. Even Satan is stripped of his power in the Qur'an and reduced to the function of eternal tempter, a catalyst for ethical decision making and, hence, for moral and spiritual development. If anything, Muslims feel that they may need to be saved from themselves, from their own forgetfulness and unresponsiveness to God's many signs.

In a Muslim context, it would be more natural to ask, "How does one achieve *success* in this life: through faith or good works?" In consideration of what we have already observed, the answer becomes immediately obvious: both are essential. Otherwise, human existence would not make sense and much of life would be superfluous. For the Muslim, such a question would be analogous to asking, "What element in water—hydrogen or oxygen—is necessary to quench one's thirst?"

Before considering what the Qur'an tells us about God, let us recapitulate. The Qur'an claims that man's earthly life is not a punishment and

that it does not satisfy some whim of its creator. Rather, it is a stage in God's creative plan. Mankind has been endowed with a uniquely complex nature with contrary inclinations. Through the use of his/her faculties (intellectual, volitional, spiritual, moral, etc.) and the trials he or she is guaranteed to face, an individual will either grow in his or her relationship with God—or as the Qur'an says "in nearness to God"—or squander himself or herself in misdirected pursuits. The Qur'an asserts that this earthly life will indeed produce a segment of humanity that will experience and share in God's love; these are called in the Qur'an *Muslimun* (Muslims; literally, "those who surrender"), for they strive to submit themselves—heart, mind, body and soul—to this relationship. They are those who find peace, security, and trust in God and who do good and strive to set things right. To better understand how the lives we lead facilitate closer communion with God, we turn now to God in the Qur'an.

### The Most Beautiful Names

The Qur'an presents two obverse portraits of God and His activity. On the one hand, He is transcendent and unfathomable. He is "sublimely exalted above anything that men may devise by way of definition" (6:100); "there is nothing like unto Him" (42:11); and "nothing can be compared to Him" (112:4). These statements warn of the limitations and pitfalls in using human language to describe God, especially such expressions as are commonly used to describe human nature and behavior, for man's tendency to literalize religious symbolism often leads to the fabrication of misleading images of God. Nevertheless, the above statements serve only as cautions in the Qur'an, since it too, of necessity, contains such comparative descriptions. If we are to grow in intimacy with God, then we need to know Him, however approximately, in order to relate to Him, and toward this end speech is an obvious and indispensable tool.

Thus, in addition to declarations of God's complete incomparability, we find His various attributes mentioned on almost every page. Often used to punctuate passages, they occur typically in simple dual attributive statements, such as, "God is the Forgiving, the Compassionate" (4:129), "He is the All-Mighty, the Compassionate" (26:68), "God is the Hearing, the Seeing" (17:1). Collectively, the Qur'an refers to these titles as *al asmaa al husnaa*, God's "most beautiful names" (7:180; 17:110; 20:8; 59:24).

Say: Call upon God, or call upon the Merciful, by which-

ever you call, to Him belong the most beautiful names. (17:110)

God! There is no God but He. To Him belong the most beautiful names. (20:8)

He is God, other than whom there is no other god. He knows the unseen and the seen. He is the Merciful, The Compassionate. He is God, other than whom there is no other God; the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace, the Keeper of Faith, the Guardian, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme. Glory to God! Above what they ascribe to Him. He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the Fashioner. To Him belong the most beautiful names. Whatever is in the heavens and on earth glorifies Him and He is exalted in Might, the Wise. (59:23-24)

The Divine Names are a ubiquitous element of Muslim daily life. They are invoked at both the inception and completion of even the most common tasks, appear in persons' names in the form of *Servant of the Merciful*, *Servant of the Forgiving*, *Servant of the Loving*, etc., cried out in moments of great joy and sorrow, murmured repeatedly at the completion of ritual prayers, and chanted rhythmically in unison on various occasions. Because Muslims insert them into conversations so frequently and effortlessly, some outsiders have accused Muslims of empty formalism. But this reflects a lack of understanding, for the truth is that the Divine Names play such an integral role in the lives of the faithful that their use is entirely natural and uninhibited.

The Divine Names are, for Muslims, a means of turning towards God's infinite radiance. Through their recollection, believers attempt to unveil and reorient their souls towards the ultimate source of all. A knowledge of them is essential if one is to comprehend the relationship between God and man as conceived in the Qur'an and as experienced by Muslims.

In his *Concordance of the Qur'an*,<sup>17</sup> Kassis renders in English most of the titles and adjectives applied to God in the scripture, together with some of their different shades of meaning. His list is not exhaustive. Other Qur'an scholars have obtained longer lists and other possible meanings in English

<sup>17</sup> Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'an* (University of California Press, 1983).

could have been added, as it is hard to do justice to the Arabic original. For example, *rabb* which Kassis renders as "Lord," conveys the idea of "fostering," "sustaining," and "nourishing." According to the famous scholar of Arabic, al Raghīb al Isfahani, it signifies "the fostering of a thing in such a manner as to make it attain one condition after another until it reaches its goal of completion."<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the word "Lord" does not bring out this idea. The following list of divine attributes is taken from Kassis.

#### Divine Names and Attributes:

**Able** (*qadir*); **Absolute** (*samad*); **One Who Answers** (*ajaaba*); **Aware** (*khabeer*); **Beneficent** (*rahmaan*); **Benign** (*barr*); **Bestower** (*wahhaab*); **Blameless** (*haasha*); **Bountiful** (*akrama, tawl*); **Clement** (*'afoow, haleem, ra'oof*); **Compassionate** (*raheem*); **Compeller** (*jabbaar*); **Creator** (*badee', bara'a, fatara, khalaqa, khallaq*); **Deliverer** (*fat-taah*); **Disposer** (*wakeel*); **Embracing** (*wasi'a*); **Eternal** (*qayyoom, samad*); **Everlasting** (*qayyoom*); **Everlasting Refuge** (*samad*); **Evident** (*dhahara*); **Exalted** (*ta'aala*); **the Exalter** (*rafee'*); **Faithful** (*aamana*); **Fashioner** (*sawwara*); **First** (*awwal*); **Forgiver** (*ghaffaar, ghafuur*); **Gatherer** (*jama'a*); **Generous** (*kareem*); **Gentle** (*lateef, ra'oof*); **Giver** (*wahhaab*); **Glorious** (*'adheem, akrama, majeed*); **God** (*Allah, ilaah*); **Gracious** (*lateef, rahmaan*); **Grateful** (*shakara*); **Great** (*kabeer*); **Guardian** (*hafeedh, wakeel, waleey*); **Guide** (*had'a*); **He** (*huwa*); **Hearing** (*samee'*); **High** (*'aleey*); **Holy** (*quddoos*); **Honorable** (*akrama*); **Informed** (*khabeer*); **Inheritor** (*waritha*); **Inward** (*batana*); **Irresistible** (*jabbaar*); **Most Just Judge** (*hakama*); **Kind** (*lateef, ra'oof*); **King** (*malik, maleek*); **Knower** (*'aleem, 'alima, khabeer*); **Last** (*aakhir*); **Laudable** (*hameed*); **Light** (*nuur*); **Living** (*hayy*); **Lord** (*rabb*); **Loving** (*wadood*); **Majestic** (*jalaal, takabbara*); **Master of the Kingdom** (*malaka*); **Merciful** (*rahmaan*); **Mighty** (*'azeez, 'adheem*); **Omnipotent** (*iqadara, qadeer, qahara, qahhaar*); **One** (*ahad, waahid*); **Originator** (*fatara*); **Outward** (*dhahara*); **Overseer** (*aqaata*); **Pardoner** (*'afoow*); **Peaceable** (*salaam*); **Powerful** (*qadira, qadeer, aqaata*); **Praiseworthy** (*hameed*); **Preserver** (*haymana*); **Protector** (*mawl'a, wala', waleey*); **Provider** (*raz-zaaq*); **Quickener** (*ahyaa*); **Reckoner** (*haseeb*); **Sagacious** (*khabeer*); **Seeing** (*baseer*); **Shaper** (*sawwara*); **Splendid** (*akrama*); **Strong** (*qaweey*); **Sublime** (*takabbara*); **Subtle** (*lateef*); **Sufficient** (*ghaneey, istaghna'a, kafa*); **Superb** (*takabbara*); **Sure** (*mateen*); **Tender** (*lateef*);

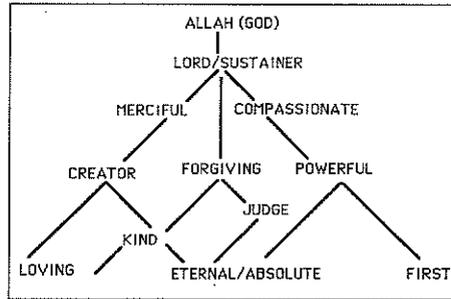
<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, Text, English Translation and Commentary*.

**Thankful** (*shakara, shakoor*); **True** (*haqq*); **Trustee** (*wakeel*), **one who Turns towards others** (*tawwaab*); **Watcher** (*raqeab*); **Wise** (*hakeem*); **Witness** (*shaheed*).

There is great variance in the number of times these attributes are applied to God in the Qur'an. For example: God is called *Allah* (the God) approximately 2698 times, *Rabb* (Lord, the Sustainer) almost 900 times, *al Rahmaan* (the Merciful) 170 times, *al Raheem* (the Compassionate) 227 times, *al Ghaffaar* (the Forgiving) and *al Ghaffoor* (the Forgiving) a total of 97 times, and *al Lateef* (the Kind, the Gentle) 7 times. This repetition and variation have an important influence on Muslim religiosity. To appreciate this, one first needs to realize just how often a believer is in contact with the Qur'an.

A practicing Muslim will recite the Qur'an at the very least five times per day during his/her obligatory prayers. Many Muslims listen to the Qur'an on cassette tapes similar to the way westerners listen to music, very many read some portion of it daily for guidance and study, and a significant number have memorized it in its entirety. As they continue through the Qur'an, Muslims are constantly recalling the Divine Names and Attributes, which appear again and again on virtually every page. Through this continuous recollection, a certain spiritual vision or image of God writes itself on the Muslim heart and mind, with the more frequently mentioned attributes attaining a certain position of priority over those less frequently stated. If we were to attempt to visualize this effect, we might picture a pyramid of the Most Beautiful Names: *Allah* would be at the apex and then the attribute of *Rabb* (Nourisher, Sustainer, Lord) connected to and proceeding from Allah somewhat below; then the attributes of Mercy, *al Rahmaan* and *al Raheem*, further on down, proceeding from and manifesting the attributes above them, like rays of light flowing from a lamp; then Forgiveness, *al Ghaffaar* and *al Ghaffoor*, and Creator, *al Khallaq*, proceeding from Mercy; and so on (see the diagram below).

In this way, a Muslim develops a completely immaterial conception of God; he or she approaches God through mind, heart, soul, feelings, and intuition, not through physical imagery. This, I feel, is the main source of Islam's famed iconoclasm. It is not a harsh fanaticism that has its roots in a culturally and artistically primitive desert community; it is a corollary to the way Muslims conceive of and relate to God through concepts that express intrinsic qualities and activities rather than through visual images. Thus we have the unique Muslim religious art of calligraphy, which does not consist of portraits and statues, but of words, often the Divine Names and Qur'anic



verses, beautifully and elegantly written and producing wondrous and intricate symmetries and designs that must be studied very carefully to decipher the hidden meanings and discover the truth behind the beauty.

Another look at the Divine Names reveals a perplexity. Since the names *al Rahmaan* (the Merciful), *al Raheem* (the Compassionate), *al Rabb* (the Sustainer, Nourisher), *al Mawla/al Waleey* (the Protector, Guardian), and *al Ghaffaar/al Ghaffoor* (the Forgiving) appear so frequently, we would expect that the seemingly closely related name, *al Wadood* (the Loving), would appear more than twice. If we include the large number of references to God's loving or withdrawing His love from others, then we might feel it appropriate to increase this total. But on close examination of such instances, we notice that God's love in the Qur'an is not universal, and this is in fact what sets this attribute apart from the others just mentioned. His mercy, for example, embraces all creation and includes even the worst sinners (7:156; 30:33; 30:36; 30:46; 40:7; 42:28), and His sustaining and nourishing extend to all. God is the only true protector of every soul (2:107; 6:62; 10:30) and He immediately accepts all sincere repentance (4:110; 13:6 39:53). But when the Qur'an speaks of God's love, it is pointing to a very special *relationship*, willfully entered into by God and man, a relationship that the Qur'an says most of humanity will reject (17:89; 25:50; 27:73). Although God's mercy, compassion, and care shine on all mankind, only those who turn to Him and strive throughout their lives to surrender themselves to Him will attain a bond of love with Him. This love signifies a love shared—a love received and given—and a mutual involvement. Since relatively few will choose to enter into it, we should probably not be at all surprised at the limited use of the name *al Wadood* in the Qur'an, for while a loving relationship with God is available to everyone, most will not enter into one.

Let us turn again to the Divine Names, this time recalling our discussion of what Islam requires of man. As we make our way through the Qur'an, we are reminded persistently of the attributes of God and the qualities that we are supposed to cultivate in ourselves. It is not long before it dawns on us that there is considerable intersection between the two, for almost every virtue that we are to develop in ourselves through our actions toward others has its origin and perfection in God. For example, we are to grow in beneficence, benignity, bountifulness, clemency, compassion, faithfulness, our willingness to forgive, generosity, gentleness, givingness, graciousness, honorableness, justice, kindness, knowledge, love of others, mercy, peacefulness, protectiveness of the weak, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and wisdom. Yet, these originate in God as His attributes of perfection. Thus, by developing these attributes in ourselves, we are actually growing *nearer*—to use a Qur'anic term—to their infinite source. Hence, the more we come to possess these qualities, the more we may come to know God. Since it is possible for human beings to experience and acquire these virtues at higher levels than other creatures, they have the potential to relate to God in a uniquely intimate way.

An analogy may help elucidate this point. Assume that I have a pet gold fish, a dog, and three daughters. The gold fish, being the most limited in terms of intellect and growth, could only know and experience my love and compassion at a relatively low level no matter how much kindness I direct toward it. The dog, who is a more complex and intelligent animal than my fish, can feel warmth and affection for another on a much higher level and therefore can experience the love and compassion I shower on him to a much greater degree. Yet my daughters, as they mature, have the potential to feel the intensity of my love and caring for them on a plane that my dog could never conceive of, because they have the capacity to know first hand, through their own emotions and relationships, deeper and richer feelings than my dog. And I would have to say that the love I now have for my parents is greater than the love I had for them when I was a child, because by having children of my own, I came to better know and understand the power of the love my mother and father gave to me.

Pushing the above analogy a bit further, we see that it is not enough for my daughters to invest themselves only in other human relationships, as they will never experience the intensity of my feelings toward them unless they also acknowledge and turn to me as their father, that is, unless they accept and enter into that parent-child relationship. I could have all the fatherly feelings for them in the world, but if by some strange set of cir-

cumstances they totally rejected or were oblivious of them, then they would never enter into a relationship of love with me. All the caring and kindness I had for them would be of little benefit to them. This, I believe, is why the Qur'an insists on both faith in God and good works toward our fellow man, because both are necessary if we are to come to know God. If an atheist is a great humanitarian, he may gain the love and admiration of neighbors and friends and perhaps great self-satisfaction and meaning in life, but he will still be spiritually empty. I am not insisting that such a person would be destined for eternal suffering, for that would depend on factors that are impossible for us to know or measure, such as his personal limitations, the environment in which he lived, the opportunities that were presented to him, and many others. However, the purpose of the Qur'an is not to discuss such precarious, borderline cases as possible options; it guides toward what will most benefit man and warns of what will destroy him.

"Every soul must taste of death; then to Us you will be returned" (29:57). This truth reverberates throughout the Qur'an. It reminds the reader that the end and purpose of all earthly endeavor is this reunion. Ultimately, it is our relationship with God that matters. However, it would be wrong to say that it is all that matters, for, as we discovered, our relationship with God is bound intimately to our responses to our fellow man. Rituals, inspiration, contemplation, and remembrance (3:191; 4:103) all play integral parts in bringing us nearer to God, but so does our growth in virtue. The more a believer grows in the attributes that originate in God, the closer and more intense is his/her bond with Him and the greater is his/her capacity to receive and experience His infinite beauty and power, both in this life, and incomparably more so in the next life, where earthly distractions and masks are removed.

This is much more than having our own personal experiences of goodness to approximate God's transcendent goodness; it involves a kind of intimacy and knowing that cannot even be shared by two human beings. There is the well-known expression, "In order to begin to understand me, you have to walk a mile in my shoes." This means that we cannot truly know another person unless we could somehow fully enter into his life and experience it from his personal perspective. As this is not really possible—since we are always, in a sense, outside that experience—the implication is that we are very limited in our ability to sympathize with others. Certainly, we can never fully know God, but yet we can experience His being in a uniquely profound way.

The Prophet once told his companions that one percent of the mercy that God bestows on creation is manifested in human behavior.<sup>19</sup> The saying is meant to impress upon us the greatness of God's mercy. However, it also indicates that the mercy we demonstrate and feel is but an infinitesimal fragment of God's limitless mercy. Thus, God grants us the ability to participate in and experience His mercy firsthand in our earthly lives, not only as recipients, but as givers of mercy as well, for when we are merciful toward another creature, that being receives something of God's mercy through us.

The same holds for almost all of the other Most Beautiful Names of God: if we are truthful, we are experiencing a fraction of the truth that comes from God; if we attain wisdom, all wisdom flows from God; if we obtain power, there is no power but in God. A mother participates in creation on a level that will always be a mystery to men, and hence her experience of the attribute of Creator is especially profound. Perhaps the same can be said of her experience of the Merciful and the Compassionate. Many ancient Muslim scholars felt that the female is more sensitive to certain divine attributes than the male and conversely. Such names as the Powerful, the Protector, the Provider, were believed to be more suited to the male.

The Qur'an informs us that God breathes something of His spirit into every human soul (32:9). This seems to indicate that every human has a seed of the Divine Attributes within him/her or, in other words, that the virtues he/she experiences are but a breath of the Divine Names. The concept, that the more one pursues virtue the greater becomes his or her capacity to experience the divine, is brought to light by the saying of Muhammad that asserts that the more a believer persists in worship and doing good, the clearer his heart becomes so that it is better able to receive the divine light, and that if someone is negligent in these, his heart becomes rusted and incapable of receiving divine illumination.<sup>20</sup> The goal of the devout Muslim is to grow continually as a receiver and transmitter of God's infinite radiance, to be drawn ever nearer to the source of all that is beautiful, to accept the office of delegate of the Possessor of the Most Beautiful Names, and, hence, to serve as a *khalifah* (vicar) of God on earth as described in 2:30.

It appears that we have returned to where we first started. This entire discussion of the purpose of life in the Qur'an was launched by the story of

<sup>19</sup> From *Sahih al Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* as translated in *Riyad as Salihin* of Imam Nawawi, 94.

<sup>20</sup> From Ibn Majah and Tirmidhi as translated in Mazhar U. Kazi, *Guidance from the Messenger* (Jamaica, NY: ICNA Publications, 1990), 84.

man as told in verses thirty through thirty-nine of the second *surah*. One might assume that it began with the angels' question and, hence, with a doubt or criticism, but this would be an oversight. In fact, our investigation was inspired by an astounding affirmation that was so positive and optimistic that the angels' question had to be raised: "Behold, your Lord said to the angels: 'I am going to place a vicegerent on earth.'"

How can man, this most destructive and corruptible creature, serve as a deputy and representative of God? Of all beings, how can man act as an agent and emissary of his Lord? Human history and human nature seem to be at odds with this election. But when we look at mankind from this viewpoint, we, like the angels, are seeing only one side of reality and are neglecting man's potential for goodness and self-sacrifice as well as his ability to strive to live by the highest standards of virtue. Every person has it within himself to receive, represent, and impart to others the mercy, compassion, justice, truth, bounty, and love that originate in God and thus to act in this way as His emissary on earth. The Qur'an maintains that human nature contains this inclination and potential (30:30), but it requires a choice that must be faced continually and remade. The office of *khalifah* is not simply conferred; it must be accepted voluntarily and it must be a life-long commitment. The Qur'an does not ask for human perfection, but rather asks that we persevere in striving for self-improvement and that we never become complacent (2:197; 5:2; 7:26) or despondent (15:56; 39:53; 15:55) about our progress.

### First Objection

It may be that the Qur'an's concept of life has a certain appeal and coherence. However, let us not allow ourselves to be romanced into accepting it. The idea that growth in virtue leads to inner peace and well-being, and that it contributes an abiding beauty to life, is easy to admit. The notion that it also allows us to receive and experience God's infinite attributes to ever greater degrees is sensible. Yet, is there not an obvious and glaring problem with this conception? Cannot this divine plan be charged with gross inefficiency? Why did not God simply create us with these virtues from the start? Why did He not program mercy, truthfulness, compassion, kindness, and the rest into us and bypass this earthly stage in our existence? Thus, we never really got beyond the angels' question: Why not make man someone greater than he is—someone like the angels?

To answer this, we need not search far, but only have to look within our own selves. If we know nothing else of the virtues under consideration, we certainly know they cannot exist in a being at very high levels if they were merely programmed into it. Virtue, if programmed, is not true virtue as we conceive of it, but something less. We can program a computer to be always correct, but we could not describe it as a truthful computer. We do not consider a stethoscope to be merciful although it aids the sick. The Qur'an presents angels as creatures without free will, but man can rise to heights much higher or sink to depths much lower than them.

Virtues are abstract concepts and difficult to define, but I believe that we can agree that to grow in virtue at least three things are needed: *Free will*, or the ability to choose; *intellect*, so that one is able to weigh the consequences of his or her choices and learn from them; and third, and equally important, *suffering and hardship*. As we saw, the Qur'an emphasizes strongly all three of these while discussing man's spiritual evolution. To grow in compassion, for example, is inconceivable without suffering. It also requires choice, the ability to choose to reach out to someone in need or to ignore him. Intellect is necessary so that one can estimate how much of oneself will be invested in showing compassion to the sufferer. Similarly, to be truthful involves a choice not to lie and is heightened when telling the truth may lead to personal loss and suffering, which can be predicted through the use of one's reason.

How often do we hear in plays, movies, and songs statements like, "You never really loved me, because when I was down and out and my life was falling apart you only thought of yourself and you left me!" Such a statement acknowledges the essential roles of hardship, choice, and intellect in love. The same could be said of the famous wedding vow that asks two people if they are ready to commit themselves to each other "for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death." It is the same with all the virtues: these three elements are crucial to our growth in them.

*When my oldest daughter, Jameelah, was a baby, she became very ill one night. The only way I could get her to sleep was to carry her on my shoulder while I paced the apartment and sang softly to her. If I stopped singing or tried to put her down, she would immediately wake up crying. So all night long, about eight straight hours, I carried my little girl and kept on singing. Her fever broke around dawn and she was then able to sleep on her own. Of course, by this time I was exhausted. My back was killing me, my throat was hoarse, and I had to be at work in an hour.*

*When I recently recalled this episode for her, Jameelah asked me, "Weren't you mad at me, daddy?"*

*I was surprised by her question, because the feeling never at any moment that night entered my heart.*

*"Mad at you!" I told her: "Sweetheart, I couldn't have loved you more! It is a memory that I will always cherish."*

Love, compassion, and caring are born of such experiences. They have a beauty and value that is, to use an expression of the Prophet, "worth more than this world and all it contains."<sup>21</sup> They also frequently contain opportunities for healing previous wounds and recovering past losses.

*Sarah, my second daughter, broke her leg when she was only a year old, and I had to stay that night with her in the hospital. She came so quickly after Jameelah—only a year separates them—and my work load at the university had increased so much, that I had spent hardly any time with Sarah until then. When Jameelah was a baby we were inseparable, but now a year had past in Sarah's life and I hardly knew her.*

*Sarah gripped my hand through the night; if I let go of it she would scream. The muscle spasms in her leg were keeping her awake. I had to lean over her bed rail to reach her hand and the rail was digging into my side. It was another sleepless, uncomfortable night.*

*As I watched this little child fight and struggle through the hours with her pain, I discovered Sarah for the first time. As I gazed into her big brown eyes and studied her expressions and reactions to my touch and my voice, I found how much this child and I were alike—how similar our personalities were. I was so ashamed that I had not taken the time before this to get to know her and I realized how much I had lost and how much we both needed each other. I vowed that evening to begin to work on my relationships with all my children and not to wait for crises to bring us together.*

These incidents were two minor trials in my life from which I learned so much. I wonder how much greater must be the experience of motherhood, for if I could gain so much benefit from these two moments, how much greater must be the potential personal gain from carrying a child for nine months? Perhaps this is why the Prophet Muhammad told his companions that motherhood puts paradise at a woman's feet.

<sup>21</sup> An expression used frequently by Prophet Muhammad. See *Riyad as Salihin* of Imam Nawawi, 221-22.

It also helps me understand why Islam places so much emphasis on family ties, since these relationships are for us the most intense and demanding and thus provide some of the most important opportunities for personal growth. The Prophet stated that "marriage is half of faith," since men and women only attain the fullness of their personalities as spouses and parents. Consider also the verse in the Qur'an that states that marriage provides spouses with a special way to experience love and mercy and that we should reflect on this most important sign:

And among His signs is this, that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and he has placed love and mercy between you. Truly in that are signs for those who reflect. (30:21)

As parents and as children, we may experience the widest range of the Divine Names as givers and receivers, respectively. When we attain middle age and are simultaneously parent and child, we reach a point in our lives that allows us to learn of God through both perspectives. The following two passages highlight this stage in our lives.

Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, never say to them even "Uff!" (a minor expression of contempt) nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor. And out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility and say, "My Lord! have mercy on them even as they cherished me when I was a little one." (17:23-24)

We have enjoined on mankind kindness towards parents. In pain did his mother bear him and in pain did she give him birth. The carrying of the [child] to his weaning is thirty months. At length when he is fully grown and attains forty years he says, "O my Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the favor which You have bestowed upon me, and upon both my parents, and that I may work righteousness such as You may approve; and be gracious to me in my children. Truly I have turned to You and truly I do bow in Islam. (46:15)

The first of the above passages links worship of God with kindness toward parents. It recalls their care and tenderness, their self-sacrifice is clearly implied, and thus they deserve our utmost respect. The second passage shows that honoring one's parents is an expression of gratitude toward God. It especially honors the mother's role because of the greater degree of pain and suffering she goes through in raising children.

Islam sees a unity and harmony between body, mind and soul, and unifying principles that govern all three. Coaches often tell athletes "no pain, no gain," by which they mean that in order to develop our physical strengths, we must be willing to suffer. Teachers inform students that they must work hard in order to grow intellectually. Muslims understand that the same law applies to spiritual development. Moral and spiritual growth requires the discipline of one's will, the use and development of one's mind, and the experience of hardship and suffering. The last of these should never discourage the Muslim, for the Prophet told his followers that a believer should always thank God in good times and in hard times, because he or she can benefit from both.<sup>22</sup>

## Second Objection

Let us agree that virtues, like love, compassion, truthfulness, and kindness, are not programmable and, furthermore, that in order to grow in these qualities we must possess the ability to choose and to reason and that we need to face adversity. Is there not then an obvious counter-example? Does or did God grow in these qualities? Does He weigh and choose between alternatives? Does He need to reason things out? Did He have to learn these attributes? Can He experience suffering?

This objection confuses creator with creature and bestower with receiver. God, the Creator, is described as eternal, absolute, perfect, transcending time and space. He is not diminished nor improved by His activity. He is the continuous source and preserver of all existence. His Most Beautiful Names indicate that He is the perfect and only real source of the attributes in which we must increase our capacity to receive and experience. He is the absolute source of all the mercy, compassion, wisdom, truth, etc., that flows through creation.

Man as a creature, by definition, becomes. He experiences growth and decline. Creation, according to the Qur'an, passes from one state into another (13:5; 28:88; 32:10). Hence man, in particular, is a changeable being.

<sup>22</sup> From *Sahih Muslim* as translated in Kazi, *Guidance from the Messenger*, 151-52.

The fact that God is not is a Qur'anic axiom (33:62; 35:63). God is the sole origin of—the explanation behind—all virtue, as His being accounts for its very existence. He does not grow in His ability to experience mercy; He provides the mercy in which we share. He does not increase in wisdom; He guides us to the wisdom that originates in Him. He does not develop His power; He empowers others. Far from providing a counter-argument, His being accounts for the attributes that we are to pursue.

## To Live and Learn

We have seen how the Qur'an underscores the learning ability of man and the instructional value of life in human moral and spiritual growth. That man will err along the way in his choices is inevitable, but God, in the Qur'an, does not expect us to be infallible; instead, He has granted us the ability to learn and gain from our mistakes. The Qur'an warns of the dangers of sin but also explains that if someone realizes his errors, repents, and believes and does good thereafter, God transforms his once-destructive deeds into beneficial ones.

He who repents and believes and does good; for such God changes their evil deeds to good ones. And God is ever Forgiving and Merciful. (25:70)

This verse seems to include the notion of the positive value of our acknowledged and amended errors. It is certainly good to avoid an evil solely out of obedience, but if one has also experienced personally its destructive and painful consequences, the wisdom and benefit behind its avoidance become inculcated in his heart and mind. It is like the child who avoids the kitchen stove after having been burned by it: he is no longer simply obeying his parents but is avoiding what he knows intrinsically to be harmful.

The Qur'an describes how even God's elect grew from past errors: Abraham discovers monotheism through a sequence of mistaken attempts (6:75-82); Moses commits involuntary manslaughter but repents and learns from it (28:15-19); and David is taught an important lesson that helps him realize a past wrong (38:21-26). The Qur'an's several criticisms of Prophet Muhammad are clearly meant to instruct him and his community.

God does not require us to become perfect before admitting us into His grace. Rather, the more we grow in goodness and in faith, the more we avail ourselves of it—the more our hearts become opened to receiving it. This is the lifelong effort of the believer: to refine his spirituality and thus to enter into an ever more intimate relationship with God. As

long as we are alive, our personal growth has no reachable upper limit for we can never reach a stage at which we can no longer gain from doing good. A Muslim believes that no good deed is superfluous. No matter how small it is, it will benefit him in this life and the next.

Then anyone who has done a speck of good, will see it. And anyone who has done a speck of evil will see it. (99:7-8)

In the Qur'an, God does not seek to bar men and women from His grace; He desires to guide them to it and He pursues them incessantly and aggressively. He invites, reminds, challenges, argues, shames, entices, and threatens. He inflicts calamities upon the sinful so that "perhaps they will return [to God]" (7:168; 30:41; 32:21, 43:28).

To those won over to its calling, the Qur'an provides much of what may be termed practical spiritual advice. First of all, one should avoid the heinous sins (murder, adultery, cheating the poor, etc.). In conjunction with faith in God, this will insure paradise in the next life.

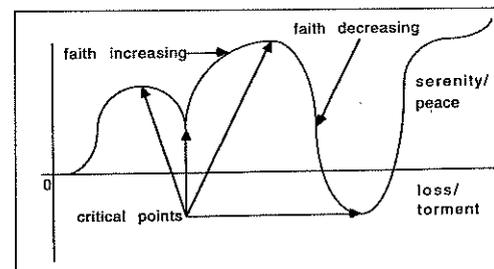
If you avoid the great sins of the things which are forbidden you, We shall expel out of you all the evil in you, and admit you to the gate of great honor. (4:31)

That which is with God is better and more lasting for those who believe and put their trust in their Lord; those who avoid the great sins and indecencies and when they are angry even then forgive. (42:36-37)

Those who avoid great sins and indecencies, only [falling into] small faults—truly your Lord is ample in forgiveness. (53:32)

After repentance, one should try to make amends in order to guard against a spiritual decline. In the same vein, the Qur'an states that good deeds offset evil ones (11:114; 13:22; 28:54). The idea here seems to be that if we take a step backward, we should try to counter it immediately by taking several steps forward so as not to lose progress. A key related eschatological symbol is that of the Balance on the Day of Judgment, which will weigh a person's good deeds against his evil ones. If the former outweigh the latter—if the individual is essentially a good person—then he or she will enter eternal bliss. We should keep in mind, however, that God has made it so that the positive rewards of righteousness far outweigh the negative consequences of wrongdoing (28:84; 40:40).

All this may seem too empirical, since it is impossible for us to detect precisely and accurately measure our good and sinful doings. However, the Qur'an is not providing an exact science of spiritual growth, but rather a helpful conceptual model. The Muslim is the first to admit his utter dependence on and trust in God's mercy and kindness, for he knows that he is on earth for a purpose. This conceptualization helps him to pursue it, even if it is not entirely clear to him what life's purpose is or has never agonized over its meaning.



Muslims say that if your faith is not increasing, then it is about to decrease or else it already has. If we were able to plot a person's spiritual growth against time, a Muslim would envision it as a continuous curve that, at any point, is either ascending, descending or at a critical turning point. According to this perspective, faith is not a steady state. A believer must be on guard against unwittingly slipping into a downward slope, and so he must always review the current state of his religiosity.

"How is your faith?" One Muslim will ask another. There is no precise measure, but there are a number of diagnostic checks that may help: "Do I feel closer to or farther from God in my five daily prayers lately?"; "Am I giving more or less in charity these days?"; "Was I at greater or lesser peace with myself and with others in the past?" With such self-analysis a Muslim hopes to stay on what the Qur'an describes as "the uphill climb" (90:11).

Surely he thought that he would never return (to God). But surely his Lord is ever Seer of him. But no, I call to witness the sunset redness, and the night and that which it drives on, and the moon when it grows full, you will certainly travel stage after stage. But what is the matter with them that they believe not? (84:14-20)

## Trial and Error

Life is often described as a great classroom—the ultimate learning environment. This description accords well with the Qur'an. As the best of all teachers, God not only provides us with the essential tools for learning but guides us to learn and grow through personal discovery as well. Thus the Qur'an states that God “taught [mankind] by the pen—taught man that which he did not know” (96:4-5), even though man's acquisition of reading and writing skills was a slow and gradual human development, one in which God's influence is easily missed. So subtle and effective is God's teaching that man often attributes his intellectual achievements entirely to himself. So the Qur'an continues:

No, but man is overbold, in that he views himself as independent. (96:6-7)

Earthly life provides us with a sense—a false one actually—of independence of and distance from God, a sense that drives us to learn and apply what we learn seemingly on our own. This is somewhat like when a teacher leaves the classroom and then watches through a one-way mirror to see how his students interact when faced with solving problems: no longer able to appeal to their teacher, the pupils are forced to solve the problems independently, while all the while the teacher monitors their progress and intercedes only when he deems it necessary. This is an extremely effective teaching device, for there is no substitute for first-hand experience.

In such a setting, one of the principle ways in which we learn is through trial and error. When I speak of trial and error here, I am referring not only to tests and mistakes we meet with on the intellectual plane, but also on the moral and spiritual plane, although the two overlap and are complementary. When a mistake we make has moral implications, it becomes a sin, the gravity and harm of which increases with our awareness of its wrongfulness (4:17-18). But if we repent and avoid it thereafter, it could, as we have seen, assist our spiritual growth. Thus we can learn and grow from our mistakes. Without the potential for error, realization, and reform, our spirituality would stagnate. So vital are these to our development in this earthly stage that the Prophet Muhammad reported that if mankind ceased sinning, God would replace them with other creatures who would continue to sin and repent and gain God's forgiveness.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 95.

Earthly trial is another key ingredient of the divine scheme: “We will try you with something of fear” (2:155), “God tests what is in your hearts” (3:154), “You shall surely be tried in your possessions” (3:186), “He tests you in what He has given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues” (5:51), “O believers, God will surely test you” (5:97), “We try you with evil and good” (21:35), “He may try some of you by means of others” (47:4). The Qur'an states that God created the entire cosmos in order to test mankind (11:7) and that God created death and life on earth to the same end (67:2). Since these tests can not improve God, they must be for our intellectual and spiritual refinement, and therefore the universe and our existence in it are designed to produce this testing and learning opportunity.

The Day of Judgment (1:4) is depicted as the moment when the results of our efforts are realized. The Qur'an's depiction of it has an unmistakable academic tone. It resembles the end of term or graduation day on a college campus. Mankind will be sorted out into three classes (56:7-56): The Foremost in Faith, those who excelled in their submission to God and are brought nearest to Him; the Companions of the Right Hand, those who did well enough on earth to enter paradise but who do not reach the level of excellence of the Foremost in Faith; and the Companions of the Left Hand, those who failed in life and who face suffering in the life to come. The record of all deeds, however small or great, will be brought out. The sinful will be in great terror this moment as they sense their fate (18:49). The faces of those who failed in life will be humiliated, laboring, and weary, while those who were successful will have joyful, exuberant faces (88:1-16). The successful will receive their earthly records in their right hands and will gleefully show them to others; the failures, consumed by grief and embarrassment, will be given their records in their left hands or will hold them behind their backs (69:19-30; 89:10). When awarded their records in their right hands, the successful will ecstatically run to show them to their families, but the failures will cry out miserably (89:7-11).

These descriptions have penetrated deeply into the consciousness of Muslims, who frequently draw comparisons between life and preparation for an exam. While this imagery lends itself to the most sophisticated and most naive understandings, every Muslim apprehends at least this much: Life presents us with a continual series of tests and our overall success or failure in responding to them will translate either into a state of happiness or suffering in the life to come. It supports the view that earthly life is an educational and developmental stage in our creation.