Practical Sufism An Akbarian Foundation for a Liberal Theology of Difference

by Vincent Cornell

Among the criticisms leveled at the Sufi tradition by its modern Muslim opponents, two stand out as most prominent. The first is that Sufism does not represent authentic Islam. This is allegedly because its teachings do not come directly from the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, and the first generations of Muslims (*al-Salaf al-Salih*). According to this "Salafi" argument, Sufism is a Trojan horse for unwarranted innovations that owe their origins to non-Muslim civilizations such as Greece, Persia, and India. The Salafi polemic began early in the history of Sufism, and is often associated with the anti-Sufi arguments of Hanbali scholars, such as Ibn al-Jawzi (d.1201) in *Talbis Iblis* or Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328) in his critiques of Ibn 'Arabi.[1] It was given a new lease on life in the twentieth century by the modernist reformer Muhammad Rashid Rida (d.1935), who edited Ibn Taymiyya's works and influenced later Salafi ideologues such as Hasan al-Banna (d.1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.[2] Although Banna saw some value in what he called "pure" Sufism, he condemned the Sufi tradition as a whole for incorporating foreign ideas, such as "the sciences of philosophy and logic and the heritage and thought of ancient nations". As a result, he asserted, "Wide gaps were opened for every atheist, apostate, and corrupter of opinion and faith to enter by the door in the name of Sufism."[3]

In the generation after Banna's death, Salafi modernism, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and allied groups such as Pakistan's Jamaat-i Islam, contracted a marriage of convenience with Salafi traditionalism, represented by the Wahhabi sect of Saudi Arabia. The result of this union was the birth in 1962 of the Muslim World League (*Rabitat al-'Alam al-Islami*), which provided financial and institutional support for Salafi missionary activities in the Muslim world and beyond.[4] The worldwide spread of Salafism was accompanied by a systematic campaign against Islamic traditionalism (except for Hanbali traditionalism) that has seriously undermined Sufism as a viable spiritual alternative in Muslim countries. In the words of Sayyid Qutb (d.1966), the former head of the Muslim Brotherhood's Section for the Propagation of the Message, the *al-Salaf al-Salih* "created a generation – the generation of the Companions of the Prophet, may God be pleased with them – without comparison in the history of Islam, even in the entire history of man. After this, no other generation of this caliber was ever again to be found."[5] According to Qutb, traditional Islam allowed itself to be reconquered by the very ignorance, depravity, and misguidance (*jahiliyya*) that the original message of Islam had sought to overcome. Sufism supposedly helped to perpetuate this new *jahiliyya* because it was a remnant of the "feudal ages": its traditionalism was an obstacle to progress and reform, and it advocated a spiritual withdrawal from life that led to the evil of a socially useless existence. For Qutb, Sufism was the first blow to be struck at the integrity of Islamic thought and the existence of the "Islamic nation".[6]

Sayyid Qutb's polemic exemplifies the second major criticism of Sufism in the modern era: that it is impractical and socially irrelevant. This critique has been nearly as harmful to the reputation of Sufism as the accusation of inauthenticity. For Hasan al-Banna, Sufism fostered an "isolated spirituality" (*ruhaniyya i'tizaliyya*) that leads to political and social quietism. This tendency runs counter to the "socially-conscious spirituality" (*ruhaniyya ijtima'iyya*) of Islamic activism, which promotes practice over theory and calls for open resistance against political and social injustice.[7] Banna's successors were even more

extreme in their criticisms of Sufism's relevance. For Qutb and Muhammad al-Ghazali (d.1996), Sufism was a medieval relic. Unscrupulous politicians used Sufi doctrines to "drug the masses" and "exploit the people" by causing victimized Muslims to resign themselves to their economic and social fate. Unlike Banna, who maintained amicable relations with some Sufi orders, they saw the Sufi *tariqa* as a prime cause of Muslim disunity.[8]

Today, leaders of Salafi organizations routinely use these critiques to turn Muslims away from the Sufi message. In many communities, anti-Sufi attitudes have led to a "tyranny of the majority" that adversely affects the lives of Muslims who follow the Sufi way. This tyranny can be observed even in liberal democratic countries such as the United States. *The American Muslim*, a widely distributed magazine published by the Muslim American Society of Falls Church, Virginia, contains an advice column in which a "Sheikh" named Muhammad al-Hanooti gives fatwas on various aspects of Muslim life and practice. In the September 2003 issue, a woman who has been approached by "a good Muslim man" for marriage inquires about her suitor's practice of Sufism (p. 38). She wonders about the suitability of a Sufi for marriage because she does "not want to end up with someone who does something wrong against Islam". Hanooti's response clearly illustrates the danger that Salafi ideas pose for Sufis who wish to remain active in their communities. "I do not know what sort of Sufi he is," says Hanooti, "but, in general, I advise you to marry a person who has good knowledge of Islam, and one who is not merely following culture and tradition. In general, I would caution you against marrying a Sufi, for a great many of them do not have a good knowledge of Islam and are tilted toward lives of inconvenience." By counseling the woman to not marry a Sufi, Hanooti is in effect saying that Sufis are not Muslims and that the Qur'anic ban against a Muslim woman's marriage to a non-Muslim applies not only to the followers of other religions, but to Sufis as well.

Sufism and Authentic Tradition

Those who are well acquainted with the doctrines and history of Sufism know that both of the critiques detailed above are false. First of all, Sufism, like most religious institutions in Sunni Islam, traces its origins to the Qur'an, the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad, and the way of *al-Salaf al-Salih*. Thus, Sufism has just as much right to be called "Salafi" as its opponents. Most of the early systematizers of Sufism, such as Abū 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d.1021), Abū Nu'aym al-Isfahani (d.1038 9), and Abū al-Qasim al-Qushayri (d.1074), were trained in Shafi'i jurisprudence, which was "Salafi" to the core. Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.855), the founder of the Hanbali tradition, was a student of Imam al-Shafi'i (d.820), and the Hanbali and Shafi'i legal schools do not differ on essential matters. Although Salafi opponents of Sufism have the right to object to Sufi doctrines and practices, they do not have a warrant to claim that Sufism has no authenticity. In fact, it is easier to claim that Sufism, not Salafism, is the more authentic, because its traditions are more consistent with the historical contours of Islamic thought. It is much more difficult to maintain, as Salafi modernists do, that nearly all of Islamic thought between the first century of Islam and the nineteenth or twentieth century of the Common Era is a distortion of "true" Islam.

The accusation that Sufism is impractical or socially irrelevant is equally false. In the Sufi tradition, one of the earliest terms for "saint" was *salih*. This is the same term used in the phrase, *al-Salaf al-Salih*, which denotes the supposed forerunners of today's Salafis. The Qur'an mentions the *salihin*, along with martyrs and propagators of the Islamic message, as people whom Allah has favored (4: 69). A *salih* (fem. *saliha*) is a morally upstanding and

socially constructive person who performs righteous works (*salah*) and strives for the improvement (*islah*) of oneself and one's fellow human beings.[9] Since a major role of the Sufi *salih* is to make the world a better place, it is hard to argue that such a person is socially irrelevant. The retreats and periods of meditation practiced by Sufi *salihin* were means to specific ends; they were not ends in themselves. Many Sufis emerged from their retreats to become active in their societies. Sometimes this activism was manifested outwardly, as among the famous activist shaykhs of North Africa.[10] At other times it was manifested inwardly, such as when Harith ibn Asad al-Muhasibi of Baghdad (d.837) formulated the Sufi doctrine of the tripartite soul (*nafs*).[11] Are we to conclude that Muhasibi's ideas were not relevant because he preferred to look for the causes of social problems such as murder, suicide, and tyranny in the individual psyche rather than in society at large? Is a Sufi "psychologist" such as Muhasibi less socially useful than a modern Salafi politician?

In the present-day culture war that pits Salafi and other forms of Islamic activism against an ideologically demonized West, and that pits a resurgent Western positivism and cultural imperialism against an ideologically demonized Islam, the perspectives of Sufism and other major traditions of classical Islam are more important than ever. The wholesale rejection of the historical traditions of Islamic thought by Salafi modernist ideologues constitutes a massive example of the fallacy of the excluded middle. To all intents and purposes, there are no "middle ages" for Salafi Islam. Instead, the idealized memory of a pristine "original age" provides the basis for a utopian political ideology whose vaunted "Islamic system" was never part of traditional Islamic society. There is no historical authenticity in such a combination of myth and fantasy. Although Salafi ideologues are often nostalgic for the past glory of Islamic civilization, they seldom mention that this glory was built on foundations – such as those provided by Sufism and other traditional Islamic disciplines like *Kalam* and *Falsafa* – that have mostly been rejected by present-day reformers. Such a position is both logically and historically untenable. In the study of Hadith, a tradition is considered inauthentic (*marfu'*) if the chain of transmission between the Prophet Muhammad and the present is broken. How then, can Salafi modernism, which willfully rejects twelve centuries of Islamic development between the Prophet and the present age, claim to be authentic when its own tradition is *marfu'* as well?

Commenting on the contradictions of the early modern age, the Moroccan Sufi Ridwan ibn 'Abdallah al-Januwi (d.1583) warned his contemporaries: "Soon you will see, when the dust clears, whether a horse or an ass is beneath you!"[12] Today's contradictions within Islam are more lethal; it is a bomb, not an ass, which Salafi ideologues may be riding into the future. The extremist tendency of Salafi utopianism has become all too visible since September 11, 2001. Its single-minded hubris has transformed a regional problem into a global crisis. If Muslims cannot accept doctrinal differences among themselves, how can they hope to live in a globalized world, in which cultural and religious differences are norms rather than exceptions? An authentic Islamic theology of difference is needed to make sense of a pluralistic world. Such a theology must be premised on the realization that the present state of religious diversity reflects the will of God and that Islam allows different paths to an understanding of the divine will.

Finding Interpretive Space

The dialectical process through which new theologies arise requires a hermeneutical space in which critical thinking can take place. The Salafi regimes of power that dominate contemporary Sunni discourse restrict such space by branding all approaches that do not fit

their agenda as "un-Islamic". It makes little difference whether these "un-Islamic" responses seek a neo-traditionalist revival of the juridical, philosophical, or Sufi approaches of the past, or whether they employ the tools of modern critical theory to come up with new solutions. The Salafi response to the problem of making Islam relevant in the modern world is to proclaim, "Islam is simple", and to reduce religious consciousness to a calculus of ritual obligations, external symbols of group identity (such as modern "Islamic" dress), and political doctrines that promote cultural and creedal exclusivism.[13] The radical superficiality of contemporary Salafi thought has led to the development of a restrictive and highly ideologized sense of orthodoxy that, when combined with the anti-traditionalism described above, has turned Salafism, if not the majority of Sunni Islam, into more of a sectarian cult than an actual religion.

Before modern times, few Muslim scholars of repute would dare to assert, "Islam is simple". Islam, as it was lived and interpreted, was as simple or complex as it needed to be, and the level at which it was approached depended on what circumstances required. The institution of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), traditionally the most important intellectual discipline in Islam, was premised on the need to apply the Shari'a in a multiplicity of different contexts, and developed a sophisticated logic for interpreting the Law in different situations. The complexity of Islam in practice was acknowledged further through the establishment of Islamic jurisprudence in several methodological schools, which differed in their approach to textual sources, yet recognized each other's right to exist. The juridical hermeneutical method, known as *ta'wil*, was the subject of treatises within each school and was applied to both legal and theological interpretation.[14]

The way in which *ta'wil* was used to create a hermeneutical space for new theological positions is described by Abū Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111) in *Faysal al-tafriqa bayna al-Islam wa al-zandaqa* (The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Heresy). Ghazali wrote this work to refute the tendency of Muslim scholars in his own time to condemn their opponents as unbelievers or heretics. According to Ghazali, sacred texts such as Qur'an and Hadith are open to interpretation on five different levels: (1) ontological-existential (*dhati*), (2) experiential (*hissi*), (3) conceptual (*khayali*), (4) intellectual (*'aqli*), and (5) metaphorical (*shabahi* or *majazi*).[15] These levels of analysis mark the boundaries of interpretive space in Islam: "Everyone who interprets a statement of the Lawgiver in accordance with one of the preceding levels has deemed such statements to be true ... It is [thus] improper to brand as an unbeliever anyone who engages in such interpretation, as long as he observes the rules of hermeneutics (*qanun al-ta'wil*)."[16]

Ghazali's method of *qanun al-ta'wil* was predicated on the assumption that the jurist or theologian will at times be compelled to acknowledge "the logical impossibility of the literal meaning (*zahir*) of a [sacred] text".[17] When this happens, hermeneutical space must be made available for alternative explanations. To render an interpretation valid, one must interrogate each of the five hermeneutical alternatives systematically, thus establishing a logical warrant for the method that one chooses to employ.[18] Ghazali does not claim that all interpretations of a sacred text are of equal value. Some may be misguided or even completely wrong. However, wrong interpretations should not be suppressed as heresy. Instead, they must be disproved dialectically. An interpretation is heretical only if it denies the truth of a sacred text on all five hermeneutical levels. Epistemologically, the exegesis of a sacred text constitutes informed opinion (*zann*) and not absolute truth (*haqq*). Thus, no one may claim an exclusive right of interpretation and no single interpretation is definitive. Ghazali's methodology of *qanun al-ta'wil* fulfills an important need in contemporary Islamic

thought because it grants dissident thinkers the right to express their views. In this way, it helps preserve alternative voices that keep the process of interpretation open-ended. In terms of modern political philosophy, its spirit conforms to the liberal ideal of freedom of speech by conceding to jurists and theologians the right to be wrong.

An Akbarian Approach to Religious Difference

The warrant to interpret sacred texts on more than one level is necessary if Muslim theologians are to engage constructively with theologians of other religions. Contemporary Muslims must reexamine the full panorama of Islamic religious thought, assess its successes and failures, and listen once again to the voices that have been silenced. Today, these silenced voices include most of the intellectual traditions of medieval Islam: philosophy, systematic theology, the classical jurisprudential tradition of Sunni Islam, and Sufism. Although it would be a mistake to consider all Sufis "liberal" or "open-minded", Sufi thinkers were more inclined than their exoteric counterparts to view Islam from a wider perspective and deal meaningfully with religious difference. In part, this was because they understood theology in its original sense as the "study of the nature of God", and followed their inquiries wherever this definition took them. Some of the most perceptive Sufi writings on religious difference came from the school of Ibn 'Arabi (d.1240), who was one of Islam's greatest metaphysicians. Many of the tenets of "Akbarian" theology, which refers to Ibn 'Arabi's designation as "The Greatest Master" (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*) by his followers, were criticized by opponents of Sufism for not adhering to the creedal boundaries of mainstream Islam.[19] An example of such an alleged "innovation" can be found in the treatise entitled, *al-Insan al-Kamil* (The Perfect Man), by the Iraqi Sufi 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (d.1428). Jili, who was one of the most important of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrinal successors, ends a discussion on the origin of religious difference with the following statement:

Ten sects are the sources for all of the religious differences (which are too numerous to count), and all differences revolve around these ten. They are: Polytheists, Naturalists, Philosophers, Dualists, Magians, Materialists, "Barhamites", Jews, Christians, and Muslims. For every one of these sects God has created people whose destiny is Heaven and people whose destiny is the Fire. Have you not seen how the polytheists of past ages who lived in regions not reached by the prophet of that time are divided into those who do good, whom God rewards, and those who do evil, whom God recompenses with fire? Each of these sects worships God, as God desires to be worshipped, for He created them for Himself, not for themselves. Thus, they exist just as they were fashioned. [God] may He be glorified and exalted, manifests His names and attributes to these sects by means of His essence and all of the sects worship Him [in their own way].[20]

At first glance, this passage appears to deny the significance of religious difference and to promote an early version of the "transcendent unity of religions" thesis. However, after a more careful reading, one discovers that it is a justifiable, if unconventional, interpretation of certain Qur'anic verses according to Ghazali's method of *qanun al-ta'wil*:

For each one of you we have made a Law (*shir'a*) and a way of life (*minhaj*). If God had wished, He would have made you into a single community. Instead, He has done this so that He may try you with what He has given you. So strive against each other in good works, for to God is the return for all of you and He will inform you about that wherein you differ (5: 48).

If your Lord had willed it, everyone on earth would have believed. Would you then force people to become believers? (10: 99)

Although Jili's exegesis of the Qur'an was innovative, it was fully valid according to the rules of hermeneutics proposed by Ghazali. Jili began his analysis by taking the sacred text at its literal word. Starting from the literal meaning (*zahir*) of the Qur'anic verses, he employed the method of *qanun al-ta'wil* on the conceptual and intellectual levels of meaning, without resorting to metaphor. Then he took another Qur'anic verse, "God does whatever He wishes" (2: 253), and applied the theological notion of divine voluntarism to the empirical fact of religious diversity. The conclusions that Jili draws in *al-Insan al-Kamil* – that the existence of religious differences is God's will, and that all human beings, even unbelievers, practice religion as God intended them to do – follow logically from this process of interpretation. However, this is not to say that Jili's interpretation is the "true" meaning of these Qur'anic verses. It is only to say that his interpretation is as valid as any other interpretation derived from the literal meaning of these three verses. Even more, Jili affirms that Islam is the quintessential religion of God. Later on in the text, when he discusses how "each sect finds pleasure in its tenets" (Qur'an, 30: 32) he does not absolve the unbelievers of their errors.[21] For Jili, religions are not equal in value. However, when the Qur'an commands, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2: 256), this means that even false religions should be respected by Muslims because all religions, including those that are in error, exist by God's will.

Contemporary Muslims should carefully consider Jili's reasoning and the Qur'anic verses that support it. In the modern age, the chief problem for Islamic theology is not the proliferation of local religions, but the competition of rival world religions, most of which have histories longer than that of Islam and have developed sophisticated means of defense and interpretation. If God had truly intended to save the world through the message of Christ alone, then why would He have allowed the theological challenge of Islam? If Islam resolved all of the contradictions of Christian theology, then why is Christianity still the largest religion? Part of the answer to these questions, Jili would assert, lies in the recognition that each religion contains a portion of universal truth, to which people respond in their own way. Theological hostility can never be transformed into tolerance until this fact is recognized. In a recent unpublished paper, Martin Lings, commenting on Mark XII, 30 ("Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength"), notes that Muslim and Christian religious authorities have been much too eager to risk "with all thy mind" for the sake of "with all thy soul and with all thy strength".[22]

The Creative Command and the Islamic Original Position

According to Akbarian moral theology, there are two types of divine command, which entail different kinds of human obligations. Each command implies a different way of approaching the religious other. The first type of divine command conceives of the other in a universal sense, as a fellow descendant of Adam, the first human being. According to this perspective, all human beings share the same natural rights and duties that derive from the covenant contracted between God and humanity before the creation of Adam. The second type of divine command is addressed more specifically and narrowly to the Muslim believer. It governs obligations that are detailed in the Shari'a, and includes the Qur'anic verses of difference and discrimination, which separate Muslims from believers in other religious traditions. These verses discuss the relations between the Muslim community and other

religious communities, the theological relationship between Islam and other religions, and the rules of social interaction, including the rules of war.

Ibn 'Arabi calls the first and most universal type of divine command the Creative Command (*al-amr al-takwini*).[23] This command is "creative" because all of creation, including humanity, is a product of God's goodness and creativity. The Qur'anic verses that best characterize this command are: "My mercy encompasses everything" (7: 156); and "[God's] only command when he desires a thing is to say to it Be!' and it is" (36: 82). The divine names of mercy, *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*, govern the Creative Command because the act of divine creativity – the bestowal of existence upon nonexistence – is the most merciful act that God performs. The Creative Command is logically prior to all other divine commands because it expresses most completely the Qur'anic message of unity. Under the terms of this command, the most important duty of the human being is to recognize that insofar as she is human and created, she has one God, one origin, one ancestor (Adam), one race, and shares with all other human beings the same nature, dignity, and religion. This religion is Islam, in the universal sense of recognizing and submitting to the consequences of one's ontological dependence on God.

The relationship between God and the human being that is implied in the Creative Command is formally expressed in the first part of the *Shahada*, the Islamic "witnessing" of ultimate truth: "There is no god but Allah". This relationship also expresses what the liberal moral philosopher John Rawls (d.2002) might have called the Islamic "Original Position". This is because the Creative Command sets the most basic and fundamental terms on which the relationship between self and other is predicated. For Rawls and Ibn 'Arabi alike, the relationship between self and other is the basis of all natural duties, irrespective of whether it is between the human being and God or between oneself and another human being.[24] This relationship is epitomized in the Qur'an by the verse that describes humanity's covenant with its Creator and Lord: "When thy Lord drew forth their descendants from the children of Adam, He made them testify concerning themselves [saying]: Am I not your Lord?' They replied, Yes, we do so testify'" (7: 172). Humanity's assent to the responsibilities implied in this covenant constitutes the "social contract" that is the basis of the Islamic Original Position. Although the Qur'anic "social contract" is hierarchical, and thus is not exactly the same as Rawls' secular contract between ontological equals, it still meets the criterion of equality that is necessary for a liberal theory of justice. This is because the Islamic Original Position conceives of all human beings as ontologically and morally equivalent and as sharing the same natural rights and duties.

The normal human condition is to see God from the starting point of the world. To see God from this perspective is to see God as the Lord and Creator of everything. This is the attitude expressed in the Islamic Original Position when the human being responds to God's query, "Am I not your Lord?" with "Yes, I do so testify." Muslim exegetes interpret this assent as having been given before the earthly creation of the human being, when all of Adam's future descendants were summoned to acknowledge God's Lordship and His role in their creation. The fact that this covenant was contracted before humans were on earth implies that human beings have a transcendent side to their nature, and thus have the ability to rise above their earthly condition and view the world as if from a distance or a height.[25] The higher one goes, the more the world appears as a whole, and differences that seem significant on the ground become insignificant when viewed from above. From such a vantage point, all of the world, including all peoples and all of their different beliefs, are part of the same reflection of God, whose "face" will abide forever (55: 27), for "He is the First and the Last, the

Outward and the Inward" (57: 3). This universalistic worldview, in which self and other are part of the same unity, is an important corollary of the Creative Command and gives rise to the natural duties that result from the Islamic Original Position: "Oh humankind! Keep your duty to your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and created its mate from it and from whom issued forth many men and women. So revere the God by whom you demand rights from one another and revere the rights of kinship" (4: 1). As this verse indicates, the duty to abide by God's Creative Command includes reverence for the rights of kinship (*al-arham*, literally, "the wombs"). Clearly, this duty applies to genealogical kinship, but it also applies to the greater kinship of the human species, since all of humankind, as the children of Eve, are born from the same womb.

To return to the terminology used by Rawls, the "initial contractual situation" of humanity's covenant with God is the starting-point from which all concepts of right begin, including the rights that people demand from each other. The fact that such rights are both mutual and reciprocal is also part of the Islamic Original Position and is a consequence of the shared ontology of humanity. This ontology includes a transcendent aspect, which is the spiritual potential of each human being. The Qur'an says that God breathed His spirit into Adam (38: 72), and that "[God] created the heavens and the earth with truth and right (*bi-l-haqq*), and fashioned [Adam] in the best of forms" (64: 3). Thus, human beings, who are composed of both spirit and matter, have a natural duty to respect the rights of others, because both self and other share the same combination of material being and spirit. This duty pertains irrespectively of whether the other is one's biological kin or belongs to another race or religion. To objectify and depersonalize another human being because of ideological or religious differences is to forget that all humans are made up of the same combination of spirit and clay. This is the mistake that led Satan, in the form of Iblis, to disrespect Adam by saying, "I am better than [Adam]. You created me from fire, whereas you created him from clay" (7: 12).

According to Rawls, a conception of right "is a set of principles, general in form and universal in application, that is to be publicly recognized as a final court of appeal for organizing the conflicting claims of moral persons."[26] Such a conception of right may be derived directly from the Islamic Original Position. As the Qur'an reminds us, not only was Adam created with rights, but the entire cosmological universe ("the heavens and the earth") was similarly created with *haqq*, an Arabic term that can mean "right", "truth", or "justice". The idea that all created things possess rights that are part of their ontological nature is fundamental to the Islamic conception of justice. The duty to respect the inherent rights of others is a corollary of this premise; human *dignity* is a right that is not exclusive to Muslims. Thus, the tendency of some Muslim ideologues to deny moral personhood to non-Muslims or dissenting Muslims is both a lapse of understanding and a breach of God's Creative Command.

Another basic right that is derived from the Islamic Original Position is the right to *life*: "Do not take a human life, which God has made sacred, other than as a right; this He has enjoined upon you so that you might think rationally" (6: 151). Another is the right of *free choice*, without which divine judgment would be meaningless: "The truth is from your Lord. So whosoever wishes shall believe, and whosoever wishes shall disbelieve" (18: 29). It would make a mockery of the God-given rights of dignity, life, and free choice for Muslims to restrict the social and political rights of confessional minorities or to assign collective guilt to a nation because of its religion or system of government.

The basic rights in Islam – the right to life, the right to freedom, and the right to dignity – depend on a second natural duty that arises from the Islamic Original Position. This is the duty of mercy (*rahma*), which is prior to all other duties in Islam except the acknowledgement of humanity's common dependence on God. Allah says in the Qur'an, "My mercy encompasses everything" (7: 156), and every *Sura* of the Qur'an except one begins with the formula: "By the name of God, the Beneficent (*al-Rahman*), the Merciful (*al-Rahim*)".[27] Muslim reformers who wish to reform their societies by making the Shari'a the basis of their legal systems often forget that the duty of mercy applies to each and every obligation that is enjoined upon human beings in the Qur'an. What this means in practice is that when the performance of an obligation calls for severity, it is the duty of Muslims to temper severity with mercy.

The Command of Obligation and Islamic Justice

In terms of religious practice, the concept of obligation has more of a day-to-day impact on the lives of individual Muslims than the concept of right. Thus, it is no surprise that the type of divine command most often discussed in Islamic literature is the Command of Obligation (*al-amr al-taklifi*).[28] This command forms the basis of the Islamic legal system and is divided by jurists into injunctions covering acts of worship (*'ibadat*) and interpersonal behavior (*mu'amalat*). The latter category includes business transactions, criminal justice, and the laws of nations. The Arabic term, *taklif*, used in the phrase *al-amr al-taklifi*, is a legal and moral concept that refers to the responsibility of individuals to carry out their obligations. The Command of Obligation imposes specific obligations on Muslims, either individually or collectively. It is a matter of debate whether such obligations should be obeyed simply because they come from God or because they are good intrinsically. Muslim modernists, following the teachings of Muhammad 'Abduh (d.1905), assert that all divine commands are subject to empirical verifiability and serve a necessary function that can be proven rationally. Literalists, such as the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, consider it sacrilegious to put God's commands to such a test and assert that Muslims should obey them unquestioningly, simply because they come from God. What is perhaps most significant is that neither side seems to have discussed this question from the standpoint of a systematic moral philosophy. Whereas the juridical tradition of Islam dealt with questions of moral choice pragmatically on a case-by-case basis, it was primarily the philosophers and the Sufis who attempted to assess the Islamic concept of obligation within the context of more universal conceptions of right and justice.[29] The marginalization of philosophy and Sufism in contemporary Islam, and the resulting lack of debate on the wider philosophical issues surrounding the concept of obligation have become major contributing factors to the rise of extremism in the Muslim world.

The duty that governs the moral obligations of Muslims under the Command of Obligation is *justice*. An alternative reading of the verse, "[God] created the heavens and the earth with truth and right (*bi-l-haqq*)", is "God created the heavens and the earth with justice". Justice, in the sense of what is right and proper, is a secondary meaning of the Arabic term, *haqq*. Justice is enjoined on human beings as a natural duty in a number of Qur'anic verses: "Verily, God commands justice and kindness" (16: 90); "Make peace between them with justice, and act equitably" (49: 9). The Arabic term for justice in these verses, *'adl*, corresponds closely to the Aristotelian notion of justice, which carries the connotation of "fairness" or "equity".[30] For Rawls, all obligations arise from the principle of fairness, because fairness "holds that a person is under an obligation to do his part as specified by the rules of the institution whenever he has voluntarily accepted the benefits of the scheme".[31]

In Islam, "voluntary acceptance of the scheme" is implied in the Islamic Original Position as a consequence of the covenant struck between God and humanity. Justice is thus a natural duty in Islam because human beings are "born into" justice from before their creation; the concept is, in effect "hard-wired" into the physical and social worlds that humans occupy.[32] The major concepts that are included in the notion of justice in Islam also appear as Divine Names. God is thus characterized as The Truth (*al-Haqq*), Justice (*al-'Adl*), and The Fair or Equitable (*al-Muqsit*). This is particularly significant because for Ibn 'Arabi and his school, the qualities of existence are imparted as manifestations of the Divine Names.

A problem with applying the notion of justice to specific obligations in Islam is that justice is most commonly understood as a moral duty, whereas the Command of Obligation is understood as a legal requirement. Because the exact relationship between duties and obligations has not been philosophically determined in contemporary Islam, there is a tendency to fall into a confusion of priorities in the attempt to apply one or the other. Ibn 'Arabi, who was one of the few Muslim thinkers to address the problem of duty versus obligation systematically, prioritized the two concepts in light of the two types of divine command. The natural duty of mercy is enjoined upon human beings through what Ibn 'Arabi called the "Mercy of Obligation" (*rahmat al-wujub*), which is an aspect of the Command of Obligation.[33] Unlike the altruistic "Mercy of the Gratuitous Gift" (*rahmat al-imtinan*), which is part of the Creative Command and is an expression of divine love and creativity, the Mercy of Obligation refers to the mercy that is required in every moral action, according to the Qur'anic verse: "Your Lord has prescribed mercy for Himself" (6: 12).[34] Ibn 'Arabi further relates the concept of mercy to the divine names *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*, with the Mercy of the Gratuitous Gift corresponding to *al-Rahman* and the Mercy of Obligation to *al-Rahim*. Because of the reciprocal nature of justice, any act of mercy bestowed by one human being upon another constitutes a gift for both the receiver and the giver. For the receiver, the gift of mercy compensates for the severity of justice. For the giver, the duty to act mercifully is also a gift from God because it counteracts the tendency of the ego to indulge in self-righteousness:

God exercises mercy as a gratuitous act under the name *al-Rahman* (The Beneficent), while he obligates Himself (to requite with mercy) under the name *al-Rahim* (The Merciful). Obligation is part of the Gratuitous Gift, and so *al-Rahim* is contained within *al-Rahman*. "God has written upon Himself mercy" in such a way that mercy of this kind may be extended to His servants in reward for the good acts done by them individually – those good works which are mentioned in the Qur'an. This kind of mercy is an obligation upon God with which He has bound Himself toward those servants, and the latter rightfully merit this kind of mercy by their good works.[35]

To summarize: the natural duty of mercy is part of the Islamic Original Position by virtue of the Creative Command, which corresponds to the divine name *al-Rahman*. In like manner, the Command of Obligation obliges human beings to act mercifully by virtue of the divine name *al-Rahim*. Just as human mercy (*rahma*) is implicit in the idea of mercy as a universal principle (*al-Rahim*), so the obligation to act mercifully on all possible occasions is a necessary corollary to the notion of mercy as a natural duty. However, most people are not aware of the logical priority of mercy and other natural duties that arise from the Creative Command. Mired as they are in a world of difference and subjectivity, they interpret the Command of Obligation in an exclusive sense, and overlook the logical priority of both the Creative Command and the natural duties that arise from it:

The divine effusion is vast, because [God] is vast in bestowal. There is no shortcoming on His part. But you have nothing of Him except what your essence accepts. Hence, your own essence keeps the Vast away from you and places you in the midst of constraint. The measure in which His governance occurs within you is your "Lord". It is He that you serve and He alone that you recognize. This is the mark within which He will transmute Himself to you on the day of resurrection, by unveiling Himself. In this world, this mark is unseen for most people. Every human being knows it from himself, but he does not know that it is what he knows.[36]

The Muslim who views the world from a narrow, fideistic perspective can only perceive God through his or her personal experiences. How God is to be conceived and what His commands entail are questions whose answers are constrained by the limitations of one's understanding of self and others. The sectarian interpretations that the believer gives the commands of God may be justified in a qualified sense, but they are likely to lead to injustice if they are applied universally and uncritically. This is because human understanding of the divine command reflects one's own biased perspective more than it reflects a theological or philosophical understanding of God as God truly is. In a commentary on the famous tradition, "He who knows himself, knows his Lord," Ibn 'Arabi states: "You are the one who becomes manifest to yourself, and this gives you nothing of [God] ... You do not know other than yourself."[37]

Even the Muslim jurist, who is trained to consider a scriptural obligation as prior to a moral duty, must assess each obligation according to whether the divine command that governs it is general or specific in its application. If the application is specific, he must inquire about any limitations to its application that might arise through the historical context of its revelation.[38] A divine command must not be applied universally if the context of its revelation demonstrates conclusively that its application is specific to a particular time, place, or social situation. An example of this dual problematic of prioritization and contextualization can be found in *Surat al-Tawba* (Chapter on Repentance), where some of the most hostile verses concerning Muslim and non-Muslim relations appear. How is a Muslim to respond when the Qur'an commands: "Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah or the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah has forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute (*jizya*) readily, being brought low" (9: 29)? Certainly, it is helpful to know that there is a limiting context: this discourse was revealed at a time when the polytheists and the Jews in Arabia had broken their treaties with the Muslims and banded together against the Prophet in what proved to be the final assault on Medina. However, as late as the mid-twentieth century, Sayyid Qutb, who was fully aware of the historical background of this verse, interpreted it as a general obligation to compel non-Muslim minorities to pay the *jizya*-tax. Even more, he defined the *jizya* not as an exemption from military service as Muslim apologists have often done, but as a protection tax and token of humiliation that temporarily exempted Jews and Christians from persecution by the Islamic state.[39] The prioritization of rights over duties embodied in Ibn 'Arabi's notion of the dual nature of the divine command not only strengthens the liberal response to such discriminatory interpretations, but it also supports the juridical tendency to promote mercy by seeking limiting exceptions to the Command of Obligation whenever possible.

A Bridge to Hospitality and Toleration

The first step toward a new Islamic theology of difference is for Muslims to recognize that ultimately, everything happens because God wants it to happen. This includes the fact of human diversity, which the Qur'an mentions as having been created for the purpose of reflection and learning:

Among [God's] signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colors. Herein indeed, are portents for those with knowledge (33: 22).

Oh humankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes so that you may come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the most God-conscious of you. Verily, God is the Knowing and the Aware (49: 13).

Included within the diversity of which the Qur'an speaks are differences in human ideas, worldviews, and religions, all of which exist because of God's Creative Command. However, the acceptance of plural perspectives on the Absolute does not mean that all religions are ultimately the same, or even that some religions might not be more effective paths to the knowledge of God than others. By the same token, prioritizing the natural duty of mercy by acknowledging the dignity of Buddhists and Christians or accepting the divine origins of Judaism and Hinduism does not mean that Muslims cannot oppose the unjust actions of believers in other religions. Actions should be seen as evil whenever they undermine the universal principles of life, dignity, freedom of choice, and justice that are embodied in the Qur'an and other scriptures. Evils should be opposed in themselves, and they should not be seen as inescapable consequences of alternative religious beliefs. According to the Akbarian perspective, no religion that God allows to exist is bad per se, and no one has the right to exclude a believer in another religion from the brotherhood of the Islamic Original Position. Individual Christians and Hindus can do bad things, but so can Muslims. Saying that Jews are the eternal enemies of Islam or that American foreign policy is necessarily driven by "Crusader" intentions is a moral and theological error of profound proportions. On the moral level, this error is caused by ignoring the priority of the Creative Command over the Command of Obligation; on the theological level, it is caused by ignoring the full meaning of the human being as God's vicegerent (*khalifa*) on earth (2: 30 33).

For Muslims, the acceptance of religious differences does not have to mean abandoning one's belief in the theological superiority of Islam or fearing that one is acting against God's will. In fact, the situation is quite the opposite. The permissibility of religious pluralism is clearly indicated in the following Qur'anic passage: "For each of you we have made a Law and a way of life. If God had willed, He would have made you into a single community" (5: 48). In this verse, "Law" (*shir'a*) is a synonym for religion, because it refers to the duties and obligations that provide a framework for the moral life. In pre-modern Islam, the subject of "the Law before Islam" constituted what we today would call the history of religions.[40] In addition, the verse goes on to say: "Strive against each other in good works, for to God is the return for all of you and He will inform you about that wherein you differ." Even a literal interpretation of this statement would suggest that the only inter-religious competition that counts in the sight of God is competition in good works, such that Muslims would compete with Jews, Christians, and others in the alleviation of human suffering. This is very different from the belief, expressed by contemporary Hamas and Islamic Jihad extremists, that strapping on a bomb belt and blowing up a bus of Israeli school children will earn the martyr a reward in heaven because the children are potential Israeli soldiers.

All morally significant acts, whether performed by Muslims or non-Muslims, must be judged by prioritizing the rights and duties of the Creative Command over the requirements of the Command of Obligation. Each moral individual is a responsible (*mukallaf*) person, who carries out his or her obligations in the context of the religion or moral standard (*shir'a*) that one accepts by virtue of either choice or birth. Most Muslims interpret the Qur'anic verse, "He it is who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so that it may prevail over all religion, even if those who assign partners to God disapprove" (9: 33), as an assurance of the ultimate victory of Islam over other religions. However, Ibn 'Arabi's teachings remind us that all human beings, including Muslims, "assign partners to God" in various ways. In his view, believers in all religions are equally far from the "religion of truth" that will prevail at the end of time. The will of God is not one-dimensional. Limiting the interpretation of God's word to a single level of understanding was theologically untenable in the past, and it is even more untenable today, when human knowledge has new tools for analyzing and reflecting on the meaning of revelation. Five centuries ago, the Sufi and jurist Ahmad Zarruq of Fez (d.1493) wrote: "He who practices Sufism without the Law is a heretic; he who practices the Law without Sufism is a reprobate; but he who combines the Law and Sufism has attained the truth."[41] What Zarruq meant by this was that the practice of scriptural hermeneutics demands a multi-dimensional perspective, in which individual obligations are viewed in the context of the creativity of God's will, and in which the outer word of the Law is interpreted in light of its inner spirit.

As a unique combination of spirit and matter, the human being is by nature a builder of bridges between conceptual worlds. Beneath the differences that obtain between religious doctrines, sacred laws, and worldviews, all normal human beings share the ability to transcend their limitations; all have the intellectual means to communicate with each other across religious divides. In light of Qur'anic teachings, it is illogical to assume that religious misunderstanding is normal or that religious differences cannot be bridged. If believers in different religions are unable to understand each other, it means that one or both are lacking in spiritual insight, or that one or both are in fundamental error about the nature of God. Among the rights bestowed upon us by God, the right *not* to understand is nowhere to be found. The Qur'an warns Muslims: "Be not of those who ascribe partners to God (*mushrikun*), who split up their religion and become schismatics, each sect exulting in its doctrines" (33: 31 32). This error is part of the theological sin of *shirk*, a term usually defined as "assigning partners to God", but which literally means, "sharing". In other words, it consists of letting contingent ideas, concepts, and prejudices share in God's will and sovereignty, and as such, is the greatest impediment to theological hospitality and the acceptance of difference. Along with Ibn 'Arabi, all Muslims should be cognizant of the wider implications of the Qur'an's warning: "God does not forgive your *shirk*, but he forgives all else, as He wills" (4: 48).

Notes

1. See Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: the Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, NY, 1999), pp. 87 112.

2. Ibid., p. 90. See also Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York and Oxford, 1993 reprint of 1969 first edn), p. 5. Banna was a frequent visitor to the Salafiyya bookstore in Cairo and the Muslim Brotherhood published the final edition of Rida's journal, *al-Manar* (ibid. pp. 321 2).

3. Mitchell, *Muslim Brothers*, p. 214.

4. The first council of the Muslim World League, which met in December 1962, was headed by Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Al al-Shaykh, a direct lineal descendant of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d.1791), the founder of Wahhabism, and included Said Ramadan, the son-in-law of Hasan al-Banna. See Hamid Algar, *Wahabbism: A Critical Essay* (Oneonta, NY, 2002), p. 49. Said Ramadan was stripped of his citizenship by the revolutionary government of Egypt in 1953. He had long been a key figure in the Muslim Brotherhood's international bureau and was influential in the establishment of the Brotherhood in Syria. He subsequently received political asylum in Switzerland, where his son, the prominent European Islamic intellectual Tariq Ramadan, was born. See also Mitchell, *Muslim Brothers*, pp. 141 2.

5. Seyyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Damascus, English trans. of 1962 Arabic edn, n.d.), p. 15.

6. Mitchell, *Muslim Brothers*, p. 216.

7. Ibid. Mitchell translates *ruhaniyya ijtima'iyya* as "social spirituality".

8. Ibid.

9. On the concept of *salah* see Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, TX, 1998), p. 6.

10. Ibid. See especially the chapters on Abu al-'Abbas al-Sabti (d.1204), pp. 79 92, and Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-Jazuli (d.1465), pp. 155 229. In his youth, Hasan al-Banna joined a socially active Sufi order known as the Hasafiyya. He was involved with this order for twenty years, and claimed that the Hasafiyya Society for Charity was the inspiration for the Society of the Muslim Brothers. Mitchell, *Muslim Brothers*, pp. 2 6.

11. On Muhasibi's theory of personality, see Margaret Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad: A Study of the Life and Teaching of Harith B. Asad al-Muhasibi, A.D: 781 857* (London, 1977 reprint of 1935 first edn), pp. 86 110.

12. Muhammad ibn Yusuf as-Sijilmasi, *Tuhfat al-ikhwan wa mawahib al-imtinan fi manaqib Sidi Ridwan ibn 'Abdallah al-Januwi* (Rabat: Bibliothèque Générale, ms. 114K), p. 86. [All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.]

13. In "Toward the Light", a manifesto for the reformation of Egypt sent to King Faruq in 1947, Hasan al-Banna included among the planks of his program "Consideration of ways to arrive gradually at a uniform mode of dress for the nation". Hasan al-Banna', *Five Tracts of Hasan al-Banna' (1906 1949): A Selection from the* Majmu'at Rasa'il al-Imam al-Shahid Hasan al-Banna', trans. Charles Wendell (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1978), p. 129.

14. An important work in this genre is Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn al-'Arabi al-Ma'afiri (d.1149), *Qanun al-Ta'wil* (The Rules of Hermeneutics), ed. Muhammad al-Slimani (Beirut, 1990). This jurist from Seville in Muslim Spain was not related to the Sufi Ibn 'Arabi.

15. Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Hamid al-Ghazali's* Faysal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa (Oxford and Karachi, 2002). I have altered Jackson's translation of terms slightly to fit the present discussion. Ghazali's full discussion of the terms mentioned above can be found on pp. 94 100.

16. Ibid., p. 50.

17. Ibid., p. 104.

18. Ibid.

19. See Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, for a full account of these objections.

20. 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili, *al-Insan al-kamil fi ma'rifat al-awakhir wa al-awa'il* (Cairo, 1981), vol. 2, p. 122.

21. Ibid., pp. 122 4.

22. Martin Lings, "With All Thy Mind", unpublished paper disseminated at the second "Building Bridges" seminar hosted by His Highness the Emir of the State of Qatar and Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, Doha, Qatar, 7 9 April 2003.

23. William C. Chittick calls this the "engendering command", because it results from the manifestation of the divine name *al-Rahman* (The Engendering). The source for this concept is Ibn 'Arabi's *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyyah* (The Meccan Revelations). See William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, NY, 1994), p. 142. It may also be translated as the "formative command", because the Arabic term, *takwin*, carries the connotation of formation or development.

24. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 1999 revised edn), pp. 10 19.

25. This could be used as a metaphorical interpretation of Qur'an, 7: 46, "And on the Heights are men who know all of them by their signs."

26. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 117.

27. In *Fusus al-hikam* (The Ring-Settings of Wisdom) Ibn 'Arabi calls this type of mercy the "Mercy of the Gratuitous Gift" (*rahmat al-imtinan*). It is a mercy which God bestows on things simply because they exist. For Ibn 'Arabi, all existence is ultimately good, since it comes from God. Evil is nonexistence (*'adam*). See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley and London, 1983), p. 121.

28. Chittick calls this the "prescriptive command". See Idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, p. 142.

29. This is not to say that Muslim jurists did not discuss such questions. However, those who did so most successfully, such as Ghazali and Ibn Rushd (d.1198), combined their juridical backgrounds with studies of Sufism or philosophy.

30. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN, 1988). See especially the chapter entitled, "Aristotle on Justice", pp. 103 23. In Aristotle, justice is based on ratios, and not on equivalences. These ratios govern the principle of fairness in distributive justice and retributive justice (or "justice as rectification"). See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Oswald (Indianapolis, 1981 reprint of 1962 first edn), Book V, pp. 111 30.

31. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 301.

32. Ibid., p. 302. The fact that the Arabic term, *'adl*, connotes justice, fairness, and equity eliminates Rawls' problem of having to draw a lexical distinction between justice and fairness. In Islam (as in Aristotle), one cannot say that justice is qualitatively different from fairness, because they are essentially the same thing.

33. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, pp. 121 2.

34. This passage could also be translated as: "Your Lord has written mercy upon His own Spirit".

35. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 122. This discussion is found in *Fusus al-Hikam*.

36. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p. 152. This passage is from *Futuhat* (IV 62.23).

37. Ibid., p. 163. The passage comes from *Futuhat* (IV 421.34).

38. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 139 48.

39. Sayyid Qutb, *Fi zilal al-Qur'an* (In the Shade of the Qur'an) (Beirut and Cairo, 1980), pp. 1220 50. A less severe perspective can be found in Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Non-Muslims under Shari'ah (Islamic Law)* (Lahore, 1981).

40. This subject is discussed in detail in A. Kevin Reinhardt, *Before Revelation: the Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany, NY, 1995).

41. Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad Zarruq, *Qawa'id al-Tasawwuf* (Principles of Sufism), ed. Muhammad Zuhri al-Najjar and 'Ali Ma'bid Farghali (Beirut, 1992), p. 8.