

# Faith and Morality: The Islamic View

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There is a point of view popular with some religious thinkers—among them Muslims—that religion and morality are two separate institutions and have very little to do with each other. This is because the former is centered in God, while the latter is entirely human in content and approach.<sup>1</sup> According to this view, an individual can be moral without subscribing to any recognizable religion. Furthermore, a deeply religious person occupies a station in life where usual relations with the world, including those with other people, are perceived as being so lowly and mundane that they become irrelevant. This is, to say the least, not the essential Qur'anic standpoint.

The Qur'an, as well as a number of sayings of the Prophet, does not envisage an estrangement between God and humanity. Human beings are said to have been created after the image of God,<sup>2</sup> Who is nearer to each person than his/her own jugular vein (Qur'an 50:16). They are so close to each other that they may possibly enter into a mutual dialogue. There is thus an organically intimate relevance of the individual's religious faith with the subsequent performance of the corresponding moral actions. In the Qur'an, the word *āmanū* (they held on to faith [in God]) is almost invariably followed by *'amilū al ṣāliḥāt* (they performed good actions). However, it must be understood that faith is not an honorific term, a characteristic that may be inculcated into a person's character in its own right. It rather refers to a barely psychological state, an attitude of mind. A person may have faith in the all-good God or in some evil being(s) (Qur'an 4:31). In the first case, such an individual is necessarily good; in the other, he/she is bound to be morally bad.

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<sup>1</sup>This was the position of the Mu'tazilī, who generally held that ethical characteristics are determined by a person's natural reason rather than by revelation. Thus, for them, revelation simply confirms these characteristics. More recently, this was the declared opinion of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a nineteenth-century religious-political thinker of the Indian subcontinent.

<sup>2</sup>Muhammad M. Khān, *The Translation and Meanings of Sahīh Al-Bukhārī* (Medina: Islamic University, n.d.), 160 (Kitāb al Isti'zān, no. 246).

Despite the Qur'anic concept of a close relationship between faith and action, early Muslim theologians, prompted by certain extratheological and especially political reasons, argued about whether there is or is not a necessary relationship between faith and action. There were two opposing points of view. At one extreme were the Murji'ah, who believed that faith consisted only of the knowledge of God and the Prophet and that it was accompanied by a public acknowledgment of what He had revealed through Muhammad. For them, it had nothing to do with actions. A person in whose heart was a faith in God would not cease to be a *mu'min* even if he/she committed a grave sin. Some even believed that outward allegiance to Judaism or Christianity did not detract from an individual's *īmān*. According to the group at the other end, the Khawārij, actions were a necessary constituent of faith. In their opinion, if a Muslim committed a grave sin, he/she had lost faith and instantly became an apostate. Having been categorized as an apostate, it became the duty of the pious Muslims to kill him/her.

These two extremist attitudes led to two opposing ethical positions. The Murji'ah encouraged unlimited tolerance and what sometimes amounted to moral laxity and licentiousness, whereas the Khawārij became synonymous with a rigid and bigoted stance in all social and moral matters. The Mu'tazilah, tried to follow an intermediate course between these two extremes. According to them, a Muslim who committed a grave sin neither lacked in nor lost his/her faith: he/she occupied an intermediate position between the two.

In the present paper, I have used "faith" as the closest equivalent of the Qur'anic term *īmān*. Most translators, however, have used "belief" which, I hold, is an incorrect rendering. This will become clear as the distinct connotations of these two terms are brought out in the following pages.

The one basic difference between belief and faith, as these words are used in English, is that the former is propositional, while the latter is nonpropositional, in character. I always "believe that" such and such is the case. Even "belief in" statements can be reduced easily to "belief that" ones so that the object of this verb becomes a proposition. For example, "he believes in angels" means "he believes that angels exist." Faith, on the other hand, is always "faith in" some being or reality, and that is not translatable into any "faith that" statement. Belief has only an academic significance, and every new belief only adds itself to that particular individual's intellectual biography, whereas faith implies the total commitment of one's cognition, affection, and conation to the object of his/her faith.

As a result, there is another distinction: belief is subject to change and is replaceable when richer evidence in the relevant case becomes available. A change of faith is not so easy: it is possible only when the person possessing it goes through an entire metamorphosis and becomes, in effect, a new per-

son. If we seek to further compare belief and faith as modes of knowledge, we may profitably refer to the distinction made by Bertrand Russell between "knowledge by acquaintance" and "knowledge by description."<sup>3</sup> Belief would correspond to knowledge by description, and faith to knowledge by acquaintance. The latter, however, has an additional characteristic: it stands for that kind of knowledge in which the object of acquaintance is somehow personal, with the result that it almost amounts to an I-Thou encounter between the individual with faith and that in whom/which this faith is reposed.

In view of the above, it can be seen that the Qur'anic word *īmān* should be translated as "faith" rather than "belief." *īmān* and its derivatives, as used in various contexts, behaves as a directly and immediately experiential act so that it comes out as a *shahādah*: the individual of faith in the capacity of a direct observer confidently bearing testimony to what has been observed. It involves one's whole being, for commitment to the truth is always total. Thus it is used nonpropositionally in almost all of its occurrences in the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup>

In the Qur'anic worldview, because one's faith in God or, to be more general, one's faith in the Unseen, is a commitment, it implies a whole metaphysics and an entire philosophy of life. The metaphysics thus conceived has a close relevance to the visible reality. In the visible universe around us, there are three levels of being which, in an ascending order of excellence, may be enumerated as the level of matter, the level of life, and the level of mind and consciousness. Each level has its own laws of nature peculiar to itself, which means that the higher is always "supernatural" and "metaphysical" vis-à-vis the lower. In a way, the higher also presides over the lower and serves as the ideal to which the latter can aspire. For example, life is metaphysical for matter, and mind is metaphysical for both life and matter.

Based on the same pattern, the universe constituted by God's will and His plan of action is metaphysical for all strata of beings below; the latter in turn are destined to share the former and carry it out. Such is the intimacy of the relationship between the metaphysical beyond and the visible present. Incidentally, the whole conception of the universe implies that physical sciences on the one hand, and metaphysics on the other, have the reciprocal right of mutual intervention. Some critics object to this out of their fear that such an arrangement would jeopardize unnecessarily the autonomy and the "freedom of inquiry" of the positive sciences. But this fear is not justified.

Sciences necessarily need a metaphysical outlook, as such an outlook provides significant pointers to the direction in which scientific progress should

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<sup>3</sup>Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), chapter 5.

<sup>4</sup>For a more detailed discussion of this subject, see Abdul Khaliq, *Problems of Muslim Theology* (Lahore: Izharsons, 1989), chapter 3.

advance. Without these pointers, there is a likelihood that scientists may be led into undesirable and sometimes blind alleys. A person's moral behavior and understanding also need a healthy metaphysics. The Qur'an is very clear on this point, for it declares that the Book of God provides guidance only to those who have a "knowledge of the ultimate state of affairs," for which it uses the term *īmān* (faith) (Qur'an 2:2-3).

A metaphysics grounded in the Islamic faith is therefore different from Western metaphysics, which, in general, is a purely rational construction. According to the Qur'an, we do not calculate and reason out metaphysics: we rather experience it, have an encounter with it, and live it. It is a matter of the individual's psychological formation that prepares him/her for his/her role in life. Kant, we are reminded here, had declared metaphysics, the endeavor to gain knowledge of being beyond phenomenal reality, an impossibility. The door to metaphysical knowledge has thus remained largely closed for those philosophers who accept reason as the only mode of knowledge. The Qur'an, on the other hand, declares knowledge of the ultimate reality to be the outcome of a "faithful" commitment and, therefore, a thoroughly possible enterprise.

Metaphysics, being thus a matter of an individual's personal experience, is not just a postulate of morality; it is part and parcel of moral behavior. An individual is known and recognized by the kind of metaphysics he/she holds. A reference to the Socratic maxim of "knowledge is virtue" is apt here. For Socrates, knowledge (of virtue) is not simply a prerequisite of virtuous behavior; both, for all practical purposes, are mutually identical. Similarly, in Islam, subscribing to a metaphysical system and performing certain actions in accordance with that system are two aspects of the same phenomenon. The Supreme Reality of Islam—God—is not an abstract concept, but a Being possessing a will and a plan of action and qualified by the beautiful names (*al asmā' al ḥasanah*) that symbolize the ideals of perfection for the moral agent. The greater an individual's closeness to these ideals, the better he/she is from the moral as well as spiritual point of view. Equally truly, if a person has faith in evil forces and has constructed the corresponding metaphysics, his/her behavior will become erratic and undesirable.

In conclusion, the cause of an individual's or a people's moral degeneration is to be sought in the loss of truly religious faith. A rejuvenation and cementation of a truly religious faith will automatically reinstate morality. But how can this actually be accomplished? A search for an answer to this question is an independent subject requiring separate treatment.

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