

Social Intuitions and Qur'ānic Ethics

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Abstract

Detractors of, apologists for, and those who would simply describe Islamic ethics, often assert that the Qur'ān is the source of Muslim norms of behavior. While at one level this assertion is indisputable, to assert this casually obscures one of the most subtle and most distinctive features of Qur'ānic ethics, namely that the Qur'ān very frequently specifies that one ought to act according to norms not specified in the Qur'ān, that is, one is to have recourse to sources of ethical knowledge located elsewhere than in Revelation. This paper will justify this assertion, and then explore the implications of a Revelational specification to follow non-Revelational moral norms. Preliminarily such a doctrine would seem consistent with features of Qur'ānic anthropology and cosmology which, in contrast, for example, with most forms of Christianity, diminished the categorical difference between the Next world and This one, and between human nature and human potential. Some possible different workings-out of this ethical system for Imāmī-Shī'ī and Sunnī Islam will be considered as well.

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Introduction

The prevailing understanding of Qurānic ethics both among fundamentalists and critics of Islam is that the Qurān provides a set of specific and quite rigid rules for living the Islamic life. These rules constitute the *sharīah*, usually translated as “Sacred Law,” and justify the claim that “Islam is more than a religion,” that “Islam is a way of life.”

Yet from the point of view of the History of Religions, this commonly-held belief that the Qurān is made up of rules poses a problem. Islam was arguably the first “world religion,” and it has proved a meaningful way to live in an astonishing set of geographical and sociological environments—urban and rural, tropical and desert, pastoral and agricultural. One would expect that diversity and flexibility would characterize such a religious institution, rather than the rigidity and prescriptivism that its haters and some of its proponents ascribe to it.

As part of a larger project examining Islamic variation, I want to consider today the ethical assumptions of the Qurān itself as a model for Muslims to reflect upon as in the 16th/21st century proceeds.

The notion that the Qurān is “full of rules” is hard to sustain if one examines the Qurān carefully. The belief that the Qurān is a book of stipulations arises partly from the accident of the Qurān’s arrangement: the first several *sūrahs* in the redacted Qurān—*al-Baqarah*, *Āl Imrān*, *al-Nisā*; *al-Māidah*, etc.—have a relatively high percentage of rules that (following traditional dating) arose during the creation of the Islamic polity in Madīnah: rules for marriage and divorce, inheritance and incest rules, food rules, contract and diplomatic relations, and so on. Yet, there is a general agreement that even the most generous accounting of Qurānic prescription gives one only some 500 rules in the entire Qurān. This is nowhere near enough to be the basis for a rule-driven religion or system of ethics. I want to suggest that from the early days of Islam the Qurān was mostly understood not as a “rulebook.” Proof is that both ‘Alid and non-‘Alid communities quickly developed theories of augmentation—either by means of charismatic guides (the Imāms) and/or the sunnah of the early generations, the Companions and the Prophet himself—to “fill in the gaps” in the Qurānic revelation. In short, Qurānic ethics cannot be rule-bound, as early Muslims knew.

My argument here is that this turn toward sources other than the Qurān to understand how to act in accord with Qurānic intentions is due not to some sort of deficiency in Qurānic ethics. Rather, that search for another source of ethical knowledge is part and parcel of Qurānic ethics; it is stipulated by the Qurān itself.

To me, the most striking fact of the Qurʾān is not that it contains rules—often quite detailed rules about family, property, and society—that should really surprise only Christians and especially contemporary Protestantized Christians whose normative model of religion is a religion comprised of concepts, sentiments and dogmas—in other words, mental rather than practiced constituents. For them rules of practice are distinctly secondary and even hazardous, since “the written law inflicts death.”¹ That distaste for rules is simply a theology-driven choice. Certainly the belief that the presence of rules leads necessarily to rigidity or even transgression is based on a naive view of reading, as we will see. Read carefully, the Qurʾān’s ethical discourse is in fact open-ended, contextual, and demands a careful situational analysis shaped by local and temporal norms; it is not to be understood (based on the Qurʾānic text alone) as comprised solely or even mainly of rigid and eternally prescribed, specific and unchanging rules of conduct as so many in our age-Muslim and non-Muslim-suppose.

The Vocabulary of Qurʾānic Virtues

Let us consider only some of the large number of Qurʾānic words that denote “virtue” in the broad sense. In this way we may come to understand what the Qurʾān understands to be “the good.” Let us begin with a Qurʾānic term for virtue that defines virtue fairly explicitly: Derivatives of the root letters *b-r-r*.² The most common form is the nominative, *al-birr*, which is used eight times in the Qurʾān (Q 2:44, 177 [twice], 189 [twice]; 3:92; 5:2; 58:9), in passages coming from the later period of revelation. In Qurʾānic usage, *birr* connotes virtue or righteousness in the context of religious attitudes and acts, as in the verbal form Q 2:224: { ... act well (*tabarrū*), fear God, and reconcile people,} or Q 60:8: { ... to be good to [your opponents] and be equitable toward them.}

The term in pre-Islamic Arabic seems to have meant “piety”—especially towards one’s parents,³ benignity, but also a state of heightened and disabling purity resulting from ritual consecration practices, especially of the Ḥums. Q 2:189 addresses what seems to be a pre-Islamic taboo, connected perhaps to the *ḥajj*, according to which people in the state of consecration (*iḥrām*) had to leave and return to their houses via back doors and even holes under walls.⁴ The cultic usage is directly confronted by the Qurʾān: {it is not *birr* to go to houses from their backs but rather, pious is the one who

1. Paul 2 Corinthians 3:6 Knox translation.

2. see Izutsu, 1966 #3, 207-11.

3. From the same root comes the verb *barr*, which seems to mean, literally, “to be pious,” that is, filial toward parents (see Q 19:14, 32). God Himself is called al-Barr (Q52:28).

4. Hurgronje, 2012 #4, 45; Juynboll, 2007 #2658, XXX.

fears God (*wa-lakinna l-birra mani ttaqá*.)} The verse continues with an exhortation to enter houses by their doors (*abwāb*) and to fear God. This follows the general Qurānic presentation of piety when it is redefined through a series of lists (*birr* is not X but Y) to denote a state of inner disposition: it becomes “God-consciousness” (*taqwá*) as Rahman translated it.

More elaborately, at Q 2:177 *birr* is once more defined over against cultic practice, in this case the older *qiblah* from which Muslims have been redirected and turned in worship to Mecca:

{It is not *birr* that you turn your faces to the east and the west, but *birr* is one who has faith in God and the last day and the angels and the Book (q.v.) and the prophets, and [one who] gives wealth from love of Him to kin and orphans, and the unfortunate and *ibn al-sabīl* [probably those who have recently immigrated to Medina], and to those who ask; who frees slaves and undertakes worship and pays *zakāt*, and those who fulfill their compact (lāhd), when they make compacts, and the steadfast (*al-ṣābirīn*) in adversity, in stress, and time of tribulation; those who have integrity (*ṣadaqū*) - these are the ones who fear God (*al-muttaqūn*).}

The cultic prescriptions so dear to legists are not dismissed—one is still to perform *ṣalāh*, pay *zakāh*, and turn in a certain direction when praying, but those practices are subordinated in what one of my teachers called the “semantic re-filling” of the term *birr*. The muslim¹ internal disposition toward God, the muslim’s ethical judgement—these are the new meanings assigned to *birr*. Virtues such as generosity towards the vulnerable are listed along with the cultic worship and payment of one’s religious dues in such profusion as to overwhelm the merely cultic and to subordinate it to the dispositional and the ethical.

This is confirmed in three instances (Q 3:92; 5:2; 58:9) where *birr* is paired with *taqwá*, “piety” or “an awareness of God,” or some derivative of the root letters *w-q-y*; in all cases it is overtly virtue, not cultic conformity in a religious context that is implied. {You do not attain *birr* until you spend (*tunfiqū*) from that which you love; and whatever you spend, God is aware of it. (Q 3:92).}

It seems that by the end of the period of Qurānic revelation, a vocabulary defining virtuous membership in the community had been developed. *Birr* was among the terms that had significance in the pre-Islamic world but were being redefined to convey a new, Qurānic, ethical sense. Piety in the Qurān is not just doing the right act, or observing the right taboos, but the inner disposition and attitude that transcend that act.

1. I take W. C. Smith’s point seriously, that the Qurān is concerned with the “submitter” (*muslim*) more than with members of a certain “religion” (Muslims).

The “emptiness” of Qur’ānic virtue terms

Though *birr* has been redefined away from its cultic and familial origins, it retains-through lists of conceptual synonyms-a degree of specificity that just allows us to emphasize the perspectival, attitudinal, in understanding the term. Even that degree of specificity is absent from other important terms for virtue in Qur’ānic ethical discourse. For example, the very common term for good and good works (*khayr*, *khayrāt*) are as vague in the Qur’ān as the English terms we use to translate them.¹ The term usually is stereotyped with “vie in” or “hasten to.”² *Khayr* itself means “good,” and in certain contexts has an explicitly moral sense, as in Q 3:26: {in your hand (God) is the good (*al-khayr*).} Izutsu points out that this term usually refers to bounty and wealth, or to bounty and wealth properly used.³ It is things we like or of which we approve. *Khayr*, then, is what we might call a natural good, but beyond that, not much more can be said.

Likewise, it is difficult to translate *ḥ-s-n* and its derivatives more precisely than with the word “good.” Aside from aesthetic description and mere approval in a number of places, the root sometimes suggests ethical action: {then we gave Moses (q.v.) the book complete for those who do good (*alladhī aḥsana*)...} (Q6:154). The most obvious “ethical” usage of the root is with the form *iḥsān*, which occurs twelve times,⁴ e.g. {kindly treatment of parents} (Q 2:83, *bi-l-wlidayni iḥsānan*), or {Divorce twice, then take back with *ma’rūf* or release with *iḥsān*} (Q2:229). The point of these passages is to incite the listener to what he/she knows to be proper behavior. More often, it is overtly a reference to religiously-approved behavior, especially when this form is used in the plural, e.g. Q 3:172:

Those who responded to God and the messenger after the wound befell them, for those among them who did well (*ahsanū*) and feared God-a mighty reward!

Izutsu suggests that the root *ḥ-s-n* refers to pious acts and includes ethical acts informed by the pre-Islamic virtue of prudent forbearance (*ḥilm*).⁵ One passage that suggests a progression of virtuous development or a hierarchy of ethical values is the following:

For those who have faith and do good deeds (*ṣāliḥāt*), there shall be no transgression (*junāḥ*) concerning what they have eaten. Therefore [be one of those who] fear God and

1. {Vie with one another in good works} (Q2:148); see also 3:114 where it is linked with “enjoining the *ma’rūf*,” see below for a discussion of this term.
 2. e.g. Q23:56.
 3. Izutsu, 1966, 217 f; but see also Q 5:48; 8:70.
 4. Q 2:83,178, 229; 4:36, 62; 6:151; 9:100; 16:90; 17:23; 46:15; 55:60 [twice].
 5. Izutsu, 1966, 224 ff.

have faith and do good deeds (ṣāliḥāt), then fear God and have faith, then fear God and do kindness (ahsanū); God loves those who do kindness. (Q5:93)

The most frequent word for virtuous conduct is *ṣāliḥ* or other words from the root which occur some 171 times in the Qurān. The root appears in verbal forms as in, {who does right (*man ṣalaḥa*) from among their fathers, wives, and offspring [shall enter the Garden of Eden]}.¹ Its most common form is a nominal plural in stereotype with *amilu* as “doing good deeds,” or “those who do virtuous acts” (*alladhīna amilu l-ṣāliḥāt*).² *Amilu l-ṣāliḥāt* is so common as to amount almost to a chorus in Qurānic discourse. Ṣāliḥ acts explicitly earn the doer paradise.³ Very often *ṣāliḥ* is joined to other fundamental Qurānic concepts, as in Q 5:93 which we’ve already seen: {... Therefore-[be one of those who] fear God and have faith and do good deeds (*ṣāliḥāt*) ...}.

The twinning of faith and good works led Izutsu to speculate that *ṣāliḥ* is the outward expression of the faith (*imān*) so often enjoined by the Qur’an.⁴ It certainly is the case that *ṣāliḥ* is sometimes found among the qualities listed in passages that read like catechisms of what it means to be a virtuous Muslim.⁵ Yet, for all its prominence in the Qurān, the *ṣāliḥ* is undefined, and this it shares with the other important terms for virtue.

The term that best helps us to understand the nature of Qurān ethical prescriptions is *ma’rūf*, a term that appears 39 times (in slightly varying forms) in the Qurān yet seems to require no explanation from either the Qurānic text or from commentators.⁶ It is often paired with kindness (*iḥsān*) and is itself often translated merely as “kindness.” It is frequently an adjective, e.g., {*Qawl ma’rūf*}⁷ but it is most interesting when it straddles the line between adverb and noun. {*Bi-l-ma’rūf*} functions Qurānically both to tell us *how* something is to be done and *what* is to be done: {... so long as you give them what you provide them *bi-l-ma’rūf*} (Q2:233). Indeed, in the *aḥkām* verses, *ma’rūf* often modifies a command-pay *bi-l-ma’rūf*, for instance.⁸

1. also 40:8; 13:23.

2. e.g. Q 2:25 and numerous other instances.

3. Q 2:25; 5:93; 18:107.

4. Izutsu, 1966, 204.

5. see, for instance, Q 2:277; 5:89.

6. See the discussions on the first occurrence of the term, Q 2:178, in al-Tabarī, *Tafsīr*, al-Nīsābūrī, *Tafsīr*, al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi*.

7. e.g., 47:21; 2:263.

8. See also 2:228, 2:178 and elsewhere.

Most importantly for the Islamic ethical tradition is the injunction to {command the *ma'rūf* and forbid the *munkar*}.¹ Here *ma'rūf* cannot mean “kindness.” So, what *does* it mean?

Michael Cook says elegantly:

There is no indication that [ma'rūf] is itself a technical or even a legal term. ... Thus it seems that we have to do with the kind of ethical term that passes the buck to specific standards of behavior already known and established.²

The word occurs without the sorts of definitional lists we saw with *birr*: It is this, it is that. If we pay attention to the Qur'ānic text, we must note that the text refers only to “the *ma'rūf*” without explanation. Our only clue is that *ma'rūf* means “the known.” But how is it known? Nothing in the use of *ma'rūf* stipulates how the *ma'rūf* is known—the Qur'ān does not say “*ma'rūf bi-l-shar*” or “*ma'rūf min al-nabī*” or *min ūlū l-amr* or *min ahl al-ilm* or anything else.

“Do good deeds. Do kindness.” “How anodyne!” one might think. “Be a good person.” Is this helpful to a person facing a temptation or an ethical dilemma? I believe the answer to be “yes, this is helpful.” One lexicographer uses a standard understanding of “knowing” to suggest that the test of the *ma'rūf* is that “it is that in which the self finds ease (*sakinat ilayhi l-nafs*) and it deems it good, because of its goodness-intellectually, revelationally, and customarily.”³ In other words, the Qur'ān assumes that some part of the good enjoined by the Qur'ān is known without revelational stipulation. It is ordinary knowledge to which the Qur'ān refers. “You *know* what to do and how to do it,” says the Qur'ān. “Do it the right way. You know the difference between doing something with kindness and doing it grudgingly, obeying the spirit of the law and not merely the letter.” In other words, the Qur'ān not only provides a particular and unique species of knowledge through Revelation, but it also indicates the moral knowledge of the Meccans and Medinans and indeed all the Arabs hearing the Qur'ān between 612 and 632.⁴

This was recognized and indeed canonized as an epistemic principle by al-Shāfi'ī in his *Risālah* when he said that understanding the Qur'ān depended upon grasping the various implications of a Qur'ānic declaration that are apparent to a speaker of the language in which the Qur'ān was revealed, but are not apparent to a non-native.⁵

1. 3:104 and seven other times.

2. *Commanding* 15.

3. Abu l-Baqā, *Kulliyāt*, iv, 185.

4. see Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, i, 163.

5. *Risālah* §53-4.

Al-Shāfiʿī's response to this feature of revelation was to argue that the Qurān's auditors understood the Qurān mostly in the context of the Prophet's normative activities and sayings-the Prophet's sunnah. Yet recent research has shown that Shāfiʿī was making an argument, not reflecting the early Muslims' practice:¹ All kinds of knowledge from all sorts of people augmented and informed the quest to be a good Muslim. In short, it was the ethical culture of Arabia that the Qurān assumes to underpin Qurānic dictates when it tells Muslims to do something *bi-l-ma'rūf* or to command the *ma'rūf*.

Nonetheless, both al-Shāfiʿī with his emphasis on the Prophet's sunnah and the early jurists with their emphasis on the normativity of the early Muslims in Arabia were focused on an *illud tempus*, a religious Golden Age-understanding of how to augment the Revelation. Does the Qurān share this point of view? Of course it enjoins obedience to the Prophet but in the passages cited, the absence of this model of ethical amplification is striking. The Qurān does not say "command what the Prophet liked and forbid what he despised;" nor does the Qurān say "If you want to know what "known is" (*wa-mā adarāka mā al-ma'rūf*) look to the customs of your forefathers among the Arabs," though surely in the seventh century environment that is the relevant context.² "*Ma'rūf, ṣāliḥ, birr, ḥasan/iḥsān*"-none of these terms points to a single source of knowledge. In fact, in their very specificity they point to ethical knowledge, generally.

Yet, is the Qurān's appeal to cultural knowledge restricted to the seventh century or is it an appeal to invoke what is known by Muslims when they reflect upon the Qurān in the world in which they live?

The history of Muslims' grasp of the Qurān is-it seems to me-of Muslims' gradually discovering that the Qurān is more than they had known. There is no doubt that most early Muslims saw the Qurān as *their* Scripture, as the text for an Arabian ethnic religion. We know that in the eighth century conversion to Islam was actually discouraged and that few non-Arabs were allowed to convert to Islam without first converting to 'Arabism' by becoming *mawālī*. If the accounts are to be believed, at least one of the Umayyad caliphs and some of the Shīʿī imams disagreed with this position, but it was the position generally held by Muslims and one enforced by the state. By the 9th century, on the other hand, conversion was openly advocated and

1. Lucas, 2008 #5.

2. This is not to say that revelation or the Prophet or experts, including infallible ones, have nothing to say, of course.

Islam became a world religion, rather than an ethnic religion. Muslims discovered that the Qurʾān applied to humankind, not just to Arabs.

Could it be, then, that the Qurʾān-when it commands the *maʾrūf* or that something be done *maʾrūf^{an}* or *bi-l-maʾrūf*-expects the Muslims to look to what we know, in the 15th Islamic and 21st Milādī century? Those changes in our ethical assumptions and knowledge, about slaves, about women, about equity and justice, are supposed to inform the reading of the Qurʾānic text now, just as they did when the first Muslims heard the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān's repeated use of unspecified terms for good, may not be imprecision, but a goad to ethical reflection in the contemporary environment.

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