INTRODUCTION

I

Islamic ethics should be of interest to Muslims and non-Muslims alike in two aspects. The first is its central place as the core of Islam, if we can include Islamic law as an integral part of ethics.[1] The Qurʾān repeatedly uses the phrase 'those who believe [in God] and do good works',[2] taking it for granted that these two attributes belong to the same group in extension, and that the first is a prerequisite of the second – but also that the first would be insincere and not true belief without the second. Following this lead, the legal profession in the first two centuries of Islam tried to make the law of the *sharīʿa* cover every ethical situation and to make the study of this law the culminating study in Islamic education. Thus, since Islamic education was the most formative element in Islamic civilization, the important rôle of ethics in this civilization becomes obvious.

The second aspect of interest lies in the theological and philosophical theories that were constructed to support normative ethics. These theories all belong to the main Western lines of rational theology and philosophy and have little relation to the theologies and philosophies of East Asia. This relation to Western intellectual history has, unfortunately, rarely been recognized in the West. As a result, Islamic thought has been generally neglected and ignored in Western histories of theology and philosophy.[3] This thought should in the future be substantially incorporated into histories of Western theology and philosophy, both for its intrinsic interest and because it constitutes a large

[1] The relation between ethics and divine law in Islam is usually stated in the reverse direction: that the whole range of ethics was absorbed into the *sharīʿa*, so that all conduct was judged as obedience or disobedience to divine law. This is true in a formal sense, that normative ethics was worked out in legal books and judgements. But we may equally observe that the purpose of this vast legal structure was ethical in a modern sense. The relation may be proved by the evidence of several legal principles, fictions and practices which broke out of the strict mould of classical theory in order to accommodate the demands of justice and public interest. An example is the Malikite principle of *istiṣlāḥ*, 'consideration of public interest', which may be used in preferring one interpretation of the *sharīʿa* to another.

[2] Qurʾān, ii, 25 and many other verses. All references to the Qurʾān are to the verse numbers of the standard Cairo edition.

[3] A recent anthology in English on ethical voluntarism was composed entirely of quotations from Western sources, without any from Islamic theology, where this theory was most fully discussed and developed. It provided the main theoretical basis for Sunnite Islamic law for roughly a thousand years (A.D. 800–1800).

part of the historical link between ancient Greek and medieval Christian thought. All this is true for ethical theory, as for the other main branches of theology and philosophy.

2

This volume consists of the author's collected articles on Islamic ethics in the formative and earlier classical periods of Islamic civilization. It is organized by schools of thought in a roughly chronological order. Most of the articles are centred around two closely related discussions: (1) an extended controversy about the ontological status of value in ethics, and (2) a simultaneous controversy about the sources of human knowledge of such value. It is the second of these themes that is indicated by the title. The two themes are seldom clearly distinguished in the classical discussions, but it will help our understanding to distinguish them from time to time.

Broadly speaking, we can discern three positions that were held on these two questions.

A. Values have an objective existence. They can be known by independent human reason or from scriptural tradition (the Qurʾān and the traditions of Muḥammad); sometimes by both. This was the position of the Muʿtazilite theologians.

B. Values are in their essence whatever God commands. Thus they can be known ultimately only from tradition, although reason can be used in subordinate ways to extend tradition. This was the position of the major school of traditionalist theologians, the Ashʿarites, and most Islamic jurists.

C. Values are objective, and they can be known *entirely* by the independent reason of wise people, including philosophers. But they are presented by a prophet to the common people in the persuasive, imaginative language of scriptural tradition. This was the position of the philosophers.

Other combinations are possible, and some were argued. We shall refer to these, but the present study will be organized primarily to illustrate the three positions outlined.

3

This brief statement can be clarified by explaining and distinguishing the main terms used. We can begin with 'Islam' and its derived adjectives, 'Islamic' and 'Muslim'. 'Islam' stands primarily for the religion itself, the religion of submission or surrender (*islām*) of man's will to the will of God, together with its direct developments in law, theology, mysticism and other branches of knowledge, and a whole set of institutions such as the caliphate and art forms such as mosque architecture. But although the spirit of Islam penetrated in

different degrees every aspect of the civilization which grew up with the religion, it is strictly speaking ambiguous to refer to this civilization also as 'Islam', because a civilization is not a religion and can never be completely formed by one, to the exclusion of the many other influences which contribute to it. Rightly recognizing this distinction, Marshall Hodgson in *The Venture of Islam* coined the word 'Islamdom' to match the parallel distinction between Christianity and Christendom.[4] But 'Islamdom' is too inelegant a word to be introduced into the English language and I will not use it. I shall continue to call it 'Islam' or 'Islamic civilization' with reference to its main formative influence, but with the understanding that it includes many features not directly parts of Islam the religion.

Hodgson made a corresponding distinction between adjectives, using 'Islamic' and 'Islamicate' respectively. Here again I do not care much for his new word, and prefer to make the same distinction with the words 'Islamic' and 'Muslim'. Thus we shall have Islamic theologians but Muslim philosophers. The former based their sciences on Islam, the latter were philosophers who happened to be Muslims.

Another distinction is that between 'traditionists' and 'traditionalists'. The former term refers to the collectors of *ḥadīths*, which record the sayings and acts of the Prophet and his Companions. The latter term is much wider, referring to all those scholars who derived the Islamic sciences of law and theology entirely from the positive sources of the Qurʾān and Traditions. They are contrasted with 'rationalist' theologians, the Muʿtazilites, who gave legitimacy to a limited range of independent ethical judgements springing from a sense of equity.

The historical periods of Islamic civilization and their names are by now fairly well agreed upon by the scholarly community. There are three main periods. The first is formative, from Muḥammad in Madīna (A.D. 622–32) to about 870. The transition to the second period, the classical, is marked by the occurrence of several features which were to endure for the next millennium. The Traditions were informally canonized in the great collections of Bukhārī, Kulīnī and others; the schools of *sharīʿa* law were well established; the twelfth and last Shiʿite *imām* disappeared; the Sunnite caliphate was reduced to governing little more than Iraq; the Greek sciences and philosophy had been introduced into learned circles; the visual arts and literature were settling into steady patterns, not without constant change; the economic order was a kind of feudalism, and government almost everywhere was in the hands of secular sultans and amirs.

[4] Vol. I (Chicago, 1974), pp. 57–60.

This classical Islamic civilization endured for a thousand years. There are sub-periods, of which the two most important are divided at 1500, with the consolidation of the three large empires of the Ottoman Turks, the Persian Safavids and the Mughals in India. But the criterion of this division was political; Muslim society continued with little change. There was no renaissance, reformation or voyages of transoceanic discovery, therefore no transition at this time to a modern period. Thus the term 'medieval' is meaningless in relation to Islamic history. The continuity of Islamic civilization from around 870 to 1870 was expressed in a striking way by Edward Lane in his Introduction to *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London, 1835). Referring to the *Thousand and One Nights*, he wrote:

> if the English reader had possessed a close translation of it with sufficient illustrative notes, I might almost have spared myself the labour of the present undertaking.[5]

This civilization is appropriately named 'classical' because it was the first actualization of Islamic concepts and ideals in a complete and durable form.

Modern Islamic civilization, the third historical period, was introduced by the overwhelming inroads of Western military power, technology, law, commerce and educational systems. Perhaps it is best symbolized by the opening of the Suez Canal to world shipping in 1869 and the consequent indebtedness of the Khedive of Egypt to the British government and French financial institutions. Whatever paths it eventually takes, Islamic civilization can never revert to its classical form because the outlook of modern Muslims has been changed irrevocably by their recent experiences, both traumatic and liberating.

4

This book is not a complete treatment of Islamic ethics, which would have required a work of larger scope.[6] It is limited in several respects. The first is the type of ethics discussed: ethical theory in the theological and philosophical modes, not normative ethics.[7] Secondly, these essays concern the mainstream of classical Sunnite thought, with the addition of a couple of philosophers.

[5] Edition of London, 1908 (reprinted, 1923), pp. xvii–xviii, n. 1. A similar illustration of the continuity of classical Islam is found in the *Description de l'Égypte* (Paris, 1809–26), compiled by the French scholars who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte on his invasion of that country (1798–1801). This mighty work revealed to educated Europeans the existence of a still living civilization not much different from that which they knew in a vague way from the *Thousand and one nights*.

[6] See chapter 2 for a classification of types of ethics and a short review of the theories to be examined in this volume.

[7] Chapter 1 covers the whole period of Islamic theology and philosophy. Chapter 6 reaches back into pre-Islamic religions and ancient Greek philosophy. Chapter 13 touches on modern Islamic jurisprudence.

There is no attempt here to deal with the Shiʿite sect and there are only incidental references to Sufism, important as these movements are in the intellectual history of Islam. Thirdly, the time span covered is the formative period and the earlier classical period (to Ibn Rushd at the end of the twelfth century), with a few exceptions. Finally, even within the limits described there is no attempt at completeness.

In short, this is a collection of papers on such topics as I have been able to deal with over the last quarter of a century, within the bounds of my competence and the time available. All these papers present particular authors, schools or problems – sometimes of wide scope. My belief is that particular, detailed illustrations of a field of study form a more interesting and effective introduction to that field than a general survey which tries to cover the whole ground.

Certainly this is true of Islamic ethics at the present time, when the spade work has not yet extended very far. The first two articles, however, are surveys, and they are placed here to inform and orient readers with little or no previous knowledge of Islamic theology, philosophy or ethics.

These articles have undergone a few revisions, none of them major, to take account of studies more recent than themselves. Some new titles have been added to bibliographical notes. Conventions of spelling and the like have been made consistent as far as possible, as explained in 'Conventions'. But the problems of transcription from Arabic are notorious, and I beg to be excused if some inconsistencies of detail remain in the text.

1

ISLAMIC THEOLOGY AND MUSLIM PHILOSOPHY

In the early centuries of Islam theology and philosophy were regarded as two distinct disciplines, following their own assumptions and intellectual traditions. 'The science of dialectic' (*ʿilm al-kalām*) meant Islamic theology, derived only from the revealed Qurʾān and the Traditions of the prophet Muḥammad. Philosophy (*al-falsafa*) was a 'foreign' science based on natural knowledge and largely inspired by ancient Greek philosophy. As time passed theology and philosophy interacted increasingly, with varying relations in different parts of the Muslim world. But we must begin by describing them as separate, as they generally were until about the eleventh century A.D.

THEOLOGY

All teaching, discussion and writing on this subject were conducted in Arabic, the language of the Qurʾān and of other Islamic subjects such as exegesis and jurisprudence. The principal centres of theology were in Iraq and Iran.

After early discussions on conditions for salvation and the moral qualifications of caliphs the first systematic school, the Muʿtazilites, arose in Iraq in the eighth century, about a century after Muḥammad's death (632). Their self-description as 'the party of unity and justice' announced their central doctrines.

The unity of God (Allāh) was understood very strictly by them, reflecting the emphasis of the Qurʾān. Polytheism and the Christian Trinity were rejected as a matter of course. The Qurʾān could not be eternal beside God but must have been created by the one eternal being. Even the attributes of God such as His power and wisdom would raise problems if they were thought of as separate eternal entities; they had to be somehow united with an essence of God which was purely simple, since 'unity' included simplicity.

Muʿtazilite ethical theology insisted that God was just in an objective sense as understood by man. Therefore He would treat man with this intelligible justice in distributing rewards and punishments on the day of Judgement. Thus they would be punished only for sins which they had had the power to avoid. This implied that men had power to choose their own conduct, free

from predestination. God has delegated to man this power to decide and even (according to the later Muʿtazilites) to 'create' his own acts.

These doctrines of God's unity and justice were worked out with much refinement and far-reaching related theories over a period of three centuries by theologians of two schools, those of Baṣra and Baghdād, with constant controversy among themselves and with opponents. They seldom enjoyed government support and were increasingly denounced. The Basran tradition culminated in the work of ʿAbd al-Jabbār (*c.* 935–1025), a Persian who wrote a long *summa* presenting the latest positions in dialectical form. After him there were few Muʿtazilites, and most of their books were destroyed by opponents or neglected in libraries.

Their method was rationalist in the sense that they started from a few principles stated or implicit in the Qurʾān, then deduced their logical consequences, without too much regard to problems of consistency presented by other assertions of the Qurʾān. Their theory of knowledge supported confidently the powers of human intellect (*ʿaql*).

The Muʿtazilites met with opposition from the beginning from a variety of viewpoints. Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), a famous jurist of Baghdād, disapproved of all theology on the ground that it was bound to go beyond the Qurʾān by interpreting it according to human ideas, thus distorting its messages which were perfectly expressed in the Book of God. Theology was idle speculation which had not been practised by Muḥammad and his Arab companions, the models for later Muslims to follow; it could only raise needless doubts about Islam. Nonetheless there were later Hanbalite theologians, even if their intent was negative. Ibn Taymiyya of Damascus (1263–1328) was the most influential. He made a rare attempt to refute Aristotelian logic. The Hanbalite school persists today in Saʿūdī Arabia.

Some early Shiʿite theologians of the Imāmī sect (now the majority in Iran), such as Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d. 795/96), disagreed with the Muʿtazilites in a different way. They accepted theology, but opposed the transcendental Muʿtazilite doctrine of God and interpreted the Qurʾān more literally. God moves in space. His knowledge changes with the changes in its objects. But later Imāmī theologians absorbed many of the Muʿtazilite doctrines, such as the objective justice of God and the freedom of man.

A more formidable opposition to Muʿtazilism emerged around the ninth century from Sunnite theologians who may be called traditionalist, in the sense that they tried hard to follow closely the precise meaning of the Qurʾān. If this created apparent problems of consistency, they would interpret the text cautiously with the help of the Traditions and a careful study of the Arabic language and grammar at the time of the Prophet. Thus they were known

as 'the party of tradition' (*ahl as-sunna*), who followed the guidance of transmitted sources (*naql*) rather than independent human intellect. In fact, however, they were unable to follow this programme with complete consistency since they, like the Muʿtazilites, emphasized one principle found in the Qurʾān rather than others, as will be shown.

The moderate liberalism of the traditionalist school is seen in their doctrine of God's attributes. These could not be assimilated to a single essence of God, as the Muʿtazilites proposed, because the Qurʾān mentions many attributes, often by an abstract name; e.g., God is not merely 'knowing' He also has 'knowledge'. Thus His attributes are real and distinguishable, without impairing His unity; for a single existent can have many attributes, as is commonly believed. So, too, they insisted that the Qurʾān is the eternal, uncreated Word of God, being His very thought.

The principle which the traditionalists singled out as supreme was that of God's omnipotence. This is indeed stressed greatly in the Qurʾān. Some of this school even denied natural causation in the world, because it would imply power in things other than God. In its place they constructed an 'atomic' theory of causes, by which God is the sole cause of the successive states of the world, in themselves causally unconnected with each other.

Again, respecting omnipotence they found fault with the Muʿtazilite view that there are objective standards of good and evil which God follows. Even though the Muʿtazilites had been careful to state that God follows these standards freely, their very existence was now rejected because they would be independent and prior to His thought and will. The only standard of value for God and man was the will of God; whatever He wills is good by definition. This is ethical voluntarism, which after the jurist Shāfiʿī (d. 820) became the first principle of Islamic law in most schools. By adopting it traditionalist theologians could claim that God's will suffers no ethical limits. Thus, even if He punishes sinners whose acts He has predestined He cannot be called 'unjust', for justice means nothing but obedience to divine laws, and God is not subject to any laws.

Such a position, however neat as a theory, could hardly satisfy believers in an intelligible divine justice. The Sunnite theologian Ashʿarī of Baṣra (870–935) then elaborated a subtler theory of justice, which might leave man responsible for his acts and so rightly culpable for his sins. This was the theory of 'acquisition' (*iktisāb*), suggested by the Qurʾān and already proposed by earlier traditionalists. While God creates every act of man and enables him to do it, the act is still that of the human agent, making him responsible for its consequences to himself. Ultimately, however, God predestines what act a man chooses; thus the problem is dismissed but not solved.

A solution closer to the Muʿtazilite one was worked out by Māturīdī of Samarqand (d. 944). A man really chooses how to act, then God creates for him the act that he has chosen. Man 'acquires' his act, while God 'creates' it. Thus freedom and justice are preserved, but 'creation' remains God's privilege, contrary to the later Muʿtazilite vocabulary.

The schools of Ashʿarī and Māturīdī became predominant in Sunnite Islam: the Ashʿarites in all the Arab countries and for a while in Iran, the Maturidites in Transoxania (now Uzbekistan), Turkey and India.

PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy began to be studied in the ninth century, after Syriac Christian scholars at Baghdād had made accurate Arabic translations of most of Aristotle and some later Greek commentaries on him. Plato's dialogues became known through translated summaries. Parts of the *Enneads* of Plotinus were translated and became very influential, but they were generally ascribed to Aristotle – a cause of much confusion. Major works of Greek science were also translated, such as Galen's medicine, Ptolemy's astronomy and geography, Euclid's geometry. These were regarded as the most advanced scientific books in the world, and since philosophy was not distinguished from science it shared in their prestige and came to be viewed by educated people as giving equally certain knowledge. All the philosophers were learned in one or more of the other sciences. most of them were Muslims, but philosophy was not consciously Islamic until a later period.

The first Muslim philosopher, Kindī (d. 870), an Arab of Baṣra, was a pioneer in Arabic philosophical writing. He showed some independence from the Greeks in holding that the world is not everlasting but was created in time, as the Qurʾān declares.

Fārābī (873–950) was a Turk of Transoxania who studied and wrote in Baghdād and Aleppo. He gained a high reputation as an Arabic commentator on Aristotle, but his own philosophy was more Neoplatonic. Thus he propounded the emanation of the world in successive stages from God and the higher intellectual beings. Man must strive for happiness by climbing through intellectual discipline toward a conjunction of his soul with the world's Active Intellect. The ideal community requires a political organization such as the caliphate, in which a code of divine law (*sharīʿa*) has been provided by a philosophic prophet. Prophets are distinguished by imaginative powers which enable them to teach the Law to the people in a convincing style.

Ibn Sīnā (Latin Avicenna, 980–1037) was a Persian of Bukhārā who was chief physician and minister to several princes in Iran. Besides his major

medical and philosophical works in Arabic he also wrote a few in Persian, being the first to do so since Islam. His philosophy resembles that of Fārābī in being a synthesis of Aristotelian, later Greek and original views. He accepted the emanation of the world, the Aristotelian psychology of active and passive intellects and the ascent of the soul. But he was not strictly a Neoplatonist, in view of a number of differences. His cosmological argument for the existence of a First Cause is widely known. Every ordinary essence is in itself contingent, so that its existence requires an external cause. But the chain of such causes cannot be infinite. Therefore there must be one non-contingent essence which exists without a prior cause and gives existence to everything else.

The world is everlasting; 'creation' means continual emanation. The human mind is completely determined by causes, like the rest of the world. Ibn Sīnā describes a mystical path in an allegorical fable but was not himself known as a practising Ṣūfī. His philosophy is a wide-ranging and self-consistent synthesis which is central in Islamic philosophy, drawing upon his predecessors and providing the classical base for all his successors in the eastern countries. He himself thought it harmonious with Islam, but it was soon to be criticized as contrary to Islam in certain respects.

THE INTERACTION OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

The Ismaʿilite sect of Shiʿism had in the tenth century already incorporated into its esoteric theology a Neoplatonic cosmology of emanation. By contrast, Sunnite theologians generally ignored philosophy until well into the eleventh century. But now two brilliant theologians educated themselves in the philosophic tradition and reacted to it.

One was Ibn Ḥazm of Córdoba (995–1064), a literary author who joined the Zahirite school of law, which derived all Islamic law from a literal construction of the Qurʾān and Traditions. An imaginative writer and a learned critic of all religions other than Islam, Ibn Ḥazm applied literalism to theology in a logical and sweeping fashion which allowed no other source of religious truth than relevation. Greek logic and even metaphysical concepts could be used to explain and defend this truth but never as independent sources of religious knowledge.

The Persian Ghazālī (Latin Algazel, 1057–1111) held a somewhat similar view of philosophy, although from a more traditionalist standpoint. After studying Shafiʿite law and Ashʿarite theology under the eminent Juwaynī (d. 1085) at the college of law (*madrasa*) at Nīshāpūr, he became professor in an important *madrasa* at Baghdād. There he made a deep study of the