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COMMANDING RIGHT AND FORBIDDING WRONG  
IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

What kind of duty do we have to try to stop other people doing wrong? The question is intelligible in just about any culture, but few of them seek to answer it in a rigorous fashion. The most striking exception is found in the Islamic tradition, where ‘commanding right and forbidding wrong’ is a central moral tenet already mentioned in the Koran. As a historian of Islam whose research has ranged widely over space and time, Michael Cook is well placed to interpret this complex yet fascinating subject. His book, which represents the first sustained attempt to map the history of Islamic reflection on this obligation, covers the origins of Muslim thinking about ‘forbidding wrong’, the relevant doctrinal developments over the centuries in all the major Islamic sects and schools, and its significance in Sunnī and Shī‘ite thought today. In this way, the book contributes to the understanding of contemporary Islamic politics and ideology and raises fundamental questions for the comparative study of ethics.

MICHAEL COOK is Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University. His publications include *Population Pressure in Rural Anatolia, 1450–1600* (1972), *Early Muslim Dogma* (1981) and most recently *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (2000).

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia  
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Galliard 10/13pt *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Cook, M. A.  
 Commanding right and forbidding wrong in Islamic thought / Michael Cook.  
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 66174 9

1. Islamic ethics.
2. Religious life – Shī‘ah.
3. Religious life – Islam.
4. Islam – Doctrines. I. Title.

BJ1291.C66 2000 297.5–dc21 99-054807

ISBN 0 521 66174 9 hardback

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In the early evening of Thursday 22 September 1988, a woman was raped at a local train station in Chicago in the presence of several people.

A brief account of the incident appeared that Sunday in the *New York Times*, based on what the police had said on the Friday.<sup>1</sup> The salient feature of the incident in this account was that nobody had moved to help the victim, and her cries had gone unheeded – for all that the rape took place during the rush hour. As Detective Daisy Martin put it: ‘Several people were looking and she asked them for help, and no one would help.’

A longer account which likewise appeared on the Sunday in the *Chicago Tribune*<sup>2</sup> placed the matter in a very different light. Quoting what the police had said on the Saturday, the article began by stating that six bystanders were to be recommended for citizen’s awards for their work in helping the police arrest and identify the suspect. The account that followed emphasised two features of the situation which did not emerge from the notice in the *Times*. The first was that the rape took place in a part of the station to which access was blocked by an exit-only turnstile. The second was that the bystanders were confused in their understanding of what was going on: the rapist had ordered his victim to smile, which she did. Although at one point she reportedly mouthed the word ‘help’, it was only after her assailant had run off that she screamed. Initially, at least, the bystanders took the woman to be engaged in voluntary sex. But one young bystander, Randy Kyles, took a second look and thought, ‘Man, this is strange.’ Something seemed not to be right, so he did not get on his train when it came in. (Others on the platform, by contrast, remarked that what was happening was weird, but nevertheless boarded the train.) When the victim ran up the steps screaming that she had been raped, Kyles chased

<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times*, 25 September 1988, 33.

<sup>2</sup> *The Chicago Tribune*, 25 September 1988, Section 2, 1. All further information on the incident is taken from this account.



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after the rapist, eventually flagging down a police car and getting him arrested. Kyles later explained his action as follows: ‘I had to do something to help that woman. It just wasn’t right. It could have been my mother, my aunt, one of my mother’s friends.’<sup>3</sup>

It is clear from these accounts that neither paper considered a rape at a local station in Chicago to be newsworthy in itself. The focus of journalistic attention – and the anticipated focus of the reader’s interest – was the conduct of the bystanders. The account given in the *Times*, which went back to Detective Daisy Martin’s statements on the Friday, placed their behaviour in a most unflattering light: though they greatly outnumbered the lone rapist, they had simply stood by and let it happen. The implication was that their conduct was shameful, and the reader reacts with appropriate indignation. How differently we would have behaved had we been there! Or at least, we hope we would have.<sup>4</sup>

The account given in the *Tribune*, by contrast, suggests that at least some of the bystanders, and Kyles in particular, behaved commendably. They had two good excuses for not intervening during the rape itself – the physical layout of the station, and the appearance of consent created by the coerced smiles of the woman, even if these did not look quite right. Kyles himself behaved with energy and courage when the situation became clear. He felt that he had to do something to help the woman, just as we would have felt had we been there; and we hope that we would have acted as well as he did in the distinctly confusing circumstances of the case.

Underlying these two accounts, and the remarks of Martin and Kyles, is a broad moral consensus.<sup>5</sup> One cannot just stand by and watch a

<sup>3</sup> I leave aside the roles of the other bystanders commended by the police; the part they played is in fact somewhat obscure in the account.

<sup>4</sup> But then again, what if the rapist had turned out to have a gun? There is no indication that he did, although he had a record of criminal violence. He had been in jail since February after robbing a young woman and breaking her nose with a bottle, and had only been released the previous week through a clerical error. During the rape he likewise threatened his victim with a bottle. But confronting a man with an apparently unbroken bottle is significantly less dangerous than confronting a man with a gun.

<sup>5</sup> Just how widely this consensus is in fact shared by the American population at large is not a question that need be taken up here. There are certainly cases where, as represented in the *New York Times* version of our incident, bystanders look on and do nothing, and such behaviour can easily be read as a product of callous indifference. A notorious example of such inaction is the murder of Kitty Genovese in Queens in 1964, in the course of a series of stabbings witnessed by thirty-eight people (see M. Hunt, *The compassionate beast: what science is discovering about the humane side of humankind*, New York 1990, 128f.; someone did shout ‘Let that girl alone!’, but took no further action). However, the research of social psychologists suggests that such inaction is more likely to be a product of what has been dubbed ‘the bystander effect’: the very fact that a number of people are present socially inhibits each one of them from stepping forward (*ibid.*, 132–5; I am

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woman, even a complete stranger, being raped in a public place.<sup>6</sup> Either one must do something about it; or one must have good and specific reasons for not doing anything. In other words, we have a clear conception that we have some kind of duty not just to behave decently ourselves, but to prevent others from doing things to their fellow humans which are outrageously wrong.<sup>7</sup> Yet in everyday life we lack a name for the duty, still less a general formulation of the situations to which it applies and the circumstances that dispense us from it. The value is there, but it is not one that our culture has developed and systematised. ‘It just wasn’t right’ is the bottom line in Kyles’s explanation of what he did; the ‘just’ signals that, had he been pressed to explain himself further, he would have had nothing to say. We either understand or we don’t. In fact, of course, we understand perfectly well, and some of us can on occasion wax quite eloquent on the subject; but our culture provides us with no ready-made articulation of our understanding. It is true that lawyers and philosophers carry on a discussion of the conditions under which we have a duty of ‘rescue’.<sup>8</sup> But this discussion is too arcane to be described as a possession of our culture at large. Randy Kyles had clearly not heard of it; nor, for that matter, had I, until I became aware of it as a by-product of my research on Islam.

Islam, by contrast, provides both a name and a doctrine for a broad moral duty of this kind. The name – *al-amr bi’l-ma’rūf wa’l-nahy ‘an al-munkar* – is somewhat unwieldy, as is its literal translation, ‘commanding right and forbidding wrong’. For simplicity, therefore, I shall usually shorten the Arabic to *al-amr bi’l-ma’rūf* in my notes, which in any case are intended mainly for the erudite and the intrepid. In my text, where I try as far as possible to avoid inflicting naked Arabic on the reader, I will normally refer to

indebted to Rhoda Howard for referring me to this very readable survey of research on altruism). If we sought to establish the extent of an American consensus, the key question would not be whether people act in such situations, but rather whether they feel ashamed when they do nothing.

<sup>6</sup> On the other hand the bystanders, though ‘shocked and amazed’, do not seem to have had a problem with standing by while a couple had sex in a public place, provided the element of coercion was absent; and there is no indication that subsequent commentators felt differently. Not all cultures would take this view.

<sup>7</sup> I have deliberately left blurred at this point a subtle but significant distinction brought to my attention by Margaret Gilbert. Does the duty arise from the fact that the rapist is doing wrong, or from the fact that the victim is being wronged? Kyles himself is not very clear about this. He felt he had to do something to help that woman; yet what he actually did was not to help her in any material sense, but rather to bring the wrongdoer to justice. I shall return to this distinction (see below, ch. 20, section 2).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, J. Feinberg, *The moral limits of the criminal law*, New York and Oxford 1984–8, vol. 1, ch. 4; T. C. Grey, *The legal enforcement of morality*, New York 1983, ch. 4.

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the duty as ‘forbidding wrong’; this sounds less awkward in English than ‘commanding right’.<sup>9</sup> The existence and general character of the duty is well known to Islamicists. It has received passing attention in one connection or another from a good many scholars, and is the subject of a concise but informative encyclopaedia article.<sup>10</sup> It is the purpose of this book to build on this by providing a full monographic treatment of forbidding wrong.<sup>11</sup> I should make it clear from the start that my interest here is in the duty of individual believers; this book is only tangentially concerned with the place of rulers in forbidding wrong, or with the officially appointed censor (*muh̄tasib*) and his administrative role (*hisba*).

The first objective of the book is to set out an intelligible account of the duty as it appears in the scholastic literature of Islam. In one way this

<sup>9</sup> Occasionally a distinction is insisted on between *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, but this is the exception rather than the rule. The Persian exegete Maybudī (writing in 520/1126) quotes an anonymous saying to the effect that *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* is a weightier duty than *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf* (*Kashf al-asrār*, Tehran 1331–9 sh., 2:234.9 (to Q3:104); for this work, see below, ch. 2, note 23); the Ḥanbalite Abū Ya'īla ibn al-Farrā' (d. 458/1066) makes a distinction between the two (see below, ch. 6, note 127); likewise some accounts of the duty separate the two for purposes of exposition, or treat only one of them (see, for example, below, ch. 9, note 121, and ch. 11, note 69). On the other hand, the Imāmī exegete Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1153) remarks à propos of Q9:112 that *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf* includes *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, and that it is as though they are one thing (*ka-annahumā shay' wāhid*) (*Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Qumm 1403, 3:76.4; cf. also the Shāfi'ite Kamāl al-Dīn ibn al-Zamlakānī (d. 727/1326f.) in a philological analysis of Q9:112 *apud* Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyya al-kubrā*, ed. M. M. al-Ṭanālī and 'A. M. al-Ḥulw, Cairo 1964–76, 9:203.2; the Imāmī Karakī (d. 940/1534) (*Fawā'id al-Sharā'i'*, ms. Princeton, Arabic Manuscripts, New Series 695, f. 138a.15; for this manuscript, see R. Mach and E. L. Ormsby, *Handlist of Arabic manuscripts (New Series) in the Princeton University Library*, Princeton 1987, 300 no. 1332); the Ḥanafī 'Alī al-Qārī (d. 1014/1606) (*Sharḥ 'Ayn al-ilm*, Cairo 1351–3, 1:433.27); and the view of Ibn Taymiyya cited below, ch. 7, note 69). For a late scholastic dispute over the question whether the term *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* can be held to be redundant alongside *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf* on the ground that ‘commanding something is forbidding its opposite’, see 'Abd al-Bāqī al-Zurqānī (d. 1099/1688), *Sharḥ*, Cairo 1307, 3:109.9, and Bannānī (d. 1163/1750), *Hāshiyā*, in the margin of Zurqānī, *Sharḥ*, 3:109.1; the argument goes back to the omission of ‘forbidding wrong’ in Khalīl ibn Ishāq (d. 767/1365), *Mukhtaṣar*, ed. Ṭ. A. al-Zāwī, Cairo n.d., 111.5. See also the anecdote quoted below, ch. 4, 71, where a traditionist attempts to get out of trouble by making a distinction.

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, London 1982–, art. ‘Amr be ma'rūf’ (W. Madelung). There is no article on *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf* in the first or second editions of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, or their supplements to date.

<sup>11</sup> In principle, I am interested in all Islamic manifestations of this moral value, irrespective of how they are expressed. In practice I have traded heavily on the salience of the phrase *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf* in this context: treatments are readily located in works that devote a chapter to it, and the phrase is easy to scan for in those that do not. I have not deliberately discriminated against material that employs the term *ghayyara* (cf. below, ch. 3, 34), but this usage is a lot harder to spot in a page of Arabic text. I have given scant attention at best to material that does not employ one or other of these usages. In other words, my principled conceptual aspirations may not always have been well served by my pragmatic lexical methods.

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prosaic task is simple enough. A typical account of the duty in this literature will run to no more than a few pages, and these will rarely be characterised by the baffling abstraction of discussions of divine attributes, or the excruciating technicality of the law of inheritance. What makes the research time-consuming and its presentation complicated is the fact that there are very many such accounts, and that the doctrine they present is far from uniform. It varies with time and place, from sect to sect, from school to school, and from scholar to scholar. As a glance at the table of contents will show, I have chosen to present the bulk of the material by schools and sects; within them, the organisation is largely chronological. Not all readers will want to read all of this material; but those that do will find that, while some of it is tedious, most of it is reasonably accessible.

The book has further objectives which go beyond the modest aim of describing a scholastic tradition. As a historian of ideas, I naturally aspire to explain why Islam came to have such a doctrine, and why this doctrine varied as it did from one milieu to another. As a historian of society, I would like to know how this intellectual tradition was related to the society in which it flourished, and what difference it made to life on the street. It will not surprise anyone that my achievement in these respects is a much more limited one. The limitations are sometimes those of my own knowledge. For example, I would never have completed this book had I not in many cases confined my reading of a work to its chapter on forbidding wrong; this undoubtedly means that I have on occasion missed other relevant features of an author's thought. Sometimes the limitations are those of the sources. For example, it is notorious that we tend to know too much about scholars in the pre-modern Islamic world and too little about anyone else – apart from rulers.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, 'practice' in this book almost invariably means practice as described in Islamic literary sources. And sometimes the limitations we are up against arise from the inherent murkiness of historical causality, even where information is vastly more abundant than it is for most of Islamic history.

The overall structure of the book should be seen against this background. Part I is intended to lay the descriptive foundations; its core is the analysis of the normative material found in the Koran, Koranic exegesis, tradition and biographical literature about early Muslims. Part II is devoted to the Ḥanbalites; the reason for this lengthy treatment is not any intellectual sophistication in Ḥanbalite doctrine, but rather the relative abundance of

<sup>12</sup> It should thus come as no surprise that much of the discussion in this book turns on the relationship between scholars and rulers.

material which can be used to relate the doctrine to practice. Part III, by contrast, is concerned with the groups that offer the richest documentation for the intellectual history of the duty – the Mu‘tazilites and their Zaydī and Imāmī heirs. Part IV collects the remaining sects and schools, and ends with a chapter pulling together the discussion of classical Islam. Part V is more ambitious. It starts by surveying the place of forbidding wrong in modern Islam; the scope of the survey is limited, however, by the fact that the only Islamic languages I read in some fashion, other than Arabic and English, are Persian and Turkish. In the last two chapters I take up the question of the pre-Islamic antecedents of the duty, and offer some comparisons with non-Islamic cultures, including that of the modern West.

The structure of the book is perhaps less in need of apology than its dimensions. In the decade since I began serious work on the project, I have watched the growth of the typescript with increasing alarm, and my attempts to cut it back in the final stages of editing have met with only limited success. The result of my labours is not, I think, the largest book on forbidding wrong ever written; for this, the prize still goes to the Damascene Zayn al-Dīn al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 856/1452).<sup>13</sup> But mine may well retain for some considerable time the distinction of being the largest in a Western language.<sup>14</sup> If it is any consolation to my colleagues, I have no intention of writing a book of this length again.

Some remarks on conventions of transcription and citation can be found at the beginning of the bibliography. Where a passage from a primary source has already been adduced by a previous scholar in a relevant context, I have generally (but not invariably) acknowledged this.<sup>15</sup> When I give a cross-reference to a footnote, it may in fact refer to the text immediately preceding the note-indicator in question.

Finally, a word on technology. The passage of time will make it increasingly obvious that this book is the product of an era when Islamic texts were not yet available in significant numbers on CD-ROMs.

<sup>13</sup> See below, ch. 7, 161. The work runs to 854 pages in the Riyāḍ edition.

<sup>14</sup> A contemporary work in Arabic on a large scale is that of Dr ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Aḥmad al-Mas‘ūd (see below, ch. 18, note 1); but to my knowledge his promised second volume has yet to appear.

<sup>15</sup> But note that when I say that a passage was cited by a previous scholar, this does not necessarily mean that he cited it from the edition to which I refer.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The research on which this book is based was begun while I held a position in the History Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. The bulk of it, however, was carried out after I joined the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton in 1986, mostly during semesters of leave. During this phase of the work, I received from the University Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences several small but strategic grants which funded particular aspects of my research. For one semester of full-time leave in the spring of 1990 I was supported by a generous grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, and in 1995 I was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend.

Like any scholar working in such a field, I have depended on a number of research libraries in a variety of countries, both for printed works and for microfilms of manuscripts (a good many of them since published). For the latter I am grateful in particular to the British Library, Leiden University Library, the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, the Vatican Library, the Süleymaniye Library, Istanbul, and the Maktabat al-Asad, Damascus. I also benefited considerably from access to the relevant files of the İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi, Üsküdar, and would like to thank Tufan Buzpınar and Ayhan Aykut of the Centre for their help in this and other connections. But the foundation of my research has been the superb Islamic collection of the Firestone Library at Princeton and the helpfulness of its staff (I am particularly indebted to Azar Ashraf for first aid in Persian matters).

I owe my earliest sense of the significance of forbidding wrong in Islamic thought to conversations with Fritz Zimmermann, and my first opportunity to put some ideas together on the subject to Roy Mottahedeh, who in the spring of 1985 organised a conference at Princeton on 'Justice and Injustice in Islamic Political Thought'. Over the years I have used much of the material in the book for talks and lectures delivered in various academic

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contexts. In particular, a draft of chapter 5 was presented in written form to the fifth colloquium on the theme ‘From Jahiliyya to Islam’ held in Jerusalem in July 1990,<sup>1</sup> and a draft of chapter 14 to a conference on ‘Saber religioso y poder político en el Islam’ held at the Escuela de Estudios Árabes in Granada in October 1991. I am grateful to the respective organisers for the opportunity to discuss the material with specialist audiences.

Numerous scholars have helped me by giving me references and answering my queries, and I have done my best to acknowledge them in their proper places. I owe one of my first references to Basim Musallam, and a quite disproportionate number of them to Nurit Tsafrir and Maribel Fierro. I have incurred a special debt to my colleague Şükrü Hanioglu for material that would otherwise have been inaccessible to me. A number of colleagues read parts of this work at various stages of drafting, and gave me their suggestions and comments. The first attempt I made to put together a substantial paper on forbidding wrong was read and thoroughly criticised by Ella Landau-Tasseron. A draft of chapter 2 was read by Etan Kohlberg and Uri Rubin. A first, primitive, version of chapter 5 was read by Emmanuel Sivan. Drafts of the chapters on the Ḥanbalites were read by Nimrod Hurvitz, Frank Stewart, Sarah Stroumsa and Nurit Tsafrir. A draft of chapter 8 was read by Fred de Jong, one of chapter 12 by Şükrü Hanioglu, one of chapter 14 by Maribel Fierro, and one of chapter 18 by Houchang Chehabi. Drafts of the preface and chapter 19 benefited from the sharp philosophical eye of Margaret Gilbert. Patricia Crone, Gerald Hawting, Etan Kohlberg and Everett Rowson read and commented extensively on a draft of the entire study.

So also did my colleague Hossein Modarresi, to whom I owe a special debt for numerous references and much material not separately acknowledged, for extensive help with queries of all kinds, and for enabling me to understand countless things that would otherwise have remained opaque to me. Without all this, the book would have been immeasurably poorer.

In the course of writing the book, I have received much good advice from many sides. I know that I have not always followed it. Particularly towards the end of the process, I have become almost as disinclined to make drastic revisions to what I have written as Pontius Pilate. If I have persevered in error, the responsibility is mine alone.

In very practical terms, I owe an enormous debt to my wife, Kim. Without her help in numerous connections, the book would have taken

<sup>1</sup> A summary of the material and a few of the ideas presented in this draft appear with acknowledgement in C. Gilliot, ‘Islam et pouvoir: la commanderie du bien et l’interdiction du mal’, *Communio*, 16 (1991).

Cambridge University Press  
0521661749 - Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought  
Michael Cook  
Frontmatter  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS • xvii

twice as long to write, or alternatively have ended up half the size (an outcome she would have been the last to regret).

Last but not least, I would like to express my appreciation to Lennart Sundelin for his courage in undertaking the indexing of so large a book, and to my department for a generous contribution towards the expenses of its publication.