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Forbidding Wrong in Islam

An Introduction

Michael Cook's massive study in Islamic ethics, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, was published to much acclaim in 2001. It was described by one reviewer as a masterpiece. In that book, the author reflected on the Islamic injunction, incumbent on every Muslim, to forbid wrongdoing. The present book is a short, accessible survey of the same material. Using anecdotes and stories from Islamic sources to illustrate the argument, Cook unravels the complexities of the subject. Moving backwards and forwards through time, he demonstrates how the past informs the present. By the end of the book, the reader will be familiar with a colourful array of characters from Islamic history ranging from the celebrated scholar Ghazzālī, to the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, to the Āyatullāh Khumaynī. The book educates and entertains. At its heart, however, is an important message about the Islamic tradition, its values, and the relevance of those values today.

Michael Cook is Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University. His publications include *Early Muslim Dogma* (1981), *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (2000), and *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (2001).

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MICHAEL COOK
Princeton University



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Preface

In May 2000 the British police were searching the home of a suspected member of al-Qā'ida in Manchester, and chanced on a terrorist manual written in Arabic. After the events of 11 September 2001, extracts from this manual were made available in an English translation. These extracts included instructions to be followed by undercover members of the organisation in order not to blow their cover; such a member should avoid manifesting his religiosity through his appearance or conduct. One point underlined in this connection was, in the wording of the translation, that he should 'not get involved in advocating good and denouncing evil in order not to attract attention to himself'. In the same way, a brother travelling on a special mission 'should not get involved in religious issues (advocating good and denouncing evil)'.¹

The duty which the terrorist manual thereby set aside is a central, and in some ways distinctive, feature of Islamic ethics. As the celebrated Sunnī scholar Ghazzālī (d. 1111) put it, every Muslim has the duty of first setting himself to rights, and then, successively, his household, his neighbours, his quarter, his town, the surrounding countryside, the wilderness with its Beduin, Kurds, or whatever, and so on to the uttermost ends of the earth.² Of these demanding activities, all bar the first fall under the rubric of 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' (*al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar*) – roughly speaking, the duty of one Muslim to intervene when another is acting wrongly.

This book is an epitome of a research monograph I recently published on this duty under the title *Commanding right and forbidding wrong in Islamic thought* (Cambridge 2001).

Note on footnotes: Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to my monograph *Commanding right and forbidding wrong in Islamic thought*, Cambridge 2001. Apart from cross-references and a few references to new sources, the purpose of these notes is to help any reader who wishes to do so to locate the relevant passage or passages in the monograph.

¹ *The New York Times*, 28 October 2001, B8. The passages are taken from pages 54 (item 11) and 40 (item 6) of the manual respectively.

² 445.

xii Preface

The original monograph was a detailed presentation of the results of some fifteen years of research. Its seven hundred pages were weighed down with several thousand footnotes and over fifty pages of bibliography. Moreover, the large-scale organisation of the material was according to the various sects and schools that make up the Muslim community, not by topic. In short, the monograph was written primarily for specialists. The text (as opposed to the footnotes) was not in principle inaccessible to non-specialists, but it would have taken considerable courage and persistence for anyone other than a specialist to read it from cover to cover.

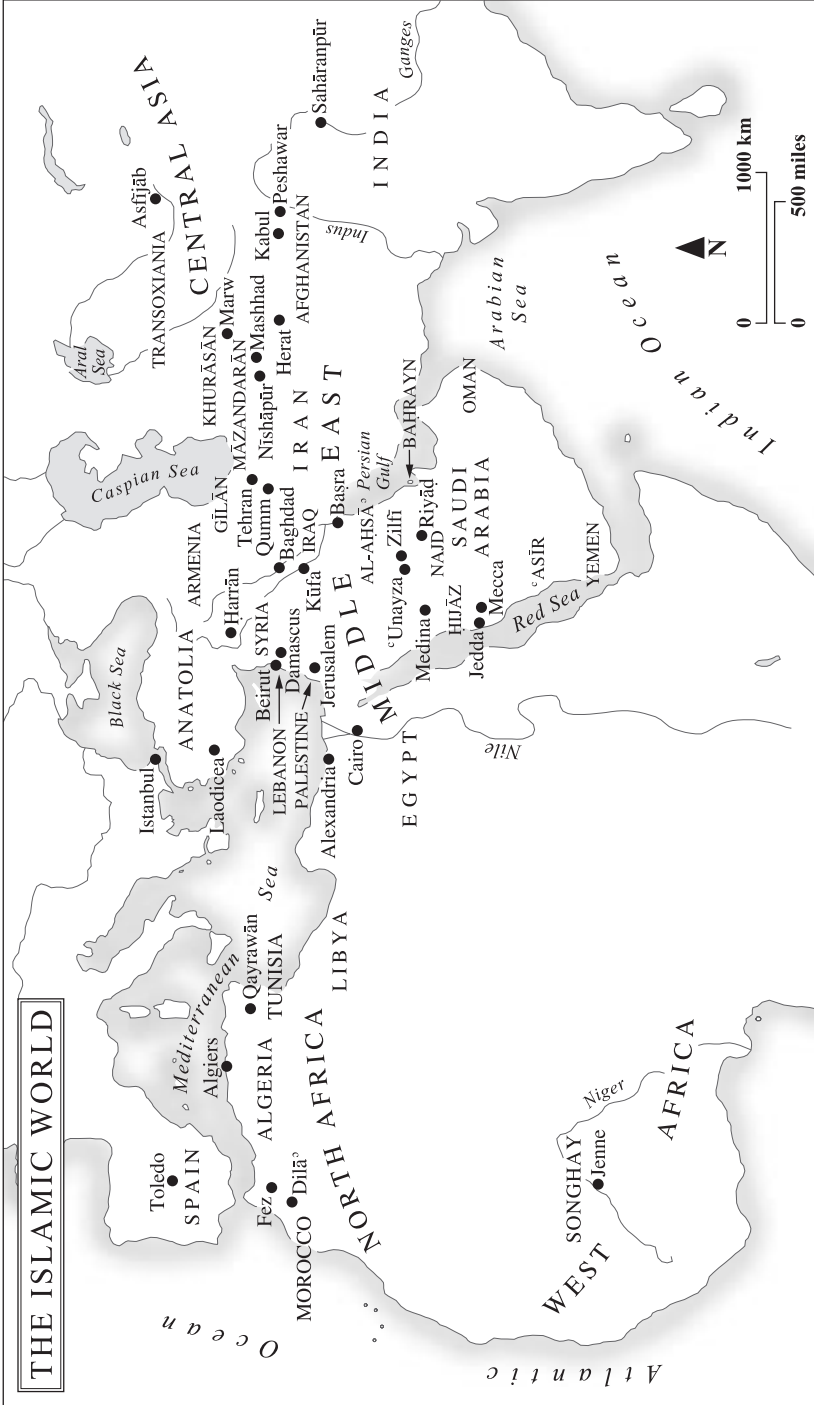
The present epitome is designed specifically for the non-specialist. As can be seen from the table of contents, the material has been drastically rearranged to make the organisation thematic; only the last four chapters replicate the organisation of the monograph.

No one who has read the monograph need read this epitome. Except in a small number of cases readily identifiable from the notes, there is no new material here. I have often rearranged the data, and occasionally this leads to new and perhaps better ways of looking at things. But there is nothing here that would count as a novel theory.

At the same time, no non-specialist who reads this epitome has any need to go to the monograph. Everything that really matters about the subject is covered here. Perhaps the only exception would be someone with an interest in one particular sect or school; for such a purpose, the organisation of the monograph is more helpful.³

This epitome is subject to all the numerous debts set out in the ‘Acknowledgements’ and footnotes of the monograph. Some further information used here was kindly given to me by Şükrü Hanioglu, Barbara von Schlegell, Matti Steinberg and Nenad Filipović. I have benefited considerably from the comments of Patricia Crone and Bob Moore on the typescript, and I regret that at the time I was working on this epitome, few reviews of the monograph had yet appeared. Finally, I would like to thank Janet Klein for preparing the index.

³ I have written an even more succinct account of forbidding wrong that is to appear as the entry ‘al-Nahy ‘an al-munkar’ in the *Supplement* to the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. There is also an informative article by W. Madelung in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (London 1982–, art. ‘Amr be ma‘rūf’).



This map shows the location of places mentioned in the text, and contains information related to more than one period.