

CHAPTER VII

The System of Morality

From Ch. 7, Introduction to Islam, by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah

MEN may be divided into three principal categories:

(1) Those who are good by nature, and incorruptible in the face of temptations, whose very instinct suggests to them whatever is good and charitable.

(2) Those who are just the contrary and are incorrigible.

(3) Those who belong to the intermediary group, and behave suitably if they are constrained thereto by supervision or sanction, but who would otherwise lapse into a state of carelessness or do injustice to others.

224. This last category comprises the immense majority of the human race, the members of the other two extreme categories comprising but a few individuals. The first kind (like human-angels) does not require any direction or control; but it is the second kind (like human-devils) which must be controlled, and prevented from doing evil. Great attention has to be devoted to the third kind (human-men).

225. The members of this third category resemble in certain respects the beasts – they are calm and content with what they possess, so long as they perceive nothing better in the possession of others, or do not suspect some mischief on the part of others. This evil propensity in the face of temptation has been, at all times, the object of intense preoccupation on the part of human society. Thus the father controls his children. The head of the family, of the tribe, of the city-state, or of any other group of men tries to force those who are placed under his authority to be content with what they possess, and not to usurp that which others have obtained in an honest and legitimate way. Perhaps the very aim of human society is none other than controlling temptations and remedying damage which has already been done. All men, even members of the same nation, are not developed alike. A noble spirit is willing to sacrifice and do works of charity. An intelligent spirit sees very far, and consequently any prospect that would compromise attaining some immediate gain, prevents it from doing evil, even if it should not be persuaded to sacrifice on its own initiative. As to the ordinary spirit, not only does it not willingly consent to sacrifice, but it will even permit itself to thrive at the expense of others, unless there be a fear of violent and immediate reaction on the part of its victim, or society, or any other

superior power. The obtuse spirit is not even deterred by this fear, and so it persists until the end with its criminal objectives, struggling against all opposition, until society imposes a state where it can no longer exert itself recklessly, such as a punishment by death or imprisonment.

226. All laws, all religions and all philosophies try to persuade the masses, or the intermediary category, [3] to behave in a suitable manner and even to offer voluntary sacrifices in order to help the poor, the destitute and those who have needs and still cannot satisfy them, through no fault of their own.

Characteristic Traits of Islam

227. Islam is an all-embracing mode of life. Not only does it prescribe beliefs but also the rules of social behaviour. Moreover, it occupies itself with the nicer application and functioning of its laws. We know that Islam does not believe in the life of this world as an end in itself, or in a body without a soul. On the contrary, it teaches belief in the Hereafter. Its motto, as enunciated by Qur'an, is "*The best in this world as well as the best in the Hereafter.*" It is thus that not only does it praise what is good and condemn evil, but it also provides rewards and sanctions, both spiritual and material. As far as its injunctions and prohibitions are concerned, Islam inculcates within the spirit a fear of God and the last judgement after the Resurrection, and the punishment of Hellfire. Not content with this, it takes all possible precautions in the realm of material sanctions, in order to deter man from permitting himself acts of injustice and violation of the rights of others. It is thus that the believer prays and fasts even when he is not coerced to do so and he even pays a tax when the government ignores fixing the amount or finds itself unable to secure payments by force.

The Basis of Morality

228. It often happens that motives or circumstances can bring about a profound change in the significance of an act which may outwardly seem to resemble one another. For instance, the death occasioned at the hands of a brigand, of a hunter mistaking his victim for game, of a

fool, or a minor, in self-defence, by a headsman executing the capital punishment ordered by a tribunal, a soldier defending his country against an aggressive invasion, etc. – in all these cases, the killing is sometimes punished more or less severely, sometimes pardoned, sometimes considered a normal duty which entails neither praise nor condemnation, and sometimes obtains high praise and honour. Almost all human life is composed of acts whose good and evil nature are relative. This is why the Prophet Muhammad has often declared: **"Acts will be (judged) only according to intention."**

229. Islam is based on the belief that Divine revelation was sent to men through prophets as intermediaries. Its law and morality, like its faith, are therefore based on Divine commandments. It is possible that in the majority of cases, human reason should also arrive at the same conclusion. But essentially it is the Divine aspect which has the decisive significance in Islam and not the reasoning of a philosopher, a jurist or a moralist, the more so because the reasoning of different individuals may differ and lead to completely opposite conclusions. Sometimes the motive of discipline is found underlying an obligation and practice which is apparently superfluous.

230. First of all, one may divide human actions into good and evil (represented by orders and prohibitions). Acts from which one must abstain are also divided into two inclusive categories: (i) Those against which there is temporal sanction or material punishment in addition to condemnation on the day of the Final Judgement, and (ii) those which are condemned by Islam without providing a sanction other than that of the Hereafter.

231. In a saying attributed to the Prophet (and reported by Qadi 'Iyad, in his *Shifa*, ch. 2) we see the conception of life envisaged by Islam, " 'Ali asked the Prophet one day about the principles governing his general behaviour, and he replied, **"knowledge is my capital, reason is the basis of my religion, love is my foundation, desire is my mount for riding, remembrance of God is my comrade, confidence is my treasure, anxiety is my companion, science is my arm, patience is my mantle, contentment is my booty, modesty is my pride, renunciation of pleasure is my profession, certitude is my food, truth is my intercessor, obedience is my sufficiency, struggle is my habitude and the delight of my heart is in the service of worship."**

232. On another occasion, the Prophet Muhammad said, **"The sum-total of wisdom is the fear of God."** Islamic morality begins with the renunciation of all adoration outside God, be it adoration of the self (egoism), or adoration of our own handicrafts (idols, superstitions) etc. and the renunciation of all that degrades humanity (atheism, injustice, etc.).

233. Abolishing the ineluctable inequalities (based on race, colour of skin, language, place of birth) Islam has proclaimed (and realized more than any other system) the superiority of the individual based solely on morality, which is a thing that is accessible and open to everybody – without exception. This is what the Qur'an (49:13) has said: *"O mankind, lo! We have created you of a male and a female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another; verily the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is the most pious; lo! God is Knower, Aware."*

234. In a beautiful passage (17:23-9), the Qur'an gives twelve commandments to the Muslim community, and says:

(i) Thy Lord hath decreed, that ye worship none save Him.

(ii) And that (ye show) kindness to parents. If one of them or both of them were to attain old age with thee, say not 'Fie' unto them nor repulse them, but speak unto them a gracious word. And lower unto them the wing of tenderness through mercy, and say: My Lord! Have mercy on them both, as they did care for me when I was little. Your Lord is best aware of what is in your minds. If ye are righteous, then lo! He is ever Forgiving unto those who turn (unto Him) in repentance.

(iii) Give the kinsman his due, and the poor, and the wayfarer, and squander not (thy wealth) in wantonness. Lo! the squanderers are ever brothers of the devils, and the Devil was an ingrate to his Lord. But if thou hast to turn away from them, waiting mercy from thy Lord, for which thou hopest, then speak unto them a convenient word.

(iv) And let not thy hand be chained to thy neck nor open it with a complete opening, lest thou sit down rebuked, denuded. Lo! thy Lord enlargeth the provision for whom He will,

and straineth (it from whom He will). Lo! He is ever Knower, Seer of His slaves.

(v) Slay not your children, fearing a fall to penury; we shall provide for them and for you. Lo! the slaying of them is a great sin.

(vi) And come not near unto fornication. Lo! it is an abomination and an evil way.

(vii) And slay not the life which God hath forbidden save with right. Whoso is slain wrongfully, we have given power unto his rightful representative, but let him not commit excess in slaying. Lo! he will be helped.

(viii) Come not near the property of the orphan save with that which is better till he come to strength;

(ix) And keep the covenant. Lo! of the covenant it will be asked.

(x) Fill the measure when ye measure, and weigh with a right balance; this is meet, and best refuge.

(xi) Follow not that whereof thou hast no knowledge. Lo! the hearing and the sight and the heart – of each of these it will be asked.

(xii) And walk not in the earth exultant. Lo! thou canst not rend the earth, nor canst thou stretch to the height of the hills. The evil of all that is hateful in the sight of thy Lord. This is part of the wisdom wherewith thy Lord hath inspired thee (O Muhammad). And set not up with God any other god, lest thou be cast into hell, reprov'd, abandoned.

These commandments, comparable to and more comprehensive than those given to Moses, were revealed to the Prophet during the Mi 'raj.

235. It would be too lengthy to cite here all the Quranic exhortations. However, we may quote a passage (4:36-8), in which it speaks of the social behaviour of the average man:

"And serve God; ascribe nothing as partner unto Him: (show) kindness unto parents, and

unto near kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and unto the neighbour who is of kin (unto you) and the neighbour who is not of kin, and the fellow-traveller and the wayfarer, and (the slaves) whom your right hands possess; lo! God loveth not such as are proud and boastful, who hoard their wealth and enjoin avarice on others, and hide that which God hath bestowed upon them of His bounty; for disbelievers. We prepare a shameful doom. And (also) for those who spend their wealth in order to be seen of men, and believe not in God nor the Last Day; whoso taketh Satan for a comrade, a bad comrade hath he."

236. In another passage (49:10-12), the Qur'an describes the characteristics of Muslim society:

"The believers are naught else than brethren; therefore make peace between your brethren and observe your duty to God, that haply ye may obtain mercy. O ye who believe! Let not a folk deride a folk who may be better than they are, nor let women (deride) women who may be better than they are; neither defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames. Bad is the name of lewdness after embracing the faith. And whoso turneth not in repentance, such are evil-doers. O ye who believe! Shun much suspicion. For lo! some suspicion is a crime. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother (by backbiting)? Ye abhor that (so abhor the other) and keep your duty to God. Lo! God is Relenting, Merciful."

The Fault and its Expiation

237. Nobody could object to good counsel, offered in the above mentioned verses, but man has his weaknesses. He is composed jointly of the elements of good and evil. By his innate defects, he gets angry; he is subject to temptation, and is driven to do harm to those who are weaker and have no means of defending or avenging themselves. Similarly, his noble sentiments make him repent afterwards; and in proportion to the force of his repentance, he tries more or less to rectify the harm he had done.

238. Islam divides faults into two broad categories . . .

those which are committed against the rights of God (unbelief, neglect of worship, etc.), and those against the rights of men. Moreover, God does not pardon the harm done by a man to his fellow-being – it is the victim who alone can pardon. If one does harm to another creature, be it man, animal or any other, one commits in fact a double crime – a crime against one's immediate victim, and also a crime against God – since the criminal conduct in question constitutes a violation of the Divine prescriptions. Thus when there is an injustice or crime against another creature, one has not only to try to repair the damage, by restoring to the victim, of one's violation, the right which had been taken away from him, but he also has to beg pardon from God. In a famous saying of his, the Prophet Muhammad gave a warning, that on Doomsday, a certain person would be thrown in Hell because he had tied up a cat with a rope giving it neither to eat nor to drink, nor letting it go and seek food, thus causing the death of the poor animal in inanition [from lack of nourishment]. In another Hadith, the Prophet spoke of Divine punishment to those men who did not fulfil their duty against even the animals, by not giving them sufficient food, or loading them beyond their strength, etc. The Prophet prohibited even the hewing down of trees without necessity. Men should profit by what God has created, yet in an equitable and reasonable measure, avoid all extravagance and waste.

239. When one causes damage to another and wishes to mend it, there are several ways he could adopt. Sometimes by merely asking pardon everything is set right. At other times it may be necessary to restore the rights which were taken away, or replace them if the original rights could not be restored, and so on.

240. To show clemency to others and pardon them is a noble quality and upon this Islam has often insisted. In eulogizing it, the Qur'an (3:133-4) says: *"And vie one with another for forgiveness from your Lord and for a Paradise as wide as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the pious, who spend (as charity) in ease and in adversity, who control their wrath and are forgiving towards mankind. And God loveth the doers of good."*

241. God is incomparably more forgiving and merciful than the most merciful of men. Among the names with which Islam calls God, there is *Rahman* (Most Merciful), *Tauwab* (Most Pardoning) *'Afu* (one who effaces faults), *Ghaffar* (Most Forgiving), etc. Those who commit a sin against God, and then repent find God full of indulgence. Two verses of the Qur'an may show

the Islamic notion of the bounty of God:

(a) *"Verily God pardoneth not that partners should be ascribed unto Him, while He pardoneth all else to whom He will. (4:116)*

(b) *". . . O My slaves who have been prodigal to your own hurt! Despair not of the mercy of God. Verily God forgiveth all sins; verily He is the Forgiving, the Merciful. (39:53).*

243. If one gives up disbelief and turns to God to beg pardon from Him, one can always hope for His clemency. Man is weak, and often breaks his resolutions, but true repentance can always restore the grace of God. There is no formality, no buying of Divine pardon through the mediation of other men, but one must turn directly to God and present to Him one's sincere regrets in a tête-à-tête conversation (*munajat*); for He is the knower of all and nothing can be concealed from Him. **"The Love of God for His creatures is a hundred and more times greater than that of a mother for her child,"** as has once been remarked by the Prophet, for the Prophet Muhammad has said: **"Mercy has been divided by God into one hundred portions, of which He has retained Himself⁹⁹ and distributed the one portion among all the beings living on the earth; the mutual mercy found among the creatures comes from the same."** In a saintly saying (*hadith qudsi*) the Prophet reports God as saying: **"Whoever tries to approach Me by a span, I approach him by a cubit, whoever comes towards Me walking, I run to meet him"**. The Qur'an (11:114) announces no doubt: *"Verily good deeds carry away evil deeds."* Alms and charities are no doubt recommended, yet they do not buy automatically the Divine pardon for a given sin; each has an independent existence, and God's freedom is absolute.

The Injunctions

244. The Qur'an often employs two characteristic terms to designate good and evil. Thus it refers to *ma'ruf* (the good known to everybody and recognized as such), and *munkar* (the evil denounced by everybody and recognized as such). In other words, the Qur'an has confidence in human nature, in the common sense of man, **"There will never be unanimity in favour of evil, even if some people permit it to themselves"** is the purport of a well-known saying of the Prophet. The Qur'an (3:110) calls the faithful *"the best community"* and explains that this is so because they *"enjoin good*

(ma'ruf) and forbid evil (munkar) and believe in the One God." Another passage (103:1-3) is still more emphatic, *"By the Time! Lo! Man is in a state of loss, save those who believe and do good works, and exhort one another to truth (or right) and exhort one another to endurance (or constancy)."*

245. But there are also injunctions against particular evils. As has already been remarked, there are those which accompany a sanction and a public punishment, and those regarding which there is only a warning of punishment in the Hereafter, and, except in cases of extraordinary gravity, public authorities do not take cognizance of them.

246. In his celebrated speech, on the occasion of the Farewell Pilgrimage, the Prophet declared the ***inviolability of the rights of a man in all the three categories of person, property and honour***. In fact the Muslim penal law takes it into account, declaring that the principal crimes are the following: murder, damage to body, fornication and adultery (which are all crimes against the person), theft and highway robbery (which are crimes against property), and calumny against chastity, and consumption of alcoholic drinks (constituting crimes against honour). All these are punished.

247. As for the damages against a person, the punishment is in principle retaliation – life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. But there is first of all the great principle of motive and intention. Has one caused damage voluntarily or only by accident? Again, there is the choice for the victim (or the heirs of his rights) to agree to a monetary reparation, or even pardon completely. If the judicial proof establishes that the crime was intentional, then the public authorities have no right to pardon, for the matter rests with the sufferer.

248. Entirely different is the case of fornication and adultery. For the consent of the parties does not attenuate its gravity. The Prophet had so greatly succeeded in developing justice and self-criticism among his companions that they preferred the severest public punishment in this world to the one in the Hereafter. So they presented themselves voluntarily before the Prophet, and confessed their sins and submitted themselves cheerfully to the legal sanctions. Outside confession, it is always very difficult to prove illicit sexual relations, if the parties were willing. In order to diminish temptation, Islam has taken other precautions as well: prohibition of promiscuity; of easy and unsupervised meetings between the young of

opposite sexes if they are not near relatives; and even the recommendation of the veil to cover the face of a woman if she goes out in the street or meets strangers. Far from attracting the gaze of the amorous strangers by her coquetry, it is the duty of a Muslim woman to reserve her beauty and her attraction only for her husband. The veil has other advantages also for the woman. One knows the great difference between the exterior of those women who work in the fields, for instance, and of those who are not exposed to the sun. One knows also the difference between the outer and inner feathers of a bird. In fact the veil preserves for a longer time the charm and freshness of the skin. One can see that plainly on comparing the skin of the face or hands with that of other parts of the body which are habitually covered. The veil does not at all signify seclusion, but it does diminish the temptation that could attract strangers. It is abusing the credulity of the simpleton to make-believe that covering the face with a veil generates tuberculosis. This disease is as prevalent among people where women-folk never use the veil, not only in Black Africa, but even in the most highly developed societies from Finland to Italy, as the latest research has brought to light. In passing, it may be mentioned that there is no legal penalty for the neglect of this Quranic recommendation. (For veil, see also [paragraph 392](#)).

249. We are not required to enter into the details of the different aspects of the injunctions against theft and highway robbery, or other crimes against property.

250. It is a characteristic of Islam to have imposed a penalty on the defamation of women in the matter of their chastity. When one thinks of the numerous occasions when one indulges in conjecture against neighbours or other women and the ease with which one gives liberty to one's tongue, in the company of friends, one will admit that this Islamic injunction is well founded in the interests of society. If someone intends to accuse a woman, one should produce judicial proofs; otherwise, conjecture which touches the honour of a woman will be punished with severe sanctions.

251. The prohibition of alcoholic beverages is one of the most well-known traits of Islam. It was by gradual steps that the Qur'an had enforced it: *"They question thee about alcoholic drink and games of chance; say: In both there is great sin and certain profits for men, yet the sin of them is greater than their usefulness"* (2:219). Again (4:43): *"O ye who believe! Draw not near unto service of worship when ye are drunk, till ye*

know that which ye utter . . ." And finally (5:93-94): "*O ye who believe! Verily wine and games of chance, and idols, and divining arrows are only infamy of Satan's handiwork; leave it aside, that haply ye may prosper. Satan seeketh only to cast among you enmity and hatred by means of wine and games of chance, and to turn you from remembrance of God and from (His) worship. Will ye then abstain?*" It will not pass unnoticed that in this last verse, the Qur'an includes alcoholic beverages and idolatry in the same category. During his life, the Prophet Muhammad administered forty stripes to those who violated the injunction. The caliph 'Umar doubled the punishment, arguing that drunkenness led to obscene loquacity in which one calumniates [slanders] the chastity of women, for which latter crime the Qur'an (24:4) has imposed the punishment of eighty stripes. Therefore alcoholic beverages should also have the same sanction. How much enormous economic loss would be avoided, and how many homes would recover peace, if drink, so dangerous to health and morality, were given up!

252. Among the acts for which no definite penalty has been prescribed but which are left to the discretion of the judge, we may mention games of chance of all kinds (including lotteries, gambling on race results, etc.). Who does not know the tragedies of casinos? How many homes have not been ruined in the vain hope of easy gain – and therefore illicit gain? Lotteries, on rational scales, gradually upset the equitable distribution of the country's wealth, and prove to be the source of all economic ills. They also affect politics.

253. In his anxiety to cleanse society, and above all public administration, from corruption, the Prophet employed the severest terms of condemnation: **'One who takes as well as one who offers bribe would both go to Hell.'** One day, a tax-collector submitted his accounts to the Prophet, saying: These are the public revenues, and these are gifts which people have offered me. Becoming furious, the Prophet mounted the pulpit of his mosque and spoke: **'Let these tax-collectors remain in the house of their mothers and see if gifts come to them!'** Without the knowledge of her husband, one day the wife of the caliph 'Umar sent through an official envoy, proceeding to Byzantium, a present to the wife of the emperor who in her turn, sent a precious necklace. When the caliph learnt of this, he confiscated the necklace in favour of the Public Treasury, and paid his wife the value of her original present to the empress as has been recorded by Tabari.

254. In order to ameliorate public morality, the Prophet said one day: **'Don't insult time; it is God that you insult, because the succession of nights and days comes from Him.'** This is an admonition that deserves to be considered by our contemporaries even today. After all what avails our malediction of the weather so many times every day, if not to prove our own stupidity?

255. Islam does not exact the impossible; it seeks only to bring a constant betterment of human morals into all walks of life by means available to individuals and collectivities. And the responsibility will always remain personal. So the Qur'an (2:286) says: ". . . **for each soul, it is only that which it hath earned, and against it only that which it hath deserved . . .**" A noble spirit does not permit itself evil on the pretext that others also indulge in the same. Instead of imitating the vices of others, one should rather set others an example of good and of integrity of character.

256. Some remarks may be made on social conduct in general. Regarding the rights of good neighbourliness, the Prophet Muhammad declared: **'Gabriel has so often and so greatly insisted upon the rights of neighbours, that I feared that he was going to accord them the right to heritage even as to the near relatives of a deceased.'** It is related that there lived a Jew in the neighbourhood of the Prophet in Madinah, and the Prophet himself set an example to show how a Muslim should treat his non-Muslim neighbours. Among other daily acts of courtesy, the Prophet used to go to the house of this Jew if he fell ill, in order to inquire about his health, and to be otherwise of help to him. As regards daily relations with others, the Prophet declared: **'None of you is a believer if he does not like for his brother exactly that which he likes for his own self.'** Or again: **'The best of men is he who does good to others.'** The Qur'an (59:9) has spoken of a concrete case, that of the first Muslims of Madinah, who had extended their hospitality to the Meccan refugees, and it cites them as an example of practical Islam: ". . . *they prefer (the Refugees) above themselves though poverty be their (own.) lot . . .*"

257. To conclude; "*O ye who believe! Be ye staunch in justice, witnesses for God, even though it be against yourselves or (your) parents or (your) kindred, whether (the case be) of a rich man or a poor man . . .*" (Qur'an 4:135).