



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“The Ethical Tradition in Islam”

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Beginning and Development: Foundational Values

The norms and assumptions that have characterised belief and action in Islam have their initial inspiration in two foundational sources. One is scriptural, embodying the message revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad and recorded in the Qur'an. The second is the exemplification of that message in the perceived model pattern of the Prophet's actions, sayings and norms, collectively called the *sunna*. Muslims regard the Qur'an as the ultimate closure in a series of revelations to humankind from God, and the *sunna* as the historical projection of a divinely inspired and guided human life in the person of the Prophet Muhammad, who is also believed to be the last in a series of messengers from God.

The late Fazlur Rahman, noted University of Chicago scholar of Islamic thought and modernist Muslim thinker, argued that in its initial phase Islam was moved by a deep rational and moral concern for reforming society and that this moral intentionality was conceived in ways that encouraged a deep commitment to reasoning and rational discourse. Like other religious traditions, and particularly Christianity and Judaism, Islam, in answering the question, “What ought or ought not to be done?” had a clearly defined sense of the sources of moral authority. The Qur'an revealed God's will for humankind, who in turn could respond to that revelation through the exercise of reason to elaborate forms of ethical behaviour. The emphasis on reflection and the necessity of cultivating a moral life based on revelation as well as the search for a rational understanding of human conduct is therefore critical for the development of a philosophically oriented system of Muslim ethics. The relationship between the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet, as a model of behaviour, was also elaborated to create a legal framework within which values and obligations could be determined. The process of determination and elaboration, however, involved a more limited and focussed application of human reasoning and it is this continuing interaction between reason and revelation and the potential and limits of the former in relation to the latter, that provide the basis for formalised expressions of ethical thought in Islam.

In one of the chapters of the Qur'an, entitled the Criterion (*al-Furqan*, sura 25), revelation to all of humanity becomes the point of reference for distinguishing right from wrong. The same chapter goes on to cite examples of past Biblical prophets and their role as mediators of God's word to their respective societies. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam's beginnings are thus rooted in the idea of the divine command as a basis for establishing moral order through human endeavour. Elsewhere in the Qur'an, a revealed morality presents humanity with a clear distinction between right and wrong, which is not subject to human whim. By grounding a moral code in divine will, an opportunity is afforded to human beings to respond by creating a rational awareness that sustains the validity of revelation. Thus a wider basis for human action is possible if rationality comes to be applied to revelation to elaborate criteria for encompassing the totality of human actions and decisions. These themes are played out in the Qur'anic telling of the story of Adam's creation and regress.

Adam, the first human, is distinguished from existing angels, who are asked to bow down to him, by virtue of his divinely endowed capacity to “name things,” that is, to conceive of knowledge as capable of being described linguistically and thereby be codified, a capacity not accessible to angels, who are seen as one-dimensional beings. This creative capacity carries with it, however, an obligation not to exceed set limits. Satan in the Qur'an exemplifies excess since he disobeys God's

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command to honour and bow before Adam, thus denying his own innate nature and limits. In time, Adam too fails to live within the limits set by God, loses his honourable status, which he must attempt to recover subsequently by struggling with and overcoming his propensities on earth, the arena that allows for choice and action. Islam views Adam as recovering his former status by attesting to the capacity to return to the right course of action through rational understanding of his failure and by transcending the urge to set aside that rationality and test the limits of knowledge unmediated by God. Adam's story therefore reflects all of the potential for good and evil that is built into the human condition and is symbolic of the human response to a divine revelation within history. Adam's story exemplifies the ongoing struggle within humanity to discover the way that allows for balanced action and submission to the divine criterion. In this sense the word Islam stands for the original revelation, requiring submission to achieve equilibrium, and a Muslim is one who seeks through action to attain that equilibrium in personal life as well as in society.

The human quality that encompasses the concept of the ideal ethical value in the Qur'an is summed up in the term *taqwa* which, in its various forms, occurs over two hundred times in the text. It represents, on the one hand, the moral grounding that underlies human action, while on the other, it signifies the ethical conscience which makes human beings aware of their responsibilities to God and society. Applied to the wider social context, *taqwa* becomes the universal, ethical mark of a truly moral community:

O humankind! We have created you out of male and female and constituted you into different groups and societies, so that you may come to know each other-the noblest of you, in the sight of God, are the ones possessing *taqwa* (Qur'an 49:11-13).

More specifically, when addressing the first Muslims, the Qur'an refers to them as "a community of the middle way, witnesses to humankind, just as the Messenger (Muhammad) is a witness for you" (Qur'an 2:143).

The Muslim *Umma* or community is thus seen as the instrument through which Qur'anic ideals and commands are translated at the social level. Individuals become trustees through whom a moral and spiritual vision is fulfilled in personal life. They are accountable to God and the community, since the community is the custodian through whom the covenantal relationship with God is sustained. The Qur'an affirms the dual dimension of human and social life, material and spiritual, but these aspects are not seen in conflicting terms, nor is it assumed that spiritual goals should predominate in a way that devalues the material aspects of life. The Qur'an asserts that human conduct and aspirations have relevance as acts of faith, within the wider human, social, and cultural contexts. In this sense, the idea that Islam embodies a total way of life can best be understood.

An illustration of one aspect of such a vision is the Qur'an's emphasis on the ethics of redressing injustice in economic and social life. For instance, individuals are urged to spend their wealth and substance on family and relatives, orphans, the poor, the travelling homeless, the needy, and freeing of the enslaved. Such acts define a Muslim's responsibility to develop a social conscience and to share individual and communal resources with the less privileged. These commands are institutionalised in the Qur'an through the duty of *zakat*, a term suggesting giving, virtue, increase, and purification. In time, *zakat* became an obligatory act assimilated into the framework of ritual pillars including prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. The Qur'an also sought to abolish practices of usury in the mercantile community of Mecca and Medina, stigmatising such practices as reflecting the lack of a work ethic and an exploitation of those in need.

At the social level, the Qur'an's emphasis on the family includes a concern for ameliorating the status of women through the abolition of pre-Islamic practices, such as female infanticide, and by affording women new rights. Among these were the rights of property ownership, inheritance, the right to contract marriage and to initiate divorce, if necessary, and to maintain one's own dowry.



Polygamy, the plurality of wives, was regulated and restricted, so that a man was permitted to have up to four wives, only if he could treat them with equity. Muslims have traditionally understood this practice in its seventh century context, as affording the necessary flexibility to address the social and cultural diversity that arose with the expansion of Islam. However, some modern Muslims maintain that the thrust of the Qur'anic reform was in the direction of monogamy and an enhanced public role for women. Such modernists also hold that the development and occurrence of customs and practices of seclusion and veiling of women were a result of local traditions and customs, and are antithetical to the spirit of emancipation they claim to envisage in the Qur'an.

Since Muslims are privileged in the Qur'an and cited as the "best of communities" whose function it was to command the right and prevent wrong, the Prophet Muhammad's mission, like that of past prophets, involved the creation of a just, divinely-ordained polity. The struggle towards this goal involved Muslims in warfare and the term in the Qur'an that encompasses this effort as a whole is *jihad*. Often simply and erroneously translated as "holy war," *jihad* carries a far wider connotation that includes striving by peaceful means, such as service and education. This striving can also take place in a more personal and internalised sense, as in the struggle to purify oneself. Where it refers to armed defence of a justly executed war, the Qur'an specifies the conditions for war and peace, the treatment of captives and the resolution of conflict, emphasising that the ultimate purpose of God's word was to invite and guide people to the "ways of peace."

As the Muslim polity took shape, it also became necessary for it to address the question of its relationship and attitude towards non-Muslims with similar scriptural traditions, particularly Jews and Christians. In the Qur'an they are referred to as the "People of the Book." Where they lived among Muslims, as subjects, they were to be granted "protected" status through a mutual agreement. They were to be subject to a poll tax and their private and religious property, law, and religious practices were to be protected. They could not, however, proselytise among Muslims, although Muslims were encouraged to convert Christians and Jews. The Qur'an recognises the particularity of all religious communities, favouring common moral goals over mutually divisive and antagonistic attitudes when possible:

For each community, we have granted a Law and a Code of Conduct. If God wished, He could have made you one community, but he wishes rather to test you through that which has been given to you. So vie with each other to excel in goodness and moral virtue.
(Qur'an 5:48)

The need for congruence between the divine moral imperative and human life is also reflected in the preserved Prophetic tradition which is perceived as explaining and confirming Qur'anic values and commands. The recording of episodes of the Prophet's life, his words, actions, and habits, came in time to represent for Muslims a timeless model pattern for daily life. It also assumed an authoritative role in explaining and complementing the Qur'an. His personal character, struggle, piety, and eventual success, enhance for Muslims Muhammad's role as the paradigm and seal of prophecy. A rich tradition of poetry in praise of the Prophet exists in virtually all the languages spoken by Muslims, inspiring both the commitment to emulate his behaviour and a sense of personal affinity and love for his person and family. For Muslims, the message of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet's life thus remain inseparably related through all of history as paradigms for moral and ethical behaviour. They formed the basis for Muslim thinkers to develop legal tools for embodying moral imperatives. The elaboration of the legal sciences would lead to a codification of norms and statutes that gave form to the concept of law in Islam, generally referred to as the *shari'a*. Among the forms that developed to encompass the moral imperative, are the various schools of law in Islam, each of whom, through the legal discipline of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), elaborated legal codes to embody their specific interpretation of how Muslims should respond to God's commands in conducting their daily lives.



Parallel to the developing legal expressions, there also emerged a set of moral assumptions that articulated ethical values, rooted in a more speculative and philosophical conception of human conduct as a response to the Qur'an and the Prophet's life. Groups in Islam, as well as schools of law, were not as clearly circumscribed in the first three centuries of Muslim history as is generally thought. Most communities of interpretation were still in formation, and their subsequent boundaries and positions were yet to be fully defined and elaborated. Public, legal, and educational institutions in the Muslim world of the time had not achieved the classical forms or purposes that came to be associated with them. A key to this process of definition and distinction is the nature of public discourse that characterised the growing Muslim society in its first three centuries. Muslim conquest and expansion resulted in contact with cultures whose intellectual heritages were selectively appropriated by Muslims then refined and further developed. The integration of the intellectual and philosophical legacies of Greece, India, and Iran, among others, created conditions and a tradition of intellectual activity that would lead to the cosmopolitan heritage of an emerging Islamic civilisation. Christian and Jewish scholars, who had already encountered the above legacies in varying degrees, played a crucial mediating role as "translators," since they were also aware that the moral disposition of Muslims, like theirs, was shaped by common monotheistic conceptions based on divine command and revelation. The term *adab* has come to be used to define the wide connotation of meanings implied by the moral, ethical, intellectual and literary discourse that emerged. It was also during this period, from the eighth to the tenth centuries, that we see the emergence of what later came to be clearly identifiable theological and intellectual traditions, within the Muslim community that are identified with groups such as the Sunni, Shi'a, Mu'tazila, and the Muslim philosophers.

The main features of the moral environment and perspective based on the Qur'anic message define the general ethical stances that came to be regarded as normative through their expression in legal language and terms. In the early period of Muslim intellectual history, these values also provided a frame of reference for the selective appropriation and development of philosophical, moral, and ethical assumptions from other traditions, for example, the Hellenistic. These incorporations served as a basis for widening the scope and application of an Islamic frame of reference to articulate ethical and moral values outside of merely juristically defined values. Since clear cut distinctions in Islam between religion, society, and culture are hard to sustain, it seems appropriate, in discussing Muslim ethics, to let the whole spectrum of tendencies, legal, theological, philosophical, and mystical, act as resources for disclosing moral assumptions and commitments in order to appreciate both development and continuity across the whole spectrum of Muslim thought and civilisation.

Theological and Traditional Approaches

The emergence of an intellectual tradition of inquiry based on the application of rational tools as a way of understanding Qur'anic injunctions led to the use among Muslims of a formal discipline devoted to the study of *kalam* (literally meaning speech, i.e., the word of Allah). The goals of this discipline were theological, in the sense that the application of reason was to make comprehensible and justify the word of God. The discussions involved Muslims in the elaboration and definition of certain ethical concerns, namely: the meaning of Qur'anic ethical attributes such as just, obligatory, good, evil, etc.; the question of the relationship between human free will and divine will; and the capacity of human beings to derive, through reason, the knowledge of objective ethical norms and truths.

Without doing too much injustice to the process of debate and discussion among various Muslim groups, it can be maintained that, in general, two clear positions emerged: one associated with the Mu'tazila and the other a traditionalist approach (generally associated with the Sunni tradition in Islam).

First, the Mu'tazila argued that since God is just, rewarding and punishing within this context, human



beings must possess free choice in order that they might be held fully accountable. They denied that acts could therefore be predestined. Second, they maintained that since ethical notions had objective meaning, human beings possess the intellectual capacity to grasp these meanings. Reason therefore was a key attribute and capacity and, independent of revelation, the human being was capable of making empirical and rational observations and drawing ethical conclusions. Natural reason, however, must be supplemented and confirmed by divine revelation. Related to this was another Mu'tazili conviction, that God's just nature precluded any belief that He might deliberately lead believers to sinful acts.

Historically, the Mu'tazila school of thought died out and its views were not deemed acceptable to the majority of the traditionalists. The latter's refutation of the main points suggest a differing orientation towards the sources from which ethical values are derived, and the context of faith in which they have meaning. The traditionalist position, as embodied, for example, in the classic work of one founder of a Muslim juridical school, al-Shafi'i, was that the foundations of faith were a matter of practice, not speculation. Over against the Mu'tazila belief that natural reason enabled good and evil to be determined, al-Shafi'i emphasised revelation as the ultimate source of definition. Since the principle of human accountability was also the cornerstone of juridical thought, obligations implying the human capacity to undertake them, good and evil were to be determined on the basis of textual proof in the Qur'an and by what was contained in the Prophetic tradition. Acts and obligations were good and evil ultimately because divine commands defined them as such.

On the question of human freedom for action, the Mu'tazili portion was combated, in one respect, through a notion of acquisition. It was argued that the human power to perform acts was not one's own but came from God. Human beings "acquire" responsibility for their actions, thus making them accountable. It must be emphasised that traditionalist thinkers were not opposed to the use of reason. They parted company with rationalists only over the value placed on reason. They regarded reason as an aid and tool for affirming issues of faith, but purely secondary in its relation to the definition of ethical obligation.

The traditionalist position argued that the final basis for moral obligation was the data of Islam's foundational texts, the Qur'an and the *sunna*, elaborated and applied as God's commands and prohibitions, conceived as the *shari'a* and, formulated through the respective Muslim juridical schools. Such formulations of commands and prohibitions in Muslim books of law are expressed in ethical terms. Five categories are employed for evaluating all acts: (1) obligatory acts, such as the duty to perform ritual prayer, paying of *zakat* and the practice of fasting; (2) recommended acts, which are not considered obligatory, such as acts of charity, kindness, prayer, etc.; (3) permitted actions, regarding which the law adopts a neutral stance (there are no expectations of reward or punishment for such acts); (4) acts that are discouraged and regarded as reprehensible, but not strictly forbidden (Muslim jurists differ about what actions to include under this category); (5) actions that are categorically forbidden, such as murder, adultery, blasphemy, theft, intoxication, etc.

These categories were further set by jurists within a dual framework of obligations: towards God and towards society. In each instance, transgression was perceived in both legal and theological terms, as constituting a crime as well as a sin. Such acts were punishable under the law and the jurists attempted to specify and elaborate the conditions under which this could occur. For example, one of the punishments for theft or highway robbery was the cutting off of a hand and, in minor instances, flogging. Traditionally, jurists attempted to take into account active repentance to mitigate such punishment, following a tradition of the Prophet, to restrict the applicability of such punishments to extreme cases.

Some of these categories have received attention in several Muslim countries in recent times where traditional juristic procedures have been re-instated, but there is a great deal of divergence in the Muslim world about the necessity and applicability of some of these procedures. Where applied, such punishment is meted out through *shari'a* courts and rendered by appointed Muslim judges. Jurists or



legal experts also function as interpreters of the *shari‘a* and are free to render informed legal opinions. Such opinions may be solicited by individuals who wish to be certain about the moral intentionality of certain acts, but, among most Muslim schools of law, such opinions need not be binding. The four major Sunni schools of law consider each other to reflect normative stances on matters of legal and ethical interpretation. For Muslim jurists, both law and ethics are ultimately concerned with moral obligations which they believe are the central focus of the Islamic message.

Philosophical Approaches

The integration of the philosophical legacy of antiquity in the Islamic world was a major enabling factor in the use of philosophical tradition among Muslim intellectuals. It gave rise to figures such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and others, who became well-known to medieval Europe as philosophers, commentators and exponents of the classical tradition going back to Plato and Aristotle. The public discourse of *adab*, grounded in philosophical and moral language and concerns, represents a significant part of the cosmopolitan heritage of ethics in Islam and reflects efforts to reconcile religiously and scripturally derived values with an intellectually and morally based ethical foundation. The Muslim philosophical tradition of ethics is therefore doubly significant: for its value in continuing and enhancing classical Greek philosophy and for its commitment to synthesising Islam and philosophical thought.

Al-Farabi (d. 950 CE) argued for harmony between the ideals of virtuous religion and the goals of a true polity. Through philosophy, one is able to arrive at an understanding of how human happiness is to be achieved, but the actual recourse to moral virtues and acts involve the instrumentality of religion. He compares the founding of religion to the founding of a city. Citizens ought to acquire the traits which enable them to function as residents of a virtuous polity. Similarly the founder of a religion establishes norms that must be upheld through action if a proper religious community is to be established. The thrust of Farabi’s argument, particularly as it is articulated in his classic work, *The Virtuous City*, suggests a communal framework for attaining ultimate happiness, and defines therefore, significant social and political roles for religion as well as an engagement in similar concerns for politicians. In this respect, the emphasis on virtue and its ethical connotations suggests a common focus for both Greek and Muslim philosophies, namely the application of such standards and norms to political societies. The greater the wisdom and virtue of the rulers and the citizens, the greater the possibility of attaining the true goal of philosophy and religion, ‘happiness’.

Ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE) develops the argument that the Prophet embodies the totality of virtuous action and thought, reflected in the attainment of moral virtue. The Prophet, he claimed acquired the moral characteristics needed for his own development which resulted in a perfect soul. This achievement not only imbued in him the capacity of a free intellect but also made him capable of laying down rules for other people through laws and the establishment of justice. This rationale implies that the Prophet goes beyond the philosopher and the virtuous ruler who possess the capacity for intellectual development and practical morality, respectively. The establishment of justice, in Ibn Sina’s view, is the basis for all human good. The combination of philosophy and religion encompasses harmonious living in both this world and in the hereafter.

Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE) was faced with the daunting task for a Muslim philosopher of defending philosophy against attacks, the most well-known by the great Sunni Muslim theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE). The latter, through a work entitled *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, had sought to represent philosophers as self-contradictory, anti-scriptural and, in some cases, as affirming heretical beliefs. Ibn Rushd’s defence was based on his contention that the Qur’an enjoined the use of reflection and reason and that the study of philosophy complemented traditionalist approaches to Islam. He asserted that philosophy and Islam had common goals, but arrived at them differently. There is thus common interest between Muslims who adopt philosophical frames of inquiry and those who affirm juridical ones.



In summary, the various Muslim philosophers in their extension and occasional revision of earlier classical notions linked ethics to theoretical knowledge, which was to be acquired by rational means. Since human beings were rational, the virtues and qualities that they embraced and practiced were seen as furthering the ultimate goal of individuals and the community. This was the attainment of happiness.

Ethics in the Shi'a Tradition

The Shi'a differed from the Sunnis in attributing legitimate authority after the Prophet Muhammad's death to his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali and subsequently to his designated descendants known as Imams. They emphasised the Imam's role in contextualising the faith but also in promoting the use of the intellect. Shi'ism, like the early theological and philosophical schools, affirmed the use of rational and intellectual discourse and was committed to a synthesis and further development of appropriate elements present in other religions and intellectual traditions outside Islam.

One well-known Shi'a writer is Nasir al-din Tusi (d. 1275). Developing further the philosophical approaches already present among Muslims and linking them to Shi'a conceptions of guidance, Tusi draws attention to the need for ethical enactments to be based on superiority of knowledge and preponderance of discrimination, i.e., by a person "who is distinguished from others by divine support, so that he may be able to accomplish their perfection." Tusi blended into his ethical work elements of Neoplatonic as well as Shi'a Ismaili and Twelver Shi'a philosophical and moral perspectives.

The Twelver Shi'a are so-called because of their belief that the twelfth in the line of Imams they recognised had withdrawn from the world and is to reappear physically at the end of time to restore true justice. In the meantime, during his absence, the community is to be guided by trained scholars called *mujtahids* who interpret for individual believers right and wrong in all matters of personal and religious life. In the Twelver Shi'a tradition, such individuals, called *mullahs* in popular parlance, play a significant role as moral models. In recent times in Iran and elsewhere *mullahs* have assumed a major role in the political life of the state, seeking to shape it in line with their view of a Muslim polity.

For Ismaili groups, the Imam's presence is considered necessary to contextualise Islam in changing times and circumstances, and his teachings and interpretation continue to guide followers in their material as well as spiritual lives. An example is the role of the current Imam of the Nizari Ismailis, the Aga Khan, who leads a worldwide community. Among the Shi'a, continuity with Muslim tradition and values thus remains tied to the continuing spiritual authority vested in the Imam or his representatives.

Sufi Perspectives

Sufism is the mystical and esoteric dimension of Islam, emphasising the cultivation of an inner personal life in search of divine love and knowledge. Since a major part of Sufi teaching was to enable an individual Muslim to seek intimacy with God, it was felt that such seekers must embrace a commitment to an inner life of devotion and moral action that would lead to spiritual awakening. The observances of the *shari'a* were to be complemented by adherence to a path of moral discipline, enabling the seeker to pass through several spiritual "stations," each representing inner, spiritual growth, until one had understood the essential relationship of love and union between the seeker and Allah. Since the inner meaning of action was a significant aspect of Sufi understanding of ethical and moral behaviour, Sufis emphasised the linkage between an inner, experiential awareness of morality and its outward expression so that a true moral action was one embracing and penetrating the whole of life.

In its institutional setting, organised Sufi groups taught conformity to traditional Muslim values but



added the component of discipline and inner purification. Since the practices that instilled discipline and moral awareness varied across the range of cultures and traditions encountered by Islam, many local practices were appropriated. These included, for example, the acceptance of the moral customs and practices adhered to in local tradition, such as in Indonesia and other countries, where large-scale conversions had occurred. Sufi ethical practices thus provided a bridge for incorporating into Muslim moral behaviour the ethical values and practices of local traditions, illustrating the universality of Sufi Muslim perspectives on the oneness of the inner dimension of various faiths. Al-Ghazali, the Sunni jurist and theologian mentioned earlier, became a supporter of Sufi thought but sought to synthesize the moral perspectives of the *shari'a* with the notion of inner piety developed by Sufis. He conceived of divinely ordained obligations as a starting point for cultivating a moral personality, provided that it led to an inwardly motivated sense of ethics in due course. He was, however, reluctant to accept the emphasis of some Sufis on a purely experiential and subjectively guided basis for moral action.

Muslim Ethics in the Contemporary World

The practice and influence of the diverse ethical heritage in Islam has continued in varying degrees among Muslims in the contemporary world. Muslims, whether they constitute majorities in the large number of independent nation states that have arisen in this century, or whether they live in significant numbers and communities elsewhere, are going through an important transitional phase. There is growing self-consciousness about identification with past heritage and recognition of the need to adapt that heritage to changing circumstances amidst a globalisation of human society. Ethical questions faced by Muslims cannot be reflected in unified and monolithic responses. They must take into account the diversity and pluralism that has marked the Muslims of the past as well as the present.

Ethical criteria that can govern issues of economic and social justice and moral strategies for dealing with questions of poverty and imbalance have taken up the greater share of Muslim attention in ethical matters. Whether such responses are labelled “modernist” or “fundamentalist,” they all reflect specific readings of past Muslim symbols and patterns and, in their rethinking and restating of norms and values, employ different strategies for inclusion, exclusion and encoding of specific representations of Islam. In terms of broad moral and ethical concerns, this ongoing discourse seeks to establish norms for both public and private life and is therefore simultaneously cultural, political, social and religious.

Since the modern conception of religion familiar to most people in the West assumes a theoretical separation between specifically religious and perceived secular activity, some aspects of contemporary Muslim discourse, which does not accept such a dichotomy, appear strange and often retrogressive. Where such discourse, expressed in what appears to be traditional religious language, has become linked to radical change or violence, it has unfortunately deepened stereotypical perceptions about Muslim fanaticism, violence and cultural and moral difference. As events and developments in the last quarter of the twentieth century indicate, no one among the many Muslim societies in the world can be regarded as normative for all Muslims. In the pursuit of a vision that will guide Muslims in decisions and choices about present and future ethical matters, the most important challenge for Islam may not simply be to formulate a continuity and dialogue with its own past ethical underpinning but, like the Muslims of the past, to remain open to the possibilities and challenges of new ethical and moral discoveries.

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