

**THEOCENTRIC ETHICS IN ISLAM:
FROM SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS TO MORAL CONSCIENCE**

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*Source: A Catholic-Shi'a Engagement: Faith and Reason in Theory and Practice. Section-14. First
Published 2006 by Melisende Publication Ltd. London EC1N 8QU, England.
www.melisende.com*

By the term 'theocentric ethics' we mean not so much a systematic philosophy of ethics, centred on a particular conception of God; rather, what is intended is a spiritual orientation towards the divine nature, an orientation which generates ethical sensibility and moral rectitude, doing so in the measure of the accuracy of the perception of the divine nature, and in particular, according to the depth of the intuition of the beauty of God. This perception of the divine nature—or consciousness of the ultimate reality—is the deepest foundation of moral comportment: spiritual consciousness, in other words, fashions moral conscience. Veracity on the level of metaphysics carries in its wake sincerity on the level of ethics. What follows is a preliminary sketch of this view of the spiritual—and one might say, 'aesthetic'—foundations of moral praxis in the metaphysical, mystical and visionary traditions of Islam.¹

Having stated the basic argument of this paper, it is necessary to respond to an objection that might be made at this point: surely, it will be argued, moral conscience *precedes* spiritual consciousness, in that one is first taught basic moral

¹ These esoteric dimensions of Islam are expressed within both Shi'a and Sunni branches of the faith, in the form of Sufism and 'Irfān, respectively. It is also true, however, that even in its formal exoteric structure, Shi'ism contains features that are akin to that which is found expressed within Sunni esoterism. According to Henri Corbin, the 'great themes' of Sufism are those of Shi'ism, beginning with the fundamental distinction between the Law (*al-sharī'a*) and spiritual Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa*), and continuing with the polarity of 'zāhir' [outer, apparent, exoteric] and *bāṭin* [inner, hidden, esoteric], the idea of the cycle of *walāyah* [sanctity] in hierohistory following on the cycle of prophecy. The idea of the *quṭb* or mystical pole, in Sunnī Sufism is simply the translation of the Shiite idea of the Imām ...' Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, tr. Philip Sherrard (London, 1993), p.191.

For a more nuanced approach to this issue, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Shi'ism and Sufism: their Relationship in Essence and in History', in *Sufi Essays* (London, 1972).

rules and ethical principles, and then one gradually acquires a sense of higher spiritual and metaphysical realities. While this is evidently true as an empirical observation of the process of individual development, the argument misses the point that, in principle, it is the actual nature of the Good as such, rather than such and such a good, that determines the moral vision of right and wrong, that vision which is imparted by the teacher—whether the latter be a prophet, saint, elder or parent. This vision contains a moral dimension but is determined essentially by a particular worldview, in which a notion of ultimate reality is heavily implicit.² Thus, in a religious context, the view of the Good, or the Absolute, takes priority over morality in the very measure that the principle takes priority over its manifestations, and essence over its forms.

One particularly important aspect of the divine nature as regard our discussion here is expressed in the following definitive statement by the Prophet about the nature of God: ‘Truly, God is beautiful and He loves beauty.’³ The word used for beauty here is *Jamāl*, one of the divine names being *al-Jamīl*, ‘the Beautiful’. It should be noted that the divine names—traditionally 99 in number—are collectively referred to in the Qur’ān as ‘the most beautiful names’, *al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*, the word for beautiful here coming from another root, that of *ḥasuna*, to be fine, good and beautiful. This description of the divine names comes in an important passage in the Qur’ān in which several such names are mentioned:

² As Alasdair MacIntyre writes: ‘We are looking for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and consistency in life.’ *After Virtue—A Study in Moral Theory* (London, 1981), p. 204.

³ See A.J. Wensinck et al, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden, 1936-1969), vol.1, p.373, for references to standard collections of Sunni *ḥadīth* which cite this saying, such as those of Ibn Ḥanbal, Muslim and Ibn Māja. In the Shi’a tradition, this saying is attributed to Imam ‘Alī. See ‘Allāma Muṭahharī, online book, *The Islamic Modest Dress* (<http://al-islam.org/modestdress/title.htm>) for references to this saying in the compendium of traditions entitled *Wasā’il al-Shī’ah*. The following saying of Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq is also noted by Muṭahharī: ‘God is beautiful and He loves His creatures to embellish themselves and reflect their beauty.’

‘He is God, other than Him there is no god, Knower of the hidden and the manifest, He is the Compassionate, the Merciful.

He is God, other than Him there is no god, the King, the Holy, Peace, the Bestower of security, the Guardian, the Almighty, the All-Compelling, the Supreme; glory be to Him above all that they ascribe as partners to Him.

He is God, the Creator, the Originator, the Fashioner of forms—unto Him belong the most beautiful Names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies Him. And He is the Almighty, the Wise.’ (Sūrat al-Ḥaṣhr, LIX: 22-24)

Even though some of the divine names refer to the wrathful side of God, nonetheless, as a whole, they are given the epithet of ‘beautiful’, and this fact in itself is full of significance: even those qualities which, on the surface, appear to be other than beautiful—those which refer to God as ‘the Avenger’ (*al-Muntaqim*) or ‘the Slayer’ (*al-Mumīt*)—are in fact integrated within a framework defined by beauty. For all these apparently negative attributes are manifested in order to restore a lost equilibrium, and thus bring about harmony, and harmony is inseparable from beauty. It is thus that all the divine qualities are described collectively as ‘beautiful’: the totality of the acts of the attributes of God cannot be described as anything other than beautiful insofar as they are complementary, integrated, harmonious, and therefore ‘beautiful’. Beauty is not just one amongst a range of qualities and attributes; rather, this quality takes us to something absolutely fundamental and irreducible about the divine nature.

The fact that all of the 114 chapters of the Qur’ān (except one, chapter IX) begin with the *basmala*, the consecration: ‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful’ (*bismi’Llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*) likewise indicates this ontological precedence of beauty over other qualities, for the names of mercy refer to the gentle and as it were ‘maternal’ aspect of God—the root of the word for mercy, *raḥma* is connected to the word for ‘womb’, *raḥim*. One might have thought it more logical to balance out the formula of consecration by referring to a name expressing the rigorous side of God alongside one of these names of mercy, but instead one finds a

repetition of the principle of compassion. God is, above all else, merciful and compassionate. As the Qur'ān says: *My Mercy encompasseth all things* (VII: 156). The qualities of mercy, forgiveness and compassion all stem from the absolute goodness of God. Infinite goodness and absolute beauty, then, are inseparable within the divine nature; and they are likewise inseparable on the plane of the human soul: as Frithjof Schuon so aptly puts it, summing up the relationship between virtue and beauty in general, but which is particularly pertinent to this relationship within the Islamic view of ethics: beauty is outward virtue, virtue is inward beauty.⁴

As mentioned earlier, the word for beauty in the *ḥadīth* describing the divine nature was *jamāl*, but the other word for beauty, *ḥusn*—as in the phrase *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*, 'the most beautiful names'—takes us closer to the core of the relationship between virtue and beauty. For whereas the conventional term used for 'ethics' is *akhlāq* (plural of *khuluq*, character, nature) in Arabic, there is another term comprising the meanings of virtue, goodness, beauty, moral excellence, and that term is *iḥsān*, the literal meaning of which is 'making beautiful'.⁵ The word is the verbal noun derived from the fourth form of the Arabic verb, *aḥsana*, meaning to do good, to make excellent, to adorn. In the Shi'i tradition of ethics, much emphasis is placed on the contrast between *ḥusn* (beauty) and *qubḥ* (ugliness) in the definition of virtue and vice, respectively; and what is particularly stressed in this ethical tradition is the principle that the intrinsic beauty/goodness of good acts, attitudes, dispositions can be grasped as such by the intellect and is not merely the result of some arbitrary divine *diktat*: acts are not simply defined as 'good' because the revealed Law prescribes them, nor are bad acts bad simply by virtue of being proscribed by the same Law. Rather, the Law prescribes good acts because they are intrinsically good, and the intellect is, by its nature, capable of perceiving that goodness, and it is

⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington, 1995), p.113.

⁵ See Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York, 1994), pp.xxxii, 267-273. In drawing attention to the aesthetic connotation of this key term, the authors cast into a different light the many verses in the Qur'ān that mention *iḥsān* and its derivatives. For example, LIII: 31: ... [that He may] recompense those who do what is beautiful with the most beautiful.

capable of perceiving the 'beauty' of that goodness;⁶ and likewise as regards bad actions, they are bad by nature, and both their evil and their 'ugliness' can be perceived by the intellect.⁷

Ihsān is the third term in a ternary formulated by the Prophet in a well-known saying, known as the *Ḥadīth Jibrā'īl*, as the interlocutor in the dialogue is none other than the angel Gabriel in human form. He came to the Prophet and asked him a series of questions:

'O Muhammad, tell me about Submission (*al-islām*)', the stranger asked. The Prophet replied: '*Al-islām* is to testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God, to perform the prayers, to pay the poor-due (*al-zakāt*), to fast in Ramaḍān, and to make the pilgrimage to the House [the Ka'ba] if you are able to do so.' The narration continues:

'He [Gabriel] said: You have spoken truly, and we were amazed at him asking him and saying that he had spoken truly. He said: Then tell me about faith (*al-īmān*). He said: It is to believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in divine destiny, both the good and the evil thereof. He said: You have spoken truly. He said: Then tell me about virtue (*al-iḥsān*). He said: It is to worship God as if you could see Him, and if you see Him not, yet truly He sees you.'⁸

The discussion pertaining to the 'vision' of God is vast and complex in the Islamic tradition, and we cannot enter that discussion here. Suffice to say that the most

⁶ Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, I-II, q.27 a.1: 'The beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For since good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms the desire; while the notion of the beautiful is that which calms the desire, by being seen or known ... it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty.'

⁷ See Ja'far Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam* (trans. R. Shah-Kazemi), (London, 2002), pp. 48-51, for a brief explanation of the 'intelligibility of virtue and vice', by a leading contemporary Shi'i theologian. See also M A Shomali, *Shi'i Islam: Origins, Faith & Practices*, London: ICAS, 2003, pp. 136-140.

⁸ This is the first part of a strongly authenticated tradition related by both Shi'i and Sunni sources. See, for the full text in both English and Arabic, *ḥadīth* no.2 of *An-Nawawī's Forty Hadith* (Tr. E. Ibrahim, D. Johnson-Davies, (Damascus, 1976), pp.28-33.

satisfying formulation regarding the nature of this vision is given by Imam ‘Alī who, upon being asked whether he had ‘seen’ God, replied that he would not worship what he had not seen, and added: ‘Eyes do not see Him through the witness of outward vision, but hearts see Him through the verities of faith (*ḥaqā’iq al-īmān*).’⁹

‘Seeing God’ through the vision of a heart transfigured by the spiritual realities of faith constitutes the highest form of *iḥsān*, and carries in its train that mode of *iḥsān* that is expressed by the notion of ‘virtue’. The *muḥsin* is therefore one who not only does good, but also sees God, rather than ‘seeing himself’. The Imam warns us to beware of vanity, conceit and lavish praise of oneself by others, as these are ‘Satan’s most reliable opportunities to efface the virtue (*iḥsān*) of the virtuous (*al-muḥsinīn*).’¹⁰ The true, objective vision of God results not only in virtue but also in spiritual effacement in the *face* of that supreme Reality. The all-engrossing vision of oneself, on the contrary leads not only to the forgetting of God—the abandonment of ‘theocentric’ ethics—but also to all the vices that feed upon egocentricity as their life-blood.

To be virtuous, then, is to be a *muḥsin*, and this entails much more than simply an outward mode of action, or a set of observable behavioural traits: it is in reality a form of worship, governed by the awareness of God, an awareness that God always ‘sees you’, even if ‘you see Him not’. It should be noted that this form of worship cannot be conflated with the specific acts of formal worship already described by the Prophet in his answer to the question of what *islām* consists in—the double testimony, the canonical five daily prayers, the alms tax, fasting during Ramaḍān and the pilgrimage to the Ka’ba. Rather, the ‘worship’ in question here, in the context of *iḥsān*, is supra-formal; it encompasses the whole of one’s life, one’s inner being is fashioned by the permanent awareness of the divine presence, a presence which is conscious: God truly sees you.

⁹ See Syed Ali Reza’s translation (which we have not followed) of the dialogue between the Imam and Dhi’lib, in which this important statement occurs in the *Nahj al-balāgha*, translated as *Peak of Eloquence* (New York, 1996), p.354.

¹⁰ *Nahj al-balāgha* (Tehran, 1993) p.382; *Peak*, p.546.

The state governed by the principle of *ihsān* is thus a pre-requisite for the sincerity of outward action, whether such action assumes the form of obligatory prayer or moral praxis. It is a state of being which is determined by a *vision*, which is not in the first instance moral, but which carries in its train moral rectitude; it is a vision of ultimate reality, which elicits and generates an existential disposition: one must first *be* and then *act*, being taking priority over action in the measure that spirit takes precedence over form, and the principle, over its manifestations. This existential disposition, or mode of being, is predicated, realistically, not only upon the ultimate spiritual vision—‘seeing God’—but also, on the less exacting ‘vision’, that which is constituted by the knowledge that, ‘if you see Him not, yet truly He sees you’. This in turn implies the awareness that one is perpetually in the presence of God, in the presence of that Reality to which one is accountable, a Reality which is not only absolutely just—and which thus calls forth from us ethical propriety—but also, and above all else, beautiful in its essence—and which thus invites us to partake of contemplative felicity.

The very beauty of God—appreciated in the measure of one’s contemplativity—calls forth the beauty of man: ‘Assume the character traits of God *takhallaqū bi’akhlāqi’Llāh*,¹¹ the Prophet is reported to have said, and the divine archetype of beauty is rendered accessible to man through the sincerity of his effort at realizing *ihsān*, the ‘making beautiful/fine/excellent’ of his own soul. In the Islamic universe of ethical discourse, one might say that there is no ethics without aesthetics; and aesthetics, for its part, extends far beyond the domain of artistic sensibility, while also including it, needless to say. The appreciation of beauty enters into the articulation of one’s spiritual sensitivity and into one’s ethical comportment. It could

¹¹ This saying, though not strongly attested by the exoteric authorities, nonetheless plays an indispensable role in the elaboration of the spiritual foundation of virtue in the mystical traditions of Islam. It goes hand in hand with the esoteric interpretation of another saying—which is well-attested: ‘God made Adam in His form (*ṣūratihī*).’ In general, the theologians understand the form in question to be that of Adam—thus, ‘God made Adam in Adam’s form’—whereas the mystics understand the form to be that of God.

also be said that in the theocentric view of ethics being presented here, spiritual aesthetics functions as a bridge connecting metaphysics with ethics: the assimilation of the Real, on the plane of metaphysics, takes the form of a vision of the Beautiful, and this in turn bears fruit as ethical predisposition, that moral goodness which is inward beauty. Ethical action is thus predicated, ultimately, on contemplation; initially, it is based on an intuition of the divine substance of goodness and beauty, an intuition which is profoundly deepened through the practice of prayer, and ultimately brought to fruition by spiritual contemplation.¹² Thus we find Imam ‘Alī insisting that all of our actions are the fruit of our prayers: ‘Know that your every action is dependent upon your prayer’.¹³

Turning now to the level of moral praxis, let us note that the metaphysical qualities of Being—or, in theological terms, the ‘names and qualities’ of God—are discernible not only in their archetypal or principial nature, but also through their traces or reflections in the souls of exemplary human beings—primarily, the prophets and the saints. In Islamic terms, the final prophet, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh, is regarded as the most complete embodiment of the virtues, which, for their part, are rooted in the divine qualities which they reflect. This perspective on the relationship between human and divine qualities is summed up by Ibn ‘Arabī, possibly the most influential theosopher/gnostic in the Islamic mystical tradition,¹⁴ in his description of the wisdom behind the creation of Adam. This description comes at the beginning of his chapter entitled ‘The Ringstone of the Wisdom of Divinity in the Word of Adam’ in his most famous work, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (‘The Ringstones of Wisdom’):

¹² For the difference between formal prayer and essential contemplation—both being understood as modes of ‘remembrance of God’—see the essays in the section on prayer and spirituality in *Catholics and Shi‘a in Dialogue—Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (eds. Anthony O’Mahoney, Wulstan Peterburs and Mohammad Ali Shomali) (London, 2004), pp. 185-320.

¹³ *Nahj al-balāgha* p.330; see also the English translation of Syed Ali Reza (which we have not followed) in *Peak of Eloquence*, p.487.

¹⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī’s influence is equally strong in the Sunni and Shi‘i traditions, even if not all of his positions conform to those upheld within the exoteric dimensions of the two traditions. For the most comprehensive presentation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s vast corpus, see the two volumes by William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, 1989) and *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany, 1998).

‘The Real willed, glorified be He, in virtue of His Beautiful Names, which are innumerable, to see their identities (*a’yān*)—if you so wish you can say: to see His Identity (*‘ayn*)—in a comprehensive being that comprises the whole affair insofar as it is possessed of existence,¹⁵ and His Mystery is manifest to Himself through it. For the vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like the vision a thing has of itself in another thing, which will be like a mirror for it...¹⁶

In this perspective, the whole of creation is akin to a mirror, while Adam is the principle of reflection for that mirror. It is thus the human being, alone, who reflects all of the qualities back to God; by this means, God comes to enjoy the vision of all of His own qualities ‘in another’: those perfect exemplars of humanity who faithfully reflect the source of their creation. The qualities are divine, whether they be grasped in their supra-manifest mode within the divine nature, or in their manifested mode within human beings. But the difference in existential modality is never overlooked by this vision of essential identity. The difference is analogous to that between light and its reflection in a mirror: the reflection is light, and nothing other than light as regards its essential substance, its reality, but it is also other than light as regards its limitations, its derivative nature, and its ontological contingency or ‘poverty’—its utter dependence on a source external to itself.

As mentioned above, it is in the soul of the Prophet that the divine qualities are most perfectly embodied as virtues. The conduct of the Prophet (his *sunna*) is

¹⁵ One might also translate this as ‘qualified by existence’ (*muttaṣifan bi’l-wujūd*). The meaning here is that God created a ‘being’ (*kawn*, which also means cosmos, and more literally, ‘that which has come to be’) capable of comprising, through reflection and in manifest mode, the ‘whole affair’, that is, the supra-manifest reality of the divine essence, doing so insofar as it, the *kawn*, is ‘qualified’ by existence, that is, it has bestowed upon it a relative and derivative existence, that existence which, strictly speaking, pertains solely to the divine Essence—whence the epithet for this school of thought, *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the oneness of existence or being.

¹⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣuṣ al-ḥikam* (trans. Caner Dagli, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*) (Chicago, 2004), p.3.

a fundamental moral and spiritual paradigm for the believers. The Muslims are told by God in the Qur'ān (XXXIII: 21) that they have in the Prophet a 'beautiful example' (*uswa ḥasana*), and the Prophet is indeed imitated both as regards outward acts and inward attitudes. But one should not view the prophetic paradigm only in terms of the last prophet; for the reality of the prophetic substance is by no means exhausted by its manifestation as the particular man through whom the final revelation was conveyed. Rather, this prophetic reality, substance, or 'light' is to be understood in terms of the following statement by the Prophet: 'I was a prophet when Adam was still between water and clay.'¹⁷ This statement recalls that of Christ: 'Before Abraham was, I am' (John, VIII: 58). The prophetic reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*) or the prophetic light (*al-nūr al-muḥammadi*) not only transcends all particular prophets, it also comprises them; it is thus that, in the Qur'ān, the essence of the prophetic message is deemed to be one: *And We sent no messenger before thee, but that We revealed unto him: There is no god but Me, so worship Me* (XXI: 25) . Likewise, one can understand better why it is that belief in all the prophets is incumbent upon the Muslims, and that, even more profoundly, the true believers are described as those who do not make any distinction between God's messengers. This is expressed in the following verse, which comes closest of all to defining the Islamic credo:

The messenger believeth in that which hath been revealed unto him from his Lord, and [so do] the believers. Every one believeth in God and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers—we make no distinction between any of His messengers ... (II: 285)¹⁸

¹⁷ This saying is found in Shi'i sources, such as Amīnī's, *al-Ghadīr* (vol.7, p. 38), and al-'Āmilī's *Miftāḥ al-falāḥ* (p.29); and in such Sunni sources al-Ḥākim's *al-Mustadrak* (vol. 2, p. 609; with a slight variation: here Adam is described as being 'between spirit and body'); al-Suyūṭī's *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaghīr* (vol.2 , p. 296, in the same form as the latter reference). These references are from the CD Rom *al-Muḥjam al-fiqhī* (Tehran, Nashr-i Markaz, 2003).

¹⁸ See our *The Other in the Light of the One—The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 2006) for a discussion of this important theme, based on traditional spiritual exegesis of the Qur'ān.

In this light it is easier to understand why the Qur'ān is replete with stories and lessons from the lives of many of the pre-Muḥammadan prophets—of whom there are, according to tradition, 124,000; *about some We have told thee, and about others We have not told thee* (XL: 78). These prophets are fully integrated within the Muslim spiritual universe—albeit in ways which may not fully correspond to the accounts given in the New and the Old Testaments. The different prophets, as depicted in the Qur'ān, can be seen as so many facets of one and the same jewel, or crystal, the dazzling array of refractions of the one light passing through it being elicited by the different environments in which the essential prophetic message is conveyed. The way in which the one message assumes such diverse forms is beautifully expressed in the following Qur'ānic image:

*And in the earth are neighbouring tracts, and gardens of vines, and fields sown, and palms in pairs, and palms single, **watered with one water**. And we have made some of them to excel others in fruit. Surely herein are signs for a people who understand.* (XIII: 4; emphasis added)

All of the prophets are also seen as belonging to a single *umma*, a single religious community. In the chapter aptly entitled 'The Prophets' (*al-anbiyā'*), mention is made of Moses, Aaron, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Ishmael, Enoch (Iḍrīs), Ezekiel, Jonah, Zacharias, John, Jesus and finally, Mary, the last person to be spoken of prior to the verse which declares: *Indeed, this, your umma is one umma, and I am your Lord, so worship Me* (XXI: 92).

The stories of the prophets are thus stories of, and for, the single, all-embracing, universal religious community. A Muslim typically reads the stories of the different prophets as pertaining not only to sacred history, but also to the doctrinal teachings of Islam, to the moral challenges one faces in one's own life, and, inwardly, to the spiritual vicissitudes of one's own soul. To give just one example of the latter

principle, Rumi, in the middle of one of his stories concerning Moses and Pharaoh, suddenly breaks off the narrative and speaks directly to his readers:

‘The mention of Moses has become a chain to the thoughts (of my readers), for (they think) that these are stories which happened long ago.

The mention of Moses serves for a mask, but the light of Moses is thy actual concern, O good man.

Moses and Pharaoh are in thy being: thou must seek these two adversaries in thyself.

The (process) of generation from Moses is (continuing) till the Resurrection: the Light is not different (though) the lamp has become different.’¹⁹

Thus all of the prophets and their stories concern the Muslim at different levels, offering the spiritually sensitive seeker so many exemplary ways in which to deal with concrete problems, the prophetic response embodying the appropriate combination of moral and spiritual qualities. The situations described in the Qur’ān cover an astonishing range of complex ethical challenges together with solutions in which spiritual principles are brought to the fore. One such challenge—a particularly relevant one for our times—is that with which the prophet Joseph was confronted. A brief look at his way of overcoming temptation, according to the Qur’ānic account, will help to illustrate the relationship between moral rectitude and spiritual vision which is being stressed in this paper.

The story of Joseph in the Qur’ān is contained within chapter 12, entitled ‘Yūsuf’, and which, unlike other chapters,²⁰ is almost exclusively devoted to the story in question. It is similar, in its broad outlines, to the story as recounted in the Bible, but there are many significant differences. The part of the story which concerns us here is Joseph’s success in resisting the attempted seduction of Zulaykha the beautiful wife of his master in Egypt. This takes us to the heart of one of the most sensitive

¹⁹ *Mathnawī* (Tr. R. A. Nicholson), (London, 1934) III, 1251-1255. (The words in parentheses are by Nicholson.)

²⁰ Each of the other chapters of the Qur’ān which bears the name of a prophet as its title in fact devotes only a limited portion of the chapter to the prophet in question.

moral problems of our times: how to resist temptations to seek sensual gratification outside the bonds of marriage. For, despite being a prophet, and thus *maṣūm*, or morally impeccable, Joseph nonetheless felt, at some level of consciousness, the pressure exerted by Zulaykha's attempted seduction. This is clear on both occasions²¹ when Zulaykha tried to seduce him. On the first, Zulaykha had bolted the door and urged Joseph to come to her; his reply was: *I seek refuge in God*, and the Qur'ān adds, pointedly: *She verily desired him, and he would have desired her, had he not seen the evidence of his Lord* (XII: 23-24; emphasis added).²² On the second occasion when Zulaykha made her advances (this time, together with her invited guests), and when imprisonment was threatened should Joseph refuse, he cries out: *O my Lord, prison is dearer to me than that unto which they are inviting me; and if Thou fend not off their plot, I shall incline unto them and become one of the ignorant* (XII: 33; emphasis added).

Thus, Joseph was indeed attracted to his beautiful seductress, but ascribes his successful resistance not to his own power but to God. For, after he is released from prison, and exonerated of all guilt, he says: *I do not exonerate myself, for the soul incites to evil, unless my Lord hath mercy* (XII: 53).²³ What should be stressed here, to begin with, is not just the juxtaposition between human sinfulness and divine mercy; for a unilateral stress on this contrast would diminish human moral responsibility, it would imply that human agency is entirely passive, utterly dependent upon divine intervention. Rather, man's moral agency is active, and is rigorously centred on intellectual discernment and spiritual vision. For Joseph 'saw'

²¹ In the Bible account, Zulaykha makes only one advance.

²² One should also note that Joseph says: my lord hath made excellent (*aḥsana*) my abode. Most commentators say that the lord in question is his master, the husband of Zulaykha, but a more mystical reading would have the lord refer to God, so that the meaning becomes: God has made excellent (or beautiful) my spiritual station. This reading fits well with the principles being discussed here.

²³ Joseph expresses here one of the key themes in what would be later elaborated within the discipline of mystical psychology. The 'soul which incites to evil' (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi'l-sū'*) is that lower dimension of the soul which needs to be overcome. First it is tamed through discipline (when the soul is characterised by self-censure: *al-nafs al-lawwāma*), and then it is eliminated altogether through grace, when the soul is characterised by the 'peace of certainty' (*al-nafs al-muṭma'inna*). See Muhammad Ajmal 'Sufi Science of the Soul', in *Islamic Spirituality* (ed. S.H. Nasr) (London, 1987), vol. I, pp 294-307.

concretely the 'evidence' of his Lord: we return to the very essence of *iḥsān*, a vision of God, which translates into unshakeable virtue. In this instance, it generates the power to abstain from evil, to remain incorruptible, and this power cannot be dissociated from the beauty of the vision enjoyed. For what is 'seen' by Joseph is not just some abstract moral 'evidence'—the comprehension that extra-marital relations were sinful, and would be punished by a just Lord who knows and sees everything; rather, what is seen is the 'evidence' provided by the very *presence* of that which he witnesses. The reality and power of God is fully present for the prophet, but so is the self-evident—albeit supra-sensible—beauty of God, and it is this transcendent beauty which eclipses the ensnaring, but illusory, beauty of the seductress. In the face of absolute beauty, all of its reflections on lower planes fade into insignificance—even if all beauty, on whatever plane of manifestation or reflection, is nothing but the beauty of God. For the substance of beauty is one, absolute and infinite, while its forms, only, are many, relative and finite.

In the light of this beauty, resistance to temptation emerges not so much as a consequence of negative constraint, rather, it arises out of a supremely positive attraction: the irresistible attraction exerted by the transcendent source of all beauty upon the soul of one whose spiritual 'eye' enjoys the vision of God. It is not that such a person has to strenuously withhold himself from the world; for the world, and all its false allure, is withdrawn from one who is penetrated by this vision of beauty. It is possible to assert, therefore, that beauty, far from being merely that which is aesthetically pleasing, is ethically empowering; and this, in the very measure that the beauty in question is retraced to its divine source. One might go so far as to say that love of God is inconceivable in the absence of the beauty of God, it is this beauty and not just the divine qualities of goodness, mercy, justice, etc., which make God infinitely lovable. It is this love of God, stemming from a concrete vision of divine beauty, which buttresses and deepens all moral values, imbuing them with an existential certitude which moral conviction, on its own, will not possess. This certitude is existential and not just conceptual in that love of divine beauty resounds with the deepest nature of the soul, which, as seen already, is made in the 'form' of

God, a form which the Qur'ān refers to as *most beautiful: God ... formed you, and made beautiful your forms (aḥsana ṣuwarakum)*. (XL: 64)

A 'theocentric ethics' governed by this vision of the intrinsic beauty of divine reality makes good action not only conceivable and practicable but also infinitely attractive, if not irresistible. To accomplish sin, in such a perspective, becomes practically inconceivable, in much the same way as ugliness is intrinsically repulsive. One should also note, finally, that a moral disposition that is centred on God rather than man, far from rendering inaccessible the source of human morality, makes that source inescapable. For man is made in the image or form of God, and he cannot escape That of which he is an image, and which is thus more fully constitutive of 'his' reality than he is himself, just as, to return to our earlier image, the reflection is more fully real in and as the Light of which it is a reflection than it is as a reflection. Thus, God describes Himself as being *closer to him than his jugular vein* (L: 16); and the divine reality *cometh between a man and his own heart* (VIII: 24). The beauty of the divine presence, therefore, is not only transcendent, it is also immanent and all-pervasive. We can therefore adapt the formula of the first *shahāda* of Islam and say: 'There is no beauty except [that of] God (*lā jamīla illā'Llāh*)'. This testimony appears to us as an appropriate response to the universal, and indeed **unavoidable**, beauty of God. For if it be true that He 'sees' us—*He is with you wherever ye be* (LVII: 4)—it is also true that we cannot help 'seeing' Him and the beauty of the countenance divine: *Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God*. (II: 115)