

Notions of Salvation in Islam

Texte zum Islam: Hugh Johnson

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I. Faith and Doctrine

1. Faith

The Qur'an claims to be a revealed religious and social code, whence the essentially juridical character of Islam, defined above all by a law shari'a applicable to the whole community of believers. Thus is explained the form taken by the profession of faith. It is not a simple affirmation, but is rather a witness pronounced by the believer which integrates him forever into the community. Its content is reduced to a condensed formula (shahada) drawn from a Qur'anic verse (7,157) in which Muslims are enjoined to believe in the unique God and that Muhammad is the messenger of the unique divinity. This simple faith, designed as an exteriorization of an inner commitment is of such an intense constancy as often to impress outside observers. It is before anything else an act of submission (Islam) of the believer to divine omnipotence without making any fundamental distinction between faith (Iman) and Islam, even though one insists much more on the spoken word in an act of allegiance, whereas the other puts its accent on intimate and interior conviction. As for works, in the practice of canonical rites, Muslims accord them a secondary role in salvation. Works only serve as a complement to faith, intensify it, without changing anything in the essence of faith, such that the believer who commits a mortal sin is considered to be a reprobate, but not to be lost, or excluded from paradise. The believer is opposite the "hypocrite," whose visible good actions hide his absence of conviction, and the "infidel" (kafir), a term which includes all non-Muslims, and is practically the equivalent of a polytheist, who associates other divinities with God.

2. Doctrine

Even though doctrine has been given no other official formulation than the shahada (see above), Muslim teachers have attempted to draw together dispersed catechetical elements of the Qur'an at to place them in a corpus of catechism. There were treatises attributed to Abū Hanifa, who lived in the tenth century, essays by al Ash'ari (deceased in 936), and essays by el Ghazali, who died in 1111. The principal articles of faith, the oneness of God, the sending of prophets and the Day of Reckoning are drawn evidently from the Qur'anic verse from surah four (v. 136), which calls upon Muslims to believe in God, his Messenger, in The Book given to Muhammad, and in scriptures sent to mankind before Muhammad. Whoever does not believe in God, in his Angels, in his books, in his messengers, and in the Day of Reckoning is completely in error.

The Oneness of God

God is the eternal being, transcendent and omnipotent. God is one. This is affirmed repeatedly throughout the Qur'an. His oneness is lifted up particularly in the famous surah 112, often considered to be the oldest. "Recite: God is one. He is eternal. He did not beget and He was not begotten. None is comparable to Him." Other surat of the Qur'an are often used to set forth the concept of God according to the Qur'an. "Everything disappears but his face." (He is eternal), "There is nothing comparable to Him." (Affirmation of God's absolute transcendency and sovereignty, precluding any analogy with his creation). "No justification can be demanded of him for what he has done." (His will is totally arbitrary, also an expression of God's supreme sovereignty). God, the only objective reality, is given a series of 99 most beautiful names, which serve as "handles" by which to grasp that reality, not as a possession, but as an aid to understanding. The belief in the oneness of God and thus in God He is, in the eyes of Muslims, the characteristic which permits them to distinguish between themselves and all other people, including Christians, whom they accuse of the sin of association because of their doctrine of the trinity.

The omnipotence of God is shown in his creative power. Through and act of pure pleasure (and out of no need or weakness), God created the universe ex nihilo in seven days (man appeared on the sixth day) taking no rest on the seventh. Resting would also imply less than omnipotence. He created seven heavens and seven earths. Heaven has seven parts as does Hell. God created angels as creatures of light without sex or sexuality.

Four archangels (Jibril, Mikhail, Israfil and Izraēl) are assigned specific responsibilities. To each human being are assigned two special angels. Another angel (a fallen one) is Satan (Shaētan), who is also called Iblis.

Shaētan refused to worship the first man, and was expelled from Paradise. In revenge for his exile, he was the cause of the exile of Adam and Eve, who were simply guilty of having listened to Shaētan. However, their guilt was not transmitted to their posterity. There is no notion in Islam of original sin or of natural sinful inclinations of humanity.

Sending Messengers

God charged certain men with transmitting His message, His will to other men, and to call his chosen people to more faithful obedience to that will, because human blindness to God's will had led them often to refuse that will. Muslim doctrine therefore calls upon man not only to believe in the specific mission of Muhammad, but also in that of all other prophets who went before him, including those of the Old Testament (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses) and Jesus. The most important of these remains Muhammad, the "seal" of the prophets, who is considered to have reestablished the integrity of the divine revelation (the reproduction of the uncreated model, the "mother of the Book"), partially received by Jews and Christians, but "falsified" by them. The prophets were exempt from serious sin, and were placed hierarchically above the angels. They were given the possibility of performing miracles. The revelation of the Qur'an is the only one which Muhammad claims for himself.

The Day of Reckoning

All of human history will be closed on Resurrection Day which coincides with the Day of Reckoning. The dead await that day in their graves, with the exception of the prophets and martyrs, who are given direct access to Heaven. The end of time will be marked by a terrible cataclysm after which the Mahdi (well-directed) will appear. The Antechrist, false Messiah will also appear, but will be slain by Jesus. Each soul will be called before God to answer for his good and evil deeds, transcribed in an individual Book for each person. The verdict will be known when the person passes over the pit of fire or falls into it. Muhammad will intercede for each Muslim. Details of Heaven are given in the Qur'an as in the Bible, although the description of each differs.

II. Sources of Law

The Law, an ensemble of juridical and religious prescriptions which must always rule the community conduct of the believers, is essentially supported by the Qur'an, whose text has absolute authority and value. However, certain dispositions of the law are applicable to a specific time and place in Muslim society. In time, jurists, in order to respond to political and social developments, had to call upon new elements to determine community conduct. These new elements, however, were considered to be in implicit accord with the content divine revelation, either by the authority of verifiable tradition, or by analogical reasoning. They became, along with the Qur'an, sources of law.

The Qur'an

The text of the Qur'an remains the prime base of Muslim jurisprudence. It was not, however, fixed in Muhammad's lifetime. At that time, several companions, also called secretaries, had transcribed fragments of the revelation. No one thought of making a complete transcription, because nearly all the believers knew the surat by heart. However, the earliest redactions were not identical, causing divisions within the community. The oldest version seems to have been one established in about 776, but was still not really complete.

The established version of the Qur'an, a "textus receptus" is divided into 114 surat of unequal length, the shortest having three verses, and the longest 298. Even so, the earliest texts were unvowelled, a phenomenon which lent itself to varieties of interpretations. To that should be added a number of contradictory texts, some representing abrogations of others.

The Sunna

The second source of law is the sunna, a term which means "conduct, way of behaving." It is applied more especially to the conduct of Muhammad. In order to reply more adequately to new problems posed by the

evolution of the primitive community, customs from the lifetime of Muhammad were sought through interrogation of the companions, on what he said or did. The collection of "traditions" (hadith) was established to serve as a basis for juridical sciences and thus a written law was juxtaposed to an oral law, and completed by the latter. The hadith were sayings attributable to Muhammad or to one or the other of his companions, through an unbroken or nearly unbroken chain of authoritative sources.

Juridical Schools of Thought

Still another source was canon law, based in theory on the sunna. In fact, it probably grew up at the same time as the "science of tradition" if not earlier. Today, only four of these "schools" are considered "orthodox": the Malikite, the Hanafite, the Chafiite and the Hanbalite. They are of equal validity, and the great religious universities include representatives of each one. The least rigid of these, Hanafism, was adopted by the Turks and the Ottomans, and is in vigor in Turkey. Hanafism is most practiced in Lower Egypt, in the Hijaz, in East Africa and in Palestine. Hanbalism is present in Iraq and Syria, while North Africa is primarily Malikite.

III. Islamic Law and Religious Life

The renewal of the pre eternal alliance concluded between Adam and God, and to the posterity of Adam, Islamic Law is only the expression of the contract which God offered the believer, who was nothing more than a slave or servant thus given a privileged juridical status. The purpose of the law was to procure in the present life better conditions of existence to the believer, and in the life to come the eternal reward, whence the three major divisions of canon law. First were religious prescriptions, the second penal law, and the third principles of social life. However, the application of the law encountered various obstacles, among them popular beliefs or historical circumstances, which almost always pushed Islam to make compromises. This gap between theory and practice, especially sensitive in family and social life, shows up in religious life. This consists mostly for the Muslim in the accomplishment of the five ritual obligations determined by the law, and called "pillars of faith."

The community of Islam to whom the observance of "fundamental duties" was insufficient, added, as protection against the arbitrariness of divine omnipotence, special devotions, sometimes touching on superstition if not purely magical practices, and which play an important role in religious life among Muslim peoples. One of the most interesting of these popular practices is the "prayer of request" (du'a) suggested even by the Qur'an (11,62). Rejected out of hand by the Mu'tazilites as devoid of any value, the Ach'arites try to reconcile it with the doctrine of predestination. For the Muslim masses, this practice has become the recourse of last resort: "Man has nothing in hand other than the prayer of request."

Without doubt, certain Qur'anic verses like the following: "You will not reach piety until you have given in alms that which you cherish the most" (3,85), seem to invite the believer to interiorize religious life. This tenet, not finding a legitimate place in orthodox canon law, found a place in the Sufi movement, spilling over the limits of ritual prescriptions. Muslim religious life always has an essentially contractual character and engenders a morality of the same nature. The notion of moral duty is foreign to Islam which recognizes only a juridical obligation, with the specific aim of promoting the respect of the "rights of God" (fundamental rights) and "human rights" (penal codes). In this respect, human acts are classified in five categories: "indifferent," "recommended," "unadvised," "obligatory," and "forbidden."

Nonetheless, one would be remiss in denying that Islam offers real values and virtues, especially in the social domain. In response to the invitations of the Qur'an, where we can find the rudiments of "divine commandments," they take on the character of an extension of piety, as one can surmise from the verse which says that piety is not turning your face to the sunrise or to the sunset. "Pious is he who believes in God and the last day, in angels and books, and prophets, who out of love for God gives of his sustenance to his neighbor, to orphans, to the poor, to travelers and to those who ask for help, who redeem captives and who pray, who give alms and fulfills the commitments he has made, who is patient in adversity, in difficult times and in times of violence. Those are just who fear the Lord." (2,172).

Solidarity, mutual help, hospitality, generosity, fidelity to the word given to members of the community, moderation of desires, sobriety: These are the virtues which today as well distinguish Muslims from many others. These are unpretentious ideals which seek to measure up to the forces of human nature and its needs, but which also are enough to give a sense of personal dignity unknown to the Arabs of pre Islamic Arabia. Faithful obedience to the law, faithful observance of the precepts of the faith, the profession of the faith, augmented by the virtues and virtuous deeds offer access to the mercies of God and thus to salvation.

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