

Forbidding Wrong in Islam

Michael Cook



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Forbidding Wrong in Islam

An Introduction

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

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

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An Introduction

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

² 445.

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

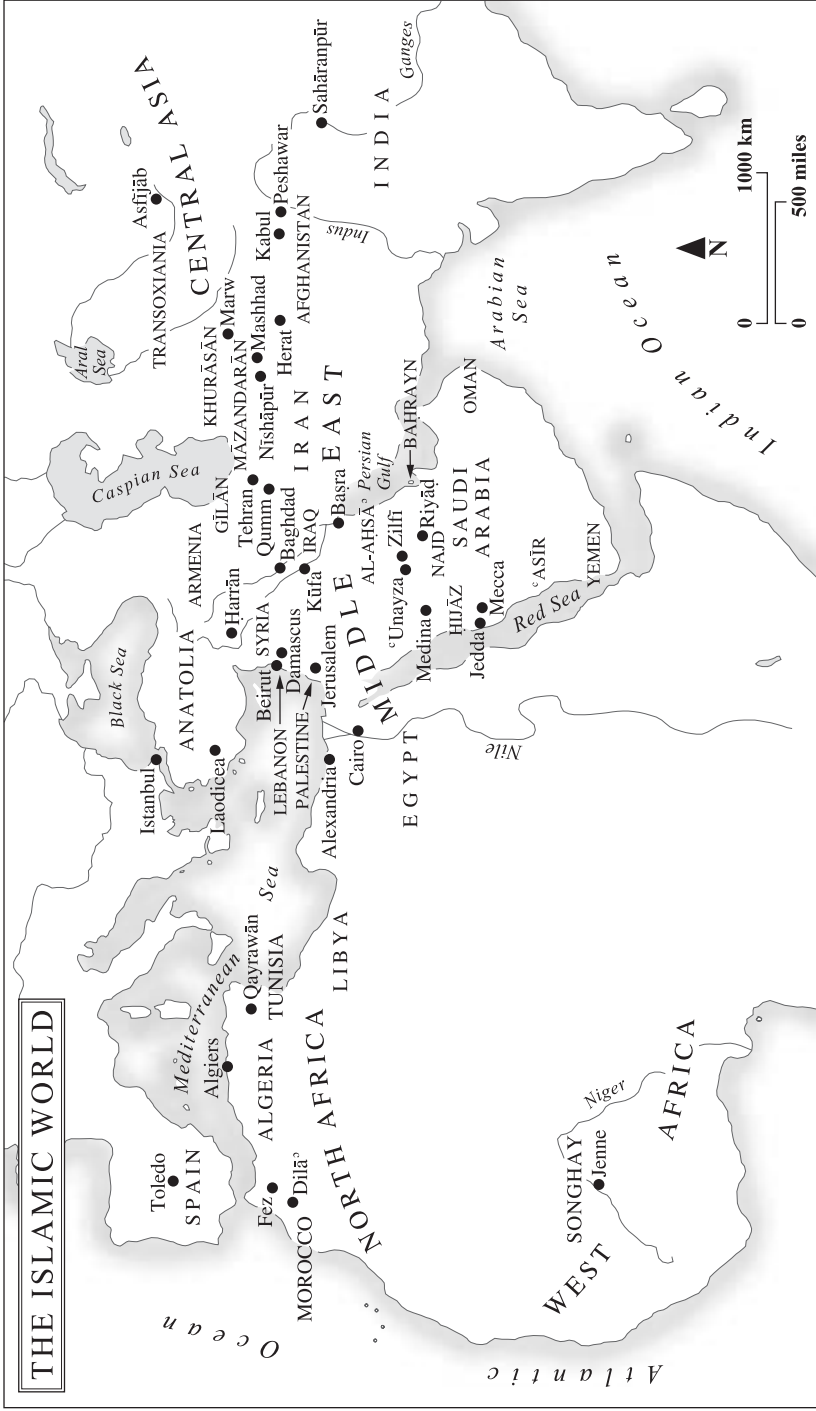
The present epitome is designed specifically for the non-specialist. As can be seen from the table of contents, the material has been drastically rearranged to make the organisation thematic; only the last four chapters replicate the organisation of the monograph.

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

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

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

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



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

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the early evening of Thursday 22 September 1988, a woman was raped at a local train station in Chicago in the presence of several people.¹

A brief account of the incident appeared that Sunday in the *New York Times*, based on what the police had said on the Friday. The salient feature of the incident in this account was that nobody had moved to help the victim, and her cries had gone unheeded – for all that the rape took place during the rush hour. As Detective Daisy Martin put it: ‘Several people were looking and she asked them for help, and no one would help.’

A longer account which likewise appeared on the Sunday in the *Chicago Tribune* placed the matter in a very different light. Quoting what the police had said on the Saturday, the article began by stating that six bystanders were to be recommended for citizen’s awards for their work in helping the police arrest and identify the suspect. The account which followed emphasised two features of the situation that did not emerge from the notice in the *Times*. The first was that the rape took place in a part of the station to which access was blocked by an exit-only turnstile. The second was that the bystanders were confused in their understanding of what was going on: the rapist had ordered his victim to smile, which she did. Although at one point she reportedly mouthed the word ‘help’, it was only after her assailant had run off that she screamed. Initially, at least, the bystanders took the woman to be engaged in voluntary sex. But one young bystander, Randy Kyles, took a second look and thought ‘Man, this is strange’. Something seemed not to be right, so he did not get on his train when it came in. (Others on the platform, by contrast, remarked that what was happening was weird, but nevertheless boarded the train.) When the victim ran up the steps screaming that she had been raped, Kyles chased after the rapist, eventually flagging down a police car and getting him arrested. Kyles later explained his action as follows: ‘I had to do something to help that woman. It just wasn’t right. It could have been my mother, my aunt, one of my mother’s friends.’

¹ ix–xi.

It is clear from these accounts that neither paper considered a rape at a local station in Chicago to be newsworthy in itself. The focus of journalistic attention – and the anticipated focus of the reader’s interest – was the conduct of the bystanders. The account given in the *Times*, which went back to Detective Daisy Martin’s statements on the Friday, placed their behaviour in a most unflattering light: though they greatly outnumbered the lone rapist, they had simply stood by and let it happen. The implication was that their conduct was shameful, and the reader reacts with appropriate indignation. How differently we would have behaved had we been there! Or at least, we hope we would have.

The account given in the *Tribune*, by contrast, suggests that at least some of the bystanders, and Kyles in particular, behaved commendably. They had two good excuses for not intervening during the rape itself – the physical layout of the station, and the appearance of consent created by the coerced smiles of the woman, even if these did not look quite right. Kyles himself behaved with energy and courage when the situation became clear. He felt that he had to do something to help the woman, just as we would have felt had we been there; and we hope that we would have acted as well as he did in the distinctly confusing circumstances of the case.

Underlying these two accounts, and the remarks of Martin and Kyles, is a broad moral consensus. One cannot just stand by and watch someone rape a woman, even a complete stranger, in a public place. Either one must do something about it, or one must have good and specific reasons for not doing anything. In other words, it seems, we have a clear conception that we have some kind of duty not just to behave decently ourselves, but to prevent others from doing things to their fellow humans that are outrageously wrong. Yet in everyday life we lack a name for the duty, still less a general formulation of the situations to which it applies and the circumstances that dispense us from it. The value is there, but it is not one that our culture has developed and systematised. ‘It just wasn’t right’ is the bottom line in Kyles’s explanation of what he did; the ‘just’ signals that, had he been pressed to explain himself further, he would have had nothing to say. We either understand or we don’t. In fact, of course, we understand perfectly well, and some of us can on occasion wax quite eloquent on the subject; but our culture provides us with no ready-made articulation of our understanding.

In Islamic culture, by contrast, such a duty has a name, and it has been analysed repeatedly by the religious scholars whose writings make up the bulk of the literature of Islam. The main purpose of this book is to make this body of thought available in English in a concise and readable form. We can come back to the intriguing contrast between the treatment of the duty in Islamic and Western cultures at the end of the book.²

Before we delve into the thinking of the Muslim scholars, there are some preliminary matters that need attention: the terminology used by the Muslim scholars

² See below, ch. 13.

in referring to the duty; the religious allegiances of these scholars; and the main types of work in which they set out their ideas. The following sections address these themes, and are in the nature of road-maps.

1 Terminology

The phrase ‘commanding right and forbidding wrong’ has its source in Muslim scripture, that is to say in the Koran, which Islam considers to have been revealed by God to the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632) through Gabriel. Thus in one verse, God is calling for unity among the believers, and addresses them thus: ‘Let there be one community (*umma*) of you, calling to good, and commanding right and forbidding wrong; those are the prosperers’ (Q3:104). In another verse He avers: ‘You were the best community (*umma*) ever brought forth to men, commanding right and forbidding wrong’ (Q3:110). And again: ‘And the believers, the men and the women, are friends one of the other; they command right, and forbid wrong’ (Q9:71) – a verse, incidentally, that is notable for its explicit mention of women in connection with the duty. As these examples show, the phrase is firmly rooted in the diction of the Koran.

But what goes for the phrase may not be true of the conception. There is no certainty that the Koranic phrase originally meant what the later Muslim scholars took it to mean. The Koranic uses of the phrase are vague and general, and give no indication of the concrete character of the duty, if any. Indeed, there was a trend in early Koranic exegesis that saw the duty as simply a matter of affirming the basic message of Islam: ‘commanding right’ was enjoining belief in the unity of God and the veracity of the Prophet, and ‘forbidding wrong’ was forbidding polytheism and the denial of the Prophet.³ But whatever the Koranic phrase originally meant, the Muslim tradition overwhelmingly took it to refer to the duty we now understand by it.

Muslim scholars normally follow Koranic usage in referring to ‘commanding right and forbidding wrong’ in tandem. Occasionally they make scholastic distinctions between commanding right and forbidding wrong, but these are niceties we can leave aside.⁴ For our purposes, they are two sides of the same coin, and in most contexts we can conveniently abbreviate the full phrase to ‘forbidding wrong’.

Alongside the Koran, Islam possesses a second body of material at least some of which is accorded the status of revelation, namely tradition (*ḥadīth*). In early times, individual traditions were orally transmitted, but within a few centuries they had been reduced to writing and embodied in voluminous collections. In the Sunnī case, what the Muslim scholars consider to be authentic traditions from the Prophet form a body of material with a status comparable to that of the Koran. There are

³ 22–4.

⁴ xii n. 9; cf. below, 106.

numerous traditions that refer to forbidding wrong, often to encourage believers to perform the duty. However, the tradition that figures most prominently in the discussions of the later scholars, at least among the Sunnīs, is couched in different terms. Like many traditions in favour of forbidding wrong,⁵ it is identifiable from its transmitters as stemming from the city of Kūfa in Iraq.

According to this tradition, Marwān, the governor of Medina, was presiding over the ritual prayer on a feast-day some time in the 660s or 670s. In this connection he did two things that were considered irregular: he brought out the pulpit despite the fact that it was a feast-day, and he delivered the sermon before conducting the prayer. In the face of these ritual infractions, a man got up and said: ‘Marwān, you’ve gone against the normative practice (*sunna*)! You’ve brought out the pulpit on a feast-day, when it used not to be; and you’ve started with the sermon before the prayer!’ At this point, one of the Companions of the Prophet commented that the man had done his duty, and proceeded to quote something he had heard the Prophet say: ‘Whoever sees a wrong, and is able to put it right (*an yughayyirahu*) with his hand, let him do so; if he can’t, then with his tongue; if he can’t, then in his heart, and that is the bare minimum of faith.’⁶

This tradition, then, provides us with a clear example of a wrong that needs righting, and at the same time sets out a schema of modes in which a believer might respond to it; we will come back to these ‘three modes’ in a later chapter.⁷ Yet in the payload of the tradition, the Prophet speaks not of ‘forbidding’ wrong but of ‘righting’ it, using a verb (*ghayyara*) whose primary sense is ‘to change’.⁸ From this the scholars derive the phrase ‘righting wrong’ (*taghyīr al-munkar*) – though because the phrase derives from a Sunnī tradition, it is less used by the Shi‘ites.⁹ Despite the difference of language, the scholars take it for granted that ‘forbidding wrong’ and ‘righting wrong’ are the same thing, and we will follow them in this without further ado.

Both these ways of referring to the duty go back to early Islamic times. There is a third that is of later origin, and mainly an invention of Ghazzālī.¹⁰ Following a precedent set by a somewhat earlier scholar, Māwardī (d. 1058), he adopted the word *ḥisba* as a general term for ‘forbidding wrong’. He then developed a terminology based on the root behind this word (*h-s-b*). Thus the person who forbids wrong is ‘the one who performs *ḥisba*’ (*al-muḥtasib*), the person who has committed the wrong is ‘the one to whom *ḥisba* is done’ (*al-muḥtasab ‘alayhi*), and the wrong itself is ‘that with regard to which *ḥisba* is done’ (*al-muḥtasab fīhi*).

Because Ghazzālī was a very influential thinker, this terminology is frequently encountered in the works of later scholars.¹¹ But despite its systematic character,

⁵ 45.

⁶ 33f.

⁷ See below, ch. 3.

⁸ 34f.

⁹ 258f.

¹⁰ 429; 447–9.

¹¹ 21 n. 36; 296 and n. 298; 326 and n. 145; 371; 423 and n. 229; 452 n. 161; 455 and nn. 191f.