

Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought

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If one saw a wrong being committed in public, should one intervene? This basic moral question is at the heart of a significant body of Muslim scholarship, and forms the topic of Michael Cook's eminently learned and comprehensive study. The historian is interested in the scholastic elaboration of all issues surrounding "*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*", as "Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong" is known in Arabic. Furthermore, he tries to reconstruct how, in different phases of Islamic history and in different doctrinal settings, this principle has been applied by Muslims.

The matter seems simple enough at first sight, particularly if one takes Cook's initial example, that of rape in a public space, which evokes moral outrage in most societies regardless of their creed. But how about the second example, a goldsmith in the Khurassanian town of Merw which became the seat of the 'Abbasid revolutionary leader Abu Muslim in the mid-8th century?⁽¹⁾ According to Muslim tradition, the goldsmith repeatedly went to Abu Muslim, reproaching him of un-Islamic behaviour and eventually threatening with rebellion, upon which Abu Muslim had him executed. In this example, some of the many underlying issues of the seemingly clear moral principle become visible, among them the question whether or not the correction of alleged wrongdoing justifies armed rebellion against a Muslim ruler? And, perhaps more importantly, who has the authority to judge what constitutes right, what wrong? After all, Abu Muslim, in the example accused of not following proper Islamic behaviour, led a rebellion in the name of Islam against another Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads.

Cook reconstructs the scholastic edifice by first analyzing the sources of Muslim creed and law, the Koran and the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadith), and then goes on to scrutinize early Muslim writing and practice. In the main part of the book, he systematically traces the development of scholarship on the topic in the different legal schools and by prominent jurists. He not only retraces the steps of later Muslim commentators, who wrote systematic treatises on the subject, he also succeeds in giving at times, a

very lively picture of the problems confronting a relatively new monotheistic community. This allows readers, even those whose main interest might lie outside the scope of his immediate problem, to obtain a vivid image of many aspects of the processes which eventually led to the elaboration of Islamic law and theology in the 9th century. Cook succeeds in demonstrating how the relatively scattered Koranic references to the duty were supplemented by rather contradictory traditions of what the Prophet had reportedly said or done. This development can be explained to a considerable degree by accounting for the different political and historical conditions in various places. Thus, scholars in the Iraqi city of Kufa focussed on the transmission of traditions which emphasized that individual Muslims were obliged to fulfil the duty, while Syrians quite often held that to direct one's efforts towards the reform of others in an activist fashion was only incumbent upon Muslims during periods of "good" Muslim government. If this had lapsed, the individuals were excused - something that might be interpreted as political quietism. This view gained currency during a period when Syria was the centre of the Umayyad caliphate (661-750) - by many considered to constitute a departure from the caliphate as established by the Prophet's immediate successors, while Kufa at the time was a major centre of political opposition.

The author then traces the development of the ideas on Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong through the enormous amount of material produced by Muslim scholars. He considers all major schools of law, both Sunni and Shi'i, as well as some smaller sects, paying attention to minute points of agreement and dissent, as well as to common roots of the different views. Incidentally, his work thus contains much of interest to readers working on almost any aspect of Muslim doctrine. As quite a lot of the material and the arguments repeat themselves by their very nature, it might be useful, for the purposes of such a review, to use the probably most elaborate argument on Commanding Right, presented in Cook's chapter 16, as a vantage point from which to explore wider discussions, rather than following Cook's genealogical approach. The reference is to the *Revival of Religious Sciences* by the influential scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111).

al-Ghazzali starts out by noting that Commanding Right is a duty derived from the Koran, Prophetic and later traditions as well as from the consensus of the jurists and common sense. Only those Muslims who are legally competent and able to fulfil the duty are obliged to carry it out, excluding the infirm, under-age and lunatics, but including sinners (albeit with certain limitations), slaves and women. Incidentally, the latter group is often excluded in classical Islamic thought, and only relatively few scholars, most notably the Ibadis in Oman, spilt some ink on discussing female participation in the duty controversially. Only in modern times, women seem to be considered relatively regularly as eligible for Commanding Right, although the question of propriety, i.e. problems arising from women speaking or acting publicly, continues to pose a problem.

al-Ghazzali rejects the notion that official permission from the Imam or other authorities needs to be sought before an individual engages in Commanding Right. In al-Ghazzali's view, and contrary to views widespread among Imami Shi'ites, this contravenes early Muslim practice, although al-Ghazzali recognises that violent action might lead to objectionable general disorder. Similarly, he advises caution in cases where the person performing the duty imperils himself, as in the case of Commanding Right to an authority.

In this context, the distinction between different levels of the duty comes in handy. After all, it can be performed in many different ways. Firstly, an observant Muslim might want to inform the offender of his deed. If he failed to see the point, he could be politely counselled. Only if this failed as well, should harsh language be used or physical action such as the breaking of jars containing alcoholic drink, be considered. Even among those jurists who in theory approved of violence, its threat or actual use ought to be considered as the final resort only. In the case of confronting an authority, one might consider to condemn the offence silently (i.e. perform the duty "in the heart" only). If one decided to speak out, it was only prudent to avoid more drastic actions which were likely to cause disorder. This line of argument links nicely to the condition that the actor needs to have the power to act: if his measures were likely to be ineffective, and/or harmful to himself, it would be pointless and even forbidden to proceed. If, however, the action might endanger him but had the chance of being effective, al-Ghazzali sanctions it - in contrast to quite a few other scholars who prefer a more cautious approach. This notwithstanding, he is quite conscious of the temptations related to the duty: He explicitly warns believers not to perform the duty if they are susceptible to perform it in order to

foster their own feelings of well-doing and moral superiority. The 18th century Sufi (mystic) 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nablusi went even further by stating that only Sufis had sufficient self-knowledge to avoid this pitfall. As Cook shows, this position was a clear reaction to an earlier anti-Sufi movement which had attacked Sufi "innovations" under the banner of Commanding Right, and had even risked death in pursuit of the duty.

But what kind of actions are to be confronted by the pious Muslim? While most commentators limit themselves to references concerning alcoholic drink, sexual offences and the playing of music, al-Ghazzali offers a somewhat longer list. It includes wrongs committed in the mosques, such as "sloppy prayer" and "faulty recitation of the Koran" (p. 443), and improper commercial practices. A Muslim might do wrong by obstructing the roads, e.g. by slaughtering there or soiling them in some other manner. He might commit offences against propriety in the public baths, not to speak of decorating such bathhouses with imagery forbidden by Islamic law. Finally, al-Ghazzali discusses offences in relation to hospitality, which can range from a conspicuous display of wealth to offering forbidden drink or food. Cook's investigation of early biographical material shows that this list can be easily extended, for example, maltreatment of slaves and animals prompted some early Muslims to intervene.

Like many other Muslim commentators, al-Ghazzali is also acutely aware of the potential violation of privacy inherent in the duty. Should one intervene upon hearing music from a stranger's house? Many theorists actually argue that the duty only applies to offences which occur openly, and explicitly forbid, for example, to enter other peoples' houses without leave. al-Ghazzali stresses that one ought not to spy on others, however, if the offence is discussed in public by good witnesses, he allows for action, even if it entails an element of intrusion such as entering a house without leave to do so. In order to minimise the almost inevitable unpleasantness inherent in the duty, al-Ghazzali - in line with all Muslim commentators on the issue - suggests that it should be carried out as nicely as possible.

Cook's thorough investigations show clearly that Commanding Right was (and is) very much an urban phenomenon. Quite a number of expositions reflect what must have been the view of common people: Commanding Right was easily considered as an unwarranted intrusion into privacy and downright meddling.

A major issue of contention seems to have been the question whose task the fulfilment of the duty was. Was it incumbent upon every single Muslim (capable of carrying it out), such as the ritual prayers, or was it a duty - such as holy war - where a sufficient participation absolved others from its performance? Most scholars agreed on the latter, and, in general, quite liked to regard Commanding Right as their own preserve. Some, such as the founder of the Hanbali school of law, Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 855), did not really trust the state to apply the duty in a fair way. Nevertheless, Muslim states have been tempted to try and institutionalise the practice. It has been mentioned earlier in the context of Iraqi interpretations that Commanding Right could be seen as a justification for rebellion. When, in the 19th century, the Wahhabi sect extended in the Arabian Peninsula, Commanding Right provided a convenient means to deepen what the Wahhabis deemed to be proper Muslim practices. After the Wahhabi conquest of the Hijaz in 1924/25, confrontations between strict Wahhabi tribesmen from Najd and the more relaxed and ethnically heterogeneous population of Mecca and Jeddah in particular caused much disquiet. In the end, an official body charged with Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong was founded, ostensibly to check the aggressive behaviour of Ibn Saud's warriors against local inhabitants and pilgrims, but obviously also to satisfy Wahhabi demands for stricter adherence of the Hijazis to Muslim laws. This institutionalisation in the name of a variant of Hanbalism certainly was a long way from Ibn Hanbal's sceptical view of state intervention, as well as an interesting convergence with practices in modern (Shi'i) Iran! It also illustrates the extent to which the interpretation of Commanding Right could depend on political and historical circumstances more than on the leading authorities of a particular legal school.

In this context, some interesting modern day interpretations of Commanding Right deserve mention. Obviously, Commanding Right still proves an attractive justification of revolt against un-Islamic rule. It is therefore quite surprising that a leading theoretician of modern (Sunni) Islamism, Sayyid Qutb, advised caution on this point. He argued that it was by far more important to strive for the creation of a truly Muslim society than for individuals to engage in single acts of Commanding Right. Therefore, individuals living in

an un-Islamic society were not really capable of acting upon their duty. Unsurprisingly, not all of his followers chose to adopt this particular view, which seems rather state-focussed and does not easily appeal to the activism of many modern-day Islamists.

Another remarkable interpretation of the duty can be found in conjunction with current discussions about human rights and freedom of speech. Thus, one writer argues in favour of human rights on the basis of the principle. This is based on a reinterpretation according to which Commanding Right provides a public safeguard for what is nowadays understood to be human rights, rather than the implementation of specific tenets of the Muslim doctrine. Others have suggested that Commanding Right requires Muslims to speak out freely. They thus take it as an early guarantee for the freedom of speech. Quite obviously, it might be regarded also as the exact opposite! These are very interesting issues relevant to a host of current international discussions, and as a modern historian, the reviewer would have appreciated if the author had engaged with them even nearly as intensively as with the intricacies of earlier legal discussions. Given the range of material that would have needed to be considered, it is quite clear, however, that it was beyond the scope of Cook's study, and his footnotes give ample material for anybody wishing to embark on a detailed investigation of these issues.

Cook concludes his study with some comparative notes, which should widen its appeal to readers interested in moral philosophy in other cultures or in general. Without trying to be exhaustive, he suggests that the notion of intervention in support of moral right is probably universal, but that Islam is unique in terms of the depth and breath of attention given to this particular issue. He convincingly shows that both pre-Islamic Arabia as well as the Jewish and Christian faith contain elements similar to those found in Muslim thought. To his credit, he is extremely circumspect when it comes to the question - very popular among Islamicists of earlier generations - whether or not Islam was influenced in particular by Judaism and Christianity. While he admits that it is difficult to prove separate developments, he suggests that the opposite assumption - of Islam influencing the other two monotheistic faiths - is equally possible, and that both types of influence are difficult to ascertain. Possibly, Cook suggests, the special Islamic attention to the issue was the result of pre-Islamic tribal egalitarian activism coupled with monotheism. In a brief discussion of other world religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism, he argues that his survey of the literature shows that ideas similar to Commanding Right were expressed in passing, but did not receive the kind of systematic elaboration which he has shown for the Muslim authors.

In his conclusion, Cook argues that, although modern secular culture in many cases easily understands the Islamic arguments and may arrive at quite similar reasoning, it is much more concerned with the rescue of victims from unfair treatment than with the "wrong" per se. In addition, not only do the categories of right and wrong vary between Muslim and secular Western thought, what further differs is the understanding of public and private. Thus, Westerners regard human rights as a public affair which consequently deserves intervention regardless of the places, whereas individual comportment, i.e. regarding the use or abuse of alcohol, or sexual relationships, are regarded as private at least as long as they do not infringe visibly on other people. Obviously, a Muslim following Islamic prescriptions of "right" and "wrong" would come to quite different evaluations of comparable situations.

This book is a prime example of meticulous scholarship that will interest a readership far beyond its immediate topic. In times when hastily compiled volumes have become the norm and publishers loose interest both in publishing scholarly monographs and in proper editing, Cambridge University Press has to be congratulated for an outstanding example to the contrary. Without such tools as the extensive and scrupulously researched footnotes (for once not banned to the end of the chapters or book!), the detailed index and the long bibliography, Cook's study would have lost much of its current value. As it stands, it is likely to become the major reference work for anybody trying to understand an important aspect of Islamic ethics in its historical development.

Notes

1. All dates in the review, unless stated otherwise, refer to the Christian era.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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