

WHEN HAPPINESS FAILS: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

KHALED ABOU EL FADL

Azmeralda and Omar Alfi Distinguished Professor of Islamic Law, UCLA School of Law

ABSTRACT

In this article, I set forth conceptions of happiness (*sa'ada*) from the Islamic tradition, and against this background, I discuss the failure to attain happiness in the modern age. The cumulative Islamic tradition attests to the importance of happiness to faith in God, and to the importance of faith to happiness. While the themes of knowledge, enlightenment, balance, peace, and knowing the other are central to the Islamic theology of happiness, the failure of happiness is embodied by the idea of *jabiliyya* (a state of ignorance). I argue that a crucial issue in considering happiness and the failure of happiness is how one understands submission to God, and that submission to God is not simply obedience or servitude to God; rather, submission to God means aspiring to and seeking the goodness of God, and liberating one's soul and being from a state of godlessness, or ignorance (*jabiliyya*), in order to attain a state of Godliness. To grow into and with God's love is the epitome of fulfillment, goodness, and happiness. However, when submission becomes a formulaic relationship based on generalized stereotypes about history, societies, and people, or on a stereotyped understanding of one's self dealing with a stereotypical understanding of an omnipotent but inaccessible God, unhappiness becomes the norm. Drawing on this analysis, I argue that in the modern age, the modalities of thought in puritanical movements have had a consistently demoralizing and dehumanizing effect that persistently undermines the possibilities for social and moral happiness, and thus, undermines the very purpose of the Islamic faith.

KEYWORDS: Islamic law, ethics, morality, Islamic theology, modernity, religious extremism

A basic tenet of Islamic theology is that God has no wants or needs. Everything that God has revealed through God's angels and prophets is for the well-being and prosperity of the recipients of the revelation. God gave human beings a covenant, which, if they accept it, is for their own benefit, and if they reject it, is to their own detriment. In Islamic law, this principle is translated into a number of legal maxims that articulate a mandate to remove harm and end suffering. In other words, the law of God mandates a normative obligation, both collective and individual, to act to alleviate harm and suffering. This, in turn, becomes the basis for the often-made argument that anything that causes suffering or misery cannot be a part of the Shari'a or God's law.

The moral and legal obligation to alleviate or end suffering and hardship helps in understanding the importance of happiness in the Islamic outlook, but the alleviation of suffering and hardship is not the same as the achievement of happiness. Even if the most faithful try their utmost to end hardship, suffering, and misery, this does not amount to the realization of happiness. Although God is

self-sufficient and described as the Giver, happiness is not realized through simple practice, obedience, or some other formalistic or legalistic dynamic.¹ An effective way to begin to understand the Islamic outlook is to ponder the Prophet Muhammad's refrain: "Whoever succeeds in knowing himself will come to know his Lord."² One of the consistent themes in the very large literary corpus dealing with the issue of *sa'ada*, or happiness, is an inextricable link drawn between knowledge and enlightenment on the one hand, and happiness on the other. The more a believer knows about himself, about other people and cultures, and about the world, the more such a believer will be capable of understanding the balance (*mizan*) that is necessary in striving for justice with the self and others (*qist*). Indeed the struggle to learn, and to achieve self-knowledge and knowledge of the other, is labeled by the Prophet as the highest and most challenging form of jihad. The Qur'an describes those who succeed in understanding the balance and in achieving enlightenment as existing in a true state of happiness.³ They are in a state of harmony and peace with themselves, creation, and God. This is a state of blissful tranquility, equilibrium, and ultimately, peace. In this serene and harmonious state, enlightened believers enjoy a special relationship with God. The Qur'an describes them as people who come to enjoy a complete sense of fulfillment (*rida*); they trust God, and God trusts them; they love God, and God loves them.⁴ The state of enlightenment and happiness that they enjoy pervades every aspect of their being, to the point that the Qur'an describes their blissful happiness as manifesting on their joyous and luminous faces; they tread the earth with their inner light between the palms of their hands, which most scholars agree is a symbolic reference to attainment of the divine grace of wisdom.⁵

The themes of knowledge, enlightenment, balance, peace, and tranquility are central to the Islamic theology of happiness. But if these concepts represent the ideal of happiness, the complete failure of true happiness is literally embodied by the idea of *jahiliyya* (a state of ignorance). In Islamic source materials, it is common to refer to the period preceding the Prophet's revelation in Mecca as the *jahiliyya*. However, I do not believe that *jahiliyya* is a historical category as much as it is a moral concept. *Jahl* means ignorance, heedlessness, lack of awareness, and even idiocy or foolishness, but with a clear connotation of the perverse, pernicious, dark, foreboding, and inauspicious. In Islamic eschatology, it is common to refer to a people plagued by ignorance, injustice, cruelty, and hatred as a people living in a state of *jahiliyya*. Ingratitude, selfishness, and arrogance, as well as the prevalence of vice and inequity in any society, are all thought to be characteristics of *jahiliyya*. The Prophet taught that blind ethnic and tribal allegiances are part of *jahiliyya*—part of existing in a state of moral ignorance. *Jahiliyya* is a condition of narcissism, self-involvement, and ignorance that exists to varying degrees at varying times inside a person's heart that, from a faith-based perspective, should be cleansed by God's light and

1 See, for example, Q. 22:37; 64:16.

2 Jalal al-Din Suyuti (d. 1505), "*al-Qawl al-ashbah fi hadith man arafa nafsahu faqad arafa rabbahu*," Daiber Collection, GAL II 148 nr. 72, Tokyo University. See Ibn 'Arabi, *Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom: At-Tadbirat al-ilahiyyah fi islah al-mamlakat al-insaniyyah*, trans. Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1997), 231–54; Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 216–21. Translation from Arabic sources are those of the author unless otherwise noted.

3 See Muhammad Ibn Abi Bakr Ibn Qaiyim al-Jauziya, *Miftah Dar al-Sa'ada wa Mansur Wilayat al-'Ilm wa al-Irada*, ed. Mahmud Hasan Rabi' (Alexandria: Maktabat Hamidu, 1399 H.); Abu al-'Abbas Ibn al-'Arif, *Miftah al-Sa'ada wa Tahqiq Tariq al-Sa'ada* (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1993); Lex Hixon, *The Heart of the Qur'an: An Introduction to Islamic Spirituality*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 2003), 66–67, 163.

4 See Q. 13:28; 5:119; 9:100; 58:22; 98:8.

5 See Q. 57:12; 66:8; 24:40.

love.⁶ As the Qur'an asserts, it is not physiological blindness but the blindness of the soul and heart that leads one into darkness and misery.⁷

Every period of human history has suffered its share of *jahl* and *jahiliyya*.⁸ *Jahiliyya* is as entrenched in human history as the social ailments of bigotry, racism, hatred, and oppression. But speaking as a Muslim, I believe in Islam's enduring role of unyielding resistance to the temptations and false pleasures of *jahiliyya*. Islam is the belief in an ideal—the ideal of submission to God and only to God, and freedom from submission to all else, including false idols, the worst of which is the egotistical self. The word “Islam” connotes the dual meanings of submission to God and the finding of peace in God. To go through the enlightenment of finding peace in God does not mean the annihilation of the self in God. It does mean gaining the wisdom to understand the balance between the self, the other, and God, and to exist in harmony with the self, creation, and the Maker. In Shari'a discourses, God is recognized as having rights (*huquq Allah*), but so do human beings (known as *huquq al-'ibad*).⁹ Finding peace in God means comprehending the just balance of rights, and struggling to preserve this balance by giving each right its due.¹⁰

The implications of the theology of submission to God are profound and numerous, and they pervade every aspect of the search for happiness, whether it be at the personal or the social level. If submission to and peace in God are to be meaningful in any real sense, persistent resistance and rebellion against the personal *jahiliyya* of the iniquitous and uprooted soul, and against the social conditions and structures that compel the sufferance of ignorance and hatred, are mandatory. To see with the light of God instead of the fogging of the ego mandates disciplining the ego with the humility brought about by a searching intellect and an active conscience. The theology of Islam resists the state of *jahiliyya* by calling upon human beings to wage a relentless jihad in pursuit of enlightenment and against the oppressiveness of ignorance and the social and political deformities and illnesses that spread in the absence of justice. The jihad against *jahiliyya* is a constant struggle to bring balance and peace to one's own soul, and to pursue balance and peace for one's society and for humanity.¹¹ In other words, it is a jihad to bring justice within and without—for oneself and for all of humanity. This jihad is a never-ending effort at self-enlightenment as well as the pursuit of enlightenment at the community and social level. The Prophet of Islam described the act of engaging the self, critically and honestly—the confrontation of the self with the self—as the highest form of jihad (*al-jihad al-akbar*, or the greater jihad).¹² It is

6 See Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Misr: Kazi Publications, 1964). Qutb relied on the same idea of *jahiliyya*, but for different purposes. Qutb used it to create a dichotomy between Islamic and non-Islamic societies. For Qutb, if Muslims turn away from the path of Islam, they are part of the *jahiliyya* and are no longer Muslim. See John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Sayed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah* (London: Routledge, 2006).

7 Q. 22:46.

8 See Muhammad Qutb, *Jahiliyat al-Qarn al-'Ishtin* (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1995). This influential book describes what Qutb calls the *jahiliyya* of the twentieth century.

9 Khaled Abou El Fadl, “The Islamic Legal Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Comparative Law*, ed. Mauro Bussani and Ugo Mattei (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 295–312; Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 13, 47, 301.

10 The Prophet is reported to have said: “*I'tu kulla dhi haqqin haqqahu*” (give each possessor of rights his due rights). See Ahmad bin Shu'ayb Nasa'i, *Sunan an-Nasa'i* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1999), 350; Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad bin Isma'il Bukhari, *Jam 'Jawami' al-Abadith wa al-Asanid wa Maknaz al-Sibah wa al-Sunan wa al-Masanid* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Jami'at al-Maknaz al-Islami, 2000), 1:369.

11 Mustafa Hilmi, *Al-Akblaq bayn al-Falasifa wa Hukama' al-Islam* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Arabiyya, 1986), 206–09.

12 John Renard, “Al-Jihad al-Akbar: Notes on a Theme in Islamic Spirituality,” *Muslim World* 78, no. 3–4 (October 1988): 225–42.

quite true that it is very difficult to gaze long and hard at one's self and see the inequities and faults, not as an excuse for nihilistic self-effacement and apathy, but as part of an ongoing struggle to cleanse, purify, and grow with Divinity or into Divinity. Indeed, this is much harder than any armed war in which one could engage. Living persistently and patiently to sacrifice the ego for the love of God is much harder than a simple death in the name of God. The sages of Islamic theology have written so much about the perils of leading a life without introspection and self-criticism, and of the maladies of a soul that allows fear, anxiety, and insecurity to distract it from the greatest jihad—the jihad against the self.¹³ Without introspection and self-judgment, a person grows complacent with his or her ego until all sense of reasonable and just self-perception is gone. And, as noted above, in Islamic theosophy, self-knowledge and knowledge of God are inseparable.

The Qur'an instructs Muslims to discuss and deliberate as a means of confronting and solving problems (known as the obligation of *shura*, or consultation), but for these deliberations to be genuine and meaningful, a measure of humility and self-awareness is necessary.¹⁴ Moreover, one of the central themes of the Qur'an is the normative obligation of enjoining what is good and resisting what is bad or evil (*al-amr bi'l ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*).¹⁵ In the Qur'anic discourse, the seriousness with which this individual and collective obligation is taken often constitutes the difference between a moral and happy society, and a society plagued by injustices and suffering under the weight of moral ignorance. Islamic theological discourses often emphasize that selfishness, egoism, cowardice, ignorance, and apathy are the major reasons why people fail to rise to the challenge of this moral obligation and, as a result, end up perpetuating the darkness of *jahiliyya*.¹⁶ Muslim theologians conceived of an interconnected process in which reflection and deliberation (*tafakkur wa al-nazar wa'l ta'ammul*) would lead to the realization of the importance of goodness, the seeking of knowledge (*talab al-'ilm*) would lead to a comprehension of the moral good, and the struggle against the ego would enable people to actively engage and pursue goodness.¹⁷ The failure of this process would mean that society would lose its moral anchor and, in the process, itself. Dwelling in this condition of *jahiliyya*, human beings would deny themselves the opportunity to grow from a state of godlessness to Godliness.

In the Islamic outlook, a believer is expected to be in a constant state of resistance to the state of *jahl* and the disease of *jahiliyya*. In a sense, in struggling to submit to the Almighty, a Muslim struggles for liberation from and against the captivity of godlessness. Godliness is not just a conviction or belief; it is a practice and a state of being. And this state, which is essentially connected to beauty—with the attributes of divinity such as love, mercy, justice, tranquility, humility, and peace—is antithetical to *jahiliyya*, which is associated with the ailments suffered in a state of godlessness such as hate, cruelty, inequity, arrogance, anxiety, and fear. In the language of the Qur'an

13 See Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Beirut: Sharikat Dar al-Arqam bin Abi Arqam, n.d.), 1382. For a very interesting study on the greater jihad, see Charles Upton, *The Science of the Greater Jihad: Essays in Principial Psychology* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2011); Maher Jarrar, "The Martyrdom of Passionate Lovers: Holy War as a Sacred Wedding," in *Jihad and Martyrdom*, ed. David Cook (Oxnard: Routledge, 2010), 2:95–111.

14 For verses pertaining to consultation, see Q. 3:159; 42:38. See Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 37–64.

15 For verses on enjoining the good and forbidding what is bad or evil, see Q. 3:104, 110; 7:157, 199; 9:71.

16 For a comprehensive study on the original sources on enjoining the good and forbidding the evil, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

17 This literature is so vast, deep, and numerous that it defies citation, but for a good introduction to some of these concepts, see Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 267–88; Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 17–20, 33–34; Hixon, *The Heart of the Qur'an*, 185, 202–03.

as well as in the teachings of the Prophetic Sunna, Godliness is not a status or entitlement; it is a state of being in which a person emanates Godliness not just in his or her ethical beliefs and conduct, but in the very spirit and aura that emanates from and enfolds such a person.¹⁸ Hence, the Prophet described the truly godly as those who reach a stage where it is as if they see with God's eyes, hear with God's ears, and feel with God's heart, and thus become godly human beings (*'ibadun rabbaniyyun*).¹⁹ In contrast, when human beings embrace their *jabiliyya* and turn away from God's path and grace, they dwell in the misery brought about by their own weaknesses, insecurities, and imbalances. In traditional Islamic theology, the state of being that embodies Godliness is known as *ihsan*—a state of being beautified by divinity and its goodness.²⁰ The closer human beings come towards the ideal of Godliness or *ihsan*, the more they can experience true happiness. The more they drift away from themselves and descend into and settle for godlessness, the more elusive and misguided their quest for happiness becomes. The Qur'an consistently draws a strong connection between those who have forgotten God and those who have forgotten themselves. In the Qur'anic usage, those who have forgotten themselves because of lack of honesty with the self and the failure to wrestle with and discipline the ego, and because of complacency towards their own moral failures, are identified as being marred by self-deception and moral alienation.²¹ Those who forget themselves are at risk of drifting without the anchoring role and rootedness of God, and they are therefore at risk of being increasingly overcome by fears, anxieties, and sadness.

As I mentioned, every age of human history suffers from its share of *jabiliyya*. Every age is marred by dark practices of bigotry, hate, oppression, domination and subjugation, and suffering; thus, what is distinctive about the moral failures of our age is not their nature or kind. Indeed, the moral failures of our age remain disconcertingly, and perhaps even despairingly, similar to those of past ages. What is different about our age is that while the moral failures remain the same, these same failures—these *jabiliyyas*—are, today, less tolerable and more inexcusable than at any other time in history. Human beings continue to suffer from ignorance, but our ability to teach, learn, and communicate is better than in any previous age. We continue to suffer from hate, bigotry, and racism, but our knowledge of human sociology, anthropology, and history—of our collective experience as human beings—makes these failures more offensive and less justifiable than at any other time in history. We continue to wage war and slaughter each other, but at the same time, our ability to kill and cause destruction is more lethal and dangerous than at any other time in history. But our codependence on each other as human beings and our increasingly inter-linked world, in addition to the unprecedented dangers posed by our weapons, make our constant resort to war and violence incomprehensible, and definitely less forgivable, than at any other time in history. In every sense, we possess the methods and tools for the anesthetization of pain and the pursuit of pleasure, but not for the end of suffering and the realization of happiness.

In this age, the problem lies not in our technical abilities or know-how. The problem lies in our will, our sense of purpose, our normative values, and indeed, in our very comprehension of humanness. Paradoxically, while our collective sense of the humane—our understanding of rights, denial, and suffering—has improved, and while our technical ability to protect rights has been augmented, our ability to get beyond our isolation and limitations as individuals, and to reach for the

18 Hilmi, *Al-Akblaq bayn al-Falasifa wa Hukama' al-Islam*, 172–73.

19 Q. 3:79; 5:44. See Abu 'Abdullah al-Harith Ibn Asad al-Muhasibi, *Risala al-Mustarshidin* (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2000), 245–48; al-Sayyid 'Abd Allah al-Shubbar, *Al-Akblaq* (Beirut: 1991), 301–03.

20 Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 151–64.

21 See Q. 58:19; 59:19; Ahmad 'Abd al-Rahman Ibrahim, *al-Fada'il al-Khalqiyya fi al-Islam* (Cairo: Dar al-Wafa', 1989), 251–66; Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 24–26; Hixon, *The Heart of the Qur'an*, 190–91.

transcendental and perennial in what is human, has deteriorated. In the modern age, our rational sense of the humane has increased but our spiritual grasp of the human has deteriorated. Perhaps this is why so many philosophers have described the modern age as the age of anxiety, restlessness, uprootedness, or groundlessness.²² Indeed, the predicament of the modern age has been that while our intellectual capacities have sprung forward by leaps and bounds, our spiritual abilities have not. Our ability to access information about each other, and to collect and organize data about our world, has given us a greater sense of control and raised our expectations as human beings. However, all of this has done little to elevate our consciousness or consciences. While we can see more of our world and gaze further into the universe than at any other time in history, our capacity to transcend the limitations of our corporeality and materiality has only diminished.

For believers, faith enables them to reach out for Godliness, for the perennial, transcendental, sublime, and beautiful. There is no doubt that throughout human history religion has been a powerful instigator of change—in fact, religion has been responsible for truly transformative moments in human history. Not too many forces in history have had religion's power to inspire, motivate, and inform. Even in the largely secular Western academy, many social theorists have recognized the positive and, in my view, necessary role that religion ought to play in remedying many of the ailments of modernity.²³ In the modern (or postmodern) era, human life has been enriched by many advances that have brought comfort and safety to our bodies but, at the same time, infected our souls with the restlessness that comes from loss of purpose and lack of certitude. Skepticism and deconstructionism have liberated the human mind from numerous self-imposed limitations but imprisoned the soul within the confines of empiricism. Modernity has uprooted the human soul, but for those who are still able to believe, religion can provide a much-needed anchor. Our faith in the objectivity of the scientific method has given us unprecedented control and mastery over our physical existence, but this control has done little to address the fact that we are, essentially, subjective beings, and that many of our challenges are metaphysical in nature.

Overcoming the restlessness and anxieties of the modern age does not mean escaping to religion as an ephemeral and cursory infusion of mindless happiness into a structurally unhappy situation. For me as a Muslim, my faith allows for the pursuit of happiness and, at the same time, for the coming to terms with my mortality. I think that, for many believers, religious belief is a form of empowerment against the greatest oppressor of all, which is death. Empowerment against the absoluteness and finality of death does not necessarily amount to passivity and resignation, and indeed, it can inspire the exact opposite. Moreover, the transience of life can tempt one to become concerned solely with self-happiness and to disregard the happiness of others. In the Islamic

22 See, e.g., W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007); Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

23 See, for example, Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," in *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13–38; Cornel West, "Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 92–100; Jürgen Habermas, "The Political": The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 26–27; Christopher Lane, *The Age of Doubt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); William Egginton, *In Defense of Religious Moderation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Howard Wettstein, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

faith, one's fate in the afterlife is, in good measure, a reflection of how one treated others in this earthly life.²⁴

I do not doubt that there are believers who use religion as a vehicle for moral banality, apathy, and even nihilism. And I do not doubt that their form of religiously rationalized happiness is more a hypnotic, vegetative state than an objective to be deliberately pursued through a dynamic engagement with divinity.²⁵ Islam, like all systems of faith, can be used to make pain more bearable, or to mitigate the harshness of suffering. And indeed, Islamic theology does place a heavy emphasis on patience and perseverance before hardships, and on not giving in to despair or despondency (*al-sabr 'ala al-nawa'ib wa al-shada'id*). Resisting hopelessness and enduring life's trials and tribulations is a moral virtue and a sign of a strong faith. Some Muslims do use the affectations of pious endurance in order to justify moral indifference and apathy, but this is a misuse and corruption of religion, and not a necessary consequence of it. This kind of corruption of religious doctrine is most often used not to perpetuate a false notion of pious happiness, but to justify the continuation of impious misconduct and the miseries that are its result.

For Muslims who have a proper understanding of their religion, and who are true believers—and by true believers, I do not mean those who indulge in the affectations of belief, but those who feel anchored, inspired, and empowered by their faith—for these believers, happiness can only be attained by resisting the *jahiliyya* within and the *jahiliyya* without. For these Muslims, the engagement with the Divine is translated into a dynamic of beauty, peace, balance, mercy, and love, and this dynamic is a vigorous path to empowerment, enlightenment, and happiness. Misusing the doctrine of fate to justify resignation and passivity before oppression or injustice is not the worst kind of corruption of the Islamic faith. Much worse is using Islam itself to perpetuate a state of *jahiliyya* in which the religion is usurped and turned into an instrument of hatred, bigotry, prejudice, ignorance, suffering, and ugliness.

The exploitation of Islam to perpetuate values or conditions contrary to Godliness is a contradiction in terms and an abomination. As a matter of conviction, to use religion to perpetuate conditions that are theologically associated with godlessness, or the absence of Godliness, is offensive. As a Muslim, I believe that the light of God, and indeed the light of Islam, embody and are embodied by the values of beauty, peace, tranquility, and love. When Islam is exploited to justify the opposite conditions, this is akin to the perpetuation of *jahiliyya* in the name of Islam. The illuminations of God cannot coexist with the darkness of *jahiliyya*. To put this in theological terms, God has made it a Divine purpose to endow human beings with joy and happiness; therefore, to exploit God's message in order to perpetuate misery or suffering is, to say the least, deeply problematic.²⁶ Similarly, the Qur'an proclaims that God has ordained the dignity of all human beings, and so, in principle, the Divine cannot be used to justify the perpetuation of indignities or the degradation and humiliation of human beings.²⁷ Nevertheless, there can be no denying that all religions have been exploited in ways that are fundamentally at odds with their tenets.

24 See Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 267–317; Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 106–20.

25 For a historical refutation of the thesis of political quietism, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). There are many Western scholars who consistently portray Muslims as fatalistic and politically quietist, and then usually go on to fault these purported characteristics for what has been described as oriental despotism. But like so many of the arguments of Orientalism, the accusation that Islam is the source of pacifism and quietism is culturally prejudiced and politically driven. It is gross oversimplification to claim that Islamic theology is fatalistic, or that it espouses ethical indeterminacy.

26 For the argument that the whole purpose of religion is the attainment of happiness in this life and in the hereafter, see Hilmi, *Al-Akblaq bayn al-Falasila wa Hukama' al-Islam*, 190–92.

27 Q. 17:70.

At the most basic level, the most persistent, religiously inspired failure of happiness occurs when faith is used to preach hatred and the demonization of the other. Religiously inspired hatred is in itself a form of *jahiliyya* because, fundamentally, it exploits the Divine—the embodiment of mercy, compassion, and love—to erase the vestiges of divinity. Exploiting the authority of God to degrade and devalue others is most often a product of the twin problems of lack of critical insight into the self and lack of empathetic knowledge of the other, however the other is defined. Any kind of fair knowledge of the other is very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain without critical self-perception and introspection. It is fairly easy to turn a critical gaze on people who are different, especially if they happen to be powerless or weak. As the Prophet Muhammad taught, the struggle to liberate the self from the oppressiveness of ignorance is harder than any effort to liberate oneself from the domination of others. Hence, living persistently and patiently to sacrifice the ego for the love of God is more challenging than sacrificing the body in death for God’s sake. Similarly, to come to know and truly achieve understanding of the other is infinitely harder than simply identifying and condemning what the other represents. Indeed, the Prophet acknowledged that a moral person should be preoccupied with his or her own faults instead of finding faults in others.²⁸ Often people demonize what is alien to them not because of any real assessment of the threat posed by the other, but because of their own insecurities and self-inflicted fears. Without introspection, we are always at risk of projecting our own insecurities and fears onto others and, then, unleashing our hatred and bigotry on the demonized constructs of the other that we invented.²⁹

I emphasize this point because of the extent to which the Qur’an focuses on the role of social intercourse and understanding as necessary values in facilitating human happiness. According to the Qur’an, becoming trapped in a state of social enmity and rancor is equivalent to the corrupting of the earth (*fasad fi al-‘ard*), and achieving social intercourse and understanding (*ta’aruf*) and amicability (*ta’aluf*) are pursuits of Divinity.³⁰ This is a normative Shari’a value of supreme importance; to obtain knowledge of the other is an act of Divinity and beauty, while to fail to understand and to fall back on anxieties and fears is ugliness and the corruption of the Divine presence. Cycles of reciprocated fears lead only to a spiraling descent into a thoroughly corrupted earth—an earth without Divine presence, and a world drowning in pain and misery.

Importantly, those who have expended a serious amount of energy studying any of the major religious, moral, or intellectual traditions in the world quickly realize that these traditions have survived and spread because of the significant contributions they have made to humanity. Put differently, the traditions that have little to offer humanity—the traditions that have primarily contributed cruelty and suffering, such as fascism, colonialism, or communism—do not persist for long. This sociohistorical reality is powerfully captured by the Qur’an when it says: “This is how God determines truth from falsehood. The froth in due time disappears, but that which is useful to human beings remains on the earth. This is how God sets forth the precepts of wisdom.”³¹ The froth that duly disappears is composed of sparkling but short-lived creeds of anger or hate that endure only as long as good people do not resist them. But to demonize any of the major religious

28 For a discussion of the hadith “*Tuba liman shaghilahu ‘aybuhu ‘an ‘uyub al-nass*,” see Muhasibi, *Risalat*, 84–85; Mujtaba Musavi Lari, *Risalat al-Akblaq* (Lebanon: Dar al-Islamiyya, 1989), 274–76.

29 Rush W. Dozier Jr., *Why We Hate: Understanding, Curbing, and Eliminating Hate in Ourselves and Our World* (New York: McGraw-Hill Books, 2002).

30 On *fasad fi al-‘ard*, see Q. 2:27, 205, 251; 7:56; 13:25; 23:71; 30:41; 28:83. On *ta’aruf* and *ta’aluf*, see Q. 49:13; Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, 37–64; ‘Umar Muhammad al-Tumi Shibani, *Falsafat al-Tarbiyya al-Islamiyya* (Libya: al-Dar al-Arabiyya al-Kitab, 1988), 244–60.

31 Q. 13:17.

traditions in general, and Abrahamic traditions in particular, is not possible without an astoundingly crude and uninformed reading of history.

Although charged political interests, and reciprocal cycles of violence and hate, act as powerful disincentives, those carrying a moral vision must, nevertheless, transcend their immediate contexts and act on their moral obligations towards humanity and God. In my view, it is imperative that communities of faith not succumb to the temptations of hate, and that they insist on a common human venture seeking moral advancement and greater fulfillment of Divinity on earth. But doing so mandates what may be described as the constituent elements of such a moral enterprise: an empathetic engagement with the other, transparency and honesty in discourse, and self-criticism. Without these three basic elements, it is extremely difficult to generate the trust and respect necessary for knowing the other and joining in a common enterprise. Put differently, these three constituent elements are necessary for achieving the Qur'anic ideals of *ta'aruf* (knowledge and understanding of the other) and *ta'aluf* (social amicability).

The Qur'an sets out an effective moral agenda for achieving the ideals of *ta'aruf* and *ta'aluf* among both Muslims and human beings in general. The Qur'an starts the discourse by addressing conflict resolution between Muslims. It emphasizes the essential brotherhood of all Muslims and urges Muslims to make peace between disputing Muslims while persevering in the way of justice. Justice mandates adherence to the dual imperatives of impartiality and equity. Addressing itself to "those who believe," the Qur'an proceeds to put forth the steps necessary for peaceful conflict resolution and adherence to the mandates of justice. It commands "the believers" not to mock one another and not to indulge in name-calling and slander against one another. The Qur'an then instructs Muslims on ethical personal traits: Muslims are to refrain from dealing in suspicions instead of verified facts; they are to refrain from backstabbing and from speaking without knowledge about other human beings; and they are to refrain from spying on and prying into the affairs of others. After setting out this ethical course of conduct, the Qur'an shifts from addressing Muslims in particular, to addressing all human beings. It states: "O people, we have created you from male and female, and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you will come to know one another, and that who has greater integrity has indeed a greater degree of honor with God. Surely, God is all-knowing and most wise."³² Equally important, the Qur'an explicates a moral and sociological principle of grave significance—it states that diversity is a principle of creation. People are different and will remain so until the end of time, and in a most intriguing statement, the Qur'an asserts that if God had so willed, human beings would have ceased to be different. But they will not, and "for that God created them."³³

The idea that diversity is a purpose of creation is intriguing but also challenging. If diversity is one of the purposes of creation, then far from being resisted or mistrusted, it must be embraced and promoted. Historically, Muslim scholars to a large extent accepted the inevitability of diversity, and this was one of the factors that influenced the practice of tolerance in the Islamic tradition. Compared to the prevailing paradigms of the premodern age, the Muslim civilization has been exceptionally tolerant of the other. In recent times, some pundits, largely motivated by religious and political bigotry, have tried to cast doubt on the historical fact of tolerance in the Islamic civilization. Suffice it to say, however, that in the premodern era, Muslim minorities were systematically annihilated in Europe and Africa, while non-Muslim minorities in Muslim territories survived.

32 Q. 49:9–13.

33 Q. 11:118.

The Qur'anic challenge is, in light of enormous diversity, for human beings to get to know each other. This does not mean inventing an artificial construct of the other and then coming to know that construct. And it does not mean that regardless of the actions of the other, the other's ethics and actions must be deemed acceptable and legitimate. While recognizing the legitimacy of a considerable amount of difference, the Qur'an insists on objective, universal moral and ethical standards, encapsulated in the ideas of equity and justice. Furthermore, the Qur'an considers particular actions such as spying, backstabbing, and slander to be inconsistent with the ethical precepts of a just and equitable existence.³⁴ The acceptance of diversity and pluralism and genuine knowledge of the other is a moral objective in and of itself, but it also serves an important functional purpose. Undertaking the social process of coming to know the other enables human beings to discover and learn to differentiate between the universal precepts of morality, on the one hand, and the relative and subjective experiences, on the other.

Claims of ontological or universal truth, whether based on reason or revelation, are not anathema to Islam. Indeed, the Qur'an recognizes certain ethical principles as universally applicable and pertinent.³⁵ The Qur'an states, for instance: "And God does not desire for human beings to suffer injustice."³⁶ A statement such as this generates layers of meaning, but it is reasonable to conclude that, from an Islamic perspective, Muslims are encouraged to search for moral universals that could serve as shared and common goals with humanity at large.³⁷ This seems to me to be an essential characteristic of a universal religion that is addressed to humanity at large, and not to an exclusive cultural, social, or ethnic group. The Qur'an insists that it is the bearer of a message to all humankind and not to a particular tribe or race.³⁸ Moreover, the Qur'an asserts that the Prophet Muhammad, and in fact the Qur'an itself, was sent to all peoples as a blessing and mercy.³⁹ The Qur'an also persistently emphasizes the ethical quality of mercy as a core attribute of God and as a fundamental and basic pursuit of Islam.⁴⁰ The Qur'an informs human beings that God has decreed and mandated mercy even upon Himself and is therefore bound to extend it to human beings. In the Qur'anic discourse, mercy and peace are inextricably linked—peace is a Divine mercy, and mercy is the bliss of peace. To comprehend and internalize God's mercy is to be in a blissful state of peace.⁴¹ This is at the very essence of the state of Divine beautification and of being filled with the goodness of the Divine, and having this quality manifest outwardly in everything a person does is known as *ihsan*. *Ta'aruf* (knowing the other) and *ta'aluf* (social amicability) are great gifts of Divine mercy that lead to the grace of enjoying peace. But knowledge of the other is not possible without the grace of *ihsan*, which calls on people to approach one another not just with mercy and sympathy, but with empathy and compassion.

In my view, to pursue the Qur'anic ideal of "knowing the other" requires not only a moral outlook that is empathetic towards the perceived other, but also, since the process is bound to be exceedingly difficult without transparency and honesty in discourse, a norm of self-critical humility. As generations of Muslim theologians have emphasized, self-critical humility is not only necessary

34 See Q. 4:112; 49:12.

35 On this subject, see George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

36 Q. 3:108.

37 See my essays in Khaled Abou El Fadl, Joshua Cohen, and Ian Lague, eds., *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 3–26, 93–112.

38 Q. 38:87.

39 Q. 7:52, 203; 17:82; 21:107.

40 Q. 12:111.

41 For instance, see Q. 6:54; 27:77; 29:51; 45:20.

for genuine self-knowledge; it is also fundamental to the ability to critically engage the other. Without self-critical engagement, it is inevitable that the other will become the object of numerous projections, and that this other will unwittingly become the scapegoat for ambiguous frustrations and fears embedded within the self. Critical self-knowledge as well as honesty in confronting one's own ambiguities is necessary if one is to avoid the risk of scapegoating and projecting onto the other one's own frustrations, failures, and unhappiness. In short, the process of *ta'aruf* is not limited to learning about the other; rather it also requires learning about the self, and conscientious self-engagement is key for avoiding the all too familiar problem of inventing the other in an entirely self-serving way.

It is this introspective imperative that compels me, as a Muslim, to come to terms with the prevalence of a grim reality in many parts of the Muslim world—a reality that has made Islam an instrument for inflicting a great deal of misery on many people. I must say that as a Muslim, I am intellectually and spiritually committed to the proposition that Islam, as a body of convictional, normative doctrines, makes a positive contribution to the human potential for goodness, and that its contributions are necessary and indispensable. However, at the same time, I am cognizant of the Qur'anic teaching that obligates human beings to bear witness in justice even if against one's own or one's self.⁴² As a number of commentators have noted, Islam in the contemporary age is going through a process of vulgarization in which some Muslims, disconnected from their own tradition, construct a coercive and artificial culture that indulges in simultaneous, symbolic displays of apologetics and cruelty.⁴³ By vulgarization, I mean the recurrence of events that seem to shock the human conscience, or that are contrary to what most people would identify as moral and beautiful. As I have argued elsewhere, oppressively dehumanizing actions committed by adherents of certain theological orientations within contemporary Islam have contributed to the construction of a stereotyped image of Islamic cultures.⁴⁴ Through this stereotyped image, in so many parts of the non-Muslim world, Islam has become associated with cruelty, violence, and despotism. It is beyond contention that postcolonial Muslim cultures have been plagued by arid intellectual climates, and by a lack of critical and creative ethical approaches to their inherited tradition, which has greatly hampered the development of the humanistic moral orientations within Islam. I also think that it is beyond disputation that Islamophobes, with their well-funded machinery dedicated to promoting and disseminating bigotry and racism, have helped to propagate very negative stereotypical images of Islamic cultures, history, and beliefs. But the harm done by Islamophobes to the image of Muslims or Islam pales in comparison to the actual suffering and misery inflicted by puritanical Muslims on Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Modern puritanical Islam is rooted in the teachings of Wahhabism, a fanatical and highly intolerant movement that originated in the deserts of Najd, an area that is now part of Saudi Arabia. The movement, founded by Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), was uncompromisingly radical, conservative, and militant, especially towards fellow Muslims. The movement considered the Ottomans and their Muslim supporters, as well as Sufi orders, Shi'i sects, and proponents of rationalist orientations within Islam, to be heretical apostates who must repent or be put to death. The movement meted out the same treatment to Muslims who did not follow the strict

42 Q. 4:135.

43 For the piece that inspired the expression "vulgarization of Islam," see Robert Scott Appleby, "The Quandary of Leadership," in Abou El Fadl, Cohen, and Lague, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, 85–92.

44 Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005); Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Modern Ugly and the Ugly Modern: Reclaiming the Beautiful in Islam," in *Progressive Muslims*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 33–77.

code of practice adhered to by the Wahhabis. Relying on its very narrow understanding of orthodoxy, Wahhabism espoused a deep distrust of human subjectivity, creativity, and intellectualism, and it banned philosophy, music, dance, romantic poetry, and practically all forms of artistic expression. But what started as a marginal movement limited to the hardened desert Arabs of Najd was supported by enormous reserves of oil money and protected by Western powers eager to secure favorable oil concessions, and it eventually spread throughout the Muslim world.⁴⁵

In one respect, modern, Islamic, militant extremism, or what some have come to call jihadi movements, represent a clear failure of religious happiness, especially when such movements take the form of a persistent theology of rage, anger, and condemnation. In a piece written some years ago, titled “The Orphans of Modernity,” I described the general state of dispossession and alienation felt in so many Muslim cultures due to the invasive and disruptive effects of colonialism and modernity, which severed the ties between Muslims and their inherited, native intellectual and moral traditions—the cumulative historical legacy in which they anchored and also negotiated their sense of distinctive and collective identity.⁴⁶ The colonial and postcolonial eras were periods of numerous social and political upheavals that only exacerbated the sense of alienation and disempowerment felt in most Muslim cultures, as the collective memory of historically anchored institutions, normative categories, and epistemological traditions were dismantled, lost, and became extremely difficult to retrieve or reconstruct. Puritanical movements sought to overcome these feelings of displacement and loss of identity, and the resulting sense of disempowerment, by adopting highly reactive modes of thinking that emphasized highly symbolic displays of power, defiance, and patriarchy. Part of the mechanics of purity, absolutism, and efforts at self-empowerment is the production of modes of thinking that may be called fault- and judgment-centered. What I mean are modes of thinking that are preoccupied with the idea that humans have historically failed God, and that because of this failure, they deserve God’s wrath and punishment. Muslim puritanism had to place itself in a position to judge the failures of other Muslims and, at the same time, to judge its members’ own success or fidelity to God’s plans. To be empowered in such a fashion, puritanism had to assert that it and it alone understood God’s straight path, and it had to usurp the domain of judgment and condemnation. Therefore, these puritans saw themselves not only as the people who could see that Muslims had deviated from the righteous path, but also as the possessors of the hope for reconciling with the Divine.

From the puritanical point of view, the vast majority of Muslims are responsible for bringing God’s wrath and punishment on themselves by deviating from the straight path of the Lord, and they (the puritans) hold the key to resolving any feelings of disempowerment and defeat by bringing about an end to God’s wrath. The puritanical mindset is prone to casting feelings of disempowerment and displacement, felt at any particular time, as the result of historical failures that burden subsequent generations with the sins of their forefathers. Not surprisingly, puritanical movements tend to be unsympathetic to narratives of social suffering because, from the puritan perspective, any current hardship or misery in the Muslim world is simply Muslims’ just desert for their impiety and disobedience. This mindset also explains the intolerance of puritanical movements towards co-religionists, who are seen as impious or heretical, and the irreverent and highly selective attitude that puritans exhibit towards the collective, inherited Islamic tradition.

In their most extreme form, these puritanical orientations glorify suicide bombings as a form of sacrificial catharsis that is performed with a sense of deluded heroism. Having despaired of the

45 Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, esp. 62–75.

46 Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Orphans of Modernity and the Clash of Civilisations,” *Global Dialogue* 4, no. 2 (2002).

possibility of happiness on this earth, the suicide bomber sacrifices himself or herself in the belief that his or her own death, and the death of Muslim victims in particular, will help to absolve the *umma* (the totality of Muslims everywhere) of its failures before God. The bomber focuses on what he or she believes is a life of happiness in the hereafter and believes that any Muslim casualties are part of the necessary price that Muslims must pay as a result of having broken their covenant with God. The suicide bomber sees himself or herself as a martyr, forcing fellow Muslims to pay the price of resistance, a price that must be paid to earn Divine victory. In many ways, suicide bombing, if religiously motivated, is a total failure of religious happiness. True earthly happiness is imagined to have existed only in a highly idealized historical moment, during which the Prophet and his companions are believed to have founded a utopia in Arabia. Puritans believe that this utopia was lost only after Muslims betrayed God's law and indulged their whims and base desires. Only through pious adherence to God's law will Muslims once again deserve God's grace and victory and become capable of recreating the imagined utopian state in which they enjoyed dignity and justice. This didactic and mechanistic logic locks Islamic puritanism into a cycle in which the utopian ideal becomes an instrument of judgment and condemnation, while the unattainability of the ideal creates significant pressure that leads to spiraling frustration and radicalization.

Whether in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iran, puritanical movements do tend to generate a considerable amount of social unhappiness and desolation. Not all puritanical movements resort to suicide bombings or political violence. Furthermore, not all puritanical groups believe that Muslims have no sanctity because they are deserving of God's wrath and punishments. However, the modalities of thought in puritanical movements have a consistently demoralizing and dehumanizing effect that persistently undermines the possibilities of social and moral happiness, and thus, undermines the very purpose of the Islamic faith. I call these modalities, and the way in which they set forth norms that generate repetitive social consequences, the modalities of pietistic affectations and stereotyped determinations.

Puritanical movements insist on a simple and straightforward premise: if humanity piously follows the straight path set forth by Islam, people will attain the twin goals of well-being and happiness in this life and in the hereafter. In most cases, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of this conviction or the intentions of those who adhere to it. The fact is, however, that the lived experience of puritanical Islam persistently sets in motion processes that invariably lead to social vulgarization and dehumanization. I do not believe that the failures of puritanism are necessarily in its objectives or purposes, but rather, in its modalities of thinking that doom those who fall under the authority or control of puritanical movements to a state of frustration and unhappiness.

What I mean by stereotypical determinations are responses that lock Islamicity within a narrow space of interpretive or constructive possibilities. A stereotyped response is reactive, and to the extent that it affirms a picture of orthodoxy in order to reassert an authoritative image of Islamicity, it is a form of religious affectation. Stereotyped responses assume a narrow view of Islamicity and, then, seek to reproduce this view as an affirmation of orthodoxy within a specific sense of presupposed determinations. In other words, stereotyped responses are premised on a narrow view of what is truly and authentically Islamic and what is not, and also on the dogmatic exclusion of alternatives. The Islamic intellectual heritage contains many possibilities of creative interpretation, and the Shari'a tradition, in particular, is rich and highly diverse. Stereotyped responses, however, significantly narrow the range of constructive possibilities by restricting potential creative interpretive activity by dogmatically limiting the tools of determination—tools such as text, reason, or custom.

It is much easier, but also dangerous, to deal with life's challenges by identifying the relevant facts, not through sociological and cultural experiences but through a religiously motivated,

imaginary construct. Instead of dealing with the full complexity and richness of life and with challenges on their own terms, the religious-imaginary limits what are considered to be the relevant facts in such a way as to avoid having to deal with challenges in the first place. In this situation, life is not experienced and studied in its full richness and diversity; rather, the process of living itself is conceptualized in highly stereotyped forms that have little to do with material culture or lived experience. Consequently, challenges are not dealt with through a dynamic of systematic analysis, and social problems are not treated from within an exhaustive analytical framework. Instead, the stereotyped forms that are used to respond to challenging facts and difficult problems sustain and perpetuate certain fictions of performance or pietistic affectation. In effect, instead of wrestling with contexts and contingencies, practitioners rely on convenient fictions that allow them to avoid confronting the reality that exists on the ground, and they respond to constructed fictions through stereotypical determinations that affirm, and do not challenge, these constructed fictions. Stereotyped responses that ignore the nuances of history and life do not just stunt the development of Shari'a as a field of normative discourse; they often stunt the development of serious ethical evaluations, social development of standards of reasonableness, and the cultivation of shared human and humane values. This occurs because practitioners fall into the habit of avoiding the pain of wrestling with uncomfortable facts, and the escape into ready-made dogma acts to dull the intellect and hamper the continual development of a critical sense of moral responsibility.

Archetypal symbolism plays a prominent role in puritanical orientations as an elaborate system of pietistic performances that affirms and perpetuates doctrinally constructed images of genuine Islamicity. Very often, these constructed images are vigorously and irrationally asserted and defended at the cost of a vibrant discursive dynamic that would allow for the critical regeneration and reconstitution of Islamic norms. Of course, the silencing of alternatives is not something practiced by puritans alone, but the tension between the expectations set by puritans as the bearers of the symbols of Islamicity, and the complex and unyielding reality of Muslim societies, leads to a particular, recognizable dynamic. The gap between the constructed Islamic ideal of the puritan, and the highly contextualized and contingent Islamicity of the average Muslim, creates a challenging and tense situation. Attempts to forcibly impose the constructed Islamic ideal are met by numerous acts of resistance by average Muslims, which often brings puritanical Muslims into full confrontation and conflict with their native societies. Such conflict often leads puritans to ignore the growing gap and friction between the ideal and reality and to adopt pietistic affectations that distill and encapsulate the whole idea of Islamicity into highly symbolic performances of piety.

Since the 1970s there has been enormous growth among movements that emphasize symbolic performances—such as forms of attire, facial hair, smells and perfumes, or specific expressions and phraseology—as representations of genuine Islamicity.⁴⁷ Of course, symbolic performances of religiosity are not problematic. What is problematic is when these performances become a form of pietistic affectation that compensates for or conceals social tensions and frustrations. While stereotyped responses to complex and contingent social realities lead to a great deal of social frustration and unhappiness, pietistic affectation only ignores and conceals the existence of this unhappiness.

From the earliest narratives of Islamic history, and to this very day, there have always been believers who find happiness to be a rather uncomfortable subject. To their minds, happiness seems to be an indulgence that does not correlate with the purportedly stern and somber deliberativeness that is needed to submit to God. This attitude towards happiness, however, runs afoul of

47 See Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 85–110.

cumulative and redundant historical narratives that portray the Prophet of Islam not only as a joyous, serene, and tranquil person, but also as someone who cherished and celebrated happiness. The Qur'an bolsters this impression by emphasizing the importance of happiness to faith in God, and the importance of faith to happiness.⁴⁸ The real issue has always been how one understands submission to God. Submission to God is not simply obedience or servitude to God; submission to God also means aspiring to and seeking the goodness of God, and liberating one's soul and being from a state of godlessness in order to attain a state of Godliness. As numerous Muslim theologians have argued, to grow into and with God's love is the epitome of fulfillment, goodness, and happiness. The key that unlocks this process is self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and ultimately, knowledge of God. In my view, happiness is possible only if people are free to grow with and into God. However, when submission becomes a formulaic relationship based not on knowledge, grace, and love, but on generalized stereotypes about history, societies, and people—indeed, when submission becomes a relationship based on a stereotyped understanding of one's self dealing with a stereotypical understanding of an omnipotent but inaccessible God, unhappiness will become the norm. The achievement of happiness will be something of a miracle.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dana Lee for her capable assistance in writing this article. I am especially grateful to my student Holly Robins for her dedicated and selfless help in bringing this project to fruition. And as always, I am grateful to my wife, Grace, for her enduring and unrelenting support.

48 See, for example, Q. 11:108; 13:28–29; 16:97; 41:34–35; 52:19–21.