1 Introduction

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Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's (d. 261/875) *Ṣaḥīḥ*, the 'Authentic' or 'Sound', one of the six canonical collections of *Ḥadīth* or Sunna – accounts of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad – contains a story known as 'the story of Gabriel' (*ḥadīth Jibrīl* حديث جبريل) because its protagonist, alongside the Prophet, is the Archangel Jibrīl, or Jabrā'īl (Gabriel), who functions in the Qur'ān as the mediator of divine revelation, just as he does in Jewish and Christian sources. The story was handed down by a notable authority, the future Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644):

> One day, as we were sitting together with the Messenger of God, may God's blessings and peace be upon him,[1] there appeared before us a man with raven hair dressed all in white. He did not appear to have come on a long journey, but none of us had seen him before.
>
> He sat down in front of the Prophet, with their knees touching, rested his hands on his thighs, and asked him: – Muḥammad, tell me of Islam. The Messenger of God answered: – It is to bear witness that there is no other god than God and that Muḥammad is His messenger; to perform our prayers, to give alms, to fast in the month of Ramadan, and, if possible, to make a pilgrimage to the Holy House of God. – That is correct – said the man. And we were surprised that it was he who put the questions and approved the answers.

1 This formulaic bow to the Prophet (*ṣallā Allāh 'alay-hi wa-sallama*), commonly rendered more simply 'peace be upon him' or PBUH, will be omitted from now on.

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> And then he asked: – Tell me of the faith [*īmān* إيمان]. He answered: – It is to believe in God, and in His angels, and in His Books, in His messengers and in the Last Day, and to believe in the divine decrees, for better or for worse. – That is correct – the man said again. And he went on: – And now tell me what it means to be good [*iḥsān* إحسان]. He answered: – It is to worship [*taʿabbud* تعبّد] God, as if you saw Him: for even though you do not see Him, He sees you.[2]

After this reply, which the angel does not comment on, the passage continues with questions on 'The Hour', that is, the Day of Judgment, and on the portents which will announce it to mankind; and it ends with the Prophet saying to ʿUmar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "That was Gabriel, come among you to teach you your religion".[3]

The story of Gabriel is especially important because it teaches the richness and the scope of full acceptance of the Islamic religion: firstly, the five 'pillars of Islam' (*arkān al-Islām* أركان الإسلام), the cornerstones of the religion, that is, the acts of worshipping (*ʿibādāt* عبادات) the one God. Then the compendium of the fundamental truths, the six 'pillars of the faith' (*arkān al-īmān* أركان الإيمان). Lastly, that 'being good' – *iḥsān* in Arabic – which is epitomised in the serenity of the faithful in the face of His immediate Knowledge of our actions and intentions, the divine Eye that observes everything and judges everything, determining the fate of everyone in this world and in the world to come. But the special relevance of the story lies above all in its equating 'goodness', *iḥsān*, with 'worship', *taʿabbud*, with genuine submission; which is to say that goodness, in one's soul and one's behaviour, is indicated as a key aspect of religion. The true believer is thus not only one who bears witness, prays, fasts, gives a portion of his wealth to the community and makes his pilgrimage to Mecca if able to do so (the *arkān al-Islām*); he is not only one who believes in God and the angels, in the Holy Books and the prophets, in the Last Day and in what God has ordained for the things of this world (the *arkān al-īmān*); he is also, must also be, a moral person, benevolent and upstanding, pure in heart and with a clean conscience.

Regarding the absolute importance of goodness, which should in no way be thought to be subordinate to acts of worship, there is another of the Prophet's sayings, quoted by the celebrated 'traditionist' (i.e. a person who records or transmits the Prophetic Sunna) Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. c. 275/819) in his contribution to Muḥammad's Tradition: "The believer will obtain, through his goodness of character [*ḥusn al-khuluq* حُسن الخُلق], the same level as he who fasts and prays".[4]

Another example, from a dictionary of the earliest converts compiled by another famous traditionist, al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971): "They asked the Prophet what is the best of actions. He replied: – Goodness of character".[5]

And a final one, from the *Ḥilyat al-Awliyāʾ* or 'The Ornament of the Saints' by the Persian historian Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038). The Prophet

2 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-īmān*, no. 1. For references to the Tradition in the present work, cf. the website `https://dorar.net/hadith` and `https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopedia-of-canonical-hadith-online`.

3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

4 Al-Sijistānī; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 4167.

5 Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-kabīr*, no. 12696.

said: "You must be of good character; whoever among you has the best character is the best among you in religion [*dīn* دين]".[6]

It is necessary then, in the first place, to be intent on the good. This translates, in Islamic Law, into the primacy of the 'intention', or *niyya* نيّة, the righteous purpose without which even actions performed in compliance with the Law have no value because God does not accept them: "Actions only count according to their intention"[7] – maintains the saying placed at the beginning of another celebrated collection of *Ḥadīth*, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) – "in each man's case what matters is only what he intended to do", once again on the authority of 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.[8]

Intention is then the criterion of actions, and also underlies them and is their essence. While it is true that etymologies cannot circumscribe the overall content of words' meanings, it cannot be denied that they refine our understanding of them and reveal something of the perception that previous users have had of them. And, as the best-known lexicologist of medieval Islam, Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311), explains in his encyclopedic dictionary *Lisān al-ʿarab* 'The Language of the Arabs', *niyya*, or intention, is etymologically close to *nawāt* نَواة, which is the stone of a fruit or the seed of a plant.[9]

1.1 Prescription and Love

The tripartite division of Islamic religion into acts of worship, the essential tenets of belief and morality, as summarised in the story of Gabriel, is also present in the primary scriptural foundation of Islam, the Qur'ān. And that Book, which is distinguished by a linguistic scrupulousness that has fostered an extreme attention to its literal interpretation among Muslim theologians and jurists, clearly separates the moral from the legal component. Actions of legal significance pertain, in fact, to what God has ordained or commanded (cf. the verb *amara* أمر), to what is prescribed, or written or predetermined (cf. the verb *kataba* كتب),[10] and to what is legislated (the verb *sharaʿa* شرع, from which derives *sharīʿa* شريعة, the religious Law).[11] The field of morality, on the other hand, is defined by the divine Love (the verb *aḥabba* أحبّ): God loves goodness, or *iḥsān*;[12] and 'piety' (*taqwā* تقوى), which is at once fear of God and control of the emotions;[13] and fairness, proper moderation, equanimity (*qisṭ* قسط or *iqsāṭ* إقساط);[14] and more,

6 Al-Iṣfahānī 1394/1974 of the Hijra (henceforth H), no. 6170.

7 In Arabic: *inna-mā al-aʿmāl bi-l-niyyāt*.

8 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *badʾ al-waḥy*, no. 1.

9 Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root n-w-y.

10 As in, for example fasting, just retribution, the freeing of slaves, due inheritance proportions, dowries for orphans, and so on.

11 Relevant in this case are observance of the Jewish Sabbath, and of religion (*dīn*, cf. Qur'ān VII,163) in the sense of a legacy transmitted through certain pre-Islamic prophets, in particular Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (XLII,13).

12 Qur'ān II,195; III,134 and 148; V,13 and 93.

13 Qur'ān III,76; XIX,4 and 7.

14 Qur'ān V,42; XLIX,9; LX,8

He loves self-purification (*taṭahhur* تطهّر), that is, physical purity and purity of intention;[15] and repentance (*tawba* تَوبة), the ability to retrace one's steps and correct one's heart and one's conduct.[16] He loves absolute faith in Him (*tawakkul* توكّل), with the security and composure that derives from it; and the 'patience-and-steadfastness' (*ṣabr* صبر) that keeps us resolute in pursuit of our goals.[17] Conversely, He does not love pride, nor vanity, nor greed,[18] nor does He love excess.[19]

From God's love to that of the Prophet; another important work in the Sunni Tradition, elaborated by al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), records how Muḥammad confided to his followers:

> Those of you whom I love best and on the Day of the Resurrection will be seated closest to me are those of you who have the finest characters; and those among you whom I hate the most and who on the Day of Resurrection will be seated furthest from me are the chatterers and the boasters, and the *mutafayhiqūn* مُتَفَيْهِقون. And they asked him: – The chatterers and the boasters we understand, but who are the *mutafayhiqūn*? – He replied: – They are the proud.[20]

According to another version, recorded by the traditionist Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855):

> The Prophet asked: – Do you want me to tell you which of you are dearest to me and which of you will be seated nearest to me on the Day of the Resurrection? – Three times he asked this, and we always answered: – Certainly, Messenger of God. – Eventually he said: – They are those who have the finest qualities of character.[21]

In Arab Islamic as in Arab Christian literature, the morally charged qualities are called simply *akhlāq* أخلاق 'characters' (sing. *khuluq* or *khulq* خُلق), term that does not refer so much to how they are performatively typified, as directly to the divine creative act (*khalq* خَلْق), to the original nature of things in accordance with the will of God; a term referring to the individual disposition as well as to 'proportion' and 'measure'.[22]

Hence, in the Prophetic Tradition, the frequent connection between the 'characters' and the Scale (*mīzān* ميزان) that will weigh human actions on the Day of Judgement. One example is the saying: "Nothing weighs more on the Scale than goodness of character".[23]

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15 Qur'ān IX,108.

16 Qur'ān II,222.

17 Qur'ān III,146. In the words of the Holy Book, God also loves those who fight for His cause (LXI,4), less relevantly in this context.

18 Qur'ān IV,36-7.

19 Qur'ān VI,141.

20 Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila*, no. 1937.

21 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-'ashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 6858.

22 Lane 1968, root kh-l-q; in this wide-ranging work the author reviews numerous autochthonous lexicographical sources.

23 Al-Sijistānī Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 4168.

The religious importance of the 'characters', and therefore of morality, is often expressed through images of the life to come. Among the better-known sayings of Muḥammad in Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī's *Ḥadīth* collection is:

> I guarantee a house in the purlieus of paradise for whoever forgoes a dispute although having the right to pursue it; and a house at the centre of paradise for whoever chooses not to lie; and a house in the heights of paradise for whoever has refined his own character.[24]

Another story from the Tradition or Sunna, this one from the Prophet's servant and Companion Anas Ibn Mālik (d. c. 91/709), which highlights the qualities of Muḥammad himself that made him the best of Muslims, even the best of men:

> I served the Messenger of God for ten years and he was never exasperated by me, never questioned why I had done what I had, or not done what I had not. The Messenger of God was, for his fine qualities of character, the best of men.[25]

The Prophet's superior qualities are much emphasised in the Qur'ān, which in the sura entitled *sūrat al-Qalam* 'The Pen' credits him with a 'sublime character' (*khuluq ʿaẓīm* خُلق عظيم, Qur'ān LXVIII,4);[26] and the commentators insist in their explanations on the overlap between religion and virtue, accentuating the sacredness of the moral life. Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), the renowned exegete and historian, teaches in his *Jāmi al-bayān* 'The Compendious Discourse' that the sublime character of the Prophet can be understood as his sublime religion, that is, Islam, and as his sublime Book, that is, the Qur'ān, as well as the mode of behaviour (*adab* أدب) taught him by God, which he always adhered to.[27]

Another ancient testimony is provided by the theologian and mystic Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), who illustrates more directly the Prophet's personal virtues, explaining perfection of character as a combination of justice, goodness and compassion. He cites in support another Qur'ānic passage, from the sura *Āl ʿImrān* 'The Family of 'Imrān', in which apropos of the reluctance of certain Muslims to obey, it is written:

> And by the Mercy of God, you dealt with them gently. And had you been severe and hard-hearted, they would have broken away from about you; so, pass over their faults, and pray that God forgive them. (Qur'ān III,159)[28]

24 Al-Sijistānī Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-adab*, no. 4169.

25 Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila*, no. 1934.

26 Translations from the Qur'ān are my own, the result of a combination of several English translations; cf. also *Il Corano* 2010.

27 Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān LXVIII,4. For references to the exegetical literature, cf. `https://www.altafsir.com/`.

28 Al-Tustarī 2004, commentary on Qur'ān LXVIII,4.

1.2 The Islamic Ethics of Virtue

The good qualities in the believer that God and the Prophet love can readily be linked to the branch of moral philosophy that from Aristotle onwards has been called 'the ethics of virtue', which focuses on a person's way of being, prior to, and independently of, his actions. For the western reader, the use of the term 'ethic/s' necessarily brings to mind Ancient Greece, the relativism of the Sophists, the intellectualism of the Socratics, and the various subsequent speculations on what constitutes the 'good', and the happiness of man. And it is true that a Greek substratum in the definition of virtuous behaviour and its purposes, one acquired through the translation of many Greek works into Arabic, is by no means extraneous to Islamic ethical thought. Indeed, once absorbed and meditated upon, it provided the theoretical foundations of such unquestionably 'Islamic' works, as the *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* 'The Refinement of Character', by the Persian philosopher and historian Abū 'Alī Miskawayh (d. 421/1030),[29] or the *Adab al-dunyā wa-l-dīn* 'The Ethics of Religion and of this World' by the Iraqi al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058),[30] a theorist of institutions and one of the first to combine traditional religious ethics with philosophical reflection.

We should not, however, overstate the Greek input. To do so would be to forget the historically antecedent contribution of Persian moral thinking, the works of the talented writer and translator Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. c. 139/756) for example. And above all it would mean forgetting the fundamental contribution of the Qur'ān itself, as well as the complex background of Arab values that the Qur'ān presupposes, confirms and restates. Even later, both on the particular theme of virtuous behaviour and in other instances, Islamic thought would continue to show an extraordinary ability to entertain a quantity of extraneous elements, adapting them to a different conception of life and of the world and endowing them with new values.

Among the many stories from the Prophetic Tradition that emphasise the ethical element in Muslim preaching, while at the same time confirming a continuity in moral thinking, is the following account from Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's collection: Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. c. 32/652), keen to know what the new religion had to say, sent his brother to Mecca to listen to Muḥammad's teaching and report back to him. The brother duly went, and when he returned said: "I have seen him and he recommends the noblest qualities to us in words that are not poetry".[31] Finding this an insufficient answer, Abū Dharr decided to go to Mecca in person, and speedily converted to Islam.

Another tale, this time recorded by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, reports the Prophet's reply to another believer who asked him what was the best of actions:

> To have faith in God and to believe, to strive hard in God's path, and to make pilgrimage conscientiously. – But you have said several things – the man retorted. The Prophet continued: – And to speak gently, and to treat others with generosity, and to be of good character. The man

29 Miskawayh 2010.

30 Al-Māwardī 1408/1988.

31 Words, that is, that from an Islamic perspective were a long way from the deceptive enchantments of the poets. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb faḍā'il al-ṣaḥāba*, no. 4527.

> protested: – But I want just one thing. – Be off with you – the Prophet said to him – and stop imagining that God is like you are.[32]

It seems clear that the references to 'noblest qualities' (*makārim al-akhlāq* مكارم الأخلاق) and to 'good character' (*ḥusn al-khuluq*), without further specification, indicate settled existing values. And the same cognizant memory of previous beliefs can be seen in the Qur'ān itself, which in its turn presupposes principles already known to and shared by the audience: it will suffice to mention the many references to goodness (*iḥsān*) or to the good (*khayr* خَيْر, *ṭayyib* طَيّب), and generally to what is already known and agreed on (*maʿrūf* معروف), which run through the whole corpus of the Qur'ānic preaching. And this suggests that, even in the case of excellence of character according to Islam, positioning the Qur'ān as the as a *terminus post quem* is no more than a convention. It is precisely in this sense that we should read Muḥammad's saying, reported by, among others, the traditionist al-Ṭabarānī, which makes Islamic morality the coronation of what had gone before. "God sent me to perfect noble characters and to bring good deeds to their proper fulfilment".[33]

Outside of the Qur'ān and its commentators, and of the Sunna, we find an important contribution to the Islamic ethics of virtue in a literature which stands halfway between the Tradition proper and narrative: what one might call 'wisdom writing', made up of Prophetic sayings, maxims, poetical fragments and assorted anecdotal material promoting good behaviour, teaching at the same time adherence to the right and the good according to religion, and how to satisfy social norms.[34] Among the most assiduous practitioners of the genre was Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 281/894) of Baghdad; an early traditionist, jurist, ascetic, tutor to caliphs and princes, a contemporary of the greatest contributors to the Prophetic Tradition, who operated in a cosmopolitan and culturally vibrant climate. He was responsible for dozens of pamphlets on many facets of moral life: from the virtues of the intellect to the usefulness of tears, from meditating on funerary remains to the worth of gratitude, from commendable conduct in illness to the evils of intoxicating drinks, and much more. His name will feature often in the pages that follow.

Among other important writers in this vein, we find the Sunni traditionist al-Bukhārī and his *Al-adab al-mufrad* 'The Singular Code of Manners', a manual of good behaviour amidst friends and family;[35] Aḥmad al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915), another authoritative contributor to the corpus of Prophetic traditions, with *'Ishrat al-nisā'* or 'On Frequenting Women',[36] devoted especially to good relations between spouses; the already mentioned al-Māwardī with *Al-amthāl wa-l-ḥikam* 'Examples and Pearls of Wisdom',[37] notable for its abundance of poetic material; and the Persian Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), again a renowned traditionist as well as a jurist and theologian, and his *Al-ādāb* or 'The Good Behaviour', a wide-ranging work which

32 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad, musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 17467.

33 In Arabic: *inna Allāh baʿatha-nī bi-tamām makārim al-akhlāq wa-kamāl maḥāsin al-afʿāl*; cf. al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-awsaṭ*, no. 7073.

34 This kind of writing has been classed as 'religious *adab*'; see Azarnoosh 2008.

35 Al-Bukhārī 1409/1983; cf. Al-Bukhārī 2018.

36 Al-Nasā'ī 1408/1988.

37 Al-Māwardī 1420/1999.

begins with respect for one's parents, and one's mother in particular, and closes with the love for God and the Prophet of those who meditate on the Qur'ān and the Sunna.[38] But the titles are beyond number: also belonging to the genre, for example, is *Al-adab fī l-dīn* or 'The Good Conduct in Religion', among the many works of the highly esteemed theologian, philosopher and mystic Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) – known as the 'Proof of Islam'.[39]

1.3 The Highest Example

A Muslim is one who tries to match his person to the model of Muḥammad the Prophet of Islam: this is the foundation of the Sunna, the Prophetic Tradition. Now, what isolates and ennobles morality as against actions approved by the Law is taking as a model not so much the Prophet and his goodness and righteousness, but directly God with His attributes (*ṣifāt* صفات), the ninety-nine 'Beautiful Names' (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* الأسماء الحُسنى) that Tradition has taken from the Qur'ān and tabulated in various lists.[40] The reality of a divine rather than a Prophetic similarity is clearly stated in the Holy Book, in a verse of the sura *al-Naḥl* 'The Bees':

> Those who believe not in the world to come, theirs is the evil model [*mathal al-saw'* مثل السَوء]; God's is the highest example [*al-mathal al-a'lā* المَثل الأعلى]; He is the All-mighty, the All-wise. (Qur'ān XVI,60)

In these words, faith is significantly related to the divinity as the most excellent example and contrasted with the evil of the pagans, deniers of the afterlife. The Qur'ānic exegetes are always much preoccupied with the internal coherence of the Holy Book, and in reading this passage they naturally wonder how the affirmation of the 'highest example' or 'similarity' (*al-mathal al-a'lā*), which in so far as it is an example presupposes attainability, is to be reconciled with other verses of opposite implication, which instead affirm the absolute Transcendence of God and the impossibility of attributing His characteristics to others. For example, in the same sura 'The Bees' we read, a little further on: "So put not forward similarities to God" (Qur'ān XVI,74), that is, do not posit examples (*amthāl*, pl. of *mathal*) that invoke His being.

Regardless of their coming from different schools, all the interpreters respond in the same way, insisting, that is to say, on the uniqueness of the divine model, whose very perfection admits of neither similarities nor correspondences. And, indeed, the otherness of the divine condition is a fundamental assumption of Qur'ānic doctrine and is frequently echoed by the Traditionistic literature, and by subsequent theological reflection: if God is the one Creator, every man is his creature among the other creatures; if God is our king (*malik* مَلك) or master (*mālik* مالك), man is inescapably His servant (*'abd* عبد). However, we find in the founding literature that a way of being or acting on the divinity's part may coincide with a capacity or a disposition of man, and this is something that catches our eye when we scroll through the

38 Al-Bayhaqī 1408/1988.

39 Al-Ghazālī 2005.

40 Among the most authoritative lists is the one contained in al-Tirmidhī's collection of Prophetic traditions, *al-Jāmi'*, on the authority of the Companion Abū Hurayra.

Beautiful Names: some are evidently the prerogative of God, but many more have a potential anthropological application and also indicate attainable virtues for the faithful. Sometimes, they even remind the Muslim of his necessary attitudes, as in the case of the Name *al-muʾmin* المؤمن 'the Faithful', 'the Believer', or of his legal duties, as in *al-shahīd* الشهيد 'the Witness', a Name that indicates testifying to the faith, i.e. *shahada* شهادة 'bearing witness', the primary obligation of Islam. A certain analogy between the Creator and the human creature is suggested in the Qurʾān when a given quality is attributed to God, in which case it is a Beautiful Name, but also to the true believer, when it is a human virtue. And again, a similarity can be implied in other ways by the Tradition literature, as for example when the Prophet declares that goodness of character is one of the 'characters' of God (*akhlāq Allāh*).[41] Islamic thought has therefore also illuminated the paradoxical reality of a divine model that is at once inimitable and yet followable in the way that God indicates and allows; [42] and it is in the Beautiful Names particularly that the true foundation of religious ethics should be identified.

Thus, in the past, a treatise by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, for example, devoted to the meanings of the Beautiful Names known as *Al-maqṣad al-aṣnā* 'The Most Exalted Aim [in Explaining the Beautiful Names of God]',[43] meditates on those considered 'equivocal' (*mutashābiha* متشابهة) or 'shared' (*mushtaraka* مشتركة), rooted in difference but opened to analogical reasoning (*qiyās* قياس). Here he was to be followed, among others, by one of the great thinkers of medieval Islam, the Persian commentator, theologian and jurist Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) in his *Kitāb lawāmiʿ al-bayyināt* or 'The Book of Marvellous Proofs', in its turn devoted to the attributes of God.[44] The notion that the good believer should, in his moral conduct, model himself on God rather than on the Prophet is also propounded by the Neoplatonist philosopher Miskawayh in his *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*; and it is indeed this that sets him apart from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which he takes as a point of departure for his work.[45]

The idea has been taken up by both Sunni and Shiite contemporary intellectuals, concerned as often as not to motivate their coreligionists less with regard to the external manifestations of religion than to an underlying moral uprightness and the conduct that should follow from it.[46] One example would be the Syrian academic Muḥammad Rātib al-Nābulusī (b. 1938 or 1939), quite active on the European scene, whose many works[47] include a *Mawsūʿat al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā* or 'Encyclopaedia of the Beautiful Names of God',[48] in which he regularly emphasises the communicability of divine

41 Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*, *ḥarf al-ʿayn*, no. 811.

42 I would like to point out, however, that the Prophetic saying "conform to the qualities of God" (*takhallaqū bi-akhlāq Allāh*), although quite widespread, is not mentioned by the main collections and is mostly considered spurious.

43 Al-Ghazālī 1971, 47-59.

44 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905.

45 Together with many Platonic prompts: Miskawayh 1966, 170; cf. apropos Daiber 2018, in particular 202-3.

46 This tendency is especially evident on the Sciite side; see for example the section dedicated to moral education (*al-tarbīya wa-l-akhlāq*), on Maktabat shabakat al-batūl, which currently has 18 titles consultable online. `https://www.anwar5.net/albatoul/index.php?master=9&part=1`.

47 Among the best-known and most relevant here are Al-Nābulusī 2002a; 2004a; 2004b, all devoted to the inimitability of the Islamic canon also from a scientific point of view.

48 Al-Nābulusī 2002b.

qualities and the need for the good Muslim to 'align himself' (*takhalluq* تَخلّق, cf. *akhlāq*) with the supreme model. Al-Nābulusī insists on more than one occasion that it is exactly in his morality and not in the mere observance of the letter of the Law, that the difference between the believer and the non-believer lies; and he repeatedly calls on his brethren to see the Qur'ānic allusions to the Beautiful Names as an appeal to pursue God's perfection as far as is possible for them, since at least attempting to conform to this perfection is the only way to get nearer to it.

These are interesting, even important observations, not only for those who may be reminded by them of other traditions – "Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy" (*Leviticus* 19,2), or "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful" (*Luke* 6,36) – but also and especially in thinking about Muslims residing in countries of different religious traditions, and the breadth of their identitarian self-definition, which is not to be reduced to outward manifestations alone but is also rooted in the refinement of the qualities required by their religion, and in practising them.

The scope of this book, a short, and by no means exhaustive, compendium of the principal virtues of the 'good Muslim', is to shed light on the moral element that necessarily underlies the Islamic religion, and to place before the reader the values that this religion transmits. My enquiries, often backed by lexicological considerations, consist in a wide-ranging scrutiny of religious literature in Arabic, the main language of Islam: traditional wisdom texts, or exegetical, theological or juridical ones, from the founding and classical eras, as well as, where possible and appropriate, modern and contemporary thinking – it seems to me important to make the voices of authors of our own day better known, and especially Arabic-language voices, whose linguistic medium deprives them of a wider audience. By deploying sources of differing chronology and from different disciplines, albeit all culled from the vast 'container' of religious literature, I have tried to highlight the variety of positions embraced by the Islamic vision.