

10 Repentance and Conversion

Summary 10.1 God's Forgiveness and Man's Repentance. – 10.2 The Muslim's Turning Back. – 10.3 God's Turning Back. – 10.4 Return to the Eternal Law. – 10.5 The Magnitude of Conversion.

We have already seen a number of times how often the virtues and values of the good Muslim correspond, with due allowances, to the 'Beautiful Names' that Tradition has bestowed on God on the basis of the Qur'ānic revelation; and, again according to Tradition, that God loves those who resemble Him, that is, those who attempt to align themselves with His attributes and conduct. This applies to another quality, called *tawba* (or *tawb* تَوْب), which has the general sense of 'conversion' and expresses the purification of intention and the amendment of conduct.

One wonders how this quality, entirely appropriate to the human creature, can be predicated on God, for whom purification and amendment, let alone conversion, would appear to have no meaning. In answer to this question, let us hear the early lexicographers. Underlying *tawba* and the verb from which it derives, *tāba* تاب, – they are unanimous in explaining – there is the idea of return (*rujū* رجوع), together with the notion of reversion ('*awd* عود) and also of recovery, that is, replacement understood in terms of a retracing of steps (*ināba* إنابة). And in this ample receptacle, they identify two different but related areas, depending on whether the action comes from man or from God: in the case of human action, the return is orientation, search and request (cf. *tāba ilā*), while in the case of God it is generous concession (cf. *tāba 'alā*). It may help to take a closer look at what Ibn Manẓūr has to say in *The Language of the Arabs*.¹

The author says that *tawba* means a retreat from guilt and thus repentance, or regret, or remorse; and relies for this on the well-known Prophetic

¹ Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root t-w-b; cf. Al-Fayrūz'ābādī 1419/1998, 64; Lane 1968, root t-w-b.

saying: “Repentance is conversion”.² Then he passes on to conversion when it is God’s action, and he provides a meaning for this too: it means granting man success in his own conversion; as if to say, along the lines of the popular interpretation of *Proverbs* (16,33), “the lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord” – or: man proposes, God disposes. Ibn Manẓūr proceeds along the same lines with another important noun, the intensive *tawwāb* تَوَّاب ‘one who greatly reverts’. First he applies this to man: it means ‘he who turns back to God’, and therefore repents; then he applies it to God, when it means ‘He who turns back to His servant’, and therefore forgives. For the latter case, he offers a Qur’ānic passage in support: “He who forgives sins and welcomes repentance” (Qur’ān XL,3).

After teaching that man is reconciled when he repents and that God is reconciled when He forgives, Ibn Manẓūr offers an afterword on the interdependence of these transactions: the divine Name *al-tawwāb* means that God returns to His servant when the latter has turned back to Him out of his sense of guilt. The ambivalence but also the overlap of conversion’s meanings stands out in the commentary al-Ghazālī dedicates to the Name *al-tawwāb* ‘The Incomparably Indulgent’,³ in his work on Names. He writes:

God is the One who time after time returns to render more apparent to His servants the motives for conversion, making His signs evident to them [...] until they, when they discover the disastrous consequences of guilt through His teaching, feel fear through the alarm He has kindled in them and thus return to conversion, when God’s favour will also return to them, and at the same time His acceptance.⁴

10.1 God’s Forgiveness and Man’s Repentance

While the Qur’ān speaks of conversion or *tawba* in terms of the action of the Creator together with that of His creature, insisting on the overlap of those two actions, with many theological nuances – and an unquestionable rhetorical power – the exegetical works, in the vast majority of cases, perform on the other hand an as-it-were ‘corrective’ operation, determinedly splitting the process into forgiveness (*maghfira* or *ghufrān* غفران) and repentance (*nadam* ندم), thus maintaining divine otherness.

The corrective operation performed by the exegesis is evident in the explanation of the sura ‘The Cow’ where it is said: “Then Adam received some words from his Lord, and He turned towards him [*tāba ‘alay-hi*]. Indeed, it is He is the Oft-Returning, The Merciful [*al-tawwāb al-raḥīm*]” (Qur’ān II,37). While the Qur’ān treats Adam’s repentance as one with God’s forgiveness, forgiveness moreover followed by ‘words’ and thus with a potential Prophetic charge, the commentaries, even those of earliest date, show very clearly a divergence of meanings: among them, a work entitled *Gharīb al-Qur’ān* or ‘Rare Expressions in the Qur’ān’ by the fourth Shii Imam Zayd Ibn ‘Alī (d. c. 122/740),⁵ where God’s ‘conversion’ is aid and support, while

² In Arabic: *al-nadam tawba*; Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-zuhd*, *bāb dhikr al-tawba*, no. 4250.

³ No. 80 in the principal lists of Names.

⁴ Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root t-w-b.

⁵ Ibn ‘Alī, s.d., commentary on Qur’ān II,37.

for man it is the reversal of culpable action, renunciation of similar infractions and finally repentance; or the *Tafsīr* ‘Abd al-Razzāq, a commentary by the early scholar ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 211/827), which illustrates the divine priority over human actions with a dialogue between God and Adam:

Adam asked: – Lord, did You prescribe this sin for me before You created me, or did I invent it on my own?

He answered: – Not at all, I prescribed it for you before I created you.

Then Adam said: – Since You have prescribed it for me, then forgive me.⁶

A story from the life of the mystic Rābī‘a al-‘Adawiyya (d. 185/801), an important, almost legendary figure, illustrates the priority of *tawba* which is always to be traced back to God:

Once a man came to her and asked: – If I turn to God, will He turn to me? To his surprise, she replied: – No. Then she immediately qualified her negation by adding: – However, if He turns to you, you will turn to Him.⁷

In al-Ṭabarī’s *Compendious Discourse*, the splitting of *tawba* into divine Forgiveness and human repentance is by now well established; but the distinguished commentator does not ignore the terminological overlap that is so evident in the Qur’ān. Balancing his discourse between restoration and reinstatement, al-Ṭabarī explains man’s conversion as a return (or *awba* أَوْبَة ‘homecoming’) from culpability, and God’s conversion as a gift (*rizq* رِزْق), or, again, as a return (once more, *awba*), from wrath to contentment and from punishment to forgiveness. Al-Ṭabarī appears to take for granted another conviction, previously mainly to be found among mystics – one destined to loom large in the later literature of every era and tendency, and in fact also present in Ibn Manẓūr’s dictionary – namely that the divine *tawba* should be read first and foremost as God’s acceptance of human conversion.⁸

But this is also an idea that can be found in the Qur’ān itself, and more than once: in the sura ‘The Repentance’ it is said that God is “the One who accepts repentance from His servants [*qābil al-tawb*]” (Qur’ān IX,104); in the sura *ghāfir* ‘The Forgiver God’, He is “the Forgiver of sin, the Acceptor of repentance” (XL,3); and in the sura *al-Shūrā* ‘The Consultation’, “it is He who accepts the repentance of His servants, forgives their evil deeds” (XLII,25).

On the many aspects of ‘conversion’ or *tawba*, the most remarkable exegetical work is that of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in *The Keys to the Unknown*. His commentary on the sura ‘The Cow’, when it deals with God’s ‘turning back to’ Adam (II,37), is nothing short of a treatise on *tawba*.⁹ The author engages with the definition and modalities of human conversion, quoting excerpts from al-Ghazālī’s *Al-tawba ilā Allāh wa-mukaffirāt al-dhunūb* or ‘The Conversion to God and the Atonement of Guilt’, a section of the great *Ḥiyā’ ulūm al-dīn* or ‘The Revival of the Religious Sciences’.¹⁰ From al-Ghazālī he takes, for example, the latter’s subtle analysis of human *tawba* articulated

⁶ Al-Ṣan‘ānī 1419/1988, commentary on Qur’ān II,37.

⁷ Cf. Atif Khalil (2023, 169) quoting Al-Qushayrī 2002; cf. also Khalil 2018.

⁸ Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur’ān II,37.

⁹ Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur’ān II,37.

¹⁰ Al-Ghazālī 1407/1987.

in three distinct phases – the first being acknowledgement (*‘ilm*) of the harm produced by guilt, and of the ‘veil’ that it weaves between the believer and divine Clemency, distancing man from the object of his desire: this gives man a sorrow or suffering to which he gives the name of repentance (*nadam*). The second phase is when man formulates his resolve (*‘azm* عزم) to abandon his past culpable behaviour including in such future as remains to him, and the final stage is the amendment of his ways. Still following al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī teaches that repentance sums up all three phases of *tawba* in the sense that the knowledge which precedes it is its premise, while the abandonment of culpability and guilt is its result, so that repentance, which connects both with the knowledge that comes first and the renunciation that comes later, is in the middle, embraced by the two sides, and is both the fruit and that which bears fruit; this explains why the Prophet said that repentance is reconversion.¹¹

But whereas al-Ghazālī thinks that human repentance is by ‘divine custom’ (*sunnat Allāh* سنة الله), almost a natural law, al-Rāzī is on the other hand a firm believer in God’s freedom and His ceaseless intervention in the world, and thinks that knowledge of culpability and the harm it causes have little to do with man’s own ability and initiative, but instead come directly from God’s will. Al-Rāzī explains that conversion (*tawba*) brings the believer and his Lord together: the former is like a runaway servant who returns to his master, and the Other like a king who, however reluctantly, welcomes the servant out of mercy; but unlike an earthly king, who is outraged by his servant’s misbehaviour and welcomes him back at most once, the Most High continually welcomes back the faithful with genuine goodness and kindness, should they sin and repent at any point throughout their lives.

One last consideration. Al-Rāzī, as we have seen, is a great admirer of al-Ghazālī; but he does not subscribe to the older master’s notion that human *tawba*, like divine *tawba*, also involves forgiveness, and not only repentance. Reflecting on the Name *al-tawwāb* in his work on the Beautiful Names, al-Ghazālī in fact maintains that human conversion or repentance is not only towards the Lord, but also towards one’s brother: “Whoever, time after time, listens to excuses of sinners, whether subjects, friends or acquaintances”, he writes, “is conforming to a divine quality, and that will shape his destiny”.¹² Thus he traces a clear convergence between God’s behaviour and man’s, in a common vocation to forgiveness.

10.2 The Muslim’s Turning Back

In certain verses of the Qur’ān, the verb *tāba* ‘to return’, ‘to reconvert’ appears repeatedly, first referring to man’s action and then as God’s or, vice versa, first God’s and then man’s. These passages present the reader with movements of mutual conversion that are in many ways comparable: man turns back by withdrawing from his present state, and God also recovers His former favourable inclination towards the believer, between Creator and His creature almost a duplication of intentions and behaviour. The first example comes from, again, the sura ‘The Cow’:

¹¹ Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur’ān II,37.

¹² Al-Ghazālī 1971, 150-1.

Except those who repent and make amends and openly declare [the Truth]: To them I turn; for I am Oft-returning, Most Merciful. (Qur'ān II,160)

This verse suggests the temporal priority of human turning back, as if to say that God forgives only those who are already repentant. Al-Rāzī, however, concerned as always to emphasise God's freedom of action, maintains that His acceptance of human repentance is not rationally necessary. God speaks here of forgiveness in order to compliment Himself, he observes, and if forgiveness were a necessary thing, the compliment would be meaningless or would not be one; this means that God accepts repentance not out of necessity but out of clemency (*rahma*).¹³

Ibn Kathīr takes another view in his *Exegesis of the Sublime Qur'ān*: "When the supporters of unbelief or ungodly innovation reconvert to God", this author writes, "God turns back to them"; his is a hypothesis of reality, a conditional future, but a certain one. And he adds that this guaranteed divine turning back is unique to Islam because before, among the antecedent communities, God did not welcome the conversion of unbelievers and innovators.¹⁴ And here we must remember that Ibn Kathīr, when he speaks of unbelief or innovation, is thinking only of theological aberrations, because he is well aware that God's forgiveness is denied to the apostate; as the Qur'ān says in the sura 'The Family of 'Imrān', "surely those who disbelieve after they have believed and then increase in unbelief - their repentance [*tawba*] shall not be accepted" (Qur'ān III,90).

In support of the notion that only the Muslim's 'conversion' is necessarily accepted by God, the author relies on the well-known Prophetic saying, as follows:

The adulterer is not a believer while he is committing adultery, the thief is not a believer while he is stealing, the drinker who drinks of wine is not a believer while he is drinking wine, the plunderer is not a believer while he is plundering [...] because, at those moments, faith abandons him. If he turns back, then God turns back to him.¹⁵

Ibn Kathīr is thus able to affirm that Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, is "the Prophet of conversion, the Prophet of mercy";¹⁶ and again, in highlighting the relationship between conversion and mercy, he draws our attention to a cornerstone of Qur'ānic thought on *tawba*: for it is true that the Name *al-tawwāb* 'The Oft-Returning', 'The Indulgent', always occurs in the Qur'ān paired with the Name *al-rahīm* 'The Clement' or 'The Merciful' (except on one occasion, Qur'ān XC,3, when it appears alone).

¹³ Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān II,160.

¹⁴ Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān II,160.

¹⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-maḏālīm*, *bāb al-nuḥbā bi-ghayr idhn ṣāḥibi-hi*, no. 2475; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-imān*, *bāb bayān nuqṣān al-imān bi-l-ma'āṣi*, no. 57; both on the authority of Abū Hurayra.

¹⁶ Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān II,160.

10.3 God's Turning Back

Another important verse, in the sura 'The Repentance', suggests that it is God's return that prompts human return, in a logical sequence contrary to what we have seen hitherto:

And to the three who were left behind [...] when they knew it for certain that there was no refuge from God but in Him; then He returned to them that they might turn back to Him; surely God is the Oft-returning, the Merciful. (Qur'ān IX,118)

The commentators are unanimous in explaining that the three were converts from Medina who were reluctant to go into battle with the Prophet, so they hesitated, lagging behind the others, and were therefore late in 'converting', and God was equally late in forgiving them. Like many, al-Rāzī, in *The Keys to the Unknown*, organises his commentary around deferral and postponement, which he naturally considers an expression of divine freedom. Here in essence is his teaching, set out concisely, point by point.

Firstly: "He returned to them that they might turn back to Him" means that the servant's action is created by God. Secondly, God's returning precedes in time, for "He returned" is in the past tense while "that they might turn to him" indicates an action in the future. Thirdly, since the basis of conversion is turning back, the verse describes the return of the three Medinans to their proper condition, that is, belonging to the ranks of believers. Fourthly, this also involves their persevering in their return and avoiding the repetition of their misdeeds. Lastly, «that they might turn back to him» means: that they might benefit from their return and derive satisfaction from it; but these two outcomes, benefit and satisfaction, are subordinate to God's returning to them which – the author never tires of repeating – is in no sense due but occurs through His clemency and magnanimity.¹⁷

The same emphasis on divine freedom and the error of those who think otherwise is to be found in the following summary by an early sage, taken up by al-Qurṭubī in *The Compendium of the Judgements of the Qur'ān*, again commenting on the sura 'The Repentance' (Qur'ān IX,118):

With God the Most High I have erred about four things. I thought that as soon as I loved Him, He would love me too, because He said: "a people whom He will love and they will love Him" [V,54]; I thought that as soon as I was pleased with Him, He would be pleased with me too, because He said: "God is pleased with them and they with Him" [V,119]; I thought that as soon as I remembered Him, He would also remember me, because He said: "certainly the remembrance of God is the greatest" [XXIX,45]; and I thought that as soon as I return to Him, He also returns to me, because He said: "To them I turn; for I am Oft-returning" [II,160].¹⁸

A good example of the complexity of Islamic thought is provided by al-Zamakhsharī in his *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, for this Mu'tazilite theologian instead speaks of the necessity of divine forgiveness and the

¹⁷ Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XI,118.

¹⁸ Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XI,118.

human responsibility in repentance; and he sketches a profile of the three characters mentioned in the sura 'The Repentance' that emphasises their active participation in the process. Relying on an opinion of the early writer al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, he writes:

There was a man who had a walled garden that was better than a hundred thousand pieces of silver; he said: – My garden, what has kept me back is only your shade, and the expectation of your fruit, but now I leave you to God.

Then there was another who had only his wife; this one said: – My wife, what has made me linger [...] is surely only the attachment I have for you; however, I appeal to God, I will endure the distance separating us and I will reach the Prophet. And he mounted his horse and went.

The last man had only himself, and neither wife nor wealth.

He said: – My soul, what has made me stay behind is only your love of life; however, I appeal to God, I will endure every adversity and I will reach the Prophet. So, he took some provisions, tucked them under his arm, and reached him.¹⁹

10.4 Return to the Eternal Law

Behind the double sense of conversion, or turning back – repentance for man and forgiveness for God –, there clearly lurks the notion that the past is better than the present. It is an idea that recurs in the Qur'ān, and is particularly evident in a passage from the sura 'The Women'. At the end of a legal discourse on the categories of brides allowed to the believer and those that are instead unlawful (*maḥārim* محارم), we read:

God desires to guide you, and to explain to you the ways of those before you, and to return [*yatūbu*] to you [...]. God wants to return [*yatūbu*] to you, but those who follow their evil desires seek to lead you astray. (Qur'ān IV,26-7)

It is a potentially trappy passage for exegesis because, on "those before you" (*min qabli-kum*) ought to mean the pre-Islamic generations, not yet enlightened by the Qur'ān. And indeed, many commentators think that the lesson of these verses is a negative one: that the predecessors are cited to ensure that Muslims do *not* follow in their footsteps by marrying their mothers, daughters and sisters without regard to consanguinity and the interdictions attached to it.

But the majority view is another, based on the convergence of monotheistic Laws regarding the same interdicts: "those before you" to be followed in methods and procedures are then rather the many pious people who lived before Islam, first of all the prophets, bearers of similar juridical views. This is a conviction that runs through the entire history of Islamic thought, and in modern times becomes even more pronounced. But let us proceed in order and review the main exegeses.

Some authors float a relationship between the habits of ancient believers and the habits of God, which according to the Qur'ān do not change

¹⁹ Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XI,118.

or vary (cf. e.g. XXXIII,62 or XXXV,43). They initiate thereby a discourse on the perpetuity of Revelation, as essentially identical always and for all. Here, for example, in a close paraphrase, is Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's commentary on this passage.

In the verses preceding the ones under analysis (i.e. IV,26-7), God has explained to Muslims the existing obligations in matrimonial matters, differentiating what is permissible from what is not, the good from the bad. Then He says "to explain to you the ways of those before you", which can be understood in two ways: the marriage obligations that God is now prescribing for Muslims are those he had previously prescribed to all religious communities; or, alternatively, that God had also explained to the ancients the usefulness of marriage regulations, although He then gave them different ones. In either case, it means that the Laws, of Muslims and others, converge in the sphere of public interest (*maṣlaḥa* مصلحة). Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī thus affirms the unanimity of the heavenly Books and the existence of an Eternal Law behind the different codifications.²⁰ We see here again the great Islamic motif of *fiṭra*, the 'original nature', the faith of Adam and Abraham, the natural vocation to monotheism, God's plan for mankind from the beginning.

A modern commentary, the *Tafsīr al-Manār* or 'The Beacon', by two Egyptian reformers, Rashīd Riḍā and Muḥammad 'Abduh,²¹ also insists on the perpetuity of the primordial creed, remaining unaltered through its various historical manifestations. Glossing the verses on marriage regulation in the sura 'The Women' (Qur'ān IV,26-7),²² the authors observe that every community in the past had its own religion, its own Law, adapted to the society of the times; indeed, it is said in the Qur'ān: "To each among you, We have prescribed a law and a clear way" (V,48). Nonetheless, there is a broad equivalence between the obligations that God has prescribed for Muslims and those reserved for other observant communities (*milal* ملل) throughout history; that is to say that, through their prophets, the ancients also conformed to the original religious vocation (*fiṭra*). Thus, the religion of all the prophets has always been one under the monotheism – a spirit of submission to God, and purity of soul obtained through actions that rectify and refine character. Subsequently, reflecting on the double quotation of the divine return – "and to return [*yatūbu*] to you [...] God wants to return [*yatūbu*] to you" (IV,26-7) – the *Manār* commentary teaches that the repetition does not have a mere reinforcing sense, but actually expresses two different actions of God, one connected to the other: the first divine conversion, historicised and in a particular sense, concerns the amnesty of marriages already ratified by the very first Muslims, still unaware of the prohibition against incest, with the obligation, however, to withdraw from those empty and defective marriages; while the second 'return' is general and timeless: what God wants from believers is that they observe these Laws forever, pure in soul and heart, and reformed in their condition.²³

If in the *Manār* commentary the idea of history is to some extent a secularised idea, in other Salafist commentaries the past is resolved within

²⁰ Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān IV,26-7.

²¹ Riḍā, 'Abduh 1366/1947.

²² The considerations summarised below are largely taken from Muḥammad 'Abduh's lectures at al-Azhar University, as is the entire commentary of the *Manār* up to Qur'ān IV,125.

²³ Riḍā, 'Abduh 1366/1947 on Qur'ān IV,26-7.

sacred history: the reference to the pre-Islamic prophets does not concern actual concrete communities, and the return to the perennial Law does not at all imply a positive image of the other 'People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb* أهل الكتاب). A contemporary example is *Aysar al-tafāsīr li-kalām al-'alī al-kabīr* or 'The Simplest Interpretation of the Words of the Exalted Almighty' by the Algerian Jābir al-Jazā'irī (d. 2018), a long-time lecturer in Islamic Sciences at the University of Medina. In the name of the perpetuity of the Qur'ānic word, al-Jazā'irī reads the verses under analysis as an exhortation directed to today's believers, and therefore offers a modernising interpretation: "those before you" would not then be the pre-Islamic communities but the first converts, the 'pious ancestors' or *salaf*, whose integrity must protect the Muslim from the 'ignorance' (*jāhiliyya* جاهلية) of his own time, hardly dissimilar to the ignorance of the pagans. According to al-Jazā'irī, the example to be followed is that "of the upright believers who have gone before you, so that you may follow in their footsteps, purify yourselves, perfect yourselves and prosper like them". As for the divine will to turn back to the faithful, it means that He "wants to lead you back from the error of ignorance to the right guidance [*hudā* هدى] provided by Islam".²⁴

In this perspective, Jews and Christians no longer share with Muslims the primordial vocation or *fiṭra*, but find themselves unceremoniously deposited among "those who follow their evil desires" and "seek to lead you astray", along with incestuous fornicators (cf. Qur'ān IV,27). The identification of other 'People of the Book' as models to be shunned is not new to the exegetical tradition – it can already be found in al-Ṭabarī's commentary. But, as we have seen, other convictions, even among the Salafis themselves, go in a different direction.

10.5 The Magnitude of Conversion

In amongst the panoply of his works, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā of Baghdad has also left us a pamphlet entitled *Kitāb al-tawba* or 'The Book of Conversion';²⁵ a work that would influence many later writers, among them the Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223) in his more exhaustive and systematic *Kitāb al-tawwābīn* or 'The Book of Penitents'.²⁶

The material assembled by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā – in the form of Prophetic sayings and stories – embraces repentance and the request for forgiveness from God, grief and regret for the ugliness of one's sins, more or less serious, the fear of punishment and the necessary atonement on earth and in the hereafter, sometimes echoing al-Ghazālī's notion of the human *tawba* as the acceptance and pardoning (*'afw*) of one's neighbour's misdeeds, in imitation of the divine *tawba*. One example is the following, on the first Muslim to have his hand amputated after committing a theft:

The man was a convert from Medina. They took him to the Prophet and told him that he had stolen. He replied: – Take him away and amputate him. But then his face clouded over.

²⁴ Al-Jazā'irī 1424/2003, glossing Qur'ān IV,26-7.

²⁵ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d.

²⁶ Al-Maqdisī 1407/1987.

Someone sitting next to him asked him: – Does this trouble you, Prophet of God?

He answered: – Do not behave as Satan's henchmen! When a ruler is presented with a criminal case [*ḥadd* حُدّ],²⁷ he can do nothing but impose the punishment. But God is the One who pardons, and He loves pardon. And he recited: "But let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish that God should forgive you? God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate" [Qur'an XXIV,22].²⁸

Another story from *The Book of Conversion* by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, where the reciprocity of conversions is quite explicit, along with the perpetuity of faith and the Law, is the following:

God inspired a prophet that punishment was imminent. That prophet conveyed the message to his people and summoned the best among them to turn back to God. Three of them went out before the people.

The first said: – Lord, You have commanded us in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses not to refuse the request of one who presents himself at our door; now, we present ourselves at one of Your gates: refuse not our request.

The second¹ said: – Lord, You have commanded us in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses to pardon those who wrong us; now, we have wronged ourselves: pardon us.

Said the third: – Lord, You have commanded us in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses to set our slaves free; now, we are Your servants and slaves: set us free.

God inspired the prophet to tell them that He had granted their requests and pardoned them.²⁹

Sometimes sympathy for others is best expressed by asking God to forgive them; as the Companion Ibn Mas'ūd said, "if you see that one of you does something wrong, do not inveigh against him, do not insult him, but pray to God to forgive him and return to him".³⁰

Here is an example of such a prayer: "My God, if we have done wrong to someone, repay him in kind for our fault and forgive us; and if anyone has done wrong to us, repay us in kind for his fault and forgive him".³¹ And here is another interesting passage on human solidarity, again from *The Book of Conversion*:

The prophet David, before himself falling into sin, railed against sinners. When he had sinned in his turn, he said: – Lord, forgive the sinners, perhaps together with them you will also pardon me.³²

²⁷ *Ḥadd* refers to the punishments of certain acts forbidden or sanctioned by punishments in the Qur'an and the Sunna, and thereby become crimes against religion.

²⁸ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 43.

²⁹ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 114.

³⁰ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 99-100.

³¹ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 95.

³² Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 125.

A last quotation, of some subtlety, makes forgiving one's neighbour a gift offered to God; it features again the mystic Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, who used to say: "Lord, I have given You the gift of him who has wronged me, You ask the gift of me from him whom I have wronged".³³

An insistence on return and conversion as cornerstones of the Islamic religion is very much alive among today's preachers: there is a contemporary *Al-tawba* 'Book of Conversion', for example, by the already mentioned Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī.³⁴ It is not a long work but a wide-ranging one, which brings together under the common heading of *tawba* a multitude of different elements, cultural, theological, legal, liturgical, ethical-moral, social coexistence, and more besides. Al-Sha'rāwī is not writing like al-Ghazālī for the spiritual postulants, still less for Ibn Abī l-Dunyā's patricians or courtiers; as is obvious from his opening lines, he is addressing a brother Muslim who is largely unversed in the doctrinal and even the ritual basics of his religion, and perhaps a little shaky in his moral principles, who, in order to reconvert to God, needs explicit and all-round instruction. The author therefore sets out to teach him the connection between man's morality and God's being and doing, without prejudicing the divine incomparability of course; and he equates, among other things, divine clemency with the spontaneousness of a mother's love;³⁵ or the apprehension of a concerned father:

like when you have a child of school age who sits up studying for many hours until sleep begins to overcome him, but continues to resist it while the book falls from his hand again and again, until finally you get up, take his book and tell him to go to bed.³⁶

Al-Sha'rāwī repeatedly quotes the well-known Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), and like him attaches great importance to intra-Islamic solidarity. And, like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī many centuries earlier, he comments on the verse that says "and lower your wing to the believers", in the sura 'The Rocky Tract' (Qur'ān XV,88), teaching that, like the bird that spreads its wings wide in flight but then folds them tenderly as it approaches its young, similarly the good Muslim will approach his neighbour with humility and in a spirit of service, knowing that when he lowers his wing on his brother, the other will lower two wings on him.³⁷

Islam - al-Sha'rāwī teaches - has not instilled the qualities of ruthlessness or pride in the Muslim, for in that case he would be ruthless and proud even with his brethren. Islam wants him rather to be ruthless and proud when necessary and, when necessary, gentle; everything to its season.³⁸

³³ Ibn Abī l-Dunyā s.d., 96.

³⁴ Al-Sha'rāwī 1422/2001.

³⁵ Al-Sha'rāwī 1422/2001, 127-8.

³⁶ Al-Sha'rāwī 1422/2001, 156.

³⁷ Al-Sha'rāwī 1422/2001, 156-7.

³⁸ Al-Sha'rāwī 1422/2001, 159.

