

13 Kindness

Summary 13.1 God Is Kind and Loves Kindness. – 13.2 Kindness towards the Weak.

Islamic thought holds that there is a direct relationship between the social conduct of the individual and God's dealings with him: "God is with you in the same way as you are with His servants" – according to an aphorism by the renowned Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya,¹ who then goes into greater detail, paraphrasing and supplementing:

The Most High is compassionate and loves the compassionate, and in truth God has compassion for the compassionate among His servants. God is considerate and loves those who are considerate towards His servants. He forgives, and loves those among His servants who forgive others; He is gracious and loves those among His servants who are kind to others while He detests those who are coarse or harsh or hard [...]. He is kind [*rafiq* رَفِيق], and He loves those who are kind to His servants; He is judicious, and He loves judiciousness; He is charitable, and He loves the charitable; He is just, and He loves those who are just; He accepts remorsefulness, and He loves those who accept the remorse of His servants.

God treats His servant reciprocally according to the presence or absence of these qualities: whoever condones, He condones him; whoever forgives, He forgives him; whoever is tolerant, He is tolerant towards him; and to whoever questions what is due to Him, He does the same in return. Whoever is kind to His servants, God is kind to him; whoever has compassion on them, He has compassion on him; whoever does good to them, He does good to him; whoever is generous with them, He

¹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1405/1985, 55.

is generous with him; whoever is helpful to them, He is helpful to him; whoever protects them, He protects him; and whoever forgives their offences, He forgives his.

But whoever encroaches on their privacy, God will encroach on his; whoever offends their reputation, He will offend his and shame him before everyone; whoever deprives them of their goods, He will withhold from him His own; whoever turns away from them, the Most High God will turn away from him; whoever deceives, He will deceive; and whoever cheats, He will also cheat. In short, whoever behaves in a given way with His creatures, God will behave in the exact same way towards him, in this earthly life and in the hereafter.²

Kindness, in Arabic *rifq*, is thus also among the capital virtues of the good Muslim: it refers to a quality of God, and indeed gives rise to one of his Names, *al-rafiq* 'The Kind', 'The Gentle', 'The Gracious';³ and God loves it in creatures. As we have already seen a number of times, when moving from one language to another, terms do not always find an exact correspondence, and translating the Arabic *rifq* with the English 'kindness' is not entirely satisfactory. In fact, kindness, being etymologically related to 'kin', refers first and foremost to family and familiarity, which is foreign to the Arabic term. This disconnect strikes us particularly when we browse through the great dictionaries of the past such as *The Language of the Arabs* by Ibn Manẓūr, which, as we have seen, is able to constantly back up linguistic arguments with the most lofty and correct phrases and idioms – also the most current of his time. And to illustrate kindness, this author points to at least three semantic areas.⁴

The first of these concerns polite and amiable manners: the opposite of brutality, roughness or even clumsiness, kindness is gentleness in manners, benevolence, and ease in relating to others; Ibn Manẓūr recalls, from the Prophet, that "kindness, in whatever it is found, beautifies it".⁵

The second element of kindness according to *The Language of the Arabs*, is solicitude or care, the caring help given to others to comfort them, or lend support; tellingly, a term close to *rifq* indicates the elbow, the part of the body one leans on like an armrest or cushion. Here again the author cites the Prophetic Tradition – Muḥammad, in reply to someone who had offered to treat a cyst on his back, declined, saying: "God is the Physician, but you are kind";⁶ – and he goes on to teach that 'kind' is an expression generally applicable to those who practise the art of medicine.

Finally, Ibn Manẓūr's great dictionary identifies a further component of kindness in the sharing of traits and experiences, in the feeling of participation in or belonging to a group, and in solidarity, all of which may merge into friendship. In fact, *rafiq*, 'kind', is used to qualify a travelling companion, particularly an inseparable one, stopping or pausing at the same points, and similar terms are used for a united, compact and mutually supportive

² Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1405/1985, 55-6.

³ A name which appears, however, only in some lists and not in others.

⁴ Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root r-f-q.

⁵ E.g. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila wa-l-ādāb*, *bāb faḍl al-rifq*, no. 4698.

⁶ E.g. *al-Ṭabarānī*, *al-Mu'jam al-kabīr*, *bāb al-yā'*, no. 18202. In Arabic: *Allāh al-ṭabīb bal anta rajul rafīq*.

group of people on the road; on *rafīq* in this travelling companion sense, Ibn Manẓūr recalls an adage: “Before a journey, choose well your travelling companion”.⁷

The transition to solidarity between believers, imagined as a single group on their way to the Last Day, is not novel. Ibn Manẓūr cites a passage in the sura ‘The Women’ (Qur’ān IV,69) where *rafīq*, ‘kind’ or ‘companion’, stands for the ‘goodly company’, denoting the ensemble of prophets, saints, martyrs and the righteous who await the arrival of the blessed in paradise. Again, our author has a story, this time about the Prophet on his deathbed, when he is said to have confided to his wife ‘Ā’isha that he preferred ‘the supreme companion’ or ‘companionship’ (*al-rafīq al-a’lā*) to remaining in the world. From communal solidarity to marital solidarity: *rafīq* is a man to his wife and also a woman to her husband.⁸

13.1 God Is Kind and Loves Kindness

We have seen that Ibn Manẓūr exemplifies all three components of kindness – politeness, solicitude and solidarity – with a direct appeal to the literature of Tradition. The latter does indeed represent an important substratum in *The Language of the Arabs*, but for obvious reasons the quotations are short and limited in number; a little amplification may therefore be helpful.

In its full version, ‘Ā’isha’s account of the Prophet’s dying goes like this:

When one of us was in pain, the Messenger of God massaged his right hand and said: – Remove the evil, God of people,⁹ and heal, You are the Healer, there is no other healing than Yours, a healing which no disease can elude.

When the Prophet himself fell gravely ill, I took his hand to do as he had done, but he took it from me and said: – God forgive me and join me to the supreme companionship.

I looked again, and he was dead.¹⁰

Another amplification, a memory of a Companion only hinted at in *The Language of the Arabs*, and now proposed here in its full version, speaking of solicitude, and of medical care in particular:

When I was a boy, I went to the Prophet along with my father. My father said to him: – I am a physician, show me this cyst you have on your back. – What do you want to do with it? – he asked him.

– I want to remove it – my father replied. Then the Prophet said: – You are not a physician, but you are a kind man. The physician for my cyst is He who put it there – or he may have said: – He who created it.¹¹

⁷ In Arabic: *khudh al-rafīq qabla al-ṭarīq*; quoted by, among others, al-Sha’rāwī 1991 in his commentary on Qur’ān IV,69.

⁸ Ibn Manẓūr 2010, root r-f-q.

⁹ In Arabic: *adhhib al-ba’s rabb al-nās*.

¹⁰ Cf. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-salām*, *bāb istiḥbāb ruqyat al-marīḍ*, no. 4068.

¹¹ See Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-’ashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 6934.

In the Sunna of the Prophet, there are numerous references to kindness. Among them, the most famous, reported in all the great works of Tradition, concerns divine love for kindness “in everything”.¹² According to a popular version, some Jews went to the Prophet and greeted him saying: ‘May poison (*samm* سَمَم) be with you’ (instead of: ‘May peace, [*salām*] be with you’). The young ‘Ā’isha heard them and replied: ‘May the poison be with you and curses too’. For his part, the Prophet returned a simpler ‘and to you too’ and corrected his wife by observing that God is kind and loves kindness in everything.¹³ It is a question here of polite behaviour, the first sense in Ibn Manzūr’s proposal; but it is also true that the broadening to ‘in everything’ raises kindness to an unconditional level. In other accounts of Muḥammad’s life, too, the reminder about kindness is without limits or restrictions, for instance when it simply coincides with good (*khayr*), as in the following Prophetic saying, which opens the chapter on kindness in Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj’s work on Tradition: “He who is without kindness is without good”.¹⁴

Much the same formula can be found in a Shiite work, *Al-Kāfī* or ‘The Sufficient’ by al-Kulaynī – or Kulīnī (d. 329/940): “In kindness there is growth and blessing, and he who is deprived of kindness is deprived of all goodness”. In addition to the generic relationship between kindness and good, al-Kulaynī also notes a relationship between kindness and faith (*īmān*): “Everything has a lock [*qufl* قفل], and the lock of faith is kindness”; or: “He who has received his share of kindness has received his share of faith”. Another aspect of kind behaviour according to al-Kulaynī is the material benefits it brings with it; the author maintains, for example: “He who is kind gets what he wants from his neighbour”; or again, more elliptically: “Kindness is half of sustenance”.¹⁵

A similar suggestion that kindness generates prosperity appears in a work on the Names put together by Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, in a summary of what constitutes good behaviour:

The Prophet said: – Kindness is good fortune [*yumn* يُمْن] and uncouthness is bad luck [*shu’um* شُؤْم], and when God wants the good of the inhabitants of a house, he brings kindness into it. Kindness, in whatever it is found, beautifies it, and uncouthness in whatever it is found makes it ugly.¹⁶

Another interesting Prophetic saying is recalled by the already mentioned al-Kharā’iṭī, one of the most conscientious authors in the moral field, in a work entitled *Makārim al-akhlāq wa-ma’ālī-hā* or ‘The Good Qualities and Their Merits’: “God’s kindness”, he writes, “is His demonstration of affection for men, and it is also His appeal to them”.¹⁷ Also of interest, finally, in the same work, is the inclusion of kindness in the framework of the intellectual faculties: “Kindness leads wisdom”.¹⁸

¹² In Arabic: *fī l-amr kulli-hi*.

¹³ Cf. al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-adab*, *bāb al-rifq fī l-amr kulli-hi*, no. 5592.

¹⁴ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *bāb faḍl al-rifq*, nos. 4694-6.

¹⁵ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, *kitāb al-īmān wa-l-kufr*, *bāb al-rifq*, nos. 7-16.

¹⁶ Al-Bayhaqī 1413/1993, 1: 396.

¹⁷ Al-Kharā’iṭī 1427/2006, 1: 1612, no. 242.

¹⁸ In Arabic: *al-rifq ra’s al-ḥikma*. al-Kharā’iṭī 1427/2006, 1: 1550, no. 214.

13.2 Kindness towards the Weak

To continue with our survey of the Prophetic Tradition on the theme of kindness: according to another great Sunni collection, that of al-Tirmidhī, God protects and welcomes into paradise those who are kind to the weak, along with those who are loving to their parents and treat their slaves or subjects well.¹⁹ He includes in kindness being gentle towards women and tender-hearted with children. Apropos of the latter, another important author, Ibn Ḥanbal reports in his collection of Traditions that one day, while Muḥammad was prostrating himself at prayer, little al-Ḥasan, his grandson, the son of Fāṭima and ‘Alī, jumped on his back. The Prophet welcomed him kindly and when he had finished his prayer, he embraced and kissed him.²⁰ Other versions include his other grandson, al-Ḥusayn: the two children both climbed on his back and when the Prophet finished his prayer he lifted his head, grabbed them from behind with kindness and put them back on the ground; but as soon as he started praying again, they came back. The Companion Abū Hurayra (d. c. 58/678) asked him to send them away and at that moment a lightning flashed in the sky. Muḥammad told them then to return to their mother.²¹

The Tradition, in fact, also includes animals among the weak. According to a fairly well-known Prophetic saying, when the land is fertile, travel sparingly and give your mounts the food they deserve, God is kind and loves kindness. And when the land is dry spare them as much as you can, and travel by night.²²

¹⁹ Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb ṣīfat al-qiyāma*, no. 2431.

²⁰ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, no. 10435.

²¹ E.g. al-Ṭayālīsī, *Musnad*, no. 907.

²² E.g. Abū Bakr al-Bazzār, *Al-baḥr al-zahhār*, no. 1070.

