CONCEPT AND FUNCTION OF REASON IN ISLAMIC ETHICS

by

G. E. von Grunebaum

Los Angeles

Hellmut Ritter zum 70. Geburtstage*

The universal mission of French civilization has been argued on the ground that it is, as it were, made to the measure of man (M. Lambilliotte, Mission pacifique et universelle de la culture française. An address before the Troisième Congrès de l’Union Culturelle Française, Fribourg, Switzerland, September 21, 1956. “La culture française est vraiment à la taille de l’homme”). The same conviction of its perfect adjustment to human nature and human needs supports the claim to universality of Islam. Both civilizations are fond of contemplating their own reasonableness and both take for granted the effective existence in mankind of reason as a fairly uniform capability to which this reasonableness is fitted as key to lock. But where in France, as perhaps in the West as a whole, reason is primarily an instrument to expand the known universe and to organize it through understanding, in Islam it is above all an instrument to accept and befriend a universe which God not only has made but of which He indicated the interpretation by revelation; so that there is a distinct limit beyond which the sacrificium intellectus will become the most profitable attitude for man to take—a limit neither epistemological nor introspective but rather a limit set by supreme and benevolent Wisdom in the interest of man whose rescue from himself and from perdition the Lord would wish to see accomplished.

This is why not only a very considerable number of messengers and prophets were, at different times and in different places, entrusted with conveying to mankind the information—facts as well as commands—necessary to guard them in this and to guide them in the next world; but this benevolent satisfaction with man as the most noble of His creatures must, more particularly, be recognized as the cause due to


R. S.
which the facts of life as well as the positive law to which man is to submit in his own interest are so perfectly attuned to his God-given nature. So to achieve salvation man needs to discipline but not to cripple or distort his gifts, as the foremost of which he may be well advised to recognize his rationality.

For Islam, to say it once more, takes man safely through both worlds and it does so because it is the religion of the mean. "We have made you a community in the middle, "ummatan wasaṭan" (Koran 2:137/142, transl. R. Bell, Edinburgh 1937-39). This brief statement (clear enough in itself but introducing in the Holy Book a statement not altogether clear in its intent) has become the locus classicus for that sentiment of the Muslim that his faith enjoins the middle path between dedication to the life of the body as this is peculiar to polytheists and idolaters and hostility to the body as this is peculiar to the Christians and their monkeyry (e.g., Ţabari — d. 923 — Taťsîr, Cairo 1321/1903, II, 5; likewise still the recent Shiite commentary Kitâb al-Mizân fi taťsîr al-Qur'ān by Saiyid Muḥammad Ḥusain ať-Ṭabāţābâ'ī, Teheran, n.d., 1955 or 1956, I, 322-323; the commentators are agreed on assigning the Christians to the one extreme but are somewhat at variance with regard to the upholders of the other). And God has called the Muslims wasaţī, those in the middle, "because of all things God loves best the intermediate ones" (Ţabari, Taťsîr II, 5:14: "īd kāna aḥabb al-umūr lillāh wasaţuhā". Thus the preferred position which the Islamic community enjoys in the favor of the Lord is due to its moderation; and this moderation is nothing but an expression of the unequalled adaptation to human nature which distinguishes the Muslim revelation and hence the ethics implicit in it. God has made man rather than the angels his xalīfa or deputy on earth (Koran 2:28/30). His qualification for this xalīfa (deputyship) is that knowledge of the

1 If H. Lammens, Taţif à la veille de l’hégire (Beirut 1922), p. 70 and again, La Meque à la veille de l’hégire (Beirut 1924), p. 306, should be right when he argues that umma wasaţī actually meant in the mouth of the prophet ‘un peuple d’élite’ the interpretation given the phrase by the Muslim community would only gain in significance in terms of its self-view.

2 Cf. also the praise of the fourth (of the seven) climes as the middle one and of the Persians as its rulers; e.g., Mas‘ūdī (d. 956), Kitāb al-Tanbih wal-īshrāf, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden 1803), p. 6: the author glorifies the kings of Persia for having ruled over ausaţ al-ard wa-aşraf al-agilīm, ‘the middlemost part of the earth and the noblest of climes’ (the passage is translated by Carra de Vaux, Le livre de l’avertissement et de la revision, Paris 1897, p. 9); similarly Barhebraeus (d. 1286), Mustaţar ad-duwāl, ed. A. Şālţānī (Beirut 1890), p. 79: the Persians are ausaţ al-umam dāran wa-aşrafuhum iqītīman, ‘the nation with the most central homeland and the noblest in regard to the clime (they inhabit)’. Both passages have been included in ‘All Akbar Dahunā’s Amṭāl wa-ḥikam (Teheran, n.d.), pp. 1665 and 1548 respectively.