The True Nature of Religion

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It is claimed — and claims of this sort are plentiful these days — that a man cannot be truly good, nor a scrupulous Muslim, nor a rightly-guided pious man, unless he adopts certain special practices, subscribes to certain particular schools, and follows certain well-known ways. He must, they say, wear nothing but a special dress: enlarging his turban, letting the folds of his garment hang loose, lengthening his sleeves, and walking with the gait of the falsely humble man who affects gravity and makes a show of clinging to it. He ought to carry in his hand a long rosary with large beads, plant in his turban a tall tooth-stick, fill his nose from time to time with various snuffs, and loosen his tongue from time to time with kinds of speech thick with the letter qaf and other weighty, sonorous consonants. All of these, they say, are necessary matters and indispensable traits, the very foundations of learning and religion, from which no righteous Muslim may deviate or affect anything different — unless he wishes to depart from the Sunna, turn away from the pure creed, and follow the way of the unbelievers.

They say: one must also frequent the tombs of the saints and the shrines of the righteous, circling them, standing before them, displaying awe and reverence toward them, and seeking nearness to God, mighty and glorious, through the blessing of those who dwell within them. Whoever turns away from this, they say, has chosen this world over the next, preferred falsehood to truth, and inclined toward worldliness rather than religion.

They say: one must, besides this, hold fast to the beliefs of the forebears and the customs of the ancients, and keep far away from introducing any good innovation or beneficial practice, from speaking one's opinion openly, from declaring one's own independent view, and from saying anything in learning or religion that no one has said before or gone to before — for this, they say, is closer to a good end, and more fitting for one who wishes to meet God with an innocent soul and a sound heart.

That is the law they have drawn up, obliging the righteous Muslim to follow it and hold fast to it, so that his religion may remain sound, his creed correct, and he himself safe from the heat of the Fire and the torment of Hell — and they have judged that to turn away from it, or to

alter it in any way, is a kind of idolatry, a species of heresy, and a form of apostasy.

With this their tongues have run freely, their pronouncements have overflowed, and by this their deeds and their conduct have been marked and demonstrated. Let us now examine what share of truth this contains, and what portion of correctness — and let our inquiry in this chapter be brief and general, to be followed later by fuller, connected chapters in which we shall explain the true nature of religious beliefs, so that the nation may be guided to them and the public may come to know them clearly.

We understand religion to have no purpose beyond this: to guide souls toward what sets right their affairs, both in the life to come and in this present one. For man is by nature social, civic by his very disposition, inclined to seek good things for himself alone and to reserve pleasant things to himself; and this inevitably leads to a divergence of desires, a parting of opinions, and a clash of schools and aims. Interests come into conflict, benefits contend with one another, and this gives rise to rancour in the breast and hearts filled with resentment and hatred — a source of corruption on earth, followed by the shedding of forbidden blood, the wasting of inviolable lives, the severing of the bonds of affection and familiarity between people, and the ruin of the edifices of civilization and settled life. There must therefore be a firm ruler and a wise sovereign authority, to judge between people with equity, to turn back the aggression of the strong oppressor from the weak oppressed, and to direct individuals and communities toward righteous action and a desire for good and the common benefit.

It is, moreover, beyond doubt that every human act has an effect, good or bad, and a consequence, praiseworthy or blameworthy, just as it has an antecedent and a cause; and the furthest of all the consequences and effects of human acts is what a person meets with after death, of good or evil, of bliss or torment. All of this requires that there be one who governs affairs, who steers the world, who rewards good deeds and punishes evil ones, who holds sway over souls and claims hearts entirely for Himself; and man therefore stands in need of a guide to all of this, one who points him toward it — for his reason alone cannot arrive independently at its reality. Though he may be capable of knowing something of the outward aspect of this worldly life, he can know nothing at all of the affairs of the life to come, since reason has no means of access to it. And God has shown grace to mankind by guiding them to all

of this, through the messengers He sent to them, the books He revealed upon them, and the religion He prescribed for them.

No one, then, has cause to understand religion by any way but this, nor to incline in any other direction, nor to follow any other path — not because we would restrict independent thought or impose our own view by force, but because this is the plain truth that religion itself proclaims and declares: "Messengers as bringers of good tidings and warners, so that mankind should have no argument against God after the messengers" [Quran 4:165]; "And We have not sent you except as a mercy to all the worlds" [Quran 21:107]; "A Book which We have sent down to you, that you may bring mankind out of darkness into light, by their Lord's permission, to the path of the Almighty, the Praiseworthy" [Quran 14:1].

These verses of the Book declare plainly that God sent down His books, and prescribed His religion, for no purpose other than to guide hearts and direct people toward their own benefit, both in this world and the next. In it, He made lawful for them what is lawful and forbade them what is forbidden, and distinguished for them truth from falsehood, right guidance from error, and the good from the reprehensible. Whoever alters it, or adds to it, deserves sin, and merits an evil reckoning.

Let us now examine these newly-invented practices and innovated customs, and see where their source lies within religion, and whether any plain or interpreted text, from the Sunna or the Book, has brought them.

We know that there is no verse or chapter in the noble Qur'an revealed to prescribe what sort of clothing people ought to wear, and that the Prophet, may God's blessings and peace be upon him, never bound us to any particular kind of garment or fixed style of dress; rather, he left that matter to us, for he was not sent to teach us how to wear our clothes or shape our appearance, but was sent to teach us how to worship God, mighty and glorious, and what path we ought to take toward happiness in this world and the next.

For this reason, the Companions of the Prophet, may God's blessings and peace be upon him, did not bind themselves to any particular dress: they wore turbans before the conquests, and wore caps afterward; they replaced the wrapped garments — the izar and the rida — with tailored clothing; they built towering palaces in Iraq and Syria, and even in Medina itself; and Mu'awiya adorned himself with gold and silver, and wore brocade and silk. By my life, our religion is far too generous for us

to constrict what the Companions of God's Messenger, may God's blessings and peace be upon him, themselves found room enough for.

We know that Islam was ordained as a war upon idolatry, its eraser, an enemy of falsehood and its executioner; it is far too pure, too clean, too noble in its very essence to command the veneration of graves and monuments, or the sanctification of stones and persons. The only one who ought to be venerated, who must be sanctified, and to whose authority submission is owed, is God — there is no god but He — who alone possesses might and power, and who alone claims majesty and glory.

They say: we do not worship these tombs and persons, nor sanctify them; we merely draw near to God through them, and seek their intercession before Him. By my life, they have said nothing but evil, and gone nowhere but into innovation in religious matters and reprehensible falsehood. There is no means, no channel, between people and God, save sincere obedience and repentance free of any association of partners with Him or hypocrisy; and God, mighty and glorious, says: "And We are nearer to him than his own jugular vein" [Quran 50:16], and says: "Or have they taken protectors besides Him? But God — He is the Protector" [Quran 42:9]. Seeking intercession through persons and idols is precisely the way of those who associated partners with Him and rebelled against Him — those who were condemned for their worship of idols and statues, and who said: "We worship them only that they may bring us nearer to God." And who is it that draws near to God through a person who has neither power nor strength, or an image with neither feeling nor life, and then believes himself, after all this, to be truthful in his religion, sincere in his faith, his creed cleared of doubt and made pure certainty?

We know that Islam was ordained to liberate minds and opinions, to rescue individuals and communities from moral and material bondage — and it was by this very quality that it brought nations to life and raised peoples up. On what grounds, then, do these innovators claim that independent reasoning in religion is error, that voicing one's opinion openly is sin, and that preferring the public benefit of Muslims is apostasy? Before us, the Companions of God's Messenger, may God's blessings and peace be upon him, themselves exercised independent judgement in religion, declared their opinions openly, and chose whatever served people's interests — bound by nothing but the Book and the Sunna; and the generation that followed them walked in their way.

Were our righteous forebears, then, innovators and apostates? Certainly not — it is, rather, a stubborn clinging to bad old custom and a persistence in ruinous falsehood that has brought these men to say what they say. Would that they had, in this matter, confined themselves to something general, or offered some brief statement open to interpretation — but instead they have multiplied their words, elaborated them at length, spelled the matter out in detail, and pressed obstinately upon it, claiming that a man's religion is not valid unless he has read al-Sanusi's Creed, which — so they say — even the Friend of God [Abraham] teaches to the children of Paradise — and other such things with no source but illusion and falsehood.

We have now given a general indication of the true nature of religion, and shown that it comprises nothing more than the enjoining of good and the forbidding of evil; whoever adds to it beyond this has gone astray, and leads others astray. We shall have, later on, fuller chapters in which we shall spell out our argument and lay out our words at length.