



ENJOINING WHAT IS RIGHT AND FORBIDDING WHAT IS WRONG IN THE QUR'AN AND THEOLOGY

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“ If I do well, help me, and if I do wrong, set me right”
Abu Bakr

“By Allah, if anyone orders me to fear Allah in this station of mine I will strike off his head”. Abdul Malik bin Marwan

When Abu Bakr addressed those who had pledged allegiance to him with the words: “If I do well, help me and if I do wrong, set me right”, he showed that he believed the ruling authority was accountable to society. This was the prevailing view throughout the time of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs. However, with the outbreak of what became known as the *Fitna* (upheaval), society saw its role of monitor and scrutineer threatened by an authority that sought to deprive it of that right, so it overthrew it.

During the time of the Prophet, the ruling authority was monitored by “Heaven”, but the Voice of Heaven ceased to be heard after his death and the right to

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scrutinise the ruler's actions passed to the community, whose voice was the "heir" to the Voice of Heaven. This right was justified on the grounds of *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* (enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong) – "a pretext for almost every kind of interference in public affairs" (to quote Abdul Malik bin Marwan), which had been adopted as a tool to enable society to exercise some control over the ruling authority. However, the situation changed completely after the *fitna* when the authority changed from being a Rightly-Guided Caliphate with mutual consultation to a despotic monarchy.¹

If this change of direction led to the authority exerting virtually absolute power over society, then the most surprising thing about it is that its suppression of society was in the name of "enjoining and forbidding". In fact rulers in later years adopted the principle as an instrument for suppressing the people's freedoms; indeed, the history of the "enjoining and forbidding" principle has essentially been the history of a struggle between those seeking to control society and those attempting to loosen the reins of control over it.

The ruling authority that claimed exclusive "ownership" of the principle in the immediate aftermath of the *fitna* aimed to use it for its own ends. In doing so it sought to divest it of any political content and give it a purely moral connotation so that it could be used to "tame" people as individuals (there can only be moral action within an "individual context").

That is why we need to resurrect this principle, which is a concept whose true nature governments have sought to conceal (as they continue to do today). This can be an extremely useful exercise, particularly since people are becoming increasingly aware that one of the most significant features of the current Arab crisis is the monopolisation of the political space by the ruling authorities and the eviction of society from it. Fortunately, the "rotation" or "alternation" of power referred to in the

¹ The following saying has been attributed to the Prophet: "The Caliphate will remain for thirty years after me, then there will be despotic rule". If Mu'awiyah was the first of the kings, as he declared himself to be, this would support Ibn Khaldun's thesis in which he distinguished between the Caliphs and kings. See Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* (Prolegomena), published by Ali Abdel Wahid Wafi (Dar al Nahdha, Egypt), Cairo, undated, Part 2, Pp. 604-607.

Qur'an also applies to the principle of “enjoining and forbidding”, and society now sees an opportunity to re-establish its role in the political space from which it has been excluded for so long.

The principle as it occurs in the Qur'an

The principle of *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* (enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong) occurs frequently in the Qur'an. Perhaps the first thing worth noting is the frequency with which it is mentioned in verb form¹. In fact there is only one exception, in which it appears as an active participle².

Where its appearance in the verb form is concerned, in most cases it occurs in the present tense, though on one occasion it is in the imperative form. With a single exception in which the verb can be found in a conditional sentence³, it occurs in simple sentences. The discourse on enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong is nearly always addressed to the general population, though it may only apply to a specific section of them; there are differences between the *mufassirin* (interpreters of the texts) over this point. The only exception is an occasion when it occurs as an imperative⁴ spoken by one human being to another, in a verse in which Luqman is addressing his son.

Apart from this instance, it is always spoken through the voice of Allah. This means that while both Allah and man pronounce on *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar*, in the case of Allah it is generally in the form of a

1 “.....he enjoins upon them what is right and forbids them what is wrong; he allows them as lawful what is good” (*Al A'raf*, 157), “...they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, and they observe regular prayers...”. (*Al Tawbah*, 71), “Let there arise out of you a band of people who invite to all that is good, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong” (*Āl 'Imran*, 104). “....you enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in Allah...” (*Āl 'Imran*, 110), “...they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong...” (*Āl 'Imran*, 114).

2 “...those enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong and observing the limits set by Allah...”. (*Al Tawbah*, 112).

3 “Those who, if We establish them in the land, establish regular prayer and give regular charity, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong; with Allah rests the end (and decision) of (all) affairs”. (*Al Hajj*, 41).

4 “O my son! Establish regular prayer, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong...”. (*Luqman*, 17).

report spoken by Him to inform man about a human obligation¹. Paradoxically, when a human pronounces on it, it is with the voice of authority, while when Allah speaks of it, it is as a witness.

The fact that enjoining and forbidding occur in verb form is significant in that the focus is on the “action” and not a description of the person performing the action, while the fact that it is in the present tense confirms that it is an “open action” and still in the process of being carried out (rather than something that happened in the past or is expected to happen in the future). This means, of course, that the discourse of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong is essentially descriptive of an action rather than a description of an existing state of affairs. And since it describes the action of a believing individual rather than a state (such as faith as a state of mind, for example), this means that it portrays faith itself as an “action in the process of being carried out”. Considered from this angle, “enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong” may be seen not as an indication of a previously existing state, but rather as a means of attaining that state. To put it in philosophical terms, the state does not precede the action, but is attained by, with and through it.

Also relevant here is the concept of faith, or belief, as something that precedes action. The relationship between faith and the activation of the principle of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong is a practical example of this. Hence those who see faith as something with an “independent existence”, which is not subject to the laws of cause and effect (i.e. as something which does not increase or decrease for any reason and is not affected by misdeeds on the part of the believer)², have tended

1 On one occasion the Qur'an refers to those who “enjoin what is wrong and forbid what is right, and are close with their hands...” (*Al Tawbah*, 67). This is part of a report on the state of the Hypocrites, who are attacked and exposed in this *Surah*.

2 “What we accept is that the true meaning of faith is belief in Allah the Most High. So what about the question of faith growing or shrinking? Our view is that if we define faith as belief, belief cannot be preferred to belief, just as knowledge cannot be preferred to knowledge. And it is because faith is a state that exists regardless of any action that the *Ahl al Haqq* (‘People of Right’) can describe an evil-doer as a Believer. The evidence for calling him a Believer is established linguistically, because he is a person who believes. One indication of this is that the Shariah rulings are addressed to the Believers – to all those who believe, whether they are virtuous or sinful - and the evil-doer is subject =

to focus on conditions that have reduced the principle of enjoining and forbidding to the point where it has ceased to have any relevance whatsoever. An example of this is al Juwaini's view that an evil-doer is a believer despite being guilty of committing major sins.

On the other hand, those who regard action as being inseparable from faith – that is, as an aspect of faith and not just an indication of it¹ - expand the principle to the point of classing it as one of the fundamental elements of faith. This was particularly the position of the Mu'tazilites and the Zaidi Shi'ites.

We can see the difference between the two positions – identifying the state with the action or classing them as two completely different things – in the attitudes of the Qur'an interpreters towards the verse: “**Ye are the best of Peoples, evolved for mankind; you enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah**” (*Āl 'Imran* 110). On the one side there are those who say that the “bestness” of the *Ummah* (Islamic Nation) depends upon the enforcement of the principle of *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar*, while on the other we have those who maintain that that “bestness” is something which the *Ummah* enjoys exclusively and automatically as an independent, absolute and unqualified quality. According to Ibn Kathir, those who maintain that “bestness” is conditional upon deeds do so on the grounds that “a man stood up before the Prophet (PBUH) while he was in the *minbar* (pulpit) and said: ‘O Messenger of Allah, which people are the best?’ He replied: ‘The best of people are those who are the most well-versed, who have the most fear of Allah and who are most faithful in enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong and maintaining the

= to the same rules as the Believer, reaps the same benefits and is buried in Muslim cemeteries; and prayers are said for him. All this shows that he is one of them”. (See al Juwaini: *Al Irshad 'ala Qawati' al Adillah*, edited by Mohammed Yusuf Musa and Ali Abdel Mun'im Abdel Hamid (Maktabat al Khanji), Cairo, 1950, Pp. 397-399.

1 Al Nadhdham says: “*Kufr* (unbelief) is only unbelief or bad on account of the person who is guilty of it – that is, the *kafir* (unbeliever). Allah did not create *kufr*; man created it through his deeds. This means that *kufr* is not a state that exists independently of man, but a condition that man has created for himself. By analogy, we can say that faith, in its turn, is not something that exists independently of man, but is created through his actions just like *kufr*”. See al Khayyat: *Al Intisar wa'l Radd 'ala Ibn al Rawandi al Mulhid*, published by Mohammed Hijazi (Maktabat al Thaqafah al Diniyyah), Cairo, 1988, P. 70.

ties of kinship¹.” Ibn Kathir adds that other people say that “bestness” is an independent, absolute and unqualified quality enjoyed exclusively by the *Ummah*, since it is the *Ummah* of the Best of Messengers, who is quoted as saying: “‘I have been given what has not been given to any of the prophets.’ We said: ‘O Messenger of Allah, what is it?’ He said: ‘I have been made victorious by awe, I have been given the keys to the earth, I have been named Ahmed, the earth has been made pure for me and my Nation has been made the best of nations’²”.

Considered from this angle, the “bestness” of the *Ummah* would indeed be an absolute, unqualified quality. Firstly, it exists by virtue of the Prophet’s “preferential status”, which is also an absolute, unqualified quality³. And the preferential status enjoyed by some prophets over others is reflected in what has been said about the preferential status of some nations over others⁴. This means there is “no question but that the Nation of Muhammad is the best of nations⁵”, since he is the “best of prophets”. There are conflicting reports from the Prophet regarding the reason for the Nation’s “bestness” – whether it is a result of the Nation’s deeds or a gift bestowed upon it without any particular justification. However, a study of the Prophet’s own position and interpretation of what is said in the Qur’an suggests that its “bestness” is the result of its deeds.

Both the above views can be seen in the Muslims’ vision of themselves in relation to the nations that existed before them. “There were two views with regard to the Muslims’ attitude towards themselves in relation to the

1 Ibn Kathir: *Tafsir al Qur’an al ‘Adhim*, Part 1, (Maktabat ‘Isa al Babi al Halabi wa Shurakahu bi Misr), Cairo, undated, P. 391.

2 Ibid. same page.

3 Needless to say, this absolute view of the preferential status is seen as Divine, because – to quote al Bazdawi – it is “from Allah” and – to quote Ibn Hazm – “it can only be recognised as proof from the word of Allah or the Messenger”. Al Bazdawi: *Usul al Din*, published by Hans Peter Linz (Dar Ihya’ al Kutub al ‘Arabiyyah), Cairo, 1963, P. 202; and Ibn Hazm: *Al Fasl fi’l Milal wa’l Ahwa’ wa’l Nihal*, edited by Mohammed Ibrahim Nasr and Abdul Rahman ‘Umairah (‘Ukadh li’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi’), Riyadh, 1st impression, 1982, Part 4, P. 102.

4 See an extensive analysis of the preferential status in Ali Mabrouk: *‘Ani’l Imamamah wa’l Siyasaah wa’l Khitabi’l Tarikhi fi ‘Ilmi’l ‘Aqa’id* (Markaz al Qahirah li Dirasat Huquqi’l Insan), Cairo, 2002, Pp. 51-74.

5 Ibn Hazm: *Al Fasl fi’l Milal wa’l Ahwa’ wa’l Nihal* (See above). Part 4, P. 91.

earlier nations whom they replaced. The first maintained that this ‘*Sunnah*’, or principle, also applied to the Muslims, insofar as if they changed and swerved from the right path they would be replaced (meaning that their status as the inheritors of the earth was dependent on deeds and effort). Then there were those who said that the Muslims were the last Nation to appear before the Day of Judgement (meaning that they would remain the inheritors of the earth until the end of time, regardless of their deeds or lack of them). This can be seen in the Tradition that says: ‘This *din* (religion) will reach the stage that the night has reached’ and: ‘A people of my Nation will continue to uphold right’ and, recorded by al Hasan al Basri: ‘Your Nation is the last of the nations...There will be no nation after your Nation, no prophet after your Prophet and no book after your Book. You drive mankind and the Hour drives you¹’. Here we should perhaps note that there are several corroborative *isnads* (chains of authority) on the state of the Nation and the state of the Prophethood; these confirm that it is the “*khatim*” (final) Nation of the “*khatim*” Prophet, just as it is the “best” Nation, since its Prophet is the best of all the prophets.

Is the *Ummah* really a “special case” or is its status a result of human effort and action? The crux of the controversy is the interpretation of: “**Let there arise out of you an *Ummah* (commonly translated as “band of people” Tr.) who invite to all that is good, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong**” (*Āl ‘Imran*, 104). This has been understood to mean that there is an “*Ummah* appointed to carry out Allah’s command to invite to what is good, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, and that they (i.e. the *Ummah*) will thus attain felicity. Al Dhahhak says: ‘They are – in particular - the Companions and – in particular – the *rawat* – that is, the *mujahidin* (those who engage in jihad) and ‘*ulama* (scholars)²’. Needless to say, the *Ummah*, or group of people, would not be appointed to that particular status or function as a free gift from Allah or on the grounds that they were a “special case”. Rather, their status and function – according to al Dhahhak – would be determined by “actions and deeds”.

1 Radhwan al Sayyid: *Al Jama’ah wa’l Mujtama’ wa’l Dawlah* (Dar al Kitab al ‘Arabiyy) Beirut, 1st impression, 1997, P. 25.

2 Ibn Kathir: *Tafsir al Qur’an al ‘Adhim*, (See above), Part 1, P. 390.

Of course, this interpretation, which stipulates that the *Ummah* earns its status through toil and effort, is totally different from the view attributed to Mu'awiyah (a highly significant attribution), which does not regard the *Ummah's* privileged position as being due to its deeds, but rather to the fact that the Arabs enjoy a special status that is denied to rest of mankind¹.

So we have the contrasting views of the *Ummah's* essential nature either being determined by *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar*, or of it having an innate superiority independent of any contingent or external circumstances. Unfortunately, the view that has become most firmly fixed in the public mind is the latter – not only as applying to the *Ummah*, but also as being true of the individual Muslim as well. And this attitude is not only limited to public attitudes. It also includes men of the stature of al Tahtawi, who – despite maintaining that “differences between nations are due to the fact that some are superior to others in science and industry”, which means that one Nation is distinguished from another on the basis of its efforts to excel (in science and technology) – declared that “it is right that there should be distinctions between the five parts of the world; that is, that one part should be given preferential status over another because of the merits of Islam and the qualities that go with it. This means that Asia is the best of all, followed by Africa with its *awlia'* (saints) and *salihin* (pious men), particularly Egypt, then Europe, because of the strength of its Islam and the fact that the Imam of the Two Holy Places and Sultan of Islam is there, then the coastal area of Algeria because of its Islamic faith despite its limited knowledge of the sciences. The most inferior part comprises the

1 Ibn Kathir reports that Abu 'Amer Abdullah bin Yahya said: “We debated with Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan. We came to Mecca and when he had prayed the Midday Prayer, he stood up and said: ‘The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: “The People of the Book split into seventy-two sects and this *Ummah* will split into seventy-three sects. All of them will be doomed to perdition apart from one – that is, the *jama'ah* (the majority group). There shall come out of my Community people in whom unspeakable lusts run amok, the way a dog drags its owner here and there. There shall be not one nook or cranny except they enter it. By Allah O Arabs! If you do not follow what your Prophet (PBUH) brought, then it is not for other than you to follow it”.’ So according to Mu'awiyah, the Arabs were singled out for the role of following Allah's command of inviting to what is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. If they failed to obey that command, then it was not for others - those not singled out for that purpose - to do so. Thus Mu'awiyah closed the door to non-Arabs. This indicates that national identity was more important to him than principle. See above ref. same page.

countries of America, because Islam has never entered them¹". One would interpret this to mean that if a nation enjoys the blessings of Islam, its backwardness in science and industry will not detract from its status as the most superior of nations.

At the same time al Tahtawi expressed optimism about the *Ummah's* prospects for achieving further progress in science and industry by importing those material blessings from the Europeans. Although there is a sort of dichotomy between a Nation being superior because it enjoys the blessings of the Islamic Faith and its preferential status being due to its superiority in the sciences, al Tahtawi saw no contradiction in this position. However, as they grew increasingly pessimistic about their prospects for achieving the level of progress that others had reached, his heirs endeavoured to compensate by stressing the purity of Islam as the *Ummah's* unique distinguishing virtue. (Some of them described it as *al Ummah al Rabbaniyah*, or "the Divine Nation", which was almost like a revival of the old concept of God's Chosen People).

The view that the essential nature of the Muslim *Ummah* – and the Muslim individual – is something self-subsistent and independent, regardless of its actions or efforts, is incompatible with the message of the Qur'an's textual injunctions on *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar*. By this I mean that the Qur'an's whole focus is on the practical side (moral and political), since it always associates the principle of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" with acts of worship (establishing regular prayers and paying the Zakat) and ethics (such as inviting to what is good - in general terms). These are both practical and action-related aspects. Moreover, the majority of the texts dealing with this principle were revealed in al Madinah². Most verses on the subject revealed in al Madinah deal with pertinent political issues; when I say this I mean that it was in

1 Al Tahtawi: *Takhlis al Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz*, study and commentary by Mahmoud Fahmi Hijazi (Dar al Fikr al 'Arabiyy), Cairo, undated, P. 160.

2 In the two Meccan verses of the Qur'an in which the principle is mentioned, on one occasion it occurs in the singular form - "O my son! Establish regular prayer, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong...". (*Luqman*, 17) - while on the other it is in the third person - "He enjoins upon them what is right and prohibits them from what is wrong and makes the good things lawful for them..." (*Al Hajj* 157).

al Madinah, not Mecca, that the state was established and Islam became a political force. And it is certain that the development of Islam's political power in al Madinah provided the framework for the revealed verses on *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar*.

One of those Madinan verses links *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* directly to temporal political power¹. There can be no doubt that this – and this alone – is the basis of al Maududi's view that “the *istikhlaf* (vicegerency) system upon earth cannot be changed or substituted merely through the presence of an upright individual or upright individuals dispersed across the world, even if they are themselves *awlia'* of Allah the Most High, or even from the ranks of His prophets and messengers. Allah has never appointed isolated individuals; rather He has appointed distinct groups that are well administered and have proved that they are indeed *Ummah Wasat* (*Ummah* of the Middle Path), or the Best *Ummah* upon Earth²”.

While al Maududi was stressing the centrality of “*al Jama'ah al Islamiyyah*” (the Islamic Group)'s role as the vanguard of the movement to establish the Divine Promise of *Istikhlaf*), it still remains generally the case that political power (as moral action) is an essential precondition for putting the principle of *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* into practice. This means that that there is an “interconditionality” between politics and morality.

This is the complete opposite of the miserable state of the prevailing religious discourse today - particularly the “neo-*da'wa*” (“new-style Mission”) approach, which appears to be emulating the neo-liberals in trying to turn religion into a mere instrument for individual salvation and sees the reform of “personal morality” as the way to save the Arabs from social and political decline. The principle of morality can never be put into practice on a purely individual basis without reference to an ethical system.

1 ²¹ “Those who, if We establish them in the land, establish regular prayer and give regular charity, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong.....”. (*Al Hajj*, 41).

2 Quoted from Mohammed 'Amarah: *Abu'l A'la al Maududi wa'l Sahwa'l Islamiyyah* (Dar al Shuruq), Cairo, 1st impression, 1987, P. 411.

It has to be a co-operative enterprise; otherwise, it will be impossible for it to have any impact and it will be no more than an empty slogan and a fig leaf for corruption and wretchedness. Political corruption leads to the personal corruption of the individual members of society. Therefore a reform of the individual's moral standards will not lead to the eradication of political corruption, since politics belongs to the "public space" in which society's individual members are also players; moreover, politics does not represent the "sum of their parts" but subsumes them into its own sphere.

Hence the significance of the *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* principle; by this I mean that it should demonstrate the relationship between morality and politics and make reform – or reversal - of the Arabs' present-day decline the framework for the restoration of individual morality. (As opposed to the other way round, as represented by the position of current religious discourse, which emphasises individual salvation while leaving society outside the realm of politics). This of course does not mean supporting the revolutionary ideology of the radical Islamist groups (which, paradoxically, does not aim to involve society as an effective player in the political arena, but seeks to use it as a tool in its battle against the state and then adopt the same autocratic style of state control as its predecessor).

What it does mean is that the individual can only exert an influence as part of a group.

The theological approach to "enjoining and forbidding"

Generally speaking, it would be true to say that there is a dichotomy in Islam's approach to politics and knowledge. On the one side it treats issues such as, for example, the "bestness" of the *Ummah*, in vague and indefinable metaphysical terms, while on the other it seeks to bring it down to the level of human reality. While the first approach is based on Divine Writ and cannot be disputed or changed, those who seek to achieve a juster and more humane world have tended to look for the historical truths and "message of realism" behind the metaphysics.

Since this dichotomy is the defining factor in the belief systems of 'ilm al kalam (theology), it was inevitable that it should have an impact on the way

the *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* principle is interpreted. Therefore, although the textual injunctions on *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* occur in the Qur'an, they are understood to represent a general rule which requires elucidation and is capable of more than one interpretation.

These two factors – the general rule and the interpretation – were the reason why Ibn Hazm stated that the entire *Ummah* “agree that *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* is obligatory; nobody disagrees about this...however, they differ over how (it should be applied)¹”. That is to say, there is agreement on the general rule, but disagreement over what precisely it means.

Differences over how to apply *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* would appear to stem from the following Hadith of the Prophet: “Whoever sees something forbidden should set it right with his hand; if he cannot, with his tongue; and if he cannot, with his heart, and this is the weakest faith”. However, we should point out here that the difference was not purely a result of different ways of understanding and interpretation. In fact, it was more a case of differing political attitudes towards the main issue in dispute immediately after the death of the Prophet – that is, the problem of who should assume power².

This means, of course, that the “*munkar*” (wrong) over which there was disagreement was political *munkar* rather than moral *munkar*. While this does not mean that moral *munkar* (i.e. “what is forbidden”) or *ma'ruf* (“right” – i.e. “what is enjoined”) are excluded, their main sense in the theologians' deliberations on the subject was political. And while the political sense is not absent from the concept when it occurs in the Qur'an (by this I mean its reference to empowerment), it is central to the theologians' usage of it³. This shows that theology is essentially nothing

1 Ibn Hazm: *Al Fasl fi'l Milal wa'l Ahwa' wa'l Nihal*, (see above) Part 5, P. 19.

2 Al Ash'ari: *Maqalat al Islamiyyin wa Ikhtilaf al Musallin*, published by Helmut Ritter (Al Hay'ah al 'Aamah li Qusuri'l Thaqafah), Cairo, 4th impression, 2000, P. 2. And al Shahristani: *Al Milal wa'l Nihal*, edited by Abdel 'Aziz al Wakil (Maktabat al Halabi wa Shurakahu li'l Nashr wa'l Tawzi'), Cairo, 1968, Part 1, P. 22.

3 Yahya bin al Husain – a Zaidi Mu'tazilite – says: “Rule is enjoining and forbidding, not property and wealth, as He, Glory be to Him, said when they said: ‘How can he exercise authority over us when we =

more or less than a religious language used in Islam as a vehicle for political ends; hence the concepts are subordinate to the political discourse of the context in which they appear.

This is confirmed by the fact that the concept first surfaced during what became known as the Great *Fitna*, which – since it was both “great” and a “*fitna*” (upheaval, trial subversion) – came to be classed as a “political *munkar*”. And since - like all types of *munkar* - it needed to be corrected, this was how it was defined by those who regarded it in these terms. Attitudes to the *Fitna* ranged from total non-involvement to active participation, depending on the political positions of the parties concerned, and it was the disagreements between them that determined their differences over how to correct a *munkar*.

Noting the contrasting positions between two theological systems over the definition of *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* Ibn Hazm observed: “The *Ahl al Sunnah* (People of the *Sunnah*) of former times including the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) and those who came after them – and this was stated by Ahmed bin Hanbal and others, as well as by Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas, Usamah bin Zaid, Ibn 'Umar, Mohammed bin Maslamah and others – maintained that its purpose was only in the heart, or with the tongue if such were feasible, and not with the hand or unsheathing of the sword...¹” And since it is said that “in this respect the *Ahl al Sunnah* followed the example of 'Uthman (may Allah be pleased with him) and other Companions we have mentioned (may Allah be pleased with them) and those of them who saw fit to sit (without participating),²” this means that their attitude towards *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* was the same as that of 'Uthman and his supporters when they preferred to withdraw and sit idly by while the *Fitna* raged around them.

= are better fitted that he to exercise authority, and he is not even gifted with wealth in abundance? Allah also said: 'Allah hath chosen him over you, and hath gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess. Allah granteth His authority to whom He pleaseth.' In this verse Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, shows that rule is enjoining and forbidding, not abundance of wealth". See Imam Yahya bin al Husain: *Kitab fihi Ma'rifat Allah min al 'Adl wa'l Tawhid*, published by Mohammed 'Amarah (editor), *Rasa'il al 'Adl wa'l Tawhid*, Part 2, (Dar al Hilal), Cairo, 1971, P. 84.

1 Ibn Hazm: *Al Fasl fi'l Milal wa'l Ahwa' wa'l Nihal*, (see above) Part 5, P. 19.

2 Ibid. P. 20.

This is further confirmed by Ibn Hazm's list of people who maintained that a *munkar* should be corrected by the heart or the tongue (assuming the latter is feasible). Most of them (and specifically Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas, Usamah bin Zaid and 'Abdullah Ibn 'Umar) lived through the events of the Great *Fitna* and were in favour of total non-involvement in the struggle that was taking place.¹

By contrast, the position that “unsheathing the sword to implement *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* is an obligation, if there is no other way of repelling what is wrong, was supported by some of the *Ahl al Sunnah*, all the Mu'tazilites and all the Kharijites and Zaidis”². It was almost identical to the stance of those who were actively involved in the events of the *Fitna*, whichever side they happened to support. It is said that it also represented the view of “‘Ali bin Abi Talib (may Allah be pleased with him), as well as all the Companions who were with him, 'Aisha, the Mother of the Believers (may Allah be pleased with her), and Talha and Zubair and all the Companions who were with them (may Allah be pleased with all of them). This was also the position of 'Abdullah bin Zubair, Mohammed (bin al Hanafiyah), al Hasan bin 'Ali and the rest of the Companions (Emigrants and Helpers) who took part in the Battle of al Hurra (may Allah be pleased with all of them)”³.

All these people took part in the bloody events of the Great *Fitna* and its aftermath.

The principle of active resistance to *munkar* was also championed by the Mu'tazilite Qadhi Abdul Jabbar, who said: “It is not permissible for a Muslim to leave the leaders of error and oppression (unopposed) if he can find helpers and he feels that he is capable of restraining them. This was what al Hasan and al Husain did; this was what the Reciters did when they helped al Ash'ath rise up against Abdul Malik bin Marwan; this is what the people of al Madinah did when at the Battle of al Hurra; this is what the people of Mecca did with Ibn al Zubair on the death of Mu'awiyah, and what Yazid bin al Walid bin Abdul Malik did. This was how they resisted the practice of *munkar*”⁴.

¹ Some – like Ibn 'Umar – defended their non-involvement by saying: “I do not know which side is in the wrong. If I knew, I would be the first to fight it”. See *ibid.* Part 5, P. 20.

² *Ibid.* Part 5, P. 20.

³ *Ibid.* same page.

⁴ Al Qadhi Abdul Jabbar al Mu'tazili: *Tathbit Dala'il al Nubuwwah*, edited by Abdul Karim 'Uthman, Beirut, 1966, Part 2, Pp. 274-275.

While each of the two contrasting positions on how to correct a *munkar* is – in its own eyes – based on precedent, both sides actually derived their fundamental principles on this issue from actual events on the ground. Moreover, just as this shows how *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* entered the realm of politics, so too does it demonstrate the essential role that political events played in developing the “roots” of theology in general.

Whatever the case, those who preferred to stand idly by during the *Fitna*, or resist wrongdoing with the “heart” or “tongue” (the weakest of instruments), were in the “weakest faith” category, while the others who participated actively in the events with the “hand” – i.e. through action – were the “strongest in faith”. Hence the dichotomy between speech and action which lies at the heart of the disagreement between the two main theological systems – that is, between the Ash'arites (the heirs of the position of the “People of the Hadith and *Sunnah*”, Ibn Hanbal, whom al Ash'ari regarded as the “revealer of the fundamentals of the Faith”, as well as others who favoured an indulgent approach to the ruling authority and opted for the “weakest” approach to correcting a *munkar* – i.e the heart and the tongue), on the one hand, and the Mu'tazilites (in addition to the Kharijites, the Zaidi Shias and other rejectionists, who insisted that *munkar* should be corrected through action and that the ruling authority should be held accountable).

The theologians’ “words versus action” approach to “enjoining and forbidding” has its historical parallel in the conflict between an authority which sought to monopolise *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* for itself and a society which strove to hold that authority to account and compel it to behave justly by retrieving the power of enforcement from the hands of its rulers.

Those who maintained *munkar* should only be corrected with the heart or the tongue asserted that “using the sword is wrong, even if men are killed (by the ruling authority) and progeny are taken captive, and whether the Imam is just or unjust, and we have no right to remove him, even if he is bad or corrupt, and it is wrong to rebel against the ruler”¹. However, they went further than mere submission to the ruling power and rejection of rebellion against it. In fact, they actively supported that power by stripping the principle

¹ Al Ash'ari: *Maqalat al Islamiyyin* (see above), Pp. 451-452.

of “enjoining and forbidding” of its political function and replacing it with a moral and sermonising role in which *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* only applied to the individual, leaving the despotic authority free to repress its troublesome opponents.¹

So limiting the function of “enjoining and forbidding” to the heart or the tongue helped the state to repress society by fragmenting it and turning its members into subservient subjects.

On the other hand, those who supported the principle of correcting *munkar* through action asserted that it was obligatory to “remove unjust, oppressive Imams and use every means to prevent them from exercising their power as Imams, whether with the sword or other than the sword”². In their view “enjoining and forbidding” was a tool for society to use in order to overthrow unjust rulers, or at least control them and set them on the right path.

We can say that, generally speaking, the conflict over words and action was actually a cover for differing views over the extent of mankind’s ability to change the world. By this I mean that there were those who maintained such a thing was impossible and that a person should accept things as they are while exercising his alleged right to disapprove of them with his heart and tongue. Meanwhile, others insisted that man was able to change his world through his actions, which in turn would be determined by his awareness of the world in which he lived. For them, *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* provided the framework for setting the world to rights; in doing so, it highlighted the vital role that awareness and understanding needed to play in the process, since without awareness and understanding no action could ever have any hope of success.³

¹ Here it is particularly worth noting that in the modern so-called Shariah State *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* has been reconstituted in the form of an “Authority” or fully-fledged institution which serves the state by holding the individual in subjection.

² Ibid. P. 125.

³ This is confirmed by the present-day Islamist groups (we could perhaps call them “modern Kharijites”), who are able to inconvenience the repressive Arab state of today, but without overthrowing it. This is because their naivety and lack of awareness has ensured that they are incapable of being anything more than a thorn in the side of the state they are trying to topple and unable to offer a genuine alternative to it.

Any effective action would, of course, require a much broader awareness than a knowledge of religion.

The view that “*ma'ruf*, or right, is any action demonstrably recognisable as good by the person who performs it, while *munkar*, or wrong, is any action demonstrably recognisable as bad by the person who performs it¹” shows that “enjoining and forbidding” are understood as part of a system of reason-driven approval and disapproval, which operates on the maxim: “deeds are describable as good or bad on the basis of their intrinsic qualities²” (that is, they do not acquire any additional attributes of goodness or badness from external sources, and the intellect is capable of recognising those qualities objectively).

So “enjoining and forbidding” are based on those attributes that are intrinsic to them. They are rationally inspired, not merely elements of Shariah discourse with no logical foundation, and their aim is to establish a world that is ruled by reason.

Hardly anyone would dispute the assertion that chaos and disorder are the dominant features of the Arab world today. It is for this reason that it desperately needs to put the principle of *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* into practice - though not in the style of those who see it as a way of repressing people in the name of “all that is holy”, while in fact using it as a mask to hide a brutal face.

In reality, it is impossible to operate the system of “enjoining and forbidding” by invoking “all that is holy” and then shackling the people’s will and ability to act. This is not only because commands and prohibitions are meaningless without the ability and will to carry them out, but because it implies that political *munkar* or tyranny and injustice can be ascribed to Allah. According to Imam Yahya bin Husain, that is the rationale behind the notion that “this injustice which has been inflicted on the people is decreed by Allah. If Allah had not decreed this injustice for them, the tyrants would

= The same thing happened to their Kharijite predecessors, whose revolution was snuffed out despite their courage and nobility, because they lacked awareness and maturity.

1 Al Qadhi Abdul Jabbar: *Sharh al Usul al Khamsa*, edited by Abdel Karim al 'Uthman (Maktabat Wahba) Cairo, 1965, P. 141.

2 Ibid. P. 203.

not be able to oppress them. Injustice has been inflicted upon them at the hands of this tyrant by Allah's decree.

“But if this is what they understand and they believe the Being they claim to worship did this to them”, Imam Yahya goes on to say, “then when will they ever be able to understand the Creator, and when will they be prepared to call upon Him and seek His help against their oppressor? They call upon the One Whom they claim decreed this injustice should be inflicted upon them....but what they are worshipping is a false image of Allah. That is why their Lord has abandoned them and does not support them against their oppressor. Indeed, how could He support them against their oppressor if He has Himself decreed this injustice should be inflicted upon them?If these people were of sound mind and knew Allah as He really is, they would reject the idea of His accepting injustice for His worshippers, just as He, Glory be to Him, has rejected it as one of His own attributes. If they were (of sound mind), they would enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, and call upon their Lord to help them against their oppressor, and he would respond to their prayer and lift the weight of oppression and tyranny from their shoulders”¹.

So awareness and understanding are vital tools for liberating the will and the ability to act. They are also essential preconditions for operating the principle of “enjoining and forbidding” and freeing Allah from the false accusation that He condones injustice and tyranny over mankind.

We can conclude from the above that the principle of *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* is highly relevant to the Arab world of today and can make a useful contribution to resolving the current Arab crisis. It can set people on the road to regaining their “will and ability to act” and restoring them to their roles as effective players on the world stage, and it can enable society to take the first steps towards reclaiming its right to hold its rulers to account.

¹ Imam Yahya bin al Husain: *Kitab fihi Ma'rifat Allah min al 'Adl wa'l Tawhid*, published by Mohammed 'Amarah (editor), *Rasa'il al 'Adl wa'l Tawhid*, Part 2, (see above), Dar al Hilal, Cairo, 1971, Pp. 85-86.