

3 The Muslim Devil

Muslim tradition about the Devil is closely related to that of the other two great Western religions, Judaism and Christianity. The principles of Islam are strict monotheism and absolute submission to the will of God. For Muslims, the revelation of the Old Testament was superseded by that of the New Testament, which in turn was superseded by God's revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad. Muhammad (c. A.D. 570-632) was born in Mecca, a cosmopolitan trading community, where as a young man he came into contact with Jewish and Christian as well as pagan Arab thought. About 610 the archangel Gabriel revealed to him the contents of a book—the Qur'an—whose prototype was in the seventh heaven. The historian identifies the intellectual components of the Qur'an, but for Muslims the holy book cannot be understood as the product of human minds or of a cultural milieu, for it is the direct word of God, written in heaven and dictated by the archangel to the prophet. In Christianity, Scripture is contingent upon the person of Jesus Christ, who himself is the Word; in Islam, Scripture has infinitely more authority than the person of Muhammad, who is the vehicle of the Word.

In the century after 622, the date when Muhammad left Mecca for Medina in the Hegira, the journey from which the Muslim calendar is dated, Islam swept the Middle East and the Mediterranean, establishing itself as one of the world's great cultural forces. During the two

centuries from the foundation of the 'Abbasid caliphate in 750 to 950 the basic doctrines of Islam were set, roughly in the same way that the basic doctrines of Christianity had been set by about 450.¹

Muslim thought was based primarily on the Qur'an and secondarily on the hadith, oral or written traditions of the practices and thoughts of Muhammad (*sunnah*). Commentaries on the Qur'an and hadith were produced, and then in a manner analogous to rabbinic and scholastic literature, commentaries on the commentaries, until a wide and detailed theology resulted. Further, a body of precedent formed around legal decisions and judicial opinions on matters of conduct. The Qur'an and hadith show close affinities with Jewish and Christian Scriptures, apocalyptic literature, and rabbinic and patristic theology. This influence is apparent not only in Muslim doctrines, but in certain ambivalences and confusions: for example, the Qur'an, like patristic writings, is unclear as to whether Satan was a being of high or of low degree before he fell.²

The problem of evil is inherent in and endemic to Islam, as it is to Judaism and Christianity. All three religions insist upon one, omnipotent, omniscient God. On this, Muslims are uncompromising: Allah's omnipotence is total, and nothing can happen apart from his will. But then suffering must come from God. The hadith emphasize God's omnipotence and describe a deterministic universe. God knows all suffering from all time and must have complete control over it. If one understood suffering properly, one would praise it as part of God's will. Punishment and testing are the two ways in which the Qur'an reconciles suffering with God's mercy. Suffering is a punishment for our sins. God is compassionate and merciful, but he is also just, and it is just that the sinful suffer. Even those whose lives are devoted to God endure suffering as a test. The proper response to suffering is *islam*, submission. The Qur'an has no doctrine of original sin in the Christian sense. Although the moral fall of Adam is described, his sin was not passed to his descendants. Yet it is clear that humanity is pointed in the wrong direction. "The soul of man," says the Qur'an, "is truly prone to evil."³

1. One of the best general surveys of Islam is M. G. S. Hodgson, *Introduction to Islamic Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1958). A good introduction to Muslim thought is W. M. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1962).

2. See W. M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, 2d ed. (London, 1970), and *Companion to the Qur'an* (London, 1967). Throughout I use the sura and verse numbering of A. Y. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 3d ed. (Lahore, 1938).

3. Sura 12.53. On evil and suffering in Islam see especially J. Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge, 1970), and J. Bowker, "The Problem of

The being and activity of the Devil is tolerated by omnipotent God for his own purposes. Islam is never dualistic, and the Devil has no independent existence of his own. God created the Devil, God permitted him to fall, and God allows him to be active in the world after his fall. All this is part of God's plan for the cosmos.⁴

The Devil has two names in the Qur'an. One is Iblis.⁵ Always in the singular and always a personal name, "Iblis" occurs nine times in the Qur'an, seven in the context of his fall from grace. Some commentators argued that Iblis obtained his other name—Shaytan—as a result of his rebellion; others that the Qur'an uses the name Iblis to refer to the Devil in his relationship with God and the name Shaytan to refer to him in his relationship with humans. That Iblis and Shaytan are two names for the same evil being is clear.⁶ *Shaytan* is a pagan Arabic term possibly derived from the roots "to be far from" or "to born with anger." Under Jewish and Christian influence, Muhammad defined the term in relation to its Hebrew cognate *satan*, "opponent" or "obstacle." The Qur'an also describes him as accursed, rejected, and punished by stoning. He is a rebel against God. The name Shaytan appears much more frequently in the Qur'an than does Iblis, usually in connection with the tempting and seduction of humans; the term *shayatin* in the plural also appears as the equivalent of Christian demons, evil spirits who are followers of the evil leader.⁷

The Qur'an does not make clear what kind of being the Devil is.

Suffering in the Qur'an," *Religious Studies*, 4 (1969), 183–202. For the Christian fathers on original sin see SATAN.

4. On the Devil in Islam see B. Bamberger, *Fallen Angels* (Philadelphia, 1952), pp. 112–113; E. Beck, "Iblis und Mensch, Satan und Adam," *Le muséon*, 89 (1976), 195–244; A. J. Wensinck and L. Gardet, "Iblis," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 3, pp. 668–669; F. Rahman, *Islam*, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1979), pp. 31–35; H. Gätje, *The Qur'an and Its Exegesis* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 164–171.

5. The name *Iblis* is probably derived from the Greek *diabolos*, though alternative explanations exist, and Muhammad may have learned the term from Aramaic-speaking Christians. See W. Eickmann, *Die Angelologie und Dämonologie des Koran* (New York, 1908), p. 35; Beck, p. 217; Wensinck and Gardet. The name *Iblis* is known nowhere before the Qur'an. See A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda, 1938), pp. 47–48. See note 10 below for the sura references to the name.

6. See suras 4.117, 7.18–20, 19.44, 20.116–120.

7. Satan as "rejected" or "punished by stoning," suras 3.36 and 16.98; shayatin in the plural, e.g., sura 7.27–30. An evil angel 'Asra'il, or Izra'il, also appears as the angel of death who attempts to seize a person's spirit at death, but this angel is not the same as Satan. See Jeffery, pp. 187–190; L. Gardet, "Les fins dernières selon la théologie musulmane," *Revue thomiste*, 56 (1956), 427–479; 57 (1957), 246–300. The shayatin existed in pre-Islamic thought as a synonym for the evil jinn. Muhammad apparently moved the term in the direction of the Devil under Jewish and Christian influence.

Sura 18.50 states, "He was one of the jinn, and he broke the command of his Lord." Jinn are morally ambivalent spirits created by God out of fire, who may or may not have been considered a grade of angel.⁸ The jinn appear to be roughly equivalent to the *daimones* or *daimonia* of Greco-Roman paganism and derived from an ancient pagan Arab distinction between gods and inferior spirits named *jinn*. The pre-Islamic Arabs associated the jinn spirits with caves, graveyards, darkness, and the underground. Pre-Muslim jinn could on occasion consort with deities, but Muslim writers downgraded them considerably. The Qur'an is unclear as to the comparative ontological ranking of angels, jinn, and humans, though angels always rank above jinn. Regardless of ontology, Allah placed humans above both angels and jinn by requiring that all spirits bow before Adam. The ontological ranking may be God, angels, jinn, humans, or God, angels, humans, jinn, or God, humans, angels, jinn. Most Muslims would say that God had placed humans above angels, but some argue that the command to the angels to bow before humans was merely a test. The Sufis even argued that Iblis failed to bow before Adam because his extreme reverence for God prohibited him from bowing before any created thing.⁹

The Qur'an teaches that the requirement to bow before Adam precipitated the fall of Iblis. Seven times the holy book repeats the story in various forms. God created Adam from clay and then called upon the angels to prostrate themselves before him. "So the angels prostrated themselves all of them together; not so Iblis: he refused to be among those who prostrated themselves."¹⁰ Iblis, a spirit of fire, was contemptuous of the human made of clay and outraged that God should ask him to grovel before such a lowly creature.¹¹ The essence of his sin was rebellion against God provoked by pride.

Was Iblis a jinni or an angel? All the passages in which the story

8. See Eickmann. The collective term *jinn* (sing. *jinni* masculine and *jinniya* feminine) derives from the Arabic root "to be hidden." God created the jinn: suras 51.56, 6.100. They are created from fire: suras 15.27, 55.15. Ibn 'Abbas said that the jinn were hidden from the other angels on account of their superiority, but this is out of line with tradition, which says that if the jinn are angels at all they are an inferior order. See Eickmann, p. 13. Compare the Christian ambivalence as to the rank of the Devil before his fall.

9. Beck, p. 218. The idea that Satan fell because he refused to bow to Adam derives from the first-century Jewish apocryphal "Books of Adam and Eve."

10. Sura 15.30–31. Essentially the same story appears in suras 2.34, 7.11–18, 17.61–65, 18.50, 20.116, 38.76. The story seems to be derived from the apocalyptic *Christian Life of Adam and Eve*, chaps. 12–16, where the Devil refuses to worship Adam because human nature is so inferior to angelic.

11. Iblis created from fire: sura 7.12; 38.76.

occurs put the refusal of Iblis to bow in the context of God's command to the angels. For this reason, and because of the underlying apocalyptic and Christian traditions, it seems that Iblis was an angel. Sura 26.95 refers to the "hosts of Iblis" in apparent reference to other angels who fell under his influence. And if Iblis had been only a jinni, God would not have considered it so important that he venerate Adam. In favor of Iblis' being a jinni are sura 18:50: "He was one of the jinn;" suras 7.12 and 38.76, which state that he was (like the jinn) made of fire; God's exclamation to him in sura 7.13: "Thou art the meanest of creatures;" and the traditional idea that whereas the jinn were morally ambivalent the angels were created sinless and could not have fallen. This last idea would also stand in the way of making the jinn a variety of angel.¹² The question is unresolved. In Islam as in Greco-Roman philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity, the relationships among the various genres of spirits are blurred.¹³

The Muslim account of Iblis' fall adopts the line taken by Irenaeus, who argued that the Devil had fallen out of envy for humanity, rather than the later Christian consensus that he had fallen before the creation of the material world and because of pride and envy of God. Muslims found it difficult to conceive that any creature could presume to envy the infinite Deity. The whole drama, including the fall of Iblis and the temptation of Adam, occurred in heaven. After Iblis failed to bow to Adam, God expelled him from heaven: Get out of here, you rejected and accursed being! My curse is upon you until the day of judgment. Iblis pleaded: Give me respite till the last day, when the dead will be raised. God agreed to this, and Iblis continued: Then, by your power, I will put humanity all in the wrong! Except, of course for your servants. I will surely bring Adam's descendants under my sway, all but a few. God permits Iblis to tempt humanity and to destroy those who yield to temptation, but over those who love God the Devil has no power. God concluded the interview: I will surely fill hell with you and any who follow you. But you shall have no authority over my servants (suras 17.61-65, 38.77-85).

Though Satan was thus ordered from heaven, God did not force

12. Wensinck and Gardet. The hadith say that the angels were created from light (*nur*), while the jinn were created from fire (*nar*): the two words are linked both in sound and in etymology. The "meanest of creatures" may have been applied to Iblis only after his fall. Some commentators have argued that sura 18.50, which defines Iblis as a jinni, is a later textual addition.

13. Wensinck, p. 669: "It can in any case be said that Muslim thought remains undecided as to whether he was an angel or a djinn." See also F. Jadaane, "La place des anges dans la théologie cosmique musulmane," *Studia islamica*, 41 (1975), 23-61.

him to leave immediately, for he gave him permission to tempt Adam and Eve. Posing as a sympathetic adviser, the Devil persuaded them to eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree and "thus by deceit wrought their ruin." Now God ordered both Satan and the first humans out of Paradise (suras 2.35-36, 7.19-31, 20.117-121). Satan roams the world, and until the end of time God allows him to tempt and deceive us. He is our implacable enemy. Yet we always retain our free will. Satan himself reproaches us: "I had no authority over you except to call you, but you listened to me: then reproach not me, but reproach your own souls" (sura 14.22). No one can excuse himself by arguing that the Devil made him do it, for Satan has the power only to tempt, never to compel.¹⁴ As in the Christian tradition, Satan tempts us to heresy, apostasy, and idolatry: he urges avarice, quarreling, drinking, gluttony, and gambling. He leads us to ignore our duty to God and to follow false prophets. He uses fear as well as blandishments, cowing us into submission when enticements fail. His treachery is limitless, and in the end he abandons even his followers to ruin, for God has ordained that all who follow Satan will suffer with him in hell. To fend Satan off we cannot rely upon the works of our own hands, but only, through prayer and the Qur'an, upon the mercy of God.¹⁵

This was the revelation about the Devil upon which the tradition of Islam is based.¹⁶ But, as in Christianity, scripture left unresolved the central question of the nature of evil in a world ruled by an omnipotent and merciful God. The tendency of monotheists is always to limit God's goodness in order to preserve his omnipotence or to limit his omnipotence in order to preserve his goodness. A corollary question is whether God hates evil because it is evil or whether evil is evil because

14. Free will: suras 16.98-100; 58.10. Satan as tempter and enemy of humanity: suras 2.204-206, 3.155, 4.60, 4.116-121, 6.43, 7.175-176, 7.200, 8.11, 8.48, 12.5, 16.63, 24.21, 28.15, 29.38, 35.6, 36.60, 41.36, 43.62, 114.4-6. Satan makes promises that he does not fulfill: 4.119.

15. Heresy and apostasy: suras 2.161-165, 6.142, 59.16; idolatry: suras 4.117, 26.92, 27.24; avarice: sura 2.275; quarreling: sura 17.53; drinking, gluttony, and gambling: sura 5.93-94; forgetfulness of God: sura 6.68, 12.42, 18.63; false prophecies and revelations: suras 22.52-53, 58.10; fear: sura 3.175; abandons followers: suras 25.26-31, 59.16; God's mercy saves us: sura 4.83.

16. On further developments of the idea of evil, see W. M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh, 1973); W. M. Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London, 1948); G. von Grunebaum, "The Concept of Evil in Muslim Theology," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 2, no. 3 (1968), 1-3; G. von Grunebaum, "Observations on the Muslim Concept of Evil," *Studia islamica*, 31 (1970), 117-134; D. Gimaret, "Un problème de théologie musulmane: Dieu veut-il des actes mauvais?" *Studia islamica*, 40 (1974), 5-73; 41 (1975), 63-92; G. F. Hourani, "Averroes on Good and Evil," *Studia islamica*, 16 (1962), 13-40.

God hates it. In the eighth century, Hasan al-Basri preserved God's goodness by ascribing all the evil in the cosmos to the work of the Devil and his human followers. But such an interpretation, developed logically, posits a cosmic principle separate from God, an idea inadmissible in a rigorously monotheistic religion such as Islam. Al-Ashari (873-935) argued that the omnipotence of God requires us to believe that everything comes from him and that all deeds are willed by him, though some indirectly. Thus God, though not the direct cause of evil, may be its indirect cause. Al-Maturidi (d. 944) drew a distinction between God's will and God's desire. All deeds are willed by God, but some do not occur with God's good pleasure. The purpose of suffering is to test, warn, or punish humanity. The Mutazlites argued that God's power was limited by his justice, this limitation not arising from outside God's nature, which would be absurd, but rather from within his own nature. Abbad ibn-Sulayman of Basra (d. 864) contended that God had power over evil but was not the cause of it: God permits evil without willing it. But this left unanswered the question of why he permits it. The intricate difficulties in trying to square justice with mercy, goodness with omnipotence, is illustrated in a well-known story:

Let us imagine a child and a grown-up person in Heaven who both died in the True Faith. The grown-up one, however, has a higher place in Heaven than the child. The child shall ask God: "Why did you give that man a higher place?" "He has done many good works," God shall reply. Then the child shall say, "Why did you let me die so soon so that I was prevented from doing good?" God will answer, "I knew that you would grow up into a sinner; therefore, it was better that you should die a child." Thereupon a cry shall rise from those condemned to the depths of the Hell, "Why, O Lord!, did You not let us die before we became sinners?"¹⁷

Another aspect of the question of good and evil is human responsibility. If God is good and omnipotent, why do humans do evil? If the answer is that they have free will, then the problem is to reconcile free will with determinism. The question provokes as lively a debate among Muslims as among Christians, though in Islam the terms are different, human freedom being expressed in terms of human *qudra*, power, as against the power of God. The Qur'an and the hadith insist upon the absolute nature of divine power, and therefore divine determination has always been dominant in Islam. Yet some theologians,

17. Cited by Rahman, p. 91.

such as the Qadariyya, have argued that God delegates responsibility for actions to humans, thus allowing them to shape or at least shade their own destiny. This solution—that God's will for the cosmos involves his suspending his own omnipotence in the region of human freedom so as to produce the greater good of good freely chosen—is a logical response inevitably arising within Islam as well as Christianity. It was considered morally absurd and a severe limitation on God's justice that he should condemn and punish humans for sin if we were not to some degree responsible for it.¹⁸ In one respect Islam differed markedly from Christianity: though the first humans ate the forbidden fruit and thus committed the first human sin, that original sin in no way passed on to their descendants. We sin, not because of inheritance or through mystical participation in Adam's disobedience, but rather from a motion of our own individual souls, provoked in large part by the conflict of bodily desires with those of the soul. The Devil exploits these perturbations of the soul, but neither he nor Adam's sin is their cause.¹⁹

Muslim speculation attempted to fill in the picture of the Devil presented by the Qur'an. Zamakhshari (1075-1144), for example, explained that Iblis refused to bow to Adam for the reason that he refused such honor to any but God and also because he believed that the fire of his own substance was superior to the clay of Adam's. Such interpretations of hadith sometimes became fanciful and often betrayed influences from beyond Islam. The fourteenth-century Syrian story that Iblis helped God create Adam, gathering from the earth sweet and salty matter from which Allah formed the first human, resembles the legends of Christian dualists as well as certain Shi'ite myths. The mainstream followed the Qur'anic interpretation more carefully: the Devil, motivated by pride and deceit, attempts always to

18. Rahman, pp. 100-107; Bowker, *Problems*, pp. 102, 123-126; Gimaret, p. 62; Grunebaum, "Observations," pp. 118-119; Watt, *Free Will*, pp. 238-242. The logical inevitability of some of these arguments invites critical reflection upon the sociology of knowledge. It is true that changes in social conditions may encourage shifts and developments in perceptions. But it is also true that ideas have an internal dialectic independent of social considerations. The close symmetry between Christian theology in Paris and Muslim theology in Baghdad has little to do with similar social conditions, more to do with cultural diffusion and mutual influence, and most to do with the internal dialectic of ideas. Belief in a monist God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good inevitably raises a closed set of questions, to which a closed set of answers, objections, and counterobjections inevitably respond.

19. G. Anawati, "La notion de 'Péché originel' existe-t-elle dans l'Islam?" *Studia islamica*, 31 (1970), 29-40.

thwart God's plan for the salvation of the world. But these attempts are wholly vain, for Satan exists and functions only by the permission of God, who uses him against his will for the divine purpose of testing and punishing. The Devil is clever; he can shift his shapes and make himself and his schemes seem attractive to silly humans; he exerts influence over the human body, especially the sexual organs; he hates God, humanity, and among humans Muslim believers particularly. He is immensely clever yet a total fool, since he does not understand God, or the cosmos, or his own place in it. His vision is warped and bent. His doom and ruin are sure.²⁰

Theological speculation could deepen the meaning of tradition. Al-Ghazali, the practical, mystical theologian who, like the Christian nominalists and mystics, pointed out the limitations of theological assertions, followed a path similar to the via negativa of Pseudo-Dionysius. The reality of God is so much greater and broader than we can begin to understand that God is obliged to speak to us in metaphor and analogy. The Qur'an is absolutely true, but the truth that it gives us, holy as it is, can be only a pale shadow of the truth that exists in the mind of God. The Qur'an's revelation is complete so far as human understanding is able to grasp, but it is limited by the inadequacies of human speech and human concepts. God in speaking with us uses concepts such as the angel Gabriel, who draws us toward good, and the Devil, who draws us toward evil, because we are incapable of understanding reality without such concepts. Satan is a metaphor. We understand the Devil's works through psychological experience, since they manifest themselves in our own minds. The story of Satan's refusal to prostrate himself before Adam can best be understood as a metaphor for the refusal of the passions to bow to the dictates of reason. Satan is the personification of the obstacle that blocks humanity off from God, which is our own foolishness and sin.

But interpreters of al-Ghazali who did not grasp the sense of the via negativa did not understand that it transcends the metaphorical and allegorical. Al-Ghazali is not saying that Satan is only a metaphor, only an element in our psychology. He is a metaphor, but he is also not a metaphor. He is a real personality. Al-Ghazali grasps that whatever formulation we may make about reality is so precarious and so limited that we dare not ascribe it to ultimate reality. If we say, "Satan is a personality," we may have some idea of what we mean, but we have no right to assume that our idea of personality corresponds in any

20. Gätje, p. 167; G. Calasso, "Intervento d'Iblis nella creazione dell'uomo," *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 45 (1970), 71-90, esp. 71-72, 82-88.

but the most remote way to what is in the mind of God. Thus we do not know what Satan is really, objectively, and ultimately. He is, and he is not. What we *can* know is how he (whatever he is) seems to function within our minds, so we had better dwell upon the metaphor that we can know rather than the ultimate that we cannot. We perceive, directly, evil thoughts rising in our minds. Are the evil thoughts Satan? Does Satan cause the evil thoughts? Does he exploit them? We do not know: we know only that evil thoughts arise from an evil principle and can lead to evil actions and an evil state of mind that separates us from God.²¹

The mystical tradition of the sufis, also rooted in the via negativa, emphasized that Iblis' purpose and role in the cosmos exceed our understanding. Al-Hallaj (857-922) said that when Iblis was asked to bow before Adam he refused because he knew that only Allah should be worshiped. Hallaj went so far as to declare that in all the world the only being that had as much respect for God as did Iblis, and who was as complete a monotheist, was Muhammad. For inscrutable reasons God had set Iblis an impossible task: "God cast him into the sea with his hands tied and said to him: beware lest you get wet." God strictly ordered Iblis to do what he had strictly ordered him not to do: he to whom alone the knee must bow commanded him to bend before Adam. In later mystical thought, Iblis even became the model of the perfect lover who would rather be separated from God and God's will than united with God against God's will. For some mystics he became a model of perfect loyalty and devotion.²² The perceptions of the Qur'an and hadith and of the great Muslim theologians such as al-Ghazali, resonating as they do with the perceptions of the Christian tradition, confirm the significance of the concept of the Devil in Western monotheist religion.

21. M. Kably, "Satan dans l'Ithia' d'Al-Ghazālī," *Hespéris Tamuda*, 6 (1965), 5-37. The "Devil's Delusion" (*Talbis Iblis*) of Abu'l-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī (1116-1200) is more an attack on al-Ghazali and the Sufis than a work on diabolology. See D. S. Margoliouth, "The Devil's Delusion: *Talbis Iblis* of Abu'l Faraj ibn al-Jawzī," *Islamic Culture*, 19 (1945), 69-81; Margoliouth, "The Devil's Delusion by Ibn al-Jauzi," *Islamic Culture*, 9 (1935), 1-21. Compare the *logismoi* of the Christian monk Evagrius of Pontus to al-Ghazali's view: see SATAN, pp. 177-183.

22. A. Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimension of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975), pp. 191-196; A. Schimmel, *Pain and Grace* (Leiden, 1976), p. 185. For some untraditional modern interpretations arising from Islam, see A. Schimmel, "Die Gestalt Satans in Muhammad Iqbal's Werk," *Kairos*, 5 (1963), 124-137; A. Bausani, "Satan nell'opera filosofico-poetica di Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938)," *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 30 (1955), 55-102; I. Joseph, *Devil Worship* (Boston, 1919); G. S. Gasparro, "I miti cosmologici degli