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RETURN, REPENTANCE, AMENDMENT, REFORM, RECONVERSION
 A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF *TAWBA*
 IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC ETHICS

SUMMARY: The present essay aims to explore, within the general framework of Islamic ethics, the complex notion of *tawba*, whose immediate peculiarity lies in its double meaning, being akin to “repentance” in the case of man, and “forgiveness” in the case of God. Our investigation will begin with the Koranic use of the root *twb*, observing its explicit content as established by the earliest lexicographers (in particular the work of Ibn Manẓūr), and identifying its presence in the Koran itself and in classical, modern and contemporary exegesis, as well as in the principal didactic literature, again including modern contributions.

Premise

For the western reader talk of “ethics” inevitably sends us back to ancient Greece: to sophistic with its disdain for objective norms – be they dictated by ancient or majority custom, or by divine fiat – and to various lines of speculation concerning the good, or the nature and fulfilment of man. And it is true that a Greek substratum, concerning the definition of virtuous behaviour and its proper ends, is by no means alien to Islamic ethical speculation: after a process of study and meditation¹ it will form the theoretical basis of such celebrated and undeniably “Islamic” works as the *Tahdīb al-aḥlāq* of Abū

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¹ According to the *Fihrist* of Ibn al–Nadīm (d. 385/995), the *Nicomachean ethics* was translated into Arabic by Ishāq b. Ḥunayn (d. after 289/910), cfr. A.A. Akasoy & A. Fidora, *Aristotle. The Arabic version of the Nicomachean ethics, with an introduction and annotated translation by D. M. Dunlop*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2005. A compendium, known as *Iḥtiṣār al–iskandarāniyyīn*, goes under the name of the Jacobite Christian Abū ‘Alī b. Zur‘a (d. 398/1008). Cfr. C. D’Ancona, “Aristotle and Aristotelianism”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (= *EI*) 3rd ed. (cfr. referenceworks.brillonline.com).

‘Alī Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) or the *Adab al-dunyā wa al-dīn* of al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058). In this sense, the construction of a recognisably “Muslim conscience” cannot be said to be fully achieved before the XIth century CE². None the less it would be wrong to overemphasise the Greek contribution, with a consequent neglect of the, historically anterior, absorption of Persian moral thought – and one thinks here in particular of the works of Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ (d. ca 139/756) – and above all of the fundamental contribution of the Koran, a fount not only of precepts but, clearly, also of principles. Such an overemphasis would also entail overlooking the complex bedrock of values which the Koran in its turn presupposes, evaluates and reaffirms.

A well-known story, included in the authoritative compendium of Muslim b. al-Ḥaǧǧāǧ (d. 261/875), tells of the conversion of one of the earliest Muslims, Abū Ḍarr al-Gifārī (d. ca 32/652). This man, curious to know the import of the new religion, sent his brother to Mecca to listen to the Prophet’s preaching. The brother duly went, and on his return reported: “I have seen him and he preaches right conduct in words that are not mere poetry”³. Another story, cited in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), recalls the Prophet’s answer to one that asked him what action was the best. He replied: “Have faith in God and believe, follow earnestly His path, make the pilgrimage conscientiously”. “You have named many things”, the man responded. But the Prophet continued: “And speak kindly, and succour others with generosity, be magnanimous and of good character”. The man exclaimed: “But I wanted just one thing”. “Go hence – the Prophet enjoined him – and cease to think that God is like yourself”⁴.

These stories, which underline the ethical content of Islamic preaching, at the same time bear witness to a certain continuity of moral sensibility⁵, in so far as reference to “right conduct” (*makārim al-aḥlāq*) or to “good character” (*ḥusn al-ḥuluq*) without specifying further suggests an appeal to pre-existing fundamentals. As we have indicated, the same conscious memory of pre-existent convictions can be found in the Koran; the Book in its turn presupposes principles already familiar to and shared by its audience: one might cite for instance the mentions of the good (*ḥayr, tayyib*) or what is common knowledge (*al-ma‘rūf*), or of “doing good” or “doing good works” (*iḥsān*, cfr. *aḥsana*) that can be found over more or less the whole preaching period⁶. This means that when speaking of Islamic ethics, to posit the Ko-

² R. Walzer, “*Akhlāk*”, *EP*, I (1960) 335–339.

³ “*Ya’ muru bi-makārim al-aḥlāq wa yaqūlu kalāman mā huwa bi-l-ši’r*”; cfr. *Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, no. 4527, from Ibn ‘Abbās (here and hereafter, for every reference to the Tradition, unless otherwise indicated, see <http://www.islamweb.net/hadith>). This episode is also mentioned in J. Robson, “Abū Ḍarr”, *EP*, I, 118.

⁴ Cfr. *Musnad al-‘ašara al-mubaššarīn bi-l-ḡanna, musnad al-šāmiyyīn*, no. 17467, from ‘Amr b. al-‘Aṣ.

⁵ Cfr. again Walzer, “*Akhlāk*”.

⁶ Cfr. G. Hourani, “Ethical presuppositions of the Qur’ān”, in *Muslim World* 70/1 (1980) 1–28, see also his *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, 23–48; K. Reinhart, “Ethics and the Qur’ān”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* (=EQ; cfr. again referenceworks.brillonline.com).

ran as a *terminus post quem* can come to sound purely conventional. On the particular theme of virtuous behaviour, as indeed on analogous subjects, Islamic thought continually demonstrates an extraordinary capacity to pick up extraneous elements along the way, absorb them and fit them into a quite different conception of life and of the world, giving them a fresh value; and it is just this inclusive and co-optive aspect that makes the study of Islamic ethics a task that can never be completed. Given then that this essay is necessarily a summary treatment, we will identify and analyse the ingredients of the virtue *tawba* and define the qualities of the man possessing it, with reference to the ‘canonical’ sources and other traditionally based works from the formative years of Islam down to the present day.

Tawba, or “reconversion”

In the foundational Islamic literature, the Koran and the Sunna, the verb *tāba* occurs on dozens of occasions, as also its action nouns, *tawba* particularly, but also *tawb* and *matāb*, along with the corresponding agent nouns *tā’ib* and *tawwāb*, expressing the purification of intentions and the mending of ways. Arab lexicographers of the classical period are unanimous in explaining that underlying its content is return (*ruḡū’*), together with the idea of receding (‘*awd*), as well as recovering, that is, replacement understood in terms of a retracing of steps (*ināba*). Within this ample receptacle which could bear the general label ‘reconversion’, they identify two different but related areas of meaning, according to whether the action originates with man or with God: in the case of human actions, the returning involves reorientation, enquiry and petition (cfr. *tāba ilā*) whereas God’s actions are concessions from above (cfr. *tāba ‘alā*)⁷.

We may look, by way of example, at the work of Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1312–

⁷ On the root *twb* in the canonical literature: U. Rubin, “Repentance and Penance”, *EQ*; F.M. Denny, “Tawba”, *EP*, X (2002) 413; Idem, “The Qur’ānic vocabulary of repentance: orientations and attitudes”, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47/4, Thematic Issue (Dec. 1980) 649–64; R.A. Nicholson, “Tawba”, *EP*; D. Rahbar, *God of Justice. A study in the ethical doctrines of the Qur’ān*, Brill, Leiden 1960, 155–157; M.M. Allam, “The concept of forgiveness in the Qur’ān”, *Islamic Culture* 41 (1967) 139–153. Useful reference to *tawwāb* in D. Gimaret, *Les Noms divins en Islam: Exégèse lexicographique et théologique*, Editions du Cerf, Paris 1988, 416. A notable example of the treatment of *tawba* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought (it is a “curvature of being that causes it to turn about and return to its starting point”) in S. Pagani, *Il rinnovamento mistico dell’Islam. Un commento di ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī a Ahmad Sirhindī*, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Dissertationes III, Napoli 2003, 136–137; cfr. A. Bausani, “Note sulla circolarità dell’essere in Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240)”, originally in *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 56 (1982) 57–74, also in M. Pistoso (ed.), *Il “pazzo sacro” nell’Islam. Saggi di storia estetica, letteraria e religiosa*, Luni Editrice, Milano 2000, 353–377, especially 355–356. On criminal jurisprudence in relation to *tawba* (that is, whether or not it entails the suspension of *ḥadd* penalties), which is beyond the scope of the present essay, see generally M. Ayoub, “Repentance in the Islamic Tradition”, in A. Etzioni & D. Carney (ed.), *Repentance. A comparative Perspective*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Boston–Oxford 1997, 96–121 (particularly 102–107).

1313) in *Lisān al-‘arab*⁸. The author states immediately that the noun *tawba* means a recoil from guilt (*ruḡū‘ min al-ḍanb*); and then explains this expression as “repentance” – or “regret” or “remorse” – citing in support the well-known saying of the Prophet according to which “contrition is repentance” (*al-nadam tawba*)⁹; he goes on to exemplify briefly uses of the verb, always in the sense of a human action. Subsequently he turns to the use of the verb *tāba* when it refers to an action of God (followed in such cases by ‘*alā*), proposing the meaning “conceding to man success – or *tawfiq* – in his *tawba*” (cfr. *waffaqa-hu la-hā*).

Ibn Manzūr follows the same sequence in explicating another important noun, the intensive *tawwāb*. First he applies it to man – where it means one who turns towards God, *tā’ib ilā Allāh* – and then to God – where it is He who turns towards His servant (*yatūbu ‘alā ‘abdi-hi*) – and follows this with a Koranic quote that aligns this divine rendering to forgiveness: “He who forgives a fault (*ḡāfir al-ḍanb*) and embraces reconversion (*qābil al-tawb*)” (Q 40:3)¹⁰.

At the end of his note on this verb root, Ibn Manzūr cites one of his sources, Abū Manšūr al-Azharī (d. 370/980)¹¹, who takes more or less the same line – one uses *tāba* of a man who withdraws, returns and amends his conduct (‘*āda, raḡa‘a, anāba*) while in the case of God it applies to His pardon (*maḡfira*) – but he adds a gloss on the interdependence of the operations: God is *al-Tawwāb* because “with His favour (*faḍl*) He makes a return to his servant when the latter has returned from his wrongdoing to Him”.

The interpretation offered by *Lisān al-‘arab* represents a good starting point for our investigation of *tawba* in the context of Islamic thought.

We note first of all that Ibn Manzūr interprets the noun *tawba* exclusively in terms of human action, even though in at least two of its six Koranic appearances the term treats of an action that belongs to God (cfr. *al-tawba ‘alā Allāh* in Q 4:17&18)¹². We must establish then whether post-Koranic thought had really trimmed the meaning of *tawba*, limiting it’s application only to human reconversion, or if it had instead maintained its Koranic sense of an act common to both man and God. In the latter case we need to trace in the texts the logical unfolding of the contents of *tawba*: which of the two senses is felt logically to take precedence over the other? – that attributed to God, similar to forgiveness (*maḡfira*, cfr. *ḡufrān*), or that attributed to man, resem-

⁸ Dār al-ma‘ārif, Beirut 2010 (6 vols.), vol. I, 233. Cfr. Al-Fayrūz’ābādī (d. 817/1415), *Al-qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, Mu’assasat al-risāla, 6th ed., Cairo 1419/1998, 64; E.W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Librairie du Liban, Beirut 1968, part 1, 321.

⁹ Usually accepted on the authority of Anas b. Mālik or ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd.

¹⁰ Cfr. Q 9:104 e 42:25. Al-Fayrūz’ābādī adds that God is called *al-Tawwāb* because He passes from severity to mildness (*min al-tašdīd ilā al-tahfīf*) or because He turns to the believer with His welcome or *qubūl*. On divine reconversion as acceptance of human reconversion, see also below.

¹¹ The author of *Tahḏīb al-luḡa* (ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn *et alii*, 15 vols., Cairo 1964–1967).

¹² The other four are Q 9:104, 42:25, 66:8 and (though ambiguous) 4:92.

bling repentance (*nadam*)? The answers will prove to diverge according to the different schools.

Behind this double sense of *tāba* there is none the less semantic common ground, the idea of ‘reconversion’, that is ‘return’ from a given negative state; and therefore that the earlier state is better than the later. In this case, the question is: does the noun *tawba* – and more generally the verb root *twb* – convey that same idea of virtuous recoil, that “conservative reformism” that has always been a default position of Islamic thought.

As far as the intensive noun *tawwāb* is concerned, which the Koran applies both to God and to man – for example where it is said that God loves “those who reconvert” (*al-tawwābīn*, Q 2:222) – we have seen the double meaning is undoubtedly maintained in the *Lisān al-‘arab*: a man is *tawwāb* if he repents greatly or often, while at the opposite pole we have a divine Name, the Incomparable Forgiver. Considering then possible transpositions of The Most Beautiful Names into human virtues¹³, we can ask to which meaning has Islamic thought had recourse in defining the expression of *tawba* as a quality of the believer. Is the good Muslim one who repents, or one who forgives, or both of these? In fact, the two concepts which lexicographical research identifies in the verb root *twb*, while certainly related, are none the less directly opposed.

The ambivalence of return

The split nature of the root *twb*, so pronounced in lexicographical analysis, is much less clear in the Koran. The Book certainly distinguishes the two different fields *tāba* commands – as we have seen: ‘*alā* for God and *ilā* [*Allāh*] for man – but employs the verb to express both the Creator’s and the believer’s actions in the sense of positive recoil, allowing no scope for confusion with other verb roots and indeed insisting, with uncompromising rhetoric, on the unambiguity of its meaning. The cited split nature – defending, obviously enough, God’s otherness against any suggestion of anthropomorphism – is on the other hand found even in the earliest exegetical works. But, in contrast to the lexicographers, the commentators, addressing perhaps a more expert reader, tend to defend the uniqueness of the root *twb* and are by no means prepared to allow a mere equivalence between human *tawba* and “repentance” (*nadam*), nor between divine *tawba* and “forgiveness” (*mağfira*, *ğufrān*)¹⁴.

We may observe how these authors¹⁵ treat the earliest appearance of the root *twb* in the Koran, where we can be sure they make no prior assumptions; it first occurs in

¹³ Following al-Ġazālī’s lead in *Al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fi Šarḥ Asmā’ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*, Arabic Text, edited with Introduction by Fadlou A. Shehadi, Dar el-Machreq, Beirut 1971.

¹⁴ Although suggested at various points in the Koran, for example Q 5:39: “But if anyone repents (*tāba*) [...], God will turn towards him (*yatūbu* ‘alay-hi), God is most forgiving (*ğafūr*) [...]”.

¹⁵ For references to the exegetic literature, see <http://www.altafsir.com>.

the Cow sura and has to do with the sin and reconversion of the first man: “Adam received the words from his Lord, and He accepted his repentance. He is the Ever-Relenting, the Most Merciful” (*al-Tawwāb al-Raḥīm*) (Q 2:37)¹⁶.

We can already see the bifurcation of meanings in a text of early date, the *Ġarīb al-Qur’ān* of Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. ca 122/740)¹⁷. This eighth century commentator explains that God’s “reconversion” is help and support (*‘awn*) while that of man is tripartite: withdrawal (*ruḡū’*) from wrongdoing, then renunciation or abandoning (*tark*) of it, and finally repenting (*nadam*) of the action from which he intends to “reconvert” himself¹⁸. Another early text, the *Tafsīr* by ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣana‘ānī (d. 211/826–827), puts forward, under fictional cover, the idea that God’s “reconversion” is His forgiveness, following man’s reconversion. Thus the author narrates a conversation between Adam and God. Adam asks: “Lord, have You written this sin to my charge (*katabta-hu ‘alayya*) before You made me, or did I invent it myself (*ibtada’tu-hu min qibali nafsi*)?” And He replied: “By no means, I charged you with it before creating you”. So then Adam said: “Since You made me with it, then forgive me it (*fa-iḡfir-hu lī*)”¹⁹.

A century later, in the *Ġāmi‘ al-bayān* by Ibn Ġarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), the double sense of the word *tāba* is well established. But the eminent commentator, confident as always in his own independent reasoning or *iḡtihād*, does not want to let go of the terminological overlap affirmed by the Koran, and continues to speak of *tawba* both with reference to man and to God, hanging his whole argument on restoration and renewal, without having recourse to repentance or forgiveness in the strict sense of the words (*nadam*, *maḡfira*). He explains the reconversion of God’s servants as the mending of ways (*ināba*) and return (or homecoming, *awba*)²⁰, and God’s reconversion as a gift (*rizq*), or, again, as a return (once more, *awba*) from anger to satisfaction and from punishment to remission (this last *‘afw* or *ṣafḥ*). Al-Ṭabarī’s words also take as read a conviction already current, among spiritual thinkers in particular – for example in the *Ādāb al-nufūs* by al-Ḥārīṭ al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857)²¹ – and destined to

¹⁶ It is a Medinan passage as are nearly all the appearances of the *twb* root: cfr. Rubin, “Repentance”; Denny, “*Tawba*” (“the forms *tawba* [...] and *tawwāb* [...] being exclusively Medinan”); Nicholson, “*Tawba*”.

¹⁷ Handed down by Abū Ḥālid al-Wāsiṭī of Kufa, useful here because moderate in tendency, its attribution notwithstanding, as observed also by W. Madelung, “Zayd b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn”, *EP*, XI (2005) 512–513.

¹⁸ A similar tripartite treatment of human *tawba* reappears three centuries later in a treatise on Sufism by al-Huḡwīrī (d. 469/1077), *Kaṣf al-maḡḡūb*, cfr. Denny, “*Tawba*”. On al-Gazālī’s tripartition of *tawba*, followed in turn by al-Rāzī, see below.

¹⁹ As recounted by ‘Ubayd b. ‘Umayr al-Layṭī (d. 77/696–697). The same story from the same source, together with a similar version by Suddī, can be found in al-Ṭabarī’s commentary.

²⁰ On the synonymy of *tawba* and *awba* in the commentaries, cfr. Rubin, “Repentance”, and see then al-Rāzī’s discussion.

²¹ Ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad ‘Aṭā’, Mu’assasat al-kutub al-ṭaqāfiyya, Beirut 2nd ed. 1411/1991 (1st ed. 1408/1987), 31–145 (followed by *Kitāb al-tawahhum*, 149–201). The paragraph entitled “the sincerity of contrition (*nadam*) and its pointers”, which heads the chapter dedicated to “those who are near to

enjoy a considerable vogue in the succeeding literature of every epoch and tendency: that is, that the divine *tawba* should be read not so much as a reconversion on God's part as His "acceptance" (*qubūl*) of human reconversion²².

This shading of God's returning into "acceptance" we also find in the *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān* by a contemporary of al-Ṭabarī, al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), a firm espouser of many other future commonplaces: the idea that divine returning might be assimilated not only to forgiveness (*gufrān*) but also to "a thing most close to this last" (*qarīb*), i.e. to tolerance or imperturbability (*taḡāwuz*); and that such returning consists in the guiding and perfecting (*hudā, tawfiq*) of man's reciprocating action. However, al-Māturīdī is convinced that even Adam's *tawba* is in the last resort a divine action, as indeed are all human operations; therefore – the author maintains – Adam turns away from wrongdoing because God has already created his reconversion within him²³.

On the themes we have been looking at, the most significant commentary remains that of Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) in his *Mafātiḥ al-ḡayb*. His gloss on the verse in question is extensive, subtle and includes many recommendations; of the eight heads it is arranged under, the last five are entirely dedicated to *tawba*, in effect amounting to a treatise on the subject, which it is worth taking a closer look at.

The author concentrates on the definition and working of reconversion in man and God²⁴, and proposes an interesting close reading of the *Kitāb al-tawba* by al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111) the opening of which he quotes almost verbatim²⁵. He takes over the idea that human *tawba* involves three phases. First the acknowledgement ('*ilm*') of the harm occasioned by the sin, and of the "veil" that this interposes between the be-

reconversion (*tawba*) and those who are far off from it" (pp. 65–67), begins as follows: "Who is the man most confident of acceptance (*qubūl*) of his reconversion? He is the one who fears most, who is the most sincere in his contrition (*nadāma*) [...]".

²² Following Q 9:104: "He who accepts (*yaqbalu*) repentance (*tawba*) from His servants", cfr. Q 42:25: "It is He who accepts repentance from His servants, and pardons evil deeds"; cfr. Q 40:3. This opinion is confirmed by al-Zamaḡṣarī, al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī; also, by way of example, by the Imamite al-Ṭabarsī (or al-Ṭabrisī, d. 548/1154) in his *Maḡma' al-bayān*, by the Ḥanbalite Ibn al-Ġawzī (d. 597/1201) in his *Zād al-masīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr*, by the Šafī'ite al-Bayḏāwī (d. 716/1316) in his brief *Anwār al-tanzīl*, by the modern Zaydite al-Šawkānī (d. 1250/1834) in his *Fath al-qadīr*, and by the contemporary Taṅṭāwī (d. 1431/2010) in his *Wasīf*. The direct translation or divine reconversion into *qubūl* also appears in more popular contemporary works, such as the *Tafsīr aysar al-tafsīr* by As'ad Maḡmūd Ḥawmad (d. 2011) et alii, Ḥawmad's own publishing house, Damascus 1990.

²³ Just as – the author goes on immediately to state – Abraham's following of the true path (cfr. Q 16:121) is owing to the prior creation in him of the ability of guidance (*hudā*).

²⁴ The fourth of al-Rāzī's heads.

²⁵ Cfr. *Al-tawba ilā Allāh wa mukaffirāt al-dunūb*, ed. 'Abd al-Laṭīf 'Āšūr, Maktabat al-Qur'ān, Cairo n.d. (also Maktabat al-Sā'ī, Riad n.d.). This is the first book of the fourth part of the *Ihyā'*, subdivided into the following four paragraphs: 1. the essence of *tawba*, arranged in its turn under five heads (pp. 25–53); 2. when *tawba* occurs, under four heads (pp. 55–98); 3. fulfilment, conditions and stability (*tamām, šurūf, dawām*) of *tawba*, under five heads (pp. 99–136); 4. *tawba* as remedy (*dawā'*) for persistent sinning, under five heads (pp. 137–157).

liever and divine clemency, estranging man from the object of his desire, causing him the regret and suffering (*asaf*, *alam*) which we call “contrition” or “remorse” (*nadam*). This sets off the second phase, occupying the present time (*ḥāl*), in which he forms the resolve (*‘azm*) to abandon now, and for all his remaining future, the sins committed in the past. The final phase is the correction of his behaviour (*fi‘l*)²⁶. Still following al-Ġazālī, al-Rāzī teaches that repentance or *nadam* absorbs into itself in some sense all three phases of *tawba*: in fact the acknowledgement that precedes it is its premise (*muqaddima*), while the renunciation of wrongdoing is its outcome, so that repentance, which cannot be dissociated either from the acknowledgement which comes before nor from the resolve that comes after, occupies a middle space, “bounded by the two sides”; and is at the same time, so to speak, the fruit (*ṭamra*) and what bears the fruit (*muṭmir*). This is why – al-Rāzī continues – the Prophet says that “repentance is reconversion (*al-nadam tawba*)”²⁷. But he then admits a doubt concerning the actual succession of the three phases – “from divine custom” as the author of the *Ihyā’* has it – each in close and necessary dependence on the preceding one (cfr. *tarattub ḍarūrī*), as if the working through of the *tawba* were a function of human psychology. Instead, according to al-Rāzī, a firm advocate of God’s free will, acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and of the wrong it causes, do not come at all within the capacity, the freedom of action or the will of man (cfr. *qudra*, *amr*, *iḥtiyār*); and even if it were so, he would not know how to deal with them²⁸.

The author of the *Mafātīḥ al-ġayb* goes on to engage with the Mu‘tazilite ‘Abd al-Ġabbār (d. 415/1024) that *tawba* is necessary even for the lesser sins²⁹. He then confirms the synonymy of *tawba* or “reconversion” and *awba* or “return”. He then states that *tawba* is a subject that brings together (cf. *yuṣṭaraku fī-hā*) the believer and the Lord; the former is like a runaway servant who retraces his steps and the Other, if initially reluctant (*mu‘riḍ*), receives him with clemency and goodwill (*rahma*, *faḍl*)³⁰.

²⁶ Cfr. *Al-tawba ilā Allāh*, p. 21. The same tripartition can be found in the work of the Ḥanbalite Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223), see D. Talmon-Heller, “Charity and Repentance in Medieval Islamic Thought and Practice”, in M. Frenkel & Y. Lev (ed.), *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin – New York 2009, 265–269, particularly 267.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22. On this Prophetic saying see also above.

²⁸ Further on in his commentary, regarding Q 4:26–27 (on these two verses see also below), he will state explicitly that human reconversion is created and instilled in man by God: “It demonstrates repentance for past sins, and the intention to return to them no more (cfr. *‘adam al-‘awd*) in the future; now, repentance and intention come under the heading of the will (cfr. *irādāt*), it is unthinkable that the will has need of further wills, it would be to beg the question (*tasalsul*). [...] Therefore the above repentance and intention can come only through the creative intervention (*bi-taḥlīq*) of God. [...] In short, it is God that turns back (*yatūbu*) towards us”.

²⁹ As was the case, indeed, with Adam. This is the fifth of al-Rāzī’s heads.

³⁰ The sixth head. Here the author specifies that God’s acceptance (*qubūl*) is of two kinds: a great reward (*ṭawāb ‘aẓīm*) when it is acceptance of devotion or *ṭā‘a*; but in the case of *tawba* it is a straightforward forgiveness of sins (cfr. *yaġfiru al-dunūb*). On the relationship between *ṭā‘a* and *tawba* in this author’s teachings, see also below.

Al-Rāzī turns next to the “assimilation” theme and the gulf that divides the Creator from an earthly king: the latter, offended by the servant, will accept him back no more than once because his nature will not permit him to do otherwise, whereas the Highest One welcomes the reconversion of the faithful freely, “with true benevolence and real kindness (*maḥḍ al-iḥsān wa al-tafaḍḍul*), even though they sin and return to the fold every hour for the duration of their lives³¹.

Al-Rāzī, alert as al-Ṭabarī to every letter of the Koranic text, or even more so, has not to this point suggested any close synonymy between man’s *tawba* and repentance (*nadam*), nor between God’s and His forgiveness. He will do so almost furtively at the end of his analysis, in the course of some “supplementary lessons” (*fawā’id*), ancient parables in which human reconversion becomes a request to God for forgiveness (*istiġfār*)³².

Reciprocal conversions

In some verses of the Koran, the verb *tāba* makes repeated appearances, first denoting an action performed by man and subsequently an action performed by God, or, vice versa, first by God and then by man. These passages suggest to the reader movements of mutual conversion that appear in many ways comparable: a man turns back withdrawing from his current state, and God too recovers an earlier state of goodwill towards the believer, carbon copies almost of states of mind and behaviours between the Creator and His creature. We find the first passage of this kind in the Cow sura (Q 2:160): “[...] those who reconvert (*tābū*) and reform themselves (*aṣlahū*) and show this openly, to these I will turn, for I am the Ever-Relenting, the Most Merciful (*al-Tawwāb al-Raḥīm*)”.

Let us now return to the works of the leading commentators. The verse just cited suggests the temporal precedence of human turning back, and the ancient commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767)³³ insists on this, while making clear the gulf between the two kinds of reconversion: that of man being the renunciation of unbelief or *kufr*, that of God being a passing beyond and renouncing the application of punishment (*tagāwuz*) for that unbelief. Al-Ṭabarī³⁴ on the other hand does not declare any

³¹ This is why God deserves to be described with the intensive form *al-Tawwāb*, the seventh head. The author assumes familiarity with some of the Prophet’s sayings. For example “[...] I turn back (*atūbu*) to Him a hundred times a day”, accepted generally on the authority of Abū Hurayra, cfr. Ibn Māġa, *Kitāb al-adab, bāb al-istiġfār*, no. 3813; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad, musnad al-‘ašara al-mubaššarīn bi-l-ġanna*, no. 9595; cfr. also the variant “[...] more than seventy times a day”, in al-Buḥārī, *Kitāb al-da‘awāt, bāb istiġfār al-nabī*, no. 5859.

³² The eighth and last head.

³³ Ed. ‘Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Šaḥāta, 5 vols., Cairo 1979–1988. The author is actually better known as an unreliable traditionist than for any skill in exegesis, but is still interesting on account of his early date.

³⁴ The which discussion treats again and simply with the recessive movement: for man it is stepping back (*iyyāb*) and amendment (*ināba*) after estrangement and flight (*inširāf, idbār*); for God it is turning back (*ruġū’*) and restitution (*radd*), with remission of punishment (*‘afw*).

priority, insisting from the outset on an essential reciprocity. What is meant by “those who reconvert [...] to these will I will turn”? – he asks. Does it mean that God will reward only those who reconvert, or, conversely, that only those will reconvert whom God has turned back to? The point is – he answers – that the one thing cannot be if the other is lacking, and it is as if the Koran had said the two together, simultaneously.

Advancing chronologically, al-Rāzī, keen as ever to insist on God’s absolute freedom of action, derives from this verse that the divine acceptance of man’s turning back is not rationally necessary (*ġayr wāġib ‘aqlan*); in fact – he observes – God speaks of his own turning back in self commendation, so it is clear that if acceptance were necessary, there could be no such encomium or none that made sense. God’s acceptance of the *tawba* therefore is driven not by necessity but by clemency (*raḥma*) towards the believer, who is juridically responsible (*mukallaḥ*) for his own actions. The great Sunni theologian proceeds to compare human reconversion to devotion or *tā’a*, two concepts which he feels are allied precisely because both depend on God’s pleasure; the difference – he writes – is that His acceptance of *tawba* entails only cancellation of punishment (*isqāṭ al-‘iqāb*), while His acceptance of devotion brings reward (*tawāb*)³⁵.

Continuing on, the Hanbalite Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 774/1373) does not raise the questions of antecedence or necessity: he teaches that “when the proponents of unbelief or impious novelties turn back towards God, God turns to them”; his is a hypothesis concerning a conditional future, but a certain one³⁶. And this writer adds that the certainty of the divine return is a privilege peculiar to Islam, because previously, among former peoples, God had not accepted the reconversion of unbelievers and innovators³⁷. By

³⁵ The author has already made this point in his commentary on Q 2:37, cfr. note above.

³⁶ Resting on numerous analogous sayings of the Prophet; see also the following note. Moreover, when the *tawba* is sincere, God is obliged to accept it: the same line is taken, following Q 66:8, by one of the most important statements of Mutazilite doctrine, the *Šarḥ al-uṣūl al-ḥamsa* erroneously attributed to ‘Abd al-Ġabbār, d. 415/1024, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm, Cairo 1965, 790; cited by A.J. Wensinck & L. Gardet, “*Khaṭī’a*, Péché et repentir”, *EF*, IV (1978) 1138–1141.

³⁷ *Lam takun al-tawba tuqbalu*. One thinks of the Koran passage on Cain, whose repentance (*nadam*) was not reconversion (*tawba*) and was not accepted by God (cfr. Q 5:31); and also of some references to the Children of Israel, e.g. Q 7:161–162, when, being incapable of *tawba*, they were destroyed by a heaven-sent plague. An example in the opposite direction is Q 2:54, where the reconversion of the Jews is followed by the reconversion of God. Cfr. U. Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān. The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image*, The Darwin Press, Princeton 1999, 83–99. The idea that the *tawba* of the Muslims should be accepted is pervasive in the Sunna, for example in the well-known Prophetic saying handed down in numerous forms, mainly on the authority of Sa’d b. Mālik (d. 74h) and of ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Saḥar [Abū Hurayra] (d. 57/678), according to which the adulterer when he commits adultery does not commit it, as a believer, the thief who steals does not steal as a believer, the wine-drinker drinking wine does not drink it as a believer, the faith abandons him and when/if he reconverts, God restores the faith to him/ turns back to him”. Which means however that *tawba* is denied to the apostate, cfr. Q 3:90 (“those who deny the faith having once received it [...], their turning back will never be accepted [...]”); see also Rubin, “Repentance”.

this route Ibn Kaṭīr arrives at a definition of Islam as “the Law of the Prophet of re-conversion, the Prophet of clemency” (*šarī‘at nabī al-tawba wa nabī al-raḥma*). And so, in highlighting the relationship between reconversion and clemency, he emphasises a key concept in Islamic thought regarding *tawba*: and it is in fact true that the eleven Koranic citations of the divine Name *al-Tawwāb* involve a pairing with the Name *al-Raḥīm*, bar one, the earliest (Q 110:3), where *al-Tawwāb* appears alone³⁸.

We can now consult the commentators on another important verse, from the ninth sura, known in fact as *al-Tawba*, where we find an opposite logical sequence to that in the verse just analysed, because it is God’s turning to him that prompts His creature’s return: “And [He also forgave] the three who were left behind (*ḥullifū*) [...] When they were certain that there is no refuge from God except in Him. Then He turned to them (*tumma tāba ‘alay-him*) so that they could turn back to Him (*li-yatūbū*). Indeed, Allah is the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful (*al-Tawwāb al-Raḥīm*)” (Q 9:118).

The first point of interest in this passage, and a point to be sure that the exegesis picks up on, is the deferral expressed in the root *ḥlf* (cfr. *ḥullifū*). According to the commentators’ unanimous opinion “the three” were converts from Medina, three Helpers³⁹ to whom God turned after having previously turned to the Prophet, to the Emigrants and to other Helpers of firmer faith; they are the same three persons to which the same *al-Tawba* alludes a few verses earlier, where it says that “there are others deferred (*murḡawna*) until the command of God – whether He will punish them or whether He will turn back to them” (Q 9:106). Al-Ṭabarī’s commentary once again does not refer to forgiveness or repentance exactly; as well as re-employing a number of the terms we have already come across – *ruḡū‘*, *ināba*, *tawfīq*, *rizq* – he emphasises God’s deferral (*irḡā‘*)⁴⁰ of human reconversion if He wishes it so. He explains in fact that the Lord “leaves behind” these three in the sense that, relative to others, he concedes *tawba* to them belatedly: first he renders them afflicted, repentant, worried, distressed because they are resistant to the *ḡihād* and opposed to the Prophet, “after which he conceded them a recovery of devotion and return to that which pleases Him”. Al-Rāzī’s commentary on the verse in question also concentrates on the delay or deferral (*ta’ḥīr*) of human *tawba* as an expression of God’s freedom of action. The author looks particularly at the obvious meaning, at that *tumma tāba*, “then He turned”, where – he observes – *tumma* serves to introduce what is de-

³⁸ Comparable on the pre-eminence of *tawba* in the Koran’s teaching and its pairing with *raḥma* or clemency is Sayyid Quṭb’s (d. 1966) claim to see in it “a luminous window through which blows a breeze of hope calling and guiding the faithful to the source of light. So that their hearts do not despair of God’s clemency, but rather are confident in the welcoming of their reconversion; God has said that He is *al-tawwāb al-raḥīm*, and He is the most truthful of speakers”.

³⁹ Murāra b. Rabī‘a, Hilāl b. Umayya and Ka‘b b. Mālik according to the sources.

⁴⁰ Which is not the same thing as the “deferral” to God of judgement on the virtue or wickedness of men’s deeds, a doctrine associated with Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (d. ante 101/720) and to the *Kitāb al-irḡā‘* which is attributed to him.

ferred (*li-l-tarāḥī*). He then rehearses in strict sequence, as is his wont, the various functions appropriate to God and to man in the context of *tawba*, and directs his reader to the devotion expected of the believer, to be sure, but also, and principally, to the antecedence, at once logical and temporal, of the divine will.

In the first place – he notes – “He turned to them so that they could turn back to Him” means that this action of the servants is created by God. Secondly, “He turned” is in time past, while “so that they could turn back” indicates a future action. Thirdly, as the basis of *tawba* is return (*ruḡūʿ*), this is a matter of these three persons returning to their habitual state (*ḥālātu-hum wa ʿādatu-hum*), that is, to their inclusion (*iḥtilāṭ*) among the number of believers, their prior exclusion (*mubāyana*) having been cancelled. Fourthly, it is also a question of their persevering in this return and taking steps to avoid a repetition of the sin. Fifthly and lastly, “so that they could turn back to Him” means “so that they could profit by their return and derive satisfaction from it”, but these two benefits, the profit and the satisfaction, are subordinate to God’s turning (cfr. *illā baʿda tawbat Allāh*), which – the author never tires of repeating – is in no sense their due (*li-aḡli al-wuḡūb*) but comes from His mercy and His magnanimity.

For a fine example of the complexity of Islamic thought, we should not overlook the *Kaššāf* by al-Zamaḡṣarī (d. 538/1144); both because the author, as a Muʿtazilite, goes in the opposite direction and champions human agency in *tawba* and even the necessity of its acknowledgement by God, and because, here as elsewhere, he displays his great gifts as a linguist and a lexicologist. In the case of the verse in question, al-Zamaḡṣarī suggests that perhaps the three Helpers were not so much “left behind” (*ḥullifū*, the passive form) as “stayed behind” (*ḥalafū*, the active form), that is, they remained in Medina and declined to join the combatants. Or perhaps – he continues – by employing the root *ḥlf* the Koran is saying that they were sinners, in so far as one says *al-ḥālifa* to describe the wicked, and *ḥulūf al-fam* is an expression indicating the bad breath of fasters. Or again, following to the variant reading proposed by Ġaʿfar al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), we could be meant to understand that they “differed from others” (*ḥālafū*).

However that may be, al-Zamaḡṣarī teaches that when the three turned back to Him, God accepted their appeal so that they might remain firm in their return, even in the face of future sins; and then, to reaffirm their active participation in the affair, he sketches a character for each of them, citing Ḥasan al-Bašrī (d. 110/728). “There was one who had a garden enclosed by a wall which was worth more than a hundred thousand *dirham*; and this man said: – garden of mine, what made me stay behind was only your shade and the fruit of your trees, but now I leave you to God. And there was another who had only a wife, and he said: – wife of mine, what made me delay [...]”⁴¹ was surely only my attachment to you, but, with God’s help, I will learn how to bear my absence from you until I reach the Prophet. And he leapt in to the saddle and went to join him. The last man had nothing but himself, neither wealth nor wife. And he

⁴¹ “But not remain behind” are the omitted words.

said: – soul of mine, what has kept me back is only the love that life has for you, but, with God’s help, I will learn how to bear every adversity until I reach the Prophet. So he bundled up what he had, thrust it under his arm and went to join him”.

We have seen in the works of both al-Zamaḥṣarī and al-Rāzī another key component of the divine “reconversion”: God is not only He who accepts human *tawba*, but He who lays down its durability (*dawām* or *dawm*) and solidity (*ṭubūt* or *ṭabāt*). This is similarly noted by, among others, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) in his *Ĝāmi’ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān*.

Among the notable aspects of the latter’s work, especially with regard to the didactic parts of the Holy Book, is a reluctance to identify God’s returning with His forgiveness, since, legally speaking, this would entail the possible cancellation of a *ḥadd* punishment. The author therefore posits rather a deferral (*safh*) of chastisement, or a sort of tautology, whereby God’s reconversion would be nothing other than an exhortation towards man’s own reconversion; and he reminds us of the Women sura, where it is said: “O you who believe, believe in God ” (Q 4:136). But the most striking feature of his commentary is his assiduity, unlike the majority of his illustrious contemporaries, in distancing the letter of the Text from its doctrinal rendering. His determination in thus expanding the Koranic lexicon – *tāba* and its derivatives for example, but others also – is apparent when he quotes these words of an early sage: “In God the Most High I have been mistaken in four things. I thought that as soon as I loved Him, He would love me in return, because He said: He will bring forth a people whom He will love and they will love Him (Q 5:54); I thought that as soon as I was pleased with Him, He would be pleased with me, because He said: God will be pleased with them and they with Him (Q 5:119); I thought that as soon as I remembered Him, He would remember me, because He said: the remembrance of God is the greatest thing (Q 29:45); and I thought that as soon as I turned back to Him, He would turn back to me, because He said: He turned to them so that they could turn back to Him (Q 9:118)”.

Self reform and return to the everlasting Law

As we have said, behind the doubled meaning of *tāba* – turning back or return of man, thus a sort of repentance, and turning back or return of God, and thus a form of forgiveness – there is the underlying idea of a past better than the present. On this theme, we can examine the commentaries on another recurrence, in consecutive verses of the Women sura, where, at the end of a legalistic argument on brides permissible or conversely *maḥārim*, it is written: “God desires to explain things clearly to you, and to guide you (*li-yahdiya-kum*) into the ways (*sunan*, cfr. *sunna*) of those before you, and to turn to you (*li-yatūba*) [...] And God would turn to you in mercy (*an yatūba*); but those who follow vain desires would have you go astray” (Q 4:26–27).

This is a trappy passage for exegesis, in that, for the first audience of the Koran at the historic moment of its revelation, “those before you” are the pre-Islamic generations, as yet unenlightened by Islam. In fact, many commentators think that in these

verses, the Book is recalling the impious and their tragic end. The instance would be therefore a guide (*hudā*, cfr. above, *li-yahdiya-kum*) *a contrario*, which is to say that these pre-existing peoples are cited precisely because the Muslims have *not* followed their example, in this particular case marrying their mothers, daughters or sisters with no regard for consanguinity and its associated prohibitions.

The most widely accepted interpretation is, however, another, based on a convergence of the laws governing these very prohibitions. In this alternative reading “those before you”, as models to be followed with regard to methods and procedures (*subul*, *manāhiğ*), are all the men of piety who lived before Islam i.e. “the believers” (*al-mu'minūn*, Muqātil), “the people of faith” (*ahl al-īmān*, al-Ṭabarī), “the people of the road of righteousness and devotion” (*ahl al-hudāwa wa al-ṭā'a*, al-Māturīdī), “the upright” or “the honest” (*al-ṣāliḥūn*, al-Zamaḥṣarī), the “people of truth” (*ahl al-ḥaqq*, al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī) or those who followed praiseworthy paths” (*turuq ḥamīda*, Ibn Kaṭīr), chief among them the prophets and the messengers, promulgators of compatible juridical material. This opinion runs through the whole exegetical history, but is evidence of a substantial dichotomy that can come sharply to the fore not least in the contemporary world.

To return to our review: some authors air the idea of a rapport between the ways of the believers of yore and the Way of God (*sunnat Allāh*), those customs that “He had already observed beforehand”⁴² and that, according to the Koran, are not subject to change or variation⁴³; and they derive therefrom an argument for the perennial nature of revealed law, substantially equal for all. Here for example, in faithful paraphrase, is al-Rāzī’s commentary on this passage.

God has expounded⁴⁴ the rules (*takāliḥ*) relating to marriage differentiating the permissible from the forbidden (*ḥalāl*, *ḥarām*) and the good from the bad (*ḥasan*, *qabīḥ*). And then it is written in the Koran: “[...] to guide you into the ways of those before you”; and this passage has a twofold meaning. On the one hand it means that all the guidelines that God has laid down pertaining to the marriage of Muslims, he had already decreed in all the religious laws (*ṣarā'i'*) of all observant communities (*milal*). On the other hand, it can mean that just as God has explained to Muslims the usefulness (*maṣlaḥa*) of marital law, He had done the same with the ancients, explaining its worth also to them. This indicates that the laws, of Muslims and of others, converge under the umbrella of the common interest (cfr. *maṣāliḥ*), while differing in their particulars⁴⁵.

⁴² As confirmed by the Joint Forces sura referring to the Prophet’s marriage with the divorced wife of Zayd, his adoptive son (Q 33:38).

⁴³ Cfr. Q 33:62 (“[...] you will find no change in God’s practice”); or 35:43 (“[...] ‘you will never find any change in God’s practise; you will never find any deviation there”).

⁴⁴ That is, in the verses preceding those analysed, cfr. Q 4:19–25.

⁴⁵ Al-Rāzī’s discussion is reproduced almost to the letter in the *Wasīṭ* of his contemporary Ṭaṭṭāwī, cited above.

More than two centuries earlier al-Māturīdī had been more specific: “The customs of those before you – he wrote – are the laws of the ancients, the people (*ahl*) of the Torah, of the Gospels, of the Psalms and the other Holy Books. In fact the preaching of Mohammed is not ground-breaking or new (*badī‘*, *ḥādīṭ*), as the Koran reports the Prophet saying: “I am nothing new among God’s messengers” (Q 46:9).

Reference to the unanimity of all the Books and to the existence of an Eternal Law above and beyond its various codifications cannot but evoke a perpetuity of Faith, a single primordial credo overarching its various historical expressions, the *fiṭra*, the natural vocation towards monotheism, God’s project for the human race. This important piece of doctrine is the focus, in the modern era, of the celebrated *Tafsīr al-Manār* by Rašīd Riḍā (d. 1935), who actually makes use of the concept of *tawba* to propose an interesting variation on the theme of return (*ruḡū‘*) so dear to the reformist writers. The author⁴⁶ observes the the Koranic passage in question sets up a degree of equivalence between the obligations God demands of Muslims, obligations conducive to their wellbeing (cfr. *maṣāliḥ*, *manāfi‘*), and the favour (*ni‘ma*) conceded to the predecessors, and this in his opinion confirmed that these had acted in conformity (*bi-muqtaḍā*) with “original uncorrupted human nature” (*fiṭra salīma*), for all that every community had their own religion and their own Law (*dīn*, *ṣarī‘a*), appropriate to the society of the time; it is written in fact: “To each among you we have prescribed a law and an open way” (*ṣir‘a wa minhāḡ*, Q 5:48). Moreover – he continues – “the religion of all was a single religion if considered under the aspect of monotheism, of the spirit of service, of a purity of soul reached through deeds aimed at correcting character and refining behaviour [...]. Therefore, when God says that He wishes to turn back towards you, it means that He wants to include you [...] among those who reform themselves and withdraw from the old ways (*mimmā salafa*), those that you followed in the Age of Ignorance and the earliest Islam (*awwal al-islām*), when you strayed from the behaviour demanded by your essential nature (cfr. *sunnat al-fiṭra*) [...]”.

Later, meditating on the double mention of divine returning in the two verses under examination – as noted: “[...] to turn to you (*li-yatūba*) [...] And God would turn to you in mercy (*an yatūba*)” – the *Tafsīr al-Manār* explains that the repetition is not merely for emphasis but also expresses two different actions on God’s part, the one leading into the other. The first divine “turning”, of specific application and dating, has to do with the amnesty conceded to those marriages already ratified by antecedent believers, still unaware of certain prohibitions; in this case, adherence to precepts would entail turning away (*ruḡū‘*, *tawba*) from such incestuous, void, or harmful (*bāṭila*, *ḍarra*) unions. The second “turning”, on the other hand, is atemporal and general: what God desires is that the faithful observe these rules always, to keep themselves pure in mind and heart, and reformed (cfr. *[li]-tuṣlahā*) in their behaviour.

⁴⁶ The observations summarised hereafter are largely attributable to Muḥammad ‘Abduh and to his lectures at al-Azhar (as for the rest of the content of *Tafsīr al-Manār* up to Q 4:125).

If the vision of history in the *Tafsīr al-Manār* is, or is also, a lay one, other Salafi commentators see the past as enacted within a purely religious historical framework: reference to pre-Islamic prophets is not applied to concrete communities, and the concept of reform and a return to the perennial Law in no way entails a positive view of other “peoples of the Book”. An example of this stance would be the *Aysar al-tafsīr fī kalām al-‘ālī al-kabīr* by Abū Bakr al-Ġazā’irī (born 1921)⁴⁷. According to this writer, the model to be followed is to be found “in the behaviour of the prophets and of the pure believers (*ṣāliḥūn*) who came before you so that you might follow in their footsteps, and purify yourselves, and make yourselves perfect, and be blessed as they are”; as for God’s desire to turn back towards the faithful, this means that He “desires to lead you back ([*an*] *yarġa‘a bi-kum*) from the error of the Age of Ignorance towards the true guidance (*hudā*) of Islam”. Al-Ġazā’irī proposes an immediate interpretation, in so far as he explains the passage as a direct appeal to today’s believers; thus in that “those before you” he reads more particularly the Predecessors, whose integrity should be an example for the contemporary reader against an everpresent, and especially contemporary, *Ġāhiliyya*. And similarly, according to this author, Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians alike are lumped together with the incestuous fornicators (*zunāt*) – among “those who follow vain desires”, those who “would have you go astray” alluded to in the last part of the verse. The identification of “the peoples of the Book” as a model to be avoided is not new to the exegetical tradition, indeed it is to be found in al-Ṭabarī⁴⁸. But, as we have said, there is a strong tradition to the contrary⁴⁹.

The good Muslim’s turning back

A last reflection. The *Tafsīr al-Manār* defines “*tawba*” as both the turning back of God and that of man, thus reviving from medieval thought the ambivalence of the term, bringing it back into play, and calling on the faithful to meditate on this overlap of returning, as al-Ṭabarī or al-Rāzī and above all Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī had done.

The chapter that al-Ġazālī’s *Maqṣad* dedicates to the Name *al-Tawwāb* is founded on mutual returning. God is “He who turns (*yarġa‘u*) time after time to make easy for His servants the reasons for returning, making clear His signs⁵⁰ [...] until they,

⁴⁷ I note here the error in <http://www.altafsir.com>, where the birth date is confused with the date of death.

⁴⁸ From al-Suddī. But perhaps this refers only to the Jews (as in al-Ṭabarī, without citing a source, and also in Muqātil). Cfr. also Ibn Kaṭīr.

⁴⁹ Among modern Salafites for instance, the Saudi ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Naṣīr al-Sa’dī (d. 1376/1956), of Ḥanbalite inspiration, identifies the positive example in the prophets but also “in their followers” (*atbā‘u-hum*).

⁵⁰ *Āyāt*. There may be here a reference to a widely reported saying of the Prophet, handed down on the authority of Samura b. Ġundub (d. ante 60h) and quoted by, among others, Ibn Ḥuzayma (d. 311/923–924), and by al-Bayhaqī (458/1066), *al-Sunan al-kubrā*: “[...] the eclipses of this sun, the eclipses of this moon, and the dispersal of these stars [...] are signs from God, with which he puts His servants to the test, to see who among them is fulfilling his reconversion (*man yuḥdiṭu min-hum tawba*)”.

having discovered the disastrous consequences of their wrongdoing through His teaching, are frightened by the fearfulness He has awoken in them, and so return (*raġa'ū*) to repentance, and God's favour consequently returns (*raġa'a*) to them. Al-Ġazālī however does add a gloss, a *tanbīh*, as he always does when Names are “equivocal” (*mutašābiha*) or “shared” (*muštaraka*) between God and man: “Whosoever, time and again, accepts the justifications of wrongdoers, be they his subjects, or friends, or acquaintances, shows this quality (*ḥulq*) and his destiny will depend on it”⁵¹.

This gloss in the *Maqṣad* is remarkable: it maintains in fact that *tawwāb* covers not only the servant who turns back to the Lord, but the man who turns back to his brother. In its human form then, the virtue *tawba* involves not only a turning back similar to repentance, but also a turning back similar to forgiveness, *mutatis mutandis* in imitation of God; and in this manner posits a much more exact convergence between God's behaviour and man's. The idea, beginning with various Koranic overlaps between epithets describing God and describing man, that the majority of the Most Beautiful Names can also be read as a luminous mirror to as many of man's attributes vis-à-vis his neighbour is a relatively familiar idea in Islamic religious writing. Many Names are seen as a way of pointing out to the faithful the road to moral self-realisation and to the building of the ideal society; among these, *al-Šakūr*, “The Most Grateful”, or *al-Ḥalīm*, “The Forbearing”⁵². But the case of *al-Tawwāb*, with the internal doubling of sense we have been examining, has a singularity of its own, the point being that *tawba*'s semantic province is understood to be essentially devotional, and demands vertical interpretation. Al-Ġazālī's position therefore remains an isolated one, not included in, or shared by, the corpus of Islamic speculation.

We may seek definitive confirmation in the didactic literature, by consulting an early work, *The Book of Repentance* (*Kitāb al-tawba*) by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā of Baghdad (d. 281/894)⁵³, and then, given the substantial unanimity of interpretation in the classical literature devoted to the argument – as for example in the *Kitāb al-tawwābīn* by the Ḥanbalite theologian and jurist Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī (m. 620/1223)⁵⁴ – passing directly on to the homonymous work by a contemporary commentator and preacher with a wide following, the Egyptian Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Ša'rawī (d. 1998)⁵⁵.

⁵¹ *Al-Maqṣad*, 150–151.

⁵² On this theme may I refer the reader to two earlier essays of my own: “The Gratitude of man and the gratitude of God. Notes on *šukr* in traditional Islamic thought”, in *ISCH* 38 (2012) 45–61; and “*Ḥilm*, a virtue of man. A contribution to the study of Islamic ethics based on the traditional sources”, currently printing.

⁵³ *Kitāb al-tawba*, ed. Maġdī al-Sayyid Ibrāhīm, Maktabat al-Qur'ān, Cairo n.d.

⁵⁴ Although more exhaustive and better organised (from the angels' and the prophets' *tawba*, through the ancient kings and their peoples, down to the Prophet's Companions, to Muslim rulers and other important figures in Islamic history, and ending with those cases where *tawba* coincides with conversion to Islam, from idolatry or other monotheisms) this text follows closely Ibn Abī al-Dunyā. Cfr. <http://www.worldcat.org/title/kitāb-at-tauwabin-le-livre-des-penitents/oclc/27789110>.

⁵⁵ *Al-tawba*, ed. 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥaġġāġ, Maktabat al-turāt al-islāmī, Cairo 1422/2001.

We will look first at Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's work.

At first, the assembled material deals entirely with contrition (*nadam*), appeal for forgiveness (*istiġfār*), lamentation and regret for the ugliness of the sins, more and less serious, committed, fear (*ḥawf*) of punishment in this life and the next, and the necessary expiation (*kaḥḥāra*); interpersonal relations, including the forgiving and forgetting of one's neighbour's infractions, are ignored. But on closer examination we find the odd exception.

For example, there is the following story about the first Muslim to have his hand amputated: "He was one of the Helpers. They brought him before the Prophet and told him that he had stolen something. He said – take him away and amputate. But then his face darkened and those sitting near him asked him: – Has this caused you grief, Prophet of God? He replied: – Do not be Satan's helpers! When a ruler (*wālī*) is confronted with a criminal case (cfr. *ḥadd*), he has no choice but to impose the penalty; God is the one who absolves (*al-ʿafw*) and who loves absolution (*ʿafw* again). And then he recited – Let them show indulgence and forgive (*wa-l-yaʿfū wa-l-yaʿfaḥū*): do you not want God to forgive you? God is the All-forgiving and All-merciful (*ġaḥūr raḥīm*) (Q 24:22)"⁵⁶.

In another instance, the relationship linking God's pardon and absolution of man with man's of his brother is made quite explicit, alongside the idea of the perpetuity of the Law: "God inspired a prophet with a premonition of imminent punishment. The prophet transmitted this message to his people and ordered that the best among them to go forth and make amends to God (*yatūbū*). Three of them went out in front of the people. The first said: – Lord, You have laid it down in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses that we should not refuse the appeal of whoever should appear at our door; now, we appear before Your doors: do not refuse our appeal. The second said: – Lord, You have laid it down in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses that we should absolve (*an naʿfuwa*) those who do us wrong; now, we have done wrong to ourselves: absolve (*aʿfuʿ an-nā*) us. The third said: – Lord, You have laid it down in the Torah revealed to Your servant Moses that we should free our slaves; now, we are Your servants and slaves: free us. God inspired that prophet to announce that he had accepted their appeal and absolved them"⁵⁷.

Often sympathy for others can be expressed through a request to God for their absolution. One example is afforded by the words of the Prophet's Companion, Ibn Masʿūd (d. ca 32/652–653): "If you see one among you committing a sin, do not inveigh against him, nor abuse him, but pray to God that He absolve him and turn back toward him (*yatūbu ʿalay-hi*)"⁵⁸. Another example is the following prayer of one Ḥazm b. Abī Ḥazm: "My Lord, if we have stained ourselves with a sin against an-

⁵⁶ *Kitāb al-tawba*, 43, no. 17. The saying also appears in al-Bayhaqī's *Sunan, kitāb al-aṣriba wa al-ḥadd fī-hā*, no. 16186.

⁵⁷ *Kitāb al-tawba*, 114, no. 139.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 99–100, no.114; cfr. p. 100, no. 115.

other, compensate him in good things for our sin and forgive us (*ağfir la-nā*); if another has stained himself with a sin against us, compensate us in good things for his sin and forgive him"⁵⁹. Another interesting passage regarding human solidarity: "The prophet David, before succumbing himself to a sin (*ḥaṭī'a*), would inveigh against sinners. When he himself sinned, he said: – Lord, pardon (*ağfir*) the sinners, and perhaps together with them you will pardon me also"⁶⁰. A final quotation, of some subtlety, which renders the pardoning of one's neighbour a gift offered to God: "Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 185/801) was given to saying: – Lord, I have offered You the gift (*wahabtu la-ka*) of one who has wronged me. Ask Thou for the gift of me from him whom I have wronged"⁶¹.

We skip now at least ten centuries of history and turn to the *ṣayḥ* Mutawallī al-Ša'rawī's pamphlet on repentance. It is a work of modest dimensions⁶² but a far-reaching one, which collects under the common denomination of *tawba* a host of diverse elements: cultural (meaning and typology of *tawba*⁶³), theological (the *tawba* that satisfies and delights God; divine clemency), juridical (obligatory *tawba* – or *wāğiba* – and prescribed *tawba* – or *mustaḥabba*), liturgical (the canonical prayer or *ṣalāt*, including analysis of the gestures and words comprising it; legal alms-giving or *zakāt*, etc), moral and ethical (sincere intention or *niyya*, patience or *ṣabr*, charity or *iḥsān*), social ("difference within the community" or *iḥtilāf*, in the sense of divergence of aptitudes and practical capabilities among believers) and more besides. Al-Ša'rawī is not of course writing like al-Ġazālī for the spiritual postulant, nor for the Abbasid patrician like Ibn Abī al-Dunyā; as is clear from his opening words, he is addressing a brother relatively ignorant of the doctrinal and cultural fundamentals of religion, and perhaps with his moral principles a little awry, who will require serious instruction across the board to turn him back to God. The author teaches him the connection (*ta'alluq*) between man's being and God's, always allowing for God's incomensurability, as for example when he aligns the divine clemency with the freely given love of a mother⁶⁴, or when he describes God's concern for the Prophet's well-being (cfr. Q 80:1) through the example of one who has "a son who goes to school and sits up long hours until tiredness gets the better of him, but carries on battling with sleep while his book falls again and again from his hand until you get up and take the book from him and send him to bed [...]"⁶⁵.

Like Ibn Taymiyya (m. 728/1328), whom he continually cites in his text, al-Ša'rawī sets immense store by social solidarity, among Muslims of course. And re-

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 95, no. 107.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 125, no. 160.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 96, no. 108.

⁶² 163 pp., including the editor's preface.

⁶³ Here too in three parts: contrition (*nadam*) for the sin committed in the past, abstaining from it (*iqḷā'*) in the present, firm commitment ('*azm*) to not backsliding in the future, cfr. p. 29.

⁶⁴ *Al-tawba*, 127–128, cfr. 135–136.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

calling the *al-Ḥiğr* sura where it is written “Lower Thou Thy wing to the believers” (Q 15:88), he writes that like the bird that spreads wide its wings in flight but folds them tenderly when approaching his young, so will the good Muslim approach his neighbour with humility and readiness to serve, knowing that when he lowers his wing to his brother, his brother will lower both to him⁶⁶. Islam – he says – does not instil the quality (cfr. *lam yaṭba‘u-hu*) of impetuosity (*šidda*) in the Muslim, nor that of pride (*‘izza*), for in that case he would be impetuous and proud even with other believers. Islam wants him instead to be impetuous and proud when necessary, and when necessary be mild (*layyin*); every thing in its place⁶⁷. It is a part of *tawba* too – as al-Ša‘rawī explains – to be full of mercy to those who merit it, to one’s brothers, as the Koran itself teaches in the Victory sura (cfr. Q 48:29)⁶⁸.

Conclusions

Following the Koranic commentaries with the help of the lexicography and other devotional literature, particularly the classical, but also the modern and the contemporary, we find in the verb *tāba* and its principal derivatives a dichotomy of meaning, which will be more or less emphasised according to author and epoch.

The single meaning “return” or “turning back”, generally agreed on in these various works, is in fact translated into two distinct fields, which are, however, not always and only equivalent to divine forgiveness and human repentance: on the one hand, the turning back known as *tawba*, or “reconversion”, can be understood as acceptance and giving, and thus forgiveness and absolution but also tolerance and indifference, and the conferral of stability and continuity on the right path embarked upon by man, always assuming this be God’s will; on the other hand it can be understood as contrition or regret or remorse for wrongdoing, but also as reform and mending of ways and as the offering up of obedience now and always. The vital axis of this dichotomy is reciprocity, both directional – *tawba* proceeds from God towards man, and from man towards God – and perspectival – it can be viewed from either God’s or man’s angle of vision.

That lexical singularity none the less induces Muslim thinkers to postulate one authorship and logical precedence – which is naturally the divine – at the same time as the coexistence of both fields of action, with man’s active role being awarded greater or lesser weight according to different schools of thought.

Tawba, in its sense of a recessive or convergent movement which is unique even if expressed under two different aspects or from different sides, indicates a return, which may be conceived historically or meta-historically, to an ideal state – which is a “normal”, normalised one – in terms of the relationship between the Creator and his

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 156–157.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

creatures, which is to say the original Adamic or more generally prophetic state, with unquestioning obedience to the Faith and the Law revealed and established by God from the beginning. According to some this is a question of primordial faith or *fiṭra* and a Law codified in the laws of other monotheisms, even; according to others it is a question of the strictly Islamic credo only, and of the right conduct exemplified by the Muslim “Predecessors”.

In so far as, following the Koran’s lead, *tawba* is understood as an entirely vertical process – from man to God and from God to man – there is an almost total lack of reference to the social sphere in the literature dedicated to the subject: in the few cases where we find mention of man’s “reconversion” with respect to his brother, this is a particular and marginal offshoot of turning back to God. Thus the tradition tends not to read in human *tawba* any analogue of pardon, absolution and so on, and to gloss over that degree of shared approach between the Lord and His faithful servant which the Koran itself does imply by applying to both the epithet *tawwāb*, “he who much or often turns back”. The present writer certainly does not mean to suggest that Islamic ethical thought is bereft of ideas concerning the pardon or absolving of one’s neighbour, quite the reverse: it is merely that we find rather that they are conveyed through other lexical roots⁶⁹.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent essai tente d’explorer, dans le cadre général de l’éthique musulmane, la vision complexe de la *tawba* dont la particularité évidente se trouve dans son double sens, car elle signifie ‘repentance’ dans le cas de l’homme et ‘pardon’ dans le cas de Dieu. Notre recherche commencera avec l’usage coranique de la racine *twb*, considérant son contenu explicite tel qu’il est défini par les premiers lexicographes (en particulier, l’œuvre de Ibn Manẓūr) et identifiant sa présence dans le Coran lui-même, l’exégèse classique, moderne et contemporaine, tout comme dans la principale littérature pédagogique incluant également les contributions modernes.

⁶⁹ That is, primarily, *ḡfr* e *fw*; the Koranic occurrences of these two roots, which include a number of relevant instances, are collected in Rahbar, *God of Justice*, 408–436 (appendices IX e X; the occurrences of *twb* are in XI, pp. 437–442).

