

# The Muslim Concept of Surrender to God

*In seeking to understand Muslims it is essential to grasp the dominating themes of their faith. Unity, guidance, and obedience rank particularly high. In this article the author traces the development of the most fundamental Muslim concept that forms the touchstone of their identity—surrender to God.*

by Mark Nygard

**T**he Pakistani Muslim leader Abul A'la Mawdudi, surely represents many Muslims when he expressed pride that his religion was not, like so many others, named after a specific person or group. He points out that Christianity takes its name from Christ, Buddhism from Buddha, Zoroastrianism from Zoroaster, Judaism from the Jews. Islam, however, takes its name from "an attributive title," that is, Islam describes anyone who has the attribute of *islam* (surrender), and of being *muslim* (one who has so surrendered), of having surrendered himself to God or resigned his will to God's will in such a way that he experiences the well-being of God's peace.<sup>1</sup> Surrender to God is seen by Muslims as the defining characteristic of their faith, basic to their own sense of identity as Muslims and touchstone to their sense of unity. The question is: Exactly what does surrender to God mean for Muslims?

Straightforward definitions of surrender exist. Perhaps the first to be offered by a Muslim on the street is a practical one: accomplishment of what are called the five "pillars of Islam." One who surrenders to God is one who practices the following divinely ordained acts:

1. *Shahada*, the witness that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his Prophet.

2. *Salat*, the ritual prayers, or worship services, performed daily during five specified intervals.

3. *Zakat*, ritual alms giving based

upon the value of stipulated property.

4. *Sawm*, fasting during daylight hours during the month of Ramadan.

5. *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during the lifetime of each Muslim for those who can afford it<sup>2</sup>

A sixth pillar is sometimes added, *jihad*, which means "'striving, or exertion' in the way of God," either personally by struggle against lack of faith and devotion, or publicly, by preaching, teaching and, if necessary, armed struggle.<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the aspect of day-to-day obedience, these pillars are fundamental requirements of Muslim surrender so basic that there is virtually no disagreement over them among the various branches of Islam.

Nevertheless, when one considers that there are persons widely considered to be Muslims who neglect all but the first pillar for significant parts of their lives, such simple definitions begin to seem illusive. The fact of the matter is that Muslim thought on surrender is more complex, and is the fruit of a history of development by a human community faced with a wide variety of circumstances and decisions over a period of 1400 years. Its full breadth and beauty can be more adequately appreciated by considering, however briefly, some key moments in that history.

## **Surrender as Uncompromising Obedience**

The year is 656, and the third caliph of the new Islamic movement has been murdered. The governor of

Syria, Mu'awiya engages the forces of 'Ali, son-in-law of Muhammad and natural heir to power, in a contest for succession. After two weeks of battle, 'Ali agrees to arbitration of the issue on the basis of the Qur'an. Suddenly, a number of 'Ali's men withdraw from his camp in protest. How is it possible, they ask, that the will of God as revealed in the Qur'an should be mediated by human authorities? How can it be that their hero, 'Ali, should compromise his faith and religious principles by consorting with the followers of a pretender? In negotiating with one who was outside God's will, 'Ali demonstrates that he himself is outside God's will and thus, in fact, neither a true Muslim nor qualified to lead true Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

Those who "went out" (*kharaja*) from 'Ali became the kernel of the Kharijite movement. The dominating characteristic of this movement was the conviction that the faith of a Muslim had to be accompanied by appropriate works or it was no *Islam* at all. Morality was more important than profession of faith since it exposed one's faith. Faithfulness in surrender to God meant single-minded integrity of action as proof of the word, lest faith be proven false. A failure of integrity at any point indicated an incompleteness of surrender, betraying the fact that one was not really the Muslim one professed to be, and Kharijites removed such persons from the community.<sup>5</sup>

The uncompromising character of the Kharijite position was so driving

that the movement splintered, as sect judged fellow-sect unworthy of the name Muslim. In political issues there was no toleration for a ruler who appeared to the faithful to have fallen into sin. In personal matters there was no recourse for error, no mercy or forgiveness. They could not structure a world themselves, and they were hotly pursued for their unyielding criticism of the legitimacy of the world of others. While theirs was not to be the defining position, the passionate insistence of the Kharijites on the totality of surrender undoubtedly reflects the passionate insistence of the Qur'an on the incomparable uniqueness of God. It may be argued that the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in our century renews some Kharijite themes.

#### Surrender as an Inward Belief

Some thirty years have passed since the Kharijites "went out" from 'Ali. The successors of Mu'awiya have not only established their dynasty after the death of 'Ali in 661, but managed to put down a second civil war of dissatisfaction with their leadership. Around every campfire, discussion of the recent war ends with the same debate: Who really should have been caliph back in 'Ali's day? Are these Umayyads God's choice of leadership for Muslims? Should the 'Ali line be returned to power? Maybe some other leader is really the right one? The temptation to be intolerant of rival points of view and create division within the movement is very real, not for Kharijites only, but for the whole Muslim community.<sup>6</sup>

From this time a book has come down to us, written by al-Hasan, grandson of 'Ali entitled *Kitab al-Irja'*, or Book of Deferment. In this book al-Hasan proposed that the question of the rightness or wrongness of each party's candidate should be postponed, or deferred (*irja'*), to God's own ultimate judgment, and that meanwhile Muslims should refrain from declaring themselves on the disputed matter.

Implicit in this concept of postponement was the idea that profession of faith must be taken seriously, even when actions might not seem to all observers to correspond with it. The claim to be a Muslim must be respected on its own merit and not be called into question by actions. By this doctrine al-Hasan was giving opponents on all sides a theological rationale for setting aside judgment on a potentially disruptive issue that was not likely to be resolved soon. Those who accepted this approach came to be known as people of deferment, or Murji'ites.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, the issue of succession died down, 'Ali was accepted as one of "the four rightly-guided caliphs," and the Murji'ite idea of postponing judgment of rulers ceased to be quite so critical an issue. What remained important, however, was a concept of faith that fundamentally excludes consideration of a person's acts. In the words of Gibbs and Kramers, "a Muslim does not lose his faith through sin," or eschatologically, "where there is faith, sins will do no harm."<sup>8</sup> "We do not consider anyone to be an infidel on account of sin," declares article one of the Murji'ite confession, *Fikh Aqbar I*.<sup>9</sup> In effect, *islam* is identified with *iman*: surrender is most essentially a matter of faith. Misinterpretation of religious duty does not negate faith; neither does committing forbidden acts. Erroneous believers and sinful believers are Muslims nonetheless because of their faith. This emphasis on faith came to be the defining hallmark of the Murji'ite movement in contrast to Kharijites with their emphasis on corresponding acts.

Such a definition of surrender had the effect of internalizing its basic nature. It became impossible to establish the presence of true *islam* by empirical observation, so its confession by an individual had to be accepted by the community. God alone could know the posture of the heart, so God alone could judge the true Muslim from the pretender. Thus, it

was a position that relieved the community of the need to make difficult excluding decisions concerning its members. Sociologically, Muslim identity before the community was established by confession of faith, and both believer and community were enabled to pass on to other questions of life and faith beyond the issue of identity. Not only so, a Muslim individual or group confident of their inward belief could respond more resiliently to occasional human failure, knowing that it was not intrinsically related to their identity as Muslims. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that the Murji'ite position became widely accepted in Islam as the pragmatic approach to self-definition, even though periodic calls for more moral rigor occurred.

#### Surrender as a Freely Chosen Human Possibility

Sometime between the years 694 and 699 a man named Hasan al-Basri sits down to write a letter to the caliph. Hasan's views are rumored to be unusual, and the caliph has asked him to account for himself. Carefully Hasan pens a document, still extant, that includes these words:

God creates only good; evil stems from men or from Satan. Man chooses freely between the two; but God knows from all eternity what man will choose. He only "leads him into error"...if man has first given him occasion for this through his sin.<sup>10</sup>

Without denying God's will and foreknowledge entirety, Hasan allowed for the possibility of free human choice. Based on Quranic exegesis, he granted that God is determinative not only of external events such as poverty and famine, but also of internal human workings connected with surrender, such as faith and obedience. But most significantly, Hasan also maintained that God determines these only *after* human choice and leading. God's power may be active in the relationship that comes about through surrender, but it is active only as each person chooses to

make it so. This human participation is important for practical piety. When the choice goes awry, the person who made it is responsible for the consequences. God's responsibility in the human realm is limited to that which is good.<sup>11</sup>

This position came to be known as Qadarite, the idea of limitation of God's power (*qadar*) to permit some semblance of responsible human choice. Although Hasan al-Basri is the first record of such views that we possess, they were apparently not uncommon during the first Islamic centuries. A moderate position, sensitive to Quranic witness, it seems that it was considered by the faithful to be neither particularly unorthodox nor dangerous until its ultimate consequences were realized by the more systematic approach of the Mu'tazilites.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Surrender as Human Response to a Just God**

A young disciple of the Hasan al-Basri mentioned above, Wasil ibn-'Ata', sits among a group of men discussing the issue of faith and works. He listens intently as his master is asked just what will become of a grave sinner who is nevertheless a Muslim. The Kharijite answer is, of course, that such a sinner could certainly not be a true Muslim and so was lost forever. The Murji'ite answer, on the other hand, is that, since the name Muslim was dependent upon confession of faith rather than moral uprightness, he must still be destined for paradise. For a Qadarite who affirms a responsible human will, the choice is uncomfortable, and Hasan hesitates between the two possibilities. As he does so, young Wasil, his student, speaks up in his place. "A grave sinner can be classified as neither believer nor unbeliever," he asserts. "For these people there must be some 'intermediate position.'" Vigorous discussion ensues, but

Wasil and others refuse to take the usual sides and finally leave the fellowship of their master, prompting him to say, "He has withdrawn (*i'tazala*) from us."<sup>13</sup>

The group came to be known as the Mu'tazilites (those who have withdrawn), and over the next century their influence in the Muslim world became enormous. Borrowing logical methods from Greek philosophy and applying

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them to Muslim data, Mu'tazilite thinkers systematized Muslim thought in a way most convincing for their age. By 833 their teaching became temporarily the official position of the caliphate in Baghdad and for centuries after retained influential spokes persons for its cause.<sup>14</sup> Though Mu'tazilite thought has long been out of fashion it may be argued that a number of significant modern Muslim thinkers have taken positions that resemble Mu'tazilite points of view.

Behind the idea of an intermediate state lies a powerful sense that God's justice would not assign those to paradise or hell who did not fully deserve them. Though all Muslims hold that God is just, Mu'tazilites gave particular emphasis to the reasoned principle of justice, to the extent that God's justice has been called "their fundamental dogma."<sup>15</sup> Using the analogy of the invisible to the visible, a philosophical principle that one can deduce what is true for the invisible realm by observing what is true for the visible, Mu'tazilites argued that the same apprehension of justice and injustice that is valued by humankind must be valued by God as well. By this principle human moral

law takes on a kind of transcendent quality. That which is perceived to be good on this earth will be seen as good by God and be rewarded accordingly.

Likewise with that which is wrong, God will not let it go unpunished. If this be true, then God is not capricious in his dealings with humankind; the fact that he is just in a way intelligible to humankind makes him predictably

so. Mu'tazilites could even describe God as *obliged* to act in a certain way in a certain situation, lest he be proven unjust. With this obligation of God in mind, Mu'tazilites could argue amongst themselves whether God had the power to do that which

was unjust. Indeed, it appeared to some that the omnipotence of God was compromised by this principle of justice.<sup>16</sup>

Every Muslim knew that the God of the Qur'an was a commanding God, ordaining laws and promising reward or threatening punishment depending on how those laws were fulfilled. For Mu'tazilites this meant that humankind must have the power to obey those commands, lest the consequences attached to the laws and the God who attached them be shown unjust. Surely God could not justly hold people responsible for deeds they did not have the will or power to commit or refrain from committing. "Obligation and sanction can only be understood in reference to a responsible being."<sup>17</sup> The implication was that God did not coerce, but had given the freedom to humankind to act or not to act in a given situation. The concern for a free human choice prior to divine determination was thus clothed with a theological system that emphasized God's justice.

Implicit in this freedom was real power to act. Since God is the source of all power to act, two important affirma-

tions about the way God gives this power were necessary. First, the power to act must come from God in some way prior to the moment when the action was required so that the individual could be responsible for the way the God-given power was used or not used. Otherwise the action would seem to be God's and not that of the person acting. And secondly, a just God would not give grace (*luff*) inequitably, determining human actions by the amount or kind of grace given.<sup>18</sup> In the name of justice God must give freely and abundantly to all, so that the deciding factor in surrender as in other actions will be not divine economy, but the human response.

### Surrender as Divine Gift of an Omnipotent God

It is the middle of a tenth-century night in what is now Iraq. An aspiring teacher of the Mu'tazilite school, awakes suddenly from his sleep and sits bolt upright. Al-Ash'ari has had a dream. In his dream God himself has spoken to him and has called his teaching into question. God has asked him to defend his Mu'tazilite position on the basis of the sayings of Muhammad, and if he cannot, to give it up. This is not the first time al-Ash'ari has had such a dream, and he is shaken. He decides he must abandon a promising career among his Mu'tazilite teachers and take up the position of their opponents. But he will not give up the methods he has learned.

In the years ahead al-Ash'ari would become a powerful champion against the Mu'tazilite teaching using the very logical methods that made those teachings so popular.<sup>19</sup> The school of thought that followed him, the Ash'arites, would come to be regarded as "the most important single school of systematic theology in orthodox Islam,"<sup>20</sup> with a wide following into our present day.

Al-Ash'ari predicated his theology upon an affirmation of God's almighty

will. Anything less than a comprehensive divine will seemed to him to attribute to God either "unmindfulness and neglect" or "weakness, impotence, feebleness, and failure to attain His desire."<sup>21</sup> God revealed himself to be a comprehensively willing God in such Quranic verses as 76:30, "But you shall not will unless God will."<sup>22</sup> In al-Ash'ari's understanding, our impression that events happen because other events cause them is an illusion. The real reason for happenings of all sorts is because, moment by moment, "God creates necessary motion."<sup>23</sup>

In particular, the kind of human faith and actions that might be involved in surrender cannot be the result of human willing but rather of God's. Al-Ash'ari goes so far as to affirm and offer proof that they are "produced" by God, even "created" by God. The human individual simply "acquires" them from God. By this "doctrine of acquisition" (*kasb*) a person does what he does "in virtue of a created power."<sup>24</sup> That power is not his own; it is put in place by God at the very moment it is needed, and not before. There is no time interval in which humans may be in control of it. It is truly at every instance and at the deepest level God's power.

This is not viewed by al-Ash'ari as necessity, because he defines necessity on the basis of what is experienced to be necessary at the level of creaturely perception: "that to which the thing is constrained and compelled and forced, and from which it can find no way to get free or to escape, even though it strive to be freed from it and want to escape from it and exhaust its endeavors to do so."<sup>25</sup> There is no struggle in an acquired act, no sense of the involuntary obligation to commit an act that this definition would require. The individual finds that one has the power to do what the individual wants to do and does it, even claiming responsibility for the deed accomplished.<sup>26</sup> Whether or not this definition of necessity satisfies the philo-

sophical question of ultimate responsibility, it does in fact satisfy the daily perception and experience of most people who think of themselves as being responsible agents, how ever that power to be responsible came to exist.

Since both what humanly seems good and what humanly seems evil come from God and God alone, then the human creature is forever "either the recipient of a favor for which he must give thanks, or the object of a trial which he must endure patiently."<sup>27</sup> One who is surrendered to the will of such a God, then, is one whose life rotates between thankfulness and patient endurance. He believes that God sends moment by moment what he wills, and he accepts it. For Ash'arites it is this quality of belief that is essential for the surrendered attitude before the omnipotent God.

### Al Ghazali: Surrender, a Unity of Body and Soul

It is the last half of the tenth century in what is now northeastern Iran, and al-Ghazali is on the search for knowledge of God. He finds he can't believe something just because others have said so (*taqlid*), and he wonders about the elegant logical rationales for proving and defending knowledge (*'aql*) used by the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites. He yearns for more certainty, and his search leads him to the Muslim mystics, the Sufis, with their mystical intuition of God (*dhawq*). With them he disciplines himself to arrive at that point where "there is no veil between you and [God] except your pre-occupation with aught else."<sup>28</sup> This is "union with God" which al-Ghazali afterward described in three ways:

1. The character of the mystic becomes God-like, "as if only God (God's character) is within him."
2. The consciousness of the mystic is so fixed on God in love and adoration that it is aware of nothing else.
3. It is seen that "there is naught

in existence except Allah, that all existence is in His Aspect.”<sup>29</sup> This “union means that God and man are in harmony, and that man’s heart reflects God.”<sup>30</sup>

Yet, even now, with this mystical union, al-Ghazali is not satisfied that he knows God’s inner nature. Through the mystical experience he has gained a sense of assurance of belief, a subjective confidence of belief (*yaqin*), but he is not convinced that he can thereby attain fresh content of belief, fresh illumination from God himself (*wahi*).<sup>31</sup> For this he returns to the Qur’an. The chasm between the world of humankind and the realm of God yawns wide for al-Ghazali, too wide for reason, too wide for mystical approach. Only God can overcome it, and al-Ghazali believes God has done that miracle in the Qur’an.

Al-Ghazali is remembered by Muslims today not because he had a mystical experience of God. Countless Sufi mystics had gone this way before, proceeding far beyond Ghazali to heterodox experiences of direct contact, unity, and even mystical identity with the Deity. Rather, the accomplishment of al-Ghazali is that he afterwards returned to orthodox Muslim teaching based in the Qur’an and so linked it with his mystical experiences that the warmth and assurance of their approach was made available to orthodox Muslim faithful. He brought Sufism into the heart of surrender to God.

How did he do this? Without entering into his philosophical rationale it may be said that al-Ghazali makes much of the observation that what the body perceives and does profoundly affects the reflective soul, and conversely, what the soul becomes in the process of acquiring experience profoundly affects its use of the body.<sup>32</sup> In his own words,

Everyone is undoubtedly influenced by this inter-relation of his mind [soul]

and his body. For assuredly if the mind is perfected and purified it will improve the deeds of the body, so that they too will become commendable. And conversely, if the impressions that are given to the mind by the body are wholesome they will put the mind in a favorable state, and the dispositions will tend to become agreeable. Therefore the way to purify the mind is to make habitual these actions which are completely pure, having in view that when this has become a cus-

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tom by means of frequent repetition, then the state that has been produced on the mind will become constant.<sup>33</sup>

Recognition of purity in actions requires that their meaning be known and reflected upon. Thus it is important that the commendable action be performed in full consciousness of its meaning, so that the full impact on the soul be obtained.

For the Muslim seeker after God this has tremendous significance. It means that devotional acts—in particular, the pillars of Islam prescribed by the Qur’an—must be appreciated for their inward as well as their outward aspects. These aspects correspond to the soul and body of the human individual and are inseparable. It is not possible to perform the devotional acts in a “sound” manner without knowing their deeper meaning and performing it “with single-minded devotion, purity of thought and absolute sincerity,” and al-Ghazali criticized Muslim jurisprudence of the time for allowing it. But neither is it possible to neglect the outward manifestations of the acts in preference for inward and spiritual approaches to God according to the practice of some Sufis. In his synthesis of *shari‘a* and Sufis insight al-Ghazali held that the purpose of every act of devotion is the remem-

brance of God by the soul, and therefore “perseverance in [the act] means perseverance in remembrance, as a result of which love of God and intimacy with Him are produced in the soul. Thus, the ultimate aim of devotional acts emerges as love of God and nearness to Him.”<sup>34</sup>

Al-Ghazali’s surrender must be understood in terms of this twofold

discipline. It is the outward life of obedience to the divinely-commanded ritual and action, accompanied by inward consciousness of its spiritual meaning and intention. Surrender is thus a unity of meaning and action in an

individual’s life that prepares the soul for its blessed eternal existence with God

### The Muslim Concept of Surrender: A Flow of Thought

There is not enough space to pursue other significant moments of the Islamic story. One could discuss surrender as an outward manifestation of an inner love (Ibn Taymiyya), or surrender as a courageous struggle for personal growth in intensity and mastery of the universe (Muhammad Iqbal). One could consider how daring new efforts to understand surrender continue to be attempted in response to the challenges and possibilities of the modern situation. But perhaps enough has been said to demonstrate the vitality of the concept. It is not so much a vocabulary term to be understood as it is a river of thought, flowing across the varied landscape of Muslim history, to be pondered and appreciated. In its simplicity it can be grasped by a child: awed acknowledgment of God’s uniqueness. In its straight forwardness it can be applied by the working day world: obedience to God’s ordinances. In its significance it can be relished at length by theologian and philosopher, for its ramifications touch all aspects of life.

The concept of surrender to God invites consideration by Christians and those of other religious persuasions, for the struggles for self-understanding that are played out around this theme in the Muslim theater of history are often the very same struggles that we have experienced ourselves. In surrender to God we see devout people wrestling with theological questions that are our own: the relationship between faith and good works, the awareness of power versus a sense of human responsibility, the relationship of theology and our practice of the faith, etc. What makes it so interesting is that Muslims have done their wrestlings and built their reflections with quite a different set of data in quite a different set of circumstances. Those of us whose faith is different will surely have a better understanding of ourselves and our faith in God for having sought to understand Muslims in their surrender to him.

#### End Notes

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5. G. Levi Della Vida, "Kharidjites," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978) 3:1074-76.
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13. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 47.
14. Joseph van Ess, "Mu'tazilah," *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 10:221-225. See also D. Gimaret, "Mu'tazilah," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 7:783-787.
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17. Ibid., 790.
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19. W. Montgomery Watt, "Al-Ash'ari, Abu 'I-Hasan," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1:694. See also his *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 65.
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21. Richard McCarthy, ed., *The Theology of Ash'ari* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953) 41, in which he translates al-Ash'ar's *Luma'*.
22. Ibid., 34. Other Quranic verses cited elsewhere include 10:99, 32:13, 85:16, 11:107-109, 6:112, and 2:253/254.
23. *ibid.*, 56-59.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 59.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 64.
28. Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazali's Unique Unknowable God* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964) 59.
29. Ibid., 32-33.
30. Ibid.
31. "A Short Creed by al-Ghazzali," Duncan B. Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory* (Lahore: Premier Book House, 1960, 1964, first published 1903) 303-304
32. Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of Al-Ghazali: A Composite Ethics in Islam* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Central Printing Sendirian Berhad, 1975) 46-47.
33. Dwight M. Donaldson, *Studies in Muslim Ethics* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963) 140-142, in which he translates portions of al-Ghazali's *Ihya'* III:48-50.
34. Quasem, *Ethics of al-Ghazali*, 47-48. See also Umar-ud-Din, *Ethical Philosophy of al-Ghazzali* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1972) 163. "...The 'Ibadat [ordinances for worship] have been ordained only for achieving the remembrance of God, and if this object is not realized, there is no value in Salat [prayer ritual]."

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