



Repentance, Redemption, & Salvation: An Islamic Framework

ROOHI TAHIR

Author Biography

Roohi Tahir has a BS with honors in Computer Engineering from Boston University and is currently enrolled in BMAIS, pursuing a Masters in Islamic Studies from the Islamic Online University. She is also the Founder and instructor of Nourish Your Soul, a platform for Islamic education.

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Introduction

“Every son of Adam commits sin, and the best of those who commit sin are those who repent.”¹ While seemingly counterintuitive, this profound statement from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is a cornerstone in the understanding of repentance (*tawba*) within the framework of Islamic theology. Much can be gleaned from these few words; perhaps the most striking question is how one in a continual state of sin and repentance can at the very same time be regarded as the best of humanity? This question is even more significant given the darkness and negativity often associated with sin within our collective imagination, an association that is likely the result of a fusion of religious doctrine and encounters with culture, folklore, mythology, and literature such as Dante’s *Inferno*. Haunting special effects depicting scenes of the journey to the underworld, often used to characterize man’s fall from grace into an abyss, distant from redemption, further contribute to this view. Yet, one of the defining characteristics of *tawba* is that it in fact enables one to attain a more righteous outcome and noble standing with God.

Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves. [Qur’an 2:222]

Tawba plays an essential role in shaping a believer’s outlook on life, making it a means of fortifying one’s faith, such that without it, one is susceptible to doubt and despair. This paper discusses the Islamic discourse on repentance and highlights the critical role it plays in the life of a believer. The core beliefs in regard to *tawba* from Islam’s primary sources, the Qur’an and the *Sunnah*, are described along with its distinct features, particularly in light of more common interpretations of the word “repentance.” This word is typically used to identify the process of remorse and subsequent seeking of redemption for one’s sins in the sight of God—and is often associated with the Judeo-Christian traditions which share some common beliefs with Islam but fundamentally differ with respect to others.² *Tawba* is both an outward (comprising specific actions) as well as an inward (hidden from public

¹ *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Vol. 5, Book 37, *Hadith* 4251

² "Repentance." Encyclopedia of Religion. Encyclopedia.com. (November 2, 2017).

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/repentance>

view) endeavor the believer undertakes. A follow-up paper to this theological study of *tawba* will address its practical applications, introduce its vast spiritual dimensions which involve examination of one's inner condition, the obstacles to *tawba* one may encounter, and the stages of the spiritual journey undertaken to gain closeness to Allah as taught and implemented by the Prophet ﷺ. It is ultimately one's self-awareness and conviction in *tawba* which naturally guide one's approach to life and provide the moral compass by which to live. This conviction also provides the motivation necessary to drive one toward *tawba* while safeguarding one from sin, disillusionment, and despair—thus making it a crucial component of faith and an act of worship to appreciate and inculcate for one's well-being and salvation.

But indeed, I am the Perpetual Forgiver of whoever repents and believes and does righteousness and then continues in guidance. [Qur'an 20:82]

The Afterlife, Repentance, and Redemption

Belief in life after death, in accountability for one's actions in this life, and in the subsequent need for repentance varies the world over. While the focus of this study is *tawba*, it is important to briefly mention a few prevalent beliefs in order to have reference points from which to compare, contrast, and develop a better understanding of the Islamic perspective and draw from its many benefits. Humanity for the most part intuitively holds to belief in God with projections of growing numbers of adherents globally for all the world's major religious groups.³ However, it must also be noted that an increasing segment of the world's population subscribes to a spectrum of secular liberal ideologies that are either characterized by doubts and misconceptions about God and religion, or that deny the existence of God altogether. This, in turn, leads to the denial of the existence of, and the motivation to work toward, an afterlife in which to reap the rewards of life's work—placing all emphasis instead on life in this world. In this view, notions of morality and justice sit squarely in the hands of humans, whose reasoning and

³ Wormald, Benjamin. "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. April 02, 2015. Accessed November 06, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

capability is presumed sufficient for managing their affairs for the relatively short time they have on earth.⁴ With no sense of accountability to God, the need for repentance is also dissolved—and with it a core element that, from the Islamic perspective, serves to facilitate moral development. As 'A'isha once reported, “I said, ‘Messenger of Allah, the son of Jud'an established ties of relationship, [and] fed the poor. Would that be of any avail to him?’ He said, ‘It would be of no avail to him as he did not ever say: O my Lord, pardon my sins on the Day of Resurrection.’”⁵ *Tawba* involves a recognition of one's own fallibility in one's moral choices and of one's potential for evil, and an acknowledgment that these need amending. Furthermore, the very essence of Islam involves total submission to one's Creator and Master, God Almighty, so it should come as no surprise that the Qur'an clearly distinguishes between the consequences of heedlessness and denial (of those who understand its message) and the reward He promises to those who choose belief and righteousness:

[They are] those whose effort is lost in worldly life, while they think that they are doing well in work. [Qur'an 18:104]

Whoever disbelieves—upon him is [the consequence of] his disbelief. And whoever does righteousness—they are for themselves preparing—that He may reward those who have believed and done righteous deeds out of His bounty. Indeed, He does not like the disbelievers. [Qur'an 30:44-45]

As for those who believe in supreme divine authority, we can broadly categorize them into two groups—Eastern faiths and Abrahamic faiths. Eastern faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism⁶ focus on refining the inner self, and generally subscribe to divine incarnation, reincarnation, and *karma* as the means to salvation. Thus, salvation is achieved through one's deeds in that human beings face accountability for the good and evil they carried out in this world through cycles of rebirth; this approach leaves no room for the role of God and His forgiveness in regard to

⁴ "The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion." National Geographic. April 22, 2016. Accessed November 06, 2017. <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/>.

⁵ *Sahih Muslim* 214 In-book reference: Book 1, *Hadith* 426 USC-MSA web (English) reference: Book 1, *Hadith* 416

⁶ Muhiyaddin, Mohammed Ali. A comparative study of the religions of today. New York: Vantage Press, 1985. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/compressed.photo.goodreads.com/documents/1329911133books/13487787.pdf> pp. 23-24

man's final destiny. Reincarnation is described as a cyclical course of life and death along which the individual's soul journeys through life into death. With each cycle of rebirth, it returns once again to this world in a different body representative of its new status in a hierarchical system. Thus, a soul may be returned to this world ranging anywhere from the lowest ranking *caste* as a consequence of one's evil deeds, to that of those humans considered to have the most noble and high status (the priestly and warrior classes) for having lived a life of good. All of this is based on one's conduct in the previous life with the goal of ultimately attaining the state of *nirvana*, at which point one has reached the highest spiritual elevation and "release from earthly existence as well as from pain, desire, and sorrow"⁷—that of becoming one with the divine Absolute/Supreme Essence in eternity—a lofty goal only a select few are believed to attain, and also one that serves as inspiration for a number of mystic traditions.

A common thread among these religious traditions involves seeking seclusion and to great extent, denial of oneself and of the world in order to realize and nurture one's spirituality—an approach which could potentially bring the world to a complete halt had its practice been the only path to salvation. In contrast, Islam prescribes the perfect balance of striving to benefit oneself and others. One is to take from the tangible good of this world provided by God, stay engaged and contribute to society, and endure the challenges that accompany the temptations and harm that may come from doing so, all the while striving for moral growth and spiritual gains through *tawba* to attain His pleasure in both this world and the Hereafter.⁸ Islam is pure in its monotheism, rejecting any and all forms of polytheism, assignment of partners to God, and anthropomorphism. It is made abundantly clear that all humans are created equal in the sight of Allah, regardless of race or worldly status, that they are the most noble of His creation, and that they have been given life for the sole purpose of worshipping Him alone. Ultimately we will all return to Him to be judged and subsequently rewarded or punished in the eternal Hereafter.

⁷ Ibid pp. 26-27, p. 102

⁸ The Prophet ﷺ said, "The believer who mixes with the people and endures their harm has a greater reward than one who does not mix with the people nor endures their harm." *Musnad Ahmad* 22588

[For such is the state of the disbelievers], until, when death comes to one of them, he says, "My Lord, send me back that I might do righteousness in that which I left behind." No! It is only a word he is saying; and behind them is a barrier until the Day they are resurrected. [Qur'an 23:99-100]

The other grouping is that of the Abrahamic faiths. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their roots back to the prophet Abraham and all claim belief in, and worship of, the same God. Yet each also holds that it alone provides the sole path to salvation (*salvific exclusivity*).⁹ However, each has its own theological understandings, teachings, and practices with respect to human fallibility, need for repentance and forgiveness from God, and life in the Hereafter. It is important to acknowledge the existence of countless denominations and sects within the orthodox and reform movements of each of these major world religions that differ significantly, with some even rejecting particular theological concepts that others hold to be fundamental. The continued existence of such concepts, as well as specific references to them in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, necessitate their being discussed with regard to their relevance to the concept of *tawba*.

And We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together, and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ. [Qur'an 5:48]

⁹ "Salvific Exclusivity – Shaykh Yasir Qadhi." MuslimMatters.org - Discourses in the Intellectual Traditions, Political Situation, and Social Ethics of Muslim Life. Accessed November 06, 2017. <https://muslimmatters.org/2014/04/11/salvific-exclusivity-i-shaykh-yasir-qadhi/>.

What is *tawba*?

Derived from a verb in the Arabic language which literally means “to return,”¹⁰ the word *tawba* in the Islamic context refers to the act of abandoning something prohibited (*haram*) by Allah (and therefore deemed sinful) for that which is in accordance with the commands of Allah.¹¹ *Halal* is a significantly broader category comprising everything within the realm of permissibility as well as those acts which carry specific reward from Allah; these include most everyday matters as well as legislated acts of worship dedicated only to Allah. *Tawba* is thus in essence a “return” to Allah with a humble admission of one’s fallibility in which the servant expresses remorse while seeking forgiveness (*istighfar*) and redemption from the Master for having erred or fallen into sin. Included within the concept of *tawba* is the intention of restrain, reform, and moral self-improvement going forward. *Tawba* is defined early on in the second chapter of the Qur’an in the story of the prophet Adam, his wife, *Hawwa* (Eve), and *Iblis* (Satan). The creation story is documented in all three scriptures: the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur’an. The Qur’an mentions it in several chapters; this story is woven throughout as a frequent reminder to us of our origin, our relationship with Allah, our fallibility, the purpose of life on earth, and our final return to Allah for judgment:

And We said, "O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise and eat therefrom in [ease and] abundance from wherever you will. But do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers." But Satan caused them to slip out of it and removed them from that [condition] in which they had been. And We said, "Go down, [all of you], as enemies to one another, and you will have upon the earth a place of settlement and provision for a time." Then Adam received from his Lord [some] words, and He accepted his repentance. Indeed, it is He Who is the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful. We said, "Go down from it, all of you. And when guidance comes

¹⁰ Arabic-English Lexicon by Edward William Lane. <http://www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/lane/> p. 321

¹¹ Philips, Abu Ameenah Bilal. *Salvation through repentance (An Islamic view)*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Pub. House. p. 1

to you from Me, whoever follows My guidance—there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve.”[Qur’an 2:35-38]

The creation story provides the foundation for human existence and understanding of life itself, containing within it the methodology with which to approach *tawba*, and a description of both its practical and spiritual dimensions. It eloquently illustrates the human’s relationship with Allah—first and foremost establishing that Allah created Adam as the first human¹² and subsequently from his progeny all of mankind, with the sole purpose of worshipping and obeying Him. Adam was given knowledge¹³ and instruction—to live with his spouse in Paradise and to benefit from its plentiful provision as they wished, with the exception of a single tree He forbade them both from approaching. Allah, from His divine providence, bestowed on Adam intellect and the capacity for free will, giving him the ability to do both good and evil as a means of testing him. What ensued in the Garden serves as a paramount lesson for all time. Adam and *Hawwa* were both tempted into disobedience by *Iblis*, causing them to be removed from Paradise. Yet, as a phenomenal gesture of mercy and generosity, Allah taught Adam the very words of *tawba* with which he and his progeny are to seek forgiveness from Him. Hence, Allah made *tawba* the means of forgiveness and redemption in the struggle on earth between good and evil, and the means through which one gains both His pleasure in this world and eternal salvation upon final return to Him on the Day of Resurrection.

Furthermore, the story of Adam and *Iblis* serves as the framework for the greatest challenge we will face on earth: an unrelenting battle from the cradle to the grave against a deceitful enemy who will often pose as our confidante, just as he did in *Jannah*, in order to mislead us into disobedience.¹⁴ Among *Iblis*’s many tactics is that he skillfully instills in us his own attributes of despair and arrogance (the first expression of racism involved *Iblis* thinking himself superior to Adam) to impede man from making *tawba*. He does so by convincing us to despair of our worthiness in the sight of Allah in approaching Him directly. Those who despair in this way

¹² Who perfected everything which He created and began the creation of man from clay. [Qur’an 32:7]

¹³ And He taught Adam the names - all of them. [Qur’an 2:31]

¹⁴ [Qur’an 7:11-18]

often seek forgiveness through the help of a pious intermediary whom they view as being closer to Allah and thereby fall into *shirk*¹⁵ (assigning partners to God). He may even convince us to give up and not turn back to Allah at all. Likewise, *Iblis* will strategically appeal to our egos, causing us to become heedless. He may convince us that we do not need to make *tawba* as our worldly achievements indicate our honorable status with Allah, or that Allah's mercy alone guarantees us salvation—all prevalent misconceptions to this day.

This is our struggle on earth. To be human is to be flawed and to sin—as only Allah is Perfect; thus, falling into sin and making *tawba* are perpetual states for the believer. The creation story teaches us that human fallibility is part of the deliberate and perfect divine plan such that, just as we are naturally inclined to worship Allah and seek guidance, we are also inclined to sin. Hence, *tawba* is the greatest of blessings and of the most beautiful acts of worship taught to us, one through which we fulfill our purpose, develop humility, and strengthen our connection with Allah, while increasing our love for Him through reflection and hope for His Mercy, Forgiveness, and Generosity.¹⁶

*The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "Were you not to commit sins, Allah would create people who would commit sins and ask for forgiveness and He would forgive them."*¹⁷

Humans began their existence in *Jannah* and we are commanded to spend our lives striving to return to it, using divine guidance as a moral compass and *tawba* as provision for the journey back to our eternal home. Hence, it is not surprising that we are instinctively drawn to the comforts and beauty of this world, and find familiarity and motivation in the numerous references and descriptions within the sacred texts of what awaits us in *Jannah*.

The Prophet ﷺ described *Jannah* as “*Bricks of silver and bricks of gold. Its mortar is musk of a strong fragrance, and its pebbles are pearls and rubies, and its*

¹⁵ Philips, Abu Ameenah Bilal. *Salvation through repentance (An Islamic view)*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Pub. House. pp. 13-14

¹⁶ Philips, Abu Ameenah Bilal. *Salvation through repentance (An Islamic view)*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Pub. House. pp. 3-4

¹⁷ *Sahih Muslim, Riyad as-Salihin*, Book 1, Hadith 423

earth is saffron. Whoever enters it shall live and shall not suffer, and shall feel joy and shall not die, nor shall their clothes wear out, nor shall their youth come to an end."¹⁸

Sole authority

It logically follows that the sole authority to forgive belongs to Allah¹⁹—therefore, repentance can only be made to Him. Islam forbids any form of intermediary to whom sins are to be confessed or through whom forgiveness can be sought. Here, Islam distinguishes itself from other doctrines in and safeguards the believer from calling upon intermediaries such as idols representing God, or any prophet of God. All of the noble prophets were appointed by Him from among the best of humanity, yet were mortal and sent as role models to mankind with the divine message to worship Him alone (*tawhid*) as was the case with both Jesus and Muhammad.²⁰ Another category of intermediaries are the pious people of the past who have been raised to sainthood by their followers. They are often invoked and their graves have become sanctified as places of worship because they are believed to either have earned the status and power to intercede with God, or to themselves possess divine attributes. Sadly, such views have become widespread across religious lines, including some sects identifying with Islam. Also included are the clergy to whom confessions²¹ are made with the promise of being forgiven by God, as well as any aggrandizement of another or oneself with respect to authority over anyone's final destiny. All of these, as well as the doctrine of the Trinity²² in its deification of Jesus as the means to atonement and salvation for the sins of man, as

¹⁸ *Jami' at-Tirmidhi*, English reference: Vol. 4, Book 12, *Hadith* 2526 Arabic reference: Book 38, *Hadith* 2717

¹⁹ This is in reference to ultimate forgiveness in the Hereafter. Forgiveness at a human level between people for injustice toward one another will be discussed under the practical aspects of *tawba* concerning sins pertaining to the rights of man.

²⁰ When Allah revealed the Verse: "Warn your nearest kinsmen," Allah's Messenger ﷺ got up and said, "O people of Quraish (or said similar words)! Buy (i.e., save) yourselves (from the Hellfire) as I cannot save you from Allah's Punishment; O Bani 'Abd Manaf! I cannot save you from Allah's Punishment, O Safiya, the Aunt of Allah's Messenger ﷺ! I cannot save you from Allah's Punishment; O Fatima bint Muhammad! Ask me anything from my wealth, but I cannot save you from Allah's Punishment." *Sahih al-Bukhari* 2753, In-book reference: Book 55, *Hadith* 16, USC-MSA web (English) reference: Vol. 4, Book 51, *Hadith* 16

²¹ Philips, Abu Ameenah Bilal. *Salvation through repentance (An Islamic view)*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Pub. House. pp. 15-19

²² Muhiyaddin, Mohammed Ali. *A comparative study of the religions of today*. New York: Vantage Press, 1985.

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/compressed.photo.goodreads.com/documents/1329911133books/13487787.pdf> pp. 49-50

introduced to Christian theology by the apostle Paul, are defined as forms of *shirk* in Islam.

You have not besides Him any protector or any intercessor; so will you not be reminded? [Qur'an 32:4]

No doubt, Islam came to rectify a group of people already immersed in *shirk*, making it forbidden and hated in the sight of Allah as the worst of sins—one requiring *tawba* in this life.²³ Even more notably, from the perspective of *tawba*, this also firmly establishes the overarching mercy of Allah toward His servants in that there is no sin, regardless of its magnitude or proportion, including *shirk*, except that there exists a path of return for the one who is sincere in *tawba*. As Allah Himself has said, “...*O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.*” [Qur'an 39:53]²⁴

Another central principle in Islam is that all matters legislated by Allah (*Shariah*) inherently carry good for the preservation and well-being of humanity and protection against harm. As Ibn Al-Qayyim (d. 1347 CE) summarized, “The Islamic law is all about wisdom and achieving people’s welfare in this life and the afterlife. It is all about justice, mercy, wisdom, and good. Thus, any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the Islamic law, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretation.”²⁵ Even a cursory examination of the prohibition of *shirk* unearths a wealth of benefits—the most obvious of them with regard to *tawba* is the direct connection it establishes between us and God. Rationally, it makes perfect sense to directly approach the

²³ Indeed, Allah does not forgive association with Him, but He forgives what is less than that for whom He wills. And he who associates others with Allah has certainly gone far astray. [Qur'an 4:116]

²⁴ “Al-Bukhari recorded that Ibn ‘Abbas, may Allah be pleased with him, said that some of the people of *Shirk* killed many people and committed *Zina* (illegal sexual acts) to a great extent; they came to Muhammad and said, ‘What you are saying and calling us to is good; if only you could tell us that there is an expiation for what we have done.’” Then this verse was revealed. *Quran Tafsir Ibn Kathir*. The Call to repent before the Punishment comes.

http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1972&Itemid=95

²⁵ http://www.jasserauda.net/new/pdf/maqasid_guide-Feb_2008.pdf p. 6, p. 24

One Who has fashioned us, the One Who always answers those who call on Him, and the only Lawmaker and Judge who knows our true intentions and has ultimate power and authority over us to forgive us. *Tawba* involves being proactive and involves going straight to the Source of forgiveness, and ensures protection from those who are not only incapable and unsanctioned to speak on behalf of Allah, but also from the potential harm associated with opportunists looking to take advantage of the vulnerable. At the very least, such people may be harsh and lack compassion for those grappling with the inner struggles associated with immorality and sin. Simply put, no one can surpass the mercy of Allah.²⁶

Undoubtedly, Allah's immediate response to Adam, his being forgiven and then honored as a noble prophet with the promise of returning to Paradise becomes a source of relief and encouragement to every sinner and invokes gratitude to the One who showers His countless blessings on all of humanity and responds to those who call on Him. Thus the psychological, spiritual, and moral impact of *tawba* on a person, who may otherwise stray into further disobedience and heedlessness or fall into despair, cannot be ignored. Rather, it becomes a spring of tremendous benefit, enabling one to cultivate and strengthen a relationship of trust and love with the Creator as one experiences spiritual growth and builds the resolve needed for one's moral development. Above all, *tawba* brings about hope and motivation—two of the most prized and sought-after traits in this world, and the fuel needed to successfully attain the next.

And those who, when they commit an immorality or wrong themselves [by transgression], remember Allah and seek forgiveness for their sins—and who can forgive sins except Allah?—and [who] do not persist in what they have done while they know. [Qur'an 3:135]

²⁶ The Prophet ﷺ said, "Do good deeds properly, sincerely and moderately, and receive good news because one's good deeds will not make him enter Paradise." They asked, "Even you, O Allah's Messenger ﷺ?" He said, "Even I, unless and until Allah bestows His Pardon and Mercy on me." *Sahih al-Bukhari*: 6467, In-book reference: Book 81, *Hadith* 56, USC-MSA web (English) reference: Vol. 8, Book 76, *Hadith* 474

Sinless at birth

The Qur'an and the *Sunnah* clearly deny the idea that humans shoulder the sin of Adam or that Eve was the temptress and therefore women for all time to come must bear the consequence of her actions (as posited by some early theologians).²⁷ The belief that all humans inherit the sin of Adam and Eve arose from the doctrine of Original Sin²⁸ advanced by Augustine of Hippo (334-430 CE).²⁹ He theorized that all humans are born sinful and must accordingly seek salvation through sacramental channels such as penance and baptism to absolve them of sin. This doctrine was opposed by some Christian scholars and was later revised by the Roman Catholic Church with regard to the fate of those who die in infancy, and is no longer held to universally; some still conduct infant baptism and others limit it to adults entering the faith.³⁰ Islam stands in stark contrast when it comes to Original Sin as well as to other doctrines with similar claims. One such claim is that of the belief in *karma*, the result of which a person born into a lower *caste* or below the system entirely such as the Dalits (*Untouchables*) are virtually exiled as the lowest of society. Historically, their station was on the sole basis of their birth into the ancient Hindu hierarchy which once considered them punished and unworthy with no scope for redemption in this life for the misdeeds of a past life. This has since turned into the practice of subjecting them to severe social and economic injustice to this day, despite the reform movements within the religion in addition to the global outcry for civil rights—classifying it nothing short of an oppressive apartheid.³¹ That is not to say that the rest of humanity hasn't been plagued by its own forms of religious and social classism which are unfortunately rampant in the divisiveness, racism, and injustice visible in most if not all societies throughout history. It would be remiss to not point out that even the Muslim world

²⁷ "Original sin." Original sin - New World Encyclopedia. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Original_sin

²⁸ "The Christian belief is that Jesus (peace be on him) died on the cross to save his devotees and to blot out the "original sin" committed by Adam (peace be on him) and that sheer faith in Jesus as the son of God (peace be on him) acting as and on behalf of God through the holy bond of the Trinity alone would free them from all sins." Muhiyaddin, Mohammed Ali. *A comparative study of the religions of today*. New York: Vantage Press, 1985. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/compressed-photo.goodreads.com/documents/1329911133books/13487787.pdf> p. 51

²⁹ Philips, Abu Ameenah Bilal. *Salvation through repentance (An Islamic view)*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Pub. House. pp. 16-17

³⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church - IntraText. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1C.HTM

³¹ "How Can I Help." Dalits and Untouchability. <https://www.dalitsolidarity.org/dalits-and-untouchability.html>

has regrettably strayed from its own teachings in this regard and has not been spared from such ignorance and tyranny. The Qur'an states that Adam and *Hawwa* were both tempted into disobedience of Allah, both sought forgiveness, and were both subsequently forgiven before being sent to earth.

So he [Iblis] made them fall, through deception. And when they tasted of the tree, their private parts became apparent to them, and they began to fasten together over themselves from the leaves of Paradise. And their Lord called to them, "Did I not forbid you both from that tree and tell you that Satan is to you a clear enemy?" They said, "Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers." [Qur'an 7:22-23]

Furthermore, the Qur'an establishes individual responsibility for one's actions. The consequences of one's actions, whether salvation or damnation, cannot be shouldered by anyone else, regardless of who they are. Sin cannot be inherited or passed on to another; nor can anyone intercede for another without the permission of Allah—yet another reminder of Allah's supreme mercy and justice. The great theologian and jurist, Al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), who wrote extensively on the topic of repentance, dedicating an entire book to it in his monumental work, *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, describes the nature of the covenant between human and God as being an individual one between the servant and his Master, while also pointing out that society as a whole has a collective responsibility to safeguard itself from injustice and transgression. "The community is not the source of salvation but rather it is, by divine will and command, an area of responsibility in which man can either pursue obedience or disobedience."³² This is apparent in the communal responsibility to seek knowledge, enjoin good, and forbid evil as taught by the Messenger of Allah ﷺ who said, "Whoever among you sees an evil action, and he is able to change it with his hand, then change it with his hand (by taking action); if he cannot (do so) with his hand, then with his tongue (by speaking out); and if he cannot, then with his heart (by hating it and feeling that it is wrong), and that is the weakest of faith."³³ It is also understood from this that

³² Stern, M. S. *Al-Ghazzali on Repentance*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990. p. 22

³³ *Sunan Ibn Majah* English reference: Vol. 1, Book 5, *Hadith* 1275 Arabic reference: Book 5, *Hadith* 1334

one's actions may have positive or negative effects on others such that both the individual as well as the one inspired to do good will have their own share of reward for doing so and likewise the one inspired to do evil as a result will have his/her own share of sin.

*O mankind, fear your Lord and fear a Day when no father will avail his son, nor will a son avail his father at all. Indeed, the promise of Allah is truth, so let not the worldly life delude you and be not deceived about Allah by the Deceiver [Satan].*³⁴ [Qur'an 31:33]

The Prophet ﷺ further explained that all of humanity is in actuality born innocent. He said, "Every child is born with a true faith of Islam ([*fitrah* or intuition] to worship none but Allah Alone) and his parents convert him to Judaism or Christianity or Magianism, as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal. Do you find it mutilated?"³⁵ This means that humans are born with the capability of recognizing Allah and are naturally inclined to worship Him. However, they are influenced by their surroundings and life experiences. Every human has been given sufficient intellect, capability, and the will to direct themselves—yet, one may be overcome by these influences, causing the *fitrah* to become buried. Such influences can eventually succeed in drawing one away from Islam, even if temporarily, until one is able to return to the *fitrah* and seek the path of truth and guidance to Allah. Many have done so, and continue to do so upon the realization that a crucial element of one's existence is missing and must be pursued in order to experience a life of purpose and fulfillment. Allah's mercy, justice, and wisdom decree that He only holds individuals responsible to the extent of their limited capability, and only once they have received knowledge of Islam.³⁶ In the past, this was done through

Also, "And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful." [Qur'an 3:104]

³⁴ "Nor let the chief deceiver deceive you about Allah" refers to the Shaytan. This was the view of Ibn `Abbas, Mujahid, Ad-Dahhak and Qatadah. The Shaytan makes promises to them and arouses in them false desires, but there is no substance to them, as Allah says: He makes promises to them, and arouses in them false desires; and Shaytan's promises are nothing but deceptions. [4:120]" *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* - English [31. Luqman - Verse: 33].

<http://www.recitequran.com/en/tafsir/en.ibn-kathir/31:33>

³⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1385, In-book reference: Book 23, *Hadith* 138 USC-MSA web (English) reference: Vol. 2, Book 23, *Hadith* 467

³⁶ The Prophet ﷺ said: "The pen has been lifted from three: From the sleeper until he wakes up, from the minor until he grows up, and from the insane until he comes back to his senses or recovers." *Sunan an-Nasa'i* 3432 and in

His sending prophets and books to specific nations to guide them, and from the advent of Islam and the final Prophet, Muhammad ﷺ, it remains in the final revelation to all of humanity, the Qur'an and *Sunnah*.

Whoever does righteousness—it is for his [own] soul; and whoever does evil [does so] against it. And your Lord is not ever unjust to [His] servants.
[Qur'an 41:46]

Understanding the nature of forgiveness

One of the most remarkable attributes of sincere *tawba* is its wiping out of all the sins which preceded it. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “The one who repents from sin is like one who did not sin”³⁷—about which Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328 CE) said, “The one who repents from sin is like one who did not sin, and if the sin is removed, then the punishment and consequences are also removed”.³⁸ Hence, *tawba* offers a tremendous opportunity for anyone seeking a way out from false beliefs and a lifestyle they have come to realize is not the true path to Allah. ‘Amr ibn al-‘Aas said, “When Allah put Islam in my heart, I came to the Prophet ﷺ and said: “Give me your right hand so that I may swear allegiance to you.” He held out his hand and I withdrew my hand. He said, “What is the matter, O ‘Amr?” I said, “I want to stipulate a condition.” He said, “What do you want to stipulate?” I said, “That I will be forgiven.” He said, “Do you not know that Islam destroys that which came before it?”³⁹ In stating this, the Prophet ﷺ was reassuring ‘Amr—who had been among the more prominent of the Quraysh in his opposition to Islam and was from the later companions to accept it—that by abandoning disbelief and sin for Islam—essentially, *tawba*—all his previous sins had been forgiven and it was as if he were returned to his pure state on the day he had been born. The Qur'an itself is a call to all of humanity to this

another narration: “Verily, Allah has pardoned my nation for their mistakes, their forgetfulness, and what they are coerced into doing.” *Sunan Ibn Majah* 2043

³⁷ *Sunan Ibn Majah* (4250)

³⁸ *Sharh al-‘Umdah* (4/39)

³⁹ *Sahih Muslim* (121)

very return to Allah—an indication of the universality of Islam which promises salvation to anyone who sincerely enters its doors.

Say to those who have disbelieved [that] if they cease, what has previously occurred will be forgiven for them... [Qur'an 8:38]

But what of the sins of the believer—does every sin necessitate *tawba*? Can some sins put one out of the fold of Islam? These among other fundamental questions became the subject of discussion in the quest of early theologians to better understand and define Islamic theology. The need to do so arose with the spread of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula during its formative stage, encountering growth and with it the infusion of external political and philosophical ideologies. It is important to note the dangers of ignorance and extremism which can mislead one to misconstrue the true essence of *tawba* and forgiveness. One example is seen in the belief held by the early Kharijite movement which “argued that sins themselves were a form of *kufr* (disbelief in God). They argued that if you commit a sin, you are in effect a disbeliever in God and thus could be fought and killed, even if you were a Companion of the Prophet ﷺ or a caliph...”⁴⁰ While the movement itself was short-lived, this kind of extreme thought is still evident in the atrocities being carried out in our times, largely against Muslims—a result of similar distortions of Islam by modern-day politically driven groups responsible for widespread devastation and the rise of Islamophobia. Not surprising were the counter movements which also formed in those early days, such as those postulating that human behavior is solely the result of divine decree (*qadr*). This belief left no room for free will and responsibility for one’s own actions;⁴¹ the problematic nature of this view is obvious in light of the true teachings of Islam. Both extremes illustrate the crucial role of the correct understanding of *tawba* and the role it plays in one’s faith, outlook, and subsequent actions.

The renowned scholar Al-Tahawi (d. 933 CE) summarized in his highly acclaimed work, *Al-'Aqidah*, the authentic Islamic position by consensus (*Ahl us-Sunnah*

⁴⁰ Alkhateeb, Firas. "Who Were the Kharijis?" Lost Islamic History. October 30, 2017. <http://lostislamichistory.com/who-were-the-kharijis/>

⁴¹ Stern, M. S. *Al-Ghazzali on Repentance*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990. p. 38

wal-Jama'ah) in regard to sin and redemption. It holds that God has commanded man to obey Him and forbids him from disobedience; but that no one is to be excommunicated on the basis of that disobedience or sin as long as one is not claiming it lawful—though sinning may have harmful effects on one's faith. The believers live in hope of Allah's forgiveness without assumption of its certainty, and they pray for the sinful among them, having concern for their salvation without despairing in regard to it. All humans will be resurrected after death and brought to judgment before Allah. Their deeds will be presented to them and they will be recompensed for their actions with reward or punishment in the Hereafter. Even those followers of the Prophet ﷺ under the heaviest burden of sin for which they have not repented will eventually, by Allah's mercy, justice, and special permission for the pious to intercede on their behalf, enter Paradise, though they may face punishment in the hellfire initially for a period of time in accordance with His will and divine wisdom.⁴²

Not all sins are alike

Scholars, from the time of the Companions, have extrapolated from the primary sources and attempted to categorize the nature of sin as being either *major* or *minor*; differing in their compilations as to exactly which sins belonged in each category. It is generally accepted that sins for which Allah has designated a specific punishment to be carried out in this world and sins that carry the threat of punishment in the hereafter are considered major sins for which making *tawba* is obligatory; for example, the unjust taking of life and *shirk*.⁴³ This doesn't mean that one can afford to become negligent with regard to what may be perceived as a minor sin. The believer was cautioned against doing so by the Prophet ﷺ when he said, "Beware of minor sins like a people who descend into the bottom of a valley, so one comes with a stick and another with a stick until they have fire to cook their bread. Verily, when a person is held accountable for these minor sins they will destroy him"⁴⁴ giving a visual sense of small sins piling up on one

⁴² "Al-Aqīdah of Imām Al-Taḥāwī in English and Arabic." Faith in Allah الإيمان بالله. May 22, 2016. Accessed November 06, 2017. <https://abuaminaelias.com/aqeedah-of-imam-tahawi/>.

⁴³ Stern, M. S. *Al-Ghazzali on Repentance*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990. pp. 56-65

⁴⁴ *Musnad Ahmad* 22302

another until they accumulate to the level of a major sin depicted by the raging fire. When asked about the number of major sins, the companion and great scholar Ibn Abbas said, “They are closer to seven hundred than only seven, but no sin is an enormity if forgiveness is sought and no sin is minor if it is stubbornly repeated.”⁴⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah took this a step further, pointing out that *tawba* is not only to be made for having committed evil; rather one should additionally repent for falling short in performing good deeds. He stated that repentance is obligatory on every responsible human for the abandonment of obligatory deeds and for committing that which is forbidden. However, he added that repentance is highly recommended for one who has not refrained from acts which are discouraged, though permissible to the extent they are not sinful (*makruh*), and for not having performed recommended acts (*mandub*) which, though not obligatory, are pleasing to Allah and rewarded. He goes on to say that the people who make both of these kinds of *tawba* are among the closest to Allah.⁴⁶

It is no doubt from the immense mercy of Allah that minor sins are forgiven readily with virtually every good deed and act of worship. Examples of this include: in being charitable and kind; between every two consecutive obligatory prayers and from one Friday prayer to the next; in the obligatory fasting of Ramadan as well as the recommended fasts, particularly the days of Arafah and Ashura; and with every remembrance of Allah in general as will be further elaborated in the discussion of the practical aspects of *tawba*. In this is demonstrated two of Allah’s most generous attributes, that He is *Al-Ghafoor*,⁴⁷ the One Who is Exceedingly Forgiving and Who conceals our sins, protecting us from being exposed, and He is *Al-‘Afu*,⁴⁸ the One who consistently overlooks and effaces sins, blotting them out of one’s record of deeds as if they never occurred—leaving no trace of ill-effect in their wake. Imam Al-Ghazali shares a beautiful reflection, suggesting that perhaps the exact number of major sins is designed to remain unknown so as to keep the servant more vigilant in avoiding them—just as was the

⁴⁵ *Tafsīr al-Tabarī* 9207

⁴⁶ *Risaalah fi al-Taubah*, Zarabozo, Jamaal Al-Din M. *Purification of the soul: Concept, process, and means*. Denver, CO: Al-Basheer Publications & Translations, 2002. p. 382

⁴⁷ *Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane. <http://www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/lane/> p. 2274

⁴⁸ *Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane. <http://www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/lane/> p. 2094

case in His keeping the Night of Power in Ramadan hidden in order for the servant to strive that much more to observe it.⁴⁹

And establish prayer at the two ends of the day and at the approach of the night. Indeed, good deeds do away with misdeeds. That is a reminder for those who remember. [Qur'an 11:114]

Most certainly, My Mercy prevails over My Wrath⁵⁰

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of researching the topic of *tawba* is the overwhelming realization and reinforcement of the mercy of Allah over His creation—albeit a glimpse of it, given that He has reserved ninety-nine parts of its one hundred for the Day of Reckoning.⁵¹ What began with Allah “turning” toward Adam in mercy that allowed Adam to seek forgiveness indicates His wish for us to successfully pass through life’s tests. The goal is to return to Him with a book of deeds which, as a consequence of His divine mercy, will weigh heavy on the scale in our favor if we have been sincere in belief and effort to worship Allah—despite falling short innumerable times along the way. Allah is in reality the One who perpetually turns toward His servants—He is *Al-Tawwab*: “Then He turned to them so they could repent. Indeed, Allah is the Accepting of repentance [Al-Tawwab], the Merciful.” [Qur'an 9:118]

One of the most fundamental statements of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ confirms this when he said, “Deeds are considered by the intentions, and a person will get the reward according to his intention.”⁵² From this comes the understanding that no good intention will go unrewarded even when one is unable to follow through with action, nor will one be unjustly punished for what one does unintentionally. It is important, however, that one be conscientious to not allow evil intent to take root by steering clear of evil thoughts, and thereby the accountability one may have to

⁴⁹ Stern, M. S. *Al-Ghazzali on Repentance*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990. p. 59

⁵⁰ *Al-Bukhari and Muslim, Riyad as-Salihin*, Book 1, *Hadith* 419

⁵¹ *Sahih Muslim* 2753

⁵² *Al-Bukhari and Muslim, Riyad as-Salihin*, Book 1, *Hadith* 1

face should they turn into the resolve to act upon them, and lead one to committing evil. When the companions, fearing the consequences of involuntary evil thoughts and the whispers of Satan in passing thoughts, asked the Prophet ﷺ about them, he responded saying, “Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, will forgive my *ummah* for whatever crosses their minds so long as they do not act upon it or speak of it.”⁵³

And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein [Qur'an 50:16]

*Allah decreed good deeds and bad deeds, then He explained that whoever thinks of doing a good deed then does not do it, Allah will write it down as one complete good deed. If he thinks of doing a good deed and then does it, Allah [may He be glorified and exalted] will write it down between ten and seven hundred-fold, or many more. If he thinks of doing a bad deed then he does not do it, Allah will write it down as one complete good deed, and if he thinks of it then does it, Allah will write it down as one bad deed.*⁵⁴

Can one ever know or even imagine anyone else capable of such generosity and mercy? Yet, Our Creator and Master not only continues to bless humanity with His Mercy, but He is actually appreciative and most pleased with our repentance, making *tawba* the path to fortifying our faith, seeking His pleasure and ultimately the means to sustained contentment, reward, and eternal salvation. For all the times one feels regret or questions whether it is too late or whether one is even capable of change—know that this is a call to action and that the door to repentance is wide open as long as one is alive.⁵⁵ Repentance is not only the basis for redemption, but it is in fact to be conscientiously and strategically used to better the future, to gain the pleasure of Allah and an even higher and more noble standing before Him—amazingly so for having sinned, sought forgiveness, and reformed. Ibn Taymiyyah sums it up beautifully in saying, “The servant is always between a

⁵³ *Al-Bukhari* 5269

⁵⁴ *Al-Bukhari* 6491

⁵⁵ The Prophet ﷺ said, “Allah accepts the repentance of His slave so long as the death rattle has not yet reached his throat.” *Sunan Ibn Majah*, English reference: Vol. 5, Book 37, *Hadith* 4253. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Whoever repents before the sun rises from the west, then Allah will forgive him.” *Sahih Muslim* 2703

blessing that requires his thanks and a sin that requires the seeking of forgiveness. Both of these circumstances, by necessity, are always with the servant. He is constantly moving among the blessings and bounties of Allah and he is always sinful and in need of repentance and asking for forgiveness. For that reason, the chief of all humans and the leader of the pious, Muhammad ﷺ, would seek forgiveness in all situations.”⁵⁶

*O Allah! Make us among the repentant, and make us among those who purify themselves.*⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Majmoo*, Vol. 10, p. 88; Zarabozo, Jamaal Al-Din M. *Purification of the soul: Concept, process, and means*. Denver, CO: Al-Basheer Publications & Translations, 2002. pp. 386 - 387

⁵⁷ *Jami` at-Tirmidhi* 55