



## Being Commanded by God: Katharsis for Righteousness

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### Abstract

Research Article



Many people in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic monotheistic traditions testify to their experience of being commanded by God to do something or to be a certain way. Is this kind of testimony from experience credible in some cases, and, if so, on what ground? The main thesis of this article is that it is credible in some cases and a suitable ground is available in the morally purifying experience of the human conscience. The article looks to the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the *Qur'an* for relevant testimony to the importance of righteous divine commanding experienced by humans. The relevant commands are not abstract or merely theoretical but grounded in human moral experience and potentially motivating for righteous action. The article doubts that God would be God if there were no divine commanding given directly to receptive people in their moral experience. It contends that God would not be a morally righteous guide of the divine kind needed for the worthiness of worship by humans in the absence of God's commanding people directly in their experience.

### Keywords

God, Righteousness, Commanding, Katharsis, Moral experience, Evidence.

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Received: 2023/06/19 ; Received in revised form: 2023/07/10 ; Accepted: 2023/07/15 ; Published online: 2023/07/17

▣ Moser, P.K. (2023). Being Commanded by God: Katharsis for Righteousness. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research*, (Special Issue on "Comparative Philosophy of Religion"), 25(3), 5-26.  
<https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2023.9247.2870>

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## Introduction

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic versions of monotheism have long maintained that God is fully holy as perfectly righteous, or morally good. Divine righteousness is not limited to God's internal moral character; instead, it moves outward to interaction with humans for the sake of their redemption or salvation. In doing so, it aims to guide people to cooperative repentance, faith, and obedience toward God. An intended result is volitional submission to God, thus giving God's moral will normative supremacy over human wills. We shall explore how God presents the divine moral will to humans via divine commanding in human moral experience including the conscience.

### Divine Commanding in the Hebrew Bible

Gerhard von Rad has commented: "There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of *tzedakah* [righteousness]" (1962, p. 370). Alan Richardson adds: "Righteousness is for the Hebrews the fundamental character of God" (1958, p. 79). We need to clarify what this righteous character involves. P.T. Forsyth has suggested that God's character of perfect righteousness grounds both divine holiness and divine love: "Holiness is the foundation of divine love and the bloom on divine righteousness" (1905, p. 19). I concur with this suggestion and will present relevant evidence.

An important testimony in the Hebrew Bible to the direct experience of God occurs in the book of Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah, 6: 1–5, NRSV here and in subsequent biblical translations unless otherwise noted).

The reference to "a man of unclean lips" and "a people of unclean lips" is crucial. It contrasts the intervening "Lord of hosts" with the inferior moral

state of Isaiah and his fellow Jews. It points to a higher moral state of the Lord.

In the previous chapter of the book of Isaiah, we find a portrait of the moral state of the Lord of hosts:

The Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness [*tzedakah*]....

Woe to those who drag iniquity along with cords of falsehood, who drag sin along as with cart ropes, who say, "Let him make haste; let him speed his work that we may see it; let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten to fulfillment, that we may know it!" Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight! Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of their rights! (Isaiah, 5: 16, 18–23)

This is Isaiah's call for attention to the righteousness of the Lord of hosts as God's distinctive moral character. Such righteousness is identified with "good" rather than "evil," with "light" rather than "darkness." It also calls for patience toward seeing the fulfillment of "the plan of the Holy One." In addition, it challenges people who are

wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight," without their depending on the righteous wisdom of the Lord.

The book of Isaiah offers a promise of future fulfillment in righteousness for the people of God:

A spirit from on high [will be] poured out on us, and the wilderness [will] become a fruitful field, and the fruitful field [will be] deemed a forest.

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness, and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. (Isaiah, 32: 15–18)

An aim of divine righteousness is this kind of social peace and faithfulness among the people of God. The goal is a righteous society of the people of God under God's distinctive righteousness. It motivates human hope in the ultimate victory of God in such righteousness.

The book of Isaiah presents God as challenging human anti-God ways,

calling for a responsible, candid human reply:

I alone am the one who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Accuse me; let us go to trial; set forth your case, so that you may be proved right. Your first ancestor sinned, and your mediators rebelled against me. (Isaiah, 43: 25–27)

This passage identifies God’s motive in extending divine righteousness, including forgiveness, “for my own sake.” God thus seeks to uphold God’s own perfect moral character, and this is foundational. From this motive, coupled with divine love, God brings divine righteousness and forgiveness to wayward humans for their salvation. The integrity of God’s goodness is not to be ignored in the redemption of humans.

Isaiah places responsibility on humans for receiving and cooperating with divine righteousness: “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land, but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah, 1: 19–20). God takes responsibility for trying to purify the people of God while maintaining their responsibility to cooperate with God in divine righteousness:

Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Surely I will pour out my wrath on my enemies and avenge myself on my foes! I will turn my hand against you; I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. And I will restore your judges as at the first and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward, you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. (Isaiah, 1: 24–28)

The divine motive toward the people of God is purification in righteousness: “I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.” The goal is that they be “redeemed ... by righteousness,” for those “who repent.” So, the desired purification brings divine righteousness to inhabit and form the people of God. This is a kind of interpersonal moral katharsis for God’s people.

The Biblical message of God as righteous and as spreading righteousness echoes throughout the Hebrew Bible, beyond the book of Isaiah. The prophet Malachi, for instance, continues a theme from Isaiah by connecting God’s coming to humans with the divine moral refining of them as a means to righteousness: “[The Lord] is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will

sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness” (Malachi, 3: 2–3; cf. Zechariah, 13: 8–9, Psalm, 66: 10–12). Divine moral agitation of humans through refining or purifying them aims at human righteousness in relation to God. We will not adequately understand divine action toward humans apart from such divine agitation for righteousness. If we neglect that kind of agitation, we will neglect the moral commands at the center of God’s righteous character.

Divine righteousness has priority even over worship ceremonies in the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Amos represents God:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos, 5: 21–24)

God refuses to receive, and even hates, human worship coupled with human unrighteousness. Human worship of God is to be motivated by human cooperation with divine righteousness, thus reflecting God’s unique moral character of righteousness.

Divine righteousness extends beyond ethics to bear on human knowledge of God, as the book of Jeremiah reports:

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord. (Jeremiah, 22: 15–16)

Doing righteousness, according to Jeremiah, is integral to knowing the Lord. Such knowing, then, is practical, and not merely speculative or theoretical. It thus is morally robust in its dependence on divine righteousness.

The emphasis on divine righteousness stems from a divine preference for human life over death. The book of Ezekiel represents God’s preference coupled with severe consequences for human disobedience:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? But when the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity and do the same abominable things that the wicked do, shall they live? None

of the righteous deeds that they have done shall be remembered, for the treachery of which they are guilty and the sin they have committed, they shall die. (Ezekiel, 18: 23–24)

Human life, then, depends on cooperation with divine righteousness for its avoiding death, by God's standard of a righteous life. This is the result of God's righteous character as the standard for worthwhile human life.

The divine way of promoting righteousness includes divine "leading" of willing humans in a moral direction. Psalm 23 characterizes God as a divine shepherd: "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (23: 3, RSV). This leading includes commanding by God and other moral means. The psalmist indicates divine guidance in his experience as he moves to prayer to God in the second person: "Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me" (23: 4, RSV). The rod and the staff are the shepherd's means of guiding, safeguarding, and rescuing the sheep. The psalmist treats them as symbolic for divine moral guidance, including by God's good commanding. The psalmist thus identifies a vital result from God: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (23: 6).

The Hebrew Bible offers a summary of the role of divine commanding with a life-or-death challenge: "See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply" (Deuteronomy, 30: 15–16). The good life in question is a righteous life in cooperation with God. The recurring idea of divine guidance to righteousness continues in the Christian New Testament.

### **Divine Commanding in the New Testament Experience**

The place of divine command for the sake of righteousness is prominent in the New Testament, particularly in the writings of the apostle Paul. Paul asks: "Do you presume upon the riches of [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans, 2: 4). He adds that "[the Gentiles] show that what the law [of God] requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them" (Romans, 2: 15). God, according to Paul, is at work in human conscience to draw people to God on the basis of their need of a life guided by divine righteousness. This work can include a divine command in conscience.

Paul takes divine righteousness to be received by a human response that goes beyond mere obedience to the requirements of the divine law. He explains:

The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. (Romans, 3: 21–26, RSV)

Paul's message includes the claim that “[humans] are justified by [God's] grace as a gift,” and not by anything they have earned. He holds that human moral failure in relation to God blocks any avenue to God through human earning. Human righteousness, given its moral failure, does not meet the divine standard, by Paul's lights.

Paul's alternative to human earning is human faith, or trust, in God, and he finds a basis in the experience of Abraham in the book of Genesis. He explains:

What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For, if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” [Genesis, 15: 6]. Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. (Romans, 4: 1–5, RSV)

Paul holds that, given human failure to satisfy the divine standard of perfect righteousness, God nonetheless finds a responsible and merciful way for humans to be justified before God. God credits righteousness to them on the basis not of their failed earning but of their faith, or trust, in God; that is, the God who seeks to lead them into righteousness. As a result, Paul claims that “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Romans, 8: 14; see also Galatians, 5: 18, 25).

We need to identify the heart of what Paul calls “the gift of grace” from

God in the divine crediting of righteousness to humans. This gift is not abstract or speculative but interpersonal and experiential. The salvific gift is *God* himself coming to humans to lead them, with their faithful cooperation, into an ever-deepening filial relationship of experienced reconciliation with God. Paul puts it in terms of filial adoption:

You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if we, in fact, suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans, 8: 15–17; see Galatians, 4: 6–7)

God “bears witness” to the people of God according to Paul, affirming their status as children of God in God’s family undergoing salvation toward righteous relationships with God and other humans.

Paul puts his message of the good news of divine grace in terms of divine reconciliation and righteousness:

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake, God made the one who knew no sin to be sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians, 5: 19–21)

“Be reconciled to God” sums up Paul’s understanding of the goal of God’s gift of grace, and that is a divine command, in Paul’s understanding, even for the people of God.

Paul thinks of God’s gift in terms of “life” with God: “Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.... The Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Romans, 8: 6, 10). Paul has in mind “life and peace” with God (Romans, 5: 1), and he finds the needed source in “the Spirit” of God, even though humans are expected to cooperate with that source.

Paul finds divine motivating power for righteousness among humans in “the fruit of the Spirit”: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things” (Galatians, 5:22–23). Such fruit of the Spirit, manifested in human experience, is not a set of principles, concepts, or ideas. Instead, it is,



in Paul's approach, a divine presentation of the moral character, or personality, traits of God, shown by God in human moral experience. It is thus an experienced feature of God himself in action, bringing God's character into human experience. As a result, it serves as direct experiential evidence of God's reality and goodness. (For the development of this theme, see Moser (2023).)

Paul is clear about the role of God in the fruit of the Spirit, including divine love, manifested in human experience. Remarking on the basis of faith and hope in God, Paul states: "Hope [in God] does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans, 5: 5). Paul's talk of "not putting us to shame" concerns evidential, or epistemic, shame. It rejects such shame on the basis of available evidence of God from divine love shown in human moral experience ("poured into our hearts" through God's Spirit). Paul finds the same Spirit at work in human moral conscience, challenging and guiding people, including himself. He writes to the Roman Christians: "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit" (Romans, 9: 1). God's Spirit works in the conscience, according to Paul, to confirm what is true and good and thus real.

Paul gives a decisive role to God's Spirit in revealing knowledge of God to humans:

God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. (1 Corinthians, 2: 10–12)

The Spirit of God brings not only God's gifts to humans, including cognitive gifts but also some understanding of those divine gifts.

The relevant process involves the searching of humans by God's Spirit, in a manner recognized by Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. (Psalm, 139: 1–6)

Such knowledge cannot be attained by humans on their own. It must come as a gift from God, who mercifully intervenes in human experience to bring moral goodness and guidance to people in need. (On the guidance in question, see Moser (2022a).)

The divine challenge to unrighteousness leads to the following command from Paul to the Corinthian Christians: “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.... Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death” (2 Corinthians, 7: 1,10). The desired moral cleansing or *katharsis* is not a self-help program, given its dependence on the power of God’s Spirit: “If you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans, 8: 13). Such a struggle against unrighteous “deeds of the body” is part of repentance before God.

According to the book of Acts, Paul’s preaching at Athens included a divine command to repent: “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts, 17: 30). The author of Acts may be a bit creative in representing some of the early preachings, but he captures a theme from Paul here. The relevant divine command extends to human conscience so long as humans, according to Paul, do not “by their injustice [or, unrighteousness] suppress the truth” in this area (Romans, 1: 18). Humans, then, have a voluntary role in responding to a divine command to repent. They thus are not pawns of God, in Paul’s thought.

Paul finds the problem of suppressing the divine truth to emerge from a human will in need of the cooperative receiving of divine transformation in moral *katharsis*. He remarks to the Roman Christians: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God’s mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans, 12: 1–2). (For relevant discussion, see Moser (2022b).)

Paul couples the needed renewing of the human mind to presenting oneself with God. He gives such presenting a central role in the commanded repentance and moral *katharsis* in righteousness:

Do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, so that you obey their

desires. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Romans, 6: 12–14)

The talk of “grace” here signifies divine power to lead people to righteousness in relationship with God, and thus to life with God, rather than moral death. The command to “present yourselves to God” indicates that the key relation is interpersonal (divine-human), and not just a matter of human behavior. It bears on who we are (in relation to God), and not just what we do. Actions matter, of course, but God is after persons in their righteous relationships with God. These relationships are to include grounded trust in God, as in the case of Abraham (Romans, 4: 1–5), even if that trust occurs in the context of a very limited understanding of God and divine purposes.

### **Divine Commanding in the *Qur'an***

As the religion of absolute submission to Allah, or God, Islam finds its basis in the following prayer in the *Qur'an*: “Our Lord, ... make us submissive to You, and from our descendants a community submissive to You” (*Qur'an*, 2: 128). Likewise: “Who is better in religion than he who submits himself wholly to God, and is a doer of good, and follows the faith of Abraham the Monotheist?” (*Qur'an*, 4: 125; see also 31: 22, 72: 14).

The *Qur'an* contrasts God with the one who commands evil, and it associates the people of God with doing “good on earth”: “O people! Eat of what is lawful and good on earth, and do not follow the footsteps of Satan. He is to you an open enemy. He commands you to do evil and vice, and to say about God what you do not know” (2: 168, 169).

The *Qur'an* associates God with righteousness:

Righteousness does not consist of turning your faces towards the East and the West. But righteous is he who believes in God, and the Last Day, and the angels, and the Scripture, and the prophets. Who gives money, though dear, to near relatives, and orphans, and the needy, and the homeless, and the beggars, and for the freeing of slaves; those who perform the prayers, and pay the obligatory charity, and fulfill their promise when they promise, and patiently persevere in the face of persecution, hardship, and in the time of conflict. These are the sincere; these are the pious. (*Qur'an*, 2: 177)

The *Qur'an* does not limit such righteousness to Muslims but makes it available to Jews and Christians: “Those who believe, and those who are Jewish, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—any who believe in God and the Last Day, and act righteously—will have their reward with their Lord; they have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve” (2: 62).

Islam, according to the *Qur'an*, is the original monotheism of which Abraham was a proponent: “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a Monotheist, a Muslim. And he was not of the Polytheists” (3: 67). It also aims to include Moses and Jesus under the religion of Allah: “He [Allah] prescribed for you the same religion He enjoined upon Noah, and what We inspired to you, and what We enjoined upon Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus: ‘You shall uphold the religion, and be not divided therein’” (*Qur'an*, 42: 13).

The *Qur'an* portrays a formative religious experience for Muhammad as follows:

- V4. It is but a revelation revealed.
- V5. Taught to him by the Extremely Powerful.
- V6. The one of vigor. He settled.
- V7. While he was at the highest horizon.
- V8. Then he came near and hovered around.
- V9. He was within two bows' length, or closer.
- V10. Then He revealed to His servant what He revealed.
- V11. The heart did not lie about what it saw.
- V12. Will you dispute with him concerning what he saw? (*Qur'an*, 53: 4–12)

Such an experience prompted Muhammad to convey the contents of the *Qur'an* as the word of God, as a communication from God through him. It anchored his conviction that he was called to be God's final prophet to humans.

The *Qur'an* characterizes the divine revelation to Muhammad as follows:

- V1. Read [or: Proclaim]: In the Name of your Lord who created.
- V2. Created man from a clot.
- V3. Read [or: Proclaim]: And your Lord is the Most Generous.
- V4. He who taught by the pen.
- V5. Taught man what he never knew. (*Qur'an*, 96: 1-5)

The report here is that God, the “most generous” Creator, is using Muhammad and his pen, as a prophetic messenger, to reveal divine things previously unknown to humans. This report accompanies the religious

experience of Muhammad, and it led to the formation of Islam as a religious way of life.

Allah's revelation to Muhammad, according to the *Qur'an*, came with "clear signs" of divine involvement in the process, but these signs were rejected by some people (*Qur'an*, 2: 97–99). We need to clarify what kind of "sign" of God was central to Muhammad's religious experience.

The experience of *being commanded (by Allah)* is at the center of Muhammad's formative religious experience. The following summary statement identifies the center of his experience: "The guidance of Allah is the guidance, and we are commanded to surrender [or submit] to the Lord of the universe" (*Qur'an*, 6: 71). The *Qur'an* puts Allah's status as the one who commands on equal footing with Allah's status as the Creator: "Your Lord is Allah; He who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then established Himself on the Throne. The night overtakes the day, as it pursues it persistently; and the sun, and the moon, and the stars are subservient by His command. His is the creation, and His is the command. Blessed is Allah, Lord of all beings." (*Qur'an*, 7: 54). This is a strong sense of "command," because it involves a kind of divine control over the objects of the command. A command need not have such control, but Allah's command does, at least in some cases, according to the *Qur'an*.

The signs of Allah to humans are "within yourselves," and they should be clear to those who pay attention:

V20. And on earth are signs for the convinced.

V21. And within yourselves. Do you not see?

V22. And in the heaven is your livelihood, and what you are promised.

V23. By the Lord of the heaven and the earth, it is as true as the fact that you speak (*Qur'an*, 51: 20–23).

An important question is: How are the signs of Allah "within yourselves"? An answer will guide us toward where to look for the intervention of Allah in human experience.

According to the *Qur'an*, having signs "within yourselves" involves Allah's "calling" people to himself through his Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad, who represents "clear revelations" from Allah as "most compassionate":

V7. Believe in Allah and His Messenger, and spend from what He made you inherit. Those among you who believe and give will have a great reward.

V8. What is the matter with you that you do not believe in Allah, when

the Messenger calls you to believe in your Lord, and He has received a pledge from you, if you are believers?

V9. It is He who sends down upon His servant clear revelations, to bring you out of darkness into the light. Allah is Gentle towards you, Most Compassionate. (*Qur'an*, 57: 7–9)

Allah's commanding people to submit in obedience and worship is an experience that many people report to have or feel, and it motivates their commitment to a faithful Islamic way of life. Such commanding was at the experiential center of Muhammad's life, and it accounted for his circulating the message of the *Qur'an*.

The *Qur'an* goes beyond the view that God hides from some people to the stronger view that God "leads astray" or "misguides" some people:

We have appointed only angels to be wardens of the Fire, and caused their number to be a stumbling block for those who disbelieve; so that those given the Scripture may attain certainty; and those who believe may increase in faith; and those given the Scripture and the believers may not doubt; and those in whose hearts is sickness and the unbelievers may say, "What did Allah intend by this parable?" Thus Allah leads astray whom He wills, and guides whom He wills. (*Qur'an*, 74:31)

In a similar vein: "Whomever Allah desires to guide, He spreads open his heart to Islam; and whomever He desires to misguide, He makes his heart narrow, constricted, as though he were climbing up the sky. Allah thus lays defilement upon those who do not believe" (*Qur'an*, 6: 125). This is a kind of divine judgment, and it raises the question of who wills unbelief first, Allah or humans. The matter is controversial, but we may assume that the Islamic missionary movement depends on the view that individual people need to make a responsible, voluntary decision about the message offered.

The central role of divine command in the *Qur'an* relies on a notion of the law of God: "We revealed to you the Book, with truth, confirming the Scripture that preceded it, and superseding it. So, judge between them according to what Allah revealed, and do not follow their desires if they differ from the truth that has come to you. For each of you, we have assigned a law and a method" (*Qur'an*, 5: 48). The divine law in question is the updated, clarified version (relative to past versions, such as the Mosaic Law) based on the commands of the *Qur'an*.

Submitting to Allah is law-based according to the *Qur'an* and the relevant law emerges in Allah's unique revelation to Muhammad. The *Qur'an* endorses

“earning,” “reward,” and “wages” from God on the basis of its law and human submission to God. For instance: “Whoever submits himself to God, and is a doer of good, will have his reward with his Lord—they have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve” (*Qur’an*, 2: 112). This kind of submission includes active striving on the part of humans: “The human being attains only what he strives for. And ... his efforts will be witnessed. Then he will be rewarded for it the fullest reward. And that to your Lord is the finality” (*Qur’an*, 53: 39–42). These remarks suggest that humans are not mere pawns of the will of God. They evidently have an active voluntary role in responding to God’s will in their lives.

The *Qur’an* portrays God as crediting humans on the basis of what they “earn”: “God does not burden any soul beyond its capacity. To its credit is what it earns, and against it is what it commits” (*Qur’an*, 2: 286). In a similar vein: “How about when We gather them for a Day in which there is no doubt, and each soul will be paid in full for what it has earned, and they will not be wronged?” (*Qur’an*, 3: 25). This talk of “earning” suggests payment from God for human merit.

God’s paying wages to humans on the basis of their good works arises in the *Qur’an*: “As for those who believe and do good works, He will pay them their wages in full, and will increase His grace for them. But as for those who disdain and are too proud, He will punish them with an agonizing punishment. And they will find for themselves, apart from God, no lord and no savior” (*Qur’an*, 4: 173). Similarly: “He [Allah] will pay them their dues in full, and will increase them from His bounty” (*Qur’an*, 35: 30). Such talk of “dues” relies on a notion of human earning or meriting something from God.

The wages-earning approach of the *Qur’an* to submission to God differs from some Jewish understandings and Paul’s approach to divine-human atonement (even though the latter portray God as giving rewards to humans). A law-based theism can reject human earning of God’s approval, on the ground that human obedience is simply a fitting human response to God’s goodness toward humans. In Muhammad’s approach, however, good human life will require human earning toward God, on the basis of human submission to God in obedience. Such theistic interpretation of religious experience adds special rigors to the meaning of human life, but it is nonetheless religious in its being practical, overarching, primary in value offered, and self-engaging. It offers to integrate a human life under absolute submission to God’s commanding will.

The *Qur’an* connects the proper divine-human relationship to divine grace and love in search of human love in response:

O you who believe! Whoever of you goes back on his religion—God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him, kind towards the believers, stern with the disbelievers. They strive in the way of God, and do not fear the blame of the critic. That is the grace of God; He bestows it upon whomever He wills. God is Embracing and Knowing. Your allies are God, and His Messenger, and those who believe—those who pray regularly, and give charity, while bowing down. (*Qur'an*, 5: 54–55)

The people of God are thus “a people whom He loves and who love him.” The role of such love, divine and human, goes beyond any merely external behavior to what motivates a divine-human relationship. It extends to inward psychological and volitional factors in action toward relating to God.

Suitable motivation bears on two prominent religious practices in Islam: pilgrimage (*Hajj*; to Mecca) and prayer (*Salat*; five times each day). God announces to Muhammad:

We showed Abraham the location of the House: Do not associate anything with Me; and purify My House for those who circle around, and those who stand to pray, and those who kneel and prostrate. And announce the pilgrimage to humanity. They will come to you on foot, and on every transport. They will come from every distant point. That they may witness the benefits for themselves, and celebrate the name of God during the appointed days. (*Qur'an*, 22: 26–28)

Note the command to “purify My House,” thus calling for moral katharsis. The practices of pilgrimage and prayer depend on purity and celebration in motivation toward God. They are, then, to be properly motivated inwardly, and are not to be merely external practices.

Sacrificial offerings to God are to conform to the purified motives of pilgrimage and prayer, in keeping with “righteousness” and the “good news” of God’s guidance for humans:

Those whose hearts tremble when God is mentioned, and those who endure what has befallen them, and those who perform the prayer and spend from what We have provided for them. We have made the animal offerings emblems of God for you. In them is goodness for you. So, pronounce God’s name upon them as they line up. Then, when they have fallen on their sides, eat of them and feed the contented and the beggar. Thus We have subjected them to you, that you may be thankful. Neither their flesh, nor their blood, ever reaches God. What reaches



Him is the righteousness from you. Thus He subdued them to you, that you may glorify God for guiding you. And give good news to the charitable. (*Qur'an*, 22: 35–37)

Sacrificial offerings to God are to stem from gratitude to God as a result of the goodness God supplies in them. They are to involve righteousness expressed by humans in making sacrificial offerings out of gratitude to God. This righteousness glorifies or brings honor to God for divine guidance given to humans. It thus underwrites the good news of God's guiding righteousness.

The *Qur'an*, we have noted, portrays righteousness in terms of belief in God coupled with sincere actions pleasing to God (2: 177). Righteousness is faith in God joined with sincere conduct commanded by God. This is the center of the holy life commanded by God through Muhammad, and it is the way to absolute submission to God. It is the goal of a good human life, according to the *Qur'an*.

### Answering Divine Commands

We have identified the central role of divine commanding in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with a divine expectation of obedient human response. A pressing question is whether humans have the moral strength to handle divine commands adequately, given God's morally perfect character and commands. Humans tend to be morally weak at times, and their weakness can yield conflict between them and God's morally perfect character and commands. A result is their falling short at times of perfect obedience to God and divine commands. God can be merciful, but divine mercy does not always result in perfect human obedience to God. We need some explanation of how this problem is to be resolved.

We could respond by representing humans as mere coerced pawns of God's "sovereign, all-controlling" will, but that would preclude genuine *human* submission to God. It would be, in effect, God's will and power submitting to God's fully dominating and controlling will. In that case, genuine human responsibility would be suffocated, and genuine, voluntary human agency would be extinguished. Interpersonal human response to God then would be an illusion at best.

We should allow for acceptable human submission to God's commands without perfect human submission. Needed divine mercy would allow for such an option, given the moral weakness in humans. Even if perfect obedience is an ideal, to be realized in the future (see Matthew, 5:48), divine compassion and mercy do not include the condemnation of humans simply for their

imperfect repentance, faith, or obedience toward God.

In his parable of the prodigal son, Jesus portrays God to be “filled with compassion” and eager to receive the returning prodigal son with forgiveness and even joy (Luke, 15: 20). He remarks: “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke, 15: 7). A similar theme emerges in the Hebrew Bible: “To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, but we have rebelled against him and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets” (Daniel, 9: 9–10; see also Psalm, 130: 4). The *Qur’an* characterizes God similarly: “God, the Gracious, the Merciful,” adding: “Forgiver of sins, Acceptor of repentance, ... Bountiful in bounty” (*Qur’an*, 40: 3).

Jesus shows awareness of moral imperfection among God’s people in his parable of the two debtors (Luke, 7: 40–50). He acknowledges God’s forgiveness for “a woman in the city who was a sinner,” despite her obvious status of moral imperfection (Luke, 7: 37). He does not portray God as demanding for forgiveness of human imperfection in repentance, faith, or obedience. At the same time, he discourages humans from boasting in their repentance, faith, or obedience, advising: “When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’” (Luke, 17: 10).

H. R. Mackintosh has commented on the divine compassion at work in the forgiveness of humans, as represented by Jesus in relation to the “woman in the city who was a sinner”: “To [Jesus] the wish for reconciliation was enough. Repentance settled all accounts. He will not keep her waiting, or put her on probation, nor will he spoil his gift by cruel reminders of the past” (1927, p. 94). This comment takes us in the right direction, but I propose that we replace “the wish for reconciliation” with “the sincere cooperative commitment to reconciliation.” A “wish,” as commonly understood, is too weak to support the kind of faith or trust in God needed for interpersonal human reconciliation with God.

The divine commands in search of repentance, faith, and obedience are not abstract and merely theoretical. They include uncoercive nudging or drawing in human conscience, aiming to motivate humans in voluntary cooperation with God’s manifested will in human moral experience. Paul thus advises: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians, 2: 12–13, RSV). This talk of “working out” signifies the human moral struggle to cooperate with God’s manifested will, such as in the

aforementioned fruit of the Spirit. It does not presume human earning or meriting of God's approval. Paul holds that God works uncoercively in human conscience to guide people toward righteousness in relationships with God and other humans. This leaves room for a voluntary, responsible human response. As people cooperate with God, the fruit of God's Spirit comes to fruition with salience and motivational power in the human moral experience. The evidence for God's reality and goodness thus gain clarity for cooperative people.

Mackintosh remarks on the interpersonal directness of the divine relating to cooperative humans in forgiveness, or pardon:

The reality of pardon, imparted by God, can never be demonstrated to one who has not known it from within, nor can it be shown to follow necessarily, as **X** follows **Y**, from any rational notion of God that might figure in a metaphysical argumentation.... It can nonetheless be experienced as something borne in upon the mind that submits itself, with candour.... It is the breaking of eternity into time, the intervention of a love beyond all measures, a supernatural event not deducible by any human calculus from the nature of the universe but rather the spontaneous and unanalysable deed of God. We do not reach it by hard thinking; we are confronted by it. It emerges from pure love as an inexplicable gift **to** the unworthy which conveys the solution of our sorest problems. (1927, p. 35)

The role of human conscience is crucial here because it can bring a person into an I-Thou acquaintance with God and the fruit of the Spirit. It thus can give one an opportunity to yield, in repentance, trust, and obedience, toward God's direct challenge toward a righteous relationship with God. The manifested fruit of the Spirit is intended by God to lead people in that needed direction. People can, and often do, resist, but the divine challenge, amounting to a divine command, is real nonetheless. Its reality and goodness offer a gift and a moral challenge for anyone willing to be guided by God. It also offers salient evidence of God's compassionate existence.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that divine commanding recurs throughout the scriptural traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This article has contended that such commanding provides an important, if widely neglected, basis for evidence of God's reality and goodness. The evidence provided, however, is sensitive to human receptivity to it, in terms of a cooperative response in repentance, faith, and obedience. Human conscience supplies an area for direct

I-Thou human acquaintance with the commanding God behind the relevant evidence in the moral experience of the conscience.

The evidence in question includes the fruit of God's intervening experience, such as love, joy, and peace. It comes to fruition in salience and motivating power as people cooperate with its moral leading or guidance toward moral katharsis for a righteous relationship with God. This article supports the lesson that, from the standpoint of divine righteousness, theology without moral katharsis is empty, and moral katharsis without theology is blind.

### **Ethics declarations**

### **Conflict of interests**

The author has no competing interests.



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