

Adab and the Ethical Authority of the Qur'ān

“The dialogue of thinking with poetry is long. It has barely begun.”¹ This commanding statement by Martin Heidegger invites us to reevaluate the connection between pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān. This connection remains under scrutiny, often through rigid, antiquated norms that have long questioned poetry's historical validity as a source. Returning again to the nature of the comparative itself, and judging from recent scholarly tendencies, we see that there appears to be a compulsive avoidance of “thinking with poetry” in Euro-American scholarship on the Qur'ān.² This is not to say that a comparative approach to the Qur'ān bypassing pre-Islamic poetry and focusing on the Bible, or on the broader epistemic space of late antiquity, is untenable. On the contrary, these sources remain a meaningful part of Islamic religious heritage, and such studies undoubtedly have the appeal of connecting epistemological dots, especially by putting scriptures in a larger context and casting a different light on their subject matter. Additionally, as the latest variation on the theme of Abrahamic monotheism, the Qur'ān in many cases, as I exemplify in this chapter, self-evidently invites comparison with the Torah and gospels, and at times even compels these comparisons to take place as a way of understanding and interpreting the scripture. Yet, Heidegger's statement is highly relevant in its application to the current state of affairs in Qur'ānic studies. Pre-Islamic poetry is conditional for understanding the Qur'ān, not only as a syntactic and semantic prerequisite for making sense of the scripture, as al-Jurjānī, for instance, would see it, but also as a literary corpus that invites us to step beyond the conventional framing of this relationship as “antithetical” or of the Qur'ān as a scripture that derives its ethical paradigm from elsewhere and is only interested in eclipsing rather than entering into genuine dialogue with its local context.

This chapter is devoted to reading verses from pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān, noting the dialogue and the numerous ethical negotiations that can be seen clearly thereby. But before I address these communal/ethical dialogues available in pre-Islamic sources, it is important to recall that a fundamental historical/ethical issue in understanding the Qur'ān has lain in the mess of problematizing Islamo-Arabic sources. Many have thus offered either an Islamicist faith-based apologia or an obverse periodization of a sort (a continuity under the rubric of "late antiquity") whose authenticity and reliability are hardly questioned. In this case, the issue of weighing and deciding sources raises two crucial questions. Is the Qur'ān's ethical authority—namely, the human burden of moral responsibility, its critique of social inequalities, its codification of sexuality, its sympathy for the poor and the deprived, its emphasis on sustainable communal justice, and the accompanying complex baggage of accountability, sin, guilt, and conscience that come with all religious discourses—drastically different from its pre-Islamic environment? Or are such ethics indeed an imported and adapted *byproduct* of moral practices and codes in ancient Rome, the biblical tradition, or the classical late antique world more than they are a reflection of the Qur'ān's sociolinguistic structure? The second question has to do with the constitution of ethical authority as such: Where does it come from? How does one learn to trace it objectively to its so-called origins? What verification tools does one need to successfully locate or point from afar to the origins of such ethics?

Answering these questions will offer a valuable lesson for interrogating the theoretical applicability of late antiquity as an "inventory" for ethics in the Qur'ān and for "understanding" Islam in the West today. If "history is what hurts," as Fredric Jameson famously reminds us, then the denial of genuine historical thinking would always be at risk of carrying its own germs of self-critique. Peter Brown himself, in fact, offers a valuable insight into this dilemma. In an essay on the parallels and contrasts between late antiquity and Islam, which he wrote in the aftermath of *The World of Late Antiquity*, Brown acknowledges "quite frankly" that "as a non-Islamicist but a layman, I am concerned not simply to garner a rich crop of acceptable interdisciplinary insights and erudition."³ To be sure, Brown still holds tightly to the conviction that "Graeco-Roman civilization . . . was a culture that aimed at realizing a single human ideal from which all valid human achievements were held to radiate."⁴ Yet, his reconsideration that "the deeper we enter into the common ground between late antique *paideia* and Islamic *adab*, the more *sympathy* we gain for the refusal of men in great classical civilizations to put their faith in any safeguard other than the patient and intimate grooming of the behavior of their elites, and for the faith that such grooming can happen, can be seen to happen, and can be repeated in every generation."⁵ Key to Brown's argument is the word "sympathy," which not only suggests the specificity of his approach to the difference between late antiquity and Islam (with a crooked detour through early medieval Christian celibacy); it also explains how self-critique of seemingly

unavoidable historical categorizations, if there were to be any, would still fall back in the face of the other:

Yet, no sooner have we entered with sympathy into this common concern than the difference between Islam and the Graeco-Roman world springs to the eye. Though often brought to bear on men of deep religious belief, Hellenistic and late-antique *paideia* contained no religious code and imposed no religious sanction whatsoever. The sanctions imposed were those brought to bear by purely human significant others in the society. Ultimately, a man was brought to heel by the sense of shame, by reminders of the antithesis of *aischron* and *kalon*, and by the revulsion felt by the refined soul for those unrefined elements of raw human nature that betrayed themselves in breaches of decorum, *aschemosyne*. “My lord, you forget yourself”—*aschemoneis* hegemon—is the ultimate put-down placed in the mouth of a Christian martyr confronting an ill-tempered Roman governor. Late antique *paideia* only brings us half the way to the Islamic product of *adab*, as *adab* is defined by Georges Anawati: “un vrai code de savoir-vivre ou se mêlent les exigences d’un homme ‘bien élevé’ mais en même temps soucieux de bien se comporter ‘en présence de Dieu.’”⁶

While Brown does not go so far as to admit that *any* type of unwritten laws of moral conduct and ethics could be transferrable anywhere in the globe from one generation to the next through inherited ancestral and tribal customs, his “after-thought” statement confirms what we already know about Greek *paideia*: that it is in essence a process of *anamnesis*, where humans are educated into their genuine humanity, at least according to Werner Jaeger, through *mos maiorum*—that is, through the rich wisdom of ancestral heritage aimed to develop a person into maturity.⁷ Not only does *mos maiorum* have a “religious” component to it, but it can on occasion generate resemblances among other cultures. If, according to Brown, late antique *paideia* provides only “half the way” to the Islamic product of *adab*, one wonders not merely about the second half of that way, but about how that “first half” came to be and how *paideia* traveled in Brown’s fluid world of late antiquity and found its way to pre-Islamic and then Qur’ānic Arabia. Could an argument be made that because *xenia*—the great concept of Greek hospitality and the guest-host relationship—was first celebrated in Homer’s *Odyssey*, must all ethics of human hospitality trickle down from “the rugged land of Ithaca, too cramped for driving horses” to the desert sands of the Arabian peninsula, where ancient Arabs cleverly adapted it into their own *al-karam wa-wājib al-ḍiyāfa* (generosity and moral duty towards guests)? Or would we go even further back and wonder who taught Homer the art of *xenia* in the first place? Abraham?⁸ Or is *xenia* itself an innate human virtue that emanates spontaneously in the world under different names? It would seem implicit in Brown’s description that what previously passed under the so-called influence or “continuity” of late antiquity is at least a phantasm to the degree that it has no historical evidence to support its precedence over other cultures, especially oral and preliterate communities in general.

A strong ethic of *ḍiyāfa* (hospitality) did indeed permeate pre-Islamic Arabia. Before the Qur’ān, pre-Islamic poets such as ‘Amr ibn Kulthūm, Imru’

al-Qays, ʿArafā, Zuhayr, Mālik ibn Ḥarīm al-Hamdānī, and Umayya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, to refer but to a few examples, composed poetry that thematized clear ethical imperatives in reference to the guest-host relationship, among other virtues such as *al-murūʿa*, *al-shajāʿa*, *al-karam*, *al-amāna*, *al-ṣidq*, *al-wafāʿ*, and *al-ʿiffa* (virtue, bravery, generosity, trust, truthfulness, loyalty, and chastity). These poets were the mouthpieces of their clans, boasting tribal virtues in addition to other exploits like honor, pride, love, female beauty, mettle in battles, heroism, camel nomadism, and praise of family and friends as well as mockery of foes and adversaries. Poetic contests were so fierce that even a cursory reading of any of the *Muʿallaqāt* would bring the tension of these ethical rivalries back to life. Many of these ethical tenets survived in the Qurʾān as many were filtered out. Why would Brown then choose to bypass this rich pre-Qurʾānic tradition and offer a reading of the Qurʾān, or Islam for that reason, that is so selective and so ahistorical?

In his defense, Brown derives his argument on *adab* from Georges Anawati's post-Qurʾānic definition, which confines it to a mixed duality of *bien eleve* (good upbringing) and *bien comporter en presence de Dieu* (behaving well in the presence of God) and only to an understanding of *adab* as theogony. Anawati's definition is well taken, but it only addresses a fraction one of the many complex variegations of *adab*, thus truncating the term from its fountain sources as well as its socio-linguistic and ethical associations in polytheistic pre-Islamic Arabia. Pre-Islamic Arabic happens to be the fountainhead of *adab* in the Arabo-Islamic tradition; its absence from Brown's argument makes it impossible to understand his point. In the field of Arabic studies, what we call *adab* is located in a constellation of historical shifts from the era of the pre-Islamic *qaṣida* until now. The emergence and codification of Arabic *belles lettres* has also resulted in the formation of aesthetic and philological principles across time that eventually separated *adab* and distinguished it from nonliterary forms of human expressions.⁹

Still, Brown's acknowledgment offers us an entry into what has been historically othered and repressed in the study of the Qurʾān in the West. This is an area which shows palpable gaps in broad categorical thinking in surrendering to an *ʿaṣabiyya* that oftentimes obliges certain historians to "patch" human time and events, to use ʿAntara's powerful expression, as they dismiss records of genuine historical thinking as "immaterial" or "unavailable" to them, when in reality such records lie gravely in wait for scholars to dis-inter them. My attempt to de-other native sources, however, is not simply a protestation against the intensely ideological dismissiveness inherent in the study of the Qurʾān, which continues to examine it with Eurocentric eyes.¹⁰ It is rather an invitation to commiserate with a neglected tradition whose dialogue with the Qurʾān is bound to broaden our understanding of early Islam. It is also noteworthy that while the divide between Islam and Hellenism was reconciled in the early centuries of Islam when measured Muslim scholars translated Greek manuscripts into Arabic, the Qurʾān kept a marked ethical distance from Hellenistic thought, one which manifested itself in "a moral turn,"

as Gustave von Grunebaum puts it “to the concepts of paradise and hell, of reward and punishment, law and freedom.”¹¹

When Arnold Toynbee arrived at a parallel conclusion that “between the Koran and Hellenism no fusion was possible,”¹² he did not draw his conclusion too sharply but based his findings on what he perceives to be a clear moral and tetic disconnect between the culture of the Qur'ān and Greek-Hellenistic thought.¹³ Similarly, Carl Heinrich Becker states that the Qur'ān projects an anti-pagan sentiment unique enough to make it *unhellenistisch* in a predominantly Hellenized era.¹⁴ Even Theodor Nöldeke dismisses the allegation that the Qur'ān could be a product of late antiquity or Hellenism owing to what he considers to be an absence of intellection and abstract thought in its scripture.¹⁵

Nöldeke's dismissal of the Qur'ān as a product of late antiquity reminds us that in the realm of humanism, the rise of monotheism itself signified a profound shift, dissolving the vast and cosmic internationalism of Hellenistic polytheism. This earlier spiritual landscape allowed for a range of divine beliefs, where choosing to believe in one, many, or none of the gods was less contentious. Monotheism broke through this celestial plurality, redefining the divine and the sacred, leaving an indelible mark on the fabric of spiritual history. Embracing humanism thus compels us to reflect on monotheism's emergence from Akhenaton's devotion to the Sun as the one and only God, marking a pivotal departure from the rich tapestry of polytheism. This transformation itself invites a deeper, nuanced interpretation of the Qur'ān, positioning it within a broader, literary and cultural context. It evokes memories of an era when divine multiplicity was the norm, a time prior to the Abrahamic monotheistic paradigm that pressured scholarship into debates over authenticity and derivation. The Qur'ān, while firmly monotheistic and critical of polytheism, encapsulates a linguistic and aesthetic legacy that transcends its religious orthodoxy. It demands an intellectual appreciation that honors its unique place in the annals of literary heritage, free from the binary of original versus derivative, and without the overtones of secular nostalgia.

Yet Brown's earlier work has managed to trigger a growing influence on the practice of Hellenizing the Qur'ān's context in recent Euro-American scholarship, one which often follows a methodical approach of “inclusion.” This “inclusion” is at best dialectical. On the one hand, it embraces an ethos of “incorporating” Islam under banners of late antiquity¹⁶ and Hellenism.¹⁷ Garth Fowden, for instance, argues that Islam is a religion “rooted in Antiquity, even consuming it.”¹⁸ On the other hand, this very approach betrays a colossal deficit in Arabicity and fails to capture the Qur'ān's strong ethical negotiations with the established customs of pre-Islamic Arabia. Such a hurried approach to the Qur'ān cannot but arouse an anxiety of otherness. More than the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, more than the wines of immortal Greek gods, and more than the veiled women in the *Didascalia*, it is pre-Islamic poetry (as well as the ethics and aesthetics of its constitutive communities) that is the great absent from these debates. Brown's argument that Hellenistic and late-antique *pai-deia* was practically irreligious and imposed no theological sanctions is not only

informative but crucial for understanding the ethical context of early medieval Christianity, its promotion of clerical celibacy, and to the Qur'ān's commentary on the topic, a point which I address in detail toward the end of this chapter.

For now, suffice it to say that Brown's categorical fixation on connecting the dots between Islam and late antiquity, which has already left absent an entire corpus of literature behind it, is itself a symptom of this imaginative Eurocentric *'aṣabiyya*. This fixation not only leaves gaps in its totalizing vision, but also suffers from theological contradictions and the absence of a fair assessment of a history of the other. It is not without notice to observe the deep affinities between Hellenism, the Bible, and the Qur'ān. Yet, only a thorough and in-depth reading of this corpus of ancient Arabic literature will allow us to begin to grasp the distinctiveness of the Qur'ān's ethical intervention as a different socio-linguistic order than the one already familiar to us in pre-Islamic Arabia. For this reason, it is important to excavate some of the perineal ethics of pre-Islamic Arabia and assess their relevance to the early years of the Qur'ān. Even in Islamicist scholarship, pre-Islamic poetry is often associated with but rarely thanked for the founding of the Qur'ān's ethico-linguistic landscape as well as its exegetical tradition. Al-Jāhīz reminds us that the genre of ancient Arabic poetry started about 150–200 years before the Qur'ān, thus establishing the proper Arabic register that appears in the Qur'ān. Ibn Qutayba too confirms that ancient Arabic poets are the authority when it comes to understanding the Qur'ān and all things Arabic:

يقع الاحتجاج بأشعارهم في الغريب وفي النحو وفي كتاب الله عز وجل وحديث رسول الله

They [pre-Islamic Arab poets] are the authority for understanding unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar, the Qur'ān and hadith.¹⁹

Pre-Islamic Arab tribes celebrated poetry as their *dīwān*—that is, the record of their lives, cultural practices, genealogies, and histories. Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī (d. 845/6) states that pre-Islamic poetry has *ṣinā'a wa thaqāfa* (a craft and a skill).²⁰ The sixth-century Arabic literature into which Muḥammad was born consisted thus of remarkable poetical (as well as prosaic) pieces that comprised all the records of the Arabs, which included, to use the language of Ibn Qutayba, “useful events, correct genealogies, fine wisdom on par with philosophers, and knowledge in fields of equinology, astronomy, among others.”²¹ In addition, Muḥammad's knowledge of pre-Islamic poetry is well documented in Arabic sources.²²

On balance, the problem with the origin of the word *adab* is that there is no conclusive evidence of its ethical meaning and usage either in pre-Islamic Arabic or in the Qur'ān. It is understandable from the example I cite shortly, according to which the Egyptian critic Shawqī Ḍayf relates *adab* to *ma'duba* (pl. *ma'ādib*)—namely, “a banquet, a communal meal.” But this would not be the only time that words of seemingly identical roots come to be speculatively connected. Another plausible theory is that *adab* is formed from a plural *ādāb*, interpreted as *a'dāb* but originally *ad'āb*, the plural form of *da'b*, “custom, manner, habit,” in what linguists would traditionally refer to as “a back formation.”

Yet this understanding too cannot be proved with concrete evidence. In its very general ethical sense, however, *adab* is akin to, or at least a part of, *murū'a*, a defining pre-Islamic feature of virtue, which M. M. Bravmann carefully traces in the study of the *Jāhili* background of the Qur'ān, defining the latter as a practice of "ethical duties of several kinds."²³ Furthermore, Bravmann shifts attention to considerations of the important role *murū'a* played "even in Islamic days,"²⁴ thus acknowledging Ignác Goldziher's influential study of the word and the concept, while debunking his long-standing theory on the categorical contrast between "*Muruwwah* und [and] *Din*."²⁵ Thus, when Ḍayf cites examples from pre-Islamic poetry to situate the root of *adab* in the heart of sixth-century Arabia's ethos of *murū'a*, he does so with the understanding that *adab* emerges from a communal invite for sharing food, a remarkable act of *xenia* at the heart of pre-Islamic customs. Food ethics thus manifested itself in bountiful acts of hospitality, originating from offering food, where *al-ādib*—namely, *al-dā' ilā al-ta'ām* (the food-offering host)²⁶—offers a meal to everyone and presents a holistic communal invitation that is unconditional and indiscriminatory, one that is performed at all times, and especially in the harshness of winter, where food is scarce and most needed in the deserts of Arabia. The following lines from Ṭarafa record this earliest association of *adab* with the ethics of hospitality and the guest-host relationship:

نَحْنُ فِي الْمَشْنَاءِ نَدْعُو الْجَفَلَى لَا نَرَى الْآدِيبَ فِينَا يَنْتَقِرُ

We, in the winter, invite all / you don't see the *ādib* (host) among us discriminating.

There is in Ṭarafa's line a deep sense of ethical fulfillment in performing communal acts of hospitality, which manifests itself in offering banquets to the stranger, the orphan, and the homeless. Ṭarafa's ethical reference finds its match in the following line from al-Hudhali:

وَكُنَّا إِذَا مَا الضَّيْفُ حَلَّ بِأَرْضِنَا سَفَكْنَا دِمَاءَ الْبُئْنِ فِي ثُرْبَةِ الْحَالِ²⁷

When a guest visits our land / we spill the blood of cattle in the muddy sand.

The confirmation and celebration of hospitality ethics confirms that the obligation to offer hospitality to strangers in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam is both tribal and communal, a collective ethic embodied in the insistent spirit of the plural Arabic pronouns that permeate those lines: *naḥnu*, *nad 'ū*, *finā*, *kunnā*, *bi 'rdinā*, *safaknā* (we; we invite; it is our custom; our land; we spill). Note the conditional case in al-Hudhali's verse. The particle *idhā* in the verse's first hemistich initiates a conditional clause that is met with the direct and unmediated *safaknā* verb phrase in the main clause of the second hemistich. This structure carries a rhetoric of alacrity and immediacy. The language also makes this instance of hospitality conditional, but conditional only on the appearance of a stranger. In other words, hospitality in pre-Islamic Arabia is not only seasonal, per Ṭarafa's verse, but ongoing. There is no excuse for denying hospitality to anyone; even the untimely arrival of a stranger in town is reason enough to trigger immediate hospitality. In this respect, al-Hudhali's line is as Abrahamic as it could possibly be. The Qur'ān celebrates

Abraham's hospitality toward his guests with a similar linguistic code of immediacy. In the following verse, the Qur'ānic verb phrase "fa-mā labitha" creates a similar effect of speed and wholeheartedness we see in al-Hudhalī's line :

لَقَدْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُنَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ بِالْبُشْرَى قَالُوا سَلَامًا فَقَالَ سَلَامٌ مِّمَّا لَبِثَ أَنْ جَاءَ بِعِجْلٍ خَنِيذٍ

When our messengers arrived at Abraham's with the good tidings, they said "peace"; he said "peace," and rushed to bring in a stone-roasted calf. (11:69)

The ethical demeanor of unhesitant swiftness to attend to strangers/guests—without knowing who they are—sinks deep into the tribal and communal values of pre-Islamic Arabia, a feature that makes the reception of Qur'ānic ethics of hospitality seamless and relatable to its receiving community. There is an intimate correlation between these sentiments and the Qur'ān's clarion call for being hospitable to the stranger and the homeless.²⁸ So, in addition to its early manifestations in Greek mythology, hospitality can in fact be traced back to Abraham's enthusiastic welcome of his visitors in the Old Testament (Genesis 18:1–15) and its corresponding version in the Qur'ān (11:69–70; 15:51–52; 51: 24–27), making the responsibility toward the stranger as quintessentially "Godly" as it is quintessentially human. With the exception of the Amalekites, where the narrative is more contentious, kindness toward strangers is a core value in the Bible's teachings: : "But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."²⁹

Hospitality is also a key component of the ethical rhetoric and practice of pre-Islamic Arabia, as a practical application of *adab*, and it seems to conform to features in the Qur'ān. What the Qur'ān does differently, however, is co-opt this preexisting *paideia* into the larger framework of its own eschatological narrative. As a practice, then, hospitality may come down to an offer of food to strangers and impoverished fellows who come to find themselves within one's vicinity, but it is crucial to see it in its Qur'ānic framework as a commendable ethical practice *outside* one's home domain. In other words, the Qur'ān lends hospitality an intratribal and even national mobility, evoked with respect to empathy toward the other, not just as a local tribal act of giving food to those who come to "our" land, but of giving it outside the comfortable and the familiar, and even in circumstances when one could not afford to give it, in fact when one would rather not give:

وَيُطْعَمُونَ عَلَى حَبَّةٍ مِسْكِينًا وَبَيْتِمَا وَأَسِيرًا. إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكْرًا. إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِنْ رَبِّنَا يَوْمًا غَمُّوسًا قَمْطَرِيرًا

They give food *despite their love for it* [my emphasis] to the homeless, the orphan, and the incarcerated. [They say,] "We feed you for the face of God; we do not expect from you return or thanks. We fear from our God a stressful, face-frowning day."

From a historical viewpoint, we might note that feeding one's enemy is an ethical trait that derives from the Bible: "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if

he is thirsty, give him a drink.”³⁰ Further, there is much to say about the ethics of feeding the incarcerated. The Qur’ān confirms this biblical ethics not just by making it conditional upon request, but by giving food, without solicitation, to the enemy of God, food that one would rather keep for oneself. According to al-Bayḏāwī, this Qur’ānic verse makes specific reference to prisoners of war, the *usarā’ al-kuffār* (captive nonbelievers) who are categorically opposed to monotheistic faith and the idea of God.³¹ In today’s context, we might think about this ethical call in terms of attending to fellow humans living under siege or kept in the cages of the carceral state—how this attention plays a role in educating the food-giver in the overarching logic of the state, its criminalization of the poor and the disempowered, its reliance on race as a conceptual tool to divide humans, and its refusal of any redistributive policy that would work overall against the hunger of those experiencing homelessness, those lacking kin support, and those locked up.

To return to Brown’s point, at the heart of Qur’ānic *adab* there lies a call for disciplining human desire and a high moral order of self-denial. Yet, this *adab* of self-discipline is not completely alien to ancient Arabia, even though an exaggerated sense of personal and tribal glory often predominates pre-Islamic poetry. However, ancient poems of glory and pride must always be read in their historical contexts. While such poems include themes of personal glory, exaggerated pride, tribal honor, panegyrics, and vindictive, they still carry strong overtones of communal *adab*. Take, for instance, ‘Amr ibn Kulthūm’s long ode, which is often associated with the series of protracted battles known as Ḥarb al-Basūs [(the Basūs War). The war between two tribes in ancient Arabia, which is referenced in the context of this conflict, is one of the most famous pre-Islamic Arabian wars that was purportedly sparked by the killing of a camel belonging to a member of the Bakr tribe by a member of the Taghlib tribe. The Basūs War is said to have lasted for around forty years, starting in the late fifth century and continuing into the early sixth century. ‘Amr ibn Kulthūm’s ode is said to have contributed to bringing peace between his tribe, Taghlib, and the neighboring tribe of Bakr. In particular, the following lines of the ode composed likely in the early part of the sixth century, describe the gallant deeds of his tribe and portray a genealogy of the glory, nobility, and compassion toward refugees that run through his ancestors:

فَقُلْ حَدَّثْتُ فِي جُشَمِ بْنِ بَكْرٍ	بِنَقْصٍ فِي خُطُوبِ الْأَوَّلِينَ
وَرَثْنَا مَجْدَ عَلَقْمَةَ بْنِ سَيْفٍ	أَبَاحَ لَنَا حُصُونِ الْمَجْدِ دِينَا
وَرَثْتُ مُهْلَهْلًا وَالْخَيْرَ مِنْهُ	زُهِيرًا نَعَمْ ذُخْرُ الدَّائِرِينَ
وَعَنَابًا وَكُلُومًا جَمِيعًا	بِهِمْ نَلْنَا ثَرَاتِ الْأَكْرَمِينَ
وَذَا الْبُرَّةِ الَّذِي حَدَّثْتُ عَنْهُ	بِهِ نَحْمِي وَنَحْمِي الْمُلْتَجِينَ
وَمَنَا قَبْلَهُ السَّاعِي كُلُّيْنَا	فَأَيُّ الْمَجْدِ إِلَّا قَدْ وَلِينَا ³²

Have you been told of any lack in Jusham ibn Bakr / When it comes to great affairs
with early tribes?

We inherited the glory of 'Alqama ibn Sayf / Who made lawful to us all forts of glory.

I inherited from Muhalhil the goodness of Zuhayr, the best of all the renowned.

And 'Attāb and Kulthūm as a whole / To them we owe the heritage of the noblest ones.

And Dhū al-Bura of whom you know / Who protects us and make us care for others in need.

And from us before him comes Kulayb / What glory have we not attained?

While the ethical code of 'Amr ibn Kulthūm's ode gives the impression that tribal pride and glory are the trademarks of his people, a closer look reveals that his celebration of the *adab* of his tribe—namely, the generosity, kindness, and protection of strangers inherited from his ancestors—is in fact the motor of his pride. Praising high moral standards is a key element of pre-Islamic poetry. Zuhayr's ode, to give another example, is also dedicated to a celebration of kindness and virtue as much as it is a criticism of vicious behavior such as cursing, avarice, and the misdirection of charitable deeds:

وَمَنْ يَجْعَلِ الْمَعْرُوفَ مِنْ دُونِ عَرْضِهِ	يَفْرُهُ، وَمَنْ لَا يَنْقِيَ السُّتْمَ يُسْتَمَّ
وَمَنْ يَكُ ذَا فَضْلٍ فَيَنْحَلْ بِفَضْلِهِ	عَلَى قَوْمِهِ يُسْتَعَنَ عَنْهُ وَيَذَمَّ
وَمَنْ يُوفِ لَا يَنْمَمُ وَمَنْ يُهْدِ قَلْبُهُ	إِلَى مُطْمَئِنِّ الْبِرِّ لَا يَتَجَمَّعُ
وَمَنْ يَجْعَلِ الْمَعْرُوفَ فِي غَيْرِ أَهْلِهِ	يَكُنْ حَمْدُهُ دَمًا عَلَيْهِ وَيَنْدَمُ
وَمَهْمَا تَكُنْ عِنْدَ امْرِئٍ مِنْ خَلِيقَةٍ	وَإِنْ خَالَهَا تَخْفَى عَلَى النَّاسِ تُعْلَمُ ³³

He who gives charity to protect honor / will increase his honor, and he who curses shall be cursed.

He who is generous but dispossesses his people of his generosity / shall be dismissed and reproached.

He who fulfills his promise cannot be reproached / and he whose heart is guided/toward benevolence cannot falter.

He who shows charity to those who do not deserve it / his praise shall turn into censure and he shall be regretful.

And whatever demeanor a person has / but thinks no one will notice, it shall be revealed.

The above lines from Zuhayr indicate that pre-Islamic Arabic poetry represents the classical corpus of *adab* par excellence. It could be argued that *adab* is the major articulation of this genre, and that the key forms of communal relationships are the ones that are weaved around it. In addition, the social and moral code of *adab* is the chief means of distinguishing between men and tribes in ethical terms. As it is obvious from the following lines by al-Muthaqqib al-'Abdī (553–87), men who have virtue, who keep their word, who are courteous to their neighbors, who

do not backbite, and who are not hypocrites, are praiseworthy because they follow a high moral code of *adab*, regardless of their social status:

لَا تَقُولَنَّ إِذَا مَا لَمْ تُرِدْ	أَنْ تُنِّمَ الْوَعْدَ فِي شَيْءٍ نَعَمْ
حَسَنٌ قَوْلٌ نَعَمٌ مِنْ بَعْدِ لَا	وَقَبِيحٌ قَوْلٌ لَا بَعْدَ نَعَمْ
إِنَّ لَا يَبْعُدُ نَعَمٌ فَاجِسَةٌ	فَبَلَا فَايْدًا إِذَا خَفَتِ النَّدَمُ
فَإِذَا قُلْتَ نَعَمٌ فَاصْبِرْ لَهَا	بِنَجَاحِ الْقَوْلِ، إِنَّ الْخُلْفَ دَمٌ
وَاعْلَمْ أَنَّ الدَّمَ نَقْصٌ لِلْقَتَى	وَمَتَى لَا يَبْقَى الدَّمُ يُدَمُّ
أَكْرَمَ الْجَارِ وَأَرْغَى حَقُّهُ	إِنَّ عِرْفَانَ الْقَتَى الْحَقُّ كَرَمٌ
لَا تَرَانِي رَاتِعًا فِي مَجْلِسٍ	فِي لُحُومِ النَّاسِ كَالسَّيْعِ الضَّرْمِ
إِنَّ شَرَّ النَّاسِ مَنْ يَكْتُمُ لِي	حِينَ يُلْقَانِي وَإِنْ غَبْتُ سَتَمٌ ³⁴

Do not say, if you do not wish/ to fulfill a promise, “yes.”

It is good to say “yes” after saying “no” / But “no” after “yes” is bad.

“No” after “yes” is scandalous / begin with “no” if you fear regret.

If you say “yes,” then commit yourself to it / carry it to a successful end, for breaking it will get you vilified.

Know that vilification belittles a man / and he who does not keep his guard will be vilified.

I care for my neighbor and I honor his right/ a man’s true gratitude is kindness.

You won’t see me cannibalizing people in councils, biting their flesh like a voracious beast.

The most evil of people is he who smiles / when he sees me and backbites me in my absence.

I should clarify that adhering to this moral code of al-‘Abdī is not an easy matter since it does not entail a Brownian compliance in the theological sense of the word—namely, the way it is clearly outlined as *al-ḥalāl wa al-ḥarām* (the religiously legitimate and the religiously forbidden) in Islam. Rather, it subscribes to a humanist code of an ethical ideal that cultivates its moral obligations from human nature and from being in the world. Yet, at the heart of this pre-Islamic “morality” code still lie earthly riches, even a crazed desire for amassing huge fortunes. Thus, we see Ṭarafa reflecting on his materialistic culture by describing how a woman not only blames him for his poverty, but equates fortune with “eternity”:

وتقول عاذلتني و ليس لها	بغد ولا ما بعده علمٌ
إن الثراء هو الخلود وإِ	رُّ المرأ يكرِب وجهه العدمُ ³⁵

My blamer would say, having no / knowledge of tomorrow or after:

Wealth is eternity and / a man’s misfortune is brought by the lack of it.

Another well-known poet of the pre-Islamic era, Mālik ibn Ḥarīm al-Hamdānī,³⁶ has a different poetic view from al-‘Abdī on the wisdom of life. To al-Hamdānī, one is better off becoming wealthy, since life with money and richness can change one's fate for the better. Oddly enough, al-Hamdānī states that lack of wealth leads to lowliness, misery, and corruption: Unlike al-‘Abdī's wise man who is rich in morals, al-Hamdānī's wise man is a moneyed man whose fortune is bound to bring him praises even when he is censurable and morally unworthy:

وَأُنَبِّتُ وَالْأَيَّامُ ذَاتَ تَجَارِبٍ	وَتُنَبِّدِي لَكَ الْآيَّامُ مَا لَسْتَ تَعْلَمُ
بِأَنْ ثَرَاءَ الْمَالِ يَنْفَعُ رَبَّهُ	وَيُثْنِي عَلَيْهِ الْحَمْدُ وَهُوَ مُذَمَّمٌ
وَأَنْ قَلِيلَ الْمَالِ لِلْمَرْءِ مُفْسِدٌ	يَجْزُ كَمَا حَزَّ الْقَطِيعُ الْمُحْرَمُ
يَرَى دَرَجَاتِ الْمَجْدِ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُهَا	وَيَقْعُدُ وَسَطَ الْقَوْمِ لَا يَتَكَلَّمُ ³⁷

I learned, and time is the best teacher /—for it reveals to you what you do not know—,
That wealth benefits its owner / and allows him to be praised even when at fault.
And that lack of money degrades / and hurts like a harsh fresh whip.
He [the man without wealth] would see the grades of glory he cannot attain /
and would sit among people but cannot speak.

Al-Hamdānī is not alone in adopting a prudential view of the importance of being well off. We continue to see in pre-Islamic poetry palpable delineations of a materialistic community that favors affluence and possessions, inhabiting an opportunistic moral code whose greediness engendered taking booty in the manner of the Vikings, an ethical laxity that had become to a large degree a predominant disposition in pre-Islamic Arabia. The following example from Ṭarafa illustrates not only the life of lasciviousness, alcoholism, and insobriety that he led with his cronies, but also a sense of bitterness and indignation owing to his lack of wealth. Like al-Hamdānī, Ṭarafa contends that richness equals societal respect and admiration:

فَإِنْ تَبْعَنِي فِي حَلَقَةِ الْقَوْمِ تَلَقَّنِي	وَإِنْ تَلْتَمِسْنِي فِي الْحَوَانِيتِ تَصْطَلِدِ
مَتَى تَأْتِنِي أَصْبَحَكَ كَأْساً رَوِيَّةً	وَإِنْ كُنْتُ عَنْهَا ذَا غِنًى فَاعْنِ وَازْدُدْ
.....	
نَدَامَايَ بِيضٌ كَالنَّجْمِ وَقِينَةٌ	تَرْوَحُ عَلَيْنَا بَيْنَ بُرْدٍ وَمُجَسَّدِ
.....	
فَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبِّي كُنْتُ قَيْسَ بْنَ خَالِدٍ	وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبِّي كُنْتُ عَمْرَو بْنَ مَرْثَدٍ
فَأَصْبَحْتُ ذَا مَالٍ كَثِيرٍ وَزَارِنِي	بَنُونَ كَرَامٍ سَادَةٌ لِمَسْوَدٍ ³⁸

If you are looking for me, find me in the folk's gathering / and if you want to catch me, I will be in the taverns

Whenever you visit in the morning, I'll offer a cup of wine full to the brim / and if
 you don't need it, do without, and continue so
 My drinking mates are white, like the stars, and a singing-girl / comes to us late in a
 robe and revealing garment.
 If my lord willed it, I could have been Qays ibn Khālid / and if lord willed it, I could
 have been 'Amr ibn Marthad.
 And I would have possessed a vast fortune and received visits from / noble sons and
 masters of masters.

I should add that the desire for material gain explicitly expressed in these poetical works is bound to clash with the Qur'ān's antimaterialistic view of the world. The poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia paints a peculiar picture of material immortalization, one that the Qur'ān vehemently opposes in its early Meccan sūras and beyond. From the start, the Qur'ān takes the side of the poor and deprived, expressing concerns over a type of people who *yaddu 'u al-yatīm wa-lā yahuḍu 'alā ṭa 'āmi al-miskīn* (rebuff the orphan and do not urge the feeding of the homeless),³⁹ thus breaching even the most basic tenets of *adab*, which had evidently been in place as a common custom before the Qur'ān to protect the rights of the poor and the underprivileged in a predominantly materialistic community. This compassionate attitude toward the disadvantaged eventually transcribes itself as one of five obligatory commandments of Islam and becomes known as *zakā* (obligatory alms tax). In an organic, direct response to the excessive celebration of wealth, the rise of a greedy apathetic tribalism, and the perverse embrace of materialistic values in pre-Islamic Mecca, some of which we see unabashedly reflected in these poems, the Qur'ān pulls no punches in drawing on the preexisting ethos of *adab* in denouncing every act of avarice and money-hoarding in the Meccan and Medinan communities of early Islam. It even mocks those who believe that wealth equals eternity. And this is where the ethical turn reaches its acme: the only eternity of accumulating wealth for wealth's sake and of looking down on fellow humans, retorts the Qur'ān unequivocally, is going to be hellfire. For instance, sūra 104 is one of the early Meccan chapters that presents the Qur'ān's harsh response to those who seek to amass fortune while denigrating their fellow humans:

وَيْلٌ لِّكُلِّ هُمَزَةٍ لُّمَزَةٍ—الَّذِي جَمَعَ مَالًا وَعَدَّدَهُ—يَحْسَبُ أَنَّ مَالَهُ أَخْلَدَهُ—كَأَلَّا لِيَلْبِثَنَّ فِي الْخَطْمَةِ—وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ
 مَا الْخَطْمَةُ—نَارُ اللَّهِ الَّتِي تَطَّلِعُ عَلَى الْآفَاقِ—إِنَّهَا عَلَيْهِمْ مُّوَصَّدَةٌ—فِي عَمَدٍ مُمَدَّدَةٍ

Woe to every backstabber and turncoat. Who accumulates wealth and keeps count of it. He thinks that his wealth will make him eternal. Nay! He shall be thrown into the *Ḥuṭama*. And what do you know of the *Ḥuṭama*? It is God's lit fire, which sees the hearts. It is sealed upon them. In outstretched pillars. (104:1–9)

The verses begin with a divine warning, a heavenly resolve to respond with wrath and retribution to the crime of hoarding money while being contemptuous of the disadvantaged. This lethal combination of obsession with wealth and ridicule

of humans can only lead to hell according to the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān considers men who amass wealth and lack tolerance and compassion, men who are careless about social equality, to be a menace to society. The reference is to those who not only value and roll in riches but whose view of the world allows them to devalue their fellow humans, by backbiting them, laughing at them, whether verbally or nonverbally—that is, by cursing them, making scornful facial gestures, imitating their disabilities, or deriding them for their poverty and squalor, as if they were a completely different subclass or subspecies. Those who value money more than their fellow humans and who think money will make them eternal shall only be worthy of eternity in hell.

The Qur'ān thus brings eschatological ethics into the thick of Arabia not necessarily as a difference from Hellenism as Brown would argue, although this is always a welcome point of comparison, but as Arabia's difference *from itself*, or to be more accurate, as taking sides in the already conflicted and entangled ethical claims of pre-Islamic Arabia. This context is key. Like Hellenism, pre-Islamic polytheistic Arabia has its versions of moral codes, including moral obligations and failures that are all too human.

Brown argues that early medieval Christian sexual ethics and monastic disciplines are better understood in the context of Greek and Roman civilizations, with the latter affording more autonomy regarding sexual practices. While sexuality in pre-Islamic Arabia is still a topic in dire need of extensive research, it is not hard to glean from Ṭarafa's poem that there is an unchecked subjectivity to male sexuality. Yet, there are also complexities that involve race, status, and gender dynamics attached to pre-Islamic sexuality. On the one hand, one could detect an implicit principle of morality in pre-Islamic sexual ethics in al-'Abdī's poem, especially in reference to honoring the rights of his neighbor (*ukrimu al-jāra wa ar 'ā haqqahu*) and the implication that the wife and children of his neighbor would by default fall under that "right" of protection from emotional or physical harm. On the other hand, poetic depictions of sexual conquests present these incidents as a normal aspect of everyday life. The following lines from Imru' al-Qays's ode add to his strong sense of ancestral pride an enumeration of romantic exploits and sexual conquests:

فَمِثْلُكَ حُبْلَى قَدْ طَرَفْتُ وَمَرْضِعَ فَالْهَيْئَتُهَا عَنْ ذِي ثَمَائِمٍ مُخَوِّلَ
إِذَا مَا بَغَى مِنْ خَلْفِهَا انْصَرَفَتْ لَهُ بِشَقٍّ وَتَحْتِي شِقْهًا لَمْ يُخَوِّلَ⁴⁰

So I visited a woman, just like you, in the evening, who was pregnant and nursing /
but I distracted her from her newborn, who was hung with charms.
When he cried, she leaned back to him, extending half her body / while leaving the
other half underneath me, unstirred.

In these lines, the poetic persona is seeking to persuade his beloved to yield to his sexual advances, a dramatic monologue akin in its corporal tone to Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (1681). Yet Marvell's passionate call for sex with the

woman he so fervently desires is set against the lapse of time and physical decay. In Imru' al-Qays, however, the persona demeans the "coyness" of his beloved by stating that she is no different from other women he slept with. He congratulates himself for persuading her to have sexual intercourse with him. The Arabic word *alhaytuhā* implies both agency and pleasure; he boasts how the love of a mother for her own baby is equaled by her passion for the poet, surrendering half her body to him. Imru' al-Qays's persona succeeds where Marvell's has not. The woman/beloved is not described as being forced, "coy," or even disliking the adventure. She may have enjoyed it; they may have met before; she may have instigated the encounter; she may have been recently widowed. We will never know, since *al-ma'nā fī baṭn al-shā'ir* (meaning lies in the belly of the poet), as ancient Arabs would say, and one can easily get lost in fictional speculations about fictional affairs. What we know, what the texts allows us to see, is that the poet casts himself as so irresistible that she, a pregnant and nursing mother, has no choice but to succumb to his temptation. The lines delineate how the mother lays down her baby behind her back, adorned with amulets and charms, in complete submission to the poet's sexual advances. Not only that, but even when the baby cries and is hungry for his mother's milk, she turns but with one half of her body toward him while keeping the other for her lover/poet so as not to interrupt his and her pleasure.

It is easy for a puritanical theologian such as al-Bāqillānī to interpret this formidable representation of masculinity, so graphic in its depiction of male sexual exploits, in contradistinction to the righteous tone of Qur'ān's discursive ethical authority, where matrimonially regulated sexuality becomes the mode for protecting chastity and fostering social and communal cohesions. Al-Bāqillānī sees the flamboyant tone with which the persona depicts his encounter with a female lover as a powerful manifestation of the social victory brought about by the Qur'ān. To exaggerate his sexual potency and appeal, Imru' al-Qays's persona reduces the mother/lover to a sex toy. By contrast, mothers have a supreme moral status in both the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth. Some may deduce that a pregnant mother who is also nursing an infant may have little desire for a whimsical sexual encounter with a nightly lover. The phrase *mithluki* (the likes of you) may also be seen as loaded with gender stereotyping and the denigration of women. "Like you" or "like your kind" may sink deep into the ethical consciousness of pre-Islamic Arabia, representing a "blackening" of a woman's fame and a misdeed on the part of the poet that would run counter to the ethical turn of Islam, which embraces the virtues of virginity and chastity, and celebrates the social triumph and institutionalization of a debauchery-free community.

But to contradict the amateurish puritanism of al-Bāqillānī's theological thought, who only saw poetry as either *ḥarām* or *ḥalāl*,⁴¹ the discourse of poetry—one cannot emphasize this enough—is not the same as religious scripture: poetry allows for fiction and for humor (Imru' al-Qays is even described as impotent in some reports). Poetry is the domain of imagination, exaggeration, linguistic

play, even comedy and titillation; poets “say what they do not do,” as the Qur’ān famously reminds us. There is nothing wrong with that, as I explain in the following chapter.

Unlike Christianity’s adoption of celibacy as a reaction to the moral laxity of Hellenistic Rome, the Qur’ān, while aware of clerical celibacy and monastic institutions, embraces a middle ground as a reaction to the loose sexual principles of pre-Islamic Arabia. The Qur’ān does not attach to celibacy any major role. On the contrary, marital union and the raising of offspring are inalienable principles of Muslim faith. While the Qur’ān takes a firm ethical stand against human greed and self-absorption, it also does not encourage sexual abstinence. This ethical imperative is especially clear in Qur’ān 57. While the sūra advocates a continuity of acts of charity and kindness familiar to the Bible,⁴² it presents us with an intriguing dialectic of discontinuity in Christian dogma. In one of its verses (57:27), the sūra presents Christian dogma as a sign of divine mercy and of God’s continuous intervention in the world to offer guidance and deliverance through prophets and messengers:

ثُمَّ قَفَّيْنَا عَلَىٰ آثَارِهِم بِرُسُلِنَا وَقَفَّيْنَا بِعِيسَى ابْنِ مَرْيَمَ وَآتَيْنَاهُ الْإِنْجِيلَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِي قُلُوبِ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُ رَأْفَةً وَرَحْمَةً
وَرَهْبَانِيَّةً ابْتَدَعُوهَا مَا كَتَبْنَاهَا عَلَيْهِمْ إِلَّا ابْتِغَاءَ رِضْوَانِ اللَّهِ فَمَا رَعَوْهَا حَقَّ رِعَايَتِهَا فَآتَيْنَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْهُمْ
أَجْرَهُمْ وَكَثِيرٌ مِنْهُمْ فَاسِقُونَ⁴³

Then in their footprints we sent our messengers; we sent Jesus, son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel, and we instilled compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him, and a monasticism they contrived. We did not prescribe [it] on/ to them except in order for them to seek the satisfaction of God, but they did not observe it properly, so we rewarded those among them who believed, and most of them who remained were disobedient.

This continuity serves two important functions. First, it emphasizes the decree of divine justice—that is, the claim that God is not in the habit of abandoning humanity or letting it lapse into depravity without sending periodical divine guidance. The Qur’ān states that there has not been a span of time on earth when God neglected to send a prophet to inform humanity of God’s existence and to invite people to follow an ethical manual that steers them away from evil.⁴⁴ This ethical manual is often referred to in the Qur’ān as *nūr* (light) or *hudá* (guidance), in references to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.⁴⁵ This figuration of godly guidance as “light” is crucial in Qur’ān 57⁴⁶, precisely because light connotes a dissipation of darkness in a long ethical concatenation of god-sent prophets.⁴⁷ Secondly, as verse 57:27 has it, the light always reminds us it that comes from one divine source, thus sealing the question of the oneness of God and creating an ethical continuity of Abrahamic monotheism in harmony with the context of the Qur’ān, from Noah to Abraham to Moses to Jesus to Muḥammad : a variation on the theme of calling for the one God, and an extension of the line of prophets to Muḥammad—namely, that the call of all these prophets has always been to worship one single God,

and that no prophets are excepted. They are messengers and servants of God chosen at a time in human history, with various miracles suitable to the time, as al-Jāḥiẓ explains,⁴⁸ to draw people's attention to God.

On the other hand, the second half of verse 57:27 brings forth a discontinuity thesis by interrupting the Christian practice of monasticism and its associative practice of celibacy. The first half of verse 57:27 focuses on the message of Jesus, the son of Mary whom God has given the Gospel (*ātaynāhu al-Injīl*). The Qur'ān states that God instilled an ethic of compassion and mercy (*ra'fa wa rahma*) in the hearts of the disciples and those who followed Jesus. So far so good. But then comes the conjunctive *wa* (and), which initially reads like the continuity of the verse. The conjunctive *wa* is followed by the word *rahbāniyya* (monasticism) immediately after the two modifiers of "compassion" and "mercy," creating almost a double entendre. *Rāhib* literally means "fearing/someone who fears." Pious, renunciant Muslims who turned from the world could sometimes be called *rāhib*, a term that still carries strong implications of celibacy and sexual abstinence.⁴⁹ In its later development, Islam has come to strongly condemn celibacy. Recall, for instance, the well-known story about 'Uthmān ibn Maz'ūn, who deprived himself of sexual intercourse with women and boycotted the eating of meat. When 'Uthmān says he wants "to be a monk [*tarahhub*] in the mountains," the Prophet replies, "The 'monkhood' of my community is sitting in mosques waiting for the *ṣalā*." This story neatly shows that *rahbāniyya/tarahhub* is interpreted as an abdication of sexual desire and abandonment of society.⁵⁰ At any rate, the linguistic ambiguity in 57:27 lies specifically in the function and meaning of the conjunctive clause following *rahbāniyya*. Could the clause be read as "God has instilled compassion and mercy *and* monasticism" in the hearts of the followers of Jesus, a possible reference to the disciples but also to all guardians of Christianity in the years and centuries to come? In other words, are monasticism and its associative celibacy of the same category of love and compassion? Or is it a caesura, an interruption and therefore a *bid'a* (, heresy)—namely, a novelty to the original Christian dogma?

Syntactically, it might be slightly confounding to read the verse as such: "God has planted in the hearts of Jesus's disciples/followers compassion, mercy, and celibacy." The way the verse reads in Arabic does not prohibit this understanding. However, *rahbāniyya* comes immediately before *ibtada'ūhā* (they contrived it/invented it/came up with it/designed it/imposed it on themselves), making the objectival antecedent, *-hā* (it), at the end of the verb a direct reference to that *rahbāniyya*, and thus tipping the caesura in the direction of reading the verse as follows: "and monasticism [, which] they contrived," a reading that counters another—that is to say, "and monasticism that God inspired followers of Jesus to commit themselves to in the way he inspired them to behave with compassion and mercy." One thing is clear. It is difficult, both semantically and syntactically, to read the objectival suffix *-hā* in *ibtada'ūhā* as an antecedent to "compassion, mercy and monasticism." In other words, devising or coming up with *rahbāniyya* is of a self-imposed doctrine that God according to the Qur'ān simply did not decree, but

that may have been humanly devised in the path of moral and spiritual advancement and thus deemed approved by God. Yet, just as we start to think the verse has given us a straightforward statement, we see the aporia in 57:27: “We did not dictate/prescribe [it] on/to them except in order for them to seek the satisfaction/approval/consent of God.” This exception is in keeping with the main tenants of Sūra 57, which in sum is a chapter that celebrates the continuity of the light of God through the procreation of the human race. The theological aporia here lies in the implication that celibacy is an ethical practice premised on the understanding that virility is on a collision course with spiritual devotion to the very God who created the sex drive and bid humanity to multiply in the first place.

In this context, celebrating the divine will of procreation would seem to collide with *rahbāniyya*, which, in its own devotional imperative as a practice of inner freedom and spiritual growth in the service of God, is also, paradoxically, an interruption of that very divine order, and of the celestial continuity of its ethical guidance, which is manifest through the endurance of the human race. The *adab* of *rahbāniyya* in 57:27 thus serves as the extreme opposite of being an active participant of a community of believers and of having *takāthur fī al-amwāl wa al-awlād*, the boastful worldly practice of multiplying fortune and children referenced earlier in 57:20:

أَعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهُمْ زِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ فِي الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ

Know that this lower life is but play, entertainment, adornment, boasting among yourselves, and multiplying wealth and children.

Historically, early Christianity, especially in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion, suffered considerably. Many believers, the Qur'ān states, were persecuted, burned alive, chased across city borders, and so on. The reference to the “cave people” in Qur'ān 18 is a case in point that serves as a painful reminder of the abominable persecution of early medieval Christians, where a group of young men ran away into the mountains and hid in a cave (most likely escaping from the evil and hedonistic Roman emperor, Decius [249–51], known in Arabic sources as Diqyānūs). It is nonetheless still exegetically possible to interpret 57:27 as indicating that God has accepted the isolation—that is, the celibacy of those devout men who designed it or imposed it upon themselves, circumstantially and out of necessity—as the need to escape persecution was compelling; however, somehow in the process the practice apostatized and it may have likely become difficult for its adherents to uphold its standards. Or, as the Qur'ān says, “they failed to nurse it as properly as it should be nursed, so we rewarded those among them who believed and many of them were/are impious.” In other words, celibacy demands that priests and nuns conduct themselves in proper rituals of purity and have the proper qualifications of ordination. Still, the Qur'ān neither offers a complete picture of Christian celibacy nor pronouncedly denounces it. The verse ends with deferring the whole matter to God, who would decide whom to reward based on the truth and sincerity of their faith.

The circumstances that engendered celibacy should not be overlooked, especially the revolting and unending Roman persecution against Christian minorities. Early Christianity sought to flee to the desert to avoid such brutal oppressions, and in this act to differentiate itself from pagan Greece, but also from Judaism, which, like Islam, has no interest in celibacy and puts great emphasis on marriage and family values as consecrated duties. This emphasis brings us back full circle to Brown's main argument on Islamic *adab* vis-à-vis *paideia* in relation to late antiquity and early medieval Christianity. "The novelty of the Islamic *adab*," Brown contends, "was not its religious content, but the application to men in the world, to non-monks, of a religious grooming that had been considered capable of transforming only those who had withdrawn from society to give themselves over to an alternative *paideia* in the miniature society of the celibate monastery, 'as if in another world.'" ⁵¹ Brown here is alluding to some followers of Jesus who were claimed to have deserted conjugality and family life in order to dedicate themselves to proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God. ⁵² Sūra 57 takes a side in this debate. Because of the lack of upholding the standards of celibacy in the proper manner suitable for its application, Sūra 57 makes reference to a certain failing in celibacy and monasticism *writ large*, for reasons that are not mentioned in the sūra, but which one might infer could be institutional (power/authority), or personal, or both.

It is likely that Brown is not familiar with Sūra 57's take on celibacy; but, knowing that the Qur'ān makes a unique seventh-century statement on the application of celibacy, it would be injudicious to conclude that "the problem that faced the exponent of the classical concept of *adab* was a very different one from that which faced the Christian ascetic holy man," or that "unlike the Christian holy man, the Muslim exponent of *adab* could be said to stand at the 'core' of his culture, realizing at their fullest intensity the ideals to which all observant Muslims subscribed."⁵³ Despite the appealing testimonial from Ernst Gellner that "Islamic propriety emanates from their essence, as it were,"⁵⁴ Islamic *adab* emanates primarily from the Qur'ān *and*, as I have tried to demonstrate, from its filtered pre-Islamic culture. In the Qur'ān, the moral authority of the *homo-Islamicus* derives from the various articulations of the dos and don'ts peppered throughout its 114 sūras. But, to Brown's point, over time, celibacy did create an ascetic paradigm of moral hierarchy in early mediaeval Christianity, which chaste clergy used as a superior moral order to control the so-called "lowly" life of the uninitiated,⁵⁵ a hierarchical structure that the Qur'ān effectively nipped in the bud, but that yet somehow survived in classical Islam under a different garb of institutional hierarchy, one in which the religious elites and '*ulamā*', *sans* sexual abstinence, became the counterparts of medieval Christianity's celibate clergy.