

## FITNA

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### Abstract

In order to articulate the Qur'ānic concept of *fitna* I divided this article into three parts. In the first part, I discuss the etymology, meanings, and use of *fitna* in the Qur'ān. I argue that though *fitna* indicates deception, seduction, anarchy and turmoil, it is considered normative; it is the nature of this world. The essence of *fitna* is a merging of truth and falsehood that renders signs seductive and removes truth from the field of reason. Meaning is neither true nor false, absent nor present; it is incomplete since it partially operates within the sphere of *ghayb*, or the invisible reality. In the second part, I explore *fitna* as a sociological analytical concept by situating it within Western sociological theory. I contrast *fitna* to related concepts in the works of Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard and Timothy Bewes. Exploring the work of Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328 CE) in his treatise on truth and metaphor, and comparing it to the work of Bernard McGinn, I argue that in articulating meaning and truth, *fitna* avoids both dialectic synthesis and cosmic dualism by proposing a partial overlap between *zāhir* and *ghayb*, or the visible and the invisible worlds. In the third part, I study two applied aspects of *fitna*: in legal reasoning, and the theology of apocalypse. I explain how a worldview of *fitna* featured a formal notion of truth that is legal, rather than ontic and objective, and is grounded in *ghālib al-zann*, or the predominant probability. I then connect the apocalyptic turmoil to an increasing overlap between *ghayb* and *zāhir*, which escalates to their identification, but this comes with the end of *fitna* and the end of this world.

**Keywords:** *Fitna*; *ghayb*; Islam; truth; interpretation; apocalypse; probability; seduction.

### Resumen

Para expresar el concepto coránico de la *fitna*, este artículo se divide en tres partes. En la primera parte, se discuten la etimología, los significados y el uso del término *fitna* en el Qur'ān. Se argumenta que, aunque la palabra *fitna* indique decepción, seducción, anarquía y caos, al mismo tiempo se considera normativa, como el estado natural del mundo. La esencia de la *fitna* es una amalgama de verdad y mentira, la cual hace que los signos se vuelvan seductores y que se elimine el concepto de la verdad del campo de la razón. El significado no es ni verdadero ni falso, no está ni ausente ni presente: es incompleto, pues opera desde la esfera del *ghayb*, o la realidad invisible. En la segunda parte, se explora la *fitna* como concepto sociológico analítico, situándolo dentro de la teoría sociológica occidental. Se contrasta la *fitna* con conceptos relacionados en la obra de Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard y Timothy Bewes. A través de una exploración del pensamiento de Ibn

Taymiyya (1263-1328 CE) en su tratado sobre la verdad y la metáfora, y comparándolo con el de Bernard McGinn, se argumenta que, al articular el sentido y la verdad, el concepto de la *fitna* evita tanto la síntesis dialéctica como el dualismo cósmico, proponiendo en cambio una superposición parcial entre el *zāhir* y el *ghayb*, o los mundos visibles e invisibles. En la tercera parte, se estudian dos aspectos aplicados de la *fitna*: en el razonamiento legal y en la teología del apocalipsis. Se explica cómo una cosmovisión de la *fitna* incluye una noción formal de la verdad que es legal en vez de óptica y objetiva, y anclada en *ghālib al-zann*, o la probabilidad predominante. Finalmente, se conecta el caos apocalíptico al incremento en la superposición entre el *ghayb* y el *zāhir*, lo cual llega a abarcar hasta su posible identificación, pero esto último solamente llega con el fin de la *fitna* y el fin del mundo.

**Palabras clave:** *Fitna*; *ghayb*; Islam; verdad; interpretación; apocalipsis; probabilidad; seducción.

*When that type of battle begins, it lasts longer than others,  
because Allah is on both sides  
Paulo Coelho, The Alchemist.*

In this article, I will explore the concept of *fitna* as articulated in the Arabic language and Islamic tradition. I will start with a discussion of its etymology, meanings, and use in the Qur'ān. I will follow this discussion with a number of theoretical reflections that aim to explore *fitna* as a sociological analytical concept and situate it within Western sociological theory. Finally, I will study two applied aspects of *fitna*: in legal reasoning, and the theology of apocalypse.

## I. Etymology

*Fitna*, literally temptation or seduction, seems to have two overlapping meanings. First, it means a severe trial. The *fitna* of gold and silver is to place these two precious metals in fire to purify them by separating

them from other less valuable metals or impurities. Likewise, human hearts are assumed to have both truth and falsehood. The severe trials and tribulations that humans go through purify their hearts of falsehood and make them stronger in faith and obedience. In *sūra* 22, *āya* 11, the Qur'ān comments on this mixture of truth and falsehood in the hearts of believers, which requires testing, by saying, "There are also some who serve God with unsteady faith: if something good comes their way, they are satisfied, but if they are tested, they revert to their old ways, losing both this world and the next—that is the clearest loss."<sup>1</sup> The translator, M.A.S Abdel

<sup>1</sup> M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 210.

Haleem, used “if they are tested” to translate “*in aṣḥabat-hum fitna*,” which literally means “if they are stricken by *fitna*.” In *sūra* 24, *āya* 63, the Qur’ān implies that people bring this test upon themselves by committing sins. It says, “and those who go against His order should beware lest a trial afflict them (*an tuṣṭibahum fitna*) or they receive a painful punishment.”<sup>2</sup> In *sūra* 29, *āya* 2, however, it seems that though committing sins invites *fitna*, as a severe test, all claimers of faith are going to be tested anyway. It says, “Do people think they will be left alone after saying ‘We believe’ without being put to the test (*yuftanūn*)?”<sup>3</sup>

*Fitna*, nevertheless, has a second meaning; it is not the test that purifies truth of falsehood, but rather, the act of taking what is false for what is true, mixing them together and making them indistinguishable from each other. Here, *fitna* comes as deception, or misguidance. Both the Devil and the magician are called *fattān*. The goldsmith too is called *fattān* since his work requires mixing together different metals. The Qur’ān warns the Prophet about *fitna*, deception by the unbelievers. In *sūra* 5, *āya* 49, it says, “Do not follow their whims, and take good care that they do not tempt you away from any of what God has sent

down to you.”<sup>4</sup> In *sūra* 22, *āya* 53, the Qur’ān states that *fitna* is the work of Devil. It says, “He makes Satan’s insinuations a temptation (*fitna*) only for the sick at heart and those whose hearts are hardened—the evildoers are profoundly opposed [to the Truth].”<sup>5</sup>

What seems to me to be of utmost importance here is that *fitna* is not considered an exceptional situation, an aberration from the norm. It is not even portrayed even as an illness, as an unfortunate event that is expected to occur a number of times in everyone’s life. *Fitna*, to a certain degree, is actually considered to be normative. The overlapping of truth and falsehood is part of the very nature of this world, and, in fact the Qur’ān expands *fitna* to include all of the bad and the good of human existence. In *sūra* 21, *āya* 35, it says, “We test you all through the bad and the good.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in *sūra* 8, *āya* 28, the Qur’ān states, “Be aware that your possessions and your children are only a test (*fitna*).”<sup>7</sup> Even though the translator had to choose one of the two aforementioned meanings of *fitna*, the verse could be read in both senses, for possessions and children can lead to either truth or falsehood, and they can test the heart, or even seduce it. The mix of truth and falsehood, *fitna*, is thus the nature of

2 Ibid., 226.

3 Ibid., 252.

4 Ibid., 72–73.

5 Ibid., 211.

6 Ibid., 205.

7 Ibid., 112.

this world. In fact, the Qur'ān admits that the prohibited wine and gambling still include benefits to people. In *sūra* 2, *āya* 219, it says, "They ask you [Prophet] about intoxicants<sup>8</sup> and gambling: say, 'There is great sin in both, and some benefit for people: the sin is greater than the benefit.'"<sup>9</sup>

This ambiguity of truth and its mixture with falsehood spreads differences, and sometimes causes disputes among peoples. In *sūra* 6, *āya* 53, the Qur'ān says, "We have made some of them a test for others, to make the disbelievers say, 'Is it these men that God has favoured among us?' Does God not know best who are the grateful ones?"<sup>10</sup> In *sūra* 25, *āya* 20, a similar meaning is implied, as the Qur'ān says, "But We have made some of you a means of testing others—will you stand fast?"<sup>11</sup> In *Tafsīr al-Manār*, the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) explained the meaning of these verses by stating,

It means that We (God) made each one of you a test for the other, by being different than the other in terms of wealth or poverty, power or weakness, health or sickness, knowledge or ignorance, etc. One of you despises the other and oppresses him; the other envies him

and plots against him. Stand fast, for only those who stand fast survive these *fitan* (plural of *fitnah*.)<sup>12</sup>

This world, therefore, is a world of differences, differences that create and maintain *fitna*. *Fitna*, however, does not work by generating meaning through the interplay of opposite signs. Wealth and poverty, health and sickness, or knowledge and ignorance are signs that refer to realities and meanings of this world. None of these signs, however, *exclusively* refers to the reality of faith. Both wealth and poverty could be a sign of either good or bad faith, for wealth could be either a blessing or a trial. Poverty, too, could be a blessing, in which God protects the heart of the believer from worldly distractions, or a test. Of course, people try to reveal the true meaning of these signs: for instance, what does God really mean by making me different than the other person? They may also use other signs, such as the manifestations or practices of faith, but those acts can, in turn, become either demonstrations of proper faith, or of hypocrisy and arrogance. It is not that signs have no meaning. There is indeed a true meaning reflected in these signs. However, this meaning communicates with an invisible reality, *ghayb*, and therefore remains incomplete.

8 Though the choice of the translator is intoxicants, the word in the Qur'ān is *khamr*—that is wine.

9 Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 24.

10 Ibid., 83.

11 Ibid., 228.

12 Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1948), vol. 7, 445.

The Qur'ān moves this world of differences into a surprising new level. In *sūra* 49, *āya* 9, the Qur'ān says, "If two groups of the believers fight, you [believers] should try to reconcile them."<sup>13</sup> In this world of differences, where truth is always an uncertain possibility, where seductive signs constantly spread *fitna*, a fight between two groups among the believers is not unexpected. In lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311–1312)'s classic dictionary *Lisān al-'Arab*, *fitna* means a dispute of opinions, madness, and the loss of one's mind.<sup>14</sup> In other words, reason cannot be a universal reference to truth, for rational thought is a symbolic process that is grounded in *seductive* signs.

Emphasizing this meaning—that a certain sign may refer to two opposite true meanings, the Qur'ān orders Muḥammad in *sūra* 21, *āya* 111, to say, "I do not know: this [time] may well be a test [*fitna*] for you, and enjoyment for a while."<sup>15</sup> The Prophet is therefore asked not to argue back rationally: signs of power, as the unbelievers argued, can indeed be a sign of blessings. Instead, the Prophet is asked to shift the question to the sphere of *ghayb*, invisible reality, where articulating an objective truth is not possible.

In fact, the Qur'ān admits that its signs, the holy words of the Qur'ān itself, cannot be a last refuge of truth. In *sūra* 3, *āya* 7 to 9, it says,

...it is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning (*muḥkamāt*)—these are the cornerstones of the Scripture (*umm al-Kitāb*, or the mother of the Book)—and others are ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*.) The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble (*fitnah*) and to pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say, "We believe in it: it is all from our Lord"—only those with real perception will take heed. "Our Lord, do not let our hearts deviate after You have guided us. Grant us Your mercy: You are the Ever Giving. Our Lord, You will gather all people on the Day of which there is no doubt: God never breaks His promise."<sup>16</sup>

The word in Qur'ān that was translated into ambiguous is *mutashābihāt*. The word *tashābih* means resemblance, similarity, or similitude. A verse in the Qur'ān may indicate two different meanings, much like power can be a blessing and sign of faith, or yet a test, or a manifestation of apostasy. Truth cannot be articulated at the semiotic level—that is, as visible reality, *al-zāhir*. This shortcoming, however, does not

13 Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 338.

14 Muḥammad Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, year not mentioned), 3344–3346.

15 Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 208.

16 Ibid., 34–35.

move truth completely outside of the semiotic sphere. True existence in the semiotic sphere is contingent on *ghayb*, the invisible reality.

This is why the Qur'ān refers its readers to the heart—a space that is of this world, but non-semiotic and invisible, *ghayb*. In this way, the Qur'ān does not claim the existence of an objective method to reveal its true meaning. Instead, it points out to the hearts of its readers, and contrasts those who are perverse at heart to those who ask God to not let their hearts deviate. For the believers to be “firmly grounded in knowledge,” *rāsikhūn fī al-'Ilm*, they need to penetrate the semiotic and rational level of the text and communicate by their hearts with knowledge that inhabits the space of *ghayb*. Nevertheless, truth, the ultimate true meaning of the Qur'ān, is known *only* by God. In fact, the believers finish their prayer by stating that a world with no doubts comes only with the Day of Judgment.

In its everyday use, *fitna* usually refers to either war or sexual seduction. In *Lisān al-'Arab*, “Fitnah is what happens among people of fighting. Fitnah is killing. . . . The Prophetic tradition, ‘I see *fitan* among your homes’ refers to killing, wars, and disputes that will erupt among groups of Muslims once they divide in separate parties.”<sup>17</sup>

17 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 3346.

In different Ḥadīth collections (which compile the reported deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad), apocalyptic tribulations that precede the end of time are called *fitan*. Likewise, the war that started off among Muslims by the assassination of the third Caliph, ‘Uthmān Ibn ‘Affān (47 BH-35 H/577-656 CE) and ended by the murder of the Prophet’s grandson, al-Ḥusayn Ibn ‘Alī (4-61 H/626-680 CE,) is called *al-fitna al-Kubra*, or the grand *fitna*. Sexual seduction too comes as a meaning of *fitna* in *Lisān al-'Arab*, which uses other words derived from the root *f-t-n* to describe attraction or sexual allure. For example, the dictionary states, “People of Ḥijāz say: the woman *fatanat-hu*, if he adored and loved her.”<sup>18</sup> Another meaning in this vein in *Lisān al-'Arab* is “She made him to tilt away, *amālat-hu*, from his purpose.”<sup>19</sup> In a report of Ḥadīth, the Prophet says, “After me, I have not left any *fitnah* more severe to men than women.”<sup>20</sup> Whether in war or love, *fitna* works as an anarchic force, destabilizing the political and social order.

## II. Sociological Reflections

My aim in this section is to situate the concept of *fitna* within social theory. The dialogue between this concept

18 *Ibid.*, 3344.

19 *Ibid.*, 3345.

20 Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1993), vol. 5, 1959.

and Western approaches may provide some methodological insights, and could also help us to use the concept *fitna* in order to understand a spectrum of social, cultural and political phenomena and formations among Muslim communities.

With its connotations to war and sex, *fitna* reminds us of the two Freudian basic life instincts: Eros and Thanatos. Sigmund Freud mentioned that these two concepts may be conflated, such as in sadism “where the death instinct twists the erotic aim in its own sense and yet at the same time fully satisfies the erotic urge, that we succeed in obtaining the clearest insight into its nature and its relation to Eros.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, Freud recognized that the death instinct is as *original* in human beings as Eros is. He wrote, “I adopt the standpoint, therefore, that the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man.”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Freud saw these two instincts as essentially separate and contradictory in action:

I may add now that civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind. ... And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution

of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species.<sup>23</sup>

Georges Bataille focused too on eroticism and death in his works. Unlike Freud, however, Bataille saw both eroticism and death as aiming toward unity. He proposed an evolutionary explanation to this phenomenon by proposing that what characterizes animality—an archaic existence of human beings—is immediacy, or immanence.<sup>24</sup> The movement from animality to humanity was characterized by a separation from the world, where the world is recognized as an objectified world, a world of things, and where reality is the order of these things. The human being, separated from, and perhaps imprisoned in, this world of things, yearns to go back to a lost world that s/he perceives as sacred. The way back to this lost world can go only through the removal of barriers, borders, where the animal in the world is like water in water. Bataille argues that both sexual consummation and murder can achieve this unity. He writes, “only the beloved can in this world bring about what our human limitations deny, a total blending of two beings, a continuity between

21 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1962), 68.

22 *Ibid.*, 69.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zoe Books, 1989), 17.



two discontinuous creatures.”<sup>25</sup> Death too, celebrated in the ritual of sacrifice achieves this continuity. Bataille writes, “A violent death disrupts the creature’s discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one.”<sup>26</sup>

Both sexual intimacy and death, therefore, create a fusion of what would be otherwise differentiated. Thus: “Intimacy is violence, and it is destruction, because it is not compatible with the positing of the separate individual.”<sup>27</sup> What we want to emphasize here is that attraction, and the energy behind it, does not arise because of the nature of the erotic object itself—attraction purely due to the properties of a given erotic object would bring division rather than fusion, and create a subject/object relationship. Bataille writes, “The object of desire is different from eroticism itself; it is not eroticism in its completeness, but eroticism working through it.”<sup>28</sup> One may then ask: if eroticism is the fusion of a man and a woman in the consummation of sex, what would make the woman, beyond the sexual urge, seductive? Here, Bataille points out to another form of fusion. It is the elusiveness of her

attitude—an attitude that says both yes and no to the seduced man. Bataille writes, “Putting oneself forward is the fundamental feminine attitude, but that first movement is followed by a feigned denial.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the Qur’ān portrays feminine seduction not in terms of nakedness, but rather as the interplay and fusion of the signs of modesty and immodest, as expressed in *sūra* 24, *āya* 31, “they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms.”<sup>30</sup> Much like *ghayb*, hidden charms are both overt and secret, present and absent, even if they are mostly invisible.

In his work, *Seduction*, Jean Baudrillard resumes the project of Bataille. Like Bataille, Baudrillard portrays a picture of two worlds: one of labor, production, polarity, reality and power, the other of play, signs, appearance and seduction. He writes that “this alternative is undoubtedly of the order of the feminine, understood outside the opposition masculine/feminine . . . This strength of the feminine is seduction.”<sup>31</sup> The feminine seduces, Baudrillard argues, because it is neither the same nor the opposite of the masculine. I want to highlight here two significant differences in Baudrillard’s work that separate him from that of Bataille.

25 Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 20.

26 Ibid., 22.

27 Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 51.

28 Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, 130.

29 Ibid., 132.

30 Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, 222.

31 Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990), 7.



First, unlike in Bataille, there is no deeper level, such as an archaic id or Freudian unconscious, which encloses a deeper mythic meaning and animates the subject. Seduction operates (plays) on the surface, where there is nothing other than this surface itself: “The capacity immanent to seduction to deny things their truth and turn it into a game, the pure play of appearance, and thereby foil all systems of power and meaning with a mere turn of the hand.”<sup>32</sup> Seduction’s play on the surface is not the opposite of any true depth. Baudrillard is clear here: “It is not quite the feminine as surface that is opposed to the masculine as depth, but the feminine as indistinctness of surface and depth. Or as indifference to the authentic and the artificial.”<sup>33</sup> Appearance, however, does not mean complete visibility; that would be the hyperreality of pornography.<sup>34</sup> Baudrillard writes,

Seduction does not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence. Its sole strategy is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystallizes attention outside all concern with meaning.<sup>35</sup>

The second difference between Bataille and Baudrillard is in the concept of unity that is highlighted by

Bataille. Baudrillard distances himself clearly from any notion of unity, or fusion. He writes, “The diagonals or transversals of seduction may well break the oppositions between terms; they do not lead to fused or con-fused relations (that is mysticism) but to dual relations.”<sup>36</sup> For Baudrillard, real sex is not the climax of seduction, but its murder.<sup>37</sup> What opens the path to desire is in fact the *indefinable*.<sup>38</sup> Unity, much like the Hegelian dialectic, is unidirectional. What Baudrillard is proposing is the logic of the *dual* and the dynamic of *reversibility*. Baudrillard contrasts the logic of the dual, which “dominates the game, the ritual and the entire sphere of the rule” to the logic of the polar that is dialectical and “organizes the universe of the law, the social and meaning.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, the logic of the polar creates the rational world of reality, meaning, grammar, and law. The logic of the dual creates the playful world of the game, where rules are conventional, and performance is parody, mere ritual. This is why seduction promotes reversibility. Baudrillard writes, “Seduction is stronger than production. . . . It is a circular, reversible process of challenges, oneupmanship and death.”<sup>40</sup> Here, what prevails is the

32 Ibid., 8.

33 Ibid., 10.

34 Ibid., 28–31.

35 Ibid., 85.

36 Ibid., 105.

37 Ibid., 13.

38 Ibid., 42, 43.

39 Ibid., 155, 156.

40 Ibid., 47.

principle of indeterminacy. Thus, Baudrillard states, “Only signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs, absorb us.”<sup>41</sup> It is this indeterminacy, the elusive yes *and* no position of Bataille, but without the possibility of union, what creates the endless cycle of seduction and its continuous reversibility. Bataille echoes, “It (seduction) implies a radical indetermination that distinguishes it from a drive—drives being indeterminate in relation to their object, but determined as force and origin, while the passion of seduction has neither substance nor origin.” Central to seduction is play, “It is not from some libidinal investment, some energy of desire that this passion acquires its intensity, but from gaming as pure form and from purely formal bluffing.”<sup>42</sup>

To articulate the Islamic concept of *fitna* with Baudrillard’s concept of seduction, we need to visit two works of the Sunni jurist and theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328 CE): *al-Ḥaqīqa wa al-Majāz* and *al-Iklīl fī al-Mutashābaha wa al-Ta’wīl*. I have already explained that, semiotically, *fitna* is grounded in signs that may carry one of two different meanings. A pure meaning expressed by signs that provide true representation is as semiotically impossible as the existence of pure gold. Pure gold, much like God, exists only

as a conceptual possibility, but never within reality or its semiotic representation. *Fitna*, as I stated above, is normative. This world is a world of *fitna*—not because of its falsehood, but because of the impossibility of separating truth and falsehood.

Rejecting the two linguistic concepts of *truth* and *metaphor*, and the implied hierarchy that relates them, Ibn Taymiyya grounds meaning in *is-ti’wāl*, or the inter-subjective use. In addition, the single word does not have the capacity to articulate a true meaning. Conventional meaning inhabits a syntax, in which a single word is situated. Ibn Taymiyya differentiates between two concepts: *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*, in which the first refers to the act of explaining speech or text, and the second refers to that of interpretation. He argues that interpretation (in Arabic, *ta’wīl*) comes from the root *āl*, which means “to become.” Since this is a chronological concept, Ibn Taymiyya argues, then the other meaning can be known only in the future—that is in the other world. He does not mean that the otherworldly meaning is true, while ours is false or metaphorical. In fact, both of these meanings are true. There are two kinds of truths—that is true meanings, each of them is called, for instance, “river.” There are rivers in this world and rivers in Heaven. Neither of them is *the* true meaning, which renders the other a mere metaphor.

41 Ibid., 74.

42 Ibid., 81, 82.

Those are different truths that share a common word because of their *similarity in some aspects*—aspects, which we currently do not know. We can, for instance, explain the word “river.” Its interpretation, however, its other true meaning, will be known only in the other world.<sup>43</sup>

In order to further situate, and probably distinguish, *fitna* in the context of Western sociological theory, I will invoke Timothy Bewes’ brilliant work: *Reification*. Bewes argues that “reversibility implies a certain underlying assumption: that there is an other to language, something completely outside the text and inarticulable by it; that the text is as nothing, merely thinglike, in relation to this outside . . . .”<sup>44</sup> Unlike this understanding of the existence a parallel universe, *fitna*, in fact, works from within the text, and from within reality itself. Signs are not, as Baudrillard argues, empty. Signs have a meaning—a true meaning, to use Ibn Taymiyya’s words. *Fitna* is propagated because of the existence of true meanings that are neither identical, nor opposite—meanings that are similar from certain angles.

This Sunni understanding of *fitna* in Ibn Taymiyya is closer to historian

of mysticism Bernard McGinn’s understanding of pseudo-Dionysius. McGinn states,

All things both reveal and conceal God. The dissimilar similarity that constitutes every created manifestation of God is both a similarity to be affirmed and a dissimilarity to be denied. Therefore the universe is both necessary as an image and impossible as a representation of the God for whom there is no adequate representation.<sup>45</sup>

Meaning or Truth, in Ibn Taymiyya’s works, is neither absent nor present; it is *incomplete*, because only ‘some aspects of it’ are covered by the notions of *ghayb* and *zāhir*, or the visible reality. This is the Sunni understanding of *ghayb*; its absence or presence is only partial. The *Encyclopedia of Islam* defines *ghayb* as “what is hidden, inaccessible to the senses and to reason—thus, at the same time absent from human knowledge and hidden in divine wisdom.”<sup>46</sup> The definition of the *Encyclopedia* is inaccurate, for the concept of *ghayb* partially overlaps with that of *zāhir*.

43 Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Iklīl fī al-Mutashabih* (Alexandria, Egypt: Dār al-Baṣīrah, 2002).

44 Timothy Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 202, 203.

45 Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 174, as quoted in Thomas Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 161.

46 “Al-Ghayb,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Brill Online, [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-ghayb-COM\\_0231](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-ghayb-COM_0231) (accessed February 1st, 2018).

This *overlapping*, this grounding of *fitna*, is at odds with the Hegelian synthesis: the unity of opposites and yet, it also stands at odds with cosmic dualism: the existence of two irreducible opposites. The two overlapping principles of the dual are engaged in an alluring relationship that is characterized by contingency, and grounded in a theology of attributes that invites human meaning, while rejecting anthropomorphism. This relationship is further rooted in a theology of human action that is neither independent, nor a mere reflection of God's actions. This theology rejects the existence of universals independent of reality. This is the world of *fitna*, where truth overlaps falsehood, *zāhir* overlaps with *bāṭin*, *ṣarī'ah* with *Ḥaqīqah*, and divinity with humanity. *Fitna* is the essential character of this world. To say this is not to invite condemnation, for *fitna*, whether as sex, or fighting, is not only allowed, but also instructed and celebrated. The commandments to fight for God, and the prohibition against celibacy and encouragement to stay always married have plenty of textual evidence in both the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth.

### III. *Fitna* Applied

#### A. In the Law

In "Ethos, Worldview and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," Clifford Geertz defines *worldview* and *ethos* as follows:

A people's ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Their worldview is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order.<sup>47</sup>

Geertz frames the relationship between worldview and ethos in the famous *is/ought* problem, and writes that the powerfully coercive "ought" is felt as if it grew out of a comprehensive and factual "is," and in such a way, religion grounds the most specific requirements of human action in the most general contexts of human existence.<sup>48</sup> One wonders how a Muslim worldview of *fitna* would shape out the ethos of law. Geertz himself helps us answer this question.

Reflecting on the concept of *ḥaqq*, or truth, Geertz finds that al-Ḥaqq is God, while *ḥaqq* is used to refer to reality. Geertz offers two insightful observations here. First, there is a connection of identity between God and reality. This connection—or overlapping as I argued above—reconceptualizes the role and meaning of truth, and reverses the *is/ought* problem as it is applied in Muslim societies. Geertz writes,

47 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 127.

48 *Ibid.*, 126.

But *ḥaqq* is something else again: a conception that anchors a theory of duty as a set of sheer assertions, so many statements of brute fact, in a vision of reality as being in its essence imperative, a structure not of objects but of wills. The moral and ontological change places, at least from our point of view.<sup>49</sup>

Geertz understands the crucial significance of this overlapping. He writes, “But the relation of the upper-case sense of R (or, more precisely, *ḥa*) and the lower-case one is the heart of the matter.”<sup>50</sup> Geertz argues that this semantic relationship turns the real into “a deeply moralized, active, demanding real, not a neutral, metaphysical ‘being,’ merely sitting there awaiting observation and reflection.”<sup>51</sup> This overlapping—which structurally parallels the overlapping of meanings, or truths, in the writing of Ibn Taymiyya—brings an interesting legal notion. Geertz writes, “Muslim adjudication is not a matter of joining an empirical situation to a jural principle; they come already joined. . . . Facts are normative: it is no more possible for them to diverge from the good than for God to lie.”<sup>52</sup>

The second observation that Geertz offers here is a response to an

expected problem. How would *ḥaqq* be identified in legal disputes? This question is, in fact, another version of the issue of meaning that we have discussed in relation to Ibn Taymiyya. Geertz’s answer goes along the same lines as that of Ibn Taymiyya. If meaning is anchored in the *use*—that is in intersubjectivity—not in any claim of an independent and objective meaning, identifying *ḥaqq* is similarly grounded, not in the skills of the judge, but in *shahādah*—that is the spoken witnessing. The weight of justice, that is of joining *ḥaqq* with *Ḥaqq* falls on a community of *shuhūd ‘udūl*, or upright witnesses. Geertz writes, “Where the normative and the actual are ontologically conjoined--*Ḥaqq* with a capital *Ḥa*’—and oral testimony (or the record of oral testimony) is virtually the sole way in which what transpires in the world--*ḥaqq* with a small one—is represented juridically.”<sup>53</sup>

Unfortunately, however, Geertz seems to see not just partial overlapping, such as the one Ibn Taymiyya conceptualized, but a complete one. The historicity of *Ḥaqq*, according to Geertz, is its incarnation in the Qur’ān. With (unfortunate) confidence, he states,

But the notion of the certainty and comprehensiveness of the law as embooked ... in the Quran powerfully reduces, if it does not wholly

49 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 187.

50 Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 188.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 189.

53 Ibid., 192.

remove, any sense that questions of what is just and what unjust may be, in and of themselves, ambiguous, quixotic, or unanswerable.<sup>54</sup>

This regrettable conclusion by Geertz is diametrically opposed to a long and established legal tradition in Islam. Muslim jurists have never pretended that their law is founded on certainty. On the contrary, they agreed that *ẓann*, doubt or uncertainty, is enough, not only to deduct legal rulings in specific cases, but to establish legal principles as well. It is the consensus of Muslim jurists—except for Ibn Ḥazm (384-456 H/994-1064 CE) and his marginal Zāhirī school—that *ẓann* is a valid basis of legal rulings. Al-Ghazālī (450-505 H/1058-1111 CE) wrote that “The consensus of the Companion is to follow the predominant probability, *ẓann ghālib*.<sup>55</sup> Al-Sarkhasī (Died 490 H/1097 CE) wrote that “The agreement (among scholars) is that certainty, *ilm al-yaqīn*, is not a condition in making an action required or allowed.”<sup>56</sup> Al-Rāzī (544-604 H/1149-1208 CE) too wrote that “Ruling in religion with mere *ẓann* is permissible in the consensus of *ummah*, all Muslim community.”<sup>57</sup>

In *al-Muwāfaqāt*, al-Shāṭibī (720-790 H/1320-1388 CE) wrote that “Ruling according to *ẓann* in general has been established in the details of *Sharī‘ah*.”<sup>58</sup> In addition, al-Shāṭibī argued that both *ẓann* and *qaṭ‘*, or certainty, are equal in *Sharī‘ah* (Islamic law).<sup>59</sup> Al-Āmidī (551-631 H/1156-1234 CE) too stated that “A difference in proving that something prohibited by *ẓann* or *qaṭ‘* does not create a difference in the strength of the prohibition.”<sup>60</sup>

In *Al-Mustaṣfa*, al-Ghazālī presents an interesting argument. He responds to the question of authenticity of *aḥādīth al-āḥād*, which are the reports of Ḥadīth that are narrated by only one, two or three narrators. The problem al-Ghazālī is articulating is whether such reports should be considered to be evidence enough to establish legal rulings and duties. Unlike the *mutawātir* (that is the report that was narrated by a larger group of people, and hence its authenticity is certain) the *āḥād*’s authenticity is uncertain—that is *ẓannī*. Al-Ghazālī writes, “Sanctioning an action, once there is *khabar*, narration (that dictates this action), is one thing; whether this *khabar* is true or a lie is a different thing.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, *taklīf*,

54 Ibid., 190.

55 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Šifā’ al-Ghalīl* (Baghdad: Maṭba‘at al-Iršād, 1971), 202.

56 Abū Bakr al-Sarkhasī, *Uṣūl al-Sarkhasī* (Hyderabad: Lajnat IHyā’ al-Ma‘ārif al-Nu‘māniyyah, 1993), vol. 2, 141.

57 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), vol. 12, 282.

58 Abū Isḥāq al-Šāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt* (Khubar: Dār Ibn ‘Affān, 1997), vol. 2, 26.

59 Ibid., vol. 1, 519.

60 Abū al-Ḥasan al-Āmidī, *Al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām* (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumay‘ī, 2003), vol. 1, 140.

61 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Al-Mustaṣfa Min ‘Ilm al-Uṣūl* (Medina: Šarikat al-Madinah



legal responsibility, is grounded in the mere existence of *khavar* (again, narration), not in its truthfulness, once your best guess is that this *khavar* is likely true.<sup>62</sup> Muslim jurists established several legal principles that circle around *ghālib al-zann*, which we may translate into “predominant probability.” For instance, take into consideration the following rule: what should be considered is the predominant, the most frequent, not the rare.<sup>63</sup> When two elements mix, the rule is based on that which is predominant. This rule, for instance, could result in naming an alloy “gold,” even though the alloy is, in fact, not pure gold. The legal examples in which the rule is based on that which is predominant are countless. People are expected to lose focus when they pray; they are expected to go to pilgrimage, and also to not forget to buy gifts and commodities that are not available in their native country, or to use water to perform ritual ablutions and attain ritual purity, even though the water is obviously murky or dirty. In all these cases, the legal ruling is based on the predominant probability, *ghālib al-zann*. Interestingly, al-Ghazālī argued that even the rational evidence (that is, deduction) is based on probability, since the universal is deducted from

an examination of many—or perhaps most, but never all—of its particulars.<sup>64</sup>

To conclude this section, I will briefly present a curious discussion among *uṣūlī* scholars, or the scholars of the principles of law. This discussion brings us back to the concept of *fitna* and Geertz’s conceptualization of the notion of truth. The discussion evolves around an intriguing question: using legal reasoning, different jurists would likely reach different rulings for the same case. The multiplicity of opinions indicates that their rulings are based on *zann* not *qaṭʿ*, probability not certainty. Because an action based on *zann* is legally correct, we will have contradictory actions, all of them are correct. Practically, there is no problem. However, theoretically, are all of them *true*?

The consensus among Muslim jurists is that demanding the realization of truth would be unreasonable, since it is beyond human capacity. Accordingly, all *mujtahids*, the scholars who are involved in serious legal reasoning, will be rewarded by God for their *work*. Jurists are divided into two schools, however, in other ways that relate to this question. The Muʿtazila and Ashʿarī theologians believe that all *mujtahids* are correct. The Ashʿarī, however, believe there could be several truths, while the Muʿtazila argue that

al-Munawwarah li-al-Ṭibāʿah, year is not mentioned), vol. 2, 185.

62 *Al-Mustaṣfa, Ṣifāʾ al-Ghalīl*, 183.

63 Aḥmad al-Raysūnī, *Naẓariyyat al-Taqrīb wa al-Taḥlīb wa Taḥbīqātuha fī al-ʿUlūm al-Siyāsiyyah* (Al-Manṣūrah: Dār al-Kalimah, 2010), 102.

64 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Miʿyār al-ʿIlm fī Fann al-Manṭiq* (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿah al-ʿArabiyyah, 1927), 160.



there is one truth, but all *mujtahids* are correct, whether they reach it or not. A majority of jurists, however, have held that truth is one: those who reach it are correct, those who do not reach it are incorrect. Nevertheless, regardless of correctness, everyone will be rewarded by God for their effort and labor.

Had Geertz attended to this controversy, he would have proposed to those jurists the use of capital T, and small t (Truth and truth). The majority calls those who do not reach God's True ruling mistaken. However, it is an expected mistake, not a sin, so they are rewarded by God. The Ash'arī, adopt a position similar to that of Geertz, who argued that jural principle and empirical cases come already joined. They believe that God's true ruling is born *after* legal reasoning, so several true rulings could coexist. The Mu'tazila, attending to both capital T and small t, argued that there is one True ruling, but the other *mujtahids'* rulings are all true. This legal discussion is in fact also a theological discussion, for it goes along the same lines of arguing about God's attributes. It is a theoretical controversy rooted in the overlapping of True ruling with true rulings. All jurists have maintained one consensus, however: demanding the True ruling is beyond human capacity; fabricating a false ruling is sinful; what is required is finding only a human true ruling. This is the heart of normative *fitna*.

## B. In Apocalypse

Apocalyptic events in collections of Ḥadīth are included in chapters of *fitna*. For instance, al-Bukhārī puts these reports in a chapter titled "The Book of *Fitan* (plural of *fitna*.)" Muslim includes them in a chapter titled "The Book of *Fitan* and Portents of the Last Hour." Similarly, Abū Dāwūd includes them in his chapter "The Book of *Fit-an* and Fierce Battles." Al-Tirmidhī too calls this chapter "The Book of *Fit-an*." It is the same title for these apocalyptic narratives in Ibn Mājah as well. The end of this world is preceded by signs, first come numerous minor signs, then a few, but major signs follow up.

The minor signs have two basic characters. First, there is an increase in falsehood, and a decrease in truth. For instance,

Ignorance overcomes knowledge; obedience to one's parents ceases off; the unqualified assumes offices; bad people are the community leaders; adultery and usury spread out; God's law is forgotten, etc. ... the Qur'ān will be forgotten; Muḥammad's tribe of Qurayš will go extinct; other tribes will revert to paganism; and the Ka'bah, the most holy house in Islam, will be destroyed.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Mohamed Mohamed, "Apocalypse in Islam," in *Apocalypse in Context: Apocalyptic Currents Through History*, ed. Kelly Murphy and Justin Scheduler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 234.

Second, there is an increase in the overlapping of *ghayb* on *zāhir*. In a report of Ḥadīth, the Prophet says, “When the Day of Resurrection approaches, the vision of a believer will hardly fail to come true.”<sup>66</sup> Metaphysical signs that defy the objective rules of the physical world seem to be more frequent. For instance, “trees, stones, beasts, inanimate objects, and even sandal straps and whip ends will speak up!”<sup>67</sup> This steady increasing of the overlap between *ghayb* and *zāhir* further destabilizes the world. Disorder leads to tribulations and fierce wars. Eventually, we witness the emergence of the major signs. Two of these signs are especially important for us in this study.

On the one hand, the increasing of falsehood reaches its climax by the coming of al-Dajjāl, a Muslim version of the anti-Christ. Al-Dajjāl’s *fitna* is severe, and Muslims are instructed to steer away from him to avoid his deception.<sup>68</sup> In essence, he is the absolute falsehood; in appearance, he pretends to be the absolute Truth: God Himself.

Al-Dajjāl’s actions seem miraculous. It will rain on his order. He will kill a man and restore him back to life. He comes with heaven and hell, a river, water and a mountain

of bread. Yet, Muslims must be aware of his tricks: his heaven is hell, and his hell is heaven. Everything he says is trickery.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, there is the coming back of Jesus. “The main role of Jesus after his descent (from Heaven) is associated with al-Dajjāl, insofar as Jesus is the one who will kill al-Dajjāl with his spear and protect the believers from al-Dajjāl’s deception and evil.”<sup>70</sup> The rest of the major signs follow the killing of al-Dajjāl and soon this world ends.

In this confrontation, we see for the first time an absolute truth fighting an absolute falsehood. The world of *fitna*, of incompleteness and overlapping, is fading away. The spread of *ghayb* reaches its climax by the complete disappearance of *zāhir*. *Ghayb* identifies with *zāhir*. Falsehood, presented as Dajjāl, “disappears just as the salt dissolves itself in water.”<sup>71</sup> There is no longer *fitna*, but this world is no longer either. Truth prevails, meaning is complete, and people are either believers or non-believers. This is the end of *fitna*!

66 Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1993), vol. 6, 2574.

67 Mohamed, “Apocalypse in Islam,” 235.

68 Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd-Allāh al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *al-Mustadrak ‘Ala al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2002), vol. 4, 576.

69 Mohamed, “Apocalypse in Islam,” 238.

70 Ibid., 239.

71 Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Quṣayrī al-Nīsābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Riyadh: Dār Ṭībah, 2006), vol. 2, 1342.

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