

# Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE

## Fiṭra

The Arabic word *fiṭra*, often translated “original disposition,” “natural constitution,” or “innate nature,” appears in the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* literature and factors into Islamic legal and theological discussions about human nature and knowledge. The related verb form *faṭara* occurs eight times in the Qur’ān, in the sense of “create” or “constitute” (Q 6:79, 17:51, and elsewhere), and the active participle *fāṭir* six times, to describe God as the “creator” of the heavens and the earth (Q 6:14, 12:101, and elsewhere). The sole occurrence of the noun *fiṭra* in the Qur’ān links it closely to true religion: “So set your face toward the religion, being upright, the natural constitution (*fiṭra*) of God, according to which He constituted (*faṭara*) humanity” (Q 30:30). The key *ḥadīth* report on *fiṭra*, which appears in several variants in the Sunnī *ḥadīth* collections, implies that Islam is the universal religion of birth: “Every newborn is born with the natural constitution (*fiṭra*). Then, his parents make him a Jew, Christian, or Zoroastrian. This is like an animal that bears another that is perfect of limb. Do you sense any mutilation in it...” (Muslim, Kitāb al-qadar, Bāb ma‘nā kull mawlūd; Gobillot, 5–16).

In the early centuries of Islam, the Azraqīs, a rigourist branch of the Khārijīs, maintained that enemy children should be considered unbelievers and killed. Opponents of the Azraqīs combined the *fiṭra* report mentioned above with other *ḥadīth* reports indicating that children of unbelievers go to Paradise if they die before reaching maturity, to argue that such children are in fact believers and may not be killed (Wensinck, 42–4, 214; Adang, 393–8). The Qadarīs, an early theological movement emphasising human responsibility and divine justice, and their successors, the Mu‘tazilī *kalām* theologians, interpreted the *fiṭra*

report similarly to mean that all human beings are born into Islam. It would be unjust of God to create children to be unbelievers from birth; only parents turn their children into adherents of other religions. In turn, traditionalists such as Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) resisted the Qadarī/Mu‘tazilī interpretation, by reading the term *fiṭra* as God’s predetermination, assigning some people to Paradise and others to Hell (Gobillot, 32–45; van Ess). Others retained a deterministic outlook but introduced stronger human accountability for monotheistic belief by equating *fiṭra* with the primordial covenant in which God called out to humans before He created them, “Am I not your Lord?” to which they replied, “Yes, indeed” (Q 7:172) (Gobillot, 46–53; Wensinck, 191, 215–6). A further view articulated by the Mālikī jurist Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070) understood *fiṭra* to mean that humans were born in a neutral state, with the potential for both good and evil (Adang, 408).

The notion that *fiṭra* was equivalent to Islam figured into classical jurisprudential reasoning on the legal status of children born to non-Muslims. As indicated above, such children should not be killed in battle because they were actually Muslims. Yet, for purposes of inheritance and other matters of personal status, their status was that of their parents. Muslims and non-Muslims could not inherit from each other, but orphaned children under the age of accountability—presumed Muslims though they were—still inherited from their non-Muslim parents (Gobillot, 18–31). However, the Andalusian jurist Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) ruled that in case of doubt about paternity, as with an abandoned child, the child must be brought up as a Muslim in the Muslim community (Adang, 405–7).

The highly influential philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 428/1037) saw *fiṭra* as epistemologically important but sometimes misleading. For Ibn Sīnā, the *fiṭra* is the body of necessary judgements known through sense perception that is shared by all human beings, without respect to religion or community affiliation. Moreover, the *fiṭra* does not contain commonly accepted moral judgements acquired through upbringing and social environment. Even though

the judgements of the *fiṭra* cannot be doubted within the realm of sense perception, they are, in Ibn Sīnā's view, not all true. This has to do with limitations in the estimative faculty (*wahm*), in Ibn Sīnā's psychology an internal sense of the animal soul that perceives connotations in things not apparent merely from their physical forms: when a sheep perceives danger in a wolf, for example, that perception arises apart from the wolf's mere form. According to Ibn Sīnā, the judgements of the *fiṭra* that are true and found also in the intellect are the first intelligibles (for example, that the whole is greater than its parts). However, some judgements of the *fiṭra* that derive from the estimative faculty are false, in which case the true judgement must be found in the intellect. For example, the estimative faculty judges incorrectly that all existent things necessarily occupy space, whereas the intellect judges correctly that some existents do not occupy space (for example, an immaterial being such as God). Thus, a keen intellect is required to prevent the *fiṭra* from corrupting true knowledge (Ahmed, 3–5, 89–93; Griffel, 11–25).

The *fiṭra* was not a matter for extended reflection in Ash'arī *kalām* theology before al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). Al-Ghazālī himself largely adopts Ibn Sīnā's notion of *fiṭra* as consisting of the first intelligibles and the judgements of estimation shared by all human beings, apart from upbringing, and he adds in knowledge of God's existence as well. Like Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī excludes moral judgements from the *fiṭra*, and this allows him to criticise reliance on conventional morality and advance in its place the moral guidance offered by the revelation of Islam (Griffel, 8–9, 30–1).

Appeal to *fiṭra* as a source of knowledge pervades the theology of the Ḥanbalī reformer Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328). Similar to al-Ghazālī, Ibn Taymiyya posits knowledge of God's existence as innate to human nature, and he rejects rational *kalām* proofs for the existence of God as unnecessary and misguided. However, whereas Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī limit the epistemological scope of *fiṭra*, Ibn Taymiyya expands it to include the moral sphere and regards it as a fully reliable guide to truth, not subject to the errors of the estimative faculty

posited by Ibn Sīnā. Ibn Taymiyya also rejects earlier views that *fiṭra* was an indication of the predetermination of human destinies, and that it meant that humans were born neutral in disposition towards good and evil. For Ibn Taymiyya, the *fiṭra* is the religion of Islam, but in potentiality rather than in actuality. Ibn Taymiyya compares the *fiṭra* to a newborn's instinct for its mother's milk. The newborn will drink if unimpeded; that is, it will actualise the potentiality of its instinct to drink. Similarly, the human *fiṭra* is an innate faculty and body of knowledge that, unimpeded by countervailing forces, will actualise knowledge, love, and worship of God. The role of prophets is not to introduce anything fundamentally new to the *fiṭra* but to clarify, strengthen, and perfect it (Hoover, 39–44; Özervarli, 45–54; Holtzman).

Ibn Taymiyya's basic notion that the *fiṭra* is a positive and instinctual disposition towards Islam is widespread in modern activist circles. The scope of this view of *fiṭra* has been expanded by revivalists to include not only the legal, moral, and epistemological spheres but also the psychological and the political, and it has been used to mount an apologetic for Islam as the most suitable and naturally fitting religious system for humankind (March; Mohamed; Utz 47–52).

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