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UNDERSTANDING THE AUSTRALIAN SHI'ITE MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE ON ETHICS

Mohamad Younes*

Abstract: Despite the strong emphasis on ethics within the Islamic tradition, Islamic ethics is scarcely represented as a discipline within academic scholarship. Many works on ethics are heavily spread across Islamic jurisprudence, philosophical theology and Qur'ānic exegesis. Even within these areas, Islamic ethics have predominantly been studied from Sunni perspectives, with little attention paid to Shi'ite or other minority understandings. This article will, therefore, use qualitative data collection methods of semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups to sociologically study the perceptions, understandings and applications of Islamic ethics in Australian Shi'ite Muslim everyday living. It will investigate overarching understanding of Islamic ethics and its specific application in Australian Shi'ite Muslim context. The article's objective, therefore, is twofold: to strengthen Islamic ethics as an independent discipline; and to unravel Shi'ite Muslims perceptions, views or lack thereof regarding Islamic ethical thought. This is significant as specific understandings of Islamic ethics in certain contexts help to explain how minority groups such as Shi'ite Muslims develop their own ethical standards to shape social relations in society.

Keywords: *Islamic ethics, Shi'ite Islam, Australian Shi'ite Muslim*

INTRODUCTION

Islam has expanded and has over 1.8 billion adherents today, living in virtually all corners of the globe.¹ Although most of Islam's adherents, known as Muslims, are located throughout Africa and Asia, there has been significant growth in Muslim populations living in Australia, Europe and the Americas, or what is collectively known as the West.² Recently, the diverse communities constituting the worldwide Muslim population have expressed a need, in differing ways, to link their Islamic heritage to points of cultural self-identification.³ In order to appreciate the variety of Islam's tradition of ethical thought, it is vital to develop a

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¹ Michael Lipka, "Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the US and around the World," Pew Research Center, August 9, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

² Mona Siddiqui, *The Good Muslim: Reflections on Classical Islamic Law and Theology* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³ Richard Peters, *Ethics and Education (Routledge Revivals)* (London: Routledge, 2015).

sociological understanding as to how the range of Islamic esteems have been fashioned in the progression of Muslim history. Ethical traditions in Islam are an application of various approaches toward moral and ethical values.

Ethics has been defined by William Lillie as “The normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies – a science which judges this conduct to be right or wrong, to be good or bad or in some similar way.”⁴ The word “ethics” originates from the Greek word “ethos,” which means “character, spirit and attitude of a group of people or culture.”⁵ According to Richard Peters, ethics is defined as “a systematic approach to understanding matters of right and wrong, good and bad as they relate to the wellbeing of and the relationships among sentient beings.”⁶ Rania Kamla highlights ethics as interrelationships between human beings and society.⁷ According to Bryan Burks, ethics is normally split into three primary sub-disciplines:

1. meta-ethics
2. normative ethics
3. applied ethics⁸

Meta-ethics pertains to the origin of moral judgments and ideas. Normative ethics deals with general theories on how an individual should live their life. Theories that judge actions by their consequences are traditionally called “teleological;” however, the word “consequentialist” has recently superseded it. Another group of theories within normative ethics, entitled “deontological,” determines someone’s actions by their agreement or disagreement to a formal principle. Applied ethics deals with applying moral theories to practical moral issues. Such matters as racism, human rights and justice have been predominant, as have abortion, euthanasia and controversial questions raised over the value of human life. Successive writers and philosophers on Islamic ethics, such as Al-Farabi (d. 950), Ibn-Miskaway (d. 1030), al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and al-Tusi (d. 1274), have generally defined Islamic ethics as the science of the human soul, which defines the characteristics and qualities of the soul as well as the methods of how to control and moderate them.⁹ Generally, this is an ethical system formed by the teachings of the Qur’ān and explained by Prophet Muhammad through actions and words. Large amounts of work on ethics are scattered

⁴ William Lillie, *An Introduction to Ethics* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1971), 1-2.

⁵ Stephen Loeb, “A Survey of Ethical Behavior in the Accounting Profession,” *Journal of Accounting Research* 9, no. 2 (1971): 301.

⁶ Peters. *Ethics and Education*, 4.

⁷ Rania Kamla, “Critical Insights into Contemporary Islamic Accounting,” *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 20, no. 8 (2009).

⁸ Bryan Burks, “The Impact of Ethics Education and Religiosity on the Cognitive Moral Development of Senior Accounting and Business Students in Higher Education” (PhD diss., Nova Southeastern University, 2007).

⁹ Mariam Al-Attar, “Meta-ethics: A Quest for an Epistemological Basis of Morality in Classical Islamic Thought,” *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 1, no. 1-2 (2017).

throughout Qur'ānic exegesis, theology and jurisprudence as well as in the work of mysticism.¹⁰

This article offers an analytical study of Islamic ethics from the Shi'ite perspective. In addition, it argues that Shi'ite Islamic ethics are highly imamate based; that is, reliant on the actions and sayings of what is believed in Shi'ism as 12 divinely guided imams (leaders). Achieving such goals will enhance the overall conceptualisation and understanding of the complexities of Islamic ethics in a contemporary Shi'a Muslim context.

SECULAR ETHICS VS ISLAMIC ETHICS

From an Islamic perspective and at a secular level, there are reasons for individuals to behave ethically. From an Islamic point of view, two prime factors stem from the same source: one is belief in Allah (God) and the hereafter. The proper Islamic understanding of belief in God involves a behaviour from the Muslim with a sense of striving to earn the pleasure of God on the one side and aiming to secure a place of success in the hereafter on the other.¹¹ Second is secular ethics, which is a branch of moral philosophy by which human faculties form the basis of ethics. The difference here is that secular ethics are not derived from supernatural revelation or guidance. For a Muslim, however, accepting Islamic ethics over secular ethics is completely rational. If a Muslim denies the importance or even acceptance of Islamic ethics, they are undermining their claim to be a Muslim.¹² A requirement and essential message of Islam demands believers behave ethically in all facets of human activity. In fact, Muslims should welcome the study of Islamic ethics as an opportunity to properly understand what their faith involves. The Qur'ān emphasises that good ethics of a believing Muslim is always inspired by the desire to seek the pleasure of God.¹³ Good ethics are not meant to attain worldly benefits; however, this does not necessarily suggest that worldly gains are not Islamically acceptable.

The other important moving force for the Muslim is the desire to be rewarded by God in the hereafter. The believer sacrifices difficult temptations of worldly benefits related to unethical practices by storing faith in God alone for benefits in the hereafter.¹⁴ It can be derived from the above varying standards of ethical and unethical behaviour that the moving forces for enjoining good and refraining from bad would normally differ from other perspectives. For instance, proponents of the idea of "relative ethics" are motivated by the external as well as internal factors of consideration leading to a decision, while in the case of "intuitive ethics" the psychological circumstances of the individual are what is important, which depends on their social, educational and financial background. Lawrence Becker

¹⁰ Ataullah Siddiqui, "Ethics in Islam: Key Concepts and Contemporary Challenges," *Journal of Moral Education* 26, no. 4 (1997).

¹¹ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹² Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992).

¹³ Khaliq Ahmad and Sadeq AbdulHasan, "Islamic Ethics in a Changing Environment for Managers," in *Ethics in Business and Management: Islamic and Mainstream Approaches*, ed. Khaliq Ahmad and AbdulHasan M. Sadeq (London: Asean Academic Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Aryn Sajoo, *Muslim Ethics: Emerging Vistas* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004).

states, according to “the standard as law,” the moving force for ethical behaviour is generally avoiding the idea of a punishment related to “bad” behaviour.¹⁵ If we look at “the standard as pleasure,” behaving ethically is because of pleasure. In the case of the “evolutionary view of ethics,” the motivating factor is to add to the developmental process of the person. Finally, in the “standard as value school,” the motivation for doing “good” is based on expecting a good or valuable outcome.

GOOD AND BAD

From the Islamic perspective, God guides human beings through life but in addition provides free will to do good work or engage in evil.¹⁶ One of the reasons this freedom was given to humans was for the simple purpose of testing them; to see how people would use their authority and freedom. The Qur’ān presents this information of the human ‘soul,’ suggesting that soon the individual will surely face the consequences of their “good” and “bad” actions.¹⁷ In this manner, as indicated by the moral philosophy of Islam, the standard of recognising good from bad is a piece of the innate disposition of man. This innate disposition involves moral concepts like honesty, truthfulness, justice, assisting the weak, freedom and more. The Qur’ān, as a Muslim’s primary source, consistently reminds men and women of various basic ethical and moral values.¹⁸ For instance, the Qur’ān speaks of wrongfully depriving others of their rights as well as bribery to authorities as a grave sin because such actions reject the essential values of equity, honesty and ceasing from cheating others.¹⁹ Another verse says, “Woe to those who give less [than due].”²⁰ According to Shahid Hasan, the Qur’ān does not intend to explain to humanity that these actions as sinful; rather, the Qur’ān presupposes this understanding, merely reminding humanity of the sinful actions they already know.²¹ Many of the Qur’ānic references to ethical principles and their applications in society have a similar nature.

They are all based on the idea that these principles are an obvious reality of which humanity is already aware. However, another field of Qur’ānic commands relates mainly to applying such universal ethical standards. For example, the Qur’ān speaks of the etiquette of interaction between opposite genders in a mutually interactive setting. This particular principle is based on the value of modesty, yet the Qur’ān does not refrain from reminding men and women of keeping modesty throughout interactions with the opposite sex; rather, it prescribes a code of conduct that is applied practically.²² This is seen similarly through the prohibition of *riba* (interest). The banning of *riba* as per the Qur’ān is established on the

¹⁵ Lawrence Becker, *A History of Western Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁶ Qur’an 17:15.

¹⁷ Qur’an 91:7-10.

¹⁸ Oliver Leaman, *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁹ Qur’an 2:188.

²⁰ Qur’an 83:1.

²¹ Shahid Hasan, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (New Delhi: MD Publications, 2010).

²² Muhammad Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1980).

standard of justice. Likewise, the Qur'ān not only reminds people of the value of justice through economic transactions, but also prohibits a transaction that, from the Islamic point of view, is injustice. These and other comparative occasions are cases where the Qur'ān has not only specified an ethical standard but has connected and applied a moral guideline to a practical life circumstance and has endorsed or disallowed a specific action. Thus, to summarise, the ethical message of Islam can be placed into two categories:

1. Where the Qur'ān has prompted men and women, reminding them of the essential ethical values with the suggestion that if they deliberately go astray from such values, they should then have no reason to guard themselves.
2. Where the Qur'ān has connected essential ethical standards on viable life circumstances and has allowed or denied specific conduct.

SOURCES OF ISLAMIC ETHICS

Generally speaking, Shahid Hasan states all societies carry the principles in ethical thought held in common.²³ Furthermore, Hasan adds the sources of such moral and ethical behaviours can be dated back to three main sources: divine revelation, innate disposition and reasoning.

In the 25th chapter of the Qur'ān, called the Furqan (criterion), revelation from the Islamic perspective is given to all humanity, becoming a point of difference discerning right from wrong. Moreover, the chapter provides ethical cases of past Biblical prophets and their characters mediating God's word to their respective societies. Karen Armstrong, in *A History of God*, states:

In practical terms, Islam meant that Muslims had a duty to create a just equitable society where the poor and vulnerable are treated decently. The early moral message of the Qur'ān is simple: It is wrong to stockpile wealth and build a private fortune, and good to share the wealth of society fairly by giving a regular proportion of one's wealth to the poor.²⁴

Moreover, Muslims subscribe to the idea of humanity being guided by God through means of Prophets and messengers sent to various nations throughout human history bearing God's revelation.²⁵ Such prophets are believed to have been sent with a universal message from God, as well as a specific Sharia (rule of law) to establish a Muslim *umma* (community) subscribing to the submission of God.²⁶ The Qur'ān does not distinguish between prophets²⁷ and is replete with admonitions by prophets to their nations proclaiming the unity of the one true God.²⁸ A Muslim should believe and accept all prophets' teachings whether or not they know their backgrounds or origins, as they are all considered part of God's message in the

²³ Hasan, *Ethical Theories in Islam*.

²⁴ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 171.

²⁵ Qur'an 23:44.

²⁶ Abdurezak Hashi, "Islamic Ethics: An Outline of its Principles and Scope," *Revelation and Science* 1, no. 3 (2011).

²⁷ Qur'an 2:136-8.

²⁸ Qur'an 7:56-57.

Islamic faith. This revelation is found primarily in the Qur'ān and exists in *aḥadīth* as secondary sources.

In Arabic, the idea of intuitive reasoning is known as *fitrah*, which, from the Islamic perspective, is the basic innate disposition of all human beings.²⁹ This is another source of ethical thought claiming there is innate intuition in all people to guide them to right or wrong. The Qur'ān magnifies the idea of an innate nature in many verses³⁰ that has been created for all people.³¹

The faculty of reason – the third source of ethical thought – exists through the ability to reason and deduct a conclusion using one's own mind. From the Islamic point of view, those who possess wisdom, thoughtfulness and reflect over life matters are glorified by the Qur'ān.³² However, the Qur'ān also mentions those who refuse to use their faculty of reason and wilfully violate the boundaries set by God's commands.³³ In addition to these main sources, Shi'a Muslims gather and strive to imitate the ethical and moral characteristics of the 12 imams believed to be appointed by God. These are, according to Shi'a tradition, divinely guided leaders from the lineage of Prophet Muhammad.³⁴

SHI'ITE AND SUNNI DISTINCTIONS

There are substantial common denominators between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam. Both trust that piety, righteousness of Qur'ānic standards and striving for goodness everyday are the best ideals for people. Sunni and Shi'a Muslims concede the requirement for a solid ethical and moral guide to manage human conduct in every one of its manifestations. However, there are differences in not only sources of ethics but also Islamic law. Sunni and Shi'a Muslims accept the below as crucial sources:

- The Qur'ān
- *Ḥadīth* and *sunna*
- Five jurisprudential schools of thought.

In addition to the 12 imams, Shi'a Muslims also follow a *marja* (high Islamic authority) as a source of ethics regarding various ethical and situational questions they may face in their surroundings, as mentioned previously. Thus, Shi'a Muslims seem to be more imamate-based in their Islamic approach as opposed to the Sunni Muslim perspective, which does not have such an emphasis on imams. Furthermore, the Shi'ism expression of the five principles of

²⁹ Munir Baalbaki, *Al-Mawrid: A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary* (Beirut: Dar Al-Ilm Lill Malayeen, 2001).

³⁰ Qur'an 2:138.

³¹ Qur'an 30:30.

³² Qur'an 8:29.

³³ Qur'an 67:10.

³⁴ Muhammad Al-Sadr, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence: According to Shi'i Law* (London: ICAS, 2003).

religion (*usul al-fiqh*) includes: “faith in divine unity; prophecy; resurrection; the Imamate, belief in the Imams as successors of the Prophet; and divine justice.”³⁵

Sunni and Shi’a Islam concur regarding the three essential principles of God: unity, prophecy and resurrection. It is only in the principles of imamate and divine justice that they differ. On the topic of imamate, the Shi’a view emphasises exclusive capacity over the imam, which in turn separates the Shi’a from the Sunni perspective. On the topic of divine justice, an emphasis of God possessing an innate quality of “divine nature” is specific to Shi’ism. A large portion of the *ḥadīth* writing in Shi’a and Sunni Islam is similar, but the chain of transmission in numerous cases is not similar. Likewise, the continuation of the Prophet’s authority in Shi’ism is constituted by the 12 imams’ sayings and actions supplementing the prophetic *ḥadīth* and *sunna*. For Shi’ism, the 12 imams can be said to expand the identity of Prophet Muhammad amid the succeeding centuries. Such accumulations of the sayings of the 12 imams found in *Nahj albalaghah* of Ali and the *Usul al-kafi*, comprising proverbs from all the imams, are from the Shi’ite perspective a continuation of the *ḥadīth* collections focusing on the Prophet.³⁶

PARADIGM OF SHI’A ISLAMIC ETHICS

In this section, my goal is to introduce one exemplary Islamic figure: the 10th century thinker Ibn Miskawayh. Specifically, my focus is on the theory of virtue in the ethics of Ibn Miskawayh and its contemporary applications to Islamic everyday practices in Australia from an ordinary Shi’a Muslim perspective. It is helpful to keep in mind two fundamental facts about the study of ethics in Islam. First, in Islam, revelation, as recorded in the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*, provides specific moral content. However, this content does not cover every possible moral dilemma a Muslim may encounter nor do these sources articulate a theoretical framework for the elaboration of a fully robust Islamic ethics. This is not to say that individual Islamic thinkers did not develop systematic theories of moral philosophy, because polymaths like Al-Ghazali and Ibn Sina certainly did.³⁷ According to Nancy Snow, in the Islamic tradition, ethical concerns are not exhausted in the sacred texts but instead have been discussed in various specialised sciences focused on *akhlaq* (ethics), *tasawwuf* (spirituality), *tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur’ān), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *falsafa* (philosophy), *adab* (etiquette), and so on.³⁸ This can be further seen through the works of Labib Şubḥi,³⁹ George Hourani⁴⁰ and Kevin Reinhart.⁴¹ Second, Islamic legal thought, which focuses on the forms of reasoning, abstract values and codes of conduct, is often perceived to be the dominant form

³⁵ Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai, *Shi’ite Islam*, trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (London: George Allen, 1975), 14.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Nancy Snow, *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Subhi Labib, “Capitalism in Medieval Islam,” *Journal of Economic History* 29, no. 1 (1969).

⁴⁰ George Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Kevin Reinhart, “Islamic Law as Islamic Ethics,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1983).

for reflection on moral matters and most work that we call ‘Islamic ethics’ produced in the West in the last 50 years is not pure ethics but properly categorised as *fiqh*.

Ibn Miskawayh’s *Tahdhib al-akhlaq* (The Refinement of Character) is an example of a specific genre of etiquette whose purpose is to bring together two sources – Islamic revelation and the Greek philosophical canon – and it is one of the earliest examples of this type of *tahdhib* (work on ethics). In this work, Ibn Miskawayh develops a practical theory of virtue ethics that draws selectively from Greek philosophy to make it consistent with an Islamic ethos and worldview.⁴² He holds a central place in Islamic ethics for his summary and explication of basic elements of practical philosophy, especially those arising from Neoplatonism. For Ibn Miskawayh, virtues are dispositions related to faculties of the soul.⁴³ Virtues are acquired through a process of training, which begins as a struggle, leading to the repetition of moral acts and the formation of a habit. Good habits, in turn, help cultivate virtues. Virtues are character traits, which are permanent parts of a state of the soul that “go all the way down,” so to have a virtue is to be a certain sort of person. As Ibn Miskawayh put it, a disposition to do the right thing “may have its beginning in deliberation and thought, but then it becomes, by gradual and continued practice, an aptitude and a trait of character.”⁴⁴ Moreover, prostration of daily prayers cultivates humility and submission in the person who prays, devotion by fasting in Ramadan, and devotion and generosity in almsgiving. Lowering one’s gaze is also a bodily action suggested for men and women, but the following verse in the Qur’ān requires a second category of bodily actions for women: they should not display their “ornaments.”⁴⁵ Ibn Miskawayh considers bodily actions to be central to the cultivation of character, a role he discusses in the following passage of *Tahdhib al-akhlaq*:

now as the soul is a divine, incorporeal faculty, and as it is, at the same time, used for a particular constitution and tied to it physically and divinely in such a way that neither of them can be separated.⁴⁶

Through continuous training and over time an individual can ground the ingredients of good character in their personality such that it becomes a habit and natural disposition.

RESEARCH METHOD

To reach the goals of this article, a qualitative research method was undertaken. The primary characteristic of qualitative research is that it is for the most part “fitting for small samples, while its results are not quantifiable and measurable.”⁴⁷ Its core advantage, which at the same time reveals its essential distinction from quantitative research, is being able to offer a complete portrayal and investigation of research subjects, having no restrictions on the

⁴² Snow, *Cultivating Virtue*.

⁴³ Aḥmad ibn-Muḥammad ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* [The Refinement of Character], trans. Constantine K. Zurayk (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1968).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁵ Qur’an 24:31.

⁴⁶ ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, 157.

⁴⁷ Mira Crouch and Heather McKenzie, “The Logic of Small Samples in Interview-based Qualitative Research,” *Social Science Information* 45, no. 4 (2006): 483.

extent of the research and most importantly nature of participant responses. For this study, structured in-depth interviews were conducted. “In-depth interviews are personal and unstructured interviews, whose point is to identify member’s feelings, sentiments, and views with respect to a specific research subject.”⁴⁸ The primary advantage of personal interviews is that they include individual and direct contact among interviewers and interviewees, and in addition remove nonresponse rates; however, interviewers need to have developed crucial skills necessary to effectively carry out a meeting. In addition, semi-structured interviews offer flexibility as far as the stream of the interview, leaving space for conclusions that were not at first intended and could be inferred with respect to a research subject. However, “there is the risk that the interview may stray from the pre-specified research aims and goals.”⁴⁹ This empirical research consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews alongside chosen focus groups. Thus, a qualitative data collection method was most appropriate, as it allows an adaptable way of gathering reactions and narratives.⁵⁰ The technique by which respondents understand and decipher their social reality is among the essential drive for a qualitative research method.⁵¹

Selecting such a methodology will create synergy among members, expanding on each other’s perspectives and views on the Shi’ite Muslim appreciation of ethics. Another purpose behind this method choice is to experience the ‘emic’ viewpoint from the interviewees, which is evaluated by unfolding their profound perceptions.⁵² This research was conducted across four sites totalling 12 individuals identifying as ordinary Australian Shi’ite Muslims. The aim of this research was to understand what Australian Shi’ite Muslims consider to be ethics as well the sources of such ethical principles. In extension to this, the article also aims to unravel the Shi’ite Muslims perceptions, views or lack thereof regarding Islamic ethical thought. The respondents were ordinary Australian Shi’ite Muslims from age 18 upwards. All the interviews were conducted over nine months following ethics approval during 2016, with repeated visits to the interviewees’ mosques, schools and institutions in the metropolitan areas of Sydney. Twelve interviews were conducted and from this cohort four focus groups were created with three members in each group. Respondents were chosen randomly, but a balance of genders was maintained for the interviews and focus groups. I was aware of the generally brief time of nine months, thus 12 interviews of rich and various backgrounds alongside focus groups sensibly sufficed.

The critical role of the interviews within this research was to unfold the ordinary Australian Shi’ite Muslim respondents’ understandings, applications and recognitions with respect to Islamic ethics. Patterns of the participants’ gender, age, profession, length of time in Australia (generation) and background were vital toward the inferences drawn from the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁹ John Gill and Phil Johnson, *Research Methods for Managers* (New York: Sage, 2002).

⁵⁰ Steven Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: The Search for Meanings* (New Jersey: Wiley-Interscience, 1984).

⁵¹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵² Norman Denzin and Lincoln Yvonna, “Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research,” in *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (New York: Sage Publications Inc, 2008).

information gathered. This related back to the fundamental drive Taylor and Bogdan talk about with a specific end goal to unravel respondents' social reality.⁵³ Such research is important as it will make possible a more intimate knowledge of Islam in its multidimensional reality. Adding to the importance of this research, there are relatively few published studies about Islamic ethics from an Australian perspective, let alone many publications on Australian Shi'ite Muslim perspectives in Australia. This novel research contributes to the field of Islamic ethics not only by providing a unique perspective on Shi'ite Muslim views of ethics but also into Shi'ism, which, according to Farhad Daftary, has not been adequately assessed historically.⁵⁴

Questions were asked to interviewees to identify the detailed perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards Shi'ite Islamic ethics. In summary, semi-structured in-depth interviews play an advantageous part in this research by enabling language to express the meaning of the participants' thoughts.⁵⁵ In addition to 12 individual interviews, this research collated information from four focus groups, containing three interview participants each. Focus groups are extremely useful in acquiring certain types of information when circumstances would make it hard to collect using different methods. Focus groups are also chosen to increase points of view and perceptions from respondents about their comprehension or application of Islamic ethics. Within this setting, focus groups will empower this research to better comprehend the level of consensus among Australian Shi'ite Muslims on Islamic ethics and determine the scope of understanding and difference between the respondents. With respect to data collection tools, this study included in-depth semi-structured questions as a guide for the interview process. A few questions were prepared in advance, for the researcher to direct the interview towards the fulfillment of research goals; however, further questions were added during the interviews. Examples that were incorporated into the semi-organised survey included: Describe what you think Islamic ethics is about. What do you think are the sources of Islamic ethics? Can you give me an example of how Islamic ethics change your everyday living? Do you think Islamic ethics are situational or always apply? Do Islamic ethics play an important role in your daily life? Are you influenced or guided by any ethical tradition(s)? Do Islamic ethics impact you in Australia?

Several steps were involved in developing the survey questionnaire for the interviews and focus groups. The first was to identify the specific topics that would be covered. This involved consulting the literature on the relevant principles and questions relating to Islamic ethics from a practical point of view, i.e. how Islamic ethics practically impact individuals in their daily lives. One of the most significant decisions that can affect how people answer questions is whether it is posed as open-ended, where respondents provide a response in their own words. The chosen approach was to use open-ended questions to discover which answers are most common. In this way, the questions may better reflect what the respondents were

⁵³ Steven Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: The Search for Meanings* (New Jersey: Wiley-Interscience, 1984).

⁵⁴ Farhad Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam* (London: IB Tauris, 2013), 23.

⁵⁵ Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).

thinking or how they viewed Islamic ethics as a Shi'ite Muslim living in Australia. It was important to ask questions that were clear and specific, and that each respondent was able to answer. Some questions that were incorporated into the focus groups include: How do you feel about Islamic ethics? What are some ways you think Islamic ethics can be revised? Do you think Islamic ethics are situational or always apply? What else can you say about the sources of Islamic ethics? Can you give me an example of how Islamic ethics changes your everyday living? What are the needs for Islamic ethics in Australia? How devoted are you to Islamic ethics on a scale from 1 to 5? How important do you think it is to be living in accordance with traditional Islamic ethics? It was made evident to the respondents that open-ended questions could be answered in their own words. Moreover, the choices of words and phrases were critical in expressing the meaning and intent of the question to the respondents and ensuring all respondents interpreted the question in a similar way. All the interviews and focus group discussions were digitally recorded and typed up, evident through a study information sheet with the respondent's permission.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The data was collected from four main sites then processed in response to the problems posed in the first portion of this article. The site locations were: Masjid Arrahman, Kingsgrove; Al-Zahra College, Arncliffe; Imam Hassan Centre, Annangrove; and Al-Mahdi Masjid, Campbelltown. The essential objectives driving the accumulative data and subsequent data analysis was to broaden a base of knowledge to strengthen Islamic ethics as an independent discipline while also addressing the scant attention Shi'ite Islam has received in respect to what ethics means to Shi'ite Muslims. The interviews and focus groups were held at the four sites during February and April 2017 after I had visited the four sites and discussed with the organisation leaders the nature and scope of the study. The information regarding the study was sent to the respondents beforehand so they were aware of it all. Announcements were made during the daily activities at each site about the study suggesting that if anybody was interested, they were free to approach myself for an interview and to join a focus group.

In general terms, the participants were willing to participate in the research. The discussions took place in the classrooms and offices at the sites and lasted approximately 30 to 35 minutes for the in-depth interviews. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour at each site. During the interviews, I kept notes to help me to analyse the gathered data. During the focus groups, the respondents were free and encouraged to express their views, even on topics not mentioned in the discussed fields. Participants were common in the fact they were all ordinary Australian Shi'ite Muslims; however, they came from many different walks of life and upbringings. The research examined participants' beliefs and attitudes towards Islamic ethics, with chosen sources used to apply them, and identified what influences or prevents them from applying such principles or traditions. Finally, it should be stated the conversations with the participants flowed pleasingly with great insight into ordinary Australian Shi'a Muslims. Content analysis was used to analyse the data that was gathered

from the personal interviews. As per Moore, McCabe and Evans, content analysis is the kind of research where information is arranged in themes and sub-themes in order to be comparable.⁵⁶ A favourable standpoint of this research is that it assists in information gathered being reduced and simplified.

A discussion of the implications of such themes in the following section may suggest ways to address the matters found. The primary categories which emerged were:

- *Ahlul-bayt* (family of the Prophet)
- Sources of ethics themes – the Qur’ān/imamate
- *Taqwa* – God-consciousness through good actions.

Despite the fact there is a great deal of research on Muslims, Shi’a Muslims are a seldom studied group in Australia and throughout the world in general.⁵⁷ The expectations of this research were based on the inadequacy of Islamic ethics understanding throughout Australian Muslims and the lack of literature surrounding Shi’a Islamic ethics throughout Western scholarship. The qualities found in ordinary Shi’ite Muslims during the interviews and focus groups were:

- They are consciously unaware of Islamic ethical principles.
- They have a vague and uncertain understanding of ethics and ethical traditions in general.
- They agree on the sources of ethics being the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth*, imams and prophets.
- They have a low level of understanding of Shi’ite ethical traditions, including figures such as Ibn Miskawayh, Nasir Al-Tusi and Mulla Sadra.
- Most participants were not aware of the theoretical framework proposed by Ibn Miskawayh and did not subscribe to it.
- They regard the imams/prophets as sources of ethics guidance and perfect role models. Islamic ethics for all participants played an important role in their daily lives – some more than others – nonetheless, 95% of members considered it vital with only 5% giving it moderate significance. There was a high emphasis on doing good in this world and the hereafter referencing the Qur’ān (2:201). In extension, Shi’ite Muslims consider being ethical a form of worshipping God.
- Shi’ite Muslims rely on the *aḥadīth* of the imams as opposed to mainstream collections such as Sahih Bukhari.
- Shi’a Muslims uphold and accept the concept of the infallibility of 14 individuals. These individuals, according to the participants, were inspired by God and protected to not commit any sins during their lives.
- 70% of the Shi’ite Muslim participants felt like a minority within Islam and that they must often limit themselves in practicing their traditions. Interestingly, the attention

⁵⁶ David Moore, George McCabe and Michael Evans, *Introduction to the Practice of Statistics Minitab Manual and Minitab Version 14* (New York: WH Freeman & Co., 2005).

⁵⁷ Farhad Daftary, *A History of Shi’i Islam*, 3.

surrounding Islam, ISIS and terrorism led some (50%) Shi'ite Muslims participants in Australia to be more open about their practices.

- 95% of the participants stressed that their tradition is a more peaceful version of Islam and based on universal values. Shi'ite Muslims are concerned about distancing themselves from Wahhabi Islam, ISIS, Salafism and extremism, all of which represent traditions they believe are the furthest from their outlook.
- Shi'ites believe the Qur'ān is best understood through the Prophet's family. 90% of the Shi'ite Muslim participants saw Australian law as not in conflict with their Islamic ethics.

From among the interview discussions (in the interests of confidentiality, the names used in this article are fictitious), 41-year-old Zeinab, who subscribes to Kingsgrove mosque, mentioned with regards to the question on the sources of ethics that “after the Qur'ān we look at the *ḥadīth* and writings of the imams.” This seemed to be the majority view among the participants. Having said this, Shi'ite Muslims follow the fifth *madhab* (Ja'fari school of thought) but also recognise the four Sunni schools as well. Abdul, who is 22 years old, expressed some knowledge about the four Sunni schools of thought but immediately identified with the Ja'fari school. When pressed on this, Abdul further explained that “Imam Jafar comes from the *ahlul bayt* (family of the prophet), which is why we follow his teachings because it is the most trustworthy and ethical.” Shi'ite Muslims subscribe to a *marja' taqlid* (an ayatollah – high Islamic authority) for ethical decisions in their lives. Moreover, 90 per cent of Shi'ite Muslims ranked themselves to be devoted 5/5 to Islamic ethics. When asked why they ranked this so high, the responses centred around aspiring to be like the 12 imams. According to 28-year-old Sarah living in Western Sydney, her complete devotion to Islamic ethics and wanting to be like the imams is due to a “heavy emphasis on the importance of the *ahlul bayt*.” The family of the Prophet is very much loved and revered by Shi'ite Muslims regardless of where they are from. Shi'a Muslims exclusively believe the imams of *ahlul bayt* have a *wilayat* (guardianship appointment) granted to them by God through his Messenger. Shi'a Muslim participants accept the imam concept as having ethical principles from the imams and advancing morality. These principles, according to the participants, can be seen through the martyrdom theme of Karbala showing signs of justice and morality.⁵⁸ Ibrahim, a 25-year-old who attends Al-Hassan centre weekly, explained the death of Imam Hussein (the grandson of prophet Muhammad and a significant figure in the Shi'a Muslim community as a heroic and redemptive leader who died during the battle of Karbala in AD 680) was a “sacrifice for all Muslims and this event teaches us all about justice and right and wrong.” Ibrahim added “if it wasn't for the sacrifice of Imam Hussein, Islam would have deviated away from its ethical principles and fallen into corruption just like the leaders against Imam Hussein claiming to be Muslim.”

Being God conscious according to Shi'ite Muslims affects their overall ethical lives. Good behaviour and character are viewed as a form of worship as there is high emphasis on doing

⁵⁸ Sayyid Akhtar, “Karbala: An Enduring Paradigm of Islamic Revivalism,” *Al-Tawhid: A Journal of Islamic Thought and Culture* 1, no. 1-3 (1996).

good in this world and awaiting the hereafter. The Qur'ān states, "But among them is he who says, 'Our Lord, give us in this world [that which is] good and in the Hereafter [that which is] good and protect us from the punishment of the Fire.'"⁵⁹ Furthermore, achieving *taqwa* for Shi'ite Muslims is possible by emulating the actions and characteristics of the Prophet and imams, who are, according to them, perfect in the sense that God prevented them from committing sin. Fatima, who is 24 years old and from Kingsgrove Mosque, made it very clear the "imams are not like Allah, we never say they are like God but the way they are perfect is through God protecting them from making mistakes, but they're not God." In response to Fatima, another participant, Talal, who is from the same mosque, stated:

the biggest difference we have with Sunni Muslims is the idea of infallibility found for not only prophets but also for the imams, but it's also most misunderstood because it is not about them not having the ability to commit sin, at the end of the day they are human but the point is God protects them from committing any sin.

Apart from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth/sunna*, Shi'ite Muslims subscribe to imams as sources of ethics and moral principles. The 12 divinely inspired imams are, according to the Shi'ite Muslim participants, key sources of ethical principles. All in all, these ideas and foundational pillars help us understand what it really means for a Shi'ite Muslim to be ethical.

DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

Favourable qualitative studies can help us "understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing."⁶⁰ For this understanding to occur, Patton emphasises the need for validity and reliability,⁶¹ which are factors that a researcher should be concerned with. Moreover, Nahid states the ideal scenario is to conduct research that is valid and reliable.⁶² In this research, primary and secondary data have been taken into consideration to ensure validity and reliability in the research conducted. The majority of secondary data collected is from established academic peer-reviewed international journals, and it is therefore reasonable to accept their reliability. Moreover, it may be difficult to tell for certain whether the theoretical framework is the most reliable as the study makes some assumptions, for example, assuming all participants experience the same thoughts. Nonetheless, Nahid claims primary and secondary data are valid and reliable when following the observations guideline.⁶³

This research has been subject to several limitations and the most important ones are briefly discussed in this section. The first limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size, being only 12 participants. A bigger sample would enhance the reliability of the research. Second, this article is not a complete representation of all Shi'ite Muslim views

⁵⁹ Qur'an 2:201.

⁶⁰ Elliot Eisner, *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 58.

⁶¹ Michael Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Components* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001).

⁶² Nahid Golafshani, "Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research," *The Qualitative Report* 8, no. 4 (2003).

⁶³ Ibid.

living in Australia; rather, it is a small-scale reflection. Third, the research design adopted focus groups and in-depth interviews as opposed to a total ethnographic approach of direct respondent observation. Hence, the study may lack the investigation of cultural differences among Australian Shi'ite Muslims. Regardless of the restrictions, this study provides a basis for future research to explore and answer frontline questions with respect to Islamic ethics.

The participants were Twelver Shi'ite Muslims, interviewed individually as well as split into four focus groups with three participants each at four sites. The participants came from different national backgrounds such as Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Pakistan. Most of them have completed university degrees, ranging from bachelor degrees in business to a professor of global finance. Others work in diverse industries including engineering, human resources and finance. Nonetheless, the common Shi'ite Muslim demographic in this study was an Australian born student between the age of 20 and 25.

This sociological study of Australian Shi'ite Muslims agrees with the conclusions of Tabatabai⁶⁴ and Daftary.⁶⁵ The study confirms the scant attention being paid to the understanding of Shi'ite Islam, specifically in terms of ethical and moral values, mentioned first by Tabatabai and later by Daftary. Moreover, this study conveys that all Shi'ite Muslim participants expressed emphatically throughout the interviews and focus groups that being "ethical" was an extremely humane and productive thing. In addition, three themes emerged throughout the qualitative data collection regarding the concept of ethics from a Shi'ite perspective: the concept of *ahlul bayt* (family of the Prophet); *taqwa* (God-consciousness); and the sources of ethics.

To get an understanding of what the participants meant when they talked about Shi'ite Islamic ethics, they were asked to give their own definition of the term. The statements are provided below:

- [Zeinab, aged 41 yrs] "I think it means adopting the rules and conduct of the Qur'ān and following our imam's examples."
- [Tariq, aged 37 yrs] "For me it is what's allowed and what's not allowed. The morals in Islamic theology."
- [Rana, aged 20 yrs] "The laws and teachings from all the prophets, imams and *ḥadīths* in Islam."
- [Abdul Hayeq, aged 22 yrs] "Islamic ethics are the laws of God."
- [Abdulla Hanif, aged 19 yrs] "The Qur'ān and *ḥadīths* from the imams."

As participants were asked to define Shi'ite Islamic ethics, the participants conveyed four main factors used in defining the term – the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, imams and *sunna*. Interestingly, imams were the second highest source of ethics after the Qur'ān. Throughout Sunni and Shi'a Islam, the *ahlul bayt* (family of the Prophet) is a very beloved element of Islam after the death of the Prophet. Considering the crucial significance of the subject, it is not surprising to

⁶⁴ Tabatabai, *Shi'ite Islam*.

⁶⁵ Farhad Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*.

see the Shi'a vary from some Sunnis on this issue. From the Shi'a perspective, the family of the Prophet consists of 14 people:⁶⁶

- Fatimah al-Zahra
- Imam Ali
- Imam al-Hasan
- Imam al-Husayn
- The nine descendants of Imam al-Husayn
- Prophet Muhammad

All participants during the focus groups asserted the above 14 individuals are protected by Allah from any kind of flaws, thus, they are worthy of being obeyed. A big factor stemming from the study was that all participants seemed emphatic on the idea of the infallible imams. Another theme that arose was the idea of imamate. Shi'a Muslims in the focus groups commented on such an idea and 90 per cent suggested this grace is incumbent on God to appoint an imam to guide and lead the *umma* (community) after the Prophet.

Interestingly, not all the participants across the sites agreed with each other in terms of the status and level of priorities when it comes to the sources of ethics. The Campbelltown participants placed all three – the Qur'an, imams and *marja*, as the same. The other three sites placed the Qur'an first followed by imams and *marja*. These findings present ordinary Australian Shi'a Muslims as diverse within their own Shi'a interpretations and rationalities.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to sociologically assess the understandings, perceptions and uses of Islamic ethics in Shi'a Muslim everyday living. Using qualitative data accumulation methods for semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups, this study aimed to strengthen Islamic ethics as an independent discipline and address the scant attention Shi'a Islam has received with regards to ethical principles. The aim of this article was to present the results of the qualitative research of this study on ordinary Australian Shi'a Muslims regarding Islamic ethics. Summarising the main points:

- Islamic ethics for all participants plays an important role in their daily lives.
- *Taqwa* (God-consciousness) for Shi'a Muslims affects their ethical lives as being ethical is considered a form of worshipping God.
- Shi'a Muslims believe the Qur'an is best understood through the Prophet's family (*ahlul bayt*).
- Shi'a Muslims follow the 5th *madhab* (Ja'fari school of thought) but also recognise the four Sunni schools.
- Shi'a Muslims subscribe to a *marja' taqlid* for various ethical decisions in their lives. As for the theoretical framework, Ibn Miskawayh's work on ethics in his *tahdhib*

⁶⁶ Vivienne Angeles, "The Development of the Shia Concept of the Imamate," *Asian Studies* 21 (1983).

alakhlaq (cultivation of ethics) sets out to show how individuals might acquire the right dispositions to perform morally correct actions in an organised and systematic manner.

Ibn Miskaway's theoretical framework, according to the participants, had no significant influencing effect nor did any of the participants resonate deeply with the traditions or heritage of influential figures such as Ibn Miskaway. There was some awareness among the participants and the data clearly signified a high reliance and devotion toward the 12 imams; however, not too much was centred among figures like Ibn Miskaway. This article identified the complexity of Islamic ethics and points out the need for a comprehensive study in this discipline. Moreover, significant relationships were found between Shi'a Muslim's sources of ethics being very much imamate based. Although Shi'a Muslims identified the primary sources as the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, imams were extremely vital in their approach to ethical and moral questions. Shi'a Muslims were not too familiar with the concept of Islamic ethics until it was explained to them; however, this was expected as Daftary points out the level of awareness and knowledge regarding Shi'ism is quite low.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the results were expected based on the fact that literature of Islamic ethics is predominantly based on Sunni perspectives, with little attention paid to Shi'ite or other minority understandings.⁶⁸

Overall, not only does this article delve into the minds of Australian Shi'a Muslims' perceptions and understandings regarding Islamic ethics, it demonstrates that Shi'a Muslims' approach to Islamic ethics is focused on the imamate and *wilaya* as integral components to Shi'ite understanding. Shi'ite Islam is in no way a monolithic understanding; rather, it comes in different shapes and rationalities from within.

⁶⁷ Farhad Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*, 3.

⁶⁸ Abdul Ansari, "Islamic Ethics: Concept and Prospect," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (1989): 81.

APPENDIX A

Details of the Focus Groups

Group	No. of members	Dates	Group location
1	3	28.2.2017	Masjid Arrahman Kingsgrove
2	3	17.3.2017	Al-Zahra College Arncliffe
3	3	29.3.2017	Al-Mahdi Masjid Campbelltown
4	3	14.4.2017	Imam Hassan Centre Annangrove

Semi-structured In-depth Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What is your level of education?
3. What does the word ethics mean to you?
4. Describe what you think Islamic ethics is about.
5. What do you think the sources of Islamic ethics are?
6. Do Islamic ethics play an important role in your daily life?
7. Are you influenced or guided by any ethical tradition(s)?
8. Do Islamic ethics impact you in Australia?

Focus Group Discussion Questions

How do you feel about Islamic ethics?

What are some ways you think Islamic ethics can be revised?

Do you think Islamic ethics are situational or always apply?

What else can you say about the sources of Islamic ethics?

Can you give me an example of how Islamic ethics changes your everyday living?

What are the needs for Islamic ethics in Australia?

How devoted are you to Islamic ethics on a scale from 1 to 5?

How important do you think it is to be living in accordance with traditional Islamic ethics?

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