

Humanity

Humanity: A Muslim Perspective

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In Islamic revelation Allah is central to all the reality of existence as independent, infinite, and transcendent Being. Humanity, on the other hand, is finite and dependant on God. Ontologically speaking, human beings by their very nature are dependent and limited in knowledge and power. They need God for their existence and survival. Although human kind is created by God and dependant on Him for their existence, they are created in the perfect form compared to the rest of creation. This distinctive advantage of humanity over the rest of creation is based on the reasoning that human beings have been given by God. They were made not only knowledgeable of things, but also with power over them. In the Qur'anic story of human origins, God makes humans on earth as His successors, or trustees (*khalipha*). "When your Lord said to the angels: 'I am placing on the earth one that shall rule as MY deputy'" (Qur'an, 2/30). In this story God taught Adam all the names of creatures. In this version of human creation it was God who initiated the creation of humanity; it was God who gave humanity the knowledge of things; it was God who gave human kind knowledge, above even that of the angels. Only Satan failed to recognize this truth of the divine plan for humanity.

In the Qur'anic story of the origins of humanity the image is that human beings carry in themselves a spirit as the breath (*ruh*) of God. The Qur'anic story of creation is free from any pessimistic image of the human being. The Qur'an makes it clear that in spite of the temptation of Adam, with the tree of fruit, God continued His trust in him. "Then Adam received commandments from his Lord relented towards him. He is the Forgiving One, the Merciful" (2/37). This positive outlook in the Qur'an toward human beings is behind all the optimism and the trust that prevails in the soul of the Muslim community. The second important message that comes through the Qur'anic version of human origins is the positive image of women. The Qur'an does not give any image of the feminine gender which might be understood as secondary to the gender of male. There is a complete equality of gender with equal knowledge, freedom and responsibility before God. Both genders have been tested, tempted, and successfully survived the temptation. Satan has been defeated with the guidance from God as a faithful act on the part of the human, both as man and woman.

In Islamic thinking sin is not essential to basic human nature. It is a result of human free will and the free choice. Humanity, according to Qur'an, is created in the best mold (*'ahsan taqwim'*) or perfect constitution. Yet with a divine mystery the Satanic temptation stands in the way to cause human beings to forget their essential reality and purpose. The Qur'an has not introduced an image of human being who has consciously and knowingly chosen to sin and rebel. Instead it has brought an image of human forgetfulness which needs to be reminded. This is why the Qur'an as the divine revelation is called the reminder (*zikr*). This is another aspect of the Islamic revelation which looks at human being

positively, as open to growth and transformation. The Qur'an talks about other aspects of the human inclinations to fanaticism *jahl*, deviation, slipping, self deception, and mistaking, haste etc. But this temptation to evil or sin is a later phenomenon and has not penetrated into the essence of human beings. With faith in God and good works human beings can always turn to their primordial goodness. Human nature in the personality of Adam and Eve has not been permanently and incurably distorted, alienated, or fallen. The idea of original sin inherited from generation to generation has not been accepted among Muslims. In the Qur'anic version, Adam and Eve committed sin together each on his her will and account, each being responsible for his her own choice. No one was to blame the other for his or her own choice. Here is the Muslim understanding of individual responsibility before God. The sin that Adam and Eve committed has not destroyed their conscience entirely either. They repented afterwards and their repentance was accepted by God. Thus human beings are born not sinful but pure. Every human being is given a chance, just as their forefathers were given. They are given responsibility for their own destiny. Since there is no idea of original sin, there is no supernatural salvation either. In Islamic piety sin is not the most central aspect of human condition. A popular hadith reads: "Every child is born in the pure state of his/ her creation (*fitrah*), only then his parents make him Jew, Christian or Zoroastrian" (....). The common understanding of this hadith is not only the innocence of the child from the burden of an inherited sin, but also the equation of the pure nature with the attitude of surrender *islam*.

In Qur'anic teaching, no human soul is capable of saving another soul. "Each man shall reap the fruits of his own deeds: no soul shall bear another's burden" (6/164). Islamic anthropology has not developed doctrines of substitution, redemption, sacrifice, or mediation. Salvation is due to a direct relationship between the human individual and his/her God. The celebrated theologian al-Ghazali described the essential human condition as something between fear and hope without any assurance of salvation, which leaves human beings in humility before God, saving them from possible arrogance and pride. The relationship between God and the human individual is a free relationship based on mutual promises and commitments. The covenant of relationship between the two is related to the relationship between human beings themselves as well. According to the Qur'an neither predestinarianism or electionism nor libertarianism explains the nature of that relationship. Within the broader framework of God's independence and human dependence, human free will is not completely independent of God's will. Thus there is room for God's role in the form of teaching, guidance, direction, mercy, and counseling. But each human has a role in his/her own salvation, with his response to God's call in knowledge, faith, and struggle. Revelations through messengers are initiatives on God's part to communicate with humanity to lead them aright, but it is up to the human beings to listen and live up to the revelatory guidance in their own good or harm. Such free and fair relationship has been assumed to exist between the Creator and the human creature, preserving the dignity and integrity of both parties, without giving also room in that intimate relationship to third parties.

Humanity: A Christian Perspective

Terence Nichols

In Jewish and Christian tradition, God created human beings according to the stories found in Genesis chapters 1-2. Genesis 1 tells us that God created human beings in the sixth day, “in his image.”

So God created humankind in his image,

In the image of God he created them;

Male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

There are two very important points here, fundamental to all later Christian (and Jewish) tradition. First, it is *God* who created human beings. Human beings are not merely products of nature, nor of fate and chance, but are intended by God. The story does not tell us how God created human beings (see below), only that God is the ultimate creator of human beings. Second, we are told that humans are made in God's *image*. This is not said of the animals, only of humans. But the text does not tell us exactly what this means. Theologians in the Christian tradition, such as Augustine and Aquinas, noted that humans were also given dominion over all living things (Gen. 1:28). Augustine writes: “From this [human dominion over the animals we are to understand that man was made to the image of God in that part of his nature wherein he surpasses the brute beasts. This is of course his reason or mind or intelligence...” (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book I, chap. 20.30—ET New York: Paulist Press, 1982, Vol 1: p.96). So Christian tradition located the ‘image’ in human reason or intellect, by which we know God, and govern the animals. Modern scriptural commentators however emphasize the role of dominion or stewardship which was given by God to human beings. In this sense of ‘image’ human beings are God’s representatives or stewards or trustees, charged with the stewardship of God’s creation—a noble but demanding responsibility.

The last line of Genesis 1:27 says that humans were created male and female. This implies of course that human beings are created in relationship, not alone. The Christian tradition has emphasized two points here: first, that *each* human being is created in God’s image. This is the basis for the Christian belief that each human person, made in God’s image, has intrinsic rights which cannot be arbitrarily taken away by the state or violated by other persons. But in addition to this, human beings are created in relationship with one another and with God. Christian tradition has also held, therefore, that human life can only be fulfilled in communal relationships and in relationship with God. Finally, this text was used by Jesus himself as the basis for Christian monogamous marriage: “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife” (Mark 10:6-7).

There is a second story in Genesis (Gen 2:4b-25) about the creation of human beings. Here God forms the first man from the dust (or dirt) of the ground “and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). Human beings, then, are formed from the matter of the earth, but also from God’s spirit; human are, therefore, spirit and matter, integrated into a single living being. Later in the story God formed the animals, and later still, made the first woman from the rib of the man. The

point of this story is not that woman should be subordinate to man, but that the two are intimately related; it is a justification of marriage (Gen 2:23-24).

It is clear in the Hebrew scriptures that human beings are meant to live in relationship with one another, but also in relationship with God. For this reason, God instituted covenants with the people, through Abraham, through Moses, and through David. Later, in the New Testament, according to Christian belief, God initiates a new covenant through Jesus Christ.

The New Testament

In the New Testament, Jesus is seen as the messiah, the incarnate *Logos* of God (John 1), and as the mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews). In Jesus' vision, human life is meant to be lived in submission to God. God's kingdom or reign, which is the heart of Jesus' preaching, is simply the submission of the world and humanity to God's will. God is love, and Jesus two great commandments are based on Love: "You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like unto it: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39). Both of these commandments are taken, almost verbatim, from the Hebrew scriptures; the first is the *Shema* (Deut. 6:5), the second from Leviticus (19:18). These commandments also sum up the ten commandments, the first four of which relate to the love of God, and the last six to the love of neighbor. The purpose and fulfillment of human life, then, is found in love. Persons are not fulfilled individually, but in community.

The New Testament holds up a beautiful vision of humanity being invited to share in the gifts of God's Holy Spirit (I Cor. 13), to participate in the divine presence (John 14), and to become children of God. Paul writes: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Rom. 8:14). Jesus prays to God at the end of the great discourse in John's gospel "that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:26).

In Christian belief, this relationship with God is carried on even after death. Christians, and other believers, hope that they will be resurrected and live in communion with one another and with God in heaven. This is the end and goal of human life.

The evolution of humanity:

Modern biology has made it clear that humanity evolved gradually from primate ancestors over hundreds of thousands of years. This is supported not only by the fossil record, but even more so by the evidence of molecular biology (see *Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Sciences*, 2nd edition, Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999). This theory challenges a literal reading of the Genesis creation stories--that is, reading them as if they were meant to be science or history. Modern exegetes however read the stories in Genesis as *symbolic* stories which tell us, through symbols, spiritual and theological truths about God and God's relation with humanity.

Humanity being made in God's image is a good example of such a symbol. Almost no one reads this to mean that human beings look just like God; if this were the case, God would be located in space and time.

If we read the Genesis accounts as symbolic stories, which reveal spiritual truths about humanity and our relation to God, then there is no reason that these stories have to clash with evolutionary theory. The official Roman Catholic position is that while God may have created the human body through a long process of evolution, God creates each human soul directly, so that each person is truly a child of God. This is a middle position between those Christians who reject evolution, and who read the Genesis accounts as the literal history of the creation of humanity, and more scientifically minded Christians who support evolution, but who would also argue that the soul or self develops gradually in each human being, and does not exist separately from the body.

Indeed, there is growing evidence that human beings in this life are psychophysical unities, that is, that the states of our bodies, especially our brains, affects our minds, and our minds in turn affect our brains. Nonetheless, even while recognizing that in this life human beings are psychophysical unities, it is possible to defend the view that the human soul survives after the death of the body (see Terence Nichols, *The Sacred Cosmos*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003, chapters 6 &7).

What happens to human beings after bodily death? Traditionally, in Christianity, each human being is judged by God at death (see entry "Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell"). The irrevocably wicked find themselves in hell (not because God in his anger puts them there, but because they have chosen in this life to reject God). The blessed find themselves in the presence of God, in heaven, because that is what they have chosen in this life. Catholics hold that many souls, who have chosen for God in this life, but are not yet perfect in their love of God and neighbor, go to a state in which their love is gradually purified. Traditionally this is called Purgatory. Protestants typically reject the existence of Purgatory, and hold that at death each human being goes directly to heaven or hell

Points of Agreement:

Muslims and Christians agree that God created humanity, gifted human beings with reason and free choice, and charged them with the responsibility of the stewardship of creation. This is one of the meanings of being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26); "image" means a representative who is to care for the creation as God would. This is the meaning of God giving human beings "dominion" over the earth, and of the story in Genesis 2 of God setting the human being in the garden "to till and to keep it." Similarly, in the Quran, human beings are to be the *kalipha*, that is, vicegerents, stewards, or trustees of God in the care of creation. Such a responsibility means that human beings must have the ability to know what God expects them to do, and the freedom to follow God's commands.

Further, both traditional Muslims and traditional Christians agree that human beings will be resurrected, will be held accountable by God in a final judgment, and will end in either heaven or to hell.

Points of Disagreement:

The Quran says that God asked human beings before they were born on earth, "Am I not your Lord?" And the human responded 'Yes' (Surah:). There is almost no tradition in Christianity of God appearing to human beings before their creation on the earth. Origin speculated about a preexistence of souls, who fell before their earthly existence. But this idea has never received any significant following in Christianity. Rather, human beings are first created when they are conceived in the womb.

A more striking difference is that Christians have traditionally explained human alienation from God as due to original sin, whereas Muslims explain this as due to "forgetfulness." The doctrine of original sin is that the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, had consequences for all human progeny. All of Adam and Eve's children, and all subsequent progeny were born outside the Garden of Eden, that is, outside of the full presence of God. This was later explained theologically by the idea that in Adam (and Eve) all of human nature existed, and fell away from God, so that all subsequent generations of human beings were born partially alienated from God. As Augustine put it, we are born with our wills turned in upon ourselves, that is, we are born selfish, and can only come to love God fully through grace.

Both Jews and Muslims reject the Christian doctrine of original sin. How do Muslim explain the fact that human beings are not fully at one with God? By the doctrine of forgetfulness; humans are good, free, and responsible, but have forgotten about God. Therefore they need prophets and revelation to remind them about God and God's commands, and they need frequent prayers to keep from forgetting God each day. A prominent Muslim teaching is *taquid*, "Being conscious of God."

Points for Discussion:

Both the doctrine of original sin, and the doctrine of forgetfulness, could be fertile points for further discussion. In Christian theology, one of the effects of sin is darkening of the intellect. This could be seen as forgetfulness. Further, in Christian spirituality, perhaps the major impediment to being fully conscious of God, in prayer or meditation is distraction, that is, forgetting about God and focusing on earthly concerns. One of the aims of the religious and monastic life in Christianity is precisely to be constantly mindful of the presence of God. The lack of mindfulness of God, and the constant presence of noise and distractions, is one of the major problem in living the Christian laypersons in living the Christian life. So, even though the theme of forgetfulness of God has not featured prominently in Christian theology, the idea is present in other words, and would be a fruitful point for discussion.