

The *Qur'ân's* Evaluation of Human Nature: An Inquiry with a View Toward Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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There is far more sound than sense made about how Islam evaluates human nature and how that might bear upon the agenda of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Among the mantras endlessly repeated by Muslim apologists is that Islam views human nature with liberal optimism and has no notion of "original sin." Rather, so they say, Islam views the human being as born essentially with a clean slate. They cite (not altogether accurately) the term *fitrah* as it is used in *Sûrah* 30:30, "Set your face toward religion with lofty intent, [toward] the innate character of God (*fitrah*) in the context of which the human race was brought forth (*fatara*). There is no changing what God has created. That is the religion of worth, but most people refuse to know that."¹ Leaving aside, for the moment, the Christian understanding of sin and human nature, we must ask: Is this Muslim apology really valid? Does the *Qur'ân* sustain it? And the answer we must give is no, not very well.

We will take up three aspects of this matter. First, we will investigate the *Qur'ân's* story of the Fall. We will then analyze the *Qur'ân's* language as it describes the human person. And, finally, we will focus on the issue of sin and its origin. In the course of our survey of its relevant passages, we will discover that the *Qur'ân* directs its readers toward a very healthy pessimism regarding human nature, which, if not meshing precisely with the post-scriptural Christian doctrine of "original sin," certainly does not clash with it.

The Adam and Eve Story

The story of Adam in the *Qur'ân* is found in two main passages (and several minor ones). We will focus on the main ones: *Sûrah* 2:30-38, and *Sûrah* 20:115-127. As is frequently the case with certain major themes in the *Qur'ân*, these passages are more or less parallel. They do, however, contain shades of differences, and so the one comments on the other. In chronological terms, the *Sûrah* 20 passage was revealed considerably earlier than that of *Sûrah* 2. A third passage, *Sûrah* 7:10-25, falls somewhere between these other two; to it we will also make reference.

The context of *Sûrah* 20 is God's counsel to Muḥammad concerning the *Qur'ân*, its purpose, and how it is to be handled (vs. 113-114). The point is made that Muḥammad is not to grow impatient but take revelation as it comes, praying for an increase of knowledge and not to be presumptuous. By way of illustration, therefore, the story of Adam's impetuosity is given.

Earlier we made a covenant with Adam. But he became forgetful. We found no steadfastness in him. When we said to the angels, "Bow down before Adam," they all bowed down except for Iblîs [Satan]. He refused.

So we said, "Adam, this [Satan] is your enemy and your wife's enemy. Do not let him be the cause of your expulsion from the garden. You will only come to grief. Here you need not hunger or go naked. Here you need not thirst or be struck by the sun." Satan then beguiled them, saying, "May I guide you to the tree of immortality and sovereign power which does not decay?" They both ate [the fruit] of it and their gracelessness became apparent to them. So they hurriedly sewed together leaves from the garden upon themselves. Adam defied his Lord and lost his way. Then his Lord re-collected [chose, elected] him and he [Adam] found guidance. He [God] said, "Fall down from it [the Garden], all of you. The one shall be the others' enemy. Then, when guidance comes from me, the one who follows my guidance will not be lost nor experience distress. He who refuses to remember will lead a stressful life. On the Day of Resurrection we will gather him together, and he will be blind. He will say, 'Lord, why did you assemble me blind when once I saw?'" He [God] shall say, "It was for that reason [to give sight] that our signs came to you, but you neglected them. It is for this reason that on this day you have been neglected." This is how we punish the one who gives in to excesses, and refuses to believe in the signs of his Lord. The Punishment of the hereafter is more intense and more enduring (*Sûrah* 20:115-127).

The context of *Sûrah* 2 is the *Qur'ân's* expression of amazement and outrage at the ingratitude of humankind, despite its knowing that God is the very source of life, the creator of all that is, and sovereign in knowledge. In this context, therefore, the story of Adam is that of one who, in spite of his great knowledge and special dignity, is less than grateful and wanders into disaster.

Your Lord said to the angels: "We are placing a vice-regent on earth." They said, "Will you place thereon one who will corrupt it and shed blood, while we praise your glory and hallow you?" He said, "I comprehend what you do not know." He taught all the names to Adam, then he displayed them [the things named] before the angels and said, "Prophesy and tell me the names of these, if you be speakers of the truth."

They said, "Praise be to you! We have no knowledge except of that

which you have taught us. You are the all-informed, the wise.”

He said, “Adam, inform them of their names.” And when he had informed them of their names, he [God] said, “Did I not tell you that I comprehend the mysteries of heaven and earth and know what you have shown forth and what you keep hidden?” Then we said to the angels, “Bow down before Adam!” They all bowed down except for Iblîs [Satan]. He refused and was numbered among the ungrateful. And we [God] said, “Adam, dwell in the garden, you and your wife. Eat freely of it whatever you want. But do not approach this tree, or else you become a bringer of darkness [a transgressor].” Satan caused them to slip, and caused them to deviate from the path they followed. Thus we [God] said, “Fall down. Each shall be the other’s enemy. On earth you shall have firm grounding and pleasure for the time being.” Adam received from his Lord words, and his Lord restored him to grace. He [the Lord] it is who induces to repentance and he forgives. We [God] said, “Fall down out of it, all of you. But when my signs come to you as a guidance, know that those who follow my guidance need not fear nor be sorrowful.” (*Sûrah* 2:30-38)

The context of *Sûrah* 7 focuses upon God’s justice in punishing the ungrateful and rewarding the faithful (vs. 10-25). The point of the illustration of the Fall, then, has to do with the justice of the judgment of expulsion, tempered as it is with the gift of guidance.

Several *sufficient* causes are to be adduced for Adam’s quite literal fall (a conceit Milton adopted directly from the *Qur’ân* and Muslim teaching): He was reckless and unstable, wasting his inheritance; he proved ungrateful, being heedless of God’s gifts; he was self-injuring and not a little stupid; seeking glory for himself, he lost what dignity he had. All this rendered him easily susceptible to the temptations of Satan, who is seen as the *efficient* cause of Adam’s rebellion. The *Qur’ân*, unlike the Bible, depicts Adam as the author of rebellion, taking Eve with him in his error. Having rebelled, even after having been forgiven, Adam and Eve were no longer considered fit residents of Paradise. They had become tainted somehow by their graceless disobedience in a manner that could not be expunged, except perhaps through the ordeal of living in this world – the “nether world,” this “fallen down world” (*ad-dunyâ*) – and passing through the gateway of death. Whatever the case, they were no longer fit for the environment of Paradise. Thereafter, they were in a state of “at-odds-ment” with one another, and with Satan (who shares their exile). Consequently, the three – man, woman, and Satan – are intimately bound together in a triad of enmity. Clearly the

message, if not the precise story elements, is consistent with the message of the Genesis narrative.

The *Qur'ân*, therefore, documents a real fall from grace and innocence; a fall from ease and plenty; a fall from tranquility of conscience and peace; a fall into enmity and distress. Enmity and distress (and the agonies of hard labor) characterize the life of the world into which Adam and Eve descended. As the tainted Adam entered into that new world, he imbued it with his spirit. There is, therefore, a certain quality of fallenness that infects this world by virtue of the presence of fallen human beings within it. (The skepticism of the angels proved to be well founded.) The triad of conflictual relationships – man, woman, and, against both, Satan – sets the dynamics of the life of this nether world (*al-hayâh ad-dunyâ*). And it is held in sharp contrast to the life of the world to come (*hayât-ul-'âkhirah*), upon which the believers are to pin their hopes and their spiritual ambitions.

But the Muslim will not understand the Christian term “lost” as applying to the progenitors of the human race. The Fall and its tragedy are limited to the man and the woman (and also to Satan). The notion that expulsion from the garden implies a separation from God – the essence of lostness in medieval Christian understanding – is missing, as it is also in the Old Testament’s parallel narrative. God is not, in himself, affected by the tragedy that has overtaken his creatures. He is concerned about it, but he is not distressed by it in any radical sense. In fact, no sooner has the Fall taken place than God “recollects” or “elects” Adam. Though Adam had become wayward through rebellion, God taught him to repent with a posture receptive to forgiveness and gave him guidance. Judgment, which ought rightly to have followed, was actually postponed (or at least mitigated). Guidance toward the lost Paradise was given with words. These words that God gives – the proto-scriptures – are, like the gift of the names, an endowment to Adam of the power of genuine insight. In a word, Adam became the first prophet of humankind as well as its progenitor. In fact, with the Fall the true story of humanity begins.

The *Qur'ân*'s Assessment of the Human Being

The human being considered individually (*al-'insân*) and to some extent also collectively (*an-nâs*) is not very highly regarded in the *Qur'ân*. References to the human individual are overwhelmingly harsh, even though the human person is not without some status, dignity, and virtue. After all, the person has been created in the best form possible (*Sûrah* 95:4). In this regard, we find in *Sûrah* 23:

We created the human individual from the product of clay. Then we placed that person as a [viscous] drop in a well-established place. Then we created of that drop a clot of blood and of that clot a

lump of meat; of that lump we created bones with flesh. Finally we built the person up as a distinct creation. Thus: Blessed be God, the best of creators! After that you will die. But on the Day of Resurrection you will rise (12-16).

In *Sûrah* 15 this picture is amplified and has some relationship with the Adam/Fall narratives we have already examined: the individual is created from the clay of black mud and into that person God breathes his own spirit. Thus it is that the angels are to bow down to the human being, discerning the animating spirit of God himself (26-30). But seeing only the clay, *Iblîs* (Satan) refuses obeisance and is roundly cursed. Nonetheless he is allowed to tempt humankind until the Day of Judgment. Only God's true worshipers are not to be touched by him (15:31-42). Human persons know; each has insight (75:14) and therefore is accountable. Though their environment is one of affliction (90:4), yet human beings are not tried beyond their capacity (2:286). Thus, on the face of it, the human being (individually considered) has every chance of "making it."

To understand this perspective correctly, we must set aside the idealistic and extra-biblical notions that clutter Christian theology concerning the "perfection" of the primordial human person, notions which are post-scriptural. Islam never had such a god-like figure with whom to deal. The human person is above all a creature. There is nothing particularly god-like about this creature. To be sure, the person is exceptional in creation. Adam was given to know the "names," he is granted "words," and he accepted the "covenant" of accountability. No other creature was so foolhardy as to accept *that* responsibility (33:72). Thus, as a creature, the human person is burdened with a special dignity and office. But that dignity is depicted as greater than the human person's actual capacity and stature. The *Qur'ân* is not at all embarrassed to describe the human person as being created weak (4:28), fickle (10:12; 17:11), tyrannical, ungrateful (14:34), contentious (16:4), hasty (17:11; 21:37), tight-fisted (17:100), argumentative (18:54), deluded (19:66-68), ignorant (33:72), impetuous (70:19), an extremist (96:6), and a loser (103:2). To employ a British colloquialism, the *Qur'ân* sees the human person as something of a "rotter." Far and away, most of the *qur'ânic* references to the individual human being are in this negative tone. Given these qualities, in fact, on their own human beings have little, nay rather, they have *no* chance.

The human personality is precariously balanced and vulnerable. It is lofty in calling, but in essence it is mundane, and in constitution prone to capriciousness and error (sin). As the *Qur'ân* portrays it, the human person is caught in a polarity between freedom and enlightened self-interest. Freedom (*hawâ* "the blowing wind") is a constituent element in the human psyche that, unchecked, is blindly passionate and eventually both self-serving and self-destructive, because its basic quality is thoughtless ignorance or heedlessness (*jahl*). In essence,

ignorance is darkness (*zulm*), which in turn characterizes both injustice and tyranny. In the constitution of the human being, this element of freedom is extremely aggressive and tends toward chaos and moral corruption.

In contrast, the human person's enlightened self-interest (*fitrah*), with which the human being first came off the drawing board, is an altogether laudable trait. We will return to a more focused discussion of the term *fitrah* later. For now suffice it to say that Muslim thinkers came to understand this trait as imbued with the human being's best feature, intelligence ('*aql*). And with intelligence is associated the gifts of discipline, restraint, balance, value-awareness (ethical sense), and justice. By nature, however, *fitrah* is a passive sort of thing. It is a stabilizing element in the psyche; it is not involved in initiating action. Unaided, it is no match for the assertive *hawâ*, the passionate force of freedom.

For this reason, the human being is doomed. To be redeemed, the human person must be aided. In this respect, Islam is no less perceptive of the human predicament than is Christianity. That which is noble in the human being is ultimately worth saving, but that nobility is very much threatened from within by the fragility of the human constitution itself.

In response both to the value of the human person and to his extreme vulnerability, God from the very beginning provides humankind with guidance (*hudâ*). The mediator of this guidance is the messenger or apostle: the prophet. The prophet (*nabî*) is an individual whom God has blessed with "words;" he is the bearer of news (*naba'*) or the unveiled good news (*bushrâ*); he is one sent on another's authority (*rasûl*). Appealing to and supporting the human person's enlightened self-interest, guidance supplies knowledge ('*ilm*) to intelligence. This knowledge is more than just a body of information; it is wisdom and illumination. God's guidance allies itself with human common sense to hold in check the impetuous tendencies of individuals in order to redirect them into true creativity. And the appropriate response to guidance is gratitude (*shukr*); the all-too-common human response, however, is presumption and ingratitude (*kufir*) that logically leads to the manifold permutations of idolatry.

What optimism the *Qur'ân* has with regard to the human being, therefore, is based upon the ministries of a line of "supermen," the prophets. These are the moral giants of the human race. Each community under heaven has had its messenger, a person who has brought warning, guidance, and knowledge from God. Thus it is that the prophet becomes, in fact, the linchpin of humanity. Without the prophet who, by election and charismatic endowment, stands head and shoulders above the ordinary mass of humanity, there is no hope at all. Prophets are messianic, God-likened, and God-linked human beings whose ministries are inspired by the power of God himself.

The Matter of Sin

The dispute between Christianity and Islam about “sin” is not whether it is “original.” (In saying this, I realize I am going against the accepted consensus.) Rather the real point of dispute concerns optimism (or its lack) about the human person and the relationship between the person and the divine.

Arabic has three main terms for “sin” — *khatî'ah*, *ithm*, and *dhanb*. The first has the sense of a fairly serious mistake or error in judgment and, therefore, of action. The second is broad in scope but points to an inadvertent slip-up with the added sense that this can stick to and soil a person. The third term points to a more deliberate crime or offense that engenders guilt and may be subject to prosecution. Despite these different shades of meaning, they are frequently employed as synonyms and rhetorically interchangeable. The *Qur'ân* employs them in much the same manner as do existing Arabic translations of the Christian scriptures. The contexts and usages are not strikingly different either.

The point is that in the *Qur'ân* sin or rebellion against God can be expressed in many ways. We will focus upon two.

The most serious of these is ingratitude (*kufir*), which leads to a person's abandoning the posture of worship (*'ibâdah*). The ungrateful one (*kâfir*) deliberately chooses to abandon being a servant (*'abd*) of God. This one becomes a bringer of darkness (*zâlim*) and, by extension, one who makes god-like that which is not God (*mushrik*). What is frequently translated in western texts as “infidel” in the Muslim understanding ought actually be translated as “ingrate.” On further reflection, to be ungrateful is a more serious offense than that of simply abandoning or distorting the faith. In the Islamic sense, one who commits the act of *kufir* deliberately becomes “a bull in the china shop,” smashing and defacing the goodness of creation “just for the hell of it,” and thereby denies the God who is its merciful author. The act releases the full force of *hawâ*, which causes the individual to descend into the depths of self-delusion (the utter loss of rationality [*'aql*]). In modern terms, we're talking about self-induced insanity of the sort that is incarnated in the world's great tyrants and replicated on a smaller scale by mini-tyrants throughout the world, including in recent times the instigators of terrorism.

Over against this, the *Qur'ân*'s entreaty to the individual is to be grateful (*shâkir*). The *Qur'ân* is redolent with urgings to consider the many marks of God's abounding mercies, both great and small. These include specifically the ecstasies of legitimate sexual congress, which brings self-aware human life into being from the most common of elements, and which, therefore, accounts for the sacred nature of the bond between husband and wife, parents and children. In spite of its limitations (which include the involuntary nature of human conception), the

magnificent mystery of life itself is a cause for giving thanks. It is immeasurably amplified by becoming aware of responsibility, and that awareness portends both ethics and worship. The human being, universally considered, is God's vice-regent (*khalîfah*) on the earth, but it is the believer (*mu'min*) who must perceive this most clearly. And therefore the highest of creation becomes creation's servant by intentionally becoming the servant of God (*'abd*). And it is this noble mission that the acts of *kufr* and *shirk* betray.

The other sin that preoccupies particularly the later revealed chapters of the *Qur'ân* is that of exploitative dissimulation (*nifâq*). In a sense, hypocrites (*al-munâfiqûn*) are more to be condemned than self-confessed ingrates (*kuffâr*). They say all the right things and perform all the right acts, but "their hearts ain't in it ..." In fact, their hearts are "agin' it." And this points toward a profound spiritual insight: the heart, being the most gullible organ in a person's psyche, is a fickle instrument. In essence, the hypocrite is an undeclared *kâfir*. And that makes the sin far more insidious since it infects the whole community. ('Usamâ bin-Lâdin and all who adopt his doctrine belong to this category of hypocrites so far as the main body of thoughtful Muslims are concerned.)

Islâm is a total commitment. In particular it involves both the act of unbridled gratitude and the reintegration of life, the establishment of personal integrity. Truth saying (*qawl-ul-haqq* – one of the more significant sobriquets of Jesus in the *Qur'ân*) becomes the litmus test for that integrity. *Al-haqq* is one of the names of God, and to be the utterance of that *haqq* is God-like. It is this fundamental element of truth saying and truth living that *nifâq* undermines in sometimes blatant but often in very subtle ways.

Kufr and *nifâq*, therefore, are before us, both Christian and Muslim. The human story (whether in Christian or in Muslim rendition) is two steps forward and one step back. The syncopation of the steps taken is quite another matter. What is utterly clear is that Islam and Christianity are not as far apart on how to evaluate the human condition as some would lead us to believe. The issue in the end is how we understand the interaction between the divine and the human. And on that matter Muslims and Christians have a great deal to discuss, even though in the end both confessions concur that "by their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew 7:16) and "the righteous live by their faith." (Habakuk 2:4 cf. Romans 1:17).

Concluding Remarks

This essay (begun a very long time ago) is being concluded during the Easter season in this the Year of Our Lord 2008. It is a time when relations between Muslims and Christians are fraught with crisis. Cultural, political, and social factors are in the mix to seriously muddy the waters of faith. Those waters

should be running clear if we are to address each other's basic concerns and become serious players in our shared vocation of global reconciliation. The fact of the matter is we need to install some very intentional filters that clear those waters of rank impurities.

Lately I have been particularly intrigued by two Arabic terms that may point us in a constructive direction. The first is *ta'âruf*, which means mutual recognition and intellectual understanding in the context of human diversity; the second is *tasâmuḥ*, which means reconciliation (and not the frequently *mis*-translated "tolerance"). The former is a qur'ânic term (*Sûrah* 46:10); the latter does not appear in the *Qur'ân* but increasingly appears in Arabic Muslim literature. I find them curiously complementary.

The *Qur'ân* has a strong streak of humanism in it. It frequently waxes eloquent on the topic of humanity. In all its diversity, the unity of the human race is one of God's manifest "signs" of mercy. We all start and we all finish at the same point – in the hands of God. The *Qur'ân* says, "We belong to God and to him we return" (*Sûrah* 2:156). Muslims are increasingly finding this to be a baseline for their humanist approach to world affairs. That is, we are to seek the human bond that unites and transcends all else that may divide. It is a profoundly authentic Muslim sentiment, and a key component in what Muslims mean when they say their faith is devoted to peace.

When this insight is blended with the meaning of *tasâmuḥ* something more happens. Even though Arab writers use it to translate the western word "tolerance," they cannot help but be influenced by their Arabic term. In fact, in Arabic a new concept is born, one which is far more rich, profound and constructive than mere "tolerance." By this concept, the *Qur'ân's* humanism is amplified to mean not only mutual recognition and understanding, but also a drive to reconcile peoples, to bridge the divide and to hear folks say to each other, "We forgive one another." The pain of the wounds of conflict can be set aside. Turn the page! Something new may be written into human relations. It is humanism matured.

The intellectual effort of *ta'âruf* and the radical ethical imperative of *tasâmuḥ* blend into one force. It is increasingly potent in today's Arab and Muslim discourse and behavior. And this growing initiative is worthy of recognition and support. It is also a blend of thought that any thoughtful Christian or Jew cannot but approve and even wholeheartedly adopt.

I write this during the Easter season, the season of our Christian hope. May it impart to us courage to break out of the medieval intellectual and ethical trap in which we have all been ensnared for centuries. The ways of peace are accessible whether on the scarred battlefield of relations between the sexes or on the larger

stage of intercultural and international conflict. That is why I have hope. I think that we (Muslims, Christians, and Jews representing flawed and faltering humanity) will choose peace and pursue it. Its time has certainly come.

¹ All quotations from the *Qur'ân* are the author's own translations.