

# Who is Man? The Perennial Answer of Islam<sup>i</sup>

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IN a World Exhibition whose theme is "Man and his World," "La terre des hommes," and which is devoted to a display of the different aspects of man's life and activities, it is perhaps not futile to pause for a moment and pose the question who is this man to whom the world is said to belong, the world or the "earth" which he has conquered yet is on the verge of destroying at the very moment when his conquest seems most complete. Modern man feels at home on earth, or rather would like to feel at home completely in this world, in contrast to the traditional Christian man or men of other civilizations who nearly always felt as a traveller in this world and a stranger upon the earth which they considered as but a temporary abode. Yet, even modern man cannot totally evade or forget his inner yearning for the abode beyond, his urge for the transcendent or remain oblivious to the fact that the more he tries to become a completely terrestrial being, a creature of this earth, the more does the earth seem to crumble from under his feet and the more does he seem to fall out of harmony with the earthly environment. It is a paradox that the more man has tried to become "natural" during the post-medieval period, the more has he lost harmony and contact with nature to the extent of endangering his own existence within it.

Let us not forget that today the predominant axis of man's knowledge of things, his science, is earthly and terrestrial. Modern man learned the laws of the physics of the earth from celestial physics and astronomy. The laws of motion of Newton were based on the laws of planetary motion established by a Pythagorean Kepler who significantly enough spoke of these laws, specially the third law, in a work entitled *Harmonice mundi*. And once these heavenly laws were relegated to the level of terrestrial physics, this physics itself became the model of other forms of knowledge. Today it is this "earthly" physics that seeks to understand the constitution of the "heavens" and therefore to obliterate the meaning of heaven, at least physically. Today all of modern man's science is "terrestrial," yet he cannot obliterate the metaphysical and symbolic significance of "heaven," of the "celestial" whose imprint he bears deep within himself. And so when man no longer makes spiritual flights or ascensions into the heavens in the manner of a Dante, he has the *mystique* to fly with a capsule into planetary space—in the same way that when he no longer climbs spiritual mountains he tries to desecrate and debase physical mountains by "conquering" them. Or when the majority of men no longer practice those authentic spiritual disciplines which make the veritable vision of the transcendent world possible, they use Mescaline and LSD with the hope of gaining such a vision without undertaking the necessary travail, self-negation and discipline. Although outwardly now a complete creature of the earth and its master, and no longer the "half angel" "half man" of traditional Christianity, this urge is deeply engraved in the very texture of man's existence and manifests itself in one way or another, sometimes even violently when the natural and normal means are not open to it.

Man feels himself as the possessor of all things, as the unquestionable conqueror and master of all of nature as if he had created it himself. But this sense of possession and power is only too often combined with a remarkable lack of responsibility and realization of the right to life of other creatures. Man's domination is too often a prostitution of nature rather than its legitimate use. The voice of conservationists is raised here and there but is usually drowned in the much louder voice which in the name of human welfare wants to make man's mastery over the earth total and complete, irrespective of what this may mean for the earth itself and its creatures. It is here that one is faced with the tragic situation in which the very assertion of the unlimited rights and power of man over the earth make man's life on earth ever more difficult and dangerous leading in a direction which if pursued further might mean the very termination of both this domination and man's very life. One is reminded of the Quranic verses: "But the Devil whispered to him, saying: O Adam! Shall I show thee the tree of immortality and power that wasteth not away?" (XX; 120; Pickthall translation), referring to a Faustian power that only appears not to waste away but is always posing the danger of destroying him who would wield that power. Being no longer the custodian of the earth, and yet wielding power, man is in the danger of losing his mastery over it as well. It seems that man cannot really live peacefully on earth and be just an earthly creature. The loss of the transcendent dimension has made terrestrial life itself precarious.

Could one but conclude that a secular humanism of the type first cultivated during the Renaissance is basically contradictory and fallacious? That is, one cannot speak of man and defend his dignity and right independent of the "divine image" which has made him man and bestowed upon him both dignity and freedom. Otherwise, humanism is only a half way house from the theomorphic conception of man to the infra-human into which man is being dragged today through many of his own inventions and creations. He who wishes to speak about man better concern himself about the whole of man or not speak at all. And he who wishes to speak about man and his world must of necessity first consider who is man and in reality *whose* world it is about which one is speaking. Without penetrating into these questions and discovering the appropriate answers the hope for a harmonious relation between man and his world is dim indeed, and so many pictures of the further and more complete conquest of nature in the future become nothing but a chimera and dream, for within man lie forces that no "earthly" science, even if it is extended to the Pleiades, can ever understand or unravel, or control.

Modern science may enable man to know how he is constituted chemically or biologically, or where he is in galactic space. But this form of science cannot tell man who he is, where he was before his earthly existence and where he will be after it. It cannot reveal to man where he stands in what has been called "existential space," in the hierarchy of universal existence. It therefore cannot provide for man "orientation," for to orient man's life means to know where he comes from, where he is to go and most of all who he is.

In this situation in which the knowledge of man is urgently needed and is yet well nigh impossible to discover through normal channels of learning available today, where even the traditional Christian theological teachings concerning man have in certain cases succumbed to the lure of the microscope and the telescope, giving rise to a pseudo-wisdom which strikes at the very root of the Judeo-Christian concept of man and his dignity, it is not perhaps unwise to turn to the teachings of Islam on this question. For in Islam, as in other revealed religions, the truth of the nature of things and especially of man is to be found, and Islam reaffirms explicitly and fully the truths expressed in another fashion in Christianity and other revealed traditions. Moreover,

Islam, belonging to the same spiritual tree as Judaism and Christianity, presents a doctrine of man not so far removed from the Occidental world view as to be considered by oversophisticated and so-called "realists" as merely "exotic" but irrelevant, and is yet original and distinct enough to be of interest for the Westerner who seeks to answer the question "who is man?" One could in fact say that in the teachings of different religions man can discover different elements of his own universal nature, aspects of the "Universal Man" himself of which every man is an image.

If some religions are based on the incarnation of God in human history or the God-man, Islam is based on the encounter between God considered in his Absoluteness and man in his full nature as the theophany of God's Names and Qualities. All creatures reflect some aspect of the Divine, as an image is reflected in a mirror. Only man reflects all of the Divine Names and Qualities and this moreover in a central and conscious manner. By virtue of this relation which he possesses *vis-à-vis* God he is a "central being" in this world, always located in an "existential space" in which the vertical, transcendent dimension is present. Whether he is aware of it or not, man's situation in this "space" is not just horizontal and material. The vertical, spiritual axis stands always before him. Reality for man is always three dimensional, whether man chooses to live in a two dimensional, material world devoid of the dimension of depth or height (*al-tul*), or whether he realizes fully the infinite third dimension beyond the limited horizontal surface of existence with which he usually associates himself, and today more than ever before, whether he flies to the galaxies or swims to the depths of the sea. This centrality is intrinsic to the human situation and man cannot evade it any more than he can evade being born in a particular time and space. That is why he is called the vice-gerent of God on earth (*khalifat Allah*).

Man was taught the name of all things as the Quran states: "And He taught Adam all the names," (II; 31), meaning that he was given power and dominion over all things by virtue of being God's vicegerent (*khalifah*) on earth. But with this function of *khalifah* was combined the quality of *'abd*, that is, the quality of being in perfect submission to God. Man has the right to dominate over the earth as *khalifah* only on the condition that he remains in perfect submission to Him who is the real master of nature. The mastery and power of man over nature is only a borrowed power given to man because he reflects the Divine Names and Qualities.

Islam does not accept the idea of incarnation or filial relationship between God and man. But it does stress the theomorphic nature of man, the fact that God breathed into man of His Spirit and created a being in which His Names and Qualities are fully reflected, for as the Prophet said: "God created man upon His image." Nor does Islam accept the idea of original sin. It appeals, not to the will of man which has been warped since that event or act which Christianity so profoundly describes as original sin, but to his intelligence which lies within the primordial nature of man (*al-fitrah*), the inner nature which man possessed before his fall on earth (*hubfi*) and which man still carries deep within himself.

In his primordial nature man is always the perfect *khalifah* of God. But man is forgetful of this nature and therefore always in need of Divine revelation and grace as also confirmed by Christianity. Being forgetful, man is prone to seek to take advantage of the power and privilege afforded to him as the *khalifah* of God while neglecting to remain His *'abd*. From the Islamic point of view the plight and tragedy of modern man consists in that he wishes to make use of his intelligence and power as a theomorphic being to dominate the earth and even the heavens, without accepting the fact that he *is* a theomorphic being or realizing the responsibilities that issue from the occupation of such a central and seigniorial position on earth. Man wants to play

the role of God, to create and destroy, to dominate and rule, without realizing that he is not God but an image and reflection of His Names and Qualities. It is as if a shadow would want to play the role of the object of which it is the shadow, or as if noise would be sufficient to conquer the heavens. The great disequilibrium existing between man and nature as well as man and himself today, could be summarized in Islamic terms by saying that man wishes to remain the *khalifah* he was created without being the *`abd* which he was also created, given that mysterious freedom to rebel against even that which he really is. In fact indirectly the most evident proof of man's theomorphic nature is that he can rebel against himself, against his own nature and stop being, at least for a time, what he really is.

Yet, man cannot fully forget his inner being, his theomorphic nature, for however hard he tries to float on the surface of his being and run away from the Centre, he carries the Centre within him and sooner or later the Centre manifests itself in one way or another in the periphery and the surface. For to be made in the image of God in the sense of being the theophany of His Names and Qualities is a reality that lies in the human state itself. Islam affirms the primordial character of man's theomorphic nature and his special situation in the cosmos and *vis-à-vis* God by referring to a covenant made between God and man even before the creation of the world. For as the Quran states: "And (remember) when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily." (VII; 172). In this *yea* is to be found the secret of human destiny because by iterating it man accepted the burden of trust (*amanah*) which none in creation but he dared accept. "Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from hearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it." (XXXIII; 72).

This trust from whose acceptance all of creation shied away, is precisely the burden of vicegerency of God on earth, of faith itself in its profoundest sense. To have accepted this trust means to have accepted freedom and also responsibility toward both God and all creatures. It means the freedom to transcend all degrees of existence and reach the Divine Presence even above the state of the angels, as Islamic texts assert. But it also means the possibility of rebellion, of the negation of the very reality upon whose image man is made. The grandeur of the human state is precisely in the sublimeness of the goal that can be achieved and the abysmal terror of the risk that is inherent in the situation. Whatever path he chooses man cannot evade the grandeur of his state, the fact that he is placed at the intersection of the "horizontal" and "vertical" dimensions of reality. Even when he tries to forget this nature and consider himself only as an animal that somehow happens to think, he cannot evade the cosmic dimension of his being, except that in such a case he risks bringing destruction to the whole terrestrial environment and even to the cosmic environment about him.

Man then cannot evade the consequences of that original covenant by virtue of which he accepted the trust (*amânah*) from God, receiving certain rights as well as being charged with certain responsibilities. Tradition or religion in its universal sense (*al-din*) is then inherent to the human state. The spiritual anthropology of Islam considers *din* as a necessary condition of full manhood. For man to live without *din* is to be only accidentally human for it is to be deprived of that very essential condition, the acceptance of the burden of *amânah*, which defines the human state. One could thus again re-confirm the point already mentioned that humanism without the realization of the theomorphic nature of man is, from the Islamic point of view, no less than a contradiction and absurdity. And perhaps the experience of the past two centuries in the West has, to put it mildly, at least not contradicted the Islamic view. Cut from his transcendent and

spiritual archetype man has the greatest difficulty in remaining just human and not being dragged into an infra-human world created by secularized man himself.

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The Islamic conception of man is summarized in the doctrine of *al-insân al-kâmil*, the universal or perfect man, a doctrine whose essence and full manifestation is to be found in the Prophet of Islam and whose doctrinal exposition and formulation was left to later sages and saints such as Ibn `Arabi and Jalâl al-Din Rûmi. In fact Islamic gnosis (*al-`irfan*) revolves nearly always around the two axes of unity (*al-tawhid*), dealing with God and His Names and Qualities, and *al-insân al-kâmil* dealing with man and the cosmos. The first is concerned with the Origin and Source of creation and the second with manifestation and the return of things to the Source. Or one could say that the first corresponds to the first "witness" or *Shahâdah* of Islam, *La ilâha ill'-Allah*, there is no divinity but the Divine, and the second to the second "witness," *Muhammadan rasul Allah*, Muhammad is the Messenger of God. Muhammad is the Universal Man *par excellence* and also the quintessence of all creation, of all that is positive in cosmic manifestation. The Universal Man contains all degrees of existence within himself and is the archetype of both the cosmos and man. Therefore, metaphysically and of course not physically and quantitatively, there is a profound correspondence between man and the cosmos. Although outwardly a small part of the cosmos, man contains inwardly and within himself a reality that is the source of the cosmos itself—and that is why even fallen man, he who has forgotten his own true nature, has the power to dominate nature.

From the pure star-bright souls replenishment is ever coming to the stars of heaven.

Outwardly we are ruled by these stars, but our inward nature has become the ruler of the skies.

Therefore, while in form thou art the microcosm, in reality thou art the macrocosm.

Externally, the branch is the origin of the fruit; intrinsically the branch came into existence for the sake of the fruit.

(Rumi) <sup>ii</sup>

The spiritual man, although outwardly dominated by nature, inwardly rules over things most of all because he has conquered his own inner nature. Might one not add that today when man boasts most about conquering nature, the reverse process has taken place, namely an apparent and outward conquest of nature combined with complete lack of asceticism, spiritual discipline and self-negation which therefore makes man more than ever a prisoner of his own passions and natural inclinations. But the spiritual man who has overcome his passions and who is the reflection of Universal Man and its realization and embodiment is the pole toward which the Universe itself is attracted, to the extent that Jalâl al-Din Rumi, that supreme poet of the spirit, could say:

Wine in ferment is a beggar suing for our ferment;

Heaven in revolution is a beggar suing for our consciousness;

Wine was intoxicated with us, not we with it;

The body came into being from us, not we from it. <sup>iii</sup>

The Universal Man, whose full metaphysical doctrine cannot unfortunately be expounded here, is then the sum of all degrees of existence, a total mirror before the Divine Presence and at the same time the supreme archetype of creation. It is the prototype of man, the reality that man carries potentially within himself and can always realize if there is aspiration, persistence and of course divine succour. It is enough for man to realize the total possibility of his own existence, to become fully conscious of himself, to gain that treasure of true felicity and peace which he seeks outwardly here and there but never seems to find.

You who wander in deserts away from your own consciousness,  
Come back to yourself to find all existence summed up in you.  
You are the way and reality of perfection.  
One in whom the great consciousness of God dwells.

(Abu' l-Mawàhib al-Shâdhili)<sup>iv</sup>

One is here reminded of the advice of medieval sages in the West, "Above all to thy own self be true."

The cosmic dimension of man may bring certain protests from theologians that this would obliterate the distinction between grace and nature and reduce man to simply "natural man." Christianity, having expanded in a world which suffered from too much emphasis upon rationalism and naturalism, had to draw a sharp distinction between nature and grace, at least in its official theology. But Islam was not faced with the same situation. For this and for other reasons its doctrines are such that it considers nature itself as a handiwork of God in whose arteries flows the grace issuing from the Creator Himself. Man also is from a certain point of view a "natural being," yet without being deprived of grace. He is natural without being reduced to the natural man of the Renaissance or of Rousseau and the French encyclopaedists. The whole question of natural law, original sin, the role of nature in spiritual realization and the like is approached in a different light in Islam and these questions have of course their bearing on the understanding of man and his function in the world. By considering man in his primordial nature (*al-fitrah*) and bestowing upon each Muslim the priestly and sacerdotal function, Islam removed the sharp distinction between the religious and secular, or sacred and profane, making of man a natural being who yet is the most direct symbol of the spiritual world in nature and in direct contact with that world.

Furthermore, by virtue of being the *khalifah* of God on earth and occupying the central position he does hold, man is the channel of grace for nature. The spiritual man is the means whereby nature breathes of the spiritual life and is prevented from suffocation and destruction as also confirmed by Western Hermetical and alchemical writers like Flamel and Jacob Böhme. Were man to cease completely to follow the spiritual life and lose his contact with the spiritual world, he would also cease to be a source of light for nature and in fact would turn toward the destruction and vilification of nature. The relation between modern industrial societies and virgin nature should provide an occasion to pause and meditate on this relationship.

The constitution of man and his relation with God and nature cannot be fully understood without analyzing the meaning and role of intelligence and reason, by means of which man seeks to master the world. First of all a clear distinction, often forgotten today, must be made between the intellect, the faculty which knows immediately and totally, and reason whose Latin root (*ratio*) reveals its function of analysis and division. Islam appeals to the intellect in man, whose

function it is to know the principles of things and which will arrive at the basic Islamic doctrine of Unity (*al-tawhid*) if it functions normally and is wholesome (*salim*). In fact the role of revelation is to remove those obstacles which prevent the intelligence from functioning in a whole-some manner. Otherwise the intellect within man confirms the revealed truths of religion and Islam bases itself on a truth which is evident and in the nature of things.

As for reason, it is like the shadow and reflection of the intellect. If it remains subservient to the intellect and also to revelation which likewise issues forth from the Supreme Intellect or Logos, then it is a positive instrument which can aid man to journey from multiplicity to Unity. But if it rebels against its own source, against both the intellect and revelation, then it becomes the source of disharmony and dissolution. Other creatures have intelligence in the sense that they reflect certain aspects of the divine and also cosmic intelligences. But only man possesses this subjective polarization of true intelligence which we call reason. And that is why only he can destroy the natural harmony of nature.

If modern man has been able to dominate but at the same time destroy nature and himself more than men of all other civilizations, it is precisely because with him more than ever before reason has been made independent of its principle. In such a condition reason becomes like an acid burning through the tissues of the cosmos and at the same time is powerless before the infra-human and irrational forces that revolt against it from below, in the same way that it has rebelled against the intellect above it. The relation between rationalism and the spiritual and intellectual heritage against which it rebelled on the one hand, and the irrationalism of modern times on the other, is very similar and in fact nearly the same thing as the humanism which rebelled against the theomorphic concept of man only to end in being threatened by infra-human forces it has itself liberated. Islam, while considering man as essentially an intelligence that has also will power and performs actions, and emphasizing knowledge as a means of salvation and deliverance, yet rejects the position of rationalism and its limiting of the intellect to its reflection, which is reason as ordinarily understood. For Islam the world of the mind is much more vast than we usually envisage. It is in fact the locus of the Presence of the Divine Spirit, but man must penetrate beneath the surface of the mind with which he usually identifies himself in order to become aware of this Presence.

Again to quote Rūmī:

What worlds mysterious roll within the vast,  
The all-encircling ocean of the Mind!  
Cup-like thereon our forms are floating fast,  
Only to fill and sink and leave behind  
No spray of bubbles from the Sea upcast.  
The Spirit thou canst not view, it comes so nigh.  
Drink of this Presence! Be not thou a jar  
Laden with water, and its lip stone-dry;  
Or as a horseman blindly borne afar,  
Who never sees the horse beneath his thigh.<sup>v</sup>

It is the very centrality and totality of the human state which makes any "linear" and "horizontal" evolution of man impossible. One cannot reach a more central point in a circle than the centre itself. Once at the centre one can always move either upward or downward but no further in the horizontal direction. The evolutionary view of man as an animal, which even from

the biological point of view is open to question, can tell us little as to the real nature of man; no more than can the theories of many anthropologists who discuss anthropology without even knowing who man, the anthropos, is and without realizing the complete states of universal existence which man carries with him here and now.

Once it was asked of `Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet: what existed before Adam? He answered Adam, and to the question what existed before that Adam he again answered Adam adding that were he to be asked this question to the end of time he would repeat Adam. This saying means that irrespective of when he appeared in the time—space matrix of this world, the metaphysical reality of man, of the Universal Man, has always been. It could not become but is because it transcends time and becoming. It is, furthermore, this eternal archetype that determines the meaning of the human state and which man always reflects and bears potentially within himself in all time and space. Those who speak of the future evolution of man perhaps do not realize that higher possibilities of existence do not lie in some future time ahead of man but here and now above him, yet within his reach. Frankly, it must be said that the way man is "evolving" today makes it ever more difficult for him to attain these higher states of consciousness and being, whose very existence he has begun to doubt in general, while a certain number of people in this very climate of doubt seek to reach these states through the short-cut of drugs and pills rather than through spiritual discipline. One might say that the total and central nature of the human state, deriving from man's theomorphic nature, make his relation with other states of being not a temporal one but a spatial one. Man stands at the crossing of the vertical and horizontal dimensions containing the amplitude and breadth of universal existence within himself here and now. It is for him to delve into himself in order to realize who he is, to realize these states which comprise his full nature. No development in time, especially in a process during which man lives increasingly on the surface of his being, fleeing from himself and the needs of his inner nature, will ever automatically bring an evolution to higher planes for the human species.

Rather, the urgent problem today is to prevent man from falling into an infra-human world, which he faces because he has rejected his own transcendent origin and prototype. Modern man wants to kill the gods, without destroying himself. He wants to reject the Divine and yet remain fully human. Islam has considered this question fully and has provided an answer with which we shall conclude this discussion. In several places in the Quran mention is made of the term "Face or Countenance of God" (*wajh Allah*), for example the verses: "There remaineth but the Countenance of thy Lord of Might and Glory." (LV; 27) and "Everything will perish save his Countenance." (XXVIII; 88).

Nearly all Muslim sages have agreed that "the Face or Countenance of God," which alone endures and persists, is the spiritual aspect of man's nature. Ultimately the body dies and even the inferior psychic elements perish or at least are integrated into a higher degree of being, namely that of the spirit. It is only the spiritual element which is eternal. It is the face that man has turned toward God. But it is also the face that God has turned toward man. The "Face or Countenance of God" embraces a total reality one aspect of which is man's spiritual countenance and the other God's countenance toward his creation and especially his vice-gerent on earth, man. And it is this same reality which in Shi'ite Islam comprises the inner nature of the Imam. The Imam is the link between God and man, a spiritual being in whom the divine and the human orders meet.

To meditate on the theme of the "Face of God" is to realize that man cannot destroy the



divine image without destroying himself. The poetical cry of Nietzsche in the 19th century that "God is dead," a cry which has now been turned into a theological proposition in certain quarters and is advertised far beyond its purport and significance by those who seek after the sensational and who seem to have little reverence for the belief of those living and dead for whom God is eternally present and alive, cannot but have its echo in the assertion that man is dead, man as a spiritual and free being. Man cannot destroy the face that God has turned towards him without destroying the face that man has turned towards God, and therefore also all that is eternal and imperishable in man and is the source of human dignity, the only reality that gives meaning to human life. The inexhaustible richness of the symbol of the "Face or Countenance of God" should possess much meaning for modern man who seeks desperately for meaning in human life and the preservation of human dignity, but is too rarely concerned with the other half of this reality, namely the "Countenance of God," that aspect of the Divine that has turned toward us as human beings.

To know himself, man must come to know the "Face of God," the reality, that determines him from on high. Neither flights into outer space nor plunges beneath the seas, nor changes of fashions and modes of outward living alter the nature of man and his situation *vis-à-vis* the Real. Nor can biological or conventional psychological studies which deal only with the outward aspects of human nature reveal to man who he is and how he should "orient" himself in that journey whose end is the meeting with the Real. Man can know himself only by realizing his theomorphic nature. It is only in remaining conscious of the divine imprint upon his soul that man can hope to remain human. Only the attraction of the celestial can prevent man from being dragged by gravity to the abysses of sub-human existence. And it is a remarkable feature of the human state, that no matter where and in what condition he may be, man always finds above him the sky and the attraction which pulls him toward the Infinite and the Eternal.

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<sup>i</sup> A Noranda Lecture delivered at the Universal Exhibition in Montreal on September 4, 1967.

<sup>ii</sup> R. A. Nicholson, *Rumi, Poet and Mystic*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1950. p. 124.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* p. 141.

<sup>iv</sup> M. Smith, *The Sufi Path of Love*, London, Luzac and Co., 1954, p. 72.

<sup>v</sup> R. A. Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 106.