

THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF HUMAN PERFECTION*

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The name 'Islam' refers to the religion and civilization based upon the Qur'ān, a Scripture revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the years AD 610–32. About one billion human beings are at least nominally Muslim, or followers of the religion of Islam. The modern West, for a wide variety of historical and cultural reasons, has usually been far less interested in the religious dimension of Islamic civilization than in, for example, that of Buddhism or Hinduism. Recent political events have brought Islam into contemporary consciousness, but more as a demon to be feared than a religion to be respected for its sophisticated understanding of the human predicament.

Those few Westerners who have looked beyond the political situation of the countries where Islam is dominant have usually devoted most of their attention to Islamic legal and social teachings. They quickly discover that Islam, like Judaism, is based upon a Revealed Law, called in Arabic the *Shari'a* or wide road. Observance of this Law – which covers such domains as ritual practices, marriage relationships, inheritance, diet and commerce – is incumbent upon every Muslim. But western scholars have shown far less interest in two other, more inward and hidden dimensions of the Islamic religion, mainly because these have had few repercussions on the contemporary scene. Even in past centuries, when Islam was a healthy and flourishing civilization, only a relatively small number of Muslims made these dimensions their central concern.

The more hidden dimensions of Islam can be called 'intellectuality' and 'spirituality'. The first deals mainly with the conceptual understanding of the human situation and the second with the practical means whereby a full flowering of human potentialities can be achieved. They are important in the present context because they provide clear descriptions of human perfection and set down detailed guidelines for reaching it. If we want to discover how Islam has understood the concept of perfection without

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reading our own theories into the Qur'ān or imposing alien categories on the beliefs and practices of traditional Muslims, we have to pose our question to the intellectual and spiritual traditions of Islam itself.

Muslims look back to the Qur'ān and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad as the primary sources for everything authentically their own. These sources provide a number of teachings concerning the nature of reality, which are accepted by all Muslims and, as it were, instil the myth of Islam into the Muslim consciousness. The most succinct expression of these teachings is found in the Islamic testimony of faith: 'There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.' All Muslims have faith in God and in the Qur'ān, the divine word brought by God's Messenger. More generally, according to the Qur'ānic formulation, Muslims believe in God, the angels, the Scriptures, the prophets, the Last Days and predestination. From these basic objects of faith, the later authorities derive three principles that form the core of all Islamic intellectuality: the declaration of God's unity (*tawhid*), prophecy, and eschatology, or the return to God. In theory all Muslims agree on these concepts, but in practice they have interpreted their meanings in a wide variety of ways. Naturally, the majority of Muslims have not been concerned with anything more than the basic catechism. The interpretation and exposition of the principles of faith have been left to those with an intellectual bent, and it is these learned classes of society who founded the various schools of thought in Islamic civilization.

Most of the vast literary output of the Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions over the centuries has dealt directly or indirectly with the question of human perfection and the manner in which it can be achieved. Nothing is more central to the concerns of the religion. But the Islamic world-view differs profoundly from that of the modern West; before we can even begin to ask what constitutes a perfect human being a few general trends in Islamic thinking need to be brought out. Three of these are of particular interest: Islam's theocentric view of reality, its cosmological presuppositions, and its idea of hierarchy.

THE UNDERPINNINGS OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Islam begins with the statement 'There is no god but God', and all thinking that has an Islamic element to it takes this 'declaration of God's unity' – the first principle of faith – as its point of reference. In brief, God, the ultimate reality, is one, and everything other than God comes from God and is related to Him. No true understanding of anything is possible unless the object in view is defined in relationship to the divine. All things are centred on God.

Theocentrism gives Islamic cosmology its peculiar contours and differentiates it sharply from everything that goes by the same name in the modern

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West. In the Islamic view, cosmology serves to describe the existential situation of human beings in relationship to God and the universe, thus allowing people to understand the purpose of life in the context of the world around them. Interestingly, those traditional Muslims who still study and understand Islamic cosmological teachings feel in no way threatened by contemporary cosmology or the findings of modern science, since these pertain only to one of the several worlds with which Islamic cosmology concerns itself.

Muslim thinkers look upon the world with a view towards the symbolic significance of phenomena. All things are – to use the Qur'anic expression – signs (*ayat*) of God, pointing towards invisible realities lying beyond outward appearances. In contrast, modern cosmology deals strictly with what the Muslims call the visible realm (*shahada*), so it has nothing whatsoever to say about the most significant dimensions of the universe, the unseen (*ghayb*) realities that are hidden from ordinary sense perception. It might be suggested that modern physics deals largely with unseen phenomena, but this would be to ignore their inherent qualities as discussed in Islamic thought: everything unseen is alive and aware. The invisible realm is not found in the outward world of quantity and dispersion, but in the inward world of quality and unification. It lies in that dimension of reality that stands beyond the inanimate realm on a curve ascending from life, to consciousness, to enlightenment, and beyond.

The cosmos as a whole – often defined as 'everything other than God' – derives from God and manifests His signs. Its invisible and visible dimensions can be viewed either synchronistically or temporally. From the first point of view, the universe might be compared to a vast globe, whose surface is the sensory world and whose centre is God's own Spirit, to which all the angels and other invisible beings are subordinate.

Invisible things stand closer to ultimate reality than visible things. Hence they are more real. They manifest God's signs more intensely than the objects of sense perception. Since angels are made out of the light of self-awareness, they are direct manifestations of God, who is 'the light of the heavens and the earth' (Qur'an 24:35). They possess the divine attributes – such as life, knowledge, will, power, speech, generosity and justice – with an intensity not found in the creatures of the lower worlds. At the opposite end of the ontological spectrum, inanimate objects fail to manifest any of these qualities, except in a dim and indirect fashion.

Those creatures that have both visible and invisible dimensions – such as plants, animals and humans – possess the divine qualities in various degrees of intensity. Hence, for example, the divine attribute of awareness is only weakly present in a plant (and even then in a rather metaphorical manner), while it shows itself clearly in the higher animals, and may reach intense degrees of actualization in human beings.

It is important to note the special place of human beings in this picture

of the cosmos. The Qur'an expresses the peculiar human situation in its own mythic language when it says that God created Adam by kneading a handful of clay and breathing into it from his own Spirit. Hence human beings represent a mixture of clay and spirit, darkness and light, ignorance and knowledge, activity and passivity. In fact, all the divine attributes are present in man, but they are obscured by those dimensions of existence that manifest a lack of the same divine attributes. The most invisible dimension of the human being reflects the divine light directly, while the bodily or visible dimension reflects it only dimly or not at all. Between the divine Spirit and the body stand many degrees of relatively invisible existence where the divine attributes manifest themselves in all sorts of mixtures and permutations. This whole intermediate domain of the human microcosm is often called the soul or imagination.

When we take the temporal dimension of existence into account in describing the Islamic cosmos, we perceive immediately that things have a beginning and an end. At present we find ourselves situated within a visible domain, but in the future we will enter into a realm known as the 'next world' that is now wholly invisible to us. There human beings will face reward and punishment for their activities in this world, or, as the intellectual tradition prefers to put it, they will possess modes of existence totally appropriate to their own true natures. Those who have followed a course in life that has strengthened their inner participation in the luminous ontological attributes of God will manifest openly and with great intensity the qualities of existence that they have acquired, such as life, knowledge, will, power, speech, generosity and justice. But those who have dispersed their spiritual light and failed to orientate their lives towards the divine unity will remain in a world of multiplicity and dispersion, far from the luminous qualities which bring about happiness and wholeness.

A final guiding idea of the Islamic world-view is hierarchy. The cosmos just described is ranked in degrees. Thus the angels, in respect to the intensity of the divine attributes manifest within them, stand at a higher level than other creatures, and the creatures whose bodily forms are present in the visible world – human beings, animals, plants and inanimate objects – are also ranked according to the same qualities. This ranking in degrees is especially important in the human domain, where no two individuals possess the same qualities and characteristics. Though all human beings are created by God and are commanded to serve Him, nevertheless, 'God charges no soul, save to its capacity' (Qur'an 2:286). Each person has a unique capacity to receive God's charges. This capacity goes back to a number of factors. The intellectual tradition often describes these factors in terms of the degree to which a person acts as a mirror for the attributes of God, and this in turn is determined by a host of secondary causes related to factors such as heredity, physical constitution, individual aptitude and environment.

Perhaps the most important of the divine attributes that human beings

manifest are knowledge and understanding. Certainly, as Franz Rosenthal has shown in *Knowledge Triumphant*, no religious tradition places more emphasis upon the importance of knowledge than Islam. The Qur'ān and the Islamic tradition recognize that no two people have the same degree of knowledge, since the divine attributes have been distributed unequally among creatures. 'God has preferred some of you over others in provision' (16:71). That is why the Qur'ān can say, 'Above everyone who knows is a knower' (12:76). The excellence of knowledge is stressed repeatedly. 'Are they equal', asks the Qur'ān, 'those who know and those who know not?' (39:9).

This recognition of differing human capacities has had profound practical repercussions throughout Islamic history. For example, it has meant that Islamic societies have never tried to coerce the masses into striving for the highest ideals of the religion. Rather, Islam has set down the path of perfection for those who have the interest and aptitude to undertake the arduous journey themselves. At the same time, there has never been any suggestion that knowledge has limits that might define an educated person. On the contrary, the quest for knowledge is never-ending, and those with the necessary preparedness must pay close attention to the advice which God addresses to the most perfect and knowledgeable (in the Islamic view) of all human beings, the Prophet Muhammad: 'Say: "My Lord, increase me in knowledge"' (Qur'ān 20:114).

THE ROAD TO PERFECTION

With these general presuppositions of Islamic thought, we can turn to the specific question of human perfection. Islam's three principles demand the interrelationship of all things in a manner that is intimately connected to human becoming. First, the declaration of divine unity demands that all things come from God and return to Him. Hence, human perfection needs to be understood as a harmonious relationship with all things established on the basis of the underlying unity of reality. The second principle of Islam – prophecy – sets down the path whereby perfection can be actualized. The Qur'ān and other Scriptures are God's guidance, sent to mankind in order to show the way to the perfect human state. On their own – that is, without divine guidance – human beings remain ignorant of the nature of their own selves, since human nature derives from the divine nature, and God in Himself is unknowable. He is only known to the extent He chooses to make Himself known. 'God knows what is before them and what is after them, but they comprehend nothing of His knowledge save such as He wills' (Qur'ān 2:255). God makes Himself known through the prophets, setting down the proper human relationship with Himself and the cosmos.

The third principle of Islam, eschatology, deals with the actual mode of the return to God. The prophets bring guidance in order that human beings

might attain to perfection and realize ultimate happiness, which depends upon their being fully themselves – or fully human, which is the same thing. A foretaste of ultimate happiness may be found in this world to some degree, but for the most part it is stored away for the next world, where each individual's true nature will be made manifest.

The question of how the divine guidance revealed in the Qur'ān should be understood marks the point where the different perspectives within the religion begin to diverge. But until very recent times, all Muslims have agreed that the Prophet Muhammad embodies the divine guidance perfectly. To follow the Prophet is to follow God. In the words of the Qur'ān, 'Say (O Muhammad!) "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you"' (3:31). The codification of the prophetic model is known as the *Sunna*, the wont or custom of the Prophet.

The *Sunna* can be viewed on a number of levels. To begin with, it lays down the model for correct activity. The *Shari'a*, or Revealed Law, represents those elements of the *Sunna* that are incumbent upon all followers of the religion. Every believer must perform the five daily prayers, fast during the month of Ramadan, pay the alms tax, and so forth. These activities were legislated by the Qur'ān in general form, while the Prophet, through his specific activities during his lifetime, set down the details of how these rules and regulations must be put into practice. This is not to deny a certain divergence of views as to what the Prophet actually said and did. The five major 'schools of Law' codify the traditional range of this divergence.

One of the many concrete results of the Islamic conception of hierarchy has to do with the esoteric orientation of much of Islamic learning. The sciences were not concealed from people, but it was recognized that not everyone would be able to make full use of the available resources. Learning was viewed as one of the chief means by which the way to human perfection could be clarified and pursued. But few individuals have the interest or aptitude even to come to an understanding of the full reality of human perfection, much less to undertake the disciplined training that leads to it. At the same time it was recognized that not all seekers would attain to the same state of perfection, since each human being represents a unique capacity for knowing and understanding, and God expects from each person only 'to the extent of his capacity' (Qur'ān 2:286).

In broad outline, this hierarchical view of knowledge and learning meant that all Muslims were expected to follow the Revealed Law, since only a minimal understanding of Islamic teachings, accessible to any sane person, was necessary in order to put the basic injunctions of the Law into practice. Hence Islamic Law defines an adult simply as a person who has reached physical maturity in control of his or her rational faculties. All who become adults are required to observe the injunctions of the Law, whereas before adulthood they are not answerable to God for the Qur'ānic commandments.

From the point of view of the Revealed Law, 'human perfection' can mean no more than careful observance of the Qur'anic legal injunctions and imitation of the Prophet's *Sunna*. The Law deals only with activity and does not ask about intentions or the moral and spiritual dimensions of the person who performs the activity. As far as the Law is concerned, the right and wrong ways of doing things are at issue, not love for God and neighbour or the moral attitudes and spiritual realization that are the inward complements of correct action.

Islam's intellectual and spiritual dimensions take the legalistic concept of adulthood as the first step in a process of realizing the fullness of humanity, a process that will occupy a person until the end of his or her life. The Prophet had intellectual, moral and spiritual qualities that are more central to human perfection than activity. Activity, after all, while answering to certain outward circumstances, must be grounded in those inward and unseen dimensions of the human being which precisely set human beings apart from other creatures. But most human beings are hardly aware that these invisible dimensions exist, and it does little good to tell them unless they have the capacity to understand. And then they must discover the practical significance of these dimensions for themselves.

The Law provides the framework within which the moral and spiritual attributes potentially present in human nature can be protected and nurtured, but it cannot guarantee their continued growth; nor will all people have the capacity to devote themselves to developing and strengthening these qualities. The Law stipulates the minimum requirements for living up to the divine standards for mankind and for fulfilling the goal of human existence. If the Law is observed 'to the extent of one's capacity', God will see to it that the person ends up in a happy state of existence after death. But capacities are diverse. What is sufficient for salvation for one person may be insufficient for another, since God demands 'to the extent of capacity'. People may observe the Law but nevertheless live below their capacities. In other words, they may have the aptitude for developing their intellectual and spiritual dimensions but fail to do so, being distracted by affairs of 'this world', that is, anything that turns them away from activity for God's sake and understanding with a view towards God.

THE GOAL OF HUMAN LIFE

Those dimensions of Islam dedicated to providing the guidelines for the development of the full possibilities of human nature came to be institutionalized in various forms. Many of these can be grouped under the name 'Sufism', while others can better be designated by names such as 'philosophy' or 'Shiite gnosis'. In general, these schools of thought and practice share certain teachings about human perfection, though they also differ on many points. Here we can suggest a few of the ideas that can be found in most of these approaches.

1 Human beings are God's vicegerents (*Khalifa*) or representatives in this world. The cosmos as a whole represents an infinitely vast display of the signs of God. All the divine attributes are reflected in unfathomable diversity through the myriad worlds and the creatures scattered therein. But human beings are microcosms. Just as the universe reflects all the divine attributes in an infinitely vast display, so also human beings reflect all the divine attributes in a concentrated unity. Man is the mirror image of both God and the cosmos. Since man finds all things within his own being and awareness, he is able to rule the outside world. He recognizes all things within himself, and, knowing them, is able to control them. This provides him with the necessary qualities to be God's vicegerent. But by the same token, he is responsible for the manner in which he interacts with the creatures under his power.

2 The model for attaining to human perfection, also called the 'vicegerency of God', is set down in the divine word, that is – in the Islamic sense – the Qur'an. Without following the guidance set down in the Scriptures, human beings will fall short of their full humanity and fail to reach ultimate happiness, which depends upon being true to their own nature. The divine guidance revealed in the Qur'an is embodied in the Prophet Muhammad. Thus his wife A'isha remarked that those who wanted to remember the Prophet should read the Qur'an, since 'his character is the Qur'an'. But emulating the Prophetic model does not mean simply conforming to the Prophet's outward activity: it demands assimilation of his moral and spiritual traits as well. In other words, the Qur'an and the *Sunna* represent God's guidance for the full actualization of human perfection on every level, from the outward levels – those of activity and social concerns – to the more inward levels, such as knowledge, morality, love, spirituality and every human virtue.

3 All human attributes are in truth divine attributes. Just as the cosmos and everything within it are nothing but the signs of God, so also man and everything within him are God's signs. Every positive trait displayed by a human being derives from God. All human knowledge represents a dim reflection of the divine knowledge, just as all virtues – generosity, justice, patience, compassion, gratitude, love – are manifestations of divine qualities. A human being possesses nothing positive which he can claim as his own, since everything belongs to God. This holds for other creatures as well, but human beings, because of their peculiar synthetic configuration embracing all the divine attributes, are held responsible for their own choices and activities. The fact that most of them dwell in heedlessness (*ghafla*) of what they owe to God will not excuse them from being called to account. (This concept of heedlessness, it should be noted, is as close as Islam comes to the concept of original sin.)

4 People are profoundly mistaken when they identify anything positive as their own. This holds not only for outward possessions, which are on loan

from God, but also for inward possessions, such as the positive attributes and characteristics that go to make up their own specific identities. The only thing human beings may rightfully claim as their own are those attributes that define the distance that separates them from God. Existence and everything that goes along with it – such as life, knowledge, will and power – belong strictly to God, whilst non-existence and its concomitant qualities – such as ignorance, need, death and weakness – belong specifically to the creature.

5 Human beings on their own are nothing, but as representatives of God they are everything, since they manifest all the divine names and attributes. However, the fundamental nature of this 'everything' is itself indefinable, since it is modelled upon God, who is ultimately unknowable. Full human perfection involves the actualization of all the divine attributes present in the human configuration, and hence it involves entrance into indefinability. When human beings identify the positive contents of their persons with any specific attribute or definition, they have failed to grasp their own true nature. Perfection demands the shedding of all attributes and definitions, since these are limitations. Perfect human beings manifest all divine attributes, so they are defined by none of them. They employ each divine attribute in the appropriate circumstances, recognize all things for what they are, and interact with all creatures in accordance with the creatures' realities.

6 Though in theory any human being can achieve the fullness of human perfection, in practice only a tiny minority will reach it. Nevertheless, the majority will benefit from the human state if they observe the Law and strive to the extent of their own capacities, and they will benefit from all those who achieve human perfection, since it is the vicegerents who act as intermediaries between God and the cosmos, serving as channels for the divine replenishment that sustains the world.

7 The purpose of the social order is to provide a stable framework within which human perfection can be achieved, and all other goals are secondary. The more a society forgets the purpose of human existence, the further it moves from legitimacy. It is the duty of the learned to preserve to the fullest extent possible the teachings and practices of religion in order that the greatest number may attain ultimate happiness and the door to human perfection may always remain open.

The contemporary situation

The past two hundred years have witnessed profound changes in the social and political situation of Islamic countries. For a great variety of reasons, not the least being the pressures of western political intervention and cultural colonialism, the Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions have become peripheral if not extraneous to the events taking place in the Islamic world. The traditional educational system was structured in a manner which

encouraged a never-ending search for knowledge and established close personal relationships between teacher and student, or better, master and disciple. Education was viewed as a lifelong process of developing the human personality in the fullest sense, especially its moral and spiritual dimensions. The most gifted students were led by their innate desire for learning and a system that emphasized praxis as much as theory to a personal quest for *tawhid*, or the right relationship between themselves and God on the deepest levels of awareness and existence.

As a result of the vast changes that have overcome the Islamic world, the nature and goals of education have been radically altered. In order to meet the challenge of the western powers, the political authorities have exerted all their efforts towards training young people according to the norms of western education. The great desire for 'development' has pushed most traditional concerns into the background. Gifted students are attracted to fields like engineering and medicine, while only a small minority follow the traditional path of education. Even in former times, only a relatively small number of the learned had the proper qualifications and aspirations to come to an understanding of the nature of human perfection and enter into the path of achieving it. Now practically all the young are drawn into fields that yield quick and concrete results, and the possessors of the traditional learning are hard pressed to transmit even the basics of the *Shari'a*. It has become more and more difficult to find students prepared to receive the far more sophisticated intellectual and spiritual teachings.

It is true that not all intellectually gifted young Muslims study modern western disciplines, but even most of those who study their own traditions do so in accordance with western norms of learning. 'Critical editions of texts' are frequently published, but all too often the contents of these texts are not understood, and certainly not perceived as a programme for human life. To the extent that 'objectivity' in the western academic mode has become established, the living spiritual tradition has been strangled.

Education is no longer an end in itself, a road leading towards the personal actualization of the highest ideals of a religion. On the contrary, it has become a matter of developmental policy. National and social goals take precedence, and the very idea that there might be an individual road to human perfection is ridiculed. Islam is no longer a wide road aiming at bringing about ultimate happiness for the greatest number of people and human perfection of the gifted few, but an ideological tool, subservient to the goals of political factions. To the extent that any idea of human perfection is discussed in Islamic terms, it is now orientated towards social and political objectives – objectives inspired by those dominant currents in the modern world which see material gain as the highest good.

Some western observers tell us that the highly visible movements found in Islamic countries today represent a return to Islamic ideals. But those more sensitive to the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of Islam know

that most of the visible activity represents an intensified destruction of Islamic values. The Islamic concept of human perfection has been banished from the stage, to be replaced by various types of outwardly orientated human endeavour borrowed from contemporary ideologies. The traditional Muslim quietly set out on a personal quest, while the modern zealot shouts slogans from the pulpits with the aim of reforming everyone but himself.

The modernizing movements in Islam have been especially concerned with reformulating the concept of human perfection. In order to 'bring Islam into the modern world', it was necessary to provide a new portrayal of the human ideal, the Prophet Muhammad. The Islamic tradition as a whole, and the spiritual tradition in particular, had always recognized the supra-mundane dimensions of the Prophet's personality, dimensions that follow from the very definition of human perfection. The early Muslim modernists, in their zeal to set up a goal for human life commensurate with the idea of 'reform' in the western mode, set out from the beginning to 'demythologize' the Prophet's person. The tradition had long interpreted the Qur'anic verse 'Say: "I am only a human being like you"' (18:110) to be a denial of Christian-style incarnationism and a confirmation of the idea that all human beings are made on the divine model and should aspire to full perfection. For the modernists, this statement was taken to mean that the Prophet's aspirations went no higher than their own. When he was commanded to say, 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge', he had chemistry and engineering in mind. In short, by rejecting the sublime dimension of the Prophetic personality, the modernists were able to turn attention away from the possibility of perfection in any mode but that defined by social and political categories derived from the West.

More recently, certain modernist groups – including some perceived in the West as fundamentalist – have attempted to overthrow the Prophetic model completely, claiming that 'the Qur'an is enough for us'. Without the guidance of the Prophet and the traditional authorities, Islam becomes a weapon that can be wielded by anyone for any purpose whatsoever. Human perfection is what you say it is, and your view is as good as anyone's.

In short, the entrance of Islam into the modern political scene has meant the eclipse of the highest and most sophisticated dimensions of the religion. An intellectual elite that had once, through teaching, writing and personal influence, been able to keep the goal of human spiritual perfection always in view has all but disappeared, to be replaced by ideologues with prescriptions for human betterment foreign to the tradition. The survival of Islam as a religion serving the highest human aspirations will depend largely upon the ability of Muslims to reclaim this eclipsed spiritual heritage.

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