

THE HUMAN PERSON ACCORDING TO ISLAM

1. Introduction

It is not very easy to give a purely philosophical notion of the Islamic concept of the human person. Islam considers man as one integral reality and so he cannot be divided into watertight compartments of philosophy and theology. A purely speculative philosophy on the human person will have nothing to do with Islam. Hence, what is attempted in this paper is basically a Quranic picture of human person.

2. Creation of Man

Following the Semitic heritage the Quran also speaks of man's creation from mud. "Verily We created man of potter's clay of black mud altered....and breathed into him of My spirit" (XV, 26).¹ But a detailed account of the development of man's creation is given in chapter 23.

Verily We created man from a product of wet earth; Then we placed him as a drop (of seed) in a safe lodging; Then fashioned We the drop of a clot, then fashioned We the clot a little lump, then fashioned We the little lump bones, then clothed the bones with flesh, and then produced it as another creation (XXIII, 12 f.).

God's creative work, as far as man is concerned, is recapitulated in these verses. Man begins his life as an animal. But the breathing of God's own spirit into him makes the infant animal into the infant man. This process need not be precisely at a given point of time, but may be a continuous process parallel to that of physical growth.²

1. The Quranic texts in this article are quoted from, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation* by Pickthall Mohammed Maramaduke
2. Ali Abdullah Yusuf, *Holy Quran*, Vol, II (Delhi; Kutub Khana Ishayat-UI-Islam), p. 875

3. Dignity of Man

What aileth you that ye hope not toward Allah for dignity
When He created you by (diverse) stages?.. And Allah
hath caused you to grow as a growth from the earth, And
afterward He maketh you return thereto, and He will bring
you forth again, a (new) forthbringing.

And Allah hath made the earth a wide expanse for you
That ye may thread the valley-ways thereof (LXXI, 13 ff.).

Fakhr al-Din al-Razi commenting on these verses remarks that God made man into a living being when he was lifeless matter, made him to speak when he was dumb, to hear when he was deaf. God placed in him a wondrous nature and admirable wisdom, for which no description is adequate.³

4. Man: God's Viceroy

Just before the creation of man God said to the angels: "Lo I am about to place a viceroy in the earth" (II, 30). The angels were not very happy with this decision of God. They asked: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood"? Then God said: "Surely I know that which ye know not (Ibid.). After the creation of Adam and his wife God placed them in the Paradise with the following words: "O Adam I dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden and eat ye freely (of the fruits) thereof where ye will (11, 35). Opinions differ whether this Garden was a place on this earth. Yusuf Ali is of opinion that it was not. He says: "It was after the Fall that the sentence was pronounced: "On earth will be your dwelling place". Before the Fall, we must suppose Man to be on another plane altogether - of felicity, innocence, trust, a spiritual existence, with the negation of enmity, want of faith, and evil. Perhaps time also did not exist, and the Garden is allegorical.⁴

According to the Bible, God created man after His own image but a little less than the angels. But in the Quranic understanding the generality of man is superior to that of an angel. This is clear

3. *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. II, Leiden, p. 1237.

4. Ali Abdulla Yusuf, *Holy Quran*, Vol. I, p. 25

from the following verse: "And when we said to the angels: Prostrate yourselves before Adam, they fell prostrate, all save Iblis. He demurred through pride, and so became a disbeliever" (11, 34).⁴ This sentence may lead one to make a comparison between the status of men and that of angels. The angels, though holy and pure, represented only one side of creation. According to Yusuf Ali we may consider that the angels are without passion and emotions! He writes:

The power of will or choosing would have to go with them (men), in order that man might steer his own bark. This power of will (when used aright) gave him to some extent a mastery over his own fortunes and over nature, thus bringing him nearer to the God-like nature, which has supreme mastery and will. We may suppose the angels had no independent wills of their own: their perfection in other ways reflected God's perfection but could not raise them to the dignity of vicegerency. The perfect vicegerent is he who has the power of initiative himself, but whose independent action always reflects perfectly the will of his Principal.⁵

5. Man - the Lord of Creation

God created the universe and entrusted it to the care of man. So his duty is to develop it and not to destroy it. "He it is who created for you all that is in the earth" (11, 29). This shows that everything has been created for the benefit of man and so all things can be made use of by him unless a limitation is placed by law on that use. "And He created the sun and the moon and the stars, made subservient by His Command; surely His is the creation and the command" (VII, 54). So God has made everything subservient to man's dominion.

6. Man - the Knower

Man has the capacity to know things. This power was given to him at the time of his creation itself. Even angels do not possess the knowledge which man has.

⁵. Ibid., p. 24.

And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform me of the names of these, if ye are faithful. They said: Be glorified! We have no knowledge saving that which Thou hast taught us... He said: O Adam! Inform them of their names and he informed them of their names (11, 31-33).

Some commentators especially the Sufis consider "the names" to be attributes of Allah, while many others hold them as the names of animals and plants. The literal meaning of the Arabic word used here would mean "the names of things". Many commentators take it for the inner nature and qualities of things which would include even the feelings. However, as Yusuf Ali points out the whole passage is charged with mystic meaning. The particular qualities or feelings which were outside the nature of angels were put by God into the nature of man. Man was thus enabled to understand the reality and so to plan and initiate his own career as he was about to assume the office of vicegerent of God on earth.⁶

7. Purpose of Man's Creation

Man is created to be God's vicegerent (*Khalifa*) on earth (11, 30) and so is certainly gifted with the power of controlling the rest of the earthly creation. The whole universe is created for the benefit of man.

Allah it is who hath made the sea of service unto you that the ships may run thereon by His command, and that ye may seek of His bounty, and that haply ye may be thankful; And hath made of service unto you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth; it is all from Him. Lo! herein verily are portents for people who reflect (XLV, 12-13).

Thus man is placed above the whole of creation and even above the angels to attain a high position destined for him in the divine scheme.⁷ If everything in nature is intended for the service

6. Ibid.

7. Ali Maulana Muhammad *The Religion of Islam* S. Chand & Co., p. 145.

of man, then the man must have a higher purpose in life. "Surely We have created man in the best make, then We render him the lowest of the low, except those who believe and do good, for they shall have a reward never to be cut off" (XCV, 4-6). Muhammad Ali explains this idea as follows:

It cannot be that the whole of creation should serve a purpose and that man alone, who is lord of it and endowed with capabilities for ruling the universe should have a purposeless existence. Man has a higher object to fulfil, he has higher life to live beyond this world; and that higher life is the aim of life.⁸

8. God-Consciousness of Man

There is an inner light within each man telling him that there is a Higher Being, a God, a Creator. It is like an appeal to man's inner life. The existence of God is taken as an axiomatic truth almost in all religions. The Quran has put forward many arguments to prove the existence of a Supreme Being Who is the Creator and the Controller of this universe. Here we are concerned only with the God-consciousness of human beings. "Are they the creators (of their own souls)? Or did they create the heavens and the earth?" (LXII, 35-6). No answer is given to these questions since they are self-evident. But sometimes the Quran also answers such questions. "And if thou shouldst ask them, who created the heavens and the earth, they would certainly say, the Mighty, the Knowing, One has created them" (LIII, 9). On another occasion a positive and emphatic "Yes" was the answer given to God. "And thy Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness regarding their own souls: Am I not your Lord (*Rabb*)? They said: "Yes! We bear witness."

This consciousness on the part of the human soul is mentioned in terms of its unimaginable nearness to the Divine Spirit. "We are nearer to him than his life-vein" (LX, 16). And again, "We are nearer to it (the soul) than you" (LXVI, 85). The idea that God is nearer to man than his own self shows that the consciousness of the existence of God in the human soul is even clearer than the consciousness of its own existence.⁹

8. *Ibid.*, 278.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

9. Man-God Relationship

Although the human soul has such a clear consciousness of the existence of God, why do atheists and agnostics exist in the world? The inner light is not equally clear in all people. With some the consciousness of the Divine presence and existence is very strong while in others it is weak and dim. Though the atheists and agnostics deny the existence of God, they do admit the existence of a First Cause or a Higher Power even though they may deny the existence of God with particular attributes. But occasionally that inner light asserts itself especially in times of distress or affliction. When everything is alright with the human beings there is a tendency among many to ignore God who is in him, but in difficulties and sorrows they turn to Him. The Quran has made it amply clear.

And when we show favour to man, he turns aside, and withdraws himself, and when evil touches him, he makes lengthy supplications (LI, 51).

And when the waves come over them like coverings, they call upon Allah, being sincere to Him in obedience, but when He brings them safe to the land, some follow middle course (XXXI, 32).

According to many Islamic thinkers, there is in man's soul something more than mere consciousness of the existence of God, namely an inner yearning after its maker. The love of God is implanted in it and it is ready to undergo any sacrifice for the sake of God. The human soul cannot find complete contentment without God.¹⁰

10. Man a Free Agent of His Actions?

One of the hottest controversies in the field of Islamic philosophy was on the issue of the freedom of human will. All the faculties with which man has been endowed have emanated from the great divine attributes. Yet all human attributes are imperfect, and can be exercised only under certain limitations. Man's will stands in the same relation to the Divine will as his other attributes to the attributes of the Divine Being. On this point Muhammad Ali writes:

10. *Ibid.*, 140.

He (man) can exercise it (his will) under limitations and laws, and there is a large variety of circumstances which may determine his choice in each case. Yet it is not true that the choice to exercise it has been taken from him; and the fact is that, notwithstanding all the limitations, he is free to exercise his will, and, therefore, though he may not be responsible to the same extent for anything done in all cases, and a variety of circumstances must determine the extent of his responsibility, which may be very small, almost negligible in cases, and very great in others, yet he is a free agent and responsible for what he does.¹¹

There has been a misconception that the religion of Islam is a fatalistic one since its followers are asked to submit themselves to the will of God, manifested in every moment of human existence. *Taqdir*, meaning the absolute decree of good and evil by God, is the word popularly used to indicate that understanding. But according to Muhammad Ali "this is neither known to the Quran nor even to Arabic lexicology. The doctrine of predestination is of later growth, and seems to have been the result of the clash of Islam with Persian religious thought." Those who support the predestination theory may find many quranic verses to support their view. For example:

Glorify the name of thy Lord, the Most High, who creates, then makes complete, and who makes things according to a measure (*qaddara* from *taqdir*) then guides them to their goal (LXXXVII, 1-3).

Surely we have created everything according to a measure (*qadar*) (LIV, 49).

And there is not a thing but with us are the stores thereof. And we sent it not down save in appointed measure (XV, 21). Of what thing did He create him (man)? Of a small life germ He created him, then He made him according to a measure (*qaddara-hu*) (LXXX, 18,19).

God is the first and ultimate cause of all things. But this does not mean that He is the author of all the deeds of man. God did create man but He also created the circumstances in which he lives

11. *Ibid.*, 322.

and works. But the prerogative of man is that he has been endowed with a discretion to choose how to act, which he can exercise under certain limitations, just as all his other powers and faculties are exercised under limitations and only in accordance with certain laws. "The truth is from your Lord; so let him who pleases accept (it) and let him who pleases reject (it) XVIII, 29). As he exercises his discretion or his will in doing a thing or not doing it, he is responsible for his own actions and is made to bear the consequences.¹²

11 The Great Controversy

One of the greatest controversies in the Islamic world was held on the issue of the freedom of the Human will. This divided the Muslim world into three groups. Muhammad Ali summarises its history as follows.

The useless controversy as to whether God was or was not the creator of man's deeds divided the Muslim world at one time into three camps. The *Jabriya* held that God was the creator of man's deeds, whether good or evil, and man was entirely powerless in the matter.... Another party (*Qadriya*) went to the other extreme holding that man, being the creator of his own actions, had full control over them.... Their argument was that it was impossible that God should first compel man to do a thing and then punish him for it. The general body of the Muslims held that both these were extreme views. But in marking out an intermediate course, they adopted a position which was not very clear.... They introduced the theory of *Kasb* which means "acquisition.... Further discussions led the holders of this view to the absurd position that man was only outwardly free, being inwardly forced. Its true that man's will works under certain limitations, *qadar* or *taqdir* of God, but it is not true that Divine will compels him to take a certain course. There may be a hundred and one causes of his decision in a particular case, and his responsibility may vary according to those circumstances; but still the choice is his, and so is the responsibility.¹³

12. *Ibid.*, 320.

13. *Ibid.*, 321.

12. The Question of Predestination

It has been often pointed out by the critics that Islam is a religion of fatalism and prophet Muhammad was a political opportunist. "The contradictory statements of the Quran on free will and predestination show that Muhammad was an opportunist preacher and politician and not a systematic theologian."¹⁴ Sell has expressed the same view in the following words: "Some Quranic passages seem to attribute freedom to man, and speak of his consequent responsibility, others teach a clear and distinct fatalism."¹⁵ But according to some Muslim scholars the doctrine of predestination, or the decreeing of a good course for one man and an evil course for another has basis neither in the Quran nor in the Traditions. God has granted freedom to man to choose whatever he wants and he, not God, will be responsible for its consequences.

The misconceptions on the doctrine of predestination perhaps follows from the doctrine of the foreknowledge of God. This also comes from an imperfect understanding of God's knowledge. The limitations of space and time, without which human beings cannot know a thing, mean nothing in the case of God's knowledge. God has neither past, nor future, but everything is "present" for Him. God sees or knows the future as a man would know what is passing before his eyes. God's knowledge in no way will force a man to choose in this way or that way and so God's foreknowledge has nothing to do with the theory of predestination.

13. God's Writing or Kitab

The Quranic references to God's writing of adversities and the existence of a heavenly tablet also have been used by many to support the doctrine of predestination. "Nothing will afflict us save what Allah has written down (*kataba*) for us" (IX, 51). "Allah has written down (*kataba*), I will most certainly prevail, I and my apostles" (LVIII, 21). Muslim scholars are of opinion that in these and similar instances there is no mention of predestination or the fixing beforehand of an evil course for the evil doer. Death or distress is due to circumstances over which man has no control,

14. McDonald Dunken B. "Qadar" in *Encyclopedia of Islam* Vol. IV,

15. Sell, *Faith of Islam*, p. 338.

while the doing of good or evil is a matter entirely of man's own choice. *Kitaba* means ordering and not *preordaining*. It may also mean *intending* a thing. "No affliction comes about but by Allah's permission (*idhn*) LXIV, 11). What is called *kitaba* in one place is called *idhn* in another. Thus the writting of Allah is only His knowledge or permission or order. This is to admonish the Muslims that they are brought to perfection through adversities and trials. God intends to try the believers by means of various kinds of afflictions and it is through patience in sufferings they should obtain Divine blessings and mercy. This is the true meaning of the word *Muslim*, namely total resignation to the will of God. Therefore, Muslims are made to say, "Nothing will afflict us save what Allah has written down for us" (IX, 51).

Muslim scholars have taken great pains to defend the freedom of man against the apparent references in the Quran which may lead an ordinary reader to accept the theory of predestination. One of such instances is that "God leads the people astray"! This mistaken notion arises out of a misconception of the meaning of the word *idzlal* when ascribed to God. This word carries a variety of meanings besides "leading astray". It should be noted that wherever *idzlal* is attributed to God, it is only in connection with the transgressors (11, 26), the unjust (XIV, 27), and the extravagant (XL, 34), not the people generally. The true sense in this context is that God judges them in error or brings them to destruction.

Another misconception related to the freedom of the human will is "God's setting seals on hearts". "Those who disbelieve, it being alike to them whether thou warn them or do not warn them, will not believe. Allah has set a seal upon their hearts and upon their hearing, and there is a covering over their eyes" (11, 6,7). From this and similar verses it is thought that God has created some men and women with seals on their hearts, while others have been created with free and open hearts. But the teaching of Islam is that all human beings are created pure and sinless. "Then set thy face upright for religion in the right state-the nature (*fitra*) made by Allah in which He has made all men, there is no altering of Allah's creation; that is the right religion" (XXX, 30). God sets a seal upon the hearts of certain people as a result of their own actions

The seal, therefore, being the consequence of one's own deeds, has nothing to do with the doctrine of predestination.¹⁶

14. Man: Called to a Future Life of Peace and Bliss

"Whoever believes in Allah and the last day and does good, they shall have their reward from Allah" (11, 62). A true Muslim in his five daily prayers addresses God as the "Owner of the Day of Judgement" at least thirty times. Thus the idea that every deed must be requited is constantly brought before the mind of every Muslim.

A belief in life after death implies that every deed, however secretly it may be done, must bear fruit, and therefore this belief is both the greatest impetus towards good and noble, and the greatest restraint upon evil or irresponsible, deeds. A deep consciousness of the consequences of a deed, consequences which must follow even after death, is thus engendered by a belief in a life after death. But more than this, such a belief purifies the motives with which a deed is done. It makes a man work with the most selfless of motives, for he seeks no reward for what he does; his work is for higher and nobler ends relating to the life beyond the grave.¹⁷

The basis of the future life is laid in this present life. The heavenly life for the good and the hellish life for the wicked begins here and now. The state between death and Resurrection is called *barzakh* which literally means a hindrance. This intervening state is also known by the name of *qabr*, which means *grave*, but has also been used in the wider sense of the state which follows death. "Then He causes him to die, then assigns to a grave (*aqbara-hu*); then when He Pleases will raise him to life again" (LXXX, 21, 22).

Without going further into the details of the Islamic understanding of the life after death, it is enough to mention that the Quranic eschatology is almost equal to the Christian understanding of life after death. Man has a higher object to fulfil, he has a higher life to live beyond this world, and that higher life is the aim of

16. Ali Maulana Muhammed, Op. Cit., p. 335.

17. Ibid., 226.

human life. "Allah says I have prepared for my righteous servants what no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, and what the mind of man has not conceived" (Hadith according to Buchari, 59:8). The paradise, which is the last state of man, will be the eternal abode of peace. God has promised to the righteous dwellings in gardens of perpetual abode and the greatest of all enjoyments is God's abiding presence and pleasure. "As for those believe and do good, their Lord will guide them by their faith; there shall flow beneath them rivers in gardens of bliss; their cry in it shall be; Glory to Thee, O Allah! and their greeting in it shall be, Peace and the last of their cry shall be, Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds" (X, 9, 10'). The paradise is mentioned in the Quran as *dar al-salam* or "abode of peace" (VI, 121; X, 25).

The meeting with the Lord is the great goal to attain which all good deeds are done. "And seek assistance through patience and prayer, and surely it is a hard thing except for the humble ones, who know that they shall meet their Lord and that they shall return to Him" (II, 45, 46).

15. Unity of Mankind

Muslims are fully convinced of the unity of the humankind. This is considered as a natural corollary of their belief in the unity of God (Tauhid). One of the attributes of God is that He is *Rabb al-alam*, "the Lord of all nations". This signifies that all the peoples of the world are, *as it were, the children of one Father*, and that He takes equal care of all, bringing all to their goal of completion by degrees. "All men are a single nation" (II, 213). "Mankind were but one community"; then they differed (X, 20). God grants both physical as well as spiritual sustenance to all the nations of the world. "There is not a nation but a warner has passed among them" (XXXV, 24) God created all people alike, in the Divine nature XXX, 30). All are asked to maintain this unity and brotherhood. "And hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of Allah, and do not separate. And remember Allah's favour unto you; how you were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that ye became as brothers by His grace" (III, 103).

Although the Quran and the Traditions of Prophet Muhammad stress the unity of mankind, the history of the Muslims testifies to the fact that this universal outlook was not always maintained.

The muslims believe that they are the best of believers. "You are the best community that hath been raised up for mankind" (III, 110). Most of the People of the Scripture, i. e., Christians and Jews, are evil-doers. (Ibid). So the Quran discourages to take others into close friendship. "O Ye who believe! Take not for intimates others than your own folk, who would spare no pains to ruin you" (III, 110). The Muslims are even encouraged to fight against the Christians and Jews. "Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah, nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily" (IX, 29).

16. The Perfect Man (al-Insan al-Kamil)

The concept of the "Perfect Man" which is prevalent among the Sufi mystics is not directly derived from the Quran. According to many scholars it is the effect of the mystics' contact with outside sources such as gnosticism, hermetism, mazdaeanism, manichaeism, etc. However, even in the Quran one may find some indications to the concept of a "Perfect Man". For example, in the whole of creation, man occupies a leading position since the universe, the heavens and the earth with all that they contain are placed in the service of man. Man is appointed as God's vicar (*Khalifa*) (II, 36; XXXIII, 72). Fakhr al-Din al-Razi explains how the mystics got the idea of the "Perfect Man" from the above mentioned verses:

Among the beings endowed with perception, there are those who perceive both the universal and the particular; these are men. Some others who perceive only the particular are the animals; while those others who perceive only the universal are the Angels. Man has therefore an intermediate position which endows him with a value unique in creation; thus, despite his weakness, he will bear the *amana*.¹⁸

God gives a special "light" to man which makes him a Perfect Being "God is the *wali* (friend) of those who believe; He makes them come forth from the darkness to the light" (II, 257) According to certain commentators, even if God should give this

18. Quoted by Arnaldez, R in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. III, p. 1239.

guarantee to all His creatures, He is said to be in a very particular sense the friend of the Believer because He has additional favours for him. So, to be a Perfect Man one should be a believer and friend of God. "Allah guideth unto His light whom He will" (XXIV, 35).

The symbol of the Perfect Man is also connected with the alchemical conception of man as a microcosm and of the macrocosm as "meganthropos" (*insan kabir*). According to al-Djurdjani, in his *Definitions*, the perfect man unites the totality both of the divine worlds and of the engendered worlds, universal and particular.¹⁹ The Perfect Man, in himself, is that which corresponds to the totality of the Real. Al Djili defines the Perfect Man as follows: "All the epiphanies of the essence of the God of truth (*Hakk*), from the *uluhiyya* (the being-Allah) and the *Ahadiyya* (Absolute unicity) to the *Wahidiyya* (the unity of the multiple), the *Rahmaniyya* (virtue of mercy) and the *Rububiyya* (the Lordship) recur in the copy, that is to say the Perfect Man". In the words of al-Kunawi "The fortieth degree of existence is the Perfect Man. It is with him that the degrees reach their completion, that the world is perfected and the God of Truth manifests Himself to the world by the most perfect manifestation".²⁰

17. Conclusion

Islam views man as a religious person (*homo religious*). He is created by God with immense potentialities. But his relationship with God always remains at a creaturely level. The Christian concept of divine sonship and the Hindu idea of participation in the divinity of God are not well received by Muslim scholars for the fear of diluting the Islamic concept of the oneness of God. However, in the world of created beings he is given the lordship to control and develop the rest of the universe as God's vicegerent on earth.

Though man is prone to weakness and corruption, he is created sinless and so does not stand in need of redemption by a divine saviour. He can attain to salvation only through his total surrender

19. *Ibid.*, p. 1240

20. Both quotations are from *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. III, p. 1241.

to God. This makes him a slave of Allah (Abdullah). Through the holy Quran and the Traditions (Hadith) of the last Prophet, Muhammad, God has given to humankind definitive guidelines to obtain eternal salvation. Those who believe in God and do good to others in accordance with the clearly laid down Islami laws (*Shariat*) will be rewarded with everlasting peace.