

## Faith beyond Political Correctness: Islam's Commitment to Humanity

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The ultimate vision of Islam is transcendent: it is a moral doctrine, not a secular ideology. Islam takes the measure of the human condition from the perspective of the eternal and fosters a faith whose truth stretches beyond the realm of existence and time. Only through a commitment to the ultimate transcendence does the human world, the world of history and politics, acquire whatever meaning that it seeks. For the human world can have no claim to being *sui generis*, whether existentially or morally. Man's existence is a gift, and his/her morality a commitment. Morality is an obligation, a contractual agreement that has been freely negotiated by Man himself and not a burden arbitrarily imposed upon him. Existence and morality are therefore indissoluble in the Islamic perspective. Just as we cannot will ourselves into existence, we cannot annul the moral contract either. We may, of course, if we are foolish or haughty, disregard the stipulations of our agreement, but dissolve it, we cannot. The *is* of the human condition, accordingly in the Islamic scheme of things, is never bereft of the *ought* of the transcendence. The world of politics and history, whatever their legitimacy and import, can never be the be-all and end-all of the Islamic commitment.

Unfortunately, this sterling truth of our faith, the rationale behind Islam's trans-political stake in the politics of humanity, is being eclipsed by the spread of a modern form of nihilism, both indigenous and foreign, that accepts no calling higher than the self-realization of the political will. According to its secular gospel, there are no transcendent values: whatever cannot be measured by the yardstick of politics has no validity, whatever cannot be poured into the sacramental chalice of politics has no healing power. The ultimate gift of this secular consciousness is the loss of the transcendental vision. Either it afflicts us as a home-grown messianic politics that is totally bereft of political reason or it terrorizes us as the scourge of a ruthless Empire that only lives by the logic of force. Gone not only is the erstwhile morality of faith that never submitted to the amoral claims of state-sovereignty, but also the hope of the enlightened for a unified humanity and eternal peace. Because of the clash of the two secular fundamentalisms, an indigenous one that abjures the promise of the here-after for the rewards of the here-now and a foreign one that sees its own project as the End, the measure of our humanity is again the grisly logic of *Realpolitik* and its unedifying elevation of the law of the jungle. Ours is the Hobesian nightmare of might triumphing over right.

Given the situation, when any commitment to staying within the ideational ambit of Islam, simply cherishing it as personal faith, has become a matter of considerable personal liability, it is imperative that Muslim introspection and self-criticism refocuses on the primordial covenant between Man and God, the *raison d'être* of the humanity's mission in history and the fount of Islamic humanism. Though this reclaiming of our spiritual moorings may not convince our extremists to renounce their parochial vision, nor may it cure the powers-hat-be of their hubris, but it may at least save us from the misery of impotent rage, self-pity and breast-beating; it may even persuade some of us to desist from the acts of senseless violence and self-immolation. We may also realize that it is not our faith that bears the responsibility for the spiritual callousness and moral depravity of our times. No, cracking under the onslaught of ungodly forces and confounded by the demons of nihilism, we ourselves seem to be renouncing our primordial commitment to humanity for a defeatist and suicidal politics of immediate return.

To speak of Man in the Islamic vein is not only to confront the sanctimony of the secular will-to-power; it is also to realize the poverty of modernity's image of man. For as soon as we envision man in transcendental terms, we become conscious of the enormous ideational gulf that separates traditional discourses from the modern ones. For man, from the vantage point of any philosophical or theological discourse, is a given, a precept rather than a concept; it is through man that the world - cosmos, *physis*, nature - acquires its meaning and form. The very *raison d'être* of modern science, and the incontestable premise of its epistemology, on the other hand, is the rejection of all anthropocentric visions and principles. Needless to say that the Islamic perspective on politics and culture, emanate as it does from the Islamic image of Man, is irredeemably anthropocentric.

Islam's anthropological vision devolves from its belief about 'the ultimate scheme of things', about the totality of being of which God, *Allah* in the language of the Qur'anic revelation, is the creator. The 'ultimate' in the Islamic worldview, thus, is trans-cosmological; it stretches beyond the world of men and stars (Al-Qur'an: 2:255). It also follows that the pre-eminence of the political and the claim of its sovereignty, which is taken for granted by every modern discourse, is found problematic when examined from the Islam's trans-historical vantage-point.

Any discussion of Islamic humanism presupposes that we reach back to the original message of the revelation, for the true image of *homo islamicus* has become obscured as much by the heartless positivism of modernity--as by the mindless literalism of the Islamic tradition itself. We must start by reiterating the centrality of transcendence in the Islamic scheme of things. Islam without a commitment to the Ultimate beyond, affirmed in the testimony of faith as the Unique God (Allah), would not be Islam at all. Thus, for all the sanctity and existential necessity of the historical Muslim community, Islam is not coterminous with it. Nor is the historical community, indeed the world of history itself, the ultimate locus of the Muslim's loyalty. There's no equivalent to the secular maxim, 'My country right or wrong', in Islamic ethics. The Muslim's loyalty to any historical order, perforce political, is always

conditional: it is always deferential to the obligation of 'enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong' (3:103).

The very notion of faith, *Islam* (Surrender to God) presupposes a trans-historical and transcendent disposition of man (*fitra*) (30:30). Humanity and not nation or state is thus essential to the Islamic vision. Whatever politics that emanates from the historical existence of the Muslim community may therefore never renounce the goal of human unity; it may never become an end in itself and fall prey to the logic of self-deification that is the essence of secular ideologies. Conscience (*Din*) and not Empire (*Dawla*) constitutes the Muslim's primary pathway to humanity. It is in the delineation of this ideal that the Qur'an categorically affirms the 'unity in diversity' of the human creature, and upholds the supremacy of the moral over all other emblems of distinction or pride:

*O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely, the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you..'* (49:13)

As befits the transcendental worldview of the Qur'an, the addressee of its discourse is a universal, archetypical and trans-historical human being. Even the covenant that God has with man is primordial and is contracted prior to the advent of the historical time. Man enters his/her historical existence only after submitting to the sovereignty of God:

*And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify touching themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said: 'yes, we testify...'* (7:172).

The Qur'anic image of man, it must be underlined, is transcendental without being anti-historical. Like every other being and non-being, man is a creation of God. Yet, his status is special on two accounts: *ontologically*, because he has been infused with God's spirit (15:29; 38:72: 32:9), and *morally*, because he is God's Deputy and the custodian of his creation on earth (2:30ff; 7:11ff; 20:116ff). It is through the story of the birth of Adam that Qur'an alludes to, what may be regarded from our human point of view, as the most significant act of creation. Adam, from the Qur'anic account, may be envisaged in both transcendental and immanentist terms; both as the primordial, eternal man and as the individual, historical human being. The 'transcendence' of Adam, which is reflected in his intelligence (*'aql*) and which endows him with rational faculty and moral judgment, must therefore be seen in conjunction with his 'immanence', his mission in history. For Adam has on his own accord accepted the challenge of creating a just moral order on earth, an enterprise described by the Qur'an as 'Trust' (*Amana*). (33:72)

Man acts thus as the intermediary between nature and morality, between a blissful, albeit non-reflexive and amoral, state of animal existence and a voluntary assent to the demands of a higher calling. For the Muslim mind, further, the immensity of space and matter is a symbol of the Transcendent reality: all this plenitude of being and immanence points beyond itself. Significantly, then, it is the soul (Intellect) of man which, as a repository of

Divine signs, mediates between the natural world and the transcendent truth beyond, and assures man of his ultimate felicity:

*We shall show them our signs in the horizons and in their souls, till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. (41:53)*

One must not confound this transcendental perspective with the biological one of modern science and construe Adam as an emblem of *Homo sapiens* (in the manner of Lucy!), or reduce man's being to atoms and genes. Of course, it is licit to speak of man in concrete biological terms, as the Qur'an itself employs biological images and metaphors (23:12-14; cf. also 32:8), but it is only within the 'grand paradigm' of transcendence that the quintessentially spiritual and moral nature of Adam's mission can be contemplated, and perhaps apprehended.

Adam, the first man, who stands for all humanity has also been recognized in Islam as the first prophet, a fact which is construed that mankind throughout its earthly sojourn has never been without divine guidance. Significantly, when the Qur'an speaks of historical men and women, especially former prophets, it does so without the least regard to chronology and does not make any distinction between former prophets. The unity and identity of divine guidance, available to all prophets and preached by all of them, renders all historical, ethnic and geographical distinctions superfluous. Here again we encounter a transcendent vision that is inimical to the politically sectarian views of humanity as 'sovereign states'. It demolishes all the idols of ethnic pride, cultural hierarchy and religious exclusiveness.

Most significantly, the Qur'anic designation of Adam as the Representative or Vicegerent (*Khalifa*) of God is pre-eminently moral in scope and purpose. It presents a conceptual scheme that mediates between transcendence and immanence, that bridges the gap between the *de facto* and the *de jure*, the *is* and the *ought*, of the human situation - without invoking the ontological language of incarnation. Man is denied the attribute of 'sovereignty' but given all the freedom, royal power and 'pontifical' responsibility that are the privileges of the Viceroy. In moral terms, it is tantamount to denying man the right to be 'a norm unto himself' and a source of his own values. The Qur'anic view of Adam's *khilafa* is a supremely humanistic doctrine, without the hubris and arrogance of errant humanism which according to the critics of modernity is its bane and the source of its nihilism.

Though there is no ontological relationship between God and Adam in the manner of the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, the Qur'anic Adam does appear to have some functional resemblance to Jesus in being a bridge between transcendence and immanence; except that Adam's role, as mentioned earlier, can only be conceived in moral terms. (Cf.: 3:58). In Christian theology, Jesus is referred to as the 'Second Adam', redeeming mankind of the sin that the first Adam had committed. Apparently, due to the absence of the Original Sin in Islam, the first Adam retains the functions which in Christianity are the preserve of the second. Little wonder, the individual human being's relationship to Adam, not only the biological fact of belonging to his progeny but also the moral obligation devolving from Adam's covenant

with God, his assumption of the trust of moralizing nature, has become the emblem of Islam's humanism.

Returning to our own times, we must not become too depressed by the treason of our intellectuals! We do know that when, at the mock tribunal of 'civilization and human rights', the discourse of Islamic *raison d'état* that is the pride of the guardians of the sacred law (*fiqh*) is indicted for not possessing a moral vision transcending the self-interests of a parochial political community (the Ummah of in the eyes of our critics), all that we can do is to recoil in horror at this unseemly spectacle of 'victor's justice'. Very little in the way of an exposition of Islam's transcendent – and ineluctably moral - vision is ever proffered by official Islam. All that these beneficiaries of our historical order, whose authority and power both have been crushed to naught by the juggernaut of modernity, can conjure is a lame apology of the status quo! Islam for them is nothing but a frozen moment in time, a provincial culture rather than a universal faith. Any conscientious believer may, however, notice that the legalistic discourse of our tradition does not do justice to the moral vision of the Qur'an. And neither does the parochial politics of 'revivalism' which lacks both the jurist's method of instrumental reasoning and his concern for the common good (*Maslaha*)!

But, even more crucially, the Muslim has no reason to be impressed by modernity's claims about the humanity of its order. Indeed, for the Muslim, any vision of man, any semblance of a moral and philosophical doctrine of humanism, remains specious so long as it does not measure man against a reality that is greater than man himself. It is here, in acknowledging man's subordination to a moral law, infinitely more universal and legitimate than the ones prevailing in our, perforce parochial, political constituencies, that the incompatibility of Islamic *khilafa* and secular sovereignty is fully revealed. Islamic conscience, a gift of theocentric faith, is never hostage to the Muslim political order, or any political order for that matter, in the manner of the secularist. For the latter, the political order is the be-all and end-all of all historical existence. In the final resort, the secular doctrine of 'state sovereignty' removes all distinction between morality (universal, in the Kantian mode) and politics (parochial, in the constrictive sense of political correctness!).

For all its sanctimony, modern civilization provides no evidence, not even in theory, that it aspires to overarch the pernicious divide of morality and politics, that it possesses a universal vision which identifies the self-interest of its own political community with the wellbeing of humanity. All that the theory and practice of modern politics offers is a compelling vindication of the creed of *Realpolitik* (which upholds that humanity has no claim to any common good or universal morality) and a return of the Empire. Whatever the pain of this insight, our search for a meaningful, moral existence must continue. It is the Muslim's duty to delineate the Qur'anic vision of the *Khilafa* of Adam in such a way that mankind's collective responsibility for the moral ordering of the single human world becomes the paramount focus of the socio-political discourse.

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