
Man

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THE CONTEMPORARY MIND LOOKS for consistency both in ideologies and in any general system of concepts. Consistency may well be seen as the test of their validity. We may not agree with the Marxist view of man or the Freudian view, but we acknowledge that each system has its own internal logic even though we may not accept the assumptions upon which the system is constructed. This expectation must be put aside when we approach the Islamic view of man. Here we are dealing not with a consistent pattern of concepts devised by the human mind functioning within its own limitations but with the paradoxes and ambiguities inherent in the created world and in the shattered reflections, perceived here and now, of what lies beyond creation and infinitely transcends it. We can no longer insist that man must be either this *or* that. We are obliged to admit that he may be both this *and* that.

Man as God's Vicegerent and Slave

Islam sees man as the vicegerency of God on earth and the projection, as it were, of the vertical dimension onto the horizontal plane. Gifted with intelligence in the true sense of the term, he alone of all creatures is capable of knowing the Reality of which he himself is a manifestation and, in the light

of this knowledge, of rising above his own earthly and contingent selfhood. Gifted with the power of speech, he alone stands before God as His valid interlocutor. Through Revelation as also through inspiration God speaks to His creation; through prayer as also through an awareness which is a silent form of communication man speaks to God and does so on behalf of the inarticulate creation that surrounds him. He is, potentially if not actually, higher than the angels, for his nature reflects totality and can be satisfied with nothing less than the Total. It is a synthesis from which no element, from the highest to the lowest, is excluded, and it is a mirror in which are reflected the Names and Attributes of the God before Whom he stands upright, now and forever.

This is one side of the human coin. A simple change of perspective shows the other, and Islam sees man as a creature of dust or clay, a nothingness before the overwhelming splendor of the Real—impotent before Omnipotence, a little thing (brother to the ant) who walks briefly upon the earth from which he was molded, vulnerable to a pinprick and destined soon to be seized upon and taken to Judgment. He is a slave whose highest achievement is to obey without question his Master's Will or (in more esoteric terms) to rid himself of everything that might appear to be "his," so that the Divine Will may operate through him without impediment. Any good that he may do comes from elsewhere. He can take no credit for it since it did not originate with him. Only the evil that he does is his to claim and possess as his own. Knowledge and virtue, if they are reflected in his being, are a loan from his Creator. So too are the senses, through which he perceives the theater of his experience but which may be taken from him at any moment.

We have here the positive and negative poles of human existence or human identity according to the Islamic view of our situation. They might appear irreconcilable, but, for the Muslim, they represent the concrete reality of this situation and they interpenetrate each other much as do the positive and the negative, the light and the dark, in the Chinese *yin-yang* figure. Mastery—that is to say, the quality of vicegerency—is intimately linked to “slavehood,” and “slavehood” as such is neither more nor less than the excellence of a clear mirror that reflects the higher realities and could not reflect them if it were less than clear. According to the mystic and theologian al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111), everything including the human creature has “a face of its own and a face of its Lord; in respect of its own face it is nothingness, and in respect of the face of its Lord it is Being.” This image suggests a further dimension: the creature who in this fashion faces two different ways is, in consequence, a meeting-point, a bridge. The human heart, which Islam identifies as the seat of knowledge rather than the seat of emotion,¹ is sometimes described as the *barzakh* (“isthmus”), which both separates and unites the “two seas,” the divine and the earthly. It is precisely on account of this function that man can be defined as *khalīfat Allāh fi’l-ard*, the vicegerent of God on earth.

Adam and Eve, the Prototypes of Humanity

The prototype of this identity as vicegerent is man as he first issued from the hand of God—Adam, primordial man. The Quran states:

God spoke to the angels in that time (the time beyond time), saying: Indeed I shall place on earth a vicegerent. They asked: Wilt Thou place upon it one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? While, as for us, we celebrate Thy glory and extol Thy holiness. Their Lord answered: Truly I

know what ye know not! Thereupon He taught Adam the names of all things, then placed them before the angels, saying: Tell me the names of these if ye are truthful. They said: Glorified art Thou! No knowledge have we save that which Thou hast taught us. Thou indeed art the Omniscient, the Wise. He said: O Adam! Inform them of the names of these things. And when (Adam) had informed them of the names, He said: Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of the heavens and the earth, and I know what you show and what you hide? (II, 30–33)

The angels were then commanded to prostrate themselves before this new creation, man, and they did so, all save Iblis, the satanic power or spirit of rebellion, who refused out of blind pride to humble himself before a creature whose glory is masked by dust.

The chroniclers, relying sometimes upon what the Prophet himself said concerning these matters and sometimes upon inspired imagination, have filled out this brief narrative in rich detail. According to the fourth/eleventh century commentator al-Kisā'ī, the archangel Gabriel was commanded to assemble the angel ranks before Adam, who then spoke to all the inhabitants of the heavens, who stood in twenty thousand rows around him. A pulpit was set up for him and he was clad in robes of honor with a golden crown on his head, jewel-encrusted and having four corner points each set with a pearl whose brightness would have put out the light of sun and moon (being transparent to the Divine Light, which eclipses all other lights). When he held up before them the rod of light which God had given him, the angelic hosts stood in awe of him, saying of him: “O our Lord, hast Thou created any creature superior to this?” Then he addressed the celestial assembly with the authority that his Creator had delegated to him, and when he came down from the pulpit his radiance was even greater than it had been before.

His radiance, so al-Kisā'ī tells us, was not unique, for God created for him a mate, equal “in splendour and in beauty,” *Ḥawwā'* (Eve), so called because she was created out of Life (*ḥayy*) itself. She was of the same form as Adam except that her skin was more tender, her coloring lighter, her voice sweeter, her eyes wider and darker, and her teeth whiter. “O Lord, for whom has Thou created her?” asked Adam. “For him who will take her in faithfulness and be joined with her in thankfulness!” And their Lord, Who Himself performed the marriage ceremony between them, added: “This is My handmaiden, and thou art My servant, O Adam! Nothing is dearer to Me in all My creation than ye twain, so long as ye obey Me.” “Glory to Him who created the pair” says the Quran (XXXVI, 36), and Muḥammad told his companions that “marriage is half the religion.”

Then, according to the same author, a magnificent steed, saddled with a saddle of emerald and chrysolite and bridled with a bridle of jacinth, was brought to Adam, a winged steed which, when its rider had praised God, told him, “You have spoken well, Adam, for none may ride me save one who is thankful.” For Eve, there was a superb she-camel as mount. The incomparable pair then made their way to the garden created for them, with angels to the right and to the left, before and behind, and others of the angelic host lining the route. God addressed Adam, saying: “Now remember My favors to you, for I have made you the masterpiece of My creation, fashioned you a man according to My will, breathed into you of My spirit, made My angels do obeisance to you and carry you on their shoulders, made you a preacher to them, loosened your tongue to all languages. . . . All this I have done for you as glory and honor, so beware of Iblis

whom I have made to despair. . . .”² But this warning was ignored or forgotten when Iblis, the agent of division and separation, tempted the celestial pair with the glamor and glitter of relativity and a spurious independence. So began a process that leads from that time to the present day. It must be noted, however, that they “fell” together, equal in guilt as they had been equal in glory. Eve was no temptress so far as the Islamic tradition is concerned. And although they were exiled, as are all who live upon this earth, yet they were promised by Him Who is named the Ever-Forgiving, the All-Forgiving, the Effacer of sins, that their posterity would never be left without guidance through the dark alleyways of the lower world. This “guidance,” according to Islam, culminated and was completed in the coming of Muḥammad, who, as it were, closes the circle.

The Prophet as the Perfect Human Model

Although such myths and legends as that of al-Kisā’ī are rich in meaning and symbolism and cannot be regarded merely as human inventions, the fact remains that “Adam,” in whatever manner we may understand this name, is remote from the practical life in which men and women need to find their direction and orientation. There is, however, a prototype of human perfection (in small matters as in great) very close to the pious Muslim, closer to him—so the Quran tells us—than his own selfhood. Since Muḥammad is also, by definition, close to God, it follows that he provides not only guidance but also a human—viceregal—link between the Divine and the earthly. A man or a woman qualifies as a Muslim when he or she makes, in good faith, the dual profession or witnessing, first to the Divine

Unity and then to the messengerhood of Muḥammad. If this second truth were not joined to the first, there would be an impassible barrier between what is above (Divine Reality) and what is below (the creature of earthly dust). For the ordinary believer, the entirely exoteric Muslim, this suffices. It is enough that the Creator should have commissioned His chosen messenger Muḥammad (having commissioned many others before him) to bring mankind guidance and the Law, together with the promise of paradise and the threat of hellfire. For the esoterists—that is to say, for the Sufis—the function of providing a link between God and man, heaven and earth, is reflected—at least as a virtuality—in every human creature, provided he models himself, inwardly as well as outwardly, upon the model provided. “In the messenger of God,” says the Quran, “you have a good example (*uswat^{un} ḥasanat^{un}*)” (XXXIII, 21). Addressing His messenger directly in the chapter of The Pen, God says: “Thou art truly of a tremendous nature” (LXVIII, 4). Questioned concerning her husband, ‘Ā’ishah said: “His nature is the nature of the Quran”; in other words, he was not only the messenger but also the embodiment of the message.

It follows that the key to the Muslim view of man is to be found in the person of the Prophet of Islam. He has many titles of glory, but the first, which even precedes the designation “messenger” in the confession of faith, is “slave” or “servant” (*‘abd*). For the Muslim, this attribute of “slavhood” always comes first, whatever else may follow, for reasons that will be clear from what was said earlier. Thus, the adherent of Islam is a Muslim (“one who submits”) rather than a *mu’min* (“one who believes”). Just as the quality of obedient passivity is a precondition of the Messenger’s activity in the world, so this quality determines the ordinary

human creature's fitness to fulfill the function for which he was created. It is the starting point or springboard without which there can be no journeying and certainly no viceregency. The human will is perfected only when it reflects the Divine Will. Closely related to this is the title *al-nabī al-ummī*, the "unlettered Prophet," and it is precisely this title that guarantees the authenticity of the Scripture, the Quran, since a divine messenger can only convey the message accurately if he adds nothing to it in terms of human knowledge. The Muslim as such receives the message at second hand, but he too is required to receive it—through the Quran—without permitting his receptivity to be distorted by any trace of profane knowledge or by his personal likes and dislikes.

But the perfect scribe, who misses no syllable of what is dictated to him and who is, so to speak, all ear, is also *ḥabīb Allāh* (the beloved of God), just as Adam was "most dear to God." With this image the whole picture changes, and the relationship between Creator and creation is seen from a different

perspective. It is said that the Arabic word for man, *insān*, is derived from the root *uns*, which has the meaning "intimacy," and the poets and mystics of Islam moved swiftly from the Master/slave image to that of Lover/beloved, a relationship of mutuality. According to a holy tradition (*ḥadīth qudsī*), "I was a Hidden Treasure and I desired to be known; therefore I created Man" (or, according to a different version, "the worlds"). Many exoteric Muslims question the authenticity of this saying because they take it to imply that God "needs" something outside Himself, and to ascribe "needs" to God is, in Muslim terms, close to blasphemy. It is true that the Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabī, whose influence upon the

metaphysical doctrines of Sufism can hardly be exaggerated, did at times write as though there were, at the very heart of the Divine, a yearning for a relationship of mutuality. H. Corbin has analyzed this perspective with great subtlety, but to interpret “need” in human terms is to miss the point.³ Reality, which is also by definition absolute Perfection, can have only one obligation, the obligation to be Itself. This implies a plenitude which, by its very nature, “radiates” or “overflows” outward or—to use a more human image—desires to give Itself. This does not imply any lack in the Divine Perfection but, on the contrary, refers to a particular dimension of this Perfection, except for which the existence of anything outside or—though only in appearance—separated from the Absolute would be incomprehensible.

This doctrine, whatever suspicions it may arouse in the minds of certain Muslims jealous to preserve the utter transcendence of a God in relation to Whom blind obedience is the only possible human response, assists us nonetheless in defining the Islamic view of man’s role and therefore in understanding the concept of “slavery.” The predestined receptacle of the “overflowing” of the Divine Plenitude is necessarily passive and necessarily empty of all other contents. In this context humility is no longer a moral or sentimental concept, but neither more nor less than the most favorable existential attitude for anyone who wishes to receive what is given.

In the Islamic view the role of the Messenger of God—the role of Muḥammad—is both to be the perfect receptacle and to provide a model of perfect receptivity. But the imitation of the Prophet in Islam has a very different character from the purely spiritual “imitation of Christ” to which the pious

Christian aspires. The fact that Muḥammad, unlike Jesus, was destined to live through all the major experiences to which a human being may be exposed in the course of his life gives the practice of the religion its specific character and lends to this “imitation” a remarkable precision, even in the simplest acts of daily life. Faced with some common human problem, the Christian will seek in his own heart to discover what Jesus might have

done; the Muslim, more often than not, knows what Muḥammad did.

During his formative years, he had run through the gamut of youthful experience; orphaned very early in life yet sheltered by the love and care first of his grandfather and then of an uncle, born a townsman yet passing a part of his childhood with a Bedouin family in the desert, traveling in adolescence with the great trading caravan to Syria, rubbing shoulders with the extraordinary variety of people drawn to Mecca by its wealth. He had been a merchant, with all that this implies in the way of practical experience and of assessing the honesty of those with whom one must deal; he had married a widow considerably older than himself and had given an example of faithful and devoted monogamous marriage, later (after her death) to give a complementary example of justice and kindness as the husband of a number of wives; he had experienced the joy of fatherhood and the sadness of seeing all but one of his children die before him; he had suffered bitter persecution, which he faced with exemplary patience; and he had suffered, above all, the shattering impact of the encounter with Divine Reality.

Fully formed and now a master of men, he completed his mission during the Medina years as the ruler of a sacred

community—a city-state dedicated to the worship of the One God—and as the guide, counselor, and friend of that community. During those final ten years he organized no fewer than seventy-four campaigns, leading twenty-four of them himself. Yet the record of those years in the *ḥadīth* literature pays less attention to such public events than to his relationship to the people around him, people who turned to him for counsel and comfort in every conceivable human situation while observing his every action and recording for posterity the details, great and small, which have provided the Muslims throughout the ages with the concrete model for their living and their dying. In all this they have been made aware of a particular element in the human situation, which is decisive in determining this situation as Islam understands it. Passivity toward what is above us—“slavehood” in other words—has its complement in activity and initiative here where we find ourselves, in this world and in that part of ourselves that belongs to this world. This is *jihād*, a word that means “effort” or “struggle,” but is commonly translated as “holy war.” The viceroy of God on earth cannot be idle; it is his function to rectify what is amiss both in the world around him and within himself. This obligation is in proportion to his receptivity.

The imitation of the Prophet, however, can take different forms, as can the “holy war,” which may, on occasion, be directed against the enemies of the Faith and of the Good, but which may equally be directed against those elements within ourselves which are the root of all the evils that appear outwardly in the theater of this world. It is in the nature of religion, since it engages the whole personality, to run to certain excesses when enthusiasm destroys the sense of proportion and zeal

overcomes judgment. There are Muslims whose desire to imitate every action and every gesture of the Prophet exceeds the bounds of what is universally applicable, so that the sheer weight of outward observance smothers inwardness and leads almost inevitably to hypocrisy. Meticulous outward imitation is one vocation among others and is justified as a spiritual method insofar as—and only insofar as—it engenders corresponding inward attitudes, attitudes that might simply be defined as “virtues” in the deepest sense of the term. Through playing a part—in this case, the “part” played by the Prophet in his outward behavior—the ultimate intention is that the personality as such should enter into the mold provided by his personality.

Others whose aim it is to follow the “perfect example” may—particularly under the conditions of modern life, which make it, to say the least, difficult to live exactly as though one were a member of Muḥammad’s community in Medina in the seventh century of the Christian era—seek their exemplar in his inward nature, going to the source of his actions and striving to imitate the virtues that found expression in all that he did and said. If we bear in mind that his nature was “the nature of the Quran,” it can be seen that to enter into the mold of the Prophet’s personality is, in effect, to enter into the mold of the Quran. It might, indeed, be permissible to describe the Prophet of Islam as “the Quran in action or in application,” and, by derivation, the same might be said of the Muslim who is all that he should be and who, as such, incorporates in his own person the Islamic concept of man.

The Muslim who aspires to such excellence is greatly assisted by the wealth and extent of the *Ḥadīth* record and by the fact that this record includes so much that might be considered

“trivial” but for the fact that it relates to a manifestation of the Sacred and conceals beneath a seemingly commonplace surface indications of momentous significance. It is not only in grave matters or in promulgating the ordinances of the community that Muḥammad demonstrated his innermost nature but also in his dealings with his family, with his friends, and with those who sought his advice on the minor aspects of everyday life. This relates to what may be described as the totality of his mission, which was destined and required to penetrate every level of human experience and to bring the light of an all-encompassing guidance even into the darkest corner, the smallest crevice, of life in this world. The Muslim does not only learn his religion, his duties, and his rules of conduct from the *Ḥadīth* literature; he learns from it what it is to be human as Islam understands the human role, and he drinks from it, as though from a great pool, the water of perfection, the perfection of vicegerency.

Adam, Muḥammad, and the View of Man

The Islamic view of man may best be defined and exemplified in relation to these two poles, Adam and Muḥammad, the first prophet and the last, the beginning of the story and the end of it. To lay stress upon the “closing of the circle” represented by Muḥammad’s mission is to stress also the primordial nature of this mission. History had unfolded and humanity had pursued its predestined course. There had to be—and there was—a return to the origin, insofar as such a return might be possible at so late a stage in the cycle. Islam justifies itself as the *dīn al-fiṭrah*, which might be translated as “the religion of primordiality” or even as “the original religion.”⁴ The perfect Muslim is not a man of his time or indeed of any other specific historic time. He is

man as he issued from the hand of God. “You are all the children of Adam” (or “the tribe of Adam”) as Muḥammad told his people.

In relation to man as such, the word *fiṭrah* may be taken to refer to the human norm from which, according to the Quran, humanity has fallen away.⁵ But the word is derived from a verb meaning “he created” or “he cleft asunder” (the act of creation being described as a cleaving asunder of the heavens and the earth)—hence, its reference back to the origins. It follows that the image of human perfection (or, quite simply, of human normality) lies in the past, not in the future, and the way to its attainment lies not in an aspiration focused on a distant goal or in any miraculous redemption from inherent sinfulness but rather through the removal of accretions and distortions that have both corroded and twisted a perfection that is, in essence, natural to mankind. It is a question not of leaping over the world or of being rescued from it but of retracing, in an upward direction, the downward slope of time.

We have here a sharp contrast to the Christian view, which posits a primordial corruption of the innermost core of the human creature. For Islam this core remains sound and cannot be otherwise. Neither time nor circumstance can totally destroy what God has made, but time and circumstance can cover it with layer upon layer of darkness. This offers a clue to the deeper meaning of the term *kāfir*, usually translated as “infidel,” “unbeliever,” or “denier of the truth.” The word *kafara* means “he covered,” in the way that the farmer covers seed he has sown. In fallen man—man at the bottom of the slope—there has taken place a covering of the Divine “spark” within and, as a direct result of this, he himself covers (and so

ignores or denies) the Truth, which has been revealed with dazzling clarity and which is, at the same time, inherent in the hidden “spark.” Islam envisages this man as imprisoned in a cell the walls of which he reinforces by his own misguided efforts, the cell of the ego, which sets itself up as a little god and isolates itself from the stream of Divine Mercy which flows at its doorstep. The guidance provided by the Messenger of God offers him the opportunity, if he will take it, to come out into the open, the sunlight, which is his natural environment. The command inherent in this message is: *Be what in truth you are!* From this point of view it may be said—and has often been said although seldom with full understanding—that the Islamic concept of man is “static.” All is here and now, neither distant nor in another time.



33. The Black Stone, a meteor placed at the side of the Ka'bah and revered as a symbol of the original covenant between man and God.

In referring to a return to the origins and a remounting of the stream of time, we are brought back to the Quranic story of the creation of Adam and to the legends that surround it. The

Quran cannot be said to take a flattering view of human nature, and the first man wasted little time in giving way to temptation. One may reasonably assume that God knew better than did the angels what mischief this creature would do, and it does not seem fanciful to read into the text the implication that his stature, his vicegerency, was not unconnected with his capacity for mischief making. In the realm of relativity (which is, of necessity, foreign to the angels), light and darkness, good and evil, are inextricably mixed together. The angels cannot deviate from their Creator's Will, and yet they were commanded to bow down before this creature so prone to rebellion. One is led inevitably to ask what could be the secret of his manifest superiority. The answer relates, in the first place, to the concept of totality, which is in itself ambiguous.

Man as a Central Being

The concept of totality is ambiguous because, when it disintegrates as it does in the nature of fallen man, we find, in place of unity and good order, a chaos of mutually conflicting forces and characteristics. If, as Islam asserts, the human heart reflects the Names and Attributes of God, then this little vessel of clay must break into many pieces unless held together by Him Who has chosen it as His mirror. This is why the *kāfir* is, by definition, a shattered creature, at war with himself even as he is at war with his God, his Origin and his Source. He has severed, at least in the context of relativity, his link with the Reality upon which his own being and his function depend. He has, in the precise sense of this common term, "gone to pieces"; and as a direct consequence—since man is its linchpin—the world "goes to pieces." To understand why this should be so we have to grasp one of the

most fundamental and universal concepts known to humankind, shared by the Chinese tradition and by African tribal religion as also by Islam and other major traditions—the concept of man’s centrality. If, for convenience, we envisage the earth as a flat disk, then the thread that holds it in place

and connects it with all that is above and beyond passes through its center. In terms of this image, this doctrine, man is the aperture at the center. He alone of all created beings and things is situated directly beneath the Divine Axis. It is for this reason and only for this reason that he can be said to reflect Totality in the mirror of his innermost heart, and it is for this reason and only for this reason that he qualifies as the viceroy of God on earth and, according to a *ḥadīth*, “Allah and His angels, together with the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth—even the ant in its hole, even the fish—invoke blessings upon whomsoever teaches what is good.”

For “aperture” we might substitute the word “window.” “The house without a window,” says Rūmī, “is hell,” and he adds that “the function of religion is to make a window.”⁶ According to Abu Bakr Siraj Ed-Dīn, “If the earth be likened to a windowless house, then man is the watch-tower in the house, and the Eye of the Heart is as a single window in that watch-tower to which all the dwellers in the house look up for their light. Without this Eye man ceases to fulfil his essential function, having fallen from his true nature; but with this Eye he is the sole earthly receptacle of the spiritual light of which he is the dispenser among his fellow creatures. . . .”⁷ From this point of view the *kāfir* (who “covers” the Truth, the Light, even from himself) might be defined as one who pulls down a curtain over the window and plunges the whole house into darkness.

The notion of man's centrality does not refer only to his existential situation; it refers also to the knowledge that is contained, at least in virtuality, in his heart. "He [God] taught Adam the names," so the Quran tells us. This might be defined as universal or all-encompassing knowledge, for the name of anything defines its identity and is intimately linked to the creative act of God. By "naming" it He brings it out of "nonexistence" into the light of day; He causes it to be knowable. The gift of knowledge, the privilege—precisely—which gave Adam his superiority over the angels, may be said to follow logically from the assertion that man's heart reflects Totality. But it follows also that the knower of the "names" knows also the "Namer" of all things or is capable of knowing Him. In the Islamic view, and particularly in the view of the Sufis, the human creature is capable of knowing the Creator, capable of hearkening to God's words and speaking to Him. The being who stands at the center point of relativity is potentially able to know the Absolute. Islam is "the religion of Law." It is also "the religion of knowledge," and the duty to acquire knowledge is a recurrent theme in the sayings of Muḥammad, as it is in the Quran. Since the summit of knowledge is the knowledge of God, the Quran identifies man's highest duty in terms of "seeking the Face of his Lord."

Islam, however, does not demand of mankind that they should observe

a duty to which they have not assented, and this assent is identified with what is known as the Day of "*Alast*." "And when thy Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their loins, their posterity [He] caused them to testify concerning themselves [saying]: Am I not your Lord (*alastu bi-rabbikum*)? They said: Yea, truly, we testify!" (VII, 172).

The passage concludes by explaining that we are told this “lest you should claim on the Day of Resurrection that you were unaware of it. . . .” We have, in other words, assented to this commitment and this acknowledgement before ever our conscious life began. The same implication is apparent in another Quranic passage, which may be said to emphasize man’s viceregal function. “We offered the Trust (*amānah*) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they drew back from bearing it and feared to do so. It is Man who bore it. . . .” (XXXIII, 72). The reference to “the mountains” is illuminated by the following: “Had We caused this Quran to descend upon a mountain, thou wouldst indeed have seen it humbled and cleft asunder from fear. . . .” (LIX, 21). Revelation, knowledge, vicegerency, centrality: all these are aspects of the burden that the human creature freely bears, and it is in terms of this burden that he is defined as truly “human.” It is also in terms of this burden that the *kāfir* is seen by Islam as less than human.⁸ The supreme Trust was given to the open-eyed creature, capable of choice and, for that very reason, capable of betraying the Trust. If he does so, what then is left of him but the dust from which he was made?

Islam and the Primordial Religion

The term *dīn al-ḥiṭrah* (“primordial religion”) mentioned earlier has an alternative translation more familiar to those in the modern world who seek a universal faith beyond all confessional divergencies. The *dīn al-ḥiṭrah*, since it refers back to a time before the different “religions” were revealed or crystallized, is the “perennial philosophy” which is to be found behind the veil of every authentic religion (and is itself the guarantee of authenticity) and also in the background of

the mythological religions of so-called primitive peoples. Islam, however, claims by implication a particularly direct relationship to this “perennial philosophy,” since it defines itself as the final revelation of a timeless message of which mankind has been “reminded” again and again by countless “messengers of God.” The Quran acknowledges without ambiguity that the laws and practices of the different crystallizations of the *dīn al-fīṭrah* have differed according to time and place,⁹ but the truth of the Divine Unity and the decisive principles that are derived from this do not change, have not changed, and can never change. “The doctrine of Unity is unique” (*al-tawḥīd* *wāḥid*), so it is said. All else is illusion.

The connection between the “primordial religion” and the final one is underlined by the absence of any priesthood in Islam. The *‘ulamā’*—that is to say, the men learned in religious matters (and particularly in the minutiae of the Law)—may at times appear to occupy the role of “clergy” in other faiths, but such authority as they may possess depends upon the respect of the community, a respect that must be earned. They have an advisory function but cannot act as intermediaries between the worshiper and the Object of his worship. It follows that each Muslim is, from this point of view, his own “priest,” as is already apparent from the fact that any Muslim may lead his fellows in prayer, provided he knows a few verses of the Quran. By the very fact of having made the attestation of faith, affirming his adherence to the religion and to the community, the Muslim speaks directly to his Creator with nothing to soften this tremendous encounter, and his situation would be no different were he to find himself the last man left on earth. Many Western observers visiting the lands of Islam before modern manners infiltrated

the community and before modern dress, with all that it implies in the way of vulgarization of the human form, was widely adopted have remarked upon the “priestly bearing” of ordinary Muslims going about their everyday business.

This air of dignity, control, and self-containment—as of one who walks always in the presence of the Sacred—relates directly to the concept of “vicegerency,” for it goes without saying that the representative of God on earth must of necessity comport himself with dignity. The bearer of the burden—the “Trust”—is not free to live carelessly or to slip into the ways of vulgarity. This would be to live beneath himself and, in the pejorative sense of the term, to forget himself. Moreover, there is no area of life and no corner of the world, however humble or however hidden, in which he might cast aside his priestly role. The unitarian perspective of Islam does not admit the existence of a secular realm in which man might act purely as a creature of this earth, a “human animal,” and it does not recognize the division between the worldly and the Sacred, which appears self-evident to the Christian. To do so would seem to the Muslim dangerously close to the sin of *shirk* (“idolatry” or, to be more precise, the belief that there are realities independent of The Reality). It would suggest to him that the world or some particular aspect of the world could be treated as though it possessed an existence outside the Divine Pattern. Islam, by its own inner logic, embraces every possible facet of existence, for God has named Himself *al-Muḥīṭ*, the All-Embracing.

If every Muslim is a “priest,” then there can be no laity in Islam. The *ummah* (“community”) is, in essence, a sacred community—hence, the importance of the “consensus of the believers,” by which many matters are decided, and also the

Quranic principle of *shūrā* (“consultation”), which should determine matters of government however often this principle may be ignored in the actual practice of politics. The integrated life of the community—or of “the city”—is made possible by the fact that the Prophet was, for the final ten years of his life, the ruler and spiritual director of a self-governing city-state, which crystallized, as it were, in the mold of the revelation which had “descended” upon him. It is not the laws of man that determine the structure of family life, the business of trade, bartering in the market, or the craftsman’s work, but the Law of God.

Man and the Crafts

It is perhaps in the work of the craftsman that we may identify with particular clarity one of the functions of God’s viceroy on earth. To make out of raw materials, by means of human skill and effort (an effort that might aptly qualify as a type of *jihād*), objects that are both pleasing to God—since, according to a *ḥadīth*, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty”—and useful to man is a labor worthy of the “children of Adam” and entirely compatible with their delegated splendor. To fulfill its function, however, the object that has been made, humble as it may be—a table, a pot, even a comb for the hair—must have a dual aspect; it must be useful for entirely practical purposes, and it must “remind” its user of the Creator of all things. The craft as such cannot, therefore, be a merely human invention—and here we are drawn back to the “perennial philosophy”—for it is axiomatic among those peoples who, in small corners of the world, have survived with their most ancient traditions intact, that the crafts were taught to their ancestors through revelation (by “the gods” or “spirits”). Islamic tradition echoes this belief by attributing

the revelation of craft techniques to different messengers of God.

Each craft may be said to have a “secret”—as, indeed, has often been stated by Muslim craftsmen—just as every human being has a “secret” which is also his point of contact with the Divine. This view of the crafts shatters all glorification of modern technology, for this technology, on the one hand, produces objects that are exclusively utilitarian and entirely divorced from the Sacred and, on the other, makes the craftsman obsolete. Such objects are no longer a “reminder” for those who handle them and no longer a form of prayer for those who produce them. The viceroy is thereby deprived of one prayer for those who produce them. The viceroy is thereby deprived of one of his essential functions—that of imitating (on however humble a scale) the creative act, which itself produces in the visible universe the natural phenomena that are both useful to mankind and, at the same time, “signs (of God) for people who understand,” as is stated repeatedly in the Quran.

It is in understanding these natural “signs,” which are an aspect of God’s eternal message to mankind, that the viceroy acquires that knowledge which is his most characteristic gift. It is in treating these signs with respect—that is to say, in respecting his environment as a whole—that he demonstrates another aspect of his God-given function. The Muslim is commanded to “walk softly upon the earth”¹⁰ and, although he is permitted to make use of its products to sustain his life, there is not a single text either in the Quran or the *ḥadīth* literature that could be taken to justify the exploitation of its riches in a destructive manner.

Man and the Social Order

The Islamic concept of man, however, although it gives absolute precedence to the individual's direct and unmediated relationship with God, always places him firmly in his social context, and it is in his relationship with his fellows that he is most severely tested. "Manners" (*ādāb*) are a part of the religion, and Western observers have made frequent reference to the "Muslim cult of manners." All this follows directly from the principle of vicegerency and from the "priestly" identity of the believer. The individual "representative of God on earth" lives and works among others of his own kind; they are as he is and must be treated as such. This involves a certain formalism in human relationships, which contemporary Westerners sometimes find "unnatural" but which is entirely appropriate for the Muslim, who sees the human creature as something more than a child of nature. It has however another aspect, no less important, and this relates not to man's glory but to his wretchedness.

The Muslim is required to treat others with a respect due not to what—in most cases—they are but to what they might be. This presents a sharp contrast to the modern tendency to detect feet of clay in every hero and to interpret "realism" in terms of unmasking the vices and weaknesses of men and women from an unspoken assumption that evil is in some way more "real" than good and ugliness more significant than beauty. This leads all too easily to the assumption that, in discovering some minor flaw in an otherwise virtuous man, we have succeeded in exposing falsehood and bringing truth to light. By the same token, we condemn the "hypocrisy" of the imperfect man who still attempts to set a good example to others, and we praise the "honesty" of one who confesses his

shortcomings to the world. From the Muslim point of view it is difficult to perceive what purpose this “honesty” serves, beyond setting a bad example to the community.

In this matter Islam starts from first principles. Beauty and goodness relate to God, Who is the supreme Reality, and have their source in Him; ugliness and evil relate to nothingness and have the insubstantiality of shadows. Positive qualities are, in the proper sense of the term, more *real* than negative ones. The pious Muslim, therefore, averts his eyes with a decent courtesy (which is also a kind of courtesy toward the Divine Image) from the sores on an otherwise healthy body and from the flaws which may spoil but cannot annihilate the potential nobility of those around him, or he will do so as long as the person concerned desires to be better than he is. It is the direction that a man or woman tries to follow rather than the stumbling on the way that is significant.

Muḥammad promised his people that those who “cover” the sins of their fellows in this world will have their own sins “covered” by God when they come to judgment, and he warned them that those who go out of their way to expose the sins of their fellows in this world will have their own sins mercilessly exposed on Judgment Day. He told them also that one sin in the sight of men may be worse than a hundred in the sight of God. Social stability and the maintenance of “ties of relationship” are among the highest priorities in the Islamic scale of values, and, while a private sin may be readily forgiven, the setting of a bad example is an offense against the sacred community, which is the vehicle of the Faith.¹¹ The Quran itself rigorously condemns all malicious gossip

and backbiting, and it compares the seeking out of a man's past sins to "eating the dead flesh of your brother."

There is, moreover, in all gossip and in every effort to draw attention to the weaknesses of our fellows an unspoken assumption that we "know all about them." In the Islamic view God alone knows all about anyone. He knows every thought and hears the secret whisperings of which the soul itself may be less than fully aware, for He is the sole Owner of our souls, our minds, and our senses. Above all, He knows the *sirr*, the "secret" or innermost nucleus of each being, and no man can know another's "secret."¹² In its deepest sense, therefore, respect for others derives from the hiddenness of each being's true identity; and since this identity is intimately linked to its Source, its Creator and Owner, we dare not presume that it is worthless. However misshapen the outer husk may appear, we know that the kernel is present within it; the husk is corruptible but the kernel is inviolable.

To Become What One Is

For the individual Muslim who aspires to become what he should be—what in essence he *is*—the intention to set a good example to his community does not preclude an unflinching awareness of his own shortcomings and of his own inadequacy to fulfill the Trust which he accepted while still in the "loins of Adam." Indeed, this awareness is the precondition for any betterment in his condition. Except in very rare cases his vicegerency is no more than a virtuality yet to be realized. Neither the Quran nor the *aḥādīth* of the Prophet present a flattering picture of human nature as it exists; quite the contrary. The principal motive for following the example of Muḥammad is that in

him the Muslim sees the perfect example of one who did fulfill his function.¹³ The Muslim feels privileged if he can at least stumble in these footsteps. He believes that in doing so he has done all that he can do. To climb from where he is to the high peak that is the fulfillment of his human role is clearly an impossible task, but he does not despair since he knows with certainty that *lā ḥawḷ^a wa lā quwwat^a illā bi' Llāh*, “there is no strength and no force save with God.”

Man's role in the “impossible ascent” may be summed up in two words: intention and *jihād* (understood in this context simply as “effort”). According to a *ḥadīth qudsī* recorded by the most reliable authorities, the taking of one step toward his Lord brings man the Divine Help he needs: “And if he draws near to Me by a hand's span, I draw near to him an arm's length; and if he draws near to Me an arm's length, I draw near to him a fathom's length; and if he comes to Me walking, I race to him.” In other words, God requires very little of this creature of dust who was nonetheless glorified at the beginning of time, but He requires that little absolutely. First, the Muslim must know—knowledge being a duty laid upon him—what his role is in the created universe and in the theater of his brief experience of worldly life. Second, he must wish to fulfill this role and intend to do so with God's help. Third, he must put his little strength and his little talents at the service of this intention.¹⁴ The rest is in other hands.

The ambiguities in the Islamic concept of man and in the human situation as such are therefore resolved in the effort that the children of Adam, made from dust, exert in the direction of the viceregal ideal and in the Divine Help that is offered in response to this effort. And yet the fulfillment of the viceregal role is but a by-product of man's primary

function, which is to worship God and to open himself to the Light. “All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God,” according to the Quran, animals by following their God-given instincts, inanimate objects by obeying the God-given laws of the material world. But the child of Adam (to whom God taught the “names” of all things) stands above this vast current of universal worship; he does from choice what the rest of creation does willy-nilly, and he knows what he is doing.

This it is that makes him the spokesman of creation, doubly representative; for, if he “represents” God in the province of the world, he also “represents” the world before God. This is what it means to be the *khalīfat Allāh fi’l-ard*, composed of earthly dust and yet borne aloft by the angels, knower of the “names,” bearer of the Trust, and yea-sayer in response to the Divine Question, “Am I not thy Lord?”

Notes

1. “When we speak of the Heart-Intellect we mean the universal faculty which has the human heart for its symbolical seat but which, while being ‘crystallised’ according to different planes of reflection, is none the less ‘divine’ in its single essence” (F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer [London: John Murray, 1959] 95).
2. See al-Kisā’ī, *Qisās al-Anbiyā’* (English translation published in *A Reader on Islam*, ed. A. Jeffery [The Hague: Mouton, 1962] 187).

3. H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).
4. “So set thy face towards the religion as one by nature upright—the *fiṭrah* of God in which He created (*faṭara*) man—there is no altering the creation of God. That is the eternal religion” (XXX, 30).
5. “By the declining day! Verily man is in a state of loss, save for those who believe and do good and exhort one another to Truth and exhort one another to patience” (CIII).
6. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, book 3, v. 2404.
7. Abu Bakr Siraj Ed-Din, *The Book of Certainty* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1970) 30–31.
8. “To the Muslims a real atheist is not deemed to be a romantic rebel or a superior philosophical free-thinker, but a sub-human of limited intellect . . . degraded to the level of bestiality, if not below” (A. Bennigsen and M. Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* [London: Croom Helm, 1983] 62).
9. “For each of you have We appointed a Divine Law and a way of life. Had God so willed, He could have made you one people; but so that He might try you by that which He hath bestowed upon you (He willed otherwise); so compete in doing good. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you concerning that wherein ye differ” (V, 48).

10. “And the (faithful) servants of the All-Merciful are those who walk softly upon the earth, and when the foolish ones address them answer: Peace!” (XXV, 63).

11. “Who is the truly good-mannered Muslim?” asks François Bonjean, and he answers: the one “who is judged least unworthy of serving as a model for his children, for his relatives, for his neighbours, for the inhabitants of his quarter, for his city or for simple passers-by and for travellers—for the whole of humanity” (“Culture occidentale et culture musulmane,” *Les Cahiers du Sud*, 1947, p. 185).

12. The *sirr* may also be said to contain the seeds of the future, which is concealed from mankind but known to God, and none can foresee what a man may become in the course of time. The Christian might ask himself whether those who were acquainted with the rhetorician Augustine in the warehouses of Carthage could have guessed that this dissolute man would grow into Saint Augustine, the greatest of all the fathers of the church.

13. “The Prophet as Norm is not only the Whole Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) but also the Ancient Man (*al-insān al-qadīm*). Here there is a sort of combination of a spatial with a temporal symbolism; to realize the ‘Whole’ or ‘Universal’ man means to come out from oneself, to project one’s will into the absolutely ‘Other’, to extend oneself into the universal life which is that of all things; while to realize the ‘Ancient’ or ‘Primordial’ man means to return to the origin which we bear within us; it means to return to eternal childhood, to rest in our archetype, in our primordial and normative form, or in our theomorphic substance” (F.

Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. D. M. Matheson [London: Allen & Unwin, 1979] 102).

14. The Quran emphasizes that God does not “change a people” until they change themselves, and this is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, man is helped when he attempts to change himself for the better; on the other, his first tentative steps on a downward slope soon gather momentum.