



A Path Straightened Out: Perspectives on Human Nature in the Qur'an

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Preface

The Qur'an stimulated inquiry into external physical nature, one of the four loci of the divine signs—human nature, history, and society being the rest of the quartet.¹ For billions, the Qur'an has proved a catalyst for sparking curiosity about the divinely ordained resources of human nature and especially of our spiritual nature—as we are instructed to look inwards towards our own existential reality. Who are we by nature? What is the divine verdict on our essence and the purpose of our existence? Do we find this purpose through a spiritual quest or do we assign ourselves our own purpose and nature?

In Muslim reflection inspired by the Qur'an, human beings are considered the apex of God's creation (*ashraf al-makhlūqāt*). This is not a Qur'anic expression but is implicit in the scripture's elevation of the status of the Children of Adam. The scripture both exalts humanity as being congenitally created in the best form but also notes its degradation to the lowest of the low (Qur'an 95:4-5). This high estimate is dismissed by secular humanists—for whom it is self-congratulatory hubris, a 'speciesism' that disowns our real and unflattering lineage in the animal kingdom. Believers retort that secularists deny the true nobility of our nature and thus our potential for achieving moral excellence.

This essay provides a panoramic view of the Qur'anic perspective on the resources of human nature. Exploring this strategic theme assists the intelligent inquirer to locate the root of the tensions between several related but rival—and, in some cases, totally opposed—views of the true image of our humanity. How do we orient our societies towards receiving the mercy and grace of God? How do we best strive in His path? We survey the Qur'an's outlook on the nature, scope, ambitions, unique qualities, and limits of our nature. Most broadly, this essay prepares the thoughtful, conscientiously puzzled reader to consider carefully the major competing offers of human flourishing, the good life, and the collective good

¹ On the signs of God, see my "Can an Islamic Natural Theology Explain God's Silence Today?" *Renovatio* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 23–36. All references to the Qur'an are given in the body of the text. Thus, Qur'an 2:1 means the opening verse of the second surah.

for any society committed to justice, equality, and other ingredients of social moral health and communal integrity.

In sections I and II below, I describe the high status of humankind, as represented by Adam, in the divine scheme of creation. I assess the human-divine relationship and the related question of the purpose of creating human beings. In sections III-V, I discern the problematic nature of humanity by noting how the ambivalence of our nature is a divinely ordained feature, not an accident or unintended tragedy. Are we essentially good, essentially evil, or both simultaneously? How then do we become virtuous? In the hiatus of section VI, I pause to take stock of these issues as we prepare to examine, in the next two sections (VII-VIII), the practical, legal, and political implications of Adam's nature and that of his descendants. A pair of sections (IX-X) scrutinizes the Islamic portrait in the context of an influential rival portrait of the true nature of our humanity, namely, the Christian offer of salvation from sin. The final Section (XI) examines synoptically the contours of the entire terrain while casting a bifocal glance at future research conducted within the environment of our secular and pluralist liberal societies.

I. Adam, the crown of creation

God has given human beings all they ask for (Qur'an 14:34) and has blessed and honored them. This high regard for humankind is no incidental emphasis. We see it notably in Qur'an 17:70, where the verbs *karramnā* (we conferred special favors upon) and *faḍḍalnā* (we preferred) indicate high regard for humanity in the divine perspective. Everything has been subjugated to *al-insān*, the Qur'an's most inclusive word for humankind in general, including when displaying characteristically human and deplorable tendencies. Thus, in some contexts, *al-insān* means the human creature as arch-disbeliever and disputant, morally wayward and skeptical (e.g., Qur'an 19:66-7; 36:77-78; 75:3-6).

Created physical nature, particularly the aquatic and animal kingdoms, has been made serviceable and subservient to us human beings (e.g., Qur'an 14:32-3; 16:5-18; 36:33-42, 71-73; 43:12-13; 45:4, 12-13; 67:15). We are appointed, indeed anointed, by our unique Creator to be beings of a higher order of creation. Even the

angels had to bow down to Adam though this does not imply that humans are created to be of a higher order of beings than angels. Arguably, *righteous* human beings may become superior to angels. Our humanity, originating from a single source (Qur'an 4:1; 3:195; 49:13), is praised in Islamic doctrine as the crown of creation, a description similar to that the biblical Psalmist: "You made him [man] lord of the works of your hands, put all things under his feet."²

Human beings are morally the zenith of creation: "Surely we have created humankind in the best shape" (*aḥsan taqwīm*; Qur'an 95:4). The verse is part of a triple dialectic: creation in optimal form, reduction to depravity, and a final rescue of only the virtuous believers from our shared human potential for vice and evil. As we shall explore below, humanity is created, to translate literally, "in the nature framed of God" (*fiṭrat Allāh*; Qur'an 30:30). The Islamic scripture occasionally tempers the divine exaltation of our species: the creation of humanity is a marvel but the creation of the heavens and the earth is a greater one (Qur'an 40:57; 79:27). We humans alone are, however, appointed as imperialists with the mandate for dominion over nature—but only on condition that we serve God. On the way home from the laboratory, we must stop by at the mosque. Thus we can temper our hubris—as knowers—with our humility as worshippers, lest we forget that "above every knowledgeable one is One All-Knowing" (Qur'an 12:76).

An especially exalted view of humankind is contained in the divine affirmation: "I have breathed into him [Adam] of my spirit" (*ruhi*; Qur'an 15:29; 32:9; 38:72)—a phrase that exegetes take great pains to dissociate from any notion of divine presence understood as incarnation in the Christian dogmatic sense. All orthodox commentaries on this verse stress that the phrase does not imply divine incarnation—or the closely related idea of God indwelling his creation (*ḥulūl*), a Christian belief about the presence of the Holy Spirit, the third being of the Trinity, living in a righteous human being. Indeed, Islamic orthodoxy typically maintains that the spirit or soul breathed into the human creature is, properly speaking, merely attributed to God in the sense of divine ownership: 'my spirit' means 'a spirit that belongs to me.'

² Psalms 8:6.

However, this image of God blowing His spirit into the human frame indicates the divine influence on the supernatural dimension of our total human endowment. This Islamic motif is one of a few that are genuinely in common with Islam's rival faiths, the complex of Abrahamic monotheisms, ethnic, ethical and juridical, respectively, if we describe each faith by its single dominant quality. More broadly, God has strengthened the elect "party of God" (*hizb Allāh*) "by a spirit from himself" (*bi-rūḥin minhu*; Qur'an 58:22). Jesus (PBUH) is analogously fortified by "a holy spirit" from God (*rūḥ al-qudus*; Qur'an 2:87, 253).

Some orthodox Muslims may feel uncomfortable with the Judeo-Christian dogma that human beings were created in God's image or likeness³ since traffic with images, even abstract ones, is deemed idolatrous. In what follows, I speculate about this notion. My views are conjectural and move beyond but not against the resources of Islamic orthodoxy (in any case, itself not entirely unified), but I find the idea here a useful stimulus to further philosophical research. I discuss this notion as though it were a scientific hypothesis. It guides a thought-experiment and is thus a useful heuristic principle for conceptual analysis.

So what could this resourceful metaphor picturing humanity in God's image mean—and does it demean humans? It distinguishes the Greek idea of human dignity as being intrinsic to our true nature from the monotheistic notion that human worth is derivative from humanity's relationship to their unique and gracious Creator. Greek idealism identified the human essence with *nous* (theoretical reason), which was immortal. Human beings are essentially rational and moral—and that fulfills them. In Greek idealistic reflection, they are not religious creatures who need to worship God in order to fulfill themselves and attain ultimate peace and tranquility.

An image, like a shadow, necessarily lacks intrinsic reality since it derives its existence wholly, and its character partly, from the reality of which it is the image. Our humanity is constituted by our potential for relationship to God: our status is contained in our actual relation to our divine Creator. This implies that human dignity does not inhere in us by virtue of our remarkable capacities and qualities.

³ Hebrew, *tzelem Elohim*; Latin, *imago Dei*; Genesis 1:27.

For monotheists, human dignity derives from a derivative albeit vital relationship to God. This connection is part of our essence. This does not mean that we have no nature of our own: our distinctive capacities and qualities depend on our relationship to God while also existing, by divine permission, in their own right and thus belonging equally to our essence. An image derives from the reality that projects it but it still exists apart from that original reality once it has been cast. Unlike an optical illusion, it is real.

This existential or ontological debate—one about what truly exists—is vital to a correct understanding of *religious* humanism, a worldview that secular humanists claim is inauthentic, incoherent, and degrading, since it derives the dignity and sanctity of human life from an extrinsic and moreover non-existent reality, namely, God and our submissive relationship to him. Monotheism does stress that it is not our nature alone but rather our special relationship to God that distinguishes us from the rest of creation. This human exceptionalism is no cause for pride—for it is a divine endowment, an election courtesy of God's grace, not a unilateral achievement of human initiative and ingenuity. The Qur'an condemns as arrogance the presumption of human self-sufficiency (75:36; 96:7), the chief feature of the Hellenic (classical Greek) outlook. Humanists insist that monotheists have no right to call their faith 'the noblest humanism' when they preach an anti-humanist manifesto. Monotheists retort that secularism has no monopoly on humanism!⁴

Neither the Qur'an nor the Bible commits itself to a view concerning the precise respects in which human beings reflect the image of their Creator. "There is nothing like Him [God]" (Qur'an 42:11), no one is worthy of the same name as God (Qur'an 19:65) and "nothing could attain parity (*kufuw*) with Him" (Qur'an 112:4). For Muslims, asserting the affinity of the human to the divine is sustainable if conjectural but precarious and, beyond a certain point, blasphemous: to affirm that nothing wholly resembles God is not to say that nothing at all resembles Him in any respect. The unique and infinite and metaphysically perfect God may in principle share some qualities, in limited measure, with His finite and imperfect human (and angelic) creatures. Some moral values, qualities, attributes, and

⁴ Buddhists accuse secular humanists and monotheists alike of ignoring *animal* suffering and welfare.

qualities such as goodness and justice, found in humans, are actualized and realized perfectly only in God. The Qur'an rejects only the idea of a robust divinity immanent in our humanity. God cannot become incarnate inside our humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. The Qur'an repudiates that claim as blasphemous mythology, a libel against God's true nature.⁵

II. Why did God create one who may rebel?

Human beings are intelligent and curious, harboring an ambiguous potential for both good and evil and therefore are held accountable for their choices (Qur'an 17:36). The Qur'an encourages us to actively use our faculty of reason (*'aql*) in order to achieve success in the life of faith. Those who neglect to use their reason on earth will regret it bitterly as they enter Hell (Qur'an 67:10). God taught Adam the names, presumably of animals and plants in the Garden, a hint that he can categorize items, a skill vital for the empirical study of nature (Qur'an 2:31-33; note also Qur'an 96:4-5). But, by the same token, human beings are, unfortunately, more than anything rebellious and quarrelsome (Qur'an 18:54).

Why create such a contentious creature given to wrangling? The Qur'an stresses the *moral* seriousness of the decision to create human beings (Qur'an 6:70; 7:51; 21:16-17; 38:27; 44:38-9; 45:22; 67:2). We are obligated to God who created us for only two purposes: to worship him (Qur'an 51:56-7), a revelation affirmed naturally by all believers but taken to heart particularly by apolitical and quietist sects, and to show God "which among them is the best in conduct" (Qur'an 18:7). We are therefore put to the test to try our moral mettle (Qur'an 21:35; 67:2; 76:2). Against pagans, the Qur'an denies that the creation was pointless or created for amusement (Qur'an 21:16-17; 44:38). The world was not made "without [moral] purpose" (*bāṭilan*; Qur'an 3:191; 38:27) or "frivolously" (*'abathan*; Qur'an 23:115).

⁵ Islamic *theology* is a mistranslation of *kalam* since it is not permitted for Muslims to know God's *nature* in itself but rather only those divine attributes that bear on His revealed moral and legal *will* for us. God's nature remains an eternal mystery. Christian theologians seek to know God's nature since Christians seek to establish a deeper relationship of actual identity and mutual love involving God. For the Qur'an's repudiation of key Christian ecclesial beliefs, including divine anthropomorphism and incarnation, see especially sharp rebukes in Qur'an 4:171, 5:72-3, 5:116, 6:101.

Despite humankind's significant status in creation and the divinely guaranteed integrity of the moral foundations of life in this lower world in which we are on probation (Qur'an 21:35), the Qur'an eulogizes those who believe and do good as "the best of created beings" (98:7). The context is an attack on the disbelievers among the People of the Book, those who reject Islam, described here as the worst of creatures. We need God but He does not need us (Qur'an 35:15). He remains independent of us while caring for us and indeed loving the believers, even taking close friends from among them, a kind of fellowship with His pious servants (see Qur'an 3:31; 4:125). The claim that God is perfect and therefore not in need of His creatures remains, however, no isolated reference but rather a clear and consistently repeated Qur'anic emphasis. Perhaps it aims to shatter human complacency and thus enable us to cultivate the disposition to be humble before God.

III. Human nature as the site of internal struggle and conflict

We introduce the problematic nature of humankind through an enigmatic Qur'anic affirmation, plastic to interpretation. The Qur'an notes the agonizing condition of being mortal and human: "We have surely created humankind in toil and struggle" (*fī kabad*; Qur'an 90:4). The previous verse—an oath, "by the father and what he produces"—alludes obliquely to the triple nexus of sex, procreation and birth, a frequent Qur'anic motif that is present in the inaugural revelation (Qur'an 96:1-5). If the consonants are vocalized as *fī kabid*, the phrase literally means 'into the liver.' Suggestively, in Arabic culture and poetry, as in Farsi and Urdu literature, the liver is a seat of emotional travail.⁶ The associated verb *ka/ba/da* in modern Arabic, whose augmented form is made by lengthening the initial consonant, means 'to suffer, to endure.' The Qur'anic phrase suggests endurance in the face of persistent adversity. For that is the human condition, the condition of being human.

⁶ Hence the anguished Arab poetic cry of "O my liver!" (*ya kabadi*), not "O my heart!" One suspects alcohol abuse by secular Arab poets, hence their exaggerated concern for this vital organ. The liver (*jigar*, Farsi; *kalayjah*, Urdu) is seen as one seat of a person's deepest emotions. It is a common metaphor in Persia and the cultures of the northern Indian peninsula.

In English, though not in Arabic, a welcome ambiguity attends 'condition,' neutrally meaning a state but also a medical ailment.

We were created in a state of physical weakness (*du'f*), followed by the strength of youth which terminates in the infirmity of old age (Qur'an 30:54). Moral weakness is also essential to our nature: God wants to lighten our difficulties "for humanity was created weak" (*wa-khuliqa al-insānu da'ifan*; Qur'an 4:28). This was deliberate as the use of the theological (past) passive (*khuliqa*) indicates: the creation of humankind is according to the decree of God, the unstated subject. The Qur'an also uses the active voice, with emphasis, as in the earlier quotation: *laqad khalaqnā* ("We have surely created"; Qur'an 90:4).

Thus, God has intentionally created humankind with a restricted capacity to resist evil. We sin and we repent—and God forgives. Moral self-perfection and realization or actualization of our essential nature must be pursued in the context of human weaknesses. When aided decisively by the supplement of divine grace, however, complete self-mastery is in practice achievable, as witnessed in God's chosen servants, such as the Prophet ﷺ (Qur'an 4:113; 33:21) and the mother of Jesus (Qur'an 3:42). This limitation is partly caused by an unspecified weakness in the human frame (Qur'an 4:28) and furthermore by an innate capacity for (and dynamic proclivity toward) evil.

Our natural structure conceals "the soul that strongly urges [us] to do evil" (*al-nafs al-ammārah bi-al-sū'*; Qur'an 12:53). Mentioned uniquely here, the intensive form of *a/ma/ra* (to command) is used to convey the force of this evil impulse. God decrees the evil impulse; it is no unintended tragic by-product of human design or error. Being part of the divine design, this inclination towards injustice is integral to our God-given nature. Obedience to the evil soul distorts and fragments our original higher nature (*al-fīṭrah*; lit., the creation; Qur'an 30:30). We possess the constructive force of the self-accusing soul (*al-nafs al-lawwāmah*; Qur'an 75:2) which counteracts the evil soul's destructive power in the human personality. The

intensive form of *la/wa/ma* indicates severe self-incrimination by this innate, rather tyrannical, inner disposition.⁷

A human being is “created of haste” (*khuliqa min ‘ajal*; Qur'an 21:37). And haste is, as we say in English, from the devil. The context is the Arab pagans' repeated demand for details of the time and hour of judgment (Qur'an 34:29); many request that the judgment be hastened (Qur'an 29:53-4) and some request an immediate and complete display of God's signs. Human beings are typically impatient and ignorant: “Man prays for evil as fervently as he prays for good—for man is given to haste” (*‘ajūlan*; hyperbolic form; Qur'an 17:11). Such hasty and impulsive behavior is, however, a characteristic rather than a constitutional liability. We are foolish and short-sighted and therefore quickly despair of divine mercy; we are impetuous and weak-willed, thus incapable of constancy (Qur'an 30:36). We even undertook foolishly the burden of ‘the trust’ when the rest of creation, perhaps wisely, declined it (Qur'an 33:72).

To take stock of the various, sometimes opposed, facets of our nature, we may conclude thus far that we are created with certain weaknesses but, to compensate for these limitations, the Qur'an pledges that “God does not burden anyone beyond their capacity” (Qur'an 2:286). Despite the liabilities instilled in our nature, what God demands of us remains commensurate with our capacity to carry it out—to the best of our abilities. And that is the most that a just and merciful God expects of His human creatures (Qur'an 64:16).

IV. Congenital de jure qualities vs. acquired de facto defects

“And we had already taken the covenant from Adam but he forgot; and we did not find firm resolve (*‘azm*) in him” (Qur'an 20:115). This Adamic deficit, already present in the character of the first man, refers to the pre-existential covenant taken from the whole of the Children of Adam, as a single species, before their history

⁷ “Conscience (alone) is a thousand witnesses (against the wrong-doer)” is a famous Latin wisdom proverb (*Conscientia mille testes*). Paul argues that even the Gentiles (pagans, disbelievers) possess it (Romans 2.14–15). Modern Arabic and Islamic languages have *damir*, a word not found in the Qur'an.

commenced (Qur'an 7:172-3). What is true of Adam is characteristically true presumably of most, if not all, of his descendants (see Qur'an 7:102). Thus, as a Prophetic tradition has it: "Adam denied, so his offspring denied, and Adam forgot and his offspring forgot, and Adam sinned, so his offspring sinned."⁸

To deepen our insights here, we must distinguish Qur'anic claims that 'Man *is/was* (*kāna*) x y z' from 'Man was *created* (*khuliqa*) with a, b, c traits or tendencies' where *khuliqa* is a theological past passive, the unstated agent or subject being God. If we human beings are ungrateful, quarrelsome, stingy, and so on, these could be merely accidental, albeit admittedly blameworthy, attributes that can be eradicated through our determined efforts over time. If, however, we are made to be anxious, weak, and so on, then these are divinely ordained constitutional limitations in our essence; indeed, they are what make us human and prevent us from becoming or being angelic or divine. All human limitations, both essential and accidental, can be overcome with divine permission and assistance. The essential limitations, however, are naturally harder to overcome entirely—unless God Himself by fiat or preference chooses to cure us of some radical weakness. If so, the debate enters into the intractably puzzling territory of human free will versus divine predestination and determinism.

Let me take a striking example. The Qur'an uses three unusual words to sketch a sharp portrait of human beings as impatient, anxious, and mean. Our natures conceal a permanent emotional imbalance redressed only in the remembrance of God: "Certainly man was created (*khuliqa*) extremely impatient (*halū'an*). When misfortune befalls him, he is fretful (*jazū'an*); when prosperity is his lot, he is begrudging and stingy (*manū'an*)" (Qur'an 70:19-21). He was *created* by God as x and, as a result, he *is* also y and z. The conjugation *ka/na* to indicate *is/was* is unstated here. All three traits are negative but the first is willed by God. The resulting pair of negative characteristics is caused by the original trait which is congenital in virtue of being a divine endowment.

Neither the congenital limitation nor its two humanly derivative consequences are in practice constitutionally permanent since the very next verse exempts the

⁸ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, bk. 47, no. 3356, <https://sunnah.com/urn/640820>.

worshippers (Qur'an 70:22), the truly faithful who follow the rituals of their faith in an attempt not to impress others but rather to cultivate the right moral dispositions of Islamic ethics (*akhlāq*). The Qur'an eulogizes the Prophet's character (Qur'an 68:4) and the Prophet ﷺ himself affirmed that he was sent to perfect character.⁹ Worship is intended to form, indeed transform, a Muslim's conduct. Through pious effort aided by the grace of God, the believer overcomes these negative traits which include cognate dispositions such as being prematurely despairing (Qur'an 41:49) and being grossly ungrateful (*kāfir*; *kanūd*; Qur'an 17:67; 100:6 respectively). These are dispositions, not irresistible impulses or biologically instinctive drives and needs such as hunger and thirst and, arguably, sexual desire. The negative proclivities are, however, inertial though not strong enough to determine our nature against our conscious will and effort. Nonetheless, such undesirable tendencies do persist in the absence of any faith-motivated and emotionally sustained attempt to sublimate and re-direct and dissipate if not altogether eliminate or transcend them. Unsurprisingly, most human beings remain uncorrected in these aspects of their de facto congenital endowment.

Intrinsic deficiencies in human nature differ from merely typical limitations such as those found in a strained military situation. The Qur'an reassures the Messenger ﷺ that a hundred patient believers will defeat a thousand disbelievers (Qur'an 8:65). The next verse revises this ten-to-one ratio to a two-to-one ratio since God notes a temporary weakness (*da'f*; Qur'an 8:66) among the Muslims. If a human characteristic cannot be remedied, through unassisted effort of will coupled with a change of circumstance, it is residually human—constitutional and congenital. What is primary or innate to our constitution is correctly identified with only those features of our nature that form part of the divine design. The rest are secondary qualities that may be prevalent and hard to eliminate but are no part of our divine endowment. Thus for example, our tendency to forget, to be typically and routinely negligent (*ghāfil*) of our true condition as God-dependent creatures, remains a secondary attribute. Notwithstanding its prevalence as the chief blight of our spiritual lives, human beings were not created in a state of *ghaflah*. However, this

⁹ Imam Malik, *al-Muwatta'*, no. 1614, graded as authentic by Ibn Abdul Barr in *al-Tamheed* (Morocco: Ministry of Religious Endowments, 1967), 24:333.

admittedly remediable defect is traceable back to Adam, the prototypical man who forgot his covenant with God (Qur'an 20:115).

V. Further liabilities and weaknesses of our nature:

We wrong ourselves

We are often unfaithful to our higher nature; our actions are treasonable to the cause of piety. Heedless and obstinate, we refuse to discipline the God-given faculties and facilities of hearing, sight, and the heart, the seat of discernment and reasoning (see Qur'an 23:78; 67:23), the place where divine revelation descends in the case of the Prophet ﷺ (Qur'an 26:193-4). We use such God-given gifts of perception instead to heedlessly translate wicked intention into wicked conduct (Qur'an 42:20). On the Day of Judgment, a seal shall be set on the mouths of sinners while their limbs (and skin), which were used as instruments to extend the range of sin, will bear verbal witness to their misuse (Qur'an 24:24; 36:65-7; 42:21-3). God knows the secrets of the hearts (*ṣudūr*; lit. chests; Qur'an 5:7).

In Qur'anic pleas for the remembrance of God, the mechanism of treachery towards Him is linked with infidelity towards our own selves. The Qur'an advises believers to fear and remember God. If they forget Him, He will cause them to forget themselves (Qur'an 59:18-20). The generic human defect is *ẓulm al-naḥs* (injustice to one's own soul), mentioned often. For example, Sheba, when she converts to monotheism in Solomon's court, confesses that, as a former sun worshipper, *she* had wronged her own soul (Qur'an 27:44), not God. The verb *ẓa/la/ma*, used with the preposition *min* (from), neutrally indicates a deficiency in what is expected of something or someone, a failure to realize an intended purpose, what the Greeks called a person or thing's *telos*. We note this linguistically subtle usage in the parable of the garden (Qur'an 18:32-44) where two men, one humble and penitent, the other proud and boastful, engage in a didactic dialogue. The proud man is tested with the gift of two gardens producing luxuriant growth and "not failing in any respect" (*lam taẓlim minhu shay'an*; Qur'an 18:33) to produce the expected and requisite fruits, the intended purpose of the gardens. It is subtly

hinted that the human owner fails to achieve his purpose, namely, the pure worship of the real owner of the gardens.

This self-wronging is committed through treachery to our higher nature. We forget God when we commit the partly intellectual error of associating false deities with the one true deity—the unforgivable sin of idolatry (*shirk*, lit., partnering). Once the mental crime of *shirk* is placed on the level of volition, the practical result is conduct treasonable to our higher nature. Acknowledging our capacity for such perfidy is to acknowledge the actual conduct of Adam's progeny, especially as we survey the long and colorful catalog of evils caused by a persistent recalcitrance concerning God's laws. This ominous aspect of human nature is implicit from the very beginning of our historical saga, as shown by the Qur'an's account of the first murder (5:27-32). This dimension of darkness deepens the account intellectually and morally. However, unlike the biblical testaments,¹⁰ the Qur'an never affirms or implies any irreversible tragedy in the divine decision to create humankind.

The innate knowledge of God that we possess acts as a heavenly counterpoise to our God-ordained potential for waywardness. When we acknowledge the sovereignty of God by recognizing His signs, we allow the celestial side of our nature to dominate. We yearn for the higher world and God takes up our case and makes us rise above the angels. However, when we wantonly deny the divine portents and prefer our folly to divine wisdom, we become like the man “to whom We [God] sent our signs but he let them pass him by until the Devil took up his case and thus he became one of the misguided people” (Qur'an 7:175). God could have elevated him through His signs but the fool “gravitated heavily towards the ground” and followed his vain and base desires (Qur'an 7:176).

Not all moral evil is intrinsic to human nature or caused by mortal weakness. The Devil, known variously as *Iblīs*,¹¹ *al-Shayṭān*, and *al-Ṭāghūt* (the rebel), has sworn, by the majesty of God, ironically, that he will mislead Adam and his progeny and

¹⁰ Yahweh regrets creating humankind (Genesis 6.6–7).

¹¹ *Iblīs* is a fallen jinn, not a fallen angel. The jinn are a class of elemental beings created out of fire. Like humankind, but unlike angels, the jinn are free to accept or reject God (Qur'an 15:26; 37:71). Iblis was a jinn (Qur'an 18:50) who disobeyed God and was therefore expelled from God's presence. Angels are not free to disobey God and hence, unlike in Christian angelology, cannot fall from grace through disobedience.

seduce them away from the remembrance and worship of God. Armed with a limited warrant for autonomous action until the day of judgment, he seconds and abets the self-destructive tendencies in our nature (Qur'an 7:11-28). The Qur'an warns us about this arch-deceiver (Qur'an 34:5) and advises us that he is an enemy: "therefore, treat him like an enemy" (Qur'an 34:6).

Humankind is stretched like two outposts of an empire; one is godly, the other is a sub-human, potentially diabolical, frontier—and the intervening territory is human. This Qur'anic portrait is shrewdly ambivalent, nuanced, and fruitfully tense. It concedes to the secular dimension of our humanity by granting some demands of our nature while emphasizing equally our transcendent endowment. It permits optimism¹² since men and women are inclined to accept surrender of their will to God. Al-Islam is for humanity, as framed of God (...*lil-dīn ḥanīfan fiṭrat Allāh*; Qur'an 30:30), and therefore the religion of divinely created and thus upright human nature, a faith to which the repentant sinner reverts rather than converts.

VI. Hiatus: The path straightened out for us

Despite certain permanent innate as well as temporally and contextually conditioned restrictions, God enables us to please Him by achieving "the wholesome peace of submission" (*salām al-islām*), the fruit of active and continuous submission to His will. The Qur'an approves of "the tranquil soul" (*al-naḥs al-muṭma'innah*; 89:27-30), our final end, achieved after a lifelong struggle between the evil-commanding and self-accusing souls (Qur'an 12:53; 75:2). It is, after a long journey, a return to our first abode, a return to our original nature, our divinely willed constitution. The tranquil soul finally reaches equilibrium and achieves enduring equanimity—but it is still human, not divine.

Compare here the antique and realistic wisdom of Plato's tripartite division of the soul: the spirit and the appetites were like two wild untamed horses that needed to be controlled by reason, the third part. This control was to be exercised

¹² The Qur'an's optimistic view resembles the Mahayana Buddhist belief that our original nature is potentially *buddha*: once self-awakened, we will spontaneously avoid evil and pursue good. Buddhism is classified as an eastern faith but is a potentially universal faith, perhaps a semireligious humanism. It may be dubbed "the Christianity of the East" while Christianity is "the Buddhism of the West."

individually and socially; hence Plato's preference for authoritarian rule. Similarly, in the Torah, the evil impulse (*yetzer ha-ra*)¹³ in the human creature competes incessantly with the opposed good force (*yetzer ha-tov*). The Messiah, when he eventually arrives, will eliminate the evil impulse and thus transform humanity and end history. Jews believe that Jesus did not succeed in eradicating our evil nature and thus the world remains unredeemed. One has only to look, Jews contend, at the reality of our world during the duration of Christianity for the past two millennia to recognize this fact. The Qur'an does not promise the eradication of evil from our nature, only its defeat by the forces of divinely aided goodness, as witnessed in the lives of God's chosen. Famously, as in the case of Joseph, God's elect servants retain the latent potential for evil while being divinely safeguarded from its actualization (Qur'an 12:24, 32).

The contending forces of the evil-commanding spirit and the self-accusing spirit (*nafs*; see Qur'an 12:53 and 75:2, respectively), mentioned above in section III, find a rough parallel in the opposed powers of the flesh and spirit¹⁴ in Christian terminology. These fight ferociously in the tense theater of actively competitive human dispositions. The attainment of virtue, even conspicuous virtue, remains highly probable. The race requires athletic aptitude and training. The Qur'an tempers its optimistic assessment by its emphasis on practical realism. It affirms that establishing a virtuous lifestyle requires relentless patience and constant struggle (*jihād*) against our lower nature. Rarely do we humans welcome the steep moral climb (*al-'aqabah*; Qur'an 90:11). While we have the potential and capacity to lead God-fearing lives, most of us prefer the easier option of disobeying God's orders. Our notoriously all-too-human ability to oppose the divinely endorsed cause of justice and purity is ubiquitous in the Qur'an's numerous rejection narratives that portray the unheeded prophets as men rejected by or expelled from their native cities (e.g., Qur'an 21:15; 53:53; 69:9, etc.).

We possess dual but not complementary capacities; these make us crave earnestly for the ideals of piety that lie dormant in our nature. In the heat of life's struggles,

¹³ Genesis 6.5.

¹⁴ See my *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) and my commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians. Read chapter 6, commentary on Galatians 4.21–5.1 and 5.13–26.

however, we also wish to disown those very ideals. This arrangement generates religious success and failure. Few people achieve conspicuous virtue although many achieve some degree of moral excellence and self-restraint.

The path straightened out (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*; Qur'an 1:5; cf. *ṣirāṭin mustaqāmin*; a path straightened out; Qur'an 6:39, 87) for us is straightforward only in that we must turn right and go straight—to paradise! A form of the simple verb *qa/wa/ma* appears in the augmented form of *istaqāma*, meaning 'to straighten out': a hint of struggle and recalcitrance reside in its formation and meaning. The active voice describes believers as those who "remain straightened out" (*istaqāmū*) after acknowledging that God is their Lord (Qur'an 41:6, 30; 46:13).

VII. The Shariah is a consequence of optimism about our nature

The Qur'an's perspective on the faculties of reason and conscience (which essentially constitute human nature) impressed Muslims who laid the moral and philosophical foundations of the central discipline of jurisprudence. Muslim jurists confidently claimed that applied Islam, based on Qur'anic doctrine about human nature and its resources, provides practical and spiritual knowledge that satisfies the canons of reason, a reason unaffected by our capacity for sin. The sacred law (*sharī'ah*; a path; Qur'an 45:18) was derived from the Qur'an and supplemented with the Prophet's authoritative example which specified in meticulous detail the correct exercise of the will in our imperfect attempt to attain purity of heart and intention.

The details of the holy law, as the comprehensive enactment of the sovereign divine will for humankind, could be worked out by using the divinely bestowed gift of human reason (*ʿaql*). The notion of a revealed law, however, as opposed to its detailed exposition and subsequent implementation, is antecedent to society since it creates society—just as divine revelation predates the faithful community it engenders and fosters. Think of the Prophet's city-state. Revelation led to revolution—understood as profound, irreversible, and comprehensive societal

transformation at all levels and in varied dimensions ranging from the political, legal, communal, and economic to the personal and spiritual. The sacred law teaches us to attain the felicity of faith while it aims at achieving both our individual happiness (*sa'ādah*) and the common good (*al-maṣḥāḥ*). We are *innately*, that is, *independently of any particular social context*, equipped to attain the highest good by acting rationally for the sake of the good. That is why Islam could create countless law-abiding communities all over the world, from Morocco to Indonesia.

We need to do more than merely recollect our abstract knowledge of our true status as law-bound creatures subject to divine sovereignty, a truth we acknowledged before we were embodied in actualized history (Qur'an 7:172-3). Islamic legislation is paternalistic: it presupposes continuous reinforcement of the law, a realistic confession that we are not naturally wholly virtuous or law-abiding. The recalcitrance of human nature often has the last word and explains the widespread failure of human societies to fulfill God's laws perfectly.

VIII. The appointment of Adam as 'successor in the earth'

"And [recall the time] when your Lord said to the angels, 'I will appoint in the earth a successor (*khalīfah*),'¹⁵ and they retorted: 'Are you going to place in the earth one who will create disorder in it and shed blood while we celebrate your praises and glorify your holiness?' God replied: 'I know things of which you have no knowledge'" (Qur'an 2:30). The angels initially inquire about God's declaration since they believe that Adam and his seed shall shed blood and cause corruption in God's good earth.

God offered 'the trust' (*al-amānah*) of moral responsibility to the heavens and the earth and the mountains but they all refused to undertake it and were afraid of it. "But man undertook it; he is extremely unjust and foolish" (Qur'an 33:72). The

¹⁵ Only Adam is appointed and, to the chagrin of secular feminist readers, not his unnamed spouse Eve. The masculine noun *khalīfah* (Qur'an 30:2, 38:26 [or *khalīf*, caliph]) has no accepted grammatically feminine form although, ironically, it already contains the feminine ending *-ah*.

context of this passage is the intrigues of hypocrites and secret agitators in Medina as the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ struggles to create an ideal theocracy. Here it seems that it is our decision to be vicegerents of God; we voluntarily and ignorantly undertook the trust, the stewardship of the earth, and the commitment to serve God and thus refute the satanic scepticism about our potential for godliness. Human beings are morally ambitious but also foolhardy.

The purely religious doctrines of the Qur'an—beliefs about God, His angels, revealed books and prophets—simultaneously sustain certain social and political entailments. Compared to normative Christianity's low estimate of *Homo politicus*—the heavenly city is not on earth—the Qur'an's optimistic anthropology implies the political perfectibility of human nature, an assumption that explains the scripture's repeated insistence on the constant struggle to establish a just and righteous order on earth. Muslims see Islam as providing a habitat for the cultivation of what were known to the Greeks as the political virtues. The excellences of civic life were to be developed and nurtured during participation in the political, including imperial, life. These demands enlarged the sphere of religious duty, thus providing another arena for the service of God. The sea of faith found a specifically political estuary.

Despite fearing the awesome and imminent day of resurrection (Qur'an 7:187; 21:1; 22:1-2; 47:18, etc), the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ calmly and systematically built a civil community in Medina and remained at the helm of its political destiny literally until death, euphemistically called “the certainty” (*al-yaqīn*; Qur'an 15:99). Zeal for a better world yet to come did not prevent him from founding the heavenly city in this imperfect world. Admittedly, Medina does not fully correspond to Augustine's *The City of God* since Medina was a *ḥaram*—a sanctuary. It was never heavenly since its citizens were not sin-free or perfectly virtuous people guaranteed salvation simply by virtue of being its residents.

The Qur'an and the Prophet's ﷺ teachings are both apocalyptic in mood. Both proclaim imminent divine judgment, perhaps in part to indicate the moral urgency of “The Hour” (Qur'an 20:15) rather than only its temporal proximity. This is done to motivate piety here and now. Be that as it may, this practical and applied moral

attitude of living life despite the possibility of debacle close at hand sounds unremarkable only in a secular age where large-scale planning for the future is commonplace, notwithstanding current risks. Consider, however, the feverish apocalyptic anticipation of the end of the world and the imminence of judgment found in first-century Palestinian sectarian Judaism and in the earliest authentic Pauline epistle (1 Thessalonians), dated to 50 CE. The New Testament contains only an interim politics and ethics since Christians were awaiting the end of history. Paul and Jesus' religious enthusiasm, as recorded in the Gospels, precluded the possibility of founding a socio-political order during their own lifetimes.¹⁶

IX. Does our human nature need a savior to redeem us or only a warner to guide us?

Muslims see human beings as subject to both good and evil proclivities but often weak-willed in respect of following through with their good intentions. In any case, they are apt to forget the truth about God's right to guide their lives, a truth they confessed, as disembodied souls awaiting the commencement of actual history (Qur'an 7:172). At this prehistoric primordial assembly, convened outside historical time but in some sacred space, all human beings acknowledged the lordship of their only Creator: God.

This tradition, unique to the Qur'an, contrasts with the overall Christian picture of an original human situation tainted by inveterate sinfulness and a radical alienation from God. For Muslims, the essential element in human nature is an intellect (*'aql*) that can acquire knowledge and appropriate a revealed truth that informs practical religious conduct. For Christians, the human will and intellect are defiled and, especially for Protestants, disabled by sin. Human nature is corrupted by the fall, a contingent event with ineluctable consequences. Having fallen into sin separates us from God. Therefore, the intellect, no longer enlightened by divine truth, holds false opinions; the will, no longer guided by divine love, makes evil choices. The fall, according to most Christian theologians, was a unique disaster which fully determined and denatured the total nature of humankind. Adam's lapse from grace

¹⁶ I argue for this thesis in my *Islam as Political Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), chapters 3 to 7.

disfigured his original nature and, hence, that of his descendants: human beings are fallen creatures with corrupted wills and irreparably damaged reasoning faculties.¹⁷

Christian theologians isolate the crisis of sin as the deepest crisis in the human personality. We are being sucked in by the quicksand of sin and cannot save ourselves; only someone standing on firm ground can offer us the hand of help. Men and women know themselves only as sin-infected creatures; we do not know human nature in its integrity. Only God can save us and redeem us from our own evil nature (John 3:16).¹⁸ In fear and trembling, Paul worked out the details of this offer of salvation (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

Muslims reject any such permanent crisis in the human personality caused by a single act of sinful disobedience to the divine will. Adam's disobedience in paradise was a consequential but contained act of rebellion to God's will, a transgression with no larger implications for human nature or even Adam's nature. The Qur'an frequently emphasizes that "no laden one shall bear another's load" (e.g., 53:38), thus disowning the harmful and despair-inducing idea that Adam's sin was inherited by his children. Typically, the sinful act is caused jointly by the extrinsic factors of ignorance and weakness of will. If men and women are determined to follow divine tuition, they can still rise above the angels. The expulsion from heaven is an opportunity to dispel the devil's doubts about our ability to please God (Qur'an 4:117-121). Adam asked God for forgiveness for his disobedience—and God forgave him. God is most forgiving and merciful, a constant refrain in the Qur'an (e.g., 2:35-37).

¹⁷ Catholic theologians have mitigated this harsh view and inadvertently aligned it partly with Islamic teachings: traces of the *semen religionis* (seed of religion) survive the fall, and, therefore, all men and women, unless they are congenitally or invincibly ignorant of God's existence, retain the *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity) that is their birthright.

¹⁸ For my analysis of the Hebrew redeemer (*go'el*) and its radical transformation into the Christian ideal of the anointed savior (Greek, *Christos*), see my "Prophet Warning: Justification, Retribution and Salvation in Islam—A Comparative Study" in *The Anxiety of End-Time*, ed. Peter Koslowski (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), 1–18. I explain why Islam rejects as ineffective the sanguine system of Jewish sacrifice. Though unnecessary for redemption and salvation—submission (*islām*) to God's will suffices—it remains acceptable as charitable piety (see Qur'an 22:37). Tellingly, despite relating the Moses story countless times, the Qur'an nowhere mentions the many blood sacrifices that surrounded the covenant with Moses as portrayed in the Torah.

X. What is the purpose of the Islamic holy law?

The law is, for Muslims, as for other followers of the Abrahamic tradition, a catalyst for good deeds. Paul saw it as merely our temporary tutor, awaiting the gift of the Messiah's grace that would finally render it redundant. Paul argued that the Law of Moses frustrates its internal intentions because it identifies the scope of sin without enabling us to escape from sin or its consequences (Romans 2:12-7:25). Christians believe that all human beings are fallen—sinners who crave redemption from their sins followed by reconciliation with a holy God. We need grace to transform us, not only revelation to guide us: what we are by nature can only be rectified by what we may become by grace.

The purpose of the Shariah, however, is not to eradicate sin or its freely willed consequences since sinful action is an essential human proclivity. Rather, the law reveals humanity's full potential for avoiding sin as much as possible while doing works of virtue. This is a dimension of our nature that would otherwise remain dormant, its latent potential wasted as in an intelligent teenager who plays truant. Virtue is not beyond the law but rather through the law. This is why Islamic teachings oppose any wholly supernatural, therefore radically external, rescue, via grace alone, from the human plight and blight of sin and disobedience. Though not innately deviant or crooked or unsound, the Children of Adam are easily misled into temptation. To face and resist temptation, divine warning and education jointly suffice: all we need are rightly guided mentors who can guide us out of our heedlessness. The Prophet of Islam is not a savior or even an advocate (*wakīl*; Qur'an 10:108; 17:54; 39:41). We must manage our own affairs: if we do well, we do well for ourselves and if we do evil, we do it only to our own souls's detriment (Qur'an 17:7). Divine grace is, nonetheless, indispensable since good actions cannot achieve salvation for anyone, not even for the Holy Prophet himself ﷺ!

The Qur'an rejects the resigned and tragic view that human beings are radically incorrigible. Muslim historians have therefore reasoned that, given the Prophet Muhammad's success in establishing a virtuous city in Medina, we too can create a God-centered culture in any time and place. The original and perfect political

providence of God can be recreated, if only in a fragmentary and imperfect form. The exacting prescriptive demands of Islamic law emerge naturally from the Qur'an's optimistic account of human spiritual potential—the uniquely Islamic doctrine of our original capacity for goodness, a doctrine opposed to the blight and stigma of original sin. Moreover, beyond merely ritualistic demands (as in Jewish law, *halakhah*), the Shariah focuses on moral and intention-oriented nomistic demands.

Many human beings worship God despite the distractions of the world. Countless human beings remember God in formal daily prayer and in informal petition and supplication (Qur'an 22:18). Unlike angelic worship, however, human devotion is, inevitably, imperfect and infrequent. Angels ceaselessly worship God, as they proclaim when He decided to create humankind (Qur'an 2:30); they do so, however, without the need to resist temptation. Indeed, a not negligible number of human beings are conspicuously virtuous. “The friends of God” (*awliyā' Allāh*; Qur'an 10:62), successfully live in the active heat of pious emotion. Devout believers love God with greater intensity than the idolaters love their idols (Qur'an 2:165). Many of the faithful respond enthusiastically to the divine summons; the ones devoted to their Lord (*al-ribbīyūn*; Qur'an 3:146) worship God in times of persecution and, despite being outnumbered, ceaselessly battle against their disbelieving oppressors. “The determined prophets” (*ulū al-‘azm min al-rusul*; Qur'an 46:35) are commended for their outstanding patience.¹⁹ Over God's party, the devil has no authority (Qur'an 16:98-9). God's judgment about true believers is in principle always bound to be—and in practice always found to be—true (Qur'an 95:4-8).

¹⁹ The prophets of resolve and resilience are thought to be Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. All except Noah received scriptures. Enigmatically called “the former scrolls” (*al-ṣuḥuf al-ūlā*, Qur'an 87:18–19) of Abraham and Moses, and mentioned again, with the names of the two Hebrew prophets reversed (see Qur'an 53:36–7), this Abrahamic revelation was perhaps similar in language, though not legal content, to the Torah. It is no longer extant, even in fragmentary form.

XI. Humanity as a work in progress? A philosophical farewell

The Qur'an eulogizes the earliest generation of Muslims as the best community (3:110). This verse may arguably refer to all Muslims at all times, but the earlier generations of Muslims were definitely better than the latter. In any case, a famous hadith²⁰ warns the early believers that if they neglect merely a tenth of the law, they might be condemned to Hell while the Prophet goes on to inform them of a time when obeying even a tenth of the law would suffice to save the sinners. Are we that conspicuously sinful generation? And will subsequent generations continue getting even worse?

How do we, in secular cultures, balance the commitment to human rights and dignity, including the intellectual right to inquire and doubt, with orthodoxy's right to safeguard divine honor and prerogatives? Does a dualism in our congenital apparatus fragment our personality—robbing us of our integrity and wholeness, making us morally schizophrenic regarding good and evil, diluting or even contaminating our primordial design as creatures destined to please God, though not seek ultimate communion with Him? Can we ever transcend altogether the struggle between good and evil within our natures and thus move beyond good and evil? God's nature is finely balanced between mercy and justice. But what can we say about our own nature? What a work of art is man! The same poetic lament ranges from Shakespeare in the west to Iqbal in the east.

In the divine design of humanity is contained an indefinite though not infinite potential for goodness. But we are not *finite* forms of an *infinite* God. That is a logically incoherent thought. Admittedly, such subversive thoughts arise only when we turn mysteries into mere problems, as if we were doing secular social science. 'Why are human beings created weak?' remains a mystery because it asks about the motives of a deity whose intentions, like His nature, are by definition

²⁰ Muḥammad ibn 'Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, vol. 4, bk. 7, no. 2267, graded as *ḥasan* (good).

irreducibly mysterious (see Qur'an 6:103). One should not therefore expect any wholly naturalistic answer to be fully satisfactory.

The de facto deficiencies and deficits in human nature make us human and fallible. They do not denature us from some imagined de jure nature. To think the latter is to imply a divine regret concerning the tragedy of humanity, a thought foreign to the Qur'an. Our weakness is willed by God. It enables the capacity and motivation for struggle—to overcome such liabilities, to improve ourselves and thus attain finally, by grace, the kind of perfection appropriate for a weak and fallible creature, victimized by temptation. Striving and strife occur as we encounter our lower nature, the evil-commanding soul which is an integral part of our constitution as human beings. The Socratic-Platonic view contains an undue optimism that reason and knowledge recollected are all we need in order to subdue the recalcitrant will in the service and cause of virtue. Paul rejects this in favor of hyperbolic and hubristic pessimism, as he boasts of his weakness, his utter need for divine intervention and Christ's all-sufficient grace. The Qur'an's characteristic moderation, resembling what philosophers call pragmatic realism, provides a third way here.

The narrative of Adam's creation and appointment releases, under pressure of disciplined challenge, certain axiomatic insights about our foundational moral and metaphysical location and status in the world. It can never be outdated: it is perennially relevant as it guides our conduct inside history for different generations. The Qur'an still speaks to us today since its account of Adam portrays human nature as raw material rather than some static draft of a mechanical design that must culminate in only one finished product. Our nature is designed to be elastic and indeed plastic—to our own free will and consciously dynamic effort and action.

We are neither animals guided simply by biological needs and instincts nor pre-programmed angelic 'robots' who involuntarily obey God just as all creation does through the governing laws of nature. Only the Last Day will decide our nature as ultimately good or evil when we are commanded to read the book of our own actions (Qur'an 17:14). Thus, our destiny is finally determined only *in virtue*

of the virtue we attain, not some fixed or pre-determined nature which is neither good nor bad absolutely. We are and become what we do habitually.