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# Man in Society according to Islam with a Christian Evaluation\*

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In traditional Islam the doctrine of man has not properly been developed as in Christianity. It has been said that there is only one doctrine in Islam and that is the doctrine of God. This is very largely true. Everything in creation including man appears to be a foil to the all-embracing and all-dominating power of Allah. This emphasis on the unity, power and majesty of God is at once the strength and weakness of Islam. It is more strength than weakness, for it was devotion to faith in Allah that enabled Islam to achieve the conquest of many geographical areas of the world and assume the rôle of a civilizing force. Modern Muslim leaders of thought are again raising the standard of 'tauhid', not merely to arouse the Muslim world from forgetfulness of their glorious past, but also to give them the vision of an illustrious future and stir them to work for the conquest of the world at large for Islam. In order to see the doctrine of man in its right perspective it is necessary to keep in mind the Godwardness of Islam.

## THE QURANIC TEACHING ABOUT MAN

Man was created of clay (23:12ff.). 'We created man of dried clay of black mud formed into shape' (15:26). It is pointed out that whereas the rest of creation came into being by a fiat of Allah, man was 'formed' from matter. 'Verily We created man from a product of wet earth, then placed him as a drop (of seed) in a safe lodging. Then fashioned We the drop into a clot, then fashioned We the clot a little lump; then fashioned We the little lump bones, and then clothed the bones with flesh, and then produced it as another creation—so blessed be Allah, the best of creatures' (23:12-14).

Here man's origin and his evolution from a lower stage to a higher is traced. The point emphasized is not so much the superiority of man over the rest of nature, but that man is the creature

\*A paper read at the Indian Christian Theological Conference.

in whom wisdom and power of creation are best evidenced, and in whom after creation the sovereignty of Allah is exemplified as His *khalifa* (vicegerent). Of himself man has no intrinsic worth. He is what He is in virtue of what God wills him to be.

The Quran says about man: he is mortal (21:35); he has hardly any will of his own (81:29; 76:30); created good, but very low unless he believe and do good (95:4ff.). He is weak (4:32), inconstant (17:12; 89:15-17), capricious (41:49-51), covetous (17:102), proud of riches (96:6ff.), universally sinful (16:63), made from earth to return to earth (71:16ff.), will accuse himself on the last day (75:14), he is above all ungrateful. These verses, however, must be taken in the context of the opposition which the Prophet had met in his ministry.

Man's greatness lies in his being an 'abd' (slave) of God; apart from Him man is nothing. In the phrase '*khalifa*—vicegerent—of God', the emphasis is on the words 'of God' and not on *khalifa* as some later Muslim potentates tried to make out. In 15:29 it is said that God creates man and then breathes into him His spirit (cf. Genesis 2:7). Man's superiority is due not to him but to the spirit of God that is in him. It is said that from a 'despised fluid' man becomes God's vicegerent, not because of any superiority in him but because of the 'breath' of God in him. By virtue of his office as the *khalifa* of God man is even superior to the angels and not 'a little lower than the angels' as the Bible says. Angels are asked to prostrate themselves before Adam, and all of them do except *Iblis*, who argues that he was created from fire and so could not worship a creature of earth. *Iblis* was condemned because he failed to see that man's superiority over him was in fact due to the presence of God's spirit in Adam, so that worship of Adam was not the worship of a lower creature but of God Himself. Satan's excuse was really a subterfuge for his own self-centredness. It was a refusal to worship God alone and to obey Him implicitly. Man cannot subdue the world of nature and bring peace among men so long as he is not guided and strengthened by the spirit of God.

The principle just enunciated holds good for man in his relation to society. God has created all men of one spirit (*nafas*) (4:1). Commenting on this verse Muhammad Ali says, 'Thus these words declare the unity of the human race and equality of the male and female'. Man is above woman in matters of social relationship, but man and woman are essentially the same in virtue of the *nafas* of God cast into them. Solidarity of mankind is one of the basic beliefs of Islam. Division among men is due to their neglect of the unity of God. Absolute faith in the sole sovereignty of God over man both in his personal life and in society is the key to man's happiness.

In the Muslim tradition there is another concept dealing with the individual in the group, namely *Dar al-Islam*, the brotherhood of the faithful. This is not merely a theoretical concept; it is an intangible equality which gives every Muslim a feeling of sympathetic solidarity with every other Muslim and provides

him with a sense of security. He belongs, he believes, to a brotherhood which is above colour, class, nationality and state organizations. In fact a Muslim can feel at home in many lands scattered from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the very heart of the Pacific. All this creates or is able to create an *esprit de corps*, a unity of peoples, the importance of which cannot be over-estimated. (H. B. Smith : *Muslim Doctrine of Man ; Muslim World*, Vol. XIV, July–October, 1945).

It will be seen from this that man's social nature can find its highest felicity in a community organized for the service of the one God. In an attempt to bring out the essential structure of Muslim government Grunbaum states these points. 'The purpose of man is the service of God, "ibada". Complete "ibada" requires the existence of an organized community of believers. The existence of such a community requires government. The primary purpose of government is the rendering possible of "ibada".'

The ideal of society in Islam is the coming together of all mankind under the banner of Islam for the primary purpose of the worship and service of God. Man attains to his full stature in a Muslim society, because Muslim society is the only society in which 'tauhid' is fully apprehended and put into practice. There is no hatred of non-Muslims. On the contrary, it is maintained that social dealings are possible with those who worship the one God but are outside the pale of Islam. This is specially so with those called 'the people of the book', namely the Jews and Christians, who are monotheists. But there can be no fellowship with polytheists and idolators. The unity of mankind is based on the fact that they have been created from 'one soul' and can be maintained by the worship of and obedience to the will of Allah. All men are equal before God, but they lose the equality to the extent that they compromise the unity of God. Jews and Christians, though they are 'people of the book', cannot have the same right and privilege in a Muslim society as the believers do, for they do not accept the last and final revelation of God.

#### MODERN ISLAMIC VIEWS OF MAN IN SOCIETY

One of the most famous and influential personalities in Islamic modernism is Muhammad Iqbal. Though he claims to derive all his teaching from the Quran, it is an undeniable fact that he has been deeply influenced by modern Western evolutionary philosophers. He says that there are three things which are perfectly clear from the Quran : that man is the chosen of God (20:114) ; that with all his faults, man is meant to represent God on earth ; and that man is the trustee of a free personality which he accepted to his peril (33:72). According to Iqbal, Islamic theologians, under the influence of non-Islamic forces, have developed a dualism regarding human nature. It was the sufis who maintained the unity of inner experience declared in the Quran, and Iqbal argues that the task lying before the Muslims is to discard

the unhealthy intrusion into Islam and to re-think the whole of its theology. He finds the clue to the right method of reaching the self in Bradley's approach to the problem of human personality. Rejecting the special theory of Bradley, he insists that 'The finite centre of experience, therefore, is real, even though its reality is too profound to be intellectualized'. The human ego is thus retained by Iqbal. His exposition is based greatly on ideas derived from Bergson and a number of other Western philosophers. Islam, according to Iqbal, does not recognize the distinction between the Sacred and the Secular, the material and the spiritual. He emphasizes the dynamic nature of the soul and its affinity with the Ultimate Soul. Though some of his words would sound heretical to the orthodox Muslim, he gets away from being censured on account of the fiery torrent of his poetry. 'We have strayed away from God', he says, 'and He is in quest of us.'

Iqbal maintains that man is a co-worker with God. He should therefore take the initiative. Desire in the sense of an ever-advancing surge towards the ideal is what gives reality to the human soul.

While emphasizing individuality, Iqbal is not oblivious of society. Society is the school in which individual persons are trained into perfection. 'For the individual to be bound to society is a blessing. It is in community that his worth is perfected.' The vision of the ideal society was one in which 'there would be no aggressive wars, no colour or race or class or national distinctions, no beggars or unemployed. It would be permeated by the spirit of brotherhood, social service and spiritual warmth' (Wilfred Smith's words).

Iqbal is no fatalist. For him 'tadqir' merely means inner potentiality created by God but which unfolds itself by the strivings of the individual. Muhammad is the perfect example of what the Quranic general principles mean in actual practice. There is no need in Islam for priests; by following the Prophet in all details of life the faithful are brought in touch with God. Iqbal, as may be noted, is trying by all arguments that come by, sociological, philosophical, mystical, and poetical, to instil into the minds of his co-religionists a sanguine hope about the future of Islam and inspire them to action. He is deeply loyal to Islam, especially to the Quran and the Prophet, and is proud of its history. But he cannot be regarded as a consistent thinker. Though all Muslims will enthusiastically accept his ideal for the future of Islam, it is not likely that they will endorse his delineation of the nature of man in terms of a philosophy of a particular time. Iqbal himself may not perhaps claim finality for his expositions. His purpose is a more immediate one. He is trying to make his contemporary Muslims feel that their religion and culture are not outdated, but rather they are much ahead of the time, an ideal towards which the whole creation is moving. Iqbal is giving to Islam what Christianity is giving to the world, namely the good news of God's nearness to man and of His concern for the restoration of mankind to a happy life in Him. As a good Muslim, Iqbal

rejects the Christian idea of man's sinfulness ; he is not conscious of the ' exceeding sinfulness of sin '. Adam's sin, he thinks, was a rise rather than a fall. Iqbal tries to raise humanity to divinity without redemption. He cannot do otherwise as a Muslim. Even with regard to the position of women in Islam, he is unable to say a word against tradition, and he keeps women behind the purdah.

Another leader in Islamic thought in modern times is Zia Gokalp of Turkey. Like Iqbal, he also is a poet. While both men share in the ardent desire for the revival of Islam, Gokalp thinks that the salvation of man lies in the development of his social rather than of his individual personality. However, by society Gokalp means Turkish nationalism. But he insists that the traditional social framework of Islam is not suited to modern conditions.

Like Iqbal and other Muslim moderns, Gokalp is unwilling to give up the Quran. It contains, he declares, general principles which are eternal and unchangeable ; but in practical application, he admits, they should be adapted to changing conditions of society. The mediaeval system of law and jurisprudence, argues Gokalp, must give place to something that will help the nation to rise to full stature in the modern world. He teaches that in the early days of Islam the religious leaders did not take active part in the government but directed it from outside. The decline of the Muslim society began when religious leaders became the officers of the state and thus ceased to be a corrective and directive force in the life of the community.

Gokalp's ideal society is calculated to rouse nationalism among Muslims. But it is based on a narrow conception, and in the final analysis it may prove a hindrance rather than a help in the full development of human personality ; it is surprising that Iqbal and Gokalp allowed their free spirits to be cramped by it. The spiritual founder of Pakistan, Iqbal, as also Gokalp, seems to have ignored the universal ideal which he has seen, and thrown out to his co-religionists the path of nationalism.

Before passing on to make a Christian assessment of the Muslim idea of man in society, a few words may be said about mysticism in Islam. In many ways Islamic mysticism has attempted both to delve deeply into the inner recesses of human personality and to evolve an ethical discipline to reach the final goal of unity with God. The orthodox religion is too formal, external and mechanical to satisfy the longing of the human heart to draw close to the Object of its worship. The wisdom of the head fails to give any certain knowledge of God, but the wisdom of the heart offers it through the path of mysticism. A loving approach to God—its first step is the purification of the heart—which is to be effected by repentance and confession of sin. Then by a strict control of the body and mind, the soul of man is believed by degrees to change, as it were, from glory into glory, till in the end it attains to the ecstatic state, in which it can have a clear vision of the Beloved and is lost in love (*ishq-i-haqqi*). The final

stage, *fana fillah*, is one in which the mystic believes himself to have been annihilated in God. This stage is interpreted by some as one of complete absorption in God ; but Iqbal and others have a different view about it. Iqbal, for instance, maintains that 'it is not the drop slipping into the sea, but the realization of the reality and permanence of the human ego in a profounder personality'. The transformation of the soul is described by Jalaud Din Rumi, the famous Muslim mystic, in these words :

I died to the inorganic state and became a plant and then  
I died to the vegetable state and attained to the animal. I  
died from animality and became man : why, then, should I  
fear ? When have I become less by dying ? At the next  
stage I shall die to man, that I may soar and lift my head  
amongst the angels ; once more I shall be sacrificed and die  
to the angels ; I shall become that which enters not into the  
imagination.

Mysticism emphasizes love as the motive and final goal of the human soul. The sufi form of worship is not the reciting of set prayers but constant remembrance of God. Withdrawal from the world and a life of quiet meditation on God to the neglect of society are generally advocated by the sufis. But men like Rumi teach that love cannot be best expressed by withdrawal from the world. It is in God, the Perfect Personality, that man finds his destiny.

#### A CHRISTIAN ASSESSMENT OF THE ISLAMIC IDEA OF MAN IN SOCIETY

Islam's emphasis on the sovereignty of God over nature and man is in absolute agreement with the teaching of Christianity. But in actual practice Christianity, as it developed in the West, tends to keep religion in the background, not in the sense of neglecting it but rather of regarding it as a leaven quietly leavening the whole lump of human affairs. Generally speaking, Christians are seldom found praying in public or repeating the name of God constantly with their lips. A Muslim, on the contrary, does not hide his religion under a bushel. He may be accused of ostentation and superficiality, but the fact is that he is truly God-intoxicated. His emphasis on the absolute unity of God is psychologically good for the common man, for he is led to give his undivided loyalty and devotion to the one God. He avoids the danger of practical polytheism or tritheism to which Christians and others are often subject.

Christians and Muslims agree in regard to the *form* of 'one God and one humanity' ; but they differ with reference to the *content*. The Christian conception of God is deeper and richer as it lies at the back of the divine revelation made in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. The ideal of man in Christianity is Jesus Christ and of society the Church as founded by Him. The ideal of man in Islam is Muhammad, the perfect man, and of society his *umma*, community.

Whereas Islam emphasizes the sovereignty and absolute 'otherness' of God, Christianity teaches His nearness. Though Islamic sufism stresses God's nearness, the traditional and dominant view is that God is to be feared ; submission to Him and complete resignation to His will are the orthodox Islamic teaching. Islamic moderns like Iqbal have tried to correct this 'defect'. In Christianity the affirmation of the doctrine of the Incarnation makes a great difference in man's understanding of God's nature and of the attitude which he should adopt in relation both to God and to his fellow men.

Both Christianity and Islam believe in the brotherhood of man and the solidarity of the human race ; but in practice Islam has given a better expression to it than Christianity, not in the form of an elaborate code of conduct or by establishing a religious state but in actual practical relationship with one another. Since there is no priesthood in Islam, there appears in it no class distinction, except among the sufis whose 'leaders' become virtual mediators between God and man. In Christianity it is recognized that full fellowship is possible only among those who are 'in Christ', yet every man is a brother for whom Christ died. Furthermore, in ordinary day-to-day relationships in this world Christianity teaches no distinction is to be drawn between a Christian and a non-Christian ; all men are to be treated equally. In Islam, on the other hand, complete equality and religious liberty is not possible for non-Muslims. Courtesy and kindness, however, are shown to all, and that is a great quality of Muslim people.

Such incongruities in modern life as polygamy, divorce and purdah are gradually disappearing from Islam. The rigidity of the Muslim law is also being modified in our times on the recognition that it was not meant to be or can be valid for all times and that in the interests of the basic principles of Islam the laws have to be changed to meet new conditions. In the words of N. B. Smith :

Islam recognized the intrinsic worth of the individuals as owing their existence to God and responsible to Him for their actions. This means that no individual can be completely subsumed in a totalitarian structure such as that of Communism . . . neither can Islam ever make peace with the economic determinism or materialistic interpretation of history which is fundamental to Marxism. Man is not controlled by matter or by economic forces since he is essentially a spiritual being with affinities to God and thus a moral being, free in his spirit. God and not matter is in control of historic movements.

State and religion are identical in Islam. This has proved to be a great burden to modern Muslim society. In some places, as in Turkey, the state and religion have virtually been separated and the idea of universal brotherhood has suffered diminution in consequence of the rise of independent national units in the world of Islam.

In Christianity man is a child of God, made in his image. He has been given in Jesus Christ a promise of full redemption from sin, and has also been grafted into His Body, the Church, which is the fellowship of the redeemed, in order that he may grow 'into the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'. This emphasis with reference to man in society cannot be found in Islam ; it is still unreached by those who are called Christians. The idea that man can rise from being essentially an 'abd' (slave) of God to be a 'co-worker' with Him by a dynamic effort of his own, as suggested by Iqbal, is something which, from the point of view of the Christian understanding of man, is impossible of actuality. Islam has much to learn *in theory* from Christianity, and Christianity has much to learn *in practice* from Islam.