Thirteen Theories of Human Nature

Seventh Edition

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CHAPTER

7

Islam: The *Khalifa* Ideal

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Many readers of this chapter may know little about Islam except what they have seen in the contemporary media. In the wake of 9/11 and the 7/7 London bombings, recent attention has focused on the immediate, the sensational, and the threatening. Despite the fact that very few Muslims have engaged in terrorism and many terrorists have not been Muslim, there is a tendency in Europe and North America to associate Islam with terrorism. A brief historical overview of the growth of Islam may help establish a more balanced view.

With strong historical roots in Judaism and Christianity, Islam is the third great monotheistic world religion of Semitic origin. It arose in Arabia in the seventh century C.E., when the prophet Muhammad had a series of visions. According to Islamic tradition, these visions are direct revelations from God (Allah) and compose what is today the text of the **Qur'an**.

Disputes arose in the wake of the Prophet's death (632 C.E.) as to who should succeed him as leader of the nascent Muslim community. A lengthy period of social and political unrest followed. In the latter decades of the seventh century, a series of civil wars split the community into a majority party (known today as "**Sunnis**," or followers of the

Prophet's practice) and a minority party (known today as "**Shi'a**," or followers of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, a close companion and blood relative of the Prophet). The names of these parties are somewhat misleading because the minority party also considers itself to be following the practices of the Prophet. What originally distinguished the two groups was a philosophical disagreement: Who is best qualified to succeed the Prophet as leader of the Muslim community? The Shi'a held that the leader, or *imam*, should come from Muhammad's family line; and they still look to an imam from that line to continue the prophetic tradition. The Sunnis followed a practice that prevailed among many Arab tribes of the time and invested leadership in an individual chosen after consultation among tribal elders.

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) this intracommunal turmoil, the seventh century also witnessed Muslims acquiring unprecedented wealth through territorial expansion. Within a century of the death of Muhammad, Muslims had conquered the Near East, North Africa, and much of Spain and had established themselves at the gates of India and China. By the late eighth century, a Muslim Empire (ruled from Baghdad, in modern-day Iraq) rivaled the Roman Empire in extent, though it did not include Turkey, Greece, or Italy.

From the eighth to the twelfth centuries, there was a great flowering of Islamic civilization. Many Muslims interpreted their material success as vindication of the rise of Islam, and perhaps it is not surprising that this same period saw startling creativity in the religious realm. Indeed, much of what is regarded today as Islamic tradition was established during this time. Remarkably, Muslim intellectuals and pietists produced this cultural achievement without the aid of centralized institutions to guarantee uniformity of belief and practice among the faithful. Instead, Islamic traditions rely upon a broad degree of consensus among scholars (*ulama*) trained, to a large extent, in the arcane particularities of canon law. Muslim jurisprudence resembles Christian theology in that neither questions the authority of a claimed divine revelation. It resembles British common law insofar as it is case-based, but Muslim jurists do not recognize legal precedent in the same way as their common law counterparts. Like British common law, Muslim jurisprudence evolved into a highly specialized profession dominated (though never exclusively) by male elites. It is also interesting to note that, from the eighth century until the present, the majority of Muslim jurists have belonged to mystical brotherhoods.

In addition to their accomplishments in religious thought and practice, Muslim thinkers developed intellectual systems that combined the inheritance of Greek, Egyptian, Indian, and Iranian philosophies with the Islamic faith. In this age of great confidence, Muslims made advances in the fields of science, medicine, philosophy, and theology. These advances

were later passed on to intellectuals in western Europe. Indeed, a persuasive case can be made that Europe's emergence from the so-called Dark Ages was facilitated by exchanges that took place among Muslim intellectuals and their Jewish and Christian counterparts in Spain during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Starting in the late fifteenth century, Europeans began to explore and colonize much of the world outside of Europe. Over the course of five centuries, their great strides in military and economic development permitted them to dominate Muslim-majority countries—including those associated with the early modern empires of south Asia (the Moghuls), central Asia (the Safavids), and western Asia (the Ottomans). Since then, Muslims have debated how best to react to Western empire building and culture. Some have favored a degree of assimilation, but others have reacted by strongly affirming separate Muslim religious and cultural identity. At various times and in particular locations, the backlash has been violent (for instance, British troops put down a Muslim rebellion in the Indian mutiny of 1857 and in the Sudan at the end of that century). In recent years the continuing tragedy of the Palestinians and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have also led to violent clashes.

Islam is the second-largest world religion, and after recent waves of immigration, we find substantial Muslim sections of the population in Europe and North America. It is to be hoped that this chapter may assist mutual understanding.

A THIRD TESTAMENT? THE QUR'AN'S RELATION TO BIBLICAL LITERATURES

No discussion of "biblical" views of human nature or their impact upon human cultures is adequate unless it takes into consideration the challenge that the Qur'an poses to those views. Since its first, piecemeal recitations in the early decades of the seventh century C.E., the Qur'an has been in conversation with what we should term "biblical literatures." This latter term is preferable to "the Bible" because, despite its presentation as a single text, the Bible is a library of books produced by a variety of hands over a period of about a thousand years. Moreover, it is not a complete compendium of books produced during that period, nor is it by any means entirely representative of the literatures that its own authors and readership produced or held sacred. The Bible is a selection of sacred texts that provides the modern reader with a window from which to observe a particular vista of literary history and, hopefully, come to an appreciation of the Near Eastern religious genius associated with the people of Israel. The identity of that people—as with the identity of every "people"—is socially

constructed: it is what has been termed an "imagined community." Biblical literatures (both within and without the biblical canon) and the literary responses to them (the Qur'an included) are crucial components of the construction of the identity of the people of Israel and of its successor communities: today's Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The historical origins of the Qur'an are shrouded in mystery. This is because the manuscript traditions that are available for the biblical books and much ancient literature are lacking in the case of the Qur'an. Islamic tradition informs us that within a decade or two of the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the then-reigning caliph (or successor to the Prophet as leader of his community) decided that a standard edition of the Qur'an should be produced. This decision is indirect evidence that manuscript variants existed, and the tradition itself has preserved examples of small variations within a handful of Qur'anic passages. Nevertheless, nothing has come down to us that would suggest that the earliest Qur'ans differed in any significant respect from the Qur'an we possess today. This circumstance is certainly consistent with the traditional account of the caliph's decision to produce a standardized text. Historians of the Qur'an, however, remain hopeful that the early caliphate was at least as susceptible to bureaucratic inefficiency as are the governments of modern states, for such inefficiency allows the possibility that there is somewhere preserved (and forgotten) a cache of manuscripts that will eventually prove to be as illuminating for the history of Islam as the twentieth-century Qumran and Nag Hammadi discoveries have proved to be for the histories of Judaism and Christianity.

Until such a momentous discovery occurs, however, scholars of the Qur'an have no viable alternative to the Islamic tradition's account of the processes of its revelation and collection and, of course, their own historical instincts and skepticism. While no historian can regard such circumstances as ideal, they do not undermine all competent historical inquiry. In the first three centuries following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims produced a large body of literature that reflects, albeit indirectly, the social situation into which the primitive Islamic community was born. A judicious use of this material, in combination with archaeological evidence and even some texts produced by non-Muslim contemporaries, sheds fascinating light on the Qur'an and its relation to biblical literatures.

For the purposes of the present chapter, one piece of documentary evidence preserved in Muslim sources will have to suffice to illustrate the point. In the past half-century, a document known as "the compact of Medina" has come to be accepted as authentic by virtually all historians of early Islam, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is thus deemed to be an accurate reflection of the social and political conditions that prevailed in the Arabian oasis of Yathrib (later named Medina) that Muhammad

and his followers colonized after fleeing persecution in Mecca around the year 622 C.E.

It is a remarkable document. First, it is contemporary with the Qur'an—or at least parts of the holy book. Second, it names the Arab tribes that populated the oasis when Muhammad and his beleaguered followers arrived there; it also records their religious affiliations. They were mostly Jews. Third, it enunciates the principles according to which Muhammad's followers and the Arab-Jewish residents of the village were to cohabit the town. Two main principles emerge from the text: one governing the day-to-day affairs of the people and another governing the community's response to external threats. As for daily life, each religious community was free to conduct its affairs without interference from the others. Nevertheless, they all together formed a single ***umma***, or community. In the event that the town should come under attack—a circumstance that the compact of Medina appears to anticipate as imminent—all distinctions within the community would be put aside and the people of the town would band together in common defense.

The significance of this document for the interpretation of the Qur'an, the view of human nature one finds within it, and an understanding of the Prophet Muhammad's vision of a just community cannot be overestimated. It is, in fact, a key to understanding the place of the Qur'an in the literary history of the ancient Near East. When the Qur'an is read in light of the compact of Medina, and vice versa, the two documents suggest how it represents a particular response to the conditions under which it was likely to have been produced. What the Qur'an purports to disclose under these circumstances is nothing less than the divine plan that underlies human history and, with it, humanity's true nature. The division of humanity into sects and tribes that had been a perennial source of conflict prior to the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad is revealed, *sub specie aeternitatis*, as a piece of divine wisdom: "Oh Humanity! Know that We have created you from male and female and made you races and tribes in order that you may gain insight through mutual acquaintance; for truly the most noble among you in the sight of God are those who stay conscious of the divine; indeed, God knows all and is all-aware" (Qur'an 49:13). Here the Qur'an implies that the biblical story of the Tower of Babel tragically misreads human differences: the true effect of those differences (starting with differences in gender) is a particular kind of knowledge (translated above as "insight") acquired through intimate and reciprocal relations.

This celebration of difference and the underlying human equality that it implies is a theme that runs throughout the Qur'an. Indeed, the revision (re-vision) of biblical motifs and themes is one of the most characteristic means by which the Qur'an tells its story. In at least a dozen places, the

Qur'an proclaims that it is a "confirmation of the truth" of the biblical revelation (see Qur'an 2:42, 2:89, 2:91, 2:97, 2:101, 3:3, 3:81, 4:47, 5:48, 6:92, 35:31, 46:12), but it confirms that truth through the allusive retelling of vignettes familiar to its audience from biblical literatures. In the process of retelling such vignettes, the Qur'an selectively interprets many of them anew. It is on this account that many Muslims began to regard the Qur'an as a replacement for biblical literatures and to speak of the latter as having been "corrupted" by their custodians. But this does not appear to be the Qur'an's position at all. Instead, the Qur'an presumes a thorough knowledge of biblical literatures on the part of its audience; without that thorough knowledge, its original audience would have no way of knowing the transformation it was attempting to bring about in their understanding of biblical motifs and themes.

In the sections to follow, we shall revisit a number of those motifs and themes and elucidate how the Qur'an appropriates them for its own purposes. We hope to make clear the distinct alternative that the Qur'an and its interpretive traditions pose to the theories of human nature that have been inferred from biblical literatures.

METAPHYSICAL BACKGROUND: THE ISLAMIC CONCEPTION OF GOD

The Qur'an and its interpretive traditions do not argue for monotheism; they simply assume it. There is only one divine being, Allah. "Allah" is not a proper name for God (as, for example, "Zeus"); it is, rather, the elision of two Arabic words: the definite article *al-* (in English, "the") and a noun, *ilah*, which is cognate with the ancient Semitic form *el*, meaning "a god." The combination of these two words produces "Allah" or, in English, "the god." Arabic-speaking Christians, Jews, and Muslims all refer to their god as Allah. Muslims understand Allah to be the god of all monotheists regardless of religious affiliation.

Like his counterpart in biblical literatures, Allah is the Creator of the universe who communicates with humankind by means of prophets and messengers. Such figures are chosen by God at various times in history and tasked with reminding the communities to which they belong that God has expectations of them. The form that the prophetic reminder takes depends upon the community in question and its particular needs (as God sees them). The Qur'an and Islamic traditions assert the prophetic vocation of a variety of saintly figures found in biblical literatures, as well as other figures whose stories were handed down, presumably through oral traditions. So, for example, Moses brought his community a system of laws; Jesus and his mother, on the other hand, worked miracles (Mary's

miracle was to conceive Jesus while yet chaste) and taught their community through their sagacity and the purity of their personal example. Muslims revere all of the figures that their traditions deem to be prophets. But the Qur'an and its interpretive traditions are adamant that such reverence must never transgress the line that is said to distinguish reverence from worship. For Muslims, worship is due to God alone.

In its insistence upon God's "unity" or "oneness" (***tawhid***), the Islamic conception of monotheism is uncompromising. For the Qur'an, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is an ontological impossibility. Insisting that there is a distinction to be made between reverence for the prophets and worship of God, Islamic traditions implicitly criticize the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ. Today, many Christians regard Muslim intransigence on this point as a definitive barrier to interreligious dialogue, but this was not always the case. Lacking historical perspective on the development of their own dogma, many contemporary Christians are not aware of the internal politics, of the Church and the Roman Imperium, which ultimately decided the question of Christ's unique status as both human and divine. For several centuries, church authorities wrangled over what such statements as "Jesus is the Son of God" could possibly mean; and even when a negotiated settlement was eventually reached in western Europe, the churches on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and in central Asia continued to espouse views on the nature of Christ that had been declared heretical in the Roman west.

The Qur'an's treatment of Jesus retains some of the flavor of these church polemics. Indeed, it appears, at some level, to participate in them: "Truly, in God's sight, Jesus was like Adam whom God created from dust and then said to him: 'Be!' And so he was. The truth of the matter comes from your Lord, so do not be found among those who argue about this" (Qur'an 3:59–60).

By employing the logic of the biblical tale of the creation of Adam, the Qur'an is able to affirm both the "virgin birth" of Christ and his unadulterated humanity. After all, according to Jewish and Christian tradition, Adam, though he lacked human parents, was not a god but fully human. If one accepts the biblical tale as authoritative, it is plausible to conclude that Christ, who lacked one human parent, was also not a god but fully human.

After the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.) definitively pronounced Christ "truly God and truly man," Christian tradition in western Europe has tended to regard the Muslim view that Jesus was neither more nor less a man than Adam as a kind of "demotion" of Christ. But from the Islamic perspective, Christ is not demoted by comparison to Adam; instead, an uncompromising monotheism is embraced and the dignity of humankind is given its due. Muslims regard both Adam and Christ as prophetic figures; therefore, both are considered to be exemplars of humanity at its finest and worthy of emulation. We shall return to the Qur'an's treatment of Adam in the next section; but before we leave this discussion of metaphysics, it is important to acknowledge a difficulty that Islamic monotheism creates for itself and to review how Muslims have attempted to address that difficulty.

For Muslims, Allah's uniqueness implies incomparability. Not only do they insist that God cannot be compared to anyone or anything found in creation, but they also have made this insistence an article of faith. Unlike the Christian church, however, Muslims have expended very little effort on the production of catechisms, confessions, and creeds. One enters the Islamic community (the *umma*) by means of a public profession that there is "only one God and Muhammad is God's messenger." Such a bare-bones affirmation of monotheism and Muhammad's prophethood—combined with a historic aversion to centralized authority in matters of belief and practice—has left Muslims free to hold a wide variety of opinions about all manner of questions, both secular and religious. Consequently, Muslim intellectual traditions have allowed rich veins of speculation. However, on the question of divine uniqueness, traditional formulas (derived from the Qur'an) emphasize that not only is God "one" but there is nothing to which God may be compared and no one who may be regarded as God's equal. As unproblematic as this may appear on the surface, it leaves one with the question "Who or what is God?" If comparison to anything found in creation is impossible, this question is unanswerable except by a tautology: God is God.

Despite this conundrum, the Qur'an itself assures its audience that God is just and compassionate, all-knowing, all-wise, and so forth. Indeed, the Qur'an and the oral traditions believed by Muslims to have been handed down from the Prophet Muhammad himself (***hadith***) offer anthropomorphic descriptions of Allah that have puzzled Muslim intellectuals from the earliest days of the faith. One particularly enigmatic example from the Qur'an will illustrate the point: "Everything comes to ruin except God's face" (Qur'an 28:88). The mystical implications of this statement are certainly intriguing, and Muslim pietists have taken this verse to mean that, ultimately, only God is real. If that is the case, then everything one experiences in the natural world—everything subject to destruction or decay—may be compared to the passing shadows in Plato's cave. But why does the Qur'an talk of the "face" of God? Traditional commentary on this passage has encompassed a broad spectrum of interpretations from literalistic anthropomorphism (God, like human beings, has a face) to the metaphorical (God's "face" is an expression indicating the divine "essence"). Since there is no central authority responsible for endorsing an "orthodox" or

correct interpretation of the sacred texts of Islam, there is no final answer to this puzzle.

Such indeterminacy in a matter as central to a theistic tradition as "who or what is God" is an obvious source of anxiety for adherents of that tradition. It should come as no surprise then that the problem of anthropomorphic descriptions of Allah has played a role in the development of Islamic traditions that is roughly analogous to the problems faced by Jews and Christians when attempting to describe God and that Christians have struggled with in understanding what it means to say that Christ is "truly God and truly man." There are deep differences between literal and metaphorical understandings of religious statements, as we saw in Chapter 6.

THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE

A key to understanding the Islamic view of human nature can be found in the Muslim reverence for Adam as a prophet, for his elevated status in Islamic traditions contrasts with his treatment in Christian dogma after the second century C.E. In that century Irenaeus, the influential bishop of Lyons, entered into a fierce controversy with Gnostic Christians. In disputing their remarkably pessimistic attitude toward human nature in general and bodily existence in particular, the bishop opened up a line of argument that would eventually find dogmatic expression as the doctrine of original sin. Biblical literatures are innocent of this notion, but the church fathers developed it from an observation of human fallibility into an imputation of universal guilt that human beings inherit as a consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden. In what appears to be a conscious refutation of this Christian view (which Jews have never adopted), the Qur'an qualifies its repeated warnings that God punishes sin with the added assurance that divine wrath will be meted out only for the sins that each individual has committed himself or herself (see, e.g., Qur'an 37:38–39).

The Qur'an also revisits the biblical tale of Adam and Eve and, in the course of retelling the story, characteristically revises it. Where the Genesis version features a wily serpent that confuses Eve as to God's precise instructions about what fruit is forbidden—and she, in turn, convinces her husband to transgress the divine command—the Qur'an identifies Satan (not a serpent) as the *couple's* tempter (the Arabic utilizes the grammatical dual, indicating that both husband and wife transgress together). Then Adam receives a revelation "from his Lord," marking him as a prophet, and the text indicates that he "turns" to God (or God to him), a term that, in Qur'anic usage, indicates forgiveness of sin (Qur'an 2:35–38; see also 7:19–25 and 20:117–124). In other words, instead of sin becoming part of

the inheritance of humankind due to Adam's "fall," forgiveness is offered to a repentant Adam, for Allah is "the One who turns, the Merciful."

The Qur'an's version of this tale raises at least two issues that require further consideration. First, we are told explicitly that Adam repented his transgression and achieved the rank of prophet. But what became of Eve? Second, does the Qur'an (or its interpretive traditions) offer an explanation as to why our fabled first parents were unable to resist Satan's suggestions?

When addressing the first question, it is fair to acknowledge that the grammar of Qur'anic Arabic relieves Eve of the burden that she has carried in traditional Jewish and Christian renderings of this tale: that of the temptress and/or Satan's dupe. But the question of what becomes of Eve once the two have transgressed God's commandment is left unanswered. The grammar of the passages in question shifts abruptly from the dual ("both of you") to the second-person plural ("you all"). It is as if the divine voice turns to address persons not present in the story. When it does so, it tells them to leave paradise, some as enemies to others. Does God address all of humanity with these words? Is the Qur'an implicitly addressing its audience?

As for the second question, the Qur'an tells us that God made an agreement with Adam but that Adam forgot his obligation and did not intend to break their covenant (Qur'an 20:115). Eve's state of mind, on the other hand, is not mentioned in the text. It is difficult to know what to make of the Qur'an's relative silence as to Eve. Is there gender bias at work? This is not a question to dismiss lightly. That said, other women (such as Mary, mother of Jesus) do receive more extensive coverage in the Qur'an and its interpretive traditions. Therefore, when considering the Qur'an's references to this archetypal tale of the history of sin, the most that one can say with confidence is that Eve's role in that history is understated when compared to her role in both Jewish and Christian legend.

Adam's prominent role in the Qur'anic version of this story is picked up by later Islamic traditions that pair him with Muhammad: the two become the "alpha and omega" of a different history—the history of prophecy. For Muslims, the significance of prophecy lies in the belief not only that God communicates with humankind through selected representatives but also that those representatives are themselves emblematic of a belief in human perfectibility. In the next section we shall consider how the Qur'an and its interpretive traditions offer human nature itself as a foundation for that belief.

DIAGNOSIS

A distinguished Pakistani-American professor of Islamic studies at the University of Chicago, Fazlur Rahman, once noted that, while the Qur'an

mentions Allah more than 2,500 times, its great and persistent theme is not God but humankind. The Qur'an offers itself as "guidance" for humanity but guidance presented in the form of "reminders." Indeed, one of the Qur'an's own epithets for itself is "the Reminder" (16:44). This implies that the holy book should not be understood as a source for new information about God or about humankind: its mission, and that of the Prophet who brought it, is to jog the memory of its audience, to refresh its recollection about matters it already knows but has forgotten.

Such a claim may strike the reader as remarkable given the Muslim view that the Qur'an constitutes a divine "revelation." But, as we have seen, the Qur'an's relationship to biblical literatures is revisionary. This is analogous to the relationship that the New Testament bears to Jewish scripture. It is therefore useful to think of the Qur'an as presenting its readers with a "third testament" rather than an entirely new system of religious thought and practice.

For Muslims, a "third testament" became necessary when, in their view, readers of the second, or "new," testament began to conflate the messenger (i.e., Jesus of Nazareth) with the message (his teachings about Mosaic law and his pious example) in such a way that the messenger *became* the message. The Qur'an clearly regards Christian deification of Jesus as a serious mistake (see, e.g., Qur'an 5:72), but the source of this error is ultimately like that of many human errors: the tendency to forget. As we have seen, the Qur'an's illustration of this very human tendency is Adam; and in what may be a subtle echo of St. Paul's archetypal use of Adam ("the figure of him that was to come," Romans 5:14), subsequent tradition connects Adam to Muhammad and all the prophets (including Jesus) who came between. In Islamic terms, "salvation" is achieved through individual emulation of prophetic example: conforming one's behavior to the *sunnah*, or practice of the prophets. Even prophets can be forgetful and make mistakes, but, like Adam, they never *intend* to break their covenant with God.

What all of humanity inherits from Adam, then, is not "original sin" but, rather, this covenant, according to which Allah offers guidance to Adam and his progeny. In addition, the Qur'an indicates that God's covenant invests Adam and his progeny with a unique role in creation: that of ***khalifa***, God's designated representative on Earth (see, e.g., Qur'an 2:30). We shall examine both of these aspects of the divine covenant with humankind.

As we have seen, Muslims believe that Allah guides humankind by means of prophetic reminders; yet not everyone chooses to follow the guidance offered. Many who fail to follow Allah's guidance do so, like Adam, out of forgetfulness. In addition, Muslims apportion some of the

blame for evil to the wiles of Satan (as in the Garden); but the Qur'an also indicates that some individuals intentionally fail to follow divine guidance, whether or not they are tempted to do so by Satan. Consequently, Muslim legal and ethical reflection emphasizes the role of intention (***niyah***) when assigning praise or blame to a given act. The discernment of intention, however, raises new questions. If Muslims are unwilling to adopt a doctrine of original sin, how are they to account for bad intent? Turning back to the Qur'an, one discovers that the origins of evil are not systematically explored there. The existence of evil (like the existence of God) is merely assumed; where it originates is unclear. Speculation on this matter—including God's potential complicity in the origins of evil—occupied some of the brightest minds of early Islam over the course of several centuries. That said, our present concern is with the part played by humanity in this cosmic drama, for the ways in which the Qur'an and its interpreters discussed human motivation in this context shed light on the Muslim view of human nature.

The Qur'an's approach to human nature relies upon a vocabulary it shares with both biblical literatures and early Arabic poetry. Two key terms dominate the discussion: *nafs*, typically translated into English as "self" or "soul," and *ruh*, literally "breath" or "wind" but also used to indicate an angelic figure or divine quality. In the Qur'an itself, these two terms are used separately; over time, however, Muslims began to use them interchangeably and fleshed out their meanings with Christian, Neoplatonic, and Aristotelian conceptions.

Generally speaking, the Qur'anic *nafs* functions like Plato's "appetitive soul." It has a tendency to desire the beautiful things that this world has to offer, preferring them to God's pleasure (Qur'an 18:28). It is thus liable to command an individual to do evil (Qur'an 12:53). "Evil" is not a quality that inheres in human beings; it is the consequence of actions taken in pursuit of particular desires. In themselves, those desires are perfectly natural, and their moral quality depends, again, on an individual's intentions and whether their satisfaction is consistent with one's role as *khalifa*. It is important to note, moreover, that the Qur'an does not consider human beings helpless in the face of their desires: they are not obliged to heed their *nafs*. Instead, they are called upon to restrain them (Qur'an 79:40–41). We shall elaborate upon this theme in our discussion of the term *khalifa*.

Non-Muslims typically associate the term *khalifa* with the political history of postprophetic Muslim society. In that context, it is a title conferred upon the successor to Muhammad as temporal leader of the community ("caliph"). But the word appears in several passages of the Qur'an itself. At Qur'an 2:30–34, God informs the angels at creation that he will place upon the earth a *khalifa*, and the context clearly indicates Adam. God

then teaches Adam the names of all things in creation, and Adam, in turn, instructs the angelic host with the knowledge that he has obtained from God. When he completes the lesson, God orders the angels to bow down before Adam—something that they would ordinarily be expected to do before God alone. Presumably, this gesture is designed to demonstrate to the heavenly host in dramatic fashion that Adam has received a powerful appointment by God: he effectively stands in the divine "shoes," as it were. Human beings are God's deputies on Earth. This notion differs from the grant of "dominion" to Adam in the biblical book of Genesis insofar as Muslims hold that dominion belongs to Allah alone. He is *rabb*, or lord and sustainer of the universe, while the human being is his *'abd*, or vassal, who may exercise authority on Earth only by proxy. This view suggests that human beings must be mindful of their actions since, in theory, they have not been given free reign to do as they wish. When a human being acts, divine honor or dignity is at stake, and God is anxious that his honor not be tarnished by the misdeeds of his servants.

At Qur'an 38:26, King David is also addressed by God as *khalifa* and is told, as a consequence, that he must judge between people with truth "and not follow your desires lest they lead you astray from the path of Allah." In this passage we observe an explicit connection made between the role of *khalifa* and the restraint of desires that, if followed, would lead to unjust results. The *khalifa*, like anyone else, must learn to cope with *nafs* in order to remain on the path of godliness.

In a third passage (6:165), the Qur'an indicates that the term *khalifa* is not limited to prophetic figures like Adam and David. Instead, the narrative voice of the Qur'an addresses its audience and describes God as "the One who has made all of you the *khala'if* [plural of *khalifa*] of the earth, and has elevated some of you above others by a degree, in order that He might test you by what you have received. Truly your Lord is swift to requite and truly He is a forgiving and merciful God." Here one is reminded of the words that Luke's Gospel places on the lips of Jesus: "for of those to whom much has been given, much shall be required" (Luke 12:48).

In the Muslim religious imagination, the role of *khalifa* is not limited to prophets or to Muhammad's political successors: it is the high office to which God appointed Adam and, through him, all humankind. Some of Adam's progeny appear to have been gifted with a more favored station in this regard than others—but unfortunately, the Qur'an does not elaborate on this rather cryptic remark. It does make clear, however, that God intends such gifts to test the mettle of their recipients. One cannot help but wonder if the "degree of elevation" enjoyed compensates for the measure of advantage—if advantage is what is contemplated here: for "truly your Lord is swift to requite."

It is interesting to note that the Qur'an employs similar terminology when discussing the relationship between divorced husbands and wives. At 2:228, newly divorced women are advised to avoid sexual intercourse for a period of three menstrual cycles. One obvious reason for this waiting period is that, in the case of pregnancy, paternity would be assigned to the former spouse; the passage also suggests that the parties may become reconciled at this time. The Qur'an then states, "And to the women belongs equitable treatment like that which belongs to the men [literally, those who are against them in the divorce], and men have a degree over women, and God is mighty and wise."

Contrary to what one might expect, this passage has generated very little commentary over the past fifteen centuries. Muslim exegetes find its meaning clear and uncontroversial: women and men are entitled to equitable treatment under the law, and what constitutes equitable treatment under the law for women mirrors what constitutes equitable treatment for men—with this seemingly enigmatic caveat: that "men have a degree over women." The obvious question is, "A degree of what?" Employing the traditional rule that one part of the Qur'an interprets another, the caveat arguably indicates a "degree of elevation" intended by God to test the fairness of the man who would divorce his wife, rather than a general superiority of men over women. The Qur'an elsewhere proclaims that God assigns degrees "to everyone according to what they have done in order that He may repay them for their actions" (46:19; see also 6:132).

As with any passage of the Qur'an, we can never be certain what it meant to its original audience. From the commentary tradition, we can acquire insight into what a given passage meant to subsequent generations. Generally speaking, the statement that "men have a degree over women" has been narrowly construed: it is not a declaration of innate male superiority, for if it were, the prior statement that women are entitled to equitable treatment mirroring that of men would contradict the order of nature. Instead, reference is frequently made to the fact that, at the time of marriage, a man pays his wife a dowry and, during their married life, he is expected to support his wife financially. At the time of divorce, these expenditures merit consideration. Such concerns probably reflect the development of Muslim jurisprudence in the postprophetic period.

PRESCRIPTION

Notions concerning a divinely ordained "natural order" abound in the Qur'an, but like monotheism and the existence of evil, they are presumed rather than argued. Taking their cue from a rather obscure passage (Qur'an 30:30), Muslim thinkers have posited the existence of an "inner nature"

(*fitra*) inclined toward God. As we have seen, human beings also possess an appetitive dimension (*nafs*) that may lead an individual astray from the path of God. But neither the Qur'an nor its interpretive traditions regard any human being as helpless in the face of his or her desires. We are enjoined to use our best efforts to restrain desire in the pursuit of God's pleasure.

In addition, the *hadith* literature recognizes the formative role of environment in the shaping of personality: "Every infant is born according to the *fitra*; then his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian." According to this prophetic saying, one's religious tradition is best understood as an accident of upbringing. Presumably, this principle should apply as well to those who are brought up as Sunni or Shi'a Muslims, but this author has encountered translations of the *hadith* in which Muhammad is quoted as saying "Every infant is born Muslim." Such an interpretation conflates Islamic traditions with human nature and introduces a subtle change into the apparent meaning of the *hadith*. Thus transformed, it provides a handy proof text for Muslims hoping to encourage non-Muslims to convert (or "revert") to Islam, but it is unfaithful to the wording of the Arabic text.

Conversionary applications aside, Islamic traditions contemplate human nature as a complex amalgam of intentions and desires, some of which lead one toward the divine and others which lead one astray. By themselves, none of these intentions or desires necessarily determines how a given individual will conduct her or his life. Moreover, circumstance plays an important role in every human life, but this factor, too, does not necessarily determine the final outcome. Ultimately, that outcome would appear to depend on God's inscrutable will (see, e.g., Qur'an 2:213).

Like many Christians, Muslims believe that God loves them and has a plan for their lives. The particulars of that plan, however, are unknown. The Qur'an and its interpretive traditions provide Muslims with what the New Testament memorably terms a great "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1): prophetic exemplars beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad. **Sharia**, misunderstood by many in the West as a kind of legal code, is an ideal of life lived according to prophetic example. Devout Muslims meditate upon the examples set by Muhammad and other prophetic figures (including Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus) as those examples have been preserved for them in a vast body of devotional literature (which includes the Qur'an and *hadith*). ***Fiqh*** (confused with sharia by many in the West) is not a legal code either but, instead, a highly specialized discipline of interpretation in which Muslim scholars attempt to apply rules derived from stories of the prophets (and rules derived from rules derived from those stories, etc.) in particular cases. Such scholarship has produced

another vast layer of literature, which we may call "legal," although the Islamic conception of law is an expansive one and covers not only questions of legality per se (what constitutes a crime, what constitutes fair business practices, how one may inherit property from a deceased family member, etc.) but also questions of etiquette, ritual practice, personal hygiene, and much else. One could say that devout Muslims attempt to fill in the blanks of the divine plan as it applies to them in their individual lives by attending, as best they can, to particular lessons drawn from these complex literary sources. But that is not all: traditions of Muslim piety (including **Sufism**) offer further examples to emulate. Such examples are typically conveyed by means of stories in the "lives of the saints" genre: traditions concerning holy men and women (imams, master dervishes, shaykhs, and shaykhahs) whose exemplary characters demonstrate that the ideal of human perfectibility is a worthy goal and may be pursued by any person regardless of race, gender, tribe, or sect. Muslims who choose to emulate these individuals presumably desire to discipline their *nafs* and discover their "inner *khalifa*."

Rooted as it is in the Qur'anic tale of Adam, the *khalifa* ideal is regarded by Muslims as universal: "Humankind is a single community (*umma*), so God has raised up prophets: bearers of glad tidings and bearers of warning. Moreover, God has equipped the prophets with true scripture in order that it might judge between the people concerning the matters over which they differ" (Qur'an 2:213). Here, as throughout the Qur'an, we encounter the twin themes of human solidarity and difference, held in tension, with the prophets and their revelations providing criteria by which human differences may be sorted out. This would appear to be the theory of human relations and prophetic intervention implicit in the compact of Medina. Furthermore, the remainder of this passage contends (not without irony) that the prophets have delivered their messages with clear arguments designed to settle such disagreements, but those who received the scripture, driven by selfish desires, have differed among themselves as to its meaning. Therefore, God intervenes to guide those who trust him (by his will) to the truth.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Qur'an and its interpretive traditions present the reader with a broadly biblical yet fairly straightforward and comprehensive theory of human nature. This theory is characterized by competing elements that exist in tension: individual and environment (or society), unity and diversity within human society itself, ungodly desires and inclination to follow the divine will. Into this world of competing tensions, God has sent prophets

and saints to guide those who would lead a life worthy of the high calling for which the human being was created: the *khalifa* ideal. But despite this divine intervention, human history shows how the vast majority of people on the planet have failed to live up to God's best hopes for them. In the end, it is God who guides those whom he chooses to his path.

In one respect, the story that Muslims tell one another about the human species is optimistic: men and women are not "fallen" by nature, and they are not predisposed to displease their Creator. On the other hand, "fallen" or not, men and women do displease God with remarkable consistency and are ultimately dependent upon his mercy for salvation. The biblical overtones of this message are unmistakable, and those who reject the God of biblical literatures will not find much comfort in the message of the Muslim's "third testament." That said, the world contains billions of individuals who claim to embrace, in some fashion, a biblical deity; and for them the Qur'an and its interpretive traditions present an opportunity to revisit, if not rethink, what it is that they believe about God and humankind and why they find those beliefs compelling. If this chapter has succeeded in provoking such thoughtfulness, it will have fulfilled its author's objective in writing it. Moreover, it will have permitted the Qur'an itself to live up to its claim to be an aid for reflection (Qur'an 16:44).

FURTHER READING

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In Oxford University Press's Very Short Introduction series, Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Muhammad* (2011), Michael Cook, *The Koran* (2000), Malise Ruthven, *Islam* (2000), and Adam J. Silverstein, *Islamic History* (2010).

L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), reviews both the premodern and modern history of Muslim political ideas and state formation and, in the process, exposes their rich diversity. The slogan that there can be no separation of "church and state" in Islam receives little support from the historical record of Muslim societies.

Fred McGraw Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). A measured but critical investigation of the rise of the early Muslim community in light of the best historical evidence presently available.

John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Now in its fourth edition, this is a very popular and competent treatment of the subject.

Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Concise and readable introduction to the development of Muslim jurisprudence.

Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). A comprehensive and scholarly approach to the subject that remains the gold standard in the field. Published prior to the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979, the third volume is in need of an update.

Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). A collection of primary source materials documenting Muslim engagement with questions of democracy and pluralism throughout the twentieth century. For a more current perspective, regularly consult http://english.aljazeera.net/.

Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994). An accessible study of the Qur'an by an important modernist scholar of the late twentieth century.

Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975). See especially Chapter 4, "Man and His Perfection."

KEY TERMS

fiqh
fitra
hadith
khalifa
niyah
Qur'an
sharia
Shi'a
Sufism
Sunnis
tawhid
umma

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the "*khalifa* ideal" relate to the Islamic notion of prophethood?
2. How does the "*khalifa* ideal" relate to the Islamic notion of *fitra*?
3. Compare and contrast the "*khalifa* ideal" to some of the other approaches to human nature that you have encountered in this book. How, for example, is that ideal similar to the way of the Confucian sages or to the path of the Buddha? How is it different?
4. Are you persuaded that the Qur'an's approach to the problem of evil is adequate? If so, in what ways is it adequate? If not, how is it inadequate?
5. Do you think that the Islamic community's historic inability to create a centralized authority responsible for determining an "orthodox" interpretation of the Qur'an helps or hinders the articulation and maintenance of the "*khalifa* ideal"?