The Islamic Concept of Anthropology

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The human race is mysterious and mystifying. The various aspects of existence are more profound than can be understood. Despite constant endeavor throughout history to solve the riddle of humanity's existence, there are still incalculable unrevealed mysteries. Even now that we stand upon the heights of a multitude of anthropological studies and research, we are still faced with a number of ambiguities. It is astonishing that with the development of these studies still more unconsidered perplexities unfold.

Appreciation of the importance of anthropology does not require much explanation or emphasis. The major difference between anthropology and other fields of research is that in anthropology the problem is not understanding it, but understanding me. Thus, any results from anthropological research can be greatly effective in our interpretation of the philosophy of life, our own status in existence, and our relationship with other elements of existence. In this way, anthropological research can give our lives special meaning.

From this perspective, there is an irrefutable difference between understanding humankind and understanding a type of plant or animal or faraway star. In addition, many current theories and debates regarding various branches of science are based on specific anthropological hypotheses. For example, the many theories in education are established on a particular .portrayal of the human race and its abilities and potentials

Various Branches of Anthropology

Despite their astonishing variety, the different discussions in anthropology may be classified into the four spheres of scientific, philosophical, theosophical, and theological anthropology. These four branches may also differ in their principles and methods of research.1

Nonetheless, it seems that comprehensive understanding of humanity cannot come about without considering the findings of all these divisions. In this treatise, our object of debate is mostly Islamic anthropology. In view of the remarkable comprehensiveness of the Islamic principles and teachings that are related to understanding humanity, we shall endeavor to .present a short representation of Islam's view of humankind by selecting a few major issues

The Importance of Anthropology

In addition to the general aspects of the importance of understanding human nature, anthropology is especially significant from the religious perspective. The understanding of

humanity and the mysteries of its being open up new doorways to understanding God. Humans are the only creation that can be the manifestation and absolute mirror of the Supreme Truth. Thus, similar to the exterior world, our inner being is also a focus of divine signs: “We shall soon reveal unto them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that He is the Supreme Truth (that it is the truth).”2

Moreover, the Qur’an considers neglecting oneself concomitant with neglecting God: “They forgot Allah so He caused them to forget themselves.”3

Various Hadiths also emphasize this concomitance.4 Additionally, anthropology has an intricate relationship with other Islamic ideological—like prophethood and resurrection—, moral and jurisprudential [fiqhī] teachings such that correct understanding of these teachings cannot .be realized without understanding humanity

The Creation of the Human Race

According to Islamic belief, all humans that have ever existed, regardless of their racial, cultural, lingual, and other differences have arisen from a single and common origin. In the beginning, God created a single man and woman and the rest of humankind were born of their filiation. Thus, through consecutive generations, the number of humans slowly increased: “O People! Be pious towards your Lord, who created you from a single soul (person), and from it created its mate, and scattered from them many men and women.”5

Accordingly, some Qur’anic verses call humans the children of Adam and in this way the Qur’an stresses their relationship with the first link in humanity’s history.6 Also, in several verses it is emphasized that Adam (‘a), who was the first human to lay foot on earth, has been created differently than the creation of his children because, in contrast to his descendants, he has not been born through the coupling of a man and woman. Like many other truths in existence, the manner of genesis of the first human is hidden from us. We know nothing more than the fact that the original substance from which the human race was created is what the Qur’an terms dust (turāb) or clay

#7789;īn): “When thy Lord said unto the angels: Verily, I shall create a human from clay.”7

According to this, we can say that the Qur’an denounces theories that regard humanity as an evolved product of animals or humanoid beings.8

God’s unique genesis of the first human shows an aspect of humanity’s intrinsic greatness and .their supremacy over all other creatures in existence

Aspects of Humanity’s Being

According to the Islamic perspective, humankind is not a completely material and natural

creature. In fact, humanity's existence consists of a material aspect—the body—and an incorporeal aspect—the spirit or soul. Regarding the inception of humans, the Holy Qur'an declares that after the completion of several stages in the formation of the fetus, a new stage begins that is related to their incorporeal aspect: "Then of the sperm We created a blood-clot, next of the blood-clot We created tissue, and then of the tissue We created bones, afterwards We covered the bones with flesh, and then We originated within it a different existence."9

Even though the qualities of this new existence are not revealed, the difference in phrasing and the use of the verb "انشأنا" (we originated) instead of "خلقنا" (we created) is a subtle indication of the fundamental difference between the respective stage and the previous stages—which were all concerned with humanity's material aspect. Therefore, many exegetes consider this verse to be a testimony of the creation of the human spiritual gem.

Also in several Qur'anic verses, the creation of the spiritual and immaterial aspect of humanity is termed breath of spirit: "Then He shaped it and breathed in it of His spirit."10

According to this verse, after God brings order to the creation of the fetus, and makes its body well proportioned and balanced, He breathes spirit11 into its body.

The nature of humanity's spirit is a complex and controversial issue.12 According to several Qur'anic verses, it seems that after death the soul continues its life independent of its corporeal body.13 Since the endurance of the spirit after the body's extinction entails the continuity of one's existence, it is clear that between the two aspects of humanity's being, their spiritual gem has authenticity; this gem forms the essence of each human and it is usually interpreted as "me".

Of course, the existential independence of the spirit from the body after death does not mean that there is no true relationship between these two. In fact, as long as persons live in the natural world their body and soul are correlated and are affected by each other. Based on this correlation, religious teachings obligate us to protect the sanctity of both aspects. Thus, we must be utterly protective of our body and utilize it in the best possible manner on the path of attaining salvation and bliss.14

The advantages of humanity's nature, especially those that originate from the spiritual aspect, have provided them with an elite status in the expansive world of existence. Humans, in the core of their essence, are superior not only superior to animals, but also to all of God's creations.

Humans and Animals

The material aspect of humankind has many similarities to animals. However, our spiritual aspect has profound differences that affect our beliefs and propensities.

Humans are both superior to animals in their understanding and in the instruments and sources of their understanding. In addition, our cognitive system, regarding its qualities and applications, is far more complex than the faculties of animal cognitive systems. Animal cognition is restricted to a collection of sensory data which humans share but to which they are not restricted. In addition to the senses, humankind is also equipped with the intellect—something that animals do not enjoy.15 Through deliberation, humans are able to understand more general concepts and laws of nature; they can discern the depth and core of a thing by studying its exterior; and can discover the relationships of apparently unassociated and scattered phenomena. Logic, philosophy, and even the disparate branches of empirical science would never have been conceived without the employment of intellect.

Moreover, humans possess various spiritual (non-material) aspirations that animals do no :have. These are as follows

The Aspiration for Knowledge .1

Humans are naturally scholarly and inquisitive and the propensity to know is fused deep within their souls. Amazingly, human curiosity is not restricted to sciences that directly concern their daily lives. In fact, discovering new truths is always fascinating to humans. Knowledge and awareness is always appealing and desirable to the human race. In short, due to their inner .calling, humans flee from ignorance and tend towards knowledge and awareness

The Aspiration for Beauty .2

Another of humanity's spiritual inclinations is fondness of beauty and aesthetics. All humans prefer beauty to ugliness. Our beauty and the beauty of our living environment and the objects with which we relate are important to us. In contrast, animals only endeavor to resolve their instinctive needs. Gorgeous features, attractive scenery, beautiful homes, etc. are meaningless to them. Throughout history, aesthetical tendencies have been the source of timeless .masterpieces and various spiritual disciplines

Moral Aspiration .3

One of humanity's most elevated spiritual features is their ethics. Humans organize many of their deeds within the framework of moral standards and principles. Ethics has a decisive effect upon one's motives and behavior. Good and evil, and obligation and constraint have no meaning to an animal, whereas moral good and evil, and duties and restrictions are the criterion for assessment and evaluation of a person's deeds.

According to Islamic belief, understanding good and evil, and understanding the system of

morals is amalgamated in humanity's being:16 "By the soul and He who shaped it and then inspired it [with the understanding of] its lewdnesses and pieties."17

Also due to their nature, humans tend toward engaging in good and are inclined against committing evils: "But Allah has endeared to you faith and has beautified it within your hearts, and He has made repulsive to you unbelief and transgression and disobedience."18

Thus, disposition toward moral virtues is another quality that has made humankind superior to animals.

4. Aspiration to Worship

Propensity towards worship and veneration of a divine being is another of humanity's spiritual features. Historical investigations show that from long ago, humans have been familiar with worship and adulation. The unique feeling of this disposition is so powerful and extensive that even deniers who boast of irreligion are not free of some type of exaltation and worship. Thus, prophets were not the initiators of worship and veneration. In fact, their duty was to show the correct method of worship and present humanity's religious feeling with a worthy orientation.

The Elect of Creation

Not only is the human race superior to animals, but in light of their various attributes and distinctions, humans possess a lofty and privileged status in contrast to the whole of creation. Here we shall enumerate several of these distinctions:

1. God's Vicegerent [Khalifah] upon the Earth

Humans are the only beings who—because of their impressive existential capacities—hold the status of divine vicegerency. While quoting a discussion between God and the angels, the Holy Qur'an reminisces of the creation of humans, which was carried out in order for them to be His representative upon the earth: "And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Verily, I shall set a viceroy upon the earth."19

Various indications within this verse show that divine vicegerency is not specific to Adam ('a) and includes all human beings.20 Additionally, when contemplating the meaning of khalīfah we realize that the humans are the only beings that can become the best possible manifestation of divine attributes of perfection and a symbol of His absolute good and beauty throughout the entire Creation. This is because khalīfahs or vicegerents are, in all aspects, representative of the office that appointed them. Therefore, the selection of humanity for this office indicates their genetic [takwīnī] potential and immense capacity for reaching perfection.

2. The Highest Capacity for Knowledge

The Qur'an states that God taught Adam a special knowledge of which the angels were ignorant. After they professed their ignorance, God ordered Adam ('a) to teach the angles some of this unique knowledge: "And He taught Adam [the knowledge of] the Names, all of them, then He presented them upon the angels and said: 'Explain to Me these names, if thou speak truly.' They said: 'Glory be unto Thee! We have no knowledge save what Thou hast taught us. Surely Thou art the All-knowing, the All-wise.' He said: 'O Adam! Explain unto them their names.'"[21]

We do not completely know the truth of what it means to know "the Names". Even so, it seems that knowing the Names does not merely mean understanding various words, but awareness of general truths in which all of humanity's knowledge is rooted and which is attainable by God's creations.

In any case, this verse indicates the awesome capacity for knowledge that humans possess. This potential makes humans worthy of the vicegerency of God on earth, and elevates them to the status of educator of angels.

3. Divine Trusteeship

Humans are the only creatures who accepted the heavy burden of the divine trust: "Surely We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it, but humans carried it; surely they are foolish wrongdoers."[22]

Many exegetes consider this trust [amānah] a type of volition, duty, or perfection that is realized through the volitional choices of humans. No other creature carries the responsibility of its choices and its perfection; but humans are free in choosing between good and evil. Therefore, they hold responsibility for their own volitive actions.

In any event, humans—like their Creator—have free will and through righteous use of their volition, they can attain perfections that the rest of God's creations cannot enjoy; and this is another feature of humanity's intrinsic superiority.

4. The World as Humankind's Instrument

Another point that reveals the lofty status of humans in the world is that God has made the universe their instrument and has given control of other things in nature to them: "Have you not seen that Allah has subjected to you all that is in the heavens and earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, both manifest and hidden?"[23]

Yea, the philosophy of the world's existence is to bring about a foundation in which humans can ascend towards worthy perfections and volitional intimacy with God. The whole world belongs to humans, so that they live for God and remember Him.

The clouds, winds, sun, and sky exist; that you earn some bread and eat it not in neglect. For you all are bewildered and obedient; it would not be fair that you be not dutiful.24

Obeisance of the Angels .5

After creating Adam (‘a), God ordered the angels to bow before him: “And when We said unto the angels: ‘Bow to Adam’, so they bowed.”25

Because Adam (‘a) is the manifestation of all of humanity’s existential potentials and abilities, obeisance of the angels reveals that, due to its unlimited capacities, humankind is superior .even to the angels

Humanity’s Inherent Honor .6

The intrinsic abilities of humankind, some of which we indicated earlier, have caused them to be honored by God: “And truly We honored the children of Adam.”26

Doubtless, by this all-embracing honor, a sort of inherent honor was intended. Because of humanity’s unique abilities, this honor embraces all humans.27 Accordingly, humankind is a .lofty and elevated creature before God

The Other Side of the Coin

Up to this point, humanity’s distinctions and merits have been discussed. However, the Holy Qur’an also has many critical verses regarding humanity and the enumeration of their faults and deficiencies: various Qur’anic verses introduce humans as foolish wrongdoers,28 very ungrateful,29 insubordinate and rebellious,30 niggardly31 and avaricious,32 hasty and rash,33 and the most disputatious of God’s creations. How is it that on one side, the Qur’an elevates humans to the highest of ranks and on the other side, it dispraises them with the strongest of admonishments?

The truth is that there is no contradiction in the Qur’an’s laudations and criticisms of humans. This is because each of these laudations and criticisms addresses a specific aspect of humanity’s being. Humans are unique creatures that possess an existential comprehensiveness, because both celestial [malakūtī] and animalistic aspects exist within them. This richness originating from the essence and nature of humankind sets them in the highest echelon of Creation. This is because they have the capacity to attain the ultimate status of perfection by strengthening their celestial and empyrean aspects and harnessing their animalistic and ignoble facets. According to the religious perspective, because of this existential wealth, humankind is worthy of praise and are thoughtful and noble creatures. In contrast, if we only consider the base aspects of humankind and focus on their instinctive and

natural necessities, we shall discover a being that deserves criticism and reproach. Persons who relinquish control to their instincts and carnality [shahwat] and whose intellects serve their animalistic instincts and tendencies would soon become avaricious, niggardly, ungrateful, rebellious, evildoers, etc. Sometimes, such humans advance so far on the path of animality that, according to the Qur'an, they become viler than beasts: "They are like beasts; nay, rather, they are further astray."34

Additionally, in various narrations [riwāyāt] after comparing humans with angels and animals, it is declared:

فمن غلب عقلهُ علي شهوتهِ فهو أَعلىٰ مِن الملائكةِ و مَن غلبَت شهوتُه على عقلِه فهو أَدني مِن البَهائمِ.

"So whoever's intellect prevails over their carnality is better than angels, and whoever's carnality prevails over their intellect is lower than animals."

Mawlānā versified the substance of this narration in his Mathnavī al-Ma'navī (Spiritual Couplets): Word has come that the Holy Creator; Has created the creations of the world in three types.

One group's existence is all intellect and knowledge; These are the angels who know naught but worship.

In their essence, there is no want or passion; They are pure light and live by the love of Allah.

Another type is void of knowledge; It is called animal and is satiated by forage.

It sees naught but the stable and fodder; It is unaware of wickedness and of honor.

And the third is humankind; It is half angel and half donkey.

Its donkey half tends towards baseness; The other half tends towards greatness.

And which will prevail in the battle of morality; Of this pair which will win the backgammon?35

Compulsion or Free Will

So far, we made it clear that God has established great potentials and abilities within humanity's being. Additionally, through use of their free will and correct choices, humans can realize their genetic [takwīnī] and inherent potentials and attain lofty ranks of perfection. However, do we humans truly possess this instrument of volition or is everything we do compulsory and enforced? In order to answer this question we must present a brief discussion on compulsion and volition, especially since various religious teachings sometimes reinforce [belief in compulsion or determinism [jabr ingārī.

An Ancient Question

The issue of compulsion and volition is a very timeworn issue that has continually called humans to contemplation. The fundamental question is this: Do humans have free will in some

of their deeds or do they have no volition whatsoever, making their actions compulsory? Volition means that a person's behavior is based on their awareness, power, and will in such a way that they are able to abandon the said behavior. In other words, a volitional act is one which is founded upon the choice and selection of the agent and happens through one's intention and decision. Of course, the fact that an action is volitional does not mean that it is committed with desire and relish because it often happens that an action is selected while contrary to the primary tendency of the agent but due to knowledge of its advantage, such as the sick who drink bitter medicine against their initial desire.

In any case, there have always been two general perspectives regarding the answer to this question: some advocate determinism [jabr ingārī] and believe that humans cannot commit true volitional actions and others favor free will or libertarianism [ikhtīyār] and believe that humans have volition in some of their deeds.36

Notes:

1. - The main methods in scientific, philosophical, and theosophical anthropology are respectively empirical, theoretical, and intuitional. Theological anthropology is based on referral to original texts of religion. Additionally, in general, scientific anthropology mostly endeavors to answer specific and detailed questions, while in the other approaches we are faced with questions that are more fundamental.

2. - Sūrah Fu ilat

#7716;ā Mīm) 41:53.

3. - Sūrah ashr 59:19.

4. - See: 'Allāmah Majlisī, Ba ār al-Anwār, vol. 2, p. 32.

5. - Sūrah Nisā' 4:1.

6. - For examples of these Qur'anic verses, see: Sūrah A'rāf 7:26, 27; Sūrah Isrā' 17:70; and Sūrah Yāsīn 36:60.

7. - Sūrah ād 38:71. For further examples, see: Sūrah Sajdah 32:7; and Sūrah A'rāf 7:12. Various Qur'anic verses speak of "dirt" (such as Sūrah Āli 'Imrān 3:59) or "water" (such as Sūrah Furqān 25:54) or similar terms (Sūrah ijr 15:28, 15:33).

8. - On occasion, it is thought that religious teachings regarding the creation of the first human contradicts Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of evolution through natural selection. Discussing the relationship of these two viewpoints requires an independent discussion. Here we shall suffice with three points:

a. Even though the theory of evolution, which is based upon natural selection, reveals truths regarding the evolution of various types of plants and animals, there are no consistent

scientific rationales in favor of extending this theory to include humankind. In fact, with regard to the special distinctions of humans compared to advanced types of animals—such as simians—, numerous attestations repudiate this extension and render it unscientific and illegitimate.

b. The existence of fossils and other millions-of-year-old relics from humanoids cannot confirm the application of Darwin's theory to humans. This is because the extreme probability has been proposed that humanoids have existed and become extinct before the introduction of humans—who have had an entirely different and independent genesis.

c. We cannot disregard a religious standpoint that is clearly based upon Qur'anic verses that speak of the unique genesis of Adam and humanity's link to him on account of a scientific theory that has many critics even within the biologists' society.

9. - Sūrah Mu'minūn 23:14.

10. - Sūrah Sajdah 32:9.

11. - The compound structure "روحـــــــــــه" (a) His spirit) is not a possessive compound but "reverence compound". In this type of compound, in order to show reverence and the lofty rank of an object, the object is attributed to one of great standing and honor. Thus, the attribution of "بيــت الله" (or) the House of God—the holy Kaaba) "ثــار الله" spirit to God—like similar cases such as the Blood of God—attributed to Imam Hussaīn ('a))— states the reverence and greatness of the spirit among the creations of God.

12. - Many Moslem thinkers regard the spirit as incorporeal and immaterial and others believe it is a type of "subtle body" that is different in several qualities from the material body.

13. - This includes verses that term human death tawaffā "تـوفّي" (such as Sūrah Sajdah 32:11; Sūrah An'ām 6:61; Sūrah Na l 16:70; etc.)

14. - Many profound matters may be discussed on the relationship of the body and soul, their qualities, the genetic antecedence of the soul over the body, and the materiality or spirituality of the ego. These discussions have been omitted for the sake of brevity.

15. - In truth, we have no direct or firsthand knowledge of the perceptions of animals. All our judgments regarding this issue are solely based on observation of various signs and effects. Based on these observations, there is no doubt that animals do not enjoy intellectual thought in the manner that humans do.

16. - Understanding good and evil and moral prerequisites and stipulations is in fact a part of humanity's unique percipience; something that does not exist in animals. Even so, we mentioned this issue because of its close rapport with the discussion at hand.

17. - Sūrah Shams 91:7-8.

18. - Sūrah ujurāt 49:7.

19. - Sūrah Baqarah 2:30.

which indicates continuity, and also the ,"...إِنّـي جاعـلٌ" ,20. - The use of a substantive sentence objections of the angels regarding the immorality and bloodshed of humans upon the earth show that the topic of the debate between God and the angels involved the establishment of the human species.

21. Sūrah Baqarah 2:31-33.

22. Sūrah A zāb 33:72.

23. Sūrah Luqmān 31:20.

24. - ابر و باد و مه و خورشيد و فلك در كارند

تا تو ناني به كف آري و به غفلت نخوري

همه از بهر تو سرگشته و فرمانبردار

شرط انصاف نباشد كه تو فرمان نبري

Sūrah Baqarah 2:34. - .25

26. - Sūrah Isrā' 17:70.

27. - In contrast, obtainable honor is a kind of honor that can only come about through faith and virtuous deeds. The highest ranks of this type of honor are specific to the truly pious.

28. - Sūrah A zāb 33:72.

29. - Sūrah ajj 22:66.

30. - Sūrah 'Alaq 96:6.

31. - Sūrah Isrā' 17:100.

32. - Sūrah Ma'ārij 70:18.

33. - Sūrah Isrā' 17:11

34. - Sūrah A'rāf 7:179.

35. - در حديث آمد كه خلّاق مجيد خلق عالم را سه گونه آفريد

يك گُرُه را جمله عقل و علم وجود آن فرشته است و نداند جز سجود

نيست اندر عنصرش حرص و هوا نور مطلق زنده از عشق خدا

يك گروه ديگر از دانش تهي همچو حيوان از علف در فربهي

او نبيند جز كه اصطبل و علف از شقاوت غافل است و از شرف

و آن سوم هست آدميزاد و بشر از فرشته نيمي و نيمي ز خر

نيم خر خود مايل سفلي بود نيم ديگر مايل عِلوي شود

تا كدامين غالب آيد در نبرد زين دوگانه تا كدامين بُرد نرد

The existence of various involuntary actions in humans does not validate determinism - .36 and refute belief in free will and libertarianism. In fact, finding even one volitional action in

.humans can prove free will