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Humanity: Texts and Contexts

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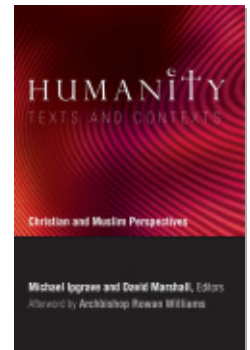
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CHAPTER ONE

Being Human

1.1 The Image of God, Human Dignity, and Vocation

Ng Kam Weng

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!
In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel!
In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of
animals!

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2

The Contemporary Crisis of Humanity

The human race has reason to be proud. It sends space probes beyond the solar system. It shatters the atom to capture the most elusive subatomic particles. It constructs mathematical models of the universe at its birth. Yet ironically, the very success of the modern knowledge enterprise has become a stumbling block to humankind's quest for self-knowledge in the modern world.

With its prowess in unlocking the secrets of nature and its technological power, the human race is convinced that it is master of its own destiny. It sees no relevance for religion. It prefers Prozac to priests. Why rely on faith to move mountains when bulldozers will do the job? If human fulfillment comes through technological advancement, why be distracted by heavenly promises? After all, we can create heaven on earth.

It was not too long ago that we heard the optimistic slogan: "My grandfather preached the gospel of religion; my father preached the gospel of socialism; I preach the gospel of science." Such optimism was shattered by two world wars, the tyranny of dictatorship exemplified by Hitler's Holocaust and Stalin's Gulag, and the genocides in Africa. To be sure, the world community found consensus for human rights for the first time with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948) based on the inherent dignity possessed by every individual. Unfortunately, the only thing that seems universal arising from the declaration is the universal abuse of human beings.

One may assume that developed nations are not spared the trauma of war and violence that plague poor countries. Still, social analysts worry about the loss of democracy

through mass media manipulation and the vulnerability of modern civilization with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Science itself has become an ecological time bomb. T. S. Eliot's words resonate with us:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

In the early 1970s a French philosopher declared, "God is dead, Marx is dead, I am not feeling well myself." Indeed "not feeling well" is the pervasive mood of contemporary modern man. This cry expresses the melancholy that is symptomatic of a modern life that has lost its meaning, coherence, and depth.

Robert Bellah, an outstanding sociologist, observes how traditional moral and religious communities seem unable to provide stable anchors in the avalanche of change: "A lifestyle enclave is formed by people who share some feature of private life. Members of a lifestyle enclave express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities, which often serve to differentiate them sharply from those with other lifestyles. They are not interdependent, do not act together politically, and do not share a history."¹ The scenario is most aptly captured by Marshall Berman's description of contemporary societies:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are . . . modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air."²

It is ironic if not tragic when human beings finally conclude that life, if not the world, is devoid of meaning in the midst of the knowledge explosion in the scientific disciplines. In the words of one writer, "At the heart of modern media is a vacuum of meaning." We may try to fill the void with entertainment to the extent of amusing ourselves to death—to borrow Neil Postman's words.

Others, nevertheless, may question why we should so easily surrender to passivity or escapism. It seems that the pervasive sense of meaninglessness is unprecedented in contemporary society. True, there have always been nihilists in human history. But the norm seems to be for human beings to believe in a moral universe that is historically sustained by religious traditions. Perhaps it is timely to revisit such traditions in general and Christianity in particular to unravel the mystery of the human race, its misery, and its majesty.

If my depiction of the sensibilities of contemporary humanity is correct, perhaps I should eschew—at least for present purposes—the temptation to wax eloquent about the traditional rhetoric of religious discourse that often centers on the human soul. Perhaps,

if only for the purpose of gaining a hearing from the modern world for the abiding relevance of the teachings of Christianity, I may engage in a concrete analysis of the human condition. I hope this modest enterprise will lead to the discovery of pointers suggesting that human glory and dignity has a transcendental source and that the final happiness of humankind includes something more than its material needs. More importantly, despite the upbeat rhetoric of the priests of modernity (represented by naturalistic scientists such as Richard Dawkins), the reality that cannot be ignored is that scientific progress exacts a terrible price on humanity. In other words, perhaps the human race today should take more seriously the dark side of modernity that is acutely exposed by the analysis of the Christian faith.

The Mystery of Humankind

It is right that we begin our analysis with a phenomenological reading of the human race that is concretely rooted in its experience of social relations and historical processes. This approach ensures that we do not fall into abstract and arguably irrelevant theorizing about an abstract deity dealing with an abstract humanity. Nevertheless, we cannot be satisfied with any fragmented perspective characteristic of the specialized domains of specific disciplines, whether in the sciences or the humanities. We must press beyond to gain a sense of the wholeness that comes from a theological analysis of humanity. In effect, this demands an integration of theology and social analysis. In the celebrated words of John Calvin, “man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.”³ We cannot truly know ourselves if we ignore the light of God’s revelation, which illuminates our whole life to uncover our true nature within the concrete realities of life.

The Majesty and Misery of Humankind

In the light of revelation, humankind’s true nature is seen to be characterized by both majesty and misery. We turn now to explore these two aspects of the human condition.

The Misery of Humankind

There is little dispute over the fact that the human race exists in a fallible and faulty condition. Psychologists and therapists diagnose the human condition using various categories of neurosis, but the success of these professionals in restoring human wholeness is increasingly questioned. Recognizing that psychotherapy can only achieve partial success will hopefully persuade the helping profession to reconsider the neglected category of sin to diagnose and remedy psychological disorder. The theological category of sin

may be unpopular to secular therapists, but it provides a cogent explanation for the pervasive moral failure of human beings. If correct diagnosis is the essential prerequisite for a cure, then surely the category of sin ought to be included as a diagnostic tool in the restoration of human wholeness.

There is no single definition for sin because the category is used to describe a complex set of pathological forms of human behavior conveniently grouped under the “Seven Deadly Sins”: pride (*superbia*), envy (*invidia*), anger (*ira*), sloth (*acedia*), avarice (*avaritia*), gluttony (*gula*), and lust (*luxuria*).

The sin of pride (*superbia*) or the tragedy of being excessively ambitious (*hubris*) and the sin of desire (*concupiscentia*) played a pivotal role in humankind’s fall from innocence to sin as described in the book of Genesis. Adam and Eve wanted to be as God even though it meant disobeying—indeed, outwitting—God, whom they suspected of selfishness in keeping good things from them in order to keep them from growing toward moral autonomy. It was desire that consumed Eve (and Adam), who found the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil pleasing to the eye and desirable for eating.

More importantly, we must not miss the most radical (i.e., going to the root) or profound significance of sin epitomized by Adam and Eve’s act of defiance against God. The tragedy is that their fall into sin led to uncontrollable passion and mutual estrangement between humans. Love and reciprocity was lost between Adam and Eve: “To love and to cherish” became “To desire and to dominate.” Finally, the fall ruptured the relationship between God and humanity and resulted in the banishment of humankind from the presence of God.

The complex phenomenon of sin is also confirmed elsewhere in the Bible. For instance, 1 John 2:15–17 says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

The Christian view of sin is based not just on some ancient traditions. It is premised on the evident phenomena of universal moral failure that betrays a prior corruption of human nature. G. K. Chesterton once quipped that “Original Sin” was one doctrine that is truly confirmed by human experience. Sinful acts are merely manifestations of a sinful nature, sinful nature itself being a primordial event (the fall or innate moral corruption) that left humankind bereft of God’s gracious presence and power. Consequently, human beings existing in a spiritually and morally deprived condition are unable to please God or to prevent themselves from falling into sin.

The Christian insistence on the universality of sin cannot be attributed to some external or impersonal force. All human beings remain responsible for their own moral acts because they willingly choose to follow the tendency of their inborn moral corruption leading to personal acts of sin. These twin assertions are the thrust of the Christian formulation of the doctrine of original sin viewed as a rupture in humankind’s relationship with God.

Reinhold Niebuhr gives one of the most eloquent and persuasive discussions of original sin in modern times. In his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr asserts:

Man is a sinner. His sin is defined as rebellion against God. The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very centre of human personality: in the will. This evil cannot be regarded complacently as the inevitable consequence of his finiteness or the fruit of his involvement in the contingencies and necessities of nature. Sin is occasioned precisely by the fact that man refuses to admit his “creatureliness” and to acknowledge himself as merely a member of a total unity of life. He pretends to be more than he is. . . . His sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction.⁴

Precisely because human beings want autonomy from God, they will not subject themselves to God’s moral demands; they always operate from inordinate self-love. Niebuhr suggests that such autonomy (or unbelief) is concomitant with pride or an attitude of self-sufficiency and defiance against God. Original sin is a complex package of unbelief (lack of trust), rebellion, and idolatry; it ends up with human beings replacing God with the self—in effect, replacing the Creator with the creature. The Christian tradition associates original sin with Adam’s historical act of defiance, but the doctrine of original sin also accurately describes the fundamental relation of every human being to God. Every person is as immediately involved with original sin as Adam and Eve were.

In summary, the primary source of moral failure is not intellectual defect. It is rather humankind’s inability or unwillingness to accommodate itself to God’s moral demands. Still, although we remain cognizant of the disruptive effect of sin, we cannot deny that in principle human beings are moral creatures. Their moral failures only highlight their moral tragedy that is so aptly pictured by Blaise Pascal, “Man is neither angel nor beast. When he tries to be an angel, he acts like a beast.”

It is important that we recognize the ambiguity of human existence and the human historical enterprise. That being the case, the balanced approach is neither to judge human beings for their shortcomings nor to approve their hubris. We cannot lose sight of humankind’s moral vocation or its hope of moral restoration. Unlike gnostic religions that enjoin flight from this evil world to gain mystical union with God, Christianity maintains that the destiny of humanity includes stewardship, and the ordering of this earth entails a moral enterprise that requires purposive moral decisions and communal action.

The Majesty of Humankind

We must avoid two errors in our reflection on humanity. First, we must ignore the naturalistic philosophers who argue that human beings remain merely animals, albeit the highest beings in the animal kingdom. To be sure, such a devaluation may be softened by qualifications such as “*homo faber*” (tool maker) or “*homo sapiens*” (intelligent creature). Nevertheless, such labels fail to do justice to the uniqueness—indeed, the distinctiveness—of humanity, which stands out with special characteristics that include the use of complex language and symbolic thought, the production of culture and technological

innovations, and fostering community based on moral values. It is surely significant that only human beings display religious longings.

Second, our analysis must do justice both to the majesty and misery of the human race.⁵ The Psalmist exclaimed with a sense of wonderment, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?”⁶ Human beings may be made lower than heavenly beings, but they are entrusted with dominion over all creation. They are under God’s rule but rule over creation.

The Creation story emphasizes several aspects of the dignity and high calling of the human race. First, the Bible affirms the original goodness of creation that includes human beings. As such, all humans are potentially redeemable from the present corruption of nature. That is to say, the Bible does not think of the human race apart from the original goodness and aim of God’s creation. Conversely, the goodness of creation emphasizes that the predicaments of human existence are not due to the inadequacy of God’s law and structuring of the world. God created the cosmos and not chaos. He intends human beings to flourish and enjoy the benefits of his creation.

Second, we are struck by the special qualities of human beings. To be sure, humans exist as creatures among other creatures in the natural world, but it is precisely their moral freedom or their ability to transcend their physical existence that marks them as unique among all created things. In particular, freedom is the ability to become what God intended human beings to be. It should be stressed that freedom is not a matter of liberty or indifference. On the contrary, freedom is the ability to orient life toward moral excellence that contributes to the development and flourishing of social and cultural life. One may even go so far as to say that morality is the participation of human beings in the ordering of nature. Christian moral action is about our joyful response to the duty God has entrusted to us. God made the world a dynamic system, a historical process that continually challenges us to grow to our full potential.

Such a positive attitude toward humanity and creation is well expressed by John Calvin, who speaks of God’s “common or general grace” endowed on human beings and creation that becomes evident in the great human achievements in earthly matters. That is to say, God has endowed his gracious gifts to everyone. These “natural” gifts or “light of nature” are possessed by all, godly and ungodly alike.⁷ We will do well to emulate Calvin, who marveled at the intellectual and artistic achievements of unbelievers and attributed such achievements to the common grace that God makes available to all people: “Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.”⁸

Human achievements through “natural” gifts or “common grace” should not be confused with other gifts that God may endow through special grace, which for the Christian includes the blessings of God’s special revelation and work of redemption.

Nevertheless, it should not be surprising that the “goodness” of fallen human beings and their “conformity” to the will of God in a limited fashion displays some parallels to the life of believers in their sanctification exemplified by their obedience to God’s commands and in their doing of God’s will. G. C. Berkouwer writes, “This approach wished to acknowledge the fact that in real life we do not encounter an absolute antithesis between complete holiness and complete evil, but that we find, in the concrete experiences of our existence, deeds in the lives of unbelievers which are unmistakably similar to the good works of the believers.”⁹

These good deeds presume that God is actively holding back the full power and corruption of sin so that, even where hearts have not been spiritually renewed, human beings are nevertheless able to conform to God’s will to relative degrees. In practical terms, people may exhibit morality as well as perform righteous deeds that work for the benefit of the common good.¹⁰

Third, the uniqueness of the human race is preeminently manifested in the relationship of human beings with God as creatures addressed by God. Only human beings are called to prayer. The corollary is that human beings fully recognize and achieve their potential in a living and dynamic relationship with God; they do not exist as completely self-enclosed beings. The essential and constitutive nature of humankind is fully comprehended only in its relationship with God. Human beings find their greatest joy and attain their fullest potential when they experience grace in a living and responsive relationship with God. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism declares, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” That being the case, God, the *summum bonum*, is the end that brings human fulfillment and perfection. Robert Louis Wilken aptly elaborates:

As we grow in virtue we delight in the good that is God. Hence freedom is never set forth in its own terms; it is always seen in relation to God. Because human beings were made in the image of God our lives will be fully human only as our face is turned toward God and our actions formed by his love. Freedom is as much a matter of seeing, of vision, as it is of doing. We know ourselves as we transcend ourselves, and we find ourselves as we find fellowship with God. Happiness, the happiness that gives fullness to life, will be ours only as our will conforms to God’s will.¹¹

The Mandate Given to Humankind

Reference to the ordering of life brings our discussion to what is called the cultural mandate. In traditional theology, the cultural mandate applies to duties such as work, marriage, government, and culture. Note, however, that human beings are still held responsible to God regardless of their fall into sin. Indeed, despite sin, God maintains his common grace of preserving goodness in human society so that there remains the possibility of redemption or new beginnings for human beings.

The original mandate given in Genesis 1:28–30 remains in effect despite human sin. Gordon Spykman elaborates:

God mandates mankind, as his “junior partners,” to join him as co-workers in carrying on the work of the world. The original creation was good, but not yet perfect. It stood poised at the threshold of its historical development. God’s creating work was finished. Nothing good was lacking. Both structurally and directionally, everything was in state of readiness, laden with potentiality. All these very promising potentials were eagerly awaiting their intended realization. To this end God enlists the services of his imagers, male and female, as his co-workers. Made in the divine likeness, we are called to exercise our office by continuing his work in the midst of his world. This original mandate still stands as a direction-setting cultural signpost along the roadway of world history.¹²

The cultural mandate commands us to use our rich talents and gifts to order the world. The mandate begins with agrarian activities in the Garden of Eden. It undoubtedly legitimizes the flourishing of technology. The cultural mandate will find its full flourishing in the heavenly city that God intends to display with full magnificence when he eventually redeems and uplifts humankind.¹³

The cultural mandate is not to be celebrated as the achievement of human autonomy. In the final analysis, we exercise our gifts and talents as we wish but in conformity to the norms built into creation (creation order and subsequently the covenant demands of God). Humans are to be responsible in exercising their talents whether in creative arts or technology or commerce, not to exploit but to create resources to be shared for the common good. Ours is not an initiating but a responsive and responsible freedom. The abiding framework for human freedom is faith in God, love toward our neighbors, and care for the earth.¹⁴

The Image of God

A full discussion of the image of God should consider the image of God as both ontological (structural) and functional (directional), although Christian discussion of the image of God has historically tended to focus on ontology. The image of God is something every human being possesses. There is no consensus as to what the image of God is ontologically, but it has been associated with the human capacity for reason, morality, and spirituality.¹⁵

From the structural or relational perspective, respect and regard for human life arises from the dignity that God endowed on the human race by giving it dominion over all things.¹⁶ Each person is unique and precious because every individual is made in the image of God. “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.”¹⁷ These verses demand that every human being be treated as equal regardless of race, gender, or social position. Concomitant with human equality must be protection from harm and along with it the range of inalienable human rights including the right to respect, the right to life, and the right to certain freedoms upheld by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁸

By way of comparison we note how a secular perspective will, if informed by Marxist historical ideology, ground human rights on the equality of the proletariat on its path of historical fulfillment, or, if informed by evolutionary theory, suggest rights come along with membership of the human race as a successful evolving species. Surely, to ground human rights on changing processes will result only in uncertainty and subjectivism. In contrast, the biblical emphasis is that the promotion of human rights is not dependent on a shifting and subjective assessment of what some people deserve compared to others. The promise that human beings are created in the image of God ensures the nonnegotiable conferment of dignity and human rights on every person.

Such an awareness of the inalienable nature of human rights was already evident among the earliest Christian writers. Wilken, citing the early Christian theologian Lactantius, argues that

freedom of religion is necessary because of the nature of God. Religion, says Lactantius, has to do with love of God and purity of mind, neither of which can be compelled. "Why should a god love a person who does not feel love in return?" he asks. Religion cannot be imposed on someone, it can only be promoted by "words," that is, by persuasion, for it has to do with an interior disposition, and must be "voluntary." "Nothing," he writes, "requires freedom of will as religion."¹⁹

The Christian concept of humankind as made in the image of God has proved to be a rich source for reflection on morality and the legitimation of human freedom. Still, given the enigma of humankind's present condition, some Christian thinkers are hesitant to equate the image of God with any ontological or essential human qualities (be they related to the human capacity for language, reason, or relationship). These thinkers instead focus on how to relate the image to the office or calling God has entrusted to human beings. That is to say, the image of God is viewed in its functional aspect that is preeminently expressed in the covenant relationship between God and humankind.

Perhaps the dichotomy between ontological and functional aspects of the image of God is unnecessary since it may be precisely because human beings are endowed with specific ontological qualities that they are capable of discharging functional or vocational tasks entrusted by God. In particular, it is the quality of being endowed with covenantal personhood that most aptly equips humans to discharge their covenantal commission.

Michael Horton draws on the insights of Meredith Kline for a fuller appreciation of the image of God. In particular, it is the character of royalty that qualifies human beings to rule over creation: temple (dominion, kingship); the ethical dimension (the foundations of the temple are justice, equity, truth, righteousness, holiness, goodness); and glory (physical beauty). "To be the image of God is to be the son of God."

As such, Horton emphasizes that the glory of the royal son is ethical-official, rather than corresponding to a particular essence in the human constitution. "As image of God," Kline writes, "man is a royal son with the judicial function appertaining to kingly office. The renewal of the divine image in men is an impartation to them of the likeness of the archetypal glory of Christ."²⁰

Humankind in its kingly office is entrusted with the duty to keep the covenant with God. What is a covenant? Sometimes it is understood as a treaty or an alliance between two parties ratified by treaty documents. The Bible indicates that the all-sufficient God took the initiative to establish a covenant that includes special favors and protection to the people of the covenant. The covenant described in the Bible goes beyond legal requirements because the two parties enter into a special relationship, pledging a mutual commitment of an intensely personal kind. Hence, loyalty and faithfulness are the central qualities of the biblical covenant.

We cannot miss the graciousness of God in taking the initiative to set up a covenant with sinful humanity. The covenant is indeed God's gracious provision whereby people who deserve to be banished from his presence are offered a new relationship with him. As 1 Peter 2:9–10 says, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received the mercy of God."

It is evident that divine revelation goes beyond transmission of information. It has a more inclusive role of establishing a covenant relationship. The relationship is ratified by the ritual of atoning sacrifice that emphasizes that sinful people can enjoy the benefits of this covenant only because God has provided the means to overcome and cover sin that had earlier caused estrangement between God and the human race. Finally, the covenant includes the provision of authoritative scriptures that spell out in detail the obligations entailed in keeping this relationship, which is a way of life characterized by utmost loyalty, trust, and obedience to God.

From the covenant point of view, God's covenant word becomes the normative benchmark of our duty to our neighbor. According to Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Human vocation—that is, the fulfillment of the cultural mandate—gains a depth and dimension with the covenantal requirement exemplified by the love command. Moral duty to one's neighbors is now informed by respect for personhood and obedience to the love command of God (vertical dimension). How we treat others especially in matters of human rights and fundamental liberties is not determined by the subjective judgment of some people about others but in accordance to the abiding claim of God's comprehensive love command to us all.

Imitation of God requires the implementation of a legal system that protects the powerless and shows compassion toward the vulnerable.²¹ Exaction of interest from the poor is prohibited and the poor hired servant must not be oppressed.²² Kindness is to be extended even to the resident alien who must be treated with justice.²³ In sum, "You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge."²⁴

Nevertheless, such laws require a sense of social responsibility and compassion for the welfare of the needy and weak rather than a set of demands enforced legalistically. That is to say, the covenant assumes a social order held together by habits of neighborliness.

That the covenant demands of God intensify and extend moral duty is clear from the provisions found in the book of Deuteronomy, the covenant book par excellence of the Bible. In contrast to the normal human instinct to restrict rights and privileges only to members of one's community, the covenant assumes justice will be extended to aliens: "The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing."²⁵

Elsewhere we read that aliens must be allowed Sabbath rest, and that they must not be oppressed.²⁶ Aliens are even permitted to benefit from the law of gleaning.²⁷ Significantly, this command came immediately after the giving of the Ten Commandments. Finally, and supremely, we have the command to love our neighbors as ourselves.²⁸ The rationale for these commands is expressed in Leviticus 19: 34, which says: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Covenant Renewal

Like creation, the biblical covenant possesses a dynamic quality. God continues to intensify his offer of covenant and extends the scope of the covenant that he offers in working out his redemption of humankind. Hence one may speak of the history of the covenant (taking the backward perspective) or even covenant eschatology (taking the future perspective). In this regard, human history is seen as the unfolding of God's covenant promises. Concomitantly, the original creation mandate will be fulfilled in history as humankind builds a renewed civilization premised on God's love command and develops creation to its highest level of glory.

In particular, the fulfillment of God's covenant promise is found in the redemption of human history and the renewal of creation through Jesus Christ. The whole earth is cleansed and will be glorified under the dominion of Jesus Christ. The great book of Romans declares that a new humanity will be constituted "to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he [Jesus] might be the firstborn among many brothers."²⁹ Christ infuses his glory to restore fallen humanity so that the *imago dei* of those who are united with him will be restored and "uplifted" into a new humanity.³⁰ Elsewhere, Paul highlights that assimilation to Christ as the image of God results in a renewed person who exhibits a Christ-like character and life to the watching world.³¹ Stanley Grenz, however, emphasizes: "Yet envisioned here is no mere private beholding, leading to an individualistic 'me-and-Jesus'" understanding of transformation. Rather, the metamorphosis involves the reformation of relationships and the creation of a new community of those who share together in the transforming presence of the Spirit and who thereby are, as A. M. Ramsey notes, "realising the meaning of their original status as creatures in God's image."³²

In short, conforming to Christ who is the image of the invisible God has become the new eschatological goal (*telos*) for renewed humanity. The covenant life as God originally

intended is now possible with humanity renewed in the image of God. Michael Horton explains: “Only by being reconciled to God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit working through the means of grace in the church can covenant-breakers be constituted covenant-keepers and be kept in that covenant until one day the image of God is finally not only perfectly restored but confirmed in everlasting righteousness.”³³

It is unfortunate that so much reflection on humanity seems so mesmerized by the past, encapsulated by the event of the fall of humanity into sin, that we lose sight of the future. Indeed, Christians envisage both a restoration and uplift through the recreation of the earth. In the words of the Bible, there will be a “new heaven and a new earth.” The new creation will be glorified and will stand both in continuity (it is the same earth) and discontinuity (it will be cleansed from sin and corruption and glorified) with present creation.

Nevertheless, creation is not subsumed under the new creation of God; it retains its integrity as the present sphere of human stewardship and the sacramental reminder of the hope of glory. In Paul’s words, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”³⁴

The book of Isaiah portrays life in restored creation (the new city of God). It is a place where “the kings of the earth shall bring their glory and nothing unclean shall enter it, but only the glory and honor of the nations.”³⁵ Richard Mouw elaborates: “The Holy City is not wholly discontinuous with present conditions. The biblical glimpses of this City give us reason to think that its contents will not be completely unfamiliar to people like us. In fact, the contents of the City will be more akin to our present cultural patterns than is usually acknowledged.”³⁶

I can do no better than to summarize the glorious vision of human destiny with the words of Anthony Hoekema: “The Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God’s praise in glorified, resurrected bodies. On the new earth, therefore, we hope to spend eternity, enjoying its beauties, exploring its resources, and using its treasures to the glory of God.”³⁷

1.2 Being Human in Islam

Mona Siddiqui

Place this discussion of being human in the dual reality of the Qur'anic world, the eternity and permanence of God, and the mortality and finitude of humankind. This is a world where creation does not begin with human beings but where humanity's role within the created order becomes central to the whole story of God, creation, and the afterlife. The whole process of creation is not described in detail although there are several words that are used to convey a sense of creation, such as *khalāqa*, *barā'a*, *ansha'a*, *dbara'a* and *faṭara*. All things are created with a purpose, the heavens and the earth have been created with the truth (*ḥaqq*) or in wisdom (*ḥikma*), and all of nature is a sign (*āya*) from God, going forth from the Divine and returning to the Divine. Here, humankind is one part of created being among others. Among the variety of themes connected with God's creative powers and the creation of humanity, it is possible to detect three scriptural themes that unfold as the defining aspects of human existence: the nature of human beings, human alienation, and human destiny. These themes give us some insight into the essence of humankind, the complex nature of our relationship with God and the rest of his creation, and our ultimate return to God.

The focus on humanity lies both in the biological makeup of humankind and in its inherent distinctiveness in relation to the rest of God's physical and natural creation. This distinctiveness has been seen in terms of dignity and nobility: for the Islamic tradition, human beings are created in the best of forms (*fi aḥsani taqwīm*) and are the noblest of creation (*ashraf al-makhlūqāt*). But this dignity is a complex term tying humanity to God and nature in physical and metaphysical ways. Human dignity in general has been a widely used term in religious scholarship with significant implications for human life, yet the concept is open to a variety of meanings. The word dignity, rooted in the Latin *dignus* and *dignitas*, both meaning "worthy of esteem or honor," has come down to us from the classical tradition. But both in Greek and Roman thought, the concept of universal human dignity did not exist; the concept was applicable to particular human beings but not to all. The Greeks identified the person of *areté*, virtue or excellence, as one who could merit dignity. The Stoics leaned toward a more humanitarian brotherhood of all and claimed that because all human beings had reason, they could all have an intrinsic dignity if they lived a life that was essentially rational, self-reflective, and in accordance with their natural surroundings. But intrinsic human worth could not be universally applied. In the classical world, inequality was a natural feature of life. The emphasis on distinction and hierarchy within humanity in much of Greek philosophy meant that dignity, implying honor and esteem, was not viewed as an inalienable characteristic of all humankind, but rather as something that only a few possessed; human value was acquired rather than inherent.

Christian theological traditions have generally rooted themselves in the fundamental concept that human dignity should be viewed as universally applicable. The concept of *imago Dei*, of human beings as made in the image of God, has been a central concept

for elaborating the relationship between man and God: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’”³⁸ The phrase signifies that human beings are created by God purposefully, not just as his creatures but as creatures who themselves are godlike in some way. The Hebrew word denotes both the sense of likeness and image. Although the first chapter of Genesis does not speak of God as a visible image, it speaks of a God who creates and who has created humankind in his own image. However, there is no precise explanation of what this likeness implies, and Richard Middleton has argued that the few biblical references to *imago Dei*, including only two texts in the New Testament, have left the way open for a wide variety of philosophical and theological interpretations of this concept.³⁹

In Islam, the Qur’anic account of the creation of humankind is simultaneously also an account of human vocation:⁴⁰

[Prophet], when your Lord told the angels, “I am putting a successor⁴¹ on earth,” they said, “How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?” but He said, “I know things you do not.” He taught Adam the names of all things.⁴²

Your Lord said to the angels, “I will create a man from clay. When I have shaped him and breathed My Spirit into him, kneel down before him.”⁴³

Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught man what he did not know.⁴⁴

We create man in the finest state.⁴⁵

He shaped you, formed you well.⁴⁶

These verses indicate multiple perspectives on human beings, their physical nature and place in creation, and their relationship with God. First, the creation of humans was not a quiet affair; rather it was announced to the angels as a turning point in the destiny of the earth itself. Indeed, the objection that the angels raised about the need to bring human life into existence, and the consequent destruction on earth, develops into one of the first Qur’anic conversations affirming humanity’s place in creation. Second, humanity’s relatively lowly but complex nature, that is, physical essence, which is clay or dust (*ṭin*), contrasts with the lofty moral status God bestows on humans, that is, representative (*khalīfā*). God has spent time on the formation and image of humankind, and God distinguishes human beings from other beings by breathing into Adam of his own spirit; thus humanity comes into the fullness of its being only through that final breath, the element of divine origin in the human makeup. Exactly what is meant by *khalīfā* in this context is open to interpretation, as with *imago Dei*, except that *khalīfā* does imply some kind of successor or deputy who will settle on earth. Early Muslim commentary also suggested that Adam, implying the generic concept of humankind, may be God’s representative in “exercising judgment with justice.”⁴⁷ The Qur’an advises Adam and the sons

of Adam that the status of *kbalifa* means that they are being entrusted with looking after the earth—the earth and its riches are in human care (*amāna*):

We established you [people] on the earth and provided you with a means of livelihood there.⁴⁸

[People], do you not see how God has made what is in the heavens and on the earth useful to you, and has lavished His blessings on you both outwardly and inwardly?⁴⁹

There are verses that explicitly convey the exalted status given to humanity: “We have honored the children of Adam . . . and favored them specially above many of those We have created.”⁵⁰

The creation of humanity is simultaneous with a given status for humanity, for this is part of the gradual unfolding of the divine plan. But in the act of creation, God himself remains transcendent and untouched. In the Qur’ān at least, human beings carry an inherent dignity and honor conveyed in the very manner of their creation, but God’s love (*ḥubb*) is not expressed as a reason for human creation. Moreover, the Qur’ān does not say that human beings are created in God’s image, even if they are created in the best of forms. The divine breath is an essential element in the completion of humankind, but it does not explain how and if this makes humanity godlike in any way.

This is not because there is no reference to images of God in the Qur’ān but because the dominant message of the Qur’ān is that “there is nothing like him [God].”⁵¹ While the absolute transcendence and oneness of God are major Qur’ānic themes and the fundamental core of Islamic monotheism, Muslim theology from the second/eighth century onward wrestled with how transcendence could be reconciled with immanence, and how God, who does not reveal himself in his interaction with humankind, could be known. How could human beings understand a transcendent God who exists in preeternity as well as in posteternity, whereas human life, intellect, and perception are all finite? The issue, it seems, is that transcendence does not mean distance, for God does want to be known. God is near man, “closer to him than his jugular vein”;⁵² he can be known by his attributes (*ṣifāt*) of which he speaks directly through the Qur’ān; he is “light upon light” and he is defined by his “most beautiful names” (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*), traditionally numbering ninety-nine.⁵³ All this formed the basis for a systematic theology about God’s essence (*dhāt*).⁵⁴ Conversely, even if God wants to be known, humankind is incapable of knowing him. Despite a variety of opinions on the knowability of God’s essence and God’s attributes, Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), perhaps the most prominent and celebrated theologian of Islam, concluded: “The end result of the knowledge of the *‘arīfīn* is their inability to know Him, and their knowledge is, in truth, that they do not know Him and that it is absolutely impossible for them to know Him.”⁵⁵ It is important to point out here, albeit briefly, that the tension between self-revelation and complete transcendence has exercised the minds of Christian and Muslim scholars for centuries—reconciling a God who is radically one and transcendent and a God who reveals himself for a purpose. Against the background of the concept of *imago Dei*, Christians disputed

how much the image of God had been damaged by the fall of humanity, whereas Muslims focused on the necessity of human submission to God. In their thinking about the relationship between the divine and the human, Muslims focused on the revelation in the Qur'an as inspiring a doctrine of purpose and obedience, whereas Christians saw the revelation in Jesus Christ as bringing redemption from sin.

In Islam, the dominant conceptual framework for human relations with God is that of servant to master. Whereas servility is not a condition of human creation, it is in fact implied in the question asked by God: “[Prophet], when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ and they replied, ‘Yes, we bear witness.’”⁵⁶ Syed Nomanul Haq writes, “so powerful is this narrative that humanity in the very principle of its being has testified to the majesty of God. In other words, human nature is essentially theomorphic.”⁵⁷ Humans’ nature (*fiṭra*) inclines them toward God; thus the servant–master (*abd–rabb*) relationship between a human and God is a natural state, not a servile state. The significance of this relationship is that human beings can understand neither themselves nor the universe on their own but only in the context of their relations with God.

Human creation, alienation, and destiny all depend on the unique relationship of human beings to God. Although weak, they are asked by God to be his successor (*khalīfā*) on earth; although free to choose, they must live the moral life revealed to them; and finally, although mortal, they must prepare for their final destiny with God. The necessary corollary of this relationship is free will, which allows human beings to make choices and judgments using their own intellect. Human freedom is the greatest human gift, not because animals and other life forms are not free but because human freedom is aligned with human accountability. The exercising of this freedom is intrinsic in the very obligation of stewardship. Curiously, according to the Qur'an, God offered moral responsibility to the heavens and the earth but they refused out of fear, yet humanity accepted it in foolishness.⁵⁸ The Qur'an reveals humankind as ready to assume its ambivalent role of stewardship in the natural world, but there is no sense that humanity really understands the onerous responsibility of a just stewardship of the natural world and a just moral order for humankind. While the Qur'an repeats that “control of the heavens and the earth” belongs to God, there is a transition of responsibility to human beings that becomes a defining moment in human destiny.⁵⁹

In the Qur'anic story of Adam's creation and his eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam's first act of disobedience is also his first act of human freedom. The whole cycle of human existence—creation by God, alienation from God, and final destiny with God—is contained within the verses of the creation narrative. Having silenced the angels' objections by revealing Adam's knowledge, God's second conversation is with Iblīs, who also raises an objection, refusing to prostrate himself in front of Adam. The Qur'anic narrative around these two conversations is hurried, for the real story is that of human beings, not of those who were created before Adam even if their devotion is total. The significance of the angels and of Iblīs is now relative to the creation of humanity. If Iblīs's pride leads to his downfall, his downfall leads in turn to humanity's first transgression. Most religions, cultures, and philosophical traditions have their own story of how

humans eventually become estranged or alienated from a god, from gods, or from a bountiful nature. The Christian lament concerns human alienation from God as a result of the fall from grace and the consequent need for the messianic mission to rescue humankind. However, the concept of alienation in Islam is different. It certainly recognizes the impact of human disobedience and humanity's loss of a certain Edenic state, but it does not see this loss as radically determining our earthly existential paradigm. Even if humankind is now expelled from paradise, paradise remains the ultimate goal and paradise or salvation is still attainable. The Edenic status is no longer a gift but can be earned once again through good works and devotion. Yet, on a prior transcendental plane, humanity has already accepted the stewardship of the earth in response to an offer from God, so the descent from paradise to earth is the loss of one world but the challenge of another. Indeed, the poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal sees the consequence of this transgression as a key step in human development: "The Fall does not mean any moral depravity; it is man's transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature."⁶⁰

It is in the earth as sacred territory, with the cycle and rhythm of nature that are also the signs of God, that humankind must once again turn to divine guidance to reestablish a just order; this is the struggle for success (*falāḥ*). Revelation in the form of divine guidance does not automatically release humanity from this struggle but provides the only hope of deliverance from a relative loss to a higher success. In other words, although God remains the supreme arbiter, salvation lies within human beings.

The human condition is perceived in different ways, and in much of Sufi poetry, the struggle is not real because even the world itself is not real:

So this world
Seems lasting, though 'tis but the sleeper's dream.⁶¹

In Islam, being human is forever to wonder what it is to be human. It is to realize our desires and to cope with that which lures us away from God. It is to live with both the faith and the risk God has placed in humanity while all the time reflecting on our final destiny. Believers live with the dilemma of God's nearness to humanity but humanity's persistent failure to turn to God. Human beings can be strong in the face of adversity but weak in the face of temptation set before them through the expulsion of Iblis from God's favor. Yet, even if humanity is caught in the cycle of sin and repentance, there remains one ultimate source of deliverance, and that is divine mercy or *rahma*. The overriding image of God in the Qur'an is contained in that single epithet that has come down in Muslim intellectual and popular tradition as God's most widely used invocation: *al-Raḥ-mān*, "the Merciful." If there is one divine attribute that could be the reason for the creation of humankind, it is divine mercy. It is God's act of mercy by which creation came into being, by which humanity, conscious of its distinct role in creation, is endowed with intelligence and freedom to know God.

Indeed the Qur'anic discourse is firmly rooted in God's intervention and signs in human history as acts of divine mercy. His signs are prophets and books, and while belief has never been forced upon humanity, belief has always been invited:

And we have sent down to you the Book in truth, confirming the Book that existed already before it and protecting it. . . . For each one of you [several communities] We have appointed a Law and an open way. If God had so willed, he would have made you all one community, but [He has not done so] that He may test you in what He has given you; so compete in goodness. To God shall you all return and He will tell you [the Truth] about what you have been disputing.⁶²

Divine intervention demands that humanity defines a relationship with God. In Islam, the authority of the Qur'an and the wisdom of the Prophet and prophets offer guidance, but human beings have the freedom not to respond. Against this freedom to reject the signs of God is the Qur'anic exhortation to turn to God in worship. Prayer develops a person's sense of self and a yearning for God; it is an instinctive desire to speak to someone in the silence of the universe, but worship, both individual and congregational, also reflects humanity's awareness of the ethical bond shared with others.

The one who does not worship God in this world is "deaf, dumb, and blind"; the one who refuses to accept the salvific message of monotheism is in darkness, and the one who mocks God will be mocked by God.⁶³ Vivid images of the torments of hell and the pleasures of paradise convey the literal or metaphorical outcomes of a virtuous or wicked life. Whether humankind has bowed to gratitude (*shukr*) or denial (*kufir*), it is without doubt that a person's own limbs will testify to the kind of life lived.⁶⁴ The ledger of deeds (*ta'ir*) will hang around each man's neck to be read on the Day of Judgment.⁶⁵ The essential premise of worship is not that God gains anything by human obedience but that humanity realizes its ultimate goals through recognition of the sovereignty of God, rejection of false gods, and development of god-like attributes.

Max Weber is right to say that Islam lacks the sense of the tragic that comes from the feeling of sin.⁶⁶ Yet while this is true in terms of a strict comparison with the Christian doctrine of original sin and redemption, human beings still commit sin; they wrong themselves and they wrong others. The whole context of our earthly existence is based on human transgression, forgetfulness, and divine forgiveness. So powerful is this emphasis that the Qur'anic message contains an almost desperate sense of divine forgiveness:

Say, "[God says], My servants who have harmed yourselves by your own excess, do not despair of God's mercy. God forgives all sins: He is truly the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful."⁶⁷

My mercy encompasses all things.⁶⁸

The same emphasis is found in perhaps the most poetic and moving Prophetic ḥadīth:

O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me and ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to Me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were

you then to face me, ascribing no partner to Me, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it [i.e., the earth].⁶⁹

God expects human beings to commit sinful acts, for the possibility of sin will always accompany human freedom. But the possibility of goodness also accompanies human choice, and goodness knows no limits; it is far reaching and can be imagined in multiple ways. The emphasis in the Qur'an is less on human transgression than on the imperative to turn to God for forgiveness. If divine mercy is ultimately the binding force between humankind and God, it is also what directs human beings to faith and good works. In other words, both the God-human relationship and relationships between human beings must have an essential ethical character.

While Muslim schools of theology disputed the exact relationship between right belief and right practice required to attain success and avoid perdition, the overarching belief in divine mercy could never be eclipsed. It is humanity's destiny to be caught in the triangle of a covenant with God and Satan's pact with God, a triangle that is broken only in the next life. Until then, "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" is the premise for human flourishing. Only in the words of the great Sufis does one detect desperation to be with God again, a restless desire to do away with that which separates humankind from God even in this life. Perhaps nowhere has this been expressed more hauntingly than in the words of the great Sufi saint Abdul Quddus of Gangoh: "Muhammad of Arabia ascended the highest Heaven and returned. I swear by God that if I had reached that point, I should never have returned."⁷⁰ Basing his desire to be with God on the narrative of Muhammad's ascension to heaven, this Sufi saint questions the Prophet's return. The mystic longs for that vision that the prophet has already experienced. The Prophet has returned, whereas the mystic would find any other experience now meaningless. For those of us believers who are neither mystics nor prophets, the struggle to find and hold onto the sacred in the profane, the sublime in the ridiculous, and the divine in the ordinary is itself no less of a challenge.