



PROJECT MUSE®

Humanity: Texts and Contexts

Igrave, Michael , Marshall, David, Williams, Rowan

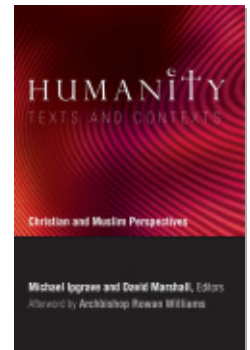
Published by Georgetown University Press

Igrave, Michael, et al.

Humanity: Texts and Contexts: Christian and Muslim Perspectives.

Georgetown University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/149.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/149>

AFTERWORD

Reflections on Humanity in Text and Context

Rowan Williams

THE GREAT ISSUES of our century are all, in one way or another, about what human beings believe about themselves. At the most pronounced extreme, some people talk as though humanity were essentially identical with its own will to domination, as though to be human was to be involved in a struggle to become more and more completely emancipated from “nature” and free to exercise the choice to be whatever we will. The effects of this are obvious over a range of contexts. Most dramatically, this mindset stands behind our environmental crisis, but it is also visible in some of our mythology about technology and its capacity to free us from humiliating limits, a mythology that operates in the medical world as well as the world of management of what lies around us. We can manipulate what the “natural” world presents us with, and there is no constraint on that manipulation other than what we decide.

All the great religious traditions begin from somewhere else; that is why they are all, in one degree or another, committed to a critique of this image of a dominant humanity emancipated from the limits imposed by the material environment. For Christians and Muslims alike, the human self is from the very first involved and implicated in relations that it did not itself create. It is, first and foremost, constituted by relation with the Creator: the human self *is* because God has spoken, and it lives because God has spoken *to* it. Consciously or not, it depends second by second on a will not its own, and it has such solidity as it has because it is endowed with the capacity to respond to what God says and gives. What is more, the human self exists in relation to the rest of the world. Some of the contributors to this book note in passing that the way modern people talk about “nature” cannot be translated back into the language of Bible or Qur’an or classical theology and commentary: there is no clear separation between what is human and what is (merely) natural. Humanity is what it is as belonging to an ordered whole, the balance and welfare of which it is called to serve and sustain. When we get into the habit of thinking of ourselves as outside the “natural” world, we are taking a first step into an unreal universe and the dissolution of our real identity as human.

Exactly what it means to say that we are called to serve the order of the world needs some spelling out. But several of the contributions to this book rightly insist that the cliché about how the Abrahamic faiths have contributed to environmental degradation

by underlining the authority or dominion of humanity in creation is a serious misreading of scripture and tradition. The language about human responsibility in the world is grounded firmly in the assumption that human care for creation has to mirror God's own care, God's "delight" in what he has made, to pick up one powerful strand in the Judaeo-Christian world. It is a check on any human temptation to flatten out the diversity of the natural order, let alone of the human world itself—a strong theme in some of the Qur'anic texts discussed here. In both Christianity and Islam there is, in a whole assortment of ways, a clear vision of humanity being answerable for the rest of the world—not as possessing proprietorial rights over it, with sole disposition of its resources. This vision is expressed vividly in the biblical and Qur'anic picture of Adam naming the animals and of the covenant recorded in Genesis with "all living things" at the end of the story of Noah. It is also expressed in the Qur'anic idea of Adam as created by God to communicate or manifest the divine will in the midst of the created order. One of these essays reflects the debate about the exact meaning of *khalifa* as a term for the dignity of human beings in creation, and questions the common translation as "vice-roy." Whatever the conclusion to this particular debate, there is no doubt at all that God is believed to have conferred on humanity a unique dignity that, in both Islamic texts and some Christian traditions, establishes that even the angels owe a kind of homage to human beings.

Humanity is itself, therefore, in this twofold relation: with its maker, whose image (in Christian and Jewish thinking) it bears or whose authority (in a more obviously Islamic idiom) it in some sense holds; and with the creation, the care of which is the distinctive vocation of men and women—the particular way in which image or authority is exercised. If humanity is thought of simply in terms of its innate dignity in relation to God, it is misconceived: that dignity has to be fleshed out in a human life that is answerable for creation. And if it is answerable for creation, it is in a very special sense answerable also for its own corporate life: it has to realize in its intrahuman relations the same intensity of divine care. All the social ethic of Christianity and Islam rests on this. For Christians, there is a further dimension in that humanity is made specifically in the Trinitarian image: its irreducible relatedness is seen as mirroring the self-relatedness of God as eternally a threefold interweaving of agencies, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is one of the areas of Christian thought least accessible or sympathetic to the Muslim, but it is also an affirmation of one thing that is common to both faiths: the clear repudiation of any idea that the essential moral unit of humanity is the isolated individual as opposed to the individual in relation.

To say this about the essential moral unit is not, of course, to deny the ethical centrality of personal liberty, and this too is significant for both religions. Christianity has laid a good deal more stress than Islam on the consequence of the first destructive choice made by human agents, the Fall of Adam, with its consequences for every subsequent human being. Christianity has tended to think of humanity as limited in its freedom because of the wrong perceptions that this primordial choice created: we cannot simply choose the good because our vision is obscured. Islam is skeptical about this inherited defect and more inclined to affirm strongly the continuing liberty of human beings to

say yes or no to the divine command. But both Christianity and Islam regard liberty as an inherent defining characteristic of human identity; and both would agree that it is in self-denying harmony with the eternal will of God that liberty finds its fulfillment. Both also face formidable philosophical problems in holding that there is a real human liberty of consent or refusal and that God foreknows or even foreordains human action. But the sense in which we can attribute this foreknowledge to God does not, in either faith, take away the clear conviction that we are held responsible for what we decide for or against God—and thus that the response of faith is not something to be coerced by human power. Both Islam and Christianity have, historically, a mixed record in this area, but the understanding of religious liberty as something that a just social order entails is now enshrined in most of the weightiest statements from leaders of the two faiths.

Mention of religious liberty leads in to the issue that a couple of contributions in this volume touch upon—the connection between contemporary Christian and Muslim views of humanity and the Enlightenment legacy represented in the discourse of human rights. It is a highly complex area. On the one hand, Christians and Muslims agree in defending an exalted notion of human dignity and personal responsibility, and a robust doctrine of what social justice demands for all. They are both, very importantly, universalist in their vision: neither faith can tolerate any suggestion that the good for human beings is divisible, that certain benefits or liberties are restricted only to some of the human race. This is why, among other things, they are both missionary religions: the missionary impulse is not to be written off as aggressive bigotry and exclusivism, but is to be understood as rooted in this conviction that all must have access to the same goods, spiritual no less than material. As universalist discourses, they have something in common with Enlightenment principles. On the other hand, they are suspicious of that kind of Enlightenment language that seeks a universal basis for religious knowledge independent of any authority or tradition, and that sees the ideal human condition as one that is emancipated from various forms of dependence, social or material. We have already noted the difficulties of this from a position of Christian or Muslim faith.

As argued in places in this book, the result is a certain complexity about issues such as equality as understood in religious terms. This may appear in the assertion from strongly traditionalist Christians or Muslims that an acceptance of a kind of hierarchy as between the sexes or even in the social order is not incompatible with a clear commitment to spiritual equality and equal dignity. Others would say that the history of religious communities shows too many examples of this principle being abused for the contemporary believer to be confident that it is now defensible in this form. But to share anxieties about this does not mean a capitulation to Enlightenment values as the natural and obvious view of the world; it is more to suggest, as do some of the authors here, that history and social change do help us draw out into full daylight, so to speak, aspects of our fundamental beliefs that will make us look again at certain historical practices or conventions long thought to be authoritative or revealed. The essays here do not offer a simple and rapid answer to this set of problems but indicate more work to be done on all sides around the question of faith and modernity. Some of this work the Building Bridges seminar has continued to undertake.

What emerges from all this discussion is a real convergence around the belief that humanity has a distinctive calling from its maker; we do not have the liberty to invent ourselves, to relocate the limits of what it is to be human, to accord with our own unfettered wills. That distinctive calling is manifest in three ways: in devotion to the Creator expressed in prayer and adoration and holy life; in responsibility for justice and generosity in the social order; and in being answerable for the care and nurture of the rest of the created order. In the contemporary world, none of these is a belief that can be taken for granted; the outworking of each is likely to bring the believer into conflict with many aspects of our social, economic, political, and technological life. To recognize this in the ways that this book does is not to summon Christians and Muslims into a sort of cobelligerence against the spirit of the age. That can be a form of self-righteous obscurantism. But it is important to see that part of the singular importance of religious belief in our era is its capacity to challenge limited and impoverished versions of human identity. To return to where we started, what we believe about humanity is bound up with what we believe about the context of humanity—hence the title of this book. That context, for the person of faith, is specified by the reality that is the context of all particular things and is itself no particular thing, no item in a list, no object to be given a label or a definition by the finite mind. Humanity is fully human in relation with God, and in that relatedness, humanity discovers how to exercise its glorious and extraordinary dignity. In our world, the service of that dignity may bring us into conflict with cultures of paranoia, violence, and indiscriminate slaughter; cultures of trivial entertainment; or cultures of exclusive privilege and hard-hearted selfishness. These essays seek to provide resources for some of that service, in a spirit of openness and mutual gratitude—a spirit, indeed, of relatedness and a recognition that we need one another to make sense of ourselves. To demonstrate such a spirit is, we believe, a sign to the world not only of critique but also of positive hope.