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RELIGION

Islam and the Innate Beauty of Human Nature

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Islamic texts typically begin talk of God's love by citing the Quranic verse, "He loves them" (5:54), which is to say that God loves human beings. God's love is enough to show that people are beautiful, for "God is beautiful and He loves beauty." Human beauty, however, is of two sorts: innate and recovered. It follows that God's love is also of two sorts, corresponding to the two sorts of mercy designated in the formula, "In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful."

The quickest way to get at the notion of innate human beauty -- as contrasted, for example, with the innate beauty of the natural world -- is to reflect on the Judeo-Christian principle of the divine image, reaffirmed in the Prophet's saying, "God created Adam in His form."

It is true that many jurists and some theologians have read the pronoun in this saying as referring to Adam rather than God. They understand it to mean that God created Adam not in stages, but all at once, in the perfection of his adult form. Nonetheless, a great body of Islamic literature, without rejecting this interpretation, has read the saying in light of the overall Quranic anthropology, which leaves no doubt that the pronoun can also refer to God.

One of God's most beautiful names is "form-giver" (*musawwir*). The name means that all shapes, forms, images, ideas, figures, representations, paintings and sculptures are created by God, directly or indirectly.

This, by the way, is a typical Quranic "name" of God. Notice that these are not proper names--unlike "Frank" or "Jane." Proper names tell us practically nothing about their objects. In contrast, the most beautiful divine names designate positive qualities that appear in creation. Typically numbered at ninety-nine, they include alive, knowing, desiring, powerful, speaking, generous, just, forgiving, compassionate.

In each case the divine name means that God alone is truly designated by the named quality. Created things receive no more than dribs and drabs of it. As for the name "Allah," it is simply the Arabic word for God, used by Christians as well as Muslims. It is not a proper name, because its meaning -- in contrast to the meaning of "Frank" -- can be understood from its etymology. To say that "Muslims worship Allah" is like saying "Frenchmen worship Dieu."

In speaking of the activity of God as form-giver, the Quran addresses human beings with the verse, "He formed you and made your forms beautiful" (40:64). All created beauty can be nothing but the signs, forms, shapes, and images bestowed by the Form-Giver. In the human case, God formed people "in the most beautiful stature" (95:4). All creatures were given beauty, but only human beings were given the superlative form of beauty. In other words, they alone were created in the form of God himself, who alone is rightly designated by the most beautiful names.

The Quran says that God created Adam as his "vicegerent" (2:30), his representative on earth. In clarifying what this implies, it says, "He taught Adam the names, all of them" (2:31). The stress here -- "all of them" -- indicates that the issue is not simply the names of the natural realm, over which Adam was appointed vicegerent, but also the names of the Creator. Without knowing both sides, Adam could not act as God's intermediary.

Adam was given knowledge and recognition of all that exists as his own actuality. As some of the Quran commentators say, he knew the names of all things in all the languages of all of his descendants. In contrast, his descendants possess comprehensive knowledge only as a potential. It is up to them to bring this knowledge into actuality. The quest to know is an inherent human attribute, and people undertake this quest precisely because of love and desire. They want to know.

God, in his love to be known and recognized, created and continues to create the universe. Human beings, in their love to know, attempt to grasp the reality behind the appearances. In the last analysis, there is nothing truly real but the True Reality. *Tawhīd*, the assertion of divine unity, provides love with its ultimate focus. Love is then the quest to overcome separation between the knower of the names (us) and the named reality (the One God).

I have just summarized countless volumes on theology, philosophy, and spiritual psychology. These books -- few of which have been translated into European languages -- provide an extensive library investigating the human phenomenon. Clearly, the approach does not coincide with that of anthropology, archaeology, biology, psychology, or any other modern science, each of which isolates a certain aspect of human nature and dissects it without end.

The Islamic approach (not unlike the Christian and Hindu, among others) addresses human nature as a global totality made in the image of the Ultimate Reality. It builds on the primal unity of all things and observes unity's endless reverberations as it emerges from indistinction. Every attempt to determine a thing's coordinates within the infinite sphere of reality must then take into account the center point of the sphere. If that is ignored, people will be talking about some things in relation to other things -- useful, practical, and fascinating, no doubt, but short-sighted.

In this way of looking at things, the One Reality -- the Good, the True, and the Beautiful -- is the source of a good, true, and beautiful universe, which has appeared and continues to appear because of God's love to be known. The quality that separates human beings from everything else is the innate quest to know the Center and rejoin it. This quest appears in the indefinite diversity of human wants and desires, which may or may not be correctly oriented. "Love" is then an appropriate name for the creative force that drives both the originating movement and the quest to return to the Beautiful.