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RELIGION

The Beauty of Following the Guidance of God

I said in my last post that Islamic thought divides human beauty into two basic sorts, innate and acquired.

Innate beauty is the harmonious balance of the entire range of divine attributes present in the human substance, such as life, consciousness, desire, power, speech, compassion, justice and kindness. Acquired beauty can also be called "recovered beauty" because it is not a new beauty, simply the innate beauty brought into the open. Although we are innately beautiful, we have lost touch with ourselves.

This is an ancient story, constantly retold in everyday life. Everyone knows that we have lost our beauty. It is so obvious that many people refuse to consider the idea that there is any such thing. No, they respond, human beings are rotten to the core, heartless and soulless, besotted with egotistic illusions, indifferent to the suffering of others. Those who sympathize with this response should wonder why, if we are so bad, we feel bad about being bad.

The Quran explains in many ways that people do not live up to their beauty. As in Genesis, the story begins with Adam, but there are important twists in the Quranic version. God told Adam and Eve not to approach the tree, but they did. They ate the fruit not because their wills became corrupted, as Christian theologians like to say, but simply because "Adam forgot" (Quran 20:115). Why did he forget? "Human beings were created weak" (4:28). How can someone who is weak carry the burden of the divine attributes? No one is strong but God.

In this version of the tale, God in motherly concern for human weakness sent prophets, one after another. With numbers like the traditional "124,000," the notion is plainly that forgetfulness is endemic to the human race -- though we don't need the numbers to figure that out. The mission of the prophets is to help people recover their innate beauty.

Everyone knows we've lost it, but people don't agree on what "it" is. Descriptions of human ills and recipes for their cure fill the writings of historians, philosophers and social critics. They provide raw material for the daily news and punditry, and they drive political and social movements. If human beings are fine, why all the fuss? "If it ain't broke..."

But it is.

People offer cures for the disease on the basis of their own diagnoses. In the Islamic context, there are two basic approaches, one focusing on the social context, the other on human nature. The first can be called "legal-mindedness," the second "spirituality."

The legal-minded approach is that of the Muslim jurists and their theological allies. They think the disease is human disobedience and claim that we Adamites can straighten things out by obeying the law, by which they mean the instructions of the Quran and the Prophet concerning right activity, as interpreted by themselves. In modern times, this approach has joined up with various ideologies spawned by the Enlightenment, all of which aim to establish paradise on earth. This approach is virtually identical with that of governments and law-makers everywhere; the difference lies in the source of the laws.

The spiritual approach acknowledges the necessity of law but rejects the idea that it can cure the problem. The underlying perspective has parallels in most religions. It first sank into me when I came across it many years ago in my favorite comic strip, Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The problem lies in my own self, and the solution is to fix myself. In the ideological approach that has been adopted by the legal-minded, the problem lies with the other guy. "We have met the enemy, and he is them."

If the disease is forgetfulness, what exactly did Adam forget? He forgot who he was, and then he tried to fix it.

It is fairly clear that law cannot solve the problem, though it keeps lawyers and bureaucrats happy. We would probably get along better if everyone did obey the rules, but the disease would pop up elsewhere. The cure lies in remembering, not in treating the symptoms.

Notice that the notion of forgetfulness points to something we already know, something that has slipped our minds. In one word, Adam forgot "God." More specifically, he forgot the fact that there is no god but God. Having forgotten, he followed a false god, an idol, whether Satan, or his own desires, or his own ego. All these boil down to the last, because it is we who make the choices. They can't make us choose what we choose to choose.

Rumi, one of the greatest teachers of the spiritual tradition, tells us that the ego is "the mother of all idols." He is echoing the

Quran's discussion of what it calls "caprice," as in the verse, "Who is more misguided than he who follows his own caprice without guidance from God?" (28:50). Muhammad put it this way: "Your worst enemy is your own self."

In the Quran's version of this ancient story, Adam and Eve asked forgiveness for eating the forbidden fruit. God immediately forgave them and then sent them into the earth, appointing Adam to be a prophet, that is, a guide for his children. All prophets, the Quran tells us, brought "reminders" (*dhikr*) to their people. The proper response to a reminder is "remembrance" (*dhikr*).

In the Quranic viewpoint, all religions established by God acknowledge *tawhīd*, the fact that there is no god but God. As the Book puts it, "We never sent a messenger before you save that We revealed to him, 'There is no god but I, so serve Me'" (21:25). "Service" is then appropriate activity in conformity with *tawhīd*.

Unlike *tawhīd*, appropriate activity depends to a large degree on historical context. God sends prophets only "in the language of their people" (14:4). This is the Quran's rationale for the extraordinary diversity of religious teachings and practices.

In short, the Islamic tradition holds that human beings are innately beautiful because of the latent divine image, but they have forgotten God and lost touch with themselves. The goal of life is then to recover the human birthright, and the way to do so is to follow revealed guidance.

(Among the good books that address the excesses of legal-mindedness, one can mention the writings of the Muslim jurist Khaled Abou El-Fazl, especially his *Search for Beauty in Islam*.)