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The Islamic Notion of Beauty

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Anyone with the vaguest knowledge of Islamic culture knows that it has produced extraordinary works of art and architecture -- Persian miniatures, the Taj Mahal, the Alhambra. Few are aware, however, that this rich artistic heritage is firmly rooted in a worldview that highlights love and beauty.

The link between love and beauty is clear. We love what we find beautiful. Beauty attracts, ugliness repels. Nor are beauty and ugliness simply physical characteristics. We all know people who are outwardly attractive but personally repellent, and vice versa.

Beauty makes a massive appearance in love poetry like that of Ibn al-Farid, Rumi, Yunus Emre, and countless others. Their verses stir up wonder and delight by evoking the beautiful characteristics of the beloved.

In explaining the relationship between love and its object, philosophers like Avicenna analyzed the universe in terms of a Necessary Being that combined the attributes of Plato's Good with those of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover. All contingent things, animate or inanimate, are in love with the absolute beauty of the Good and strive to reach it, hence the ceaseless activity that fills the universe.

Those with a more theological bent preferred to cite the saying of the Prophet, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." They understood both beauty and love in terms of the axiom of *tawhid*, "There is no god but God." If God is beautiful, then there is nothing truly beautiful but God. And if God is loving, then no one truly loves but he.

A bit of reflection on God's love for beauty leads to the conclusion that he loves himself before all else. God as the one true lover perceives his own true beauty and loves it eternally. As for the universe, God loves it because, by loving himself, he loves everything demanded by his beauty and mercy, and that includes an infinity of creaturely possibilities. This view was encapsulated in the oft-quoted divine saying, "I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures to recognize Me."

In discussions of God's love for the universe, theologians and scholars agreed that God loves both the way things are and the way things ought to be. The discrepancy between these two loves has given rise to the never-ending debate over determinism and free will, nature and nurture, science and values.

God loves the way things are because "He made beautiful everything He created" (Quran 32:7). All things are lovable because they make his beauty manifest. Each thing plays its own harmonious role in the infinite web of relationships that the Quran calls God's "signs." The signs in turn display the characteristics of what it calls God's "most beautiful names."

God loves the way things ought to be because he created human beings with freedom to change themselves. Unique among all things in the universe -- so far as we know -- human beings have the capacity to recognize themselves as works in progress and to intervene in the manner in which they develop. Ghazali and other theologians pointed out that people are "compelled to be free." The expression points precisely to the creative tension between what is and what ought to be.

God's love for all things is often discussed in terms of the universal, all-encompassing mercy designated by the name "All-merciful." His love for the way people ought to be is then tightly bound up with the particular, responsive mercy designated by the name "Ever-merciful." The formula of consecration -- "In the name of God, the All-merciful, the Ever-merciful" -- acknowledges both sorts of love.

To say that God loves all things reiterates the principle of with-ness voiced in the verse, "He is with you wherever you are" (57:4). By means of his all-embracing love and mercy, God tends to the welfare of the universe, including the posthumous realms.

To say that God loves things as they ought to be points to the human capacity to recognize God's with-ness. In order to live their lives in a manner appropriate to the divine presence within themselves, people must be merciful and compassionate. The fact that God is with them does not mean that they are also with him -- that is precisely what needs to be achieved, what "ought to be."

Not being with God opens the door to the ugliness and evil that are apparent to everyone. To ask then how a beautiful God could create a world full of ugliness is to ask why each thing and each person is uniquely itself. From the standpoint of the role that beings and things play in the cosmic harmony, all are beautiful, but some are more beautiful than others, and the scale of beauty stretches not from "one to 10" but from one to infinity.

Whatever the scale we use to judge the discrepancies among things and people, no two fit exactly into the same niche. There is gradation without limit in categories without limit. The lower a thing may be on the scale of beauty, the more it is apt to appear as ugly.

More simply, the world is ugly inasmuch as we perceive it empty of God, the absolute good. It is beautiful inasmuch as we recognize the divine with-ness, the signs of the most beautiful names that fill the universe. Failure to recognize the signs goes back to ignorance -- the "root poison," as Buddhists call it.

Islam has no notion of original sin, but the Quran does say that Adam "forgot" (20:115). Our inherited forgetfulness provides all we need to bungle the job of being what we ought to be.