

FRIDAY TIME

Friday Time 5-11 June 1998

# The Hierarchy of Creation

(Extract from 'The Vision of Islam' by Sachiko Murata & William Chittick)

In respect of *tanzih* (distance), God alone is permanent and real, while everything else is evanescent and unreal. In respect of *tashbih* (nearness), all things are real to some degree, but some are more real than others. To be real is to share in God's reality, or to be close to God. This is not meant spatially, since God is not situated in space, nor are angels or human spirits. What is meant is qualitative closeness. In respect of qualitative nearness, we said that heaven is closer to God than earth, because heaven is luminous and earth is dark. So also, angels are closer to God than clay, and spirit closer to him than body. Realities such as fire and soul, because of their ambiguous nature, have to be considered carefully before we can decide where they fit in.

We suggested earlier that human beings are situated at the peak of a hierarchy with inanimate things at the base. In human beings, the divine attributes are more intense than in animals, plants, and minerals; not only are they more intense, but all of them are present, while in other things most are absent.

Angels are luminous and human beings are, at first glance, dark. Hence, one might conclude that angels are superior to human beings. Muslim scholars have often discussed this issue and have frequently disagreed. By and large, the answer depends upon the standards that are employed in comparing the two. Moreover, the problem is made more complex because there are many different kinds of human beings, just as there are many different kinds of angels. Each human being, in fact, represents a unique combination of divine attributes, and hence corresponds to an animal species, each of which also represents a specific

combination of attributes.

Like angels, human beings can be divided into categories. Commonly there are said to be five broad sorts of people, given here in ascending order of qualitative nearness to God: truth-concealers, the faithful, the friends of God, the prophets, and the messengers.

The truth-concealers are God's involuntary servants, while the faithful accept his servanthood gladly. But it takes a while before the faithful can be true vicegerents of God, and so we can say that the vicegerents belong to the latter three categories - the friends, prophets, and messengers. When some Muslim authorities maintain that human beings are superior to the angels, they have in mind these three categories of human beings, or perhaps only the last category. They do not have in mind ordinary human beings, who fit into the first two categories.

A good deal of evidence is cited from the Koran and the Hadith to prove human superiority. We have already mentioned the prostration of the angels before Adam. The Prophet is reported to have said, "O Messenger of God! Not even the angels?" He replied, "Not even the angels. They are compelled like the sun and the moon."

The angels, as indicated earlier, have no freedom of action. They could not disobey God if they wanted to. Hence, they can be only what they are. But human beings can overcome their own limitations and move from distance (*tanzih*) to nearness (*tashbih*), from servanthood to vicegerency. Another hadith makes a similar point:

'God created the angels from intelligence, the beasts from appetite, and human beings from both intelligence and appetite. When a person's intelligence overcomes his appetite, his is higher than the angels, but when his appetite overcomes his intelligence, he

is lower than the beasts.'

That human beings can be lower than the beasts is a matter of common experience. No one blames a cat for eating a mouse, or a dog for attacking a cat, although the owner of the cat might be upset. Still, it is in the dog's nature, and dogs will be dogs, and when they do, they are worse than dogs. Moral depravity, in fact, is a specifically human characteristic.

That human beings can be higher than the angels however, is not a matter of common experience, especially in our times. This helps explain why many people nowadays have come to believe that depravity and viciousness belong inherently to human na-

At first glance, the body seems negative, because it allows darkness - and therefore disobedience and sin - to find a place in the human constitution. But at second glance, this darkness makes possible the vision of the full splendor of light. Just as white light cannot be refracted into an infinite number of colors without darkness (the removal of certain wave lengths for each color), so also the divine spirit breathed into Adam's clay cannot be refracted into the qualities of his innumerable descendant without

the darkness of the body. If not for the body, people would be angels. If they were angels, they could not move further away from God, nor could they move closer to God. They would be fixed in their places, like angels in heaven and toads, figs, and stones in the earth. "None of us there is," say the angels in the Koran, "but has a known station" (17:164). Angels and all creatures other than human beings have known stations and fixed entities. Only human beings are unknown quantities who have been given the freedom to shape their own destinies

ture. Of course, the depraved and the vicious are happy with this judgment, because they can claim that what they do is simply the natural order of things.

One of the Koranic texts that is cited to prove human superiority over the angels is a reference to the two angels Harut and Marut, who were mentioned earlier. The commentators explain that the angels in heaven continued to be upset after God created human beings. Reading between the lines, one can deduce that they kept on reminding God about their words, "Will you place in the earth someone who will work corruption and shed blood?" (2:30). They were saying, "See, God, we told you so. These human beings are a nasty and vicious lot, always

fighting and killing each other."

As befits the divine nature, God was patient with the angels' remarks (after all, he is the Patient, as the Koran tells us). Eventually, God thought that the complaints were going too far and that he had better let the angels find out for themselves that He knew what he was doing. He suggested to them that they would not do as well as the humans if they lived in the earth. This made the angels even more upset, and they protested that they would never rebel against God's commands. God said that they should prove themselves. They chose the two most worshipful and humble angels, Harut and Maru. Before sending them down into the earth, God gave them their commandments: they were to avoid wine, fornication, the unjust spilling of blood, and *shirk*.

To make a long story short, the two angels, newly embodied in order to fit into the earthly world, fell in love with a beautiful and scheming woman. At first, they observed all God's commands, but the woman convinced them that one drink of wine was nothing important, and the rest of the story is obvious. They committed murder for her and ended up worshipping her god.

When God saw how far things had gone, he called the angels to account. They immediately came to their senses and asked forgiveness. God gave them the choice of suffering punishment in this world or in the next. Not being stupid, they chose this world, and to this day they are hanging by their feet at the bottom of a well in Babylon. And of course, the angels in heaven learned their lesson. That ended all the complaints about human excesses. They under-

took with renewed vigor one of their basic duties, that of watching out for the well-being of all God's creatures, including the sinful: "The angels glorify their Lord in praise and ask forgiveness for those on earth" (42:5).

Notice that human superiority is connected with the fact that people's bodies are made of earth, and hence the earthly qualities have an effect on their souls. Harut and Marut did not sin - and could not have sinned - until they had bodies. Once the qualities of clay are mixed with light, then darkness, distance, and wrath have to be taken into account. Clay suffers the wrath of God because of its mode of existence, which is to be overcome by the lack of light. To be distant from God is to stand in a relationship of *tanzih*. Hence, it is to be faced with God's majesty, severity, and wrath. In contrast, the angels, who have no clay in their make-up, are pure light, and hence they cannot be so distant from God. It is true that many of the angels manifest God's attributes of majesty and tremendousness, but that is because they are exalted far beyond the creatures with whom they are put in contact. The angels in charge of hell, for example, are angels who manifest wrath. But it is God's wrath that shines through them and, as we shall see in the section on eschatology, wrath and distance from God are inseparable qualities.

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# THE VISION OF ISLAM

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Faith and Practice

by  
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I. B. TAURIS PUBLISHERS  
LONDON • NEW YORK

innumerable descendant without the darkness of the body. If not for the body, people would be angels. If they were angels, they could not move further away from God, nor could they move closer to God. They would be fixed in their places, like angels in heaven and toads, figs, and stones in the earth. "None of us there is," say the angels in the Koran, "but has a known station" (17:164). Angels and all creatures other than human beings have known stations and fixed entities. Only human beings are unknown quantities who have been given the freedom to shape their own destinies.

The unique situation of human beings is

alluded to in a Koranic verse that was cited earlier. When Iblis refused to follow God's command, God asked him, "What prevented you from prostrating yourself before him whom I created with My own two hands?" (38:75). Many commentators hold that the "two hands" of God mentioned here refer to the two basic kinds of divine attributes, mercy and wrath, or *tashbih* and *tanzih*. Hence, the verse alludes to the fact that Adam was made in God's form. It suggests that other things were created with only one hand, or with God's word instead of his hands. A hadith confirms this interpretation:

The angels said to God, "Our Lord, Thou hast created the children of Adam and appointed for them the present world, so appoint for us the next world."

God replied, "I will not make My righteous servant - him whom I created with My own two hands - like him to whom I said, 'Be!' and he was."

Angels, then, were created through God's word "Be!" as were other things. Some commentators maintain that angels of mercy were created with God's right hand and angels of wrath with his left hand. Likewise, God created Iblis and the satans with his left hand. However this may be, the point of such discussions is to bring out the unique status of human beings, a uniqueness that stems from the fact that they were taught all the names. Because of their uniqueness, God sends the prophets to them, but not to the angels or to the animals. (The jinn, ambiguous as always, are able to follow human prophets.) The discussion of prophecy is really the discussion of the basic rights and responsibilities of human nature. The underlying question being addressed is, How can people become worthy of the name "human being"? In other words, How do they become God's servants and vicegerents? ■