

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# Islam, personhood and ... where is God in all this?

*Peter Riddell*

*Peter Riddell is Director of the Centre for Islamic Studies and Muslim-Christian Relations and Professor of Islamic Studies, London School of Theology*

KEY WORDS: Personhood, Islam, soul, sin, hermeneutics, creation.

Islamic history has been marked by a complex set of tensions within and without. At the macro level we can focus on two great internal tensions deriving from hermeneutical approaches to Islamic Scripture. The first derived from a literal reading of Revelation as opposed to a reason-based reading of Revelation, and the second from a literal reading of Revelation as opposed to a mystical reading of Revelation.

Some of the differences of approach can be tabulated as follows:

<i>Champions of Mystical Thought</i>	<i>Champions of Revelation</i>	<i>Champions of Reason</i>
See Scripture as multi-layered, subjecting it to mystical speculation	Assert that the surface meaning of Scripture is paramount	Subject Scripture to rational thinking in the interpretative process
Emphasise Scripture plus saintly writings	Assert that Scripture and legal texts are sufficient in themselves	Emphasise Scripture plus scholarly writings by rationalist theologians
Have enjoyed strong mass support throughout the ages	Have produced radical revivalist movements periodically, calling for a return to scriptural basics. Also include conservative traditionalist scholars ('ulama')	Were prominent (as the Mu'tazila) from 8th - 11th centuries, and made a comeback through 20th-century modernist thought

Therefore, we should not ask 'What does Islam say about personhood', but rather 'What various perspectives do different Muslims have on personhood?'

The views of the champions of mystical thought, while fascinating, are more of historical than contemporary interest in the context of this issue. The dynamic in terms of contemporary Islamic ideologies is found in the engagement between revelation-based and reason-based approaches to the modern world. We will limit ourselves to two of the above actors, as these are the main competitors vying for dominance on the world Islamic stage: the champions of revelation (Qur'an and Hadith) and the champions of reason.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term 'champions of reason' is not meant to suggest that the scholars referred to demoted Islamic Scripture in importance, compared with the champions of revelation. Rather, the former gave greater priority to the use of reason in interpreting Scripture.

The champions of revelation are best represented in the modern world by two groups. First are those Islamic religious scholars (*'ulama'*) formally trained in religious schools who provide their expert input and advice to Muslim communities world-wide through religious councils, legal committees and so forth. Second are the radical revivalist groups, often not formally trained in the Islamic educational system, who look to a literal reading of the Islamic sacred texts as their primary inspiration for engagement with the modern world.

The champions of reason, on the other hand, are sometimes, though not always, formally trained in Islamic educational systems but are distinguished by their commitment to more liberal approaches to interpreting Islam's sacred texts in addressing the challenges of today. As is argued by the modern-day scholar Isma'il Al-Faruqi, 'The Qur'anic revelation is a presentation to one's mind, to reason.' Riffat Hassan, another champion of reason, implicitly challenges more literalist approaches to Islam's most sacred text in pointing out that the Qur'an is not 'an encyclopaedia which may be consulted to obtain specific information about how God views each problem, issue or situation.'<sup>2</sup>

### Anthropological vocabulary in the Qur'an

Leonardo de Chirico points out that 'the anthropological vocabulary of Vatican II is not technically rigorous but tends to employ several terms interchangeably ('man', 'men', 'mankind', 'creature', 'person', 'persons', 'humanity', 'human family', 'human community' etc.)'<sup>3</sup>

What of the Islamic primary texts? Evidence for some degree of lexical fluidity can also be found in Yusuf Ali's English 'translation' of the Qur'an, which uses the term 'person' to render a variety of Arabic terms. On occasions 'person/people' is used to render *al-nas*; most commonly 'person/people' is used to render *nafs/anfus*; rarely 'person/people' is used to render *rajul/rijal*. We will focus here on *nafs* and its various significances.

Penrice's 'Dictionary of the Qur'an' explains *nafs* as 'A soul, a living soul or person'.<sup>4</sup> It is cognate with Hebrew *nefesh*. This is the most common use of *nafs*, as seen in the following verse:

6:98 It is He Who hath produced you from a single person (*nafsin wahidatin*); here is a place of sojourn and a place of departure: We detail Our Signs for people who understand.

Some verses use *nafs* to refer specifically to the physical person:

---

2 'The Right To Contraception And Abortion In Ten World Religions', [http://www.religiousconsultation.org/islam\\_contraception\\_abortion\\_in\\_SacredChoices.htm](http://www.religiousconsultation.org/islam_contraception_abortion_in_SacredChoices.htm), copied January 2003

3 De Chirico's paper will appear in this series on personhood in a forthcoming issue of *EQ*.

4 J. Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran*, London, 1873, 149.

12:54 So the king said: 'Bring him unto me; I will take him specially to serve about my own person (*nafsi*).'

While a more inner notion of 'soul' is prominent within *nafs/anfus* in the following verse:

6:93 ...If thou couldst but see how the wicked (do fare) in the flood of confusion at death! the angels stretch forth their hands, (saying), 'Yield up your souls (*anfusakum*): this day shall ye receive your reward, a penalty of shame, for that ye used to tell lies against Allah, and scornfully to reject of His Signs!'

On six occasions the frequent use of *nafs* to signify 'self' is applied to Allah in the Qur'an:

3:28 Let not the Believers take for friends or helpers Unbelievers rather than Believers: if any do that, in nothing will there be help from Allah: except by way of precaution, that ye may guard yourselves from them. But Allah cautions you (to remember) Himself (*nafsahu*); for the final goal is to Allah.

However, the use of *nafs* for Allah is avoided in later scholarly writings.<sup>5</sup>

On one occasion the Qur'an uses the term *nafs* to refer to the *jinn* (genies) as well as to men.

Q6:130 'O ye assembly of Jinns and men! came there not unto you Messengers from amongst you, setting forth unto you My Signs, and warning you of the meeting of this Day of yours?' They will say: 'We bear witness against ourselves (*anfusina*).' It was the life of this world that deceived them. So against themselves (*anfusihim*) will they bear witness that they rejected Faith.

*Nafs* is not used within the Qur'an to refer to angels.

## Views of the champions of revelation

Throughout history the Christian tradition tended to place an increasing focus on the person as an individual rational being. This contrasted with the emerging Islamic orthodoxy. In the ninth century a debate raged between the *Mu'tazila*, who championed the application of human reason as the best means of understanding God's word, and the *ahl al-hadith* who stressed a literal interpretation of the word. The latter asserted themselves, and this led to a downgrading of the person as an individual rational being empowered to determine his own path in life, and promotion of the person as a human creature subject to the will of Allah whose primary function was service.

At this point we should pose an important question: 'What makes a person

---

5 E. E. Calverley, 'Nafs', *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1993, vol. VII, 880.

whole?' For the champions of revelation, the answer was to be found in a person fulfilling his God-given duties.

### *The purpose of the creation of man*

The twentieth-century Islamist writer Gamal al-Banna (1920-) stresses in his writings that man's primary purpose in Islam derives from being *khalifa* (vice-gerent) 'who has to relate to this earth on behalf of God, and in accordance with his guidance and values, not just by pursuing personal interest.'<sup>6</sup> Al-Banna draws on Qur'anic verses which say that man was created for a specific purpose by God:

Q51:56. I have only created Jinns and men (*ins*), that they may serve Me.

Q51:57. No Sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me.

Though al-Banna speaks of relationship, in his view man's relating to God is one of unquestioning subservience. Why is this?

### *The nature of man*

The nature of the *nafs* means that guidance is needed for a person to be able to fulfil his God-given purpose of service. The great exegete al-Tabari (d. 923), a champion of the revelation-based school, argues for three main states of *nafs* in his commentary on *Sura* 12 verse 53, which states 'the soul is certainly prone to evil'.

First is the *nafs al-ammara bi al-su'*, 'the soul which commands towards evil'. This is the soul which inclines its owner to every wrong or evil deed. The exegete al-Baghawi (d. ca. 1122) described this soul in the following terms:

The *Nafs al-Ammara Bissu'* has Shaytan [Satan] as its ally. He promises it great rewards and gains, but casts falsehood into it. He invites it and entices the soul to do evil. He leads it on with hope after hope and presents falsehood to the soul in a form that it will accept and admire.<sup>7</sup>

The second state of soul is the *nafs al-lawwama*, 'the soul that blames'. This refers to the soul which is aware of its own imperfections. The conservative Hanbalite theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) describes it in the following terms:

It has been said that the *Nafs al-Lawwama* is the one which cannot rest in any one state. It often changes, remembers and forgets, submits and evades, loves and hates, rejoices and become sad, accepts and rejects, obeys and rebels.

---

6 M. Baraka, 'Islam and Development from the perspective of an Islamic thinker and a labour unionist: Gamal al-Banna', *Islamic Quarterly*, XXVIII/4 (1984), 208.

7 Cf. A. Afifi al-Akiti, 'The Meaning of Nafs', <http://www.ummah.net/bicnews/Articles/nafs.htm>, copied May 2001.

*Nafs al-Lawwama* is also the *Nafs* of the believer... It has also been mentioned that the *Nafs* blames itself on the Day of *Qiyamah*<sup>8</sup> – for every one blames himself for his actions, either his bad deeds, if he was one who had many wrong actions, or for his shortcomings, if he was one who did good deeds. All of this is accurate.<sup>9</sup>

The third state of soul is the *nafs al-mutma'inna* (the soul at peace). Al-Tabari, citing the Companion Qatada, describes this soul in the following terms:

It is the soul of the believer, made calm by what Allah has promised. Its owner is at rest and content with his knowledge of Allah's Names and Attributes, and with what He has said about Himself and His Messenger (s.A.w.), and with what He has said about what awaits the soul after death: about the departure of the soul, the life in the *Barzakh*, and the events of the Day of *Qiyamah* which will follow. So much so that a believer such as this can almost see them with his own eyes. So he submits to the will of Allah and surrenders to Him contentedly, never dissatisfied or complaining, and with his faith never wavering. He does not rejoice at his gains, nor do his afflictions make him despair – for he knows that they were decreed long before they happened to him, even before he was created....<sup>10</sup>

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, one of the greatest scholarly writers on *nafs*, stressed that the above did not reflect three independent entities. Rather they were states which could change from one to the other, aiming for the *nafs al-mutma'inna* as a final 'aim of perfection...'<sup>11</sup> In order for this to occur, a person needed to serve God as laid down in the scriptures which were revealed through the prophets.

### *Guidance is provided*

The twentieth-century radical Islamist Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) comments upon Chapter 114 of the Qur'an, stressing each person's responsibility to follow the guidance given him, and the calamitous result of not doing so. Though the agent of evil seems formidable, it is easy for a person to ward off his temptations, simply by seeking refuge with God:

Though [Allah] has permitted Satan to attack, He has supreme power over him and He has also provided guidance for man. Allah leaves to Satan only those who neglect Him their Lord, Sovereign and Deity, but those who live in consciousness of Him are safe and protected against his intimidations and incitements. Thus, righteousness is supported by the only true power of the Lord, Sovereign and Deity, whereas evil is backed by a slinking

---

8 Day of Resurrection.

9 *Madarij as-Salikin fi Manazili Iyyaka Na'budu wa Iyyaka Nasta'in*, vol. 1, 308, cited in al-Akiti, 'Meaning'.

10 Al-Tabari: *Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, vol. 13, Bulaq 1323/1905, cited in al-Akiti, 'Meaning'.

11 *Madarij*, cited in al-Akiti, 'Meaning'.

prompter, a sneaky whisperer, cowardly in the open field, quick to retreat in war, and easily defeated by one's seeking refuge with Allah.<sup>12</sup>

### *Don't ask certain questions*

Such contemporary thinkers as al-Banna and Qutb drew much inspiration from the prominent medieval scripturalist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), who held that 'man's purpose is not to know [God], but to obey Him.'<sup>13</sup> Ibn Taymiyya was highly critical of the Islamic philosophers who considered that people could use rational thinking as a means of learning eternal truths in order to gain a detailed knowledge about God. Also targets of his ire were the Sufi mystics, who devoted their attention to knowing God and, in the more extreme mystical speculative approaches, realising union with God.<sup>14</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya is here affirming the doctrine of *bila kayf* (without asking why), so much emphasised by the champions of revelation. They stress that Muslims should accept the truths of God-given Revelation without seeking to prove them, as human powers of reason are greatly limited. As the twentieth-century champion of revelation Abul A`la Mawdudi writes: 'the sphere of human perceptions as against the vastness of this great universe is not even comparable to a drop of water as against the ocean.'<sup>15</sup>

So some questions were clearly out of bounds, in the view of the champions of revelation. A much debated example was whether God's attributes were integral to his essence (*Dhat*) or were additional to it. The Patani Malay scholar Dawud al-Fatani (d. 1847) draws on the Egyptian Shafi'i scholar Muhammad al-Suhaymi (d. 1764) in writing as follows:

It is not required... to discuss the attributes [of God] and their relations, whether they are the *Dhat* or not. In fact, the Companions of the Prophet and their followers themselves abstained from addressing such issues. [Indeed they] forbade discussion of them. It is better and much safer for us not to discuss something which is beyond our intellectual ability.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, to ask questions such as 'Is God powerful enough to have a son?', or 'Is God powerful enough to squeeze the world into an egg shell?' is branded by Dawud al-Fatani as *bid'a* (unacceptable innovation) in his *al-Durr al-Thamin* (The Precious Pearls).<sup>17</sup>

We are reminded of Eastern Orthodoxy's insistence on the doctrine of the

12 Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an* Vol. 30, London, 1979, 366.

13 J. A. Williams, *Islam*, London, 1961, 206.

14 Williams, *Islam*, 209-10.

15 Abu'l-A`la Mawdudi, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, commentary on Sura 72, [http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic/quran/intro/i072.htm#H\\_072\\_3](http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic/quran/intro/i072.htm#H_072_3)

16 *Al-Durr al-Thamin*, cited in M. F. Bin Abdul Mukti, *The Development of Kalam in the Malay World: The Teaching of Shaykh Dawud al-Fatani on the Attributes of God*, PhD dissertation, Univ. of Birmingham, 2001, 148.

17 Mukti, *Development*, 158.

Trinity as a given, asserting that it cannot be explained logically and does not need to be, according to Cornel Boingeanu.<sup>18</sup> Eastern Orthodoxy's strong rejection of Aristotelian rationalism echoes *ahl al-hadith* responses to Mu'tazilite rationalism.

Do we also hear echoes of Meic Pearse's comment that 'most people in the human past did not spend their time anxiously wondering who or what they were... it is our own age which has found human personhood problematic'?<sup>19</sup> In other words, for the Muslim champions of revelation, are our ruminations on 'what is a person?' a non-issue?

### *What about sin?*

Tony Lane reminds us of the need to consider sin in seeking to understand personhood. One of his statements is helpful in delineating Christian and Islamic doctrine. I will include a quote from his paper, inserting in italics a likely revelation-based Muslim response to key statements:

Adam was created good (*indeed*). Before the fall, Adam did not need to sin (*wa'llahu a'lam – God knows best*) – he was able not to sin (*according to God's decrees*) but he also had the capacity to sin (*according to God's decrees*). He was created with free choice of the will (*not so. God's preordained plan is at the helm*) and was able to exercise this for or against God (*only if God so willed it*), though as he was good the former came more naturally to him (*according to God's decrees*). In the garden he was on trial or probation (*as God willed it to be so*) and he fell (*no, he was cast out*) of his own free choice (*not so*). In this event not only Adam fell but also, in him, every human being (*not so. All are born good, as was Adam*).<sup>20</sup>

This provides a framework for the Islamic thesis that as Adam did not fall through an act of free choice, and there is no original sin leaving a legacy for succeeding generations of a broken relationship between God and man, therefore there is no need for the kind of bridge between God and the human sinner provided by a personal saviour. All that is needed is a mechanism, in the form of Scripture and Law, which acts as a blueprint to guide humans to follow God's instructions and thereby to earn his favour on the Day of Judgement.

Thus in the view of the champions of revelation, a person is a created human being, distinguishable from Allah in every significant respect, created not to wonder why but rather to serve Allah and to follow his guidance as contained in the sacred Scripture and the revealed Law. A person becomes whole by serving Allah and following his guidance.

---

18 Boingeanu's paper will appear in this series on personhood in a forthcoming issue of EQ.

19 Pearse's paper appears in this series on personhood in this present issue of EQ.

20 Lane's paper will appear in this series on personhood in a forthcoming issue of EQ.

## Views of the champions of reason

What about the champions of reason. How would they answer the question: 'What makes a person whole?'

In this group we hear the closest echo of a Christian view which might identify key elements of personhood as rationality, morality/will, relationality, and physicality. But it should be stressed that for the champions of reason such a view is still clearly enclosed within the confines of subservience to a transcendent God.

### *Mankind has free will*

One of the earliest proponents of the reason-based approach to Scripture, al-Hasan al-Basri (642-728), agreed essentially with the view of the purpose for mankind's creation articulated earlier in commenting '[God] ordered them to worship Him which is why He created them.' Although this statement echoes a central doctrine of the champions of revelation, al-Hasan al-Basri nevertheless allocated to the individual person a considerable measure of free will, rejecting the notion that God would create people to worship him, guide them away from that purpose, and then punish them: 'God would not have created them for a purpose and then come between them and (the purpose) because He does not do harm to His servants.'<sup>21</sup>

### *The individual's relationship with God and society*

The modern Indonesian theologian Jalaluddin Rakhmat adds another dimension to the rationalist quest, commenting as follows: 'All Muslims feel that Islam is not just about regulating the relationship between mankind and God. All groups agree, both fundamentalists and liberals, that in our religion there must be a relationship between the individual and God, but one must still be cognisant that one is part of a society. What then becomes a challenge is to formulate our position in the midst of that society.'<sup>22</sup>

The key message for our purposes is two-fold: firstly, relationship between a person and God is worthy of attention and definition, but secondly, this must not lead to a demotion of the importance of society by promoting the individual. In other words, one must not overly focus on the fragment at the expense of the whole.

### *God is transcendent*

How is such an Islamic approach to ensure that emphasising relationship between the individual and God does not reduce God in his majestic transcendence?

---

21 Cited in A. Rippin & J. Knappert, *Textual sources for the Study of Islam*, Chicago, 1986, 116.

22 Jalaluddin Rakhmat, 'Tentang Syariat, Islam Fundamentalists dan Liberal', *Tempo Interaktif*, 11 December 2000.

The modern Muslim academic Professor Mahmoud Abu-Saud articulates a reason-based approach to transcendence as follows:

(a) God, the sole Creator of all beings, the Lord and the Owner of everything, the Absolute and the Ultimate; (b) the human community as an entity integrated in the cosmos; (c) the human individual who is ordained to be responsible for himself, his collectivity and his environment; (d) Man is made of matter and spirit. He attains cognition by means of the logistics of his meditative faculty and the awareness of his spirituality; (e) the revealed standard of values, commandments and basic criteria which regulate, govern and guide human behaviour.<sup>23</sup>

Abu-Saud's final point imposes constraints on the individual who enjoys certain freedoms but only within the parameters allowed by revelation.

Abu-Saud identifies God's purposes in creating man as threefold. The first purpose is to worship God. The second is to represent God in the guardianship over the creation; man is selected for this role rather than any other creature as only man has the required faculties. Finally man is created 'to cause growth on earth and make it more resourceful for his own benefit, welfare and prosperity.'<sup>24</sup>

Hence one hears certain different perspectives articulated by the champions of reason. However, key foundational principles are shared with the champions of revelation: God is transcendent and ultimately 'other', and mankind is created to serve God. Coming to know about God through rationalist thought in no way undermines the primary objective of serving God; a servant can know a lot about his master without there being any suggestion of intimacy. 'Person' for the champions of reason is somewhat released from the shackles of the champion of revelation doctrine of *bila kayf*, but not to the extent of being able to challenge God's majestic otherness.

### Islamic responses to contemporary issues

It would be useful to try and ground our discussion in the real world, considering certain topics of contemporary debate which pertain to the issue of personhood.

#### *Contraception: prevention of a person*

Muslims no less than Christians have been challenged by ethical issues surrounding human intervention via new medical techniques in what have always been seen as the arena of God. Muslim scholars and thinkers are increasingly

---

23 Mahmoud Abu-Saud, 'Economics Within Transcendence', *Islamica* vol. 1, no. 2 (March 1993), 6.

24 Abu-Saud, 'Economics', 6.

asking themselves questions such as 'should human beings interfere via contraception with the God-given process which creates life?'

Some conservative Muslim theologians and groups who belong within the champions of revelation camp express concerns with the notion of contraception, often citing Qur'anic verses such as:

Q11:6 'There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance dependeth on Allah.'<sup>25</sup>

Their concerns are several. First, by practising uncontrolled contraception, humans may be seen to be derogating the role of God. Second, as suggested in somewhat conspiratorial terms by the radical group Al-Muhajiroun:

the idea of birth control propagatd [sic] nowadays stretches far back to a historical and an ideological conspiracy which the disbelievers concocted against the Muslims for fear of the rapid demographic growth of the Islamic Ummah, which was threatening their objectives, their areas of influence and their interests... Indeed the growing birthrate of the Muslimism [sic] does not only concern the Jews, but the whole world, for their proliferation would make them a major force.<sup>26</sup>

Abu Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim,<sup>27</sup> who belongs broadly within the champions of revelation, is willing to exercise some flexibility on the question of contraceptive use, writing as follows:

...where pregnancy may injure the health of the woman or may even threaten her life, the higher purpose of protecting life... would prevail, requiring a woman to make use of contraceptive devices to protect her health or life.

His next statement points us clearly in the direction of his primary points of reference and suggests a measure of discomfort which he feels regarding contraceptive use: 'The use of contraceptive devices for other reasons by mutual consent between the husband and wife is *makruh* (undesirable, improper)... but not necessarily *haram* (forbidden) under the *shari'ah*.'<sup>28</sup>

Champions of reason, however, do not share such concerns. Fazlur Rahman ridicules as 'infantile' the use of Qur'anic references to God's power and promise such as Q11:6 above: 'The Qur'an certainly does not mean to say that God provides every living creature with sustenance whether that creature is capable of

25 Cf. the radical group Al-Muhajiroun's statement 'Islamic Verdict on Contraception', <http://www.almuhajiroun.com/Islamic%20Topics/Islamic%20Fiqh/Contraception.htm>, copied January 2003.

26 *Ibid.*

27 This scholar took his PhD under Isma'il al-Faruqi at Temple University and teaches at the University of Durban Westville, South Africa.

28 Ebrahim, Abu Fadl Mohsin, *Abortion, Birth Control and Surrogate Parenting: An Islamic Perspective*, Indianapolis, American Trust Publications, 1989, 102.

procuring sustenance for itself or not.<sup>29</sup> Abdulaziz Sachedina<sup>30</sup> prescribes only the broadest of limits in affirming that 'birth control is... permissible if the prescribed method does not have any adverse impact on the health of either spouse and if it does not lead to permanent sterilization.'<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, at the macro level, both champions of revelation and reason are essentially in agreement on this issue. Above all, there is no suggestion that contraceptive use is a matter of personal choice which individuals can take on the basis of considerations of pleasure and sexual fulfilment, especially outside wedlock.

### *Termination of a person*

What about the thorny issue of terminating life, especially abortion, such a hot-potato in the West?

As can be expected, the champions of revelation point us in the direction of scripture in seeking a solution. Abu Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim reminds his audience that 'Analysis of the ethical issues in bio-medical technology should be derived from the guidance of Allah, Who alone has absolute knowledge of good and bad.'<sup>32</sup>

Shahid Athar points to several Islamic verses as suggesting a prohibition on abortion:

Q17:31 Kill not your children for fear of want: We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily the killing of them is a great sin.

However in unpacking the issue, Athar concludes that where the mother's life is in danger, abortion is acceptable as a last resort. Under any other circumstances, says Athar, abortion of a viable fetus is equivalent to infanticide.<sup>33</sup>

Certainly there is a debate among Muslim scholars on this issue. Islamic Law schools differ in the rigidity of their interpretations. The Hanafi school of law takes the most liberal approach, allowing the woman the right to abort under certain circumstances without her husband's consent, while the Maliki school of law prohibits abortion under all circumstances. Ja'fari (Shi'i) jurists tend to take a middle position; after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, abortion was made illegal, though a decade later it was permitted under strict conditions, where the

29 'The Right To Contraception And Abortion In Ten World Religions', [http://www.religiousconsultation.org/islam\\_contraception\\_abortion\\_in\\_SacredChoices.htm](http://www.religiousconsultation.org/islam_contraception_abortion_in_SacredChoices.htm), copied January 2003

30 A Tanzanian-born American citizen who is a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia.

31 Abdulaziz Sachedina, 'Muslim Beliefs and Practices Affecting Health Care', <http://www.people.virginia.edu/aas/issues/care.htm>

32 Ebrahim, *Abortion*, 101.

33 Shahid Athar, 'The Islamic Perspective in Medical Ethics', in Shahid Athar (ed.), *Islamic Perspectives in Medicine*, Indianapolis, American Trust Publications, 1993, 190.

mother's life was in danger or where the fetus was abnormal.<sup>34</sup>

The rationalist thinker Abdulaziz Sachedina comments as follows: 'Abortion is permitted where the mother's health is in imminent danger. In addition, before the fetus attains personhood, that is during the first 120 days, abortion is permissible if the woman would stop lactating for another child. Rape is also a valid reason for abortion if there is a fear of psychological damage and problems that could lead to physical symptoms.'<sup>35</sup>

Muslim scholars are still reflecting on the issue, though the strong tendency is towards severely restricting the practice of abortion. In no case is there a prominent group of Islamic thinkers who argue for abortion on demand. Both champions of revelation and the more rationalist theologians would see such a policy in terms of the individual hijacking what rightfully belongs in the domain of God; i.e. the creation and sustaining of human life.

### *To clone or not to clone? Artificial creation of a person*

What about cloning? This has increasingly become a topic of discussion among Muslim scholars in recent years, with the Islamic *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) Academy holding a meeting in Mecca from 28 June to 3 July, 1997 to discuss the acceptability or otherwise of cloning (*istinsakh*). The published summary of discussion included the following statement: '... the majority of the Academy members after discussion reached the conclusion that cloning is permissible in case of plants as well as in case of animals except human beings. The extension of cloning to human beings would create extremely complex and intractable social and moral problems. Therefore cloning of human beings cannot be permitted.'<sup>36</sup>

In harmony with this view, another group of revelation-based conservatives, the Council of '*Ulama*' of Dagestan, issued a *fatwa* (legal pronouncement) as follows:

Does Islam allow cloning? Islam prohibits cloning. When a man wishes to re-create the Lord's creation, he aspires to play the part of the Creator. The fact that it is forbidden is proved by one of the Hadeeth: 'Who is more wrong than he who tries to create, like Allah creates.'<sup>37</sup>

Another champion of revelation, Munawar Anees, encapsulates this view as follows: 'The Quranic paradigm of human creation, it would appear, preempts any move towards cloning. From the moment of birth to the point of death, the entire cycle is a Divine act. The humankind is simply an agent, a trustee of God

34 Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, London, Tauris, 1999, 39, 41.

35 Abdulaziz Sachedina, 'Muslim Beliefs and Practices Affecting Health Care', <http://www.people.virginia.edu/aas/issues/care.htm>

36 Mufti Taqi Uthmaani (Deputy Chairman, Islamic Fiqh Academy), 'The 1997 Meeting: Islamic Fiqh Academy' (28 June – 3 July), Mecca, [http://www.jamiat.org.za/c\\_facademy.html](http://www.jamiat.org.za/c_facademy.html)

37 'Fatwas', IslamRu, [http://www.islam.ru/eng\\_fatwa/eng\\_fatwa.shtml?name=fatwas.htm&dir=eng\\_fatwa](http://www.islam.ru/eng_fatwa/eng_fatwa.shtml?name=fatwas.htm&dir=eng_fatwa)

and the body a trust from God. As such, any replication is simply a redundant act. In the absence of a Quranic axiom on body as property, genetic policing would appear to be quite unethical.<sup>38</sup>

However, the jury is still out, according to the prominent champion of reason Abdulaziz Sachedina. He points out that the scientific understanding of the cloning process is still emerging, and in this context Islamic scholars should not be too hasty in proscribing this practice. However, he stresses that acceptance could only occur if practised within the framework of God's overall plan, not at the whim of mankind:

A tenable conclusion, derived by rationally inclined interpreters of... Qur'an [23:12-14], suggests that as participants in the act of creating with God, (God being the Best of the creators) human beings can actively engage in furthering the overall well estate of humanity by intervening in the works of nature, including the early stages of embryonic development, to improve human health.<sup>39</sup>

The debate surrounding the issue of human cloning burst into public view as a result of the December 2002 announcement by a research company tied to the Raelian religious sect that it had successfully produced the world's first human clone. Muslim groups issued a considerable number of statements, widely condemning this move by the somewhat eccentric Raelians.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations polled 1008 Muslims on the issue, of whom 81% expressed clear opposition to human cloning. Abdulaziz Sachedina reiterated his sense of caution 'in light of the limited knowledge that we have about who would be harmed by cloning or whose rights would be violated.'<sup>40</sup> A press statement issued by a legal committee of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference<sup>41</sup> spoke of 'underlying fears that the [human cloning] technique could fall into the hands of some unscrupulous elements who could abuse it for their nefarious purposes.' It nevertheless approved cloning experiments in the cases of plants and animals. The Muslim Clerical Council, Malaysia's highest religious decision-making body, issued a fatwa banning human cloning, saying the procedure was 'unnatural and totally against Islam.'<sup>42</sup>

---

38 'Re-defining the Human: Triumphs and Tribulations of Homo xeroxiens', paper presented at The International Conference on Cloning: The Cloning Dilemma, organised by Forensic Sciences Administration, Dubai Police General Headquarters, Dubai World Trade Center, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, April 4-5, 1998, <http://www.ummah.net/bicnews/Articles/human.htm>

39 Sachedina, Abdulaziz, 'Islamic Perspectives on Cloning', <http://www.people.virginia.edu/aas/issues/cloning.htm>

40 'Resources: Islam and Human Cloning', CAIR-NET Newsletter, December 27, 2002.

41 This was originally issued on 28 October 2002, but widely re-distributed following the Raelian announcement.

42 'Resources: Islam and Human Cloning', CAIR-NET Newsletter, December 27, 2002.

### *Transformation to monkey and pig: de-person-alisation*

Can a person cease to be a person? The champions of revelation argue from scripture that humans can cease to be persons in certain instances. The Qur'an suggests that God's punishment for various violations includes transforming transgressors into monkeys and pigs:

Q5:60 Those who incurred the curse of Allah and His wrath, those of whom some He transformed into apes and swine...

This theme is reinforced by the Prophetic Traditions (Hadith), the second most authoritative component of Islamic sacred scripture, which also makes reference to this divine punishment.<sup>43</sup>

Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767), one of the very earliest Qur'anic commentators, specifies the Jews as the particular recipients of this punishment in commenting upon verses 6-7 of chapter 1 of the Qur'an, the most widely recited chapter by Muslims around the world:

(Guide us along the straight path): that is, the religion of Islam because there is no guidance in any religion other than Islam... (The path of those whom You have blessed ... Not those against whom You have sent Your wrath): that is, a religion other than the Jewish one, against whom God was wrathful. Monkeys and pigs were made from them.

The revolutionary Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791), father of the fundamentalist Wahhabi movement, commented as follows in his *Kitab al-Tawhid*: 'Allah transformed some of the Jews into apes because the ape outwardly resembles the human being, although they are separate and distinct from them. Likewise, the Jews used to commit transgressions which, in some ways, outwardly appeared to be good deeds, while in fact they were false.'<sup>44</sup>

Moving down the centuries to the modern day, this theme frequently re-emerges in statements by radical Muslims when discussing the state of Israel. The contemporary Algerian radical author Abdul Malik bin Ahmad al-Ramadani al-Jazairi laments what he sees as the two great calamities of the twentieth century, the abolition of the Caliphate by Kemal Attaturk in 1924 and the establishment of Israel in 1948, which he writes was founded by 'the brothers of apes and swine in the core of the Islamic lands from where the Prophet... had ascended to the Heavens (i.e. Jerusalem).'<sup>45</sup> More recently, the Mufti of Jerusalem and Palestine, Sheikh Ekrima Sabri, gave a sermon at the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple

43 Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari*, Volume 7, Book 69, Number 494.

44 Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, *Kitab al-Tawhid*, <http://islamicweb.com/beliefs/creed/abdulwahab/KT1-chap-21.htm>

45 'Abd al-Malik ibn Ahmad ibn al-Mubarak al-Ramadani al-Jaza'iri, *Madarik al-nazar fi al-siyasa bayna al-tatbiqat al-shari'a wa-al-infi'alat al-hamasiya* (Politics between the application of Islamic law and excitability), 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., al-Dammam: Dar Sabil al-Mu'minin lil-Nahsr wa-al-Tawzi', 1418 [1997/1998], <http://www.troid.org/jan/Principles%20of%20the%20Salafee%20Dawah.htm>

Mount in Jerusalem on July 11, 1997, in which he forecast the fate awaiting the Jews:

Allah shall take revenge on behalf of his prophet against the colonialist settlers who are sons of monkeys and pigs... Forgive us, Muhammad, for the acts of these sons of monkeys and pigs, who sought to harm your sanctity.<sup>46</sup>

This metaphor regularly appears in leaflets produced by the Palestinian fundamentalist group Hamas. The very first leaflet produced by Hamas, dated January 1988, began as follows: 'O all our people, men and women. O our children: the Jews – brothers of the apes, assassins of the prophets, bloodsuckers, war-mongers – are murdering you... Only Islam can break the Jews and destroy their dream.'<sup>47</sup>

Such a literalist reading of Islamic scripture can have significant effects on the mind formation of the young, especially when given official sanction. An official textbook prescribed as part of the formal eighth-grade curriculum in Saudi Arabian schools states that Allah cursed Jews and turned them into apes and pigs.<sup>48</sup> The influence of such indoctrination can reach down to very young ages also. In mid-2002 Fox News published the transcript of an interview with a 3-year-old Muslim girl shown on Iqraa television, a joint Saudi and Egyptian channel. The interviewer was Doaa `Amer, and part of the interview ran as follows:<sup>49</sup>

`Amer: ... are you familiar with the Jews?

Girl: Yes.

`Amer: Do you like them?

Girl: No.

`Amer: Why don't you like them?

Girl: Because...

`Amer: Because they are what?

Girl: They're apes and pigs,

Thus Islamic scripture allows for some humans to change from 'person' to 'non-person'. Why does this happen? Because they turn away from the guidance God has given them, and corrupt his word. The Islamist radical writer Mohammed al-Asi explains why Jews are supposedly particular targets of this process of de-person-alisation as follows:

Whether during, before, or after Moses, these Israelis display a consistency of misbehaviour, disobedience, defiance, and malfeasance... the Qur'an

46 *Independent Media Review & Analysis*, [http://www.freeman.org/m\\_online/aug97/lerner1.htm](http://www.freeman.org/m_online/aug97/lerner1.htm), copied May 2001

47 Esther Webman, 'Anti-Semitic Motifs in the Ideology of Hizballah and Hamas', Tel Aviv University, 1994, <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/anti-semitism2.htm#Publications>

48 David Twersky, 'Jews and Christians are Apes and Pigs, Saudi Textbooks say', *The New York Sun*, December 23, 2002.

49 'Interview with Muslim Girl', Fox News, June 15, 2002, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,55304,00.html>

is speaking to these Israelis about an affair of their own deviation... it was Allah who succored and supported them and made it possible for them to move into the appointed land... But, as usual, the children of Israel flouted and frustrated the divine design... they misquoted what was in effect a divine address to all the children of Israel and not only to those who took it upon themselves to misdirect the words or the meaning of the divine communiqué. 'And We sent down on them a calamity from the sky because of their iniquity.'<sup>50</sup>

Islamic radicals, latter-day champions of revelation, employ such Muslim hermeneutics to dehumanise Jewish persons for the specific purpose of justifying continual warfare/*jihad* against them, and in so doing, seek to serve God according to their reading of God's wishes.

It should be noted that modern-day champions of reason within the Islamic community do not embrace this particular line of argument. However, nor have such scholars issued any clear statements, in the form of an authoritative *fatwa*, denouncing those who promote this ideology in the modern day.

## Conclusion

In discussing human personhood, we might ask whether we should start with human beings or with God. The champions of revelation would respond that of course we must start with God, as all things start with God, and indeed, the question itself should not even be posed. Mankind might be the 'crown of creation', but the ultimate authority of God is beyond question: '... every human being has the right to be born, the right to be, and the right to live as long as Allah... permits.'<sup>51</sup>

In answer to the question 'What makes a person whole?', Muslims of various ideological persuasions would probably state that wholeness is achieved by following the revealed Scripture and Law, not by engaging in navel-gazing. The focus should be on God, not people.

As for Graham McFarlane's three way typology,<sup>52</sup> if Muslims responded positively at all, it would probably be more towards his iconic approach where 'human creatures are created with a very clear purpose in mind. It is God who is the end-point by which the creature is to be identified.' As for McFarlane's call to focus on the resurrected Christ as the perfect person, the element of the divine attributed to Christ is a massive stumbling block. The incarnation is seen as the humanisation of God, a bringing together of two irreconcilables, the eternal Divine Master and the created weak servant.

---

50 M. al-Asi, 'Qur'an's exposure of distortions by the children of Israel', *Crescent International*, 27/7, 16-30 June, 1998, 7.

51 Ebrahim, *Abortion*, 102.

52 McFarlane's paper will appear in this series on personhood in a forthcoming issue of EQ.

In response to a quest to define 'personhood', a technical answer from within Islam might be as follows: 'Islam holds that Man consists of two essential elements, one material which is the body, the other spiritual which is the soul [*nafs*]. Life exists in the human body as long as the soul is joined to it, and it ceases when the soul departs from the body.'<sup>53</sup>

But most Muslims would ask 'Who cares? Where is God in all this? Why go to a dramatic performance and focus on describing the detail of the wallpaper in the theatre, rather than on the central drama being enacted on stage; i.e. God's plan for the world?'

Christians would answer that they saw the central drama in very different terms.

### Abstract

This article engages with a tension within Islam since the faith's early history surrounding hermeneutical approaches to sacred text. It presents diverse views held by scriptural literalists and rationalists as they relate to the over-riding theme of personhood. Key Islamic writers from both classical and modern periods are consulted to illustrate some of the debates which have taken place around notions such as self, sin, free will, cloning, abortion and attitudes towards Judaism.

---

53 Zaki Badawi, 'Organ Transplant', <http://www.ummah.net/bicnews/Articles/organ.htm>, copied May 2001.

### The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis

A major achievement in Old Testament studies, this comprehensive five-volume dictionary is an invaluable study aid for all involved in the analysis and exposition of the Old Testament.

*'When dictionaries and encyclopaedias are multiplying, NIDOTTE looks set to become the standard work in this field for all who respect the Bible.'*

Alan Millard (Rankin Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages, University of Liverpool)

0-85364-834-4 (5 volume set) / £169.99



Paternoster, PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK