

Original Faith and Divine Guidance

Mohammad Ayoub discusses the various controversies about the origin on mankind and its ultimate fate through the looking glass of religions, east and west

'Set your face, therefore, to the (true) religion, a man of pure faith. This is God's original creation according to which He originated humankind; there is no altering of God's creation (Q. 30: 30).'

Human history may be regarded as a long search for origins and meaning, or in other words, for the beginning and end of human existence. This quest has occupied all the major philosophical and religious systems throughout recorded human history. This preoccupation, moreover, has been motivated by the need to reform society by remodeling it after a golden age of a mythical past, an age of innocence, peace and harmony in both the human and natural orders. Yet although the goal of this quest has been to return to this original age of goodness and prosperity, it was realized that this goal can only be fully attained in a mythical future, in an eschatological order which would replace this present corrupt and decadent order. This eschatological hope expresses a deep despair and frustration with human history, a history of strife, exploitation, oppression and warfare. Let us look briefly at a few examples to illustrate this point.

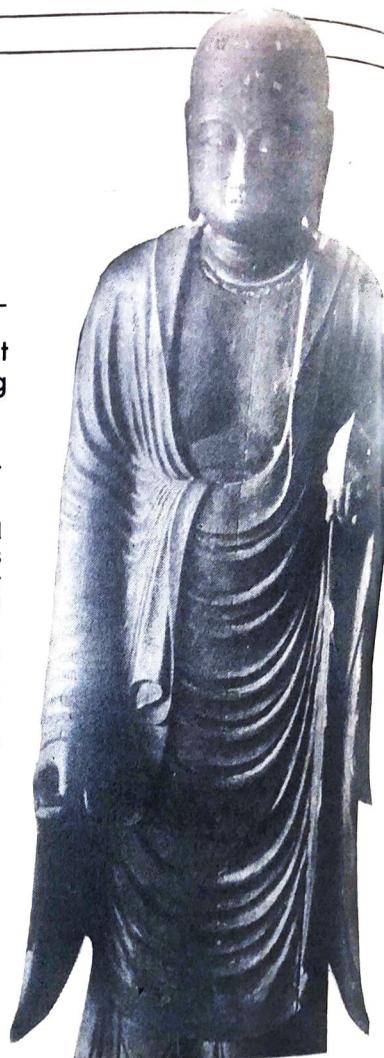
In ancient China, this mythical past reflected the harmony between heaven, earth and human society. It was an age of social harmony based on imperial absolute authority, an authority which was at once despotic and benevolent, exercised by one man, but accepted by all. The mythical emperors Yao, Shun and Yu were 'true sons of heaven', whose will they represented in human society. Gradually, however, corruption set in and human authority no longer reflected the universal harmony of a golden age of a past which was thought to lie outside the domain of the recorded history of Chinese civilization. From Confucius (K'ung Fu-tzu) Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu to Mao Tse -Tung, phil-

osophers, religious thinkers and social reformers have hearkened back to this normative age and sought to recover its social and spiritual principles and benefits.

The good emperors of ancient China ruled with wisdom and persuasion. There was a normative age because everyone in society knew his role which he fulfilled without fear of punishment, or the inducement of reward. There was, therefore, no need for a human law to enforce the will of heaven which the emperor embodied. In time, however, deterioration set in as successive rulers lacked wisdom, and thus ceased to be sage-emperors. Wisdom gradually replaced by brute force, and harmony and peace gave way to social strife, oppression and the violent wars.

In ancient India, the quest for origins and meaning was embodied in the principles of *dharma*, universal truth, virtue, or 'the good law'. The normative, or golden age of the world was seen to be a time before history; it was an age of *dharma*. It was a time when this universal law reigned supreme in the life of human society, the universe and even the higher spheres of the gods. Manu, the great sage of that golden age, recorded this eternal law in his famous law code (*dharmas-stra*) to guide the rulers of future ages, when *dharma* would be gradually forgotten and corruption and evil would dominate. As a universal and eternal principle of virtue, however, *dharma* remains the ideal goal of Indian wisdom, devotion and morality. Yet it has long been recognized that this normative age is irrecoverable. Hence, salvation remains the goal of each individual, rather than of society at large. Salvation, moreover, came to mean the final liberation of the individual from all the social and physical bonds of this world. It is liberation from life itself.

The notion of equating wisdom with



goodness or virtue, reached its highest expression in the life and mission of the Buddha. In fact Buddha means 'the enlightened one'. The Buddha denied the existence of God, or any other supernatural being, including the human soul. He affirmed, however, the existence of *dharma* as the eternal truth about life and the universe, the principle behind being of all things: 'There is, O monks', he declared, 'an unborn, not become, not made, not compounded. Had there not been that unborn, not become, not made, not compounded, no way could be discerned here of transcending that which is born, became, made, compounded.'

The Buddha was not simply a sage. He was also a great reformer. While he did not himself speak of a golden age in a distant and imaginary past, he sought to create in his order of monks and lay devotees (Sangha) 'the good society' wherein *dharma* would be actualized. For the Buddha, human nature is basically evil, but nonetheless, capable of reform. The enlightened



Is he born in sin? The Buddha is not sure

person is one who is free from attachments to material things, free from selfishness, and greed, free from the vices of lying, stealing, lewdness and backbiting. In short, a good person is one who is virtuous and dignified, of clean living and healthy mind, and above all, capable of realizing his full potential of wisdom and compassion towards all sentient beings. Such a person would in the end achieve *Nirvana* which is an eternal state of peace and bliss.

In contrast with the wisdom and traditions of India and China, the prophetic traditions of the Middle East have generally posited an original age of goodness and pristine innocence followed by all from this state of grace into a long history of corruption and sin. It is because of this fall that prophets are necessary to remind men of this lost paradise and to guide them back to it. Thus Adam and Eve were, according to Genesis, so innocent that they did not recognize that they were naked. Their sin was that they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and thus lost their innocence, and their nakedness became apparent to them. This innocence was not a natural state of virtue, but of ignorance and naive helplessness. Hence, Adam's sin was not one of disobedience of God's command, but of acquiring knowledge, and by so doing, of becoming like God, knowing good and evil. God is, therefore, made to exclaim in Genesis, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3: 22)' Thus Adam and his spouse were expelled from Paradise, and both they and their descendants

forever lost the state of goodness with which Genesis characterizes creation in its original state before Adam's fall.

Christianity is basically a religion of sin and redemption. Every human being, according to the Christian worldview, is henceforth born not in the original state of goodness and innocence in which God created Adam and Eve, but in the state of sin. Before the fall, Genesis tells us, God and man enjoyed a direct and friendly relation, where God used to visit His human creation and walk 'in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8)'. After the fall, however, God and man became enemies in need of reconciliation which could be achieved only through the incarnation and death of God in Christ, the 'only begotten son of God'. Yet even this reconciliation did not give humanity back its lost paradise in this life, but only the hope of regaining it after death. Until then, every child must carry the burden of the sin of Adam and Eve, and hope that through God's love and his or her faith, he or she would be restored to the state of Divine grace, but only at the end of time, at the consummation of man's fallen earthly history.

In sharp contrast with the views so far discussed, stands the Qur'anic view of the human individual, of human society and of human history altogether. It is important to observe, however, before we examine this unique view, that both the Hindu-Buddhist and Judaeo-Christian worldviews led in the end either to despair in the face of the 'terror of history', forever repeating itself in endless and purposeless cycles, or to romantic utopianism. The former was the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from the Indian view of time and history, and the latter expressed the hope of a 'Paradise regained' after the fall of man from the utopian existence in a paradisaical garden free from pain, anguish and death. This utopian hope finally expressed itself in the Marxist utopia of a classless society, a society free from oppression and exploitation, poverty and hunger and all forms of human inequality. This Marxist socioeconomic utopia expresses in reality an eschatological hope which was essentially born out of the Judaeo-Christian worldview.

The Qur'an affirms that man is God's representative (*khalifah*) on earth (Q. 2: 30). This awesome charge carries with it both the privilege and responsibility of man. It is a privilege because it embodies the primordial Divine trust (*amanah*) which man alone chose to bear (Q. 33:72). It is a

real responsibility because man, self-conceited and foolish that he is, is unequal to the task without Divine assistance. This Divine assistance is given through revelation and guidance. In fact, Divine guidance is God's answer to human sin. It was promised to Adam and his progeny when the first human couple were expelled from the Garden in the words: 'There shall come to you from me a guidance, and whoever follows by guidance, no fear shall come upon them nor will they grieve (Q.2: 38)'. This Divine guidance is, moreover, an innate and indelible Divine mark on the human personality. It is 'the *fitrah* of God according to which He originated humankind'.

The word *fitrah* is derivative noun from the verbal root *fatara*, meaning to create, originate, or split open. The last of these meanings is especially significant. It denotes here a Divine activity of laying bare, as it were, the original human condition by stripping it of all external accretions. It is also God's way with regard to the formation of the human character. It is innate guidance because it is an innate human capacity, or shall we say, Divine gift, to know God. Thus the famous lexicographer Ibn Manzur defines *fitrah* as: 'that original state in which created His creatures, having the capability of knowing him (Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, s.v. *fitrah*).

This concept of *fitrah* is akin to the Biblical concept of the original goodness of creation. Thus Genesis tells us that when God had finished His work of creation, He looked at it and 'behold, it was very good (Gen. 1:31)'. But with the fall of man, the entire creation lost this state of original goodness or wholsomeness. This fact is stated twice in Genesis, first when Adam and his spouse ate of the forbidden tree, and when Cain (Qabil) committed the first murder in human history. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, the earth, which before grew only the good and wholesome things, was made to grow beside 'thistles and thorns'. Because the earth swallowed the blood of Abel (Habil) who was wrongfully murdered by his wicked brother, the earth was cursed. Hence, not only man lost its original *fitrah* of God through sin, the rest of creation also was no longer God's 'good creation'.

According to the Qur'an, God's *fitrah* both in humankind and the rest of creation, may be seen as a potential of goodness and purity of faith waiting to be actualized through the response of man's reason (*aql*) to Divine guid-

ance. But in order for this potential to be fully realised, it must have its opposite, namely the possibility of evil, rejection of faith (*kufr*) and transgression. In the rest of creation, this negative potential is neutral in itself, but good in the final Divine scheme of creation and guidance. The earth must grow both the good and wholesome things, but also thorns and thistles. By means of water, 'God revives the earth after its death (Q. 30: 24)', but water can also be the cause of death and destruction through floods and inundations. Both the good and wholesome (*tayyib*) and evil and filthy (*khabiṭh*) are a necessary part of creation. It is through Divine guidance and revelation that the two can be distinguished and made lawful or unlawful. The role of the prophets in human society is to guide their people to the good and lawful things and to warn them against the evil and forbidden things. Thus the Qur'an declares that the 'unlettered prophet (Muhammad) is he who enjoins men to do that which is good and decent (*ma'ruf*) and dissuade them from doing that which is evil and indecent (*munkar*), to make lawful for them the good and wholesome things (*tayyibat*) and make unlawful the evil and filthy things *khaba'ith* (Q. 7: 157).

This Divine guidance; it is guidance to the recognition of the good and decent in human behaviour in contradiction from the bad and indecent. The two important terms *ma'ruf* and *munkar* provide the best and most precise description of the *fitrah* or original state of purity, innocence and wholesomeness. They are both adjectival nouns denoting human reactions to the moral or immoral conduct in society. The term *ma'ruf* literally means that which is known or recognised to be good, decent, or morally acceptable. In contrast, *munkar* is that which is recognizably bad, evil, or indecent, and must, therefore, be denied, rejected, or repudiated. This recognition is a basic characteristic of human reason. It is an innate capacity; it is, 'the *fitrah* of God according to which He originated human-kind'.

This innate capacity to distinguish good from evil must be regarded as only one, albeit important, dimension of the *fitrah* of man. This is because behind this capacity of moral judgement lies the recognition of a supreme Divine Being who is the author and sustainer of this moral order.

The Qur'an beautifully illustrates the workings of this cognitive capacity in man in the story of the father of

monotheistic faith, Ibrahim, peace be upon him. Ibrahim was compelled by his own *fitrah* to seek knowledge of God. He knew that God, whoever He or it may be, must be great and awesome. Fascinated by the brilliance of the moon, Ibrahim thought it to be God. But when he saw sun he exclaimed: 'This is greater! this is my Lord'. When, however, he realised that both the sun and moon are transient, he concluded that there must be a power greater than they. Thus he protested: 'I do not love those that set (Q. 6:76-78). Finally, in an outburst of devotional exultation, Ibrahim, the father of prophets, cried out: 'I turn my face, therefore, to Him who originated (*fatara*) the heavens and earth, a man of pure faith, nor will I be one of the Associates (Q. 6:79)'.

The *fitrah* of God in man is not simply a metaphysical cognitive principle. On that level, it has been recognised by many sages in most human civilization. In fact the recognition of an essential quality of goodness and purity in man has been the subject of many myths and stories from the time of ancient Chinese, Indian and near eastern myths to Jean Jacques Rousseau's fictitious character Emile who typified that pure and innocent state of savage, yet noble humanity. This ideal state was, however, obscured by the complexities of human civilization.

Far more clearly, this state of the *fitrah* is allegorically and artfully typified in the highly original romance, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* by the well-known Arab philosopher Ibn Tufal. Hayy, who grew up alone on a desert island, not only discovered by his own unaided reason that God exists, but he also went on to become a great savant, excelling the scholars of conventional religion and philosophy. There is, however, an essential difference between this philosophical concept of the *fitrah* and its Qur'anic counterpart. Ibn Tufayl wished to demonstrate, as did Plato before him, that perennial wisdom (*hikmah* or *sophia*) is an innate potential of the human soul. The task of a teacher is only to reawaken the soul to this reality. Yet even without the help of a teacher the soul can on its own discover the truths of philosophy. These truths, moreover, were seen to be one with the basic mystical truths of revelation or religion.

From the Qur'anic viewpoint, this capacity to know God is not an end in itself, but only a first step towards the final goal of human life: to know and worship God in pure faith, and to



Sinners : Underneath the Virgin, the Pontiff wonders why all men (and women) are born in sin

perform works of righteousness. The Divine *fitrah* in man can only be fully realized through faith and good works. Thus when Ibrahim discovered that God is the creator of the heavens and earth, including the sun and moon, he went on to break the idols which his people made and worshipped instead of God. He then went

further to discover and fulfil his role as a prophet and vicegerent (*khalifah*) of God on earth. He became a warner, a prophet to his people. In frustration and despair with his people's idolatry, he exclaimed: 'O my people, I ask you no reward, rather He who originated me, He shall guide me (Q. 11:51)'.

The Qur'anic concept of *fitrah* clearly implied that human beings are all created good and of sound nature, capable of knowing God and living a moral and upright life. It also implies that they are free, free to actualize this original state of pure faith and uncorrupted character, or rebel against God in His creation. Furthermore, if they rebel against God, they would only harm themselves, but in no way would this limit God's absolute power, knowledge and sovereignty over His creation. In a widely reported prophetic *hadith*, we have the best commentary on this fundamental Qur'anic concept. The prophet said: 'Every child is born in the state of *fitrah*. Then its parents make it a Jew, a Christian, or a Magain (that is Zoroastrian), and if they are Muslims, a Muslim.' By parents is here meant not only the actual father and mother of the child, but its total environment, or whatever goes into forming its human faith or religion (*din*), that the original state of pure faith, or God's *fitrah*, is universal. It transcends the human phenomena of institutionalized religion, including institutionalized Islam.

The religion (*din*) of the *fitrah* which the Qur'an describes is that essential and primordial faith in God which God Himself implanted in human nature. It is essential *Islam*, or total submission, to God of all the prophets and those who accepted their message and followed them. It is faith based not on human laws or principles, but on the law of God, His eternal and unchanging nature. The sacred laws (*shari'a* with which the prophets, from Noah (Nuh) to Muhammed, were sent with, are no more than guiding lights to this essential faith in God with which every human being is created. Furthermore, because this faith comes from God, the only laws capable of guiding men and women back to it must also come from God.

We have intentionally begun this brief essay with a brief survey of a few religious and philosophical concepts of this original state of human purity, innocence and knowledge of, or faith in God, for two reasons. We wished first to demonstrate that not

only the *fitrah* or God, of which the Qur'an speaks most clearly, is a universal and primordial state of being, but also that it is recognized as such in all the great religions, and by most of the ancient philosophical systems. To be sure, in most cases these concepts are only approximations to the Qur'anic concept. Nevertheless, the basic principle of an ideal and authentic state of being of humankind is there in all of them.

Our second reason is that we wished, through this contrast, to show the uniqueness of the Qur'an in this regard. For while in most other religious traditions and scriptures this primordial age is either forever lost or difficult to recover, the Qur'an asserts that the *fitrah* of God is that original state of pure creation in which every human being is born. It is, moreover, an actual state of being, and not merely a romantic or utopian ideal.

It must be regrettably observed that even Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalam*) have also in their way obscured this truth behind a thick wall of often sophisticated, and in the end, fruitless arguments about Divine determinism and human freedom. The final result was, in our view, a distortion of one of the most important Qur'anic concepts. Based on some Qur'anic statements and accounts of evil men being condemned to eternal predation, many traditionists and Qur'an commentators have asserted that every human being is preordained to Paradise or Hell from eternity. If this view is strictly carried to its logical conclusion, then neither God's *fitrah* nor Divine guidance through revelation have any real meaning or purpose in human life. In fact, Muslim jurists and theologians came very close to the Christian concept of original sin. In the Islamic formulations of the concepts of *qada* and *qadar* (Divine preordination and decree), not man but God must in the end bear full responsibility for man's damnation, and even its cause. In this respect, orthodox Suni Islam of the Ash'ari School is one with the Calvinist school of Protestant Christianity. In both systems, the important question to be asked is how can an All-merciful and All-just God will the predation of His rational creatures, even before they were able to choose one of the 'two highways (*najdayn*) to which God guided them (Q 90: 10).

It must, therefore, be concluded that the true faith which God had willed for all His creatures, is that pure faith in the state of which He has, and will continue to create men

and women to the end of time. Moreover, although it is the inalterable *fitrah* of God's creation, it can be obscured by man-made laws, philosophies and even religions. It is, therefore, to the Qur'an that we must always turn for guidance and help. The Qur'an contains not only the right description of our authentic existence or *fitrah*, but it also contains the laws, precepts and injunctions which would enable us to recover it.

In the call of the Qur'an for all humankind to live in accordance with God's inexorable *fitrah* of creation, there is for all of us both a challenge and a promise. The challenge is to make the Qur'an the sole law (*shari'a*) of our society, and thus live in a harmony and peace with one another and the the rest of God's creation. Then, and only then would humanity achieve its Divine purpose, which is God's vicegerency (*khalifah*) on earth. In fulfilling God's purpose for our lives, we would receive God's blessings and dominion over His good earth. This is God's promise: 'We have inscribed in the *zabur* (*Psalm*): 'the earth shall be inherited by my faithful servants' (Q 21: 105).

The religion of the *fitrah* is, as has already been stressed, that Islam of all things in the heavens and earth to God. In human society, it is 'pure faith' (*hanifiyya*) of Ibrahim, and of all the prophets before and after him. The challenge is then for Muslims everywhere to 'uphold the (true) religion, and be not divided therein' (Q 42:13).

The promise lies in, and is itself the challenge. For, had Muslims adopted the Book of God as their law and constitution, they would have been 'big power' in the world because, 'to God alone belongs all power, to His messenger and to the people of faith' (Q. 63:8). Then, they would not have been an easy target for world imperialism, racism and bombers.

In the end, however, this challenge and the promise it carries transcend the success and failures of Muslim history. The Book of God is the only guide to the 'straight way' which will lead humanity to God and to the good. This straight way (*al-sirat al-Mustaqim*) is true Islam. It is the '*fitrah* of God according to which He originated humankind'. It is the way to the life of social harmony and moral uprightness in this world and in the life to come, it is a promise of a 'garden (of paradise) whose breadth encompasses the heavens and earth, prepared for the God-fearing' (Q. 3:133)