

# HUMANITY BEFORE GOD

CONTEMPORARY FACES OF  
JEWISH, CHRISTIAN, AND ISLAMIC ETHICS



EDITED BY WILLIAM SCHWEIKER,  
MICHAEL A. JOHNSON, AND KEVIN JUNG

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*Many people make the work of scholars possible.  
In gratitude, the editors would like to dedicate  
this volume to the following individuals*

*—Michael A. Johnson—  
to my brother, Mark A. Johnson,  
and to my parents, Waldo and Nordis Johnson*

*—Kevin Jung—  
to my wife, Karen Ryu*

*—William Schweiker—  
to my sisters, Kathryn Barnhill and Claire S. Hanson*

combat. In another sense, however, the answer is clear enough. There is ample evidence for the gap between Al-Qaeda's *jihād* and Islamic tradition noted at the outset of this paper. The arguments between advocates of divine law governance in contemporary Islam make clear that advocating indiscriminate fighting, at least as a matter of settled policy, is a problematic course of action. What must be left open, or so I feel constrained to say at present, is whether there might be certain "emergencies" or extreme circumstances in which conscientious Muslims might argue that temporary or selected exceptions to the general norms of honorable combat might be justified, or at least that those carrying them out might be excused. The issue needs further analysis, not least by way of sustained attention to the rhetoric of Al-Qaeda and its Muslim critics.

There is, of course, more to be said with respect to the crisis in contemporary Islam regarding armed force and political responsibility. Indeed, as noted in my opening comments, there is much to be said generally about the matter of justification and war in contemporary expressions of the Abrahamic traditions. In these remarks, I have tried to show that these include conversations between "allied" groups of advocates of divine law governance, as well as between pluralists and advocates of divine law governance. This fact seems important in itself. Among other things, the post-9/11 Muslim discussion of Al-Qaeda tactics suggests the power of certain ideas; for example, that there are limits on what one can do, even when one is fighting for justice. In this sense, the post-9/11 conversation among Muslims goes back to the Qur'an itself, which at 2:190 indicates to Muslims:

Fight against those who are fighting you  
But do not violate the limits.  
God does not approve those who violate the limits.<sup>10</sup>

10. My translation.

## Chapter 14

### STANDING BEFORE GOD

#### Human Responsibilities and Human Rights

*Seyyed Hossein Nasr*



What I have to say in this essay pertains not only to the Abrahamic religions but to all religions, and in many ways to the human condition itself, but I shall, of course, concentrate mostly on the tradition that I know best — that is, the Islamic tradition — with the awareness that the comments I make will apply elsewhere. On the deepest metaphysical level, to be human is to stand before God. It is metaphysically impossible to be human without standing before God, whether we are aware of that standing before God or not. This statement about human existence is asserted in the famous verse of the Qur'an, where it is said, "But His command, when He intendeth a thing, is only that he saith unto it: Be! and it is" (Qur'an 36:82). That is, to the Divine Command to be, our response is to exist. Therefore, our existence itself is none other than our response to the Divine Command to be. Human existence itself is a response to God and not an original state of being independent of any other reality, and herein lies the origin and the most profound metaphysical root of human responsibility because we are ourselves a response to God. We are not only responsible to God; we are ourselves a response.

#### The Meaning of Human Being

I shall speak not from the divine perspective here but from the human one, about what it means to be human in relation to God. Now, in

Translations of Qur'an passages in this essay are the author's.

order to understand what the human state involves, what it means to stand before God, I refer to two further verses of the Qur'an of singular importance for this issue, in addition to the discussion that apparently was held here about the question of *khalifa* (vicegerent), concerning the role assigned to human beings in the myth of the creation of Adam and Eve in the Hands of God.<sup>1</sup> The first of the two verses to which I wish to refer is the verse from chapter 7 of the Qur'an where God, before creating the cosmos, before creating the earth, before creating the world, asked of human beings, "Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify" (7:172). What does this verse mean? Most Muslims just glide over it, rarely thinking deeply because the depth is only for those who have reached the inner depth of their own being. It is not so easy to get to the meaning of this remarkable verse.

First of all, it means that we have a preexistence "with" God before the creation of the world. Second, all of the verbs in this sentence are plural and not singular. God did not only address Adam, but he addressed all human beings. We must note first the verb in God's question, "Am I not your Lord?" and second, in the human reply, they said, "Yea [*balā*]." While the verb in the case of God is singular, it is plural in the case of human beings. The response, "Yea," therefore involves not only Adam but *all* human beings, that is, to be human is to have said yes to God. Now if you deny that affirmation and negate it, that itself is a possibility because God has given us freedom to do so. (I shall address that issue below.) Nevertheless, to be human is to have said yes, and we hear the mark of this affirmation deep within our beings. That is how the most profound anthropology of Islam understands the situation of human beings standing before God.

And, finally, the third verse that I want to call to your attention reveals the secret of being human from Islamic point of view: it concerns the bearing of that *amāna*, or trust, that God has placed upon our shoulders. This is expressed in the outwardly enigmatic verse of the Qur'an from chapter 33 that says, "We offered the trust [*amāna*, which is related to

1. Needless to say, the word *myth* should be taken here in its original sense, so I can use it in its authentic sense, of course, and not to mean "unreality." This needs to be mentioned because many Muslims, like ordinary Americans, think that the word *myth* means something unreal. I do not mean that at all but speak of the "myth of creation" in the deepest sense of the word *myth*.

the word for "faith" in Arabic] unto the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Verily, he has proven to be an oppressor and a fool" (33:72). This is a momentous verse in the sense that it points to the awesome responsibility of being human. One might see that if we had a choice to become human we would be, in a sense, out of our minds to do so, because we would have to bear such great responsibilities. To be human means bearing the tremendous responsibility of free will and the state of the vicegerency of God, which brings with it, of course, the greatest of all gifts, the gift of being able to draw nigh to God. This *amāna* was such a heavy burden that the mountains and the sky could not bear it precisely because to be human implies the possibility of both the affirmation and the negation of the Divine Principle, and therefore the possibility of perdition in the deepest sense of the word, which other creatures do not face.

Now I could expand on this question of trust a great deal but will not do so here. What is important in the present discussion is that at the heart of the Islamic message of what it means to be human is the bearing of this trust and the fact that this is indeed a very heavy trust that we must bear. This in turn means that as human beings we are "condemned" to a life of meaning. We are "condemned," in a sense, to a life that needs to have spiritual and moral significance. Therefore, even immorality and the denial of meaning in our lives, which is a possibility because of our human free will, even these land us in a situation and state in which we are not happy. The yearning for meaning is inseparable from human life, and nihilism is always a dead end, which, as we know, leads sometimes to psychological problems and even to the physical self-destruction of the person. We are not happy in a world that does not make sense. To make sense is to have meaning. Therefore, in the deepest sense you might say that God is meaning. In the deepest religious sense, we are in quest of meaning because we cannot live without it and we are in quest, whether we like it or not, of a life whose actions have some significance beyond themselves — that is, of an ethical life, a moral life from the religious point of view.

To be fully human is to have an awareness of the central reality of who we are. When we do not have full awareness of this, we are only

accidentally but not fully human. To be fully human is to have this full awareness of our identity and to realize that God has given us free will for an end. It is to realize that both responsibilities and human rights have no reality without free will, which originates in the freedom to say yes or no to God now, or, in other words, either to remember our original "yea" and the acceptance of the divine trust or to decide to forget it as if we have never made our eternal preeternal covenant (*mīthāq*) with God.

Now, certain great mystics and Sufis of Islam such as Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār and others have some very provocative poems in which they assert that we did not ourselves decide to be human; therefore, we are not free, and it was God who decided for us to be human. But having made us human, God has nevertheless given us free will. The divine poet of the Persian language, Hafiz, has an incredible *ghazal* with a verse that says, "The heavens could not bear the weight of this trust; but the lot fell in my poor name." That verse poses a theological question of the deepest significance: Were we free not to be human? That is the question that many great theologians have posed. And here we can answer from the Islamic point of view with a no. We were not free to be or not to be human, because God chose us to be human, to stand before God. Once we stood before God, however, we stood as free beings. Then God asked us the question to which we were free to say yes or no. At that moment, we could have responded negatively: To the question, "Am I not your Lord?" we could have said, "No, Thou art not." But we said, "Yes." So freedom comes with the very act of being created as human beings, but we had no say in the act of creation itself. It is true that on the external level it is difficult to understand human freedom. There have been negaters of human freedom all the way from the psychological behaviorists at Harvard to the Islamic theologians of the school of al-Ash'arī, as well as within Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and in all the religions of the world. In every religious and philosophical context one can find those who have negated human free will on a certain level. Nevertheless, our immediate awareness and consciousness of being human points directly to the reality of free will, and without that freedom there are neither responsibilities nor human rights. They all issue from this basic reality of the human state.

### Human Freedom

Human free will is related in the Islamic context to man<sup>2</sup> having been chosen as God's "vicegerent" (*khalifa*) on earth. The introduction to this volume discussed the similarities and differences between the Islamic conception of man as God's vicegerent in man and the Western (that is, Christian and Jewish) idea of the image of God — man made in the image of God.<sup>3</sup> But in fact these two formulations are not antithetical; they are not really different from each other in their essential meaning, but only different ways of expressing the same truth at the deepest level. In the case of *khalifa* (vicegerent), it means a being who *represents* and thus *has* the powers of another being, as in the case, for example, of the viceroy of Queen Victoria in India. So, in a sense, that person is the image of the other person inasmuch as that person has the powers of the other person whom he represents. Thus, the two terms (*khalifa*; *imago Dei*) are not antithetical images or metaphors. Rather, they are similar to each other. It is true that the Old Testament and the New Testament do not speak of the word *khalifa*, or vicegerent, and that the Qur'an does. But what this term really means is clearly related to the concept of the "image of God." To be God's vicegerent on earth is in a sense to be "God-like" without in any way denying God's transcendence — for, of course, theologically, there is nothing like unto God — and to be "God-like" means to possess some of God's powers. That is precisely why we have free will. Again, from a theological point of view, God is both infinite necessity and infinite freedom. This is so because God, from the point of view of traditional metaphysics, is both absolute and infinite. If God were not necessity, there would be no world, and if God were not the absolutely free, there would be no human freedom. Moreover, the grandeur of the human state, which involves precisely the possibility of error or deviation, of doing right or wrong, of going toward or rejecting God, would not be there. Therefore, the concept of *khalifa* (vicegerent) implies itself the presence of free will in human beings as does the concept of the "image of God."

2. By man we mean of course "men and women" — "man" in the sense of *homo* and *vir* in Greek and Latin, and not simply the male.

3. In addition to the introduction to this volume, see also the discussion of the Islamic conception of "vicegerency" in the essay by Abdulaziz Sachedina also in this volume.

There are other places where original Islamic sources refer to ideas related to the "image of God." One is in the Qur'an where God says, "I breathed my Spirit into him [man]" (15:29). God has breathed God's Spirit into Adam and that is the foundation of why human life is sacred and why human beings must be moral if they are going to be human beings in the real sense of the term. I shall come back to this issue in a moment.

Also, the very term "image" also appears in a *ḥadīth*, that is, in one of the "sayings of the Prophet," which says, *Khalaqa 'Llāh 'ādam 'alā ṣūratihī*, that is, "God has created man upon his *ṣūra*," a term that can be translated as both "image" and "form" (but perhaps "form" is more appropriate here). In any case, *ṣūra* does not mean "image" in the sense of a painting, or pictorial image. Islam, like Judaism, is aniconic in its sacred art and does not find acceptable the making of an image of God. "Thou shalt not make a graven image," one of the commandments revealed to Moses, is also accepted in Islam. So "image" must not be understood here as painting, but rather this *ḥadīth* means "being the theophany of all of the Names and Qualities of God." That is why we can, in fact, play God-like roles in this world. That is the key reason why we have an environmental crisis. The essence of the environmental crisis comes to this: we have the capacity to try to play the role of God on earth and destroy other species. No other creature on earth can wreak such havoc on the earth and destroy other creatures as can humans. Only we can do that. So the very fact that we are able to destroy the environment on a global scale is indirect proof of the existence of God if we really understand the deeper claims of causality involved.

### Freedom and Divine Law

This freedom of choice, which is also a moral choice and which God has given us, must, of course, manifest itself on the level of action. And here Islam, like Judaism (and especially Orthodox Judaism), emphasizes very much the law that is given by God. Because we are given this freedom of choice, being who we are, we need some guidance not to fall from the right path. If we had no freedom of choice, there would be no need for revelation or Divine Law. On a more mystical level you

might say that God loves us, but love cannot be based on coercion. Love has to be based on attraction. Therefore, there must be something in the soul receptive to that which attracts. On the level of action, we have to do certain things in order to make the channeling of this attraction possible. In the case of Islam, this is grounded in Divine Law and its ethical content, although other elements are also involved, including especially sapiential knowledge, or *ma'rifaḥ*. In this regard, Judaism and Islam are close together. Both religions assert the idea that there is a sacred law that is given by God and that God is the ultimate legislator. In the case of both religions, ethics is to a large extent related to this sacred law.

Now, you might say, in the case of Christianity, Christ came to break the "letter" (or the "form") in the name of the "spirit," in the name of the spiritual law of which he spoke. Legal matters pertaining to society and the individual in the matter of, for example, kosher or *ḥalāl* food, economic transactions, and so forth, are all abrogated in the name of the spiritual laws. But in Islam, as in Judaism, these matters are related to the sacred law and the actual level of action, which does not mean the giving up of our choice and responsibility because to follow the law requires our making a choice at the fundamental existential level discussed earlier. Many people feel that such obedience to the law turns the religious life into something automatic and mechanical but that is not at all the case. Our following the law is our response to God on the basis of our responsibility to God's demand upon us and is based on free choice and not automatic coercion.

From the Islamic point of view, and I believe, in a deeper sense, from all religious points of view, all human rights issue from human responsibilities. Responsibilities come before rights. The idea that we have inalienable rights which we talk about all the time today is only half the equation. The emphasis on rights, only without considering responsibilities, is a dangerous eclipse of the other half of the equation. Today we live in a world in which people believe that they have all kinds of rights without feeling the responsibilities that go with them. This one-sided viewpoint is one of the factors that is destroying the world and the civilization in which we live. Now, in the Islamic context, each of the human rights that we have issues, as I said, from the responsibilities

that we hear before God and vis-à-vis God's creatures by virtue of our being human.

Let me then turn first to the responsibilities. We have, first of all, our responsibility toward God. Our responsibility toward God is an existential one since we are ourselves responses to God's command "to be." Therefore, to be responsible is to be sincere and true to our own primordial nature, to our own most profound nature, to our deepest level of existence and, of course, not our fallen nature, for we are ourselves in our very existence that response. To be fully human is to stand before God, as I said at the very beginning. This is the human condition. That is why, in fact, certain people in today's world sometimes say that we are "hardwired to God." I hate to use these modern technological terms, but indeed there is something in the human state and human nature that, no matter what condition it is in, sooner or later turns to these ultimate questions and to Ultimate Reality Itself. Whether we use the term *God* or something else, there is something beyond us that attracts us. We are never satisfied with what we are. There is always a search for that which is beyond, which is above us and transcends us, and this search for that beyond characterizes the human state. "Above all to thine own self be true." To be responsible before God is simply to realize that we are in our deepest selves responses to God. To be oneself is to realize one's responsibilities before God.

There is, however, an ontological lack of equality between the two sides. We keep saying "God and man" or "God and woman," as if the two were on the same ontological level. Think of the painting of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo in which Adam and God are depicted as being in practically the same proportions. I believe that this crass anthropomorphism marked a grave illness in the body of Christian piety and theology at that time. God and man are depicted in practically the same proportions except that the finger of one is bit higher up and the finger of the other is bit lower. That kind of portrayal betrays the true ontological relationship between God and humans. The true ontological relationship is not based on any equality. Many people say, "Oh, God is in the imagination of human beings," and consequently they relegate the reality of God to their egos and seek to take on the ontological status of the Divine themselves. But, metaphysically speaking, God is the Source

of our being; we are the effect of that Source. God is the Being who gave the command; we are the effect of that command (to use the language of the Qur'an in the verse that I have cited above). So now I turn from the metaphysical basis of our responsibility before God, the responsibility of responding to God's call and submitting ourselves totally to God, from which issue all other responsibilities, to those responsibilities themselves.

What are our other responsibilities? First, there is the responsibility to human beings. And this starts with ourselves. We are responsible by virtue of standing before God for ourselves. We are responsible for our own salvation, as every Christian would bear witness. Our primary responsibility in this world is to save our own souls. We cannot save anybody else's soul before we save our own; that is, our primary goal is to *be* good. This recognition is very important because we live in a world in which many people want to do good without being good. It is usually much easier to do good than to be good. For example, a person contributes to some kind of fund for the dispossessed or joins some charitable organization or goes to Africa to feed the poor. These are all laudable acts, but it is more difficult to meditate and remember God for a half an hour in your own room. It is much more difficult to attain the state of goodness than to do a good act. This externalization of goodness in the world in which we live is totally opposed to the perspective according to which goodness must first of all be rooted in our being before we turn to the world of action. As such, goodness must start from ourselves and ultimately from God who is the source of all goodness. To have responsibility to the human state requires, first of all, to be good, to live the good life, to live a moral life.

This responsibility extends also to the corporeal level, to the care of one's physical health. For example, suicide is banned by Islamic Law. Compared to all the great civilizations of the world, statistically, the least number of suicides occur in the Islamic world, except for the wretched situation of the Palestinians in Israel and Palestine, which is itself a great anomaly due to an anomalous situation. Suicide bombings elsewhere are also due to exceptional political situations in which some carry out such actions that are opposed by Islamic Law if innocent people become victims. Cases of desperation are not in any case the norm. If you take the number of people who commit suicide in Sweden or Illinois and compare

it to the number in Egypt or Iran you will understand about what I am talking. The Islamic view of human existence and our responsibilities to ourselves on all levels underlying the ban against suicide is the reason. There is a very strong anathema against taking one's life because, since one has not given life to oneself, it is not one's right to take away this life. Our lives are simply not ours to take, according to our wishes.

Then there is the extension of this care for oneself outward to the family, then to the immediate part of our town, next to our city, to our country, and finally, to the whole of humanity. Here arises the question regarding our responsibility to people who are not of our religion or, in fact, have no religion at all. I shall come to that question in a moment.

Then we have a responsibility toward the rest of God's creation. This is one of the aspects of responsibility that, although mentioned very clearly in the Qur'an and in the *hadith* (as also in other religions), has come to the surface more recently, thanks to the massacre of the world of nature that we are performing today in the name of human welfare — the destruction ranging from that of the Amazon rainforest to the lakes in the United States, and everything in between. The question of responsibility to all of God's creation, which is the foundation of the new theology of ecology, or theology of the environment, in which all the religions of the world are now involved, has its roots very deeply in classical Islamic texts. But now this responsibility to all of God's creation is being emphasized and accepted more and more due to the realities of the current situation and because in the past the rest of God's creation did not really need our care as much as it does now. Take, for example, the animals in Africa. In the past, they really did not need our care to survive. The tigers were doing fine. Now we have to keep a few tigers in zoos; otherwise the species will die out. So, in a certain paradoxical sense, our responsibility has increased immensely by virtue of our having forgotten our responsibility toward the creation of God. Having turned all our attention to ourselves, having forgotten both God and God's creation, we now have forced upon ourselves this tremendous responsibility of taking care that the coral reefs in Australia do not die out, for example. When Captain Cook went to Australia he did not have to worry about the coral reefs — they were doing fine. So this responsibility is now left for us in the situation in which we live and which we have ourselves

created as a result of a lack of responsibility toward the natural world in the modern period.

Finally, there is a new responsibility, which was at one time also "potential" (like our responsibility for the coral reefs of Australia), and this is responsibility toward followers of other religions and respect for other religions — responsibility in the real sense and not only as an ad hoc diplomatic or political polite nodding of the head. Now, the Qur'an is very explicit about the universality of revelation (which is an issue for another day), as spoken of in the verse, "To every people [We have sent] a messenger" (10:48), and in many other verses.<sup>4</sup> This potential responsibility did not have to become an actuality until now with the new situation of our world. Today the question is not only that of respect but also of responsibility. A person who understands what it means to stand before God must realize his or her responsibility for respecting other religions. This responsibility is there not only for diplomatic reasons, not simply for expediency. It is necessary to realize fully our responsibilities before God.

### The Sacredness of Human Life

It is from these responsibilities that all the rights that we call human rights issue. If we can fulfill these responsibilities, then we have corresponding human rights. Now, these human rights are all deeply related to a reality that we consider to be obvious, namely, the sacredness of the human being. Yes, human beings are sacred, but within the context of the modern paradigm this assertion is very paradoxical. And why is it paradoxical? Throughout history this was taken to be an obvious fact — that human life is sacred. In fact, all of life was taken to be sacred and the whole world was sacred in a certain sense. Especially human life was considered to be sacred by followers of all authentic religions. But today we have to reassert the question, "Why is it that human life is sacred?" We must reassert this question because today we have two very contradictory views of what the human being is, held by people in the same

4. In the first chapter of my book *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), I have cited many of these verses, and I do not need to repeat them here.



buildings of the same universities and the same cities in which we live. But we do not want to face this contradiction. On the one side is the idea that the human being is nothing but a "suited-up" monkey whose head has grown a little bit. And the monkey is nothing more than something else we can trace back ultimately to molecules banging against each other in the primordial cosmic soup after the Big Bang. Now, I cannot on the basis of any logic understand what is sacred about this concept of human origin. What is sacred about the bowl of soup of molecules? Nothing. The experience of the sacred is often explained as an emotional response to something that has no basis in modern science, which most consider to be the only legitimate way of knowing acceptable in our society. Of course, there are many scientists who do not believe in this limited and reductionist perspective, but that is, logically speaking, irrelevant. The modern scientific or, rather, scientific point of view of what constitutes the human state is that it is an accident that has occurred on a third-rate planet of a tenth-rate sun, and all of these things that you read about. So, what is sacred about it? Nothing, unless you use the term *sacred* only "poetically" and emotionally.

The other view is that which has always been confirmed by the religions and which now has to be reconfirmed over and over again. And that is that human life is sacred because of the presence of the Spirit that God breathed into man, because of the centrality of human beings in creation demonstrated in the trust that God has put on our shoulders, because of the freedom God has given us which also makes us responsible for God's creation. There are many ways in which this idea has been expressed in various religions, all the way from the Spirit of God breathed into man in Abrahamic religions to the sacrifice of Prajapati in Hinduism. There are many different forms of this truth, but always present is the idea of the sacredness of the Divine Principle, the Sacred as such manifested directly in the human order. When people talk about this matter, somebody always asks a question about non-theistic religions. Let us remember, however, that in Buddhism it is only through the human state that one can attain Buddhahood! If you are a Buddhist, what makes human life sacred is the fact that you cannot attain Buddhahood through being a turtle. You have to be born into a central state, which in this world is the human state, so hard to attain, as

the Buddhists say. So in all religions, theistic and nontheistic, the reason why human life is sacred is obvious. But today we have to reassert the obvious, which is also directly related to the very basis of the reality of human responsibilities and human rights.

One of the great challenges before modern theologians today is to be brave enough to show that the religious view and the scientific view cannot both be correct in this matter and that they contradict each other. Either one or the other is correct, and it is important not to gloss over this truth. It happens that in all cultures, whether it be Western, Islamic, Indian, or Japanese, laws are based on the older idea of the sacredness of human life. This is also fully evident in the U.S. Constitution, according to the laws of this land, and indeed, any other functioning society, for when a person commits murder, he or she is punished. But if you, let us say, take a mollusk and eat it, nothing happens to you. That poor mollusk also was alive; it had life. If you buy a lobster in Boston and throw it in boiling water and it turns color, nobody will punish you. Why is this so? It is because of the traditional idea of the sacredness of human life. The laws in lands near and far are, in fact, still based on the earlier idea of the sacredness of human life for reasons that were obvious in days of old, but which are not at all obvious today.

When we speak of responsibilities and rights, it is very important to bring out the significance of what the religions say about the sacredness of human life. What they say is remarkably similar. The view of various authentic religions is almost unanimous but expressed in different languages: some speak of the divine spark, others of the Buddha nature, or the Spirit of God within us. Some emphasize the image of the Divinity in man; others the *nous* of Plato in the center of man's being, and so on. It is incredible how many different expressions there are for that reality which bestows sacredness upon human life, but in depth they all express the same thing. The human state is the central state in this world, and this central state reflects directly the multitudes of divine possibilities. It is the only means of access on earth to the Divine, and with this comes both tremendous power and tremendous responsibility. Therefore, to kill a human being is the most heinous act. It is also very bad to kill a cat, but the killing of a human being is especially something detestable because of the state of humans in the cosmic hierarchy. The Qur'an goes so far

as to say that to kill a single innocent person is to kill the whole of humanity. Respect for human life remains a central responsibility for all men and women and derives from the very nature of being human. One of the great tragedies of our time, however, is that, while we talk about human rights, we are inventing more and more means of getting rid of human life all the time in a thousand ways and also debasing human life, destroying its sacred quality and even threatening the biological means of life upon which human life depends. We do so without some times even knowing it, not only militarily but in other ways as well, such as through so-called economic development, which can end up being as lethal in the long run as bombs thrown on people's heads today. But I will not get into that issue here.

### Inclusivism and Exclusivism

There is a very important question that comes up, however, if you define the human state in this way. The followers of various religions, especially the Abrahamic family, agree that human life is sacred and that we have certain responsibilities and rights based on that sacred character of human nature. But what about people who do not believe in any religion? I am not referring here to Zulus or some other tribe in Africa, who are practitioners of some form of primal African religion, or Hopis in America, for such people have their own profound religious traditions even if some ordinary believers in the Abrahamic religions are not aware of them. I mean people who have no religion whatsoever, agnostics and atheists or, even, aggressive atheists. What about them? What are their rights and what are our responsibilities to them? This is an important question that each religion must seek to answer on the basis of its own teachings. I will give you an answer from the Islamic point of view (I do not give myself the right to speak as a Christian or a Jewish theologian) which holds that, in principle, even the life of a person who denies God cannot be taken because of the fact that he or she is no longer a believer. Historically, unfortunately, this principle has not always been observed, although in the traditional Islamic world many skeptics, including some poets, have been known without their having been imprisoned or killed.

And the rationale of that is that such a person has been created by God and potentially can always turn back to God.

Now there is an argument about the question of apostasy, which is something else. In the old days, when religion was identified with the state, apostasy was considered as treason to the state. Furthermore, this equation was not unique to Islam. If someone in France in the Middle Ages became a Muslim, most likely he would be hanged or beheaded. At the present moment we do not live in the same political situation, whether in East or West, and therefore our responsibilities must be extended to the other even if that one be an atheist or an apostate, and not only to our co-religionists or, at most, only believers in religions in general. Respect for the life of a human being, whether we are speaking of a person who follows our religion, another religion, or no religion whatsoever, should be the same from the point of view expressed above because the religious person believes that the divine spark is in everyone. It is not limited to those who belong to our religion or to another religion but even to a person who denies all religions. This responsibility does not, however, absolve us of our responsibility to the truth at all levels and in every situation in our lives. Of course, to make this big jump is not such an easy thing, even in the semi-secularized society of America. Even today we have people in this country who appear on television and say, "The God of Muslims is an idol," and "My God is the real God." What are these people talking about? One can ask if they really understand what it means to stand before God. Of course, we have this kind of exclusivism not only in the United States but also in the Islamic world as well as in the Jewish community, Hinduism, and elsewhere — in fact, all over the world. There is no doubt about this fact. That is why pointing to responsibilities beyond the confines of our own religion is precisely such a great challenge, a challenge that all religions face today.

One must have a certain amount of sympathy for those whose understanding and concerns are limited to themselves and their immediate neighbors. The sympathy ceases, however, when they try to influence the world and the lives of countless other human beings on the basis of that exclusivism. It is natural for many human beings to think that only themselves, their children, and their cousins will go to heaven — that nobody else will get there. We have this same attitude held by some within every

religion concerning not only adherents of other religions but even members of that religion itself. I have Muslim, Jewish, and Christian friends, all of whom believe that only their religious understanding is correct. Many Christians have called other Christians “pagans,” or even worse, the “Anti-Christ.” Many Muslims have called other Muslims *kāfir*, or “infidel.” There are many Jews in Israel who do not consider the liberal Jews to be Jews at all. Such attitudes are to be seen everywhere and are not confined to one religion or country, but whenever they manifest themselves, they are signs of a lack of understanding of our full responsibilities as creatures standing before God.

One of our great challenges today is to understand why this is so. It is too easy to be a universalist. I have always said that real inclusivism is an inclusivism that also includes exclusivism. This might seem paradoxical, but it is nevertheless true. We must understand why a simple peasant in Italy is not interested in Mahayana Buddhism, does not care what happens to the Buddhists in China, and is just living his own life as a Christian. The same holds for a traditional Muslim, a Jew, or anybody else who lives within a still-homogeneous religious universe where his or her responsibilities and rights are understood within the confines of that world. That is perfectly understandable. But many today are based in a great center of learning, like a university, where this exclusivism and the limiting of one’s responsibilities are no longer tenable because one comes face to face with others who are not “our own” but who are also “standing before God.” One of the great challenges to all religions today is to develop a view of standing before God in such a way that our responsibilities not only include those within our own religion as well as toward our religious teachings, its laws, and so forth, but also includes responsibilities toward other religions and those who claim to have no religion at all. I think that, to a large extent, the future of the globe and the future of human existence depend on this issue along with that of our responsibility toward the natural environment.

### The Absolutization of the Human State

Now, the question of human rights and human responsibilities conjures up a very important matter that I take every opportunity to bring up

and to discuss whenever the occasion arises. It is something that I have called the “absolutization of the human state.” Before modern times in all religions, it was God who was considered to be the Absolute. (This statement could also be made in a modified form for nontheistic religions.) I know this term *absolute* is not fashionable in philosophy departments these days in America. That does not bother me at all. We all have a sense of what it means to be absolute: that which is completely itself and excludes all otherness, all that is other than itself, that which is totally itself and relies on nothing else. That is the Absolute. Traditionally, God was considered to be the Absolute and human beings and everything else in creation were considered to be relative. We are born at a certain time; we pass through a particular cycle of life and we die. In this world we live in the domain of becoming; we live in the world of change; we live in the world of relationality; all these are relativities in comparison with the absoluteness of God. That is how our state was envisaged vis-à-vis God in traditional societies.

Then, after the Middle Ages, something happened, which I think is one of the most tragic consequences of Renaissance Humanism. And that is what I have called the absolutization of the human state, of the terrestrial human state; of course, not of celestial man in the original sense, but of fallen man, to use a Christian theological term, of man who has participated in what Christianity calls “original sin” and the subsequent Fall. In the modern world that was born with the Renaissance everything that is human came to be finally absolutized by taking away the rights of two other realities, the rights of God and the rights of God’s creation. First, we have taken away the rights of God and then given these rights to ourselves, starting with politics and proceeding to nearly everything else. Second, we have taken the rights of other creatures for ourselves and usurped their rights. This is a very important matter, which makes the emphasis solely on human rights without the corresponding responsibilities so dangerous. The fact that an American automobile manufacturer can make a vehicle the size of a room, which, each time a person drives it, contributes indirectly to the death of a number of creatures on the surface of the earth; the total lack of respect for other creatures and total lack of thought of what will happen to our own grandchildren as far as the natural environment

is concerned; to live and aggrandize the present moment in forgetfulness of the past and the future; to consume ever more to satiate the never-ending pursuit of our egos — all this is possible because of this absolutization of the human state derived from the *false* humanism of the Renaissance. This could not have occurred either in the earlier periods of Christianity, in medieval Japan, in Sung China, in Mamluk Egypt, or anywhere else.

→ This monopolization of rights for human beings is a very serious matter. Standing before God means remembering once again that we are ourselves responses to God's creative act. It is God alone who is the Absolute and to take this absoluteness unto ourselves is, finally, to destroy ourselves. In fact, one of the deepest theological lessons to be learned from what we are doing today is precisely this truth. To absolutize the human being is, finally, to destroy it. This false absolutization comes, first of all, through absolutizing our tastes and so-called needs, most of which are, in fact, pseudo-needs. They are not absolute at all, but in a consumer society, we, as consumers, absolutize our needs and claim that "we have to have this or that." And we can only have "this or that" at the expense of destroying nature and also of attacking directly or indirectly other countries for their resources, carrying out all the kinds of aggression that are going on around the globe today (which all of you know very well) rather than tightening our own belts and realizing the relativity of the human state and the Absoluteness of God. Forgoing the gratification of the fulfillment of every want is something we do not want to do, because we presume such gratification and satisfaction to be our inalienable right. So the question of human rights — about which everybody speaks and which is laudable on a certain level — has also become dangerous, theologically as well as ecologically speaking, because we tend to absolutize our transient life and have forgotten who we are. We have forgotten that we are in this world only temporarily; that this is not our permanent home; that we come from somewhere else and we shall go somewhere else; and that we have responsibilities that precede our rights, all of which are given to us by God because ontologically we are responses to God's creative Act and stand before God.

### The Religious Foundation of Ethics

Another important point with which I want to conclude my discussion is that to understand the relationship between human responsibility, human rights, and ethics, it is not sufficient to appeal to human reason and to human nature alone. Now I know there is a long period of three or four centuries during which certain Western philosophers have sought to create a philosophical ethics that seems to be rationalistic and self-sufficient and that everybody should follow. If you know of any society that follows one of those ethical systems, please let me know! There may be a few graduate students in philosophy departments who have discussed such systems in theory, but these theories have never worked in actual practice in any society. All ethical norms that we have in all societies (to the extent that these norms have survived) had their roots originally in religion, in something that people believed had come from God, whether it be Jewish ethics, Christian ethics, Islamic ethics, Hindu ethics, you name it. And it is true also that, even in the case of those people who have turned against the religious foundation of ethics and tried to base ethics on a purely philosophical foundation, the content of that ethics is still more or less the old religious ethics.

Let us take as example, the sacredness of human life. "Thou shall not kill!" — that is one of the Ten Commandments. We still have that injunction in present-day societies. Some try to give other reasons why "thou shall not kill." They say, "No, God did not speak to Moses. I think this is the rational thing to do." But why is it the rational thing to do? You can sit down here with completely rigorous logic and argue the case. You can tear away at all religious foundations of this ethical teaching but you finally end up with the conclusion that the actual content of this "rational ethics" is mostly something that this man or woman as philosopher has *inherited*. So deep down, even the so-called rational ethics is based upon religious ethics, even Marxist ethics. Let us recall that this ethics is based to a large extent on charity, on a just distribution of wealth (not that they actually applied it in Russia, but at least on paper this is true). Marxism's intent is to overcome injustice. It is to be just and charitable to the poor and so on. From whence did all these values come into the head of Karl Marx, if not from Judaism and Christianity? So

even the most atheistic type of ethics finds its essential foundation in the religious inheritance of certain moral and ethical attitudes.

The trouble is that once the religious foundation is destroyed, it becomes very hard to get human beings to live simply by ideology. Now this was tried with communism. It was tried in one of the great civilizations of the world, that is, in Europe (and of course in the recent half of the twentieth century in China and some parts of southeast Asia). Nineteenth-century Europe is the age in which ideology, to large extent, took the place of religion. Especially the powerful ideology of Marxism came out of nineteenth-century Europe, as did the Western ideology of liberalism and many other kinds of ideology. There were also the horrible ideologies of the twentieth century, such as fascism, which murdered millions of innocent people. Nor was communism any better than fascism. It caused the death of tens of millions of people. It did monstrous immoral acts but all in the name of a greater morality, in the name of the freedom of the people, of overcoming injustice, and so forth and so on. But this stage of history has now come to an end. The age of ideology as a "religion" is more or less over.

Now what has come back into the arena of history is what ideology replaced, namely, religion. Before ideology became the source of action, religion was the foundation of ethics. Ideology itself is a word that is so European that you cannot even translate it easily into non-European languages. In Turkish, it is simply rendered as *idéologie*, and in Persian also; we just copied the French word. And in Arabic they say *uṣūl al-'aqqā'id*. That is perhaps the most classical translation in Arabic, but that term means something completely different in premodern Arabic vocabulary. It means "the principle of doctrine" and has nothing to do with "ideology." The word and, hence, the concept of "ideology" itself is alien to all traditional languages and cultures and is a modern invention. They have to torture these languages to be able to invent a word for it, but it has now penetrated into more cultures as it did in the West. In any case, the great danger today is that certain people now want to make religion itself an ideology. Rather than religion acting as a source for authentic ethics, in certain quarters it has become an ideology. This transformation is one of the most dangerous events that has taken place in the world in the twentieth century. You see it in the Islamic world, in Zionism, and in

certain contemporary Christian currents that are not yet strong enough politically to become dominant but could do so soon. But this idea of turning religion into an ideology is there and it is of great significance as far as the question of human responsibilities and rights in relating to our standing before God is concerned.

In order to preserve the dignity of the human state, to allow human beings to live a moral and ethical life, and to fulfill their responsibilities to God and other human beings and the natural world, everything must be done to prevent religion from becoming an ideology. Religion must remain what it has always been, religion, which is very different matter from ideology. One of the great dangers we now face is this distortion of religion into ideology, which then enables people to fight in the name of religion in a modern context, disrespect the rights of others, and even kill in ways that are much more efficient and pervasive and very different from what had taken place in the days of old. People say humans have always fought in the name of religion. This is not precisely true. In the old days religion was part of cultural and national identity, and when people fought "religious" wars, most often they really fought for tribal or national identity or economic interest with a "religious flag" also waving. Even the Crusaders displayed these traits.

Today, something very different is taking place. It involves the conversion of religion into ideology and this change concerns the relationship between the foundation of ethics and theology. I think that to which we have to go back and what conferences such as this have to emphasize is the metaphysical and theological foundation of what it means to be human — what it means to "stand before God." From standing before God come responsibilities that we have to fulfill, as you might say, as reflections of the Absolute, representatives of universal values that we then have to apply to our human life. And with that central position on the earth comes the freedom of choice, which is imposed upon us by virtue of our being human. That is why, whether we like it or not, all messages from Heaven emphasize that to be human is to lead a moral life. It is impossible to be fully human without leading a moral life, and what we are, one could say, is to be condemned to a life that is meaningful. We are condemned to a search for meaning in our lives, meaning

which can only be realized by our being spiritual and moral. All our rights are related to this profound reality of human existence.

The time has come for all of those who consider themselves to have heard the voice of Heaven in different languages at different times to join in a chorus to explain that human life cannot survive without ethics and ethics cannot survive without a correct understanding of what it means to be human. And I believe that understanding what it means to be human cannot be really achieved by us unless we realize that we stand before God not only in our preeternal existence but even now. Everywhere we go, everywhere we are, in a sense we are standing before God, and that "yea," the yes that we uttered in preeternity still echoes within us very much here and now. The degree to which we respond to that yes, accepting God's lordship and our responsibilities as human beings as the basis of our human rights, will determine not only our happiness as individuals in this world but also the very survival of the societies in which we live.

## INDEX OF NAMES AND SUBJECTS



- 'Aṭṭār, Farīd al-Dīn, 302  
*al-'adl*, 245–49, 255  
 al-Ghazali, 240  
*al-jābiliyya*, 286  
*al-mizān*, 243–47, 251–52  
 Al-Qaeda, 3, 284–85, 290–98  
*amāna*, 36, 50, 300–301  
 An-Na'im, Abdullahi, 256–83  
 Aquinas, Thomas, 58, 63, 75, 199  
 Aristotle, 26, 102, 150, 207, 213, 218, 233  
 Asad, Talal, 262–79  
 attestation, 151, 158–59, 170–72
- Barth, Karl, 61, 97, 99, 103–4, 106  
*bay'a*, 250
- Bin Laden, Usama, 285–87, 293, 296  
 body, human, 55, 58, 60–65, 69–70, 131–32, 137–38, 147, 152, 159, 179, 200, 209, 217, 226
- Browning, Don, 198–202, 206–7  
 Buber, Martin, 145, 178, 181, 183, 209
- Calvin, John, 63, 98, 104  
 Canetti, Elias, 176  
 Caputo, John, 190–92  
 Casanova, Jose, 277–78  
 Cates, Diana Fritz, 75  
 Charlesworth, Hilary, 61, 70, 76  
 Chinkin, Christine, 61, 70, 76  
 cloning, 215, 224, 227, 235–36  
 compassion, 25–26, 28, 33, 51, 54–57, 60, 69, 72–77, 183, 227, 239, 242–43  
 conscience, 43, 46, 106, 141, 159–60, 170–72, 269, 273, 281–82, 290  
 Cordovero, Moses, 85–86
- creation, 8–15, 21, 31–40, 43–45, 47, 50, 52–57, 61–72, 79, 84, 89, 94, 108, 110–14, 121, 125, 129, 137, 140–72, 184, 211–13, 215, 219, 228, 231, 238, 242–46, 279, 300, 302, 308, 310, 315
- Derrida, Jacques, 190–92  
 dimensions of human life, 13–14, 47, 62, 80, 131, 205  
 divorce, 225, 235, 251, 253–54  
*Dominus Iesus*, 57
- embodied being. *See* body  
 evil, radical, 142, 160–62  
 exclusivism, 312–14. *See also* inclusivism
- family, 55, 65–70, 126–27, 222–29, 233–36  
   human, 180–84  
   Islamic, 247–52
- Farley, Margaret, 58  
*fiṭra*, 32, 41, 43, 48, 54  
 Fletcher, Joseph, 97  
 foundationalism, 205  
 freedom  
   divine, 103–5  
   human, 103–5, 151, 158, 162, 212, 302–9
- Freud, Sigmund, 103–76  
 fundamentalism, religious, 3
- Galston, William, 210, 236  
 globalization, 2, 4–5, 71, 181–82
- God  
   goodness of, 85–86, 307  
   knowledge of, 32, 37, 41