

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Three: What's special about being human?

We saw in Part Two that all creation in its original state is *muslim*. Daffodils and sunflowers obey their God-given *muslim* nature by turning towards the sun. The point is that they make no choice to do so. They are programmed by their *muslim* nature and just do it. Human beings have the faculty of freewill and part of our dignity is that we can choose to obey our God-given nature and live a *muslim* way of life or we can rebel.

The question of human freedom is not simple. If we were to stop people in the street and ask: What does it mean to be free? We might receive an answer something like, "I am free to do whatever I want. No-one tells me what to do!" Technically, we would call this value-free freedom. If I have two identical exercise books, one with a red cover and one with a blue, and give my daughter the choice between them, then this choice is value-free; whichever choice she makes will have an equally good outcome. If I were to say to her older sister, "You are free to choose whether you drive on the left or the right side of the road," we can see that the consequences of this choice are not the same – the wrong choice here could see her being killed in an accident. This would be a value-laden choice; she is still free to choose but I want her to make the right choice and attain the right outcome!

In Islamic understanding, the moral choices that we make are value-laden. God has given human beings guidance on how human life should be lived and we have been given freedom to choose the right path, which will lead to human flourishing. This would be freely choosing to live in accordance with the ethical will of God, which will lead us towards being fully human. A wrong choice here also has consequences [Q. 18:29]. We need to ask, "What kind of a being is God?" God is defined as being purely good; there is no evil in God. God never wills a bad outcome for any creature. If one freely follows the guidance of God, the outcome will be good.

How free are we really? Muslim scholars have given a whole range of answers to this question. Indeed, on many questions, there is a spectrum of positions that have been taken by different Muslim scholars and schools of Islam. Let's explore that on the question of freewill. There were some people who said that human beings have complete freedom and are accountable for their actions, which will be judged by the justice of God alone. They argued that, if God is being merciful to the person who makes a wrong choice and sins, then God would be acting unjustly with regard to the person who made the right choice and avoided sin. At the extreme end of this spectrum, some said that God must judge by justice alone. This leaves no room for mercy and means that human beings receive exactly the outcomes that they earn. The majority of Muslim scholars said that this was going too far as it allows no room for

God's mercy. One of the principal names for God in the Qur'an is "the All-merciful." The Muslim spectrum on freewill must end short of this extreme position.

At the other end of the discussion, there were those people who said that human beings have no freedom at all and that we just play out the part that has been written for us. At the extreme end of this position, there were those who said that God compels our actions. If this were so, then how could God hold human beings to account? We would have no moral responsibility. The Muslim spectrum on freewill must end short of this extreme position too. The spectrum can be seen to lie between these two extremes. Some Muslim scholars emphasise the pre-determined nature of human freedom but would say that nothing is written for us until we write it ourselves. Other Muslim scholars emphasise the free nature of human freedom but without taking anything away from the all-powerful nature of God.

Why take the risk?

The nature of giving human beings a degree of freewill means that we have the capacity to rebel and choose not to live by the ethical values contained in God's guidance. Would it not be easier to programme us like the daffodils and sunflowers so that we automatically do what God wants? In Islamic understanding, angels do not have freewill. God has all the angels that God wants in heaven constantly worshipping God [Q. 39:75]. They have no choice in the matter; we can say that they are programmed to do it. In creating human beings with freewill, God wants that we should freely choose to worship and obey God – freely chosen and not programmed.

Perhaps this example will make it clearer. We have a washing machine at home. We fill it with clothes and turn it on. The rest is automatic. It does not choose whether to obey or not. It just does what it is programmed to do. I don't feel the need to thank it! Now one day it breaks down and the washing begins to pile up. I get up before anyone else on Saturday morning and steadily work my way through the pile washing things by hand. I know that my wife has had a hard week at work and want to save her the time and effort. My action is a free one based on love and concern for someone else. I have done what no machine can do; that is a free act. What God wants is the worship of a free being motivated by love.

Two high dignities

God has given every human being two high dignities and also responsibilities. These are summed up in two Arabic words: *abd* and *khalifa*. To be an *abd* is to be a loving servant of God. Service without love is forced, de-humanising slavery. Love without the discipline of service leads to chaos. The servant obeys the master's will and lives according to God's commands. The servant seeks to attune his or her will completely to accept the divine will in all things. Four things go together in Islamic thinking: worship, obedience, service and love.

In the Qur'an we read that God created human beings for no other reason than that we should worship God [Q. 51:56]. If we want to worship God, then we must obey all

God's commands and keep clear of those things that God forbids. This will lead us to a life of service – to serve God and our fellow human beings. Muhammad tells us that “you have not put your foot on the first step of the ladder of faith until you wish for your neighbour all the good that you wish for yourself.” We must learn to serve our families and take care of our neighbours. We must also serve our own selves by not doing anything that will harm us. Suicide is forbidden in Islam as we take to ourselves the right of God to decide when we should die [Q. 4:29-30]. Alcohol and drugs are forbidden as they ruin us physically and mentally. All life is of the highest value in the sight of God. As the Qur'an puts it [Q. 5:32]: to take a life unjustly is like killing all humankind and to save a life is like saving all humankind.

The motive for all human actions should be love. We have a saying summarising this that is attributed to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad:

Some worship God out of fear, that is the slaves' worship.

Some worship God for reward, that is the businessmen's worship.

And some worship him out of love for him, that is the worship of freemen.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Rabi'a of Basra, an 8th century woman mystic:

O God, if I obey you out of fear of hell, send me there as I am unworthy of you.

O God, if I obey you out of hope of the reward of heaven, deny it to me as I am unworthy of you.

But, O God, if I obey you out of pure love for you alone, then hide not your face, for you are a loving God.

To be a *khalifa* is to be the regent, the agent or representative of God on earth [Q. 2:30]. The *khalifa* is the one sent with full authority to tend the earth according to the guidance of God. If human beings are polluting or corrupting the earth in some way, then we must act to stop it and repair the damage. The *khalifa* must be an ecologist, as we would put it today [Q. 31:20]. We are stewards of the earth; trustees accountable to God. We have to bring out the full beauty and potential of the creation. Consider the roses in our gardens. They are not natural. They are the work of human rose growers bringing out the full beauty over many years of grafting together rose bushes of different sorts. We can see the same thing with domestic animals. Over many generations, farmers have bred cows to be docile when being milked, to produce a high yield and to calve down with minimal problems.

We can think of the many breeds of dogs that we have today. They have been bred over a long time to bring out certain characteristics: it would not be wise to use a St Bernard to send down holes to scare out rats! Some breeds of dogs have been over-bred, so that they have developed weaknesses. There are limits to human interaction with the creatures of the earth. We are the regents of God and a regent is one who obeys and puts into practice the will of the one who sent her or him. There is always an ethical constraint on our exercise of the power of being a regent. We could think of the debate about genetically modified food crops as an example: Are we acting in accordance with the divine will to feed the peoples of the earth or are we going beyond the ethical limits given by God?

The *khalifa* must also be active in society. Human beings are charged with building a just society. We have to establish the rule of law, to make money circulate to those in need and to promote a life that leads to peace, prosperity and goodness.

These two dignities are given to every man and woman that ever lived and ever will live. We are to worship, obey, serve and love God and we are to be the agents of God on earth. Muslim men are reminded of this by their names. Have you ever met a man whose name begins with Abd followed by one of the beautiful names of God? Think about Abdullah (Servant of God) or Abd al-Rahman (Servant of the Most Merciful) or Abd al-Karim (Servant of the Most Generous). These very names are reminders of our common human dignity.

Held to account

God has given us these two responsibilities and made us free so that we can freely choose to obey them. With responsibility comes accountability. It is only reasonable that God will hold us to account for our lives. Every human being will face the Day of Judgement [Q. 6:21-31]. We will be questioned and judged according to the way that we have lived. The Qur'an records an assembly of all the pre-embodied human souls before they were sent to the earth. God asked them: "Am I not your Lord?" They responded, "Yes indeed!" [Q. 7:172]. From this Muslim scholars deduce that every human being has a natural ability, based on reason, to know that we are all creatures of God and in a relationship of service and obedience. In addition to this, none of the peoples of the earth has been left without the guidance of revelation and at least one prophet. We will all be judged then according to what we know and the way that we have followed what we know to be right.

Some people on earth have never even heard of the guidance of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. They cannot be judged on what they do not know but they have all received guidance at some time and so will be judged according to the way that they have followed what they do know. There is a difference between ignorance and rejection of something; those who know and reject the guidance of God must expect to face the consequences on the Day of Judgement. On that awesome day, God alone is the judge. God alone knows the human heart and the inner intentions of each one of us. No human being is capable of standing in ultimate judgement on another human being. Following on from that judgement comes the life hereafter, which can be lived in Paradise and drawing ever closer through wisdom and purity to the infinite being of God or Hell and the torments of those who have knowingly rejected God's guidance and been judged worthy of it by God.