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Honored Since Adam:
Islam and the Value of Human Freedom

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One recent Ramadan, I spent more time than I should have reading the news and keeping up with the general mayhem of the Middle East. At one point, thousands of Yezidis had fled to a mountain and were under siege by Daesh.¹ According to the story, the American military heroically came to their rescue.² Then the story changed: there were far fewer on the mountain than previously believed, and most did not want to leave. I still don't know what really happened. Is there any way to know? What good would knowing do?³

Apparently (again, according to the story), local Iraqis call the Yezidi 'devil worshippers.' Someone told me they revere Iblis for having refused to bow to Adam when Allah commanded the angels to do so. The rationale, apparently, is that Iblis was a true monotheist who would bow to nobody but Allah. I know not whether this is really what Yezidis believe. It seems not, according to this source.⁴

What is more interesting to me (and more productive to reflect on) is not whether Yezidis believe this (or what they believe), but the idea itself: that Iblis' refusal to bow to Adam expresses not his rebellion against God, but the purity of his faith. The orthodox Muslim response to this (as I understand it) would be that it disregards the content of God's command. Submission to God is not simply the refusal to submit to anything other than Him. Submission is a positive act of obedience, and therefore requires a specific command—a 'do this', such that submission is made real when 'this' is done. Walk around the Kaaba seven times, run seven times between the two hills, throw stones at the pillars...bow to Adam.

In this case—the first case of rebellion against God—the command was to bow to Adam. It sounds like a clever idea, that disobedience here is actually a purer form of submission—the kind of reasoning the devil might give. But when God questions him, he cannot hide his real motive: "I am better than him" (Qur'an 38:76). Thus, any pretense Iblis may have had of submitting to nothing other than God is exposed. There is something here that he places before Allah. Here is the real meaning of Iblis' rebellion, and also, ultimately, of the notion that arrogance

¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/iraq-yazidis-islamic-state-sinjar-2014856612595603.html>

² <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/11/world/meast/iraq-rescue-mission/index.html>

³ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/iraq-yazidis-living-fear-mount-sinjar-160726063155982.html>

⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/iraq-yazidis-caught-crossfire-201462412464507378.html>

and irreverence toward the rest of creation, and humanity, in particular, is somehow an expression of *tawhid*, or the purity of one's faith in God's unity and uniqueness. In light of this, it is ironic that the likes of Daesh are accusing others of devil worship.

But God commanded the angels to bow to Adam, the first human and, therefore, the father of humanity. So let's put aside the sources of confusion. God did not command the angels to worship other than Him when he commanded the angels to bow to Adam. On the contrary, in bowing to Adam at God's command, they performed an act of worship—not to Adam, but to none other than God. And this act of worship to none other than God was an act expressing reverence toward Adam, to whom God decreed that reverence should be expressed, through an act as humble as bowing. Those, then, who would charge the angels with idolatry, for obeying God's command to bow to Adam, may as well make the same charge against those who obey God's command to love the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Thus, we need not debate what the Yezidis believe or what other people believe. Instead, let us concentrate on what God commands.

Specifically, if the angels are commanded to express reverence to Adam, then what are the implications for us? Is Adam not even more deserving of our reverence? Of course, we revere Adam as a prophet. But it is important to remember that the first prophet was also the first human. Humanity and prophethood share the same root. This leads me to conclude that God's decree of reverence for Adam is at the same time a decree of reverence for humanity. Is this a hasty conclusion? The stature and status of the average human, like you and I, is not equivalent to that of Adam. He was a prophet and we are not. He was the father of humanity, and we are just his children. By some reports, he was sixty feet tall, and we are six if we're lucky. But still, he is the root of humanity and we are its branches. His blood runs in our veins. And, like all prophets, he is an exemplar for humanity—a God-given model of humanity at its most perfect. And “Allah does not burden a soul beyond what it is capable of” (Qur'an 2:286). So a prophet actually embodies nothing more than the fully realized potential of any human being—what we would be if we were all that we could be. But, of course, we are not all that we could be. “Verily, we created humanity in the best mold. Then we reduced him to the lowest of the low”

(Qur'an 95:4-5). And yet, we could be. "Except those who believe and do righteous deeds. They will have a reward without end (Qur'an 95:6)." So the command to bow to Adam is also a command to revere the potential inherent in every human being.

Reverence for the Divine is therefore impossible without reverence for the human. Likewise, true reverence for the human is impossible without reverence for the Divine. In relation to this position, two opposite extremes can be conceived. One is that reverence for God requires the rejection of reverence for the human. The other is that reverence for the human requires the rejection of reverence for God. The first extreme has appeared, historically, in the guise of various so-called 'fundamentalisms'—both religious and secular. It seems to be the implicit rationale that motivates *takfiri* extremism. The second extreme is the primary premise of the secular 'humanism' that claims reverence for humanity as its rationale for atheism and the elimination of all forms of religion.

Each of these extremes has its epistemological dimension. The claim that true reverence for humanity requires rejecting the Divine is co-entailed by belief in the self-sufficiency of the human intellect, such that trusting in God in matters beyond one's own understanding is a degrading humiliation unfit for the human being. On the other hand, those who claim that true reverence for the Divine requires rejecting the human, are fond of emphasizing the fallibility of the human intellect and then claiming to have achieved a kind of infallibility by circumventing the intellect altogether and relying exclusively and directly on revelation.

The latter—the so-called 'fundamentalists'—are correct in pointing out that the intellect is *fallible*. But they slander it by depicting it as essentially *despicable*, and they lie when they claim not to make use of it in understanding their religion. For guidance from revelation is not possible without understanding the revelation, and understanding the revelation is not possible without the intellect. So the fallibility of the intellect necessarily leads to fallibility in our understanding of revelation, and that is simply the human condition. Since nobody can claim to avoid this, epistemic humility is a moral necessity. But since this is either very difficult or very frightening for some people, they resort to claiming the ability to bypass the

human intellect and its fallibility. In doing so, they prove that the intellect is fallible and *can* be despicable, but not that it need be.

The procedure for many Muslim so-called ‘fundamentalists’ involves acknowledging that the Qur’an must be understood, but then claiming that we can insulate our understanding of it from the fallibility of the intellect by relying on the Sunnah, as if the Sunnah itself does not require understanding. How is it that a verse from the Qur’an cannot be understood without a *hadeeth* from the Prophet ﷺ or one of the *salaf* to explain it, but the *hadeeth* which is supposed to explain the verse can be understood just fine all on its own? Of course, everything requires understanding, and hence depends on the human intellect, with all its fallibility. *Hadeeth* have to be authenticated, their contexts understood, etc. This systematic intellectual undertaking requires methodological principles that require a basis in reason as much as they do revelation. There is just no way around it.

But the easiest way to make the point is to ask, why was Islam not revealed to stones instead of human beings? It is not just because stones cannot fire Kalashnikovs because apparently they can. No. What makes humans different from stones are the heart and the intellect. God’s message is addressed to the heart through the intellect, with all its fallibility, and potential despicability. The fundamentalists’ flight from the intellect, their pretense of not depending on it in their understanding of religion, is just the epistemological dimension of their flight from humanity itself—their notion that reverence for God requires contempt for the human, along with creation in general. Essentially, the ‘fundamentalist’ claims to transcend his own humanity, to understand God’s message without the aid of his own fallible intellect, and so basically to speak directly and infallibly with God’s voice. Of course, he will not explicitly say so, because in any case, he will deny that it is he who is speaking. So the incredible arrogance of his stance is cloaked in a kind of false humility. These are not his thoughts. Oh no, he has no thoughts of his own. He is only ‘delivering the message.’ Indeed, the intellect is fallible and *can* be despicable.

But as we mentioned, this contempt for the intellect represents only the epistemological dimension of a general contempt for the human in the name of

God. Some of its other manifestations are more evident in the Muslim world today. There is a race to degrade and destroy the human, and not just between *takfiri* militant groups executing human beings on video and destroying human heritage. What can we say about regimes that oppress and kill their own human subjects *en masse*, and the supposedly moderate ‘traditional’ scholars who are silent when these human beings are disposed of, but then raise a cry when *takfiri* militants raze a tomb? And we have been told that a single human being is more sacred than the Kaaba (Sunan Ibn Majah 3932). It is clear that disregard for the sanctity of the human being among Muslims today is not limited to just one faction in the petty competition for political power through religious authority.

All this might lead one to believe that the secular ‘humanists’ at the other extreme are correct and that reverence for the human does require denial of the Divine. But what they overlook is that even if the intellect were infallible, and humans *were* thoroughly rational, we would find no grounds for reverence for humanity on the basis of reason alone. The angels could not find it when God told them He would place a *khalifa* in the earth. “They said: ‘Will you place therein those who will make mischief and shed blood—while we glorify You with praises and thanks and sanctify You?’” (Qur'an 2:30). God is perfect, and the angels obey Him perfectly. What could possibly be added to that by bringing about a creature that can disobey? Why would God create such a creature, and furthermore command the angels to bow to it? “He said: ‘I know that which you do not know.’” (Qur'an 2:30).

If the angels don’t know, then we will not pretend to. In the view of the angels, with the extent of their knowledge, the creation of the human being could serve no aim other than to bring about corruption and destruction. Given what we have seen and are seeing wrought by our own bloody hands today, if the redeeming purpose God has in all this is beyond even their comprehension, then what real hope could someone possibly find in the human race, without trusting, blindly as it were, in something beyond one’s ability to understand? Surely, from the perspective of reason alone, the human race is a plague waiting for a cure. But Allah says, “I know what you do not know.”

The secular, self-styled ‘humanist,’ however, says, ‘Nobody knows what I (we...?) don’t know.’ And yet, he doesn’t know why it would not be better for the human race to never have existed at all. He is increasingly convinced that it would have. The only premises that he will allow as rationally defensible lead eventually and inevitably to the conclusion that human life is without any particular value that outweighs the suffering it brings, and that it would be, by any objective measure, better if human beings just stopped reproducing altogether. This, statistically, is one of the rare instances of a philosophical moral proposition that actually has a measurable effect on the real behavior of people in secularized societies. So much, then, for secular ‘humanism.’ Reverence for the Divine—belief in God and trust that He has a plan for humanity beyond our comprehension—is the only thing that makes any real and honest reverence for humanity possible.

Regarding human destiny, what can be arrived at through reason alone is, I think, succinctly expressed in Qur’anic verses like the one just mentioned: “Verily we created humanity in the best of molds, and then reduce him to the lowest of the low” (Qur’an 95:4-5), and also, “By time, verily man is in loss” (Qur’an 103:1-2). These express a perennial realization, shared by reflective people throughout history, and captured, for example, in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. But that which is arrived at only through faith in God, and openness to His message, is expressed in those verses that, in each case, directly follow: “except those who believe and act righteously...”. Here, God shows us that the path to His promise—the mystery of which is known only to Him, and which alone justifies the creation of Adam, God’s command for the angels to bow, and the reverence for humanity that this entails—is the only genuinely grounded humanism possible.

God said that He created humanity and *jinn* for no purpose other than to worship Him—*iman* and *amal salih*. The *hadeeth* tell us that the value of our deeds—the condition of their righteousness—rests on the intentions behind them. And thus, “There is no compulsion in religion. Verily the right has been distinguished from the wrong” (Qur’an 2:256). Purity of intention requires that the act be a real choice, free from all forms of compulsion—physical or psychological. A creature that obeys God willingly must of necessity be one with the capacity and opportunity to

willingly disobey. Any attempt to negate that capacity, then, amounts to an attempt to obstruct the human being from the purpose of his or her creation.

Freedom, in the proper sense, is, therefore, a necessary condition of any human moral value. Simply put, people cannot be forced to be good, or manipulated into being good, or brainwashed into being good. Of course, they can be forced, manipulated, brainwashed, or otherwise coerced into doing that which *would* have real moral value *if* they were to do so freely. But doing so under coercion would be morally worthless. This is the premise of what can fairly be called the liberalism of Islam. I use the term ‘liberalism’ here insofar as it has been used to refer to a similar insight expressed by some modern European thinkers, notably Kant (d. 1804). However, we must differ with him, along with many strains of modern thought on this question, by also asserting that freedom alone is not a sufficient condition for any human moral value.

What do we mean by this? First, we agree that no deed of any moral value can be done that is not done by autonomous, voluntary choice. Second, it follows from this that any act done with the intention of unjustly violating the autonomy of another is wrong. We differ, however, with the notion that this exhausts the morally significant considerations. An act can be freely done, not violate anyone else’s freedom, and still be either morally worthless or wrong. This is what I mean by saying that, while freedom is a necessary condition for any human moral value, it is not a sufficient condition for any human moral value. Another way to put this is that, while the value of one’s action depends on its being done freely, the value of one’s freedom depends on what one does with it. Respect for human autonomy, then, does not follow from freedom being an unconditional value, because it is not an unconditional value. It follows, rather, from freedom being unconditionally necessary for the human act to have any value at all.

In asserting this, I am resisting the common trend in the west to reduce all morality to the principle of autonomy, to enshrine freedom as the only objective moral value, and to relegate all other moral considerations as merely subjective individual preferences, or culturally relative ‘fetishes.’ This is crucial to distinguish the true Islamic liberalism from the dominant strands of Western liberalism which, I argue,

are ultimately empty, incoherent, and therefore impossible to realize in practice. Therefore, when I speak of Islamic liberalism, I mean nothing like what is currently being marketed as ‘liberal Islam.’

For the fact of having the capacity to choose can only be objectively valuable and meaningful if it is the case that some concrete choices are objectively better than others. If all concrete choices are taken as morally equivalent by any objective standard—that is, if the value of any concrete choice is merely a subjective matter—then there is no objective value in being able to choose. In wrongly enshrining autonomy as the only objective moral value, western liberalism has declared us free, while rendering that freedom, along with our lives, ultimately meaningless.

But to be fair, the sort of liberalism I am opposing here does not directly consider all concrete choices as morally equivalent. What it does claim is that the only objective measure of the moral value of a concrete choice lies with the question of whether the choice violates the principle of autonomy. Simply put, the only thing that makes any action objectively wrong is that it would unjustly restrict another’s freedom to act; and the only objective measure of its goodness is the degree to which it expands the freedom to act, without, of course, unjustly restricting it. This entails that the only objective standard by which to distinguish a just restriction of freedom from an unjust restriction lies, again, in whether the restriction in question involves an act that would itself unjustly restrict the freedom of others. In other words, the only justification for limiting anyone’s rights is to protect the rights of others. We can already see how this will lead to circularity, without providing any real definition as to what rights are universal. This, essentially, is why this form of liberalism turns out to be theoretically incoherent and practically impossible.

There are various answers to this problem on offer, and in all fairness, one would have to treat each in detail in order to argue that the problem is insoluble. But that would be a lengthy discussion outside the scope of what I can do here. Let me, then, simply articulate the following position, in laying out an initial defense and clarification of what I take to be ‘Islamic liberalism.’ The only way to sufficiently and coherently define the just limits of individual freedom, is by reference to a

substantive objective conception of the good, which is not reducible to the value of freedom alone, and the validity of which is not contingent on mere subjective preference. In other words, John Stuart Mill (d. 1873) was mistaken to claim that the only measure of the value of anything is whether someone desires it. And Immanuel Kant (d. 1804) was over-reaching when he claimed that his categorical imperative was alone sufficient to resolve all real moral questions.

This is just an introduction to what I see as the crucial project of defining and defending the nature of an “Islamic liberalism” against the misguided, incoherent, and eventually imperialistic and destructive versions of liberalism that currently dominate western culture. Of course, this project requires a more detailed demonstration of the fallacies of these false liberalisms than I have had occasion to present here. More importantly, the practical, ethical, and political implications of Islamic liberalism need to be drawn out more fully. This means that a comprehensive and clear set of principles for distinguishing just from unjust restrictions of freedom needs to be drawn on the basis of a substantive Islamic conception of the good. In addition, there are various concepts of freedom, autonomy, and agency that need to be distinguished and clarified in terms of their relation to contingent material conditions of life, and their particular moral salience with regard to first-order moral judgments. This work will be crucial, not only for defending the integrity of Islam from destructive, incoherent notions of liberty but most importantly for clarifying and defending the rightful value of human freedom under an Islamic liberalism, to a Muslim world which, sadly but undeniably, seems gravely and dangerously oblivious to it.