The Notion of Man from the Islamic Intellectual Tradition and Modern Science

By Noraini M. Noor and Aziuddin Ahmad

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, everything is rooted in the One Supreme Reality. Everything that exists comes from this One Reality. In this ultimate Reality, there is no distinction between subject and object, or consciousness and existence. All that exists, the universe and everything it contains, comprises only that Reality's Names and Forms, including man[1]. This Reality lies beyond the material world man lives in. The basis of this tradition is *tasawwuf*, the process of realization or actualization of who one is in the light of God, and consequently, the transformation of oneself following the example of Prophet Muhammad (*saw*). In this understanding, man is a sacred being—at once body and soul, complete and whole, for in him lie the Names and Attributes of God. Hence, this tradition considers both the ontological and epistemological aspects of who man is.[2]

---

[1] In the traditional usage, the term "man" refers to humanity as a whole. In this article we use "man" in this traditional gender-neutral sense.

[2] Both matter and non-matter. For Avicenna, followed closely by Aquinas, this ontology in which the whole range of beings is studied—substances and accidents, causes and effects, one and many, universal and particular, is metaphysics or the "first philosophy in as much as all the other [lower] sciences, receiving their [scientific] principles from it, come after it." Metaphysics is also known as "theology or divine science, so called because its principal object [of enquiry] is God," where God is the "cause" and "end" of metaphysics. See R. E. Houser, 'Avicenna and Aquinas: Essence, Existence, and the *Esse* of Christ', *The Saint Anselm Journal* 9.1 (Fall 2013): 1-21.

Modern Western thought, on the other hand, has reduced man to its basic physical and biological elements. In this view, the basis of every existent thing is matter, evolving from simple to more complex ones. There is no Transcendent Reality, for this has been replaced with the "mind" responsible for cognition and thought. In other words, only the natural aspects of man are studied—as a reductive epistemology.

In this article, we consider these two worldviews to cast light on the understanding of who man is.

The Islamic Intellectual Tradition and Man

The *ghayb* is a realm that is beyond the reach of human perception or conception—consisting of everything that is hidden from man's physical senses and awareness. The worldview of Islam is founded on *al-ghayb*. Indeed, the *shahāda,* the testimony of faith, starts with it—the Reality of God. To have *īmān*[3] (usually translated as "faith" or "belief") to a Muslim is to have certainty or certitude in Allāh, His Angels, His Books, His Apostles, the Last Day and the Divine Decree—both good and bad.

Al-Ghayb, usually translated as "the unseen," or "the invisible" can also be understood as "the concealed." The concealed is contrasted with "*al-shahāda*," "the visible" or "the witnessed." The Qurʾān 59.22 mentions these two worlds or presences; while God is "Knower of the unseen and the witnessed," human beings know only the witnessed. Hence, an inner intelligence or certainty (*īmān*) is needed to know the "concealed." Though aspects of Reality are concealed or hidden, the goal is for people to perceive them as present for it is from this higher realm that everything flows into the witnessed world of the *dunyā*, i.e., the world of man.

Just as God is the First—who existentiates all that exists, He is also the Last—the journey's end. Indeed, the circle of being begins and ends with Him. God is the ground of being, and everything that exists can only exist as an aspect of that Divine Reality, hence as an aspect of Divine Unity. "He is God, other than whom there is no god… unto Him belongs

---

[3] Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, *Al Tawḥīd*: *Its Implications for Thought and Life* (US: IIIT, 1992), argued that these English words "faith" or "belief" have elements of untruth, doubt and suspicions, while *īmān* (from the Arabic root, "*amn*" meaning 'security') signifies conviction, absolutely free of doubt of probability, of guessing and uncertainty. In other words, *īmān* is synonymous with *yaqīn* (certainty of the truth).

To read the balance of this article, please <u>subscribe</u> to this volume.
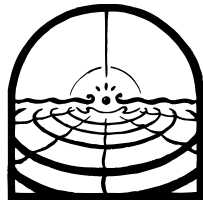
SACRED WEB
A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

<u>www.sacredweb.com</u>