

Agency, Rationality, Morality: The Qur'anic View of Man

HERNDON: INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
ISLAMIC THOUGHT, 2024. 107 PAGES.

MONA M. ABUL-FADL

Mona M. Abul-Fadl (1945-2008) had a mind of dazzling brilliance, making her one of the pioneering female Muslim scholars of her generation and a keen observer of the rapid devolution of society divorced from spiritual tradition in the modern context. In this powerful work, she provides a reading of the Qur'anic view of man as *insān* against a background of the preoccupations of modernity. Her emphasis is on rationality, freedom and morality, and the goal is the reintegration of man and the recovery of community through a reconciliation of self and the rediscovery of the essential meaning of divine guidance in so far as it relates to human life in this world. Taking the Qur'an as a divine discourse of many tiers and depths, the work singles out aspects of its discourse on creation. Abul-Fadl takes this discourse as a pivot for developing a view of moral man and moral community, with the focus remaining on the former.

To understand this work one must first understand its author. An intense thinker, Abul-Fadl made significant contributions not only to her field of research but also notably to Islamic theology, advocating for

the morality and ethics of its spiritual perspective to be given a place in modern academic discourse. Hers was a didacticism that emphasised that people are not inhuman units, cogs in a machine, but a complex, nuanced creation that needed to be understood more than studied. Her interests covered a range of topics from Islam and the Middle East to political theory, epistemology, cultural studies and feminist scholarship. And as the decades go by, it seems she was incredibly perceptive. Her ideas and commentary not only endure but seem to gather momentum and carry greater weight. For this reason she must not slip into obscurity.

Abul-Fadl's faith provided the basis for her intellectual stature, with matters pertaining to the secular humanistic perspective a lifelong passion for her. She was clear that there are fundamental issues that epitomize the human condition for which only a spiritual viewpoint can offer deeper and unique insights, allowing objective truths to be discovered, and guiding people to navigate the upheavals of life, and in fact better themselves in the moral context. For her, that theocentric humanist worldview, as epitomized in the Islamic paradigm of knowledge, was a potential force for cultural renewal. Committed to intellectual engagement Abul-Fadl powerfully challenged the hegemony of 'truths' built on little more than consensus asking awkward questions, pointing out flaws, and espousing through rigorous logic the self-evident truth of God and creation with an erudition that enhanced her academic reputation. Bringing to the fore eternal truths as opposed to ephemeral ones that are time-bound, she devoted her life to this philosophical vision, as realised in her writings, teaching, and public lectures, establishing her credentials as a scholar of great exegetical clarity and systematic exposition.

We must bear in mind that Abul-Fadl had grown up between two cultures. The greater part of her childhood was spent between England and Egypt, and she was a keen advocate of inter-civilizational dialogue. Hence, her refusal to yield to supposedly uncontested 'scientific' and 'rational' truths on the human condition as well as orientalist approaches to understanding the Muslim presence, did not signify for her the building of a theological wall and the subsequent refusal to engage with those outside. Rather, through articulating rejection and commonality, critique and commentary, she sought to open dialogue and engagement,

to penetrate beyond the Western sense of historical rivalry and explore the potentials of a shared consciousness.

Abul-Fadl felt the urgency of that conversation given the decay she was witnessing, of a modernity suffering a crisis of values and even moral anarchy. Not driven by purposes or goals, what kind of self-government could man hope to achieve? What good is the triumph of technology or the god of progress, if it provokes nihilism and a universalized state of existential angst or anomie, living a life without meaning?

In this powerful and instructive work, Abul-Fadl anticipates the flaws of a purely secular humanistic understanding of man as *insān* proving thereby that in a world of appearances (or illusion) versus reality, God cannot be dismissed so easily. Her assertive critique of a utilitarian understanding of the human being, buttressed by denial of notions of ultimate consequentialism, gives readers an acute insight into the limits and scope of core liberal, secular humanistic ideas that she contends lack explanatory power. Abul-Fadl is careful to point out that the treatise's use of the term man/mankind to mean men and women as a translation of *insān*, is purely a matter of convention with reference to modern English and western tradition. However, this is not to eclipse *insān*'s true import for she decries its rendering in the Qur'anic context arguing that every time the Qur'anic gender neutral and universal term "*insān*" is used, subsuming men and women under the category of humankind, it is rendered in English or French as "man" or "homme." This is problematic because despite the fact that these terms are conventionally used to denote universality, their gendered bias remains inherent to the detriment of their universality.

Man is a moral creature inasmuch as he is a deeply corrupting force. Accordingly, if we abandon absolute morality in favour of a relativistic ethics to promote in effect a society of 'rational' individuals governed by haphazard values, or a 'practical ethics' as Bertrand Russell would contend, built on pure trust devoid of spiritual belief, then to what extent are we endangering a civilisation we so wish to hail as technologically advanced? That is, juggling plates in a system of ever-eroding social control, where technological achievement, or the benefits of progress, are clearly not enough. A true and accurate understanding of the human

being is no doubt vital and, whilst modern disciplines in the context of the human sciences are right to make man the focus of study, a data-driven, spiritually devoid analysis misses the fundamental purpose of human life, and is a gamble. Man is left with no soul and nothing to live for.

In the author's view, the Qur'an is the best explanation of man as *insān*. It makes the human being the focal point of exposition acting as a blueprint for our existence, and guiding humanity through the journey that is life. Of greater significance, God is the Creator and origin of everything. Origins are fundamental, impacting definitions, engagement, and the type of society humanity chooses to structure for itself. Like ripples in a pond, life is lived relationally from the family unit to wider society, linking human beings in a chain that ultimately traverses across national borders to shores beyond our own. Thus, how are we to conceive of origins? Are we to view *insān* as simply an evolutionary creature, mere matter and energy, governed by animalistic tendencies which prioritise survival? Is he governed by his passions, drives and impulses? If so, from where do these emerge? If man's growth and development, whether alone or within society, demands a 'practical ethics', then who decides and what defines the forms of that value system (and trust) and the extent of its conservatism? In other words, if man chooses to be driven by alcohol, drugs and other dark pleasures, then why not unleash this potential? If judgements are to be made on a utilitarian basis then who decides the criteria and how to account for conflicting normative ethics and competing interests?

These questions deeply vex the human sciences, which increasingly try to make sense of non-practical, irrational, non-ethical and indeed illogical behaviours such as war, social problems of crime or the darker appetites of men, as well as various psychiatric disorders, with an ever-burgeoning development of ideas, research, questions, and hypotheses. The holy grail of a just and equitable world based on inclusivity and unity is not going to emerge through the power of knowledge alone focusing on the greater good, but a sense of accountability before God. Despite some inevitably valuable and nuanced insights by the human sciences (psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science etc.) there are also fundamental flaws, inescapable from honest appraisal,

because the premises at the root of secular liberal humanism governing its theoretical framework are inadequate and contradictory, if not false.

The author makes an impressive case for the Islamic perspective in her own brilliantly erudite and scholastic style, demonstrating the breadth of her knowledge. Her penetrating observations are clear and easy to understand, focused on central tenets without having to articulate each and every aspect of analysis, contributing to a greater understanding for readers and allowing them to form their own assessment. The Qur'an allows both for a powerfully complex understanding of *insān*, as well as a powerfully simple one. Its message is clear: God is the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth. It speaks to both a broader audience as well as a highly specialised one. The arguments put forward have logic and coherence. It explains ethics but notably also a root cause, a dark force permeating existence that drives men to evil. With time short and the stakes high, man as *insān* is the moral centre of the universe, and has a fundamental purpose to play within it. If he fails to leverage the power of his spiritual knowledge then the only foreseeable future is one of chaos. Man has been created to 'know' God and designated the task of being vicegerent, the perspective of his existence demanding constant moral self-reflection, stretching the boundaries of this understanding, as well as ethical engagement with the objects placed around him in this vale of tests (people, animals, nature), to ultimately realise his moral potential. He is utterly dependent on God. From the very air he breathes to the food and water he consumes, his assumption of freedom and independence being nothing but delusion. His tinkering with the world of objects in the name of science and expressions of liberal triumphalism for having understood some of the laws/working mechanisms of an infinitesimally complex universe, border on narcissism. The cosmos has its place, but *insān* is its heart and soul.

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