

**Created in the Image of God: a shared hope for understanding human rights among
Jews, Christians, and Muslims**

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During three short periods of United States history, the political leadership responded to national crises by calling for national unity based upon an appeal to the God of Creation who *created all men equally*. The first crisis produced the Declaration of Independence of 1776; the second document calling on the nation to enlarge its vision of equality came with Lincoln's Gettysburg address in 1863; one hundred years later, Martin Luther King shared his dream for racial harmony upon the premise that all men are to be treated equally.

While the Creator God is the origin of this assertion for human equality, none of the three monotheistic religions--Judaism, Christianity and Islam explicitly declares this in their texts. Human equality could be based on a number of other aspects of human behavior which George Fletcher discusses in a 2002 report.¹ Writing as a lawyer, Fletcher dismisses a few of the cherished ideals of the Enlightenment, such as law and justice, as valid foundations for human equality. He proposes that a theocentric background is more "holistic" and thus superior to any secular basis for human equality. Fletcher writes, "Nothing quite like 'all men are created equal' is ever cited in German jurisprudence of equality or, so far as I know, in any other legal culture of the world."²

The non-legal term, “created equal” enjoys only a limited, often a patronizing, call for an egalitarian expression of divine involvement in human affairs that has had little universal appeal outside the boundaries of the United States.³ It does hold a unifying, even providential promise to all people whether or not they recognize any divine origins of equality, but specifically for those of us as Christians dealing with non-Christians in a post 9-11 world where religion, for both evil and good, is once again an ideal to be reckoned with. This paper will focus on three words that refer to human equality that relate directly to the quest for understanding human rights from a specific worldview which encompasses the three monotheistic faiths of Abraham. One assumption is that non-believers of these three world religions will be able to feel more secure when tensions are reduced in the majority-religions regions of Asia and Africa.

Human equality and image of God-biblical foundations

Neither the Bible nor any other historical, theological texts specifically identify with the phrase found in the Declaration of Independence and later enshrined in the Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King’s “I have a Dream” speech. The closest syllogism is the phrase, “Created in the image of God” found in Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:3; and 9:5,6.

Then God said, “ Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over...all the earth... (26) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (27)

This is the written account of Adam’s line: When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them “man.” (5:3)

And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. (9:5,6)⁴

Despite overtones of anthropomorphisms in its use of “image” and “likeness,” these opening chapters of Genesis are the *sine quo non* of both Jewish and Christian understanding that portrays metaphorically the unique covenantal relationship between the Creator and His creation of humankind. Most contemporary Jewish interpretations of the image of God, Hebrew *tselem elohim*, are in general agreement with this comment, “The purpose of Jewish existence is to be a People in the image of God,” when it was published by the eminent Jewish spokesman, Mordechai Kaplan, in 1964.⁵ Christian tolerance of Jews has been tenuous over the past two millennium where the ideals of a common root have often been degraded or blatantly discarded. This common root for Israel and the Christian Church is most divisive in regard to the current discussion of neo-antisemitism concerning the state of Israel and its human rights records affecting the Palestinians since 1948.

This is a difficult time for all three Abrahamic religions because the state of Israel’s Jewish faith is established to the point where the rights of Arab minorities are less than those of the Jewish majority. The complex political-religious background surrounding the Jewish state deserves far more explanation than allotted here but, insufficient as it is, our US comprehension of this Middle East problem should be examined carefully in any Jewish-Christian reconciliation as “children of God.” In its simplest form, the conflict is an issue of land which the Jewish commentator, David Sandmel, mentions when he asserts that the Hebrew/Jewish covenants are eternal and do not require Christian endorsements:

From a Jewish perspective, however, that belief [Christian belief in the God of Israel] and of itself, does not make Christianity part of Israel, *as we understand Israel*, that is, a *people* that has a special *covenant* with God who has given us a specific *land*.⁶ (Italicized portions added by original author.)

My concern is that US Christians evaluate their uncritical acceptance of Israeli displacement of indigenous Christian and Muslim Palestinians by affirming the covenants God has made for the Jews as expressed in the United Church of Christ 1987 and Vatican II documents.⁷ This should relieve some of the Jewish fears of Christian “suppressionism” and move the three religions of Abraham closer to an acceptance of the “others” based upon a mutual understanding of what is the image of God for all humanity.

Image of God--Christian interpretations

Unlike Jews and Muslims, the words of Genesis describing God’s creation of humans in His image is not a stumbling block to Christians primarily because of the theological implications of the Incarnation. A reference to “image of God” in the Greek New Testament is found in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and Colossians designating Christ as the image of God.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. (Col.1:15)
 The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (II Cor. 4:4)

Christian instruction is centered on imitating and following Christ as Paul states, “...put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” (Col. 3:10). The message of the gospel overcomes the natural barriers of race and tribe which previously separated the Jew from the non-Jew. “Greek and Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, slave or free,” all are welcome to participate in Christ’s body (Col. 3:10). The gospel’s invitation will ultimately lead to Christian acceptance of the universal application of the image of God for all humankind by surprisingly making all persons equal as sinners. Among the early Orthodox Christian Fathers who contributed

to the theological discourses on the image of God is St. Gregory of Nyssa who died in AD 395. He believed that the divine image is a prototype for all humankind to see the goodness of an uncreated God and yet part of the original creation for humankind.⁸

However, the fall of Adam, which becomes a troublesome area for Jews and later for Muslims, is firmly embedded in Christian doctrine. Paul's letter to the Romans expresses the contrast between Adam's disobedience leading to death and the way of Christ's faithfulness that leads to life. (Rom. 5:12-21) His second letter to the Corinthians summarizes the two sources: "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive." The dual nature of humankind is spelled out more conclusively by the second century Christian writer, Irenaeus, who distinguishes between the "image" of God which is universal and immutable in contrast to the "likeness" that is tainted by Adam's disobedience and fall which implicates the entire humanity in what is described as "original sin."⁹

While the New Testament, as well as its early Christian interpretation, appears to limit the divine image to believers in Christ, the mystic Gregory of Nyssa stresses its universality. "The divine image, proper to the person of Adam, is applied to the whole of mankind, to universal man. That is why the multiplication of persons in the race of Adam, each one of whom is in the image of God."¹⁰

It will be Augustine (353-430) who will lead the Western Church to answer the question regarding the universality of the image of God. Augustine turns our attention to Genesis 1:26:

A human being [*homo*] is an important kind of thing, being 'made in the image and likeness of God' not by virtue of having a mortal body but by virtue of having a rational soul and thus a higher status than animals.¹¹

Augustine is joined by Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Martin Luther who in their centuries and theological eras emphasized the “Fall” and the consequences for salvation once the image or likeness has been restored. Generations of Americans have looked at God’s own image of a divine decree that He sends all but the elect to everlasting perdition. The dominant US theology was arguably a view of an angry God which coincided with an anthropology of “man in the image of God” distorted by the Fall of Man. This was upheld by Puritan and later Calvinistic ethics and reinforced in the public schools where thousands opened their McGuffey Readers to chant, “Through Adam’s fall, we sinneth all.”¹²

As for the modern age after Karl Barth and Emil Brunner the Hebrew scholar Frymer-Kensky summarizes one of the most lively theological debates of the twentieth century.

[T]he Fall has ceased to be a historic fact. Human beings are the image of God, it is their nature. The image is essentially fixed, inherent, and cannot be lost.¹³

Human creation in Muslim contexts

The subject of man’s fallen nature, or original sin, is repugnant to both Jews and Muslims. As previously stated, the biblical terms *image* and *likeness* will never be thus identified with God in the Qur’an or other sacred texts of Islam. However, the pages of the Qur’an are filled with topics that a reader of the Bible would readily recognize-- Adam, his wife, the first sons and the murder of one of them. The Creator God is the source of all life that begins with a single entry like that of Geneses 1:26. According to the Qur’an, (4:1), “[God] created you from a single person (*nafs*), created of like nature, his mate, and from them the two generated countless men and women.”¹⁴

Adam's superior position in the creative order is described in an episode repeated in the Qur'an in six separate chapters that center on Adam's contesting with Satan who curiously has been ordered by God to worship Adam. "And behold, We said to the angels: 'Bow down to Adam,' and they bowed down. Not so Iblis (Satan). He refused and was haughty. He was of those who reject faith." (2:34) The Genesis account is close to the Qur'an, relative to the temptation of Adam and his wife who are designated by God to eat of all the trees but to avoid the one while they lived in the garden. After their disobedience, the couple is forced to depart from their earthly paradise. The Qur'an says there is no further condemnation placed upon them or their descendants. (7:22-27; 20:120-123)

When one looks at the issue of human equality based upon the Qur'an, a couple Arabic words are found for "creation" in verbal and nominative forms. The less common verb is *fatara* and its noun, *fitra*, is found only in chapter 30:30. The citation below is from a modern translation of the Qur'an by Muhammad Assad who expands on the single word *fitra* to define it in seven English words (italicized):

And so, set thy face steadfast to the true faith, turn away from all that is false in accordance with the *fitra* (*natural disposition which God has thus instilled*) in man; not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created [*khaliq*] this is ever true faith; but most people know it not.¹⁵

The South African, Yasien Muhamed's book, *Fitra--the Islamic Concept of Human Nature*, goes further to define *fitra* as the "primordial faith which Allah implanted in human nature."¹⁶ "*Fitra*" is more analogous to the biblical term, "image of God" than any other Qur'anic concept. The biblical "image of God" and the Qur'an share similar concepts regarding our first parents' creation, as well as a hope for final restoration once the often disparate human conditions are reconciled to the Creator. The

Qur'an offers little in alternatives for identifying the presence of God in human life apart from the strict interpretation of the Divine Will as expressed in revelation and Islamic Law. Muslim legalists, including Yasein, quickly reaffirm the main message of Islam as unity, "The reality of *fitra* implies the reality of the soul which is predisposed to the recognition of the One, Allah." ¹⁷

Yasein quotes scores of Muslim classical and modern legalists/scholars who defend the thesis that Islam is the natural religion for humankind, making *fitra* synonymous for "Islam." A traditional and authoritative, non-Qur'anic prophetic saying, called *hadith*, quotes Muhammad as having said: "Every child is born in the *fitra*; it is his parents who make of him a Jew or a Christian or a Parsee." ¹⁸

Muslims are aware that Christians revere Christ as Savior because he redeems them from their sins. Muslim writers like Yasien consistently point out that all humans are born in a sinless state as Muslims-- no need of salvation from any original sin. ¹⁹ What Muslims long for is the *fitra* condition of human perfection where one truly submits to the dictates of an all Sovereign God. ²⁰

Aside from this significant theological difference that deals with salvation, Muslims and Christians have gone through many of the same processes of tolerating the "other" in terms of their respective understanding of the Creator-God Who from the beginning made us equal. Before looking at two contemporary Muslim scholars who speak in terms of "inclusion" rather than "exclusion" of non-Muslims, it will be helpful to examine some thoughts of a mystical Muslim who presents a universal image of God.

A Sufi perspective of the image of God

Ibn ‘Arabi was born in the Iberian Muslim state of Andalusia and died in 1240 AD in Damascus where hundreds of his followers visit his grave every year. Scholars are still sorting through the thousands of manuscripts that this prolific mystical “Sufi” writer completed in his lifetime of seeking God, less from the adherence to the law of Islam but rather from a direct awareness of God through meditations. He agrees with the Christian mystic, Gregory of Nyssa’s, identification of Adam as the image of God, the embodiment of the Perfect Man. ²¹ That Adam and all humans are endowed with this image does not violate the prohibition against graven images, Ibn ‘Arabi writes:

God created Man-who is Adam and every other representative (*khalifa*)-- in His own Image. Yet He denied the possibility of likening anything to Him, in His saying, “There is no thing like Him.” He secreted the mystery of this Divine Reality within the human being. ²²

Among Ibn ‘Arabi’s most popular writings is Bezels of Wisdom which praises twenty-seven sacred characters, of whom only six are found outside of the Bible. Jesus, John the Baptist and Zakariah are from the New Testament and like the others bear little resemblance to their biblical presence. Here is a reference to Jonah where only the *italicized* phrase is from the Qur’an’s Chapter 42:40: “...[B]ut whoever forgives and does good, his reward is with God, because he is in His image. So, whoever forgives and does not kill will be rewarded by Him in Whose image he is....having created him for that.” ²³

Saudi Arabia is one of the Muslim nations that prosecutes anyone following a Sufi way of study and worship by accusing men and women like Ibn ‘Arabi of pantheism because these mystics seek a more universal approach to God apart from the rigidity of Islamic jurisprudence.

Two Muslim advocates for minority-status

Among the plethora of books on Islam in the last few years, there are two that deserve some attention if only for their remarkable titles. Western Muslims and the Future of Islam by Tariq Ramadan and Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism by Abdulaziz Sachedina were published in 2004 and 2001 respectively, to answer the charge that Muslims are ignoring their God-ordained responsibilities in the modern age.

Sachedina, a Shi'a who has taught several years in Virginia, addresses his fellow Muslims:

Contemporary Muslim world is caught up in serious violation of people's basic social and political rights. In order to correct these political injustices peacefully, Muslims must search for historical precedents for the idea of peaceful reconciliation through instituting restorative justice, a process that, I believe, can restore to the people their God-given dignity through the *fitra*.²⁴

Tariq Ramadan is a European based writer who often visits the US where he was offered a position at Notre Dame but did not receive security approval earlier this year.

Tariq's grandfather, Hassan al Banna, as the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, links Tariq to Sunna-mainline Islam. He, too, calls upon Muslims, mostly those living as minorities, to return to the ideal of the *fitra* which he defines by the Qur'an 30:30: "Surrender your whole being as a true believer and in accordance with the nature [*fitra*] which God gave to human beings when He created them."²⁵

Tariq rapidly reviews Muslim histories and legal documents in their native Arab regions, but his interest is in the European and North American Muslims who live "between the ghetto and dissolution."²⁶ What he confidently states regarding the Muslims living in minority-status would apply to millions of Muslims who live in over fifty-five nations where Islam is the established majority religion. He is reticent to speak about European non-Muslims, as well as the secularism of the dominate European

cultures. Tucked amid a repudiation of Sufi spirituality and a call for renewal of traditional Islamic teaching is Tariq's admission, "God in His oneness put into the heart of each human being an original breath, a natural longing (*fitra*) for the Transcendent, for Him."²⁷

Both of these men authenticate the Hadith, saying that all humans are born in a state of perfection²⁸ with Sachedina's Islamic Roots more adept at integrating Western concepts and facing the issues of modernism. He is persuaded that the ideal *fitra* state is not derived from "rationality grounded" universals but is founded on the Qur'an's divine revelation.²⁹ The original *fitra* state of perfectibility as sketched by Sachedina with few Qur'anic references includes these seminal democratic concepts identified with advanced civil societies: "personal dignity and liberty," "individual human responsibility,"³⁰ and "freedom of conscience."³¹ Sachedina maintains all of these are workable within an Islamic context when Muslims dedicate themselves to God and personally involve themselves in the inner struggle (greater *Jihad*), to promote peace and tranquillity.

Professor Sachedina recalls statements supposedly made by the founder of the Shi'a sect of Islam, Ali ibn Abu Talib (d.660). Ali was asked by his appointed governor in Egypt what to do with the newly captured Egyptians. Ali's supposed response is:

Infuse your heart with mercy, love and kindness for your subjects. Be not in face of them a voracious animal, counting them as easy prey, for they are of two kinds: *either they are your brothers in religion or your equals in creation.*³²

While the tone of Sachedina's text is optimistic toward Muslims surviving in hostile settings, he does not see any shortcuts on the horizon because Muslims face massive obstacles at this time in their history. He concludes,

Although not born in primordial sin, human beings are subject to weakness,

temptation, arrogance, narrow-mindedness, and self-interest. The key to combating these defects is a continual struggle to cultivate a guiding principle of selflessness, whence flow all those religious and moral values that conduce to the sense of justice and fairness, cornerstone of an ideal society.³³

Both writers make strong cases for a moral order based on the hope of reformation of Islam that is linked to the spark of perfection at creation, the *fitra*. What is compatible with modern ideas of democracy and human rights for non-Muslims, for women and for adults who freely abandon Islam to become Christians are subjects left open for further discussion.

Human rights implications

Religious hatreds crowding into the growing respect for diversity are part of the contradictory forces at work today. The “image of God” concept for all human beings presents a rare opportunity to embrace the “other” in human rights disputes while respecting the diversity of God’s creation. Your Muslim neighbor wants some assurance that he is not perceived as a terrorist because he, like the great majority of world Muslims, has rejected terror. However, the image of God in the “other,” if a member of a terrorist network, is going to be harder to accept as we are engaged in a warfare that dims our minds and clouds our vision of humanity. Closer to home in the United States is our national predilection toward capital punishment.

The Genesis 9: 6 reference brings up the issue of taking human life either as a person, murder, or as a nation, with police or military action. The verse does approve the taking of another human life, but it does so under the guise of “life for life” which was part of the Old Covenant. Christians, Jews and Muslims have all judicially moved away from this “eye for an eye” retributive justice. A final biblical reference takes us to the Letter of James where the

Apostle asks how first century believers in Christ were able to use their tongues to praise God and with the same tongues, “curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God?” (James 3:9) The hypocrisy is not always apparent, since, along with our praises to God, we ask our governments to curse men and women to death rows in all but a handful of states. Capital punishment is a subtle form of non-restorative justice that directly violates the image of God concept which needs to be considered in the truth of the entire Scriptures.

The call for patience is also necessary. The United States, as did most of “Christian” Enlightenment Europe, took its time in recognizing religious freedom, freedom of conscience, even the abolition slavery. It took two wars, the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, and a deep racial schism in the middle of the twentieth Christian century for us to recognize as a nation the expandability of “God given” rights of equality. The self-evident truths are not so readily self-evident as we still need to apply the voices of reason with the voice of revelation to allow the Gospel light to shine on the current human rights challenges in the United States.

NOTES

¹ George P. Fletcher, "In God's Image: The Religious Imperative of Equality Under Law," Human Rights Review, 3, 2 (2002): 86.

² Fletcher 89.

³ Fletcher 96, notes 16, 17.

⁴ All selections of the Bible taken from "The Holy Bible--New International Version," [Nashville], 1986.

⁵ Mordechai M. Kaplan, The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence--A People in the Image of God, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964) 318.

⁶ David Fox Sandmel, "Israel, Judaism, and Christianity," Christianity in Jewish Terms, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, ed. et al., (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 164.

⁷ Sandmel, 164, cites the General Synod of the United Church of Christ's 1987 resolution which states that "God's covenant with the Jewish people has not been rescinded or abrogated."

⁸ Vladimir Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, (Crestwood, NY: 1998) 118.

⁹ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," Created in God's Image, Anthony A. Hoekema, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 33-42.

¹⁰ Lossky 120.

¹¹ Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 28.

¹² William McGuffey, McGuffey's First Eclectic Reader (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997) n.p.

¹³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, et al., eds., Christianity in Jewish Terms, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000) 330.

¹⁴ 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an, (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1989). Unless otherwise identified, all the translations of the Qur'an come from this publication.

¹⁵ Muhammad Asad, The Message of the Qur'an, (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Adalus, 1984) 621.

¹⁶ Mohamed Yasein, Fitra--The Islamic Concept of Human Nature, (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1996) 17.

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- ¹⁷ Yasien 91.
- ¹⁸ Bukhari, "Manakib al-Ansar," The Muslim Creed, Its Genesis and Historical Development, A. J. Wensinck (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1965) 214.
- ¹⁹ Yasien 13.
- ²⁰ Tariq Ramadan, Western Muslims and the Future of Islam, (New York: Oxford Press, 2004) 119.
- ²¹ Stephen Hirstenstein, The Unlimited Mercifier--The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabi, (Ashland, Or: White Cloud Press, 1999) 125.
- ²² Hirstenstein 165.
- ²³ Ibn al 'Arabi 153.
- ²⁴ Abdulaziz Sachedina, The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism (New York: Oxford Press, 2001) 112.
- ²⁵ Ramadan 16.
- ²⁶ Ramadan 63.
- ²⁷ Ramadan 119.
- ²⁸ Ramadan 230; Sachedina 148.
- ²⁹ Sachedina 70.
- ³⁰ Sachedina 81-84.
- ³¹ Sachedina 127.
- ³² Sachedina 110.
- ³³ Sachedina 129.