

Ethico-Theological Foundations Of A Muslim Community Of Success

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Not long ago, I had the honor of being a guest of MUIS when I delivered my paper at the Grand Hyatt Singapore on “The Challenge of Diversity in Modern Society” on 1 October 2011. Ever since that unforgettable visit, I was longing to come to Singapore once again. Thanks to Almighty God, the Covid-19 pandemic has slowed down so that we may now meet in person in Singapore by the grace of Allah and by the goodness and kindness of H.E. Masagos Zulkifli bin Masagos Mohamad, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs of Singapore. Thank you, Minister Masagos, for inviting me, for inviting us all, to speak on Communities of Success, while we should rather humbly listen to the story of the diverse communities of success in Singapore.

Indeed, Singapore is a good example of success not only for Muslim minorities but also for some majority-Muslim societies. I just want to say that I am proud of your visible success in Singapore because of your exemplary moral and ethical attitudes as well as your productive communal work towards a harmoniously successful Singaporean society. I begin my presentation with a quote from Imam Ali bin Talib, may Allah be pleased with him, *“People are travellers, the world is a place to pass through, not to settle in. His mother’s womb is the start of his journey. The Hereafter is the end of his destination. His life is the length of the distance to cover. Years are his stations, months are his parasangs, days are his miles, and his breaths are his steps. He is made to travel like a ship with its passengers.”*

Notions about the ultimate genesis, the beginning of the cosmos (cosmogony), and visions of the ultimate eskhatos, the last day of the cosmos (eschatology), deeply shape the moral and ethical orientations and behavior of man. In all three Abrahamic religious traditions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - cosmogonic notions and eschatological visions make up the most important concept for normative relations between God and humans as well as non-human creatures. Specific interconnections between cosmogony and eschatology may sustain different ethical orientations and reveal a mindset of a religious tradition and its theological articulations. Indeed, the concept of religious cosmogonies and eschatologies may be a source for a moral and ethical orientation of today, which is characterized by deep moral and ethical crises of humanity despite the power of the success of science.

The term cosmogony refers to an account of how the universe (cosmos) came into being. It differs from cosmology which is the science of the universe. Cosmology deals with the actual composition and governing laws of the universe as it now exists, whereas the cosmogony is concerned with the question of how the universe first came to be. This is something we know that we do not know. We do

not know how the universe first came to be. All cosmogonic ideas are just theories mixed with mythologies and scientific assumptions against religious beliefs of creationism, a doctrine holding that matter, the various forms of life, and the world, were created by Almighty God out of nothing. We do not know how the universe first came to be because we were not eyewitnesses when God created the universe. This is what the Almighty Allah, the Creator of the universe, nay the multiverse, *rabbu-l-‘ālamīn*, is telling us as clearly as it might be, in the Holy Qur’an. Allah, praised be to Him, said, *“I never called them to witness the creation of the heavens and the earth or even their own creation, nor would I take the misguided as my assistants. (Qur’an, 18: 51).”*

There is unanimous perception among Muslim scholars that the multiverse was created by God, the Omnipotent. Most Muslim scholars believe that the universe was created *ex nihilo* “from nothing”. They say that the essence of God, the Creator, is separated from the creation by veils (*ḥijāb*) impregnated with God’s attributes. Two parallel series of “first created things” are described. On the one side, there are creations that can be considered archetypes, like the pen (*al-qalam*), the well-preserved tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*), the throne (*al-‘arsh*), and the seat (*al-kursī*). It is said, for example, that at the divine command, the pen of light was dipped into the letter nūn. God said, *“Nūn! By the pen and what everyone writes (Qur’an, 68:1).”* The pen wrote with ink of light on the tablet of light all that was destined to happen until the resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāmah*). On the other side, they say that creation had begun with the elements: the first being water on which the divine throne rests. God said, *“It is God who created the heavens and the earth in six days - and His Throne had been upon water - that He might test you as to which of you is best in deed. But if you say, “Indeed, you are resurrected after death,” those who disbelieve will surely say, “This is not but obvious magic.” (Qur’an, 11:7).”* The point here is to emphasize the acknowledgement of and belief in God’s creation of the universe which is a starting point of a moral and ethical worldview based on a conscientious debt (*al-dīn*) to the Creator in the sense of a voluntary – *ṭaw‘an*, not compulsory – *karhan*, submission, indeed, in the sense of the awareness of being a ‘Muslim’ – a peaceful man of submission to the spiritual laws of *Malakūt*, the world of spirits as well as of the cosmological laws of *Nasūt*, the world of physics. Again, this is something we know that we do not know either. We do not know when the cosmos, at least our small planet Earth, will come to an end. Therefore, as in the case of man’s failure to figure out with certainty how the universe began because he was not an eyewitness to it, we are told that we should be aware that the date of the end of the world is out of the reach of man’s mind. Man is not in charge of the laws of physics. He is not responsible for the function of natural laws. He is responsible only for his moral conduct – indeed for his decent relationship with human and non-human beings.

Thus, man’s focus should be on harmonizing his relationship with God, his Creator and Sustainer, with man, his fellow brother in humanity, and with the natural world, his temporary abode. He should avoid being a cause of an ultimate disaster of the existence of himself as well as of the rest of God’s creatures. He should think about the consequences of his moral and ethical behaviour. A corruption (*fasad*) on Earth is always a result of human hands. God said, *“Corruption has spread on land and sea as a result of what people’s hands have done, so that Allah may cause them to taste ‘the consequences of’ some of their deeds and perhaps they might return ‘to the Right Path. (Qur’an, 30:41).”*

The importance of the interconnections of cosmogony and eschatology in the sense of belief rather than knowledge is because we believe not only in what we know but we believe in what we do not know while having faith and trust in trustworthy reports about unknowledgeable things which are

metaphysical or transcendental truths revealed by Omniscient God to His chosen messengers. This does not mean that we should disregard the results of real scientific efforts of physicists and cosmologists who are making their reports about the Big Bang and other theories in regard to the genesis of the universe. Even though some scientists will have us believe that the universe came to be through mere chance of the play of blind cosmic forces rather than by a Wise, *Hakīm*, Creator, we should appreciate objective scientific research for truth.

We should be careful about some nihilists who are telling us that this world has no purpose whatsoever as well as about some apocalyptic minds who are predicting an immediate end of the world in their lifetime because they cannot afford to imagine that the world will continue after their inevitable departure. It is our choice to believe in them or to have faith and trust in God Almighty who is teaching us through His messengers that this world is not created in vain but it is created for a serious aim and purpose.

God's aim is to reveal His glory to His creatures through His love and mercy and the purpose is to make *insān*, man, an example of a harmonious combination of an animal and rational being, the best of animal senses as well as the best of angelic spirit. Indeed, by this very purpose of the creation of the world, God Almighty is telling us that *insān*, man, is His only creature who is made to encompass both abodes, the physical as an animal and the spiritual as an angel whereas neither an animal is made for a spiritual world, nor an angel is created for a physical world.

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Thus, because *insān*, man, is a unique creature, he is advised by his Creator how to survive physically and how to improve spiritually to achieve success (*najāḥ* and *falāḥ*) in this world as well as salvation (*najāṭ* and *falāḥ*) in the Hereafter. It is interesting to note that the Arabic colloquial term *najāḥ*, meaning success, is not used in the Qur'an at all. Instead, the term *falāḥ* is used in the Qur'an to designate not only the meaning of success in this world but also to mean salvation in the Hereafter. Thus, when we hear the *adhān*, the call for the Muslim prayer, *ḥayya ala'l falāḥ*, it is an invitation to both success in this world and salvation in the Hereafter: “Come to success, come to salvation.” Besides, the reason why the Arabic term *falāḥ* is used instead of the term *najāḥ* lies in the fact that the term *falāḥ* designates the sense of a permanent, continuous, and thus eternal success and salvation, while the term *najāḥ* indicates a temporal or shortcut success usually in business and likewise. This understanding of *falāḥ* in the Qur'an leads us once again to the idea of an interconnectedness between cosmogony and eschatology in terms of a moral and ethical worldview.

If you believe that the universe was created by God Almighty from nothing, *ex nihilo*, then you believe that this universe has its Owner, *Mālik* or *Malik*, who has certain rights of His ownership. Here lies the idea of *dīn* as a debt to the Creator, *Khāliq*, and the Owner, *Mālik*, of the multiverse. Hence, if you believe that the universe has its *Khāliq*, the Creator and *Mālik*, the Owner, then you will accept the dictate of *Mālik*'s guidance. However, man is a big contradiction.

To the dictate of faith, he responds with his "dictate" of prayer: “*God, forgive me! God, save me! God, don't forget me!*” When he is tested with affluence, he boasts that God loves him, but when he is tested with poverty, he complains that God has abandoned him (*Qur'an*, 89:15-16).” In every case, man is ungrateful: “*When evil befalls him, he despairs, and when good happens to him, he goes astray (Qur'an, 70: 19-21).*” When he is in trouble, he returns to faith with the dictate of prayer to God, but when the trouble passes, he forgets the dictate of faith, which protects him from trouble. When he dictates a prayer, he expects an immediate response, but when he is reminded of the punishment for sin, he demands immediate forgiveness. Man is impatient when he begs for patience by saying: God, grant me patience, but immediately. He is always in fear of fear and of hunger. He likes to dictate his prayer to God, but he does not like to listen to God's dictates of faith. He is happy to hear that God loves him, but he is not ready to submit himself to God except when he is in trouble.

He likes to be seen as God's *khalīfa*, vicegerent on Earth, but without a moral and ethical responsibility. He tends to judge God, but he does not like to hear God's judgment on him. He cannot live alone, but it bothers him to share his life with others. But before he thinks of being a *khalīfa*, vicegerent, man must understand that he is God's debtor, *al-madīn*, confidant, *al-waṣīyy*, reliable agent, *al-amīn* that he is *al-mu'min*, trustworthy. Man is God's debtor because God gave him life. God did not ask him for anything in return except for him to be grateful, to trust in Him and to be committed to doing good deeds for his fellow human beings. Man's life is a gift from God, the Giver, to whom man, as the recipient of life, is obliged to be grateful. The word *dīn*, which is commonly translated as faith or religion, literally means debt. The translation of the word "*dīn*" in the 30th verse of Surah al-Rūm in the Qur'an as "debt" and not as "faith" confirms the thesis about man as God's debtor: - “*Turn your face towards authentic debt. It is God's natural way of creating people. There is no change in God's creation. It is an authentic debt, but most people do not realise it.*”

The term *yawm al-dīn* in a figurative sense means judgment day, but in a literal sense it means "the day of debt" or "the due day", the day when man will return what was entrusted to him which is his own life. In return, man is rewarded if he was aware of the value of his life and if he protected it from *fasād*, corruption; but man is punished if he was not aware of the value of his life and if he did not protect it from *fahṣā'*, immorality. It is so simple that there is no need to explain but there is a need to repeat it constantly because man is a forgetful being---he is *insān*, *nisyān* or *'iṣyān*.

God Almighty did not ask man how he would have wished to look like or what status he desired to have on Earth. It was "God's dictate" that man could not resist his shape and status on Earth. But God did ask man if he was ready to be a trustee on Earth. God asked him if he was capable of accepting *al-amānah*, the trust. Man was warned, however, that the heavens, the earth, and the mountains rejected that offer. Flattered by the idea of a *khalīfa*, God's deputy on Earth, man accepted the commissioner's offer without thinking what it meant to carry out the heaviest burden, which scared the heavens, the earth and the mountains. God said, “*The man is indeed incorrect and hasty (Qur'an, 33:72).*” If man is not willing or incapable of understanding that he is in debt (*al-madīn*) to his Creator during his first initiation, he will surely understand it at the time of his second initiation.

Here we recall one of the greatest Muslim minds on morality and ethics, Al-Rāghib Al-Iṣbahānī to guide us through the idea of the first and second initiation and what is in between these two destinations of man in terms of his success or failure measured by his moral and ethical performance. In the introduction of his book “The Elaboration of Two Initiations and the Achievement of Two Promises of Happiness” (*Kitāb tafṣīl al-nash’atayni wa taḥṣīl al-sa‘ādatayni*), Al-Iṣbahānī observes some paradoxes in man’s attitudes between his two ultimate destinies:

- Man does learn but his learning neither benefits him nor harms him;
- Man knows only the phenomenon of this world but he is indifferent about the Hereafter;
- Man writes books saying that it is from God in order to gain some cheap profit;
- Man debates by a wrong argument to kill the truth with it;
- Man believes but in *Jibt* and *Taghut*.
- Man does worship but besides the One God those that do not benefit him nor harm him;
- Man comes to prayer but in laziness and he remembers God very little;
- Man prays but he is unmindful of his prayers;
- Man is aware of God but when he is reminded of God’s presence, he does not care;
- Man calls on other than God Almighty;
- Man spends of his wealth for good but unwillingly;
- Man governs but in the way of ignorance;
- Man is creative but in spreading gossip.

The above pertains to the verses mentioned in the Quran: “*You have already experienced the First Initiation, don’t you remember! (Quran 56:62)*” and “*Then, God will initiate the Second Initiation because God is Omnipotent to do anything and everything. (Quran 29:20).*”

Al-Rāghib Al-Iṣbahānī explains that the destiny of *insān*, man, is to know his own nature as a prelude to knowing his initiator, God Almighty. Indeed, to know his role in the universe where he is designated as a *khalīfa*, vicegerent of God, is due to his ability to know the difference between good and evil. It is this criterion by which the success or failure of a human individual as well as a human community is measured in the immediate life of man, i.e., his ability to command good and prevent evil. Almighty God said in the Holy Qur’an, “*You might have earned the title of the best community in human history provided that you are capable to command good (ma‘rūf) and prevent evil (munkar) in the world (Qur’an, 3:110).*”

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In conclusion, we say that man's belief that the universe is created by Almighty God and his belief that he will have to account for his life before God Almighty will determine his character, his moral and ethical behavior for his success or failure here, al-dunyā, as well as for his salvation or loss there, al-ākhirah.

O Allah, set right for us our religion, which is the safeguard of our affairs, set right our world in which our livelihood is, and set right our hereafter, to which is our return. Oh God, make life an increase for us from every good, and make death a relief for us from every evil, O Lord of the worlds.



About the Author

Sheikh Dr Mustafa Cerić is currently the Honorary President of the World Bosniak Congress and the President of the Senate of the Bosniak Academy of Science and Arts. Schooled at the Gazi Husrev Beg Madrassa in Sarajevo, Al-Azhar University and the University of Chicago (PhD in Islamic Studies), he sits on various interfaith councils throughout Europe and the Middle East and was the Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1993-2012.

Sheikh Dr Mustafa Cerić issued the Declaration of European Muslims to the European Union in 2006. He has received several awards for his exceptional contribution in strengthening democracy, promoting peace and pursuing interfaith dialogue, including UNESCO Felix Houphouet-Boigny Peace Prize, 2003 International Council of Christians and Jews Annual Strenberg Award, and 2007 Lifetime Achievement Award for the Association of Muslim Social Scientists UK. He was named among The World's 50 Most Influential Muslims 2009 by The Muslim 500.

About RPCS

The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.

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