

find the repeated declaration that God could have made all mankind rightly guided, but it was within His purposes to do otherwise.

The Quran categorically affirms that God is not diminished nor threatened by our choices, even though they do carry grave consequences for the individual. The Quran's "most beautiful names" of God imply an intense involvement in the human venture. These names, such as The Merciful, The Compassionate, The Forgiving, The Giving, The Loving, The Creator, reveal a God that creates men & women in order to relate to them on an intensely personal level, on a level higher than with the other creatures known to mankind, not out of a psychological or emotional need but because this is the very **essence of His nature**.

Yet questions persist about the need for this earthly life as well as the roles of human choice, intelligence & suffering in the creation of individuals. The **great divide between theist & atheist** is their reaction to human suffering. Often the first views it as either deserved or an impenetrable mystery, while the second sees it as unnecessary & inexcusable. The Quran advocates neither viewpoint. **Trial & tribulation are held to be inevitable & essential to human development & both the believer & unbeliever will experience them.**

Man, however, does not grow only through patient suffering, but also by striving & struggling against hardship & adversity. This explains why jihad is such a key concept in the Quran. Often translated as "holy war," the word jihad literally means "a struggle," "a striving," "an exertion," or "a great effort." It may include fighting for a just cause, but it has a more general connotation as the associated verbal noun of jahada, "to toil," "to weary," "to struggle," "to strive after," "to exert oneself."

The Quran's attitude towards suffering & adversity is not passive & resigned, but positive & dynamic. Believers are told that they will surely suffer and that they are to be patient and persevering in times of hardship. But they are also to look forward and seek opportunities to improve their situation and rectify existing wrongs. They are told that while the risks and struggle may be great, the ultimate benefit and reward will be much greater.

Life was never meant to be easy. The Quran refers to a successful life as an "uphill climb," **a climb that most want to avoid.**

"Why create man?" The angels' question

echoes through our reflections. It seems that God, in accordance with His attributes, intends to make a creature that can experience His being (His mercy, compassion, love, kindness, beauty) in an intensely personal way and at a level higher than the other beings known to mankind. The intellect and will that Man has been given, together with the strife and struggle that he will surely face on earth, contribute to the development of these individuals, this subset of humanity that will be bound to God by love.

The key to success in this life and the hereafter is stated so frequently and formally in the Quran that no serious reader can miss it. However, the utter simplicity of the dictum may cause one to disregard it, because it seems to ignore the great questions and complexities of life. The Quran maintains that only **"those who have faith & do good"** will benefit from their earthly lives

It is not surprising that the Quran upholds the so-called golden rule. Many do feel that it is better to give than to receive, to be truthful rather than to live a lie, to love rather than to hate, to be compassionate rather than to ignore the suffering of others, for such experiences give life depth & beauty.

Some would say that life is really not about taking, but about giving & sharing, and that this is what gives life meaning & purpose. The Muslim, however, would not fully agree. If human intellectual, moral, and emotional evolution was the sole purpose of life, then belief in God might be helpful, but not entirely necessary, for a humanistic ideology may suffice. But the Quran does not state that the successful in life are only "those who do good"; rather, they are only those who **unite faith with righteous living**, those who "have faith and do good."

Faith should inspire righteous deeds, which, in turn, should nurture a more profound experience of faith, which should incline one to greater acts of goodness, and so on, with each a function of the other, rising in a continuous increase. From this viewpoint, all of our endeavors acquire a potential unity of purpose: ritualistic, spiritual, humanitarian, and worldly activities are all brought into the domain of worship.

Good deeds become simultaneously God-directed & Man-directed acts. For example, the spending of one's substance on others becomes an expression of one's love of God. Giving of oneself strengthens the experience of faith, or, as the Quran says: **spending in God's way & doing good brings one nearer to God and His mercy.**

Islam means "surrender" or "submission," a

giving up of resistance, an acquiescence to God's will, to His created order & to one's true nature. It is a lifelong endeavour & trial, an endless road that opens to boundless growth. It is a continuous pursuit that leads to ever greater degrees of peace & bliss through nearness to God. It engages all human faculties & its terms are unconditional. It seeks a voluntary commitment of body & mind, heart & soul.

The Quran claims that Man's earthly life is not a punishment & that it does not satisfy some whim of its Creator. Rather, it is a stage in God's creative plan. Mankind has been endowed with a uniquely complex nature with contrary inclinations & the Quran asserts that this earthly life will indeed produce a segment of humanity that will experience & share in God's love. These are called Muslims; "those who surrender"), for they strive to submit themselves heart, mind, body & soul to this relationship. They who find peace, security & trust in God. Who do good & strive to set things right.

The single most important fact governing all creation and preached by all of God's messengers is that **"there is no god but God."** It implies that the many different objects of worship chosen by men have no real authority or power. The divisions & hatreds to which such misdirected veneration lead are totally unnecessary & a result of nothing more than evil and self-destructive man-made illusions. It means there is but one spiritual & moral standard governing humanity and but one measure of a person's worth.

"O mankind! Lo! We have created you male & female & made you into nations & tribes that you may know one another. Lo! the noblest among you in the sight of God is the best in conduct." (49:13) Most importantly, it implies that the barriers we set up between ourselves & others are fallacies, because we all must answer to the same supreme God. Islamic monotheism not only demands that we accept that there is only one God, but also that we accept its natural corollary that all men & women are in fact equal under God's authority.

The two major features of Islamic monotheism – the oneness of God & of humanity – were united successfully in Islam. It will move on to future generations. For Muslims, this is but one example of how God, via Islam, completed His favour unto mankind.

Dr. Lang has excelled by turning his intellectual exploration of parts of the Islamic creed into a journey, his own intimate & touching journey. One of liberation.

Are you in spiritual bondage, even with your prayers & fasting & pilgrimage & charity? Rituals without exploration & asking is the road to hell.

Even Angels Ask
GET ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGH ASKING...
TO ACHIEVE THE DIVINE TRUTH

The world is in crisis. Environmental crises & economic crises. But there is one that is oft overlooked: **the crisis of meaning.** It is a deepening crisis that is exacerbated by religious **dogmas of fundamentalism** whether they are Islamic or Christian or Hindu. This crisis alienates many from spiritual considerations. Some have rejected religion entirely, and many who preserve some ties to a faith find it to be in conflict with their rational or scientific thinking. The result is that religion is pushed ever farther back from our experiences. The fear is that this trend will continue unless faith can be restored as being part of our essential knowledge & experience especially since **we all have an innate instinct to see our lives as meaningful.** Spirituality, then, has to be accepted as being part of human nature, and not something separate from ourselves that has to be strived for, or attained. The Quran is a revelation for Mankind that is appropriate for all peoples, times, and places, and in his book, **Even Angels Ask**, Dr Lang, a convert to Islam, opens his immensely thoughtful discussion with the most basic of questions as regards "meaning": why Man? **Why were we created, at all?** His book's title sums up this puzzling question about creation itself, a question so puzzling that **even the angels asked it of Allah.** The Quran challenges us to keep searching. A spirit of inquiry doesn't go against Islam. Ask the pertinent questions....**where did we come from?; where are we going when we die?** The answers lie in the soul's questioning.

BEHOLD, YOUR LORD SAID TO THE ANGELS: 'I AM GOING TO PLACE A VICEGERENT ON EARTH.'

THE ANGELS ASKED:

'Will you place therein one who will spread corruption & shed blood, while we celebrate your praises & glorify your holiness?' He said: 'Truly, I know what you do NOT know.'

This opening scene is in heaven as God informs the angels that He is about to place Man on earth. The angels' reply is both fascinating & disturbing. In essence it asks, "Why create & place on earth one who has it within its nature to corrupt & commit terrible crimes? Why create this being, who will be the cause & recipient of great suffering?"

It is obvious that the angels are referring here to the very nature of mankind, since Adam, in the Quran, is one of God's elect and is not guilty of any major crime. The question is made all the more significant when we consider who and from where it comes for when we think of angels, we imagine peaceful, pure & holy creatures in perfect and joyous submission to God. In our daily speech, we reserve the word "angel" for the noblest of our species.

Their question is given further amplification by the fact that it originates in heaven, for what possible purpose could be served by placing Man in an environment where he could exercise freely his worst criminal inclinations? Why not place Man with a suitably virtuous nature in heaven from the start? The verse ends not with an explanation, but with a reminder of God's superior knowledge, and hence, the implication that **Man's earthly life is part of a grand design**; and it is the Quran that reveals, through its essential message, the purpose of the existence of God, Man, and life.

We start our discovery with the Quran's

opening surah. Volumes have been written about it even though it consists of only seven short verses.

In the Name of God, The Merciful, The Compassionate 1. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds; 2. The Merciful, The Compassionate; 3. Master of the day of Requital; 4. You do we serve & You do we beseech for help; 5. Guide us on the straight path; 6. The path of those whom you have favoured; 7. Not those upon whom is wrath & not those who are lost. (1:1-7)

The first verse indicates a hymn of praise, to God, "the Lord of the worlds." The divine names, "The Merciful, The Compassionate," appearing in the second, head every surah but one (the ninth) and are among the most frequently mentioned attributes of God, both in the Quran & by Muslims in their everyday speech. The mood changes in verse three as it reawakens deep-seated anxieties & conflicts. No sooner are God's mercy & compassion emphasized than we are threatened with the "Day of Requital."

The fourth verse goes even deeper into the quagmire as it reminds us that service is rendered & pleas for help are directed to the very creator of the predicament from which we seek salvation. Far from allowing us to warm up to its message, the scripture wastes no time recalling our complaints against religion **for the Quran is no soft sell or hard sell**. In reality, it is no sell at all. It is no less than a challenge, a dare, to fight and argue against this book.

We can all relate to the last three verses for life is a chaotic puzzle, a random & confusing maze of paths and choices that lead nowhere but to broken dreams, empty accomplishments, unfulfilled expectations, and we all often ask: Is there a right path, or are all, in the end, equally meaningless? The wrath and loss for straying off the righteous path we know well, for we have absorbed life's anger and aimlessness and made it our own. It is our best argument for the nonexistence of a personal God.

In verse 31 of the Quran, the angels' question of God's creation of Man continues to be explored. **"And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said, 'Tell me their names if you are right.'"** (2:31)

Special emphasis is placed on man's ability to name, to represent by verbal symbols "all things" that enter his conscious mind: all his thoughts, fears, and

hopes, in short, all that he can perceive or conceive. This allows man to communicate his experience & knowledge on a relatively high level, as compared to the other creatures about him, and gives all human learning a preeminent cumulative quality.

They said: Glory to you: we have no knowledge except what You taught us, in truth it is you who are the Knowing, the Wise. (2:32)

In this verse, the angels plead their inability to perform such a task, for, as they plainly state, it would demand a knowledge and wisdom beyond their capacity. They maintain that its performance would, of course, be easy for God, since His knowledge and wisdom is supreme, but that the same could not be expected of them. In the next passage, we discover that Adam possesses the level of intelligence necessary to accomplish the task and hence, though his knowledge and wisdom are less than God's, it is yet greater than the angels'.

He said: 'O Adam! Tell them their names.' When he had told them their names, God said: 'Did I not tell you that I know what is unseen in the heavens and the earth and I know what you reveal & conceal?' (2:33)

Here we have an emphatic statement that Man's **greater intellect** figures into an answer to the angels' question. We are informed that God takes all into account, especially, all aspects of the human personality: man's potential for evil & his complementary & related capacity for moral & intellectual growth. To drive home this point, the next verse has the angels demonstrate their inferiority to Adam & shows that Man's more complex personality makes him a potentially superior being.

And behold, We said to the angels, 'Bow down to Adam' and they bowed down. Not so Iblis: he refused and was proud: he was of the rejecters. (2:34)

In this verse, the Quran attests to the birth of sin & temptation. The Quran later informs us that Iblis (Satan) is of the jinn, a being created of a smokeless fire and who is insulted at the suggestion that he should humble himself before a creature made of "putrid clay" (7:12;17:61; 38:76).

When a person inclines too far towards these lower (jinnic) suggestions, they make themselves easy prey to evil or satanic influences. For example, our need to survive gives way to exploitation of others & avariciousness. Our need for power gives way to tyranny.

Our need for wealth gives way to greed. Our desire for security gives way to violence. Our wish for respect gives way to arrogance.

However, the Quran does not maintain that life on earth is a punishment. Long before Adam & Eve enter the story, the angels raise the troublesome question: *Why create Man?* The Quran supplies the answer. The first point to note is that Man has a relatively higher intelligence than other creatures. Since his nature is more complex, he has a greater degree of personal freedom. Thus, he has **not only potential for growth in evil** but, reciprocally, he **has the potential for growth in virtue**.

The Quran stresses repeatedly three features of our human nature: reasoning, choice, and adversity. That the Quran gives a prominent place to reason in the attainment of faith is well known & frequently mentioned by Islamic scholars even when many western scholars view this as a defect since they see faith & reason as being inherently incompatible.

The Quran insists, however, that it contains signs for those who are wise, knowledgeable, endowed with insight, and are reflective. Its main complaint against the rejecters of faith is that they **refuse to make use of their intellectual faculties & that they close their minds to learning**. The Quran asks almost incredulously: **"Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts may thus learn wisdom?"** (22:44), **"Do they not examine the earth?"** (26:7), **"Do they not travel through the earth and see what was the end of those before them?"** (30:9), **"Do they not look at the sky above them?"** (50:6)

The Quran presents human history as a perennial struggle between two opposing choices: to resist or to surrender oneself to God. This choice must be completely voluntary, for the Quran demands, **"Let there be no compulsion in religion - the right way is henceforth clearly distinct from error."** (2:256)

The crucial point is not that one should come to know & worship God, but that one should freely choose to know & worship God. Thus we