

HUMAN NATURE AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE
SHARĪ'AH: FIṬRAH AND MAQĀSID AL-SHARĪ'AH IN THE
WORKS OF SHĀH WALĪ ALLĀH AND IBN 'ĀSHŪR*

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Introduction: The Problem

Human history has never seen before such a systematic and constant denial of human nature as it has seen in the modern age. This is due to the influence of the triumphant Promethean-Faustian spirit that has dominated modern Western civilization—European at the start, Euro-American at the end. That spirit does not seem to be content with the far-reaching techniques and processes developed to condition and mould human beings according to its reductionist secular-materialist world-view whose devastating moral, social, cultural and political consequences have already become highly visible. Thus, it has entered a new phase of its dehumanizing of human life and society.¹ Even the conception of human nature as a blank slate or *tabula rasa* that has served to underpin the various social and political theories formulated to regulate society over the last few centuries is now foundering under the onslaught of unfettered subverting forces that use effective means provided by science and technology to attain their goals.

The problem has reached unprecedented degrees of gravity going far beyond the implications of the reductionist and secular theories of human nature that have prevailed in Western thought since the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods and affected in varying degrees philosophical and social thought in the world. The

* This is a revised and expanded version of a paper read at a one-day seminar on Shah Walī Allāh of Delhi organized by the Department of History and Civilization, International Islamic University Malaysia on February 25, 2003.

¹ On the notion of dehumanization and alienation of man from his nature, see for example René Dubos, *So Human an Animal*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968 and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*, Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc, 1997 (1967).

alarming gravity we are now witnessing is more than the enhancement and refinement of the techniques and means of social control and engineering aimed at shaping human personality and directing it in accordance with some specific ideological models. It consists of a sort of demonic manipulation of the very human constitution to reengineer human beings and make them come into existence at will and upon demand. Carried out in the name of science and progress, this manipulation threatens not only to undermine the human socio-political order by sapping its philosophical and moral foundations, but also to usher in what Francis Fukuyama calls our 'post-human future'. That is, the end of mankind as a sequel to the end of history.²

Many thinkers, notably in the West, have been ringing the bell by pointing to the dangers menacing to push humanity into the abyss of self-destruction. A recurrent argument in the literature produced by such scholars is that the universal and fundamental values that used to sustain human society and ensure continuity and understanding between cultures and civilizations are now being extremely corroded. Therefore, it is suggested by some that there is necessity to bridge the widening gap between nature and culture. As Masters has put it, there is need for a new paradigm that should integrate "nature and nurture" in order to overcome this situation in a truly positive and constructive way.³

However, the dangers against which such scholars have warned us do not only consist of the relativist view that has prevailed especially in the realm of values, nor do they simply concern the question of the nature-culture/nurture dichotomy. They rather reside at a more essential level than just reducing the human personality to the biological make-up and its chemical equations that are governed by specific physical processes and environmental factors. Thus, the essence of human beings has been dreadfully summed up in the cerebral area of the human being. Like computer chips, so the self-

² This is the main them discussed by Francis Fukuyama in his book *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of Biotechnology Revolution*, London: Profile Book Ltd, 2002.

³ Masters, Roger D., *Beyond Relativism: Science and Human Values* (Hanover & London: University Pres of New England, 1993), pp. 135-57.

styled prophets of modern biotechnology and genetic engineering spread the news, brain chips may soon be on display in the market, and one can then renew one's brain as one does with one's computer. Good news! Maybe we can also upgrade our brains if we feel that we were born disadvantaged in comparison with those we deem smarter than we are!

Not only that; if those in control of the destiny of science and technology deem it necessary, for the sake of the progress of mankind as they understand it within the framework of a materialistic evolutionary vision of the world, to get rid of "inferior" individuals, lower social classes and "underdeveloped" human races, then we should not be surprised to witness a systematic effort to relieve the "super-human" brands of mankind of the burden of those unwanted elements. After all, human history has already recorded how eugenics has been used to similar purposes.⁴ One will not be unjustified to describe this as the devil's acting via human hands. As the Qur'an has clearly put it, Satan pledged as part of his misguiding task to commend the children of Adam so that "they will corrupt God's creation" (Qur'an, 4:119). According to Muhammad Asad, this Qur'ānic "allusion to Satan's inducing man to corrupt [lit., change] God's creation has a meaning to which sufficient attention is but seldom paid: Since this creation, and the manner in which it manifests itself, is an expression of God's planning will, any attempt at changing its *intrinsic nature* amounts to corruption."⁵

Unfortunately, the genuine concern of many scholars and thinkers in the West and elsewhere to restore and defend the idea of human nature as a given reality that we have to explore, understand and protect does not seem to be able to transcend the paradigm and world-view that have actually led to this state of affairs. Their main argument in most cases proceeds within the parameters of the materialist evolutionary vision that is in fact at the root of the problem they are struggling to combat.⁶ A biology-inspired or biology-based

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 85-102.

⁵ Asad, Muhammad (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), p. 128, note 141.

⁶ Cf. Dupre, John, *Human Nature and the Limits of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

conception of human nature, so it is suggested, is the solution to the problem.⁷ Without underestimating the importance of the biological and physical dimensions of man as essential in attaining a better understanding and conception of human nature, the suggested solution leaves very much to be desired, to say the least.

Even Fukuyama, one of the Western thinkers who has recently addressed the issue with pertinent insight, has not been able to disentangle himself from the secular-materialist vision that has guided the whole process. In his two major books devoted to the question of human nature and its consequences for society and culture, one cannot fail to discern how that vision and its attending episteme are so pressing that whenever his philosophical analysis brings him closer to the borders of metaphysical and religious thought he abruptly cuts his argument from running its logical flow.⁸ Arguing for “the centrality of human nature to our understanding of right and wrong”, he insists that in order to develop a concept of human dignity we should not “depend on religious assumptions about the origins of man.”⁹

This is not merely an individual position that can simply be attributed to a specific thinker who happened to be Fukuyama in our case. It is rather the manifestation of the dominance in modern philosophical and scientific thought of what the late Abdulwahab

⁷ See for example Masters, Roger D., *The Nature of Politics*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989; Kass, Leon R., *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (New York: The Free Press, 1985) and *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge of Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002); Pinker, Steven, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking), 2002.

⁸ Reference here is made to his *Our Posthuman Future* (already cited) and *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

⁹ Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, p. 16. Arguing earlier on (p. 7) concerning the dangers posed by scientific and technological manipulation of human beings, he says, “The most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a ‘posthuman’ stage of history. This is important, I will argue, because human nature exists, is a meaningful concept, and has provided a stable continuity to our experience as a species.”

al Masseri described as an “imperialist epistemological vision”¹⁰ that harnesses the mind into the pathways of narrow naturalistic and materialistic conception and interpretation of reality. It is the same imperialist epistemology that, many decades ago, made an outstanding scholar like Jung eschew “from any metaphysical or philosophical considerations”¹¹ in his analytical psychology aimed at providing an alternative to Freudian psychoanalysis which reduced man’s motivating forces and creative energies to the sexual instinct or the libido.¹²

Be that as it may, a question may be raised here as to why there shall be much concern and worry about the issue of human nature. The answer is very simple and the reasons for the need of such a discussion are evident. The root cause of most differences and conflicts between social philosophies and political ideologies and systems as well as the antagonistic attitudes towards religion and religious beliefs and values lies at the fundamental level of our conception of human nature.¹³ Depending on their view of human nature and their vision of man’s place in the wider ontological context of existence, individuals and societies develop their understanding of values and formulate their theories about individual

¹⁰ See his article “The Imperialist Epistemological Vision”, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 403-415.

¹¹ Jung, Carl G., *Psychology and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 2. Cf. Clarke, J.J., *In Search of Jung: Historical and Philosophical Enquiries* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 35.

¹² It is interesting to note in this connection that, in his attempt to transcend the materialist conceptions of the human psyche prevalent in his time, Jung formulated his “theory of archetypes” on which he postulated that religion could best be understood “by relating it to a *collective unconscious*” constituting a “psychic reality shared by all humans.” This “collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind’s evolution born anew in the brain structure of the individual.” Jung, Carl G., *The Portable Jung*, edited by J. Campbell (Harmondsmith: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 45-46. Despite the suggestive notion of “spiritual nature of mankind”, he failed to explore its implications by simply falling back on the idea of evolution, the catchword of the scientific positive mind of his day.

¹³ For further detail, see Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, *A Muslim Theory of Human Society: an Investigation into the Sociological Thought of Malik Bennabi* (Kuala Lumpur: Thinker’s Library, 1998), pp. 13-23.

and collective human life and behaviour, on which basis they devise social institutions and political systems. Accordingly, without a clear and sound understanding of human nature and of what makes human beings distinct and unique among other animal species in creation, and without arriving at a common understanding of what such uniqueness entails in terms of values and institutions, there is little hope that the wide ideological gaps and cultural and political chasms dividing humanity and accounting for the many conflicts and much bloodshed in human history could one day be bridged or even narrowed. With such concerns in mind, this article analyzes the views of two prominent Muslim scholars who worked from within the Islamic framework to address the question of human nature and the fundamental values necessary for human beings to carry on their lives both as individuals and societies. Its aim is to show how the Islamic approach can push the intellectual discourse on such issues to broader and more profound frontiers.

The Positive Interpretation of Fitrah and the Notion of Universal Religion:

As Yasien Mohamed has shown in his groundbreaking work on the Qur'ānic concept of *fitrah* and human nature,¹⁴ there are two main interpretations of the term *fitrah* that have been upheld by Muslim scholars: one negative and the other positive. The positive understanding of *fitrah* is the voice not only, as he thought, of most of classical Muslim scholars "who have said anything substantial about human nature,"¹⁵ but also of many eminent scholars who have

¹⁴ This does not by any means imply that Mohamed's work is the first to deal with the notion of *fitrah* in cotemporary times. On the contrary, many scholars have preceded him in addressing this central Qur'ānic concept and trying to explore its meaning and implications. His contribution rather resides in the fact that, taking stock of the literature that has accumulated on the subject, he provided a more academic treatment of the concept of *fitrah* and systematic analysis of its psychological, moral, cognitive and sociological implications.

¹⁵ Mohamed, Yasien, *Human Nature in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 1998/1419), p. 36. In his survey and analysis of the interpretations of the notion

addressed the issue in modern times. As he rightly put it, the exponents of the positive view "are not exclusively concerned with objective conditions which shape inner human reality (dualism) or with the polemics of the freedom-determinism problem (neutralism)".¹⁶ As our discussion of the views of Shāh Walī Allāh (1114/1703–1176/1762) and Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr (1296/1879–1393/1973) in this regard will show, their major concern is with what the same author has pertinently called "man as a dynamic reality, integrated with a universal principle of single-naturedness."¹⁷

It would be appropriate to begin by stating a few general observations that will help us set the stage for the following discussion and put the two scholars whose ideas will be discussed in their proper context. Though a big distance separates them in terms of time, space, and socio-cultural milieu, Walī Allāh and Ibn 'Āshūr exhibit strikingly common intellectual features. Both of them have attempted to develop a comprehensive approach to the study and understanding of the *sharī'ah* injunctions, that is, the body of moral commandments and legal commands enshrined in the Qur'ān and the Prophetic traditions. Two notions constitute the central themes of their intellectual effort in this respect, namely the maqāsid (or the objectives) of the Sharī'ah revolving around the concept of *maṣlahah* (human wellbeing) and *fiṭrah* as denoting the Islamic view of human nature.

The Indian scholar's contribution had been carried out in the context of a general effort to give a cohesive schema or synthesis of the metaphysical, psychological and social knowledge of his time that is mainly well formulated in his well-known book, *Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah*, thus systematically articulating and recasting the ideas of *tajdīd* and *islāh* initiated by the great Indian Muslim reformer Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (971/1564–1624CE).¹⁸ His Tunisian

of *fiṭrah* by classical and modern Muslim scholars, the author has identified four main conceptions that represent Muslim understanding of human nature, namely, predestinarian, neutral, positive and dualistic. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ For a comprehensive study and detailed analysis of the ideas of both scholars, see Al-Nadwi, Abul Hasan Ali al-Hasani, *Rijāl al-Fikr wa al-Da'wah fi al-Islām*

counterpart undertook his attempt in the context of a comprehensive view of the nature and dimensions of the reform necessary for the traditional body of Islamic knowledge as he personally experienced it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both as student and teacher. *Alaysa al-Ṣubḥ bi-Qarīb* is the work in which he most eloquently expressed this general concern. Shāh Walī Allāh made his reformative achievement on the eve of the modern era when the encounter between Muslims and modern Western civilization was still in its beginning, whereas Ibn ‘Āshūr’s reform effort was undertaken when that encounter unfolded in its most shocking aspect, the phenomenon of colonialism.

It is in the context of such a general concern to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the Sharī‘ah that the two scholars developed their views on human nature and its relationship with Islamic teachings. As will be seen in what follows, their positive interpretation of the concept of *fiṭrah* has been crucial in articulating their views with respect to the universality of Islamic teachings. In fact, and as far as I am aware, none of the classical and even modern Muslim jurists (*fuqahā’*) and legal theorists (*uṣūliyyūn*) have made such a systematic effort to formulate a cohesive view of the Sharī‘ah with essential reference to human nature. Even Ibn Taymiah and his disciple, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah, to whom we owe much for the positive interpretation of the Qur’ānic concept of *fiṭrah*, cannot be said to have made a real breakthrough in this regard.¹⁹ Their views are rather scattered and strewn about in their various works and stand in need of much effort of systematization.²⁰ There is in their work

(Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 3d edition, 1428/2997), vol. 2 (parts 3 & 4).

¹⁹ Cf. Rahman, Fazlur, “Functional Interdependence of Law and Theology”, in G. E. von Grunbaum (editor), *Theology and Law in Islam* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1971).

²⁰ On the relatively unsystematic nature of Ibn Taymiah’s thought and the problems it causes in understanding him, see Abū Ya’rub al-Marzūqī, “Fikr Ibn Taymiyyah al-Iṣlāhī wa Ārā’uhu al-Falsafīyah”, *at-Tajdīd* (A Refereed Arabic Biannual published by the International Islamic University Malaysia), vol. 6, no. 11, pp. 16-17. As for his positive understanding of the meaning of *fiṭrah*, a fair though concise, exposition can be found in Mohamed, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-44. Needless to say, Ibn al-Qayyim’s task consisted mainly of exposing and commenting on the views of his teacher.

a clear awareness and well-intended purpose, one would venture to claim, to overcome the dichotomous situation that dominated Islamic culture, especially between the study of law and legal theory on the one hand and speculative social and philosophical thought on the other. Their contributions can therefore be seen as an attempt to systematically overcome that gap. In this respect, it is arguable that for both the Indian and Tunisian scholars Ibn Taymiyyah might have been a major source of inspiration.

These common features notwithstanding, the two scholars clearly part company in their elaboration of the meaning and dimensions of *fiṭrah* as the expression of the Islamic conception of human nature. In developing his views in this regard, Walī Allāh attempted to synthesize various elements of different origins, especially when dealing with metaphysical and psychological issues. One essential influence that is easily detected in his effort is that of a clearly Platonic character as can be seen, for example, in his crucial notion of *'ālam al-mithāl* or the realm of forms and archetypes.²¹ This Platonic influence has most likely made its way to him through the philosophical and theosophical writings of Sufis and mystics that can be discerned in his book *Altaf al-Quds*.²² On the contrary, Ibn 'Āshūr displays a conscious effort to avoid such influences in dealing with similar issues. Whether in his *magnum opus* on Qur'ānic exegesis or in his other major works such as *Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah al-Islāmiyyah* (The Objectives of Islamic Law)

²¹ See for example Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah* (2 volumes, hereinafter cited as *Hujjah*), ed. Muḥammad Sharīf Sakr (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 1413/1992), vol. 2, pp. 51-69; *Full Moon Appearing on the Horizon* (al-Budūr al-Bāzighah), trans. J. M. S. Baljon (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1990), pp. 16-23. (The first volume of *Hujjah* has been translated into English by Marcia K. Hermansen as *The Conclusive Argument from God* and published by Brill Academic Publishers in 1996. A paperback edition was later published by Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad in 2003 and 2005. Unless otherwise indicated, the English translation of quotations from the said volume is Hermansen's).

²² Prof. G. N. Jalbani has translated this book as *The Sacred Knowledge* (London: The Octagon Press, 1982). Cf. al-Ghazali, Muhammad, *The Socio-political Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh* (Islamabad: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Islamic Research Institute, 2001), pp. 13-19.

and *Uṣūl al-Nizām al-Ijtimā'ī fī al-Islām* (The Principles of the Social Order in Islam), we find him exercising clear self-restraint from expanding on issues of metaphysical nature. This does not mean that his interpretative strategy and legal hermeneutics follow a literalist approach in which reason has no place. On the contrary, we can say that he has developed a balanced rationalist approach geared to eschew artificial conciliation between Qur'ānic concepts and old or new philosophical and metaphysical doctrines.

Whatever the differences and similarities between them, Shāh Walī Allāh's and Ibn 'Āshūr share some fundamental elements in their understanding of human nature. Like Ibn Taymiyyah and others, the sense of the oneness of God and love of Him and submission to His will is, according to Walī Allāh, rooted in human nature and conscience.²³ All this consists in the all-encompassing "virtue of humbling oneself before God", which he calls *ikhbāt*.²⁴ It is thus an essential part of the measured course (*taqdīr*) according to which man has been created with angelic (*malakiyyah*) and animalistic (*ḥayawāniyya*) dispositions enabling him to pursue his natural spiritual, biological and aesthetic needs.²⁵ These innate dispositions, which are inherited by the individuals of the species, constitute, according to Shāh Walī Allāh, man's unalterable original or primordial state of nature (*fiṭrah*). In his view, this constant *fiṭrah* pertains mainly to the principles and essence of good and evil (*uṣūl al-birr wa al-ithm wa kulliyātihimā*) and not to their details and particular details and applications.²⁶

With the basic elements of morality and spirituality deeply rooted in it, man's *fiṭrah* constitutes what we may consider the universal natural religion that does not change over the ages and which all Prophets came to revive and promote.²⁷ Thus, the Indian

²³ *Hujjah*, vol. 1, pp. 203-206 and 233-234; *The Conclusive Argument*, pp. 206-209 and 238-239. Cf. al-Ghazali, op. cit., p. 16 and 175.

²⁴ *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 162 and 197; op. cit., p. 157.

²⁵ *Hujjah*, vol. 1, pp. 72-82; op. cit., pp. 60-68.

²⁶ *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 85 and pp. 174-175; op. cit., p. 72

²⁷ Shāh Walī Allāh. *Hujjah*, vol. 1, pp. 85-86, 243-268; op. cit., pp. 72-73 and 245-270. For a profound discussion of the idea of natural innate religion from an Islamic perspective, see Ezzati, A., *Islam and Natural Law* (London: Islamic

scholar provides us with a holistic view of *fiṭrah* as “incorporating innate spiritual and physical tendencies which seek gratification in order to enhance and secure wholesomeness in man’s spiritual and physical constitution.”²⁸ Admitting that human individuals may differ in many respects and details pertaining to their individual characteristics, Shāh Walī Allāh indicates that it is this universal ethico-spiritual stock – inherent to the species – that the Prophet pinpointed in the ḥadīth on *fiṭrah*.²⁹ To put this point in the words of a contemporary Iranian scholar, “inclination toward virtue and repulsion from vice [have] natural roots in our being” as *human* species, that is, they are part of the “innate nature of every human being.”³⁰

This does not mean, the Indian scholar reminds us, that man is at complete variation from other animal species. Rather, he shares with them many things. As he indicates, “man is similar to the other members of his genus in his need to eat and drink, have sex, seek shelter from the sun and rain, and in requiring warmth in winter.”³¹ These biological and physical needs constitute an essential part of the divine scheme of creation and it is a manifestation of

College for Advanced Studies [ICAS] Press, 1st edition, 2002), pp. 93-109.

²⁸ Mohamed, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

²⁹ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, pp. 114-115; *The Conclusive Argument*, pp. 106-107. Reported by Mālik Ibn Anas, al-Bukhārī and Muslim with slight variations, the ḥadīth states that, “Every child is born in the natural disposition (*fiṭrah*): it is his parents that later turn him into a ‘Jew’, a ‘Christian’, or a ‘Magian’.” Mālik ibn Anas, *Muwatta’ al-Imām Mālik*, edited by Ahmad Ratib Amrush (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā’ is, 1414/1994), ‘Kitāb al-Janā’iz’ (Book of Funerals), ḥadīth 571, p. 160; al-Bukhārī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muhammad ibn Ismā’īl, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Riyad: Dār al-Salām & Damascus: Dār al-Fayḥa’, 1419/1999), ‘Kitāb al-Janā’iz’ (Book of Funerals), ḥadīth 1358/1359, p. 217; al-Naysābūri, Abū al-Ḥasan Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj, *Saḥīḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1421/2001), ‘Kitāb al-Qadar’ (Book of Fate), ḥadīth 2658/25, p. 1024-1025.

³⁰ Lārī, Sayyid Mujtabā Mūsawā, *Ethics and Spiritual Growth*, trans. ‘Alī Qulī Qarā’ī (Qom, Iran: Foundation of Islamic Cultural Propagation, 1418/1997), p. 66.

³¹ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 119; *The Conclusive Argument*, p. 115. Cf. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Full Moon Appearing on the Horizon [al-Budūr al-Bāzighah]*, trans. J.M.S. Baljon (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1990), pp. 142-144.

God's grace on man that He has inspired him to derive benefit and gratification from satisfying them.³² In fact, human beings share a lot not only with other animal species of their genus, but even with species beyond their genus such as plants. However, man differs in a fundamental manner from all of them. Beasts tend to achieve certain ends grasped by their sense perception or suggested by temptations instinctively emanating from their nature like hunger or thirst. By contrast, man pursues ends that originate from what Shāh Walī Allāh calls universal purpose or vision (*ray' kullī*) and are not necessitated merely by his biological needs.³³

Furthermore, man has another important characteristic that distinguishes him from other animals, that is, the aesthetic sense or sensibility (*zarāfah*).³⁴ Together with other universals such as speech, comprehension, generation of acquired knowledge based on self-evident truths, etc.,³⁵ these distinctive characteristics of man are at the root of all human socio-cultural development and civilization, which he discusses under the term *irtifāqāt*.³⁶ In his opinion, what this means is that such universals as can be found among different peoples at different times and places are a clear evidence that their principles (*uṣūl*) are equally ingrained or rooted in the essential specific form (*al-ṣūrah al-naw'īyah*) of all the individuals of the species.³⁷ It follows from this that the original God-given nature of

³² Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 119; *The Conclusive Argument*, p. 115.

³³ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, pp. 88–89, 120 and *passim*; *The Conclusive Argument*, p. 74, 76, 104 and *passim*; *Full Moon*, pp. 118–118. I disagree with Hermansen on her translation of the Shāh's term *ray' kullī* as comprehensive outlook. I discussed this with Muhammad al-Ghazali during the one-day seminar on Shāh Walī Allāh mentioned in an earlier note and he concurred with me that universal 'vision' or 'purpose' would be more accurate in expressing the meaning intended by the author.

³⁴ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 119; *The Conclusive Argument*, p. 115.

³⁵ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 74; *The Conclusive Argument*, pp. 60–61.

³⁶ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, pp. 119–173; *The Conclusive Argument*, pp. 113–144.

³⁷ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, pp. 148–149; *The Conclusive Argument*, pp. 140–141.

man “decrees that people, with all their varying temperaments, the distance between their countries and the various schools of thought and religions that they follow, can only agree on these things due to the consistency of the original nature derived from the form of the human species, and from the commonly occurring needs which are identical for individuals of the species, and due to virtues which the well-being of the species requires in the temperaments of its members.”³⁸ This means that what scholars from different disciplines usually call universals, thus referring to common values, needs, attitudes and practices shared by all human beings regardless of time, space and socio-cultural environment, are not the result of mere biological or geographical accidents, nor are they the outcome of historical change and cultural transformation. On the contrary, they stem from, and are the manifestation of, a universal and unalterable original nature of the human species existing in all its individuals.

Having thus surveyed some basic aspects of Shāh Walī Allāh's conception on human nature, we can now move to Ibn 'Āshūr, though I feel much more can be said on the Indian scholar's thought regarding this issue. One main reason may justify this decision. While Shāh Walī Allāh's work has received remarkable attention both in the form of translation of his books and analysis of his thought, the work of the Tunisian scholar is almost totally unknown among non-Arabic-speaking students of contemporary Islamic thought.³⁹

Ibn 'Āshūr dealt with the concept of *fiṭrah* at length on many

³⁸ *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 149; *The Conclusive Argument from God*, p. 141.

³⁹ To my knowledge, no serious work by or on Ibn 'Āshūr is available in English, except what the present writer has done. See Ibn Ashur, Muhammad al-Tahir, *Treatise on Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah*, translated from the Arabic and annotated by Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (London/Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1427/2006); El-Mesawi, Mohamed El-Tahir, *Towards an Integrated Islamic Political Theory: A Systematic Analysis of Ibn 'Āshūr's Political Thought*, in Zeenath Kausar, *Contemporary Islamic Political Thought: A Study of Eleven Islamic Thinkers* (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 1st edition, 2005), pp. 69-112; and *Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah and the Human Socio-ethical Order: An Inquiry into the Islamic Foundations of Human Society with Special Reference to the Work of Muhammad al-Tāhir Ibn 'Āshūr on the Sharī'ah Purposes* (unpublished PhD dissertation, International Islamic University Malaysia, October 2003).

occasions, especially in his magnum opus commentary on the Qur'ān and two other works of his. It would be appropriate first to look at his explanation of the general meaning of this term before examining his interpretation thereof in relation to the teachings of Islam. As he puts it, the term *fiṭrah* refers to the natural disposition (*khilqah*) or the system (*niẓām*) that God has put in every creation (*makhḷūq*). Thus, man's *fiṭrah* is the internal (*bāṭin*) and external (*ẓāhir*) state in which man has been created (*fuṭira*), that is to say, at the physical and intellectual levels. Accordingly, walking on his feet is an aspect of man's physical *fiṭrah*, while trying to hold things with his feet is against that *fiṭrah*. Similarly, relating effects to their causes and inferring conclusions from their proper premises is an intellectual *fiṭrah*, whereas attempting to infer things not from their right causes is contrary to the intellectual *fiṭrah*, hence its being considered in the art of argumentation as incorrectness of composition (*fasād al-waḍ'*). Thus asserting that things have a reality of their own independently from our perception of them is part of the intellectual *fiṭrah*, contrary to the sophists who stand against that *fiṭrah* by denying such a reality.⁴⁰ To further elaborate the intellectual aspect of *fiṭrah*, Ibn 'Āshūr leans quite heavily on a long passage from the great Muslim Peripatetic philosopher Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā (*Lat.* Avicenna) which he quotes integrally in the works pointed out above.⁴¹

Ibn Sīnā explained the meaning of *fiṭrah* in the context of his elaboration of the meaning and method of demonstrative proof (*burhān*) in the part of his book *al-Najāt* dealing with logic. This he does as follows: Let man imagine that he has come into existence fully mature and with perfect consciousness and intelligence all at

⁴⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir, *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah al-Islāmiyyah* (hereinafter *Maqāṣid*), ed. Mohamed El-Tahir El-EI-Mesawi, Amman: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1421/2001, pp. 261-262; *Uṣūl al-Niẓām al-Ijtimā'ī fī al-Islām* (hereinafter cited as *Uṣūl*), ed. Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (Amman: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1421/2001), p. 36; *Tafsīr al-Tahrīr wa al-Tamwīr* (hereinafter *Tafsīr*), Tunis: Dār Souhnoun, 1997. vol. 10/21, p. 90; *Kashf al-Mughattā min al-Ma'ānī wa al-Alfāz al-Wāqi'ah fī al-Muwaṭṭa'*, ed. Taha ibn Ali Bou Surayh al-Tunusi (Tunis: Maison Souhnoun and Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1427/2006), pp. 141-142.

⁴¹ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid*, pp. 262-263; *Uṣūl*, p. 37; *Tafsīr*, vol. 1/3, p. 193 and vol. 10/21, pp. 90-91.

once, without having known any thought, or adopted any faith, or mixed with any people, or experienced any politics; yet, he has seen the *sensibilia* (*maḥsūsāt*) from which he derives images (*khayālāt*). Let him then examine something and doubt it. If doubt finds its way to his mind, this means that the thing he has doubted is not confirmed by the *fiṭrah*; but if he cannot doubt it, then it is what *fiṭrah* necessitates. However, Ibn Sīnā remarks, not all what man's *fiṭrah* confirms is true; only things confirmed by the faculty of it known as intellect (*'aql*) are so.⁴²

But what are these things on whose truthfulness *fiṭrah* is taken as an ultimate and reliable witness or arbiter? According to al-Sheikh al-Ra'īs, these things consist of "self-evident truths (*awwaliyyāt*) consisting of propositions and premises occurring to man by virtue of his rational faculty, without any reason compelling him to believe (*taṣdīq*) in them except themselves (*dhawātuhā*)."⁴³ To state it in al-Fārābī's words, *fiṭrah* is "the capacity (*quwwah*) with which man is equipped at birth and which is not acquired by him."⁴⁴ It is a common disposition according to which sound human beings are "prepared to acquire universal intelligibilia (*ma'qūlāt mushtarakah*) that enables them to seek things and deeds which are common to them."⁴⁵ This is not all about human nature. There are, according to Ibn Sīnā, other truths firmly established in the human soul as a result of established custom, or convention, or necessitated and generated by peaceful coexistence and the common good which are necessary for social life, or dictated by human morality.⁴⁶ Although they do not enjoy

⁴² Ibn Sīnā, Al-Sheikh al-Ra'īs al-Ḥusayn Abū 'Alī, *Kitāb al-Najāt fī al-Ḥikmah al-Manṭiqiyyah wa al-Ṭabī'iyyah wa al-Ilāhiyyah*, ed. Majid Fakhri (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1405/1985), p. 99; cf. his *al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*, ed. Sulayman Dunya (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1983), vol. 1, p. 352.

⁴³ Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt*, p. 101.

⁴⁴ Āl Yāsīn, Ja'far, *al-Fārābī fī Ḥudūdihī wa Rusūmih*, being a compilation of statements from al-Fārābī's different works (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1405/1985), p. 415 (This definition of *fiṭrah* is from al-Fārābī's *al-Tanbīh*); see also Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's *Iḥṣā' al-'Ulūm*, ed. 'Alī Bū-Mulḥim (Beirut: Dār wa Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1996), pp. 36-37.

⁴⁵ Al-Fārābī, Abū Naṣr, *Kitāb al-Siyāṣah al-Madaniyyah* known as *Mabādi' al-Mawjūdāt*, ed. Fauzi M. Najjar (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1993), p. 75.

⁴⁶ Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt*, p. 100.

the same epistemological status as self-evident truths since they can be subjected to doubt and rational questioning, these widespread (*dhā'i'āt*) truths are so common to human beings that they might be seen as an integral part of man's rational *fiṭrah*.⁴⁷

In Ibn 'Āshūr's opinion, Ibn Sīnā's explanation of the meaning of *fiṭrah* is excellent. To him, the Peripatetic Muslim philosopher has succeeded to express "the true meaning of *fiṭrah* and to warn against confusing it with false perceptions deeply rooted in the [human] soul due to [external] accidents such as evil customs propagated by perverse people (*ahl al-ḍalālah*)."⁴⁸ From Ibn Sīnā's exposition, Ibn 'Āshūr further comments, we clearly realize that only savants and sages with enlightened minds can distinguish the true meaning of *fiṭrah* from the wrong perceptions and sentiments that might be mixed with it.⁴⁹ As he differently put it, only sage scholars with penetrating knowledge of the reality of things are empowered to differentiate between allegorical and unclear or ambiguous things (*mutashābihāt*), those who have fathomed the human condition and whose minds are so familiar with the dispositions (*taṣārīf*) of the Sharī'ah that they realize its goals and purposes, that is, only such people are capable of discerning the genuine meanings flowing from the spring of *fiṭrah* from those which do not.⁵⁰

Having thus outlined the general meaning of *fiṭrah* with clear reliance on Muslim philosophic tradition, Ibn 'Āshūr, an Ash'arite Mālikī jurist, then set out to delineate the scope of the meaning this term in the Qur'ānic usage. In this connection, he laments that no one has successfully demonstrated how Islam, as described in Q. 30: 30 (The Byzantines),⁵¹ is the religion of *fiṭrah* – a task which he boldly promises to undertake.⁵² To formulate his interpretation of the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 99-100.

⁴⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid*, p. 263.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 10/21, pp. 91-92.

⁵¹ The verse's translation reads as follows: "And so, set thy face steadfastly towards the [one ever-true] faith (*dīn*), turning away from all that is false (*ḥahīfan*), in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into man (*fiṭrat Allāh allatī faṭara al-nāsa 'alyhā*): [for,] not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created [*lā tabdīla li-khalq Allāh*]."

⁵² Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 10/21, p. 90; *Maqāṣid*, p. 261.

Qur'ānic use of this term, he observes that classical exegetes, such as al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Bayḍāwī and their followers, unjustifiably narrowed the scope of the meaning of *fiṭrah* in their interpretation of the verse in question. For them, this term – used to describe the religion (*dīn*) of Islam – refers to the fundamental articles of faith as pertaining especially to belief in God and His oneness.⁵³

According to Ibn 'Āshūr, there is no reasonable ground for the particularization (*takhṣīṣ*) of the meaning of the term *dīn* used in the verse under examination. For him, this unjustified particularization is due to the inadequate approach followed by those scholars and their likes. One of the flaws of that approach is that they confined themselves to particular cases and specific occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) as well as immediate textual contexts of the Qur'ānic verses as decisive criteria for delimiting their meaning.⁵⁴ Another equally, if not more serious defect of that approach, is their failure to realize one very important aspect of the Qur'ānic eloquence and mode of argumentation.⁵⁵

Hence, we must ask what is the correct interpretation of the verse that would arrive at the real meaning of *fiṭrah*? In answering this question, Ibn 'Āshūr indicates that what has been maintained by the Andalusian Ibn 'Aṭīyah and some other exegetes, is more consonant with the spirit and method of the Qur'ān and should therefore be the basis for delimiting the meaning of *fiṭrah* and

⁵³ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, p. 32; *Maqāṣid*, p. 259.

⁵⁴ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, pp. 32-33; *Maqāṣid*, pp. 259-260; cf. *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, pp. 46-50.

⁵⁵ This aspect consists in following particular or partial purposes in the discourse by a general demonstrative proposition that serves to substantiate those particular purposes as well as others beyond the specific and immediate context of the verse. As an example of this aspect of the Qur'ānic method to establish general principles and universal truths, Ibn 'Āshūr invites us to reflect on the following verse: "And if a woman has reason to fear ill-treatment from her husband, or that he might turn away from her, it shall not be wrong for the two to settle things amicably between themselves: for *amicable settlement is best* (*wa al-ṣulhu khayr*)..." (Qur'an, 4:128) The definitive article added to the word *ṣulh* in the italicized phrase implies that it is used as a generic noun. This means that this statement is a universal proposition that applies to all situations of peaceful and amicable settlement of differences, not only to that occurring between husband and wife. *Uṣūl*, p. 35; *Tafsīr*, vol. 3/5, pp. 216-217.

determining its relationship to Islam. According to Ibn 'Aṭīyah, *fiṭrah* is the inborn state or disposition by virtue of which the human being recognizes his Creator and inclines to worship Him by submitting to His commandments.⁵⁶ This interpretation is further elucidated and reiterated by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143), the eminent Mu'tazilite exegete and linguist. As he put it, the description in the verse of Islam as the unalterable *fiṭrat Allāh* means that human beings have been created in such a way that they are "predisposed to monotheistic belief and willing acceptance of the religion of Islam, rather than avoidance or denial thereof."⁵⁷ This is because, as al-Zamakhsharī explains, Islam is consonant with reason and compatible with discernment and sound thinking, so much so that if man is left alone he would choose no religion except it. Only those under evil influences, human or otherwise, will go astray from it.⁵⁸

Accordingly, Ibn 'Āshūr proceeds to formulate his ideas in which respect he invokes another Qur'ānic verse asserting that man is created "in the best conformation (*aḥsan taqwīm*)" (Qur'an, 95: 4). For him, there is no doubt that, contrary to what many classical commentators believed, the "best conformation" here does not refer to man's physical constitution.⁵⁹ This phrase points to "the power of the intellect which is the basis of sound belief and good deed."⁶⁰ This is further substantiated by the subsequent verse in the same sūrah mentioning that man is thereafter reduced to "the lowest of low (*asfal sāfilīn*)" (Qur'an, 95: 5). This reduction of man to the "lowest of low" can by no means be understood in terms of physical or biological degeneration. It is rather question of "acquiring vicious qualities through false beliefs and evil deeds."⁶¹

It follows from this that the human species has been created with a natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) endowing its individuals with

⁵⁶ Ibn 'Aṭīyah, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 336.

⁵⁷ Al-Zamakhsharī. Abū al-Qāsim Jār Allah Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar ibn Muhammad, *al-Kashshāf*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Salām Shāhīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1415/1995), pp. vol. 3, 463-464.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 30, p. 424.

⁶⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid*, 263; see also *Tafsīr*, vol. 6/11, p. 128.

⁶¹ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid*, 263.

the capacity to perceive the reality of things through systematic analysis and synthesizing which the intellect applies to the sense data presented to it by man's perfected senses. Only when adverse factors, such as perverse teachings, bad custom, coercive powers, submission to one's whims and vagaries, etc. overwhelm this *fiṭrah* does man deviate from the straight norm (*istiḳāmah*) in both thought and action.⁶² Therefore, the description of Islam as *fiṭrat Allāh* means that its principles (*uṣūl*) originate in man's nature. It also means that there are principles and sub-principles (*furū'*) which Islam has enjoined for their value as commonly acceptable virtues that are deeply rooted in human consciousness and experience to serve good purposes as derived from human nature.⁶³

Put differently, considering Islam as *dīn al-fiṭrah* implies that its "fundamentals of belief (*aṣl al-i'tiqād*) run in accordance with man's natural intelligence (*fiṭrah 'aqliyyah*) and that its laws (*tashrī'āt*) are either commensurate with man's natural disposition, i.e., in harmony with what reason perceives and confirms, or relate to what is good for him and does not contradict his nature."⁶⁴ Thus, human beings are naturally disposed to accept Islam's faith and submit to its commandments because these are suitable for them and do not conflict with their inborn nature.⁶⁵ As a corollary of this, Ibn 'Āshūr argues, the Sharī'ah injunctions are meant to restore human nature in all its aspects and free it from all that has encroached upon it. For example, marriage, cooperation for the common good and survival of the species, protection of life and lineage all flow from the spring of human nature. Building a righteous humane civilization and pursuing useful knowledge are also a manifestation of that same nature which is inclined to express itself through human intellectual creativity and inventions (*mukhtara'āt*).⁶⁶ Thus, because Islam is intimately linked to what is confirmed by human nature and is agreeable to it, it is considered man's *fiṭrah* as if it were that same

⁶² Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 30, p. 425.

⁶³ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 264; *Uṣūl*, p. 39.

⁶⁴ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 10/21, p. 91.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 90.

⁶⁶ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 266.

nature.⁶⁷

This interpretation is further supported by a famous Prophetic *ḥadīth* reported by Malik, al-Bukhārī and Muslim stating that “Every child is born in the natural disposition (*fiṭrah*); it is his parents that later turn him into a ‘Jew’, a ‘Christian’, or a ‘Magian’.”⁶⁸ Some earlier scholars relied on this *ḥadīth* to support their interpretation of *fiṭrah* as referring to the fundamentals of Islamic belief. For Ibn ‘Āshūr, its true real meaning actually runs against their argument.⁶⁹ In his view, this interpretation is untenable for the following reasons. Firstly, the Prophetic statement has contrasted man’s inborn disposition (*fiṭrah*) with Judaism, Christianity and Magianism (*Majūsiyyah*) and not with polytheism.⁷⁰ Secondly, since Judaism and Christianity are originally monotheistic religions, it would have been more appropriate to contrast man’s *fiṭrah* specifically with Magianism and Arab polytheism.⁷¹ This means that the mentioning of the Magian religion in the *ḥadīth* is a mere speech digression. Accordingly, its primary concern is to show the incompatibility of the two monotheistic traditions with human nature in terms of the details (*tafāriṭ*) of their prescriptions and laws of conduct.⁷² It can further be argued that Magianism and its likes *a fortiori* run against that nature whose basic features the previous discussion tried to depict.

By contrast, Islam in its totality, as faith and belief, system of values, moral teachings and practical laws and rules of individual and collective conduct, is commensurate with human nature at all levels – spiritual, intellectual and biological; hence its universality and relevance to all ages. This is a fundamental claim made by the Qur’ān concerning its position vis-à-vis the previous scriptures of monotheistic religion,⁷³ notably the Torah and the Evangel. As we

⁶⁷ Ibn ‘Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, p. 40; *Tafsīr*, vol. 1/3, p. 194.

⁶⁸ This Prophetic tradition has already been documented.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 33.

⁷⁰ Cf. Muhammad Asad’s commentary on the verse and *ḥadīth* in *The Message of the Qur’an*, p. 621, note 27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* pp. 35-36.

⁷² Ibn ‘Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 10/21, p. 92.

⁷³ According to the Qur’an, all prophets preached one and the same basic religion

read in the verse 48 of *sūrah al-Mā'idah*, God vouchsafed unto the Prophet Muhammad "the writ (*al-kitāb*), setting forth the truth, confirming the truth of whatever there remains of earlier revelations (*muṣad-diḡan limā bayna yadayhi*) and determining what is true therein (*muḡayminan 'alayhi*)." (Qur'an, 5: 48). According to Ibn 'Āshūr, the Qur'an's position towards earlier revelations is double-sided. On the one hand, it approbates and confirms what in them pertains to a universal good (*maṣlahah kullīyyah*) that does not change with either age or nation. On the other hand, it abrogates what relates to a particular temporary good (*maṣlahah juz 'iyyah mu'aqqatah*) that suited the conditions of specific peoples.⁷⁴ Thus, Islam's teachings have been devised in accordance with the principles (*uṣūl*) of the *ḡanīfiyyah* which constituted the essence of the messages of earlier prophets from Noah through to Jesus.⁷⁵

Let us now recapitulate some of the major points in Ibn 'Āshūr's elaboration of the meaning of *fiṭrah* and its relationship with the teachings of Islam. The positive view of human nature he upholds proceeds from the premise that "God has created the human species intelligence (*'aql al-naw' al-insānī*) free from all kinds of frivolity and bad wont."⁷⁶ From this innate goodness and uprightness follows the humans' "instinctive cognition of God and self-surrender [*islām*] to Him" as well as their "intuitive ability to discern right from wrong [and] true from false."⁷⁷ And this is the reason why man has been appointed as God's vicegerent on Earth.⁷⁸ But this primordial nature, in which the instinctive cognition of God constitutes the essential element, "may or may not be blurred by self-indulgence or adverse environmental influences."⁷⁹ By mentioning

whose essence consists of belief in the One God (*tawḡīd*) and submission (*islām*) to His will and command, hence the use of the word religion in the singular form as a generic noun referring the universal religion which is Islam. See, for example Qur'an, 3: 19 and 42: 13.

⁷⁴ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 4/6, p. 221.

⁷⁵ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 7/15, p. 15; vol. 12/25, pp. 50-51; vol. 15, p. 422.

⁷⁶ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 263; *Tafsīr*, vol. 10/21, p. 92.

⁷⁷ Asad, *op. cit.*, p. 621.

⁷⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 264.

⁷⁹ Asad, p. 230.

the parents' impact on their children, thus contrasting it with the natural disposition with which they are born, the ḥadīth on *fiṭrah* is actually meant to highlight the latter kind of influences.⁸⁰ As further indicated by Asad, the term "parents" in that statement has "a wider meaning of 'social influences' or 'environment'."⁸¹ Thus, to say that Islam is the religion of human nature is the same as saying that this nature can easily find the "right way to its [i.e., Islam's] fundamentals (*uṣūl*) and gets reassurance in its laws (*sharā'ī*)."⁸²

However, Ibn 'Āshūr points out that matters pertaining to man's *fiṭrah* are not of the same level of clarity and distinctness. As seen earlier, there are self-evident truths that impose themselves upon man's intelligence, just as there are less obvious truths which only deep thinking and systematic inquiry can help realize. There are yet truths that lay beyond man's capacity to perceive.⁸³ Besides the categories of realities (*ḥaqā'iq*) and conventions (*i'tibāriyyāt*), which all people of sound reason (*'uqalā'*) agree upon, there are also perceptions which are mere imaginations (*takhayyulāt*) or illusions (*wahmiyyāt*).⁸⁴ According to Ibn 'Āshūr, these imaginations and illusions are not void of any epistemological significance and socio-cultural function. On the contrary, they fulfil, though at a very minimal level, some epistemological and socio-cultural function in human life, so much so that Islam itself has made use of them in enunciating some of its injunctions out of consideration for mere expediency.⁸⁵

Another aspect of the problem has to do exclusively with the human agent himself – the perceiver – and not with its categories or levels of truth. It can be formulated as follows. The statement that man has been created in the "best conformation" (Qur'an, 95: 4) "does not in any way imply that all human beings have *same* "best

⁸⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 10:21, p. 92.

⁸¹ Asad, p. 621.

⁸² Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, p. 42.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid*, p. 265.

⁸⁵ Ibn 'Āshūr has devoted a good deal of discussion to this which is clearly informed by his study of the legacy of Muslim philosophers. See *Uṣūl*, pp. 52-74; *Maqāṣid*, pp. 251-258.

conformation” in respect of their bodily or mental endowments.”⁸⁶ It is rather an historical and empirical fact that they differ in their perception of the different categories of truth in accordance with their varying talents (*qarā'ih*) and learning (*'ulūm*). Hence, human nature stands in need of an infallible source that would “preserve it from deviating from the straight path”, and that source can be nothing but Divine Revelation.⁸⁷

The Islamic view of human nature, whose meaning and dimensions we have tried to delineate through analyzing the positive interpretation of *fiṭrah* by Shāh Walī Allāh and Ibn 'Āshūr, is closely linked to another concept that occupies a prominent place in Islamic thought, namely the concept of *mīthāq* or primordial covenant. As can be realized from the foregoing discussion, we are presented with a holistic and integrated understanding of human nature that emphasizes the spiritual and, for that matter, metaphysical and transcendental dimensions of man without alienating him from the material world or trying to portray him as an angelic being. It is a view fully aware of both the strengths and weaknesses of the human nature. There is no doubt that in so doing the Tunisian scholar has intelligently and openly benefited from the contributions of previous Muslim scholars and thinkers irrespective of their specific disciplinary background or intellectual orientation in the vast sphere of classical Islamic scholarship. But it is also of equal importance to note that, in formulating his ideas on the relation of religion and human nature, he was not unaware of the philosophical discussions that animated European Enlightenment thought in this respect, especially in France.⁸⁸ As will be demonstrated in the following section, the Islamic view of human nature is based on a deeper philosophical and theological ground expressed by the idea of covenant. To state it more specifically, it is question here of the ontological framework which underlies the Islamic conception of human nature.

⁸⁶ Asad, p. 961. (Italics in the original)

⁸⁷ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, p. 42.

⁸⁸ See his remarks on Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau in *Uṣūl*, p. 39.

Fīṭrah and Mīthāq: Human Nature and the Primordial Covenant with God

According to the Qur'ān, man's instinctive cognition of God and his natural inclination to submit to His will are rooted in a more fundamental metaphysical reality pertaining to the human beings' ontological relation with the Creator. Thus, we read that God "brought⁸⁹ forth from the loins of the Children of Adam their offspring (*dhurriyatahum*)" and "called upon them to witness about themselves: 'Am I not your Lord (*alastu bi-rabbikum*)?' They answered: 'Yea, we do bear witness thereto.'" (Qur'ān, 7: 172). This is, as Ibn 'Āshūr comments, a metaphorical description of a metaphysical situation exemplifying God's creational power in determining the essence and qualities of the creatures in accordance with His will. It is a representation of something whose nature and essence cannot be apprehended by human intelligence, but which the Qur'ān makes more immediate through metaphor. This metaphoric representation is an indication of the fact that "God has impressed in man since his creation the capacity to comprehend the proofs of [His] oneness and thereby placed in his natural intelligence the propensity to pursue and acquire that; provided he is free from any influence of adverse factors that might corrupt his inborn disposition."⁹⁰

⁸⁹ We have here followed 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's use of the past tense which is in the original. But it is a characteristic of the Arabic language and of the Qur'ānic discourse in particular that the past tense is not used to only indicate events or processes that occurred in the past and have ceased to exist. It is also used to indicate and stress continuous recurrence. Hence, Muhammad Asad has rightly suggested using the present tense to bring out more clearly this aspect whereby the 'question' and 'answer' mentioned in the verse are portrayed as a continuous recurrence in the Divine act of creation. Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 230, note 139.

⁹⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 5/9, p. 168; also vol. 7/13, pp. 125-26. According to some scholars, this verse points to the fact that man's creation (his form and constitution, his powers and capacities and the stages of his growth and development) by itself testifies to his being created by God, to his indebtedness to Him and to his innate longing to worship Him. This means that the covenant is part and parcel or a fundamental dimension of human nature. See for example, Al-Māturidī, Abu Mansur Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud, *Ta'wīlāt*

According to Shāh Walī Allāh, this is a reference to the primordial event when God created Adam to be the father of the humankind from whom the human species would originate. He thus brought into being in the World of Images (*'ālam al-mithāl*) the forms of his descendants and enabled them to realize their ultimate felicity and misery. Likewise, "He gave them the capacity to be charged with religious duties and He created in them the knowledge of good and humbleness in front of Him." This is, he concludes, "the basis of the covenant infused in their original nature, so that they will be held accountable according to it, even though they may have forgotten this event."⁹¹ In other words, to just reiterate what has already been mentioned differently, every person has an innate inclination to the Creator "at the root of his natural disposition, and an inclination to glorify Him with the greatest reverence possible." Hence, atheism runs in opposition to the intrinsic knowledge God has bestowed on human beings.⁹²

This Qur'ānic account has inspired many Muslim scholars with the fundamental idea of an original covenant (*mīthāq*) between man and God. According to the contemporary Tunisian historian and thinker, Mohamed Talbi, this *mīthāq* refers to "a solemn and pre-eternal engagement that had already fixed and determined in the ontological a-time, the relation of man to God."⁹³ Thanks to this ontological covenant, man finds the stamp of faith engaging him toward his Lord and Creator deeply sealed in his heart. From this has followed the notion of an 'original religion' which successive prophets came to confirm and revive.⁹⁴ It is beyond our power as

Ahl al-Sunnah or Tafṣīr al-Māturidī, edited by Majdi Bāsalum (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1st edition, 1426/2005), vol. 5, pp. 83-86; Qutb, Sayyid, *Fī Zīlāl al-Qur'ān* (Cairo/Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 33d edition, 1425/2004), vol. 3, pp.1392-1396.

⁹¹ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 197; *The Conclusive Argument from God*, p. 199.

⁹² Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 233; *The Conclusive Argument from God*, p. 238.

⁹³ Talbi, Mohamed, "Quelle clé pour lire le Coran" in Mohamed Talbi and Maurice Bucaille: *Reflections sur le Coran* (Paris: Seghers, 1989), pp. 108-109.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 109.

humans to uncover the hidden reality lying behind the symbolism of this primordial covenant. But this does not **mean that it is merely** “a matter of gratuitous abstraction, or ineffective myth (*mythe inopérant*).”⁹⁵ On the contrary, it points to man’s essential nature and the purpose of his worldly existence both as God’s servant (*‘abd*) and vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on Earth.⁹⁶ In this respect, al-Attas has argued that the notion of man’s covenant with God “is the starting point in the Islamic conception of religion, and is the dominant element in all other Islamic concepts bound up with it, such as those of freedom, responsibility, justice, knowledge, virtue, brotherhood, etc.”⁹⁷

By so representing man’s origin and nature and the purpose of his existence, Islam, let us say with Malik Bennabi, has laid the metaphysical foundation of a long-awaited humanism that has lacked a transcendent basis in modern thought. Thanks to the original dignity (*takrīm*) conferred by God on the children of Adam (Qur’an, 17: 70), man has acquired all his preeminence in such a way that “he is not mere living matter, an insignificant point, so insignificant on the material scale (where a star itself is nothing but a dot in the vast space) that one single atomic bomb would destroy two hundred thousand of him, as in Hiroshima.”⁹⁸ Thus, man’s **greatness** (*dimension de l’homme*) in Islam flows, according to the Qur’ānic account of the creation, from the infinitude that God has accorded him by making “the creation prostrate before Adam.”⁹⁹

Grounded, as we have seen, in the fundamental idea of the original covenant, the Islamic conception of human nature thus lays the foundation for man’s noble position and mission in the world whereby he is singularly chosen amongst all **creatures to bear** God’s trust or *amānah* (Qur’an, 33: 72). As pertinently indicated by

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 110.

⁹⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1993, PP. 139-140.

⁹⁷ Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, ISTAC, 1995), p. 75.

⁹⁸ Bennabi, M., *L’Afro-Asiatisme* (Cairo: Imprimerie Misr, 1956), p. 294.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Talbi, if we divest man of these dimensions, he will be reduced to mere "stomach and sex, that is, to a purposeless twofold function of maintenance and reproduction: producing and procreating to consume, and consuming and producing to procreate... Through an endless rotation the circle closes up on the void, the absurd and despair, which is the real disease" of our time since Nietzsche announced the death of God.¹⁰⁰

It is thus arguable that through its conception of the existence of an essential bond between human nature and Islam, the Qur'ān actually aims at uniting natural and revealed religion, hence the significance of the expression *al-Islām dīn al-ḥiṭrah*. This unification finds its expression in its basic beliefs and universal law (*sharī'ah*) whose injunctions and ordinances conform to the natural needs and longings of human beings.¹⁰¹ Likewise, in the Islamic worldview, the natural innate guidance prepares man to acknowledge and accept the revealed guidance embodied in the Qur'ān and Sunnah of the Prophet (*pbuh*).¹⁰² To put it in the words of Jomier, "Islam is thus indeed at the heart of nature which is 'submitted' to God as much as free beings."¹⁰³

The Implications of Ḥiṭrah and the Notion of Universal Religion

The notion of *ḥiṭrah*, it should now have become clear from the previous exposition, is essentially important in the Islamic conception of the human nature. Its positive interpretation by Shāh Walī Allāh, Ibn 'Āshūr and other scholars has far-reaching implications whose

¹⁰⁰ Talbi, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Al-Marzūqī, Abū Ya'rub, *Waḥdat al-Fikrayn al-Dīnī wa al-Falsafī* (Damacus: Dār al-Fikr, 2002); Ezzati, *op. cit.* pp. 60-92; Jomier, Jacques, *Dieu et l'Homme dans le Coran: l'aspect religieux de la nature humaine joint a l'obéissance au Prophète de l'islam* (Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 1996), pp. 9-52.

¹⁰² Cf. 'Abdu, al-Sheikh Muḥammad, *al-'Amāl al-Kāmilah*, ed. Muḥammad 'Imārah (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1414/1993), vol. 3, pp. 501-503; Sachedina, Abdulaziz, *Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 91-93.

¹⁰³ Jomier, *op. cit.* p. 37.

full analysis is beyond our purpose to explore.¹⁰⁴ Only some of those implications as can be gleaned from the works of these two two scholars will be discussed here, with special focus on the methodological and hermeneutical aspects elaborated by Ibn 'Āshūr. They concern mainly his historical perception of the Islamic Sharī'ah as well as his understanding of its general structure and characteristics, and the way its injunctions and precepts should be comprehended and implemented.

Let us begin by recalling and putting into stronger relief one important point that has already been mentioned. The successive Divine messages vouchsafed to select individuals (i.e., prophets) have always aimed, according to the Qur'ān, at reminding people of the essential truth engrained in their inborn nature and calling them to live in accordance with its demands. External Divine guidance through revealed writ (kutub) has accompanied mankind since very early stages of her history. Its function consisted in reviving, purging, complementing, and bringing to better actualization the inner guidance God has instilled in the human species. In Ibn 'Āshūr's view, this Divine education for mankind has followed an evolutionary process in respect of the laws and principles of legislation brought by each messenger so that the specific conditions of his respective audience is suitably taken into consideration.¹⁰⁵

It has been God's design that mankind should follow a gradual process of intellectual and socio-cultural development in which every stage – and a stage might span many centuries – would differ from the previous one in terms of the density of social organization and needs as well as contacts, conflicts and movement between the different communities and peoples inhabiting the globe. According to Ibn 'Āshūr, all this led to mutual knowing (*ta'āruf*) and cultural exchange between different communities and consolidated the sense

¹⁰⁴ For a fairly instructive treatment of the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, psychological and legal implications of the concept of *fiṭrah*, see Yasien, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-132. Referring to what describes as qualitative and quantitative as well as normative and cognitive implications of *fiṭrah*, Ezzati has discussed a number of such implications with depth and commendable insight. see his *Islam and Natural Law*, pp. 99-109 and 134-152.

¹⁰⁵ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 3/3, p. 190.

of universal society and global civilization – a fact which the Qur'ān has indicated as an aspect of God's purpose in making mankind into "nations and tribes" (Qur'an, 49: 13).¹⁰⁶ To put this idea in Shāh Walī Allāh's expression, it could be said that this process of civilization is a manifestation of the fact that human beings are naturally predisposed to it, "and neither the Arabs nor the non-Arabs ever adopted them solely due to the dictates of reason."¹⁰⁷

Thus, later stages in that historical development are seen as progress and advance over earlier ones. In this respect, he provides a panoramic description of the major stages in the history of legislation for human life and social organization where both Divine and man-made systems of legislation (*sharā'ī*) are mentioned side by side as reflecting human intellectual and socio-cultural development. Likewise, the teachings and laws of Abraham, Hammurabi, Brahma, Ancient Egypt, Moses, Zoroaster, Confucius, Solon and Jesus are mentioned as representing the human heritage that had been available when the Qur'ān – God's last word to the humans carrying to them the universal Sharī'ah that would regulate their life in all its aspects – was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Arabian Peninsula. None of them, Ibn 'Āshūr argues, had the characteristics of universality that would make it transcend the specific socio-cultural and geographical context in which it appeared, including Moses' great law.¹⁰⁸ The context-bound nature of those religious-legal traditions does not mean, however, the absence of mutual cultural and social borrowing between the communities associated with them, which took both peaceful and conflicting forms.¹⁰⁹

However, Islam, as enshrined in the Qur'ān and exemplified in the Prophet's *sunnah*, did not appear in any of the areas where those traditions had taken root. On the contrary, its advent was rather in an area that had preserved a considerable measure of simplicity in respect of social organization and cultural heritage, and having remained almost totally isolated from major civilizational spheres of

¹⁰⁶ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 12/26, pp. 259-261.

¹⁰⁷ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 46; *The Conclusive Argument*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 3/3, p. 192; cf. vol. 2, pp. 299-300.

¹⁰⁹ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 3/3, pp. 192-193.

the ancient world where those traditions had made lasting and deep impact on man and society. For Ibn 'Āshūr, a great Divine wisdom lies behind this cultural and spiritual aloofness of the immediate geographical and social context of the Qur'ānic Revelation. As a religion whose universal character the Qur'ān proclaimed from the very beginning,¹¹⁰ Islam required that its first bearers and immediate propagators should possess certain essential qualities that would allow them to carry it out world wide.

In this regard, Ibn 'Āshūr believes that four major qualities were manifested in the Arabs to whom Muhammad, the seal of God's apostles, belonged. Besides the simplicity or primitiveness of their social organization and culture and their aloofness from the cotemporary nations of their time, these people enjoyed a remarkable degree of excellence of mind and strength of memory.¹¹¹ In his view, the significance of these qualities is that those who possessed them were nearer to the original human nature (*fiṭrah*) and not burdened with legal and cultural traditions that would prevent them from embracing the new message and carrying it to other peoples.¹¹² What he seems to suggest is that there was a general preparedness and positive attitude among the Arabs to identify with Islam and respond energetically to its calling due to their being free from deep-rooted and long-established spiritual and intellectual traditions that would otherwise have taken hold of their souls and imprisoned their minds. Hence, Islam was not to be bound within the specific socio-cultural context of Arabia, both at the level of its scriptural sources (especially the Qur'ān) and its historical unfolding.¹¹³

Be that as it may, this historical perspective on the advent of

¹¹⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, p. 100.

¹¹¹ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid*, p. 319.

¹¹² To further support this point, Ibn 'Āshūr indicates that, with only a few exceptions, Arab Christians and the Jews in Madīnah obstinately refused to accept Islam because they believed themselves to be in a right religious tradition. *Ibid.*, p. 319, note 1.

¹¹³ Cf. Malik. Bennabi, *On the Origins of Human Society*, trans. Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, Kuala Lumpur: The Open Press, 1998; Abū al-Hasan al-Nadawī, *Mādhā Khasira al-'Ālam bi'Inḥitāḥ al-Muslimīn* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1996).

Islam and its position in the chain of revealed religion has permitted Ibn 'Āshūr to formulate the following features of the universality of the Sharī'ah in relation to human nature as discussed above. In other words, what follows will outline the main implications of his positive interpretation of *fiṭrah* for the understanding and application of the precepts and injunctions of the Islamic Sharī'ah.

Moderation (*i'tidāl*) and 'middleness' (*tawassuṭ*) constitute, according to Ibn 'Āshūr, one of the major characteristics of Islamic teachings and a fundamental principle of the Islamic social system.¹¹⁴ His study of the views of Muslim sages and scholars who concerned themselves with examining the qualities and conditions of the human mind and soul enabled him, he informs us, to summarize the gist of their thoughts in the following: "The essence of all virtues (*fadā'il*) and sound *fiṭrah* lies in moderateness in all matters."¹¹⁵ In his view, this means that any inclination towards extremes in the form of either negligence (*tafrīṭ/taqṣīr*) or excessiveness (*ifrāt/ghuluw*) is the result of the aberration and corruption of human nature caused by an indulgence in vain desires (*hawā*). This deviation from the norm of sound nature, he explains, occurs as a result either of following the caprices and passions of one's own invention or submitting to the influence of others who are there to embellish such aberrations and vices.¹¹⁶

Since it is part of the main goals of the Sharī'ah to safeguard and restore human nature, its precepts and commandments have been devised in such a way as to shun all types of extremism in human pursuit and conduct. Hence, the Qur'ān describes the Muslim ummah as "a community of the middle way (*ummatan waṣaṭan*)" (Qur'ān, 2:143), which the Prophet, as reported by al-Bukhārī, interpreted as being just (*'adl*).¹¹⁷ This means keeping "an equitable balance between extremes" and being "realistic in its appreciation of man's nature and possibilities."¹¹⁸ According to Ibn 'Āshūr, the middlemost position to which the Qur'ān invites mankind stems from its sense of justice and

¹¹⁴ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, p. 45.

¹¹⁵ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, pp. 45-46; *Maqāsid*, p. 268.

¹¹⁶ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, p. 26.

¹¹⁷ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, pp. 268-69; *Uṣūl*, p. 47.

¹¹⁸ Asad, p. 30, note 118.

wholeness on the basis of which everything is put in its right place and given its due measure without excess or deficiency.¹¹⁹ Moreover, the grounding of moderateness and middle-way positioning in the concept of justice in its comprehensive meaning makes it, in Ibn 'Āshūr's opinion, the fountainhead of all virtue and perfection.¹²⁰

To put this point in Asad's pertinent words, this attribute of the Shari'ah can be seen to summarize "the Islamic attitude towards the problem of man's existence as such: a denial of the view that there is an inherent conflict between the spirit and the flesh, and a bold affirmation of the natural, God-willed unity in this twofold aspect of human life" – such a balanced attitude being the direct consequence of "the concept of God's oneness and, hence, of the unity of purpose underlying all His creation."¹²¹ It is this *balanced attitude* that accounts, according to Ibn 'Āshūr, for the Muslim *ummah's* being the "best community (*khayra ummah*) brought forth for [the good of]* mankind" (Qur'an, 3:110) and for "bearing witness to the truth before all mankind" (Qur'an, 2:143).¹²²

Another equally important feature of the Shari'ah emanating from Islam's compatibility with human nature is *samāḥah*. For Ibn 'Āshūr, this characteristic derives from the quality of moderateness and middlemost positioning as discussed above.¹²³ It consists of seeking ease and shunning hardship and difficulty in all dealings and undertakings.¹²⁴ As he differently puts it, *samāḥah* is "commendable easiness in matters in which people usually tend toward sternness and intransigence (*tashdīd*) in such a way that does not lead to harm or an evil."¹²⁵ Textual evidence supporting this is abundant both in the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions.¹²⁶ But what is even

¹¹⁹ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, p. 47.

¹²⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 268; *Uṣūl*, p. 47.

¹²¹ Asad, pp. 268-69.

* This is an explanatory phrase by Asad.

¹²² Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, pp. 19-21.

¹²³ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 268; *Uṣūl*, p. 50.

¹²⁴ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 268.

¹²⁵ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 269; *Uṣūl*, p. 49.

¹²⁶ See such evidences as quoted by Ibn 'Āshūr in *Maqāsid*, pp. 269-271; *Uṣūl*, pp. 49-51.

more important, as it appears from Ibn 'Āshūr's reasoning, are the principles and wisdom underlying the emphasis laid by the Qur'ān and the Prophet on *samāḥah* as one of the foremost features of Islamic teachings. Man's nature, he argues, dislikes and eschews hardship and sternness. And since Islam is *dīn fiṭrah*, its teachings both in fundamentals and detail are agreeably accepted and implemented by human beings,¹²⁷ by virtue of their harmony with the latter's inherent physical and mental dispositions.¹²⁸ In other words, this characteristic of *samāḥah* accounts for the suitability of the precepts and injunctions of the Sharī'ah to the human souls and is what brings them comfort at both individual and collective levels.¹²⁹ Seen from another perspective, the quality of magnanimity consists of the human "soul's refusal to follow the promptings of the animalistic force."¹³⁰

The impact of this aspect of the Islamic Sharī'ah can best be seen, according to Ibn 'Āshūr, in the vast and fast widespread and historical continuity of Islam.¹³¹ As he further indicates, it has been a norm of history that the rapidity and readiness of different peoples to submit to certain religious laws (*sharā'ī*) and their persistence in so doing are commensurate with the level of ease and facility of such laws and, hence, of the degree of their compatibility with human nature.¹³²

The third characteristic of the Islamic Sharī'ah which Ibn 'Āshūr treats at some length is the universality (*'umūm*) of its teachings and the values it enjoins upon mankind. To formulate this point, he seems to proceed with an inverse reasoning whereby the conclusion validates the truth of the premise. As he argues, it has been God's wisdom and will to make Islam the last religion through which His word is addressed to mankind. This implies

¹²⁷ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 271; *Uṣūl*, p. 51.

¹²⁸ Al-Ḥasani, Ismail, *Naẓariyat al- Maqāsid 'Inda al-Imām Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr* (Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1st edition, 1416/1995), p. 271.

¹²⁹ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, p. 271.

¹³⁰ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjah*, vol. 1, p. 163, *The Conclusive Argument*, p. 158.

¹³¹ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, *ibid.*; *Uṣūl*, p. 51.

¹³² Ibn 'Āshūr, *Uṣūl*, pp. 51 -52.

that it should be based on a universal attribute shared by all human beings and deeply rooted in their souls in such a way that sound reason would readily recognize it. That attribute is nothing but *fiṭrah* or the natural disposition with which God has created the human species.¹³³ To express the same point in slightly different terms, the the universality of the Sharī'ah derives from the suitability of its injunctions and commands to human nature in all its dimensions. According to Ibn 'Āshūr, the universality of the Sharī'ah requires, as a logical consequence, that its injunctions (*aḥkām*) should be equally applicable to all nations and individuals regardless of circumstances and custom, for it is this universal applicability of laws and values that actually help bring about social unity and cohesion.¹³⁴

This argument bears important methodological and epistemological consequences for the way Ibn 'Āshūr looks at the two main textual sources of the Sharī'ah (i.e., the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*) and his conception of the relationship between them. In this and the following paragraphs, an attempt shall be made to present the gist of his views in this respect. As a general rule, the Qur'ān, in his opinion, is predominantly concerned with setting up universal principles or simply, universals (*kullīyyāt*), whereas the *Sunnah* deals mainly with particulars (*juz'īyyāt*). Qur'ānic universals, Ibn 'Āshūr explains, are expressed in both 'literal' (*lafziyyah*) and 'thematic' (*ma'nawīyyah*) forms. For him, these forms denote the certainty for which they stand for.¹³⁵

It is clear that Ibn 'Āshūr's exposition of the second class of universals builds on the same argument¹³⁶ based on the idea of thematic induction as elaborated by al-Shāṭibī. However, his view concerning the validity of what he calls "literal universals" can be said to be a clear departure from the view held by many classical legal theorists. By this expression he seems to refer to what is known in classical *uṣūl* theory as absolute (*muṭlaq*) and general (*'āmm*) statements. For those scholars, such statements, generally speaking, are not to

¹³³ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāsid*, pp. 317-318.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 319-320.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 320-321.

¹³⁶ See his discussion of the importance and steps of thematic induction in *Maqāsid*, pp. 190-195.

be taken at face value and cannot denote certainty by themselves. In other words, they are speculative (*ẓannī*) not definitive, and are therefore open to *ta'wīl* or interpretation to be qualified (*taqvīd*) or particularized (*takhṣīs*) so that their true import can be properly determined.¹³⁷ According to Ibn 'Āshūr, this view is erroneous and has led Muslim jurists to liberal and sometimes far-fetched and inaccurate applications of the technique of particularization and its like. As he plainly puts it, the truth about general and absolute statements, especially in the Qur'ān, is that most of them are meant to denote what they literally stand for.¹³⁸ Hence, they are of equal weight as thematic inductions in denoting certainty and expressing universals. The notion of universals is of utmost significance for the present study, for it provides an important element of the epistemological foundation of maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah.

As far as the Prophet's *Sunnah* is concerned, Ibn 'Āshūr does not hesitate to declare that it consists mainly of individual cases (*qaḍāyā a'yān*) addressing specific situations. Such cases, he argues, cannot be readily considered as a basis for universal legislation, since they are equally open to both generalization (*ta'mīm*) and particularization (*takhṣīs*). This probability, he maintains, is at the origin of disagreement between jurists on legal argumentation on the basis of such individual cases. It is in this light, he clearly indicates, that the Prophet's interdiction of the Companions to record anything other than the Qur'ān should be understood. As he sees it, the reason why the Prophet did not allow the writing down of something except the Qur'ānic verses was "the fear that specific details (*juz'īyyāt khāṣṣah*) would be taken as general universals (*kullīyyāt 'āmmah*)" or that "universal legislation (*tashrī' 'āmm*) would be confounded with particular legislation (*tashrī' khāṣṣ*)."¹³⁹ This is because observing the specific manners and customs (*'ādāt*) of different nations in a binding universal legislation (*tashrī'*) is against the rule. However,

¹³⁷ For further detail, see Kamali, Muhammad Hashim, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Ilmiah Publishers, 1998), pp. 104-116; Hallaq, Wael B., *A History of Islamic legal Theories: an introduction to sunnī uṣūl al-fiqh* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 45-46.

¹³⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Maqāṣid*, pp. 320-321.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 321 and 324.

this does not mean ignoring such manners and customs altogether. On the contrary, they find their proper place and value under the principle of permissibility (*ibāḥah*).¹⁴⁰

Thus, for Ibn ʿĀshūr, there should be no doubt that “the manners and customs of a specific people must not, as such, be imposed on other peoples as part of universal legislation, nor even on the people with whom they are associated. Of course, legislation must take such customs into consideration insofar as people have not altered them, for in such a situation those customs fulfil the function of terms and conditions in people’s dealings unless otherwise spelled out.”¹⁴¹

What Ibn ʿĀshūr seems to emphasize is that, unlike the Qurʾān, much of the material constituting the *Sunnah* was, literally speaking, embedded in the socio-cultural context in which the Prophet lived and carried out his career as messenger and leader of the Islamic community. Likewise, there is a pressing need for a proper approach that should enable us to distinguish in the traditions attributed to the Prophet between what pertains to the specific socio-historical circumstances of Arabia during the time of Revelation and what was general and transcended those circumstances, thus expressing the universal teachings enshrined in the Qurʾān.¹⁴² As he further clarifies his position, the universality of the Sharīʿah and the suitability and relevance of its injunctions to all mankind should by no means suggest “binding people with the customs and manners of a specific nation such as the Arabs at the time of legislation (*zamān al-tashrīʿ*!), nor should it mean compelling them to follow the detailed propositions

¹⁴⁰ Ibn ʿĀshūr, *Maqāṣid*, p. 322; *Tafsīr*, vol. 1/3, pp. 195-96.

¹⁴¹ Ibn ʿĀshūr, *Maqāṣid*, p. 322. It must be pointed out here that Ibn ʿĀshūr’s concern with the issue of the general and specific in the Prophetic traditions is so strong that he devoted a complete chapter to tackling it. Building on the work done in this respect by the eminent Mālikī jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī, he set out to examine and identify the various capacities (*maqāmāt*) in which the Prophet makes statements and carries out actions. He enumerated twelve such *maqāmāt* that need to be taken into consideration if any proper understanding of the *Sunnah* is to be achieved. See *Maqāṣid*, pp. 212-230; cf. Shams al-Dīn, Muḥammad Mahdī, *al-Ijtihād wa al-Tjād fī al-Fiḥ al-Islāmī* (Beirut: al-Muʿassasah al-Dawliyyah, 1419/1999), pp. 86-87.

¹⁴² Ibn ʿĀshūr, *Maqāṣid*, pp. 323-324.

(*tafrī'āt al-aḥkām*) and particular issues (*juz'iyāt al-aqḍiyah*) which contemplated a specific interest or good (*ṣalāḥ khāṣṣ*) for the people amongst whom the legislation unfolded, whether such customs suit other nations and times or not."¹⁴³

On the basis of the previous discussion, Ibn 'Āshūr suggests that the universality and suitability of the Sharī'ah can be conceived in two different, yet interrelated ways. Firstly, its universal values and general principles are applicable to all situations without causing harm or leading to evil. Secondly, human circumstances in all spaces and times can be moulded and oriented in accordance with Islamic teachings without difficulty or hardship.¹⁴⁴ As is clear from his reasoning, it is at this level of universality and flexibility of the Sharī'ah that *ijtihād* acquires its significance as the embodiment, according to the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, of movement and dynamism in Islam.¹⁴⁵ As he differently expresses the same idea, to speak of the universality and suitability of the *sharī'ah* to mankind in all ages and places means that its injunctions and commands consist of universal principles and values (*kulliyāt wa ma'ānī*) pertaining to the human good (*maṣāliḥ*) from which different rules and various systems can be derived to regulate human life, varying in form but always united in purpose.¹⁴⁶

From this universality and suitability principle is derived, according to Ibn 'Āshūr, the strategy of the Sharī'ah having to deal with the human life and conditions. This strategy operates at two complementary and closely interconnected levels, namely change (*taghyīr*) and confirmation or sanctioning (*taqrīr*). The first level consists of removing all kinds of corruption and categorically declaring their evilness. This type of change might take the form of more rigour and severity out of consideration for the human good (*ṣalāḥ*) and with a view to eradicating slackness and indifference in human behaviour. It also might take the form of alleviation and easing as a measure to combat excessive or extremist attitudes. For Ibn 'Āshūr, the foundation of this aspect of the Islamic strategy of

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 326.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 325-326.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 324.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 327.

change is clearly laid down in the Qur'ān. It suffices to only reflect upon the following two verses: "God is the Protector (*walī*) of those who have faith, taking them out of deep darkness (*al-zulumāt*) into light" (Qur'an, 2: 257), "through which [i.e., clear divine writ] God shows unto all who seek His pleasure the paths leading, by His grace, to salvation (*salām*) and brings them out of the depths of darkness into light and guides them onto a straight way" (Qur'an, 5:16).¹⁴⁷

The second level of the above-mentioned strategy, Ibn 'Āshūr explains, consists of confirming and sanctioning all the good norms and virtuous practices mankind has followed over the ages. As he argues, if we examine the long history of mankind, we will certainly discover that much of the positive good values and virtues on which human culture and civilization have been established are inherited from the teachings, advices and wisdom of prophets, patriarchs, sages and just rulers in such a way that they have become deeply rooted in human consciousness and experience. These virtues and good values in the human experience, which Islam sanctions and promotes are, according to Ibn 'Āshūr, expressed in the Qur'ānic phrase "enjoins upon them the doing of what is right (*ya'muruhum bi'l-ma'rūf*)."¹⁴⁸

In other words, it is not part of the Islamic programme for human life to destroy and eradicate all the values, ideas, practices and institutions that have preceded it and start human experience from a tabula rasa as if all that is merely vice and falsehood. On the contrary, Islam, based on its positive view of human nature as discussed above, aims at renewing people's spirituality and morality by linking it to the primordial tree of *tawhīd* and goodness rooted in human nature. Accordingly, all values and practices that do not conflict with its teachings and promote human good are assimilated within its parameters and oriented in accordance with its basic ideals and values. This attitude, it should be recalled, stems from a firm belief in the unity of human nature no matter how much corrupting influences might affect it.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 340.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 341.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Hamid, Eltigani Abdelgadir, *The Qur'an and Politics: A Study of the Origins*

Conclusion

Taking human nature as its central theme, this article has attempted to present a synthetic exposition and analysis of the central ideas of two scholars whose works continue to be a major source of inspiration for an increasing body of academic and intellectual work. It has mainly looked into their interpretation of the Qur'ānic concept of *fitrah* and their elaboration of the broad and profound meaning it denotes for a holistic and balanced understanding of human nature as opposed to the materialist and reductionist conception thereof. By so doing, the author aimed at engaging Islamic thought in a type of discourse that should strive to raise the interests and concerns of thinking minds to come to grips with the intellectual, spiritual, ethical, social and cultural challenges, nay threats, posed by what some have rightly described as a systematic denial of human nature; hence, a dehumanization of human beings.

This, however, does not lay ground to any claim that what has been presented in this study is exhaustive of what Shāh Walī Allāh and Ibn 'Āshūr have to offer on the issues that have been discussed. In fact, a certain strategy of both commission and omission had to be adopted in order to keep the study within reasonable limits. It has been one major aim of the author to show that much insight may be gained and more rewarding perspectives could be opened by tackling the question of human nature and other related issues through such a comparative and synthetic approach; especially as no effort of this kind has ever been made before concerning these two scholars. Perhaps, this should be an invitation for a more learned, comprehensive and detailed treatment of a subject that is worthy of serious academic consideration.

of Political Thought in the Makkan Qur'an, translated from the Arabic by Abdul-Wahid Lu'lu'a (Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1425:2004), pp. 28-30.