

Human Light: The Forgotten Foundation of Islamic Anthropology

The modern world possesses extraordinary knowledge about the human body yet remains deeply uncertain about the human soul. Advances in science, psychology, and technology have transformed human life, but they have not resolved humanity's most fundamental questions: Why are we here? Why do we recognize justice and injustice? Why does conscience continue to trouble us even when wrongdoing appears advantageous?

Islam approaches these questions from a foundation radically different from materialistic understandings. The Qur'an presents human beings not merely as biological organisms, but as creatures honoured by Allah with a unique spiritual endowment. Human dignity, moral awareness, and accountability all emerge from this Divine gift.

Allah says:

ثُمَّ سَوَّاهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِهِ ۗ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۗ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ ٩

then He fashioned them and had a spirit of His Own 'creation' breathed into them. And He gave you hearing, sight, and intellect. 'Yet' you hardly give any thanks. (Quran 32:9)

This Divine bestowal of the rūḥ lies at the center of Islamic anthropology. It does not make human beings divine, nor does it grant them independence from their Creator.

The Qur'an deliberately leaves the essence of the rūḥ beyond complete human comprehension:

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ ۗ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ٨٥

They ask you 'O Prophet' about the spirit. Say, "Its nature is known only to my Lord, and you 'O humanity' have been given but little knowledge." (Quran 17:85)

The Qur'an repeatedly portrays humanity as possessing an innate disposition toward truth. Allah says:

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا ۗ فِطْرَتَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا ۚ لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ ۗ ذَٰلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَائِمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ٣٠

So be steadfast in faith in all uprightness 'O Prophet'—the natural Way of Allah which He has instilled in 'all' people. Let there be no change in this creation of Allah. That is the Straight Way, but most people do not know. (Quran 30:30)

The Prophet ﷺ explained:

"Every child is born upon the fitrah. Then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian." (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 1385; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2658)

This hadith establishes fitrah as the original disposition of every human being. For this reason, the Quran repeatedly calls humanity to reflection:

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لَآيَاتٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ ٠

Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the day and night there are signs for people of reason. (Quran 3:190)

أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ ۗ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۗ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ النَّاسِ بِلِقَائِ رَبِّهِمْ لَكَافِرُونَ ۘ

Have they not reflected upon their own being? Allah only created the heavens and the earth and everything in between for a purpose and an appointed term. Yet most people are truly in denial of the meeting with their Lord! (Quran 30:8)

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْفُرُءَانَ ۗ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِندِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا ۘ

Do they not then reflect on the Quran? Had it been from anyone other than Allah, they would have certainly found in it many inconsistencies. (Quran 4:82)

The Qur'an further teaches that human beings were not created aimlessly. Allah declares:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ ٥٦

I did not create jinn and humans except to worship Me. (Quran 51:56)

Worship encompasses the whole of life. The human soul finds fulfillment not through unrestricted self-expression but through alignment with its Creator.

This reality explains a paradox that defines much of human experience. People often recognize truth yet fail to follow it.

The Qur'an identifies this tension within the human being itself. Allah says:

"By the soul and He who proportioned it, and inspired it with its wickedness and its righteousness. Successful indeed is the one who purifies it, and failed indeed is the one who corrupts it." (Qur'an 91:7-10)

The Quran therefore presents the soul as capable of both corruption and purification. The presence of the rūḥ does not eliminate struggle; it makes struggle meaningful.

The Prophet ﷺ emphasized the centrality of the heart in this moral journey:

"Indeed, there is a piece of flesh in the body. If it is sound, the whole body is sound; and if it is corrupted, the whole body is corrupted. Indeed, it is the heart."

(Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 52; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 1599)

The Quran repeatedly speaks of hearts that understand, remember, harden, soften, believe, and reject. In Islamic thought, the heart is not merely the seat of emotion but the centre of moral and spiritual perception.

Yet the Qur'an warns that this perception can become obscured.

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونَ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَا أَوْ آذَانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا ۗ فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَى الْأَبْصَارُ وَلَكِنْ تَعْمَى الْقُلُوبُ
الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ ٤٦

Have they not travelled throughout the land so their hearts may reason, and their ears may listen? Indeed, it is not the eyes that are blind, but it is the hearts in the chests that grow blind. (Quran 22:46)

A person may witness signs, hear evidence, and possess knowledge while remaining spiritually blind.

The Qur'an therefore warns against arrogance and self-sufficiency.

"No! Indeed, man transgresses because he sees himself self-sufficient."

(Qur'an 96:6–7)

When human beings become detached from remembrance of Allah, the fitrah is not destroyed, but it becomes veiled. The inner light remains present, yet its guidance becomes increasingly difficult to perceive.

This is why revelation functions as mercy. The Qur'an comes not to create the human capacity for truth, but to awaken and direct it.

Allah describes the Qur'an as:

وَإِنَّهُ لَهْدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٧٧

And it is truly a guide and mercy for the believers. (Quran 27:77)

And He says:

"There has come to you from Allah a light and a clear Book." (Qur'an 5:15)

The light of revelation speaks to the light already placed within the human soul. Guidance occurs when the two meet.

Modern thought often teaches humanity through biology, psychology, or economics. The Qur'an presents a different vision: human beings are creatures of Allah, entrusted with responsibility and capable of recognizing Him.

Allah says:

"We have certainly honoured the children of Adam..."

(Qur'an 17:70)

The human soul is not abandoned to confusion, nor is it left without direction.

وَهَدَيْنَاهُ النَّجْدَيْنِ ۝

and shown them the two ways 'of right and wrong'? (Quran 90:10)

Yet if the human being possesses this innate disposition toward truth, a difficult question remains. Why do people knowingly reject what is right? Why does conscience become silent? Why do individuals, communities, and even entire civilizations turn away from conscience?

The Qur'an does not attribute this solely to ignorance. It directs our attention inward—to the struggle between the soul's recognition of truth and the competing pull of desire, pride, heedlessness, and self-interest. Understanding that struggle is essential to understanding the human condition itself. It is to that inner conflict, and the Qur'anic psychology of the nafs, that we now turn.