

## 2 | God, Angels, Humans, and Satan

Salahuddin Jitmoud, an American Muslim, was stabbed to death and robbed in an apartment complex in Lexington, Kentucky, in April 2015. He was making pizza deliveries. What is notable about Salahuddin's case is how his father, Abdul Munim Sombat Jitmoud, treated the person who killed his son. Abdul Munim moved to the United States with his family from Thailand and served as the principal of a number of Islamic schools in various states, including Kentucky. During a court hearing in 2017, Abdul Munim turned to the man convicted of the murder of his son and stated that he forgave him:

My son, my nephew, I forgive you. I forgive you on behalf of Salahuddin and his mother. I don't blame you for the crime you have committed. I am not angry at you for being a part of hurting my son. I am angry at the devil. I blame the devil, who misguided you and misled you to do such a horrible crime. Forgiveness is the greatest gift or charity in Islam.<sup>1</sup>

The father not only forgave the convict, he also stepped forward and hugged him. He noted that one of the verses of the Qur'an that he often turned to for comfort was: "Say, 'Nothing will happen to us

<sup>1</sup> Marva Eltagouri, "Why This Father Hugged the Man Who Helped Kill His Son," *Washington Post*, November 10, 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/11/10/why-this-father-hugged-the-man-who-helped-kill-his-son/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/11/10/why-this-father-hugged-the-man-who-helped-kill-his-son/). Also see Jitmoud's talk, "Why I Hugged My Son's Killer? Abdul Munim Sombat Jitmoud," Muslim Community Center – MCC East Bay, YouTube video, posted August 12, 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPT6X57fBL4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPT6X57fBL4).

except what God has decreed for us. He is our Protector, and in God let the believers put their trust.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, Abdul Munim pointed out that he advised the convict to turn to God, who is the most forgiving. The following verse from the Qur’an became an inspiration for Abdul Munim to forgive the killer of his son: “Let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish that God should forgive you? God is Forgiving and Merciful.”<sup>3</sup> Abdul Munim’s faith in God led him to this remarkable forgiveness. Because of his outstanding example of compassion, Abdul Munim received Malaysia’s first Compassion Award icon from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2019.<sup>4</sup> The award is known as “mercy to all people” (*rahmatan lil alamin*), a reference from the Qur’an indicating that God sent Muhammad as a mercy for all creatures.<sup>5</sup> So who is the God of Muslims? How do Muslims relate to their divinity? This chapter examines the concept of God and his attributes in Islamic theology. I also explore the roles of humans, angels, and Satan in relation to the Creator.

While Muslims refer to God by many different names, the most common name used to invoke or address and praise God is Allah. Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians also use this word, which derives from the combination of the Arabic article *al* and the word *ilah*. In this regard, Allah literally means “the God.” Grammatically speaking, the word Allah has no plural form or associated gender.

Islamic tradition relates that in Mecca, the birthplace of Islam, people already had a notion of Allah but associated other gods with him. While the Meccans considered Allah to be their supreme creator, they also believed that other deities existed that interceded between them and Allah. Islamic tradition dates the history of Mecca to Abraham, his concubine Hagar, and his son Ishmael,

<sup>2</sup> Qur’an 9:51.

<sup>3</sup> Qur’an 24:22.

<sup>4</sup> Azura Abas, “Forgiving US Father Receives Malaysia’s Compassionate Icon Award,” *New Straits Times*, December 19, 2019, [www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/12/549299/forgiving-us-father-receives-malysias-compassionate-icon-award](http://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/12/549299/forgiving-us-father-receives-malysias-compassionate-icon-award).

<sup>5</sup> Qur’an 21:107.

who brought monotheism to Mecca. But it is believed that at some point, through interactions with neighboring cities, Mecca was introduced to polytheism. By the dawn of Islam, the Kaaba – built by Abraham and his family as the house of the one God – was full of deities. With the coming of Islam, Arab society was reintroduced to its monotheistic roots and the belief in one God, or Allah. But who is this God whom Muslims worship?

To understand and know the ways of God, Muslims turn to three sources: the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, and the created universe itself. When trying to comprehend God, Muslims believe that one should first look at the creation. The Qur'an relates the following verse: "I [God] created jinn and humankind only that they might worship me."<sup>6</sup> The purpose of creation is to know, worship, and remember God. This form of worship and remembrance is by choice, not force. Some of the Qur'an commentaries interpret the phrase "only to worship Me" as "only to know me." In line with this interpretation, a widely circulated sacred narration (*hadith al-qudsi*) reports that God said, "I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known; so I created creation in order to be known."<sup>7</sup> In the center of the story of the creation stands God's desire to reveal and introduce himself.

A few analogies might help us to understand the Islamic theology of creation. Perhaps one of the most enjoyable things for artists is to exhibit their work. Through their exhibits, artists not only delight in seeing their pieces displayed but also enjoy visitors' appreciation and admiration. For teachers, one of the most pleasing things is to show their knowledge and share it with an audience. In the same way, people who are beautiful or perfect in some way or possess specific knowledge and skills naturally aim to reveal, display, and manifest these qualities and abilities. They would especially like

<sup>6</sup> Qur'an 51:56.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "Commentary on *Surat al-Dhariyat*," in Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 1280. A *hadith al-qudsi* is a report that is attributed to God from the perspective of its meaning, but it is articulated with the words of the Prophet Muhammad.

to express their skills to those capable of both understanding and offering a proper response.<sup>8</sup> From an Islamic point of view, knowledge, love, and worship of the creator make up that appropriate response. God exhibits his large treasure of skills and blessings in this universe and invites his creation, particularly humans, to freely and consciously acknowledge him as their only creator. That, in short, is the main purpose of creation in Islam.

### God's Names: *Asma al-Husna*

The most important way of knowing God is through his most beautiful names (*asma al-husna*). God reveals himself through these names, which the Qur'an refers to as follows: "The most beautiful names belong to God, so call on Him by them."<sup>9</sup> In another verse, the Qur'an instructs its followers to "call upon God, or the Compassionate – whatever names you call Him, the most beautiful names belong to Him."<sup>10</sup> The Qur'an repeatedly mentions God by different names and attributes. In chapter 59, for example, many of God's names are listed together:

He is God, there is no god other than Him; who knows all things both secret and open. He is the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. He is God, there is no god other than Him, the Controller, the Holy One, the Source of Peace, the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme. Glory be to God, He is above all that they associate as partners with Him. He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the Fashioner, to Him belong the most beautiful names. Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him. He is the Mighty, the Wise.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Said Nursi, *Sözler* (Istanbul: Söz Basım, 2009), 178.

<sup>9</sup> Qur'an 7:180.

<sup>10</sup> Qur'an 17:110.

<sup>11</sup> Qur'an 59:22–24.

While Islamic literature often references the ninety-nine names of God, the Qur'an mentions more than a hundred. Therefore, the number ninety-nine should not be taken literally, since scripture contains more than that. All chapters of the Qur'an except one begin with the names of God, al-Rahman and al-Rahim, the most compassionate and the most merciful. God is al-Khaliq, the one who brings everything from nonexistence to existence. God is al-'Adl, the embodiment of justice. God is al-'Alim, the all-knowing one; there is nothing beyond his knowledge. God is al-Razzaq, the provider. God is al-Latif, the most gracious one. God is al-Ghafur, the all-forgiving one. God is al-Wadud, the all-loving one. God is al-Mumit, the one who inflicts death. God is also al-Muhyi, the one who gives life. God is al-Quddus, the most holy one – the one who is pure and without imperfection. The self-cleansing of the universe through alteration, transformation, death, and recreation is regarded as the manifestation of this name. God is also al-Qayyum, the self-sufficient one, who depends on nothing but on whom everything depends.

The Qur'an refers to this attribute of God with the following verse:

God: there is no god but He, the Living, the Self-Subsisting. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. His are all things in the heavens and on the earth. Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, but they do not comprehend of His knowledge except what He wills. His throne encompasses the heavens and the earth, and their preservation does not tire Him. He is the Exalted, the Magnificent.<sup>12</sup>

Muslims often know this verse by heart and usually recite it in their daily supplications.

<sup>12</sup> Qur'an 2:255.

*God's Essence, Attributes, and Acts*

Muslim theologians have classified God's names in numerous ways. One way is to think of God's names as being related to his essence (*dhat*), attributes (*sifat*), and acts (*af'al*). The names concerning God's essence belong only to him – there is nothing created that can share the qualities enumerated by these names. In this regard, the Qur'an affirms, "There is nothing like Him."<sup>13</sup> Among the attributes of his essence is existence (*wujud*). Thus God's existence stems from himself. He is not created, and his existence depends on nothing. Everything will perish except God. God has neither beginning nor end.

Another way to categorize God's names is by his attributes (*sifat*), such as power (*qudra*), knowledge (*'ilm*), will (*irada*), life (*hayat*), speech (*kalam*), hearing (*sam'*), and sight (*basar*). While these attributes are unlimited in God, humans can only partially embody these names. For example, whereas God is all-knowing, humans have limited knowledge. Whereas God has life without imperfection, humans and other creatures have life only because of God. Their life depends on God and is subject to imperfections, including illness and death. God also has the attribute of will (*irada*). Human beings share this attribute, but while God's will is unlimited, humans' free will is highly limited.

Other names relate to God's active role (*af'al*) in the creation (*khalq*) of the universe. Everything is created by God. God creates the universe from nothing (*insha*). He gives life (*ihya*) as well as death (*imata*). As part of his active role, God is also the one who provides (al-Razzaq) for his creation. In order for his creatures to continue living, God meets all their needs.

*God's Nearness and Distance*

To understand God's essence and attributes, Muslim theologians point to his nearness and distance. The Qur'an states that everything

<sup>13</sup> Qur'an 42:11.

is near to God and in his control: “To God belong the East and the West. Wherever you turn, there is the presence of God. No leaf falls without His knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> In another verse, God’s nearness to humankind is stated: “We are nearer to him than his jugular vein.”<sup>15</sup> But Islamic theology also emphasizes God’s distance from the creation. God is everywhere, so no particular thing or place is associated with God. In emphasizing God’s distance, the Qur’an states that angels ascend to God “on a day whose measure is fifty thousand years.”<sup>16</sup> One hadith reports that God is behind 7,000 veils.<sup>17</sup> God is close to creation through the manifestations of his names and attributes, while the creation itself is distant from God’s essence.<sup>18</sup>

### *God’s Jamali and Jalali Names*

Islamic theology speaks of the two modes of God, or his dual nature. God’s names are also divided into beauty and mercy (*jamali*) and glory and majesty (*jalali*) aspects. *Jamali* names are manifested in the universe as beauty, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, love, and kindness. The beauty of the creation – with its distinctive forms, fashions, and colors – generosity, and blessings are also among these names. Others are the Most Beautiful (al-Jamil), the Most Generous (al-Karim), and the Giver of Life (al-Muhyi).

The *jalali* names are revealed in the forms of majesty, awe, and fear. Life, light, and existence are manifestations of the *jalali* names, as are death, separation, fear, punishment, wrath, and major natural disasters. These names include the Majestic/Exalted (al-Jalil), the Subduer (al-Qahhar), the Almighty (al-Aziz), the Bringer of Death (al-Mumit), the Avenger (al-Muntaqim), and the Compeller (al-Jabbar).

<sup>14</sup> Qur’an 2:115; 6:59.

<sup>15</sup> Qur’an 50:16.

<sup>16</sup> Qur’an 70:4.

<sup>17</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 277.

<sup>18</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words* (Istanbul: Sözler, 2006), 215.

In the universe, one can also observe that the *jamali* names are revealed within the *jalali* names. For example, within God's unity (*wahdaniyya*) is the manifestation of divine oneness (*ahadiyya*). As the light of the sun encompasses the entire earth, so does God's glory and unity. As the sun's light, heat, colors, and shadows are found in transparent objects and drops of water, so are God's *jalal* and oneness. God is present in the universe and is the provider for all of creation. But God is also particular in providing according to the distinctive needs of every being. All the flowers on earth together, for example, manifest God's glory and unity. However, every single flower, with its distinctive beauty and color, manifests God's *jamal* and oneness.

The *jalali* names will be fully revealed in hell, while the *jamali* names will have their full manifestation in heaven. However, God's mercy is emphasized over his wrath. In one of the *hadith al-qudsi*, God says, "My mercy overcomes my wrath."<sup>19</sup> The Qur'an also stresses God's mercy: "Your Lord has prescribed mercy upon Himself, if any of you did evil in ignorance, and thereafter repented, and amend his conduct, indeed He is Forgiving and Merciful."<sup>20</sup> Referring to the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an notes that he was sent as a mercy to all creatures.<sup>21</sup>

### *Humankind in Relation to God and His Names*

At the center of the theology of God's names is humankind. Unlike in the Christian tradition, the notion of original sin is absent in Islamic theology. God created Adam and Eve, and they slipped "individually," as the Qur'an puts it. Both repented, and God eventually forgave them. The Qur'an points out that Adam and Eve were abiding in heaven. God gave them permission to do anything

<sup>19</sup> Muslim b. al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim: kitab al-tawbah, bab fi sa'ah rahmah allah ta'ala*. The hadiths are cited according to the chapter, subchapter system.

<sup>20</sup> Qur'an 6:54.

<sup>21</sup> Qur'an 21:107.



except approach a particular tree. Satan tempted them with the idea of becoming eternal if they ate fruit from the forbidden tree.<sup>22</sup>

Humans are the mirror of God's names in the most comprehensive way. That is why they are – along with the Qur'an and universe – also seen as a book to be read in relation to God. According to a hadith that often appears in Sufi literature, "God created humankind in his image."<sup>23</sup> Humankind was not only created in the image of God, but humans are the ones who read and contemplate God's names better than any being in the universe.

In the story of the creation in Islam, one learns that "Adam was taught the names" by which humans are made superior even to the angels. The ability to recognize the manifestation of God's names in creation is one of the most important ways to know God. To believe that there is one God is different from knowing God. Once humans know God and have knowledge of him, they will be led to have admiration as well as love for him. Love for God is followed by strong faith and worship. In this regard, contemplating the universe in relation to God (*tafakkur*) is an act of worship.

### *Being the Mirror of God's Names*

Humans not only reflect on the names of God and have the ability to contemplate their manifestations in the universe; they also have the responsibility to embody God's names in their acts. In line with the Qur'anic principle "do good to others as God has done good to you," believers are asked to exemplify God's names in their lives. God is the most compassionate one, and humans are encouraged to have compassion for one another and for God's creation. God is the most generous one, and humans are encouraged to be generous. God is just, and humans are encouraged to stand for justice. God creates with wisdom and does not waste, and likewise, humans are encouraged to do the same in their affairs.

<sup>22</sup> Qur'an 7:19–25.

<sup>23</sup> *Sahih Muslim: kitab al-birr wa al-salah al-adaab, bab al-nahy 'an darb al-wajh.*

In embodying God's name the Most Merciful One (al-Rahim), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) wrote that believers should show mercy to the poor and provide them with whatever they need. In order to embody God's name the Peace and Source of Peace (al-Salaam), believers should not be prisoners of their anger and greed. Al-Salaam is the one whose essence is free from imperfection. To be the mirror of this name of God, believers should overcome such deficiencies. A Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand believers are safe.<sup>24</sup>

Humankind remains at the center of Islamic theology because humans embody God's names (*asma al-husna*) in the most comprehensive way. They are also the ones who can read and contemplate the manifestation of these names in the universe better than any other creature. Humankind, therefore, carries a unique responsibility, which is to believe in God, to know and contemplate him, and to worship him. Departing from this responsibility is regarded as veiling God's signs (*kufr*); in other words, not reading the creation as it relates to God. A further step in *kufr* is *shirk*, which means to put other deities or humans on an equivalent footing with God. Islamic ontology is not limited to humans; it also includes supernatural beings such as angels.

### Angels and Their Nature

When the time comes during the academic year to discuss the subject of angels, I always stop first to ask my students whether they believe in angels. A few inevitably affirm their belief, others will say they are agnostic, but the majority of the students respond in the negative. With modernity and progress in science, belief in supernatural beings such as angels is waning. While the number of those

<sup>24</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Names of God*, trans. David Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 54–55, 61.

who believe in the existence of angels is declining, the majority of Americans still believe angels are present. According to a 2016 study, 72 percent of Americans believe in the existence of angels; in 2001, 79 percent believed in angels.<sup>25</sup>

Belief in the existence of angels has been part of the teachings of many religious traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Zoroastrianism, for example, recognizes several types of angels, each with a distinctive function. Followers of this tradition choose an angel for protection or an angel who serves as a guide to them. They dedicate prayers to that angel throughout their lives. In the Hebrew Bible, angels appeared to major figures such as Abraham, Moses, and Jacob. When Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac, an angel appeared and stopped him. Abraham sacrificed a ram instead. In the Jewish sacred texts, angels are depicted in a variety of roles: healers, messengers, guardians or protectors, teachers, and warriors. Jewish scholars, including the medieval philosopher Maimonides (d. 1204), wrote of angelic hierarchies. Angels in each category have distinct features and functions.

Angels also appear frequently in the New Testament. One of the first mentions is in the Gospel of Luke when an angel appears to Zachariah in Jerusalem's temple. The angel brings the good news of the birth of John the Baptist.<sup>26</sup> In the same Gospel, the archangel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary and tells her she will miraculously conceive and give birth to a son who will be called Jesus.<sup>27</sup> The New Testament relates many other occasions of angelic appearances. As in the Jewish tradition, angels often appear as messengers, guardians, and teachers.

Probably no other religion emphasizes its belief in angels as much as Islam. Given that the Qur'an and the hadiths repeatedly

<sup>25</sup> "Religion," Gallup, accessed April 18, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 1:11–20.

<sup>27</sup> Luke 1:26–32.

refer to angels and that belief in angels is one of the articles of faith, not believing in angels calls into question the sincerity of a Muslim's faith. The Qur'an stresses that those who deny the existence of angels are misguided.<sup>28</sup>

Prominent Muslim scholar Al-Suyuti (d. 1505) compiled around 750 hadiths about angels in his work dedicated to their study in Islam.<sup>29</sup> Despite its importance in sacred texts as well as in the popular literature of Islam, the study of angels is often dismissed as unimportant.

### *Why Angels?*

Since belief in angels is a key component of Islamic theology, Muslim theologians attempt to articulate reasons for their significance. One explanation is God's desire to be known through different manifestations of his creative activity. He revealed himself through the creation, of which angels are an important part. God creates beings who can observe his creation, contemplate its significance, and worship him as an expression of praise and gratitude. Following this line of thought, Islamic theologians argue that because God created humankind as beings capable of reflecting on his creation by virtue of their intellect, God could create other beings that could do so too. Creation as a whole is the manifestation of God's names. One of God's names is the Living One/the One Who Gives Life (al-Hayy). The manifestation of this name – of life itself – is present not only in the material world but also in other parts of the universe, including the spiritual.

If God is life, there is no nonexistence. Life is reflected to different degrees in both visible and invisible ways in every part of the cosmos. Angels are part of this living system. Since God is the

<sup>28</sup> Qur'an 4:136.

<sup>29</sup> For a study on Al-Suyuti's work on angels, see Stephen Burge, *Angels in Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

hidden treasure and eternal life himself, he longs to be known and glorified endlessly. Due to many obstacles and distractions, humankind, however, is unable to worship and praise God ceaselessly and perfectly. For this reason, angelic beings respond to divine beauty and perfection in the most comprehensive way and fill the cosmic atmosphere with meaning, illuminating and making it “alive” in line with God’s name.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Nature of Angels*

What kinds of creatures are angels? What is their nature? The word for “angel” in Islamic theology is *malak* (pl. *malaik*). Angels are God’s messengers. While God is not existentially in need of other beings, his majesty and sovereignty make it fitting that those beings exist. Angels mediate between God and humans. It is believed that angels are created from light (*noor*). Unlike humans, they do not eat or sleep, as these needs are not part of their nature. As in the Bible, the Qur’an recounts occasions when angels appeared to Abraham. On one occasion, he received four people as guests. Known for his generous hospitality, Abraham rushed home and returned with a roasted calf. He placed it in front of his guests. But Abraham noticed that they were not touching the food. Seeing that Abraham was concerned, the guests comforted him and gave him the good news of a son. Abraham came to realize that his visitors were angels.<sup>31</sup> So angels often appear in human form.

Angels constantly glorify and worship God. The Qur’an mentions that angels “never disobey God’s commands to them, but do precisely what they are commanded.”<sup>32</sup> In another verse, angels are described as those who submit to God and are free of arrogance.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Nursi, *Words*, 191.

<sup>31</sup> Qur’an 51:26–28.

<sup>32</sup> Qur’an 66:6.

<sup>33</sup> Qur’an 16:49.

In this regard, there is no characterization of angels as either bad or fallen. Angels' lack of free will differentiates them from humans and places humankind on a higher level in the creational hierarchy: Humankind has a self or ego and therefore freedom of choice, while angels simply follow what they are ordained to do. In Islamic theology, angels have no gender. And while they are depicted as physical beings, even with wings, such descriptions are metaphors for their faculties or skills.<sup>34</sup>

### *The Role of Angels*

Sacred texts of Islam not only refer to the existence of angels and their nature but also describe their roles and attributes. The four chief angels are the archangels Gabriel, Michael or Mikail, Azrael, and Israfil or Raphael. According to a hadith reported by the Prophet's wife Aisha, the Prophet would often recite the following prayer at night: "O Allah, Lord of Jibreel [Gabriel], Mikail and Israfil, Creator of heaven and earth, Knower of the unseen and the seen, You are the Judge of the matters in which Your servants differ; guide me with regard to disputed matters of truth by Your permission, for You guide whomever You will to the straight path."<sup>35</sup>

Gabriel is known as the angel of revelation. Because of the distance of God from humans, revelation to the prophets is received through Gabriel. The Qur'an mentions Gabriel as the one who brought the Qur'an down to Muhammad's heart with God's permission.<sup>36</sup> Gabriel would appear to the Prophet in diverse ways, including in human form. According to various hadiths, the archangel would often come to the Prophet in the form of one of his

<sup>34</sup> *Hadislerle Islam* (Istanbul: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2014), 1:535.

<sup>35</sup> *Sahih Muslim: kitab salat al-masafirin wa qasriha, bab al-du'a' fi salat al-layl wa qiyamih.*

<sup>36</sup> Qur'an 2:97.

handsome companions.<sup>37</sup> In the Qur'an, Gabriel also appears to Mary in the form of a man.<sup>38</sup>

While Michael or Mikail is God's messenger in charge of issues related to nature, Azrael is known as the angel of death. The Qur'an asserts, "The Angel of Death put in charge of you will take your souls, and then you will be returned to your Lord."<sup>39</sup> Death is part of God's own creation and design.<sup>40</sup> According to a story widely shared among Muslims, when Azrael was assigned to be the angel of death, he was concerned that people would hate him because of what he does. God answered that he would establish elements for death so people would not criticize Azrael as death's main source. Rather, they would think of the secondary causes as the reason for the loss of a loved one.<sup>41</sup> Finally, Israfil or Raphael is the angel in charge of eschatological signs who will blow the trumpet at the end of the world.<sup>42</sup>

The Qur'an mentions other angels as well. Among them are the *hafaza* angels, who are always present with humans, one on the left shoulder and one on the right. God assigns a *hafaza* to each individual to record all that person's deeds. Nothing a human says or does remains secret.<sup>43</sup> Considering that most crimes and injustices, including domestic violence and abuse, happen behind closed doors, the Qur'an warns the perpetrators of such crimes that eventually, everything will be unveiled. Islamic theology also mentions the angels of *munkar* and *nakir*. These angels question humans immediately after their death.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Muhammad b. 'Ismail al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab fadail al-Qur'an, bab kayf nuzul al-wahy wa 'awwal ma nazal*.

<sup>38</sup> Qur'an 19:17.

<sup>39</sup> Qur'an 32:11.

<sup>40</sup> Qur'an 67:2.

<sup>41</sup> Said Nursi, *Şualar* (Istanbul: Söz, 2009), 342–43.

<sup>42</sup> *Hadislerle Islam*, 1:536.

<sup>43</sup> Qur'an 50:17–18.

<sup>44</sup> *Hadislerle Islam*, 1:536.

### **Between Angels and Human Beings: Jinns**

In addition to angels, Muslims believe in the existence of jinns: supernatural beings believed to be created from fire. According to Islamic sources, “Jinn, as psychic beings, unseen to most humans, occupy an intermediate state between the material realm of our physical experiences and the angelic and spiritual realms.”<sup>45</sup>

God sent Muhammad as a prophet not only to humans but also to jinns. Human beings and jinns are mentioned together in twenty different verses in Muslim scripture. Not only does the Qur’an repeatedly mention jinns, one of its chapters is even named after them.<sup>46</sup> The chapter relates an occasion when a group of jinns sat with humans listening to the Prophet Muhammad recite the Qur’an. The jinns were awed by the divine words. The Mosque of the Jinn in Mecca takes its name from that event. The Qur’an also points to the prophet Solomon’s relationship with the jinns in his service. Unlike angels, jinns can choose freely to become believers or disbelievers. In this regard, there can be good jinns and bad jinns.

### **Satan among the Jinns**

Muslims believe that Satan is a jinn. The Qur’an refers to Satan as Iblis, the first jinn God created. Because of his piety and surrender to God, Iblis was initially part of a group of angels, though he was not an angel himself. According to the Qur’an, when God told the angels that he would create a human on earth, their concerned response was, “Will you place someone there who will cause harm and bloodshed, while we glorify you with praises and thanks?”<sup>47</sup> God responded, “I know what you do not know,” and proceeded

<sup>45</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, “Commentary on *Surat al-Jinn*,” in Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 1427.

<sup>46</sup> Qur’an 22:72.

<sup>47</sup> Qur’an 2:30.



to create Adam, whom God taught his most beautiful names (*asma al-husna*).<sup>48</sup> He then asked the angels, including Satan, to prostrate before Adam. Everyone did so except Satan.<sup>49</sup>

When God asked Satan why he refused to obey, Satan reasoned that Adam was created from clay, while he was created from fire. Satan argued that he was superior to Adam and was therefore unwilling to prostrate before him. (For this reason, some Muslim scholars consider Satan to be the first bigot.) As a consequence, he was cursed and banished from heaven. Satan then made it his mission to tempt people away from the divine path. God granted him the freedom to do so while stressing that pious humans would be able to resist such deception.

Satan represents evil. However, neither jinns nor Satan has power over humans. In the Qur'an, Satan's tactics are described as weak.<sup>50</sup> Yet as noted in one of the hadiths, "Satan circulates inside the human similar to the blood in the veins."<sup>51</sup> He is always nearby and can have an influence on those who rely on him.<sup>52</sup>

Satan is not a power or entity in the universe independent of God's creative agency. Satan is a creature, not a creator. God gave him the freedom to test believers in this world.<sup>53</sup> But humans can spiritually and morally thrive through the temptations and challenges of Satan – and even rise to a higher level than angels.

## Human Nature

The nature of angels and jinns can be clarified by contrasting it with Islamic theology's view of human nature. Humans were created

<sup>48</sup> Qur'an 2:31.

<sup>49</sup> Qur'an 2:34.

<sup>50</sup> Qur'an 4:76.

<sup>51</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-ahkam, bab al-shadah takun 'inda al-hakim fi wilayah al-qada' aw qabl dhalik lilkhasm.*

<sup>52</sup> Qur'an 22:4.

<sup>53</sup> Qur'an 34:20–21.

from clay and came into existence after they were equipped with a divine spirit. The Qur'an says that God first created humans from clay and fashioned their descendants from semen, an extract of humble fluid. He shaped them and breathed his spirit into them. He then gave them hearing, sight, and thought.<sup>54</sup> The exact nature of the spirit (*ruh*) is ultimately unknowable; humans have only a limited knowledge of it.<sup>55</sup>

The combination of both spirit and clay is known as soul. Once the spirit merges with the body, the human self (*nafs*) comes into existence. The soul tends to forget its nature and the reality that it "does not reside in the body but in the spirit and in God."<sup>56</sup> In this regard, the word *nafs* has a negative connotation in Islamic literature: "It refers to all the darkness within people that keeps them wandering in ignorance and distance from God."<sup>57</sup>

Unlike angels, humans are granted free will; they can choose to obey or disobey God, who is constantly testing them. The Qur'an mentions that humans were created with dignity "in the most beautiful state."<sup>58</sup> But because of their freedom of choice, they can also descend to "the lowest of the low."<sup>59</sup> Compared to angels and jinns, humans have more limitations due to their nature.

Islamic theology emphasizes human weakness. Being aware of one's inherent weakness leads to a full reliance on God and is an essential step toward becoming a servant of God, who is beyond all weakness. Recognition of human impotence is thus a fundamental means by which the believer is led to explore God's attributes – to come to know God as the almighty, the most merciful, and the most

<sup>54</sup> Qur'an 32:7–9.

<sup>55</sup> Qur'an 17:85.

<sup>56</sup> Murata Sachiko and William C. Chittick, *Vision of Islam* (Saint Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1994), 100–1.

<sup>57</sup> Sachiko and Chittick, 101.

<sup>58</sup> Qur'an 17:70; 95:4.

<sup>59</sup> Qur'an 95:5.

generous.<sup>60</sup> Without understanding their own powerlessness, God remains unknown to humans.

Humans are mirrors of God's attributes, but they must be aware of their limits in relation to God. Awareness of these polar opposites – the unlimited weakness of humans and the unlimited power of God – provides insight into God's power, richness, and glory.<sup>61</sup> As part of their created nature, humans are dependent.<sup>62</sup> Being aware of this disposition brings one closer to God. Without the boundless spiritual poverty of humans, one cannot understand the boundless richness of God.<sup>63</sup>

The Qur'an and hadiths not only refer to humans' weakness and the fact that they are in need but also allude to their longing for eternity and attachment to wealth. The Qur'an points out that humans are often "excessive in their love of wealth" and think their possessions will help them live forever.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes that everything will perish except that which is turned toward God.<sup>65</sup> What is done according to the will of God can remain permanent. Humans are asked to be grateful for what they have been given. Being superior in the eyes of God is related not to wealth, rank, color, or race but to piety. Thus the superiority of humans to angels is a function of divine wisdom, not power or prestige.

As God created humans to choose freely to worship him, so he created angels and jinns to worship and glorify him by the necessity of their nature. Despite the fact that modernity and science have caused a decline in the belief in angels, this belief remains a key component of Islamic theology.

<sup>60</sup> Said Nursi, *Lem'alar* (Istanbul: Söz, 2009), 546.

<sup>61</sup> Said Nursi, *Mesnev-i Nuriye* (Istanbul: Söz, 2009), 152.

<sup>62</sup> Nursi, *Words*, 491.

<sup>63</sup> Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Qur'an 100:8; 104:3.

<sup>65</sup> Qur'an 28:88.

According to Islamic theology, God is the creator and the owner of the universe. The creation is the manifestation of his names. It reveals God's beauty, perfection, and power. God also created beings in the universe who can admire and appreciate his creations. Among them are angels, jinns, and humans. Their ideal response will lead them to love and worship God. The revelation of God's names in the world requires diversity in creation, which includes natural evil.