The 2025 Silber-Obrecht Lecture
What Does it Mean to Be Human? Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Perspectives

Response by Dr. Younus Mirza

First, it is an honor to be a respondent for Rachel Mikva's Silber-Obrecht lecture, "What makes us human?" Rachel and I have worked together on several projects and committees, whether that be the American Academy of Religion Interreligious Studies steering group or the edited volume *Hearing Vocation Differently*. I always appreciate her focus on scripture, her ability to engage different perspectives and make Interreligious Studies relevant. I would also like to thank ICJS for hosting this forum and Zeyneb Sayilgan, Heather Miller Rubens and Benjamin Sax for shaping and guiding this project.

Rachel's lecture captures the "moment", especially with the advances in modern medicine and AI technology, and makes us relook at what it means to be human. At my institution, and I believe in higher education in general, there is a lot of concern with AI, with many academics immediately jumping to fears over cheating, in particular how students deceive faculty members by using technology to turn in assignments they didn't write. As academics, especially in the humanities, we pride ourselves in our writing and prose. However, what makes us "academics", "thought leaders" or "intellectuals" if AI can do the writing for us? How will we distinguish between the human and AI voice? What will be considered an "authentic voice"? This strikes at the fundamental essence of who we are and how we teach.

The AI revolution appears in a line of previous revolutions that restructured and changed society. The Industrial Revolution replaced human labor in droves as machines performed tasks initially only humans could do in manufacturing and agriculture. The information technology revolution made information available at one's fingertips as a question could be answered through a simple internet search. Gone were the days when you would have to refer to an expert in the field or go to the library to find the answer in a book. Now, with the advent of generative AI, our cognitive abilities are being questioned with robots being able to shift through large sets of data and analyze, summarize, and evaluate them in ways that we previously thought only humans could do. Even elements of "creativity" and "innovation" that humans previously prided themselves in are being questioned, opening the door to Rachel's question of what makes us human.

The current moment thus seems to be an opportunity for Interreligious Studies which Rachel defines in her work "Interreligious Studies: An Introduction"[1] as

> The field of Interreligious Studies (IRS) entails critical analysis of the dynamic encounters – historical and contemporary, intentional and unintentional, embodied and imagined, congenial and conflictual – of individuals and communities who orient around religion differently. It investigates the complex of personal, interpersonal, institutional, and societal implications.

As Rachel explains, Interreligious Studies focuses on the "dynamic encounters" between various individuals and religious groups on issues that relate to the personal and societal. It does not only focus on the theoretical but also on the relational and draws upon an interdisciplinary body of literature to find solutions for shared problems and advance the common good. Interreligious Studies, thus, is well positioned to address some of the questions relating to the world's most pressing problems, from climate change to AI. As Rachel observes, "When pressed by technology, science, philosophy, politics, or the simple fact of difference to think about what it means to be human, religious notions that are embedded in our cultural imaginations will surface—and they shape our common life." In particular, she asks three questions:

- *Are we good?*
- Are we free?
- Are we more than dust, more than the flesh and blood that decomposes in the earth?

In her lecture, Rachel explores these "religious notions", especially with the idea of the "origin" story which is part of various religious traditions. The various "Abrahamic" traditions have the concept of Adam and Eve which talk about the ideas of purpose and meaning. In the field of the Bible and the Qur'an and Interreligious Studies, there has been a lot of discussion regarding Abraham and more recently Mary in terms of interreligious engagement. Abraham, in particular, reemerged after 9/11 to bring peace between the various "Abrahamic Religions" in a world of war and violence. Abraham was a potential anecdote to the "clash of civilizations" thesis which predicted that the next threat after the fall of communism would be a civilizational one.[2] The West needed to bond together and quell internal strife to thwart external threats and nemesis. For many, Abraham allowed us to see different religious perspectives, look for common ground, and find shared peace.

Now, it is productive to explore Adam and Eve since they speak about our fundamental value and purpose. As Mikva highlights, our various religious traditions incorporate origin stories that frame what makes humans distinct and different than other creations. In particular, the "Abrahamic" traditions speak about Adam and Eve and how and why they are created. In the Islamic creation story, God informs the angels that he is going to create a human but they object stating that "How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?" The Angels seem to be getting at Rachel's first question on whether

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[1] Rachel Mikva, *Interreligious Studies: An Introduction* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[2] Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 29. See also his subsequent book, Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schusterm,1996). For responses and critiques to this narrative see Emran Qureshi and Michael Anthony Sells (eds.), *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

we can "be good" and even the second on whether we are "free". The Angels are asking God why he would create a being that has the potential for destruction, mayhem and war when they are "good" and possibly the very definition and essence of "good". It could even be said that the Angels were concerned with the "common good" (*ma'ruf*) as they were not only worried about personal piety but rather human impact on one another and society.[3] The fact that humans could even engage in "bloodshed" demonstrates that they are imagined to have some "freedom" but, of course, within the confines of the God's ultimate plan and decree.

God responds to the Angels concerns that he knows better: "I know things you do not" and proceeds with his plan. He then teaches Adam "all the names [of things]" which suggests that humanity is distinct in its ability to learn and educate itself (2:32). God asks the Angels of these names but they are unable respond, stating that "we have knowledge only of what You have taught us. You are the All Knowing and All Wise." God then commands Adam to pronounce the names, which vindicates God's decision and demonstrates his power and ability. Adam's ability to learn can be connected to other Qur'anic verses on how humans need to "think," "rationalize," and "reflect" as a way to understand their purpose and to discover God. Yet, on the other hand, humans are seen as part of the creation with animals "being in communities like yourself" (6:38). The same verb used to talk about human creation (*khalaqa*) is also used in reference to animals, the planets, stars and heavens. Thus, humans are both part of creation but also distinct because of their rational abilities.

However, as Mikva notes, many Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions (hadith) emphasize the "body" and that Adam and Eve were not simply intelligent minds. Rather, Adam was created out of "clay" or a "wet clay" (37:11). This contrasts with the "fire" of Jin and the "light" of angels. Humans are thus made from a distinct material similar to other earthly beings but contrasts with other creations and celestial beings. The fact that humans are made out of "clay" suggests that we are just "dust" referring to Rachel's third point. However, this piece of clay has a "personhood", (nafs) "soul" (ruh) and "rationality" ('aql) that makes it different than mere "dust".

Moreover, Adam is not created alone but as a pair with Eve. The Qur'an is explicit – in using the dual tense – that both Adam and Eve communicated with Satan, ate from the forbidden tree, and then sought repentance together. In the Qur'anic story, God tells Adam and Eve that they can eat from whatever tree but not to approach a specific tree, otherwise they will become among the wrongdoers. Satan then approaches and begins to whisper to them, asking them why God had forbidden them to eat from the tree. Was it because he didn't want them to be immortal? Or become angels? He then swore to them that he was giving them sincere advice. Adam and Eve were then deceived and betrayed; they ate from the tree, and their nakedness was exposed, leading them to put together leaves from the Garden to cover themselves.

What is fascinating about this section of the story that is comes after the part where God creates Adam and "teaches him the name of all things". Adam is seen as superior because of his knowledge, ability to learn and rationality. Nonetheless, his knowledge and rationality is not immune to desire and deception. His curiosity and questioning lead him to disobey God's command and go astray. When Adam and Eve both disobey God, their bodies become evident to

[3] Sherman Jackson, "Islam and the American Common Good," *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* (2016): 26-39.

them and they begin to cover them with leaves from the garden. The fact that they become aware of their bodies is essential as it demonstrates that humans are not only minds and data but rather have a "body" or a "responsive body" that interacts with its surroundings and communities.[4] Human intelligence is not simply a set of algorithms or cognitive functions but rather deeply connected to its contexts, which in turn affects one's emotions and feelings.[5]

God then asks them "Did I not forbid you to approach that tree? Did I not warn you that Satan was your sworn enemy?" Adam and Eve admit their mistake and then repent in the famous prayer that is frequently recited by Muslims even today: "Our Lord, we have wronged our souls: if You do not forgive us and have mercy, we shall be lost." Instead of blaming God or denying their mistake, they admit their wrong deeds and implore God for his mercy. Their repentance is understood to be accepted, and they then descend to earth where they will live, die, and be resurrected. As the great Qur'an scholar and translator Abdel Haleem observes, "In the Qur'an, it is clear that, from the beginning, that man was meant to live on earth and even to have both the moral capacity to judge between good and evil and the freedom to choose between them, so that his success or failure are of his own making."[6] He continues to explain that God "gave humans the freedom to choose, err, and repent if they wish."[7] Adam and Eve are both given the freedom to eat from the tree and then decide if they should repent for their actions. This contrasts with Satan who disobeys God but stubbornly continues in his disbelief and pledges that he will take others down his path. Unlike Adam and Eve, Satan chooses not to repent and thus faces the consequences of God's displeasure and punishment.

The themes of goodness, freedom, and the body continue in the Qur'anic story of Cain and Abel or Qabil and Habil. The Story is often separated from that of the creation story but should be read together since it continues themes that of Adam and Eve. The story begins with both sons offering sacrifices, with one being accepted and the other not. Cain becomes jealous and then he desires to kill his Abel but the brother chooses not to. As he explains, "If you raise your hand to kill me, I will not raise mine to kill you. I fear God, the Lord of all worlds." Here Abel admits that he has the freedom to defend himself and retaliate but he chooses not to, fearing God and the ultimate punishment. Nevertheless, Cain's "personhood" or "self" prompts him to kill Abel and he becomes one of the losers. However, the story does not end there; God sends a raven to scratch up the ground and shows him how to cover his brother's corpse. Cain becomes remorseful and it is implied that he buries his brother in regret. Similarly to the creation story, the theme of goodness and freedom emerges in that both of the brothers have the option to do good, but only one chooses to do so. However, once Abel is murdered his body remains important and needs to be honored and buried.

In her lecture, Rachel brings up Richard Synder and his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment* and how conceptions of the creation story may negatively impact our view of society, especially in regard to mass incarceration and criminal justice system. Rachel uses the work as part of her project to "excavate the religious ideas that are embedded in our cultural imaginations—

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[4] *Simon Balle and Ulrik* Nissen, "Responsive Bodies: Robots, AI, and the Question of Human Distinctiveness," *Religions* (2023):358-377.

[5] Unlike AI, humans are not disembodied brains nor are they simply mindless bodies.

[6] M. Abdel Haleem, "Adam and Eve in the Qur'an and the Bible" *Islamic Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1997):261.

[7] Abdel Haleem 269.

ideas that justify law and social norms, impacting our common life." Religious ideas influence our society, culture and institutions in ways that are not immediately apparent and it is important to unearth them so we can be honest and transparent about their impact. As she says "we will keep digging." In the Islamic creation story, commentators have also been influenced with the idea of "fall" and "punishment" with God exposing Adam's and Eve's bodies and then their deliverance to the earth. However, I believe that the correct view is more of a "restorative justice" model where Adam and Eve make a mistake, ask for repentance and then given a new opportunity. The story is not as much about a "fall" but rather "descent" and new beginning on earth.

I also worry about translating and interpreting the word *khalifa* as vicegerent or God's deputy. These translations may suggest that humans are a mini-Gods and that they have the right to dominate, subjugate and exploit the earth. Such a view is connected with the idea of hierarchy and dominance, with one species able to control, manipulate, and destroy the others. This view has led to the current climate crisis, which is the result of the unchecked exploitation of the earth for the so-called benefit of human beings. It would be better to translate *khalifa* as a "trustee" and to see humans as part of creation and to see creation as similar to human beings. If we see the creation around us as similar, we can have a sense of empathy and compassion that may lead us to be better custodians of our shared home and earth. Thus, our views and interpretations of our religious stories, especially creation ones, have a profound impact on the various struggles and challenges that we face as humans today.

In summary, the story of creation in the "Abrahamic" traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam can provide insights into the question of "What makes us human?" especially in an age of technological advancements and climate change. Yes, humans are distinct in their ability to learn, think and rationalize. In the Qur'an, humans are repeatedly told to reflect, contemplate and use their rational faculties.[8] However, at the same time, humans are among other creations, whether animals or other celestial beings. Humans should have empathy with the world around them leading them to be proper custodians of the earth. They have the capacity to do good but also have the freedom to choose not to. Humans are further not created ex nihilo but out of "clay" and the earth they reside upon. They have a body that responds to the world around them, leading to a range of emotions from hope to fear. Moreover, they are not created alone but in pairs, creating families, nations, and tribes. The various stories therefore indicate that we are not simply our cognitive abilities but also responsive bodies and developing communities. Humans may have previously prided themselves in their ability to be smarter than others, especially other animals and creations. However, the of advances of technology make us pause and humble us in that a robot could do similar tasks and functions. Thus, the current advances in technology and Interreligious Studies allow us to rediscover and connect with other aspects of our humanity, whether that be our responsive bodies or communities, and appreciate our complete humanity.

[8] The Qur'an further commands humans to read and swears upon the ability to write.