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The Human Person in Islam

Prof. Abdal Hakim Murad

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Abdal Hakim Murad
Dean, The Cambridge Muslim College

I well might think myself
A humanist,
Could I manage not to see

How the autobahn
Thwarts the landscape
In godless Roman arrogance.

(W.H. Auden, 'Et in Arcadia Ego')

Auden's lament is symptomatic of that alienation from nature which is a mark of the modern predicament. Having liberated ourselves from the discomforts of our environment, we feel paradoxically bereft. We hardly miss the diseases, the child mortality, and the poor dentistry of ages past; but we intuit that we have paid a price for our emancipation. Our bodies continue to be components of nature, but we are unsure how to remain at ease with that embodiment in a culture which for two centuries at least has seen nature either as an opponent to be tamed, or as a cornucopia of raw materials which might add to our pleasures.

Some might take this as a reason to harbour a systematic enmity to the modern world. However sensitive modern theologies have moved beyond an older discourse which triumphalistically identified faith either with Luddite reaction or with a Panglossian enthusiasm for progress. A median, more ambivalent position seems to be called for whereby we seek to acknowledge the blessings of modern comforts while remaining anxious for the salvation which, in our traditions, was usually seen as primarily accessible through a life of *sancta simplicitas* lived in harmony with nature. Finding such a golden mean amidst modernity's techniques has by no means proved an easy assignment.

As well as suffering an alienation from nature and natural forms of living, we moderns also struggle with our age's denial of self-denial. Christians and Muslims alike try to determine the contemporary scope of ancient concepts of renunciation and asceticism, so salient in our early centuries and normally viewed as part of the vocation of sanctity. Living lives surrounded by the carnival of modern desires, which seems to know no shame or restraint, religious believers struggle to locate the just balance. Is the mortification of the saint relative to his culturally-determined expectations, or is it an

absolute, which should never be adjusted to contemporary norms? If we are honest, we will admit that we have not developed a fully-satisfying teaching of renunciation as part of a modern moral theology.

Despite this, we remain aware that dignity, in the great ages of faith, was always bound up with the paradox of contemplating God's presence in the order of nature, while seeking freedom from the excesses of our natural impulses. We find this aestheticism, coupled with a spiritual athleticism, celebrated throughout the literature of Islam, taking its point of origin in the Prophetic poverty, in which a primal and ancient belongingness to nature is accented by the practice of an undeniable asceticism shown in fasting and an indifference to worldly possessions. Following this first example, complex trajectories were traced through the holy biographies of later *zuhhad* and *nussak*, ascetics and renunciators.⁽¹⁾ Even in our age, the practice of inner warfare against excessively partaking of Nature's feast continues to be celebrated in those traditionalist Muslim circles which have not identified outward rather than inward disruptions as their most immediate spiritual problem.

So Auden gives voice to a paradox of our condition. We belong to nature, but we do not desire to be its property. We crave a life in harmony with the natural world, but we wish to be more than merely part of it; and the rhetoric of 'saving the biosphere' may only disguise the deeper spiritual nostalgia which haunts us. Here monotheism, which attributes the order of nature to a Maker, and appoints us to be its responsible and balanced trustees, offers the most indispensable corrective to the nihilistic gluttony with which humanistic modernity consumes the globe's buried and marine treasures. Dignity, conferred by God, consists in holding our naturalness and our otherworldly destiny in a wise and symbiotic balance; and this our humanism has so far failed to achieve.

A retrieval of our dignity as truly part of the tapestry and economy of creation, then, must be based on the two elemental Scriptural insights: supported by divine grace we heal our souls by contemplating the beauty of nature, and we overcome our flaws by transcending our own selfish natures. These principles, known to Islam as *fikr* and *riyadh*, are, we might say, the heart of monotheistic epistemology. Together they dress us in a robe of honour, and gift us with a wisdom which surpasses mere logic and material analysis. As the Baal Shem Tov puts it, 'from the physical, we perceive the spiritual';⁽²⁾ and, we would add, the spiritual enables us more fully to value the physical. It is exactly in this sense that green is historically the colour of Islam: it is the colour of

(1) Tor Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles: studies in early Islamic mysticism* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 33-54.

(2) Cited in B. Sherwin, 'The Human Body: A House of God', in Abraham J. Karp (et al.), *Threescore and Ten: Essays in Honour of Rabbi Seymour J. Cohen on the occasion of his seventieth birthday* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1991), p.100.

natural life, and also of the turban of the saint, who through his inner restraint proleptically indicates a life in the garden of paradise.⁽³⁾

A balanced contemporary spirituality, which reasserts the dignity of the human person, will hence necessarily begin with a creation spirituality which acknowledges our full membership of nature. Nature's beauty invites participation, not rejection; and this is a moral as well as an aesthetic judgement. The anthropologist Malinowski uncontroversially identified the 'organic needs of man' with 'nutrition, defence and comfort, mating and propagation,'⁽⁴⁾ and went on to propose that human customs are successful insofar as they fulfil these needs. We might begin with this rather elementary insight into our membership of nature, while eschewing a narrow-minded and reductionist empiricism. If we are denied certain basic needs, particularly the right to defend ourselves and to procreate, we cannot claim to be fully part of the beauty and economy of nature; part of our inner balance will be atrophied, and hence our human personhood will be at grave risk of imbalance. Affirming this, the three monotheisms have proposed theologies of the high nobility of the warrior's calling and of the institution of marriage. Despite the rhetoric of the New Age, which accuses monotheism of thwarting our most natural and sacrally-appointed needs, our heritage is replete with examples of human souls who reached the fullness of their dignity by holding the sword against tyranny, and by 'becoming one flesh' with a spouse.⁽⁵⁾

In the context of Islam, which takes itself to be an Abrahamic restoration of a primordial monotheistic style (*ḥanīfiyya*), and whose deep impulses see nature and our natures as vibrant signs of God through which we live in Him, the marital impulse, seen as the deepest sign of our belongingness to nature, is particularly exalted. A recent study has shown how the purity laws which are so important an aspect of Muslim daily life, 'far from epitomizing and perpetuating the polarity of existence and essence, have rather helped to preserve an *affinity* between the material and spiritual in the Islamic ethos.'⁽⁶⁾ The revealed boundaries for human life, as elaborated in the juristic literature, serve to channel and enable our most powerful and holy yearnings; the *ḥanīfiyya* entails an

(3) Emma Clark, 'The Islamic Garden: history, symbolism and the Qur'an', pp.93-110 of Vincent Cornell (ed.), *Voices of Islam IV: Voices of Art, Beauty and Science* (Westport CT and London: Praeger, 2007), 97.

(4) Bronislaw Malinowski, *Culture as a Determinant of Behaviour*, cited in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.13.

(5) For the Christian virtue of political knighthood see for instance Jean Hanin (tr. Gustavo Polit), *Sacred Royalty from the Pharaoh to the Most Christian King* (London: Matheson Trust, 2011), 145-89. For some helpful reflections on the spiritual enrichment supplied by *eros*, see Jean Leclercq, *Monks on Marriage: a twelfth-century view* (New York: Seabury, 1981), and for a contemporary perspective Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2004).

(6) Ze'ev Maghen, *Virtues of the Flesh – Passion and Purity in Early Islamic Jurisprudence* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 9.

intensification of gratitude to God through participating in the ‘green’ purity of His signs. Nature and the need to discipline the tendency to excess are thus brought into a serene harmony.

To the extent that Muslim life has imitated its art – that is, its literature – the opposing tendencies of license and restriction may be seen to have cooperated in creating important aspects of societal ethos in large parts of *Daʿ al-Islām*. As good fences make good neighbors and death makes life sweeter, so do the regimented elements of religion allow for the fuller appreciation and exploitation of the unregimented elements of life. Both sexuality and spirituality are largely exercises in unruliness; the *shariʿa* delimits each of them and thereby makes them possible. Not only society, but the individual as well, is in need of solid foundations if he or she is to reach up and touch the intangible, is in need of a stable launch-pad whence to soar to the heights.⁽⁷⁾

The *fiqh* – the canonical laws of human conduct, inspired by the Prophetic example – thus emerges as a science of life which supports dignity by balancing our naturalness (*fiṭṭa*) with our natural modesty (*ḥāya*). Islam, rejecting Gnostic views of the body as an ‘odious tunic’,⁽⁸⁾ is a religion of the celebration of the body, but is also famously the religion of modesty; as the hadith reminds us, ‘Every religion has a particular virtue, and the virtue of Islam is modesty’.⁽⁹⁾ It is not a case of private indulgence and public sobriety; for the religion is generally characterised, publicly and privately, by moral puritanism, as is witnessed, for example, in its disciplines of fasting, and its absolute dismissal of gambling and other transactions based on uncertainty (*gharar*).⁽¹⁰⁾ Instead, the *fiṭṭa* and *ḥāya* are mutually reinforcing principles: the ‘sensuality’ of the Muslim which attracted the contempt of earlier European generations is not in tension with his noted public sobriety and gravamen.

Inspired by this vision of humanity as the crown of nature, uniquely able to recognise its worth and its divine Source in a way that is participatory rather than merely that of an observer, but able also to hold impulses in conscious and disciplined balance, Muslims, and surely all other monotheists as well, are called to challenge the contemporary image of humanity, which is in ever-increasing danger of degradation at the hands of a pure biological functionalism, abetted by a global culture of material greed which at best recognises only a utilitarian calculus as a basis for restraint. Herein lies an irony which richly repays reflection. Many moderns accuse religion, and monotheism most especially, of engendering disruption and violent competitiveness. At their unthinking

⁽⁷⁾ Maghen, 282.

⁽⁸⁾ Alexandra Cuttel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 21-46.

⁽⁹⁾ Narrated by Ibn Majah.

⁽¹⁰⁾ For this ‘severe’ dimension of the Islamic moral ideal see Louis Gardet, *Les Hommes de l’Islam: approche des mentalités* (Paris: Hachette, 1977), 189-90.

or extreme fringes, the religions may indeed be vulnerable to this charge. But monotheists should fight vigorously against the severely impoverished definition of the human person advocated by some of religion's cultured despisers. We should not take with much seriousness the humanism of those who call God a 'delusion', and then proceed to demolish every philosophical foundation for considering His most noble creature to be anything other than the result of a billion years of blind selfishness. The lesson of the most vehement ideologies of the twentieth century, such as Communism and Nazism, was that defining the human person mainly in terms of natural selection risks making an idol of competition and cupidity, deleting all that is finest in our humanity. It is the terminal point of the naturalistic fallacy.

The aberrations and consequent human suffering brought about by modern individualism need hardly be enumerated. The steady increase in addictive and compulsive disorders, of promiscuity and divorce, and of clinical depression, are evidently associated with a human condition which has been given everything except shared meaning and ritual – the two things which, probably, we most deeply crave. Having wreaked havoc upon the natural world, man is also damaging his own body, through epidemics of obesity, increasing alcohol consumption, and the modern tragedy of HIV/AIDS. Old notions of human dignity as the consequence of self-restraint seem to have little purchase in a worldwide corporate culture which, in a hypertrophic imposition of the cynicism of Adam Smith, strives to maximise desire as well as fulfilment.⁽¹¹⁾

John Gray has noted the rootedness of modern liberalism in the thought of Thomas Hobbes.⁽¹²⁾ Renouncing older, ultimately Aristotelian and scriptural assurances about human moral perfectibility and the *summum bonum* delivered through duty and service, Hobbes proposed predation as the underlying impulse of humanity: *Homo homini lupus*. Individualism is hence our nature, and a strong centralised state must step in to curb its natural impulse to transgress against other human beings. This individualism, which to traditional faith seems Promethean and even idolatrous in its respectfulness towards the ego, inexorably leads on to the validation and even the glorification of practices which are a self-evident contradiction of the Creator's purposes in the body and in the world. These practices, turned into the basis of ideologies of the equal rightness of individual preferences, then turn fiercely on the residue of religious faith, well-aware that only here may human beings discover a force strong and conscientious enough to obstruct the apotheosis of their desires.

In the Muslim perspective, the modern loss of dignity appears, most immediately, as the aftermath of the grandiose ambition of the Renaissance, exemplified by Michelangelo,

⁽¹¹⁾ Mostafa al-Badawi, *Man and the Universe: an Islamic perspective* (Amman: Wakeel Books, second edition 2002), 77-100.

⁽¹²⁾ John Gray, *Liberalism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 8-10.

to revive pagan conceptions of human magnificence.⁽¹³⁾ The Renaissance princes admired Aristotle's view that wealth facilitates virtue, and that magnificence is superior to ordinary human liberality, while 'greatness of soul' is preferable to normal conceptions of honour and dignity.⁽¹⁴⁾ Such vainglory, abhorrent to the monotheisms, dominated Europe until very recently, evinced for instance in the vogue for the Baroque; however it can hardly survive the cold scrutiny of our modernity, whose humanism is in a certain way less triumphalist. In our time, scientists all too easily deconstruct the pose of Michelangelo's *David*: they know too much about the mechanics of the body and of the brain to believe any longer in this vainglorious self-exhibition. Michelangelo and the sensibility he presents offer, in fact, a ready target to the secular polemic; and faith must at all costs avoid dressing itself in such pagan garb. Humility is the only stance of the human creature which is both believable and consonant with an awareness that one's dignity comes only from what one is called to be, not from what one has accomplished, whether it be in the university, the 'cat-walk', the counting-house or the playing-field. Humility, too, is our appropriate habit when we consider our place in the economy of nature. *David* stands little chance against a tiger, a blizzard, or his own senility.

Muslims today find themselves called, as never before, to restore an image of human dignity in a postmodern age which, ignorant of the saints, is in danger of critically devaluing the principle, regarding it as no more credible than ancient ideals of 'heroism' or 'magnificence of soul'. Of course, it is true that current material concerns touching human dignity are not wholly unacknowledged by revelation. 'We have ennobled the children of Adam,' says the Qur'an, 'and have carried them on land and sea'. (17:70) The language of the world as existing for human usufruct is hardly alien to revelation; but although the 'Greens' may denounce monotheism for 'objectifying' nature, what they condemn is no more than an acknowledgement of humanity's evident position as posed at its summit. To reject the principle of subordination is to reject the logic of nature itself. However this 'ennobling' is not a self-willed 'heroism', whether in triumph or adversity; it is merely the outward token of a potential inward reality. In the scriptural 'prologue in Heaven', God commands the angels to prostrate to Adam (2:34). This astounding instruction, apparently issued in violation of the most elementary monotheistic principle, is of course a sign that even the angelic orders are naturally subservient to man. This, however, denotes Adamic man, which is to say, man as originally conceived, as God's 'vicegerent' (*khaliḥa*) upon earth, into whose clay has been 'breathed' God's spirit (15:29; 38:72). *In potentia*, Adam contains all the 'natural virtues' which are intrinsic to his dignity: warriorhood, sexuality, diligent cultivation, and the production of art and literature, the frustration of which risks diminishing his humanity. These are, however, still only latent, which is why Adam and his spouse must depart from Eden to enter a realm of growth and decay where their full created potential as *homo sapiens* may have true scope to flourish. From an Islamic perspective, this is the

(13) 'Islamic art is comtemplative, whereas Gothic art is volitional, not to speak of the Renaissance, in which the volitional becomes worldly, hypocritical, sensual, and ostentatious.' (Frithjof Schuon, 'Islamic Art', pp. 1-3 of Cornell [ed.], *Voices*.)

(14) *Nichomachean Ethics*, IV, 1-4.

sense of the 'fall': the error of eating from the Tree was forgiven by the merciful God (2:37), but the pair are not to re-enter the Garden in this life. Instead, they are challenged with the wilderness, where they must create some semblance of what Eden was like. Triumph and adversity, and therefore heroism, are certainly not excluded, but the dignity which they indicate are the fruit not of ego and self-will, but of an inner temper of total submission and reliance on God.

Islam, like the other monotheisms, teaches that God made Adam 'in His image'.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the context of a Semitic perspective that is sensitive to the risks of 'comparing' (*tashbih*) God to His creatures, this is an undoubtedly daring formulation; but the Prophet of Islam is on record as speaking in these terms. Evidently the utility of the metaphor outweighs even so grave a risk. What is intended, of course, is not a pagan conception of a physical, finite God (such as that proposed today by some Mormon theology, for instance). Even though the body points to aspects of deity,⁽¹⁶⁾ God cannot 'have a body', for He cannot be confined. Instead, the Prophetic conception seems to relate to the divine predicates which are such a salient part of the Qur'an's metaphysics. The radically transcendent God who cannot be so much as glimpsed by Moses (7:143) allows a superabundance of names validly to point towards Him. These names, as al-Ghazali saw, can be predicated, *mutatis mutandis*, of the saint, that is to say, of the human being who, through self-restraint and the love of God and of others, is once more 'Adamic'.⁽¹⁷⁾

It is in this sense that Islam affirms the centrality of love, the principle proposed as so axiomatic by the *Common Word* document which launched these Forums,⁽¹⁸⁾ and which, in the context of a vision of nature and life whose positivity and optimism generate a marked religious temper of gratitude (*shukr*), appears as a quintessentially Islamic virtue. Love, defined as the soul's recognition of beauty and perfection, is the most recognisable virtue of the saints (*awliya*); they love humanity and creation because, unlike ourselves, they clearly see God's handiwork in a world full of grace, just

⁽¹⁵⁾ For this hadith and its controversies see Daniel Gimaret, *Dieu a l'image de l'homme: les anthropomorphismes de la sunna et leur interprétation par les théologiens* (Paris: Cerf, 1997).

⁽¹⁶⁾ Qaiser Shahzad, 'Ibn Arabi's metaphysics of the human body,' *Islamic Studies* 46 (2007), 499-525; cf. A. Goshen-Gottstein, 'The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature,' *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), 171-95.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Abu>Hāmid al-Ghazālī> (tr. David Burrell and Nazih Daher), *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God, al-Maqṣūd al-Asna>fi>sharh}ma 'āni>asma' Allah al-h}isna>* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992).

⁽¹⁸⁾ Lejla Demiri (ed.), *A Common Word: Texts and Reflections: a resource for parishes and mosques* (Cambridge: Muslim Academic Trust, 2011).

as they behold the modes of actual or latent perfection which, due to our egotism, we have not perceived. Their love is nothing other than conformity to God's love: to be a saint is precisely to love what God loves, and this is of inconceivable immensity. As the renowned Shari'a expert Muhammad Hashim Kamali concludes:

God's love of man, His mercy and compassion, are meant for mankind as a whole without any qualification, and encompass people of all faiths, and those who may not even subscribe to any religion. For God's love, like all His other attributes, is absolute. If God's love was the cause of man's creation, then, like His bestowal of the attribute of dignity upon man, His love too is unqualified and all-encompassing.⁽¹⁹⁾

Kamali goes on to cite Ahmad Yusri>

God's love is proven [and meant to be] for all people regardless of religion. For love is the cause of man's creation, which is why no one can be excluded. The same is true of God's conferment of dignity on the progeny of Adam.⁽²⁰⁾

It is in the continuing embrace of this love that 'Adam' and 'Eve', in various degrees of inadequate approximation, continue to walk the grace-filled earth. Finally equal in dignity, because created 'of a single soul' and native to that Paradise where only perfection is allowed, they demonstrate to the world the conscious, percipient, and hence deiform, order of creation which is the summit of everything else in the cosmos. Critically, they enter the world as two genders, indicating humanity's categoric belongingness to the order of nature, and representing, in a form which is invited to be perfect, the richly diverse and complementary principles of masculinity and femininity, between which 'God has ordained love and mercy' (Qur'an 30:21), and in whose union peace (*sakīna*) results (30:21). Masculinity is to be assertive, for Adam's intrinsicity directs him to the nourishing and defence of Eve; while the latter is supportive, honouring the husband as the indispensable protector of her child.⁽²¹⁾ Human nobility thus exists in two mutually-dependent and loving modalities; and although the articulation of these must necessarily differ among human societies, according to economic, cultural and even environmental factors, the underlying differentia between the sexes are of particular importance to Islam. Among their enduring symbols today we might mention the *hijab*, the maintenance of the beard, and, more generally, a

(19) Muhammad Hashim Kamali, *The Dignity of Man: an Islamic perspective* (Second edition: Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002), 18.

(20) Ahmad Yusri> *Hijqūq al-Insān wa-asbab al-'unf fi'l-mujtama' al-Islāmi>fi>dāw' ahkam al-Shari'a* (Alexandria: al-Ma'aif, 1993), cited in Kamali, 19.

(21) Which does not exclude the possibility of properly 'heroic' forms of womanhood in the public sphere, a tradition initiated by 'A'isha; cf. Marcia Hermansen, "The Female Hero in the Islamic Religious Tradition," *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions* 2 (1992), 111-143.

celebration of the richly-distinct character of the man and the woman. In an age when even an elementary principle such as gender is understood only in a confused way by so many, Islam's insistence on gender differentiation continues to offer humanity a model of respectful difference, which, for all the secular enmity which is directed against it, is profoundly attractive to many in our relativising modern societies.⁽²²⁾

Islam's 'anthropological' ideal is, of course, epitomised in the person of the Holy Prophet. Muslim devotional literature hence naturally focuses on the specifically Muhammadan type of sainthood, which shows the excellence of a 'perfect human being' (*al-insan al-kamil*). The following sequence, chosen from the rhyming birth-litany (*mawlid*) of al-Barzanji>(d.1764), gives a good sense of what Muslims value the most:

He was, may God bless him, intensely shy and humble.
He would mend his own sandals, patch his clothes, and milk his own sheep.
He would serve his family in a beautiful manner.
He loved the poor, and sat with them, and visited them when they were ill.
He would attend their funerals and never despised anyone brought low by want.
He would accept people's excuses. He would never address others in a way they disliked.
He would walk with widows and with slaves.
He was not in awe of kings. His anger and approval were for the sake of Allah alone.
He would walk behind his companions, saying: 'Leave my back for the angels.'
He would ride camels, horses, mules, or a donkey that a king had given him.
So great was his hunger that he would bind a stone to his waist,
even though he had been given the keys to this world's treasurehouses.
The mountains offered to turn to gold for him, but he refused.
He would, may God bless him, avoid useless talk, and would be the first to greet those he met.
His prayers would be long, but his Friday sermons would be brief.
He was agreeable to people of honour and honoured them, and would joke,
yet he only spoke true things pleasing to God.⁽²³⁾

In a popular devotional text such as this we find the specifically Muslim sense of a nobility rooted in ethical decorum and humility. The Prophet appears like an arabesque: he moves through the world with a rhythm that reveals the divine order and grace which

⁽²²⁾ See for instance Anne Sophie Roald, *Women in Islam: the Western experience* (London: Routledge, 2001); Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: challenging historical and modern stereotypes* (Herndon VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002).

⁽²³⁾ Ja'far ibn Isma'il al-Barzanji> *al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*>(Bombay, n.p., n.d.), p.43. A DVD recitation is available from Mishkat Media: 'The Mawlid of Al-Barzanji' (2010).

lie behind the surface of nature. 'The best of all matters is the middle course', as a hadith declares: ⁽²⁴⁾ each of his actions offers a perfect balance between excess and defect (it is no coincidence that Platonic ethics gained favour in medieval Islam). However his utter consciousness of God made him very unlike an apotheosized Greek hero. Humility, and a balanced celebration of nature and the divinely-appointed goodness of human nature (*fiṭṭa*), mark him out as a model of the Semitic type of active saint. The type is ultimately of Abraham, who was *ḥanīfan musliman*: 'a primordial, natural monotheist, a Muslim' (Qur'an, 3:67).

⁽²⁴⁾ Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhawī, *al-Maqasid al-Ḥāsana fi-bayān kathīrin min al-aḥādīth al-mushtahira 'ala'l-alsina* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-'Arabi, 1405/1985), 332.