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CHAPTER 1

With the Other[1]

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Introduction

This period, this present moment, is the stage where the living act out their responsibility. They cannot avoid it and cannot avert their gaze from what manifests itself as the presence of evil, whether by seeking refuge in the past as dead passivity or by concocting images of a desirable future. One may escape reality in either of these ways, but both, as is now more evident than ever before, fail to resolve the issue of the responsibility of the living. This present moment is the only certainty, the only thing about which there can be no doubts. There is only one other moment that resembles it, and that is death. The present moment and death are the only absolute certainties of human existence, and yet both seem now to be more remote than ever. And neither the present moment nor death can be comprehended without two further certainties—Eternity, and God. These too are remote from modern individuals, who have distanced themselves from these certainties to such an extent that almost their entire existence is imbued with the very reverse of certainty.

Individuals living in these times are actually in greater uncertainty than at any other time. Without explicit certainty, everything that they attain through thought, everything that preoccupies them, is a source of fear—a fear that is the expression of ignorance. The more the will is focused on uncertainty, that is, on everything other than the present moment and death, than Eternity and God, and the greater and more profound the fear, the more complex it becomes. The individual, faced with the innumerable multiplicity of phenomena in the world, can thus never be free of fear in the face of these phenomena. And since today's individual sees only himself in the image reflected back by the mirror of the world, the fact that alterity is the fundamental condition of how one faces existence means that fear of the other pervades that individual's entire being. And the more

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directly the relationship with the world is experienced, and the more indirectly the relationship with Eternity and God, the deeper this all-pervasive fear becomes.

Without considering this uncertainty and the fear that it inspires, it is impossible to explain the underlying presence and regular upsurges of evil in the world—an evil which the world has always experienced, though it is felt particularly keenly by adults alive now, and their parents and grandparents. In particular, this insecurity and fear is the prism through which the other, as the inevitable determiner of the human self, is constantly viewed. The fundamental human question, therefore—that is, the only one that can draw us closer to the one Foundation—is the question of the other, of alterity.

The present age has brought about changes that until recently seemed unthinkable. The world's unity in diversity has been so transformed that the other, the different, is no longer out of sight and out of mind. He is right here, our immediate neighbor, but a stranger for all that. Though in our midst, he is alien to the majority around him—alien in language, alien in traditions; yet his foreign, alien nature does not make him any weaker, or further from the Truth. As an individual, he may be the intimate of his neighbor, involved in the circles the latter lives in, and seen as likeable and cultured. In thought and deed he may assist them in their aspirations, and thus be perceived as necessary to the majority group. But in his determination to remain part of the community from which he sprang, he also resolutely and passionately strives to preserve his foreignness, his alien nature—to rebuild, among strangers similar to him, his old community in a place where he is a foreigner and an alien. In so doing, he confirms not only his difference from the local majority, but also his belonging to a community that feels itself to be foreign to the host community. The majority group often believes, it is true, that the individual who is a foreigner and an alien must be welcomed and respected as a guest. But that same majority is not ready—or does not know how to make itself ready—to welcome into its midst a community of foreigners and aliens, and to make it part of itself.[2]

[2] This is where the essential differences lie between the way the self is shaped in the traditional and in the modern world-view. The boundaries of the community are more decisive for individual identity in the traditional world-view than in the modern. The modern state or national polity, which is grounded in ideology, cannot tolerate internal differentiation within the group identity. It may acknowledge the right of the individual to a distinct identity, but not the political rights of an entire community within the nation-state. Tolerance, in this world-view, is reduced to a relationship

Since every outsider, regardless of how good or even saintly he may be, is seen as part of his own minority community (from which he may well indeed be inseparable or may not wish to detach himself), fear and hatred in the face of foreigners and aliens in general—who are inevitably lumped together with society's outcasts, its liars and thieves, its unclean and sick, its lazy and the greedy—give rise to a resistance that can have three outcomes. The first is persecution or even extermination, the second is assimilation, and the third is tolerance. There has been no time in which all have not been present, and there are countless instances of each. If one were to cite the worst examples of persecution and extermination in the century that has just ended, even deciding when to stop counting would be an insuperable moral challenge. But the assimilation of foreigners into the host majority is not the answer either. It is a sign of weakness on the part of both, for assimilation shows the arrogance of a majority that is unable to recognize or acknowledge the minority—which means the orphan, the poor, as well as the foreigner, the other—as the source of its debt to Oneness.

But if one were to list the best examples of tolerance, the task would be all too simple—and yet it would be recognized as the perennial expression of what is best in human nature. This, the acceptance of the need for unity in diversity, enables one to ascend towards perfection by enhancing one's own individuality, a perfection for which the human individual was created. This supreme tolerance, which is the perennial source of human striving, is what has been called the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres de Rerum Sublimium Arcanis Abditis*.[3] And it is in tolerance as wisdom that we find confirmation that the moulding of the self—whether individual or collective—is in principle impossible without all other selves. Others delineate the self. Others may be remote or intimate, but they form the boundary that defines the beginning and end of the self.

between the individual and the nation-state as a whole. This is clear from the views expressed by Stanislav de Clermont-Tonnerre in the National Assembly in 1789: "We must refuse everything to the Jew as a nation and accord everything to the Jew as an individual" (Michael Robert Shurkin, "Decolonization and the Renewal of French Judaism: Reflections on the Contemporary French Jewish Scene," *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (2), 2000, pp. 156/76).

[3] See Jean Bodin, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime* (*Colloquium Heptaplomeres de Rerum Sublimium Arcanis Abditis*), trans. Marion Leathers D. Kuntz (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1975.

And though they can be known in relation to one another, this is not sufficient, because knowledge, the process of coming to know and understand, is a relationship between knower and known, discoverer and discovered. Given that every phenomenon in the outer world and in the self is also constantly changing in relation to every other, there can be no such thing as final, immutable knowledge. In the sacred traditions, the "heart" stands for "reversion," "mutability," "flow" and "gentleness";[4] and it is only in the heart's perfect sensitivity to the metamorphoses of all that is in the cosmos and within the self, in its delicacy of feeling, that the Perfection that is beyond all confines, beyond all mutability, can be affirmed. This is a matter of discerning the real from the unreal and assenting to the real—that is, of resolving the duality within the self which reflects the relation between motion and Stillness, between illusion and Truth. As long as the self is discerned from the Self, the contingent from the Absolute, knowledge can flow from this duality—though perfect knowledge lies only with the Self, while incomplete knowledge (or the illusion of perfect knowledge) is an attribute of the self. Thus, paradoxically, the self's only true actuality lies in how far it is contained within the Self or the Self is contained within it.

There are two possible starting-points for the journey of discovery by which one strives to reflect this perpetual duality and resolve it within each self. The first starting-point is the external world; and central to this is the question: "What is the source of all that is external, and why?" This, however, is also a question to be asked of the self, and the answer is that everything that is in the cosmos speaks *In the Name of God*. Given that the self can range between the potential for ultimate evil and the potential for Stillness, for Perfection, accepting this answer as to the purpose of all existence (which is to speak God's Name) may result either in the illusion of compassion, or in its antithesis, in seeing perfection as the reason and purpose of human existence. This range of choices both postulates and demands complete freedom—but this too implies accepting that there can be no proof of Perfection external to Perfection itself, for Perfection is not contingent upon anything else. In its most profound essence, human nature has no other possibility. If, accordingly, the questioner accepts

[4] For more on the traditional meaning of the term *al-qalb* (heart), particularly in the wisdom of Ibn al-'Arabi, see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 106-109.

the answer and sees the Self and Its Name as present in the outer world, this means that the self of the questioner has submitted, wholly and willingly, to the Self, an act of submission which is the only way to perfect oneness. The will has then become that which grounds and guides faith—which is the mutuality of love and knowledge—towards the good, which is the Absolute. And it is from the Absolute via the Name, in a process of irradiation both finite and inexhaustible in the potential forms it may assume, that the forms, relations and content of the good—and the enigma of evil too—become manifest in everyone. This is because the Self, with all Its knowledge and mercy, encompasses all things—just as the self, in and as space and time, is merely a potential manifestation of the Self. Actualized by its acceptance of the answer, the will of the self then becomes identical with the Will of the Self, with the Will of God. "And when thou threwest, it was not thyself that threw, but God threw" (Quran 8:17).

The second possibility is to start from the Self. If the Self is Perfection, is Absolute, the world is only its extension, its periphery lit by the rays of the Self at its center. Realizing this, the self can abjure the world and seek its own actualization in the Self. But both approaches resolve the duality between self and Self through the testimony that there is no god but God, no truth but the Truth—the testimony that imbues the whole of existence.

The heart, the human center, constantly veers between offering and repudiating both these possibilities. Depending on how relations between self and Self are encoded in different traditions, one or other of these starting-points (from the world or from the self) may be given greater emphasis. But both are present in the observer and in what he knows, for their difference is resolved only in the Self as Unicity. Moreover, their presence takes different forms, though these attest to one and the same essence. Forms circumscribe and limit, so that the essence cannot be reduced to any one of them or even to all of them combined. But this does not mean that forms are the antithesis of essence: indeed, they affirm it, though they cannot exhaust it.

I/We and Others

Every "I," like every "we," begins and ends in the indeterminate depths of one's inner being. However, both also begin and end in the far from clear-cut boundary with alterity. Alterity is thus the crucial determinant—and also content—of the self, whether individual or collective. The Quran has to say of this:

> Hast thou not seen that God knows whatsoever is in the heavens, and whatsoever is in the earth? Three men conspire not secretly together, but He is the fourth of them, neither five men, but He is the sixth of them, neither fewer than that, neither more, but He is with them, wherever they may be; then He shall tell them what they have done, on the Day of Resurrection. Surely God has knowledge of everything.[5]

It follows from the statement "neither fewer than that, neither more" that for every individual selfhood, just as for every collective identity, God is the ultimate Other. Though the self has the potential to attain the Absolute, as long as it has not done so, it cannot be the Absolute, and the same is true for the self's boundaries with every other self or collective identity. The inner secrets and outer manifesta-

[5] Sura 58:7. In this essay the Quran will be referred to, unusually but as a matter of principle, as the Recitation, the approximate meaning of the Arabic. The choice of this word is based on the conviction that no translation is possible if key terms that have become ossified over time, and have thus lost their connection with their standing and life in the speech as a whole to which they belong, are not reconnected with that totality, which implies being translated into the target language. God's own words in the Quran tell us that it is His uncreated Word, expressed through His messenger, the Praiser. This means that it is the presence of the Absolute in linguistic finitude. In its original fact of being revealed, therefore, it is constituted by the contours of the Absolute in the human self. These contours differ from language to language, but they always remain connected to the Absolute that manifests Itself in them. That which is revealed cannot be reduced to any single contour out of all their countless manifestations in individual beings. Without that openness of every individual and every language to the Absolute, individuals would be merely that which manifests itself in them as comparable and quantifiable. In the light of this, there would be no human openness to the Absolute nor, as the Tradition teaches, the Spirit of God in the uncreated center of the individual. The prerequisite for a sacred tradition's validity is its connection with the Absolute. For the *debt*, as the relationship between the individual as debtor and God as Creator, to be due, to be religion in the original sense of the word, its basis must be the doctrine of the Absolute. Nor is this all; that debt, as the relationship between the individual and God, must comprise a spirituality that is wholly consistent with that doctrine, which means that the doctrine is from God. It comprises communion and mystery, and manifests itself in them and in sacred art. When these conditions are not met, it is fair to speak of philosophical doctrine and ideology, in which neither symbol nor way are from God. The consequences of interpretation in which there is no lasting link with the Truth are plain to see wherever human will, and the action based on that will, have left their imprint. Given that, in such a view, society is the sum of these isolated individuals, it is consequential, and constitutes a greater value. This means that the social order and its interpretation determine the individual, not the individual the social order. The traditional postulate of the individual as openness to the Self, which includes the view that the illumination of society is possible solely through the open individual, is transformed into the conviction that society can be shaped solely by rational comparison, quantification and forecasts.

tions of human relationships—be these relationships with the world as a whole, or with other individuals or groups—are inevitably contingent, for God is the only Absolute Other. Yet God is also omnipresent: thus any relationship with another that is without His omnipresent alterity implies action *against* that other, which in turn implies action against God.

One who says he is a Christian acknowledges, directly or otherwise, that he regards his selfhood as beginning and ending with that of a Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist or the follower of any other tradition.[6] It is only through the boundary with the other, which means through contact with the other, that one's own distinctive identity is possible—for wherever one may be, the definition of one's individuality is impossible without the three, four, five (or fewer, or more) others. And with each of these individual and collective identities, God is one and the same alterity.

In the modern world-view, however, which is based on the notion of the autonomy of the self, this concept of alterity is disregarded or denied. This is the key cause of the weakening of those collective individualities through which the self is shaped and guided towards the transcendent first cause and final purpose. Modern secularism claims that, if bonds between the individual and the nation-state as a whole are to be established and maintained, any boundaries that correspond to traditions of subordination to the transcendent principle must be eliminated from the social scene. But recent trends towards the desecularization and re-spiritualization of the world are now calling for a re-examination of this hitherto dominant world-view, using tolerance as a basis.[7] Thus the internal boundaries within modern communities are becoming ever more significant as markers of unity in diversity, in which relationships between different gender, ethnic and religious communities are becoming increasingly crucial for social stability.

One of the characteristics of the nation-state is that it has a defined territory, which implies external borders. But no state border, any more than any other phenomenon, can present an impermeable barrier

[6] Given that the subject of this paper is *concordia mundi*, which means the quest for possible sources of a principled unity in diversity, or principled and justifiable tolerance for the other and different, the quest cannot exclude any tradition. When these diversities are defined as Jew/Judaism—Christian/Christianity—Muslim/Islam, which is most commonly the case here, this does not mean that the full range of diversity is thereby either excluded or disregarded.

[7] See Peter L. Berger, *Le réenchantement du monde* (Paris: Bajard, 2001).

to contacts and links with the other. If the totality of the individual includes the totality of alterity, therefore, the nation-state includes distinct entities that not only demarcate but also transcend physical boundaries; and, as we have seen, the nation-state inevitably includes group differences. Yet these boundaries have no standing without that external authority which—as the sacred traditions attest—is perfect, infinite and eternal. These boundaries of human togetherness or community, moreover, are not reducible to territory or to a simple, rational blueprint. And when the nation-state seeks to enhance the quality of life for its citizens, this need not necessarily imply the abolition of their group affiliations, their complex differences and interrelationships within the nation-state. Boundaries between citizens of a given nation-state need not present a problem if they are viewed as interrelationships between individuals within one state, one nation. In practice, however, this unity often does preclude a great many collective identities within the state, whether ethnic, religious or linguistic.

The recognition and acceptance of the boundaries between them are prerequisites for the recognition of individuals. If there are elements of the population of the nation-state that are not recognized and acknowledged within the boundaries of their collective identity, there can be no talk of majority rights either. Indeed, it is from lack of such recognition and acknowledgment within the political order embodied by the state, and within its internal "national" elements, that there springs the whole tragic experience of the twentieth century. As Dominique Schnapper notes, "Philosophes et juristes sont donc à nouveau tentés de concevoir une forme d'organisation politique, dans laquelle appartenance culturelle et organisation politique cesseraient de coïncider, au moins à titre d'idéal et d'idée régulatrice; en d'autres termes de remettre en question le principe et l'idéal politique de l'Etat-nation (Therefore, philosophers and jurists are again tempted to devise a form of political organization, in which cultural identity and political organization would cease to coincide, at least as an ideal and as a regulatory idea; in other words they would call into question the political principle and ideal of the Nation-state)."[8]

With these developments, Islam—both as sacred tradition and as a tool of modern and profane ideologies—is becoming a more central and complex issue for the Western world as a whole. Europe begins and ends with Islam. If it knows Islam, it knows itself—and vice versa:

[8] Dominique Schnapper, *La communauté des citoyens: Sur l'idée moderne de nation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 77.

if it does not know Islam, Europe does not know itself either.[9] But what is this knowledge of Islam on the part of present-day Europe? This is a question of central importance for how one sees life—which implies seeing peace in motion and unity in multiplicity. It is so crucial that the very question itself must be subjected to scrutiny. The key terms here are "knowledge," "Europe," "Christianity," and "Islam." But before examining these terms, it would be worth focusing on their distinctive meanings within what may provisionally be called *historia sacra* and *l'âge de lumière*. These are two mutually contradictory outlooks, whose values are arranged along diametrically opposed scales. Any discussion of these four terms, therefore, is conditional on defining their status within each of these two outlooks, by which the world order as accomplished through history may also be interpreted. A preference for one and an aversion to the other interpretation arises from the opposing natures of the two outlooks, that of sacred history and that of the Enlightenment. The question of the religious foundations of tolerance may be addressed according to these differing outlooks as follows:

- Islam and Muhammad in European sacred history,
- the sacred history of Europe in Islam,
- European self-understanding as against that of Islam,
- Islamic self-understanding as against that of Europe.

All these concepts and relationships are present in historical reality, as two frequently independent trajectories—the social and the scientific/academic. They are known to everyone, although their definition varies from one individual to another, from one philosophy to another, from one period to another. There is, of course, nothing resembling a unity of assumptions or postulates for this field of knowledge which would make it possible to determine a set of principles similar to the mathematical principles of natural science. This essay, however, offers an elucidation of the terms under consideration—terms perhaps at odds with the body of knowledge that is the product of a heritage not subject to critical re-examination. It is hoped that this elucidation will minimize the lack of clarity attached to the terms used in these four relationships.

The subject-object distinction as the key expression of human existence is in constant flux. If rephrased as the relation between the

[9] 2 QWKHQNEHWHHQ,VOP DQGWKHQWWRI(LURSHVHHZRP DD0 DWQDN *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

self and the world, one can neither say that the self does not belong to the world nor that the world does not belong to the self: they are both distinct and both interconnected. Thus it is not feasible to reduce and confine the self and the world to the quantifiable: any such attempt is ultimately bound to admit its own impotence. Moreover, the self and the world are mere illusions if denied or deprived of their basis in transcendence. The world manifests itself to the self as a universal illusion, being seen by each individual self in the same way, whereas the illusion of the self is more complex and malevolent, for its delusions are not only inverted but also specific, particular. But the two illusions are mutually reinforcing in their isolation from and distortion of their original, authentic createdness. Given that both self and world are contingent, it is only in orientation towards the Absolute, which both eternally transcends them and is eternally immanent in them, that they can manifest themselves as the revelation of the Mystery that is the undifferentiated and immutable Plenitude.

This, however, calls for a recognition of the relationship between philosophy, as the rational attitude to the duality between self and world, and metaphysics, as an attitude which transcends philosophy by acknowledging that reason is no more than a derived or reflected form of Intellect. This acknowledgment is a key element of the doctrine, way and ritual of every tradition, but it has become blurred or lost from sight in the modern era. But this does not mean that it is absent, for its source is Truth, which the self both looks towards and holds in its center; rather, it means that people have forgotten it, or deliberately distanced themselves from it by following the delusion that the self is Reality. Nor is this acknowledgment something that can be characterized as either "European" or "Islamic": it is the human condition, and as such it is a matter of human concern.

Indebtedness and Connectedness

"Europe and Islam" is a commonplace apposition in modern discourse, an expression of the relation between two different religious, political and cultural entities—an apposition which is generally read as an opposition, whether or not this entails the desire to transcend that opposition. The terms of this apposition appear clear enough, but if the same process of deconstruction and construction is applied to both, the flaw that underlies their purported opposition will become clear.

Europe today is a geographical, cultural and political reality that is striving to transform its diversity into unity. The diversity that this

unity encompasses covers an exceptionally wide spectrum—from monarchies to republics, from the poor to the extremely wealthy, from the industrialized to the agricultural, and so on. Unity is understood as transcending these differences and as achieving a shift that turns certain shared elements—such as Christianity and parliamentary democracy—into universal features. Islam, however, does not denote a similar entity that happens to be outside Europe. There is no geographical unit outside Europe that has a similar coherence to that of the European Union, for example. One may, it is true, compare Europe with another region of the world, large or small, and all that it comprises in the cultural, political and economic sense. Such features as levels of economic development, the extent of poverty, modes of governance and the way they are enacted into law, education systems, levels of technological development and the like may be compared. One may also speak of the role of religion and how it differs from one country to another. But if we take "Europe and Islam" as a baseline for charting such comparative relationships, it soon becomes clear that we are not comparing like with like.

More importantly, Europe is not a single person, or even a single people with a single language, any more than is Islam. Even if the relationship is changed to that between "Christianity and Islam," which is what is generally implied by "Europe and Islam," the same conclusion can be reached: neither "Christianity" nor "Islam" are people who speak and who thus might be construed as being in dialogue, nor are they uniform phenomena with clearly defined, comparable boundaries. They could not be regarded as such even when Christianity was tied to the geographical notion of Europe, and Islam to another part of the world—though, in reality, neither has ever been limited to a specific geographical region. Neither Christianity nor Islam, in fact, are reducible to a single expression. If nothing else, the fact that for centuries everyone from the saintly and the good to the criminal and the fraudster has put their trust in "their" religion, be it Christianity or Islam, is persuasive evidence of this. Further evidence lies in the fact that in some expressions of both religions (expressions which may be hard to differentiate from the authentic speech of Christianity or Islam) various forms of paganism old and new may be discerned.

Individual Muslims, Christians and Jews, however, may enter into dialogue, regardless of who and what they may be on the spectrum of their human potential. This dialogue may be motivated by equanimity in regard to difference, by political realism, by existential necessity, or by a principled need to preserve and enhance, understand and deepen

what they are, and to assist one another in so doing. But however they give form to their individual selfhoods, their identities are inseparable from the Quran and Muhammad, the Gospel and Jesus, and the Torah and Moses respectively.

At the center of all three traditions is the notion of indebtedness, of that which is due, as the relationship between the individual and the Absolute. In all three traditions, the relationship of the covenant encompasses God as the bestower and the individual as the recipient. According to this covenant, the individual owes a debt to the bestower, a debt which derives from the voluntary acceptance of the Divine offer. The bestower is the Absolute, the Truth—and there can be no two Absolutes. The Recitation says of this: "We believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you; our God and your God is One, and to Him we have surrendered" (29:46). This One and the Same God of the Muslims, Christians and Jews may have different names—"To God belong the Names Most Beautiful" (7:179)—but this multiplicity of names is only the confirmation of His Unicity, a Unicity which is the confirmation of the Ineffable. This Unicity is linked reciprocally with the totality of existence, and with the human individual as part of that existence.

This interconnectedness is displayed in the triads of God-Cosmos-Man, Truth-Way-Virtue, and Doctrine-Rite-Recollection. If God and the Truth are one, this necessarily entails the existence of a perennial Doctrine that is the unalterable essence of every Way and Rite. The forms taken by Doctrine, Way and Rite, however, may differ without betraying the potential for human virtue and perfection—which means submission to the One God, or repaying what is due to Him.

What is nowadays called "Islam" by its detractors, as a byword for disorder and fears associated with this particular Other, has for the most part little to do with the perennial content of the relationship between God, Cosmos and Man as told in the Recitation.[10] Hence the word "Islam" is often used today to ascribe blame to the other, the "them," in order to justify the arrogant, coercive or violent behavior of the more powerful, the "we."[11] The members of humanity who share the epithet "Muslim" encompass almost every racial, ethnic, linguistic

[10] On the fundamental elements of the *sciencia sacra* given in the Recitation, see, for example, Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam: The Foundations of Muslim Faith and Practice* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1996), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002).

[11] On understanding the rite of the *scapegoat* and resistance to it see, for example, Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

and geographical element in the world, but tend to represent the weakest and poorest sections of humanity; and despite their numbers, they still constitute a minority in world terms, especially in terms of power or levels of development. It is thus of crucial importance for the whole of humanity to understand non-Muslim attitudes towards Muslims, an attitude that not infrequently takes the ideological shape of islamophobia—which is essentially identical with anti-Semitism, that well-known expression of blaming the other for one's own feelings of deprivation or misfortune. But it is impossible to say where the sources of this ideology lie without addressing the central issue of the relationship between philosophy and metaphysics, and between ideology and tradition.

The connection between man and God is the origin and first principle of all things, and is realized through man's openness to the Absolute and through Its presence in him as the insufflated Breath of God. This is the original human testimony: "And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify touching themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we testify'" (7:172). This universal metahistorical recognition of man's covenant with God recognizes the relationship between the individual and God, but also that of different communities with Him. There are differences between individuals, and also between peoples, but these do not in principle exclude their connection with the One and the Same God. This individual and collective link with God is premised on the principled openness of every individual—regardless of racial, ethnic, linguistic or any other human attribute—to the Absolute. The diversity and multiplicity of religious doctrines, ways and rituals are plain to see; but this multiplicity is united in its transcendent principle. The issue of the relationship between the quantifiable and the Unquantifiable, the temporal and the Eternal, the finite and the Infinite is thus inseparable from the understanding and interpretation of diversity among people. Humanity's openness to the Unquantifiable, the Eternal, the Infinite may be termed a "debt" that is due to the latter, from which humanity's right to the latter derives.

Meeting that debt, those dues, and the attainment of that right demands the duality that the sacred traditions express as the relationship between "this world" and "the other world." Moreover, this very duality confirms the underlying unicity which makes the duality translatable into its different traditions, for there can be no translatability if different doctrines, ways and rituals are not founded in the One and Only God, or "sent down" by Him into existence. And there can be no translatability if every individual doctrine, way and ritual is not affirmed by virtue of every other, regardless of affiliation.

The liberal postulate of the private, individual nature of difference precludes a collective identity based on the covenant between man/community and God. But it is not enough simply to recognize the private and personal nature of the individual and make his political rights contingent on this recognition, for in the absence of public acknowledgment of the totality of distinctive identities, both individual and collective, the fragmentation of the self and hypocrisy become political necessities—hence the individual and the community can only be acknowledged if there are clear boundaries with the other.

The arrogance of the powerful, however, must also be ruled out. In Adam Seligman's words, "This approach is an essential element of the Islamic notion of *hilma*, as of the Jewish *anva*, and the prohibition on the use of force in attaining the truth."[12] Hence the prohibition on the use of force, as a condition of human clemency, is also a crucial part of one's attitude towards the "weaker" other, for it is where the other as neighbor begins that attitudes towards difference are established in qualitative and quantitative terms: the weaker has rights over the stronger, and the stronger a debt to the weaker. If it were not so, the inevitably finite power that can be measured in quantitative terms would have to be recognized as God: but God is not and cannot be finite. (He is incomparable and unquantifiable. Everything that is in existence manifests Him, for it is created with the Truth. Without that, it is meanness and depravity.) To threaten or jeopardize the weaker, by contrast, is to wreak havoc on one's own form and to block the insight that the self can orient itself towards the Absolute only through knowing and acknowledging itself as contingency.

It is with this acknowledgment that purification, or orientation towards the Absolute, begins—a purification, a detachment from the unreal, which orients the self towards the Self. This inner revolution demands acceptance that perfection entails praise of the Absolute, or anointment by It. It demands a return to original human perfection, a distancing from sin. Or, to put it another way: by drawing closer to the Praised One or the Anointed One, as persons who exemplify perfection, the individual renounces gods and draws closer to God. It is only in renouncing phenomena in the world and in the self as gods, and in drawing closer to God as unicity, that one may accept diversity—a diversity within which the self is shaped as the reading and recognition of the signs that speak of the Truth.

[12] Adam B. Seligman, "Jezici tolerancije," in *Forum Bosnae*, 16/02, p. 201.

The Reading of the Book

By their own claims, and in the belief of the majority of their recipients, the Torah, the Gospel and the Quran were revealed or "sent down" by God. This view of God as their source, as the One who first uttered them, and of man as their recipient, entails a relationship between higher and lower, and cannot be understood without the doctrine of signs. Thus accepting the revelation—that is, the sending down of the Book from heaven to man on earth—and the presence of the Divine in human speech means accepting that the heavens are the sign of the Intellect and Spirit, and that the earth is the sign of man. This acceptance is what makes interconnection between the world and the individual possible, via the unicity to which both are open. In the Semitic revelations, creation as a whole received its seal, its culmination, in man, who is at the center of the Divine intent, in the word that is the beginning. But humankind was set at the center only after the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. As a result, human nature is both beginning and end, inward and outward, expressed both finitely and in infinitude. The uncreated spirit of the Creator is within the individual, and with His actualization, the human self resolves its duality. There is no self but the Self, and hence the self resolves its duality in a multitude of ways, which may differ in their outward appearance, but invariably bear one and the same essence. This is what makes the individual into an open observer of the world, recognizing in both the outer world as a whole and in every separate manifestation within it the Perfection that is the One and Only. Everywhere and always, the individual faces Perfection, and between him and that face of Perfection lies the way that is marked and defined by the signs in external phenomena and their open or covert reflection in the self. In the light of that Perfection, all phenomena in the outer world and within the human self are signs and symbols that, as long as there is an observer, are more or less transparent windows on the Absolute that irradiates them and manifests its goodness in the innumerable forms of their multiplicity. And when the duality between self and Self is resolved, the signs become wholly transparent to the Truth. God is then in the individual and sees Himself through the individual, and He encompasses Himself in Intellect, giving the human self the principled potential to submerge itself in Intellect of the self's own free will. Thus God announces Himself to man and sends His Word down to him out of the Silence. The Word is received and accepted, and then uttered to other people. Given that the initial recipients—Moses, Jesus and Muhammad—accepted the

Word out of their own free will, so too those who listen to them are free to accept or reject it. That which is accepted is remembered, witnessed and recorded, and then spoken, read and heard—but Silence is the source and outcome of both speech and listening.

The ability of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad to receive into their human selves the Divine Self that speaks is testimony that this is the supreme human potential. But its transmission to other people, in languages that enable it to be spoken, heard and interpreted, is testimony of the potential of the Infinite to abide in the finite. The fact that the Infinite may abide in the finite is what links man with God, through the uncreated center of his being and the Intellect as the mirror of unity in multiplicity. The interpretation of the revealed speech is accessible to man; but given that it can only be understood from the perspective of multiplicity, it is contingent, and as a result differs from one person to another. Only God can have the final and complete understanding of the Book that has been sent down:

> It is He who sent down upon thee the Book, wherein are signs clear that are the Essence of the Book, and others ambiguous.
>
> As for those in whose hearts is swerving, they follow the ambiguous part, desiring dissension, and desiring its interpretation; and none knows its interpretation, save only God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, "We believe in it; all is from our Lord" (3:17).

No human being, therefore, can say that he knows the complete interpretation of the revealed books. If it were so, it would contradict the claims made in them that they derive from God, and that they form a link between human contingency and His Absolute nature. As a result, every human interpretation of the books is limited, just as man, even in terms of his supreme potential, is set apart from God by the interdiction:

> And We said, "Adam, dwell thou, and thy wife,
> in the Garden, and eat thereof easefully where you desire;
> but draw not nigh this tree,
> lest you be evildoers" (2:35).

This original interdiction was established by God, who thereby showed that man's freedom, and the confidence in it that was offered and accepted, are to be seen as the supreme measure of human rectitude; hence the interdiction is inseparable from the state of the human self. And it is not backed up by threat of force. Because the interdic-

tion is in reciprocity with the human center, to violate it entails loss of clarity regarding not only the outer signs, but also the inner selves of those who recognize that He is the Truth. Humanity's original perfection confers happiness upon creation, and upon all existence within creation, so long as the connection with and orientation to the Supreme is maintained. The interdiction makes it possible for free will to strive towards the greatest possible proximity to the Absolute. And acceptance of the interdiction means submission or compliance, by which the bestowed is transformed into indebtedness and confidence, so that it may be accepted and, finally, repaid.

Becoming a believer, one of the faithful, offers the individual the supreme potential: the relationship with God, Who is also Faithful. One of His "Names most beautiful," the Recitation tells us, is the All-faithful;[13] thus God's faithfulness is absolute. The relationship between the faithful and the All-faithful is one of faith or trust in God. Since God is holy, His trust in man is holy too, whereas the individual's trust is invariably contingent, for there is no faithful but the All-faithful. The individual is given every opportunity to travel the way, on the basis of the trust which has been accepted, from the most profound state of evil in the self and/or hell to the most sublime state in Paradise/the self. Everything must eventually vanish save the Self or the Face of God, and the potential to travel from the depths of hell to That Face Which alone never vanishes is the condition for perfect human freedom, as the inevitable premise of the perfection of trust.

And just as the path taken by the individual from the depths to the heights is inseparable from trust in God, so ultimate redemption is inseparable from Divine Debt. It is only that Debt which enables the entirety of human potential for freedom, through the acceptance of the interdiction which determines the infinite proximity and distance between the individual and God. This interdiction is grounded in trust, which means that the individual has the freedom both to lose his original innocence and to regain it *In the Name of God*. But this trust in the Absolute and its manifestation in the totality of existence, and in humankind as the sum of all manifestation, rejects neither knowledge nor mercy, since both are attributes of the Absolute.

Existence, therefore, is the interpretation of the revelation by which the Creator brings together in human language His signs, scattered as they are in space and time. These are the words with which

[13] See 59:23.

God showed mercy to man after his violation of the original interdiction: "Thereafter Adam received certain words from his Lord, and He turned towards him" (2:37). Orientation towards primal human perfection implies turning towards patience and the truth; but since human existence ranges from "the self that inclines to evil" to "the self at Peace," or from fear of phenomena to awe of God, interpretations of the books may also cover that entire spectrum.[14] Indeed, the whole of human experience and its expression throughout history is testimony to this. But if it is hard to comprehend how it is possible for so many interpretations of the revealed books to have evolved and been pressed into the service of evil and violence, one thing is indisputable: the acceptance of God as Merciful and All-compassionate is diametrically opposed to such acts of conscription. In particular, no interpretation of the revealed books that fails to reinforce the view of the other as a companion and an equal part of creation before the Face of God can be justified from the perspective of God's all-encompassing mercy. This may seem to be an abstract view, but it is in fact very specific, even to those who have accepted existence as the immediate and specific, and God as intermediacy and abstraction.

Furthermore, the acceptance of one's revealed book as Divine speech, and the maintenance of one's link with the book, are impossible without humility, for "no compulsion is there in the debt" (2:256). Thus debate between the speakers, readers and listeners of the revealed books can approach the source only if it is conducted as fairly as possible[15]—fairness that means an awareness of change as a worldly constant, accompanied by a strengthening of the link with the good and the beautiful as the essence of human clemency. Awareness and patience relate to God, the world and people alike,[16] and are inseparable from the attitude towards the other:

> Surely the good shall be among gardens and fountains
> taking whatsoever their Lord has given them;
> they were good-doers before that.

[14] On the differentiation of the self between its orientation towards evil and its inclusion in Peace, see, for example, the chapter entitled "The Degrees" in Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources* (London: Unwin, 1988), pp. 328-31.

[15] See 29:46.

[16] See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1996), p. 224.

Little of the night would they slumber,
and in the mornings they would ask for forgiveness;
and the beggar and the outcast had a share in their wealth (51:15-19).

Will and Submission

A prerequisite for discussion of the term *Islam* within any of the relationships proposed above is that it be detached from the indeterminacy of contemporary political language. *Islam* is an Arabic noun deriving from the verbal root *s-l-m*, and its meanings are "submission," "humility." Since submission and humility also include the ability to distinguish between that which is submissive and humble on the one hand and that to which it submits or bows in humility on the other, submission encapsulates the relationship between temporal and eternal being. As a result, the notion of submission can have no meaning external to the order of being. This in turn means that submission is what differentiates being within the multiplicity of its manifestations as ordered from higher to lower. In this order, the Supreme is that which is manifest to all, and only that, for it may be signified by no other sign than itself. Existence is thus the revelation or creation of the Supreme.

From the human perspective, creation is arrayed in three levels—Heaven, Earth, and that which lies between them in the external world, which correspond respectively to the intellect, the soul and the body. In his earthly or bodily nature, man is submissive and subordinate to the two higher levels of being. Submission or humility is thus the recognition of the original nature of the self. Another stance is possible, however: the denial of that original nature. Both recognition and denial derive from the human will; the will thus confronts that duality or rift within the self, and must choose between the two. The consequences are wholly different depending on which choice is made, for the two are not equal: one path is higher in its relationship with the Truth than the other. If the latter path is chosen, the precedence of truth over falsehood, or good over evil, is overturned. Opting for the better path, by contrast, entails greater humility before the truth and the good. And this in turn means recognizing that man is created from clay, as the lowest manifestation of the Principle, and that to it he returns—dust to dust—and thereby bears witness to his submission to the Supreme. Indeed, the root of the Latin word *humilia*, and its direct derivation humility, is *humus*, meaning earth. The Hebrew word Adam, too, has the same root as *hā'ādām*, which also means earth. Thus the earthly nature of humankind, together with the insufflated Spirit of God, prompts and directs man to maintain his openness towards the Creator. This in turn implies that it is impossible for him ever to attain fully the Truth, but

also that he is never without the openness that continually directs his human self towards the First Principle. The *sajda* or prostration in prayer is the decisive sign or rite of the inclusion of human will in the reality of existence towards God. It denotes and attests to humility and proximity to the earth. In turn, the cultivation of the earth and its rites means discovering humankind's original nature, the same nature as in the Garden, where man was the appointed guardian and cultivator. To cultivate the earth is itself a rite—there is no cultivation without rite, and vice versa. Similarly, the denial of the outward signs means the denial of one's own nature; and the denial of one's own nature amounts to the denial of the other. It is only when the cultivation of the land is seen as a rite, and vice versa, that the indivisibility of humanity and earthliness can be grasped.

Clemency in Bosnian is *blagost*, the root of which is the Sanskrit *bhárgāh*, meaning light, of which the derivative is the Indo-European *bhel*, meaning to shine. As clemency is the acknowledgment of the humanity of the other, this in turn means that original perfection also always lies in the other. It is thus only in acknowledging the other that the humility of the self before the Other is possible, for every other is the image and sign of the Other. This is expressed in the testimony that *there is no other but the Other*. None of its specific features, i.e., its finitude, can exhaust Alterity, but neither can it have any meaning other than the manifestation of Alterity. And Alterity is sought by reading of the signs in the outer world and the inner self, signs whose openness is complete, since it is directed towards Perfection.

Thus, if Islam is regarded as something that somehow came to Europe at some time in the past, this is a denial of the fact that *islam*, as submission to God, is the nature of every individual and every phenomenon, and that there is no sacred Tradition without submission. If the Arabic term *din* (religion, faith) be taken in its original meaning—the Arabic root *dana*, *dayn*, with the meaning of debt—it can be seen to have the meanings of indebtedness, direction or course, subordination, response, requital. Each of these meanings implies two parties and a relationship between them. A debt is the relationship between donor and recipient; a direction or course is the relationship between those taking that course and their objective; subordination is the relationship between the subjected and that which is superior; response or requital is the relationship between someone and that to which he has been exposed. As a result, obligation—*ob-ligation*, with its root meaning of *binding*—is an invariable constituent of that relationship. If the individual is one party to that relationship, the other

party to that obligation—i.e., one of indebtedness, direction, response, reception or transmission—may be a phenomenon in the observable world and all that lies above and beyond it. There follows from this a clearer perspective on the words of the Recitation: "Today I have perfected your debt for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved submission for your debt" (5:3). "The true debt with God is submission" (3:19). This debt or indebtedness, obligation, direction, response, judgment and tradition may be expressed in various languages, but its essence is immutable, since the Other is Absolute:

> That which you serve, apart from Him, is nothing but names yourselves have named, you and your fathers; God has sent down no authority touching them. Judgment belongs only to God; He has commanded that you shall not serve any but Him. That is the right debt; but most men know not (12:40).

The inalienable debt of submission, therefore, is the revelation of the Absolute through the contingent. The debt is true, given that it is Truth that imposes it. The debt thus binds the debtor to the Truth:

> It is He who has sent His Messenger with the guidance
> and the debt of truth, that He may uplift it above every debt.
> God suffices as a witness (48:28).

The consequence of this is that the choice to honor the debt, to fulfill the obligation, to choose one's direction, and so on, is "clear" and "sincere": "Belongs not sincere debt to God?" (39:3) This debt includes, as a result, the truth that manifests itself on the path given to the debtor, who testifies through virtue that he is walking that path. The debt determines the truth, the way and virtue, and the indebted individual returns it with will, love and knowledge.

In the modern notion of knowledge, the present moment as the expression of eternity, and death as the confirmation of the mystery of life, are rejected as "other"; thus the concept of the present moment has been replaced by that of brevity, or smallness, and eternity by that of long-lastingness, or magnitude. Yet this smallness is never so minute that there is not something still smaller: hence it reveals itself as a sign pointing to emptiness, to the metaphysical zero which is absolute and, as such, independent of everything, however small or large it may be. It is into this emptiness that all the mysteries of minuteness flow, for it is the Mystery, the Silence, that can be spoken of only by saying what

it is not. The first full confirmation of the emptiness is none other than the One; and this One also confirms the unlimited multiplicity that neither adds to nor subtracts anything from it.

Similarly, "magnitude," being comparable and quantifiable, is never so great that there is not something still greater; it is always exceeded by the non-existent, by that to which nothing is comparable or similar, by the Sacred. Indeed, the definition of the Sacred is that which surpasses every magnitude in existence. "God is with everything," says 'Ali bin Abi-Talib, "but not through association; and other than everything, but not through separation."[17] This unattainability on the part of every magnitude, notwithstanding Its orientation towards It, is none other than the corroboration that the Sacred is beyond all similarity and comparability, whilst everything that is in the outer horizons and the inner selves is Its sign. And the center of human nature, its uncreatedness, enables these signs to range incessantly from one level of meaning to another in their orientation towards the Sacred, the All-peaceful, the All-faithful. All this confirms that the world and the individual, in their totality, are created in the fairest stature relative to the Creator and in His image, but that He cannot be the image of anything. The relationship between quantifiables, regardless of what they are in existence, therefore, is not everlasting, nor are these quantifiables equivalent to the Alterity they confirm and reveal. The moment the individual takes a stance towards himself and the world—to any individual phenomenon within it and to all phenomena combined—without that Alterity which is their original and final principle, *tolerance* becomes impossible, and the impulse to and reason for intolerance lies in associating and attributing the Absolute and God to anything that is comparable or quantifiable. If it is impossible to see in every phenomenon the sign of the Absolute, and to hear the voice of the Silence, the innermost human yearning for knowledge and mercy is denied. The phenomenon then defeats the individual in his desire to transcend the stability of space and the mutability of time. This in turn gives rise to thoughts and acts by which the individual mocks, refutes and destroys the signs in the outer world and in his own self. And the worst form of intolerance of the world and its signs comes from taking the desires, thoughts and interpretations that are in the self—which

[17] *Nahj al-Balagha: Selection from Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Amir al-Mu'minin, 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, vol. I, trans. Syed Ali Raza (Tehran: WOFIS, 1979), p. 16.

means in the non-absolute—and molding them into the language of sacred ritual and doctrine, into absolutes without the Absolute.

Faith: Knowledge and Love

When Satan attempts to turn Jesus away from God and make him "fall down and worship" him, Satan, instead, Jesus replies: "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Mt 4:10). The submission and prostration to God of all that exists—"and to Him has surrendered whoso is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they shall be returned" (3:83); "To God prostrates itself everything in the heavens, and every creature crawling on the earth, and the angels" (16:49)—means that every phenomenon, in its own way, is linked to the Reality that is the One and Only. The only possible attitude to and connection with that Reality on the part of the individual lie in the recognition that all phenomena in the external world and within the self serve only to corroborate that unicity: they reveal It, originate from It and return to It. Without It they are nothing, a nothing that manifests itself in the illusion of associating others with, forgetting or denying Unicity.

Since Unicity has no alterity and yet is full of the alterity of everything, associating others with It is tantamount to allocating names to phenomena without regard for their nature. At the root of every phenomenon is God's creative Word, as spoken through its name: thus the name is the center or essence of every form. The position of humankind, its "fairest stature" in the totality of creation, determines human knowledge of the names, and knowing the names of phenomena links the knower with the Creator. But when the individual distorts those names, forcing them into a coercive relationship with phenomena, this alters their original form, and himself. Every such change deprives the individual of his primal "fairest stature," or distorts it. The names imposed on phenomena have no power to prevent these phenomena from returning to God; but nothing that is associated with God has any power,[18] as the Recitation confirms: "They are naught but names yourselves have named, and your fathers' God has sent down no authority touching them" (53:23). Thus, when the proper relationship is re-established between the individual as the one who owes and God to whom the debt is due, when phenomena return to their

[18] See 35:13.

Creator, they will repudiate the false names that have been imposed on them. They will also repudiate those selves that thereby sought to sever them from their purpose: "On the Day of Resurrection they will disown your partnership" (35:14). The names will return to the original phenomena from which they were wrenched and forcibly imposed on others. The individual's interrelationship with God in "fairest stature," therefore, is grounded in knowledge of the names which are confirmed by the uncreated Word and its manifestation in creation; but everything which distances the individual from this turns him towards forgetting and non-reality.

This potential on the part of the individual is in fact the manifestation of the relationship between the self and the Self as confidence, a confidence which embodies the individual's perfection, cause and purpose: "If God should take men to task for what they have earned He would not leave upon the face of the earth one creature that crawls; but He is deferring them to a stated term" (35:45). The expressions "He would not leave upon the face of the earth one creature that crawls," if the yardstick is to be "what they have earned" and "God is with those who are aware and who do good," are only in apparent opposition. The incorruptibility of human nature is affirmed in both, the nature which makes human beings what they are—created in and for the sake of perfection. Individual salvation does not lie, therefore, in taking on a new nature, but in the restoration or rediscovery of one's original nature (perfection, or the fairest stature) through liberation from those gods that manifest themselves as illegitimate links between inner and outer phenomena on the one hand, and their names on the other.

Individual awareness and good, in their full meaning, are none other than that uncreated and perfect center; and as such that center belongs only to God: "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God" (Mk 10-18). This explains the injunctions regarding one's attitude to the other: "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Mt 7-1); "For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Mt 26:52); "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone" (Jn 8:7). These injunctions cannot be understood, however, without bearing in mind that they differentiate between original perfection and its distortion as regards the individual. Perfection, being complete and thus unalterable and true, is victorious over all illusion: "The truth has come, and falsehood has vanished away" (17:81). "He is the Truth, and that they call apart from Him—that is the false" (31:30). But judgment that comes out of falsehood and the hiding of humanity's "fairest stature" does not

acknowledge human weakness. The individual who is thus distorted must ultimately judge himself against his hidden, repudiated original perfection, and reaching for the sword out of that deformity means that one must ultimately succumb to the sword of the Truth that is victorious. In the meantime, however, the decision of the individual to condemn and punish another for his sin places that individual in a state of utter alterity, whereby the self is proclaimed as the Self. This is tantamount to associating oneself with God—and God forgives not that aught should be with Him associated (4:48). To the individual, being means discerning the unreal from the Real, the self from the Self, and it is only the Real that can condemn and punish—which it always does, with the Truth. Acting otherwise means accepting the superiority of the lower over the Higher and the imperfect over the Perfect. The root cause of this is forgetting that Truth and Presence are two expressions of Unicity, the first corresponding to human awareness, and the second to human virtue. Awareness is indivisible from knowledge, and virtue from will, and both knowledge and virtue strive to become being—a striving that becomes accomplished when one sees the Truth in every sign in the outer worlds and the inner selves, when one returns to oneself. "He who knows himself has known his Lord," said the Prophet.[19]

But when the world is confined between the depths of interiority and the heights of externality, existence becomes closed. Phenomena are no longer signs pointing to what is deeper and higher. Minuteness and magnitude are both finite, and thus accessible to reason; but the signs themselves are repudiated and cease to signify, and man is closed off from Eternity and Life. His life has no continuation after death: he does not encounter his Lord and does not submit the account of his debt. Everything is extinguished with the cessation of his actions, because everything lies between the briefest and the longest that is imaginable in finitude; the present moment does not point to eternity, and death has nothing to do with life.

This repudiation is nothing other than the desire, transformed into a deluded conviction, to strip the veil from the face of God, to reveal all the mysteries of phenomena and to dis-enchant the world. Here, the veil denotes Intellect; man cannot draw back that veil, but He may receive it into Himself: "His veil is light," says the Messenger, "and if it were to be drawn back, the brilliance of His Face would burn His cre-

[19] For more on this tradition see, e.g. Ibn al-Arabi, *al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*, Vol. II (Cairo: Al-Hay'at al Misriyyat al-Amma li'l-Kitab, 1972), p. 292.2:168.

ation wherever His gaze reached."[20] This veil of light does not render God remote: "We indeed created man; and We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (50:16). God's proximity is also expressed in the words of Jesus: "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). But the fact that there are seventy thousand veils of light between the self and the Self, that the Other sees everyone's innermost self but not vice versa—"The eyes attain Him not, but He attains the eyes" (6:103)—and that none is closer in His absoluteness means that there is no self other than the Self, and that the Self becomes manifest in the inner selves and the outer world. Both the inner and the outer worlds are thus utterly poor, and at the same time close to Him. The Divine "I am near" (2:18) is not and cannot be limited by anything. It is an unconditional proximity, and the totality of existence is merely its confirmation.

Given man's acceptance of the confidence that is offered, which means a relationship with the Absolute which is undertaken out of free will, the self must choose to remember or to forget. Remembering is the manifestation of that unconditional proximity in one's self which precludes the illusion of distance. Forgetting turns one towards the quantifiable world as the only world, and reason then appears to be one's supreme potential. As a result, the connection with the Truth becomes seen as contingent and mediated, which deprives the Truth of its autonomy and views it as identical with its various manifestations and confirmations. But even though man must choose between remembering and forgetting, the Truth and its manifestations can never be of equal value. The proffered and accepted relationship of trust between the individual and God means that the self is free to range between the two extremes of the minute and the immense (though these extremes are in essence one and the same). Living between these extremes, the individual forgets what he has received, but is also able to remember it again, thereby knowing himself as he faces himself, in the solitude that is perfect fullness and the totality that is perfect absence. Remembrance is thus a return to the perfect center, which nothing in existence can add to or subtract from. Through human remembrance, God becomes disclosed both to himself and to

[20] Sahih Muslim, I. p. 113. There are many expressions of this tradition. In Imam Ghazali's *Mishkat* (Bab-ul-Masajid) a similar tradition is cited: "Between me and Him are seventy thousand veils of Light." Ibn al-Arabi quotes and interprets this tradition in a number of its forms. See, for example, William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination.*

humanity, since human existence consists of the Principle, the spirit inbreathed into the individual by God. The human center to which remembrance is directed, then, through the testimony that "there is no god but God," is nothing other than that original uncreatedness, the sanctum that transmits the uncreated Word. To know the Absolute, therefore, is humankind's unconditional potential.

The claim that the present moment and eternity do not exist, being reduced to what is merely very short or very long, is based on the assumption that there is nothing in man that has been insufflated into him, and that as a result he is not open to Life and Eternity. The teachings of all the sacred traditions, however, refute this. The human center *is* Eternity and Life. They are not accessible through experiment; what they are may be forgotten, but they cannot be lost—and the eternal human potential for the self to find itself, in what it ever has been and ever will be, is what we call intelligence. The connection with the Absolute enables everything that is manifested to the self in the outer worlds and the inner selves to be known and understood, through intelligence, as the speech of the Self. And if the Breath of the Self is at the human center, this means that the Self is within it: "He who knows himself knows his Lord," as the Messenger said.[21]

Accepting all phenomena, and all knowledge of phenomena, as signs that can raise one towards higher levels of being, makes it possible for the manifest to ascend, through constant transformation, towards its Treasury. As the Recitation tells: "Naught is there, but its treasuries are with Us, and We send it not down but in a known measure" (15:21).

There is no phenomenon, whether in the outer worlds or the inner selves, that does not testify more or less explicitly to the forgotten presence of the Self at the human individual's center. This is what gives phenomena their attraction, since they recall the forgotten riches that are the aim of man's quest—the love, the attraction of the beautiful, that lies hidden in all that points to the Reality: "God is Beautiful and He loves beauty."[22] Accordingly, faith is the discovery of what lies beyond language, beyond the bounds of the world and all its phenomena. These phenomena were given names with man as part of creation, by the perfect will of God; and this was done in order to

[21] This well-known tradition cannot be found in the primary scriptures. It is accepted as a revelation that is not in conflict with the Recitation and the sayings of the Prophet, however: Ibn al-Arabi often uses such traditions in his interpretations, for example. See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 344-46.

[22] Sahih Muslim, I, p. 53.

indicate the potential to reach God via phenomena, through intelligence. Eternity and Life are thus in every phenomenon, and every phenomenon simultaneously reveals and conceals them: the Face of God is omnipresent, yet always behind a veil.[23] The long and the short are given meaning by being encompassed and centered in Eternity and Life: the world is created in harmony and proportion, and contains no gaps or voids. There may be deficiencies or imperfections, however, in human awareness, which has accepted the unreal, and become blinkered by forgetfulness into the belief that actions and their effects are the shapers of human destiny. And the utter otherness of God—as witnessed by the verses "like Him there is naught," (42:11) "equal to Him is not any one" (112:4) and "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God"—enables His signs to be recognized in every phenomenon, for there is nothing in the outer worlds or the inner selves that does not manifest the Truth.[24] To deny this is to distort humankind's original nature, and is an act of arrogance towards the signs of God.

But the recognition of these signs, which testifies to one's submission to and acceptance of humankind's original nakedness and poverty, manifests itself as care for and clemency towards all that fills the outer worlds and the inner selves with both freedom and determinacy.

> But there is more: the feminine character that one can discern in Wisdom results moreover from the fact that the concrete knowledge of God coincides with the love of God: this love, which to the extent that it is sincere implies the virtues, is like the criterion of real knowledge.[25]

Here it would be worth recalling the Messenger's words: "'Of this world of yours, women, perfume and prayer have been made lovable to me.' Women are thereby confirmed as the center of the manifestation of beauty. Perfume is the sign of what lies behind phenomena as their higher reality and inter-connectedness. And prayer directs, translates and connects to this source and end purpose, to God, the Supreme Good, in whom phenomena have meaning."[26] And love

[23] The verses "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God" (2:115) and "It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil" (42:51) also refer to this simultaneous presence and concealment.

[24] See 4:53.

[25] Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1991), pp. 41-42.

[26] See Ibn al-Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, chapter "Muhammad."

among people for the sake of the glory of God means accepting God's ultimate proximity: "Truly will God say on the Day of Resurrection: Where are those who loved for the sake of My glory? Today shall I shelter them in My shadow when there is no shadow other than Mine."[27] Conversely, God's love for someone means that the whole of existence loves that same person: "When God loves one of His slaves, He calls Jibreel and says: 'Truly I love this and that one; and you too should love him.' And Jibreel loves him. Then he appears in the heavens, saying: 'God loves this and that one, so you love him too.' And the heavenly hosts love him, and that honor is conveyed to him on earth."[28] Love is the guide of the self: "Man will be with him who loves him," said the Messenger.[29]

The Sacred: Beauty and Goodness

The fact that God has ordained for everyone a Law and a way of life[30] necessarily entails the conclusion that the multiplicity of paths leading from the human individual and collectivity towards the truth is part of the Divine will. None of these paths is without deficiencies, for otherwise this would deny the fact of Unicity; yet there can be no error with God, for error is the expression of freedom and determinacy in human actions. But remembering is possible for every individual; it is the prerequisite for finding the path, and its starting-point: "Recite what has been revealed to thee of the Book, and perform the prayer; prayer forbids indecency and dishonor. God's remembrance is greater" (29:45). The potential to remember is testimony to the inexhaustible depths at the center of the human self. And the debt to the Creator—the preservation of that which has been bestowed, for which consciousness of poverty and its inseparable companion, humility, are the sole guarantee—may be repaid through the connection between the rememberer and the Remembered, a connection that is direct and eternally renewable. The beginning and end of that connection is the Sacred, that which is both infinitely near and utterly remote. And both its beginning and end may be retained in memory or lost in forgetting: this is what renders the self open or closed respectively. Without the sacred, it cannot be open, which means it cannot have the ability to

[27] Sahih Muslim, IV, p. 1362.

[28] Ibid., p. 1386.

[29] Ibid., p. 1387.

[30] See 5:48.

translate every sign in the outer worlds and within itself from one language to another, via the Truth.

> And if it can be said that virtue is a moral beauty, it can also be said that beauty is a physical virtue. The merit of this virtue devolves upon its Creator and, by participation, to the creature as well if she is morally and spiritually up to this gift; this is to say that beauty and virtue on the one hand pertain *a priori* to God, and on the other hand, for that very reason, demand that their spiritual implications be brought out by the creature.[31]

> "The kingdom of God is within you," that is, in the spiritual, hence transpersonal, subjectivity; if such is the case, what can be the meaning of our outer life, of our contacts with beings and things? It is that positive phenomena manifest the heavenly treasures we bear within ourselves, and that they help us to uncover and realize them; we are fundamentally what we love, and that is why we love it; the deepest subject rejoins the happiest shores. It is necessary to have the sense of beauty and the sense of the sacred, and also—on a much more modest plane—the sense of the divine perfume in the natural pleasures that life here below offers us, which implies that we partake of them with nobleness.[32]

To think of the Sacred means to try both to allot to It the quality of being all-encompassing and to define Its boundaries. But this distorts human vision and prevents it from seeing the unlimited and creative Self in the mutability, the incessant and unlimited flux at the center of the self. Yet this unlimited potential for change at the center of one's being is the source of living mercy and knowledge, the means whereby that center approaches and desires the Mercy that embraces all things, including knowledge. What it desires is neither limited nor limitable, neither created nor creatable. Limitedness and createdness belong to the self that has not been transformed and emptied for the fullness of the self. But once this has been accomplished, knowledge will demand directness, non-mediation. In fact, the Truth in its perfection cannot be distanced from nor contingent upon phenomena; it is in them and with them, and it only becomes distanced insofar as the observer sees anything in phenomena other than the Truth.

[31] Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, pp. 44-45.

[32] Ibid., p. 49.

It is the presence of Truth in phenomena which gives the self its constant potential for remembrance, for the manifestation of verticality at one's center that gathers the entirety of existence to a single level of being. This potential for contact between levels of being is the manifestation of the Infinite in Space and Eternity in Time. It is what makes possible the return of every phenomenon to the "unmediated" world as higher ideal, during the process of descent and ascent by which the Treasury of all phenomena remains in the fullness of Peace.

The human encounter with the external world—an encounter in which the self is affirmed—calls for a resolution of the duality between self and Self, which can be attained by starting either from the self or from the world. At the same time, it also calls for a response to the question of the duality between the apparent world and God. That which appears proximate at one level of being is distant by comparison with its ideal at a higher level, because every phenomenon is "sent down" by comparison with its principle. This is linked to the meaning of symbols, which elevate themselves above what appear close, thus demonstrating that the latter are lower than what they signify. Indeed, the closer one gets to a phenomenon in appearance, the further one distances oneself from the first principle. But notwithstanding the actual distance which this apparent proximity conceals, the individual is always able to recognize and renew the covenant with the First Principle, for neither the individual nor any of the world's phenomena can ever break that original covenant, whatever situation or condition the individual may be in. Despite the fall from original purity, the First Principle remains safeguarded within the individual. The created world has not lost all its transparency; and even in the densest darkness there remains a ray of light, for the light is First Principle, which the darkness is not. And though any image of the world which rejects the principled nature of the Truth is ephemerality itself, no conjecture is insoluble when faced with the final arbitration of the Truth.

No state of self is sustainable if the way it acts towards the Principle, towards the light, is based on the denial of alterity—an act of human misconception which attempts to sever phenomena from their principle. But this illusion of separation may be dispelled by remembrance, which is humankind's perpetual potential. The individual's presence in and encounter with the world give rise to opposition between what the individual wishes for himself and for others. But any endeavor to realize his desires by dominating or depriving the other is futile, for the world that he experiences inevitably reflects the relationship

between the contingent and the absolute, the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal. If he denies the contingent, finite and temporal through which every phenomenon external to the individual manifests itself, he risks dominating or depriving others as a means of fulfilling his desires.

Alternatively, the individual may turn away from the contingent, finite and temporal towards the absolute, infinite and eternal. Central to this are two maxims: "Do as you would be done by," and "Do not do as you would not have others do to you." What the self desires is linked, in its profoundest essence, with the ray of the first principle that no self is ever entirely without. The connection between that ray (which is utter alterity) and every phenomenon calls for the self to "take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak from the evil of what He has created, from the evil of darkness when it gathers, from the evil of those who blow on knots, from the evil of an envier when he envies" (113:1-5). This turning away and seeking refuge from evil creates a balance in the desire for one's own well-being by turning it into the desire for the well-being of the other—that is, by accepting the principle that it is better to suffer evil than to commit it and the injunction to return good for evil. Inherent in the act of seeking refuge with the "Lord of the Daybreak," if it is viewed as an expression of the relationship between the self and the Self, is the testimony that "there is no god but God, no reality but the Reality." In this way, in the outer world the unreal is discerned from the real, and the inner self is simultaneously given direction. Conversely, since everything in the outer world points towards Reality, this discernment cannot be reflected within the self if any of its states are taken to be Reality itself. Human desire can be resolved only in the Absolute; and whenever any of its states are taken to be Reality, this is tantamount to proclaiming it to be a god without God.[33] Yet the self must always confront the Self, for "All things perish, except His Face" (28:88). It is only in the testimony that "there is no self but the Self" that the self is liberated from delusion and draws closer to Reality. Perfect alterity, then, is the reality of every phenomenon, and the reality of every phenomenon is perfect alterity. The immediacy so demanded can be satisfied only by rejecting the notion that there is a duality between self and Self, and recognizing that the only Sacred is that to which the self draws near

[33] The Recitation says of this (25:43), "Hast thou seen him who has taken his desire to be his god?"

in constant change and transformation, denying its contingency and opening itself to the revelation of the Self.

> Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word "God" is to signify. Or should we not first be able to hear and understand all these words carefully if we are to be permitted as men, that is, as existent creatures, to experience a relation of God to man? How can man at the present stage of world history ask at all seriously and rigorously whether the god nears or withdraws, when he has above all neglected to think into the dimension in which alone that question can be asked? But this is the dimension of the holy, which indeed remains closed as a dimension if the open region of Being is not lighted and in its lighting is near man. Perhaps what is distinctive about this world-epoch consists in the closure of the dimension of the hale [*des Heilen*]. Perhaps that is the sole malignancy [*Unheil*].[34]

The fallen state of humanity is none other than the state of the self that has become dazzled with the multiplicity of the world and forgotten the sacred as its unalterable center. The consequence of this forgetting is the inability to see the sacred as a presence both in oneself and in the other. In face of Europe's inability to live both with a clear sense of boundary towards the different, and to accept the different as the prerequisite for self-knowledge, Muslim and Jewish otherness remain as a permanent testimony to a sameness that is not and cannot be identical. What no European concept of encounter with the other—be it the notion of the "lost savior" or that of the self-sufficient individual within the nation—has resolved is the issue of acknowledging the other as testimony to one's debt towards the Other; and this is as salient today as it ever has been, especially as regards the question of European Islam. Moreover, every issue that once coded into the "Jewish question" remains present in the "Muslim question,"[35] and there can be no resolution of this underlying danger without revealing the self-same goodness in every language. Only with a clear insight into that transcendent unity is it possible to discern

[34] Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 230.

[35] On Muslims as the European others see Rusmir Mahmutćehajić, *Sarajevo Essays: Politics, Ideology and Tradition* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 83-98.

and recognize the meaning of difference, and only with a tolerance of diversity is the link with unicity in the form of the individual and collective covenant sustainable.

The Hour: Distancing and Drawing Near

The Divine image is a bridge between earth and Heaven. This enables humankind to understand the reason for being, but also enables God to see Himself from the viewpoint of the other outside Himself (although that other, in the final analysis, can only be He, for God can be known only through Himself). God's manifestation is the presence of the Absolute in the contingent, of the Uncreated in the created; thus the duality between contingency and creation, between "this world"[36] and the "other world,"[37] is but an illusion. Indeed, the duality between these two worlds affirms unicity, for both their comparability and their non-comparability point to the incomparability and unquantifiability of unicity. This world springs from the other world, and this world has no meaning or purpose outside that fact. The individual can thus have no orientation towards meaning and purpose without a recognition of the submission of earth to heaven and of matter to spirit—a submission that is laid down by the order of things, which decrees that everything in the heavens and on the earth prostrate itself to God. The heavens are the immeasurably transcendent alterity of the earth; and without that alterity, earthly purpose can have no direction. But this is merely a sign that the purpose of all worldly existence, which tells us all that is like and comparable, lies in absolute Alterity, which is omnipresent and eternal but comparable with nothing.

The human quest is based on the realization, in the uttermost depths of the self, that Mercy and Knowledge, as perfect cause and consequence, are the only meanings in which contingency may be resolved. As already noted, God offers *trust* to humankind, which means that He shows His Face as the All-faithful to His creation. His fidelity is absolute, while that of humankind is contingent, though the latter becomes the more real the closer the individual draws to the All-faithful. Human fidelity, or being a believer, is therefore nothing other

[36] Ar. *dunya* (closer, closest), in the Recitation, designates "this world." The individual is interrelated both to this world and the other world, as the Recitation says (87:16-17): "Nay, but you prefer the present life; and the world to come is better, and more enduring."

[37] Ar. *akhira* (the last) is the term used in the Recitation to designate the future life or "final place of abode" that lies beyond "this world."

than proximity to the All-faithful, and every move of the individual towards the All-faithful is met by His incomparably more rapid and greater move towards the individual. Part of the covenant between them is that mutual trust. Both parties to the covenant, however, have the potential, based on the trust conferred out of full freedom, to reject or accept what is offered. Often it seems that the individual is in a hopeless position in this open relationship between the faithful and the All-faithful; but the manifest human predilection for Mercy (grace) and knowledge, and humankind's constant refusal to accept disgrace and ignorance, are evidence that at the very center of the individual, in the uncreated principle of createdness, lie that mercy and knowledge which encompass all things. The covenant between humankind and God is therefore the transmission, in the form of restored memory, of that mercy and knowledge: human faith starts out as love and knowledge, but becomes transformed, through trust in the covenant, into a vehicle for divine Mercy and Knowledge.

And this act of transmission is the essence of language. Aristotle says that every language is a soul, and the Recitation states that the life of a single individual is as the life of all humankind (5:35). The concomitant of this is that every individual bears within himself the reality of every soul and, consequently, of every language. Conversely, human diversity is the expression of the boundless potential of the soul, of the Unicity that is its uncreated and uncreatable essence. As all souls are created from one, multiplicity merely manifests and corroborates Unicity; and the raising of the dead, the resurrection, is merely multiplicity returning to Unicity: "Your creation and your upraising are as but as a single soul" (31:28). All of existence manifests Unicity, and all its differentiation is permeated with the authentic speech of Unicity, by Unicity manifested as the Word.

Since the Creator is Absolute, there is also nothing lacking in His creation: it is perfection, the one and only. Manifestation means being in space and time; but the inner essence of perfection is always one and the same, always unrepeatable. Nevertheless, when perfection becomes manifest in finitude, it becomes multiplicity, which means that the unity and unicity of perfection are reflected in every cosmic phenomenon, both individually and together; thus Unicity lies at the heart of all differences in the cosmos. And there is no repetition in creation: every manifestation is new, unique and original, but each testifies to the unity and unicity of the Creator. Since the Creator is infinite and eternal, He is manifested by infinite diversity, and this diversity manifests His unity and unicity: the One is revealed in multiplicity,

and multiplicity manifests and praises the One. Likewise, the Self manifests Itself in individual selves, and individual languages manifest the boundless potential of the self to receive the speech of the Self.

> Language is man, and it is therefore our deiformity; to speak is to be "made in the image of God," and "*noblesse oblige*." Man's first word was a prayer, and could not but be one; the creature is a mirror of the Creator. We could also say that the first word uttered by man was the Name of the Eternal, in answer to the creative Word that projected a divine image into the world.[38]

The unicity and perfection of the Creation are not denied by His manifestation in creation: the ineffable is confirmed by unicity. The totality of this manifestation is multiplicity and motion, which in turn confirms the unicity of the One Who manifests Himself, just as this unicity confirms the ineffable.

All that is in the heavens and on earth, which means the entirety of the cosmos and man as its sum, perform the *sajda*, the prostration.[39] Together they are the universal *masjid*, the place of prostration, in which submission to God is shown by all that is created.[40] If all that is in existence, no matter how far-flung or dispersed, is summed up in man, the cosmos and man are thus two faces of one and the same confirmation and manifestation of the Self. And since the Self is Absolute, Its revelation in the contingent remains close to the Absolute, though to the created It may appear infinitely remote. Every illusion of distance thus is a manifestation of Unicity in multiplicity, and the absolute and certain can never be removed from the contingent.

The Hour and death form an ever-present certainty, as does the present moment. Indeed, in contrast to the measurability and contingency of everything that is sent down, only the Hour and death are certain. The Recitation describes both, and emphasizes their proximity, no matter how far apart they may seem: "The Hour is coming, no doubt of it, and God shall raise up whosoever is within the tombs" (22:7). If, as the only total certainty, the present moment is inseparable from death, the present moment is thus identical with Eternity,

[38] Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1990), p. 158.

[39] See 22:18.

[40] See 3:83.

and death with Life. Focusing on the present moment, then, as what is certain in life and what bears the imperative for freedom and salvation, means also being aware of death and understanding it to be the other face of contingency, a contingency which is the manifestation of the Absolute. Hence focusing on the present moment means looking at the light of the Absolute.

If Eternity (and thus God) is revealed in cosmic and human finitude, which was sent down from the Treasure house with its measure, it means that Eternity and finitude stand in a relationship of infinite and reciprocal similarity and comparability. But since God is comparable to none, He may seem remote, although he is not so in reality (indeed, only the created world can actually be remote). The Hour (which, as we have seen, is the same as the present moment) is the constant judge of that and every other illusion: it is only without its judgment that the cosmos and man appear self-sufficient and detached from Eternity. Conversely, Eternity and Infinity may seem unreal in contrast to space and time, as they cannot be encompassed by space and time; but if we acknowledge that space and time are actually encompassed by Eternity and Infinity, then the crucial nature of the Hour and death may be grasped.

The Hour thus proves to be the judge of the entire contingency of space and time. To deny one's proximity to God means denying the proximity of the Hour, whereas focusing on the Hour as the presence of Eternity in time and of Infinity in space reveals God's proximity to man, which is absolute: "And We are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (50:16). Turning to and focusing on the Hour entails moving away from seeing phenomena as autonomous and self-sufficient, and towards seeing their true nature as signs that testify to Unicity.[41] Just as all that is temporal or spatial is merely the confirmation of Eternity and Infinity, so the same can be said of the Hour. All that lies within the outer and inner worlds demonstrates and confirms the Hour, and its closeness to the cosmos and man: "Are they looking for aught but the Hour, that it shall come upon them suddenly? Already its tokens have come; so, when it has come to them, how shall they have their Reminder?" (47:18) "And the matter of the Hour is as a twinkling of the eye, or nearer. Surely God is powerful over everything" (16:77). Given that Divine Knowledge is absolute, and that the knowledge possessed by man, as the image of God, is contingent, it is only in the

[41] See 30:12-14.

drawing near of human knowledge to the Hour that one may speak of man's drawing closer to Reality or his being open to Its revelation. In focusing on the Hour, therefore, one is striving to attain knowledge of the Sacred, which once again means accepting the interdiction that is the very source of human presence in the Manifest: "The people will question thee concerning the Hour. Say: 'The knowledge of it is only with God'" (33:63). "With Him is the knowledge of the Hour, and to Him you shall be returned" (43:85).

Turning one's gaze towards the perfection of creation means turning towards one's own perfection, which is neither of the past nor of the future. Humankind's primal perfection lies in the perfect certainty of the Hour, and encompasses everything. Man may forget it, but he may also rediscover it, for it underlies all of existence as the indicator of the total presence of the Other. Conversely, forgetting this, and distancing oneself from the Hour, entails detaching oneself from all of existence and being in opposition to it. This gives rise to a rift in the self, which manifests itself as the seeming absence and non-necessity of the Other. Yet it is only with God as the Creator of all things that neither excess nor deficiency is possible: excess and deficiency are possible only in human concepts and action.

The Praiser, Praise and the Praised

The totality of existence means all that is sent down or derives from the Absolute. Every phenomenon in this process has its double: there is no individuality without something similar or comparable to it. Everything that is accessible to the senses and reason—whether by a process of differentiation or by synthesis—has its quantifiable measure, which implies that it is comparable to something else in space and time. Yet existence cannot be confined within the boundaries of quantifiability, nor can it be known exclusively through comparison and reason, for Unicity, which is similar or comparable to nothing, underlies the duality of all things. Thus comparing the duality of all things with their underlying Unicity entails the conclusion that what is manifest, all that is multiple and comparable, confirms the non-comparable and non-similar, i.e., Unicity, in a relationship as close as that between odd and even.[42]

The testimony that there is no god but God and that the Praiser is His slave and His messenger is the non-negotiable condition in the

[42] See 89:3.

honoring of humankind's debt towards God. All other demands are lesser, or more contingent. The first element of the testimony is the metaphysical principle, and speaks of the relation between the Creator and the created, the Absolute and the contingent; it describes the infinite insignificance of all that is manifest by comparison with God. But this insignificance or utter poverty is the prerequisite for wisdom, for the praise of God. And the confirmation of wisdom lies in virtue, for the former without the latter is no more than fraud and hypocrisy, regardless of how far its essence may be disguised. Furthermore, knowledge of the Real conditions being in accordance with it. The Real is entirely good, and he who knows it must adapt to it: thus acknowledging the magnitude of the Known, which leads it to be praised, demands that one accepts the insignificance of the praiser. Thus the insignificant becomes affirmed not as Reality, but as a sign of the emptiness that is impotence before the Absolute. Nevertheless, the Praiser manifests, in the fullness of his act of praise, the presence of the Absolute in the contingent. But this is also an act of submission and humility, in which to know is to be, for anything else introduces into the self the illusion of greatness, which is nothing other than a denial of and arrogance towards the Absolute. Indeed, turning towards Reality demands harmony of knowledge and being, which lies in the totality of the self that speaks with the Absolute Good in prayer, renouncing the contingencies which the self possesses and striving to orient itself towards the First Principle, which is both beginning and end. This is the striving to confirm and discover, within the self and behind all the veils of contingency, the presence of the uncreated and uncreatable Spirit of God.

The totality of existence, as we have seen, is sent down from Eternity and Infinity; in this process it is given form and boundaries. Its derived yet bounded nature means that in it, the manifest has taken on form and substance—and this is the "odd" that confirms the "even" or the one and only. "Glory be to Him, who created all the pairs of what the earth produces, and of themselves, and of what they know not" (36:36). When form and substance are seen as equal, the sending down and the measure disappear from view. But as long as phenomena remain bounded in space and time, they have the potential to praise the Treasury from which they have been sent down—the Unicity that is comparable with nothing, although it manifests itself in the uncountable multiplicity of forms and substances. Thus the cosmos as a whole is the Praiser of the Treasury, and its derived nature is inseparable from the Treasury as its First Principle. The cosmos is not

exhausted in any single one of its manifestations: space and time are its mode of being, but the metaphysical comprises its higher reality, because the cosmic is derived or sent down from the metacosmic. Thus the truth of physical phenomena is unattainable without considering the metaphysical. In this way, all the worlds praise their highest principle. In their totality, they are the Praiser, and Praise is their link to the First Principle or the Praised.

Since man also comprises the totality of creation, he is the image of the First Principle. The fact that he speaks, sees, hears, wills, loves, knows and so on means that he has received and has within him an uncountable multiplicity of attributes which originally belong to the First Principle. In their totality, these make up Praise, and thus in relation to the First Principle he is Its Praiser. Praise is his attitude towards the perfect connection between his quality of being sent down and the Treasury; and through the act of praise, the Praised manifests Himself. The testimony that there is no principle other than the Principle, then, is inseparable from the testimony that the Praiser is His Messenger, for the Principle manifests itself in man as the capacity for the Praiser to be in the closest possible proximity to the Praised through his Praising. The Praised, as the totality of the purpose and perfection of creation, is thus also He who reveals the Praised. Since there is no deficiency in the total of creation, so man as the Praiser, or the perfect image of creation, is also the Messenger of the Praised in whom He is known. This is the meaning of the words of the Recitation: "Thou seest not in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection. Return thy gaze; seest thou any fissure?" (67:3-4) The perfection of all that is created is made known in the Praiser, who is "a light-giving lamp" (33:46), "a good example" (33:21). In this way all the phenomena in the outer and inner worlds manifest themselves as signs that reveal the Truth, for there is nothing in creation without a purpose.

The perfection of the Praiser, as the messenger of the Praised One, is testified to by his quest for the meaning of boundaries, a quest which lies at the heart of attitudes towards all others who exist. For refusing to accept that all phenomena in the outer and inner worlds express the perfection of creation by the All-merciful means denying that all the Treasuries have their base in Unicity. Every such denial means seeing something else as total alterity; but such a view would imply that the creation of the All-merciful is not perfect, and thus that man cannot attain perfect inner peace.

This is a profane image of the world; but neither the World nor man can be profane. They can exist as such only in an image of man

that derives from a closed self, a coarsened, insensitive heart, and the detachment of phenomena from the Principle. And this Principle is Sacred. That which derives from human freedom (which in turn stems ultimately from the offer and acceptance of confidence) may be profane, but is then in opposition to the Principle. Knowledge founded on this becomes detached from the Sacred as manifested in being and knowledge. But if man wishes to regain his original and perfect nature, it can only be by respecting the sanctity of knowledge and being; and without knowledge of the Sacred, there can be no sacred being.[43]

By drawing closer to the Praiser, the individual can rediscover this knowledge of the Sacred, of how human nature is differentiated into an uncreated center and its manifestation. The testimony that there is no god but God and that the Praiser (*Muhammad*) is His servant and messenger is an affirmation that only God is All-sufficient; from which it follows that only He is the Praised (*al-hamid*). Praising the Praised testifies that the worlds are dependent on God, wholly and unconditionally, that the world as the Praiser has nothing that is not dependent on the All-sufficient. This dependence is concentrated in the individual, with Praise (*al-hamd*) as its innermost, uncreated and uncreatable essence; and through this essence, the individual is the *Praiser*. Thus his supreme potential is to be the messenger of the Praised, of Him who receives and manifests Praise.

Poverty, too, lies at the core of human nature, for humankind has nothing that has not been bestowed upon it. It is thus only in the purity of poverty that the individual can be both Praiser and manifestation of the Praised: "O men, you are the ones that have need of God; he is the All-sufficient, the All-laudable" (35:15). The individual who is wholly open, in his need of God, to the manifestation of the Praised within him is the Praiser, the servant and messenger of God; and as such, he is a good example: "You have a good example in God's Messenger for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day, and remembers God oft" (33:21). Muhammad is thus the Logos, for it is through him that the First reveals itself as the Last and the Inward as the Outward, that the Divine latency discloses Itself to Itself. This act of disclosure is what we see as manifestation in space and time, the revelation of all the degrees of Being. When some of these degrees of Being reveal

[43] On the relationship between the secular and the sacred in knowledge see, for example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

themselves in the individual through his connection with the Praised, so that self and externality, the inner and the outer worlds, manifest themselves as a single act of Praise, this act raises the individual from darkness to a place of praise: "And as for the night, keep vigil a part of it, as a work of supererogation for thee; it may be that thy Lord will raise thee up to a laudable station."[44] This means that all phenomena in the inner and outer worlds are oriented towards and connected with the Praised, for the self seeks Praise in all things as the presence of the Praised, since there is no flaw or lack in the creation of the heavens and the earth.

Yet misunderstanding can take place: "The seven heavens and the earth, and whosoever in them is, extol Him; nothing is, that does not proclaim His praise, but you do not understand their extolling" (17:44). This lack of understanding is then seen as an innate, universal law of history, which manifests itself as the seemingly independent course of events in space and time. This law and its manifestation in phenomena remain undifferentiated, for they are not related through the first principle and its revelation, and history becomes a sine wave of events from lower to higher and lesser to greater, a constantly repeating cycle of distancing from and drawing near to the first Principle, of forgetting and remembering It.

Yet history, too, may be seen in the light of the mutuality between Praiser, Praise and Praised. Events that have become history may be arrayed in order from the most ancient to the present moment of the observer. But in this process, diverse orders, conclusions and philosophies of history may be derived, for as every event passes from its actual manifestation in space and time into history or narrative, it loses the perfection of the original, unrepeatable presence. From the perspective of the sacred traditions, the truth is omnipresent; but the periphery, where human potential manifests itself, offers only constant change and an innumerable multiplicity of forms. At this periphery, rituals and virtues may manifest themselves in a diversity of ways; but proximity to or distance from the Truth, remembrance of or forgetting the Truth, still underlie every event in history. As a result, events are both original and quantifiable by the same scales, and history may be seen as the manifestation of humankind's drawing

[44] 17:79. The notion of the "place of praise" or "laudable station" (*mahmuda*) in Arabic derives from the triliteral verbal root *h-m-d* (to praise). This is the root from which the names *Muhammad* (the one who is taught to praise, the Praiser) and *Ahmad* (the most praised, the Supreme Praiser) are derived.

closer to or moving further from the "laudable station" (that which measures the presence of Praise in the self, and thereby its proximity to the Praiser as absolute submission to the Praised). But, as the narrative of human suffering, history may also highlight the weakness inherent in the desire to oppose the Absolute with acts of contingent will: "What, have they not journeyed in the land and beheld how was the end of those before them? They were stronger than themselves in might; but God—there is naught in the heavens or the earth that can frustrate Him" (35:44).

Tradition and Modernity

In every tradition—or more precisely, in every manifestation of the immutable Tradition—three degrees may be distinguished: the truth and its concomitant the doctrine; the way and its concomitant the rite; and virtue and its concomitant the potential sanctity of the individual. The truth is independent of the way which confirms it; thus, since only the truth is one, there is a multitude of ways. The truth is not contingent on any of them, but all the ways that manifest the truth are contingent upon it as the supreme principle. The truth manifests the way, and ordains it for every individual and for all people together. Virtue is that which confirms one's accepting and following the way; and it is expressed as humility and generosity. That which is established in descending order, from truth to way to virtue, is transformed by humility and generosity into ascent.

The individual has received all that there is, and has thereby become indebted to the truth, and thus strives to repay the debt, which means that he himself returns to the Truth and thereby becomes oriented towards it. Reception thus becomes transformed into repayment, because the self comprises the totality of being, for God has summed up in him all the names scattered through the cosmos. His submission comprises all the submission of all the worlds, but is founded on freedom, for there is no compulsion in the receipt or repayment of the debt. The individual is expected to remember his original covenant with God and to submit to Him as an act of confidence. This is submission out of free will, not imposed by the will of the Truth. It is offered and accepted as a choice between two options, and is different from the response of all other phenomena in the worlds: "We offered the confidence to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and man carried it" (33:72). As this is an offer, if it is rejected there is no debt to the Other. If it is taken up, there is a debt which has arisen from freedom of choice and confidence in the

Other, and has been offered with trust. Trusting in it is thus the free choice of both God and the individual. The individual may forget it, or break the oath of fidelity; but God will not do so. This is the meaning of his Self-manifestation as the Merciful, the All-compassionate: even the fact that the individual may forget or break his oath of fidelity to God cannot lead to His wrath surpassing His mercy.

The acceptance of this trust, as we have seen, defines man as different from all else in the totality of existence—an acceptance which, arising out of free will, manifests itself as humility: "Hast thou not seen how to God prostrate themselves all who are in the heavens and all who are in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and many of mankind?" (22:18). Though the submission of the worlds incurs no debt to God, the submission of man incurs a debt to Him. Thus humility derives from will, and through it are attained knowledge and faith, and with it beauty and love. If a being is submissive out of free will, it gains both essence and knowledge—two modes by which unicity manifests itself. In Truth, being and knowledge are one; and thus being and knowledge reflect the Truth:

> The animal cannot leave his state, whereas man can; strictly speaking, only he who is fully man can leave the closed system of individuality, through participation in the one and universal Selfhood. There lies the mystery of the human vocation: what man "can," he "must"; on this plane, to be able to is to have to, given that the capacity pertains to a positive substance. Or again, which fundamentally amounts to the same thing: to know is to be; to know That which is, and That which alone is.[45]

Society is illuminated by the openness of the self to the Absolute. But if the social context of the individual self becomes more decisive than the openness of the individual to the Absolute, society becomes the magnitude and measure that determines the individual. Then the "slave gives birth to her mistress": the magnitude and perfection of creation lose their clarity, and the fantasy of power demands that humans strive to confirm the delusion of detachment from the transcendental truth by constructing "tall buildings" and altering the original forms of the created world. This is an inversion of values, by which the individual proclaims himself greater than all else, and the external world as lesser and weaker than him. In so doing, humankind's attitude towards

[45] Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, p. 96.

the external world shows that it sees individual selfhood as subject and the cosmos as object, as the expression of relationships between greater and lesser, between the powerful and the weak. If this duality between self and cosmos remains enclosed in quantifiability, it can have no infinite Principle, either in the external world or in the self. This means excluding the Absolute from the relationship, eternal and omnipresent though it may be, simultaneously wholly proximate to phenomena and wholly distant from them—in philosophical terms, both immanent and transcendent.

The consequence of this is that knowledge and being cannot be identical, the small be transformed into the great and vice versa. The external and vast then appear to be incomplete, and hence open to rectification. Thus the rift between the self and the cosmos becomes the determinant of human potential. Knowledge of the rift increases, but with that knowledge the rift itself also widens. The illusion of human magnitude and power increasingly fills the self with a sense of sufficiency and the expectation that the world will accommodate itself to the individual and be subordinated through action, not mercy. This loses the connection with the Principle and, in consequence, reduces the individual to a set of phenomena in the world and in the self with which one becomes entangled.

But every sacred tradition leads to the opposite end: to make the individual aware of his original nature, to provide him with a perfect exemplar and to return him to the unicity of the first principle. To the sacred tradition, everything that is not this is "association with God"—that is, paganism. Everything that is not the truth is falsehood: if the phenomena in the outer worlds and the inner selves are not signs of God, they appear to us as idols that demand our submission and service (whereas wisdom lies in the very recognition of causes in phenomena and vice versa). This separation from the Principle shifts man's attitudes towards the future and prevents him from seeing the Hour as utter certainty. Man is thereby deprived of the intelligence through which the principle of the supernatural determines his own humanity. Without the supernatural, the presence of the uncreated at the center of man, he loses his original potential and becomes subject to the uncertainty of mere expectation. Phenomena in the world and in the individual become gods demanding the deformation and denial of the original, the created; and the individual seeks his affirmation in arrogance instead of humility.

But the Hour is still the supreme human potential, the manifestation of eternity. There can be neither thought nor enlightenment without

the Hour. Even the illusion of magnitude in the world around the self is the reality of doctrine, rite and virtue relative to the Hour. Remembering the Hour means renewing the connection with God, for the Hour contains the covenant with Him—it means turning towards the presence of the Self and Its manifestation in contingency, whereby Its presence in the world is transformed into the recognition of Beauty as Divine revelation. The concomitant of Beauty is Love, the desire for union. And love is the path to God, for He is beautiful.

Tradition restores or raises the individual to his original fairest stature, through purification, perfecting and unification. In the process of purification, the individual recognizes and renews his indebtedness to the first principle that is the very center of his being—uncreated and uncreatable, and as such incorrupt and incorruptible. He thereby discerns the unreal from the real, and accepts the Real as his uncreated nature. This acceptance is linked with drawing closer to the "good example" and to unicity—which means to the one and only God, for there is no god but God.

Whenever any human notions, plans or deeds are adopted without that testimony to unicity, human existence is transformed into paganism or association with God. It is this that is the root cause of violence. Paganism demands violence, is impossible without it, and is confirmed only by it. The upsurge of violence in the modern world has never offered any alternative to ideology, as a justification for denigration, persecution and killing of others. Force is met with force; both sides see themselves as good and just, and the other as evil and blameworthy.

Whatever can be said of Christianity here is valid for both Judaism and Islam. Christianity is a religion of love, which instructs its members in supreme moral principles for the sake of doing good: love thy neighbor, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But despite these moral principles, the very heart of the Gospel and foundation of human affirmation of the Divine unicity, throughout the history of Christianity and throughout the world, wherever Christians have lived, hatred for non-Christians has smouldered and flared up, often giving rise to the denigration, persecution and killing of those who were other and different. The best-known outburst of this hatred and killing is the *Shoah*, of which the Catholic Church says: "The *Shoah* was the work of a thoroughly modern neopagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity . . ."[46] Yet, trying

[46] Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," March 1998.

to trace the roots of Christian attitudes to the Holocaust, the United States Catholic Conference concluded: "Christian anti-Judaism did lay the groundwork for racial, genocidal anti-Semitism by stigmatizing not only Judaism but Jews themselves for opprobrium and contempt. So the Nazi theories tragically found fertile soil in which to plant the horror of an unprecedented attempt at genocide."[47]

If the mass denigration, persecution and killings of recent centuries are the work of "a modern neopagan regime," and as such essentially contrary to Christianity—and Muslims and Jews will say that similar events for which they bear the responsibility are also neopagan—there remains the question of how the prevailing world-view, attitudes and conduct of Christians, Muslims and Jews could have internalized neopaganism or become complicit in it. If the atrocities of the modern era are really rooted in paganism, knowledge of them becomes contingent on the issue of God and associationism with God. And it is impossible to respond to the question of the other and the different without clarifying the relationship between paganism and transcendent unicity.

Fear and Power

There is no compulsion in the debt, because man has the choice to submit to or contest the covenant. Submission means that man recognizes and acknowledges the illusory nature of his power. He thus sees power in its reality: *wa lā hawla wa lā quwwata illā bi'Llāhi*.[48] Will is confronted with the request for submission (*islam*), which is freely given; for the one who chooses may decide freely.

Voluntary submission means the recognition of a power superior to the self.[49] In such a relationship, the self places itself in a free rela-

[47] United States Catholic Conference, *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See's We Remember*, 2001.

[48] "And there is no power and no strength except by God." [*Ed.*]

[49] The issue of freedom is inseparable from the conundrum of slavery. To be free means to be enslaved to Freedom; any other form of slavery annuls human freedom. Jesus says (Jn 8:31-32): "If ye continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." The principle of this teaching is that there is no god but God. Everything to which man is enslaved, other than God, becomes a god and deprives him of Freedom. The Recitation says, in regard to the unfree (31:30): "He is the Truth; and that they call apart from Him—that is the false." Enslavement to anything but Him is tantamount to a denial of human purpose. "Hast thou seen him who has taken his desire to be his god?" (45:23). Jesus adds (Jn 8:34): "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." The central question of freedom, therefore, is one of discerning between enslavement

tionship with power. This first stage opens up the possibility that its five elements—attestation, prayer, fasting, alms, and pilgrimage—may be transformed from their specific exterior form to an inward fullness, gaining thereby an aura not of knowledge enclosed within the quantifiable world, but of something far greater. And knowledge that includes what is rationally attainable through knowledge, and also what is greater than knowledge, is another word for faith. The acknowledgment that the self is contingent signifies its comparison with the Praiser; and through Praise, the Praiser becomes identical with, as one with, the Praised. Thus drawing closer to and becoming one with the Praised means utter submission, by which the Self is revealed to Itself.

The rejection of submission may be termed denial—which means the displacement of faith from the Absolute towards one of its finite and contingent manifestations. But power without Power is nothing more than an illusion by which man defines himself in terms of partial freedom in relation to that same Power, as no more than what manifests itself in him as comparable and quantifiable. In this view, there is no human openness to the Absolute nor, as the Tradition teaches, is the Holy Spirit present in the individual's uncreated center. But the prerequisite for the rightness of a sacred tradition is that it be connected to the Absolute. For the debt, as the relationship between the individual as debtor and God as Creator, to be properly oriented, for it to be religion in the original meaning of the term, it must be grounded in the doctrine of the Absolute. Nor is this all. The debt, as the relationship between the individual and God, must comprise a spirituality that is wholly consistent with that doctrine. The latter must therefore be a doctrine that is from God; inherent in it must be communion and mystery, and the doctrine must manifest itself in these and in sacred art. When these conditions are not met, we are dealing with a philosophical doctrine or ideology, in which neither sign nor way derive from God.

The consequences of an interpretation in which there is no lasting connection with the Truth are clear to see wherever there is the imprint of human will and action based upon it. The one and only God can never be form; but no form in existence is without His presence. To look at and know the forms means uncovering the mystery of every veil—that

and Enslavement (109:1-6): "Say: 'O unbelievers, I serve not what you serve and you are not serving what I serve, nor am I serving what you have served, neither are you serving what I serve. To you your debt, and to me my debt!'"

its nature is identical with the Veiled, who is also the Revealed. But humankind's inability to transcend every form manifests itself in all the modes of "association with God," and in adopting the discourse of God into the various doctrines, ways and rituals that derive from Him, as though they were God Himself. It is these that are the prevailing features of this age, and it is a rare individual, in these circumstances, who is able to transcend such forms. For these doctrines, the world is a closed system, whose elements are also closed and isolated.

Seen in such a light, society too becomes a collection of isolated individuals, and is given ultimate value. This means that the prevailing social order and self-image determine the individual, rather than the individual determining society and its interpretation. The traditional postulate of the individual as openness to the Self, inherent in which is the view that society can be illuminated solely through the open individual, is transformed into the conviction that society can be shaped solely by rational comparisons, quantifications and forecasts.

And yet Absolute Power implies absolute freedom to submit to it. It is only when the will submits itself to the Absolute in conformity with its commandment, whether in the command to do or to abstain from doing, that the encounter with phenomena in the world reveals them to be greater than he who perceives their form. But in this process, whatever has its own image, i.e., the limited, bears limitless witness to Him Who is like nothing else, and thus has the power to manifest Himself in all things. As such He is the fundamental Other, the ever-present alterity. But humans are also able to forget the presence of that Absolute Alterity; then the contemplation of the totality of existence and all its elements is reduced to their disassembly and assembly through rational calculations, which are mere approximations and assumptions. Then everything in the external world seems non-existent or uncertain, and the self is forcibly surrounded and enclosed. This reverses the entire scheme of things. Beauty, meaning and purpose become second-order attributes, subordinate to matter, space and time as tangible, calculable and, in consequence, rationally knowable specificities. In such a scheme, the greater is seen as deriving from the lesser and the higher from the lower. Reason then becomes the supreme human potential and recognizes nothing superior to itself. The confidence that derives from an eternally omnipresent Alterity, from Infinity, becomes mere trust, a set of direct or mediated relations between measurable and comparable quantities, enacted by rational calculations in which submission, faith/love/knowledge and the sacred become reduced to redundant shadows.

But man is never without God, Who is man's Alterity: He creates him, and to Him he returns. God is firstness, which means that there is no nothingness. The nothingness that is not is the confirmation of the Oneness of Being or the Logos; the nothingness that is not is the Mystery. Thus the individual, whatever condition he may be in, resolves this duality by turning away from himself, by recognizing that his self is never other than contingency—even though the latter may tempt him to see it as absolute. At the heart of the self, therefore, the individual incessantly seeks *absolution* and a turning away from the self to the Self. In this, he strives towards perfect praise of the Truth, in which there is no longer any distinction between Praiser and Praised. The self orients the seeker of absolution, the one who turns away from illusion, towards the Logos—the light of Praise, the root of all that is, in which existence as a whole and all its phenomena bear witness to the Praised by their praise. Tying himself and drawing closer to the Praiser enables the individual himself to become the Logos, the creative "Let it be!" which manifests its presence. Out of this process of drawing closer, which is identical with perfect submission, the willingness to receive the Self in one's very center, derives the eternal testimony that there is no god but God.

Given that every society is composed of the individuals within it—and that each of them is conscious and has the potential to understand his consciousness—the organization of society as a whole and of its constituent individuals means the recognition of differences between one person and the next. These differences divide society into the poor and the wealthy, with the wealthy representing themselves as the model that others should emulate. Maintaining the wealthy in that position is thus presented as the supreme purpose of politics. It is hard to deny the fact that politics, whatever form it may take, is the establishment, interpretation and justification of the presence of a small number of wealthy as the rulers and managers of power. But every power that is not that of the Absolute can be justified only by fear of the other. The greater the will to power, the deeper the fear of the other. Since political power is derived from the stability and magnitude of the state, the other as a source of fear is represented as a threat, as an enemy that is wholly without and yet endangers the very heart of the social order. The local collective, the "us," thus calls for greater power than that of the foreign or alien, the "them." "We" are afraid of the other as of one who strikes fear into us, as of a terrorist. In his identity and culture, this other is wholly alien to "us," and not just foreign but also unknowable, for in the eyes of the terrified, there can

be nothing that "we" have in common with him, no accountability to a Truth that is equally close to everyone and judges everyone equally. The other is perceived as a chaotic nebulousness, a blind and unpredictable force that can be countered only by a structured and "absolute" power. This demands the assent even of all those who are afraid to extend full support to the political authorities (who themselves form part of the rich and ruling minority) in their battle against this barely visible enemy. The rule here is: Whoever is not with us is with them. The use of force is born out of darkness and chaos: the denser the darkness, the greater the chaos, the more justifiable the use of force. A *terrorist*, after all, does not need to be defined and specified, or to be judged by general, universally valid principles. This means that errors in the war against terrorism, mistakes that might endanger even the essence of humanity, must always be tolerated. Acting out of fear demands an affirmation of superiority. As long as fear is the motive force of the "powerful," however, not even the total annihilation of the other who is represented as a terrorist will liberate the "powerful" from a fear that has its origins in ignorance. Fear of the other and the will to dominate him by force transforms the powerful but fearful into a god, into someone who sees himself as a god in the nebulous darkness of alterity. So fear of the other, who is no longer "somewhere else," but is now everywhere and is part of the constituted social order, calls for power as the prerequisite for maintaining the world order. This in turn needs the authority of a political elite, and the planning, maintenance and development of a system of production and power.

Host and Guest

Differentiating between individual human potentials means recognizing and accepting the constant manifestation of the Absolute in the contingent, and of the Cause in the effect. The fact that the supernatural is at the center of human nature is expressed in man's potential to distinguish the unreal from the Real, and in his voluntary acceptance of the Real. When this is the starting-point, voluntary acceptance does not exhaust human potential, but merely orients it towards the higher levels of being, i.e., of the self. The will guides one towards beauty and goodness, but the appeal of the latter transcends the will: love is linked with but more exalted than the will. The individual's love transforms his being into knowledge; and the aspiration to perfection transforms being into all-encompassing knowledge.

Humans also have the potential to deny. But denial cannot annul the supernatural center of the human self: the center may be masked,

but not extinguished. Moreover, every human "I" needs a "you" so that He of Whom both are the image may be attested to, and to fulfil the requirement that the self discover and come to know itself, given that it can see itself only in the other. The one who accepts the Real cannot be a judge, for the debt to God derives from the voluntary acceptance of His offer. Virtue as the confirmation of wisdom does not even exclude the denier, as the Recitation explicitly says:

> And if any of the idolaters seeks of thee protection, grant him protection till he hears the words of God; then do thou convey him to his place of security—that, because they are a people who do not know.[50]

The love of God for the manifest does not deny His infinite perfection, nor His all-sufficiency. To all the diversity of the manifest, God is utter alterity, for God is Unity and Unicity. He is the Witness to all that reveals Him, and all that which exists bears witness to Him. The whole of existence is thus encompassed in His Unicity: "Suffices it not as to thy Lord, that He is witness over everything? Are they not in doubt touching the encounter with their Lord. Does He not encompass everything?" (41:53-54), Unicity comprises both the One Who encompasses everything and that which He encompasses. To all that is manifest, He is perfect alterity and sanctuary, and the true abode of all being is in Him. Understanding this fact implies seeing this world as the sign of the Supreme, as the abode of stability.[51] Coming towards the Lord means no less than the discovery and perception of unicity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unicity. Only the Self testifies

[50] 9:6. The demand for hospitality and protection even towards those who associate others [with God] (*mushrikun*) may appear incomprehensible. The Recitation firmly states, however, that "confidence" (*amana*) is the principle of humanity, the original and unalterable center of the self, the covenant between God and man. "Association" (*shirk*), then, has no foundation in principle. In *shirk* the unreal is taken for the Real or associated with It. Regardless of the state a man may be in, perfection is his cause and purpose. The resolute condemnation of "associationism" does not exclude the original and final salvation of every individual, for God's mercy is all-encompassing.

[51] Thus the Recitation says (40:39): "O my people, surely this present life is but a passing enjoyment; surely the world to come is the abode of stability"; and (6:126-27): "We have distinguished the signs to a people who remember. Theirs is the abode of peace with their Lord, and He is their Protector for that they were doing." Jesus says of this (Jn 14:1-2): "Ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." It should be noted that the Arabic term *rabb* (Hebrew and Aramaic *rab*) covers a wide range of meanings, including the right to something, authority over it, the upbringing, education and nurture of something from its conception to its fulfilment.

to the Self, only Unicity testifies to Unicity, and only all testifies to everything: "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God" (2:115). The encounter with Him, therefore, is the full manifestation of unicity: everything vanishes, save His Face.

Acknowledging God's words is impossible except in a state of voluntary openness to their expression in speech or writing. Their presence takes the listener or reader into their confidence; but he may accept or reject them. The Recitation is a guest among people, a guest who speaks of God. It is from the acceptance of that which is heard and read that there follows the right of speech. And there is no individual who does not deserve, if he so wishes, to have conveyed to him what his host has acquired by listening and reading—which begins as submission and humility, and then becomes love and knowledge, which are confirmed by openness and generosity. In the end, the central question for everyone faced with the diversity of sacred doctrines, ways and rituals is whether their God is one and the same. Everything that constitutes the differences between them depends on the answer to that question. Nor should it be forgotten, however, that doctrines, ways and rituals, and even forms of virtue, may be taken as gods that are not God. Associating with God may be plain to see and easy to recognize, but it may also be hidden and hard to discern.

All existence is determined by space and time—homeland and history, parents and descendants—in the ontotopological sense: man has invariably come to where he is from somewhere, and will go somewhere from there. He is at home in the space and time that determine his language and customs. These become invisible through habit, but become visible again in the need for translation. When a stranger crosses a border to enter another's space, both of them—host and stranger—are faced with the unknown: the former is confronted by someone whose language and customs are incomprehensible to him, and the latter is impotent without the will of the host. Ignorance on both sides provokes fear, which is all too often resolved by the subjugation, persecution or annihilation of the stranger. The sacred traditions speak of the obligation to welcome the stranger and to acknowledge that, though he is unknown to the host, he is wholly known to God. It is therefore the duty of the one who is in his own space and language to convey to the incomer everything that will enable him to get to know the host's customs, the host's own otherness, and to receive from the

The head of the household is thus *rabb al-dar*, for he has authority over the house and is responsible for its maintenance.

incomer in full openness everything that the incomer offers him, since no force lies behind it. The foreigner is thus a guest before God, just as is the host, but his powerlessness in regard to the host gives him the right to be served: the host has a debt to him that is no less than the testimony that the Face of God is omnipresent:

> It is not piety, that you turn your faces
> to the East and to the West.
> True piety is this:
> to believe in God, and the Last Day,
> the angels, the Book, and the Prophets,
> to give of one's substance, however cherished,
> to kinsmen, and orphans,
> the needy, the traveler, beggars,
> and to ransom the slave,
> to perform the prayer, to pay the alms (2:177).

Belief in God is inseparable from the awareness of the debt towards Him. Since He is the only absolute subject, Who manifests Himself in multiplicity, one's attitude towards the neighbor and guest shows one's faith in God and one's acceptance of responsibility for the debt to Him. Thus belief in God and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, presupposes a consciousness of this debt, which is not imposed by force. "He who believes in God and the Last Day does not threaten his neighbor, and he who believes in God and the Last Day shows courtesy to his guest, and he who believes in God and the Last Day speaks fair words or remains silent," said the Prophet.[52] One's attitude towards the other is defined, in the Prophet's terms, as the consequence and measure of one's faith in God and the Day of the Debt. And thus the sincerity of this belief will be testified to by giving precedence to the other:

> And those who made their dwelling in
> the abode, and in belief, before them,
> love whosoever has emigrated to them,
> not finding in their breasts any need
> for what they have been given, and
> preferring others above themselves, even
> though poverty be their portion. And
> whoso is guarded against the avarice
> of his own soul, those—they are
> the prosperers (59:9).

[52] Sahih Muslim, I, p. 32.

To love God and follow the Prophet means to gain His love: "He who cares for the orphan, whether or not he be related, he and I shall be together in Paradise."[53]

The stranger and the outcast, the orphan and the needy are thus a gift to the host. The opportunity to speak and to give of his property, and to be silent and to listen to what these outsiders are saying to him, offers him the chance to verify his own testimony, his own turning towards God. The host can establish his "I" in relation to the "you" of the guest, with both the "I" and the "you" returning to His presence. God is thus the source and confluence of the confidence that both have received. The presence of the guest extricates the host from the failures of the past and liberates him from the uncertainty of awaiting the future:

> The man who is conscious of the nature of pure Being willingly remains in the moment that Heaven has assigned him; he is not feverishly straining towards the future nor lovingly or sadly bent over the past. The pure present is the moment of the Absolute: it is now—neither yesterday nor tomorrow—that we stand before God.[54]

With the Other
by Rusmir Mahmutćehajić

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[53] Sahih Muslim, IV, p. 1537.

[54] Frithjof Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, p. 111.