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CHAPTER 3

The Incantation of the Griffin (Simurgh) and the Cry of the Eagle
Islam and the Native American tradition[1]

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> The incantation of the Simurgh awakens those who are asleep and its abode is on the cosmic mountain (Qāf). Its incantation reaches everyone but few listen to it. Everyone is with it and yet the majority are without it. . . . This Simurgh flies without moving and takes to the air without wings, and approaches without traversing distances. All forms issue from it but it itself is formless. Its nest is in the East but the West is not deprived of it.[2]

> Dancers wear and use whistles made of the wingbone of the eagle to which eagle plumes are attached. In recreating the cry of the eagle to the powerful rhythm of song, dance and drum, the Eagle is present in voice and being, man's vital breath is united with the essence of sun and life. Through such ritual use of the sacred form man becomes Eagle, and the eagle in his plumes is the Sun.[3]

When one journeys through the Western lands of America from Arizona and New Mexico to Montana, one encounters natural scenery very much reminiscent of certain areas of the Islamic world, especially Morocco in the West and the area stretching from Persia and Afghanistan to Central Asia in the East. And when one beholds the cultural heritage and practices of the Northern Plains Indians who were nomads with corresponding nomadic groups in the Islamic world, similarities become even more striking. One need only think of the magic of a galloping "warrior" on horseback in the two worlds in question and the qualities of valor, heroism and resignation to the

[1] This essay is dedicated to Joseph Epes Brown.

[2] Suhrawardī, *Risāla-yi safīr-i Sīmurgh* in his *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, Vol. II, ed. S.H. Nasr (Tehran, 1977), p. 315 of the Persian text. Trans. S.H. Nasr.

[3] Joseph E. Brown, "Sun Dance" in D.M. Dooling and P. Jordan Smith (eds.), *I Became a Part of It: Sacred Dimensions of Native American Life* (San Francisco, Harper, 1989, p. 244).

Divine Will which characterizes both types. What is at issue here is not only similar geographical and anthropological conditions, but spiritual principles belonging to two different universes of meaning which nevertheless manifest remarkable points of congruence and confluence. Those two worlds, that of Islam and the Native American tradition, especially of the Plains, were to meet in the thought, life and the very being of the noble scholar, Joseph Epes Brown. Our very first impression of him in Sedona, Arizona in the 1950s could have had as easily for its background the Atlas Mountains as the hills of northern Arizona. And through forty years of close association and friendship we have been witness to the meeting of these two worlds, so rarely studied in a comparative way, in the writings and lifestyle of Joseph Brown who has made these worlds his spiritual home. Therefore, as a humble tribute to him the following brief treatment of some of the remarkable similarities and correspondences between Islam and the American Indian tradition are set forth.

The first essential attribute shared by the two worlds in question, and being the cause of many similarities between them, is primordiality. The Native American tradition, a branch of Shamanism, possesses an undeniable primordial character and revives in the soul of many who have become familiar with it the deep nostalgia for the primordial nature we all carry within ourselves but which has become covered by layers of the historical existence of humanity during later periods of the cosmic cycle. Islam likewise claims for itself not only finality in the cycles of revelation but also primordiality. It is an assertion of the Truth that was at the beginning and shall always be. It returns man to the condition of primordiality (*al-fitrah*) and appeals to the primordial nature within us. It is this perspective that makes each man a priest in both traditions and allows him to stand in ritual prayer directly before God without any priestly intermediary. It is also this attribute which, in both traditions, bestows upon nature its primordial function of both theophany and sanctuary as we see in the use of virgin nature as a temple by Native Americans and as a mosque in Islam.

The attribute of primordiality which rests upon the oneness of the Principle (*tawhīd* in Islam) and its ineffable nature, hence its transcendence beyond any earthly form which would "incorporate" or "incarnate" it, is also the origin of the aniconic nature of the sacred art of Islam and that of the Plains Indians. In both cases there is an abhorrence of imprisoning the Spirit in any earthly "embodiment" and hence the development of an art form in which the Spirit is "represented" indirectly through indication and allusion rather than as an

icon. Here the nomadic spirit of the Plains Indians and the "spiritual nomadism" which characterizes the Islamic perspective as such and manifests itself so directly in Islamic art also come into play and possess a central role, for while aniconism characterizes all Islamic art, in the Native American world, it is only among the nomadic elements that the aniconic nature of their sacred art is central and so clearly visible.

There are also remarkable similarities in certain aspects of the cosmology of the two traditions concerning space and geometry. The six cardinal points of space play a major role in many Native American cosmologies and also sacred rites as is well known. But not everyone is aware of the esoteric Islamic doctrines concerning the Universal Man whose full manifestation in the Islamic world is the Prophet of Islam whose being embraces the breadth (*'ard*) and length (*tūl*) as well as depth (*'umq*) of space which symbolizes and corresponds to all the degrees of being. This "fullness" of the "dimensions of space" possessed in a pre-eminent fashion within the inner reality of the Prophet presents striking parallels to the significance of the dimensions of space and the cardinal points in the Native American tradition. There are profound correspondences between the two understandings of space as the sacred locus for the presence of the Spirit, correspondences which, however, are very subtle and cannot be easily detected by an outward study of the subject.

This similarity in the understanding of the nature of space underlies the remarkable parallels in the use of geometry, the science of space par excellence, in the two traditions. Although sacred geometry is foundational to all sacred art and architecture, its visible use is most evident in the two traditions in question. Geometric patterns are manifest wherever there is authentic Islamic art. The same can also be said of the art of the Plains Indians. Furthermore, there are certain geometric patterns, some quite complicated, which are common to the two worlds without there being any possibility of historical borrowing despite the presence of Islamic patterns in Spanish art and architecture in the Americas since the 16th century. The similarities emanate in fact from the emulation and manifestation of common archetypes rather than historical borrowing and point to visions of reality which share certain basic features.

A case of special interest is the circle whose significance among followers of the Native American tradition has been recorded by Joseph Brown as well as many other scholars. The "Indians" were known to sit in a circle especially during rituals and continue to do so to this

day while circles adorn their art. How remarkable it is that the same situation is to be found in the Islamic world. Not only is the circle or sphere, symbol of Heaven, so evident in the domes of mosques, but the Sufis also always sit in a circle (*halqah*) when they assemble to perform their prayers and invocations in gathering (*majlis*). In fact the ensemble of Sufis and the gathering in which invocation is performed is often called *halqat al-dhikr* (literally, the circle of invocation) and those who become Sufis are often said to have joined the *halqah* of the Sufis. This is also true of traditional Islamic education in general where students assemble in a circle at the feet of the master who usually sits on a pedestal (*kursī*). Many other parallels and correspondences exist to which one could point, but this primary use of the circle in both ritual and art as well as education suffices to indicate the primary significance of geometry and also sometimes the remarkably similar use of specific geometric forms in the two traditions in question.

To go back to cosmology, it needs to be mentioned that not only are there cosmological resemblances as far as the structure of space is concerned, but that also the view of the cosmos or the world of nature in Islam and the Native American tradition presents striking similarities. As already stated above, in both religions virgin nature is itself the place of worship, the cathedral in which the numinous and the sacred are experienced. Despite differences arising from the metaphysics underlying Islam, in both cases the sense of seeing in phenomena the "signs" of the Spirit or of God are very much present. The Native Americans see in each animal or plant the manifestation of a Divine Power while according to the Quran the phenomena of nature are the "signs of God" (*āyat Allāh*). Both traditions see in nature a reality to be deciphered and related to a meaning which outward forms at once veil and reveal or to use an Islamic image, a book to be "read" and interpreted. It is not accidental that both Islam, especially Sufism, and the Native American tradition have been accused of following "nature mysticism" by a number of Orientalists on the one hand and anthropologists as well as Christian missionaries on the other. Proximity to nature and love for nature in a religious and theological sense bind traditional Islam and the Native American tradition in a unifying vision of the world of nature within whose bosom they both lived in harmony for so many centuries and for the Native Americans even millennia.

Also, despite certain differences in perspective, both traditions see in natural forms, as well as sacred art created by man, not the embodiment of the Spirit but the loci of its presence. They both oppose

incorporating the Spirit and imprisoning it in forms while being aware of Its ubiquitous presence in the world of nature as well as the traditional and sacred arts created by man, whether it be the geometric patterns of a mosque or of a sand painting. Both the attitude towards nature and the aniconic character of the Islamic tradition as well as that of Plains Indians, to which reference has been already made, emanate from this basic religious and theological attitude toward the relation between the Spirit and any earthly form which would seek to incorporate it.

Strangely enough, despite this basic similarity, this principle manifested itself in very different ways in the two traditions in question. In Islam the Truth became revealed in a book, the Noble Quran, and writing became a basic element of Islamic civilization which produced probably more books than any other civilization before the invention of modern printing. In contrast, the Plains Indians and most other tribes of North America produced no written words. The truth remained oral and the power of the spoken word supreme.

This contrast is ameliorated, however, if one turns one's attention to the oral aspect of the Islamic heritage. First of all, among the nomads in the Islamic world, what remained central was the spoken rather than the written word. And in this context one must not forget that the Noble Quran itself was first of all a sonoral revelation before it was written in book form and that still today it is experienced by the great majority of Muslims through the ear rather than the eye. Secondly, all Muslims know parts of the Quran by heart and many who are called *huffāz* (plural of *hāfiz* meaning literally, memorizer) know the whole of it. This is also true of much of the *Hadīth* or traditions of the Prophet as well as didactic, epic and mystical poetry, stories, etc. In the actual practice of the religion, therefore, there is a great deal of reliance upon the spoken word which is very reminiscent of the Native American world. Thirdly, in both traditions the most essential and esoteric teachings remain always orally transmitted from master to student, or from breast to breast as Muslims say.

This is certainly well documented in the Native American case and the *Sacred Pipe* recorded by Joseph Brown is itself proof of this truth. As for Islam, despite the disregard of most Orientalists for the spoken word, the oral tradition continues very strongly to this day not only in Sufism but also in Islamic metaphysics and philosophy. Despite all that Muslims have written, there remains much that continues to be unwritten and is transmitted only orally, especially what concerns the spiritual life, Sufi practices, esoteric doctrines and certain principles

and techniques of the traditional arts. Despite the "bookish" nature of Islamic civilization, therefore, one sees here again remarkable similarities in respect for the word, the use of memory and oral means of transmission of what is most central and essential in the two traditions in question.

Despite the likely encounter of the followers of North and Central American Native religions and Muslims in the form of *moriscos* in the 16th and 17th centuries, it was only in the later part of the 20th century that the two traditions met fully for the first time. A number of significant Native American leaders have become aware of Islam and its civilizations, while within the Islamic world there is some interest for the religion and art of the Native Americans. There are now pow-wows in Dar al-islām in Abiquiu, New Mexico and shops in Santa Fe sell objects of Islamic art alongside Native American ones while some of the profoundest expositions of Native American metaphysics, cosmology and art have come from the pen of Frithjof Schuon, so well known for his peerless expositions of Islam in general and Sufism in particular.

But it was perhaps first of all in the mind and soul of Joseph Brown where these two worlds actually met on the experiential level. His whole life has been immersed in studying and teaching about the Native American tradition while his spiritual home was and remains Islam and he spent in fact some time living in Morocco. Something of the very life of North African Islam and that of the Plains Indians became fused and wed together in his soul as well as thought. Even his love and one might say his passion for horses have united the two worlds together for him, for while teaching at the University of Montana and living in the center of the natural world of the Plains Indians he has remained devoted to horses. But he has not raised just any horses that have come along. Rather, his love has been for Arabian horses for which he has become known in the area. To raise Arabian horses in the middle of an idyllic landscape still reverberating with the spiritual presence of the Native Americans characterizes on the external and practical plane this wedding between the two worlds of Islam and the Native American tradition in the mind and soul of Joseph Brown.

As for the intellectual plane, here again it can be stated that the penetrating and spiritually fecund studies that he has made during the past four decades of the traditional life, thought, and art of the Native Americans has owed more than one can say to traditional doctrines in general and Islamic spirituality and intellectuality in particular. In

his books and essays the perceptive reader will be able to observe a harmonious marriage between the spiritual visions of the two worlds in question. For these very reasons one must consider Joseph Brown as pioneer in not only making available the spiritual heritage of the Native American world, but also in bringing the Islamic and the Native American traditions together in a harmony which he has sought to cultivate all his life both within himself and in the immediate world around him. Both future students of the Native American tradition and all those interested in the encounter between Islam and that tradition must always remain grateful to the pioneering work of Joseph Brown, that gentle and perspicacious scholar in quest of the Spirit since his youth, a scholar in whose being the two traditions have met in such a remarkably meaningful and fruitful manner.

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and the Cry of the Eagle
by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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