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6. The Nature of Man

The Islamic conception of man is summarized in the doctrine of *al-insān al-kāmil*, the universal or perfect man, a doctrine whose essence and full manifestation is to be found in the Prophet of Islam and whose doctrinal exposition and formulation was left to later sages and saints such as Ibn ʿArabī and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. In fact Islamic gnosis (*al-ʿirfān*) revolves nearly always around the two axes of unity (*al-tawḥīd*), dealing with God and His Names and Qualities, and *al-insān al-kāmil*, dealing with man and the cosmos. The first is concerned with the Origin and Source of creation and the second with manifestation and the return of things to the Source. Or one could say that the first corresponds to the first "witness" or *Shahādah* of Islam, *Lā ilāha illa'Llāh*, there is no divinity but God, and the second to the second "witness," *Muḥammadun rasūl Allāh*, Muhammad is the Messenger of God. Muhammad is the Universal Man *par excellence* and also the quintessence of all creation, of all that is positive in cosmic manifestation. The Universal Man contains all degrees of existence within himself and is the archetype of both the cosmos and man. Therefore, metaphysically and of course not physically and quantitatively, there is a profound correspondence between man and the cosmos. Although outwardly a small part of the cosmos, man contains inwardly and within himself a reality that is the source of the cosmos itself—and that is why even fallen man, he who has forgotten his own true nature, has the power to dominate nature.

> From the pure star-bright souls replenishment is ever coming to the stars of heaven.
>
> Outwardly we are ruled by these stars, but our inward nature has become the ruler of the skies.
>
> Therefore, while in form thou art the microcosm, in reality thou art the macrocosm.
>
> Externally, the branch is the origin of the fruit; intrinsically the branch came into existence for the sake of the fruit. (Rūmī)[1]

The spiritual man, although outwardly dominated by nature, inwardly rules over things, most of all because he has conquered his own inner

[1] R. A. Nicholson, *Rūmī, Poet and Mystic* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), p. 124.

nature. Might one not add that today, when man boasts most about conquering nature, the reverse process has taken place, namely an apparent and outward conquest of nature combined with complete lack of asceticism, spiritual discipline, and self-negation, which therefore makes man more than ever a prisoner of his own passions and natural inclinations. But the spiritual man who has overcome his passions and who is the reflection of Universal Man and its realization and embodiment is the pole toward which the universe itself is attracted, to the extent that Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, that supreme poet of the spirit, could say,

> Wine in ferment is a beggar suing for our ferment;
> Heaven in revolution is a beggar suing for our consciousness;
> Wine was intoxicated with us, not we with it;
> The body came into being from us, not we from it.[2]

The Universal Man, whose full metaphysical doctrine cannot be expounded here, is then the sum of all degrees of existence, a total mirror before the Divine Presence and at the same time the supreme archetype of creation. It is the prototype of man, the reality that man carries potentially within himself and can always realize if there is aspiration, persistence, and of course divine succor. It is enough for man to realize the total possibility of his own existence, to become fully conscious of himself, to gain that treasure of true felicity and peace which he seeks outwardly here and there but never seems to find.

> You who wander in deserts away from your own consciousness,
> Come back to yourself to find all existence summed up in you.
> You are the way and reality of perfection.
> One in whom the great consciousness of God dwells.
> (Abu'l-Mawāhib al-Shādhilī)[3]

One is here reminded of Shakespeare's advice: "This above all; to thine own self be true."

The cosmic dimension of man may bring certain protests from theologians that this would obliterate the distinction between grace and nature and reduce man to simply "natural man." Christianity, having expanded in a world which suffered from too much emphasis upon rationalism and

[2] *Ibid.* p. 141.

[3] M. Smith, *The Sufi Path of Love* (London: Luzac and Co., 1954), p. 72.

naturalism, had to draw a sharp distinction between nature and grace, at least in its official theology. But Islam was not faced with the same situation. For this and for other reasons its doctrines are such that it considers nature itself as a handiwork of God in whose arteries flows the grace issuing from the Creator Himself. Man also is from a certain point of view a "natural being," yet without being deprived of grace. He is natural without being reduced to the natural man of the Renaissance or of Rousseau and the French encyclopaedists. The questions of natural law, original sin, the role of nature in spiritual realization, and the like are approached in a different light in Islam, and these questions have of course their bearing on the understanding of man and his function in the world. By considering man in his primordial nature (*al-fiṭrah*) and bestowing upon each Muslim the priestly and sacerdotal function, Islam removed the sharp distinction between the religious and secular, or sacred and profane, making of man a natural being who is yet the most direct symbol of the spiritual world in nature and in direct contact with that world.

Furthermore, by virtue of being the *khalīfah* of God on earth and occupying the central position he does hold, man is the channel of grace for nature. The spiritual man is the means whereby nature breathes of the spiritual life and is prevented from suffocation and destruction, as also confirmed by Western Hermetical and alchemical writers like Flamel and Jakob Boehme. Were man to cease completely to follow the spiritual life and lose his contact with the spiritual world, he would also cease to be a source of light for nature and in fact would turn toward the destruction and vilification of nature. The relation between modern industrial societies and virgin nature should provide an occasion to pause and meditate on this relationship.

The constitution of man and his relation with God and nature cannot be fully understood without analyzing the meaning and role of intelligence and reason, by means of which man seeks to master the world.

First of all a clear distinction, often forgotten today, must be made between the intellect, the faculty which knows immediately and totally, and reason whose Latin root (*ratio*) reveals its function of analysis and division. Islam appeals to the intellect in man, whose function it is to know the principles of things and which will arrive at the basic Islamic doctrine of Unity (*al-tawḥīd*) if it functions normally and is wholesome (*salīm*). In fact the role of revelation is to remove those obstacles which prevent the intelligence from functioning in a wholesome manner. Otherwise the intellect within man confirms the revealed truths of religion and Islam bases itself on a truth which is evident and in the nature of things.

As for reason, it is like the shadow and reflection of the intellect. If it remains subservient to the intellect and also to revelation, which likewise issues forth from the Supreme Intellect or Logos, then it is a positive instrument which can aid man to journey from multiplicity to Unity. But if it rebels against its own source, against both the intellect and revelation, then it becomes the source of disharmony and dissolution. Other creatures have intelligence in the sense that they reflect certain aspects of the divine and also cosmic intelligences. But only man possesses this subjective polarization of true intelligence which we call reason. And that is why only he can destroy the natural harmony of nature.

If modern man has been able to dominate but at the same time destroy nature and himself more than men of all other civilizations, it is precisely because with him more than ever before reason has been made independent of its principle. In such a condition reason becomes like an acid burning through the tissues of the cosmos and at the same time is powerless before the infra-human and irrational forces that revolt against it from below, in the same way that it has rebelled against the intellect above it. The relation between rationalism and the spiritual and intellectual heritage against which it rebelled on the one hand, and the irrationalism of modern times on the other, is very similar and in fact nearly the same thing as the humanism which rebelled against the theomorphic concept of man only to end in being threatened by the infrahuman forces it has itself liberated. Islam, while considering man as essentially an intelligence that also has willpower and performs actions, and emphasizing knowledge as a means of salvation and deliverance, yet rejects the position of rationalism and its limiting of the intellect to its reflection, which is reason as ordinarily understood. For Islam the world of the mind is much more vast than we usually envisage. It is in fact the locus of the Presence of the Divine Spirit, but man must penetrate beneath the surface of the mind with which he usually identifies himself in order to become aware of this Presence.

Again to quote Rūmī:

What worlds mysterious roll within the vast,
The all-encircling ocean of the Mind!
Cup-like thereon our forms are floating fast,
Only to fill and sink and leave behind
No spray of bubbles from the Sea upcast.
The Spirit thou canst not view, it comes so nigh.
Drink of this Presence! Be not thou a jar
Laden with water, and its lip stone-dry;

Or as a horseman blindly borne afar,
Who never sees the horse beneath his thigh.[4]

It is the very centrality and totality of the human state which makes any "linear" and "horizontal" evolution of man impossible. One cannot reach a more central point in a circle than the center itself. Once at the center one can always move either upward or downward but no further in the horizontal direction. The evolutionary view of man as an animal, which even from the biological point of view is open to question, can tell us little as to the real nature of man; no more than can the theories of many anthropologists who discuss anthropology without even knowing who man, the *anthrōpos*, is and without realizing the complete states of universal existence which man carries with him here and now.

Once it was asked of ʿAlī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet: What existed before Adam? He answered Adam, and to the question what existed before that Adam he again answered Adam, adding that were he to be asked this question to the end of time he would repeat Adam. This saying means that irrespective of when he appeared in the time-space matrix of this world, the metaphysical reality of man, of the Universal Man, has always been. It could not become but is, because it transcends time and becoming. It is, furthermore, this eternal archetype that determines the meaning of the human state and which man always reflects and bears potentially within himself in all time and space. Those who speak of the future evolution of man perhaps do not realize that higher possibilities of existence do not lie in some future time ahead of man but here and now above him, yet within his reach. Frankly, it must be said that the way man is "evolving" today makes it ever more difficult for him to attain these higher states of consciousness and being, whose very existence he has begun to doubt in general, while a certain number of people in this very climate of doubt seek to reach these states through the short-cut of drugs and pills rather than through spiritual discipline. One might say that the total and central nature of the human state, deriving from man's theomorphic nature, makes his relation with other states of being not a temporal one but a spatial one. Man stands at the crossing of the vertical and horizontal dimensions containing the amplitude and breadth of universal existence within himself here and now. It is for him to delve into himself in order to realize who he is, to realize these states which comprise his full nature.

[4] Nicholson, *Rūmī*, p. 106.

No development in time, especially in a process during which man lives increasingly on the surface of his being, fleeing from himself and the needs of his inner nature, will ever automatically bring an evolution to higher planes for the human species.

Rather, the urgent problem today is to prevent man from falling into an infrahuman world, which he faces because he has rejected his own transcendent origin and prototype. Modern man wants to kill the gods without destroying himself. He wants to reject the Divine and yet remain fully human. Islam has considered this question fully and has provided an answer with which we shall conclude this discussion. In several places in the Quran mention is made of the term "Face" or "Countenance of God" (*wajh Allāh*), for example the verses: "There remaineth but the Countenance of thy Lord, Majestic, Splendid" (55:27) and "Everything will perish save His Countenance" (28:88).

Nearly all Muslim sages have agreed that the Countenance of God, which alone endures and persists, is the spiritual aspect of man's nature. Ultimately the body dies and even the inferior psychic elements perish or at least are integrated into a higher degree of being, namely that of the spirit. It is only the spiritual element which is eternal. It is the face that man has turned toward God. But it is also the face that God has turned toward man. The Countenance of God embraces a total reality, one aspect of which is man's spiritual countenance and the other God's countenance toward his creation and especially his vicegerent on earth, man. And it is this same reality which in Shi'ite Islam comprises the inner nature of the Imam. The Imam is the link between God and man, a spiritual being in whom the divine and the human orders meet.

To meditate on the theme of the Face of God is to realize that man cannot destroy the divine image without destroying himself. The poetical cry of Nietzsche in the nineteenth century that "God is dead," a cry which has now been turned into a theological proposition in certain quarters and is advertised far beyond its purport and significance by those who seek after the sensational and who seem to have little reverence for the belief of those living and dead for whom God is eternally present and alive, cannot but have its echo in the assertion that man is dead, man as a spiritual and free being. Man cannot destroy the face that God has turned towards him without destroying the face that man has turned towards God, and therefore also all that is eternal and imperishable in man and is the source of human dignity, the only reality that gives meaning to human life. The inexhaustible richness of the symbol of the Countenance of God should possess much meaning for modern man who seeks desperately for meaning

in human life and the preservation of human dignity, but is too rarely concerned with the other half of this reality, namely the Countenance of God, that aspect of the Divine that has turned toward us as human beings.

To know himself, man must come to know the Face of God, the reality that determines him from on high. Neither flights into outer space nor plunges beneath the seas, nor changes of fashions and modes of outward living alter the nature of man and his situation vis-à-vis the Real. Nor can biological or conventional psychological studies, which deal only with the outward aspects of human nature, reveal to man who he is and how he should "orient" himself in that journey whose end is the meeting with the Real. Man can know himself only by realizing his theomorphic nature. It is only in remaining conscious of the divine imprint upon his soul that man can hope to remain human. Only the attraction of the celestial can prevent man from being dragged by gravity to the abysses of subhuman existence. And it is a remarkable feature of the human state that no matter where and in what condition he may be, man always finds above him the sky and the attraction which pulls him toward the Infinite and the Eternal.

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