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Manifesto of Life (Philosophical Interpretation of *Surah al-Asr* of the Quran)

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Abstract

This article presents a novel exploration of the manifesto of life, grounded in Quranic philosophy and a semantic methodology. It examines the 103rd chapter of the Quran – *Surah al-'Asr*, exploring the notion of *khosran* (existential loss), which the Quran identifies as a universal human affliction. An exception to this pervasive condition is highlighted: those who achieve a harmonious blend of belief and supreme righteous deeds, fuelled by Divine Love, are exempted. This paper contrasts the concepts of a life lost and a life well-lived, as depicted in the Quran. It conducts a semantic analysis of life in relation to *khosran* (existential loss) belief (*Iman*), love, supreme righteous deeds (*amal al-salihat*), truth (*haqq*), and patience (*sabr*). Ultimately, the article posits that a transcendent life is essentially an art of love.

Keyword: Life, Time, Love, Existential Loss, belief, supreme righteous deeds, Truth, Patience.

Introduction

Understanding the philosophy of life is essential for every individual as it is the foundation upon which the essence and direction of one's life can be established. The philosophical question concerning the meaning of life has been addressed with profound eloquence and depth in *Surah al-'Asr* in the Holy Quran by God, the All-Wise.

Surah al-'Asr is as a manifesto of life, presenting a stark contrast between a "Lost Life" characterized by existential loss or "*khosran*", and a "Good Life" emerging from the union of belief, or "Iman", with "Supreme Righteous Deeds" (*'amal aṣ-ṣāliḥāt*). A Lost Life is aimless and is spent in pursuit of fleeting desires and superficial goals, it is devoid of a definitive purpose or objective. In sharp contrast, a Good Life is anchored in belief — a belief that emanates from knowledge and the triad of love, lover, and the beloved. Belief is a driving force that propels one towards a life based on the values and norms derived from spiritual knowledge (*ma'rifat*). The Good life marked by an unwavering understanding of and submission to the Divine will, devout worship, and the pursuit of closeness to *al-Haqq* (the Truth). It is a life committed to serving God's creation, upholding justice, and engaging in Supreme Righteous deeds to foster the spiritual and material growth, development, and excellence of both the individual and society.

Belief is spiritual knowledge of the Absolute Good, love of Absolute Beauty and conducting one's deeds based on Divine Love. The transcendent life is the art of love. Divine love results in substantial motion within the human being. Love is the force of Divine Attraction (*Jazaba al-ilahiyyah)* which drives all existents towards the simple and expansive existence that is God, from which all existence emanates. Human beings due to the presence of free will, and the temptation of the carnal soul (*nafs al-'ammarah*), are in a state of forgetfulness, forgetting the covenant of the day of Alast, where they swear an oath of submission to God, and become

His vicegerents on this earth. While all that exists is experiencing a positive substantial motion, towards God as exemplified by numerous verses of the Quran such as 59:1 “Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies God; He is the Almighty, the Wise,” Human beings are in a state of existential loss (Khosran), experiencing negative substantial motion, except those who through Divine love display belief and supreme righteous deeds.

The "Good Life" is anchored in God consciousness (*taqwa*), belief (Iman), Love, and love for truth. It is a life characterized by tolerance, justice, and freedom.

Surah "Al-ʻAsr," is the 103rd chapter of the Holy Quran. It is classified as a Meccan Surah and is comprised of three verses. Surah "Al-ʻAsr is distinguished by its profound succinctness and depth. The surah derives its name from the term "al-ʻAsr," used in its opening verse. Al-ʻAsr which renders Time is emphasized by the oath God swears by time itself, denoted by the Arabic letter waw prefixed to *al-ʻAsr*. Islamic tradition holds that in the early days of Islam, Muslims would often recite this Surah upon saying goodbye to each other.

Surah "Al-ʻAsr" encapsulates the core teachings of the Quran with regards to life. It concisely addresses the archetypal elements regarding human existence and the philosophical framework of life by discussing four central themes: time (*al-ʻasr*), existential loss (*khosran*), belief (*īmān*), and supreme righteous deeds (*ʻamal aṣ-ṣāliḥāt*). Al-Tabarsi, in "Majmaʻ al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Quran, remarks on the surah’s significance. He states that despite its brevity, this surah comprehensively covers all that is required in religion, in terms of knowledge, action, and the social obligations of enjoining the truth and patience — an allusion to the Islamic duty of commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong, while advocating for monotheism, justice, the fulfilment of obligations, and the eschewal of indecencies.”[1]

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) extolled the virtues of this surah, stating, "Whoever recites Surah Al-'Asr, God will grant him forgiveness, and he shall be counted among those who exhort one another to truth and patience."[2]

The Text of Surah Al-Asr:

> In the name of Allah, The Most Compassionate, The Most Merciful
>
> ﴿١﴾ وَالْعَصْرِ
>
> Swear by the time, (1)
>
> ﴿٢﴾ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ
>
> Indeed, the human is in a (state of) loss, (2)
>
> ﴿٣﴾ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ
>
> Except those who believe and perform righteous deeds and exhort one another to the truth and exhort one another to patience. (3)

The Structure of the Surah

From a structural perspective, Surah Al-'Asr is divided into three sections each comprised of a single verse. The second section (verse 2) contains the Surah's pivotal message, asserting that the human being qua human being, without belief in the Divine Origin (*Mabda'*), the reality of Resurrection (*maʿād*), and the Divine messengers, and without engagement in supreme righteous deeds ('*amal al-ṣaliḥ*), is in a state of existential loss (*khosran*).

The first section of the Surah (verse 1) emphasises the importance of leading a purposeful and meaningful life and of awareness of the passage of time. It highlights the importance of time and life by swearing upon time. Thus, though brief, the first section is a profound contemplation on the philosophy of life from the perspective of Divine existential philosophy.

The third section (verse 3) which is the final section of the Surah, introduces a framework of four programs designed to save human being from their state of existential loss, and instead guiding them towards a transcendent and beautiful life – a return to their original perfect form. This is in resonance with the Quranic verses stating "Truly We created the Human being in the most beautiful form. Then We cast him to the lowest of the low." (Quran, 95:4-5) The four programs which are based on the first five verses of Surah al-Baqarah are 1) Belief in the Divine origin (*Mabdaʾ*), resurrection (*Maʿād*) and Divine messengers. 2) Supreme virtuous deeds, 3) inviting to *Ḥaqq*, 4) patience and perseverance on the Divine path.

Interpretation of Surah Asr

Verse 1:By the Time (*Wal-ʻAsr*)

Great commentators such as Tustari, Tabari, Sulami, Qushayri, Tusi, Zamakhshari, Tabarsi, Fakhr Razi, Baqli, Qurtubi, Faiz Kashani, and Allameh Tabatabai have offered diverse interpretations for this verse[3].

The interpretations of *wal-ʻAsr* include, swear by the time, lifetime, capital of Life and Life, swear to the era of Imam Mahdi's governance, swear by the age of prophethood, and also swear by the evening prayer because of its virtue.

'Arais Al Bayan Fi Haqayeq al-Quran by Roozbahan Baqhli has presented a mystical interpretation: "I swear to the time when mystics look at the beauty of truth and are happy to meet him."[4]

Considering the context of the Surah and its overarching message, the interpretation of *wal-ʻAsr* as swearing by time as the capital of human Life is the preferable interpretation, and is more consistent with the latter verses. Nonetheless, the alternative interpretations remain notable exemplifications of *ʻAsr*.

Verse 2
Human (Insaan)

The prefix *"al-*" in "*al-insan*" which renders the human, serves multiple purposes in the context of the Quran:

1. **Universality**: It denotes the generality of the statement, encompassing all of humanity and not a specific individual or group. This universality emphasizes that the subsequent declaration pertains to human beings as a whole.

2. **Emphasis**: The Arabic word "إِنَّ" (*inna*), which often precedes "ال" (*al-*), is used for emphasis. Its usage here serves to intensify the statement, indicating a serious and unequivocal message about human beings.

3. **Definiteness**: By making "إِنسَان" (*insan*) definite, it brings the focus to every individual human being, directly addressing each person's state of existence.

The Quran employs three terms to refer to human beings: "*insan*," "*bashar*," and "*nas*.". One of the reasons this word is employed here is the relation between the word *insan* and *nisyaan* which according to Arab lexicographers suggest that *insan* is derived from the word *nisyaan* which means forgetfulness. The Quran refers to the concept of humans being forgetful in various verses, highlighting the human beings' tendency to forget commitments, the signs of God and their own nature, example of such verses include:

Surah An'am

"And when you see those who engage in vain discussion about Our signs, turn away from them till they engage in other discourse. And if Satan should cause you to forget, then once you have remembered, sit not in the company of wrongdoing people." (6:68)

Surah al-Kahf

"Except if Allah wills, And remember your lord when your forget and say 'It may be that my Lord will guide me nearer than this to rectitude'" (18:24)

Surah Taha

"And verily We made covenant with Adam aforetime, but he forgot. And we found no determination in him." (20:115)

Surah Sajdah

"So, taste [the punishment] for having forgotten the meeting of this Day of yours. Indeed, we have forgotten you. And taste the punishment eternal for that which you used to do." (32:14)

Surah Al-Mujadila

"On the Day when Allah will raise them all and informs them of that which they did. Allah has taken account of it all, while they have forgotten it. And Allah is witness over everything." (58:6)

Surah al-Hashr

"And do not be like those who forgot Allah, so he caused them to forget their own souls. Those are the iniquitous." (59:19)

Thus, the choice of *insan*, could be to indicate the default state of human beings in the physical world is that of forgetfulness. The purpose of religion and the Divine messengers is to remind human beings of their origin, purpose and ultimate destination, as attested to by many verses of the Quran such as:

Surah Al-Baqarah

Humanity was a single community, then Allah sent the prophets as bearers of glad tidings and as warners. And with them He sent down the Book in truth, to judge between humanity concerning that wherein they differed. And only they who were given it differed concerning it, after clear proofs came to them, out of jealousy among themselves. Then Allah guided those who believe to the truth of that wherein they differed, by His Permission. And God guides whomsoever He will to a straight path. (2:213)

Surah Ibrahim

"And We have not sent any messenger, save in the language of his people, that he might make clear for them. Then Allah lets go astray whomsoever He will and guides whomsoever He will. And He is the Mighty, the Wise." (4:14)

The verse indicates that without this guidance human beings are in a state of existential loss. The term *insan* (human being) refers to humanity in its entirety.[5]

Three central questions of human life are: Where did I come from (origin)? What have I come for (purpose)? And where am I going (destination)? The Quran offers a comprehensive framework for reflecting on these fundamental questions and each of these questions is dealt with in detail throughout the Quran. For origin see Quran 2:30-34 (creation of Adam), 4:1 (creation from a single soul), 20:55 (creation from earth) amongst others. For purpose see Quran 51:56 (worship and servitude of God), 67:2 (Test and Trial), 11:61 (stewardship and building the earth), 91:7-10 (achieving moral excellence). For destination see Quran 2:28 (life after death), 29:57 (return to Allah), 3:9 (The final gathering), 2:82 (eternal nature of the afterlife). The questions of origin and destination are dealt with most succinctly in Surah al-Baqarah verse 156 "… Truly we belong to Allah, and indeed unto Him we return." And the question of

purpose is answered in the Quran in verse 51:56 “I did not create jinn and humanity, save to worship Me.”

This life is a place of trials and tribulations. The foundation of the world is based on hardship: "Indeed, We created the human being in hardship." (Quran 90:4)

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rumi beautifully captures the journey of the individual who has followed the four programs provided by this surah in ghazal 1674 of *Kulliyat-e Shams*:

> We are from above, and to the heights we go,
> We are from the sea, and to the sea we go.
> We are neither from there nor here,
> We are from no place, and to no place we go.
> “There is no God”, is after, “except Allah”,
> Like “there is no” towards “except” we go.
> “Say: ‘come’” is a verse of Divine attraction,
> Towards attraction to the Exalted Truth we go.
> We are Noah’s ark in the storm of the spirit,
> Inevitably, without hands or feet, we go.
> Like a wave, we raise our heads from ourselves,
> Again, to gaze within ourselves, we go.
> The path of truth is as narrow as a needle's eye,
> Like a thread, solo we go,
> Mind the companions and the dwelling left behind,
> Thus, know with every breath, we go,
> You've recited, "Indeed, to Him we return,"
> So that you may know to which places we go.
> Our star is not in the orbit of the moon,

Inevitably beyond the Pleiades, we go.

We have lofty endeavours in our minds,

From the high, to the Most High, we go.

O blind mouse, leave our threshing floor,

If you are not blind, see how with vision, we go.

O speech, be silent, do not come with us,

Witness, that from jealousy, without ourselves we go.

O existence, do not block our path

To the Mount Qaf and the Phoenix, we go.

In the holy Quran, Allah states that human beings have intrinsic knowledge of good and evil, “And He inspired it [to distinguish] what is wickedness and what is righteousness. Indeed, he succeeds who purifies it. And indeed, he fails, who corrupts it.” (91:8-10)

"Khosran" (Existential Loss)

Khosran (existential loss) refers to the condition in which an individual has lost the path back (*dhilalat*) to their transcendent origin. It denotes the condition in which human beings live their life without attention to the purpose of creation, leading to despair and spiritual alienation. Humans, as described in *Surah at-Tawbah*, are depicted as deeply engrossed in material desires: “Say, “If your fathers, your children, your brothers, your spouses, your tribe, the wealth you have acquired, commerce whose decline you fear, and dwellings you find delight in are more beloved to you than Allah, and His Messenger, and striving in His way, then wait till Allah comes with His Command.” And Allah guides not iniquitous people.” (Quran, 9:24).

In this context, the Quran criticizes the pursuit of material and worldly goals to the exclusion of Belief, God consciousness, and

supreme righteous deeds. For such pursuits are seen as delusions, distracting from the true purpose and ultimate destiny of humanity. The Quran articulates this viewpoint: “Know that the life of this world is but play, diversion, ornament, mutual boasting among you, and vying for increase in property and children—the likeness of a rain whose vegetation impresses the farmers; then it withers such that you see it turn yellow; then it becomes chaff. And in the Hereafter there shall be severe punishment, forgiveness from Allah, and contentment, and the life of this world is naught but the enjoyment of delusion.” (Quran, 57:20)

The Quran specifies different attributes for human beings in a state of “existential loss”, these include:

- Boastfulness (*fakhur*) “And if We cause him to taste some favour after adversity has befallen him, he will surely say, “The evils have gone from me.” Verily he is exultant, boastful,” (Quran, 11:10)
- begrudging (*Manu’an*) “and when good befalls him, begrudging,” (Quran, 70:21)
- to be deluded (*Ghurur*) “O mankind! Surely God’s Promise is true. So let not the life of this world delude you, nor let the Deluder delude you concerning God.”
- Love of the material world over spiritual life, “Those who prefer the life of this world over the Hereafter. and who turn from the way of God and seek to make it crooked; it is they who are far astray.” (Quran, 14:3)
- Transgressor (*ṭāghī*) “Nay, truly the human being is rebellious. in that he considers himself beyond need.” (Quran, 96:6-7)

"Khosran", according to Ragheb in *Mufradat*, means the reduction of capital. The second verse of Surah, "Al-Asr", is the answer to swearing. The world is a business market. Imam Hadi (a.s.) says in a hadith: "The world is a market in which some gain and others lose."[6]

Various interpretations have been offered for Khosran by commentators of the Quran:

> *Tafsir Sulami*: "One who does not respect God's rights and follows carnal whims and does not fear God (is in loss)."[7]

Al-Tibyan Sheikh Tusi: "Loss means the loss of human capital." By committing sins, he destroys his soul and loses his capital."[8]

Al-Kashshaaf by Zamakhshari: "People suffer from their trade in the world, except for the righteous. Because they bought the hereafter over this world and became victorious and happy, those who did business other than the business of the righteous suffered loss and misfortune."[9]

Majma-al-Bayan by Tabarsi: "Indeed, human being is at a loss.": "This answer is an oath." human is the name of the genus, which means he is in decline, because his Life, which is his capital, is decreasing daily. Akhfash says: "Losing means perishing."[10]

Fakhr Razi says: "The ice seller says: "Have mercy on the one whose capital is melting." *Khosr* means the daily reduction of life capital. The story of a human being is the story of an ice seller who was asked: "Did you sell?" He said: "No. However, it is over."[11]

In *Kashf al-Asrar*, Maybodi writes:

> “God swears an oath by the days and the time, which are the locus of taking heed for the gazer and the trace of the power of the Powerful: The Adamite is always in decrease and loss, his life in ruins. He is destitute and bewildered in the passing days. Every day that passes him by in his heedlessness is one part of his decreasing life, bringing him closer to the Last Day. He travels in decrease and fancies that he is increasing. He brings forth disobedience as ready cash and throws off obedience for tomorrow.
>
> You said you'd do the work fully tomorrow.

Who gives you the assurance of tomorrow?

God's Messenger, who was the paragon and the best of creation, the chosen and pulled up by the Real, said that he never got up in the morning expecting to reach the evening, and he never slept in the evening expecting to reach the morning; that he never put a morsel in his mouth supposing that he would finish eating it before he died. That paragon often used to say in supplication, “O Lord, give me a life in the sweetness of obedience, give me a death pure of alienation and slipping, and bring me into Your Presence neither shamed by my deeds nor embarrassed by the passing days.”[12]

Allamah Tabatabai in the Tafsir al-Mizan writes: "Loss means capital deficiency."[13] A person's capital is his Life. With his Life, man can get the means of his pleasure in the Life of the hereafter. If he follows the truth in belief and action, his business will be profitable, blessed in his business, and safe from evil in the future. Suppose he follows falsehood and deviates from belief in God and doing righteous deeds. In that case, he will lose in business (not only did he not gain anything more than his capital from Life's capital, but he also ate from his capital and made it the means of his misery), and He will be deprived of good in the hereafter.

Verse 3, The Four Principles of a Good Life: Belief, Supreme Righteous Deeds, Truth, and Patience:

The concept of a good life in Islam is anchored in four foundational principles: belief, supreme righteous deeds, truth, and patience.

Human existence, as portrayed in the Quran, is inherently challenging: 'Verily, We have created human in hardship' (*Surah Balad*, verse 4). This world is a realm of trials, offering opportunities for growth and development or the risk of failure, all of which shape one's journey towards eternal life. The quality and condition of eternal life is contingent upon how one navigates the transitory realm of earthly existence. The life in this world is not a

final destination of comfort and peace but a temporary stage—a battlefield for an eternal tomorrow.

Surah Al-Asr, in its third verse, elucidates the four pillars of a good life. A fulfilling and virtuous life in this world is posited as the starting point for a prosperous and beautiful existence in the hereafter.

1. Belief (*Iman*)

From a philosophical perspective, Belief (Iman) represents the existential transcendence of human beings, encompassing intellectual, emotional, and action-based dimensions. It is the activation of the Divine intellect within individuals, nurturing good moral and spiritual virtues, and connecting the human heart to its transcendent origin.

Belief is dependent on several pillars: knowledge of the truth (Haqq), verification of the truth, and, at a higher level, achieving union with the truth. This union guides one's deeds in both personal and spiritual realms, aligning them with the principles of truth.

The term '*Haqiqat*', renders 'truth' in English, stems from the root '*Haqq*', which also means 'truth' and refers to God. Therefore, *Haqiqat* embodies both the theoretical and practical teachings of the Absolute Wise (*Hakim Kull).*

A believer is someone in whom knowledge of the Divine has been actualized, and whose life is founded upon Divine teachings. Belief encompasses belief in God, the Resurrection, Divine messengers, as well as the practice of prayer and charity. In Islam, belief and supreme righteous deeds are intrinsically linked; while belief is a state of intellectual and spiritual existence, supreme righteous deeds are its manifestations.

Belief is a central concept in the Holy Quran, encompassing various dimensions and areas, as well as what contradicts it. Semantically, belief interconnects with concepts like 'choice', 'knowledge', 'piety', 'righteousness', 'certainty', and 'supreme righteous deeds'. At its core, belief is sincere love and affection for God, manifested through supreme righteous deeds.

Practically, believers stand in opposition to transgressors, while theoretically, they are contrasted with infidels, polytheists, and hypocrites.

The benefit and ultimate result of belief are prosperity and salvation in both this world and the hereafter, as the Quran states: “It is they who act upon guidance from their Lord, and it is they who shall be successful" (Quran, 2:5).

Description of Believers and Signs of Belief:

Believers in Islam are characterized by specific qualities and actions as delineated in the Quran:

1. Belief in the Unseen: They believe in the Unseen, steadfastly perform prayer, and utilize the provisions granted by God for righteous purposes (Surah Al-Baqarah; verses 3-4).

2. Tabari's Definition of belief: Based on certain hadiths, Tabari defines belief as encompassing confirmation, fear, action, and confirmation accompanied by action. [14]

3. Sheikh Tusi's Definition of belief: Drawing from a hadith of Imam Reza (a.s.), Sheikh Tusi describes belief as confirmation in the heart, adherence to God's commands, and confession with the tongue. [15]

4. Comprehensive Righteousness and Humility: Righteousness for believers extends beyond ritual practices, as they show humility in prayer and maintain commitments in various aspects of life, including charity, prayer, zakah, and truthfulness. Refer to the following Quranic verses for further reflection on this principle: Surah Al-Mu'minun; verses 1-4, Surah Al-Baqarah; verse 177:

“Truly the believers have prospered, who are humble in their prayers, and who turn away from idle talk, and who give the alms,” (Quran, 23:1-4)

“It is not piety to turn your faces toward the east and west. Rather, piety is he who believes in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets; and who gives wealth, despite loving it, to kinsfolk, orphans, the indigent, the traveller, beggars, and for [the ransom of] slaves; and performs the prayer and gives the alms; and those who fulfil their oaths when they pledge them, and those who are patient in misfortune, hardship, and moments of peril. It is they who are the sincere, and it is they who are the reverent.” (Quran, 2:177)

5. Heartfelt Belief and Devotion: True believers exhibit a deep, heartfelt connection to their belief, experiencing God-consciousness when God is mentioned, and increasing their belief upon witnessing His signs. They demonstrate their belief through consistent prayer and charitable deeds. Refer to the following Quranic verses for further reflection on this principle: Surah Al-Anfal; verses 2-4, Surah Al-Sajdah; verses 15-16:

“Only they are believers whose hearts quake with fear when God is mentioned, and when His signs are recited unto them, they increase them in belief, and they trust in their Lord, who perform the prayer and spend from that which We have provided them. It is they who truly are believers. For them are ranks in the sight of their Lord, and forgiveness and a generous provision.” (Quran, 8:2-4)

6. Ethical and Moral Integrity: Believers are characterized by their ethical and moral integrity, showing patience in adversity, control over anger, and a willingness to forgive others. Refer to the following Quranic verse for further reflection on this principle: Surah Al-Imran; verse 134.

“Who spend in ease and hardship, and curb their rage, and pardon others—and God loves the virtuous—” (Quran, 3:134)

7. Virtues and Commitment: A range of virtues is present in believers, including both men and women, highlighting their commitment to striving in God's cause and their truthfulness in belief. Refer to the following Quranic verses for further reflection on this principle: *Surah Al-Ahzab*; verse 35, *Surah Al-Hujurat;* verse 15.

“For submitting men and submitting women, believing men and believing women, devout men and devout women, truthful men and truthful women, patient men and patient women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, men who fast and women who fast, men who guard their private parts and women who guard [their private parts], men who remember God often and women who remember [God often], God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.” (Quran, 33:35)

“Only they are believers who believe in God and His Messenger, then do not doubt, and who strive with their wealth and theirselves in the way of God; it is they who are the truthful.” (Quran, 49:15)

8. Signs of True Belief: True safety and guidance are attributes of those who do not compromise their belief with injustice. Supreme righteous deeds, patience in adversity, and maintaining purity in various aspects of life are signs of true believers. Refer to the following Quranic verses for further reflection on this principle: *Surat al-An'am*, verse 82; *Surat al-Asr*; verse 3; *Surah Hajj*, verse 35; *Surah Mominun*; Verses 1-12.

“Those who believe and who do not obscure their belief through wrongdoing, it is they who have security, and they are rightly guided.” (Quran, 6:82)

“Except those who believe and perform righteous deeds and exhort one another to the truth and exhort one another to patience.” (Quran, 103:3)

“whose hearts quiver when God is mentioned, and who bear patiently what befalls them, who perform the prayer, and who spend of that which We have provided them.” (Quran, 22:35)

“Truly the believers have prospered, who are humble in their prayers, and who turn away from idle talk, and who give the alms, and who guard their private parts, save from their spouses or those whom their right hands possess, for then they are not blameworthy— and as for those who seek beyond that, it is they who are transgressors— and who keep their trusts and their covenant, and who are mindful of their prayers. It is they who are the heirs, who shall inherit Paradise, abiding therein.” (Quran: 23:1-12)

These descriptions and qualities encapsulate the essence of belief in Islam, highlighting the multifaceted nature of belief as it manifests in both thought and action. The believers’ life is that of God consciousness, devotion, supreme righteous deeds, love for and extending help to the creations of God, and unwavering trust in God.

The Four Pillars of Belief

Amir al-Mu'minin Ali (AS) stated, Belief rests upon four pillars: patience, certainty, justice, and jihad.'[16]

1. **Certainty (*Yaqin*):** This involves being certain of Divine unity, recognizing the temporal nature of this world, and acknowledging that life after resurrection is the final and eternal life of the human being. It encompasses the certainty of both the exoteric and esoteric worlds. Furthermore, it includes the belief that God has sent Divine messengers to guide and develop humanity.

2. **Patience (*Sabr*):** Integral to belief, patience is synonymous with perseverance. It is perseverance in the path of God. This can be manifested in various forms: adherence and actualization of God's commandments, devotion in worship, commitment to implementing God's social directives, such as behaving with kindness, compassion, and generosity towards God's creations, combating oppression and fostering justice, and resilience and perseverance in the face of life's adversities.

3. **Justice (*'Idalat*):** Justice represents maintaining equilibrium between material and spiritual pursuits. It is the just distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunities within society. Further, it entails adherence to Divine ordinances in governance and judgment.

4. ***Jihad*:** *Jihad* is of two types. *Jihad al-Akbar*, the greater Jihad, constitutes opposing carnal desires and striving for spiritual development and perfection in accordance with Divine teachings. *Jihad al-Asghar*, the lesser jihad, involves societal resistance against tyranny, pursuit of personal and societal epistemological advancement, and efforts towards forging a better society in which justice is established. Echoing a prophetic hadith[17], the epitome of *Jihad al-Asghar* is speaking truth in the face of a tyrannical ruler.

2. Supreme Righteous Deeds

Supreme Righteous Deeds

Supreme righteous deeds are distinguished from ordinary good actions; they are the most appropriate actions in a given context, considering the specific requirements of time and space. Examples include striving against one's inner self (*nafs*) or ego and endeavouring on the path of God for societal betterment.

There is a significant distinction between a good deed and the best deed. A common misconception is to equate all good deeds, which is an oversimplification. A supreme righteous deed is contingent upon the exigencies of time and place. This concept is echoed in the Quran: "Do you consider giving drink to the pilgrims and maintaining the Sacred Mosque to be like those who believe in God and the Last Day and strive in God’s way? They are not equal in the Eyes of Allah. And Allah guides not wrongdoing people." (Quran, 9:19)

Neglecting the prioritization of deeds in governance can gravely undermine national security. In contemporary contexts, establishing justice and combating economic corruption within government structures are of higher priority than enforcing the hijab, despite its necessary nature. The preservation of national security is a paramount righteous act. If enforcing subsidiary regulations leads to widespread public dissatisfaction and threatens national security, safeguarding the latter takes precedence.

Prioritizing deeds such as cultural Jihad, economic Jihad, and defensive Jihad is vital. Currently, a righteous act involves ensuring national security, focusing on economic Jihad, and strategizing for the nation’s sustenance. Jalal al-Din Suyuti, in " *Al-Durr Al-Manthur Fi Tafsir Bil-Ma'thur*," interprets verse 3 as referring to Ali (pbuh) and Salman, highlighting the significance of context in understanding and prioritizing deeds.

Examples of supreme righteous deeds in the Quran are many, some of which are:

Worship and Devotion

1. **Prayer (*Salah*):** A fundamental pillar of Islam, prayer is a means of seeking help and showing devotion to Allah.

- **Quran 2:45**: "Seek help in patience and prayer, and this indeed is difficult except for the humble."

2. **Charity (*Zakat*):** Mandatory giving to support the less fortunate, signifying compassion and social responsibility.

- **Quran 2:277**: "Truly those who believe, perform righteous deeds, maintain the prayer, and give the alms shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve."

3. **Fasting (*Sawm*):** A practice of self-discipline and empathy for the needy, especially observed during Ramadan.

- **Quran 2:183**: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that haply you may be reverent,"

4. **Pilgrimage (*Hajj*):** A journey to Mecca required once in a lifetime, symbolizing unity, and submission to Allah.

- **Quran 3:97**: "Therein are clear signs: the station of Abraham, and whosoever enters it shall be secure. Pilgrimage to the House is a duty upon mankind before God for those who can find a way. For whosoever disbelieves, truly God is beyond need of the worlds."

5. **Remembrance of God (*Dhikr*):** Regularly remembering and glorifying Allah as an act of devotion and mindfulness.

- **Quran 33:41-42**: "O you who believe! Remember God with frequent remembrance, * and glorify Him morning and evening."

Ethical Conduct and Justice

6. **Speaking the Truth and Acting Justly:** Upholding truth and fairness in all dealings, a core Islamic value.

- **Quran 4:58**: "God commands you to return trusts to their rightful owners and, if you judge between men, to do so with justice. Excellent indeed is the instruction God gives you. Truly God is Hearing, Seeing."

7. **Being Just, Even Against Oneself or Relatives:** Emphasizing fairness, even in challenging personal situations.

- **Quran 4:135**: "O you who believe! Be steadfast maintainers of justice, witnesses for God, though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kinsfolk, and whether it be someone rich or poor, for God is nearer unto both. So follow not your caprice, that you may act justly. If you distort or turn away, truly God is Aware of whatsoever you do."

8. **Honesty in Trade and Business:** Ensuring fair dealings and integrity in commercial activities.

- **Quran 83:1-3**: "Woe unto the defrauders, * who, when they take measure from people, demand [it] in full, * and when they measure for them or weigh for them, they stint."

9. **Avoiding Major Sins:** Steering clear of actions considered gravely immoral in Islam.

- **Quran 6:151**: "Say, 'Come, I will recite that which your Lord has forbidden you: that you ascribe nothing as partner unto Him, and that you be virtuous toward parents, and that you slay not your children for fear of poverty—We will provide for you and for them.

and approach not indecencies, whether outward or inward, and slay not the soul that God has made inviolable, save by right. This He has enjoined upon you, that haply you may understand.'"

10. **Avoiding Backbiting and Slander:** Refraining from harmful gossip and maintaining integrity in speech.

- **Quran 49:12**: "O you who believe! Shun much conjecture. Indeed, some conjecture is a sin. And do not spy upon one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you desire to eat the dead flesh of his brother? You would abhor it. And reverence God. Truly God is Relenting, Merciful. "

Social Responsibility and Kindness

11. **Maintaining Family Ties:** Preserving familial relationships and respecting kinship bonds.

- **Quran 13:25**: "As for those who break God's pact after accepting His covenant, and sever what God has commanded be joined, and work corruption upon the earth, it is they who shall have the curse, and theirs shall be the evil abode."

12. **Helping Others in Need:** Assisting those in hardship, reflecting compassion and generosity.

- **Quran 2:273**: "[It is] for the poor who are constrained in the way of God, who are not able to travel the earth..."

13. **Caring for Orphans and the Needy:** Providing support and kindness to vulnerable members of society.

- **Quran 2:220**: "upon this world and the Hereafter. And they ask thee about orphans. Say, 'Setting matters aright for them is best. And if you intermingle with them, they are your brothers. And God knows the one who works corruption from one who sets aright, and had God willed, He would have put you to hardship. Truly God is Mighty, Wise.'"

14. **Forgiving Others:** Embracing forgiveness and overlooking faults to foster community harmony.

- **Quran 24:22**: "And let not the men of bounty and means among you forswear giving to kinsfolk and the indigent and those who emigrated in the way of God. And let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God forgive you? And God is Forgiving, Merciful."

15. **Good Treatment of Neighbours:** Showing kindness and respect to those living nearby, fostering community spirit.

- **Quran 4:36**: "Worship God, and ascribe not partners unto Him. And be virtuous toward parents and kinsfolk, toward orphans and the indigent, toward the neighbor who is of kin and the neighbor who is not of kin..."

Personal Virtues

16. **Patience and Perseverance:** Demonstrating resilience and steadfastness in the face of trials.

- **Quran 3:200**: "O you who believe! Be patient, vie in patience, persevere, and reverence God, that haply you may prosper."

17. **Humility and Humbleness:** Practicing modesty and humility in behaviour and attitude.

- **Quran 25:63**: "The servants of the Compassionate are those who walk humbly upon the earth, and when the ignorant address them, say, 'Peace,'"

18. **Practicing Patience During Hardship:** Exercising patience and relying on prayer during difficult times.

- **Quran 2:153**: "O you who believe! Seek help in patience and prayer. Truly God is with the patient."

19. **Promoting Mutual Consultation and Respect in Decision Making:** Valuing collective decision-making and respecting diverse viewpoints.

- **Quran 42:38**: "who respond to their Lord and perform the prayer, their affair being counsel among them, who spend from that which We have provided them,"

20. **Seeking Forgiveness and Repentance:** Regularly seeking Allah's forgiveness and turning towards righteousness.

- **Quran 11:90**: "And seek forgiveness from your Lord; then turn unto Him in repentance. Truly my Lord is Merciful, Loving."

Environmental and Animal Welfare

21. **Preservation of Life and Environment:** Valuing all forms of life and responsibly caring for the environment.

- **Quran 5:32**: "...whoever saves the life of one - it is as if he had saved humanity entirely..."

22. **Kindness Towards Animals and Nature:** Demonstrating compassion and care towards animals and the natural world.

- **Quran 6:38**: "There is no creature that crawls upon the earth, nor bird that flies upon its wings, but that they are communities like yourselves..."

23. **Avoiding Wastefulness:** Practicing moderation and avoiding excess in consumption and resources.

- **Quran 7:31**: "O Children of Adam! Put on your adornment at every place of worship, and eat and drink, but be not prodigal. Truly He loves not the prodigal."

Modesty and Dignity

24. **Preserving Personal Dignity and Modesty:** Upholding personal integrity and modesty in behaviour and dress.

- **Quran 24:30**: "Tell the believing men to lower their eyes and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely God is Aware of whatsoever they do.."

25. **Respecting the Rights of Others:** Honouring the rights and properties of others, especially the vulnerable.

- **Quran 17:34**: "And approach not the orphan's property, save in the most virtuous manner, till he reaches maturity. And fulfill the pact; surely the pact is called to account."

Knowledge and Wisdom

26. **Striving for Knowledge and Wisdom:** Actively seeking knowledge and understanding, a highly valued pursuit in Islam.

- **Quran 20:114**: "Exalted is God, the True Sovereign. Be not in haste with the Quran before its revelation is completed for thee, but say, 'My Lord! Increase me in knowledge!'"

Peace and Conflict Resolution

27. **Promotion of Peace and Avoidance of Conflict:** Encouraging peaceful resolutions and avoiding unnecessary disputes.

- **Quran 8:61**: "And if they incline toward peace, incline thou toward it, and trust in God. Truly He is the Hearing, the Knowing. And if they incline toward peace, incline thou toward it, and trust in God. Truly He is the Hearing, the Knowing. "

28. **Honesty in Speech and Actions:** Being truthful and sincere in all forms of expression.

- **Quran 9:119**: "O you who believe! Reverence your Lord, and be among the truthful."

Comprehensive Righteousness

29. **Good Conduct:** Encompassing all aspects of good behaviour, from justice to kindness and beyond.

- **Quran 16:90**: "Truly God commands justice, virtue, and giving to kinsfolk, and He forbids indecency, wrong, and rebelliousness. And He admonishes you, that haply you may remember."

30. **Avoiding wastefulness:** Encouraging responsible use of resources and avoiding extravagance.

- **Quran 17:27:** "Truly the wasteful are the brethren of satans, and Satan is ungrateful to his Lord."

3. *Tawasaw Bil-Haqq* (Invite to Truth)

"Haqq" is one of the divine names, it renders “Truth” in English. In the Islamic context, truth and absolute reality are synonymous with God, the source and origin of all reality (*Haqiqat al-Haqaiq).* Furthermore, "Haqq" refers to the teachings and decrees emanating from God and designed to facilitate human transcendence and the attainment of a good life. Ontologically, "Haqq" represents the discipline and order governing both the esoteric and exoteric worlds, emanating from God. Epistemologically, it signifies the alignment of subjective perception with mental and external realities. Spiritual knowledge, therefore, is a mental construct that conforms with external reality.

The term "*tawassu bil-haqq*" invites adherence to all these connotations of "Haqq." Socially, this invitation is extended through intellectual discourse and compassion, eschewing force. The Quranic verse "Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and dispute with them in the most virtuous manner. Surely your Lord is He Who knows best those who stray from His way, and He knows best the rightly guided." (Quran, 16:25) encapsulates the essence of this "invitation to truth," emphasizing gentle persuasion and reasoned argument.

"Tawasi" implies mutual recommendation and guidance. Al-Tusi interprets "Al-Haqq" as the truth to which wisdom guides[18]. In "Jami' al-Bayan," Tabari describes "*Wa tawasawa Bil-Haqq*" as recommending adherence to Divine commands and avoidance of prohibitions in the Quran[19]. Tusi explains it as urging one another to follow the truth and shun falsehood[20]. Qushayri, in "Lataif al-Isharat," mystically interprets it as sacrificing for the sake of God's creation and sincerely acting on Divine orders. Zamakhshari, in "Al-Kashshaf," views it as a firm and undeniable commitment to the truth, encompassing divine monotheism, obedience to God, following God's Books and Messengers, and preference for the hereafter over worldly life[21].

Tiflisi, in "*Wujuh al-Quran*," identifies twelve Quranic usages of "Haqq," including God, the Quran, Islam, monotheism, justice, and truthfulness the right of God, the right of people (the right of society), the right of the individual, the right of nature, the right to rule and worship God. It encompasses rights divine, societal, individual, and natural, and extends to governance and worship: "And We did not create the jinn and the humans, except that they should worship Me" (Quran, 51:56). It also embraces social justice, as expressed in "We sent Our messengers with proofs, and We sent down with them the Book and the measure of justice" (Quran, 57:25), highlighting the importance of being justice-oriented, national security and providing for the people's livelihood as the

Quran states “Who relieved them of hunger and made them safe from fear.” (Quran, 106:4).

Allamah Tabataba'i, in the Tafsir of Al-Mizan, notes that "The coming of the right after the righteous deed is like a special mention after a general one."[22] The essence of commanding the right lies in reasoning and virtuous deeds and does not involve force or coercion. Violent behaviour, as exemplified by Taliban, contradicts the principle of "*Tawasawa Bil-Haqq*." "*Haqq*," is one of the dhikr of the people of the heart, who call God by the name "*Huwa Al-*Haqq" as mentioned in the following verse “That is because God, He is the Truth, and because He gives life to the dead, and because He is Powerful over all things,” (Quran, 22:6).

4. Be Patient

Patience as understood in Quranic philosophy, is of three kinds: 1) patience in obeying God and carrying out Divine commands, such as acts of worship like fasting, performing, and upholding social virtues such as charitable conduct and social justice. Patience in this first instance is synonymous with perseverance. 2) Resistance against sin and desires of the ego. *Nafs al-ammarah* (carnal soul) and societal influences and environment invites the individual to conduct that is that is contrary to the Truth. The believer fortified by and relying on spiritual knowledge and Love of God, resists such conduct. 3) patience in the face of calamities. Human life, whether social or personal, is marked by various trials in different spheres, such as emotional, political, financial etc. However, by reliance on and belief in God, and attention to the important fact that they are not alone rather God is always with them, believers do not lose hope and do not despair, and avoid being afflicted by spiritual and ethical problems.

The concept of "patience" is multifaceted. It encompasses steadfastness on the righteous path, obedience to God, resistance to sinful urges, and resilience in adversity. [23]

Tustari, in his Tafsir, elaborates on patience: "'What is patience?' He said, 'There is no action better than patience, and there is no reward higher than the reward of patience. There is no increase except through piety, and there is no piety except with patience. There is no helper for patience except God Almighty.' They asked, 'Is patience one of the deeds?' He replied, 'Yes. Patience in action is like the head to the body.' They inquired, 'What is the purpose of patience?' He answered, 'It is waiting for relief from Almighty God.' They questioned, 'What is the source of patience?' He responded, 'Mujahid with you to perform worship and to perform them according to the rules and limits, and to try to avoid both small and big disobedience.' They asked, 'How do people exhibit patience?' He explained, 'People are of two types in patience: the class who are patient in this world in order to get what they want from it, which is a reprehensible form of patience, and the class who are patient for the hereafter, desiring the reward of the hereafter and fearing its punishment.' They asked, 'Is patience for the Hereafter one type, or are there different types?' He said, 'Patience in the Hereafter has four aspects: three of them are obligatory, and the fourth is a virtue. These are patience in obeying God Almighty, patience in refraining from disobeying Him, and patience in enduring trials from Him.' He elaborated, 'Patience in following the commands of God Almighty, patience in avoiding His prohibitions, and patience in accepting the actions of God Almighty are the three obligatory aspects, while the fourth aspect, a virtue, is patience in dealing with the actions of creatures.'"[24]

Tabari, in Jami' al-Bayan, highlights the exhortation to patience in obeying God, equating patience directly with obedience.[25]

Zamakhshari, in "Al-Kashshaf, focuses on three aspects: "Patience in resisting sin, patience in carrying out divine commands and patience in facing divine trials."[26]

Tabarsi, in "Majma' al-Bayan: "And patience refers to enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil, supplicating to monotheism and justice, and fulfilling one's obligations and avoiding what is ugly."[27]

The world is within time and space of human progress or loss.

The Semantics of Key Concepts of Surah Al-'Asr:

> The keywords of Surah "*Al-Asr*" should be interpreted within the framework of the Quran's network of key concepts. Each term belongs to a semantic family, linked to other Quranic concepts. Their meanings are best understood through the interplay within these semantic families. The keywords and concepts in *Surah "Al-'Asr*" include al-'Asr, Human, existential Loss (*Khosr*), Belief, Supreme Righteous Deeds, Truth, and Patience.

"Asr" (Time)

In the Holy Quran, "*Asr*" is semantically connected with concepts such as "world," "era," "time," "human," and "God."

"Human" (Insan)

According to Azhari, Ibn Manzoor, and other Arab lexicographers, the word "insan" (human) is derived from "Nisyaan," meaning "forgetfulness." [28] We covered this point extensively before.

Imam Jafar Sadiq (a.s.) stated, "Human *(insan*) is named so because he forgets." This is echoed in Allah Almighty's words: "Before we made a covenant with Adam, but he forgot" (Quran, 20:115).

In the Holy Quran's context, "*insaan*" is synonymous to "human," and is interconnected with a broad range of concepts including "origin," "resurrection," "world," "hereafter," "life," "death," "loss," "farmer," "belief," "disbelief," "polytheism," "supreme righteous deeds," "right," "patience," "good," "evil," "cultivation," "rebellion," "guilt," "striving," and "suffering." Humanity possesses the potential to ascend to the highest peaks or fall to the lowest depths. This dual nature is reflected in the verses: "Truly We created the Human being in the most beautiful form. Then We cast him to the lowest of the low." (Quran, 95:4-5), "We belong to God, and to Him, we shall return" (Quran, 2:152), "And He is the One who made you successors on the earth and raised some of you above others in degrees to test you in what He has given you. Indeed, your Lord is quick in retribution, and indeed He is Forgiving, Merciful" (Quran, 6:165), and "And that human shall have naught but that for which he strived" (Quran, 53:39).

Khosran (Existential Loss)

Khosran, which renders existential loss in English, has several meanings such as deficiency, destruction, loss, and misguidance. It is a Quranic term also used in *ahadith*. In Quranic verses, Khosran is associated with concepts such as human beings, life, disbelief, worldliness, and misguidance.

From a semantic perspective in the framework of the Quran, the term Khosran is related to the following terms: the afterlife, disbelief, and sins such as injustice, and it substitutes for the word 'punishment'. On the other hand, this word is in semantic opposition to the value-laden concepts of belief, forgiveness, and salvation.

Khosran represents the wasting and losing of a person's existential assets in the marketplace of worldly life without gaining a better replacement. Khosran is the opposite of salvation (Falah). The losers (*Khasireen*) stand in contrast to the believers. The losers experience downfall, defeat, and portentous ends, while the believers achieve eternal salvation. 'Indeed, the believers have succeeded.' (Quran 23:1)

The Quran states that the necessary condition for a human being to escape from Khosran is belief, supreme righteous deeds, and advising each other to truth and patience (Quran, 103:3).

In the hadiths, indulging in what distances a human from God is considered to cause one's loss[29]. (Ibn Babawayh, 1362 AH, Al-Khisal, Vol. 2, p. 632) It is narrated that 'Whoever disobeys God and His messenger is in clear loss.' (Kulayni, Al-Kafi, Vol. 1, p. 142).

"Belief" (*Iman*)

The term 'Iman' (belief), derived from the root 'A-M-N', is closely related to the concept of security and peace. The infinitive or verbal noun (Masdar) for this root is 'Amn', which directly translates to 'security' or 'safety'. This connection underscores the intrinsic relationship in Arabic between the concepts of belief and a sense of safety or peace. Thus, belief signifies creating confidence and peace in one's own heart or in the heart of others. The concept of achieving peace and assurance through belief in God and his acknowledgment likely informs the association of "security" with the notion of belief. To trust in the authenticity and truthfulness of information and the news delivered by others, and the subsequent elimination of fear, anxiety, and panic, are practical dimensions of belief.

In the context of the Holy Quran, "belief" is semantically interlinked with "God," "resurrection," "prophecy," "knowledge," "love," "worship," "piety," "cultivation," "purity," and "heart." Belief stands in opposition to disbelief, polytheism, and hypocrisy. In the Quranic narrative, "supreme righteous deed" is connected in meaning with "human," "origin," "resurrection," "belief," "world," "time," and "place." Muslim mystics posit that the belief of individuals is categorized into one of three levels - "beginning," "middle," and "ultimate" - based on their adherence to Shariat (*the law*), Tariqat (the spiritual path), and *Haqiqah* (Truth).

As described in Surah Anfal (verses 2-3), "But the believers are those who, when Allah is mentioned, feel a tremor in their hearts, and when His verses are recited to them, it increases them in belief, and upon their Lord they rely. * Those who establish prayer and from what We have provided them, they spend."

"Supreme Righteous Deeds"(*'Amal al-Salihat)*

Supreme righteous deeds, as described in the Quran, represents the highest form of good deed, one that aligns with the needs and requirements of the specific time and place. It is not just any good deed, but rather the best possible action within its temporal context. In the Quran, the concept of supreme righteous deed is semantically linked with “belief,” “goodness,” “virtue,” “cooperation,” “thoughtfulness,” “intelligence,” “rationality,” “contemplation,” “time,” “people,” “right,” and “justice”. This intricate interplay underscores the multifaceted nature of the concept of “supreme righteous deeds”, emphasizing its role in achieving a harmonious and just society.

"Truth" (*Haq*)

In the Holy Quran, "Truth" interacts semantically with concepts such as "HU," (reference to divine essence, which is unknowable), "Creation," "Wisdom," "Names of God," "Divine Promise," “wisdom” and "Existence." According to Quranic verses, God represents the ultimate embodiment and primary source of truth.

Furthermore, "*Al-Haq*" is one of the Asma ul Husna, the beautiful names of God, as highlighted in Surah Taha (verse 144) and *Surah Muminun* (verse 116).

Truth is posited as in contrast to falsehood in The Quran. "Truth" finds its application across three domains: ontology, epistemology, and the sphere of individual and social rights. Absolute Truth is God Almighty, who is both the source and end of all existence. This concept is encapsulated in verses like "That is because Allah is the Truth; He brings the dead back to life; He has power over everything." (Quran, 22:6), and "and because Allah is the Exalted, the Great." (*Surah Hajj*, verse 62).

"Patience" (*sabr*)

"Patience" semantically interacts with concepts like “human,” “belief,” “suffering,” “calamity,” “sin,” “obedience,” “testing,” and “perseverance”.

Various categories of patience have been identified in the Quran and the Sunnah. The Messenger of God, Muhammad (PBUH), said, "Patience is of three kinds: patience in adversity, patience in obedience, and patience in refraining from disobedience." [30] The underlying principle of all three types is self-restraint against inclinations contrary to one's nature. The Holy Quran mentions these three types of patience.

Patience in Adversity: This involves self-control during misfortunes. Acceptance of what God has destined is emphasized in the Quran. *Hazrat Luqman* advises his son on this form of patience: "O my son! Perform the prayer, enjoin right and forbid wrong, and bear patiently whatever may befall you. That is indeed a course worthy of resolve." (Quran, 31:17). The Quran commends those who endure hardships with patience, referring to them as the guided and promising them Divine mercy and blessings: "And We will indeed test you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, souls, and fruits; and give glad tidings to the patient— * those who, when affliction befalls them, say, "Truly we are God's, and unto Him we return." * They are those upon whom come the blessings from their Lord, and compassion, and they are those who are rightly guided." (Quran, 2:155-157).

Patience in Obedience: This refers to the challenge of performing obligatory acts such as fasting, jihad, and waking up for the morning prayer. It entails perseverance in fulfilling these duties: "And bid your family to prayer and be steadfast therein. We ask no provision of you; We provide for you. And the end belongs to reverence." (Quran, 20:132).

Patience in Refraining from Sin: Avoiding sins, which often arise from lust, requires considerable effort. The Quran highlights Prophet Yusuf's (pbuh) words on this type of patience and its rewards: "They said, "Are you indeed Joseph?" He said, "I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has been gracious unto us. Verily whosoever is reverent and patient—surely God neglects not the reward of the virtuous."" (Quran, 12:90).

Conclusion

Surah "Al-Asr" vividly portrays human life in this chaotic world. The Surah delineates two distinct life models:

1. A life centred on worldly pursuits and disregard for eternal life, resulting in the loss of both the soul and human existence in this world and the hereafter.

2. A Good life grounded in the values of the perennial philosophy (*Hikmat Khalidah*) and the teachings of the Wise and All-Knowing God.

The model of a good life is built upon five foundational pillars:

1. Belief in God, love, resurrection, prophecy, and justice.

2. Performance of supreme righteous deeds, tailored to the demands of time and place.

3. Advocacy of truth, including principles such as monotheism, justice, social cooperation, and opposition to oppression.

4. Resilience and patience through adherence to God's commandments, combating the base desires of the soul, and enduring the trials of life. Life, in its essence, encompasses both love and suffering.

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[8] Tusi, al- Tibyan, vol 10, p. 405.
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[14] Tabari, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, vol 1, p. 250-251.
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[18] Tusi, al- Tibyan, vol 10, p. 405.
[19] Tabrari, jami' al bayan, vol 24, p. 614.
[20] Tusi, al- Tibyan, vol 10, p. 405.
[21] Zamakhshari, al-Kashshaf, vol 4, p. 794.
[22] Tabatabaei, al-Mizan , vol 20, p. 612.
[23] See Zamakhshari, al-Kashshaf, vol 4, p. 794.
[24] Tustari, Tafsir al-Tustri, p.204.
[25] Tabari, Jami albayan, vol 24, p. 615.
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Notes on the Concept of *tajallī* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Thought

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Abstract

The concept of *tajallī* (God’s manifestation or Divine Self-disclosure) occupies a central place in the views of Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638 AH/1240 CE). From his perspective, the Divine manifestations provide an essential realm for many mystical experiences. *Tajallī* is also intertwined with the concepts of Divine Presence (*ḥaḍrah*) and Divine Names. This short article refers to the central themes related to this concept.

Keywords: Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī, God’s manifestation (*tajallī*), Divine Presence (*ḥaḍrah*), Divine Names

I. The unique realm

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, within the cohered experience of the Presence (*ḥaḍrah*) in each Divine manifestation, the seeker comes to know many aspects of God’s attributes or Names. The Divine manifestation, therefore, becomes the pathway and the only realm within which the mystic receives, interprets, intuits and experiences the Divine Presences.[1] The Divine manifestation or “*tajallī”*, as Ibn

'Arabī tells us, "never repeats itself" (*lā takrār fi'l- tajallī*)[2], and is therefore always unique, new and fresh.

II. The Divine Names

Ibn 'Arabī states:

> He relates the Breath to the Merciful, because by it He had mercy [assented] on the demand of the divine Modes for the creation of the forms of the Cosmos, which are the manifest Reality, He being the Manifest. He is also their inner Essence, being also the Unmanifest. He is the First, since He was when they were not, and also the Last, since in their manifestation He is their Essence; the Last is the Manifest and the First is the Unmanifest. Thus, *He knows all things, as knowing Himself*.[3]

In the following passage, Ibn 'Arabī also explains the essential role of Love in the creation of the entire existence as the Absolute's Mercy. He does so, by citing a well-known *ḥadīth-i qudsī* (Divine saying), in which God describes His love to be known to creatures through creation:

And the movement which is coming into existence of the world is a movement of Love. This is clearly indicated by the Apostle when he says (conveying God's own words): "I was a hidden treasure and I *loved* to be known." If it were not for this love, the world would have never appeared in this concrete existence. In this sense, the movement of the world toward existence was a movement of Love which brought it into existence…Thus, from, whichever side one considers it, the movement of the world from the state of archetypal non-existence toward concrete existence was the movement of Love, both from the side of the Absolute and from the side of the world itself.[4]

III. *Tashbīh* and *tanzīh*

The constant reciprocation between the two aspects of *tashbīh* (God’s similarity/ comparability/immanence, or God in the stage of *wāḥidiyah*, or inclusive unity) and *tanzīh* (God’s incomparability/transcendence, or God in the stage of *aḥadiyah*, or exclusive unity) creates a foundational ground for perpetuating the essential dialogue between God and the mystic.

IV. *al-insān al-kāmil*

From Ibn ‘Arabi’s standpoint, the Perfect Human Being (*al-insān al-kāmil*) is capable of considering both these aspects at once. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s approach, only those elevated mystics who can see or witness through “both eyes” *(dhul ‘aynayn*) of *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* are able to overcome the deficiency of a one-dimensional approach to the Absolute.[5] Ibn ‘Arabī elaborates on this essential process at the beginning of his *Fuṣūṣ al- Ḥikam*, where he describes “the wisdom of divinity in the word of Ādam.”[6]

The Reality wanted to see the essences of His Most Beautiful Names or, to put it in another way, to see His own Essence, in an all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery. For the seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror; for it appears to itself in a form that is invested by the location of the vision by that which would only appear to it given the existence of the location and its [the location’s] self-disclosure to it.[7]

Ibn ‘Arabī believes that the Names (as sacred manifestations or *fayḍ muqaddas*) in their entirety become one single domain/realm, through which *fayḍ aqdas* (the most sacred manifestation) finds its unifying *ḥaḍrah*. The multiplicity of the Names mirrored in one realm (of existence) finds its exemplary image in the very being of

the Perfect Human Being. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, the Perfect Human Being has the most perfect capability to recognize, contemplate, and practice the unity of the Names by pondering on the unity of the Source (i.e., by experiencing *ḥaḍrat al-jāmi‘* or “the Presence of the all-comprehensive”).

V. From multiplicity to unity: the Name Allah

In order to go through an essential progression from multiplicity to unity, Ibn ‘Arabī seems to focus on one particular Name. In his view, the Name Allah carries a unique *jāmi‘iyah* (comprehensiveness), and is therefore, discussed in relation to the Perfect Human Being. Here, Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the unique comprehensiveness of this Name by elucidating Its unique vastness in referring to the both concepts of *aḥadiyah* (exclusive unity) and *wāḥidiyah* (inclusive unity).

As for the fact that the Name Allah includes the Names of Incomparability, the source for this is near at hand: though every Divine Name is the same in respect of denoting the Essence of God, nevertheless, since every name other than Allah while denoting the Essence of God also denotes – because of its derivation (*ishtiqāq*) [from a specific root having a specific meaning] – a meaning of negation (*salb*) or affirmation (*ithbāt*), it cannot be as strong as this Name in the unity of its denotation (*aḥadiyyat al-dalāla*) of the Essence…God has preserved this proper name (*ism ‘alam*) from naming any but the Essence of God. Therefore God says, as an argument against those who had ascribed divinity to something other than this Named One, “[They ascribe to Allah associates.] Say: Name them!” (Qur’ān 13:33), and those who had held such a view were rendered speechless, for if they had named that thing, they would have named it by other than the Name Allah.[8]

Ibn ‘Arabī also elaborates on the unique immenseness of this Name by referring to the encompassing nature of Its Presence.

So this Presence contains all the Presences. He who knows Allah knows all things. But he does not know Allah who does not know one thing, whatever named possible thing it might be, since the property of one of these things is the property of them all in denoting knowledge of God, in respect to the specific fact that He is God over the world. Then when you receive unveiling (*kashf*) in respect to works set down in the Law (*al-ʿamal al-mashrūʿ*), you will see that you did not know Him except through Him. The denotation (*dalīl*) is identical to what is denoted through that denotation and denoter.[9]

The Perfect Human Being, in the Presence of the Name Allah--, which represents the sacred meeting, conversation and the unity of all Names--, experiences eminent mystical states.

The Perfect Human Being becomes the interpreting border/isthmus (*barzakh*) between the Named (i.e., the Absolute) and the Name (the manifestation of the Absolute).

The Perfect Man is the Son (epitome) of the world. By knowing himself, the Perfect Man comes to know that he is a dividing line between the temporality (*ḥudūth*) of the world and eternity (*qidam*) of the Real, that is, between finitude and infinity. The dividing line between finitude and infinity is the moment of creation. Creation is the human being as Ibn al-‘Arabī says, meaning that the human being is the ultimate purpose or the final cause of creation. The Real created the world because he loved to be known, that is, because he loved to realize himself, and the Perfect Man assists the Real in achieving this realization. The Perfect Man comes to know the Real by differentiating him from creation, that is, by differentiating the infinite from the finite. To differentiate the infinite from the finite is to know the Limit that brings them together while at the same time keeping them separate. The Limit that brings the finite and infinite together resembles the instant of time (*al-ʿān*), which is the essence of the past time, that is, the time of the manifestation of the Real that has come to be, and future time, that is, the time of the

manifestation of the Real that has not come to be. As such, the present state designates the Being of the Real, since the Being of the Real is the Essence of all that has come to be and all that will ever be.[10]

This Limit (*barzakh*), in Ibn ʻArabī's understanding, represents the *jāmiʻiya* of the Perfect Human Being.[11] In its practical realization, this unique characteristic means seeing the existence (i.e., Names) through both eyes of *huwa*/ *lā huwa* (He/Not He).[12] In his or her realization of the Names, the Perfect Human Being becomes the interpreter of their multifaceted *wujūh* (faces).[13]

Concluding remarks

From Ibn ʻArabī's perspective, through elevated realization of the Absolute's manifestations, the distinctive characteristic of the Perfect Human Being enables him or her to earn a constant awareness of both concepts, *waḥdah* (unity) and *kathrah* (multiplicity), in their essential mutuality. Perhaps because of this unique characteristic of the Perfect Human Being, Ibn ʻArabī states that the "circular movement of the celestial spheres follows the movement of the Perfect Human Being's heart."[14]

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Endnotes

[1] For a new methodological approach to the concept of “mystical experience,” see my book, *Method and Mysticism: Cosmos, Nature and Environment in Islamic Mysticism* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011). See also, my work in Persian, *Muqaddama-yī Pirāmūn-i Ravish Shināsī dar ‘Irfān* (An Introduction to Methodology in Islamic Mysticism) (Shiraz: Navid Shiraz Pubishers, 1385 SH/2006).

[2] For this concept, see, for example, Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al- Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ Turāth ‘Arabī, 2000), vol 1, 164, 285, 375; vol.2, 144, 616, 694; and vol. 3, 127, 569. See also William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al- ‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 18.

[3] Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, translated by R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 135-6.

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[6] Ibn ‘Arabī, *Bezels of Wisdom*, 47.

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[8] Ibid., 60-1.
[9] Ibid., 62.
[10] Salmān H. Bashier, *Ibn ʻArabī's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (New York: State University of New York
Press, 2004), 122.
[11] See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 30.
[12] See ibid., 4.
[13] See ibid., 30.
[14] Dawānī, cited in Mehdī Dahbāshī, *Sharḥ-i Rubāʻiyāt-i Falsafī wa' ʻIrfānī-yi ʻAllāmah Dawānī*.
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The Dharma of Economics: Challenges and Limitations

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Abstract

The teachings of the Buddha are often presented as a salutary framework for addressing the many ills of economic recklessness that we currently face. However, such an endeavour may not be altogether original or even meaningful. It is readily apparent that the principal tenets of Buddhist Economics (as advocated by its exponents) are not only congruent with those of other religious traditions but, also, with a range of worldly perspectives on sustainability, wealth distribution or human development in general. Accordingly, the phenomenon of Buddhist Economics might be seen as an attempt to misappropriate a popular (though not always well understood) spiritual tradition with a view to implementing a secular agenda that is arguably far removed from its original vision regarding the true purpose of human existence—one which must be seen as rooted in a transcendent reality.

Keywords: Buddhism, Economics, Religion, Secularism

Introduction

Even though the term ‘Buddhist Economics’ goes back to 1955, when E. F. Schumacher first coined it during a visit to Burma, some have argued that the notion itself can be traced back to the policies of the Buddhist king, Aśoka, in the third century BCE. Nevertheless, it has attracted widespread interest in recent decades, serving the needs of those who seek a compelling response to what are seen as the imbalances that afflict modern economies today. Concerns regarding excessive consumption, environmentally unsustainable practices and a general disregard for human welfare, have led to the promotion of Buddhism as an effective means for addressing the material ills that plague humanity.

By grounding our approach to economics on a foundation of Dharma,[1] it is believed that a deeper impetus can be given to ensuring communal well-being, resulting from a renewed concord between humanity and nature which rejects a way of life driven by greed and profit. This outlook forms part of a broader movement that questions certain dominant paradigms in Western thought viewed as harmful, by espousing an alternative Eastern approach—with an ancient pedigree—to the problems of human society and its fundamental needs.

In many of its contemporary guises, Buddhist Economics seeks to promulgate an attitude to the production and consumption of goods and services that is grounded in a more ethically aware understanding. It asks us to renounce selfishness and other disordered desires with a view to creating a world where the cardinal Buddhist virtues of wisdom and compassion come to prevail. This, we are told, will lead to greater human prosperity (not just wealth) and a greater meaning in life based on co-operation and harmony with others, coupled with more responsible stewardship of the environment. There is also a concern to better understand ourselves so that we may more effectively combat what Buddhism calls the ‘three poisons’ (greed, hatred and ignorance) which become rampant when the dharmic virtues fail to be exercised. Indeed, the practice of meditation and avoiding harm to sentient

beings (*ahiṃsā*), are considered key to orienting our hearts and minds towards a more enlightened response in the challenge to secure a fully human flourishing. In essence, Buddhist Economics undertakes to tackle the problems of economic life by encouraging a radical transformation in our consciousness that will gradually eliminate the impediments—grounded in an ego-self considered both blind and ruthless—that stand in the way of our spiritual health.

Of course, when we say 'Buddhism', it is important to be aware that we are talking about a poly-headed Hydra comprising a plethora of doctrines and practices, not all of them entirely reconcilable. So what kind of Dharma is being espoused by the proponents of Buddhist Economics? Is it the conservative teachings of the Theravādins or can it also extend to the more developed metaphysical insights we find in the Mahāyāna? Can there even be an esoteric dimension to this discipline that is informed by the tantric perspective of the Vajrayāna? This is not necessarily clear when we look at the various positions taken in this debate. In any case, when considering these questions, a pan-Buddhist approach will be attempted where possible; which is to say, one that focuses on teachings that demonstrate a unity of thought across all its schools (but only where this can readily be ascertained).

The Validity of Buddhist Economics

What, then, makes Buddhist Economics distinctively 'Buddhist'? In the literature, one reads much about 'social abundance', consumption restraint, environmental protection and so forth. However, there are scant references to, say, *Nirvāṇa*[2] along with other kindred notions that go to the heart of how we are to understand ultimate reality and our relationship to it. Doubtlessly, there is an understandable desire to promote an 'applied' form of Buddhism to the realm of human affairs but the link to traditional Buddhist doctrines often appears tenuous. It is true that we often come across passing references to interdependence, compassion and

meditation but their deeper doctrinal undergirdings are frequently overlooked. However, when this happens, we find that many of the positions taken in Buddhist Economics start to resemble the views of other faiths which also have highly developed socio-economic theories. We see this, especially, in Islam and Hinduism which are similarly committed to the well-being of humanity and the environment through the development of far-reaching approaches based on spiritual perspectives of their own. In fact, much of what is presented as Buddhist Economics is also largely consonant with a secular and so-called 'progressive' view of reality.

What we discover, then, is a dovetailing of various traditional concepts into a broad and vaguely spiritual vision—often lacking in specificity and depth—that seems equally in keeping with many other traditions and worldviews. This is not to suggest, of course, that this constitutes any kind of real problem but, rather, that what makes Buddhist Economics particularly distinctive becomes less clear. There is much to be said for the solidarity of the world's religions in the face of the common economic challenges that we face today and this, indeed, should be encouraged seeing as sectarian divisions can certainly prove inimical to confronting these difficulties. Nevertheless, in coming to terms with the reality of Buddhist Economics, we need to understand what kind of Buddhism it represents and whether this is meaningful in addressing the problems it purports to solve.

Furthermore, this raises the issue of the extent to which Buddhist Economics embraces truly spiritual objectives rather than ones that are but worldly. It is important to address this question should we want to properly understand this discipline as a legitimate expression of transcendent values (if that is, indeed, what its proponents claim for it).

When people debate the nature of economics, the focus is very much on issues such as the creation and dissemination of wealth in the pursuit of our collective good. Lionel Robbins' definition from 1932 is still relevant today, where he says: "Economics is a science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and

scarce means which have alternative uses".[3] In other words, its exclusive concern is with the control and apportionment of material goods. A Buddhist could say that our attitude to consumption, for example, is very much a religious question although others might argue that it may be more of an ethical concern, and not one that is necessarily connected to the fundamental objectives of the Dharma. I am not suggesting, for a moment, that the two are not linked but neither are they identical. For example, how is developing an effective model for just income distribution related to Buddhist teachings regarding our final emancipation from this perishable world of 'birth-and-death' (*saṃsāra*)—surely the final goal of any spiritual path?

And, yet, we often hear about this or that policy proposal being touted as an example of 'Buddhist' economic thinking without it being very clear how this is so. Indeed, some of these proposals are so broad or general in their scope that they are just as compatible with many other non-Buddhist attitudes, as has already been stated. The avoidance of unbridled consumerism or excessive exploitation of the environment are commonly-held concerns among many people around the world and not just those who adhere to the Dharma. The implications of addressing such serious problems are certainly very significant ethically—and important in discerning how to best configure our social conditions—but the degree to which we succeed in solving such difficulties, at an economic level, are more likely to be determined by empirical factors rather than spiritual principles.

For example, Buddhist teachings regarding the 'three poisons', mentioned earlier, clearly have profound consequences for how we live our lives and interact with others, but we should be careful about the extent to which this gives us confidence in drawing hard-and-fast conclusions about the right economic model for our world. In fact, there is a very real danger in deploying Buddhism as an ideological tool to advance political ends by investing them with a particular authority through association with an ancient and venerable spiritual tradition (a fact no doubt reinforced by the

cultivation of a certain mystique that often renders it immune from criticism). This, in turn, could very well lead to Buddhist Economics being used, for example, as the basis for attempts at subtle social engineering by attributing to the Dharma a range of immutable truths and then claiming for them an indisputable application in the real world.

The problem lies in extending the notion of spiritual truth (concerning, for example, divine reality or the human condition) so that it applies to the domain of economic and political thought, when such connections are often rather questionable. What we see here is a confusion of levels and the tendency to conflate metaphysical insights with the development of policies in the everyday world. This is part and parcel of a growing secularisation that we are witnessing in modern life and the gradual stripping away of any transmundane dimension, even from ostensibly religious belief. If this growing tendency is ultimately successful, we will find little to distinguish a worldly attitude to the 'good life' from one with a sacred orientation. As a consequence, there is a flattening out—or 'horizontalising'—of human existence to a one-dimensional pursuit of material comfort in the misguided expectation that this alone will serve to foster our emotional health.

At this point, it is important to bear in mind what Aristotle referred to as the 'end in itself' (our *telos* or highest good); that to which all other pursuits stand as means. In other words, we need to be clear as to what the real end of Buddhist practice is and to then reflect on what kind of life is conducive to fulfilling it. In doing so, we might find that any number of economic policies may be consistent with this aim or, indeed, that no particular economic strategy is necessarily helpful in achieving it.

We must avoid putting the cart before the horse. The objective is surely to place our economic life in service to the quest for our only proper human goal, which is spiritual liberation.

Perils of the Human Condition

In addressing the problems of our fraught terrestrial existence, it ought to be clear—at least from a Buddhist perspective—that economics cannot be our ultimate refuge. The only means by which we can end the suffering and dissatisfaction at the heart of human existence (*dukkha*) is wisdom; not the endless rearrangement of society, its methods of production or rethinking our patterns of consumption. To be sure, we can certainly aim at achieving greater equity in our relations with others by, at a minimum, diminishing some of the more egregious forms of unfairness that serve to undermine civic trust and good-will. However, this is not the same as securing true and abiding happiness which is the Dharma's sole concern. Much can be said, no doubt, for living lives of greater generosity, restraint and empathy. We can also do more to curb our untamed desires and take greater responsibility for our actions. All these efforts help to enrich the quality of our lives but such virtues are not necessarily the outcome of exclusively Buddhist ideas. They are common to many thoughtful and reflective people from most cultures.

Many religious traditions, while certainly seeing much value in the creation of wealth when it serves a noble purpose, do not consider it desirable simply for its own sake. Naturally, people cannot focus on spiritual matters if they are constantly hungry or suffering acutely in other ways. While sound economics can be helpful in meeting basic human needs, it contains no intrinsic values that give rise to a more enduring form of prosperity. By the same token, however, we cannot hold it responsible for failings that are the result of our own nescience which, if left unillumined, can only lead to the unleashing of unchecked cravings that require a vast apparatus to fulfill them—as we find in today's world thanks to the ubiquity of modern advertising and its peddling of so many unnecessary consumer products.

And yet, Buddhism reminds us that all life ends in death. Pursuing a host of transitory and (ultimately) unsatisfactory pleasures is not to live authentically. It dishonours the spiritual purpose of our human

state, which it debases with ignoble ends. One has to wonder as to why the Dharma, after over two millennia, should be compelled to address the concerns of what Thomas Carlyle called the 'dismal science' which only gained real prominence in the 19th century and was used solely for the development of public policy. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to isolate such considerations from broader realities, which suggests that Buddhist Economics can become inextricably wedded to considerations of political expediency if abused. In this respect, there is but a slender association between the Dharma and the vicissitudes of socio-economic dynamics.

In light of what we have said above, it is apparent that economics—as a formal discipline— has no direct relationship to Buddhist thought. Since the former is a vehicle for the development of policies in the secular realm, one could conceivably set up an economic theory based, for example, on the principles of frugality, benevolence and individual responsibility. However, to entrench these objectives into, say, official government policy would deprive them of any abiding value because they would need to be enforced by law rather than having them arise naturally from an affective inner disposition. The mind boggles in trying to envisage how the ethics of a *bodhisattva*,[4] who selflessly dedicates themselves to the welfare of all living creatures, might be applied to economic theory. One would have to give freely without any discrimination regarding the recipient, or any expectation of a productive return or use of resources. This bears out the Mahāyāna insight that the realm of absolute truth does indeed pervade the domain of relative truth, but only spontaneously and individually—not through a contrived and contestable program of 'social justice'.

This possibility entails some risk, of course, as most people are not enlightened bodhisattvas and so we therefore need to take into account the sobering realities of our troubled human condition and its chronic limitations. From a Buddhist perspective, the vagaries of personal and collective *karma*[5] need to be carefully considered, not to mention our disconcerting propensity to indulge in the 'three poisons'. The tendency towards harmful and irrational behaviour

that emerges in creatures of 'blind passion'[6] (as the Japanese Pure Land master, Shinran, describes us) has to be factored into any kind of social regulation. This means, among other things, avoiding the spiritual vanity of utopianism and the belief that, if we only had the right economic policies in place, we could turn our world into a paradise. The often self-righteous belief in human perfectibility betrayed by such wishful thinking ignores the Buddha's unambiguous teaching regarding the reality of s*aṃsāra* and its inherent imperfection.[7]

We must remember that both capitalism and Marxist ideology have a belief in materialism as their basis, which considers the economic dimension of life to be paramount. At times, it appears that Buddhist Economics is inordinately preoccupied with material life and the benefits we can obtain from this world. It claims to do so on a foundation of spiritual awareness but it often reverses what our priorities ought to be. When the fundamental tenets of the Dharma are properly understood, we find that the state of the world cannot altogether be improved by merely reconfiguring the unstable flux of samsāric existence in an arrangement—both brittle and ephemeral—that is more favourable to whatever our worldly interests happen to be at any one time. Before we take on the herculean task of 'fixing' the ailing condition of society, we must first address the brokenness of our own human nature. That which is intrinsically fractured in the external world cannot permanently be ameliorated through the mere agency of human beings who are also, irremediably, flawed in themselves.

The Buddha described our world as a 'burning house' of transience wherein no true sanctuary can be found.[8] We are constantly beset by vulnerability and our lives are studded with uncertainties. We find ourselves driven by fear, desire and the need for self-preservation at all costs. Ultimately, modern economic thinking is limited to the satisfaction of our bodily demands. Even if this were ever to be achieved entirely (which is most unlikely), what happens next? We are still the same confused and benighted beings that we were

before, struggling to find meaning, satisfaction and happiness in this precarious realm of birth-and-death.

The Shortcomings of Secularism

In the rush to make Buddhism relevant in an increasingly secular age, we find that it can often be used in the service of political ideologies which are—in so many ways—very much the bane of human life today. Economic activity must always be subordinate to the existential reality of our lives. We need to balance our tendency towards unwarranted idealism with the often harsh insights yielded by a more realistic perspective on the human condition. The desire to improve the world, while entirely laudable, cannot simply be brought about by ordinary thinking or willing. It must be based on a spiritual realisation of truth which is possible only on an individual, not a collective, basis. Economics itself does not offer any enduring solution to our urgent predicament in having to confront sickness, old age and death; indeed, it can more often be the problem, rather than the solution, to the difficulties we face.

The real questions that present themselves are the following: Can Buddhist Economics really help us to overcome the abyssal human ignorance that lies at the heart of the world's difficulties? Can it illuminate wherein lies our true good? What is the role of *prajñā* (the highest form of wisdom or spiritual intelligence) in all these deliberations? Furthermore, unless the remedies proposed by Buddhist Economics are universal in scope, why should non-Buddhists accept them?

We often hear that the Buddhist objective in undertaking economic activity is to realise our highest human potential. If so, what are the means of fulfilling this potential and what are its true ends? In what does so-called 'quality of life' actually consist? First and foremost, it must reflect the revolution that takes place in our interior lives when a true haven is sought in the Dharma. We frantically aim to strengthen economic conditions in order to satisfy basic physical wants but, as these are material in nature, the existential craving or

thirst (*taṇhā*) that we feel—at a deeper level of our being—will never be sated by such limited means, which invariably fail to address the needs of our true self. This can never be a steadfast solution unless we are able to think beyond the incessant demands of our senses (which, nonetheless, have their rightful place in the hierarchy of Buddhist goods).

Some assert that a 'healthy' economy can create more time for leisure activities—during which we can enjoy real happiness—by reducing the number of hours spent in occupations that are considered to be mere drudgery. But, in that case, what is the focus of our newly-found leisure time? The pursuit of mere hobbies or something much more serious? It is not enough to merely pursue satisfaction from the various distractions that the world offers (consoling as they may be). In fact, the Buddha pointed out that we would be better off, if possible, in reducing our desires, the plethora of which lies behind the modern craze for endless consumption and the increasing emptiness it creates within us, not to mention the crippling effect of countless addictions to which this gives rise along with the deleterious effects on our physical and mental health.

The solution, therefore, must be spiritual, not economic. Otherwise, we cannot address the fierce tenacity that grips a heart consumed by desire and delusion; nor can it help us overcome the worst excesses of our muddled thinking, which fancies that this burning house of death and impermanence can afford us any kind of authentic refuge. This is not where our true home is to be found. The quest for spiritual wisdom and the attainment of *Nirvāṇa* is regularly overlooked by many advocates of Buddhist Economics. A life devoted to the Dharma is perfectly possible under any number of different economic regimes, even if our personal circumstances are not particularly favourable. Many great Buddhist sages were extremely poor; indeed, their very modest lives would be seen by many today as indicative of a very low 'standard of living', although this is hardly relevant in assessing the true success of their lives.[9] While the Buddha readily acknowledged that we all need a fundamental level of material well-being (in reality, much less

perhaps than what is often considered acceptable today) in order for our spiritual development to take root, this does not give us license to immerse ourselves in meaningless consumption, or striving for more wealth than is necessary to be just comfortable and pain-free. Surely, the purpose of securing an adequate level of material stability (or at least as stable as a world such as this can provide) is to free us up to pursue higher non-economic goals; ideally, ones that conform to our true ends as spiritual beings.

We often read that our living conditions can be enhanced by giving greater attention to meditation and ethical endeavours, and that this is the contribution that the Dharma can make towards a healthier society. But Buddhist Economics should not be reduced to just an elevated moral outlook or to heightened powers of mental concentration. There is not much evidence to suggest, sad to say, that these have helped to radically change the world for the better. Things are just as lamentable, spiritually speaking, as they have ever been (if not worse in some respects) notwithstanding the countless efforts by so many to consummate such practices. At the end of the day, we may enjoy greater levels of comfort but are we wiser or more fulfilled?

Yes, by all means aim to avoid harming sentient beings where you can, but are we so sure in what harm consists (given that we often hurt others and ourselves without even realising it)? An ostensible improvement in one sphere of life can lead to intractable problems in another. We are not omniscient and the facts of any given (and often unfathomably complex) situation are not always clear to us. Of course, we should aim to follow a wholesome life as this can doubtlessly help to improve our lives in many ways (even though we very often, regrettably, fail to do so). However, unless we take refuge in a higher reality, any genuine spiritual transformation will remain beyond our reach. This reality is *transcendent*, yet it also dwells at the heart of all things and can thus be experienced by us here and now in the turbulent conditions of everyday life. We come to see it as the font of all goodness, beauty, wisdom and joy of

which we see (and pursue) only fugitive traces in this dream-like world, which can never fully bestow it to us.[10]

Conclusion

Ultimately, the history of Buddhist practice has shown us the uncomfortable truth that conventional self-generated attempts at perfection can only fail, and that—this side of the grave—we are bound to remain profoundly flawed and foolish beings. We can only become awakened to this fact in light of a greater all-pervading reality that sheds light on our condition and shows us a better way to be, despite our failure to measure up to the requirements of the Buddha's stern injunctions. A life informed by real wisdom and compassion cannot be forced, mandated or contrived but must reflect the natural and spontaneous influence of this reality in our lives to the extent to which our aptitude, temperament and natural abilities permit. The solution, therefore, is to become spiritually transformed (through grace and humility) while remaining fully aware of our deeply imperfect natures.

Left to our own devices, we can only compound these infirmities by perpetuating a life absorbed by the 'three poisons' of greed, hatred and ignorance; such an existence cannot cure its own malaise. Without transcendence, without a firm anchor in the ultimate reality that Buddhism constantly exhorts us to rely on, we will merely continue our tragic and aimless wandering in the round of transmigration, regardless of how comfortable or wealthy we may become.

Such a goal is not something to which Buddhist Economics can meaningfully contribute. We must address our own existential crisis first, by overcoming the karmic afflictions we have inherited (a lifetime's work to be sure), before we can give any thought to successfully improving the world through mere economic measures or other means that fall short of what is required. The nature of the world will always reflect the quality of our inner lives so, if this is damaged, we cannot expect to rectify the ills of life or society by

ignoring the root cause. This will inevitably add more fuel—comprising our senseless folly and blind passions—to a world that is already on fire. These flames can only be doused by the soothing waters of enlightened reality, for the proper response in the face of a transient world of fleeting goods and pleasures is to embrace an eternal realm of abiding wisdom and compassion, wherein lies true freedom from all sorrow.

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Endnotes

[1] *Dharma* (literally, "what is established or firm") is a wide-ranging term that encompasses: (i) the teachings of the Buddha that can lead to the spiritual transformation of human beings; and (ii) a transcendental order of reality that governs the cosmic and moral dimensions of the universe.

[2] "We are told that *Nirvāṇa* is permanent and imperishable; that it is power, bliss and happiness … the place of unassailable safety; that it is the real Truth and the supreme Reality; that it is the Good, the supreme goal and the one and only consummation of our life – the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace." [Conze (1975), p. 40.]

[3] Robbins (1932), p. 15.

[4] A *bodhisattva* ('enlightenment being') is someone who, out of great compassion, is dedicated to bringing others to spiritual emancipation and enlightenment. They may be found either in our everyday midst, often in forms unbeknownst to us, or they can exercise their influence in this world from other realms.

[5] "The doctrine of *karma* had its origins in India long before Buddhism appeared but has undergone great change under the influence of Buddhist thought. What a Buddhist means by karma is the acts and results of acts which are produced by our free will. Acts in former states of existence have a profound influence upon our present condition. And it is often supposed that this involves a sort of fatalistic enslavement of our wills, destroying their freedom. But, on the contrary, our wills are fundamentally free to make moral choices and we are individually responsible for all our actions. Karma does, indeed, produce our dispositions and environment but not their activities which are still free. If we were to go on living [solely] from the stimulus which comes from the natural world, human society and purposed education, we would indeed be the slaves of our inherited karma; but the fact is that we are continually influenced within and without, and so are capable of volitions which produce new karma." [*Coates* & Ishizuka (1930), p.ix.]

[6] 'Blind passion' (*bonnō*) is a comprehensive term descriptive of all the forces, conscious and unconscious, that propel the unenlightened person to think, feel, act and speak – whether in happiness or sorrow – in such a way as to cause uneasiness, frustration, torment and pain (mentally, emotionally, spiritually and even physically) for themselves and others. While Buddhism makes a detailed and subtle analysis of blind passion, employing such terms as craving, anger, delusion, arrogance, doubt and wrong views, fundamentally it is rooted in the fierce, stubborn clinging to the foolish and evil self that constitutes the basis of our existence. When we realise the full implications of this truth about ourselves, we see that the human condition is itself nothing but blind passion. Thus, just to

live, or wanting to live, as an unenlightened being is to manifest blind passion at all times, regardless of what we may appear to be. One comes to know this, however, only through the illumination of great compassion." (*Collected Works of Shinran*, Vol. 2, p. 172.)

[7] "The pathetic hope, fostered by the mystique of 'progress', that by a successive accumulation of human contrivances, *saṃsāra* itself will somehow be, if not abolished, permanently tilted in a comfortable direction is as incompatible with Buddhist realism as with historical probability." [Pallis (2003), p. 18.]

[8] In the Buddha's famous *Fire Sermon*, we read: *"O monks, everything is burning … With what is it burning? It is burning with the fire of passion, the fire of hatred, the fire of delusion. I declare that it is burning with the fire of birth, decay, death, grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow and despair." Saṃyutta Nikāya* (IV.19). [Bodhi (2005), p. 365.]

[9] According to Gampopa (1079–1153), "To have but few desires and satisfaction with simple things is the sign of a superior man." [Evans–Wentz (1958), p. 80.]

[10] The ultimate reality in Buddhism surpasses this transient world. Blissful and free from suffering, it is a permanent sphere of enlightenment tantamount to the highest happiness, described (in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*) as "the far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unageing, the stable, the unmanifest, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, the shelter, the unafflicted, dispassion, purity, freedom…" (SN 43:14). [Bodhi (2005), p.365.]

Suicide: A Spiritual Perspective

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> "[W]hen the body is killed the self is not killed."[1]
> – Chāndogya Upanishad 8:7–12
> "All living beings have two bodies, the material body and the Dharma body."[2]
> – Chih-tao
> "How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?"[3]
> – Zhūangzi
> "I begin to think [that] the only real sin is suicide, or not being one's self."[4]
> – George Tyrrell

Abstract

Throughout history, suicide has evoked a remarkably broad range of reactions—from perplexity and condemnation, to glorification and empathy. Many have tried to understand this phenomenon through the lens of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and anthropology, but much still seems to be amiss. A key factor in our current unprecedented mental health crisis is the undiagnosed impact of modernism and post-modernism; in other words, how has the loss of the sacred contributed to the

present-day alienation from ourselves, each other, and the earth? It is only through a fully integrated "science of the soul"—informed by metaphysics and the spiritual wisdom traditions of humanity—that we can, not only better understand suicide, but be properly equipped to avert tragic outcomes.

Keywords: Suicide, Psychology, Metaphysics, Philosophy, Religion.

Introduction

Suicide rates continue to climb worldwide and are not limited to just one region for this is now a global health phenomenon. Despite the efforts of mental health providers to understand and predict suicide risk, this has not led to any discernable improvements. There is also a growing awareness of how the reporting and portrayal of suicidal behavior in the media are having a negative influence and are, themselves, contributing factors in a worsening situation. The terminology employed when describing suicidal behavior can reinforce stigma and discourage vulnerable groups from obtaining much-needed support. Suicide is very complex in its psychological factors, which are not easy to comprehend. It goes without saying that any consideration of this difficult subject requires a deep sense of humility and compassion.

Without understanding how the weakening of religious belief has contributed to the spiritual crisis of the modern world, any conclusions we reach will remain shortsighted, if not superficial. Wanting to end one's life can be an understandable response to a world that appears to be upside-down and without meaning. This goes to the heart of understanding our lives in the face of widespread psychic turmoil and instability. If we are able to understand this, then we may get closer to fathoming the motives of those who seek to end their lives.

The discipline of psychology, and the field of mental health, have been challenged by a lack of clarity as to how to define suicidal occurrences, which corresponds to the lack of a well-defined terminology. Yet, if we cannot properly identify suicidal ideation and behavior, how can we manage or treat it? Also, worth noting is that some behaviors are designated as suicide attempts when they are not so.

Not only has the discipline failed to grapple with this quandary, but mental health providers are at an elevated risk of suicide themselves compared to the general population. Many notable psychotherapists and psychiatrists have ended their lives: for example, Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940), John B. Watson (1878–1958), Viktor Tausk (1879–1919), Anna Freud (1895–1982), Bruno Bettelheim (1903–1990), Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987), Robert L. Moore (1942–2016), Michael J. Mahoney (1946–2006), Petruska Clarkson (1947–2006), and Jon Driver (1962–2011).

The Failure of Profane Approaches

Many of the religions recognize the preciousness of human life, which enables us to return to the Divine by journeying on one of the divinely revealed spiritual paths. Accordingly, the eighth-century sage Shankara states: "human birth is difficult to obtain"[5] and should not be taken for granted. Because the development of Western psychology became severed from metaphysics, it lost its ability to comprehend the deeper movements of the human psyche, interpreting behavior and cognition, including our true identity, in a way that is devoid of any spiritual considerations. This undermined its grasp of the deeper facets of human existence, including the phenomenon of suicide which resulted, according to Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), from internalized anger that had originally been directed at another person: "[N]o neurotic harbours thoughts of suicide which he has not turned back upon himself from murderous impulses against others."[6] Austrian physician and psychologist

Wilhelm Stekel, who was an early follower of Freud, affirmed a similar outlook: "No one kills himself who has never wanted to kill another, or at least wished the death of another."[7] The pioneer of radical behaviorism, B.F. Skinner (1904–1990), had this to say about the phenomenon: "Suicide is another form of self-control."[8]

While there may be some validity to these theories, they do not get to the heart of this phenomenon. American psychiatrist Karl Menninger (1893–1990) wrote: "[S]uicide must be regarded as a peculiar kind of death which entails three internal elements: the element of dying, the element of killing, and the element of being killed."[9] At a psychoanalytic symposium on suicide in Vienna in 1910, Freud summarized the discussions as follows (and in a way that also reflects the reality of present-day psychology): "[De]spite … the valuable material that has been brought before us in this discussion, we have not reached a decision…. Let us suspend our judgment till experience has solved this problem."[10] In 1936, psychiatrist and historian of psychiatry Gregory Zilboorg (1890–1959) observed that "It is clear that the problem of suicide from the scientific point of view remains unsolved. Neither common sense nor clinical psychopathology has found a causal or even a strict empirical science."[11]

In summary, psychology and mental health care today have more questions than answers, in spite of the considerable resources that have been devoted to them. The Canadian clinical and forensic psychologist Antoon A. Leenaars simply admits that "No one really knows why human beings commit suicide."[12] Even though American psychologist James Hillman (1926–2011) avowed that "Suicide is the most alarming problem of life,"[13] the discipline has not been able to sufficiently contend with this troubling phenomenon.

Freud postulated the theory of the death "drive" or "instinct" (German: *Todestrieb*), suggesting that all human beings have an innate propensity for self-destruction. He articulates this bleak

prognosis for humanity: "The aim of all life is death."[14] He further outlines this notion and introduces what he has unfortunately termed the "Nirvana-principle":

> Whatever it is, we must perceive that the Nirvana-principle, which belongs to the death-instincts, underwent a modification in the living organism through which it became the pleasure-principle, and henceforth we shall avoid regarding the two principles as one. It is not difficult to infer what force it was that effected this modification, that is, if one has any interest at all in following this argument. It can only be the life-instinct, the libido, which has thus wrested a place for itself alongside the death-instinct in regulating the processes of life. In this way we obtain a series, a small but an interesting one: the *Nirvana*-principle expresses the tendency of the death-instincts, the *pleasure*-principle represents the claims of the libido and that modification of it, the *reality*-principle, the influence of the outer world.[15]

It is apparent that Freud's notion of the "Nirvana-principle" is limited to the horizontal domain of the empirical ego and does not serve to integrate the human psyche back to its source in the Divine. This is something that Freud himself describes as "the extinction ... of the tensions of the instinctual needs."[16] The so-called "Nirvana-principle" is a fundamental misinterpretation of the Buddhist tradition which is essentially a transformation of consciousness that is universal and found across all sapiential traditions. With that said, although Freud inappropriately called this theory the "Nirvana-principle," it discloses the true character of the modern individual; paradoxically, his entire psychoanalytic framework comprises a psychology that is eminently suited for the fallen humanity of our times.

It was the Enlightenment philosophers who started to conceive suicide in entirely secular terms, focusing just on the characteristics of individuals and their social environment. David Hume (1711–1776) directly assaults the position held by the Christian tradition in his essay *Of Suicide* (1783). Hume disagreed with the notion that

suicide violates the sacred order established by God for this world, and that it usurps a divine prerogative that determines when a person is to die. His position can be summarized by the assertion that suicide should "be free from every imputation of guilt or blame"[17] and that this was "the sovereign antidote"[18] to superstition and religion.

In his classic work on the subject, French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) put forward the core of his thesis: "The social suicide-rate can be explained only sociologically. At any given moment, the moral constitution of society establishes the contingent of voluntary deaths."[19] This perspective solely accounts for the covariance of suicide rates and the level of social integration across various cultures. It takes into consideration how participation in a spiritual tradition fosters resilience by protecting against the harms of suicidality. It is not difficult to make the case that increased religious participation supports spiritual integration, which is often associated with lower suicide rates.[20]

We recall that William James (1842–1910), known as the "father of American psychology," wrote a provocative essay entitled *Is Life Worth Living?* (1895). In this work, James writes: "My final appeal is to nothing more recondite than religious faith."[21] He adds: "We have a right to believe that the physical order is only a partial order; we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust."[22] In turning to the metaphysical roots of spiritual traditions, we are able to reconcile the unseen with the visible world which can, in turn, support us in our search for the meaning that is necessary to bring healing and wholeness in our lives.

The experience that human life has no intrinsic meaning is a tremendous problem in the modern world. Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) writes: "There is nothing in the world ... that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life."[23]

Life in the modern world, due to its desacralized ambiance, tends to look at existence as merely accidental which has led to a profound nihilism. When large segments of humanity are alienated from themselves, other people, and the natural environment, the implications can only be deleterious.

French psychiatrist Étienne Esquirol (1772–1840) writes: "Suicide [shows] all the characteristics of mental alienation."[24] Our gradual forgetfulness of the Divine, due to its overthrow by materialism and scientism, has caused our direct vision of higher realities (the "eye of the heart") to become veiled, leading to a host of individual and collective problems for humanity. It is worth adding here that when humanity comes to privilege its life at all costs, due to its estrangement from the sacred, it fails to see that the death of the planet is, itself, an unspoken form of inevitable suicide: "The destruction of the world is the last, almost desperate attempt, to save myself from being crushed by it."[25]

The Disfiguration of Humanity

The events of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution, culminating in the post-Enlightenment era, did not only subvert the essential role of religion in the Middle Ages but also gave birth to an aberrant notion of what it means to be human. This gave rise to individualism, which had its beginnings in the European Renaissance,[26] and which, arguably contributed directly to the growing crisis of suicidality that ensued over time in the West, thanks to its repudiation of anything higher than the isolated individual.

Contrary to modernist narratives that view the Middle Ages as fundamentally regressive, what we find is that the phenomenon of suicide was uncommon at that time. It has been said that "suicide [is] the one crime of violence which was rarer then than now."[27] It may be true that "suicide is evidently as old as the human race";[28]

however, this does not therefore imply, as some sociologists have claimed, that it is less prevalent today than it was in the pre-modern world of the First Peoples.[29] The increase in suicide in the present day appears to be directly linked to the rootlessness and nihilism of the modern world.

It is precisely the loss of a sense of the sacred—which is inseparable from our identity as human beings and our connection to all life—that contributes to the current predicament facing humanity. Furthermore, that the phenomenon of suicide was known to the First Peoples of the world does not disprove the data that indicates a significant increase in suicidal behavior with the rise of modernism. The term *suicide* was coined by the English physician Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682) and was first used in his book *Religio Medici* ('The Religion of a Doctor') in 1643. *Suicide* derives from the Latin *suicidium,* from *sui* ('of oneself') and *caedere* ('to kill').

The ending one's life by suicide can be the result of an unbearable pain that has no means of resolution—it may not be about giving up on life altogether, as much as wanting a different kind of life. Suicide is the attempt to resolve the ordeal of an afflicted self in this realm. The ego does not see that this as an attempt to steal life from the Spirit, because from the relative sphere of the ego, everything within its purview appears to be absolute. If we are trapped in a separated self, we cannot see that there is another reality beyond its immediate experience.

If we could ask the ego what it wants in seeking death, it would likely be to overcome the misery that afflicts it, rather wishing to kill the body. A paradox exists here because the ego cannot kill itself in the same way that it cannot transcend itself. What is needed is a discernment between the relative and absolute orders of reality, so that we may see who we truly are despite our transient circumstances in this world. This distinction can be immensely useful as a support for our mental health.

For the person attempting suicide, a sense of control is sometimes felt regarding what may occur after they die. American psychologist David Bakan (1921–2004) explains that an "act of self-injury ... puts death under the control of the will, giving the illusion that otherwise there is immortality."[30] The modern mindset is distinguished by a debased notion of permanence, sometimes referred to as the "immanentization of the eschaton"[31] or the "counterfeit of Eternity."[32] From a metaphysical perspective, what is born must die when the causes and conditions that brought it about inevitably exhaust themselves; yet the Real is timeless and cannot perish. Most people do not see things as they are and, without understanding this truth, they cannot know what truly serves their ultimate interests.

Inwardly, someone may feel utter anguish and be confused by the contradictory forces that are pulling their lives apart. They may not be able to see beyond this moment of despair and long for an entirely different life or reality. This predicament was poignantly expressed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832): "Nature has no way to escape from the labyrinth: her powers are exhausted; she can contend no longer, and the poor soul must die."[33]

Until we are purged of all identification with what is not divine, we will continue to be challenged by our life in this body. Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1416) explains how we are all confronted in some way, no matter what our personal circumstances may be: "For we are all in part troubled, and we shall be troubled."[34] However, we are always called to return to the present moment which is a doorway to the eternal; for it is from here that we can appreciate the full plenitude of the human person and its need to bind itself to the Spirit. Boethius (480–525) writes:

> If you thought of all the things that have happened to you, what kind of things they were, and whether they were happy or unhappy things, you would not be able to say you have not been fortunate up to now. On the other hand, if you do not consider that you have been lucky because your onetime reasons for

> rejoicing have passed away, you cannot now think of yourself as in misery, because the very things that seem miserable are also passing away.... You know there is no constancy in human affairs, when a single swift hour can often bring a man to nothing.[35]

While we are free to pursue the awakening to our primordial nature or true Self, we are also capable of betraying it. Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) provides a compelling insight into the choices that we make in this life:

> Freedom being everywhere what it is, that is, without inner constraint, it may be said that man is free to damn himself, just as he is free to throw himself, if he wishes, into an abyss; but as soon as man passes to action freedom becomes illusory in so far as it goes against truth: to cast oneself voluntarily into an abyss is to deprive oneself by the same act of freedom to act. It is the same for a man of infernal tendency: he becomes the slave of his choice, whereas the man of spiritual tendency rises towards a greater freedom. Again, since the reality of hell is made of illusion—the remoteness from God can only be illusory—hell cannot exist eternally beside Bliss, although it is unable to conceive its own end, this inability being, as it were, the counterfeit of Eternity in the states of damnation. Thus it is not without reason that Sufis have insisted on the relativity of everything created and have affirmed that after an indefinite duration the fires of hell will grow cold; all beings will finally be reabsorbed into God. Whatever modern philosophers may think, there is a contradiction between freedom and the arbitrary; man is free to choose what is absurd, but inasmuch as he chooses it he is not free. In the creature freedom and action do not coincide.[36]

The Deathless Self

The spiritual and philosophical traditions of the world hold varied views of what it means to end one's life by suicide, although we

also find a striking unanimity among some. Goethe speaks to the reoccurring need to ponder anew this important theme: "Suicide is an event of human nature which, whatever may be said and done with respect to it, demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew."[37]

We recall the celebrated words from *Hamlet*: "To be, or not to be."[38] Considered in a metaphysical context, "to be" refers to not entering the world of action, but transcending it through one's submission to the Divine; while "not to be" is not about ending our life by suicide, but about engaging with the world and entangling oneself in its endless activities. The first is about cleaving to the one and only true reality, and the second to the illusory flux of temporal phenomena.[39] Through the lens of metaphysics, suicide can be considered from a higher vantage point in which one is seen as not living up to our primordial nature—that is, suicide as that which defies the reason for our birth in this world, and which aims to sever what is, in effect, our unbreakable bond to the sacred.

Socrates (469–399) provides two possible reasons why suicide is prohibited. The first is that "we … are in a kind of prison and must not set ourselves free or run away";[40] the second is that "the gods are our guardians, and … we are a possession of theirs."[41] These reasons indicate that we are born into this temporal world for a reason and cannot arbitrarily remove ourselves from it without grave consequences. Socrates states that "any man who has the spirit of philosophy, will be willing to die, though he will not take his own life, for that is held not to be right."[42] However, Socrates also adds that, in certain cases, it may be unavoidable: "…only at some times and for some persons it is better to die than to live."[43]

The Stoics, on the other hand, viewed suicide differently in that a noble purpose could justify it, while others thought that any reason was good enough. Seneca (c. 4–65) upheld that "sometimes it is an act of bravery even to live."[44] The orator and philosopher Cicero (106–43) considers when it might be an acceptable act as follows:

"When a man's circumstances contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is appropriate for him to remain alive; when he possesses or sees in prospect a majority of the contrary things, it is appropriate for him to depart from life."[45] In Greek and Roman antiquity, suicide was conceived as an act that could be morally justified—or even called for—under certain unavoidable circumstances.

The early church fathers of the Christian tradition uniformly condemned suicide. This is evident when Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) addresses the conflation between suicide and martyrdom, and while not directly speaking about suicide, nonetheless explains that it is not permitted: "Lest any one should say to us, 'All of you, go, kill yourselves and thus go immediately to God,'" he replies "if we do act thus, we ourselves will be opposing the will of God."[46] For St. Augustine (354–430), "anyone who kills himself is a murderer."[47] We are reminded that our "bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13), applies not only to one's neighbor but also to oneself. From a conventional point of view, it is difficult to make sense of the following assertion: "The man who kills himself, kills all men."[48] But, metaphysically speaking, each human being—being unique—represents, in principle, the whole of humanity in their own person.

St. Augustine underscores the deeper motivation to die: "So the will's desire for death is not a desire for nonexistence but a desire for peace. When someone wrongly believes that he will not exist, he desires by nature to be at peace; that is, he desires to exist in a higher degree."[49] By this, he indicates that although the person is seeking an end to their suffering, which is understandable, his action is nonetheless misplaced. Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) adds: "Unendurable pain and fear of a worse death seem ... the most excusable motives for suicide."[50] St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) makes the point that "to bring death upon oneself in order to escape

the other afflictions of this life, is to adopt a greater evil in order to avoid a lesser … to take one's own life ... does oneself a very great injury, by depriving oneself of ... needful ... repentance."[51]

God gives human beings free will, which has good and bad consequences in the world. While we can aspire to live our lives in perpetual remembrance of the sacred, we can also choose to live in forgetfulness: "As the ego itself cannot cast itself into nothingness, it falls as a consequence of its destructive act into the seeming nothingness."[52]

The Islamic tradition has this to say about suicide: "[S]lay not yourselves. Truly God is Merciful unto you" (Qur'ān 4:29). We also find the following prophetic saying: "He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the Hell-fire."[53] Suicide is forbidden by Islamic Law because the decision to live or die is not ours but God's alone.

According to the Hindu tradition, it is said that "After leaving their bodies, they who have killed the Self go to the worlds of the *Asuras* [Titans], covered with blinding ignorance"[54] (Isha Upanishad 3). Of course, we need to distinguish the transpersonal Self from the false one, and while we cannot kill the unborn and eternal identity that we truly are, the human body is itself considered sacred: "The body [is] the house of the Spirit"[55] (Chāndogya Upanishad 8:7–12).

Those who do not understand the meaning of this life, and its connection to the other worlds, and die by suicide are negligent of the following pronouncement: "Into blinding darkness enter those who worship ignorance"[56] (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 4:4:10). Or "Miserable are those worlds enveloped by (that) blinding darkness (ignorance). To them, after death, go those people who are ignorant and unwise"[57] (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 4:4:11).

Śrī Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), discusses suicide from the perspective of pure nonduality:

> A question arises, why there should be suicides…. Why does one do it? Because he is unhappy and desires to put an end to his unhappiness. He actually does it by ending the association with the body which represents all unhappiness. For there must be a killer to kill the body. He is the survivor after suicide. That is the Self.[58]

Metaphysically speaking, each of us is unknowingly enacting suicide as long as we are neglecting to realize our true Self. The Sage of Arunachala explains: "The eternal, blissful, and natural state has been smothered by this life of ignorance. In this way the present life is due to the killing of the eternal, pristine Being. Is it not a case of suicide?"[59] A similar teaching is expressed in this scripture: "[The] human body … is like a … boat—so difficult to secure ... the man who does not strive to cross the ocean of Samsāra [cycles of birth-and-death], is verily a suicide"[60] (Uddhava Gītā 15:17). Shankara points out: "The man who having by some means obtained a human being ... is foolish enough not to exert for self-liberation, verily commits suicide, for he kills himself by clinging to things unreal."[61]

When a devotee asked Śrī Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982) about suicide, she responded in the following manner: "To whom belongs the body that you speak of destroying? Is this the way a human being talks? For shame!"[62] Elsewhere, the Divine Mother elaborates:

> One who commits suicide enters such a deep darkness out of which it is very difficult to be liberated. One may remain in it for ages, unless someone who has power has compassion and frees one from it. Suicide is a heinous sin. In that condition one cannot meet anyone [in the afterlife]. The human body is born in order to enjoy and suffer the fruit of one's deeds…. To try to escape from this by suicide is most foolish and only prolongs the agony indefinitely. No one who is in his senses can take his life; at the moment of doing such a thing the person is out of his mind. Suicide does not solve anything, on the contrary.[63]

Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886), the Paramahamsa of Dakshineshwar, concurs: "Suicide is a heinous sin."[64] When Śrī Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981) was asked what the problem with suicide was, he responded:

> Nothing wrong, if it solves the problem. What, if it does not? Suffering caused by extraneous factors—some painful and incurable disease, or unbearable calamity—may provide some justification, but where wisdom and compassion are lacking, suicide can not help. A foolish death means foolishness…. Endurance is usually the wisest course.[65]

In the *Pārājika*, the Buddha Shakyamuni remarks: "Whatsoever Bhikkhu [who] incite[s] another to self-destruction, saying … '[M]y friend … what good do you get from this sinful, wretched life? [D]eath is better to thee than life!'… [H]e, too, is fallen into defeat, he is no longer in communion."[66] While the Buddha taught an attitude of non-attachment (Pāli/Sanskrit: *alobha*) towards all things in this life, this was not a nihilistic teaching but an exhortation to attain Awakening:

Such indeed is how the steadfast act:

> They are not attached to life.
>
> Having drawn out craving with its root,
>
> Godhika has attained final Nibbāna.[67]

As one of the Buddha's five precepts is to abstain from killing any living thing, the prohibition on suicide follows as a matter of course. It is worth also adding that "the strong Buddhist objection to suicide ... is based on the very proper ground that ... something more powerful than a dose of poison [is needed] to destroy the illusion of I and Mine."[68] Mou Tzu (Mouzi), the second-century Buddhist and Taoist philosopher, writes: "The spirit never perishes. Only the body decays"[69] and explains: "If one has the Way, even if one dies one's soul goes to an abode of happiness. If one does not have the Way, when one is dead one's soul suffers misfortune."[70]

Mencius (Mengzi, 372–289), the second great Chinese sage after Confucius *(551–479)* wrote:

> Fish is what I want; bear's palm is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take bear's palm than fish. Life is what I want; dutifulness is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take dutifulness than life. On the one hand, though life is what I want, there is something I want more than life. That is why I do not cling to life at all costs. On the other hand, though death is what I loathe, there is something I loathe more than death. That is why there are troubles I do not avoid…. Yet there are ways of remaining alive and ways of avoiding death to which a man will not resort. In other words, there are things a man wants more than life and there are also things he loathes more than death.[71]

The shadow side of our "precious human birth" is the taking of one's life by suicide. This is tragic, whether understood in a religious or secular context. The "dark night of the soul" as expounded by the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) conveys the experience of a total absence of divine light and hope. This necessitated a great deal of suffering for St. John, but his journey out of this abyss led him to a far-reaching transformation of his being. We can be greatly tested on the spiritual path, which is liable to cast doubt on our faith, and our sense of proximity to the Spirit. Accordingly, our suffering may appear akin to a mental health crisis. As St. John of the Cross observes:

> [W]hen this Divine contemplation assails the soul with a certain force, in order to strengthen it and subdue it, it suffers such pain in its weakness that it nearly swoons away ... for sense and spirit, as if beneath some immense and dark load, are in such great pain and agony that the soul would find advantage and relief in death.[72]

There are points along the path that appear to be too much to bear: "When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me" (Psalm 73:16) or "I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning

all ... day long. For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease: and there is no soundness in my flesh" (Psalm 38:6–7). In binding our hearts and minds to a spiritual tradition, we can protect ourselves from this encroaching darkness. It is not possible to be free of trials in the temporal world (*dunya*): "[D]id you suppose you should enter Paradise without God know[ing] who of you have struggled and who are patient" (Qur'ān 3:142).

We are exhorted to always "choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19) and live in proximity to the Divine—"the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6)—regardless of our individual circumstances. The increasingly widespread incidence of suicide worldwide is truly heartbreaking, and reflects a widespread loss of a sense of the sacred. The belief that we have complete agency to determine our own fate overlooks the truth that this world is a test. Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) wrote:

> To this false life is opposed a true death: the death of passion; this is spiritual death, the cold and crystalline purity of the soul conscious of its immortality. To false death is opposed a true life: the life of the heart turned toward God and open to the warmth of His love. To false activity is opposed a true rest, a true peace: the repose of the soul that is simple and generous and content with God, the soul that turns aside from agitations and curiosity and ambition in order to repose in divine beauty. To false rest is opposed a true activity: the battle of the spirit against the multiple weaknesses that squander the soul—and this precious life—as in a game or dream.[73]

It is the misconception of a confused and distorted mind that believes suicide will provide an escape from human suffering. Such a person likely does not recognize their soul's longing to return to its source and be healed in the sacred; yet the impulse to end their life implies (metaphysically) a wish to change the conditions of existence. From the point of view of eternity, however, what matters is that we should endure our lot in this world and accept its

mystery, however hard that may seem in light of the appalling suffering we see all around us.

In the ancient West, philosophy was considered the art of dying properly. A remarkable example of this is found in Plato's (429–347) dialogue *Phaedo*, in which Socrates is awaiting his execution. In this record of his final moments of life, a discussion takes place that focuses on the question of death and its implications for living:

> It may be that the rest of mankind are not aware that those who apply themselves correctly to the pursuit of philosophy are in fact practicing nothing more nor less than dying and death. If this is so, it would indeed be strange that men who had throughout their lives sought precisely this, should grumble when it came—the very thing which they had, for so long, desired and rehearsed.[74]

One often finds in religious texts the importance of attaining a 'spiritual death' in this life, as Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) makes clear, stating "The kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead,"[75] or what the Jewish tradition calls the "cessation or annihilation of existence" (*bittul ha-yesh*); that is, by dying in the Absolute. This implicit teaching was made explicit in the renowned words of the Prophet of Islam: "Die before ye die" (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*).

Metaphysically speaking, we could look at this phenomenon, not from the outward perspective of ending a life, but as a transfiguration of our inner world; in other words, a hidden desire for a new mode of existence by forcing our own death. In therapeutic terms, "When we are no longer able to change a situation ... we are challenged to change ourselves."[76]As Hillman has suggested, a suicide attempt is an "urge for hasty transformation."[77] However, such radical renewal requires that we engage with the sacred; something that is, for the most part, completely lacking in conventional psychotherapy. The following

testimony—of a person who made an attempt on their life—reflects a spiritual crisis that is typical of what we find in the modern world:

> I really wanted to kill myself but I didn't really want to die. I pictured myself being like one of those people in stories, who would die and then come back to life after they saw heaven or something. I thought that either I would die completely, so maybe I'd see that light people talk about, or it would change other people's lives and then somehow change mine. I remember sitting there after taking the pills, waiting, and thinking, "Maybe I'll see God and find out that I am special." Finding that out was important, because I felt there had to be something deeper than what was going on here.[78]

In seeking to end her suffering and isolation, this person wanted to restore a sense of the transcendent, represented here in the relationship with her father:

> I wanted the experience of some deeper spiritual connection, to someone or something, because the [relationships] I had weren't satisfying at all. I was also taking my last real chance to be mad at my dad. I was tired of being alone. I wanted him here, with me. At the very least, I thought that I'll finally find my dad.[79]

Through this spiritual death and rebirth, we can begin to discern the deeper meaning of suffering. This will not always alleviate our immediate pain but, rather, may shift our focus towards a higher life that pervades it, thus allowing us to achieve "the peace ... which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). Accordingly, to not seek wholeness and liberation from our fallen state is itself a form of suicide in light of our creation in the "image of God" (Genesis 1:27).

If we are not aware of how influential are the dominant secular narratives of what life is, and what it means to be human, we may come to forget the significance of this unique opportunity known as human birth. This may cause us to live an infra-human life of profound confusion and spiritual amnesia, making it easier to be led

astray by the disintegrating forces of the *Zeitgeist*. On the other hand, by living in remembrance of our own primordial nature, and its connection to what lies beyond this life, we are sure to find guidance on a spiritual path.

Due to the temporal cycle and our fallen or *saṃsāric* consciousness, human existence is not without "travails in birth" (Galatians 4:19), reflecting God's intention to "greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16); however, no matter how challenging, deprived, or traumatic our circumstances may be, we must not ignore that we are called to be "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). According to the Qur'ān, we were fundamentally "created to worship God" (51:56); and likewise the prophetic saying: "He who knows himself knows his Lord." This wisdom will allow us to endure and even flourish despite what may occur in the world of manifestation.

Conclusion

As the saints and sages of all traditions attest, there is no trauma from which we cannot heal, or a predicament that we cannot move beyond, no matter how bleak it may appear. We recall that "God burdens a soul only to its capacity" (Qur'ān 2:286) and, likewise, "God … will not suffer you … above that ye are able … to bear" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Some may object that the immense scale of the current suicide epidemic serves to demonstrate, on the contrary, that human souls are clearly being burdened beyond their 'capacity' to endure the overwhelming sorrow, pain and disappointments of life. However, one might respond that when we are firmly grounded in a religious tradition, we are given the necessary spiritual support to withstand such hardships, including thoughts of wanting to take our own lives. Such thoughts are the result of turning away from the sacred, which can only deprive us of the supports that are needed to overcome such despair.

It is especially tragic when religious authorities commit suicide, seeing as they have been entrusted with the pastoral needs of others. What can be said about this is that the religions themselves are susceptible to the same disintegrating forces that have caused the mental health crises that we see in the rest of society. What we need to understand is that religions and their representatives must similarly confront such challenges in our unprecedented times, yet remain steadfast in the timeless wisdom that is made available to us by humanity's spiritual traditions.

For the person who turns their heart and mind to the Divine Mercy will realize that support and sustenance is ever present, even in the darkest of times. "Despair not of God's Mercy. Truly God forgives all sins" (Qur'ān 39:53) and "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). As it has been said, "We must never doubt Mercy; that would be the sin of bitterness. A life that ends in prayer and in trust is never lost; the most wretched of human beings finds himself in the antechamber of Paradise—or under the Blessed Virgin's mantle—the moment he prays with sincerity and hope."[80] Yet the problem is that we rarely regard our lives as gifts of grace, and all too often only see this in hindsight only, or when it is too late.

All spiritual traditions affirm that our transpersonal Self cannot be lost because we are never deprived of the Divine Presence—"Grace is always there."[81] To be confined to our traumas, pain, and struggles in this life prevents us from becoming who we truly are. Human suffering stems from our identification with a self that is cut off from the Divine. Śrī Nisargadatta Maharaj frames it as follows: "You are never alone. There are powers and presences who serve you all the time most faithfully. You may or may not perceive them, nevertheless they are real and active."[82]

By restoring a sacred psychology that is rooted in the spiritual traditions of humanity, we will be better equipped to assist people in

coping with the existential assaults that would normally drive them to leave this world prematurely. It is only a properly integrated "science of the soul" that can provide an intelligible framework for understanding our troubling situation in the world, and thus help us to better understand what it means to be fully human. Our search for meaning is inseparable from the quest for Ultimate Reality or the Absolute.

Through immersion in a life of faith, we can come to see our connection to all sentient beings and the world around us, which can assist to remedy the ills of alienation and nihilism that are ubiquitous today. In this way, we may be able to foster an enduring sense of belonging to the created order of existence. In closing, we need to exercise utmost humility when discussing this subject, and honestly admit that we may never fully understand the enigma of suicide. Yet, only in an outlook grounded in sacred metaphysics do we have the best prospect of responding to this tragic phenomenon with true wisdom and compassion.

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The Influence of St. Isaac the Syrian's Ascetical Theology on Early Sufism

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Abstract

The paper at hand aims at discussing the possibility of the influence of eastern Christian asceticism on early Sufism. As one can see, the title of the present work consists of four elements: first, St. Isaac the Syrian, a 7th century Arab monk; second, eastern Christian asceticism as presented in Isaac the Syrian's *Mystic Treatises*; third, early Sufism, that is, the first stages of Islamic asceticism; finally, the influence that Sufism potentially received by the ascetical theology of Isaac the Syrian and the Church tradition the saint represents. Although the title itself should not be viewed as an absolute statement, but rather as a flexible question in the form of a curiosity-friendly research hypothesis, discussion will take place regarding the existence of a probable scenario of how 7th century eastern Christian monasticism might have interacted with Islam regarding the ascetical practices that both movements have in common.

Keywords: *asceticism, Sufism, renunciation, prayer, light, love, union.*

Introduction

The selection of the text of the *Mystic Treatises* is not made at random. It is the reflection of its writer's life, experience and ascetical theology. Isaac the Syrian was born in Qatar in the beginning of the 7th century AD, became a monk, then a bishop of Nineveh and finally chose to withdraw and live as an ascetic (Alfeyev 2000, 25-27). He was also member of the Church of the East, a branch of Syriac Christianity (Alfeyev 2000, 16). One can observe that Isaac the Syrian was a pretty intercultural figure, since the background of his life consisted of three geographically interrelated parts. Firstly, Arabia, because he was born in Qatar. Secondly, Iraq (part of the Sassanian Empire at that time), for he was ordained a bishop of Nineveh. Thirdly, Syria (part of the Byzantine Empire back then), because his church tradition originated from the Antiochene School (Alfeyev 2000, 33).

According to Alfeyev (2000, 32-33), the theology of Isaac the Syrian was apparently influenced by theologians such as Evagrius Ponticus, John of Apamea, Aphrahat, Ephrem the Syrian, Narsai, Babai the Great, Mark the Hermit, Abba Isaias, Nilus of Ancyra, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus, while he was also aware of texts like the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, the *Macarian Homilies*, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the *Life of Saint Anthony*. His relationship with the Church was one of harmony and communion, without this depriving him of his theological originality (Alfeyev 2000, 34). He represents then not just his own self, but also the body of his Church and its collective experience on the path towards salvation. When it comes to the effect that Greek philosophy had on Isaac, it is sufficient to mention names such as Pythagoras, Philo, Plotinus, Porphyry, Epictetus and Secundus (Brock 1978, 94; Isaac of Nineveh 1923, xlvi). It is also important to see how Isaac uses the Bible in relation to the aforementioned influences.

On the Sufi side, the work that will be studied is al-Qushayri's *al-Risala* (also known as *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf*). Al-Qushayri was born to Arab parents in 986 AD in Ustuwa (which is also called Ustawa), a region of Khurasan (al-Qushayri 2007, xxi). When he was young, he traveled to Nishapur, Iran, to study under shaykh al-Daqqaq, member of the spiritual school of thought which was connected to figures of the Sufi school of Baghdad, such as al-Sari al-Saqati (865 AD), al-Junayd al-Baghdadi (910 AD) and Abu Bakr al-Shibli (946 AD), as it is supported (al-Qushayri 2007, xxi). Al-Qushayri's studies were not restricted to Sufism, but rather extended to speculative theology and Shafi'i jurisprudence (al-Qushayri 2007, xxii). Being one of the most significant manuals in the history of Sufism, *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, written in 1045 AD, is of an apologetic character and aims at exposing 'Sufism as a legitimate and respectable Islamic "science" in complete harmony with the letter and spirit of Islamic Law, the *shari'a*', starting from the Sufi ascetics of the 8th century and moving on up to the 10th century (al-Qushayri 2007, xxiv-xxv).

Al-Risala consists of a pretty useful structure for the researcher of Sufism. Specifically, it begins with a description of the Sufi doctrines, while it also contains a variety of biographies of early Sufis (al-Qushayri 2007, xxv). In this respect, the target of al-Qushayri is to indicate the connection of the Sufis to Muhammad himself as well as his companions (al-Qushayri 2007, xxv). The content of *al-Risala* is also didactic, that is, it includes the teachings and the attitudes of Sufism in a quite apologetic and clarifying way (al-Qushayri 2007, xxv). As in Isaac the Syrian's case, the ascetic practices that al-Qushayri describes have an Islamic scriptural backdrop, that is, they depend on the use and interpretation of quranic passages and hadiths (al-Qushayri 2007, xxvi). The Sufi scope of the use of the Quran is related to the idea that the friends of God (*awliya' Allah*) are considered as "kings" of this world, but not from a materialistic point of view (al-Qushayri 2007, xxvi). However, this royal status should not be taken for granted until death and judgement occurs (al-Qushayri 2007, xxvi).

Apart from their great significance among Christians and Muslims respectively, there are three additional reasons for choosing the two aforementioned books as primary sources. First, the emphasis of both writers on the concept of the fear of God triggered my curiosity to search for more resemblances between them. It is probably not a mere coincidence that Isaac the Syrian and al-Qushayri describe the fear of God as source of spiritual knowledge (al-Qushayri 2007, 68; 126; Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 213-214). In both cases, spiritual knowledge is considered as the unveiling of hidden mysteries. Could there be a further connection to the Book of Proverbs where it is claimed that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding' (Prov. 9:10)?

What is also common between the two works is that repentance is the first step in both ascetic systems, as we will soon realize. Purification, being the second step in Isaac the Syrian's ascetical theology, is also present in Sufism, while perfection, the third step, exists as the ultimate aim in both of them. This means that the beginning and the end of the Christian ascetic and the Sufi are similar, although the theological hermeneutical framework changes. This resemblance is the second reason why I use these two works as primary sources.

The third reason is that the meeting points of the two books, culturally and geographically speaking, provide the reader with the opportunity to assume that they themselves reflect events of historical interaction between Christianity and Islam. For instance, the Christian monks and the hermits of the desert are many times mentioned by al-Qushayri in his *al-Risala*, sometimes in an exemplary manner and sometimes as isolated cases of persons, who witnessed the power of Allah or/and converted to Islam (al-Qushayri 2007, 122; 236; 280; 373). Jesus is present in the work of al-Qushayri as well, although the respective descriptions are based on Christ's quranic depiction (al-Qushayri 2007, 133; 147; 228; 296; 332; 364; 396).

Regarding the historicity of the Christian-Muslim encounters in the Near and Middle East, what has remarkably functioned as a bridge between the two faiths is the translation of Greek or Syriac philosophical and theological texts into Arabic and the access that Muslims had to the translated works, as it will be shown later. The *Mystic Treatises* of Isaac the Syrian were translated from Syriac to Arabic not earlier than the 9th century (Alfeyev 2000, 30). In this sense, a straight influence of the *Mystic Treatises* on Sufism cannot be presumed before its translation, if one intends to discuss a possible effect of the former on the latter. Even after its translation, the impact that the Sufi ascetical practices might have had received by the *Mystic Treatises* remains just a presumption, since there is no affirmative tangible evidence for it.

Nonetheless, if Isaac the Syrian is seen as heir of the intellectual and spiritual tradition of the Christian writers that we have already mentioned above, one can support that his *Mystic Treatises* stand for an ascetical theology which is quite representative of the entire ascetical tradition of his Church. Consequently, if the Sufis had access to sources of Christian asceticism that were translated before Isaac the Syrian's *Mystic Treatises*, this could be a proof of Christianity's influence on Sufism (although still not a palpable one) as long as the saint's work is not in opposition to the teachings of the Church. Hence it could be possible to keep the discussion in question open by surmising that a kind of eastern Christian influence on early Sufi asceticism might have taken place.

Christian-Muslim Encounters in Syria, Iraq and Arabia

A kind of geographical contact can be observed between Syria, Iraq and Arabia, the three geographical areas which we encounter in Isaac the Syrian's life and in al-Qushayri's writings. It is through the areas in question that the borders of the Arabian Peninsula and the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires literally touch each other. Borders do not only separate, but also function as points of contact

(Barth 1969, 15). Consequently, geographical contact can also set the preconditions for cultural interaction. Keeping that in mind, one can assume a scenario of cultural exchange between Arabia and the two marginal cities of the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires, Syria and Iraq respectively. Regarding this, it is valid to ask the following question: "what has been the quality of the cultural and religious connection of these places, namely Syria, Iraq and Arabia?

The Church of the East was among the representing groups of Christians in Syria and Iraq (Cragg 1991, 22; Watt 1991, 1). Iraqi and Syrian missionaries played an important role in the process of transmitting Christianity to Arabia from the 4th century on (Smith 1995, 103-104). However, in the time of Muhammad (7th century AD) Christianity in Mecca had remained quite marginalized. There was no translation of the Bible in Arabic (only in Syriac) and the majority of Christians 'had presumably only a meagre knowledge' of their own religion, as Watt (1991, 6) describes. Arab Christians were close to the Church of the East, while culturally remote and doctrinally isolated from the decisions of the Byzantine Orthodox Church whose culture was mainly Greek (Cragg 1991, 23; Watt 1991, 4; 6; Trimingham 1979, 230). The Church of the East as well as other Christian branches were considered as heretical by the Byzantine Church and were, in consequence, facing rejection in the competition with the imperial theology, a condition which played a role for their later embodiment to Islam and the Caliphate (Cragg 1991, 15; Hourani 1991, 23-24; Trimingham 1979, 212; Watt 1991, 7-8).

Not only the missionaries and, generally, the people of Syria and Iraq traveled to Arabia, but also the people of Arabia, especially merchants from Mecca, traveled to Byzantine and Sassanian grounds (Griffith 2001, 309; Watt 1991, 9). It is said that Muhammad himself, when still a child, traveled to Syria with a caravan of traders in the company of his uncle (Watt 1961, 1-3). There the caravan met a Nestorian monk called Bahira, who predicted the future prophethood of the young Muhammad, as it is

believed, and became the child's teacher (Baum and Winkler 2003, 42; Gottheil 1899, 239; Roggema 2009, 38-39; Sizgorich 2004, 27-28; Szilágyi 2008, 200). This narrative shows how the relationships were between the pre-Islamic Arabs and the Christians of the geographical area in question. There was interaction -and sometimes identification, as we will see later- between the two. Here we also ought to mention the existence of a pre-Islamic poem, which shows how the Arab night travelers perceived the Christian ascetic's lamp as a means and a symbol of guidance (Lyall 1930, 103).

From this perspective, it is not strange at all that Christian monasticism is mentioned in the Quran. In particular, it is written that 'as for monasticism, they made it up -We never ordained it for them- only seeking to please Allah' (Q. 57:27). In the Quran one also finds information about the impression Muslims had about Christian monks. For example, one reads that 'you will find (...) the most gracious to be those who call themselves Christian. That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not arrogant' (Q. 5:82).

During the time of the Arab expansion in the 7th century AD, one could find Arabs already inhabiting in Syria and Iraq -sometimes to such an extent that the local non-Arab populations were culturally and linguistically identified with the Arabs (Eger 2013, 100; Shboul and Walmsley 1998, 266). In the decade of 630 AD during the Arab conquests against the Levant and Persia, the regions of Arabia, Iraq and Syria were incorporated in the new-born Caliphate (Hoyland 2015, 39; 49; January 2009, 62; 71). In this new context, an atmosphere of friendly interchange was developed between Christians and Muslims, since the former did not see the latter as being a threat, but rather ethnically akin (Boojamra 1997, 166).

The reason was that 'no rigid ethnic or demographic frontier isolated Arabia from the rest of the region; (…) Arabian peoples migrated slowly into the Middle East and themselves made up much

of the population of the North Arabian desert and of Syria' (Lapidus 1982, 53). Under the Islamic rule, the Christians of Syria and Iraq were able to retain their religious identity -in the beginning at least (Smith 1995, 119). What also mattered to a great extent for the inhabitants of Iraq and Syria was their own safety and peace along with reasonable taxes (Hourani 1991, 23).

The relationship of Christians and Muslims was characterized by marriages, while the education that the latter received from the former in subjects like science, medicine, art and Greek philosophy was among the main factors of social and cultural interaction between the two religious groups (Smith 1995, 112-115). In the newly formed Caliphate, the inhabitants of Syria and Persia held offices related to theology, law, administration and professorship (Brown 1989, 198). As Cragg (1991, 17) describes, 'through Arabization of its empire Islam underwent a counterprocess of Hellenization.' Cities such as Damascus and Antioch in Syria and Baghdad in Iraq, great Christian intellectual and educational centers, preserved their significance in the Islamic world (Smith 1995, 115-116).

The exchange between Christian and Islamic philosophy in places like Baghdad (in combination with the translation of Hellenistic and Persian texts to Arabic) significantly affected the formation of 'the new world of Islam' (Griffith 2008, 106; 127). Nevertheless, this knowledge was gradually given an Islamic character (Rahman 2011, 452). It is impossible for one to "measure" the weight and the depth of the Islamization of knowledge. Nonetheless, it is equally true that one could trace some 'thematic continuities', as Griffith (2008, 18-19) calls them, between Christian thinkers of earlier times and Muslim scholars of the early Islamic period.

The pre-Islamic traditional lines of philosophizing and theologizing, which Islam found upon its arrival in Syria and Iraq, took on their own Islamic character along the way of developing the Islamic *kalam*, 'a reasoned discourse on important themes in the religious

world view'; in other words, a type of doing theology dialectically and apologetically (Cook 1980, 41-42; Griffith 2008, 19). This is the reason why they should be seen rather as exercises parallel to those of the Christian tradition, both of which aimed at 'wrestling with the same conceptual problems, within the same or comparable scriptural horizons, with which earlier traditions had wrestled' (Griffith 2008, 19).

As Griffith supports, *kalam* was produced in a context of interaction with the Greek letters and the "People of the Book" (Griffith 2008, 40). Christian philosophy, having borrowed elements from the Greeks, had an impact on Islamic thought (Nadvi 2012, 213). Greek philosophical texts were translated into Arabic, because in their own multi-religious environment of the Caliphate the Muslims were facing theological challenges which had to be solved (Goitein 1963, 220-225). In regard to this, it is also important to underline the significance of the 9th century movement of translation of Greek texts into Arabic with the Syriac language as an intermediary (Brock 1977, 407; 1982, 23).

The importance of mapping the spatial journey of texts regarding their translation is not strictly limited to the text of the Bible itself; it is rather extended to the existence of ancient Greek philosophical works translated to Syriac. These texts influenced the growing Caliphate and the doctrinal formation of its religion. As Downey notes, the city of Antioch held a remarkable role in 'the transmission of the intellectual legacy of the Greeks to Islam' (Downey 1961, 578).

In that sense, Hellenic and Christian elements of thought were passed down to Islam through Syriac Christianity (Griffith 1995, 1; Haddad 1970, 13). Works written in Greek were translated from their original language to Syriac and then to Arabic, among which were those of Aristotle and Pseudo-Aristotle (from 5th to 9th century), Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry's *Introduction* (influential for the Christian thought and the shaping of Arabic

philosophy) as well as Christian theologian Pseudo-Dionysius (6th century in Syriac and 11th century in Arabic), who also employed Neoplatonic terminology (Brock 1997, 411-415; Mavroudi 2015, 50; Treiger 2007, 365; 367; Porphyry 2003, ix).

It is significant to observe for a moment what value a translation of Pseudo-Aristotle in Arabic has. By using the term "Pseudo-Aristotle" one refers to a corpus of works attributed -falsely- to Aristotle, the Greek philosopher. Among these works, the one with whom we are concerned is the so-called *Theology of Aristotle* about which it is equally false to say that Aristotle is its author (Adamson 2001, 211). Regardless of it, Pseudo-Aristotle has been translated from Greek to Syriac and then in Arabic, as it has already been mentioned in the previous paragraph. Additionally, reading the *Theology of Aristotle*, one can notice that parts of Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus' *Enneads* have been preserved in it (Kantorowicz 1942, 314). Therefore, its value as a work lies for us in the fact that it has transferred and maintained an important portion of Neoplatonic ideas in Arabic. Concludingly, there are translated works of Aristotle, Plotinus, Porphyry and Pseudo-Dionysius which preserve the Neoplatonic element in a sensibly present form regarding the philosophical orientation of the cultural milieu in question.

The Contribution of Plotinus' *Enneads*

Isaac the Syrian's theology has been influenced by Plotinus' Neoplatonic philosophy, as already mentioned. Neoplatonic philosophy emerged in the 3rd century AD with Plotinus being its founder (Brown 1989, 96; Hill and Randal 2006, 147; Sabo 2017, 494). Plotinus revered Plato and used his philosophy (Enn. V 1,8), while Porphyry, a pupil of Plotinus', has been characterized as a commentator of both Plato and Aristotle (Chase 2021, 159; Dillon 1992, 189; Plotinus 1969, 376; Strange 2007, 17). If this is the case, then it is proper for us to see a culmination of the ancient Greek

philosophy in Neoplatonism and make an attempt to trace those basic elements that have passed from the Greeks to the Christian ascetics of the East and, later on, to the Muslim Sufis.

The fundamental element that one can find in both Christian asceticism and Neoplatonism is the tendency to renounce the world. This is the start of both the philosopher's and the ascetic's journey. In Plotinus' *Enneads* one reads that 'life here, with the things of earth, is a sinking, a defeat, a failing of the wing' (Enn. VI 9,9). The soul must strip off everything that belongs to this world, in order to see the mysteries of the One and ascend to God (Mortley 1975, 365). The intellectual basis of such a tendency is supplied by dualisms such as beauty/ugliness, pure/impure, above/below and truth/illusion. In the center of these pairs lies the notion of the human soul. The nature of the human soul, according to Plotinus, is affiliated 'to the noblest Existents in the hierarchy of Being' (Enn. I 6,2). In the same passage, Plotinus explains that due its proximity to the superior reality, the soul, 'when it sees anything of that akin, or any trace of that kinship, thrills with an immediate delight.'

Can this gladness be compared to the beauty of the world? In Plotinus' words, 'is there any such likeness between the loveliness of this world and the splendours in the Supreme? (…) what is there in common between beauty here and beauty There? We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form' (Enn. I 6,2).[1] In order to be made beautiful, the soul (like all things) must receive grace from the One Principle by entering into a state of unison with the latter; however, if you let the soul go along with the Ugly, 'at once it shrinks within itself, denies the thing, turns away from it' (Enn. I 6,2).

What is ugliness? Plotinus replies that 'an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by pattern, that is, by Reason, the Matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal-Form. But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and coordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it

has rallied confusion into co-operation' (Enn. I 6,2). In short, there is a unity between the soul and the Principle that needs to be restored, so that the ground can be prepared for the former to return fully to its true and beautiful nature. The Neoplatonic philosopher informs us that 'the soul in its nature loves God and longs to be at one with Him in the noble love of a daughter for a noble father' (Enn. VI 9,9).

What kind of unity is this which needs to be attained between God and the soul? It is a unity that beautifies 'by communicating in the thought (Reason, *Logos*) that flows from the Divine' (Enn. I 6,2).[2] But how is such a communion possible? Plotinus supports that 'the Soul wrought to perfection (…) is steadfastly pure: it has turned away from matter' (Enn. I 8,4); otherwise, if it is attached to matter, it becomes foreign to its own nature and is thus associated with evil. In other words, attachment to matter ends up in the death of the soul (Enn. I 8,13). Although the human body is material and, in consequence, weak, it can still be 'inhabited by the World-Soul', complete and self-sufficing, 'while the governing soul is undeviatingly what its nature makes it wish to be, and (…) knows neither desire nor distress' (Enn. IV 8,2), acquiring thus discipline.

Therefore, on its way to Beauty the soul increasingly approaches the realm of Truth by purification and excellence. This happens through the cultivation of the soul's virtues. For Plotinus every virtue is purification (Enn. I 6,6). Virtues have a cleansing function for both body and soul and they guide the latter towards the return to its nature, away from the elements which are foreign to it. The Neoplatonic philosopher brings the example of gold by supporting that 'gold is degraded when it is mixed with earthly particles; if these be worked out, the gold is left and is beautiful, isolated from all that is foreign, gold with gold alone' (Enn. I 6,5). Likewise, the soul must be 'cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate converse with the body' (Enn. I 6,5). To achieve this, Plotinus suggests that 'the Soul must be trained – to the habit of remarking, first, all noble pursuits' among others (Enn. I 6,9).

The main pursuit is to break free from the sensible to the intelligible and, subsequently, realize the immaterial behind the material as the former being the source of the latter in the manner that light produces shadows (Enn. I 6,8). If this escape is not achieved, the soul is doomed to into remaining in the Lower World in the company of shadows (Enn. I 6,8). Hence the author of the *Enneads* invites us to 'flee then to the beloved Fatherland', the place from which we come and in which the Father is (Enn. I 6,8). One who desires to go there, needs no ship; on the contrary, the only necessary thing is to 'close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use' (Enn. I 6,8).

Consequently, the soul becomes a good and beautiful thing, that is, godlike, because 'from the Divine comes all the Beauty and all the Good in beings' (Enn. I 6,6). Plotinus prompts his readers to behave to the soul like the sculptor who modifies the statue until it has been made beautiful and acquired its final form (Enn. I 6,9). If the eye of the soul is not ready and well-prepared, then it will not be able to see that it is beautiful itself. In regard to this, Plotinus describes that 'to any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the Soul have vision of the First Beauty unless itself be beautiful' (Enn. I 6,9). This indicates the ascension to the Supreme which is 'to enter into likeness with it' (Enn. IV 7,10).

Seeing beauty within one's own self resembles the experience of drunkenness caused by wine -metaphorically speaking. Plotinus could not put it better:

> 'those drunken with this wine (…) cannot remain mere gazers: (…) all that one sees as a spectacle is still external; one must bring the vision within and see no longer in that mode of separation but as we know ourselves ; thus a man filled with a god (…) need no longer look outside for his vision of the divine

> being; it is but finding the strength to see divinity within' (Enn. V 8,10).

And in the following paragraph:

> 'Similarly any one, unable to see himself, but possessed by that God, has but to bring that divine-within before his consciousness and at once he sees an image of himself, himself lifted to a better beauty: (…) at once he forms a multiple unity with the God silently present; in the degree of his power and will, the two become one; should he turn back to the former duality, still he is pure and remains very near to the God; he has but to look again and the same presence is there. (…) The novice must hold himself constantly under some image of the Divine Being and seek in the light of a clear conception' (Enn. V 8,11).

In short, being united with God, the purified soul fulfills its state of likeness to Him (Arp 2004, 146; Peroli 1997, 120). And becoming illuminated, the soul acquires a vision of the One, which is a vision of light. We only need to underline that the light does not function us enabling the vision; this light is sight itself (Mortley 1975, 371). This process does not imply that the eye sees simply an external light by gazing at the things lit by it (Enn. V 5,7). On the contrary, it is an internal light, 'a light within itself [the eye]' which is 'unmingled, pure' (Enn. V 5,7). In the communion of God and man the latter 'hold the Light and the source of Light' (Enn. V 5,7). As Mortley (1975, 371) writes, 'Light is seen by light: light sees itself.' In this way, the purified soul attains likeness with the One (Enn. I 2,4-5).

These actions are pursued by those known as friends or lovers of God, a title and a feature which we will also see in Christian asceticism and Sufism. Plotinus informs us about how a lover of God is like (Enn. V 9,2). A God's lover strives in pain for the finding of beauty and love, but he is not interested in the love of matter; he tends toward the things of the soul instead, while the ultimate goal is the reaching of the Principle. Its mysteries, a divine gnosis, are revealed to man when in solitude (Enn. I 6,7). Thus, as a

lover of God, one must be patient enough and wait for the beauty he has loved, just like love is patiently waiting at the beloved's door (Enn. VI 5,10). The expectations of God's lovers are fulfilled when union has been achieved between each of them and the beloved to such an extent that, being in ecstasy, the soul is emptied, ready to receive God and 'has no further awareness of being in body and will herself no foreign name, not man, not living being, not being, not all' (Enn. VI 7,34).

Renunciation of the World & Seclusion

In the *Mystic Treatises,* to come closer to God rather means to take distance from the things of the world, for 'no one is able to come near to God save only he who is far from the world' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 1). One needs to be aware of what the term "world" means, if it is desirable to know how close to or far from it one is (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 12). Isaac (1923, 13) defines the world as 'love of riches; gathering of possessions; fatness of the body giving rise to the tendency towards carnal desire; love of honour which is the source of envy; exercising government; pride and haughtiness of magistracy; folly; glory among men'; in short, 'bodily behaviour and carnal thoughts.'

Accordingly, the separation from the world is not simply of a physical nature, but also of a mental one. Subsequently, the 7th century theologian defines the act of renouncing the world not merely as a 'departure from the body, but from the bodily things' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 1). And even more, not just from the bodily things, but from the desire of longing after them (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 291-292). Why is such a thing necessary? Isaac (1923, 222) replies that sin is generated and brings death to man, if the above properties (which are known to the saint under the umbrella term "world") take control and alienate the human being from God.

Emptying one's self from the recollections, which are related to the world, is a practice that keeps the Christian hermit away from being distracted during his efforts to think of God.[3] The solitary wants to become completely emptied from the concerns and dealings which belong to the world (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 20; 164). The foundation of his thought is that 'solution from matter precedes the bonds in God' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 5).[4] In a few words, renunciation of the world means to focus entirely on God, while the soul is in communion with Him (Lossky 1976, 200).

The monk wants to 'become dead to the world' for the sake of Christ (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 52). The quintessence of this can be summarized in Christ's words that 'whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?' (Matt. 16:25-26). On the contrary, the hermit finds delight in the vision of the world to be, while his riches are in his own heart (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 57). 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matt. 6:21). Consequently, it can be stated that a life full of bodily things and intercourse with the world is not valued in the same way that intercourse with Christ is. More accurately, death is valued more than a life of intercourse with the world. Being dead to the world is a matter of freedom and eternal life, since it means to be 'free while alive, and alive while dead' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 223).

In this way, Isaac (1923, 102) expresses the task of the monk which is 'to become liberated from sensible things and to be constantly with God in the thoughts of the heart and through fatiguing the body by prayer.' Great is the example regarding solitude that Isaac gives in the form of a dialogue between a disciple and a teacher. The disciple wants to learn if it is possible for the soul to be purified while maintaining relationships with the so-called 'outward world' and the teacher replies with the following questions: 'If a tree is watered every day, when will its roots become dried up? (...) If purity be nothing else than to forget the dealings belonging to non-

freedom (...), when shall he [man] be purified from them? (...) When the heart is defiled every day, when can it be purified from filth?' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 164). The rhetorical questions of the teacher are the basis of the belief which holds solitude as a guide towards peace, thinking constantly about God and getting drunk on ecstasy through reflecting on the future things and the post-resurrection life (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 171).

Solitude becomes 'the beginning of the purification of the soul' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 164). Loving the state of solitude means 'a constant expectation of death' in a sense that one is ready even to 'die for the sake of God' as well as 'live in God' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 310). This definition describes the anchorite's ideal of total dedication to God. Thus, the hermit comes through solitude one step closer to the union of his mind and heart with God (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 310-311).

Solitude 'mortifies the outward senses and quickens the inward impulses,' while 'intercourse (...) works in the inverse way' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 166). However, the solitary has an impact on the world and his life has to be therefore exemplary. Precisely, the recluse is a channel of God's glory, that is, positive properties which spread around him like sun rays and he affects others to follow his example of worldly withdrawal (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 80-81). To mention some of the hermit's 'manifest beauties', as Isaac (1923, 81) names them, one has to first take into consideration that 'the pride of Christ's church consists in the behaviour of the solitaries.' This behaviour includes elements such as humbleness, silence, fasting, simplicity, self-discipline, sparingness of speech, prayer, humility, constant weeping and, in general, chastity and freedom from greed (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 81).

Moreover, 'he who desires great things, has no intercourse with mean ones' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 24).[5] In general, it is clear that the recluse should not be distracted by being associated with others (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 205). Such thing neither takes place

because of hatred towards other men nor expresses a contradiction between love for the humankind and seclusion; on the contrary, the entire message can be summed up in Isaac's phrase 'Love all men. And be far from all men.' It would be illogical for a Christian monk to preach hatred against the humankind, when one reads in the Bible that 'whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love' (1 John 4:8). However, perfect love for the humankind is gained when one 'is clad with God', not when one 'is clad with the world or with love of his life' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 343). Afterall, one cannot love God and the world at the same time (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 278). This is the reason why one has to avoid whatever prevents him from attaining perfect love.

Love and other fruits of the recluse are reaped because of his being in solitude (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 206). The harvest is fulfilled when the anchorite reaches the grave, as Isaac (1923, 291) informs us. The fruits, which are gathered, are the result of the monk's ascesis and lead to Jesus Christ, who is metaphorically characterized as the most precious pearl, while the monk resembles the diver who searches for the pearl inside the sea; after the pearl is found, the diver asks for no more (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 218). Hence Isaac (1923, 218) indicates that 'a pearl is preserved in a treasury; the solitary's delight is in solitude.' In short, love of intercourse with Christ equals solitude (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 309).

In *al-Risala,* it is written that 'there is one thing over which the Kufans, the Medinise, *the Iraqis and the Syrians* have no disagreement: *renunciation of this world,* generosity of the soul, and giving good advice to people' (al-Qushayri 2007, 137).[6] In their own turn, the Sufis are known as friends of God from one specific characteristic: they are close to God, because they have accomplished their liberation from the things of the world (al-Qushayri 2007, 95; 291). This type of emancipation presupposes a renunciation of the world, which again practically means to extinguish the desire for the world (al-Qushayri 2007, 90). For the

Sufi, such a practice aims at being focused completely on God, as it also happens in the case of Christian asceticism. In particular, al-Qushayri states that 'the world is like an unveiled bride', which the Sufi ignores, since 'he is preoccupied with God alone and pays no attention to her' (al-Qushayri 2007, 137). In other words, the Sufi's decision finds its fulfilment in 'abandoning that which distracts God's servant from God Most High' (al-Qushayri 2007, 137).

Additionally, the world is considered as the place in which one acts sinfully (al-Qushayri 2007, 116). The only good thing about this world is that 'it prepares you for the next one' (al-Qushayri 2007, 383). The quranic root of cutting off the bonds which tie someone to the world can be traced in the idea that 'you neither grieve over what you have missed nor boast over what He has granted for you' (al-Qushayri 2007, 135; Q. 57:23). The reason for this is that the Sufi does not find pleasure in anything that belongs to the world (al-Qushayri 2007, 135). On the contrary, total renunciation can be defined as giving 'up this world, then not care about whoever picks it up' (al-Qushayri 2007, 135). It is a state which, according to the 9th century Iranian Sufi Ibn Khafif, has two levels, an immaterial and a material: one has to keep the 'heart oblivious of secondary means' and, at the same time, the 'hands free from any worldly possessions' (al-Qushayri 2007, 135).

In this sense, poverty is reasonably considered as 'the hallmark of the friends of God (*awliya'*), a decoration of the pure (*asfiya'*), and the special feature with which God -praise be to Him- distinguishes His elect ones from among the righteous and the prophets' (al-Qushayri 2007, 281). Poverty and simplicity of life are thus connected to the notion of renouncing the world, since it is also said that 'renunciation is to keep trust in God Most High and to love poverty' (al-Qushayri 2007, 136). Indeed so great is the Sufi's forbearance, faith and trust in God that al-Qushayri exemplarily mentions the phrase 'My Lord knows better about the well-being of His servants' (al-Qushayri 2007, 383).

The practice of going away from the world and renouncing everything related to it is of paramount significance. The world is identified with transience, while only God is eternal. As it is written in the Quran, 'this worldly life is no more than play and amusement, but far better is the eternal Home of the Hereafter for those mindful of Allah' (Q. 6:32). It is also mentioned that 'the enjoyment of this world is so little, whereas the Hereafter is far better for those mindful of Allah' (Q.4:77). In this dualistic scheme of the worldly "here" and the godly Hereafter the Sufi opts for the latter, which points to the eschaton, the eternal. This is the ultimate expression of man's love towards God. Afterall, this is why the Sufi can be characterized as a person who exists with God in a relationship of love; because, according to al-Qushayri, 'God (...) withdraws this world from His friends and (...) He removes it from the hearts of those He loves, for He would not be pleased with them enjoying it' (al-Qushayri 2007, 135).

It seems like solitude also possesses a vital role in the Sufi tradition, as described by al-Qushayri. Namely, it is written that 'seclusion is a sign of the people of union with God' (al-Qushayri 2007, 122). It is also stated that 'when God wants to take His servant from the ignominy of disobedience to the glory of obedience, He graces him with the intimacy of solitude, enriches him with contentment, and allows him to see his faults' (al-Qushayri 2007, 125). This implies again a combinational purificatory process with elements such as self-knowledge and repentance.

To reach there, in the desired state of solitude, one needs a humble heart. Arrogance has no place in solitude. It is then clear that 'when a man chooses seclusion he must be sure that he practices it in order to protect other people from his evil, not in order to be safe from their evil. The former comes from his thinking little of himself, while the latter comes from seeing himself to be better than others' (al-Qushayri 2007, 122). It is remarkable that, in order to support his view, al-Qushayri uses the example of a Christian monk. The story goes thus: 'Someone saw a monk and asked him: "You are a

monk, aren't you?" He answered: "No, I am guarding a dog. My soul is a dog that bites people. I therefore have removed it from them, so that they be safe from it' (al-Qushayri 2007, 122).

With regard to the "where" of asceticism, it is relevant here to clarify that it is not enough for one to have a certain type of clothing or to live at a certain place, in order to be considered a solitary, because the aim of the solitary is 'to turn bad qualities into good ones, not to withdraw from familiar places into the desert' (al-Qushayri 2007, 123). The Sufi's solitude is basically to be mentally isolated from men, in order to think only of God, even if one is surrounded by them (al-Qushayri 2007, 123-124). In this sense, the Sufi is said to be 'one who is here and not here' (al-Qushayri 2007, 123). It is the case of one who is absent from the world and his creatures, but wholeheartedly present with God (al-Qushayri 2007, 92). This can also be summarized in al-Daqqaq's phrase 'wear with people what they wear and eat what they eat, but separate yourself from them in your heart of hearts' (al-Qushayri 2007, 123).

The continual remembrance of God is what gives meaning to the ascetic and filters his practices. Uthman al-Maghribi refers to this by indicating that 'whoever chooses retreat over the company of men must be free from all recollections except the recollection of his Lord; (...) if he does not meet this condition, his retreat will plunge him into temptation or calamity' (al-Qushayri 2007, 123). The culmination of this is to be eventually separated from one's own self (al-Qushayri 2007, 123).[7] Al-Qushayri (2007, 125) clarifies this by pointing out that one of the targets of the solitary is to be 'able to seclude yourself from your own self.' Likewise, one renounces the world, when the renunciation of the self takes place (al-Qushayri 2007, 136). Even the self is, concludingly, a veil which hinders someone from seeing the Truth; that is why it has to be annihilated in solitude, since 'solitude is the companion of the truthful' (al-Qushayri 2007, 124).

Prayer & Union in the *Mystic Treatises*

To sum up, from the renunciation of the world comes the Christian ascetic's solitude; solitude leads to intercourse with God through prayer; finally, prayer ends up to the love of God (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 295). As the saint states, 'every one who loves God, loves a solitary life' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 299). It can be then indicated that 'constant intercourse (...) with God is psychic meditation and offerings in *prayer*' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 50).[8] On the contrary, a person who pursues honour, is enslaved to this world (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 298).

Thus, the role of unceasing prayer in the *Mystic Treatises* is remarkable. In general, prayer is the compass of the monk, which helps him in his orientation throughout his course (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 218). Prayer can happen under a variety of forms. Namely, it can express thanksgiving, request or praise (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 113). Following the theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Isaac (1923, 114) adds that prayer can sometimes take the form of good actions as well. The hermit bases his ascetical theology regarding continuous prayer on passages from the Scriptures that insist on praying constantly (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 337; Luke 18:1; 21:6; Matt. 7:7). It is interesting for one to see especially how the biblical verse 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation' (Matt. 26:41) is used.

Temptations strengthen the friends of God, the saints, who pray to defend themselves against the devil and acquire subsequently an increasing freedom of speech in their intercourse with God when asking for His help (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 286). This can be summarized in Isaac's (1923, 287) phrase that

'temptation is useful to every man. The virtuous are tempted in order that their riches may increase; (...) There is no one, to whom the time of exercise is not hard; (...) but without this, a sound constitution cannot be obtained.'

Somewhere else the same saint writes that 'there is no champion who suffers not blows (...) even if he gains victory in the end' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 378). Likewise, the ascetic is an athlete of God. In other words, temptation is part of one's own life-long training: being tempted is useful, but falling into temptation must be avoided (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 25).

Prayer is important to such an extent that makes the heart of the praying ones draw near God (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 50). Turning to God in constant prayer means to return to Him as it can be understood from the Book of Zechariah, where one reads that God says 'return to me (...) and I will return to you' (Zech. 1:3). In accordance with this, prayer in Isaac's *Mystic Treatises* takes the form of God's remembrance; specifically, when one is encouraged to 'remember the Lord at all times, then He will remember thee' in times of struggle and distress (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 48). 'When the body is weak by fasting and mortification', for instance, 'the soul is spiritually strong through prayer' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 179). This is the reason why prayer is characterized as

'the port of help, the fountain of salvation, the treasure of confidence, the sheet-anchor amidst the storms, the light in the darkness, the stick of the weak, the shelter at the time of temptations, the medicine at the time of illness, the shield of protection in the battle, the sharp arrow against the enemies' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 71).

The purpose is that the soul returns to its initial undefiled state. Isaac (1923, 16) calls this state "natural order"; precisely, he writes that 'when the soul is in its natural order, it is found above; When it has abandoned its nature, it is found beneath and on the earth.'[9] Intercourse with God means, therefore, that the purified soul of the solitary is flowing towards the source of purity, since 'all things are accustomed to move towards that which is akin to them' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 4-5). God is thus discovered within man (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 36).

It is also through prayer that man denies the world as well as his own self and draws near God, the Truth, meets Him personally and enters in a relationship of love with Him (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 319; Lossky 1976, 207). The causes of this love are strongly founded on praying (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 294). Finally, when the mind has reached what the 7th century recluse names 'blessed state' and the concentration of man is on God, then prayer stops, because 'the mind is absorbed in ecstasy and the desired object of prayer is forgotten. The impulses are drowned in a heavy drunkenness and man is no longer in this world' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 116-117).[10] This, the experience of 'the light of the holy Trinity through ecstasy', is the aim of the praying monk: a state in which prayer exists no more (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 118).

As Isaac the Syrian writes, this is the 'fruit of pure prayer' in the sense of the mind being ascended to a state higher than prayer; 'and, having found what is more excellent, it desists from prayer. And further there is no longer prayer, but the gaze in ecstasy' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 118). Quoting Evagrius Ponticus, Isaac (1923, 118) ends up declaring that 'blessed is he who has reached, during prayer, unconsciousness which is not to be surpassed.'[11] In other words, 'the motions of the tongue and the heart during prayer, are keys. What comes after them is the entering into the treasury' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 112). Under these circumstances, man experiences a kind of drunkenness, which makes him forget about this world (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 117). He thinks only of God and this is how Isaac (1923, 237) describes the incarnation of God, since 'He dwells in us by our constant recollection of Him.'

The state in question leads to the unity of man with God. It takes place in an atmosphere of ecstasy and silence, since unification with the incomprehensible cannot be put into words (2 Cor. 12:2-4; Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 115; 211; 349; Lossky 1976, 208). Silence is a sign that manifests man's love for the Truth and leads him to his unification with God (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 299). This is the reason why the saint advises his reader to 'love silence above all

things. It brings thee near the fruit which the tongue is too weak to interpret' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 302). However, for the time being one can only get a foretaste of this experience of union and deification (*theosis)*. According to Lossky (1976, 196), deification 'will be realized in its fullness only in the age to come, after the resurrection of the dead.' For this Isaac (1923, 315) writes that 'silence is a symbol of the future world' connecting in this way the present world's silence to an anticipated *eschaton*. In other words, what the monk experiences as illumination in his current life belongs to the total of an expected reality. In regard to illumination, the author of the *Mystic Treatises* writes that

'we possess two psychic eyes (…) but both have not the same purpose as to sight. With one we see the hidden glory of God which is concealed in the things of nature, His power and His wisdom, and His eternal care for us (…). With the other we see the glory of His holy nature' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 210).

Consequently, illumination by the divine light implies the receiving of it by a certain faculty (or eye) of the human soul with a special receptive function. Along with the illumination the acquisition of some immediate *gnosis* takes place, which has nothing to do with common worldly knowledge. This *gnosis* is the revelation that man receives from God regarding the ineffable glory of the new world or, in simple words, how creation will look like after the Final Judgement is over (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 262). Specifically, Isaac (1923, 127) says that those who are enlightened are

> 'called the Initiated, not because they see spiritually by the intermediary of the various apperceptible symbols, or because from spiritual writings they have acquired understanding concerning the Essence; but because they are full of the exalted light of the whole of immaterial knowledge and have been saturated with the essential contemplation of the threefold rays of the beauty that creates all beauties, so far as it has been permitted to them. And because they have been deemed worthy of communion with Jesus (…) because they are in truth near to

> Him, stamped by Him with the mark of the primary acceptance of the knowledge of His divine illuminated. By the godhead they are filled with essential knowledge, as it is among the angels, and with primary insight into the godhead.'[12]

By becoming receptor of *gnosis* and envisioning what is about to come in the anticipated end of time, those initiated are filled with hope

'which excites the natural longing in the soul and gives them this cup to drink and makes them drunk. And from this moment they nevermore perceive fatigue but become apathetic against troubles. And during the whole of their course (…) the crooked becomes to them straight (…), because they always see the bosom of their Father; and all those things which are far and invisible it makes to them clear in themselves, so that they gaze at them mysteriously with the hidden eye of faith. For all the parts of the soul become hot as by fire, on account of the expectation of those things which, though far, become as near' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 344).

Finally, in this state man feels love, which cannot be separated from knowledge (Lossky 1976, 215). Isaac (1923, 379) is pretty clear when he writes that 'without love of the fellow-man, the mind is not able to become illuminated by intercourse with and love unto God.' Mercy is the beginning of love and 'the holy beauty is formed by that element within thee, which resembles mercy' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 6). Isaac (1923, 343) supports then that

'so all the saints have reached this accomplishment when they became perfect, so that they resemble God in effusion of love and compassion for mankind. And they asked for themselves as a token of their resembling God, that they should be perfect in the love of their fellows. So did also the solitary Fathers, that they might bear in themselves constantly this likeness full of the life of Christ, the Lord of the Universe.'

Additionally, 'when we have reached love', the same author indicates, 'we have reached God and our way is ended' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 212). The heart becomes the home of God's glory (Griswold 1999, 5). The result is that the image of the Father in heaven is seen in the initiated (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 330). This sight presupposes purification. Otherwise, 'if the apple of thy soul's eye has not been purified, do not venture to look at the sun', as Isaac (1923, 350) underlines.[13] Nevertheless, in the state described man has reached the promised land, the state of perfection, being given the opportunity 'to find truth eye to eye in so far as nature is capable of this' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 83).

The initiated becomes like a mirror 'in which we behold the true Prototype, in those things which naturally belong to that Essence', as Isaac (1923, 305) observes. Great to such an extent is God's love and mercy that even the person in whom the image of the Father is seen has mercy not only for men, but also for 'the whole creation, man, fowls and beasts, demons and whatever exists' (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 341). Therefore, the spiritually unifying love for God implies also love for all creatures (Isaac of Nineveh 1923, 6).

Prayer & Union in *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*

On the other hand, everything we have written so far regarding *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya* can be summed up in the phrase 'Let your true companion be solitude, your food be hunger, your speech be intimate prayers. Then and only then, will you join God after you die' (al-Qushayri 2007, 123-124). We have already spoken of solitude and hunger as well as other Sufi phenomena and practices, according to what one reads from al-Qushayri. Nevertheless, we have not talked about prayer.

In the Quran, one finds written the commands 'Call upon your Lord humbly and secretly' (Q. 7:55). In support of this, it is also said that 'prosperous are the believers who in their prayers are humble' (al-

Qushayri 2007, 161). What does it mean to be humble? Obviously, to have humility. And what is humility? According to al-Qushayri (2007, 161), 'humility is when the heart stands before God -praise be to Him- with total concentration.' Thus, the praying ones need to be humble through being focused on God, that is, having consciousness of what they themselves are doing in the time of prayer, remembering God and having Him as the only preoccupation. This is why one needs to consider prayer as related to the remembrance of God.

Consequently, a fundamental condition of prayer is 'the continual attentiveness of the heart so that it shall not be neglectful' (al-Qushayri 2007, 276). For God does 'not answer the prayer of a servant whose heart is preoccupied with someone other than' Him (al-Qushayri 2007, 277). According to the Quran, the believers are invited to 'always remember Allah often' (Q. 33:41). Why? Because God says 'remember Me; I will remember you. And thank Me, and never be ungrateful' (Q. 2:152). This means that God does not forget those who pray to Him, remember Him and thank Him. However, prayer is included in the acts of worship (al-Qushayri 2007, 274). As such, it can take place only 'during appointed times', while remembrance 'in all states and conditions' (al-Qushayri 2007, 234).

Through prayer a living and immediate relationship with God is established. Specifically, it is stated that 'prayer is an exchange of messages' in which everything works fine -as long as man remains in communion with God (al-Qushayri 2007, 279). Prayer is a wide term which corresponds to specific categories of persons. In that sense, one can find three different types of prayer corresponding to three different levels or categories of believers: 'the prayer of the ordinary people is their words; the prayer of ascetics (*zuhhad*) is their deeds; and the prayer of divine gnostics (*'arifun*) is their spiritual states' (al-Qushayri 2007, 278-279).[14] Regardless of the way prayer is defined in each of the three cases above, al-Qushayri (2007, 279) informs his reader that prayer functions as 'the ladder

of the sinful' as well as 'the tongue of passionate longing for the Beloved.'[15] It is a means through which the Sufi's praise of God generates love for Him, giving thus hope and making the time and process of longing worth it (al-Qushayri 2007, 326, 328).[16]

As for Isaac the Syrian and the tradition he represents, so for al-Qushayri and his work in question prayer has a time when it ceases to exist. Otherwise, the author of *al-Risala* would not write that 'the tongues of the beginners on the Sufi path are overflowing with supplicatory prayers, whereas the tongues of those who have attained true realities (*mutahaqqiqun*) are devoid of them' (al-Qushayri 2007, 279). In other words, it is indicated here that the Sufi starts his journey towards God with prayer, but when the time comes for him to experience his ecstatic union with God, then he automatically enters a new state which is beyond prayer.

Al-Qushayri (2007, 75, 78, 105) speaks of mystical moment (*waqt*), mystical state (*hal*) and breath (*nafas*). All three are connected to the revelation of the divine mysteries to man, but they are put in some hierarchical order. For instance, it is written that breaths, 'the perfuming of hearts by the subtle entities emanating from the Unseen', are the Sufi's goal, while the other two are lesser experiences (al-Qushayri 2007, 105-106). As a result, the mystical moment is viewed as the beginner's stage and mystical states are intermediate (al-Qushayri 2007, 106).

To begin with, the moment is defined as 'an expected event whose occurrence depends on a real event' (al-Qushayri 2007, 75). To explain further this definition, al-Qushayri (2007, 75) gives the following example: 'When you say: "I shall come at the beginning of the month", [your act of] coming is expected, whereas the beginning of the month is real.' Nevertheless, when it is said that 'the Sufi is the son of his moment', it is meant that the Sufi has no future to be afraid of; he is engaged with worshiping God in the moment in which he currently is and nothing can make him worried

'while basking in the light of satisfaction (*rida*)' (al-Qushayri 2007, 76; 273).

The general rule is that one has to flow with the moment, since resisting to it is unavoidable; in this sense, the fulfillment of God's will can also be indicated (al-Qushayri 2007, 76-77). Therefore, when the time comes for one to be annihilated in God, 'he comes under the command of the True Reality', that is, 'he becomes witness to God's sublime mysteries that are hidden from the common believers' (al-Qushayri 2007, 77). What follows then is the mystical state. As ecstasy, so the mystical state is said to descend upon the heart of the Sufi regardless of his own efforts or desire to acquire it; as such, states are divine gifts (al-Qushayri 2007, 78; 84).[17] Each state succeeds another, while the previous one is considered as a veil for the next (al-Qushayri 2007, 79). They are also described as flashes of light or flashes of lightning due to their instant appearance (al-Qushayri 2007, 78-79).[18] In regard to this, the following lines can be recited:

> 'Flashes of light that shine, when they appear,
> Reveal the secret and announce the unification
> [with the Divine]' (al-Qushayri 2007, 79).[19]

It is all part of coming closer to God and becoming a friend of His, a saint. Al-Qushayri (2007, 272-273) gives al-Kharraz's description of the process of becoming a friend of God's:

'When God Most High decides to make someone His friend, He opens for him the door of the recollection [of His name]. When he has tasted the sweetness of recollection, He opens for him the door of proximity [to Him]. He then elevates him to intimate conversations [with Him] and seats him on the throne of [divine] unity. After that, He raises the veils [that have separated him from God] and allows him to enter the abode of unicity (*fardaniyya*) by revealing to him the divine glory and magnificence. When his eyes have fallen on the [divine] glory and magnificence, his 'I'

disappears completely and he becomes a non-existent entity deprived of any power. He then falls under God's exalted protection, free from any pretensions to selfhood.'

In the aforementioned passage, therefore, one can realize the connection of self-annihilation in God, union with Him and revelation of divine mysteries. Many things have been noted by al-Qushayri in accordance with self-annihilation in the context of unification with God. For instance, it is written that 'the finding of the True Reality [God] can happen only after one's human nature is completely extinguished, for there is no place for it in the presence of the Master of Reality' (al-Qushayri 2007, 84). Another example is al-Shibli, a 9th century Iraqi Sufi, who stated that 'when I am with Him, I am. However, I am erased in Him!' (al-Qushayri 2007, 96). Or again, from the same era, al-Junayd who is presented declaring that 'God's existence appears when you lose yours' (al-Qushayri 2007, 98). This points to the teaching that God erases from the heart of the Sufi 'any thought of other than Himself', something which is apparently related to the remembrance of God (al-Qushayri 2007, 96). To be annihilated from God's creatures and from one's self is to subsist in God, to think only of Him and perceive Him as the primary cause of everything behind the veils of His creation (al-Qushayri 2007, 90-91).

The more distance one takes from one's own self, the more space is made inside man for God. According to al-Qushayri (2007, 320), 'when he becomes a stranger to all other creatures (…) he enters into an uninterrupted intimate conversation with God Most High (…). It is then that he is called a 'gnostic' and his state is called 'gnosis'.' As in Christian asceticism, so in Sufism this *gnosis* is not common worldly knowledge *('ilm*). The object of gnosis (*ma'ruf*), al-Qushayri informs us, erases the personal traits of man and the contemplation of God consumes him (al-Qushayri 2007, 321). Al-Wasiti observes that in this state man also falls silent (al-Qushayri 2007, 321). Al-Qushayri (2007, 139) adds that

‘sometimes silence is caused by the bewilderment of an insight, for when some idea is suddenly unveiled [to you], words fall silent and you can neither explain nor articulate [what you have realized]. In such a state, all evidence is obliterated and there’s neither knowledge nor sensation.’

It is also said that ‘the wise have acquired their wisdom by silence and contemplation’ (al-Qushayri 2007, 140). In short, silence is closely connected to contemplation, that is, insight, ‘a phenomenon that descends into the heart and expels everything there that opposes it’ (al-Qushayri 2007, 242). Moreover, the author of *al-Risala* defines insights as

‘flashes of light that illuminate the heart; they are a firmly established knowledge that carries the hearts of men into the realms of the Unseen, from one realm to the other until they begin to see things in such a way as God (…)’ (al-Qushayri 2007, 242).

Subsequently, those who see with the light of insight, see with the light of God (al-Qushayri 2007, 242). In this way man gets illuminated and acquires proximity to God. Such an experience can be summed up in the metaphorical use of terms, such as wine, drunkenness and cup. According to al-Qushayri (2007, 95), ‘the cups of closeness [to God] appear from the Unseen and are bestowed only upon those whose hearts are emancipated and whose spirits are free from attachment to the things [of this world].’ The cup is a powerful expression for the Sufi’s ecstatic experience of love and unity with God. As such, it is identified with the ecstatic state of the man, who tastes the beauty of God and becomes intoxicated (al-Qushayri 2007, 93). For this the Sufis recite the following verses among others:

‘Neither the cup bearer nor the drunkard get tired of the wine of

Contemplation, each cup of which makes your heart drunk’ (al-Qushayri 2007, 94).

And again:

> 'The cup of wine is like the mother's milk to us
>
> If we cannot taste is, we cannot survive' (al-Qushayri 2007, 95).
>
> Finally,
>
> 'I am surprised when someone says: "I have remembered God."
>
> How can I forget, so that I have to remember what I have forgotten?
>
> I have drunk love one cup after another

But although wine does not run out, I cannot quench my thirst for it' (al-Qushayri 2007, 95).

Drunkenness and love go hand-in-hand, as we see in these last verses. It is the cup of love from which the Sufi drinks and due to which his heart rejoices. But what does love mean for the Sufi? Al-Qushayri (2007, 333-334) describes a situation in which Sufi masters were discussing what love is; at the end they asked al-Junayd, who was the youngest among them. He replied:

'When the servant of God forgets about himself, becomes united with the recollection of his Lord, renders what is due to Him, and watches Him with his heart, [then] the lights of His essence incinerate his heart, his drinking from the cup of affection becomes pure, and the Mighty One unveils the curtains of His mystery before him. [After that] if he talks, he talks through God; if he utters [a word], it is from God; if he moves, he moves by God's command; if he rests, he rests with God; he is thus, through God, for God and with God.'

Whoever is loved by God, God becomes his tongue as well as 'his hearing, his sight, his hand, and his support' (Ali 2022, 69; al-Qushayri 2007, 326). Man and God get united in one and the former starts seeing through the eyes of the latter (al-Qushayri 2007, 88). Their unification is founded on the ground of their loving relationship, where the differences between lover and beloved are

rejected (al-Qushayri 2007, 334). There is no space in one's heart to love anything else but the beloved (al-Qushayri 2007, 330). Man chooses to love God and God chooses, in His turn, the man who loves Him (al-Qushayri 2007, 291). It is, in particular, written that 'whoever loves to meet God, God, too, will love to meet Him' (al-Qushayri 2007, 325). In this sense, not only man has been given the gift of insight by and union with God, but also God has acquired a new friend through whom He makes His presence sensible in the world and His divine secrets communicable (al-Qushayri 2007, 244).

Keeping these in mind, it can be logically assumed that the role of the friends of God is urgent for the world, since 'one may not be able to gaze directly into the divine light of the sun (…) but can look at its revealed reflection in the moon,' as Heck (2006, 278) observes. The Sufi saint becomes a channel of God's grace on earth and hence a mediator between man and God (Nicholson 1921, 78). His being united with God means his return to his initial state in that 'he becomes what he was before he was', namely, before humankind broke its primordial covenant with God (al-Qushayri 2007, 309).

It is from this perspective that by looking behind the veil of creation, man sees the Creator. After the revelation of the divine mysteries, *gnosis* becomes for the Sufi a mirror, in which he sees God's face, whenever he looks into it (al-Qushayri 2007, 322). This means that man is perfected and united with God, while he reflects Him in the same way that a polished mirror reflects the light of the sun -the polished mirror being a metaphor for the heart, which has been purified through *gnosis* (Ali 2022, 141). In few words, man becomes a theophany, achieving the fulfilment of his being created in the form of God: painting and Painter have become one (Ali 2022, 140-141; Fadiman and Frager 210).

Conclusion

If there is something which is pointed out by the total of the aforementioned chapters, this is the difficulty to draw specific conclusions regarding the influence and the contribution of Isaac the Syrian on the shaping of early Sufism. This might disappoint the reader or even the researcher who begins reading the work at hand or gets occupied with mapping the environment in which Sufism was brought to life. However, this difficulty exists from the very first page of our endeavor and hence no one should feel surprised. Claiming that the ascetical theology of Isaac and his Church has an impact on the development of Sufism cannot be discussed elsewhere, but only on the level of making assumptions.

Isaac the Syrian's *Mystic Treatises* is a work which belongs to a wider chain of teachings that draws from an ancient Christian monastic tradition. He represents, in other words, not a theology of his own, but a theology of the Church, which is the Body of Christ (Col. 1:24). His ascetical theology does not merely describe a private experience, but a collective one. From an ecclesiological perspective this is important, because it shows that Isaac's theology is able to represent the Church in its entirety. As apostle Paul instructs the church of Corinth, 'be perfectly united in body and mind', because Christ cannot be divided (1 Cor. 1:10-13). Therefore, what is depicted in Isaac's theology is a Christ-centered spirituality which the members of the Church have in common.

The apt proof for the aforementioned claim is that Isaac's thought is greatly influenced by Christian theologians who existed before him -who were in their own turn influenced by others before them. As it has also been described above, the geographical and cultural areas with which Isaac the Syrian is related were integrated into the Caliphate after the Arab conquests. Since these conquests also had an Islamic character, it can be well claimed that the Arab Muslims came into contact with the Christians of the Near and Middle East - not to mention the already existing ethnically akin elements in both

Christian and Muslim sides, which actually made the encounter of the two faiths easier. Therefore, it is possible that this contact influenced the Muslim side so that a type of Islamic asceticism was developed.

Having said that, one can now ask the question: if this is the case, is Sufism an Islamic expression of theological authenticity or a product of cultural exchange? The answer is that Sufism is both -but this would be the answer even for Christian asceticism. On the one hand, there are the interactions of Sufism with Christian monasticism (as al-Qushayri mentions in *al-Risala*). On the other hand, there is the potentiality for a practice to acquire theological authenticity, when it is transferred into a different theological context, since the relationship between the practice itself and its own new meaningful ambience is an authentic one. In other words, ascetical practices do not exist in a vacuum, but they receive their meanings from the contexts in which they are established.

In conclusion, what has been considered as a common cultural denominator and a bond between eastern Christian monastic practices and Sufism is Neoplatonism with a special focus on Plotinus' *Enneads*. Neoplatonism has been part of the cultural milieu(s) in which Christian monasticism and Sufism were developed, while it is also probable that elements of the Plotinian philosophy passed down to the Muslims through the translation of the *Enneads* in Arabic. This possibility of influence is reflected on the fact that Christian and Islamic asceticism present similarities in their reasons and ways of renouncing the world, practicing prayer and expressing union with God.

Solitude and renunciation of the world help the ascetic make space in his heart, so that he can devote himself to the preoccupation with and the recollection of God. This demands a distraction-free ambience, which can be found away from people and in the loneliness of the solitary's cell, in the desert, on the mountain or in the forest. Accordingly, the Sufi's desire for seclusion is his

affirmative answer to his drawing near to God through the remembrance of Him. Thinking constantly of God is an important step, in order for one to envision the friendship in which he is with Him as well as to receive hope by meditating on the future things, which are eternal and transcend the temporal nature of this world.

Finally, prayer is the culmination of both systems, since the state above prayer, where prayer ceases to exist, is one of perfection and the desired destination of the ascetic's journey. This means that prayer is a step before unification with God. The soul becomes powerful through prayer in times of distress, receives compassion and establishes a relationship of love between man and God. What is mainly important for the purpose of the present research is the common terms and symbols that both Christian monks and Sufis use, in order to outline such an experience. In particular, as we have seen in Isaac the Syrian's and al-Qushayri's works, it is usual to talk of union with God in terms of ecstasy, drunkenness, light, *gnosis* and love. Hence, a scenario can be shown of how interaction might have taken place between east Christian asceticism and Sufism on the ground of a common geographical space, where cultural exchange has occurred.

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Endnotes

[1] This mysterious “There” is the abode of light and beauty (Enn. V 8,10).
[2] My italics.
[3] As we shall realize later, the renunciation of the world is closely connected to the monk’s preoccupation with God and prayer. As Graiver (2018, 174-175) puts it, ‘according to Evagrius, God is above all perception and thought, and therefore the mind is unable to approach God in prayer unless it has left behind all mental representations (*νοήματα*) associated with objects.’
[4] This reminds us of Plotinus’ thoughts regarding the soul’s absolution from matter (Enn. IV 8).
[5] It is possible here to see again some Platonic philosophical seeds. To be specific, the ancient Greek philosopher mentions in his *Protagoras* the phrase ‘now all things are fair, which are not mingled with foul’ (346c).
[6] My italics.
[7] On the same page, one reads the story of Abu Yazid who met God in a dream. The Sufi asked God 'How shall I find you?' and God replied 'Leave your soul behind and come.' This can probably have some connection to the biblical saying of Jesus 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me' (Matt. 16:24).
[8] My italics.
[9] The traces of Neoplatonic thought could not be clearer here.
[10] Drunkenness is a metaphor, which can be explained thus: ‘when the power of the wine penetrates into the veins, the mind forgets the particulars of all things; when the remembrance of God has taken hold of the soul, the recollection of visible things vanishes from the heart’ (Isaac of Nineveh, 1923, 217).
[11] This is said in the sense that pure prayer is ‘so rapt on its transcendent object that it absorbs the full being’ (Evagrius 1981, 75).
[12] Elsewhere, Isaac (1923, 217) clarifies that ‘in the world of truth, He [God] will show him [the initiated] His face, not however the face of His essence.’
[13] This is something which reminds us of the Plotinian use of the purified eye and the sun and goes even further to Gregory Palamas’ description of Paul’s journey to the third heaven: ‘it was as it were a sun infinitely brighter and greater than the universe, with himself standing in the midst of it, having become all eye’ (Palamas 1983, 38; 123).

[14] On the other hand, one reads on p.321 of the same work that all people have spiritual states, but 'the gnostic possesses none, because his personal characteristics (*rusum*) are totally erased, his personality (*huwiyya*) is fully annihilated by the personality of the Other.' Is this a contradiction or the two sides of the same coin? In short, can it be assumed that from a Sufi perspective the non-possession of states is a transcendent state itself? Indeed on p.79 al-Qushayri answers this question. He writes that one can never truly attain the True Reality of God, so that when one is advancing from state to state, his journey has no end, since God Himself has no end either. In other words, although the gnostic can be annihilated in God and possess no states, it is not due to God's limitedness, but because of the limitations of human nature that one can never fully comprehend the Infinite and Unlimited God.

[15] We see here that both religious traditions of asceticism relate the practice of prayer with the symbol of the ladder (Isaac the Syrian having said that 'the ladder unto the Kingdom is hidden within thee', as we have already mentioned above). The use of the symbol in question is earlier than Isaac the Syrian. It has been used by the 6th century saint John Climacus, who in his turn had in mind the biblical ladder of Jacob (Gen. 28:11-19). Later this symbol would be used by Rumi, the 13th century Sufi (Avdelas 2013, 171; 174).

[16] In regard to hope and longing, the following verse can be found on p.336 of the work in question:

> 'O you, who bemoans his passionate longing due to the long separation,
> Be patient, perhaps you will meet the one you love tomorrow!'

[17] The mystical state is, therefore, related to the Sufi's acts of worship, which multiply the divine grace that he receives. 'The more one engages in acts of worship', writes al-Qushayri on p.84 of his work in question, 'the more divine graces come to one from God.'

[18] However, on the same pages it is also shown how among the Sufis some schools of thought believe that state endures and others not.

[19] It is added that God's True Reality remains unattainable.

Qadam Rasool of Odisha: A Historical Review

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Abstract

The Muslims conquest of Odisha made a distinct impact on the indigenous expression of life and culture of its peoples. The style incorporated in architecture was new in modes and principles of construction and it reflected the socio-cultural and religious need of the followers of Islam. Architecture unfolds the genuineness of the post-cultural heritage. In Odisha, the defeat of Mukunda Deva at the hand of Sulaiman Karrani in 1568 CE marked the end of Hindu rule. The Afghan rule in Odisha is marked by a period of political warfare. However, the political unrest toned down with the conquest of Odisha by Mansingh the General of Emperor Akbar in 1595 CE. The Muslims rule in Odisha from 1568 to 1751 CE opened a new chapter in the history of architecture. They introduced their own tradition in methods of construction and decoration. The use of building materials such as concrete, mortar, introduction of arches vaults, domes and miners, etc. embellishment of the walls with perforated screens, geometrical and floral patterns etc. are some of the typical features of Islamic architecture. The most important

Islamic architecture of Odisha is of Qadam Rasool (foot print shrine of Prophet Muhammed PUH) of Cuttack and Balasore.

Keywords:- Mughal, Afghan, Subedar, Nazim,Naib-Nazim, Mosque, Madrassa, Qadam Rasool, Persian Inscription.

Introduction

The Muslims conquest of India made a distinct impact on the indigenous manifestation of life and culture of its own peoples. The style incorporated in architecture were not only new modes and principles of construction but reflected the social-religious demands of the followers of Islam. (1) Architecture is one of the important sections of learning to articulate the progress and degeneration of culture of a country. The literary text, the archaeological inputs and the folk tradition appear to be man's endless endeavors in building of human habitation from ancient hut type to gigantic minarets and mosques over the ages. Architecture unfolds the genuineness of the post-cultural heritage and impels history to carry its message through a period amidst the variability of culture and civilization. In fact, architecture is the objectification of the consciousness of people in solid meeting and reality which is transcendent into totality. (2)

The defeat of Mukunda Deva at the hand of Sulaiman Karrani in 1568 CE marked the end of Hindu rule in Odisha. It is true that, the Afghan rule in Odisha was a period of political warfare and unrest. However, the political unrest toned down with the conquest of Odisha by Raja Mansingh one of the confident General of emperor Akbar in 1595 CE.(3) consequently, in Odisha Afghan rule was short lived and confined only to the border districts up to the North of Mahanadi river and having little indelible imprint in the culture of Odisha.

The Muslims rule in Odisha from 1568 to 1751 CE opened a new chapter in the history of its architecture. The Muslim introduced their own tradition in methods of construction and decoration. The use of building materials such as concrete, mortar, introduction of arches vaults, domes and miners, etc. Embellishment of the walls with perforated screens, geometrical and floral patterns etc. are some of the distinctive features of Islamic monuments. The Islamic architecture in Odisha is represented by a small number of mosques, tombs etc. which mostly belong to the Mughal period. As Cuttack was their head quarter and thus it contains several Islamic monuments. (4)

Undeniably, Muslims migration to Odisha was a continuous process, they settled in Odisha with new religion and culture. Along with the administrators, general, traders and camp followers, the *Ulemas* (religious preacher) and saints were also come with them to serve their religious needs. The Muslim religious institutions like *Mosque*, Tomb, *Maktab* and *Madrassas* were flourished under the patronization of Muslim rulers. Cuttack was the capital and grew to be the most important centre for Muslim religious institutions, afterwards with the penetration of the Muslims to the interior of the Odisha, Muslim population increased considerably. Presently, Muslims mosque and tomb of the saints are found in every nook and corner of Odisha. Only in Cuttack district there are around 307 Muslim shrines and mosques were found. A good number of Muslim educational institutions grew up in Odisha like, *Maktabs* and *Madrassas* for education of Muslim pupils. Most of the institutions still continue to-day. The *madrassa* at Khatibinshahi Cuttack, Pattamundai, Binjharpur, Aali, Alanahat, Sharadhapur, Soram (Puri) are some of the examples which got Muslim patronage to impart education to their children.(5) Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb appointed Qazis, Muftis and Muhatasibs and granted rent-free lands to saints and pious person in Odisha. (6)

There are references of the Muslim rulers granted lands to poor, deprived, saintly men, *ulemas*, and *moulavis*, and to the different

religious institution of Muslims for their maintenance. Mughal Government issued 10 batis of land to Abdul Hamid a holy man for his maintenance for praying to God for the longevity of the throne. Nawab of Bengal in 1686 CE. granted 5 batis of land to Musabat Aisa Bibi of Jajpur in Odisha for her maintenance, likewise Shaikh Abdul Salam received grant from emperor Aurangzeb 1704-05 CE. Sometimes Government issued grants for the students as *Madad-i-Mash* and also to the pious persons. It has also come to light that not only Mughal Subedars but also individual rich and pious men had conferred land to the religious minded people. One of such example is Muhammed Shah Ghazi who gave 5 batis of land to Jajpur mosque through Allauddin one priest of that mosque.(7) The generosity of Muslim rulers was not confined only to Islamic monuments, religious persons or saint; the Muslim rulers confirm lands already enjoyed by the trusty of the temples of Hindus and expedite the matter for release of more grants for the Hindus religious purposes, which indicate the religious liberality of Muslim population in Odisha since fifteenth century onwards.

So far as the Islamic architecture in Odisha is concerned; it particularly started with the advent of Mughal rule as the Afghans could not have peaceful time to devote themselves for architectural activities. Most of the architectural works are belongs to the Mughal period. The Islamic monuments in Odisha as elsewhere in India comprise mosque, tomb, palaces of the Governor and the forts. The monuments as shrines are contribution to the society of Muslim rulers and administrators. All medieval monuments of Odisha had directly or indirectly bear the contact of Islamic architecture.

Since Cuttack had been the capital of the Mughal Government in Odisha, it enjoyed the privilege of possessing some of the exceptional Islamic monuments.(8) Badaoni, acclaimed historian of the reign of Akbar described Cuttack as "*the mine of heathenism*". Abul Fazal, renowned writer during the reign of Akbar describe Cuttack as "The city has a stone fort situated at the bifurcation of two rivers, the Mahanadi held as high veneration by the Hindus, and

the Kathjuri. It is the residence of the Governor and contains some fine buildings". This stone fort has been after careful scrutiny identified with fort of Barabati constructed by Mukunda Deva.(9) Wiilliam Bruton is the first and only English man to give us a description of the splendor of the court of Mukunda Deva. The palace of Mukunda Deva is now in ruins and is identified as Barabati fort. (10) A few of the significant Islamic architectural works in Odisha are unfolded here as under:

Qadam Rasool of Cuttack

Odisha situated in the eastern side of India; Cuttack is located at the head of Mahanadi River Delta. The city with a 1000 year old history and culture also called as a millennium city. Cuttack takes pride in being the state capital for years during the rule of Mughals, Afghans, and Marathas before the British rule. Mughal rule for an extended period resulted in the creation of several Islamic architecture.

A large roof designed with beautiful images from Ismalic architecture and ornate minarets mark the 18th century Muslim shrine in Cuttack, Qadam Rasool (Footprint of the Prophet Muhammed PUH). Situated in the Jail Road area in Cuttack, the dargah was built in Indo-Islamic architectural style by Shujauddin Mohammed Khan. It spreads over an area of 57 acres and has a high compound wall with towers at each of the four corners. A large minaret in the centre of the dargah, bearing the crescent and the star, is complimented by nine small minarets that have been designed with wood carvings and lacquer craft. The Qadam Rasool has been located inside a metal basin in the centre of the dargah, which also has a music gallery known as Nawabat Khana. There are three smaller mosques inside the shrine.

It is also been noted that, the *Qadam Rasool* the most important Mughal architecture in Odisha is situated at Cuttack. Haji Syed

Alimullah, President of Dacca and a close relative of Syed Hashim of Mashar of Persian brought the holy relic from Najab in Arabia with the signature of the Sherif of Mecca. It was first kept under a Khirin tree in Kukuriapada village in Sungra Pargana of Cuttack district in order to testify the geniuses of the relic. The place was named as Rasulpur for enshrined the holy relic. Because of the presence of the holy relic in the Sungra Pargana many diseases and ailments became healed from that are the news reached to the Shujauddin Mohammed Khan the then Deputy Nazim of Odisha, in the latter part of the reign Emperor Aurangzeb desired to pay homage to the sacred relic but that was not possible due to the bad communication between Rasulpur to Sungra. Hence, Diwan Muhammed Ali, Officer in Charge of the Shrine of Sungra removes the holy relic of the Prophet to Cuttack in accordance with the direction of Shujauddin Mohammed Khan, and with the order of the Deputy Nazim, the holy relic was shifted to Rasulpur at Cuttack and at Jabraghat on the bank of the river Mahanadi in the year 1099 *Amli* in a straw-thatched house the holy relic was installed. Munshi Hashmand Khan was appointed as the Superintendent to look after the shrine. Till today this locality of Cuttack has been called as Hashmant Shahi. (11)

The *Qadam Rasool* Shrine has a boundary of half a square mile. On each corner of the boundary wall there is a small minaret. A well-laid garden inside it, but, since it has been converted to a Muslim burial ground. The garden has been lost to decay. The main entrance is called as *Naubat Khana* (music gallery). It comprises doubled storied the upper story was used to beat drums at the sunrise and sunset during the month of Ramadhan/Ramajan, for observation of Fast and during other specific reason and times the drum was beaten. To the right side of the *Naubat Khana,* there is one small mosque called Moti Maszid. It was built on an elevated plinth and seems to be contemporary of the *Naubat Khana*. The Moti Maszid is a single flat dome resting on three arches.(12) After the *Naubat Khana* another entrance is there where six *Hujras* on both sides with dome on them used as a resting shed. The entrance

has two stone pillars inserted in the walls on both sides. On the right side of the entrance there is one more mosque similar in architecture to Moti Maszid mentioned above was built in 1130 *Hijra* era i.e., 1717 CE by Nawab Shujauddin Mohammed Khan who equally built the main impressive building of *Qadam Rasool*. The mosque has nine small minarets having a big one on the centre bearing the emblem of Islam i.e. the crescent and a star. It has beautiful arches and fine *Mehrabs* recently one *Azangah* was added to its beauty and utility.(13)

The *Qadam Rasool* shrine is an octagonal building standing on a plinth, has only one dome, over which a small golden dome has been positioned. The interior roof has been painted with flowers and plants. The non-existence of the human forms in the paintings indicates the painter's awareness of Islamic sanctions. It has a marble floor in black and white squares. In the centre the Qadam of Rasool or foot print of the Prophet has been placed in a metal basin, on a pillar, encircled by water (it is very often drunk by the devotees), kept in a octagonal reservoir. The pinnacle of the dome been adorned like those of *Sikhara* temple with *Kalasa* and *Amalaka*. At the first glance the structure looks like a structure built on a temple style of architecture. The most important characteristic in the construction is that it has been built in Odia style by Odia masons and architects. So far as the architectural design of the building is concerned it is one of the beautiful pieces of Mughal architecture in Odisha. Hence, it is an example of fusion of Hindu-Muslim architecture in Odisha. Inside the *Qadam Rasool*, a big grave yard is there in which Mohammed Taqi Khan, the Deputy Nazim of Odisha, Fateh Khan and Azam Khan and many more notable personalities have been buried. It is also stated that a well-known saint Shahid Pani tomb is also found there. (14) In the *Qadam Rasool* premises there are several inscriptions some are inscribed on the main building and others are on the tomb stone within the compound. These Persian inscriptions unfold the architectural history of Odisha. The architecture of Qadam Rasool is unique of its

own kind, today this shrine is dear to Hindus and Muslims alike. Historically it is a monument of beauty. (15)

Qadam Rasool of Balasore

There are few Islamic architecture available in Balasore town like, Juma Maszid built during the reign of emperor Aurangzeb, it also contain a Persian inscription by which we can know about the mosque in detail. *Qadam Rasool* deserved special attraction to describe. Shujauddin Mohammed Khan Son-in-law of Murshid Khan I an ardent champion of Islamic architecture in Odisha. He constructed a few Islamic monuments in Odisha. Mohammad Taqi Khan, Son of Shujauddin Mohammed Khan donated properties for the maintenance of *Qadam Rasool* at Balasore.(16) He also erected the gates of the *Qadam Rasool* at Balasore. Taqi Khan also constructed the *Dargah* which was renovated in later period of times. He also made generous grant of lands to the extent of 30 batis and twelve *manas* in the Sunhat Pargana of Balasore on 1137 Amli i.e.1729 CE.(17) One Persian inscription attached to the holy structure indicates that the ground which contains the holy Prophet's foot prints deserves deep reverence of sages for ages.

Thus, it can be summarized here that the medieval Islamic architecture in Odisha may not be of exceptional one with many of its contemporary in India. Yet the architecture constructed by the Muslim rulers are considered to be the exceptional one which indicates their interest in its beauty and splendor.

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Thus Taught Master Shichiri: One Hundred Gems of Shin Buddhist Wisdom
By Gōjun Shichiri, Translated by Hisao Inagaki, Foreword by John Paraskevopoulos, Preface by Hisao Inagaki, Introduction by Toshikazu Arai
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Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Jōdo Shinshū, also known as Shin Buddhism, belongs to the Mahāyāna tradition and was founded by Shinran (1173–1263). It is the largest school of Buddhism in Japan today, and is slowly becoming more widely known throughout the world. This work consists of a collection of spiritual teachings by Gōjun Shichiri (1835–1900) that were recorded by his followers in the late 1800s. Master Shichiri was a very influential and popular propagator of Shin, in addition to being a highly respected scholar and prolific writer.[1]

It is often said that spiritual traditions need to keep up with the times in which we live. While Master Shichiri lived over a hundred and twenty years ago, his insightful sayings speak to the myriad difficulties that we face in today's troubled and perplexing world.

[1] See D.T. Suzuki, "Sayings of a Modern Tariki Mystic," *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1924), pp. 93–116.

His teachings focus on what is most essential to our lives, which goes beyond the limits of any specific era and which can prepare us to confront challenges in whatever time or place we live. He counseled people from all walks of life and did so with a deep understanding of the Dharma, in a manner that embodied a true spiritual intelligence at work.

Eshō Hamaguchi (1874–1966) collected many of Shichiri's spiritual instructions in several volumes. The hundred sayings in this book under review were taken from *Shichiri Wajō Genkō Roku* ('A Record of the Words and Deeds of Master Shichiri') originally published in 1912. These excerpts were selected and translated by Hisao Inagaki (1929–2021). This is the first time that a book entirely devoted to Master Shichiri has appeared in a language other than Japanese.

When a seeker asked Master Shichiri how they could live an easier life, he responded in the following manner:

> In this stormy world, you will encounter joy and pain in anything you do. However, if you limit yourself to half the joys you're entitled to, you'll experience only half the pains that you would normally expect to suffer. In this way, you can live a relatively easy life. (p. 11)

Someone came to him to ask if they should leave their busy job in the city and move to a quieter place, in order to engage in spiritual practice without the distractions of everyday life. The Master responded by skillfully discerning both possibilities and how they would spiritually affect the seeker:

> [W]hen timber logs are sent down a river, they often collide with large rocks and other impediments. They also encounter difficult corners and curves, which can block their smooth passage. But every time logs come up against an obstacle, this serves as an impetus for them to push forward all the more.

In a peaceful, slow-moving river, logs will not proceed downstream as quickly; yet they will flow quite rapidly in a torrent even when faced with obstructions. Just so, your day-to-day dealings in the frantic world … give you a better chance of hearing the teachings. Being … in the country, your life may certainly be happier and more peaceful but your inclination to seek joy in the Dharma will be much reduced. (p. 13)

A peaceful ambiance may initially be conducive to the practice of the Dharma but, without a supportive spiritual community in place, it may likely disappear before too long. The following advice is recalled from Myōe Shōnin (1173–1232) and speaks to the pitfalls of such a path:

> It's surely the case that if you live with fellow disciples, many more disturbances will arise for your practice. Nevertheless, these upheavals will give you an incentive not to lag behind others and to succeed in your endeavors quickly. If you are alone, you'll tend to become complacent. (p. 14)

People often state that they are too busy to listen to the teachings or apply their principles to their lives. They overlook that "the winds of impermanence can suddenly blow at any moment" (p. 23) and that the saving wisdom of the Dharma alone is imperishable in this earthly existence.

A seeker's understanding of their life is based on their assimilation of the Buddhist teachings; however, if they suffer from wrong views, even the Dharma cannot come to their aid:

> However hard you may try to pour hot water or tea into a cup, you cannot do so if it's upside down. Needless to say, you should place the cup down correctly. However diligently you may hear sermons, if the 'cup' of your mind is the wrong way up, the Dharma-water cannot fill it. Therefore, do not overturn the 'cup' of your mind. (p. 24)

Shin differs from other forms of Buddhism in that the seeker is urged to take refuge in the 'Other-Power' (*tariki*) of the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life (Amida), rather than engaging in 'self-power' (*jiriki*) practices. In this tradition, Amida Buddha (considered the personal dimension of the highest reality that would otherwise be inconceivable) is the liberating light of Wisdom and Compassion that meets us precisely where we find ourselves in the midst of our fraught and uncertain existence, regardless of our condition. Through the invocation of the Buddha's name—*Namo Amida Butsu*—the arising of Amida's mind within us can take place and transform our lives.

It is through *shinjin* (the 'true heart and mind' that is given to us by Amida Buddha) that we can abandon this world of 'birth and death' *(saṃsāra*), without having to rely on our own spiritual contrivances. Master Shichiri adds: "When you hear of the salvation that is available here-and-now, you readily accept it. This is *shinjin*" (p. 99). He explains this subtle yet vital point:

> You are not saved by your own efforts; only by Amida's Primal Vow which is beyond our comprehension. 'The matter of great importance—birth in the Pure Land—should not be handled by you; leave it entirely to the working of the Vow.' So it is said. This is Amida's problem, not yours! Whatever's achieved by means of your own contrivance is of no use whatsoever. (p. 21)

By invoking the Name *Namo Amida Butsu* ('I take refuge in the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life'), we become infused with immeasurable Wisdom and Compassion, which is the personal dimension of the inconceivable ultimate reality that constantly reaches out to us in a form that is accessible to our limited understanding. The reality of *Nirvāna* becomes vividly embodied in the practice known as *nembutsu* (which means thinking of, or remembering, the Buddha). The *nembutsu* is itself a response to "hearing the Name" understood as the Buddha's initial 'call' to us.

We should always be mindful of the Dharma. For this reason, we are reminded to ceaselessly "recite the nembutsu as many times as possible whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down" (p. 29). Regardless of where we are and whatever circumstances may be, Master Shichiri teaches: "In your practice of nembutsu, be sure to recite it day and night, in whatever situation you find yourself" (p. 41). As he points out, we are the obstacle to the working of the Name and, for this reason, we need to be ever vigilant by taking refuge in Amida alone and abandoning calculative thinking (*hakarai*): "The nembutsu is never lazy—*you* are lazy!" (p. 97).

Master Shichiri conveys a proverb which is often confirmed: "[P]eople often complain about their lives when they are, in fact, very well off" (p. 112) as they tend to overlook many of the good things they are blessed to have and focus only on what is unsatisfactory. He makes very important observations about the role of family and raising children, which apply to all spiritual paths: "Unless you raise children in the Dharma, you can do very little for them when they're grown up" (p. 46). He cautions, "Always be very careful when bringing up your children. One wrong step could lead them away from the right path by a thousand miles" (p. 46). In summary, Master Shichiri provides an outline of what is required to leave behind the suffering realm of 'birth and death' *(saṃsāra*) in order to enter the Pure Land (which is another way of referring to the attainment of *Nirvāna*):

> If you give away your doubts, indolence and unwholesome thoughts to Amida, you'll receive, in return, shinjin, nembutsu and the motivation to perform good—the reward of birth in the Pure Land will then be conferred naturally. As a result, the three 'poisons' that afflict you—greed, anger and stupidity—are removed. (p. 102)

In this collection, Gōjun Shichiri provides practical guidance as a pastoral counselor *par excellence* on how to live the *nembutsu* way, especially in what is known in Shin Buddhism as the "decadent age of the Dharma" (*mappō*). It is through these profound gems of

liberating wisdom that we can see how Buddhist psychology can be practiced not only in the face of day-to-day challenges but, on a deeper level, in the quest to restore our true identity in ultimate reality with a view to attaining spiritual healing and wholeness. This work will undoubtedly be treasured by all students and followers of Shin Buddhism, as well those who wish to better understand this widespread and influential school of Japanese Buddhism. Master Shichiri's sayings are a precious gift to all who can discern the timeless wisdom that pervades them; something that is not limited to just the Buddhist tradition, for it is universal and can benefit all those seeking truth and illumination in their lives.

The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name

By Brian C. Muraresku, Foreword by Graham Hancock
New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2020, PP. 480.
Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Central to any discussion of entheogens is the quandary in which we currently find ourselves. We live in a time of extremes that are visible everywhere; not only do things not appear to be in their rightful place, but they seem to be going abysmally wrong. To overlook the emergence of the *psychedelic renaissance* within this historical moment is to ignore the spiritual crisis of the modern world and its severe impact on the collective psyche. We need to acknowledge the momentous developments that led to the post-Enlightenment world and its desacralized outlook which has fueled the dominance of *scientism* and *materialism*. Unless we do so, it becomes difficult to properly assess the claim that psychedelics are the panacea for all the maladies of our time.

The book under review has become a bestseller and has captivated modern minds. It reads much like a work of fiction, something akin to *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) with its entertaining and detective-like narrative. *The Immortality Key* aims to disclose the secrets of the ancient mysteries, which required a twelve-year odyssey in search for the roots of religion. Brian Muraresku embarked on a quest to substantiate his thesis that all religions have their foundation in

mind-altering substances which, for Western civilization, begins in Greece at Eleusis. He boldly claims that entheogens "founded Western civilization" (p. 353) and, elsewhere, speaks of "the psychedelic reality behind Western civilization's original religion" (p. 21).

When the doyen of comparative religion, Huston Smith (1919–2016), wrote that the sacred uses of mind-altering substances are the "best kept secret"[2] in the history of humanity, we can be sure he was referring to a hidden knowledge about the use of entheogens within diverse spiritual practices, not that psychedelics formed the basis of religious belief.

According to Muraresku, this work – which "presents the pagan continuity hypothesis with a psychedelic twist" (p. 14) – addresses two key questions: (1) "Before the rise of Christianity, did the Ancient Greeks consume a secret psychedelic sacrament during their most famous and well-attended religious rituals?"; and (2) "Did the Ancient Greeks pass a version of their sacrament along to the earliest, Greek-speaking Christians, for whom the original Holy Communion or Eucharist was, in fact, a psychedelic Eucharist?" (pp. 14–15). Muraresku summarizes his research (along with Carl Ruck's grand theory) when he attempts to explain

> How psychedelics were the shortcut to enlightenment that founded Western civilization: first in the Eleusinian Mysteries, then in the Dionysian Mysteries. How paleo-Christianity inherited this tradition from the Ancient Greeks, later passing it to the witches of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. And how the Vatican would repeatedly suppress the original, psychedelic Eucharist to rob Christians of the beatific vision—first in Europe, and then around the world after the Catholic colonization of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. A truly global conspiracy. (pp. 353–354)

[2] Huston Smith, "Preface," to R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, and Carl A.P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (Los Angeles, CA: Hermes Press, 1998), p. 10.

Muraresku informs readers that what motivated him to write this book on the study of the present-day uses of entheogens was the mystical experiences reported by the many volunteers engaged in clinical trials with psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy (including the therapeutic value of these sacred medicines for trauma, anxiety, depression, addiction, end-of-life distress, and other ailments). Indeed, the author was fascinated by the ostensible similarities between the mystical element and transformative power found in ancient mystery religions, and contemporary uses of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy.

The claim that religion itself had its genesis in entheogens is not original to Muraresku, but has been advocated for some decades.[3] In particular, it has been suggested that these compounds were the key ingredients of both the *Soma* mentioned in the Ṛgveda and the Avestan *Hoama* of the Zoroastrians. According to the Hindu tradition, "We have drunk Soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the gods discovered"[4] (Ṛgveda 8:48:3). Some have identified this substance as the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*[5] or the fungus ergot (or *Kykeon* of the Eleusinian Mysteries), which contains psychoactive alkaloids such as LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide).[6] It has also been asserted that the *Manna* of the Old Testament was a psychedelic,[7] as well as the psychoactive

[3] See R. Gordon Wasson, Stella Kramrisch, Jonathan Ott, and Carl A.P. Ruck, *Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

[4] Ṛgveda 8:48:3, *The Hymns of the Ṛgveda*, trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith, ed. J.L. Shastri (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1999), p. 198.

[5] See R. Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969).

[6] See R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, and Carl A.P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (Los Angeles, CA: Hermes Press, 1998).

[7] See Dan Merkur, "Manna, the Showbread, and the Eucharist: Psychoactive Sacraments in the Bible," in *Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion*, ed. Thomas B. Roberts (San Francisco, CA: Council on Spiritual Practices, 2001), pp. 139–144.

mushrooms associated with the cult of Mithras[8] (said to be used in ancient Egypt).[9] Even the origins of Christianity have been ascribed to *Amanita muscaria*[10] or *Psilocybin* mushrooms.[11] Needless to say, such flagrant reductionism is open to serious challenges.

These sacred plants are thought to have been used from around 5000 BC;[12] that is, at the beginning of what the Hindu tradition calls the *Kali-Yuga* or 'Iron Age' – the culmination of our current temporal cycle, or, at best, the preceding *Dvapara Yuga* or 'Bronze Age.'

Thus, it could be said that the use of sacred plants occurred late in the cosmic cycle (*manvantara*) and not at its inception – namely, the *Krita-Yuga* or *Satya-Yuga* (known as the 'Golden Age' in Western cosmology). The oldest known spiritual tradition of Hinduism (the *sanātana dharma* or 'eternal religion') existed in the 'Golden Age' and was not the by-product of a later period. This appears to suggest, as Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) observed, that "the use of intoxicants … is a recent innovation and points to a

[8] See Carl A.P. Ruck, Mark Alwin Hoffman, and José Alfredo González Celdrán, *Mushrooms, Myth and Mithras: The Drug Cult that Civilized Europe* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2011).

[9] See Andrija Puharich, *The Sacred Mushroom: Key to the Door of Eternity* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959).

[10] See John Marco Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross: A Study of the Nature and Origins of Christianity Within the Fertility Cults of the Ancient Near East* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1971).

[11] See Jerry B. Brown and Julie M. Brown, *The Psychedelic Gospels: The Secret History of Hallucinogens in Christianity* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2016).

[12] Peter T. Furst, "Ancient Altered States," in *Higher Wisdom: Eminent Elders Explore the Continuing Impact of Psychedelics*, eds. Roger Walsh and Charles S. Grob (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 153. Some psychedelic researchers regard the rock art found in the mountain range of Tassili n'Ajjer southeast Algeria to be the most ancient verification of entheogenic use.

decadence in shamanic technique."[13] This is not to say that entheogens cannot be medically beneficial, or helpful in healing many of the psycho-somatic maladies of our time – especially when employed in the sacred context of a given spiritual tradition – but to suggest that they are the origins of all religion simply does not hold up.

This book explores how many of the 'mystery' religions – such as those of ancient Egypt and Greece, especially the Eleusinian, Dionysian, and Orphic mysteries – participated in the process of initiatory death and rebirth in order to be transfigured into a divine mode of being through the use of entheogens. Participants were considered privileged to have been initiated into the ceremonies of these mystery traditions.

The Immortality Key cites various texts in support of its thesis. The ancient Greek playwright Sophocles (c. 496–406) declares: "Thrice fortunate are those among mortals who have seen these rites before going to Hades; for they alone have life there, while others have every kind of misery."[14] Further testimonies likewise indicate that, as a result of having experienced the mysteries, the soul of the initiate will be content and at peace after death. For example, Cicero (106–43) asserted that the Eleusinian mysteries disclosed how "to live happily, but also to die with a better hope."[15] These initiations, then, did not confer just posthumous spiritual benefits, but also led to a dis-identification with the ego, along with a new identity that both transcended and suffused the psycho-physical dimension.

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[13] Mircea Eliade, "Shamanic Ideologies and Techniques among the Indo-Europeans," in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 401.

[14] Sophocles, Fragment 837, *Fragments*, trans. and ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 368–369.

[15] Cicero, De legibus II.xiv.36, *On the Republic, On the Laws*, trans. Clinton W. Keys (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 415.

In the Western Church, there is the experience known as the "beatific vision" (Latin: *visio beatifica*) and the Eastern Church teaches the doctrine of "deification" (Greek: *theosis*). The Christian tradition states that God "dwell[s] in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see" (1 Timothy 6:16), yet it is through the cleansing of the Intellect (*Intellectus*) – or the "eye of the heart" – that we may see the Divine "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). In connection with this experience, we find written in the Gospels: "ye shall see heaven open" (John 1:51). It was the Hungarian scholar Carl Kerényi (1897–1973) who employed the term 'beatific vision' (Latin: *visio beatifica*) for what was experienced at Eleusis.[16] Interestingly, the term was not indicated in Greek. Muraresku notes that "It was this same beautiful vision that brought the very concept of psychedelics into the modern world" (p. 342), and states that "To get the beatific vision, you have to die for it" (p. 343).

Muraresku mentions that a prominent feature in the world's religions is the injunction that finds expression, for instance, in the well-known words of the Prophet of Islam: "Die before ye die" (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*). In the Hindu tradition, there is the concept of being 'twice-born' (*dvija*): our initial entry into terrestrial existence is one type of birth, whereas the second is an initiation into a spiritual path. Within the Jewish tradition, especially in its mystical dimensions, there is a similar notion of *dying before dying* known as 'cessation or annihilation of existence' (*bittul ha-yesh*). At St. Paul's Monastery on Mount Athos are inscribed the words: "If you die before you die, you will not die when you die." In Western Christianity, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) expressed the

[16] See Carl Kerényi, "The Eleusinian Version of the *Visio Beatifica*," in *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 95-102.

same concept in this way: "If you could naught yourself for an instant, indeed I say less than an instant, you would possess all."[17]

This alchemical and transformative psycho-spiritual process of 'dying before dying' appears in a myriad of forms throughout the spiritual traditions and their sacred psychologies, yet points of convergence can readily be discerned. At the heart of every integral psychology or "science of the soul" is the recognition of a psycho-spiritual transformation or *metanoia*, which is inseparable from a metaphysical vision grounded in the sacred. This can be seen as a sacred psychology – rooted in metaphysics – that speaks of a 'horizontal' dimension comprising the empirical ego, and a vertical dimension that pertains to the transpersonal Self.

This book postulates a psychedelic "Reformation to end all Reformations" (p. 14) that is emerging to fill the spiritual void felt collectively by those – not only in the present-day West – but throughout the world who are "religiously unaffiliated" (p. 8) and "spiritual-but-not-religious" (p. 9).

This warrants some clarifications. The authentically spiritual dimension found in the world's religions is what keeps a faith healthy, as it were. Yet many are unsure how to access this, so it is often assumed to be altogether absent when this is assuredly not the case. We must take the time to rediscover these neglected elements at the heart of all religions.

There are those who are averse to the idea of religion, and are only interested in its mystical or esoteric aspects, as we find among those who claim to be "spiritual but not religious." This often fails to recognize that formal religion is the protective framework that allows us to access its inner dimension. As has been pointed out by many, true spirituality can never be a commodity for mass

[17] *Meister Eckhart, Sermon 17, The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, trans. and ed. Maurice O'C. Walshe (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), p. 131.*

consumption: "[T]ruths of a certain order by their very nature resist all 'popularization': however clearly they are set out."[18] We recall that while the word "religion" is off-putting to many (who prefer the notion of "spirituality"), we need to remember that the etymological root of the English word "religion" is the Latin *religare*, meaning to "re-link," or "bind back" to the Spirit that is transcendent to, and immanent in, all things.

This book aims to substantiate a continuity between the ancient mystery religions and the contemporary therapeutic uses of entheogens. As Muraresku writes: "The religion with no name is the oldest continuously functioning spiritual tradition the world has ever known" (p. 385). The author adds "The religion with no name is back" (p. 387), yet what does this mean? With a closer analysis, two claims become evident: (1) all religion derives from psychedelics; and (2) the contemporary form of "the religion with no name" is the emergence of the "psychedelic renaissance" and its employment of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. This approach is again shortsighted, if not erroneous altogether, for it does not understand the true nature of religion and spirituality. It is the Absolute that discloses itself through revelation to the diverse communities and cultures of the world in the form of sacred tradition, but it is not within the agency of psychedelics to create divine Revelation or bring about new religious forms.

To reduce the origin of religion to psychedelics is to completely misconceive the nature of revelation. Sacred medicines can certainly be a medium through which spiritual influences may be channeled, but to suggest that they are the source of all religious manifestations is quite risible. Spiritual phenomena are not the concoction of human beings but, rather, should be seen as firmly grounded in a 'vertical' dimension of reality that is transcendent, yet immanent in all things at the same time.

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[18] René Guénon, "The Hatred of Secrecy," in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, trans. Lord Northbourne (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 85.

A puzzling aspect of the book is that Muraresku does not appear to be concerned by the absence of any support for his thesis, not to mention that the inner or mystical dimension found within religions can be accessed without the use of psychedelics. After all, religion consists of both exoteric and esoteric dimensions, and it is through the outer forms that we can access the spiritual kernel. There is a certain position of 'entheogenic exclusivism' in this misconceived outlook which asserts that all spiritual realization requires psychedelics.

Although the author mentions his many travels, research, and conversations with various scholars, there remains a paucity of evidence regarding the existence of a "secret" tradition based on entheogens. Indeed, a hidden aim emerges in Muraresku's attempt to undermine the validity of divine revelation and supplanting it with mind-altering substances as a substitute for the spiritual traditions. The work under review is unable to make a compelling case for its grand theory of the "pagan continuity hypothesis with a psychedelic twist" (p. 14), due to its overreach and misunderstanding of what true religion and spirituality are. This work is largely a product of the "psychedelic renaissance" and, while its promises are indicated in the wealth of clinical findings for therapeutic value, its present-day uses are poles apart from the traditional uses of entheogens. This highlights the spiritual vacuum and confusion that afflict the psychedelic movement, and indicates our need to turn to the spiritual traditions for their profound discernment and guidance on these matters, which are of the highest importance for our ultimate well-being.

In Memoriam: William Stoddart (1925–2023)

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

On the morning of November 9, 2023, William Stoddart returned to his Lord; he was ninety-eight years old. Stoddart was, without question, one of the most noteworthy representatives of the perennial philosophy in our times. He lived a full and remarkable life, traveling extensively to meet spiritual authorities and visit sacred sites around the world.

Stoddart's deep interest in all major religions led to extensive travels around the globe. In Europe, he sought to access the fullness of the Christian tradition—in Catholicism (France, Spain, Italy, Ireland, and Poland); Orthodoxy (Greece, Russia, and Serbia); and Protestantism (Germany, Holland, and Scandinavia). He also traveled elsewhere so as to immerse himself in Islam (Morocco, Turkey, and Bosnia), the Hindu tradition in India (where he had *darshan* with the 68th Jagadguru of Kanchi), and the Buddhist worlds of Sri Lanka and Japan.

Stoddart spent his professional career in London, working chiefly in medical research until 1982. Following his retirement, he relocated to North America in order to live near his spiritual mentor, Frithjof Schuon, who had moved from Switzerland to the United States in 1980. As he never married or had children, one could say that his many spiritual friends and associates became a *de facto* family, with whom he journeyed towards the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

Stoddart was born in Carstairs, Scotland, in 1925. He was raised and educated there until he attended the University of Glasgow, where he studied languages (French, German, and Spanish). He maintained his interest in languages and literature throughout his life. Stoddart also completed a medical degree at the University of Glasgow, followed by additional studies at the universities of Edinburgh and Dublin.

Raised a Protestant, the young Stoddart's focus was very much on the Bible, God, Christ, and prayer. He discovered Eastern spirituality through his father, who often traveled to India. He also learned about Hinduism and Islam during his school years. Having intuited, from an early age, the validity of all religions, he remarked: "It never for a moment entered my head that these religions could be false. I knew instinctively that they were true, but had no idea at the time just how much the doctrine of 'the transcendent unity of the religions' was going to mean for me in later life. I should add that this intuition of the validity of the non-Christian religions in no way weakened my attachment to Christianity."[19]

At the age of twenty, Stoddart discovered the writings of the great art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947). Encountering these works took his life in a completely different direction. It was through Coomaraswamy that he learned about the work of the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951). To understand the fullness of Stoddart's life and outlook, one needs to begin with the seminal exponents of what has become known as the Perennialist (or Traditionalist) school; specifically, Guénon, Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984). While he recognized that there were many other advocates of the *philosophia perennis*, Stoddart himself would assert that these were the most significant. He constantly reminded serious seekers that one needed to "read and re-read the writings of

[19] Unpublished interview with Lynn Pollack (2003).

Frithjof Schuon" in particular. It was through doing so that one could recognize the supra-formal truth at the heart of all religions.

Stoddart was an award-winning author and editor. He was assistant editor of *Studies in Comparative Religion*, a British journal dedicated to publishing writings on the perennial philosophy. He was a board member in the early days of the Matheson Trust, which promotes the philosophical, metaphysical, cosmological, and aesthetic study of all traditions. One of Stoddart's gifts was his capacity to distill complex and voluminous information into very direct and succinct language, for which reason he was regarded as a "master of synthesis."[20]

While he was exceptionally gifted in his exposition of the world's religions and their inner dimensions, he also managed to make them accessible to ordinary people. He was always reminding seekers not to complicate or overthink matters, as one only had to focus on the essentials. Indeed, his motivation to simplify things was solely with a view to the "one thing needful" (Luke 10:42). It goes without saying, however, that his work remained a paragon of rigor and clarity.

In paying tribute to the life and work of the English Catholic writer Bernard Kelly (1907–1958), Stoddart recalls a telling statement about Kelly that could just as easily have applied to himself: "There are some of us who can't rightly pray without a pen in our hands."[21]

Stoddart upheld the need for people to be grounded in a way of life that allowed for the assimilation of truth and wisdom into their hearts and minds. Central to this endeavor was the indispensable

[20] Mateus Soares de Azevedo, "Book Review—Outline of Buddhism," *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1998), p. 277.
[21] Bernard Kelly, quoted in William Stoddart, "Scholastic Universalist: The Writings and Thought of Bernard Kelly (1907–1958)," *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 76, No. 897 (October 1995), p. 455.

requirement to learn "how to think."[22] In doing so correctly, we can be truly objective and see things as they are. In the study of the doctrines and methods of all religions, we are able to discern between the Real and the illusory—or the Absolute and the relative—while being afforded a path that takes us home to the One.

Stoddart invariably contemplated the spiritual traditions from a universal perspective and had a compelling vision of their abiding unity in ultimate reality. Stoddart strongly challenged the assumption that, if one were to recognize the truth of a foreign religion, it would undermine a commitment to one's own tradition. To acknowledge the validity of other religions ought not to weaken faith in one's own. At the same time, he saw that it was not enough to simply affirm diverse religious manifestations and their unity, but that we needed to pursue a salvific path wholeheartedly: "We must be capable of the cardinally important intuition that *every religion*—be it Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam—*comes from God and every religion leads back to God*."[23]

Stoddart was constantly responding to an influx of correspondence from friends, readers, and seekers, who sought him out for guidance on spiritual matters. He also received numerous visitors and was warmly remembered for his generous hospitality. His advice never failed to meet the individual needs of those who required direction. When speaking to people, he would communicate using as few words as possible.

Stoddart considered the role of beauty in one's life to be paramount. He always encouraged reflection on Schuon's teachings about the aesthetic quality of our abode, dress, and comportment. His own

[22] Frithjof Schuon, quoted in James S. Cutsinger, *Splendor of the True: A Frithjof Schuon Reader*, trans. and ed. James S. Cutsinger (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. xxxii.

[23] William Stoddart, "Religious and Ethnic Conflict in the Light of the Writings of the Perennialist School," in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism*, eds. Mateus Soares de Azevedo and Alberto Vasconcellos Queiroz (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), p. 32.

home was decorated in a graceful manner, thus embodying Plato's dictum that "Beauty is the splendor of the True." Stoddart was always a gentleman and deeply compassionate in his dealings with others; yet, when he felt compelled to correct someone on a matter of doctrine, he would not hesitate to say—with great care and concern—that he was spiritually obliged to do so.

The wide range of Stoddart's writings include: *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (1976; second edition: *Outline of Sufism: The Essentials of Islamic Spirituality*, 2012); *Outline of Hinduism* (1993; second edition: *Hinduism and Its Spiritual Masters*, 2007); *Outline of Buddhism* (1998; second edition: *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism: The Essentials of Buddhist Spirituality*, 2013); *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism* (2008); *What do the Religions say about Each Other? Christian Attitudes towards Islam, Islamic Attitudes towards Christianity* (2008); and *What Does Islam Mean in Today's World? Religion, Politics, Spirituality* (2012). Stoddart's contribution was not confined to just his own literary accomplishments; he also translated several traditionalist works from the original French and German: *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (1981) and *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* (1981); over 3000 poems by Schuon, and many outstanding volumes by Burckhardt, such as: *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (1967); *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art* (1987); and *The Essential Titus Burckhardt: Reflections on Sacred Art, Faiths, and Civilizations* (2005). Stoddart regarded Burckhardt as the "right hand of Truth."

Stoddart was spiritually present and alert until the very end. His presence will be very much missed; yet he would not want us to dwell on his departure from this world, but rather have us pay attention to our own *path of return* through a dedicated relationship to the Spirit. He never tired of reminding people that, in Schuon's *opus*, there was everything necessary to sustain our spiritual journey back to the Divine, yet we needed first and foremost to be rooted in

one of the authentic revealed spiritual traditions that have been bequeathed to humanity. It is through the doorway of tradition that we may apprehend the unanimity to be found among all the great religions. We pray that our dear friend has made a swift return to his heavenly abode: “Verily we belong to God and unto Him we shall return” (Qur’ān 2:152).

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Endnotes

Endnotes should be typed double-spaced at the end of the article rather than at the bottom of each page and numbered in a single sequence. Acknowledgements should be the last number in the article and placed in the endnotes accordingly. Endnotes are for the citation of the sources.