

Editorial: The Principle of Verticality

by *M. Ali Lakhani*

The spiritual man is one who transcends himself and loves to transcend himself;
the worldly man remains horizontal and detests the vertical dimension.

Fritjof Schuon

The principle of verticality, which is a fundamental principle of traditional wisdom, is based on the affirmation of transcendence as an aspect of a comprehensive and integrated reality that is Absolute. According to this understanding, reality has both a transcendent Origin and an immanent Center, which are one, rather than being reduced to the merely horizontal dimension of its existential or quantitative elements. Verticality implies both Heaven and Earth, a worldview in which meaning and purpose are defined principally by both height and depth, and secondarily by breadth – that is, principally by man’s relationship to God, who is simultaneously ‘above’ and ‘within’ creation, and who therefore governs all creaturely relationships – rather than by breadth alone – that is, solely in terms of the relationship between the subject and the world. It also implies that the horizontal is subordinate to the vertical, that is to say, the relationship between man and the world is premised on the primary relationship between God and man: to restate this in Christian terms, the love of one’s neighbor is premised on one’s love for God.

According to the traditional worldview, existence is transcended by a supreme reality, which, whether expressed in theistic or non-theistic terms, is Absolute, and which, without derogating from its unity, is simultaneously (at the level of the primary hypostasis) expressed by the horizontal ternary, Truth or the Solely Subsistent Reality, Goodness or

the Perfection and Font of all Qualities, and Beauty or Abiding Serenity and the Source of its Radiant Effulgence: in Platonic terms, the True, the Good and the Beautiful. All creation is prefigured in this supreme reality, which projects existence out of its own Substance into a world of form (hence etymologically, *ex-stare*, to stand out of, or to subsist from, as the formal world of existence stands out of, and subsists from, the Divine Substance) through a vertical ternary comprising, first, the Essential or Principal Absolute (which is Beyond-Being), second, the Relative-Absolute Source of Archetypes (which is the primary hypostasis of Being), and third, the realm of Manifestation (which is Existence). The world itself, and its creatures, including man, as such, are therefore of derivative significance and are accidental in relation to the supreme reality, which alone is substantial. The world is transient, ephemeral and illusory. The Divine Substance alone is permanent and real. This view of the transcendent, supreme and substantial reality of the Absolute (which, according to the principle of verticality, is described in terms of its elevation or perfection in relation to creation) finds its expression in all religious traditions: “O Arjuna! There is nothing higher than Me; all is strung upon Me like pearls on a string.” (*Bhagavad Gita*, vii. 7); “It may be considered the mother of the universe. I do not know its name; I call it Tao. If forced to give it a name, I shall call it Great.” (*Tao-te-Ching* xxv); “His greatness is unsearchable.” (*Psalms* cxlv. 3); “In the world, inclusive of its gods, substance is seen in what is insubstantial. They are tied to their psychophysical beings and so they think that there is some substance, some reality in them. But whatever be the phenomenon through which they think of seeking their self-identity, it turns out to be transitory. It becomes false, for what lasts for a moment is deceptive. The state that is not deceptive is *Nirvana*: that is what the men of worth know as being real. With this insight into reality their hunger ends: cessation, total calm.” (*Sutta Nipata* 756-58); “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it... The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” (*Isaiah* xl. 6-8); “Therefore you must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (*Matthew*, v. 48); “Glory to God, the Lord of the Throne; high is He above what they attribute to Him!” (*Qur’an*, xxi. 22); “All that is on the earth will perish: But the face of thy Lord will abide forever – full of Majesty, Bounty, and Honor.” (*Qur’an*, lv. 26-27).

The principle of verticality implies hierarchy, and consequently a radically different view of space and time than that which exists outside tradition. The conventional view is based on a horizontal perspective in which man, as such, and the elements which comprise the universe, are perceived merely as quanta that relate to each other within the dimensions of space and time. Space is, as it were, the dimension of the location of interactions, whose boundaries are defined by physical laws and subjective choices, and time is, as it were, the dimension of the sequencing of these interactions, in a linear trajectory, from the past through the present to the future. By contrast, the cosmological worldview of traditional wisdom is based on a perspective in which space is metaphysical before it is physical, so that it is perceived as the realm of Infinite Possibility, of the unfoldment of the spiritual substance into the material world through a continuum that is vertically integrated, with each level (or horizontal dimension) being qualitatively incommensurable or discontinuous in relation to the preceding level from which it emerges. In spatial terms, man's proximity to transcendent Reality is proportionate to his proximity to his immanent spiritual Center, and inversely so. In temporal terms, existence (in the etymological sense of emergence from the Divine Substance) is simultaneously a descent from a point of Origin and an ascent to a point of Return. The Center is meta-spatial, and corresponds to the Origin, which is meta-temporal. This view of space and time as dimensions of transcendental reality is found in all religious traditions: "Creation is only the projection into form of that which already exists." (*Bhagavad Gita*, iii.2); "Whatever happens, in any form or at any time or place, is but a variation of the One Self-existent Reality" (*Yoga-Vasishtha*); "I being one become many, and being many become one." (*Sutta-Pitaka*, Buddhist Pali canon); "I am Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." (*Revelation*, xxii.13); "He is The First and The Last, The Outward and The Inward; He is The Knower of All Things." (*Qur'an*, lvii.3).

Traditional cosmology, being predicated on verticality, also implies a hierarchy of faculties. The supreme faculty which resides in the spiritual Center or Heart of man – within the transcendent Self (in Vedantic terms, *Atman*) – is the cognitive faculty of the discerning Intellect, the Eye of the Heart, which is known in different religious traditions under the names *nous*, *buddhi*, or *al-aql al-kulli*. This guiding faculty alone is capable of

discerning what is real and distinguishing it from what is transient, ephemeral or illusory, and the Intellect therefore has precedence over the reasoning mind and the senses, both of which are capable of only a partial discernment of reality, and are thus subject to its beguilements. Under the traditional schema, the will is therefore subservient to the intellect, but if this role is reversed, man can become enslaved by his passions, the untamed will being then capable of impressing even the reasoning mind to its own causes, to justify its own desires. This hierarchy of faculties is common to all religious traditions. One of the best known images of this hierarchy is found in Hinduism: “Know the Self as lord of the chariot, the body as the chariot itself, the discriminating intellect as charioteer, and the mind as reins. The senses, say the wise, are the horses; selfish desires are the roads they travel...When a man lacks discrimination and his mind is uncontrolled, his senses are unmanageable, like the restive horses of a charioteer. But when a man has discrimination and his mind is controlled, his senses, like the well-broken horses of a charioteer, lightly obey the rein.” (*Katha Upanishad*, 1.iii.3-6).

The epistemological implication of this view is that knowledge is rooted in being, and therefore ontological knowledge is the basis of all true cognition of reality: this is the most profound knowledge that traditionalists term ‘gnosis’. Man therefore has the ability, through his innermost self, the transcendent Intellect, to divine that which is real: in Platonic terms, knowledge is simply recollection. It is the art of diver who stands at the precipice of himself and plummets within, to his innermost center, drowning in the ocean of transcendence. Such knowledge is transformative precisely because it penetrates to the very core of reality. It is therefore not mere ‘mental’ knowledge, but knowledge that also acts and feels: gnosis is thus to fully participate in the Presence of the Divine. All other forms of knowledge are partial, valid only within their own limited dimensions of competence. Thus each sense has its own appointed mode of perception, so too does the reasoning mind, but these faculties cannot fathom the heart of the Real. It is only through the Center that the circle is known, only through journeying to the Heart that the Inner Eye of the Intellect can be fully opened. An epistemology that denies verticality thereby limits perception to the outer senses and the reasoning mind, which then usurp the role of the higher faculty, pretending thereby to be competent beyond their limits. Thus the Biblical prophet laments: “O

foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes, and see not; which have ears, and hear not” (*Jeremiah*, v. 21).

In addition to the hierarchy of faculties, verticality entails a hierarchy of knowledge and therefore an authority based on knowledge. Truth is the prerogative of the wise, and the fragrance of wisdom is the virtue of the wakeful heart. Truth is ‘wholeness’, which is embodied as wisdom, that is, ‘holiness’ or sanctity. This is the foundation of all genuine authority. All other constructions of authority are merely formulations of the mind premised on an absence of verticality. Pseudo-spirituality, which may profess to affirm transcendence, betrays transcendence by mistaking the occult or purely psychic realm for the spiritual. Its so-called ‘holy men’ may be invested with authority by their believers, but this is no different to the secular authority conferred by the masses on their ‘false prophets’, the politicians, rulers, celebrities or other ‘idols’, in the sense that the authority claimed or conferred in each of these instances never transcends the horizontal dimension of psycho-physical existence, and cannot therefore be considered vertical in the metaphysical sense understood by tradition. Thus in all religious traditions authority is established on the basis of holiness and orthodoxy, on voluntary obedience and discipline rather than outer compulsion, on outer forms of observance that are coupled with initiatory rights that provide bulwarks against deviation and error, while encouraging and promoting inner search, detachment and compassion.

By affirming transcendence, man affirms his exile from the Origin, and his commitment to a point of Return. By affirming immanence, man affirms his immersion within the sacred theophany, and his commitment to the Center. The purpose of human existence is thus understood in terms of the above commitments, which are essentially the same: reintegration and sanctity. To return to the Origin is to return to the Center. It is to detach from contingency (which implies horizontality) while attaching oneself to the Divine Substance (which implies verticality). The teleological, soteriological and eschatological implications of this are common to all religious traditions: transcendence is the meaning of existence. Because the Center is everywhere (Divine Subjectivity being distinct from the atomized or egoic subjectivity), existence is the effulgent theophany of transcendence; it is the sacred radiance of the Divine: “The center which is here, but which we know is really everywhere, is *Wakan-*

Tanka.” (*Black Elk*). Verticality thus entails a shift in perception, rendering reality as metaphysically transparent: it is to perceive the sacred Center in all things: “God’s center is everywhere, His circumference nowhere.” (*St. Bonaventura*). On the basis of this perception, man is a steward to all that is sacred (“a vicegerent on earth”: *Qur’an*, ii.30), bound to strive to subordinate his passions in view of his reverence of the sacred (“Paradise lies in the shadow of swords”: *Hadith*), and is thereby accountable for his transgressions, for deeds redound upon their doer (“According to what deeds are done/ Do their resulting consequences come to be;/ Yet the doer has no existence:/ This is the Buddha’s teaching”: *Garland Sutra* 10). *Vincit omnia veritas!*: It is through Truth that the round of existence and suffering is transcended, by dying to one’s egoic self and realizing the Truth that lies within, in the innermost Self that is our transcendent and immanent Center. Truth is simplicity, and salvation therefore is purity. It is a return to innocence, to the primordial nature of one’s kardial Origin and Center: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (*Matthew*, v.8); “My earth and My heaven contain me not, but the heart of my faithful servant containeth Me.” (*Hadith Qudsi*).

While traditional man roots meaning in transcendence, the worldly man perceives meaning in predominantly materialistic ways. He compensates for his lack of verticality by an excessive horizontality. Lacking quality, he searches for meaning in predominantly quantitative terms. What he lacks in depth, he strives to express in intensity. What he lacks in wisdom, he makes up for in cleverness. What he lacks of love, he pursues in power. What he lacks of compassion, he expresses in sentimentality. What he lacks in nobility, he strives to express in tawdry celebrity. What he lacks of beauty, he seeks in graphic realism or garish sensationalism. What he lacks in wonder and reverence, he strives to express in idolatry. What he lacks in vision, he compensates for in curiosity. What he lacks of reality, he seeks in the abstract or the surreal. What he lacks of spirituality, he seeks in hallucinatory experiences or in the occult psychology of pseudo-spiritualism. What he lacks of religion, he pursues in false creeds and utopias, in progressivism, materialism and scientism.

As the world devolves, its beguilements increase, demanding greater understanding and resolve to resist its snares. Without the guidance of the Intellect and its sense of a transcendent and all-embracing Reality, which are implicit in verticality, traditional doctrines and sacraments are

leeches of their inwardness and interpreted in a predominantly outer dimension, which is formalistic, literal, and therefore exclusivist. Reduced to their horizontal elements, traditional adages are liable to be misconstrued. For instance, the concept of the “Golden Mean” is susceptible to interpretation by the modernist as a license to experiment all things in moderation, that is, an invitation to try everything at least once, regardless of whether or not the conduct is harmful or otherwise taboo. This is contrary to the traditional understanding of the concept, expressed for instance in Aristotle’s admonition that certain actions are immoral and have no mean, and to Confucius’ view that the avoidance of excess is directed to the development of perfect virtue or *Jen*. The avoidance of certain types of conduct is necessary to the affirmation of transcendence. It acknowledges that the world is subordinate to God. It is for this reason, in part, that each religion, in its own way, proscribes certain conduct (for example, dietary restrictions, or rules against defilement). Equilibrium is rooted in verticality. It balances the material and the spiritual through the realization that the material, per se, has no intrinsic reality, but its value lies in its sacred quality as an aspect of the Divine theophany. But equilibrium is not merely a matter of adjusting the lenses we wear when we view the world, but of locating the Center in our innermost depths. It is by the effort and grace of recollecting who we fundamentally are that we can begin to approach the One Reality that dwells in the Heart of each of us. It is by invoking the Real, not merely through the Holy Names of our respective traditions, but by embodying the Eternal Word within ourselves, that we can realize Its Truth as Presence. It is by transcending ourselves in conformity with the principle of verticality that we can realize our full existential potential, thereby affirming the reality that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God” and that we are spiritual beings, endowed with bodies, and must therefore experience that reality by being in the world but not of it, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, for the greater glory of God.