

Editorial :

“Such stuff as dreams are made on”: Existence and the Flight from Reality

By M. Ali Lakbani

Prospero:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(William Shakespeare:

The Tempest Act 4, scene 1, 148-158)

History is filled with examples of “insubstantial pageants”, which—like the “colossal wreck” of Shelley’s Ozymandias, that legendary “king of kings”—remind us of the reality of evanescence. *Tempus fugit!* and the only constant in the realm of existential reality appears to be change. Yet, beyond this appearance of cosmic flux, there is the hint of an underlying Absolute Reality which is spiritual: as Shakespeare’s Prospero observes, we will discover soon enough—after our revels are ended and when the “baseless fabric” of the cosmic dream has dissolved—that we were “spirits” all along. But while we remain in the grip of this cosmic dream, we are as oblivious to the immutable Absolute Reality as those who are asleep. Thus, according to a sacred tradition in Islam, “People sleep, and when they die they wake.” Hence, the adage, “Die before your death.” Or, as the Buddhists say, “Awaken the Buddha within”.

The Reality to which we must awaken cannot be only within us, for then it would exclude what is beyond us—nor only beyond us, for then it would exclude what is within. It must be both transcendent (beyond) and immanent (within). At the same time, it must account for not only what is spiritual and beyond change, but also what is material and changing. And it cannot be the sum of its contingent parts—for then it would be a mere construct, itself bound by contingency—but rather a transcendent and Absolute Reality, the Oneness of Presence. To perceive this Reality, we must be capable of transcending our own contingent perceptions, for we are like fish trying to understand the Ocean. To do so, we must allow ourselves to open into transcendence; we must be capable of being one with Its Presence—in fact, of being It. We must *be* what we know in order to know who we are. For us to know Reality, there must be a fusion of knowing with being.

All faith traditions teach that union with Reality is not only possible, but it is veritably the human *métier*. But just as the lesser cannot reach the greater, so we cannot reach the Absolute. Union with Reality is therefore not a matter of human entitlement or of human grasp, but rather of divine grace requiring human receptivity and submission. The passage from the human to the divine is through the spiritual grace of opening ourselves to its Presence. To gain entrance to the Throne-Room of the Heart, one does so not by entering but by being entered. This is the explanation of the Sufi mystic, Bayazid Bistami's paradoxical statement, "This thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find it", and his comment, "For thirty years I went in search of God, and when I opened my eyes at the end of this time, I discovered that it was really He who sought for me."

Because Reality is omnipresent, its divine imprint lies both *within us*—in our own spiritual nature—and in the world *outside us*—in the theophany. Its Presence *within us* is the divine spirit that was breathed into our Adamic clay, and which radiates outward from the center of our being. This immanent Center is the Heart, which, is thereby the locus of that spiritual reality (*Atman*, in Vedantic terminology) that transcends contingent being. Just as the eye knows itself through the act of its seeing, so the Heart knows itself through its own "in-sight". And through this insight it recognizes the spiritual reality of Presence in all things: hence, the Biblical teaching that the "Kingdom of Heaven" is within

us, and the Muslim tradition, “God has said: Neither My heaven nor My earth can contain Me, but the Heart of my faithful believer contains Me”. The outer, however, is also a reflection of the inner. The Presence of Reality *outside us* is in the Divine Face—(hence the Koranic statement, “Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God”¹)—which is the constantly replenishing and never-repeating theophany. The spiritual reality of the theophany is identical to that of the Heart, and is thereby recognized by the Heart as sacred. It is through the cognitive faculty of the Divine Intellect that the Heart is able to perceive the spiritual reality of Presence. For the discerning Intellect, everything in the world is a “signpost to the sacred”, resonant of the Heart’s own inner sanctity in accordance with the Upanishadic dictum, “*tat tvam asi*”—“Thou art that”. As William Blake explains, when the world is seen through the “Eye of the Imagination” (which is Blake’s term for the Divine Intellect), the Imagination perceives its own “Divine Body”—for everything has a “Spiritual Body” with “Eternal Lineaments”: in the “Divine Vision”, “everything that lives is holy”.

The fundamental insight of the Heart’s Divine Vision is to recognize its selfsame nature in the mirror of the Divine Face. This is the true object of “reflection.” When we reflect deeply, we begin to perceive our primordial spiritual nature reflected in all things, and we discern its quintessential quality, which is (in Platonic terms) Supreme Goodness—or (in Christian terms), *agape* or sublime Love, and (in Muslim terms), *rahma*, or all-encompassing Mercy. Because of this transcendent quality—which forms the very substrate of being and is therefore its ontological substance—man’s primordial nature possesses both the inward grace of “virtue” and the outward grace of “beauty”. These metaphysical attributes or graces are the foundations of all spiritual ethics (which relate to the essential “virtue” or inward beauty of man) and of all sacred aesthetics (which relate to the essential “beauty” or outward goodness of the world). Virtue and beauty are the reflections within creation of the divine quintessence that is present in the Heart. It is incumbent on man to in turn reflect this quintessence from the Center of his being into the world: this is the meaning of the Koranic *Amanah* or Divine Trust that man has promised to undertake², and it

¹ *Surat Al-Baqarab*, II.115

² *Surat Al-Abzab*, XXXIII:72

is also the basis of the Supreme Commandments on which “hang all the law and the prophets”: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” and “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”.³ To love with one’s complete heart and self is possible only when we act from our Heart—from the Center of our spiritual being. To live in this Center, and from its depth, is to be one with Reality, so that it is experienced not a mere abstraction nor a subjective perception, but in its wholeness—as “holy”—as the sacred awareness of self-transcendent Presence, and the source of all inner contentment, of the peace that “passeth all understanding”.



As we have seen, the basic “in-sight” of the inherent goodness, love and compassion of God’s creation is an attribute of man’s primordial nature—yet there is much to suggest that this is not the commonly experienced reality. This is so firstly, because man and all creatures are separated from God by the very processes of manifestation that pertain to Divine Self-Disclosure, and so man experiences the privative effects of the Cosmic Veil (*maya*, in Sanskrit), including ignorance and imperfection; and secondly, because man is given the freedom to deny God and to misplace His trust in humanity, and frequently does so, thereby abandoning his God-given nature. In both these ways, through privation and sin, human beings are forgetful of Reality. It is this “forgetfulness”, or covering up of Truth, that is our great human folly. As Shakespeare’s Lear laments, “When we are born we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools.”

Traditional societies at least provided certain bulwarks against the folly of “forgetfulness”: doctrinally, they provided the bulwark of “right thinking”, or orthodoxy (doctrines that taught us the spiritual roots of knowing, so that we might distinguish Reality from contingency, by engaging the symbolist spirit and “in-sight” of our native intelligence; that made us aware of the sacred dimensions of the Heart and the theophany; and that reminded us of our human purpose, our ethical obligations, and our accountability); and practically, they provided the bulwark of orthopraxy, of “right practices” (methods of interiorizing Reality, and

³ *Matthew*: XXII.35-40

reflecting it harmoniously, through prayer, virtue and beauty). All of these doctrines and methods served as reminders of the sanctum that lay within us—the source of that clarifying Light, through whose illumination we could transcend our contingent and merely human perspectives.

Modern societies, by contrast, have by and large abandoned these traditional bulwarks. The modernist challenge to orthodoxy has resulted from its anthropocentrism. While scientific knowledge has been a great boon, it has also brought with it certain hubristic tendencies—to deny transcendence; to reduce intellectual “in-sight” to mere reasoning, the spirit to the psyche, and the immeasurable to the measurable; and to view all issues purely in terms of the human potential to address them. The virtue of Heart-centered faith has been replaced by the pseudo-virtue of rational skepticism. It is tempting—but would be wrong—to blame science for these resulting tendencies. Rather, we should recall the stories of Prometheus, Icarus, and Faust, and remind ourselves of the dangers of hubris and the wisdom behind the adage that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing”. Like Horatio, we need to remind ourselves that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our modernist philosophy. The anthropocentric influences that have undermined orthodoxy have thereby also undermined orthopraxy. But the challenges to orthopraxy have been exacerbated by the materialistic conditions of modern societies. More than at any other time in history, humanity is confronted by an increasingly demystified world that is being reduced to its seductive outer elements. The products of our technologies endow us with an array of miraculous powers that were barely imagined in former times, focusing our attention outwardly on our material desires rather than on the theophany, while at the same time focusing us inwardly on seductive and surreal fantasies and virtual realities rather than on our quintessential Reality. In the face of this onslaught of the superficial and the concomitant flight from Reality, there is a growing thirst within man for the Real. Yet, without a rediscovery of Truth through traditional doctrines and practices, it is impossible to quench this inevitable thirst. Instead, it is all too easy for us to become lost in the wilderness of the occult or the pseudo-spiritual, or to linger in the thrall of passional beguilements or abstract, subjective ideologies. What is desperately needed is a way for us to remind ourselves of the Reality behind Prospero’s dream.



The Egyptian Sufi, Dhu 'l-Nun, taught: "The sign that a gnostic is separated from the Divine Presence is that he ceased to do the *dhikr* (the invocation and recollection of God)." The antidote of forgetfulness is remembrance, and therefore all traditional teachings concerning Reality stress the importance of its discernment by the Heart. As we have become removed from our Center through the process of existentiation or Divine Self-Disclosure, so we need to retrace our way back to it, radially, through the process of Divine Self-Discovery. As we are the exteriorization of God, so we must discover God through a process of interiorization, reversing the process of existentiation. We must discover the Center within ourselves. Jalal-ud-Din Rumi summed up a fundamental teaching of traditional epistemology in his statement that "The proof of the sun is the sun: if thou require the proof, do not avert thy face!" The "sun" here is the symbol of the Reality that is the existentiating Light. According to the doctrine that "like can only be known by like", this Light can only be perceived by self-illumination, for it is only by the Heart's Inner Light that its radiance is recognized in the theophany. As it is the mode of perception that determines its content, and as perception and substance must cohere in order to escape illusion, so it is only through self-illumination that Reality is known, transforming our perceptions, so that we see but the Self in the mirror of the Self, and everything imbued with the spiritual luster of the sacred.

To pray is to "cleanse the doors of perception". It is an act of Self-Discovery: to know who we truly are so that we may thereby be one with "That". Prayer is self-illumination through grace—it is the "recollection" of spiritual essence, the self-transcending insight of spiritual vision. Prayer is operative when it practiced in the faith that it is the Heart alone (as Subjective Self) that can know the Absolute (as Objective Reality). It is only by abandoning our outer self to the inner Self—to the Heart that prays—that prayer can occur. This Prayer of the Heart is the "sine qua non" of the return to Reality. Each faith tradition has its own canonical and contemplative forms of prayer, which are "portals to the inner sanctum of the Heart". Of these, the sacramental prayers such as the Lord's Prayer, or the *Surat al-Fatiba*, are particularly vital. But the

sacraments can only open ourselves to our Self to the extent that we participate in them whole-heartedly—with that sincerity and interiority that make them alchemically transformative. As in Leo Tolstoy's story of the legend of *The Three Hermits*, it is those who pray not merely with words and forms but with the Heart itself who are capable of "walking on water"—that is, of transcending the ordinary experience of reality.

Once prayer takes root in us, it transforms us, so that the formal becomes the vehicle of the trans-formal. It is only through the sincerity of prayer and by the continuous invocation of the Self within the Heart—in other words, only through our submission to the interiorizing effects of prayer—that we can be transformed, *realizing* the "Hidden Treasure" of our quintessential nature—the goodness, love and compassion of the Heart. It is through faith and prayer that we engender *virtue*—which is thereby not the acquired and outwardly donned qualities of conventional morality, but of the inherent and radiant qualities of our primordial nature. Virtue is the reflection of our original goodness, loving-kindness, and beneficent compassion. It is, as Krishna taught Arjuna on the sacred plain of Kurukshetra, our innate *dharma*, and the source of harmony and order. It is only by conforming to the inner norm of our spiritual nature—by being "good-hearted" and responding to the world around us through the moral intelligence of "in-sight"—that we can be truly awake, fully Present.

When we are fully Present, we are Heart-Centered, radiating the inner beauty of virtue, and seeing all things as Present, as sacred, as holy, radiant with the beauty of the Divine Face. This is the beauty that abides when the insubstantial pageant of our cosmic dream has dissolved—for, in words of the *badith*, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty".