

# Editorial: On Volition and Desire

*By M. Ali Lakhani*

*'E'n la sua volontade è nostra pace.'*  
(In His Will is our Peace.)

Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto III, line 85

Desire only God, and your heart will be satisfied.

St. Augustine

**H**umankind has been endowed with the gift of free will, and also with a sense of the Sacred, an inclination toward transcendent Beauty. According to Tradition, it is by the divine Will and Fiat that we exist, in accordance with Our Maker's creative Nature, and it is by His Command that we shall return to Him, to be judged according to His Justice and Mercy. But while we exist on this earth, we are entrusted with the gift of free will, a responsibility that carries with it not only the power to act according to our own individual whims and desires but also the fiduciary obligation to respond to the sense of the Sacred within us, in conformity with the beauty and goodness of our inner nature, and in so doing to find our inner Peace.

The purpose of volition is to direct our soul towards Beauty, so that we may be drawn by its gravitational pull, and to resist the false desires of the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, those transient and outward attractions that distract and seduce our refractory will from our impulse for the Sacred, for the eternal and inward Beauty imprinted within the Spirit which is the font of the animating soul. The fulfillment of this

purpose is the Divine Trust that is incumbent on each soul according to the degree of its intelligence.

Tradition teaches us that heaven and hell are both accessible within us, the former by conforming our souls to the divine Will, and the latter through the consequence of pursuing our individual lusts and vain desires. The choice is our own. In the words of Jacob Boehme, “...the free will may reach to which it pleases: both gates stand open to him”. But this choice is not a burden without the blessing of divine guidance. Despite the privative influences of existence, we are guided by our innate intelligence, by its capability of discerning the Sacred within its own Goodness and in the Beauty that surrounds us. The “reminders” of our spiritual patrimony exist first within the microcosm of our primordial nature and its inherent sense of the Sacred which enables it to witness the core of Being (thereby mirroring the pre-existential “witnessing” which was the basis of the soul’s covenant with God in the Qur’anic teaching of the Covenant of Alast, see *The Heights*, 7:172), and second within the macrocosm of the theophanic “signs” that reflect this Beauty. Thus we are taught to “know ourselves” and also to “see God in nature”. The outer is, to discerning eyes, the mirror of the inner. So, for example, the Qur’an states:

It is He who sends down water from the sky. From it you drink and from it come the shrubs among which you graze your herds. And by it He makes crops grow for you and olives and dates and grapes and fruit of every kind. Therein is certainly a sign in that for people who reflect. He has made the night and the day subservient to you, and the sun, the moon and the stars, all subject to His command. Therein are certainly signs in that for people who use their intellect. And also, the things of varying colors He has created for you in the earth. There is certainly a sign in that for people who pay heed. It is He who made the sea subservient to you so that you can eat fresh flesh from it and bring out from it ornaments to wear. And you see the ships cleaving through it so that you can seek His bounty, and so that perhaps you may show thanks. He cast firmly embedded mountains on the earth so it would not move under you, and rivers, pathways, and landmarks so that perhaps you might be guided. And they are guided by the stars. Is He Who creates like him who does not create? O will you not pay heed? (*The Bee*, 16:10-17)

And the Psalms state:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat. (*Psalms*, 19:1-6)

As the theophany reveals itself to us so we are guided according to our propensity to discern the mirror of its Beauty within us. This propensity is a matter of our intellectual receptivity, our spiritual intelligence or faith, which can either be open to the eternal verities of our primordial nature or be veiled from them, both by the beguilements of the material world and by the vainglories of the deluded self. In the former case, the reified world veils us from Beauty and deceives the intelligence, preventing it from seeing things aright, while in the latter, the reified self is the veil that “hardens its heart” and intentionally covers up the spirit, with the full complicity of its egoic volition, against its guiding intelligence. The celebrated Opening Verse (*al-Fatiba*) of the Qur’an thus distinguishes between those “who have gone astray” (by failing to see things aright) and those “cursed ones” (who willfully assert themselves against God). Both these tendencies, toward beguilement of the self by “the life of the present and its glitter” (*Hud*, 11:15) and toward the pitting of the Luciferian self against God (“And Satan whispered unto him and said, ‘O Adam, shall I show thee the Tree of Immortality and a kingdom that fadeth not away?’”, *Taba*, 20:120), are much on display in the world we live in, and we must be vigilant to guard against these tendencies given the conditions of our times.



The modern world poses a great peril for the soul. According to the great faith traditions, we are living in the End Times in which traditional bulwarks have eroded and, in many cases, disappeared altogether. Modern societies are increasingly secularized, pushing the boundaries of religion further into the private sphere. We can see this erosion occurring in all areas through the loss of verticality and the leveling of society to its outer elements. Primordial norms rooted in theocentric metaphysical archetypes of divine revelation, accessible through initiation and intellection, are being denied legitimacy by modernist world-views and schools of thought that privilege anthropocentric norms lacking metaphysical objectivity. Traditional structures of hierarchy and authority are being supplanted by horizontalized notions of individual rights and freedoms, and by norms and values based on the relativist criteria of subjective preferences fueled by fashion or consumerism, or those based on the quantitative criteria of

scientific materialism, which privileges mechanistic and computational analyses over qualitative intellectual perceptions and values. These trends are evident, for example, in the ascendancy of scientific atheism and its assertion of the so-called “God delusion”, in modernist challenges to traditional values about sexual freedom, gay marriage, and gender roles, and in the pervasive influence of scientism and neo-Darwinism within fields ranging from economic planning to health planning to literary criticism. Modernism has even directly influenced religion in diverse ways including evolutionist theology, syncretist ecumenism, New-Ageism, and fundamentalism, to cite only a few examples.

As the world becomes reduced to its surfaces, the qualitative elements of human purpose and value and of spiritual well-being become relegated in importance to quantitative elements such as material comforts and the outer pleasures of sensory gratification and stimulation. The inward contemplativeness of the subject gives way to subjectivism, intellectual intuitions to discursive reasoning, and empathetic virtue to indulgent sentimentalism. The psyche dominates the self and is conflated with the spirit, a trend that is evident in various forms of pseudo-religion. The loss of awareness of true metaphysical archetypes creates at the individual level an appetite for virtual reality and for surrealist fantasy, and at the social level it breeds monstrous utopian delusions. So too unbridled sensory passions, no longer tethered by their guiding intellect, make the soul vulnerable to infernal influences that manifest in myriad forms of hedonism.

In this milieu, the distractions of the material world and of the vain self can easily overwhelm our senses and cause us to lose our grip on reality. More than ever, it becomes important to combat these centrifugal influences by reorienting ourselves to our spiritual Center, by rediscovering the sense of the Sacred within our souls, by seeking its presence in the Beauty of the unfolding theophany around and within us, and by conforming our will to our deeper purpose: to become vessels of the divine Light.



Because we exist, we experience privation. Our desires represent our longing for connection with transcendence, for our apartness to be replaced by a sense of wholeness, for the emptiness within us to

be filled. In reality, as tradition teaches, we are created “from a single soul”, and therefore we have a common metaphysical origin and are connected by an intrinsic harmony, whose core or spiritual Center is our innermost being. Viewed in this light, existence is Beauty. It is the effulgent radiance of this Center, which we recognize as the Sacred. Like the reed-pipe in the opening stanza of Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, we are all exiles seeking to be united with the spiritual reed-bed which is our Origin. It is by sublimating our worldly desires to the Sacred, by being drawn by its Beauty, that we can attain the wholeness that we seek.

Yet we must empty ourselves of ourselves in order to be filled. In the words of T.S. Eliot, “In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession. / In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not.” For the desire for the possession of phenomenal things, and the quest to gratify the phenomenal self, is a form of ignorance—we ignore that which is substantial. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy observes:

...the cause of all wanting is ignorance (*avidya*)—for we “ignore” that the objects of our desire can never be possessed in any real sense of the word, ignore that even when we have got what we want, we still “want” to keep it and are still “in want”. The ignorance meant is of things as they really are, and the consequent attribution of substantiality to what is merely phenomenal; the seeing of Self in what is not-Self.

It is only by detaching ourselves from the lures of the peripheral that we can gain access to the inner sanctum of the Sacred. As Christ taught, we must submit to God’s Will (see *Mark* 14:36: “Father, ...take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt”). And as the Buddha taught (one of his principal teachings being that false desires are the root of all suffering), we must re-educate our desires by awakening our souls to transcendence. By opening ourselves to God, He opens to our souls. By turning towards God, He turns to us. Hence it is written, “Turn ye unto me, ...and I will turn to you” (*Zechariah*, 1:3) and “Remember Me and I will remember you” (Qur’an, *The Cow*, 2:152).

It is through the inner self-restraint of *ascesis* and conformity of our self-will to our primordial nature that we can open ourselves up to our transcendent source and end. It is through reconstitutive prayer and contemplation upon the eternal verities evidenced in our hearts and in nature, that we can “polish the mirror of the soul” and thereby reflect the inner Light that we possess as Lamps of God.

While we cannot necessarily change the way of the world, we can by the Grace of God change ourselves—and by doing so, we can thereby change our own world. But this requires us to reorient ourselves radically towards the “Face of God”, to discern, with “eyes of faith”, the underlying harmony of the unfolding theophany and our role within it. It requires us to open hearts to the intrinsic goodness of creation, to see it not merely in its separateness but in its integrated wholeness, as holy in each of its particulars, and thereby to perceive our own intrinsic goodness too. And by this reorientation, by this witnessing and perception, we can hope by His Grace to redirect ourselves towards His ends, to efface ourselves within His Face and to conform our will to His Will.

The true object of our volition is virtue, and of our desire is union with our Beloved. As our intellects incline to Truth, so our wills incline to Goodness, and our hearts to Beauty. It is in the ways of Goodness and virtue that we must bend our wills, and be drawn by our desire for the Beauty of the sacred presence of our Beloved. It is in so doing that we can hope to be transformed. As Ruysbroek taught, “The measure of your holiness is proportionate to the goodness of your will”, and we cannot attain to our higher purpose on this earth unless we have sublimated our merely human wills and desires to our transcendent Spirit. It is by conforming our desires to our innate Goodness, that we can hope to become a mirror of Beauty and so attain to the Peace that is everlasting.