

Editorial: The Garment of Light and the Garment of Fire

By M. Ali Lakhani

O Children of Adam!
Do not allow Satan to seduce you
in the same way as he caused your ancestors to be driven out of the garden:
he deprived them of their garment [of God-consciousness]
in order to make them aware of their nakedness.

Al-A'raf, 7:27

In both the Biblical and Koranic narratives about the temptation of Man, Adam and Eve are depicted as being in a prelapsarian state of innocence, symbolized by their unselfconscious nakedness. The Bible records, 'And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.' (*Genesis*, 2:25). Their nakedness is a metonym of their purity of spirit, for in Paradise what they perceive wholesomely with the Eye of the Spirit is the Spirit Itself.

This paradisaic state of primordial innocence is associated with the true nature and disposition of Man, which in Islam is termed *fitra*. This is the native state into which each 'naked' soul is born prior to becoming a socialized member of any formal religion. As such, it represents the state of humanity's innate God-consciousness (in Arabic, *taqwa*), denoted by the soul's reverence for spiritual verities (Truth), for natural rectitude (Goodness), and for harmony (Beauty).

When God breathes His Spirit into the clay of Adam, He animates the clay (in Hebrew, *adamah*) with life and illumines it with intelligence. Thus, the Bible states, 'And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' (*Genesis*, 2:7; and see Koran, 15:29, 32:9, and 38:72). The scriptures confirm that Adam, being clothed with the light of intelligence, was taught the names of all things (*Al-Baqarah* 2:31,

Genesis, 2:19-20), learning not only their distinguishing characteristics but their intrinsic nature as 'signs' of the theophany.

In contrast to Adam, who is created from the light of the illumining Spirit, Satan is created from fire (*Al-A'raf*, 7:12). Both light and fire are aspects of the transcendent Spirit, which can manifest as love and wisdom or as a burning and self-consuming flame. Both possibilities (light and fire) are aspects of the All-Possibility of the Absolute Reality of God. As such, both possibilities are also present within Man who, as *Imago Dei*, reflects God. But because God is by nature love and wisdom and has 'willed upon Himself the law of Grace and Mercy' (*Al-An'am*, 6:12), Man, who possesses the gift of free-will, can choose to reflect the light of love and wisdom or the fire of the flame; that is, he can choose, according to the principle of measure, to conform to the bounds—and divine bond—of love, or seek instead, in an act of self-will, to assert his will against God—and thereby break the bond established in his nature (see *Al-Baqarab*, 2:27).

The scriptures record that God commands Man not to eat the forbidden fruit. This command is in effect a test of whether Man, being aware of his innate nature, will choose to conform to it and to the limits set by God or will reject it by transgressing those limits. The tempter (the Biblical serpent or, in the Koran, Iblis) deceives Man by suggesting that, by tasting the forbidden fruit Man will obtain immortality. In other words, the tempter makes the metaphysically absurd claim that the contingent is capable of becoming the Absolute. The serpent states: 'then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil' (*Genesis*, 3:5). It is important to recall here that, in the state of aboriginal innocence, Man perceives reality wholesomely through the Eye of the Spirit, and not fragmentedly through the eyes of the flesh. The tempter suggests that Adam and Eve can only be as gods if they acquire the knowledge of good and evil because that knowledge offers them a truer choice than does the innocent and natural inclination to rectitude. This, too, is a metaphysically absurd claim for it is based on the fallacy that evil is commensurate with good. Evil, however, has no metaphysical reality and, like the fire which is its satanic substance, it cannot subsist without fuel and must eventually destroy itself. Ontological Goodness or intrinsic virtue, by contrast, transcends the polarity of 'good and evil' because its reality is eternal, its locus being the Divine Nature inscribed in the substance of Man.

Satan sought to transform Adam and Eve from their state of Edenic innocence, depicted by their wholesome nakedness, to a state of self-conscious

shame. The tempter's goal was (as the Koranic epigraph notes) to turn their unselfconscious innocence into self-consciousness by causing them to forget their innate God-conscious nature. The Koran elaborates that the purpose of the temptation was to make Adam and Eve 'conscious of their nakedness, of which [hitherto] they had been unaware' (*Al-A'raf*, 7:20) with the result that 'as soon as the two had tasted [the fruit] of the tree, they became conscious of their nakedness' (*Al-A'raf*, 7:22). By their lapse in God-consciousness, the couple became self-conscious, losing their innocence, and thereupon felt compelled to cover up their nakedness in shame (*Al-A'raf*, 7:22; and *Genesis*, 3:7).

When God admonishes Adam and Eve for their folly, they immediately confess to Him, 'We have sinned against ourselves' (*Al-A'raf*, 7:23), correctly discerning that to assert oneself against God is to rebel against one's innate nature. (The Koran repeatedly affirms that sinners only wrong themselves, as in the expression *zalamu anfusabum*, 'they have wronged themselves'). Their sin consists in bartering the peace and beauty of innocence for the tawdry beguilements and illusory freedom of experience offered by the tempter. This is the prototype of all temptations, the Faustian bargain of trading one's soul for the world—a worthless bargain, 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?' (*Mark*, 8:36).

Man's banishment from Eden is the result of his lapsing from God-consciousness into a profound disregard of his own true nature, causing him thereby to lose his soul. For those who set themselves up against Truth and are oblivious of God consign themselves, but for the grace of God, to oblivion (*Al-A'raf*, 7:51). The path back to Paradise—the Straight Path of return to God—is the way of remembrance, vigilance and rectitude. It requires one to retrace the journey from forgetfulness to God-consciousness, to turn away from the unattainable delusion of what C.S. Lewis has termed 'the sweet poison of the false infinite', and to turn instead to the attainable freedom of living in harmony and equilibrium, in conformity with the natural law—that is, within the bounds of one's own reverent nature. Thus, the Koran states (*Ar-Rum*, 30:30),

And so, set thy face steadfastly towards the [one ever-true] faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into man: [for,] not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created—this is the [purpose of the one] ever true faith; but most people know it not.

The Children of Adam are reminded that the most beautiful of garments is reverence. So, the Koran states (*Al-Araf*, 7:26),

Indeed, We have bestowed upon you from on high [the knowledge of making] garments to cover your nakedness, and as a thing of beauty: but the garment of God-consciousness is the best of all. Herein lies a message from God, so that man might take it to heart.

The message is a reminder to Man that in the postlapsarian world, he has to use his intelligence in the service of spiritual beauty, and not to forgo it for the seductions of this world. The only wages of that forgoing will be what has been promised to the iniquitous—garments created out of the very substance from which Satan was formed: fire (*Al-Hajj*, 22:19). The Koran also describes these as ‘garments of black pitch’ worn by those whose ‘faces are veiled by fire.’ (*Ibrahim*, 14:50) Instead, one is enjoined to don the lustrous garments of God-consciousness. It is by faith and virtue that the soul becomes beautiful. So, the Koran asserts, ‘O Children of Adam! Beautify yourselves...’ (*Al-Araf*, 7:31). And in the Hadith of Gabriel, the Prophet is reported to have stated, ‘Doing the beautiful means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, verily He sees you.’

The ‘garment of God-consciousness’ is the beautiful vestment of faith worn by those who live in accordance with their natural disposition. It is donned by prayer, virtue and love. Its symbol is the ‘seamless robe’ which Jesus wore closest to his naked body at the time of his crucifixion (*John*, 19:23). It is also symbolized by the woven white cloth of the Sufis, denoting their spiritual purity, and by the divine robe of light referred to by the psalmist who sang: ‘O Lord my God, thou coverest thyself with light as with a garment’ (*Psalms*, 104:2). It is the garment of virtue which each loving spouse represents to the other (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:187), and it is the robe of our spiritual nakedness—the naked beauty in which we entered this world and to which, by God’s grace, we will return.