

Editorial: The Word, the Wisdom and the Will: Human Responsibility in Light of the Divine Will

By M. Ali Lakhani

Holding with Heraclitus that the Word is common to all, and that Wisdom is to know the Will whereby all things are steered, I am convinced with Jeremias that the human cultures in all their apparent diversity are but the dialects of one and the same language of the spirit, and that there is a 'common universe of discourse' transcending the differences of tongues.

— *Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, from his Farewell Address*

Man was made to give, and mean to give, God glory.
I WAS MADE FOR THIS, each one of us was made for this.

— *Gerard Manley Hopkins, from his Sermons*

The wisdom traditions teach that harmony, or the ordering of diversity, is not achieved by superimposing a formal homogeneity or a constraining and essentializing sameness on reality but by recourse to an ordering Principle, the Logos or Word, which expresses its centering equilibrium and effulgent beauty, outwardly through Revelation, the 'Will whereby all things are steered', and inwardly through Intellection, the apprehending Wisdom by which one transcends the 'apparent diversity' of forms. In the above epigraph excerpted from his Farewell Address to the Harvard Club on the occasion of his 70th birthday, Coomaraswamy links the principal Word, the transpersonal Wisdom and the divine Will, as the basis for the metaphysical harmonizing of the Heraclitian tension between the flow and change that characterize diversity and *becoming* and the deep-seated urge for order and *being*.

Coomaraswamy's reference to the 'differences of tongues' not only evokes a religious pluralism governed by the ordering principle of what Frithjof Schuon termed 'the transcendent unity of religions', enabling one to understand formal differences in terms of their metaphysical transparency, but also at a more profound level implicitly affirms each creature's potential to uniquely manifest the divine Will and the Qualities which grace it — for, as the Holy Quran states, '*there is not a thing but hymneth His praise*' (17:44).

Gerard Manley Hopkins uses the concept of 'selving' to refer to this particularist expressive potential of the divine Will and the gift of its Qualities which constitute the uniqueness (*baeccitas*) of each creature. In his sonnet, 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', he writes,

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

...Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

It is important to understand Hopkins' use of the notion of 'selving' not merely (in Charles Taylor's terminology) as 'monological' but as 'dialogical', as relational rather than self-ish. And, as the sonnet illustrates, this dialogical capability is rooted in the creative Logos, the center of the transpersonal 'Self', represented by 'Christ.' Just as the transcendent unity of religions affirms the principial validity of the diverse revealed forms which express it, so too each individual, potentially as the Perfect Man or *Imago Dei*, expresses the creative Will as Logos, by acting 'in God's eye what in God's eye he is — Christ.' Each creature either unselfconsciously glorifies God by expressing the divine Qualities or vies with other creatures to manifest the divine Will, and, by seeking a common 'language of the spirit', to realign its being and actions in the ordering bond implicit in the harmonizing Principle of that Will. This pluralistic enterprise of harmonization constitutes the 'common universe of discourse' linking the key terms in the Coomaraswamy epigraph: the

Word, the Wisdom and the Will. And at a core level that connects our creative being, its expression, our identity and responsibility, it is also the foundation of our *telos*, as the epigraph from Hopkins' sermon states.

The quest for an ordering principle raises basic questions about human responsibility: What is human responsibility in the face of divine Will? If the world must be what it will be, especially given the spiritual entropy of the 'End Times', what then is expected of our individual engagement with it? Where does human endeavor feature within the scheme of 'the Will whereby all things are steered'?

The sages teach us that human responsibility is not absolved by the supremacy of the divine Will but is subsumed within its conferral on us of individual free will. In endowing us with the freedom to conform to the ordering pattern of His Word or to rebel against it, God permits us the potential for love and virtue, even at the risk of our transgression or sin. The grace of free will requires us to 'act in God's eye what in God's eye we are.' In Hindu terminology, we are to discern and enact our *dharma* — that which we are best fitted to do in order to *be* who we truly are: beings whose nature — however diverse our individual attributes may be — is conformed with the ordering Principle of the Logos. The particular graces of qualities, attributes and skills endowed upon us are for our use as instruments of God in the service of His Will in accordance with the Franciscan Prayer ('*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace*') — or, if we transgressively wish, in defiance of it — in either case, with due accountability.

The Arjun of our times, facing the Kurukshetra of modern life, particularly in these times when centrifugal forces predominate, is likely, however, to be as reticent about engaging with the world as was the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and as uncertain of how to act in face of the daunting challenges of the battlefield. The question facing each of us in these circumstances is 'what is our *dharma*?' If the impelling forces of *Kali Yuga* are inevitable, then how must we act? Is there anything in our nature that can aid us to understand what is humanly possible, and guide our response?

Our responsibility is commensurate with our 'ability to respond', which in turn is a function of our intrinsic nature. Muslims regard the primordial nature (*fitra*) embedded in the creative Principle of the Logos as capable — when the intellectually guided self is conformed to it — of

piercing the worldly and self-shrouding veil of forgetfulness (*ghafla*), and therefore responsibility, generally understood, is first a matter of intellection, of conforming to one's *fitra*. 'Know thyself', as the Delphic oracle stated. By contrast, the Augustinian tradition in Christianity, which emphasizes the doctrine of Original Sin, links the conforming responsibilities of Man more to salvific acts of faith and volition modeled on the Christic Logos as loving Savior, than on intellection. In each of these examples, despite the differences in emphasis, human responsibility is grounded in the Word that fuses knowing and being in love, the criterion of the divine Will, which, in purely human terms, we are free to accept or reject, but in the latter case not without the Biblical precaution: '*for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!*' (Matthew, 18:7)

Conformation to the divine Will itself requires a willingness to be guided by the unifying Principle of the Logos. Thus, the Holy Quran states that '*God will not change the condition of a people until they first change what is in themselves*' (13:11) and it affirms that this requires adherence to one's primordial nature (30:30); and so Muslims pray to be guided on the Right Path (1:7), knowing that this grace can be foreclosed if they choose instead to follow their vain desires and appetites (45:23). Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita states, '*He who discards scriptural injunctions and acts according to his own whims attains neither perfection, nor happiness, nor the supreme destination.*' (BG 16.23) Instead, each is exhorted to act according to the perennial law (*sanatana dharma*) of surrendering to the Logos by acting out of one's innermost nature (BG 3:33), with compassionate detachment. Christians model their actions on the Christic example of the Gethsemane prayer ('*not my will, but yours, be done*') (Luke, 22:42; and see also Mark 14:36) and the Lord's Prayer ('*Thy Will be done*'), acknowledging, in Dante's phrase: '*E'n la sua volontade è nostra pace*' ('*In His Will is our Peace*') (*Paradiso*, 3:85).

Human responsibility thus lies in discovering one's *dharmā* or spiritual purpose. In this, it is the 'Inner Man' that guides the 'Outer Man'. One must seek to use one's heart and conscience to discern what is needed, and to apply the particular skills gifted to one in the service of that goal. For each, therefore, the particular responsibility differs, while the universal duty of surrender is the same. In the result, one's *dharmā* lies

in the Logotic *selving* that conforms us to our essential and particular nature. This is the essence of human responsibility, and its effects are salvific. As the Gospel of Thomas states, *'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you; If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.'* (Saying 70)

Applying these principles to the question of human responsibility in the End Times, let us begin by looking at the conditions of the modern world. Never before in recorded history has humanity possessed not only the means to destroy both itself and this hospitable planet, but also the knowledge and therefore the motivation to avert this destruction. Whether one considers our nuclear or biological weaponry, our trans-humanist tinkering, our experiments with technologies which (we are being warned by scientists) could dominate and surpass us, if not harm and destroy us, our devastation and depredations of the environment, or our addiction to soul-destroying information technologies, the signs for this destructive potential and its actualization are blindingly evident. As we look into the mirror raised up to us by the current twin crises of climate change and the global pandemic, it is clearer than it ever has been that humanity must pull together or else risk pulling apart. And yet, amidst the many positive signs of this recognition, there appears to be a reluctance to engage our obvious responsibilities, even if the threats are existential. Why is this?

While there are many reasons for our lassitude (materialism and individualism being foremost among them) the principal reason is our loss of the sense of the sacred. The ethos of modernism which is dominating our times, particularly in the 'West', is causing us to lose that vision of the wholeness that binds us, that matricular bond which goes well beyond the simplistic calculus of utility and self-interestedness but extends to an appreciation of the transcendent source of our harmony, that intrinsic Center of which the great and unanimous wisdom traditions speak. It is this universal and shared ground of our being, the Logos, which compels us to care for each other as for ourselves, to empathize with one another, and to act in a common cause for the common good. But before one can speak of our responsibility for retrieving the sense of the sacred, one needs to understand the reasons for its loss.

Generally stated, there are primarily two interconnecting reasons

for our loss of the sense of the sacred: the first is the intellectual error of our forgetfulness in the face of *maya* or the veil of illusion, and the second is the volitional error of our succumbing to worldly temptations. Forgetfulness represents an epistemic closure, where the outward veil of our existence draws our attention toward the illusory and peripheral distractions of the material, psychically occluded and virtual worlds, and away from the Real. Succumbing to the temptations of those worlds represents a moral failing, where the inward forces of our egoic and untamed wills enslave us to their devouring whims and appetites. Both these influences intersect in their centrifugal aims and effects which cause us to draw away from our binding Center, as in the Yeatsian image (in 'The Second Coming') of the falcon gyring away from the falconer. In thrall to these influences, one feels powerless to reconnect with the underlying source of order and equilibrium.

Now, apart from the 'ways of the world', we each have a responsibility in the first instance to turn away from darkness toward the Light, to restore order and equilibrium within ourselves. While the wayward conditions of modernity may make this task of a reorienting *metanoia* more daunting than in premodern eras when there was a greater appreciation for the sacred, and when a more supportive framework existed for sustaining such an endeavor, it is nonetheless incumbent on each of us to do what we can. But while this responsibility to 'save oneself before one can save the world' must be undertaken individually and not vicariously, it requires guidance. A 'traveler on the Path' today can submit to a revealed tradition, to its scriptures and the wisdom and guidance of authentic teachers, while also drawing support from the fellowship of other wayfarers and their pluralistic 'common universe of discourse' which embraces the common 'language of the spirit.' As religions and cultures come increasingly into contact with each other in a globalizing world, it is evident that pluralistic bonding is better than polarizing conflict. The portals of the new knowledge societies have opened us, more than ever before in history, to a better understanding of religious commonalities founded in a principal understanding that transcends the limitations of formal differences while nevertheless respecting them. So, by re-centering ourselves, we can reposition ourselves to better engage with the pressing issues of the modern world.

The veil of forgetfulness is countered not by renouncing the world but

by resacralizing it through our individual practices, guided by Tradition, of remembrance (the essence of prayer) and of cleansing the doors of perception to witness the ever-renewing theophanies. Remembrance is the rediscovery and affirmation of our primordial ground of being, our rootedness in God. It is through reconnecting with our innermost nature that we can commune with the Divine, and thereby with our common humanity.

Similarly, the veil of temptation is not conquered through rigidly spurning and denying our appetites but by resacralizing and sublimating them through purification. It is not so much that the world is renounced as that, through an attitude of detachment, we recognize the beauty in it which its Maker saw it as 'good' (Genesis, 1:31).

Prayer, invocation, and mindfulness of the divine presence, are the ways to overcome our forgetfulness. Virtue, goodwill, and the disciplines of sacrifice and purgation, are the ways to overcome the temptations that will undoubtedly beset us. The fruit of the former is the grace of insight or vision, attributes of the path of knowledge; the fruit of the latter, the grace of wholesomeness or purity, attributes of the path of love.

If the principal source of human responsibility, then, is perception of the sacred, this requires that we conform ourselves to the divine Principle, opening ourselves to being shaped by the divine Will into that perfection for which we were created so as to better purpose ourselves to the world. Self-reformation is a prelude to one's efforts to reform the world. Our foremost responsibility is to be the guardians of our own souls against the corruptions of the world in order to fulfill our corollary responsibility, to be better stewards of the world. In becoming better human beings, we can discover our own divinely endowed talents and find the ways in which we are graced to serve the world, in accordance with the higher Will we serve.

In the face of the conditions of our times, we each have a *dharmā* to discover. It is through our reconnection with the sacred that we can fulfil our individual responsibility in a manner that aligns our skills to the centering bond of harmony. Each of us has a particular purpose, to be undertaken based on our consciences and God-given gifts. So, Krishna informs Arjun, *'It is better to do one's own dharma, even though imperfectly, than to do another's dharma, even though perfectly. By doing one's innate duties, a person does not incur sin.'*

(BG 18:47) One's particular responsibility is a function of one's own context, office and skills. Thus, in the sonnet quoted earlier, Hopkins writes that 'the just man justices;/ Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces'. Hopkins is affirming that each is fitted for a particular function which is fulfilled in accordance with God's grace. Though our gifts (graces) are individual, what binds and centers us is universal. That is the basis of our innermost Self and the empathy which defines our humanity. The Persian poet Sa'di reminds us in his celebrated '*Bani Adam*' verse that whoever has no empathy for the pain of another does not deserve to be called 'human'. *Dharma*, in the sense of human responsibility, is the compulsion to care that is born from deep empathy, one that has profound spiritual roots.

An example of such empathic caring can be found in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where the storm-ravaged king experiences a deep empathy for his fellow 'houseless' creatures, and feels driven to rectify the injustice of their suffering:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? Oh, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp.
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. (KL, 3.iv.28-36)

Later, in his 'madness', Lear tells the blinded Gloucester, who now sees the world 'feelingly', that 'A man may see how this world goes with no eyes' (KL, 4.vi.145) because empathy is able to discern injustices, especially as practiced by those in power:

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw doth pierce it. (KL, 4.vi.152-155)

Lear's 'reason in madness' illustrates how it is fellow-feeling that lies at the heart of human responsibility. It requires looking at the world

with the inner vision of empathy. Most however choose not to look with the Inner Eye but merely with the fleshly eyes which, all too often, as Lear notes, are like the ‘glass eyes’ of a ‘scurvy politician’ (KL, 4.vi. 158-158), which, possessing worldly authority but no humane empathy, are blind and heartless in relation to the true state of the human condition. The normative conscience that can guide us is the Wisdom of which Coomaraswamy speaks, born of an alignment with one’s deepest nature, and commensurate with the principal Word and the divine Will. It is through the eyes of this innermost Self that the state of the world is to be viewed, and that our own human responsibility can be defined.

In seeking his own *dharmā*, Coomaraswamy told the Harvard Club that the time had come for him ‘to exchange the active for a more contemplative way of life’. He announced that he hoped to return to India in a few months to take up the devotional surrender appropriate in Hinduism to one’s final stage of life — but his plans were not to be. He died some 18 days after delivering this Address.

Coomaraswamy ended his talk by emphasizing what we alluded to earlier — the importance of identifying oneself not with the ‘Outer Man’ but with the ‘Inner Man’, the transpersonal Self that connects us all, which, as we have argued, is also the guiding Self that is aligned in its Wisdom with the Word and the Will:

‘...And so, though I may be here for another year, I ask you also to say: Goodbye — equally in the etymological sense of the word and in that of the Sanskrit *Svaga*, a salutation that expressed the wish “May you come into your own”, that is, may I know and become what I am. No longer this man So-and-So, but the Self that is also the Being of all beings, my Self and your Self.’

And we too end with this same prayer for the grace of our *selving*: ‘May we each come into our own, as our innermost Self, and be guided by its Wisdom.’