

Two



TRUTH

*The Knowledge That Illuminates
and Delivers from the Bondage of Ignorance*

Truth hath come and falsehood hath vanished away.
Verily, falsehood is ever certain to vanish.

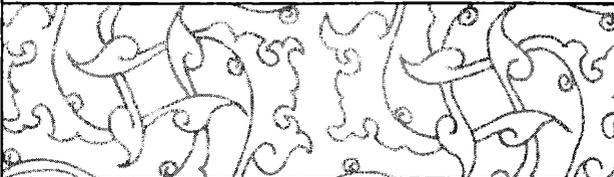
Quran 17:81

Then you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall
make you free.

The Gospel according to John 8:32, NIV

One with Thee make me, O my One,
through Oneness
Faithed in sincerity no path can reach.
I am the Truth, and Truth, for Truth, is Truth,
Robed in Its Essence, thus beyond separation.'

Hallāj



THE CENTRALITY OF TRUTH

The famous tenth-century Sufi Maṣūʾ al-Ḥallāj uttered *anā'l-Ḥaqq*, that is, “I am the Truth” or “I am the Real,” and paid for it with his life, for many misconstrued the real import of these words. These words have nevertheless echoed like an ever-repeated refrain through the annals of Sufism during the past millennium. What is this Truth of which Ḥallāj spoke, for which he paid with his life, and that all Sufis have sought to attain, considering its attainment to be the supreme goal of human life? The term *ḥaqq* used by Ḥallāj is a Quranic term. It means both truth and reality and is in fact a Name of God, who is usually referred to in Sufi literature alternatively as *Allāh* or *al-Ḥaqq*, for God is both absolute Truth and absolute Reality. The term *ḥaqīqah*, which is derived from it, refers at once to the Truth and to truth in whatever context and at any level of reality with which one is concerned. In the same way that the word *realization* contains the term *real*, spiritual realization in Sufism is called *taḥaqquq* (from the word *ḥaqq*), and the accomplished Sufi is called *muḥaqqiq* in the lexicon of figures such as the “supreme master” Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī, whose teachings have dominated much of Sufism for the past seven centuries.

According to Sufism, the supreme goal of human life is to attain Truth, which is also Reality, the source of all reality, and whose attainment, as also stated by Christ, makes us free, delivering us from the bondage of ignorance. Although deeply involved with love and also on a certain level with action, Sufism is at the highest level a path of knowledge (*ma‘rifah* in Arabic and *‘irfān* in Persian), a knowledge that is illuminative and unitive, a knowledge whose highest object is the Truth as such, that is, God, and subsequently the knowledge of things in relation to God. There is such a thing as the Truth, and it can be known. This is the first of all certitudes, from which flow all other certitudes of human life. The knowledge of the Truth is like the light of the sun while love is like the heat that always accompanies that light.

In the Quran we read, “Moses said to his household: Verily, beyond all doubt I have seen a fire. I will bring you tidings of it or I will bring you a flaming brand that ye may warm yourselves” (Quran 27:6).² To bring tidings of the fire, to see a firebrand, and to be warmed (which could also be translated as being burned) by the fire in this Quranic verse symbolize the three stages of attaining certainty of the Truth, which is symbolized here by fire. To use the traditional accounts of the

levels of certainty, there is first of all the lore or science of certainty (*'ilm al-yaqīn*), which is like hearing a description of fire from a reliable source and gaining certainty from this description. This is usually called the lore of certainty, but it also means certainty of lore or on the level of lore. Then there is the eye of certainty, or in a sense the certainty of seeing (*'ayn al-yaqīn*), which is like seeing the fire and gaining certainty of its existence through direct vision. Finally, there is the truth of certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*)—or again what can also be understood as certainty of truth—which is like being consumed by the fire and gaining the highest certainty of it by “becoming” the fire. The goal of the life of the spiritual person is to ascend this ladder of certainty until he or she is consumed by the fire of the Truth, to which some Christian mystics refer as being consumed in God.

In a famous verse Rūmī says:

The result of my life is contained in but three words:
I was unripe, I ripened, and I was consumed.

He is referring here to the same reality. There is first of all the certainty that there is such a thing as the Truth. Furthermore, on the basis of this first certainty, one can advance to higher levels of certainty of the Truth until one is consumed by It and one enters the Garden of Truth Itself.

THE CENTRALITY OF GNOSIS TO SUFISM

Christ said, “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2). This saying has of course several meanings. One of them is that there are many religions that lead to God. It also means that there are different types of spiritual paths, some based on sacrifice and selfless action, some on faith and devotion, some on love, and some on knowledge. Since Islam is the religion of unity, its inner dimension, which is Sufism, integrates these different possibilities within itself. But also since Islam is based ultimately on the knowledge of the Oneness of God, the way of knowledge is central to the Sufi path although, as already stated, this knowledge is always combined with love, faith, and correct action. That is why many of those who know in a unitive and illuminative manner and who are called gnostics (in the original sense of the term and not

as a Christian heresy) have often composed the most sublime mystical love poetry. The knowledge of which Sufism speaks is not mental knowledge but a light that illuminates the beholder of this knowledge and in fact all around it and finally returns the human being to its Source, the Supernal Sun. On the highest level, the subject as well as the object of this knowledge is God. The gnostic in Sufism is called *al-‘arīf bi’Llāh*, one who knows *by* God and not one who knows God, for ultimately it is only the Divine Spark within us that can know the Divine. Our duty is to remove the veils within that prevent such a unitive knowledge from taking place.

The Prophet has said, “Knowledge is Light,” and one can add that the Quran speaks of God being the Light of the heavens and the earth. Now, existence itself is a ray of light that issues from the Divine Sun. Knowledge is therefore also being. The more one knows in a principal manner, and not only discursively, the more one *is*. On the highest level the knower, knowledge, and the known are one. To know the Truth with one’s whole being is ultimately to “become the Truth,” to realize that the root of our “I” is the Divine Self Itself, who alone can ultimately utter “I.” It was not the individual ego of al-Ḥallāj who uttered *anā’l-Ḥaqq*. That would be blasphemy, and that is how those ignorant around him who did not understand interpreted it. In reality, one who does not utter *anā’l-Ḥaqq* is still living as a polytheist and idol worshipper, positing his or her own ego as a reality separate from God as *al-Ḥaqq* and idolizing that ever-changing and evanescent ego as well as the world as a divinity. In any case, the quest for the Truth lies at the heart of Sufism, and the goal of the adept is to be able to ascend the levels of certitude until one’s separate existence is consumed by the Truth and one is given access to the Garden of Truth.

SUFI DOCTRINE AND ITS FUNCTION IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The description and theoretical exposition of the Truth is contained in Sufi doctrine while the realization of the Truth is possible only through spiritual practice. Sufi doctrine, which is also called theoretical gnosis (*al-taṣawwuf al-‘ilmī* in Arabic and *‘irfān-i nazari* in Persian), is itself the fruit of spiritual realization and not simply philosophical speculation (for more discussion, see appendix 1). It is presented to those in quest of the Truth as a map of the structure of reality and the road that is

to be followed to transcend the cosmic labyrinth. One might say that the Sufi masters first climbed the cosmic mountain and then flew into the sky of the Divine Presence and after that, upon descending, drew a map for other climbers who wished to reach the summit and fly to the Beyond. Sufi doctrine is like the lore of certainty and its realization the truth of certainty. From the operative point of view, the doctrine is presented and then its truths realized, but in reality it is the realization of the truths of the path that have made it possible in the first place for master expositors of Sufi doctrine to formulate their teachings and guide men and women on their journey to the One. Theoretical gnosis appears as a *theoria*, in the original Greek sense of vision, of the Truth, but in fact it issues from consummation by that Truth. Only then can it act as guide for those who wish to reach that Truth. Sufi doctrine or theoretical gnosis seems to begin with the mind, but for its full understanding it must be accompanied by practice, which involves the whole of one's being and requires faith. Through this process what appears at first as a concept in the mind becomes a luminous presence that transforms one's whole being, further informing the theory or doctrine.

Sufi doctrine is in a sense both the beginning and end of the Sufi path. It is the beginning because it presents to the seeker, before he or she undertakes the spiritual quest, the basic truths concerning the nature of reality and finally the crowning Truth concerning Ultimate Reality as such. It is the end because the goal of Sufism is the attainment of that gnosis or *ma'rifah*, described theoretically in texts of Sufi doctrine but now realized with one's whole being. The lore of certainty in which we hear about the fire of truth cannot but lead, ultimately, through our quest after the fire, to discovering it and being consumed by it.

In traditional Islamic society most disciples were introduced to only certain essential elements of Sufi doctrine, and gradually as they progressed upon the path, more and more doctrine was taught to them. The great expositions of Sufi doctrine by such figures as Ibn 'Arabī, and later followers of his school such as Ṣadr al-Dīn Qunyawī, 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, Dā'ūd Qayṣarī, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, Ibn Turkah Iṣfahānī, 'Abd al-Ghaniy al-Nābulusī, and many others were certainly available but studied only by a few among the larger groups of adherents of Sufism. The tradition itself, the Quran along with its inspired commentaries, the sayings of the Prophet (*Ḥadīth*) and of many sages and saints, traditional literature, and other sources, provided for those

embarking upon the path a homogeneous religious and intellectual ambience and the basic elements of the Truth necessary to attain the goal.

Today we no longer live in such a situation, even in many parts of the Islamic world. Especially in the West, most people no longer hold a homogeneous spiritual and metaphysical worldview from which one can begin. To make Sufism understood to Westerners in such a situation, it is therefore necessary, even more so than in traditional Islamic circles, to begin with a fuller exposition of Sufi doctrine. This in turn involves not only presenting these doctrines but also clearing the ground of errors that prevent the mind from understanding the doctrines involved. In a world in which agnosticism and skepticism were very rare, one did not have to remove such errors before speaking of the existence of God. Today, obviously, the situation is very different.

Ideally, therefore, it would be necessary to clear the ground of all prevalent errors, according to the Sufi point of view and authentic metaphysics in general, such as secular humanism, rationalism, empiricism, behaviorism, deconstructionism, and so forth, which clutter the minds of so many men and women today. Only then can one present to them the Truth, which Sufi doctrine seeks to expound and explain. But that is not practically feasible here, and it would require another book. I shall therefore present the main aspects of Sufi doctrine with the presumption that those who read this book are already in quest of something beyond the fashionable “isms” of the day and that through their intelligence they will understand, at least on the theoretical level, what this doctrine entails. For those who remain rooted in the modern and now postmodern mind-set in which Truth itself in its absolute sense is denied and metaphysics is not even considered a possibility, what is said about the Truth here can at least make them better acquainted with the worldview that underlies and defines Sufism in its diverse manifestations. Nevertheless, whenever necessary, reference will be made to errors that prevent the truths of Sufism from being comprehended.

THE DIVINE REALITY

The highest truth is the truth of the Highest, and the knowledge of the Supreme Reality is supreme knowledge. Although this principal knowledge is at the heart and within the very substance of the intel-

lect, the Supreme Principle cannot be known in the ordinary manner of knowing to which our minds have become habituated. It cannot be comprehended by the mind because the very term *comprehend* is derived from a Latin word meaning to encompass and to embrace, but the Divine Reality is Infinite and cannot be encompassed by anything. The only way to know It is to plunge into the Sea of Divinity, to swim in the Ocean of the Godhead, to use the well-known image of Meister Eckhart. Our intellect is like an arrow that can reach the sun and is given the power by God to anticipate the knowledge gained by this "union." That is why we are able to speak about God and even make the assertion in an apophatic manner that God in His Essence is beyond all that we can say of Him. At the heart of Sufi doctrine and theoretical gnosis stands the Reality, which is unutterable and yet makes all metaphysical uttering possible and, furthermore, manifests Itself in categories that can be known in a kathaphatic manner, that is, in positive categories. The subject of Sufi metaphysics is said in classical texts to be the unconditioned absolute Reality, which is not even conditioned by absoluteness. Yet this metaphysics begins and ends with the truth of this Supreme Reality because It is the Origin and End of all things and Its realization the supreme goal of human life. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Supreme Principle is both the absolutely transcendent Reality and the absolutely immanent Self, who determines the ultimate reality of human beings and defines what it means to be human.

The Divine Essence, or what is referred to in Christian theology as Ipseity, called *al-Dhāt* in Arabic, is beyond all determination and definition and corresponds to what certain Christian mystics call the Godhead or the Divine Ground. It is the Essence of the Divine Order or God. The Islamic term for God, *Allāh*, denotes the Divine Essence as well as the Divine Names and Qualities, which make creation and manifestation possible. The Name *Allāh* denotes at once Godhead and God as the Divine Person and Creator. It contains, therefore, both the impersonal and personal aspects of the Divinity. *Allāh* is God understood in the full metaphysical understanding of the term and not according to particular confessional and theological definitions. *Allāh* is Reality, which is at once absolute, infinite, and pure goodness and perfection. God is the Absolute, the One before whom no relativity may even be said to exist. He is the Infinite in that in Him are to be found all possibilities. It must be remembered here that the words *possibility*,

potentiality, and *potency* are all related etymologically. This truth is an indication of the fact that possibility and the power to bring all existents into being are related in the Divine Order. God is also infinite and absolute goodness and perfection as well as the source of all goodness and perfection in the created order.

Sufi metaphysics has used several symbolic languages to express the truths with which it is concerned, including symbols connected to light, to the features of the human face, and to love, but most of all it has relied on the revelation by God in the Quran of His Names and Qualities. There is subsequently in Sufism the very important science of the Divine Names, which Muslims believe have been revealed directly by God as a means of unveiling His Nature, to the extent that He has wished, to the Prophet and through him to the followers of His last revelation. This science has both a theoretical and a practical import. Theoretically it depicts a metaphysical vision of the Divinity and the cosmology that flows from it, and practically it makes possible access to the Divinity for it is through the Names of God—the sacred Names revealed by God in the Quran concerning Himself—that men and women are able to return to God and to realize who they really are. To call God by His “Beautiful Names,” to use the Quranic terminology, results in receiving His answer since He Himself has revealed these Names as His Names; it results in drawing nigh unto Him.

In this science a distinction is made first of all between God’s Essence, His Names and Qualities, and His Acts (*al-Dhāt*, *al-Asmā’*, and *al-Ṣifāt* and *al-Af’āl* in Arabic). Although the Essence Itself is beyond all names and determinations, being the black light, which is black because of the intensity of its luminosity, certain Names pertain to It and It alone and never to His Acts, which constitute His creation; such Names include *huwa* (the Essence), *al-Rahmān* (the all-Good), *al-Raḥīm* (the infinitely Merciful), and *al-Aḥad* (the One). Then there is the level of the Names and Qualities, which are the first Self-Determinations or Self-Entifications (*ta’ayyun*) of the Essence. At this level are Names pertaining to various Divine Qualities such as generosity (*karāmah*) with the corresponding Name *al-Karīm* (the Generous), or the Quality of knowing (*‘ilm*), of which the corresponding Divine Name is *al-‘Alīm* (the Knower). Finally, there are Names such as *al-Khāliq*, meaning Creator, pertaining to God’s Acts, which are the foundations of His creation; in the deepest sense, creation is not only a result of a Divine Act but the whole created order an Act of God itself.

At the level of the Essence there is absolute oneness, but on the level of the Names and Qualities multiplicity is introduced although without destroying in any way the Divine Unity, since each Name and Quality is a self-determination of the Essence. Furthermore, it is at the stage of the Names and Qualities that the first basic duality, that is, the archetype of the feminine/masculine duality in the human and cosmic orders (the yin/yang of the Chinese tradition) appears. The Names are divided into those of Majesty (*jalāl*), the source of the masculine, and those of Beauty (*jamāl*), the source of the feminine. God is at once just and forgiving, wrathful and merciful, although as it is written on the Divine Throne, according to a sacred saying of the Prophet quoted often by Sufis, "Verily My Mercy precedeth My Wrath." This *ḥadīth* means that although God is just and is wrathful toward evildoers, His Mercy comes before His Justice and He forgives those who have committed evil acts yet turn to Him in earnestness and with their whole being. Were it not for this ordering of the Names in the Divine Order, there would be no positive dualities observable in creation such as the male/female or yin/yang distinctions. Such dualities must, however, be distinguished from false dualisms, such as gods of good and evil, which one finds in certain dualistic religions, for the dualism implied in the ordering of the Divine Names in Islam does not in any way detract from the Oneness of the Divine Principle. The whole universe comes into being through the interplay of the various determinations of the Divine Names and Qualities. The Names of God are not simply words in the ordinary sense but realities, each of which reflects an aspect of the Divine Reality. Moreover, in every religion each Name that plays both a cosmological and salvific role is sanctified through revelation by the Reality to which the Name refers. For example, in Hinduism we have the sound *Om* and on another level the names Ś'iva and Viṣṇu, which correspond in the Hindu universe to the Names and corresponding Qualities of God in Islam. In any case, the science of the Names is, according to the Sufis, the key for knowledge of ourselves, of the world, and ultimately of God as well as the means of return to our Origin.

THE ONENESS OF BEING

The Sufi science of the Divine Reality cannot be fully understood without discussing the famous doctrine of the "transcendent oneness

or unity of being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*), which has been so often misconstrued by Westerners and also by some modernized as well as exoteric Muslims as pantheism. To understand this doctrine, which many have called the crowning jewel of Sufism, it is necessary to turn our attention first to the universal hierarchy of reality. There is first of all the Ultimate Reality, which is the Beyond-Being and which some have called Non-Being, that is, a reality that transcends even Being taken as a positive category. It can be symbolized by that darkness or black light standing above and not below light and its polarizations by a prism into various colors. It is the aspect of the Divinity that is above as well as within the creative aspect of God and does not participate in the creative act. It corresponds metaphysically to the Void or *śūnyata* in Buddhism and to the supreme Tao, which cannot be named in Far Eastern doctrines. The first determination of Beyond-Being is Being, the ontological principle, which is God in His aspect as Person and Creator, the reality we address as Thou and our Lord. Then there is the Logos *in divinis*, to be distinguished from the created Logos. This Logos *in divinis* is at once the origin of universal existence and of all prophetic functions. Christianity states that it was by the Word (that is, the Logos) that all things were made and that Christ was the Logos. A similar doctrine can be found in Sufism, where the Prophet is identified, in his inner reality as the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyyah*), with the Word or Logos. As far as levels of being are concerned, we can speak of Beyond-Being, Being, and Universal Existence, which embraces and gives reality to the existence of all things. It is by virtue of the act of existentiation or what the Quran calls the command “Be!” (*kun!*) that everything in the universe has come into being. Multiplicity has appeared, but inwardly it still bears the imprint of unity.

The truth of the oneness of Being can be fully known only by being experienced spiritually. When the veil of the ego is removed within the human being, the inner Divine Spark sees and knows the Divine everywhere behind the veils of multiplicity. God becomes the eye with which the human being sees, and the human being becomes the eye with which God sees the world. In reality God is the light with which we see all things. That is why we cannot see Him in the ordinary sense. As Maḥmūd Shabistārī, the fourteenth-century Persian Sufi poet, said in a celebrated verse in his *Rose Garden of Divine Mysteries*:

Thou art like the eye and He the light of the eye,
Who has ever been able to see with the eye that with which the
eye sees?³

It is also possible to have an intellectual participation in seizing this truth through proper metaphysical preparation. That is why there are extensive works of Sufi doctrine and theoretical gnosis such as those of Shams al-Dīn Fanārī and Ibn Turkah Iṣfahānī, to which we shall turn in appendix 1, as well as writings of philosophers and theosophers such as Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī that deal extensively with the doctrine of the oneness of Being, which can in fact be interpreted in several ways. The meaning of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, if not the actual expression, can be found in sources ranging from certain Quranic verses, such as “Whithersoever ye turn there is the Face of God” (2:115), to certain sayings of the Prophet, such as “I am Aḥmad without the *m*” (meaning *Aḥad* or the One, referring to the inner oneness of the Prophet with the Source of all being). It is also the theme of many poems, some of which are among the greatest masterpieces of Sufi poetry. As for its full exposition, it must be sought in works of Sufi metaphysics. In any case, to understand even the theoretical meaning of the oneness of Being on any level requires a certain intellectual intuition as well as intellectual preparation, in addition to Divine grace, while only the saint who has reached the end of the Sufi path and become drowned in the Ocean of Divinity can know its meaning fully and in the ultimate sense.

Only a person of the spiritual rank of Ibn ‘Arabī could have sung:

We were letters, exalted! not yet uttered,
Held aloft in the keep of the Highest of Summits,
I Therein am Thou, and we are Thou,
And Thou art He, and All is in He is He—
Ask of any that so far hath reached.⁴

To speak of being is to speak of reality. Now if God is *al-Ḥaqq*, that is, the Absolute Truth and Absolute Reality or Absolute Being—which in this case may be said to embrace both Beyond-Being and Being—and He is at the same time *al-Aḥad*, the One, there cannot be two independent realities. That would ultimately involve dualism in

the principal order and the negation of both the oneness and the absoluteness of God. Although it may appear so outwardly, there cannot therefore be but one Being; all beings must issue from and ultimately be nothing other than Being. Complete ontological otherness would imply a form of dualism and posit a thing to be real independent of God or, to speak more philosophically, to possess a being completely other than the Absolute Being. Every creature has a face turned to God, which is also the Face of God turned to that creature, bestowing being upon that creature; and each creature has a face turned to the world and has an essence in itself, which makes it what it is in itself. This is what the Islamic philosophers call the quiddity or essence of an existent, as opposed to its existence, and the Sufis refer to the highest level of this reality as its immutable archetype (*'ayn thābit*). The latter is literally “nothing” in that it has no existence in itself. Everything that exists does so as the result of God’s existentiation of its archetype. Every creature is ultimately the manifestation of the Face of God and Its reflections through the immutable archetypes upon the mirror of nothingness. When the Quran asserts, “Everything perisheth save His Face” (28:88), the Sufis understand this truth as referring not to some future eschatological event but to the here and now. At this very moment, which is also the eternal now, everything is nonexistent and has perished in itself save the Face of God, and right now in whichever direction one turns there is His Face, if one could only see. To understand this reality is to realize the meaning of the oneness of Being.

The world appears to us as multiplicity, and the goal of the spiritual life is to ascend from this multiplicity to unity, to see the One in the many and the many integrated into the One. Now the doctrine of the oneness of Being does not negate the reality of multiplicity. Nor does it claim that God is the world and the world in its totality is God, a position held by pantheists. How could a metaphysics that speaks so categorically of the transcendence of God be accused of pantheism? What the Sufis assert is not that God is the world, but that the world is mysteriously plunged in God, to use a formulation of Frithjof Schuon. Existence is a manifestation of Being, and all existence issues from and belongs to Being in the same way that the rays of the sun are finally nothing but the sun.

Some Sufis and Islamic philosophers have interpreted the doctrine of the oneness of Being to mean that all levels of being come from the one Being, that all the rays of light emanate from the sun, while many

Sufis claim that on the highest level of understanding there is in fact only the one and absolute Being. Viewed from within the sun, there is nothing but the sun. So, many masters of gnosis have asserted that when you gain a clear understanding of the nature of things, to quote the famous *Treatise of Unity (al-Risālat al-aḥadiyyah)*, “you do not see in this world or the next aught beside God.”⁵ Everything in the universe is a mirror in which is reflected determinations of the One Essence, the Absolute Being and Reality, which alone is, the alpha and omega of all existence and also the single Reality and Being here and now of all things that appear to us as independent objects and realities. To realize this truth fully is to be able to see God everywhere. It is to realize the supreme goal of human life by returning to our pre-existential reality in the Divine.

CREATION AND THE MANIFESTED ORDER

Although there is metaphysically only one Ultimate Reality, the Beyond-Being, of which the first Self-Determination is Being, on the level of relativity we have the world of multiplicity, in fact, many worlds ranging from the archangelic to the material, all of which are manifestations and Self-Determinations of the One. Those very Sufis who spoke of the oneness of Being as the highest understanding of the Truth also asserted that there are grades and levels (*marātib* in Sufi texts) of being, which constitute the many worlds that separate us from the One. They even asserted and continue to assert that the person who does not believe in the multiple states or grades of being, or what is known as the great chain of being, is an “infidel” and lost to the world of faith. To be human living on this terrestrial plane of existence and to believe in God as the Absolute Being necessitates accepting the hierarchy in between. All religions in fact emphasize this cosmic hierarchy in one way or another, as we see in texts as far apart as the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite and Tibetan Buddhists on cosmology. The truth of the matter is that, on the one hand, we have a universal hierarchy linking each lower state of being to a higher one, from the carpeting on earth (*al-farsh*) to the Divine Throne (*al-‘arsh*)—that is, symbolically speaking, from the lowest to the highest order of universal existence, to repeat a famous Sufi dictum—and on the other hand, each existent, by virtue of its existence, also has a direct link to Being. On the human level it might be said that while we occupy a particular level of existence, with

animals and plants below and angels and archangels above us, as medieval Christian cosmology also asserted, we also have a direct link with God beyond all intermediary agencies. Both of these realities are part and parcel of the structure of the manifested or created order and also play a major role in the spiritual life.

It might be asked, why are there levels of being? Why did the One have to manifest the many, or in theological terms, why did God create the world? This basic metaphysical question has been posed in different religious climes, and each religion has provided its own response, usually couched in mythical or symbolic language. For example, Hinduism speaks of *līlā* or “divine play” as the reason for creation of the world—and of the many worlds comprising the totality of the cosmos, a totality not confined to its lowest part, the material plane, as many Western people today identify it.

Metaphysically speaking, the Divine Principle, as already stated, is at once absolute and infinite. Now the Infinite must include all possibilities, including the possibility of negating Itself. The realization of this possibility is manifestation, that is, all the levels of reality besides the Divine Principle that appear to exist as distinct realities by virtue of their separation from the Principle. Also, the Divine Principle is absolute goodness, and as St. Augustine said, it is in the nature of the good to give of itself in the same way that it is in the nature of light to emanate rays and to illuminate what is around it. To speak of God, understood by the gnostics, is also to speak of the world as His creation. Metaphysically we speak of *manifestation* or *emanation*, such as the emanation of the rays of the sun from the sun. When God is envisaged in His personal aspect, we then speak of *creation*. The Sufis do not see any contradiction whatsoever between the two. Moreover, in speaking of creation and the reason for it, while they repeat the saying, “There was God and there was nothing with Him,” to emphasize the total independence of the Divine Principle, its absoluteness and infinitude, they add, “And it is now as it was,” that is, metaphysically and on the highest level there is here and now only the One, and the only truth to be realized at the end of the path is the oneness of Being.

Let us come back, however, to the Islamic and more particularly Sufi explanation for the creation of the world. A famous “sacred saying” of the Prophet already cited tells us, “I was a ‘Hidden Treasure’; I loved to be known; therefore I created the world so that I would be known.” Three basic elements to this saying are of cardinal importance

for the Sufi understanding of the meaning and ontological status of creation. First of all, the purpose of creation is God's Self-Knowledge through Self-Manifestation and Self-Disclosure. The Self-Disclosure is made possible through the reflections of God's Names and Qualities upon what Sufis call "the mirror of nothingness." Now a mirror is a surface that reflects what is placed before it, and in itself the surface is "nothing," that is, it has no form of its own. Since there cannot be any being independent of God, what we see as the cosmos therefore cannot but be a reflection of God's Names and Qualities upon what is ontologically "nothing," like a mirror. Of course, some could also say that the cosmos, not to speak of founders of religions, is an incarnation and descent of the Divine Reality. Sufism, while accepting the idea of descent, does not, in accord with the Islamic tradition as a whole, consider as legitimate the idea of incarnation and therefore speaks not of incarnation but rather of the theophany of the Divine Names through their reflection in the myriad mirrors of "nothingness" comprising the cosmos. The purpose of creation is knowledge, and therefore for us to know God, which means ultimately God within our hearts knowing Himself, is to fulfill the purpose of creation.

Second, this saying of the Prophet tells us that God "loved" (*ahbabtu* in the Arabic version of the *hadith* and often translated as willed or wanted) to be known. Therefore, *hubb* or love runs through the arteries of the universe (love to which we shall turn fully in the next chapter). Third, God is the "Hidden Treasure," the source of all creation. From the inward point of view there is not only creation by God but also creation *in* God, as Kabbalistic doctrines and certain Christian metaphysicians (such as Erigena, also known as Eriugena) also assert. The archetype of all creation is in God Himself, in the "Hidden Treasure," and nothing can exist that did not have a pre-existential reality in that "Hidden Treasure." That is why the Quran asserts that the spiritual root of all things is in the Hand of God. Although creation appears to us as a separate reality, inwardly its very reality is rooted in the "Hidden Treasure." The world is not only creation but more inwardly manifestation and Self-Disclosure of the Divine Principle. It is not only a result of the Divine Will but also the "flow" of manifestation from the Divine Nature.

Ibn 'Arabī once asserted that God created the mirror so that we could speak of His relation to His creation. From the Sufi point of view, if we accept the idea of incarnation, then Reality becomes incarnated

in the spatiotemporal domain and is affected by the contingencies of this domain. Islam is based on the Absolute and not any of Its determinations or manifestations, even if it be *avātaric*, that is, related to Divine incarnation, as we find in Christianity and Hinduism. Theophanic reflection in the mirror of nonexistence, however, implies that while the image in the mirror reflects the Reality before it and provides an “image” corresponding to that Reality, that Reality is not affected by the reflection or the mirror and no change would occur to it if the mirror were to be broken. Creation is thereby seen by Sufis as myriads of reflections or theophanies (*tajalliyyāt*) of the Divine Names and Qualities in their multifarious combinations.

Classical texts of Sufi doctrine explain the process of creation further by mentioning that there is first of all the determination or Self-Entification of the Divine Names and Qualities into the realm of the immutable archetypes (*al-a‘yān al-thābitah*) of all of creation. This is called the most sacred effusion (*al-fayḍ al-aqdas*). Then God breathes through the “breath of the All-Good and Compassionate” (*nafas al-Rahmān*) upon the immutable archetypes, and from this second effusion, called *al-fayḍ al-muqaddas*, or sacred effusion, results all that exists. The human process of speaking symbolizes this creative act on its own level. We have words in our minds. In the act of speaking, our breath blows upon our vocal chords and manifests those words in external speech. As far as the universe is concerned, everything in it is the result of the *nafas al-Rahmān*. The very substance and existence of everything is, therefore, ultimately the Breath of God in God’s aspect of compassion and mercy. Esoterically speaking, all things by virtue of their existence, which is ultimately the Divine Breath, praise God, as the Quran asserts. They speak in silence of the mystery of existence, but most of us do not have the necessary power of hearing to grasp their silent words. As Rūmī says:

If only existence had a tongue,
So that it would lift the veils from existents.

Mathnawī, 3:4728

The great mystery of existence is that it veils God by what is none other than Him. As Ibn ‘Arabī said, “Glory be unto Him who hides Himself by that which is none other than He.” This truth is explicitly

stated in the Quran, where it is mentioned, "He [God] is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward and He knows infinitely all things" (57:3). It is not difficult for a person of faith to understand that God is the Alpha and Omega of all reality, that all things come from Him and return to Him. As we know, Christ also spoke of himself as the alpha and the omega. It is also not difficult to understand that God is the Inward, the inner reality of all things. But how can God be the Outward? This is the most difficult aspect of the relation between God and creation to understand. Once a fairly advanced Sufi went to a great master and told him that he could understand that God is the First and the Last as well as the Inward. But he asked the master, "How can God be the Outward?" The master put him in a spiritual retreat (*khalwah*) and told him to invoke the Divine Name *Allāh* until this truth became manifested and clear to him. The disciple followed the instructions. After some two weeks in which he continuously invoked God's Supreme Name, suddenly the walls of the room in which he was holding the spiritual retreat began to invoke *Allāh* and he heard the invocation all around him. As he wrote later, he then understood what it meant to assert that God is also the Outward. The moral of this story is that the in-depth understanding of the truth that God veils Himself by what is none other than God can come only from spiritual realization.

The Sufis also speak of creation not only as an act in the past but also as a continuous process. This is what is called the renewal of creation at every instant. At every moment the universe is absorbed into the Principle and recreated. The relation of the world with God is therefore not based solely on a temporal event called creation "at the beginning." That "beginning" is also the ever-renewed present moment. Although from one point of view creation is old, from another it is fresh and new. God's act of existentiation is ever present, and in fact existence is not so much a state as an act, as the existentiating command of God, "Be!" This doctrine is of great significance not only for cosmology but also for the spiritual life. In the same way that each breath we take rejuvenates and makes possible the continuation of our life, the Divine Breath is renewed at every moment, making possible our and the cosmos's continuous existence in what appears to us as duration. This duration is, however, nothing but the repetition of the "now" within which creation is renewed. In a deeper sense, every tree that we observe in the garden comes freshly from God's creative act.

THE CONTEMPLATION OF CREATION

The elaborate teachings of Sufism concerning manifestation are necessary to complete the metaphysical and cosmological doctrines concerning the nature of reality. As well, they provide both the theoretical background for the contemplation of nature and cosmic realities as means of reaching the Metacosmic Reality and also give us a map to help us journey through the cosmos to the Reality beyond all manifestation. Not all Sufis were given, however, to the contemplation of nature. Some, like the eighth-century woman Sufi saint of Basra, Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah, were concerned solely with God, beyond Paradise and hell, beyond prophets, and saints and the grandeur of God's creation. Many others who also emphasized the love of God or pure unity did not concern themselves with the contemplation of nature and study of the cosmic hierarchy, but many did, including some of the greatest gnostics and metaphysicians, such as Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī. In any case, the contemplation of nature is an important part of Sufi doctrine and practice, and explaining the esoteric significance of the manifested order and natural world is an integral element of the exposition of Truth.

Since in Islam the revelation came in the form of a sacred book, many Muslim sages have looked upon nature as a book of God, as did many of their Jewish and Christian counterparts. The cosmos is in fact God's first and primordial revelation. There is an eternal and archetypal Quran, which is the archetype of both the book revealed to the Prophet of Islam as the Quran and the cosmos, which many Sufis in fact call the cosmic Quran. In the same way that each letter, word, and sentence of the Quran revealed in Arabic comes from God and conveys a message from Him, each phenomenon of nature is also a sign from Heaven. In fact, in the Quran both the phenomena of nature and the verses of the Quran are called *āyāt*, or symbols and signs, each conveying a meaning beyond itself. Every *āyah*, besides its outward meaning, has a symbolic and inward significance. Every cosmic phenomenon is both a fact and a symbol of a noumenon. In a profound sense modern science, being concerned with phenomena only as facts and not as symbols of noumena, is like religious literalism in the interpretation of scripture. Sufism has always rejected both kinds of literalism and has provided over the centuries both esoteric interpretations of the Quran and the most profound "philosophy of nature" based on esoteric commentary upon the cosmic book. This "philosophy of nature"

is of the utmost significance in this day and age when, because of sheer outwardness and literalism in both science and much of religion, we human beings have become destroyers of nature rather than its protectors and channels of grace. The inner meaning of the cosmic book has become hidden from us.

Sufis contemplate nature, seeing in its forms, life, and rhythms spiritual realities that are of the greatest importance not only in themselves but also for us as wayfarers on the path to spiritual perfection. For the sage every tree is a reflection of the tree of Paradise, every mountain a symbol of transcendence, the water of every flowing stream a symbol of Divine Mercy, the wind a mark of the Spirit. The eagle flying above symbolizes the human spirit perfected through spiritual practice flying to the Divine Throne, and the fish swimming in the deep is the symbol of the soul immersing itself in the ocean of Infinity. The universe is constituted of theophanies; the cosmos is a set of symbols to be contemplated and a means to reach the Symbolized, a book to be read and understood in both its outward and inward meanings. Once one has read the cosmic book, one can set it aside and stand before the Author of the Book of Existence. One of the meanings of the Quranic reference to the scrolls being rolled up at the end of time is precisely the end to the reading of the book of nature for the Sufi who, having passed beyond the cosmos, experiences death to the world and resurrection in the Spirit, that is, his or her own eschaton.

THE UNIVERSAL HIERARCHY: THE GRADES OF BEING

As already mentioned, all traditions speak of the grades of being albeit in different languages and symbols, as can be seen in worlds as far apart as Hinduism and Judaism. Even Buddhism, which speaks of existence as *samsāra*, presents to its followers, at least in the Mahayāna and Vajrayāna Schools, vast hierarchies of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, demons, and so forth. Sufi doctrine is no exception in its emphasis upon the doctrine of the multiple states of being, which constitutes a central teaching of the perennial philosophy. The Islamic universe, based on the words of the Quran and *Ḥadīth*, is comprised of immense worlds extending from the material realm to the Divine Presence. Today modern science speaks of the vastness of the cosmos but only in a quantitative manner; it deals with only one level of cosmic existence, no matter how many

zeros it adds to distances in galactic and interstellar space and periods of cosmic time. But the whole of the material universe, no matter how extended its physical dimensions might be, is like a speck of dust before the grandeur of the world of the Spirit.

According to a saying of the Prophet, there are seventy thousand veils of light and darkness that separate us from God, and they constitute the universe. This large number refers to the immensity of the cosmos beyond its material level of existence. The Sufi doctrine of the universal hierarchy and grades of being summarizes in an intelligible fashion this reality and provides several different cosmological schemes through which the main levels of being can be envisaged. Before turning to these levels, however, it is important to mention something about the symbolism of the veil (*ḥijāb*), which plays a central role in Sufi metaphysics, similar to that of *māyā* in Hinduism, especially in the school of Advaita Vedānta, whose teachings about the nature of reality are similar in basic ways to the doctrine of the “oneness of Being” of Sufism. Because Christian metaphysical teachings, even in their most profound traditional formulations, rarely speak of the concept of *ḥijāb* or *māyā*, an appropriate term has not existed in European languages for such a concept, and with Hinduism becoming more familiar to Westerners after the Second World War, the term *māyā* has entered into the English language, where it is usually understood to mean illusion or irreality.

The Advaita Vedānta states that only *Ātman*, or the Divine Self, the Divine Ipseity, is Real and everything else is *māyā*, not ultimately real. But this does not mean that *māyā* is simple illusion. The relative is not as real as the Absolute, but the relative does possess relative reality on its own level. It is only from the point of view of *Ātman* that nothing else is real. *Māyā* was in fact translated by the great traditional authority on Hinduism, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, as “creativity,” which of necessity implies separation from the Source and therefore a lower level of reality. The Sufi doctrine of *ḥijāb* or veil is very similar to that of *māyā*. In essence, there are levels of reality or being ordered in such a manner that the lower is less real than the higher, which is veiled from it. The higher contains all that is positively real in the lower, but the lower does not possess the same degree of being or the same level of reality and perfection as the higher.

A veil or *ḥijāb* not only veils but also reveals something through that very act of veiling. We can see the example of this principle in the veils of Muslim women that are also called *ḥijāb*. If there were no cosmic

veils, the lower levels of reality would be consumed in the higher ones. A colored glass limits the light of the sun but also allows enough to go through to constitute the next order of luminosity. While every level of being is veiled from the one above, it also symbolizes what is above it to the extent of the reality of the lower level. On each level of being, exists both veil and reveal realities belonging to a higher level of existence. Sufism speaks of the outward (*al-ẓāhir*) and the inward (*al-bāṭin*) not only in relation to God but also concerning creatures. It also speaks of the visible or present (*‘ālam al-shahādah*) and invisible or absent worlds (*‘ālam al-ghayb*). Some, like Rūmī, also speak of form (*sūrah*), which in this case means outward aspect and not the Aristotelian *forma*, and inner meaning (*ma‘nā*), which also signifies essence.

The goal of the spiritual life is to be able to lift up the veil of outwardness so as to behold the inward and subsequently come to know the outward in light of the inward. Spiritual realization enables us to see the outwardly invisible within the visible. It makes possible the journey from outward form to inner meaning, what in Islam is called *ta’wīl* or spiritual hermeneutics, in such a manner that the veil itself becomes transparent, revealing the reality within and beyond it. But that is only possible if we are able to penetrate into our own center and to lift the veils within, to become interiorized, to gain inner vision. As the celebrated eleventh-century Persian philosopher and poet Nāṣir-i Khusraw said:

See with the eye of inwardness the inner reality of the world,
For with the outward looking eye thou canst never see the
inward.⁶

No one can enter the Garden of Truth who has not become trained in casting aside the veil (*kashf al-mahjūb*) and seeing beyond the veil that which it veils and yet reveals. Remarkably enough, what is always ultimately revealed is the Presence of the One, the single Essence reflected in the myriads of mirrors of nonexistence. The multiple states of being do not negate the oneness of Being at all for at all levels there is but the radiance of the one Face of the Beloved; there is ultimately but a single Divine Reality.

The fundamental states of reality may be summarized in many ways, as we see in different Sufi texts. In simple terms they can be enumerated

as one, the corporeal; two, the psychological and the imaginal; three, the angelic and archangelic, which is also the world of intelligences and archetypes; four, the Divine Names and Qualities; and finally, five, the Divine Essence. From the ontological point of view, one can speak of Beyond-Being, Being, and the Logos *in divinis*, identified also with the existentiating Principle, the “Word” by which all things were made, and, finally, the realm of separative existence. As for the Spirit (*al-Rūh* in Arabic), it may be said to be at the border between the Divine and created orders. Each of these levels in the hierarchy is itself comprised of grades and stages, as for example the various grades of the imaginal world, not to be confused with the illusory and the imaginary (which in the ordinary usage of the term is associated with the unreal while the imaginal world is real on its own level), and the hierarchy of the angels as well as the archangelic world, with which Christians are very familiar. But each grade of being or level of reality is finally nothing but Divine Presence. In fact, being and presence are ultimately the same as far as Sufi metaphysics is concerned. That is why one of the well-known versions of Sufi cosmology speaks only of presences and, going back to Ibn ‘Arabī, categorizes all of reality in Five Divine Presences.

The Five Divine Presences, which are another way to indicate the hierarchy of being, are enumerated and described by Ibn ‘Arabī as follows: one, *Hāhūt*, the “level” of the Supreme Essence of the Divinity; two, *Lāhūt*, the level of the Divine Names and Qualities and Being as the ontological principle of creation (this level also contains the uncreated Logos or Intellect); three, *Jabarūt*, the archangelic level and the higher paradisaic worlds as well as the created Logos; four, *malākūt*, the subtle domain and the imaginal world standing immediately above this world but stretching to the paradisaic realm; and five, *nāsūt* or *mulk*, which corresponds to the human, material, and terrestrial world. There are many complicated issues as far as this and other Sufi cosmological schemes are concerned, issues into which we will not delve here in our summary presentation. (For example, some Sufis speak of Six Presences interpreted somewhat differently.) What is important to realize, however, is that in all these schemes, all levels of being (*wujūd*) are also presence (*ḥuḍūr*), presence of the one single Divine Reality. Every level of existence, all that constitutes the many levels of the universe, all the creatures from the fish in the sea to the birds of Paradise are nothing but the Self-Disclosure of God. As the Sufis say, “There is no one in the house but the Master of the house.”

THE HUMAN MICROCOSM

There is a correspondence between the human being and all the levels of universal existence, all the stages of the cosmos understood in the traditional sense, and even the Divine Reality beyond the cosmos. That is why to know oneself fully is to know God, as the famous saying of the already-cited Prophet asserts: "The person who knows himself/herself knows his/her Lord." Moreover, to know oneself fully is also to gain access to all the levels of reality Self-Disclosed by God. According to an Arabic saying, "The human being is the symbol of all of existence" (*al-insān ramz al-wujūd*). That is why we can know the world and in fact all levels of cosmic reality beyond the corporeal. The metaphysical knowledge of the human state is an integral aspect of that truth whose knowledge delivers us from the bondage of ignorance and leads to that supreme knowledge that transcends all of manifestation, that illuminates and leads us to ultimate freedom and deliverance.

This doctrine of the correspondence between the human microcosm and the cosmic macrocosm is found in all the authentic expressions of the perennial philosophy, as one sees, for example, in Greek and Christian Hermeticism and Jewish and Christian Kabbalah. In the Islamic tradition it is found implicitly in certain verses of the Quran, such as the one in chapter 2 that states that God taught Adam the names of all things, for to know a name, as traditionally understood, means also to have an ontological correspondence to the being that is named. It is stated more explicitly in some of the poems of 'Alī ibn Tālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, the fourth caliph of Sunnism, and the first Imam of Shi'ism, who was also the fountainhead of Sufism. In one of the famous poems attributed to him it is said,

Thou thinkest thou art a small body,
But no, in thee the macrocosm is contained.

Later on, Sufis elaborated this doctrine in numerous ways. In fact, the doctrine of the Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), discussed in the last chapter, includes the microcosm-macrocosm correspondence in an essential way.

We are not merely bodies and not merely bodies and emotions. Nor does humanity consist simply of mind and body, as envisaged in

Cartesian dualism. This latter dualism, which arose in the West, truncates the human reality, which in the simplest form is tripartite, composed of body, soul, and spirit, the *corpus*, *anima*, and *spiritus* of the medieval Christian thinkers and the *hylé*, *psyche*, and *pneuma* of many Greek philosophical schools upon which the medieval doctrine was based. But even this tripartite traditional division summarizes a more complex situation. According to Sufi metaphysics, we have a reality on the corporeal level, which is the most outward aspect of our being. Above that level we have a psychological reality, which itself partakes of many grades. Then we have an imaginal faculty corresponding to the imaginal level of cosmic existence, which is related to the world of the psyche; then a mind, which is a reflection of the intellect; then the intellect itself (identified in essence and on the highest level with spirit) on the human level with several degrees and again corresponding to the cosmic and also metacosmic intelligible orders. And finally at the center of our being resides the Divine, the Self of all selves.

To each of these levels of reality correspond faculties that can know that particular level in itself and in relation to higher and lower states of being, for ultimately knowledge is being. Let us recall that, as Aristotle said, we know according to our mode of being; furthermore, what we know affects our state of being. It might be said that we are what we know and we know according to who we are, that is, according to the level of reality actualized in us. We have the external faculties of sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste with which we know the corporeal world in its outwardness. We have psychological modes of knowing, such as emotions, which lead us to awareness of certain things. We have an imaginal faculty of knowing by virtue of which we can know the imaginal world, as is evidenced when we perceive inwardly an imaginal form that has an external correspondence. Then we have reason, which can know the rational patterns of existence but not the noumenal reality of things. Above that faculty resides the intellect, whose seat is the heart and with the help of which we can know the spiritual and intelligible realities as well as the inward aspects of external reality. It is through this faculty, dormant in most people, that we can gain a vision of spiritual realities. Sufis refer to this faculty as the “eye of the heart,” and Hindus call it the “third eye.” Finally, there is the Divine Spark or the Divine Intellect reflected at the center of our being, in our heart of hearts, by which we can know God, but by God. This principal heart-knowledge leads not only to

the knowledge of all things in their essence but also to the knowledge of all orders of reality other than the Divine in light of that Supreme Knowledge. Illuminative knowledge concerns primarily knowledge of the Light of lights, to quote the language of the twelfth-century Persian Sufi and philosopher, Suhrawardī, but it also casts light upon all other modes of knowing and turns the objects of knowledge from fact to symbol, from opacity to light, from veil to transparent manifestation of inward reality. That knowledge to which the Prophet referred as light is not of course information or conceptual knowledge but the knowledge that illuminates both the subject that knows and the object that is known.

Usually when we think of the body, we limit it to only the physical body and speak of our senses as the means whereby through the body we know and interact with our physical ambience. But many Sufis also speak of multiple bodies within us, each with its own faculties. From this point of view one can say that we have a physical body, a subtle and imaginal body in the psychological and imaginal worlds, an intelligible body, and ultimately a purely spiritual and sacred body. Each body possesses its own faculties of knowing in the same way that our physical body possesses the five external senses. And except for the gross, physical body, all of the other bodies are immortal and survive death. In resurrection all of these bodies, including the physical, are integrated into their archetypal reality.

We are all, male and female, potentially the Universal Man here and now, and not in some temporal future, as some false interpreters of traditional doctrines assert. They believe that through some kind of process in time or progress and evolution there will appear the *Übermensch* or superman in some golden tomorrow. This dangerous notion is nothing but a demonic distortion of traditional doctrines. As we have existence here and now on earth, so also do we have a reality right now on the higher levels of existence, ascending all the way to our principal reality *in divinis*, to our archetype in God before the creation of the world. To become fully human means to actualize all these possibilities within us through knowledge, love, correct action, and virtue. The goal of the Sufi path is to return to our primordial archetype in God. This is the meaning of the enigmatic Sufi saying, "The Sufi is not created." *Sufi* in this saying means not just one who follows the path of Sufism, but one who has already reached the end of the path and returned to and realized that reality that we were and are, here and now, beyond

all confines of time and space and before the creation of the world, in the Divine Reality.

THE REALITY OF EVIL AND THE NEED FOR GUIDANCE

With all the debate now raging in America between the Christian view of original sin and fallen humanity and the goodness of human nature according to what some call a modern version of Gnosticism, it is imperative, in discussing the truth according to Sufism, to deal with the question of evil and the necessity for Divine Guidance. It must be emphasized that Sufi treatises are not simply “self-realization kits” to be handed out to those who wish to realize the Supreme Self within on the basis of their own efforts and without Divine Succor. Islam does not believe in original sin, but it does emphasize our fall from our primordial state, that primordial nature we still bear deep within ourselves. We are separated from this nature by layers of forgetfulness and imperfection, by veils that can be removed only with God’s Help. And it is precisely these veils, or ontological separation from our Source, that result in what theologically is called evil. It is to these veils with which we usually associate ourselves and our existence that the Sufi saint of Basra, Rābī’ah, was referring when she said, “Alas my son, thine existence is a sin wherewith no other sin can be compared.”⁷

Metaphysically one can explain the reality of evil as separation from the absolute Good. Let us remember the saying of that supreme Christian poet, Dante, who said that hell is separation from God: As mentioned above, the Divine is at once the Absolute, the Infinite, and the All-Good. And let us not forget that *infinite* means containing all possibilities, including that of self-negation; as mentioned already, it is in the nature of the good to give of itself as it is in the nature of light to irradiate. This emanation, which constitutes all the levels of existence below the Absolute Being, also implies distancing and separation, gradual dimming of the light and appearance of shadows. Positively, the reality of the world issues from the One Reality, but to use the very term *world* implies already separation from God. As the Kabbalists have said, the Divine had to “withdraw” from Its full Plenitude to create a “space” for creation. What we call evil is the result of this withdrawal and separation. That is why evil does not have the same ontological

status as the good in the same way that darkness does not have the same ontological status as light. The so-called problem of theodicy—that is, how could a good God create a world in which there is evil?—is the result of ignorance of the nature of God and the world and lack of knowledge of the doctrine of veil or *māyā*. This so-called problem, which has driven many a modern Westerner away from Christianity and in some cases from Judaism, has been discussed in depth by many non-Western philosophers, theologians, and mystics belonging to other religions. Countless souls in traditional societies have observed evil and misery surrounding them, but such experiences have hardly ever drawn Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists, to name just a few examples, away from religion and the world of faith. Observing evil in a world created by God who is good has not had the same religious consequences for them as it has had for many in the modern West and of course did not have the same consequences for those in the traditional West, whose reactions to this problem were similar in many ways to those of people today in most non-Western cultures.

From the point of view of the Divine Reality, there is no evil because there is nothing to be separated from the Source of the Good, but for human beings living in the domain of relativity, evil is as real as that domain, although creation in its ontological reality is good since it comes from God. This is demonstrated by the overwhelming beauty of the natural order. That is why both the Bible and the Quran assert the goodness of His creation and the fact that goodness always predominates ultimately over evil. Furthermore, the infernal, purgatorial, and paradisaic states are real although located in the domain of relativity but each with very different characteristics. The problem of evil becomes intractable when we absolutize the relative and fail to distinguish between the existential reality of a thing, which comes from the Act of Being, and its “apparent” separative existence. To speak of a world without evil is to fail to understand what the world is and to confuse the Absolute and the relative, the Essence and its veils, or to use the language of Hinduism, *Ātman* and *māyā*.

Some Sufis have said that there is no evil but only goodness and beauty. Such statements must be understood in the context of the state of consciousness from which they were speaking, the state that allowed them to see the Face of God everywhere. Everything has a face turned inward to God beyond all blemish and evil and a face turned

outward. The Sufis who have denied evil have gazed upon that face of inwardness and have seen the outward face of things in light of that inner reality. Otherwise, if Sufism had denied evil, there would be no need for Sufism itself because the role of Sufism is to overcome the imperfections and evil tendencies of the soul, called “*nafs* inciting to evil” in the Quran and subsequently by the Sufis. On the existential level of the ordinary soul, they are as real as the soul itself. To transcend evil and to behold only the good and the beautiful, one must transcend one’s own ego or this *nafs*. The overwhelming beauty of God’s creation and the ultimate triumph of the good, whatever transient phenomena of an evil nature may hold sway in the short run, is itself proof of the existential inequality between good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly. Sufis seek to cling to the good and the beautiful even amid what appears sometimes in life as predominance of the evil and the ugly. They hold fast to the Truth even when surrounded by error and falsehood, being anchored in the certainty that the Truth, which is always good and beautiful in the metaphysical sense, shall finally prevail. The Sufis would be the first to agree with the medieval Latin adage *vincit omnia veritas*, the Truth shall always triumph.

To overcome the imperfections of the soul and the abode of evil cannot be accomplished by fallen humanity without help. If there are exceptions, they only prove the rule, and one must never forget that “The Spirit bloweth where it listeth.” Putting such exceptions aside, the rule and principle is that human beings are in need of Divine Guidance to remember who they are, to be able to slay the dragon within. Through His Mercy God has therefore sent prophets throughout history to guide human beings to the One. Moreover, this guidance has two levels, the first concerned with prophecy (*nubuwwah*), which is for the guidance of the whole of a human collectivity and all members of the society for which the revelation is intended, and the second with inner and initiatic guidance (*walāyah/wilāyah*) for the few who aspire to spiritual perfection. This reality in Islam is the source, foundation, and continuous inner spiritual power that makes traveling upon the Sufi path possible. Moreover, access to *walāyah/wilāyah* is only possible within the reality of *nubuwwah*. That is why it is not possible to follow the Sufi path, or *Ṭarīqah*, without following the injunctions and teachings of Islamic Law, or *Sharī‘ah*, which is meant for the whole of the Islamic community, including the Sufis.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH AND DELIVERANCE

Knowledge of the Truth is ultimately not only a theoretical understanding of concepts. It is above all a knowledge that is combined with faith and involves all that we are. It is efficacious if it transforms our whole being and transmutes our soul. It must therefore involve our whole being. We must know not only with our senses and mind, but above all with our heart, which is our center. The knowledge that delivers and frees is one that removes the veils of separation that have caused us to forget our real identity. It is a knowledge that removes forgetfulness of that Divine Reality, which is the source of all things as well as residing at the center of our being, the Self of our self. To understand fully the Truth is to "become" that Truth. It is to cease to be what we are and become what we have always been, are, and shall be in the Divine Reality. To enter the Garden of Truth has as its condition transcending our limitations and becoming freed of the fetters of limited existence and the prison of ignorance. This is both the necessary condition for entering the Garden and the result of entering that Garden. Truth, when actualized through spiritual practice, delivers us from that prison and renders us free in the highest sense of the term. Metaphysical and cosmological truths outlined in this chapter are, according to the Sufis, a *theoria* or vision of the Real as well as a road map to guide us through the cosmic labyrinth to the Abode of the Infinite and the Eternal. They provide keys to open the doors to the expanses of the Divine Empyrean, that is, the highest celestial firmament. Once realized through Divine Guidance, these truths reveal themselves as not only knowledge of the Real but Reality in Itself and in Its manifestations, for truth *is* reality, knowledge *is* being.

In one of his prayers the Prophet of Islam said, "O Lord, show us things as they really are." To attain the stage of realizing the answer to this prayer, which means to see things in their metaphysical transparency, as symbols and not only as facts, as reflections of God's Names and Qualities, as the Self-Disclosure of God rather than as veils, we must know who we are, which in turn means that we must know God and all things, including ourselves *by* God and through Him. Such a knowledge of necessity involves all that we are. It involves love and beauty, faith and righteous action. Its attainment requires spiritual discipline

and following the Path, which the Sufis call the *Ṭarīqah*. The Truth is at once the beginning and end of the Path. Its theoretical knowledge, that is, its beginning, enables us to know who we are, where we came from, and where we should be going. Its realization, which must also be combined with love and beauty and which is the end and the goal of our life, brings access to the Garden, whose entry is the ultimate purpose of human existence.

The book of the Sufi is not the black ink of written words,
It is none other than an unblemished heart like snow.⁸