

One



WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

Who Are We and What Are We Doing Here?

“Am I not Your Lord?” They said, “Yea, verily we bear witness.”

Quran 7:172

After extinction I came out, and I
Eternal now am, though not as I.

And who am I, O I, but I.'

'Alī Shushtārī



THE UNAVOIDABLE QUESTION

Wherever we are and in whatever time we happen to live, we cannot avoid asking the basic questions of who we are, where we came from, what we are doing here, and where we are going. In everyone's life, especially when one is young, these basic questions arise in the mind, often with force, and demand answers from us. Many simply push them aside or remain satisfied with established answers provided by others in their family or community. In traditional societies such answers always came from the teachings of religion, and to a great extent they still do for the majority of people in many parts of the world. But there have always been and still are today the few who take the question "who am I?" seriously and existentially and who are not satisfied with answers provided by others. Rather, they seek to find the answers by themselves, trying with their whole being to delve into the inner meaning of religion and wisdom. They continue until they reach the goal and receive a response that provides for them certitude and removes from them the clouds of doubt. In any case, how we choose to live in this world—how we act and think and how we develop the latent possibilities within us—depends totally on the answer we provide for ourselves to this basic question of who we are, for human beings live and act for the most part according to the image they have of themselves.

Sufism addresses the few who yearn for an answer on the deepest level to the question of who they are and in a manner that would touch and transform their whole being. The Sufi path is the means within the Islamic tradition of finding the ultimate answer to this basic question, and of discovering our real identity. Throughout the ages religions have sought to teach us who we are and through their inner teachings to provide the means of "becoming" our True Self. Islam is certainly no exception. It unveils the complete doctrine of our true nature and also the nature of the levels of reality issuing from the One, who alone is ultimately Real, and provides teachings that, if put into practice, lead us back to the One through a path of spiritual effort combined with joy and felicity. The Quran asserts majestically, "Verily we come from God and to Him is our returning" (2:156). The One is of course that Supreme Source and End of all things whom Abraham, Moses, and Christ addressed as the One God and whom the Quran calls by His Name in Arabic, *Allāh*.

It is no accident that the Sacred Law of Islam is called the *Shari'ah*, which means road. It is a road that all Muslims are obliged to travel if they are to die in a blessed state. For most, however, the journey on this road is limited to the plane of action, the performance of good acts, and faith in the reality of God. Few wish to take a step further to discover the ultimate nature of who they are and carry self-knowledge to its end. Sufism, which is the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam, while beginning with the *Shari'ah* as the basis of the religious life, seeks to take a further step toward that Truth (*Haqiqah*), which is also the source of the *Shari'ah*. Sufism, which is also called the *Tariqah*, or the spiritual path, is the divinely ordained means of providing an answer to that ultimate question and leading us to the Truth or *Haqiqah* contained within that answer. The *Shari'ah* is the circumference of a circle whose radii are the *Turuq* (plural of *Tariqah*) and whose Center is the *Haqiqah* or Truth, that is, the Source of both the Law and Way as well as the Center for one who begins on the circumference, journeys along one of the radii, and finally reaches the Center, which is also his or her own center. To reach the Center means not only being in a blessed state but also reaching the state to which various mysticisms refer as union with God.

The Prophet of Islam said, "Whosoever knows his self, knows his Lord"; that is, self-knowledge leads to knowledge of the Divine. Sufism takes this saying (*hadith*) very seriously and also puts it into practice. It provides, within the spiritual universe of the Islamic tradition, the light necessary to illuminate the dark corners of our soul and the keys to open the doors to the hidden recesses of our being so that we can journey within and know ourselves, this knowledge leading ultimately to the knowledge of God, who resides in our heart/center.

Not only were we created by God, but we have the root of our existence here and now in Him. When we bore witness to His Lordship as mentioned in the Quranic verse, "Am I not your Lord?" the world and all that is in it were not as yet created. Even now we have our pre-eternal existence in the Divine Presence, and we have made an eternal covenant with God, which remains valid beyond the contingencies of our earthly life and beyond the realm of space and time in which we now find ourselves.

The answer to the question "who are we?" is related in a principal manner to our ultimate reality in God, a reality that we have now forgotten as a result of the fall from our original and primordial

state and the subsequent decay in the human condition caused by the downward flow of time. We have become forgetful beings, no longer knowing who we are and therefore what our purpose is in this life. But our reality in God, who resides at the depth of our being, is still there. We need to awaken to this reality and to realize our true identity, that is, to know who we really are.

Not everyone wants to awaken from that daydreaming we call ordinary life, but there are those who do. These men and women deeply yearn to discover their true identity, which means not only to discover the reality of God but also to journey on a path that leads to His embrace. Sufism is meant for such a person, and if you are such a person, then it has a message for you, for it is a path of return to your reality in God and indeed to God Himself. It provides the means to awaken us from the dream of forgetfulness of who we are and allow us to enter into and remain in the remembrance of the Divine Reality, which is also the heart of our selves, the Self of all selves. The Sufi path leads from the desert of outwardness, forgetfulness, selfishness, and falsehood to the Garden of Truth, wherein alone we can realize our true identity and come to know who we are. The message of Sufism is perennial because human nature is always human nature, beyond accidental changes of historical epochs and fashions of the day, and also because as long as we are human, the question that each individual faces is "who am I?" The response of Sufism to this perennial question resonates today as it has always done for those whose ears are sensitive to its call and who yearn for illuminative knowledge.

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

According to Sufi metaphysics, and in fact other metaphysical traditions in general, all that exists comes from that Reality which is at once Beyond-Being and Being, and ultimately all things return to that Source. In the language of Islamic thought, including both philosophy and Sufism, the first part of this journey of all beings from the Source is called the "arc of descent" and the second part back to the Source the "arc of ascent." Within this vast cosmic wayfaring we find ourselves here and now on earth as human beings. Moreover, our life here in this world is a journey within that greater cosmic journey of all existents back to the Source of all existence. We are born, we move through time, and we die. For most of us, without knowing who

we really are, we move between two great mysteries and unknowns, namely, where we were before we came into this world and where we shall go after death. The answer of materialists and nihilists is that we came from nowhere and we go nowhere; we had no reality before coming into this world, and nothing of our consciousness survives our death. They reduce our existence to simply the physical and terrestrial level and believe that we are merely animals (themselves considered as complicated machines) who have ascended from below, not spiritual beings who have descended from above. But if we are honest with ourselves, we realize that even the concept of matter or corporeality is contained in our consciousness and that therefore when we ask ourselves who we are, we are acting as conscious beings and have to begin with our consciousness. If we are intellectually awake, we realize that we cannot reduce consciousness to that which is itself contained in our consciousness.

Now, no matter how we seek to go back to the origin of our consciousness, we cannot reach its beginning in time, and the question again arises what our consciousness, its origin, and its end are. The spiritual practices of every authentic path, including Sufism, enable those who follow and practice them earnestly and under the appropriate conditions to gain new levels of consciousness and ultimately to become aware that consciousness has no beginning in time (but only in God) because “in the beginning was consciousness,” and it has no temporal end because “in the end is consciousness.” Once we discover who we are in the spiritual sense, we gain an insight into the mystery of where we came from before the caravan of our earthly life began its journey here below and also into the mystery of where we shall go after the end of this terrestrial journey. Self-knowledge also pierces the veils that limit our ordinary consciousness and ultimately leads to those higher states of consciousness that stand above the world of becoming. We are then able to be aware of our human reality and our ultimate identity beyond the confines of time and space. Sufism makes possible the piercing of these veils as it leads the seeker on an inward journey within the journey on the road of the Sacred Law, or the *Shari‘ah*, which is itself a journey within the journey of life, while life itself is a journey within the journey of all beings in their return to the Source. The Sufi path is an inward journey whose goal is to know who we really are, from where we came, and where we shall go. Its aim is also to know ultimately the nature of Reality, which is also Truth as such.

WHO THEN ARE WE?

As we travel upon this road of self-knowledge with the help of the means provided by tradition—means without which such a journey is in fact impossible—we gain a new perspective concerning every kind of reality with which we had identified at the beginning of our journey. We come to realize that although we are male or female, that attribute does not really define us. There is a deeper reality, one might say an androgynic reality, transcending the male-female dichotomy so that our identity is not determined simply by our gender. Nor are we simply our body and the senses although we often identify ourselves with them. As we travel upon the Sufi path, it also becomes more and more evident that what we call “I” has its existence independent of sense perceptions and the body as a whole although the soul continues to have a consciousness of the body while being also aware through spiritual practice of the possibility of leaving it for higher realms.

Likewise, although we have emotions and psychological states with which we often identify, the spiritual path teaches us that they do not define and determine our identity in the deepest sense. In fact, often we say, “I must control my temper,” which demonstrates clearly that there is more than one psychological agent within human beings. As St. Thomas said, confirming Sufi teachings, “*Duo sunt in homine*” (“There are two in man”). The part of us that seeks to control our temper must be distinct and not determined by the part of our soul that is angry and needs to be controlled. Yes, we do experience emotions, but we need not be defined by them. In the same manner, we have an imaginative faculty able to create images, and most of the time ordinary people live in the lower reaches of that world of imaginal forms. Again, we are not determined by those forms, and journeying upon the spiritual path is especially effective in transforming our inner imaginal landscape. As for the power of memory, it is for the most part the repository of images and forms related to earlier experiences of life. Metaphysically speaking, however, it is also related to our atemporal relation to our Source of Being and the intelligible world to which we belonged before our descent here to earth. That is why true knowledge according to Plato is recollection, and in Sufism the steps of the path are identified with stages of the remembrance of the Friend. Most people, however, consider these everyday remembered experiences as a major part of their identity. Yet again, the center of our consciousness, our I, cannot be

identified with our ordinary memory. We can forget many things and remain the same human being. The spiritual life may in fact be defined as the practice of techniques that enable us to forget all that we remember about the world of separation and dispersion and to remember the most important thing, which this world has caused us to forget, namely, the one “saving Truth,” which is also our inner reality.

Many would say that if we are not determined by our gender, bodies, emotions, imaginative faculties, or memories, then surely we are what we think and are determined by our minds. Here we are reaching a more delicate realm. One can say with Aristotle that man is a rational animal, which means that it is in the nature of the human being to think. Even as great a Sufi figure as the thirteenth-century Persian master, Rūmī, says,

O Brother, thou art thought itself,
The rest of thy being is but sinew and bone.

Mathnawī, 2:278

But by *thought* Rūmī did not mean simply everyday discursive thought, which skips from one concept to another without the whole being of the person who holds the thought participating in the concept (even if it be true), a thought that does not go beyond the level of mental play. Moreover, conceptual knowledge can be wrong and lead to error, and excessive cerebral activity can distract our consciousness from the center of our being. That is why mystics have also spoken of “unknowing,” and more specifically, Sufis have stated explicitly that in order to reach the Truth one has to “tear the veil of thinking.” In any case, while we have a mind, our true identity resides in an even deeper level of our being.

This deeper level is the heart/intellect, the heart being the center of the human microcosm and also the organ of unitive knowledge associated with the intellect (in the medieval sense of *intellectus*, or the Greek *nous*, not in its current sense of reason). The heart is also where the Divine Reality resides in men and women, for as the sacred *ḥadīth*² asserts, “The Heavens and the earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of my faithful servant does contain Me.”

Here, at the very center of the heart where the Divine resides, is found the root of the “I” and the final answer to the question “who

am I?" Sufism seeks to lead adepts to the heart, where they find both their true self and their Beloved, and for that reason Sufis are sometimes called "the people of the heart" (*ahl-i dil* in Persian). Of course, the phrase "both their true self and their Beloved" does not mean any ultimate duality, for as Rūmī also said, in the heart there is room for only one I, which is both the root of our true self and the Self as such. Who am I? I am the I that, having traversed all the stages of limited existence from the physical to the mental to the noumenal, has realized its own "nonexistence" and by virtue of this annihilation of the false self has returned to its roots in the Divine Reality and has become a star proximate to the Supernal Sun, which is ultimately the only I. Having passed through the door of nothingness and annihilation, I come to the realization that at the root of my consciousness, of what I call I, resides the only I that can ultimately say I and that ultimately alone is.

Neither this body am I, nor soul,
Nor these fleeting images passing by,
Nor concepts and thoughts, mental images,
Nor yet sentiments and the psyche's labyrinth.
Who then am I? A consciousness without origin,
Not born in time, nor begotten here below.
I am that which was, is and ever shall be,
A jewel in the crown of the Divine Self,
A star in the firmament of the luminous One.

Being human, however, implies a second phase of discovery in light of the first. Having discovered his or her roots in the Divine through the teachings and practices of Sufism, the Sufi then returns to the lower levels of existence, which are again seen as parts of his or her identity but not as they were before. Rather, they are transformed so that each at its own level reflects something of that supernal Reality, which determines our ultimate identity. The heart, having been discovered and its hardened shell melted through spiritual practice, emanates a light that shines upon the mind, which then, rather than jumping aimlessly from one concept to another, becomes an illuminated instrument of the intellect, able to discern true knowledge and distinguish between truth and falsehood, substance and accidents, necessity and contingency, levels of existence, and, most of all, the Absolute and the relative.

It becomes an aid in, rather than a detriment to, self-realization. The same is true of the imaginative faculty, which becomes transformed in such a way as to create imaginal forms reflecting higher rather than lower levels of reality and to facilitate the theophanic contemplation of sacred forms. As for the emotions, rather than being negative and dispersing one's spiritual energies, they become completely transformed into positive energies dominated by love, charity, empathy, and so forth and controlled by virtues, which shall be mentioned later in chapter 5. Our memories are likewise transformed, becoming the treasure-house for the remembrance of the Friend rather than a bleak warehouse filled with trivial and opaque forms, concepts, and images.

We finally come to the body, which in most mystical schools in the West is looked upon primarily as an impediment to the freedom of the spirit. Of course this aspect of the body is real, but another aspect is also very significant and is emphasized strongly by many schools of Sufism. First of all, we have more than one body. We have levels of subtle bodies within us corresponding to all levels of cosmic reality going up to God. Sufism makes possible the awareness of these other bodies and makes clear their role in the spiritual life. Second, as the soul and the psyche become illuminated by the spirit and the real "I" begins to shed its light on the individualized self, the body also becomes transformed by this inner illumination and in fact often becomes itself illuminated. One need only recall in the Christian context the halo in the iconography of saints and the incorruptibility of their bodies; a new and at the same time primordial relation is established in them between spirit, soul, and body. In Sufism the body becomes an outward source of *barakah*, or grace, in the case of those men and women who have come to realize who they really are. The body also becomes a tangible and concrete external form that preserves and reflects the spirit within. It becomes the temple of the spirit.

To the question "who are we?" we can then answer finally that we are latent archetypes embedded in the Divine Reality, which is the ultimate root of every "I," and that through that archetype, which has become existentially by God, we have existence in all realms of being from the spiritual to the physical, microcosmically and also macrocosmically. We were brought into this world in order to realize who we are and, having discovered that reality, to live accordingly while on earth. But this self-discovery is not possible without inner illumination, the subjective counterpart of objective revelation (upon which the former

usually depends, there being occasional exceptions that only prove the rule). In the Islamic tradition, it is primarily Sufism that answers this basic existential question of who we are and through this answer provides guidance for a life full of spiritual felicity, marked by illumination and leading ultimately to deliverance from the bondage of all limitation.

TO BE GOD'S SERVANT

Not only is the root of our "I" immersed in the Divine Essence or "I," which is ultimately the only Essence, all else being Its Self-Disclosure and manifestation, but we also possess a human and individual self created by God, which is real on its own level. To understand fully the reality of being human, we must also understand fully this aspect of our nature as God's servants, to use the language of the Islamic tradition. Our ego must realize its full servanthood, which the Sufis call *'ubūdiyyah*, before the Lord, and we must realize that as servants we can never become the Lord. That is why such great Sufi masters as Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, the thirteenth-century founder of one of the most important Sufi orders, asserts that the desire for union with God itself distances us more than anything else from God. Likewise, the Andalusian sage Ibn 'Arabī, who also lived in the thirteenth century and who spoke so much of the unity of the Real, asserts in a similar manner that the servant (*al-'abd*) remains the servant and the Lord (*al-Rabb*) remains the Lord. But with God's grace, with the affirmation of the Lord, that divine spark within humanity, which is identified with the intellect, can transcend all dualities, including that of servant and Lord, to reach the One, the Divine Essence, which is the root of the "I" of the servant. Without realizing our perfect servitude, however, we cannot realize that ultimate Oneness because without that realization our egos, still asserting their separate existence, would prevent God within from saying "I."

In Arabic, the word *servanthood* (*'ubūdiyyah*) is related etymologically to the word for *worship* (*'ibādah*). The Quran states, "We created man and the *jinn* so that they would worship Us" (51:56); and also "There is no god but I, so worship Me" (21:25). From the Islamic point of view, therefore, the very *raison d'être* of human existence is to worship God and thereby to realize the perfect state of servanthood, which means also to realize what it means to be fully human. Sufism asks us to delve into the deepest meaning of worship in order to realize this nature of our being

as God's perfect servants and also as creatures created by God as His valid interlocutors. In Sufism, humanity is the mirror reflecting all God's Names and Qualities; we are beings created, according to a famous *ḥadīth*, "in the image (*ṣūrah*) of God," *image* meaning here not form in the ordinary sense, for God is formless, but rather reflection of the Divine Names and Qualities. Sufism also understands "in order to worship me" to mean "in order to know me," a knowledge (*ma'rifah*) that is possible only through the realization of our perfect servanthood. That realization means etymologically not only obeying God as our master, but also realizing that all things ultimately belong to God and that in ourselves we are nothing but the poor (*faqīr*), the term *faqīr* being in fact one of the most common names for a follower of the Sufi path. The Persian term *danwīsh*, which entered the English language as *derwish*, implies the same truth. It means humbling oneself before the threshold of the Divine Reality. The highest meaning of servanthood is in fact the realization of our "nothingness" before God. It is only by passing through this gate of "annihilation," or what the Sufis call *fanā'*, that we are able to gain subsistence, *baqā'*, in God and to reach the root of our "I" and also therefore the Divine. Human beings qua human beings cannot enter the Divine sanctuary, but there is within us a reality that is already Divine. To be fully human is to realize our perfect servitude and to remove the veil of separative existence through spiritual practice so that God, transcendent and immanent within us, can utter "I."

A COMMENTARY ON THE OPENING CHAPTER (*AL-FĀTIḤAH*) OF THE QURAN

Sufism looks upon all Islamic acts of worship from the point of view of actualization of perfect servanthood, which makes possible for us to realize, through faith, acts of worship and spiritual practices leading to intellectual and illuminative understanding, who we really are, and who God is. All acts of worship are for the purpose of remembering God and drawing nigh unto Him or, more precisely, realizing this already existing nearness and intimacy, for as the Quran says, "If my servants ask about me [O Muḥammad], (tell them) I am indeed near" (2:186). Nowhere is this Sufi view of worship, which leads to both self-knowledge and knowledge of God combined with love and devotion, more evident than in Sufi commentaries upon the opening chapter of the Quran, called *ṣūrah al-Fātiḥah*, which is repeated over and over

in the daily canonical prayers that Muslims perform five times a day throughout their lives after reaching adolescence. Such commentaries have been written by many spiritual authorities over the ages to the present day.

The text of the chapter, which is the first *sūrah* of the Quran, is as follows:

In the Name of God—the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful
Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds,
the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful,
Master of the Day of Judgment.
Thee we worship, and in Thee we seek help.
Guide us upon the straight path,
the path of those on whom Thy Grace is,
not those on whom Thine anger is,
nor those who are astray.³

Quran 1:1–7

Let us try to study this chapter from the point of view of the significance of worship in relation to the human state. But before doing so, it is important to mention that every word and letter of the Quran in the original Arabic has not only an outward but also an inward meaning, including a numerical symbolism, similar to what one finds in the *gematria* associated with the Kabbalah and Hasidism. Moreover, the Quran has many levels (seven, according to some) of inner meaning, of which the highest is, according to the Sufis, known only to God. Sufi commentaries, which are called *ta'wīl*, that is, spiritual hermeneutics, are not humanly contrived meanings but rather the exposition of meanings already contained in the Sacred Text but hidden from the eye of outwardness. The word *ta'wīl* means to take something back to its origin, and in fact spiritual hermeneutics, in unveiling the inner meaning of the Sacred Text, also takes it back to its origin, for manifestation implies going from the inward to the outward so that metaphysically speaking the inner and the origin are ultimately the same reality.

Coming back to the *Fātiḥah*, I shall provide a commentary based on one aspect of the inner reality of this text related to the question of what it means to be human and not, of course, addressing all aspects and levels of its inner meaning (about which Sufis over the ages have

written numerous commentaries, some of them book length). Like all other chapters of the Quran save one, the *Fātiḥah* begins with the formula “In the Name of God—the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful.” Now God has many Names, but the two Names *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, the Infinitely Good and the All-Merciful, are the gates through which the revelation of the Quran pours forth for the guidance of human beings. *Al-Raḥmān*, which is a Name of the Divine Essence, is also the Divine Name that the Sufis associate with the existentionation of the cosmos itself. They believe that God breathed His Goodness, which is also Mercy, upon the latent archetypes residing in the Divine Intellect and Divine Knowledge and that through this “Breath of the Compassionate or the Infinitely Good” (*nafas al-Raḥmān*) the world came into being. Therefore, were it not for God’s infinite Goodness and Mercy, nothing would have come into existence, including us, nor would there be a revelation to guide us out of the labyrinth of our ego and psyche toward full self-knowledge leading to the knowledge of God and of His creation and our ultimate deliverance from all limitation. The formula at the beginning of the first chapter of the Quran, which is called *basmalah* in Arabic, not only consecrates the Sacred Text but also establishes the metaphysically necessary basis for the descent of the revelation and its reception.

The text of the chapter itself begins with “Praise be to God,” and this statement is on behalf of human beings although here it is uttered by God. The word for praise is *al-ḥamd*, and the attitude inherent in it constitutes an essential aspect of being truly human. The Quran asserts in several verses that all things praise God, but the praise by men and women is of special significance because human beings have been given the possibility of not praising God and of not being thankful to Him. The term *al-ḥamd* “li’Llāh, or “praise be to God,” which also implies gratefulness to Him, is so significant that it penetrates the daily life of all Muslims. Its constant repetition in daily discourse creates a perpetual attitude of praise of God and thanksgiving. Traditional Islamic sources assert that on the Day of Judgment all Muslims who have followed their religion faithfully will assemble under the “flag of praise” (*liwā’ al-ḥamd*) carried by the Prophet.

In Sufism *ḥamd* and the inner attitude associated with it are central. Followers of the Path are expected to be always grateful to God and to praise Him no matter what their circumstances. According to a Sufi story, one day a master and his disciples were sitting together. The mas-

ter asked one of the disciples, “What are the conditions under which we should say *al-ḥamd‘ li’Llāh*?” The disciple replied, “Whenever one receives bounty or a gift from God one should say *al-ḥamd‘ li’Llāh*.” The master responded, “What then is the difference between you and the dog sitting in front of us? If I throw him a piece of meat, he wags his tale in gratitude and praise of God. And when I do not do so, he simply sits there awaiting something from me.” The master added, “A *darwīsh* is a person who, if he receives a gift or bounty from God, says ‘*al-ḥamd‘ li’Llāh*’ and if he receives nothing and is in the greatest state of difficulty and need, he still says ‘*al-ḥamd‘ li’Llāh*.’” The attitude of praising God and being always grateful to Him, with the awareness that in ourselves we are poor and God is the Rich from whom all blessings flow—from the life we have to the air we breathe to the food we eat to the earth upon which we walk—is necessary for being truly human. It is a significant component of our humanity and is a basic way for us to realize who we are and to reach the state of perfect servanthood.

The greatest gift of God to us, however, is His Word or revelation, which enables us to return to Him. “Praise be to God” at the beginning of the *Fātiḥah* may be understood in the sense that we praise God and are grateful to Him for being worthy of receiving His revelation, and we say *al-ḥamd‘ li’Llāh* because God has created us as human beings and spoken to us, that He has placed us in a state in which we *can* say consciously *al-ḥamd‘ li’Llāh*. The grandeur of the human state is not in that human beings can make complicated machines or conceptualize complex theories, but in that men and women are worthy of being addressed by God and being considered worthy of receiving His revelation and guidance. This opening *al-ḥamd‘ li’Llāh* may be said to be not only an opening for the rest of the Quranic revelation that follows, but above all gratefulness for our being human. To be human is to be capable of hearing the Word of God and being led back to Him. The fact that in the Islamic rites each Muslim—man and woman—stands directly before God in the daily prayers without any intermediary indicates from the Sufi point of view not only that each Muslim has a priestly function but also that there is a nexus linking each soul directly to God. As Rūmī says,

There is a connection, without diminution, without comparison,
Between the Lord of the soul and the soul of human beings.

Mathnawī, 4:761

One answer that the Sufis give to the question about human nature is that the human person, the *anthropōs* (including the male and the female), is a being created to be able to be addressed by God and to address Him in turn, consciously and with free will. Our relation to God, which means also the Divine Self at the center of our being, determines who we really are and what we are meant to be. We can each start with the question “who am I?” and if we search enough be led step by step to the Sufi answer that we are beings who can address God directly by praising Him and being grateful to Him, that is, by saying *al-ḥamd*“ *li’Llāh*, and in turn be worthy of being addressed by Him and consequently to reach Him, and to realize that ultimately He is the only I.

This verse of the *Fātiḥah* continues by speaking of *Allāh* as the Lord of the worlds. This means metaphysically and cosmologically that God is the master of all space and that we are beings situated in one of many worlds, in all of which He is the Lord. To say “Lord of the worlds” is to realize that space is not simply quantitative extension measurable in Cartesian coordinates. Rather, it is symbolically the realm of Divine Presence, which permeates all places in which we live and move and have our being in this and in all other worlds. This verse speaks of *worlds* in the plural, which means, first of all, that reality is not limited to this world and, second, that there is no world—that is, other states of being, not worlds of modern science fiction—into which we can journey in soul and spirit in which the lordship of God is not the central reality. There is no extraterritoriality with respect to God’s dominion, His laws, and our responsibility to Him as human beings, as beings defined by our having responded to Him even before the creation of the world when He asked us “Am I not your Lord?” with a resounding affirmation. To be fully human is to realize our servitude toward God and to be always aware of this lordship wherever, in whichever world, we happen to be.

The *Fātiḥah* follows with the repetition of “the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful” to remind us that all the worlds in which God is Lord are also filled with His Goodness, Mercy, and Compassion. Moreover, since this verse is followed by the one concerning time, it might be said that the repetition of *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* is the means for us to be reminded that although our lives are bound by the conditions of space and time, it is the presence of Divine Goodness and Mercy that stands between these two parameters and constitutes the reality in which we actually live and have our being.

The next verse, “Master of the Day of Judgment,” concerns the flow of time at the end of which there is death and meeting with God. To be aware of our human condition is to realize that we are on a journey in this life, which ends with death followed by resurrection, and that we are destined for the unavoidable meeting with God, which means that although we die, we are also immortal. The profound reality of our consciousness cannot be eradicated by the accident of bodily death. The verse speaks not only of the Day beyond all days, but also of Judgment. This eschatological assertion is of the utmost significance for our life here on earth. It reveals the grandeur of the human state and the fact that actions in this life on earth have consequences beyond the life of this world.

Now, these are matters widely accepted by people of faith everywhere. The Sufis take a further step, however, and seek to die and be resurrected here and now and to experience the encounter with God while still here in this world through spiritual practices and by climbing the ladder of perfection. In the deepest sense those who have already achieved the goal have already died, been resurrected, met the Master of the Day of Judgment, been judged by the Supreme Judge, and rest in the Paradise of Divine Proximity. The Prophet of Islam was once asked about death and resurrection. The Prophet answered, “Look at me; I have died and been resurrected many times.”

If we put aside the opening *basmalah*, the first three verses of this seven-verse opening chapter of the Quran deal with the nature of God while having consequences for the human state. The fourth and middle verse, “Thee we worship, and in Thee we seek help,” concerns the human state itself in relation to God. The *raison d’être* of being human, as already mentioned, is to worship God and to seek His help in realizing our utter dependence upon the Divine Reality. The normal human being is a being who worships the Divine in whatever form It might be, as the long history of various human societies—excluding the secularized part of the contemporary world, which is an anomaly—reveals. For Sufis, worship (*‘ibādah*) is not merely one of the activities of human beings, it is the activity defining the state of servitude (*‘ubūdiyyah*) and therefore of being human. Moreover, in Sufism the highest form of worship is knowledge of God, which is always combined with love. According to a sacred *ḥadīth*, God asserts through the mouth of the Prophet, “I was a Hidden Treasure; I desired (or loved) to be known. Therefore I created the world so that I would be known.” This famous

ḥadīth, so often cited in classical Sufi texts, has many meanings, the most evident of which is that knowing God is the purpose of creation. To worship God through *maʿrifah* or unitive knowledge is therefore the fulfillment of the very purpose of creation and the highest form of worship. The definition of *iḥsān* or virtue, which is that of Sufism itself, is “To worship (or adore) God as if thou seest Him and if Thou seest Him not, then He seeth Thee.” This sacred *ḥadīth* refers to the same truth, for vision is directly related to knowledge.

As for seeking His help, of course all believers ask for God’s help in time of need. The Sufis, however, are those who realize that, being poor in the ontological and spiritual sense, they are always in need of God and dependent upon His help. The earnest prayer, “in Thee we seek help,” also strengthens our reliance upon God and our awareness that ultimately He alone can help us. To be fully human is to be constantly aware of this dependence and reliance, or *tawakkul*, about which classical Sufi texts speak again and again.

Standing before God who is Infinitely Good and All-Merciful, who is the master of space and time, whom men and women worship and whose help they seek, what does the servant ask from the Lord? It is to be guided upon the straight path. The last three verses of the *Fātiḥah* contain in brevity the complete doctrine of human salvation and our existential situation vis-à-vis the reality of Universal Existence. These verses specify three possibilities: the straight path, which is “the path of those on whom Thy grace is”; the path of “those on whom Thine anger is”; and the path of “those who go astray.” In relation to the Divine Reality, which is both transcendent and immanent at the center of our being as the Self, there are only three paths one can follow. The first is to march upward toward that Reality, the second to descend away from It, and the third is to neither ascend nor descend but to go horizontally, sideways, drawing spiritually neither closer to nor farther away in relation to the vertical axis of existence. Our existential situation can be further clarified by recourse to geometrical symbolism. We are situated at the point of the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes of a cross. We have a choice to ascend the vertical axis and be among those “on whom Thy grace is,” or to descend on the same axis into ever lower states of being as one of those “on whom Thine anger is.” Finally, we can wander along the horizontal line of the cross among “those who go astray.” Eschatologically these three possibilities correspond from a certain perspective to the paradisaical, infernal, and purgatorial states.

While the cross is a symbol that ordinary Muslims do not take in its Christian sense, since Islam does not identify the cross with the death of Christ, there does exist in Islamic esoteric teachings, both Sufi and Shi'ite, an elaborate doctrine of the metaphysical significance of this symbol and its relation to the reality of the Universal Man, which will be discussed shortly. In any case, the Sufi understanding of the inner meaning of the *Fātiḥah* reveals this existential situation, one of whose spatial symbolisms is the cross, of the human being as he or she stands before God.

All Muslims believe in the central significance of the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*), and Islam itself has been called by some the religion of the straight path. This basic Quranic image and symbol has many aspects and diverse meanings. As far as the path of life is concerned, the Sufis ask what this straight path is, and when told that it is the path that leads to God, they seek to follow it to its end while in this life. They want to climb the vertical axis of the cross, like the ladder of Jacob, to Heaven here and now. For Sufism, "the straight path" is ultimately the *Ṭarīqah* or the Sufi path itself, which begins with the *Shari'ah* or Divine Law. It is the path of return to the Source or the *Ḥaqīqah*, of which we have already spoken. For them the "straight path" is also the path of ascent.

To repeat the *Fātiḥah* at least seventeen times a day in the various daily canonical prayers combined with movements and other words that complement its meaning and to be aware of its inner significance, some of which we have outlined here, is to realize true servanthood before God. For the Sufi it is to realize what it means to be truly human. With the aid of the Quran, which plays such a central role in all of Islam including Sufism, the person of inner vision comes to realize the significance of being God's servant, which leads ultimately to the realization of our annihilation before Him (*fanā'*) and subsistence in Him (*baqā'*). In this way the human being becomes aware of the ideal to which he or she must dedicate all of life.

THE UNIVERSAL MAN

In classical Sufism the answer to the question, "what does it mean to be human?" is contained fully in the doctrine of what is usually translated as the Universal or Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), whose detailed exposition is to be found in the writings of such famous authorities as

Ibn 'Arabī and the fourteenth-century Persian master who lived in the Yemen, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, the author of the most famous work in Arabic bearing this title. The idea of Universal Man, which some have also called Perfect Man, is so central to Sufism that one of the greatest Western scholars of Sufism, Louis Massignon, called it "the privileged myth of Islam."

We find in Greek philosophy the idea of *anthropōs teleios*, which can be understood as "perfect man," and some have traced the philosophical formulation of this idea by Sufis to the Greek and more specifically Neoplatonic sources. But even if Sufis used certain theoretical formulations drawn from such sources, the reality they were describing did not come from earlier philosophical texts. The Universal Man is a reality independent of any philosophical descriptions of it. On the basis of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet, the Sufis were able to experience the reality of the Universal Man, which after several centuries came to be described in doctrinal fashion by Ibn 'Arabī and others.

In any case, according to the Sufis the Universal Man is the reality containing all the levels of existence other than God. It includes all the latent possibilities in each of those levels—a reality that, in those who have actualized it within themselves whether they be male or female, has become fully realized. The Universal Man is the androgynic prototype of the human state, both male and female, and also the prototype of the cosmos. That is why there exists a correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The Universal Man is like a mirror before God, reflecting all His Names and Qualities, and is also able to contemplate God through eyes that are illuminated by the light of God. He or she contemplates God's creation through God's eyes. The Universal Man possesses both active and passive perfections, and such well-known religious symbols as the Seal of Solomon and the Crescent symbolize the wedding of these twin perfections in both men and women.

In the human world the Universal Man finds its exemplars in the prophets and the great saints. Its function is both revelatory and initiatic. To become truly human is to realize, with the help of those who have already realized the state of perfection, the reality of the Universal Man, which we all are potentially. Realization means reaching the state of the Universal Man. It means returning to our primordial state (*al-fiṭrah*) and ultimately to our reality in God with the guidance of those who have already realized to one degree or another the state of the

Universal Man. To realize the state of the Universal Man is in turn to become the veritable servant of the Lord, to be aware of our central state in this world as His vicegerent (*khalīfah*), to realize our *fanā'*, and finally, through this annihilation of the ego, to reach with the light of the intellect within us the Supreme Essence, which alone is ultimately real.

WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE,
AND WHAT SHOULD WE BE DOING HERE?

What most of us are doing here in this world is living in a daydream called ordinary life, in the state of forgetting what Christ called the one thing necessary, that is, the Divine Reality. And we are in such a state because we have forgotten who we are. All we need to do is to wake up and realize our primordial nature, which is always there although buried deeply within many layers of the dross of forgetfulness. The Prophet said, "Man is asleep and when he dies he awakens." Sufism is meant for those who want to wake up, who accept dying to the ego here and now in order to discover the Self of all selves and to be consumed in the process in the fire of Divine Love.

Since we all die, it is better to seek to wake up now under conditions that involve our free will and intelligence rather than in a situation in which we are helpless. This initiatic death is the beginning of the spiritual path. In answer to the question, "what should we be doing here?" the Sufis, like sages of other traditions, say that we should take full advantage of the precious state of being human, wake up to the reality of our prototype as Universal Man, and seek to walk, while we still can, through the door that opens to the inner chamber of our heart and also to the Divine Presence. That opportunity will not always be there, for our next breath may be our last. If we do not pass through that door now, which opens into more inward or, to use the objective symbol, higher levels of being, leading finally to the Reality which is the Source and End of all, that door, which will close at the moment of death, may not be open to us tomorrow. We have no guarantee that we will continue in the state we possess as human beings in this world once we reach posthumous states of being. That is why Rūmī, echoing the saying of the Prophet, "Die before you die," suggests to those with ears to hear and eyes to see,

Go die, O man of honor, before you die,
So that you will not suffer the pangs of death,
Die in such a way as to enter the abode of light,
Not the death that places you in the grave.

What we should be doing here is discovering who we really are while we can. Now this process, which requires death to our “selves” and the piercing of the walls of our ego to penetrate into our heart, is not possible without the spiritual master, who already knows what it means to be fully human and who has realized this knowledge himself or herself through journeying across the mountains and valleys of microcosmic existence to reach the One. As we shall see later in this book, in Sufism the prototype of this spiritual guide is ultimately the Prophet himself, and all Sufi masters are his representatives in this realm of initiatic guidance. As the fully realized Universal Man and beloved of God, the Prophet was given the initiatic power, called *walāyah/wilāyah* in Arabic, that makes it possible for us to awaken from our earthly day-dreaming and to fulfill the ultimate *raison d'être* of being human, that is, loving and knowing God, which means realizing the perfect state of servanthood combined with intimacy with the Divine and, through the transparency of our outer self, allowing God within us “to know” Himself.

TO BECOME SOMEONE;
TO BECOME NO ONE

From the Sufi point of view only the person who has reached the center of his or her being and knows who he or she really is can be considered fully human and be really someone. In fact, the cap that members of many Sufi orders wear is often called the crown of poverty (*tāj-i faqr* in Persian), and those human beings who have realized fully what it means to be human are the real royalty of this world. They are princes among human beings for, as some old masters have said, they are the ones who cannot choose because God has already chosen for them. It was once asked of that supreme prince of the Sufis of Khurasan, Bāyazīd Bastāmī, who lived in the ninth century, “What do you want?” He answered, “I want not to want.” Such people, who have realized what it really means to be human, are in the state of perfect servitude

and proximity, a state in which their will is surrendered to the Will of God. It is they who are really someone in this world even if not noticed by those with only outward-looking eyes.

In Arabic and Persian the word *rajul* (pl. *rijāl*) means not only man/men but also outstanding figures whether in the field of science, religion, or politics. One speaks of the political *rijāl* of a particular country or era as well as the *rijāl al-ghayb*, literally, absent or invisible figures, who constitute an important part of the Sufi universe. In Sufism, those who have walked with determination upon the Sufi path and performed that crucial spiritual battle against their negative tendencies, or what is called the greater *jihād*, are considered the real *rijāl* of this world. They are the people who are someone in the eyes of God, whatever their station in society. The word *rijāl* carries a masculine gender, but lest one think it refers simply to the male gender, it is important to recount the famous Sufi tradition according to which on the Day of Judgment when all human beings are standing before God, He will say, "The *rijāl* [in the spiritual sense] step forward." And the first person to step forward will be the Virgin Mary. It is by virtue of coming to know ourselves and therefore our Lord that we become really someone beyond all transient honors and distinctions with which fallen human beings seek to distinguish themselves. And in becoming someone spiritually and in the eyes of God, we fulfill the purpose of human existence.

Paradoxically, however, to become someone spiritually means also ultimately to become no one. It is in the end to transcend all particularities and realize the Self within all selves, to become not this person or that person but personhood as such, which also means becoming the perfect mirror of the Divine. To return to the symbol of the sun, it is also to pierce with the light of the intellect all veils of duality and otherness to return to the Sun of the Self, which is the origin of all selves and the source of the intellect shining within those who have realized the state of perfect servanthood. It is in light of return to the Self that many Sufis have spoken, often in ecstatic language, of having gone beyond name, color and race, country, and even the formal aspects of religion, beyond faith and infidelity, to become no one and yet someone in the highest sense of the term. A sonnet (*ghazal*) attributed to one of the exalted masters of Sufism, who remains someone of the greatest importance even today and yet became no one, expresses the reality of this final state of being human, the state of realizing the unity beyond all dualities, the one Formless reality beyond all formal distinctions:

What is to be done, O Muslims, for I know myself not,
 Neither a Christian am I, nor Jew, nor Magian nor Muslim.
 Neither of the East am I nor West, nor of the land, nor sea;
 Nor of nature's quarry, nor of heavens circling above.
 I am not made of earth or water, not of wind or fire;
 Nor am I of the Divine Throne nor of floor carpeting,
 Nor of the realm of the cosmos, nor of minerals.
 I am not from India, nor China, nor Bulgaria, nor Turkistan;
 I am not from the kingdom of the two Iraqs, nor from the earth
 of Khorasan.
 Neither of this world am I nor the next; nor of heaven nor hell;
 Nor from Adam nor Eve nor of Eden, nor paradise or its porter.
 My place is the placeless, my mark the markless;
 Not either body nor soul for I am myself the Beloved.⁴

Rūmī, Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī

To be human in the full sense is to be able to realize the Truth and
 become fully immersed in its light. It is to be drawn so intimately into
 the bosom of the Beloved that one could say with Rūmī, I am no
 longer in this body or soul but have "become" the Beloved. And this
 Beloved is the eternally Living, in whose Life alone do we find eter-
 nal life and felicity beyond the gates of the death of the ego and the
 obliteration of all that separates us from transcendent and immanent
 Reality, which is also our Self, the very center of our being.

Truly I am a wondrous thing
 For him who sees me:
 Lover and Beloved, both am I,
 There is no second.
 O seeker of the essential Truth,
 Thine eye's film hides it.
 Return unto thyself, take note:
 None is but thee.
 All good, all knowledge springs from thee;
 In thee's the Secret.⁵

‘Alī Shushtarī

