

God Is Reality: Metaphysical Knowledge and Spiritual Realization

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To attain knowledge of Ultimate Reality, which is metaphysical knowledge *par excellence*, is not only a possibility for man, but human intelligence may be said to have its *raison d'être* in the attainment of that knowledge and man himself can be defined as the being created for the consciousness of the Absolute and awareness of God as Reality. Man in his present terrestrial nature (or what Christianity calls fallen man, and particularly modern man, who is no longer protected by the merciful guidance of tradition) has forgotten who he is. He has lost awareness of his primordial nature or what Islam calls *al-fiṭrah*. An inversion has taken place within him which has atrophied the power of his intelligence and veiled the eye of his heart by which he can "see" God as Reality and what appears as reality to the eyes of fallen man as relativity and veil.¹

In fallen man the center has in a sense become the periphery and the periphery the center. The solvent heart from which flows the spring of Divine Knowledge has become frozen and solidified, while the adamant mind, which should reflect the light of the Divine Sun like a clear, cut diamond, has become solvent like a flowing stream of unending images and thoughts impossible to control and opaque to the illuminating rays of the Intellect. The deepest yearnings of the soul (which should be towards the center

or the heart, interiorized toward that locus wherein resides the "Throne of Divine Mercy," to quote the Islamic doctrine) have become externalized so that man seeks avidly through never-ending outward dissipation the peace that resides in that "kingdom of God which is within you." Meanwhile, those radiations of mercy and generosity, which in the case of the spiritual man flow outward to fill the surrounding ambience with grace and light, are turned inside toward the ego to further strengthen its shell and fire its passions.

To regain the state of that man who can know Ultimate Reality (in the sense of realized knowledge) there must be spiritual discipline and a grace, both of which can in fact issue in a valid way only from a living, orthodox tradition possessing a Divine Origin and roots which are sunk deeply into the spiritual ground of all terrestrial existence, and not from concoctions made up for the marketplace by purblind leaders of the blind. Spiritual discipline, with all the different modes that it possesses in various traditions, possesses this universal goal of the remolding of man in such a way that he becomes himself and gains that primordial perfection wherein he realizes God as Reality or the Absolute as Ultimate Reality. Spiritual discipline, which is not to be equated with religious and moral discipline, is dispensed only by a qualified master for the sake of spiritual realization. If religious and moral discipline, which is for all human beings, enables man to be saved, spiritual discipline, meant for those capable of following its demands and requirements, allows him to be delivered from the bondage of limitative existence and to gain principal knowledge whose highest mode is the knowledge of the Principle as such.²

There is in man something that must contract and die; something that must expand and overflow the boundaries of his limited existence; and finally a substance which can know the Ultimate Reality and "become" one with It because it is already a spark of Divinity and was in reality never separated from Ultimate Reality. It is that spiritual heart which is not only the "Throne of the Compassionate" according to the Quranic dictum "The Heart of the Faithful is the Throne of the Compassionate" (*galb al-mu'in 'arsh al-rahmān*), but also the "instrument of knowledge" by which that reality is known. That is why the Sufi who knows God as Reality is called "he who knows by God" (*al-'ārif bi'Llāh*). The

path of spiritual realization can be summarized, therefore, in the three grand stages of contraction, expansion, and union, the modes differing according to the particular techniques and methods of the path in question.

The path can also be summarized in the famous stages of the alchemical process, alchemy itself being a science of the soul with a symbolic language to describe the stages of the cure of the soul from its imperfections, the process being *solve et coagula*. Before gold, that is, the incorruptible perfect metal which symbolizes the soul of the saint, is made, that which is coagulated and solidified in the base metal must be melted and dissolved. The element which must be dissolved is the hardened heart; it must be melted so that the spring of Divine Knowledge can flow from it. And what must be "coagulated," hardened, and crystallized or stilled is the ever moving mind which, because of the incessant flow of thoughts and images within it, is incapable of reflecting the knowledge of the heart upon the mental plane.

In any case, spiritual discipline and realization are necessary for the attainment of a realized knowledge of Ultimate Reality, although it must be remembered that since human intelligence was made for such a knowledge, an intuition of metaphysical knowledge is always possible; for the wind doth blow where it listeth. In a traditional world, moreover, the fruit of spiritual realization in a sense flows beyond the boundary of those immediately concerned and the presence of both revelation and intellectual intuition prevent channels of knowledge from becoming limited to the external senses and the ratiocination based upon data drawn from them. In the traditional world, reality is still related to Divinity, in contrast to the situation which one observes in the modern world, where what appears as reality is depleted of the sense of the sacred.

The sensualist and empirical epistemology, which has dominated the horizon of Western man in the modern period, has succeeded in reducing reality to the world experienced by the external senses hence removing the concepts of "reality" as a category pertaining to God. The consequence of this change in the very meaning of "reality" has been nothing less than catastrophic, reducing God and in fact all spiritual realms of being to the category of the abstract and finally to the unreal. At the base of the

loss of the sense of the reality of God by modern man in his daily life lies the philosophical error of reducing the idea of reality to that of the externally experienced world, of altering the idea of realism in its early medieval sense to the connotation it has gained in modern schools of philosophy. Cut off from the twin sources of metaphysical knowledge, namely, revelation and intellection,³ and also deprived of that spiritual discipline and inner spiritual experience which makes possible the concrete realization of higher levels of being, modern man has been confined to such a truncated and limited aspect of reality that of necessity he has lost sight of God as Reality. Also, even if he continues to have faith in the Divinity, the conception of the Divinity as Reality does not at all accord with that empirically determined world view⁴ within which he lives and whose premises he accepts unwittingly or often unconsciously.

It is possible for man to gain knowledge of God and to come to know Him as Reality because of the very nature of human intelligence which was made to know the Absolute as such. But to gain this knowledge it is necessary to have access to those twin sources of metaphysical knowledge and certitude, namely, revelation and intellection. Moreover, the second is accessible to man in his present state only by virtue of the first, while the fruit of wisdom which it bears lies at the heart of revelation and also resides at the center of man's own being. To reach the inner man (or the heart which is the seat of the intellect through the grace issuing from revelation) and to reach the heart of revelation (by means of the penetrating rays of this sanctified intellect) enables man to gain an adequate metaphysical knowledge of God as Ultimate Reality and, in the light of this knowledge, an awareness of relativity as relativity or more precisely as veil.

It can be said that not only modern man does not possess an adequate doctrine of God as Reality in its absolute sense, but also that because of this lack of knowledge he is deprived of an adequate understanding of relativity as veil. To conceive the Absolute in relative terms is also to absolutize the relative in some sense. To remove from God the attribute of reality is also to fail to see the world as only partial reality, as a veil which at once hides and manifests, the veil which as *al-hijāb* in Islam or *māyā* in Hinduism plays such a basic role in Oriental metaphysics.

Moreover, it is necessary to mention that whereas an adequate metaphysical doctrine pertaining to God as Reality can be found in traditional Christian metaphysics as seen in the works of such masters as Erigena, St. Bonaventure, and St. Thomas, the doctrine of the veil is more implicit and less clearly stated even in traditional schools in the West than it is in either Islam or Hinduism, although there are certainly allusions to it in the works of such sages as Meister Eckhart. The reformulation of an adequate metaphysical doctrine concerning the nature of God in a contemporary language requires therefore not only a doctrine concerning God as Ultimate Reality or the absolutely Real but also the doctrine of cosmic illusion, the veil, that creative power which at once manifests the Divine Principle as relativity and veils the Principle through that very manifestation which is none other than the veil, so that a Sufi could address God as "O Thou who hidest Thyself by that which is none other than Thee."

God as Ultimate Reality is not only the Supreme Person but also the source of all that is, hence at once *Supra-Being* and *Being*, God as Person and the Godhead or Infinite Essence of which Being is the first determination. Both He or She and It and yet beyond all pronominal categories, God as Ultimate Reality is the Essence which is the origin of all forms, the Substance compared to which all else is accident, the One who alone is and who stands even above the category of being as usually understood.

God as Reality is at once absolute and infinite, and goodness or perfection. In Himself He is the Absolute which partakes of no relativity in His Essence. The Divine Essence cannot but be absolute and one. All other considerations must belong to the order of relativity, to a level below that of the Essence. To assert that God is one is to assert His absoluteness and to envisage Him in Himself, as such. The Divine Order partakes of relativity in the sense that there is Divine Relativity or Multiplicity which is included in the Divine Nature, but this relativity does not reach the abode of the Divine Essence. God in His Essence cannot but be One, cannot but be the Absolute.⁵

God as Reality is also infinite, *the* Infinite, as this term is to be understood metaphysically and not mathematically. Ultimate reality contains the source of all cosmic possibilities and in fact all possibilities as such, even the metacosmic. God is Infinite not

only in the sense that no limit can be set upon Him, but also in the sense that He as ultimate reality contains all possibilities. Metaphysically, He is the All-Possibility.⁶ When the Bible states that with God all things are possible or the Quran asserts that God has power over all things, these scriptural statements must not be understood only in the usual theological sense of alluding to God's infinite power. They also refer to God's nature as the All-Possibility and confirm in another language the Quranic verse: "In His hands is to be found the dominion (*malakūt*) of all things." That is, the essential reality of all things is to be found in the Divine Nature. It is perhaps useful to recall that the words "possibility," "puissance," and "potentiality" are from the same root. To say that God is the All-Powerful, the All-Potent is also to say that He is the All-Possibility.

The understanding of the Divine Infinity is so essential to an adequate doctrine of the nature of God that its neglect has been the main cause for the philosophical objections to the religious idea of God as goodness and perfection, the source of all that is good and at the same time creator of an imperfect world. No problem has been as troublesome to Western man's understanding of God as presented in the mainstream of Christian theology than the famous problem of theodicy, that is, the question of the creation of a world in which there is evil by a Creator who is good. The lack of a complete metaphysical doctrine in the modern West has brought about the eclipse of the doctrine of Divine Infinity and the grades of manifestation or levels of being, with the help of which it is possible to understand perfectly well why a world in which there is evil has its origin in God who is pure goodness.

Here it is necessary to add that there would in fact be no agnostics around if only one were able to teach metaphysics to everyone. One cannot expect everyone to comprehend metaphysics any more than one could expect everyone to understand physics or mathematics. But strangely enough, whereas modern man accepts the discoveries of physics on faith and is willing to undergo the necessary training to master the subject in case he wishes to understand physics himself, unlike the traditional man of faith he does not extend this faith to the fruits of metaphysical knowledge. Without willing to undergo the necessary discipline, which in the case of traditional metaphysics and in contrast to modern science

includes moral and spiritual considerations, modern man expects to understand metaphysics immediately, without any preparation. If he fails to comprehend, then he rejects the very possibility of that knowledge which alone can solve the antinomies and apparent contradictions of the problem of theodicy and evil, and he does not even accept the revealed truth on the basis of faith, as was the case of traditional man who usually possessed a greater awareness of his own limitations than does his modern counterpart.

In any case, the doctrine of the Divine Infinity makes it possible to understand why there is a world which is limited and imperfect. The Divine contains all possibilities including the possibility of its own negation without which it would not be infinite. But this possibility implies a projection towards nothingness which, however, is never reached. This projection constitutes the world, or rather the many worlds standing below their Divine Origin. Since only God is good, this projection or elongation means of necessity separation from the source of goodness and hence the appearance of evil which is a kind of "crystallization of nothingness," real on its own level of existence but an illusion before God who alone is Reality as such. The root of the world resides in the infinity of the Divine Nature.

The metaphysical doctrine of God as absolute and infinite is contained in an explicit fashion in the Quranic chapter called "Unity" or Sincerity, *al-Tawhīd* or *al-Ikhlāṣ* (CXIII), which according to Muslims summarizes the Islamic doctrine of God concerning the Divine Nature. The chapter is as follows:

In the Name of God - Most Merciful, Most Compassionate
 Say: He is God, the One (*al-aḥad*)!
 God, the eternal Refuge (*al-ṣamad*)!
 He begetteth not nor was He begotten.
 And there is none like unto Him.

The "Say" (*qul*) already refers to the source of manifestation in the Divine Principle, to the Logos which is at once the Divine Instrument of Manifestation and the source of manifestation in the Divine Order. He (*huwa*) is the Divine Essence, God in Himself, God as such or in His suchness. *Al-aḥad* attests not only to God's oneness but also to His absoluteness. God is one because He is

absolute and absolute because he is one, *al-aḥadiyyah* or quality of oneness implying both meanings in Arabic. *Al-ṣamad*, a most difficult term to render in English, implies eternal fullness or richness; it refers to the Divine Infinity, to God the All-Possibility. The last two verses emphasize the truth that God in His Essence is both above all relations and all comparisons. The chapter as a whole is therefore the revealed and scriptural counterpart of the metaphysical doctrine of the Divine Nature as absolute and infinite, this knowledge also being revealed in the sense that it issues from that inner revelation which is the intellect.⁷

There is, however, one more statement in this Quranic chapter with which in fact the other chapters of the Quran also open and which refers to the third aspect of the Divine Nature referred to above, namely, goodness. God is not only absolute and infinite, but also goodness and perfection. To use the Quranic terminology, He is *al-rahmah*, mercy in Himself, and as such cannot but manifest Himself. The expansive or creative power of the Divinity, which "breathing upon the Divine Possibilities" manifests the world, issues from this fundamental aspect of the Divine Nature as goodness or mercy. That is why the Sufis consider the very substance of the universe to be nothing other than the "Breath of the Compassionate" (*nafas al-rahmān*).⁸ If God is both absolute and infinite, goodness or mercy also reside in His very Nature for as Ibn 'Arabī has said, "Mercy pertains to the essence of the Absolute because the latter is by essence 'Bounteous'."⁹ To reinstate the integral metaphysical doctrine of the Divine Nature in the contemporary world, it is necessary to go beyond the relativities of various orders to gain access to a doctrine of God as that Reality which is absolute and infinite, and goodness, perfection, and mercy.

Such a vision requires not only an adequate knowledge of the Principle as absolute but also an adequate grasp of the meaning of relativity, of levels of existence, of the relatively real and even of the "relatively absolute," an elliptical term which far from being contradictory contains an indispensable key for the understanding of the science of God. To use the mutually exclusive categories of Creator and created as is done theologically is to fall into certain dichotomies which can only be bridged over by an act of faith in the absence of which there is created skepticism concerning the very tenets of revealed religion. To begin with the world as reality, as is

done by most of modern philosophy, is to reach an even more dangerous impasse which of necessity leads to nihilism and skepticism by reducing God to an abstraction, to the "unreal," and philosophy itself to the discussion of more or less trivial questions or to providing clever answers for ill-posed problems.

To avoid such impasses, it is essential to revive the doctrine of the veil as already alluded to above and to rediscover the traditional teaching about the gradation of reality or of being. To understand God as Reality, it is necessary to understand that there are levels of reality and not only reality as an empirically definable psychophysical continuum "out there." The world is real to the extent that it reveals God who alone is Real. But the world is also unreal to the extent that it hides and veils God as Reality. Only the saint who sees God everywhere can claim that that "everywhere" is real.

Moreover, a particular object is not real in only one sense of the term but partakes of levels of reality from being an opaque object, an "it" as understood in modern science which is its face as *māyā* in the sense of illusion, to its being a theophany, a reflection of Divine Presence and a witness to the Divine *māyā* which is none other than Divine Creativity.¹⁰ To understand God as Reality is also to grasp the world as unreality, not nothingness pure and simple but as relative reality. It is to be saved from that central error of false attribution which issues from our ignorance and which causes our attributing reality to the illusory, and as a consequence the character of illusion to that which is Reality as such and which ultimately is alone Real.

To reinstate the doctrine of God as Reality is, needless to say, impossible without a change in the way we envisage the question and possibility of knowledge. As long as the prevalent empiricism or its complementary rationalism continue to reign or are replaced by that irrationalism which has erupted against nineteenth century European philosophy from below, there is no possibility to grasp the validity of that traditional wisdom, or that *sophia perennis*, which has always seen God as Reality and the world as a dream from which the sage awakens through realization and forgetful man through death. To grasp this doctrine, the traditional sapiential perspective based on the possibility of principial knowledge from the twin sources of the intellect and revelation must be

reinstated along with the metaphysics which is the fruit of this way of knowing.¹¹

In the light of this fact, the role of traditional Islamic wisdom, or what the Quran calls *al-hikmah*, becomes clear in this contemporary discussion on the nature of God. As a religion based completely on the doctrine of the oneness of God, a religion in which God is seen as both Reality and Truth, the Arabic term *al-haqīqah* meaning both, and *al-Haqq*, which is related to *haqīqah*, being a Name of God, Islamic wisdom can play an important role in enabling modern man to rediscover that plenary doctrine of the nature of God, a doctrine whose loss has led to the unprecedented skepticism and relativism which characterize the modern world. Islam is able to achieve this goal not only because of the nature of the Quranic revelation based as it is in an uncompromising manner upon the doctrine of Divine Unity, but also because it has preserved intact to this day its sapiential tradition which guards the absolute-ness of God and His Transcendence while hearing in the song of the bird and smelling in the perfume of the rose the sound and breath of the Beloved, which contemplates on the very veil of creaturely existence the Face of God.

Furthermore, not only has Islam preserved its sapiential tradition, but it has kept intact, despite the vicissitudes of time and turmoils of history, the spiritual disciplines necessary for the attainment of that knowledge which the sapiential tradition carries within its heart. The various paths within Sufism, as well as certain esoteric and spiritual disciplines found within Shi'ism, still dispense methods of meditation, prayer, invocation, and other disciplines which make the knowledge of the One not only a theoretical possibility but an actual and ever-present reality.

According to Islam's own teachings, this doctrine of Unity and the vision of the One as being at once Ultimate Reality and Truth is not unique to Islam, but lies at the heart of all revelations whatever be the actual possibility of attaining such a knowledge in other traditions in their present-day condition. But as the last echo of the Primordial Word upon the stage of human history during this present cycle of terrestrial existence, Islam still reverberates in a particularly vivid manner to that eternal melody of Divine Unity, recalling man to his perennial vocation as witness on earth to that Reality which is at once absolute, and infinite, and boundless goodness or mercy.

NOTES

- 1 See S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (New York: State University Press, 1975), esp. chap. 6.
- 2 Properly speaking, spiritual discipline belongs to the inner or esoteric dimension of religion, and religious discipline to the exoteric, which is also indispensable for those who aspire to follow the esoteric path. See F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
- 3 Throughout this discussion the intellect is distinguished rigorously from reason which is its mental reflection. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), chaps. 5 and 6. For a synthesis of the traditional doctrine of the intellect as it pertains to epistemology see F. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, trans. G. Polit and D. Lambert (Bloomington, Ind.: Word Wisdom, 1981), 5-35.
- 4 Although modern rationalism is in many ways opposed to empiricism, as far as the present discussion is concerned, it is nothing more than a complement of empiricism because it, too, has to rely finally upon only the evidence of the senses or the limitations of the mental plane as a result of its denial of both intellection and revelation. See F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, trans. P. Townsend (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 7-55.
- 5 It is not only possible for man to know God as the Absolute, but it is only the Absolute that can be known absolutely. Human intelligence was made to know the Absolute as such and no amount of "anti-metaphysical cleansing of language" by various types of positivists can remove from intelligence this power to know God as Reality and this Reality as the Absolute. If the use of human language to express such metaphysical assertions has become meaningless to many modern philosophers, it is not because of the shortcoming of such a language or the impossibility of making metaphysical assertions, but because such assertions become meaningless the moment human intelligence is cut from its own roots and made subservient to the dictates of a purely sensualist and empirical epistemology.
- 6 This doctrine has been expounded in an incomparable manner in the metaphysical works of F. Schuon who has brought the metaphysical term "*Toute-possibilité*" into current usage. See especially his "The Problem of Possibility," in *From The Divine to the Human*, 43-56, in which the difficult and at the same time cardinal metaphysical concept of possibility is discussed. For a general introduction to the works of this singularly neglected figure see S. H. Nasr, *The Writings of Frithjof Schuon: A Basic Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).
- 7 This inner revelation cannot, however, become operative except by virtue of that external revelation which provides for it an objective cadre and enables it to be spiritually efficacious. If there are exceptions, they are there to "prove the rule."
- 8 This doctrine has found its classical formulation in the *Wisdom of the Prophets* or the *Bezel of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-hikam*) of Muhyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī. See the translation of R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist, 1980). See also T. Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and*

Taoism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), chap. 9; H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. R. Mannheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pt. 1; T. Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, trans. D. M. Matheson (London: Thorstons, 1976), 58ff.; and S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 344ff.

9 From the *Fuṣūṣ*, quoted in Izutsu, 110.

10 A. K. Coomaraswamy in fact translated *māyā* as "Divine Creativity," while Schuon has rendered it as "Divine Play." On *māyā* and veil see Schuon, "The Mystery of the Veil," in his *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. W. Stoddart (London: Perennial Books, 1981), 47-64; and "Māyā," in his *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. Lord Northbourne (London: Perennial Books, 1965), 89-98.

11 See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, chaps. 2-4.

IV

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN PURSUIT OF ULTIMATE REALITY

GOD

THE CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION SERIES

(ULTIMATE REALITY AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE)

Edited by James Duerlinger

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Paragon House Publishers
New York