

# **DIVINE BEATITUDE: SUPREME ARCHETYPE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE**

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Most of the studies which deal with sacred art only focus on its objective aspect, that is, on its formal manifestations; our intention here is to focus rather on the spiritual dimensions of one of the subjective aspects closely connected with sacred art, that is, the aesthetic experience of the perceiving subject, the beholder of art. By aesthetic experience we mean the existential ramification of the perception of beauty; the experience of expansiveness, marvel, serenity and in its higher reaches, the feelings of bliss that can be generated in the contemplation of beautiful forms; and we take sacred art in its widest meaning, to encompass not only the formal productions of homo religiosus, but also the handiwork of the Creator: that is, virgin nature, with all the beauties found therein.

Just as terrestrial beauty both reflects and participates in the Divine Archetype of Beauty, so the experience of beauty the aesthetic sensation must derive from an archetype situated on a transcendent plane. But whereas in the case of formal beauty, participation in the archetype is rigorously objective and unconditional, in the case of aesthetic experience, participation in the archetype is critically dependent on the subjective capacity of the individual to make of his experience a spiritual foretaste of heavenly felicity and thereby a 'remembrance of God'. Beautiful vision on earth should foreshadow the Beatific vision in Heaven, it should heighten one's resolution to conform to the requirements of this celestial reward; it should, in other words, lead one to God. The experience of beauty, far from being a question of merely aesthetic sensibility, is essentially an invitation to union: union with the Divine Principle, which both projects Beauty and attracts by means of Beauty. One speaks of being entranced, enthralled, enraptured by beauty: these terms clearly indicate the spiritual potential inherent in aesthetic experience, for the individual is not fully himself in the face of a beauty that overwhelms him; indeed, a certain mode of extinction can even be said to have taken place.

Whether or not this spiritual potential will be realized depends on whether the perceiving subject is interiorised or exteriorised by his experience; that is, whether the perception of beautiful form leads one to the formless source of beauty within the heart, to the 'kingdom of God that is within you', to God 'who is closer to man than his jugular vein'; or whether, on the contrary, the experience of beauty gives rise to a fixation on the transient forms as such and thus to a cult of aestheticism, an art for the sake of art. In this case, the experience of beauty becomes a substitute for God, rather than a pathway to Him; it generates a ghaflah, a forgetfulness of God, rather than a dhikr, a remembrance of God; it gives rise to an unstable, false and fleeting plenitude which inflates the ego, rather than to a contemplation of the transcendent essences of beauty in the face of which the hardness of the ego is dissolved, and the limitations and pretensions of the ego are transcended. In the words of Firthjof Schuon:<sup>142</sup>

"... the born contemplative cannot see or hear beauty without perceiving in it something of God. The Divine that is contained in it allows him the more easily to detach himself from the appearances of things. As for the passional man, he sees in beauty the world, seduction, the ego, so that it takes him away from the 'one thing needful'..."

Now all men have an existential need for beauty, for on the one hand man is 'made in the image of God' (Khalafa Allahu 'l-Adama 'ala suratihi ); and on the other, 'God is Beautiful and He loves Beauty' (inna Allaha jamilun yuhibbu 'l-jamal). The substance of man's innermost being is woven of Beauty, and like God, he loves Beauty. Consequently, love of beauty imposes itself upon man as an ontological imperative; it is far from being just a sentimental attraction.

'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. This English saying accords perfectly with a key Platonic principle: the eye must itself be of a luminous nature for it to be able to register light; the truth must be immanent in the intellect for the intellect to be able to recognize truth. It is because beauty is of the essence of man's spirit that he is able to perceive and love beautiful forms; but it must be added that this capacity to intuit the essence in forms depends not only upon one's contemplatively, but also on the degree to which the individual's inherent beauty of soul is actualised: in other words, whether virtue and piety adorn the soul.

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<sup>142</sup> *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*. London, Faber and Faber, n. d. p.27.

According to Plato again: 'Beauty is the splendour of the True'. Now what this implies, among other things, is that one cannot come to know the Truth without also coming to know and love Beauty, which is found in all its infinite glory only in the Truth. This same fundamental principle is implied in the hadith qudsi:

I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world.

The fact that God loved to be known implies that man, in proportion to his coming to know God, will ineluctably come to love Him. The Truth, his coming to know God, will ineluctably come to love Him. The Truth, then, reveals the essence of Beauty, but beauty does not necessarily reveal the truth: it can both enlighten and delude, hence the drama of man's perennial quest for a beauty that is imperishable.

If this beauty is not sought in its Divine source, by means of contemplation, in the necessary framework of prayer and virtue, then it will be sought in its manifested forms; and these forms will become divinised, that is, adored, if not worshipped, as idols. To paraphrase Frithjof Schuon: Beauty attached to God is sacrament, cut off from God it becomes an idol.<sup>143</sup> One might add: the aesthetic sensation attached to God is dhikr, cut off from God it is ghaflah. The beautiful object will then be detached from the Divine source that imparts to it all its meaning, all its liberating power; it will be adored for its own sake, or more specifically, for the sake of the concupiscent gratification of the senses, a gratification which is the vulgar parody of that blissful contemplation of the archetypes that is the authentic fruit of aesthetic experience.

There is then a fundamental ambiguity inherent in aesthetic experience; in order to serve its proper spiritual purpose the experience of beauty must consciously be related to God. And it must be stressed that the ultimate function of this experience is to provide a foretaste of that beatitude which is one with the absolute Reality, a foretaste which is as an invitation to participate in the Divine Presence with all one's being, and not just with one's surface sensibility.

Given the fact that the Divine Reality is at once transcendent and immanent vis a vis all formal beauty, it is incumbent on man to take account of both of these dimensions; one must see all beautiful things in God, and God in all beautiful things. Failure to see all beautiful things in God violates

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<sup>143</sup> *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Pates Manor, Perennial Books, 1981, p. 182.

the aspect of transcendence: for it is blind to the fact that all beautiful things are prefigured in the Divine Principle which infinitely transcends the world; and failure to see the Divine Beauty in all beautiful things violates the aspect of immanence, by being blind to the fact that objects are beautiful only by virtue of the Divine Beauty that is rendered present through and by them.

The rest of this paper will attempt to highlight the metaphysical relationship between aesthetic experience and Divine Beatitude, pointing out these two dimensions of transcendence and immanence.

We shall begin by positing three fundamental degrees of Being: the terrestrial, the celestial and the Divine. Notwithstanding the distinctions that can be made within the celestial realms and the Divine Nature, this tripartite distinction is adequate for the purposes of our central thesis here: that aesthetic experience is a reflection of celestial felicity and that this felicity in turn is derived from its archetype, the Beatitude proper to the Absolute.

This assertion can be derived from three main sources: intellectual self-evidence; scriptural exegesis; and the fruits of spiritual realization.

Turning first to self-evidence: even the fact that man is made in the image of God, all the essential truths are inscribed in his innermost spirit; it is then altogether 'normal' that the innate knowledge of the beatific nature of the Absolute should shine forth as a self-evident reality for primordial man, or man still attuned to his primordial nature, the *fitrah*. And this spiritual intuition of ultimate Reality as the Sovereign Good, steeped in its own Beatitude, will comprise an understanding that this beatitude is the supreme archetype of all blessings and modes of happiness on the celestial and terrestrial planes. For the contemplative, every beautiful object on earth proves the Divine archetype of Beauty, and every aesthetic experience testifies to the Divine archetype of Beatitude. Beauty and Beatitude are indistinguishable in the Essence; it is only on the basis of the initial bipolarization of the One Reality into Subject and Object that one can distinguish the archetype of objective beauty and the archetype of subjective beatitude. As Dr Lings says in this book *Symbol and Archetype*, it is God's consciousness of His own Infinite Perfection that constitutes the archetype of all marvelling at perfection.<sup>144</sup>

This intellectual certitude of the Divine source of all beatitude, of the blissful nature of ultimate Reality, can also be actualised upon contact with

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<sup>144</sup> *Symbol and Archetype*, Cambridge, Quinta Essentia, 1991, p.57.

Revelation: that is, as a result of reflection upon and contemplation of scripture. The descriptions of God's nature as intrinsic beatitude, goodness, mercy and compassion - encapsulated in the basmalah - can awaken the dormant knowledge of these realities within the heart of man. The descriptions of Paradise can serve as a means of Platonic remembrance: for Paradise is not only the final resting-place of man, it was also his original home. For this reason, Plato asserts that music on earth can act as a reminder of the heavenly harmonies which man heard prior to this earthly exile. And, according to the Gospel, no man hath ascended up to Heaven but he that came down from Heaven.<sup>145</sup>

Of the numerous Qur'anic verses describing the felicity of Paradise, we should like to draw attention to one in particular, from the Surah al-Baqarah.<sup>146</sup>

Whenever the dwellers of Paradise are given to eat of the fruits of the Garden they say: this is what we were given to eat before. And they were given the like thereof.

This verse establishes in a most direct manner the relationship between the earthly experience and the celestial archetype of every good. 'Fruit' may be taken here to denote the varieties of beatific experience, so the dwellers of Paradise are asserting here that there is a continuity of essence between the delights offered them in Paradise and all positive, noble and beautiful experiences on earth; every mode of happiness on earth is thus a foretaste of a heavenly fruit.

As between the earthly symbol and the celestial archetype, however, there is both continuity and discontinuity, deriving respectively from immanence and transcendence: there is continuity in respect of essential content and discontinuity in respect of existential degree. The dwellers in Paradise express the aspect of continuity in saying 'this is what we were given before'; whereas the statement immediately following qualifies this affirmation of identity by saying 'they were given the like thereof'. In other words, from the point of view of immanence, the earthly experience of beauty participates in its celestial archetype through essential identity, while from the point of view of transcendence; the lower existential degree of this world renders all earthly experience incommensurable with the infinite plenitude of celestial realities.

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<sup>145</sup> St John, III, 13.

<sup>146</sup> Qur'an, II, 25.

Hence on the one hand, the celestial Garden is described in images that are immediately intelligible in terms of our earthly experience, and on the other hand we are told in a hadith that God has prepared for the righteous a Paradise that no eye has seen, no human heart can conceive.

One of the most vivid symbolic illustrations of this two-fold nature of all cosmic realities is to be found in the image of the spider's web. Frithjof Schuon elucidates the meaning of this natural symbol in the following terms:<sup>147</sup>

“... the spider's web, formed of warp and weft threads or of radii and concentric circles, represents the Universe under the two-fold relationship of essential identity and existential separation... from the point of view of the radii a given thing is the Principle represented in this scheme by the central point; from the point of view of the concentric circles, a given thing only represents that Principle....”

This same image can be derived from the Muslim community at prayer, the Ka'bah is then the centre of a structure delineated by the innumerable radii and concentric circles constituted by the worshipping believers.

Returning now to the exegesis of scripture, the Qur'an mentions numerous degrees of Paradise, which may be taken as the differentiated radiation of the Beatitude or Ridwan mentioned in a hadith as being that which is 'better' than Paradise, and which is also called 'greater' than Paradise in the Qur'an.<sup>148</sup> Being greater and better than paradisaal bliss this Ridwan can only be the archetypal source of this, and all possible blissful experience. It refers to the beatific contentment proper to the Absolute, alone; for only the Absolute is identical with all that is loveable. We shall return to this point below.

In the Surah al-Rahman mention is made of two pairs of Gardens; following Kashani's esoteric commentary, the lower pair consists of the Gardens of the Soul and the Heart, the upper pair being those of the Spirit and the Essence. Consideration of this latter pair will lead to the third part of our discussion, that of spiritual realization. For Kashani writes, in regard to the two fruits symbolising the abodes, the date and the pomegranate:

And the date palm-that which containeth food and enjoyment, the contemplation of the celestial lights and the manifestations of the Divine

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<sup>147</sup> *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1968, p. 27.

<sup>148</sup> Qur'an, IX, 71.

Beauty and Majesty in the abode of the spirit, for in its garden the kernel of the individuality still remaineth ... and the 'pomegranate'-that which containeth enjoyment and medicinal balm in the abode of totality, in the Garden of the Essence. It is the contemplation of the Essence through pure extinction in which there is no individuality to be fed...<sup>149</sup>

This extinction in the Essence is not only a posthumous possibility: the highest saints also taste it in the most sublime moments of contemplation, even in this life. The paradoxical combination of extinction and contemplation is summed up in the title of one of Ibn Arabi's works: *Kitab al-fana' fi'l-Mushahahadah*, -The book of Extinction in Contemplation. This extinction of individuality through contemplative absorption in the blissful nature of the Essence is indeed a point on which saints from the most diverse religious traditions converge. To the extent that metaphysical realization is total, the mystics affirm, through their concrete experience, and ineffable Reality that not only transcends all formal dogma but also infinitely surpasses the individuality as such. To take just three of the most important mystics in history, Shankara, Ibn 'Arabi and Meister Eckhart, we find the following strikingly similar characterizations of the supreme reality 'tested' and realized in mystical absorption: according to Shankara the Absolute is Sat-Chit- Ananda, Being, Consciousness and Bliss;<sup>150</sup> Ibn 'Arabi writes: *wujud, wujudan al-Haqq fi'l wajd* - Being is the consciousness of the Real in ecstasy;<sup>151</sup> and Eckhart writes that the content of the highest realization is 'immeasurable power, infinite wisdom and infinite sweetness.'<sup>152</sup>

The Bliss, Beatitude or Ecstasy that all three affirm is not an aspect of the Real: Rather it is absolutely identical with Reality and with Consciousness. The three elements are distinguishable only on the plane of relativity; they are absolutely undifferentiable in the Essence. To say absolute Reality is to say absolute Beatitude and absolute Consciousness.

It is through the immanence of the Divine in the depths of the soul that the mystics are able to realize the beatitude proper to the Absolute. But the aspect of transcendence \*is in no wise compromised, for there is no common

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<sup>149</sup> Dr Lings' unpublished translation.

<sup>150</sup> *Atma-Bodha* (Self-Knowledge) Madras, Sri Ramakrishna Math. 1975 p. 217.

<sup>151</sup> *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, W. C. Chittick. State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 212.

<sup>152</sup> Meister Eckhart - *Sermons and Treatises*, Tr. M.O'C. Walshe. Dorset, Element Books, 1979, Vol. I, pp. 60-61.

measure between even the most blissful state attainable by the individual, on the one hand, and the realization of the Absolute, on the other. All experience that remains conditioned by the 'kernel of individuality' is ipso facto relative; it is for this reason that, in their quest for the pure Absolute, the three mystics cited above methodically reject all blissful experiences that can in any way be qualified as individual. Just as the Absolute is, according to Shankara, Prapancha-upashama - 'without any trace of the development of manifestation' - so there can be no trace of the individual condition in the realization of the Absolute. Shankara comments as follows on the transcendent bliss:

It is peace ... liberation. It is indescribable ... for it is totally different from all objects ... it is unborn because it is not produced like anything resulting from empirical perceptions.<sup>153</sup>

In other words, the non-transcendent degree of bliss is something like an 'object'; it resembles that which results from empirical perception, therefore, it is conditioned by the relationship between a subjective agent and an object distinct from the subject. This object, even if it is internal to the subject, is nonetheless constitutive of a particular experience of the relative subject. It is only through the transcendence of this ontological dualism, as ground of all subjective experience, that one can speak of the realization of that bliss which is proper to the Absolute, a bliss that is absolutely indistinguishable from the Absolute.

Thus, it is not a state of bliss that defines realization; rather, it is the transcendence of all duality, the conscious realization of the supreme identity, which necessarily entails transcendent bliss. Just as it was stated above that the Truth invariably reveals the essence of beauty, but beauty does not necessarily reveal the truth, so now it can be seen that realization invariably entails bliss, while bliss does not necessarily imply realization. To conclude: whether it be grasped as intellectually self-evident, understood as the result of scriptural exegesis or 'tasted' to whatever degree in spiritual realization, this Divine Beatitude is the archetype of all beatific experience in Heaven, which in turn is the archetype of blissful contemplation of beauty on earth, including even the primary aesthetic experience.

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<sup>153</sup> *The Mandukyopanisad with Gaudapada's Karika and Sankara's Commentary*, Mysore, Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, 1974, III, 47.



For the spiritual man, the experience of formal beauty outside himself enhances and enriches the formless beauty within himself, that is, virtue in an integral sense. Only on the basis of a degree of inward beauty of soul can the experience of outward beauty be spiritually turned to account. For the profane man, on the other hand, the aesthetic experience is at best a temporary relief from the suffocating egotism that is the inescapable result of a life lacking a meaningful relationship with God, and at worst, the aesthetic experience strangles even further the egotistic soul by giving it an illusory plenitude, a sensuous justification of a life without God, an existential proof of ‘wisdom according to the flesh’. Instead of being a foretaste of a beatific Hereafter, the experience of beauty becomes the prop of an irreligious here below, an expropriation of the immanent beauty of God by the self-seeking and self-satisfied soul.

Nonetheless: ‘the more he blasphemes, the more he praises God.’ This elliptical saying of Eckhart can be applied in the present context, for no matter how much the profane man idolises beauty, his idolatry is only possible by virtue of the immanence of the Divine in all beauty; his idolatry thus unconsciously and indirectly ‘praises’ the Divine Beauty. Conscious and direct ‘praise’ on the other hand, is performed by the spiritual man who transforms his experience of beauty into a ‘remembrance of God’; in the measure that this remembrance is operative, the possibility of attachment to the passing forms of beauty recedes, because, in the words of Frithjof Schuon:

“... all the treasures of art and those of nature too are found again, in perfection and infinitely, in the Divine Bliss; a man who is fully conscious of this truth cannot fail to be detached from sensory crystallization as such.”<sup>154</sup>

Thus, from one’s experience of beauty on earth, one can derive an existential foretaste of the higher ontological degrees of bliss, for even the most elementary aesthetic experience participates to some extent in its supreme archetype, Divine Beatitude. But this foretaste deriving from the Immanence of the Divine is spiritually valuable only if it be accompanied by an awareness of the Divine Transcendence and by the accomplishment of the moral and spiritual imperatives that flow from man’s total dependence

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<sup>154</sup> *Understanding Islam*, London, George Allen & Unwin 1963, p. 135.

upon God: only then will the foretaste be consummated in a Hereafter which is, as the Qur'an tells us,<sup>155</sup> 'better and more lasting'.

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<sup>155</sup> Qur'an, LXXXVII, 17