

DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN PERSONALITY

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Let us start by asking ourselves the most fundamental and inevitable question about the development of human personality; what does it mean to be human? “What is Man”? The other inevitable question, which dovetails the earlier one, lurks in the wings, “What is the cosmos”? We have two models of the macrocosmic as well as the microcosmic reality of the human self. The macrocosmic reality is either a multistoried building or it is a mansion that has no upper story. The perspective, to which we have always adhered to, presents the cosmos as a reality arranged in hierarchy. On the other hand the human self is regarded as the point of intersection where the Divine touches the human realm, in which case the human microcosm is situated in a hierarchical relationship with other levels of being.

This model and its governing concept of reality are the shared heritage of all the known spiritual, metaphysical and religious traditions of mankind. Lord Northbourne summarizes the two approaches to the question, “What is Man?” in a simple and straightforward manner:

Are you in fact a being created by God in His own image, appointed by him as his representative on earth and accordingly given dominion over it, and equipped for the fulfillment of that function with a relative freedom of choice in thought and action which reflects the total absence of constraint attributable to God alone, but at the same time makes you liable to err? Are you essentially that, and only accidentally anything else?

Or, alternatively, are you essentially a specimen of the most advanced product so far known of a continuous and progressive evolution, starting from the more or less fortuitous stringing together of a protein molecule in some warm primeval mud, that mud itself being a rare and more or less fortuitous product of the evolution of the galaxies from a starting point about which the physicists have not yet quite made up their minds?¹⁰²

¹⁰² Lord Northbourne, *Looking Back on Progress* Lahore, Suhail Academy, 1983, 47.

In other words, the two models suggest that man could either be a Viceroy, Vicegerent or Pontiff or else a cunning animal with no destiny beyond the grave.¹⁰³ Regarding the former model, S. H. Nasr says: The concept of man as the pontiff, bridge between Heaven and earth, which is the traditional view of the *anthropos*, lies at the antipode of the modern conception of man which envisages him as the Promethean earthly creature who has rebelled against Heaven and tried to misappropriate the role of the Divinity for himself. Pontifical man, who, in the sense used here, is none other than the traditional man, lives in full awareness of the Origin which contains his own perfection and whose primordial purity and wholeness he seeks to emulate, recapture, and transmit He is aware that precisely because he is human there is both grandeur and danger connected with all that he does and links. His actions have an effect upon his own being beyond the limited spatio-temporal conditions in which such actions take place. He knows that somehow the bark which is to take him to the shore beyond after that fleeting journey which comprised his earthly life is constructed by what he does and how he lives while he is in the human state.¹⁰⁴

Tremendous is the difference that separates the perspective represented by the foregoing texts and the contemporary paradigm of progress and social development that Tage Lindbom has aptly described as “the kingdom of man.”

From the point of view of the Islamic tradition human life and personality has three dimensions. The *hadâth* of Gabriel provides us with a picture of these three dimensions.¹⁰⁵ The first three questions and their answers suggest that in the Islamic view, religion comprises three main elements.

¹⁰³ On the traditional conception of man, see G. Eaton, *King of the Castle*, Islamic Texts Society, 1993; “Man” in *Islamic Spirituality*, ed. S. H. Nasr, vol. I (New York: Crossroad, 1987, 358-377; Kathleen Raine, *What is Man?* (England: Golgonzoza Press, 1980, S. H. Nasr, “Who is Man...”, *The Sword of Ghosts*, ed. Needleman (England: Penguin, n.d.), 203-217; S. H. Nasr (ed.) *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (New York: Amity House, 1986, 385-403. Of special importance in this regard is René Guenon’s *Man and his Becoming According to the Vedanta* (Delhi: 1990), which presents the concept of man in Hindu terminology, which, nevertheless, is shared by the other traditions as well.

¹⁰⁴ S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, op. cit., 161-162.

¹⁰⁵ The reason we refer to the Hadith of Gabriel is that any explanation of the beliefs,

The first dimension of Islam is submission, and it comprises a series of activities, such as bearing witness, praying, and fasting. The word for submission is *islām*, the same word that is used to refer to the religion as a whole. *Islam* has other meanings as well but in this context, it refers to the activities that a Muslim must perform.

The second dimension is faith. The Prophet does not tell his listeners what faith itself is, no doubt because he assumes that they already know. Rather, he tells that what the objects of their faith should be.

practices, and institutions of Islam or any other religion can benefit from a model that makes sense in terms of modern scholarship and has a basis in traditional Islamic learning. Our model here is the famous Hadith of Gabriel, the authentic hadith that Muslim thinkers have often employed for similar purposes in classical texts. The Hadith of Gabriel is found in many of the canonical collections of Hadith literature with some variations. Here we have followed the text as given by Muslim in his *SaḤīḥ*. See Muslim, *Ḥm*; Bukhārā, *Ḥm*. The text reads as follows:

‘Umar ibn al-Khattab said: One day when we were with God’s messenger, a man with very white clothing and very black hair came up to us. No mark of travel was visible on him, and none of us recognized him. Sitting down before the Prophet, leaning his knees against his, and placing his hands on his thighs, he said, ‘Tell me, Muhammad, about submission.’

He replied, ‘Submission means that you should bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s messenger, that you should perform the ritual prayer, pay the alms tax, fast during Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to go there.’

The man said, ‘You have spoken the truth.’ We were surprised at his questioning him and then declaring that he had spoken the truth. He said, ‘Now tell me about faith.’

He replied, ‘Faith means that you have faith in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and that you have faith in the measuring out, both its good and its evil.’

Remarking that he had spoken the truth, he then said, ‘Now tell me about doing what is beautiful.’

He replied, ‘Doing what is beautiful means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.’

Then the man said, ‘Tell me about the Hour.’

The Prophet replied, ‘About that he who is questioned knows no more than the questioner.’

The man said, ‘Then tell me about its marks.’

He said, ‘The slave girl will give birth to her mistress, and you will see the barefoot, the naked, the destitute, and the shepherds vying with each other in building.’

Then the man went away. After I had waited for a long time, the Prophet said to me, ‘Do you know who the questioner was,

‘UMAR?’ I REPLIED, ‘GOD AND HIS MESSENGER KNOW BEST. “HE SAID, “HE WAS GABRIEL. HE CAME TO TEACH YOU YOUR RELIGION.

What is it that they must have faith in? The answer is God, the angels, the scriptures, the messengers (i.e., the prophets), and so on.

The third dimension is doing what is beautiful. The Prophet does not look at the activity itself, but the motivation for the activity. An act cannot be beautiful if it is done without the awareness of God. God is the criterion for the beautiful, the good, and the right.

And what is the human subject that unfolds its potentialities in these three dimensions? We know that the traditional Islamic understanding of the human personality describes it as made in the image of God.¹⁰⁶

Let us see what does this Divine form imply. To put the issue in its larger perspective first of all one has to take into consideration the immense variety of creation and the special position that the human beings hold in the hierarchy of manifestation.

God produces an inconceivably enormous cosmos with an infinite diversity of created things. If we investigate the creatures one by one the task can never be completed but if we speak in general terms, it is possible to classify created things into categories. The cosmos can be divided into two basic worlds, the unseen and the visible, sometimes referred to as “the heavens and the earth”, or “the spiritual world and the bodily world.” We have mentioned during our discussions that there is a third world that is both similar to and different from these two basic worlds, called the “world of imagination”. If these three worlds represent the general structure of the total macrocosm, the human being can be called a microcosm, since three parallel domains are found within each individual: spirit, soul, and body.

When we want to look at other bodily creatures; that is, those physical things that fill the visible universe we find inanimate objects, plants, and animals. What is interesting for our purposes is how these three kinds of creature manifest the signs of God; the divine attributes that become visible through them. Which attributes become visible in inanimate objects? Perhaps the best way to answer the question is to say that more than anything else,

¹⁰⁶ See the note below.

inanimate objects conceal God's attributes instead of revealing them. They tell us what God is not rather than what He is.

In contrast to inanimate things, plants display several obvious divine attributes. It is easy to see that plants are alive, and life is the first of the "Seven Leaders", the seven divine attributes that predominate in creation. Plants have certain knowledge. They certainly have desire: they want water, sunlight, fertilizer, and they trace elements. If you treat them well and give them what they really desire – like nice, rich manure — they even show their gratitude by producing enormous crops; they are not ungrateful truth-concealers. Plants have power and can destroy stones and concrete, but they need time. But all these divine attributes are found rather feebly within plants, so *tanzâh* outweighs *tashbâh*.

In contrast, the divine attributes found in animals are much more intense. Moreover, animals add other attributes that are difficult to find in plants. The knowledge possessed by animals can be extraordinary, though it is always rather specialized. Bees can tell their hive-mates exactly where to find the best honey, but they don't know much about vinegar. Monarch butterflies know the precise location of their valley in Mexico, but they cannot be trusted to take you to New York City. The animal kingdom represents an incredible diversity of knowledge and skills, divided among a vast number of specialized organisms. Desire is also clearly present in animals, but each species desires different things, and thus a great natural harmony is created where, as Rumi puts it, "Everything is both eater and eaten."

Both plants and animals represent a tremendous variety of specific signs. Each plant or animal species is a special configuration of divine attributes that is not reproduced in any other species.

Human beings are a species of animal, and they share many characteristics with them. But there is one remarkable characteristic that differentiates them from all other animals: Each animal is what it is, with little or no confusion. But human beings are unknown factors. Each species of animals is dominated by one or a few characteristics. The human being is infinitely malleable. What then is a human being? What brings about this fundamental difference between human beings and other animals? Muslims answer these questions in many ways. The easiest approach within our current discussion

is to investigate the nature of the relationship between human beings and the divine attributes. Every creature other than a human being is a sign of God in which a specific, limited, and defined configuration of divine attributes is reflected. In contrast, a human being reflects God as God. In other creatures, some divine attributes are permanently manifest while others are permanently hidden. In human beings, all divine attributes are present, and any of them can become manifest if circumstances are appropriate.

The Prophet ﷺ referred to this peculiar characteristic of human beings when he repeated the famous saying found in the Bible — a saying that has also played an important role in Jewish and Christian understandings of what it means to be human — “God created Adam in his own image”¹⁰⁷ خلق الله الأدم صورته لا ④ though we will employ “form” for “image,” in keeping with the Arabic text. Many authorities understand a similar meaning from the Qur’anic verse, “God taught Adam the name, all of them” (2:31). In effect, all things are present in human beings, because God taught them the names or realities of all things.

When it is said that everything is within human beings, this is not meant in a literal sense. The principle here is easy to understand if we return to the discussion of the divine names. God created the universe as the sum total of his signs. The signs explain the nature of God inasmuch as he discloses and reveals himself. What does he disclose? He discloses his attributes, such as life, knowledge, power, and speech. The cosmos in its full temporal and spatial extension — everything other than God — illustrates all God’s manifest attributes. Hence the macrocosm is an image, or form, of God.

The human being was also created in God’s form, embracing all God’s attributes. The difference between the whole universe and the human being is that the signs are infinitely dispersed in the universe, while they are concentrated into a single, intense focus in each human individual. The concentration of the attributes within human being makes people God’s vicegerents, that is, creatures who can perform the same functions as God, with all due respect to *tanzûb*. Human beings manifest all God’s attributes, but in a weakened and dim manner, demanded by the fact that, although they are similar to God in respect of having been created in his form, they are

¹⁰⁷ See Muslim, *Birr*, 115; Bukharâ, *Isti’dbâc* 1.

different in respect of spatial and temporal limitations. God remains infinitely beyond any human being.

God created human beings in his own form, which is to say that he taught them all the names. Adam had an actualized knowledge of these names, but he was still susceptible to temporary forgetfulness. The rest of the human race is born into a heedlessness that is more than temporary. The divine qualities are latent within them, but these qualities need to be brought out from latency and be embodied in people's minds and activities.

God had created Adam to be his vicegerent. Vicegerency is the birthright of his children. However, they will only achieve the vicegerency if they follow the prophets. They must adopt the faith and practice given by God through the scriptures: "God has promised those who have faith and work wholesome deeds to make them vicegerents in the earth, even as He made those who were before them vicegerents" (24:55). To be God's vicegerent means, among other things, to manifest all the divine attributes in the form of which human beings were created. Only by embodying God's own qualities can human being represent Him. But we know that most people do not live up to their potential. Even if they do have faith and work wholesome deeds, they never become dependable servants of God, because caprice and heedlessness often make them ignore or forget their proper duties.

This brings us to consider the other side of the question. What is it that hampers a wholesome development of human personality, a complete and integral manifestation of all the divine attributes in a harmonious manner?

In one word we can say that forgetfulness and heedlessness are fundamental faults because they negate *tawÁád*. One could equally say that to forget God is to forget oneself, since the human being is the form of God. To lose touch with God is to lose touch with one's own reality and hence to fall into unreality, which can only be experienced as painful separation from everything that is real and good.

If forgetfulness and heedlessness mark the basic fault of human beings, *dhikr* (remembrance) designates their saving virtue. Just as forgetting God leads to the painful chastisement of being forgotten by him, so also remembering God leads to the joy of being remembered by him: "Remember

Me, and I will remember you” (2:15). But *dhikr* means much more than simply the proper human response to God, since it also designates the function of the prophets.

This indeed is the most central spiritual practice involved in the development of the human personality and it has been the main concern of Sufism throughout the ages but it has a wide range of signification’s and it operates within the frame work of the *sharâ’ah* in the Islamic tradition. We shall come back to it. For the time being let us see that the wholesome development of human personality is the special domain of Sufism though it has other concerns as well.

It has a vision. This vision sees human beings a imperfect because of *tanẓâh*, and it understands human perfection to lie in the actualisation of all the divine qualities associated with *tashbâh*. To be fully human is to actualise the divine form. In order to achieve this, Sufis follow the *Sunnah* of the Prophet ﷺ and seek to embody the Qur’an. They want the Qur’an to be their character, just as it was the Prophet’s ﷺ character.

Sufis have said that Sufism is all *adab*. The point here is that every activity needs to be correct — that is, based on the prophetic model and that this can only come about when the soul is harmonized and integrated through sincerity, god-wariness, and doing what is beautiful (*iAs’an*). Moreover, doing what is beautiful cannot be forced or affected — that would destroy its spontaneity, which is one element of its beauty. Doing what is beautiful must well up in the soul — our poets might say — as fragrance wells up from the rose. Beautiful activity must be rooted in beautiful being.

To embody the beautiful is to embody the qualities of God. This is Ibn ‘Arabâ’s point when he defines Sufism as “assuming the character traits of God as one’s own.” Ibn ‘Arabâ explains that this is only a manner of speaking. In fact, those character traits are all latent within human beings because of the divine form, but they belong to God, and as long as people remain heedless of their own nature, the divine qualities within them will not become manifest in proper harmony and balance.

Iqbal, commenting on Bedil had said, “The history of man is a stern reality and the glory of human personality consists not in gradual self-

evaporation but self-fortification by continual purification and assimilation. If God, as Bedil seems to teach, is essentially life and movement, then it is not through an intuitive slumber, but through life and movement alone that we can approach Him. If, in any sense, He has chosen to dwell within us and our personality is but a veil that hides Him from us, our duty lies not in demolishing the tiny dwelling He has chosen, but to manifest His glory through it by polishing its clay walls through action and turning them into transparent mirrors.¹⁰⁸

Iqbal's comment brings us back to the central practice that helps man to polish the mirror.¹⁰⁹

The basic meaning of the term *dhikr* can be brought out by answering three questions — what, why, and how. What is to be remembered? Why should it be remembered? How can it be remembered? The object of remembrance is God, whose reality is designated briefly by the first *Shabadah*, “There is no divinity but God,” and in more detail by the whole range of names and attributes mentioned in the Qur'an. This object should be remembered because He has commanded human beings to remember Him and because ultimate happiness depends upon remembrance. The object can be remembered by imitating the Prophet ﷺ whose *sunnah* provides the model for right activity and right remembrance.

In the same way, the Sufis considered all Islamic theoretical teachings to be aimed at awakening remembrance in the soul. In commenting on the Qur'anic teachings, they demonstrate that *dhikr* implies far more than just the ritual activities that go by the name. Full remembrance means actualising all the perfections latent in the original human disposition (*fiṣrah*) by virtue of its being a divine image. Ghazālī and many others speak of human perfection as “assuming the traits of the divine names” (*al-takhalluq bi 'l-asmā' al-ikbīyya*).

The hallmark of the divine image in which human beings were created is the intelligence that sets them apart from all other creatures. Turning to God

¹⁰⁸ See Iqbal, *Bedil in the Light of Bergson*, Ed. Dr Tehsin Firaqi, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, p. 1995, P. 39.

¹⁰⁹ The reference here is to the saying of the Prophet ﷺ which speaks of the “polish” for every thing and mentions *dhikr* (remembrance/invocation) as the “polish” for the hearts.

—remembrance — awakens awareness of God in the heart and actualises the divine image latent in the soul. Ultimate felicity is nothing but the remembrance of the wellspring of our own true nature, and that is God Himself; or, it is the realization of genuine human character traits, which are the traces of God’s names. What then is the “Way” to the development of the human personality; in other words the method that provides the practical means to actualise the image of God within ourselves.

We can start with the idea that the Way is essentially:

- discernment between the Real and the illusory, and
- concentration upon the Real,

The question has to be answered: how to fix in duration this concentration upon the Real?

To be able to fix concentration in duration, we have need essentially of:

- effort, which is of the will and proceeds from without;
- comprehension, which is of the intelligence and proceeds from within.

The result of the persevering practice of effort is the mental art, the technique of concentration. One must subdue the soul, break its natural resistance, and acquire salutary mental habits.

The result of the persevering practice of comprehension — by meditation — is the inward transformation of the imagination or the subconscious, the acquisition of reflexes that conform to spiritual reality. It is all very well for the intelligence to affirm metaphysical or eschatological truths; the imagination — or the subconscious — none the less continues to believe firmly in the world, not in God or the next world; every man is *a priori* hypocritical. The Way is precisely the passage from natural hypocrisy to spiritual sincerity.

One must replace the habitual and involuntary dreaming of the soul by the remembrance of God; one must repose in this remembrance and not in dreams. It is thus that a bird flying reposes in limitlessness and not in heaviness; it is a repose heavenwards, not earthwards. One must replace

natural and passionate repose with a repose that is supernatural and contemplative.

But the fixing of concentration in duration—and the attainment of the mental art and the transformation of the imagination—is only possible with the help of grace توفيق; the intelligence and the will, alone and unaided, are not enough. Now the conditions *sine qua non* for grace are the following:

- the rites
- the virtues

One must perform the rites as perfectly as possible.

The virtues are essentially; spiritual poverty, generosity, intrinsic sincerity, or; humility, charity, veracity, hence logic and impartiality.

The rites refer to man as such and the collectivity, while the virtues refer to each particular man and so to the individual as such. There must be a collective and normative religion, but there must likewise be what might be called a personal religion, namely the spiritual manifestation, not of man or humanity, but of a particular man with his helplessness and his seeds of immortality.

Last but not least, there is always a presence in the soul. The most ordinary presence is that of the world, to the exclusion, alas, of that of God. The presence of the world always implies that of the “I”, but sometimes the presence of the “I” is even stronger than that of the world, to the point of occupying the entire space of the soul.

What is the Remembrance of God? It is to offer the space of our soul to the Divine Presence, by means, precisely, of the Name of God. To allow God to enter into our space, in order that God may allow us to enter into His space; to welcome Him here below, in order that He may welcome us in the Hereafter, and in a certain manner already in the here below.

It depends on man what he makes of the present moment; polishes the mirror and develops his personality by following the Way or let the present moment pass him by, so that the Buddhists could say, ‘Get ye across this stretching mire, let not the moment pass, for they shall mourn whose moment’s past’.