

CHAPTER ONE

God Is Reality

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 limiting the meaning of reality and removing the concept 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 meaning of reality to the externally experienced world, of altering the meaning of realist in its early medieval sense to the connotation it has gained in various schools of philosophy since the rise of nominalism at the end of the Middle Ages. Cut off from the twin sources of metaphysical knowledge, namely revelation and intellection,¹ and also deprived of that 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 worldview² within which he lives and whose premisses 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 it 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 with the aid of 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 does modern man 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, or 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, infinite and, good or perfect. In Himself He is the Absolute which partakes of no relativity in Itself or in Its 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 a Divine Relativity or Multiplicity which is included in the Divine Order, 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. To speak of God as Reality is to speak of God as the Absolute.³

God as Reality is also infinite, *the* Infinite, as this term is to be understood metaphysically and not what it means 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, as Ultimate Reality, He contains all possibilities. Metaphysically, He is the All-Possibility.⁴ 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 other language the Quranic verse, "In His hands is to be found the dominion (*malakūt*) of all things" (XXXVI.83), that is, the essential reality of all things is to be found in the Divine Nature. It is useful to recall here 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 and philosophy as 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.⁵

Here it is necessary to add that there would in fact be no agnostics around if only it were possible to teach metaphysics to everyone. One cannot expect every person 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 if he wishes to understand physics himself, unlike traditional man he does not extend this faith to the fruits of metaphysical knowledge. Without willing to undergo the necessary discipline and training, which in traditional metaphysics, and in contrast to modern science, includes also moral and spiritual considerations, modern man expects to understand metaphysics immediately and without any intellectual or spiritual preparation. If he fails to comprehend the subject, 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. In fact many people in the modern world do not even accept the revealed truths 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 toward 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 means, of necessary, 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:⁶

In the Name of God—Most Merciful, Most Compassionate
 Say: He is God, the One (*al-Aḥad*)!
 God, the eternal cause of all beings (*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 which is the source of everything; it refers to the Divine Infinity, to God being 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 is related 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-Raḥmah*, mercy in Himself, and being mercy

and goodness 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 relativity of various prevalent formulations to gain access to the total and complete doctrine of God as that Reality which is absolute, infinite, and good, perfect, and merciful.

Such a doctrine of the Divine requires not only an adequate knowledge of the Principle as absolute but also an adequate grasp of the meaning of relativity, of levels and the hierarchy of existence, of the relatively real and even of the ‘relatively absolute,’ an elliptical term which far from being contradictory contains an indispensable key to the understanding of the science of God. To use the two 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 usually skepticism concerning the very tenets of revealed religion. To begin with the world considered as reality, as is done by most modern philosophy, is to reach an even more dangerous impasse. This 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 secondary questions or to providing clever answers to ill-posed problems.

To avoid such impasses, it is essential to revive the doctrine of the veil already alluded to above and to rediscover the traditional teaching about the gradations of reality or of being. To understand God as Reality, it is necessary to understand that there are levels of reality and that reality is not only 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 what is seen and experienced “everywhere” is real.

Moreover, a particular object cannot be said to be real or unreal in only one sense of these terms, but it partakes of levels of reality, or one might say unreality, from being an opaque object, an “it” or “fact” as understood in modern science which is its face as *māyā* in the sense of illusion, to its being a transparent symbol, a theophany, a reflection of the Divine Presence and a witness to the Divine *māyā* which is none other than the 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 us to attribute 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 erupted in the nineteenth-century Europe 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 remembrance and the ordinary man through death. To grasp this doctrine, the traditional sapiential perspective based on the possibility of principal 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 light of this fact, the role of traditional wisdom or what the Quran calls *al-hikmah* in the contemporary discussion on the nature of God becomes clear. This wisdom resides at the heart of all traditions and can be discovered in those traditions which have preserved their sapiential dimension to this day. It can be found in one of its purest forms in the Vedānta, and one can see an alternative formulation of it in Buddhism.¹² It can likewise be found in the Kabbala¹³ and in traditional Christian metaphysics as found in the works as Christian sages such as Eckhart and Erigena. It is also expressed with great clarity in traditional Islamic metaphysics. Furthermore, Islam is a religion which is based completely on the doctrine of the oneness of God, and is a religion in which God is seen as both Reality and Truth, the Arabic term *al-haqīqah* meaning both. In fact the word *al-Haqq* (The Truth), which is related to *haqīqah*, is a Name of God. Therefore, Islamic wisdom can play an important role in enabling modern man to rediscover that plenary doctrine of the nature of God as Reality, a doctrine whose loss has led to the unprecedented skepticism and relativism which characterize the modern world. Islam is able to help in the achievement of 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. This tradition guards the absoluteness of God and His transcendence in its formal teachings meant for everyone. But it also allows those who possess the qualifications necessary to attain wisdom to gain full access to the metaphysical doctrine of God as at once absolute, infinite and perfect good, and makes it possible for those who have realized this wisdom to hear in the song of the

bird and smell in the perfume of the rose the sound and breath of the Beloved, and to contemplate in the very veil of creaturely existence the Face of God. According to Islam's own teachings, this doctrine is not unique to Islam but lies at the heart of all revelations. 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 Oneness, recalling man to his perennial vocation as witness on earth to that Reality which is at once absoluteness, infinitude, and boundless goodness and mercy.

Notes

1. Throughout this book, as in our other writings, the intellect is distinguished rigorously from reason, which is its mental reflection. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, chapters 4 and 5.

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., 1981), pp. 5–35.

2. Although modern rationalism is in many ways opposed to empiricism, it is as far as the present discussion is concerned, nothing more than a complement of empiricism because it, too, has to rely finally for its premises upon the evidence of the senses and the use of reason as limited by 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, 1975), pp. 7–55.

3. It is not only possible for man to know God as the Absolute, but it is only the Absolute that man can know 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 to make 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.

4. 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*, pp. 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 very important but often neglected figure, see S. H. Nasr, *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (New York, 1983).

5. To understand this doctrine, it is necessary to distinguish between God as Beyond—Being which manifests all possibilities, including the possibility of its negation and separation from the Source which is the origin of what appears on the human plane as evil—and God as Being or the Person, who wishes the good. This doctrine has been explained fully in several of Schuon's works, for example, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, trans. G. Polit (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), especially pp. 65-76; and *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. W. Stoddart (Pates Manor (U.K.), 1981).

6. On the Islamic doctrine of God, see S. H. Nasr, "God," in Nasr (ed.), *Islamic Spirituality—Foundations* (New York, 1987), pp. 311-23.

7. This inner revelation cannot, however, become operative except by virtue of that external revelation which provides an objective cadre for it and enables it to be spiritually efficacious. If there are exceptions, it is because the "wind bloweth where it listeth."

8. This doctrine has found its classical formulation in the *Wisdom of the Prophets* or the *Bezel of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)* of Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī. See the translation of R.W.J. Austin (New York, 1980). See also T. Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism*, part one, (Tokyo, 1966), chapter IX; H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. R. Mannheim (Princeton, 1969), part one; T. Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, trans. D.M. Matheson (London, 1976), p. 58ff.; W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, N.Y., 1989), p. 19; and S.H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (New York, 1992), p. 344ff.

9. From the *Fuṣūṣ*, quoted in Izutsu, *A Comparative Study*, p. 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*, pp. 47-64; and "Māyā," in his *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. Lord Northbourne (London, 1965), pp. 89-98.

11. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, chapters 2 to 4.

12. In Buddhism one does not speak of God or the Self, but one finds in this tradition other ways of expressing the truths of traditional metaphysics and ontology and not a negation of these truths themselves. See A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York, 1943).

13. On the metaphysical doctrines of the Kabbala, see L. Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, trans. N. Pearson (London, 1971).

Self-Awareness and Ultimate Selfhood: The Role of the Sacred Science of the Soul

The fruit of several centuries of rationalistic thought in the West has been to reduce both the objective and the subjective poles of knowledge to a single level. In the same way that the *cogito* of Descartes is based on reducing the knowing subject to a single mode of awareness, the external world which this knowing self perceives is reduced to a spatio-temporal complex limited to a single level of reality—no matter how far this complex is extended beyond the galaxies or into aeons of time, past and future. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the traditional view as expressed in the metaphysical teachings of both the Eastern and Western traditions is based, on the contrary, upon a hierarchic vision of reality, not only of reality's objective aspect but also of its subjective one. Not only are there many levels of reality or existence stretching from the material plane to the Absolute and Infinite Reality which is God, but there are also many levels of subjective reality or consciousness, many envelopes of the self, leading to the Ultimate Self, which is Infinite and Eternal and which is none other than the Transcendent and Immanent Reality both beyond and within.¹ Moreover, the relation between the subjective and the objective is not bound to a single mode. There is not just one form of perception or awareness. There are modes and degrees of awareness leading from the so-called "normal" perception by man of both his own ego and the external world to awareness of Ultimate Selfhood, in which the subject and object of knowledge become unified in a single reality beyond all separation and distinction.

Self-awareness, from the point of view of traditional metaphysics, is not simply a biological fact of life common to all human beings. There is more than one level of meaning to 'self' and more than one degree of awareness. Man is aware of his self or ego, but one also speaks of self-control, and therefore implies even in daily life the presence of another self which controls the lower self, for as asserted by so many Christian authorities *duo sunt in homine*. Tradition, therefore, speaks clearly of the distinction between the self and the Self, or the self and the Spirit which is the first reflection of the Ultimate Self; hence the primary distinction between *anima* and *spiritus* or *al-nafs* and *al-rūh* of Islamic thought and the emphasis upon the fact that there is within every

man both an outer and an inner man, a lower self and a higher one. That is why also tradition speaks of the self as being totally distinct from the Ultimate Self, from *Ātman* or *ousia*, and yet as a reflection of it and as the solar gate through which man must pass to reach the Self. Traditional metaphysics is in fact primarily an autology, to quote A.K. Coomaraswamy;² for to know is ultimately to know the Self. The *ḥadīth*, “He who knoweth himself knoweth his Lord,” attests on the highest level to this basic truth.

There are, moreover, many stages which separate the self and the Self. In its descent towards manifestation, the Self becomes shrouded by many bodies, many sheaths, which must be shed in returning to the One. That is why the Buddhist and Hindu traditions speak of the various subtle bodies of man, and certain Sufis such as ‘Alā’ al-Dawlah Simnānī analyze the “physiology” of the inner man or the man of light in terms of the *laṭā’if* or subtle bodies which man “carries” within himself and which he must “traverse” and also cast aside in order to reach the Self.³

In order to reach the Ultimate Self through the expansion of awareness of the center of consciousness, man must reverse the cosmogonic process which has crystallized both the variations and reverberations of the Self within what appears through the cosmic veil (*al-ḥijāb*) as separate and objective existence. And this reversal must of necessity begin with the negation of the lower self, with the performance of sacrifice, which is an echo here below of the primordial sacrifice, the sacrifice which has brought the cosmos into existence. The doctrine of the creation of the cosmos, whether expounded metaphysically or mythically in various traditions, is based upon the manifestation of the Principle, which is at the same time the sacrifice (the *yājña* of Hinduism) of the luminous pole of existence, of the Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), of Puruṣa, of the Divine Logos which is also light, of the Spirit (*al-rūḥ*) which resides within the proximity of the Ultimate Self and at the center of the cosmos. The Ultimate Self in its inner infinitude is beyond all determination and cosmic polarization, but the Spirit or Intellect which is both created and uncreated, is already its first determination in the direction of manifestation. It is *māyā* in *Ātman* and the center of all the numerous levels of cosmic and universal existence.⁴ Through its ‘sacrifice’ the lower levels of the cosmic order in their objective as well as subjective aspects become manifest. The human self, as usually experienced by men who have become separated from their archetypal reality, is itself a faint echo upon the cosmic plane of the Spirit and ultimately of the Self, and exists only by virtue of the original sacrifice of its celestial Principle. Hence, it is through the denial of itself or of sacrifice that the self can again become it-Self and regain the luminous empyrean from which it has descended to the corporeal realm.

Self-awareness can only reach the Ultimate Self provided it is helped by that message from the Divine Intellect which is none other than revelation in its universal sense. The gates through which the Spirit has descended to the level of the human self are hermetically sealed and protected by dragons which cannot be subdued save with the help of angelic forces. Self-awareness in the sense of experimenting with the boundaries of the psyche, with new experiences, with the heights and depths of the psychological world, does not result in any way in moving closer to the proximity of the Self. The attempted expansion of awareness in this sense, which is so common in modern man, who is anxious to break the boundaries of the prison of the materialistic world he has created for himself, results only in a horizontal expansion, but not in a vertical one. Its result is a never-ending wandering in the labyrinth of the psychic world and not the end of all wandering in the presence of the Sun which alone is. Only the sacred can enable the awareness of the self to expand in the direction of the Self. The Divine reveals to man His Sacred Name as a holy vessel which carries man from the limited world of his self to the shores of the World of the Spirit where alone man is his Real Self. That is why the famous Sufi, Maṣṣūrah al-Ḥallāj, through whom the Self uttered "I am the Truth," (*ana 'l-Ḥaqq*) prays in this famous verse to the Self to remove the veil which separates man's illusory I from the Self who alone is I in the absolute sense.

Between me and thee,
It is my "I-ness" which is in contention:
Through Thy "it is I"
Remove my "I-ness" from between us.⁵

With the help of the message and also the grace issuing from the Self, the lower self or soul is able to become wed to the Spirit in that alchemical marriage between gold and silver, the king and the queen, the heavenly bridegroom and the earthly bride, which is the goal of all initiatic work. And since love is also death (*amor est mors*) and marriage is death as well as union,⁶ the perfection of the self implies first of all the negation of itself, a death which is also a rebirth, for only he who has realized that he is nothing is able to enter unto the Divine Presence. The only thing man can offer in sacrifice to God is his self, and in performing this sacrifice through spiritual practice he returns the self to the Self and gains awareness of the real 'I' within, who alone has the right to claim "I am." As Rūmī has said in these celebrated and often quoted verses concerning the real 'I'⁷

I died as mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,

I died as animal and I was Man.
 Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
 Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar
 With angels blest; but even from angelhood
 I must pass on: all except God doth perish.
 When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
 I shall become what no mind e'er conceived.
 Oh, let me not exist! for Non-existence
 Proclaims in organ tones: "To him we shall return."

One of the factors which most sharply distinguishes traditional metaphysics from that part of postmedieval Western philosophy which is called metaphysics today is that traditional metaphysics is not mere speculation about the nature of Reality but a doctrine concerning the nature of the Real, combined with methods revealed by the Origin or Absolute Reality to enable the self or the soul, as usually understood, to return to the abode of the Self. The Ultimate Self cannot be approached by the efforts of the self alone, and no amount of human knowledge of the psyche can increase the awareness or the consciousness of the self which will finally lead to the Ultimate Self.

The contemplative disciplines of all traditions of both East and West insist in fact on the primacy of the awareness of the self and its nature. As the great thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen has said, "To study Buddhism means nothing other than inquiring into the true nature of the ego (or the self)."⁸ The famous dictum of Christ that the Kingdom of God is within you is likewise a confirmation of the primacy of the inward journey towards the Ultimate Self as the final goal of religion.

Traditional psychology or rather pneumatology, which however must not be confused in any way with modern psychological studies, is closely wed to traditional metaphysics, for it contains the means whereby the soul can understand its own structure and with the help of appropriate spiritual disciplines transform itself so as to finally realize it-Self. This is as much true of the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism as of various forms of Yoga in Hinduism or of the contemplative schools within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the latter tradition for example, a whole science of the soul has been developed based on the progressive perfection and transformation of the self towards the Self.⁹ In Arabic the word *nafs* means at once soul, self and ego. As ordinarily understood, the *nafs* is the source of limitation, passion and gravity, the source of all that makes man selfish and self-centered. This *nafs* which is called the *al-nafs al-ammārah* (the soul which inspires evil), following the terminology of the Quran, must be transfigured through death and purgation. It must be controlled by the higher self. With the help of the Spirit the *nafs*

al-ammārah becomes transformed into the *nafs al-lawwāmah* (the blaming soul), gaining greater awareness of its own nature, an awareness that is made possible through the transmutation of its substance. In the further stage of inner alchemical transmutation, the *nafs al-lawwāmah* becomes transformed into the *nafs al-muṭma'innah* (the soul at peace), attaining a state in which it can gain knowledge with certainty and repose in peace because it has discovered its own center, which is the Self. Finally according to certain Sufis, the *nafs al-muṭma'innah* becomes transmuted into the *nafs al-rāḍiyah* (the satisfied soul), which has attained such perfection that it has now become worthy of being the perfect bride of the Spirit, thus returning to its Lord, as the Quran asserts, and finally realizing the Self through its own annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsequent subsistence (*baqā'*) in God.¹⁰

The traditional science of the soul, along with the methods for the realization of the Self, a science which is to be found in every integral tradition, is the means whereby self-awareness expands to reach the empyrean of the Ultimate Self. This traditional science is the result of both intellectual penetration and experiment with and experience of the self by those who have been able to navigate over its vast expanses with the aid of a spiritual guide. It is a science not bound by the phenomena or accidents which appear in the psyche or which the self of ordinary human beings display. Rather, it is determined by the noumenal world, by the Substance to which all accidents ultimately return, for essentially *samsāra* and *nirvāna* are the same.

Traditional cosmology is also seen, from the practical point of view of the perfection of the soul and the journey of the self to Self, as a form of the sacred science of the soul, as a form of autology. The cosmos may be studied as an external reality whose laws are examined by various cosmological sciences. But it may also be studied with the view of increasing self-awareness and as an aid in the journey towards the Ultimate Self. In this way the cosmos becomes not an external object but a crypt through which the seeker of Truth journeys and which becomes interiorized within the being of the traveller to the degree that by "travelling" through it he is able to increase his self-awareness and attain higher levels of consciousness.¹¹ Again to quote Rūmī:

The stars of heaven are ever re-filled by the star-like souls of the pure.
The outer shell of heaven, the Zodiac, may control us; but our inner
essence rules the sky.

In form you are microcosm, in reality the macrocosm:

Though it seems the branch is the origin of the fruit, in truth the branch
only exists for the fruit.

If there were no hope, no desire for this fruit, why should the gardener
have planted the tree?

So the tree was born of the fruit, even though it seems the other way round.

Thus Muḥammad said "Adam and the other prophets follow under my banner."

Thus that master of all knowledge has declared in allegory "We are the last and the foremost."

For if I seem to be born of Adam, in fact I am the ancestor of all ancestors. Adam was born of me, and gained the Seventh Heaven on my account.¹²

The process through which man becomes him-Self and attains his true nature does not possess only a cosmic aspect. It is also of the greatest social import. In a society in which the lower self is allowed to fall by its own weight, in which the Ultimate Self and means to attain it are forgotten, in which there is no principle higher than the individual self, there cannot but be the highest degree of conflict between limited egos which would claim for themselves absolute rights, usually in conflict with the the claims of other egos—rights which belong to the Self alone. In such a situation, even the spiritual virtue of charity becomes sheer sentimentality. The traditional science of the soul, however, sees only one Self, which shines, no matter how dimly, at the center of oneself and every self. It is based on the love of one-Self which however does not imply selfishness but on the contrary necessitates the love of others, who in the profoundest sense are also one-self. For as Meister Eckhart has said, "Loving thy Self, thou lovest all men as thy Self."¹³

The sheer presence in human society of those who have attained the Ultimate Self has an invisible effect upon all of society far beyond what an external study of their relation with the social order would reveal. Such men and women are not only a channel of grace for the whole of society but the living embodiment of the truth that self-awareness can lead to the Ultimate Self only through man's sacrificing his self and realizing his own limitations and that the only way of being really charitable in an ultimate and final sense is to see the Self in all selves and hence to act towards my neighbor not as if he were myself, but because he is at the center of his being my-Self. The love of other selves is metaphysically meaningful only as a function of the awareness not of our limited self but of the Ultimate Self. That is why the injunction of the Gospels is to first love God and then one's neighbor. Knowledge of the self in its relation to the Self reveals this basic truth that the inner life of man leaves its deepest imprint upon the social order even if one were to do nothing, and that harmony on the social level can only be attained when the members of a society are able to control the self with the help of the means which only the Ultimate Self can provide for them. To quote Dogen again,

To be disciplined in the Way of the Buddha means getting disciplined in dealing properly with your own I. To get disciplined in dealing with your I means nothing other than forgetting your I. To forget your I means that you become illumined by the things. To be illumined by the things means that you obliterate the distinction between your (so-called) ego and the (so-called) ego of other things.¹⁴

The traditional sciences of the soul deal extensively with all the questions relating to sense perception, inner experiences, contact and communication with other conscious beings and the like. But their central concern is above all with the question of the nature of the Self, of the center of consciousness, of the subject which says "I". In fact, one of the chief means to reach the Ultimate Self is to examine thoroughly the nature of the I, with the help of the spiritual methods provided within the matrix of various traditions, as was done by the great contemporary Hindu saint Śrī Rāmana Maharshi.¹⁵ As awareness of the self expands and deepens, the consciousness of the reality of the only I which is begins to appear, replacing the ordinary consciousness which sees nothing but the multiple echoes of the I on the plane of cosmic manifestation. The consciousness of the only I, which is the source of all consciousness, lead the person who has realized this truth to sing with 'Aṭṭār that,

All you have been, and seen, and thought,
Not you, but I, have seen and been and wrought.¹⁶

The realization of the Ultimate Self, of the I who alone has the right to say "I am", is the goal of all awareness. Through it man realizes that although at the beginning of the path the Self is completely other than the self, ultimately the self is the Self, as Hindu masters have been especially adamant in emphasizing. But this identity is essential, not phenomenal and external. The self is on the one hand like the foam of the ocean wave, insubstantial, transient and illusory, and on the other hand a spark of the Light of the Self, a ray which in essence is none other than the supernal Sun. It is with respect to this spark within the self of every human being that it has been said that "there is in every man an incorruptible star, a substance called upon to become crystallized in immortality: it is eternally prefigured in the luminous proximity of the Self. Man disengages this star from its temporal entanglements in truth, in prayer and in virtue, and in them alone."¹⁷

Notes

1. Traditional metaphysics speaks of Ultimate Reality either as the absolutely Transcendent or the absolutely Immanent, which however are one, *Brahman* being the same as *Ātman*.

Hindu metaphysics, however, emphasizes more the language of immanence, and Islamic metaphysics that of transcendence without one language excluding the other.

See F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, trans. by P. Townsend (London, 1987), p. 90ff. See also Schuon, *Language of the Self*, trans. by M. Pallis and D.M. Matheson (Madras, 1959), especially chapter XI, "Gnosis. Language of the Self."

2. See A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, p. 10ff.

3. See H. Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. N. Pearson (London, 1978). In diverse traditions, the return of the self to the Self has been compared to the shedding of outward skin by a snake, which by virtue of this unshedding gains a new skin and a new life.

4. See F. Schuon, "Ātmā-Māyā", in his *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), pp. 53-64.

5. L. Massignon (ed.), *Le Dîwān d'al-Hallāj* (Paris, 1955), p. 90.

6. It is of interest to recall that in Greek *teleo* (τελέω) means at once to gain perfection, to become married and to die.

7. R.A. Nicholson, *Rumi—Poet and Mystic* (London, 1950), p. 103.

8. Quoted in T. Izutsu, "Two Dimensions of Ego Consciousness in Zen", *Sophia Perennis*(Tehran), vol. II, no. 1 (1976), p. 20.

9. See M. Ajmal, "Sufi Science of the Soul," in S.H. Nasr (ed.), *Islamic Spirituality—Foundations*, pp. 294-307.

10. On these stages of the soul and its purification, see Mir Valiuddin, *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism* (London, 1980); also Ajmal, "Sufi Science."

11. See S.H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Cosmological Doctrines* (Albany, 1993), chapter 15.

12. Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. by R.A. Nicholson, trans. by P. Wilson (London, 1930), IV, Book IV, vv. 519-28.

13. F. Pfeiffer, *Meister Eckhart*, trans. by C. de B. Evans, London, 1924, 1.139. Quoted in Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, p. 13.

14. Izutsu, p. 33.

15. Śri Rāmana Maharshi in fact based the whole of his teachings upon a method which asked "Who am I?" His most famous work, a collection of answers given to one of his disciples, Sivaprakasam Pillai, who arranged and amplified them, is called *Who am I?* (Tiruvannamalai, 1955). See A. Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge* (Bombay, 1957).

16. From the *Mantiq al-tayr*, trans. by F.S. Fitzgerald, in A.J. Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature* (London, 1958), p. 131.

17. F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient World*, p. 117.