

ISLAM AND THE LOSS OF EQUILIBRIUM

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If we take a broad view of the contemporary Islamic world, we may be justified in saying that the vast majority of practicing Muslims do not share the current interest in "dialogue among religions," nor are they deeply concerned with the problems the modern world finds so pressing. No doubt, part of the reason for this is that, like most of the rest of the world's inhabitants, they are uninformed and shortsighted; in any case, they have the immediate worldly and spiritual concerns of everyday life to keep them occupied. But a profoundly positive attitude can also be discerned behind this "lack of concern." To the extent that Muslims are faithful to their own heritage and uninfluenced by recently manufactured ideologies, they are certain of Islam's truth and its ability to provide them with everything that is necessary and meaningful for human life and ultimate felicity. Moreover, they know that the present situation is willed by God, since it has come about; nothing can occur outside of God's infinite Knowledge, Will, and Power. "Verily we belong to God and to Him we return" (Koran II 156); the world is in God's hands, today as always.

This is not to say that traditional Islam has nothing to offer to the current dialogue among religions. While not taking that dialogue very seriously and harboring doubts as to its real intention, Islam can nevertheless offer its own diagnosis of the disease from which we are suffering. Without knowing the nature and cause of our illness, we cannot hope to cure it. Treating its symptoms without treating its cause may in fact worsen it. Nevertheless, I do not want to claim that all Muslims will agree with my understanding of the Islamic diagnosis. "Islam" as a contemporary social reality and a living civilization embraces a vast spectrum of peoples and nations; and the name "Muslim" is claimed by individuals representing practically every spiritual, secular, political, and ideological point view. But if there is anything upon which Muslims can agree, it must be the Koran and the Hadith, the wellsprings of their religion. What follows is therefore an attempt to analyze the present situation on the basis of these two foundations.

The Theological Root of Equilibrium

The heart of the Islamic tradition is the first *shahādah* (testimony of faith): "There is no god but God." Though revealed by the Koran, in a sense this statement also precedes the holy book, since it enunciates the most fundamental of all truths, one that, in the Islamic view, underlies all

revealed religions. It even precedes human existence itself and remains true irrespective of human understanding; for, in the words of the Koran, "God bears witness that there is no god but He" (III 18). Then the second *shahādah*, "Muhammad is the messenger of God," clarifies the specifically Islamic viewpoint, different from that of other religions. "We have appointed," says God in the Koran, "for every nation a holy rite that they shall perform" (XXII 67); "Every nation has its messenger" (X 47).

The first *shahādah* relates God to the world and the world to God. With "There is no god" it negates the reality of all things other than God; with "but God" it affirms that only God truly exists. "Everything is perishing but His Face" (Koran XXVIII 88), since only He is ultimately real. "Truth (*al-haqq*) has come and falsehood has vanished away; verily falsehood is ever certain to vanish" (Koran XVII 81). This is not only the truth of revelation, but also the concrete truth of God's Reality, next to which there is nothing. "God was," said the Prophet, "and nothing was with Him;" and lest we forget the fact that with God what is past is also present, one of the Sufis adds, "And He is now as he was."

But the first *shahādah*, must also be understood in another sense, complementary to the above: since the things of this world do in fact, from a certain point of view, exist, in this respect they cannot be totally different from God, for there is no other reality. From the first point of view even the Prophet, the most exalted of creatures, is literally nothing when placed next to God. Only from the second point of view is he called Muhammad, "the praised one," for then alone can he give news of God's eternal nature. Moreover, since all things give news of God – failing which they would cease to exist – all things are His messengers in some respect. That is why the Koran constantly refers to the "signs" (*āyāt*) that make Him known – i.e., the creatures – or the fact that "Everything in the heavens and the earth glorifies God" (LIX 24 etc.).

These two complementary points of view are the "yin" and "yang" of Islam. To emphasize one while neglecting the other is to distort the faith; a heresiography of Islam could be written analyzing the way in which various sects have destroyed the equilibrium between these two standpoints. To ignore the fact that next to the Reality of God all things are literally nothing is to ascribe to the world and to this life a reality which they do not possess; it is to fall into the error of *shirk*, "associating other divinities with God." To ignore that this world is a theophany of the Divine Reality and displays everywhere His signs and that, as a result, the world is "good," is to fall into *zindiqah*, the error of Manichean dualism.

Theologically the two perspectives just referred to are sometimes summarized in terms of the doctrine of *tanzīh* or "incomparability" and *tashbīh* or "similarity" (often translated as "transcendence" and "immanence"). Nothing can be compared to God, since "Nothing is like Him"

oran MLII 11). "Far exalted is he above what they associate with Him!" (XVII 63, etc.). At the same time, all things derive their total reality from Him and constantly "sing His praise." The Koran affirms that God is the Seeing, the Hearing, the Knowing, the Willing, the Powerful, etc. These Divine Attributes embrace the qualities that are manifested in the creatures. The world is indeed similar to Him in a certain respect. Otherwise the Prophet could not have said that God created man "upon His own Form." True knowledge of God must combine "similarity" and "incomparability" in a delicate balance, never overemphasizing one to the detriment of the other.

Many complementary pairs of similar nature can be found in Islamic theological texts. To take another example, numerous verses of the Koran must be understood in the sense of affirming predestination, while many others have no meaning unless man has free will. As in other religious traditions, attempts to affirm one of these two points of view over the other or to reconcile them have filled uncountable volumes. But the characteristically Islamic position is that enunciated by one of the Shi'ite Imams: "Neither free will nor predestination! The truth lies between these two (*al-haq bayn al-amrayn*)."

A more striking example of complementarity and equilibrium is found in the doctrine of the Divine Names, of which the Koran alludes to more than one hundred; the Prophet himself listed the "Ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names of God." Those which represent God's "Acts" (*af'āl*) among the creatures are often mentioned in pairs, e.g., the Exalter and the baser, the Life-Giver and the Slayer, the Pardoner and the Avenger, the Richer and the Depriver. Theologians later classified these into the Attributes of Beauty, Gentleness, and Mercy on the one hand and those of Majesty, Severity, and Wrath on the other. God Himself is the "Coincidence of Opposites" (*jam' al-addād*), since in Him all these Attributes are identical in their existence. They only display their various effects in creation; and this is the fundamental cause of all differentiation, conflict, and strife in the Cosmos. The continued existence of the world depends upon an equilibrium among the influences of these Attributes. For example, if the Name "Slayer" demonstrated its power without the contrasting influence of the "Life-Giver," the universe would be annihilated in an instant.

The opposition among certain Divine Names results in a principle of fundamental importance: Creation is inconceivable without diversity and differentiation. There must be life and death, generation and corruption, hot and cold, strength and weakness, male and female, night and day, etc., etc. Moreover, these oppositions are precisely the root of many things that we often call "evil." To wish for a world without opposition, corruption, and destruction is to wish for an ontological plane different from our own. Islam, like other traditions, affirms that such harmony and peace is to be

found only in "Paradise" or the proximity of God.

It is true that in God all Names and Attributes are identical – since they are not separate beings but rather the modes in which the One Being of God reveals Himself to the creatures – but it cannot be said that the Attributes of Mercy are equal to those of Wrath. As the Prophet reported, the following words are inscribed upon the Throne of God: "My Mercy precedes My Wrath." Indeed, of all of God's Attributes, only Knowledge and Mercy are said to encompass "all things" (Koran LXV 12, VII 156), which is to say that they also encompass objects of Wrath. This is one reason that the Name the All-Merciful is said to be equivalent to the Name Allah or "God" in designating God's very Essence (cf. Koran XVII 110). It also helps explain why the Muslim formula of consecration, which heads practically every chapter of the Koran, reads, "In the Name of God, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate." Mercy predominates over Wrath because Mercy defines the divine nature, while Wrath only comes into play in relation to the creatures. Mercy is God's very Essence, and "God predominates over the affair" (Koran XII 21). "Unto God is the issue of all affairs" (XXXI 22).

Islam as Equilibrium

The Divine Name *al-'adl* is usually translated as "the Just." It is often defined as "He who puts everything in its proper place." The word *i'tidāl*, "equilibrium," derives from the same Arabic root and, in view of its linguistic relationship to the Name the Just, may be defined as the "harmonious interrelationship among the creatures when each assumes its proper place in creation." As a Divine Name, the Just is subordinate to *al-'alīm*, the "All-Knowing," and *al-qādir*, the "All-Powerful." God's Knowledge of all things includes a knowledge of the proper place of each thing in the hierarchy of creation; and as the All-Powerful and the Creator, he puts each in its proper situation. That "justice" should also imply "retribution" for some of the creatures results from the fact that man's central position in creation allows him to upset, in a certain fashion, the equilibrium of the cosmos and of the normative human state. This is indicated in many places in the Koran, especially in the verse of the Trust offered to man and accepted by him: "We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and man carried it. Surely he is sinful, very foolish" (XXXIII 72), since, when he does not carry it, he sets himself up against God and the balance (*mīzān*) of His Justice. "Hell" is then man's perception of his own self-induced disequilibrium in relation to the human perfection that he should have achieved. There is nothing "moralistic" about punishment; it derives from the law of cause and effect. A man reaps what he sows. But of course, ultimately even hell is a mercy, since God's Mercy must predominate in the end. Most schools of Islamic thought are either undecided about the eternity of hell,

or deny it. Certain Sufis quote a saying of the Prophet: "There will come a day when watercress will grow in hell's deepest pit."

The idea of equilibrium is embedded in the very name "Islam." The meaning of the root *s-l-m* is to be safe, secure, unimpaired, faultless. Thus the noun *salām* implies all of these things, while in a social context it means "peace". Hence the greeting, "Peace be upon you," implies far more than one might at first expect. As a Divine Name, *al-salām*, "Peace," is a "negatory" (*salbī*) Attribute, since it negates all insecurity, impairment, fault, conflict, and strife from God. Thus it implicitly affirms that all opposite Attributes exist in Him in perfect harmony and equilibrium. As for the word *islām*, the fourth verbal form from the same root, it means literally to let go, turn over, abandon, surrender; it implies deliverance from harm and the attainment of peace. As a technical religious term it carries a number of meanings, in particular, to abandon or submit one's will to God. When man follows God's Will in all things, he is delivered from conflict and strife, whether between man and God or among the creatures, and he attains to peace and harmony.

The idea of the harmony and equilibrium of all things in accordance with God's Will is found throughout the Koran. That Islam as a religion embodies this ideal is implied, for example, by the verse, "We have appointed you a midmost nation" (II 143), not only geographically, but also doctrinally and in the structure of society. The fact that man alone is given the free will and the power to upset the divinely established equilibrium between God and the world is also explained in numerous verses. I have already quoted the verse of the Trust. To that one can add, for example, the numerous allusions to a covenant between man and God (cf. especially VII 172), the fact that man is the "caliph" or vicegerent of God (cf. II 30) – i.e., His representative on earth and the intermediary between him and all other creatures – and the fact that all things in creation have been "subjected" to man (XXXI 20, etc.). These verses and many more suggest that, from the Islamic point of view, the primary reason for the rupture of the natural and social equilibriums that have been experienced by the modern world is the rupture of the equilibrium between man and God. In effect, by refusing to carry the Trust for which he was created, man has abandoned his human responsibility and sunk into animality. Peace in the world without peace with God is a chimera.

This World and the Next

In the domain of human endeavor and society, Islam establishes a fundamental equilibrium between "this world" (*al-dunya*) and the "next world" (*al-ākhirah*). From one point of view this world displays the Attributes and the signs of God; it possesses a provisional goodness because of its "similarity" to God. "O believers, eat of the good things wherewith We

have provided you, and give thanks to God, if it be Him that you worship" (II 172). "God has appointed for you of yourselves wives, and He has appointed for you of your wives sons and grandsons, and He has provided you of the good things. What, do they believe in vanity, and do they disbelieve in God's blessing?" (XVI 72). A prayer established by the Koran and much recited by Muslims is the following: "Our Lord, give us in this world good, and in the next world good, and deliver us from the chastisement of the Fire" (II 201).

Nevertheless, "This present life is naught but a diversion and a sport; surely the Last Abode is Life, did they but know" (Koran XXIV 64). Islam affirms the "incomparability" between this world and God and the fact that man will meet God in the next world. "Oh Man! Thou art laboring unto thy Lord laboriously, and thou shalt encounter Him" (Koran LXXXIV 6). In the same way that God is better than His creation, so the next world is better than this: "The enjoyment of this present life, compared with the world to come, is a little thing" (IX 38). No major scripture pays as much attention as the Koran to the unreal nature of mankind's present situation by emphasizing the importance of this posthumous abode. As anyone who has read the Koran is well aware, descriptions of the chastisement of the unbelievers and the rewards of the believers abound. "O men, God's promise is true. So let not the present life delude you, and let not the Deluder delude you concerning God" (XXXV 5).

The attitude towards the present world that Islam seeks to instill is that of detachment. As the Prophet said, man should be like a traveller who has stopped to rest at an oasis and knows that in a few moments he must be moving on. Anything that attaches man to the world is a danger that has to be neutralized or eliminated through the guidelines provided by religion. That is why poverty and lack of the means whereby one may enjoy the present life are hardly great afflictions that a man should try to overcome. What is a Muslim to conclude when he looks at the situation of modern society and then meditates upon the following verse of the Koran? "Were it not that mankind would be of one nation [i.e., in their unbelief], we would have appointed for those who disbelieve in the All-Merciful roofs of silver to their houses, and stairs whereon to mount, and the doors to their houses, and couches whereon to recline, and ornaments; surely this is but the enjoyment of the present life, and the world to come with the Lord is for the godfearing" (XLIII 33).

Islam's view of the relationship between this world and the next determines its view of social institutions: These must be oriented toward the next world. The essential function of the Shari'ah or "Divine Law" is to establish a stable framework within which man may take care of the necessary affairs of this world without being seduced by them. Since it was established by God, the Shari'ah serves to remind mankind of His words, "I

have not created jinn and men except to worship Me" (LI 56) and of the fact that all of life's affairs must take part in that worship. Otherwise man turns away from his covenant with God, fails to carry the Trust, and is "sinful, very foolish."

A theologian points out that "religion" (*al-dīn*) – here he is thinking primarily of the Shari'ah – has two essential functions: First, to govern society by providing laws and the means of enforcing them. In this way it maintains the "best interest" (*maṣlahah*) of the world in whatever the prevailing situation may be, in relation both to the general and the specific conditions of society and the individual. Second, religion governs man and society by directing their gaze toward the affairs of the next world and the ultimate end of their activities.¹ Elsewhere the same author writes that "equilibrium" is the essential attribute of the Islamic way. "Our Shari'ah has gone to great lengths to clarify this fact; it has observed and defined the balance of equilibrium in every state, affair, and situation, in its promises and warnings, and in its descriptions of the natural world's attributes and states, of spiritual conditions, and of praiseworthy and blameworthy moral qualities."²

Another theologian writes, "The Shari'ah is a universal balance revealed by God to establish equilibrium. It maintains unity and equity among all the affairs of the creatures . . . Thus it wards off the defects of contingency and the effects of egocentric and satanic multiplicity."³

Three Dimensions of the Islamic Tradition

But the Shari'ah deals primarily with a single dimension of Islam, which is a multi-dimensional reality. For our present purposes, we can discern three main dimensions of the Islamic tradition, dimensions which serve to establish various kinds of equilibrium and which, at the same time, must be harmoniously interrelated. These are referred to by the Prophet in a famous hadith recounted by the caliph 'Umar: A man unknown to the Companions suddenly appeared before the Prophet showing no signs of travel. He said, "Oh Muhammad! Tell me about *islām* ('submission')." The Prophet replied, "*Islām* is that you should bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His messenger, that you should perform the ritual prayers, pay the alms tax, fast during Ramadan, and go on the pilgrimage to Mecca if you can find the means to do so." The man replied, "You have spoken truly." 'Umar remarks that everyone was astonished at the man's words (since they suggested that he had a right to approve or disapprove of the Prophet of God). Then the man said, "Tell me about *īmān* ('faith')." The Prophet replied, "It is that you should have faith in God, His Angels, His Books, His Messengers, and the Last Day, and that you should have faith in the preordainment of both good and evil." Again the man affirmed that the Prophet had spoken truly. Then he said, "Tell me about

ihsān ('virtue').” The Prophet replied, “It is 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.” So the man said, “Then tell me about its signs.” The Prophet answered “The slave girl will give birth to her mistress; and you will see the barefoot, the naked, the destitute, and the shepherds building arrogantly high houses.” Then the man went away. The Prophet said, “Oh ‘Umar, do you know who that was? . . . That was Gabriel. He came to teach you your religion.”

This hadith, whose authenticity is undisputed, prefigures the breadth and depth of the Islamic tradition. In short, it states that Islam is a complex equilibrium among three dimensions: *islām*, *īmān*, and *ihsān*, and that once this equilibrium is upset, the Last Day will be near. A few remarks about each of these three dimensions can prepare the ground for certain conclusions concerning the Islamic view of contemporary problems and their solution.

Islām alludes to that dimension of the religion that later became institutionalized as the Shari’ah. We have already seen that its function is to establish the outward framework of society’s orientation toward God. Ideally the Shari’ah must regulate and direct most activities of society and the individual, including the government and legal institutions, the conduct of business and transactions, marriage, and outward acts of worship.

Imān refers not only to personal belief, but also to the whole doctrinal and intellectual edifice of Islam. The word *īmān* in Arabic carries none of the negative connotations of the word “belief” in English; it could never imply, for example, that a person is flying in the face of logic for sentimental reasons. Deriving from the root *’-m-n*, which means to be trustworthy, reliable, safe, *īmān* denotes something close to the English word “certainty.” It suggests that he who possesses it is secure in and faithful to his knowledge of God in particular which has been given to man in the Koran; moreover, it implies discernment between what is God and what is not God, which is none other than *tawhid*, the “profession of Unity,” the first *shahādah*. For in and through the Koran, “Truth has come and error has vanished away” (XVII 81). This is therefore the domain of doctrine, of discerning between the True and the false, the Permanent and the impermanent, the Absolute and the relative. Faith is also the domain of understanding the hierarchy of “relatively absolute” realities; in other words the *shahādah* and the Koran not only affirm that God is the Absolute Reality, they also provide the key to the knowledge of those things which manifest God in a relatively direct manner, i.e., the angels, the Books, the Prophets, and the Last Day. Certainly all things are in one respect theophanies of God, but some things

are direct epiphanies of Light, while others are so mixed with darkness as to make them into dark veils, effectively unreal or even satanic.

At the highest intellectual level of *īmān* lie the domains of Islamic theology, philosophy, and metaphysics, all of which are intimately concerned with the three "pillars" of Islamic doctrine: Divine Unity, prophecy, and eschatology. To ignore the extraordinarily rich intellectual tradition of Islam, as do so many contemporary Islamic movements, is to abandon the possibility of having effective knowledge of the objects of one's faith and to put one's religion at the mercy of opinion and belief. The Koran says, "This is a book wherein is no doubt" (II 2), neither about God, nor about His angels and prophets, nor about the Last Day. The Koran is still the same book, but the answers to all the doubts which modern scepticism has unleashed upon the Islamic world are locked away in Islam's intellectual tradition. The fact that so many Muslims are in doubt about their religion, or follow a blind belief that amounts to turning away from anything resembling logical thought, signifies only that to a large extent this dimension of the tradition has atrophied.

The dimension of *ihsān* or "virtue" is the least accessible to outsiders and even to Muslims, since it concerns the intangibles of human character and spiritual perfection. The word "worship" in the statement. "Virtue is to worship God as if you see Him," also means to "serve"; it refers not only to formal acts of worship, but also to every act a person performs and every thought his mind conceives. Since man was created only to "worship/serve God" (Koran LI 56), everything he does must be worship and service, and this can only come about through sincerity and conscious dedication of one's every breath to God. Indeed, sincerity (*ikhlas, sidq*) is the key spiritual attitude of Islam, since it is an application of the first *shahadah* to the domain of one's intention; to "worship God as if you see Him" is to act in total sincerity for God's sake alone.

The perfume of this dimension of Islam can be perceived wherever a pious and sincere Muslim is found, i.e., a Muslim who puts God's commands into practice in everything he says and does and who acts for God's sake, not for any egocentric (*nafsani*) motive. No doubt glimmers of virtue are found in most practicing Muslims, but Islam recognizes that this domain is in fact unlimited in its inward depth, since it deals with the infinite degrees of man's proximity (*qurb*) to God. "The noblest of you in God's eyes is the most pious" (Koran XLIX 13), or the most virtuous, or the most sincere. The noblest of men are the prophets, then the saints in all their myriad degrees, then the believers. The science of "piety" and "virtue" has been developed in great sophistication by the Sufi shaykhs, who speak for the institutionalized basis of virtue in Islam, i.e., the Sufi orders. These exist to provide the practical means whereby man can turn all his attention toward God, even in the midst of the life of this world. To "love God with all

one's heart, all one's soul, all one's mind, and all one's strength" – for this is a good definition of *ihsān* – is the most difficult of all tasks, and at the same time the most important. Islam could hardly have failed to teach its followers how to actualize "the one thing needful."

These then are the three basic dimensions of the Islamic tradition: *islām* or the Shari'ah, *īmān* or faith and doctrine, and *ihsān* or virtue and spirituality. The rest of the hadith, where Gabriel asks about the signs of the Last Day, refers to the corruption and decay of the religion, as is witnessed by numerous other hadiths. In a symbolic manner characteristic for sayings concerning the end of time, the Prophet says that society will have lost its religious structure or its traditional Islamic hierarchy, since the Shari'ah and the other dimensions of religion will no longer be in force. The lowest and meanest of men, the "barefoot, the naked, the destitute, and the shepherds," will be in positions of power and thus be able to build "arrogantly high houses." In the context of this and other hadiths, it is obvious that here the "destitute" stand poles apart from the "poor in spirit." One of Islam's primary concerns is to build a religious society, so the "barefoot" and the "naked" are that society's dregs, those people who are farthest from the "nobility" that Islam seeks to instill. Since the "noblest among you is the most pious," the "destitute" are people with no *īmān* and no *ihsān*. The corruption of the more inward dimensions of Islam goes hand in hand with the corruption of the Shari'ite structure of society as a whole.

In short, for the Islamic tradition to remain true to itself, it must live in a universe based on equilibrium and harmony among these three dimensions. If it ignores any one of them it will upset its own equilibrium and court disaster.

The Islamic View of History

The ideal Islamic civilization, by maintaining an equilibrium among *islām*, *īmān*, and *ihsān*, would allow a full flowing of every domain of human activity that is in harmony with man's ultimate destiny. As far as Muslims are concerned, this ideal was achieved, to the greatest extent possible, during the lifetime of the Prophet, the "golden age" of Islam; and it was achieved to a lesser extent during the reign of the first four caliphs, the only ones to deserve the title *rāshid* or "rightly-guided." By the time these three dimensions of the tradition became clearly institutionalized – i.e., in about the 3rd century A.H./9th century A.D. – the equilibrium of Islamic civilization was already in serious decline. Nevertheless the ideal has remained, as is shown, for example, by the fact that in every generation men of piety and knowledge have protested against the corruption of society. Thus, the Persian poet Sana'i cried out in the 6th/12th century,

If you want enemies, O Mahdi ("Messiah"),
Then come on down from heaven!
If you want helpers, Antichrist,
Then show yourself at once!

What one observes in the course of Islamic history is a gradual slide away from the near-ideal equilibrium of the time of the Prophet to the severe disequilibrium of the contemporary Islamic world. Naturally there have been exceptional periods and renewals; according to a hadith, a "renewer" will be born in each century. But it is symptomatic of the present-day disequilibrium that most Muslims identify "Islam" only with the first dimension mentioned in the hadith, i.e., *islām* as the Shari'ah. It may be that this is not new and that the majority were unaware of the existence of the domains of *īmān* and *ihsān*, but that did not prevent the civilization as a whole from possessing these dimensions; in effect, the majority did participate in these domains, but passively and unconsciously. Now that Islamic society has been disrupted by outside influences, the loss of these dimensions as living realities becomes tragic for the civilization. The fact that the Shari'ah remains as an ideal shows that Islam's alienation from its origins is far from complete' but the fact that *īmān* and *ihsan* no longer influence the vast majority of Muslims, especially those educated on Western models, shows how far the tradition has been lost.

The Loss of Beauty

I spoke at the beginning about *tanzīh* or incomparability and *tashbīh* or similarity. *Ihsān* – Islamic spirituality – emphasizes similarity, while the Shari'ah stresses incomparability. *Ihsan* sees the world and the human soul as theophanies of God's Beauty, Mercy, and Love; it views God primarily in terms of His Generosity and Forgiveness, all the while acknowledging that he is also the Just and the Vengeful. But its hope and trust in God is based on the certainty that God's Mercy takes precedence over His Wrath. In contrast, *islam* or the Shari'ah emphasizes God's distance from man and His commands and prohibitions backed up by the threat of punishment and the promise of reward.

When the Shari'ah and transcendence are stressed exclusively, the result is a lopsided theology that almost totally masks God's immanence. As a result, the sacred nature of the world is lost to sight. God's exclusive transcendence means that the world is no longer the theater in which He displays His signs; as objects devoid of divine content, the things of this world become spiritually indifferent – we can act with them as we wish. The way is open for the secularization of all human endeavor, not to mention the rape of the earth (the fact that the latter had never begun in the Islamic world before the influence of the modern West shows that a certain

equilibrium had been maintained, even if it was less than perfect).

The Shari'ah does not provide concrete directives for certain important dimensions of outward human activity, art in particular. The latter is based more on the discernment of beauty from ugliness (*imān*) and, to the extent it effects the soul of the artist and the observer, their participation in the beauty thus discerned (*ihsān*). Until the present century, art and architecture in the Islamic world, down to the plainest pot and the meanest hut, were always beautiful, harmonious, and conducive to peace and equilibrium. This shows the continued influence of *imān* and *ihsān*. The loss of beauty, the ugliness of the cities that ape those of the West, the omnipresent din of motorcycles and transistor radios, show that *iman* and *ihsān* have all but disappeared. The ease with which industrial ugliness is swamping the Islamic world, the eagerness with which people throw out the handwrought utensils of their parents and grandparents and replace them with the ugliest products of a plastic society, prove that Islam has largely lost contact with its intellectual and spiritual bases.

Islamic "Fundamentalism"

Many people have looked upon certain political events in the Middle East as a "resurgence" of Islam, and no doubt a certain reaction to the modern world based upon Islamic sentiments is involved. But in fact, what we are observing is the death throes of civilization. Despite all the lip service given to the Koran and the Prophet, careful observation of what has been happening reveals the following: The Shari'ah, *islām*, is enforced only when it conveniently can be harmonized with ideologies imported from outside; the rest of the Shari'ah is ignored. *Imān* – Islamic doctrine – has been totally distorted; a religion that always put God before the world has now become another social dogma, one "ism" among others.

But the most telling, and for people with religious sentiments the most obvious, manifestation of the none-Islamic nature of events can be seen in the domain of *ihsān*, or rather the lack of it. In the view of Islamic spirituality, the beauty and nobility of the human soul are of primary importance. The "noblest" of Muslims, i.e., the most pious, have always radiated love and mercy, for nearness to God means nearness to His nature and distance from fallen – or in Islamic terms, "negligent" and "forgetful" – human nature, i.e., from self-centredness, narrowness, ignorance, and bigotry. But anyone with eyes to see is able to discern the symptoms of the hate that underlies certain so-called "Islamic" movements today: ugliness, noise, clamor, stridency, fanatical narrowmindedness, a total lack of compassion. Nothing further from traditional Islamic values and virtues can be imagined. The fact that most modern "Islamic" states not only ignore the role that outward beauty and environmental harmony have always played in Islamic civilization but are usually hostile to it as well only confirms these points. In

short, we see before us the semblance of an Islamic form, since the Shari'ah is paraded around as the basis of society. But in many cases it is perhaps not too much to say that the body of Islam has been emptied of its spirit and, like a zombie, it does the work of new masters.

The "Relevance" of Islam

Finally, what does Islam have to offer to the current dialogue about contemporary problems? Is the Islamic tradition relevant to the problems from which the modern world is suffering? Islam's first answer to these questions is that its own relevance to the problems of mankind is not at issue, since God is always God and man is always man. Islam is the same message from God to mankind that it always has been. The real question is whether or not the modern world is relevant to Islam. In fact, in the eyes of traditional Islam the institutions that characterize the modern world are devoid of interest or value, since they are based upon the rejection of everything that Islam considers true and sacred. In other words, Islam cannot be expected to contribute to "solving the problems of modern society" so long as that society is considered legitimate. As far as Islam is concerned, any evils suffered by modern institutions are the inevitable consequences of the false premises upon which they are based. "Today's crisis" results from the fact that "justice," or the immanent equilibrium of the cosmos, is ignored by all those who consider themselves participants in "current events," yet it never ceases to assert itself. In the words of the Koran, "The likeness of one who expends of his wealth to show off to men and believes not in God and the Last Day is as the likeness of a smooth rock on which is soil, and a torrent smites it and leaves it barren. They have no power over anything they have earned. God guides not the people of the unbelievers" (Koran II 264).

If Islam does have something to offer to modern man, may I suggest that this lies in the clarity of its fundamental teachings, the lack of ambiguity in its basic tenets of faith, and its vision that brings the *religious* issues of the present situation into stark relief. Today many believers of all religions are no longer sure about what their own religions teach. So many compromises have been made with the world, especially in the last few years, that the boundary between the Absolute and the relative, Truth and error, Goodness and evil, Beauty and ugliness has been totally obscured. Fundamental concepts such as "truth" and "goodness" have been held up to a doubting scrutiny so often that many "believers" no longer think they have any meaning. The clarity of the Islamic vision may help some people to reconsider the bases of their own faith.

Moreover, in spite of the negative picture I have drawn, the Islamic tradition is far from dead; true representatives of the religion in all its richness, men who combine its three dimensions in a living synthesis, are

still to be found. I would maintain that at present it is impossible to have "Muslim society," since the "barefoot, the naked, the destitute, and the shepherds" are already building their "arrogantly high houses" – not the least of which are their "Islamic republics." But it is not impossible to be Muslim, and any viable Islamic society must be built on sincere individuals. I have spoken about *islām*, *īmān*, and *ihsān* in their social and historical context but they are also categories of an eminently personal and individual nature. It is still possible for a person to follow the Shari'ah, to have sound faith, and to cultivate the spiritual virtues. This will always be possible as long as men are men and the world remains in existence. As the Prophet said, "The Last Day will not come as long as one person remains on the surface of the earth saying, 'Allah, Allah.'" As the commentators point out the repetition of the Name "Allah" alludes to the true faith and spiritual virtue of the man who pronounces it. The fact that today the world still exists proves that such men still exist. As long as we are in this world, it is possible to be "true believers" – to deny this would be to say that it is no longer possible to be human.

Finally, what does Islam have to offer to the "dialogue" among religions? I would suggest that traditional Muslims would be happy to know that members of other faiths respect their beliefs; but it will be difficult to convince them that there is anything to "talk" about. The world is going where it is going according to God's Will, whether we talk or not. It is best to busy oneself with the business of the human situation: carrying the Trust. If in the meantime men destroy this world, well, the next world is a better place. Not is this "fatalism" in the sense usually understood. It is merely a clear vision of "the way things are" and action in accordance with that vision in the words of Rūmī,

Whenever you are inclined toward some task,
 you see your own power clearly,
 But when you are not so inclined and have no desire,
 you become a fatalist and say, "This is from God."
 The prophets (and believers) are fatalists in this world's work,
 the unbelievers are fatalists in that of the next world.
 The prophets choose freely the work of the next world,
 the ignorant choose freely the work of this world.
 (Mathnawī I 635–38)

Trying to "solve" today's problems" by a direct frontal assault to "choose freely the work of this world." But if man chooses the work of the next world, "the rest will be given unto him."

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