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## SLUMBER SEIZES HIM NOT

William C. Chittick

### A SELF-EVIDENT TRUTH, A MEDITATIVE TECHNIQUE,

and a spiritual practice are at once embodied in a statement upon which the Islamic perspective is founded. This statement is the first of the two Shahadahs or testimonies of faith, the words “No god but God.” The Koran tells us that it is the message of all the prophets, who are traditionally said to number 124,000, from Adam himself down to Muhammad.

To say that the first Shahadah is a self-evident truth may sound odd to those outside the tradition. As soon as we translate it into non-theistic language, however, it turns out to be something of a truism. It simply means that there is no reality but that which is truly real. Or, there is nothing real but the real. To understand how this apparently bland statement animates a major tradition, we need to consider its implications.

The first Shahadah is called *kalimat al-tawhid*, that is, “the sentence that asserts (God’s) unity.” This “assertion of unity” is typically taken as the first principle of Islamic faith, the second and third being “prophecy” and “the return to God” (or “eschatology”). In contrast to the second and third principles, unity stands outside history. It was not established by the Islamic revelation, nor does it depend in any way on the human situation. It simply expresses the way things are,

irrespective of human observation. It has always appeared within the

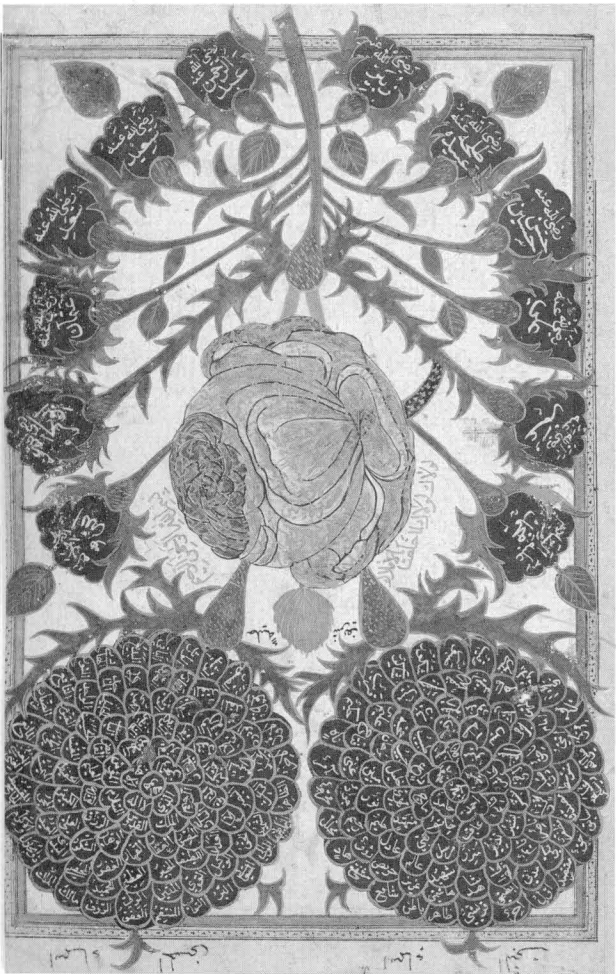
The Koran considers unity a truth, voiced in every prophetic utterance. “We never sent a messenger before you except that We revealed to him that there is no god but I.” The verse goes on to state the implication of unity, also voiced in every prophetic message: “So serve Me (21:25). In other words, the certainty granted to prophets and sages is that people should acknowledge the Selfhood is one and that all reality is subservient to it. The conclusion is that people should acknowledge their subservience by acting appropriately, by “service” (or “worship,” or “obedience”). Each messenger, however, established a distinct viewpoint and a unique mode of service: “To each of you [messengers] We have given a law and a way.”

THE FIRST SHAHADAH provides Muslims with their primary technique of meditation. Islamic theology in all its varieties—including the Sufi and philosophical traditions—describes reality in terms of the divine names. The Koran teaches that God possesses “the most beautiful names,” and it cites as examples a variety of ordinary words, such as knowing, desiring, powerful, merciful, just, and forgiving. Traditionally, there are said to number ninety-nine, though the actual lists established by the Koran often mention fewer or more.

As a meditative technique, the Shahadah allows people to unpack the meaning of that most elusive of words, “Allah.” It asserts the unity of God, illustrating that all divine names and attributes, all real qualities on earth and in heaven, find their full and true expression only in the One. To say that God is “knowing” means that there is no

and are ascribed to created things in a conventional, not a true, sense. If meditation on the first Shahadah were to stop here, we would be left with a transcendent, inaccessible God and a

THE ROSE OF MUHAMMAD  
RIGHT BLOOM HAS THE NINETY-NINE NAMES OF ALLAH;  
LEFT BLOOM HAS THE NAMES OF MUHAMMAD  
TURKISH MINIATURE, C. 1708



knowing but God. True knowledge belongs to God alone, not to anything in the created realm. So also with other divine attributes: There is none alive but God, none desiring but God, none powerful but God, none merciful but God. All attributes designated by the divine names belong to God in truth

irrespective of human observers—or so it has always appeared within the tradition. The Koran considers unity a universal truth, voiced in every prophetic message: “We never sent a messenger before thee except that We revealed to him, ‘There is no god but I.’” The verse goes on to state the implication of unity, also voiced in every prophetic message: “So serve Me” (21:25). In other words, the awakening granted to prophets and sages conveys to them the certainty that the Supreme Selfhood is one and that all reality is subservient to it. The conclusion to be drawn is that people should acknowledge their subservience by acting appropriately, that is, by “service” (or “worship,” *ibada*). Each messenger, however, establishes a distinct viewpoint and a unique form of service: “To each of you [messengers], We have given a law and a way” (5:48).

THE FIRST SHAHADAH provides Muslims with

Islamic theology in all its varieties—including the Sufi and philosophical versions—describes reality in terms of the divine names. The Koran tells us that God possesses “the most beautiful names,” and it cites as examples a great variety of ordinary words, such as alive, knowing, desiring, powerful, merciful, just, and forgiving. Traditionally these are said to number ninety-nine, though the actual lists established by theologians often mention fewer or more.

As a meditative technique, the Shahadah allows people to unpack the meaning of that most elusive of words, “God” (Allah). It asserts the unity of God by illustrating that all divine names and attributes, all real qualities on any level of reality, find their full and true meaning only in the One. To say that God is “knowing” means that there is none

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cosmos bereft of reality. But the Koran and the tradition also affirm the complementary perspective, that of God's immanence and omnipresence. The creatures manifest God's *āyāt* or "signs"—a constant Koranic theme. These appear in four basic domains: the natural world, the human self, the activities of the

Life, power, desire, and all other positive qualities lead back to their source in God. It is precisely through the qualities, attributes, and characteristics of created things that God discloses the reality of his infinite and absolute Self. "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115). "Everything has its treasures only with

this name as "the Truth," but it means real, right, appropriate, just, and worthy (along with the corresponding nouns). It signifies, in other words, there is nothing true, real, right, and worthy but God. The more we stress this point, the more we ascend to transcendence.

The Koran uses the word *haqq* 250 times, but only a few of these instances designate God per se. It uses the word to describe the appearance of the signs in various domains. It makes *haqq* an attribute of the Koran and other scriptures. It says that God creates everything in the heaven and the earth "only with the *haqq*." In other words, all revelation and all things that act in the universe accord with the reality, rightness, justice, and appropriateness. Everything is serving the purpose of God. As the Koran puts it, "There is nothing in the heavens and the earth that does not come to the All-Mighty as a servant" (19:93).

Human beings, however, provide a partial exception to the rule of universal servanthood. If not, there would be no need for the commandment "submit to the prophets in the prophetic messages. Humankind is created only as a servant" (along with the *jinn*, who include the angels). Humans can choose to have the option of rebelling against the Real, the Right, the True, and the Appropriate (even if, from another point of view, this rebellion is itself a work of the Real's love for his creature).

Human exceptionalism is obvious plainly in the signs: "Have you not seen how to God prostrate themselves all who are in the heavens and all who in the earth—the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and many of the people?" "Many of the people," in other words, do not acknowledge the Right, the True

ILLUMINATED KORAN  
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prophets (e.g., their "miracles"), and scripture (*āyāt* is precisely the word used for the "verses" of the Koran). The Book makes no distinction between natural and supernatural signs.

Whatever appears in creation signifies the divine Reality that gave it existence.

Us, and We send it down only in a known measure" (15:21).

AMONG THE MANY KORANIC NAMES of God, one became current in Islamic languages as a virtual synonym for Allah itself, and that is *al-haqq*. Translators usually render



the Worthy and act appropriately, but many do not. In this way of looking at things, "submission" (*islām*) is a fact of existence. All things are "Muslims"—submitted to the Real—because "There is no god but God," no other means through which to partake of reality. "To Him is submitted whosoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly" (3:83). The prophets and their followers acknowledge this universal submission and then add to it a particular submission. Knowing that they are submitted like plants and animals, sun and moon, they also freely choose to conform themselves to the Real. They do so by following specific sorts of service designated by revelation. The role of the prophets in human affairs is thus to lead the way to the Real, the Right, and the True.

If the word *haqq* means "right" in the sense of proper and correct, it also means it in the sense of what is rightfully due to someone or something, and hence it is employed in modern-day discussions of human rights. Muhammad had this meaning of the word in view when he said, "Your soul has a right against you, your Lord has a right against you, your guest has a right against you, and your spouse has a right against you, so give to each that has a right its right." But to say that someone has a "right against you" means that you have a responsibility toward that someone. In the pre-modern context of Islamic languages, it was impossible to disengage rights from responsibilities. In short, the Koran and the tradition employ the word *haqq* in a variety of ways illustrating both the transcendence and the immanence of the Real. Meditating upon *haqq* in the context of *tawhid* allows people to understand that God alone truly possesses reality and rightness, that he

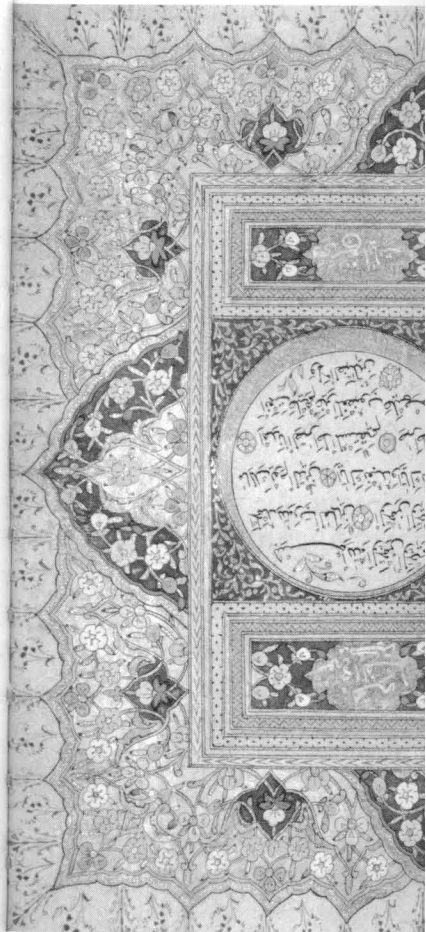
this name as "the Truth," but it also means real, right, appropriate, just, and worthy (along with the corresponding nouns). It signifies, in other words, that there is nothing true, real, right, just, and worthy but God. The more we stress this point, the more we assert God's transcendence.

The Koran uses the word *haqq* about 250 times, but only a few of these instances designate God per se. It also uses the word to describe the appearance of the signs in various domains. Thus it makes *haqq* an attribute of the Koran and other scriptures. It says that God creates everything in the heavens and the earth "only with the *haqq*." In other words, all revelation and all things and acts in the universe accord with truth, reality, rightness, justice, and appropriateness. Everything is serving the purposes of God. As the Koran puts it, "There is nothing in the heavens and the earth that does not come to the All-Merciful as a servant" (19:93).

Human beings, however, prove to be a partial exception to the rule of universal servanthood. If not, there would be no need for the commandment "serve God" (along with the *jinn*, who include Satan) to have the option of rebelling against the Real, the Right, the True, and the Appropriate (even if, from another standpoint, this rebellion is itself a worthy sign of the Real's love for his creatures).

Human exceptionalism is observed plainly in the signs: "Have you not seen how to God prostrate themselves all who are in the heavens and all who in the earth—the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and many of the people?" (22:18). "Many of the people," in other words, acknowledge the Right, the True, and

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parcels it out to creation, and that human beings have been given the freedom to accept it or reject it.

**HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM** has everything to do with the fact that Adam was created in the image of the Real and taught “all the names” (2:31). That he understood what he was taught and lived up to his responsibilities as “vicegerent” of God (2:30) is indicated by his being appointed prophet. His children, however, typically live in forgetfulness and heedlessness. Islam has no concept of original sin, but the Koran does say that Adam “forgot” (20:115), though he then repented and was forgiven. Even so, “Human beings were created weak” (4:28), and the frailty of forgetfulness appears in them as a matter of course. Surrendering to it is sufficient cause for downfall. “Those who stay heedless of Our signs—their refuge is hell” (10:7).

The remedy for forgetfulness is *dhikr*, a word that means to remember, mention, and remind. The Koran employs it as a designation for itself and other prophetic messages, all of which mention the Real and remind people of God’s rights and their own responsibilities. On the human side, remembrance of God and mention of his names are the proper response to the signs: “He clarifies the signs for the people—perhaps they will remember” (2:221).

Scholars of Sufism often translate the word *dhikr* as “invocation.” Invoking God—that is, remembering him and mentioning his name—is in fact the main duty that Sufism adds to the responsibilities explicitly set down by the revealed law. The act of remembrance transforms the Shahadah from a meditation into a spiritual practice. Any perusal of the Sufi manuals will show that the first Shahadah has

been the most common invocation prescribed for disciples. The only rival is the name Allah itself, whose meaning the Shahadah explains.

**IN REMEMBERING GOD**, the goal is to recognize the Real in both his transcendence and immanence and to be constantly mindful of the rights and responsibilities placed upon Adam’s children by the manifestation of signs in the universe, society, and the soul. Worthy remembrance demands living in the world rightly and appropriately. In other words, the goal is to wake up fully to the way things are and to live in a constant state of wakefulness and mindfulness.

Given the meditative significance of the Shahadah, all those who strive for wakefulness know from the outset that “There is none awake but God.” The Koran does not include “awake” among the divine names, but it does express the idea without ambiguity. The famous “Throne Verse,” which is inscribed in the domes of myriad mosques, begins with the words, “God, there is no god but He, the Alive, the Ever-standing. Slumber seizes Him not, nor sleep...” (2:255).

Slumber and sleep are attributes of those who were created weak. Creatures who live and stand up also lie down, sleep, and die. God, in contrast, is “the Alive who does not die” (25:58), the Ever-standing who does not sit, and the Awake who never sleeps.

On the human side, waking up, like every other ascent in the direction of the Real, amounts to “assuming the character traits of God.” This phrase, much discussed by theologians like al-Ghazālī, designates the process of actualizing the divine image latent in the human substance. In the same sort of context, Muslim philosophers often prefer the

word “deiformity” (*ta’allub*, from the same root as Allah). In both cases, the goal of human existence is not to be conformity with the Real, for the Real alone is good, the Real alone is awake.

What then is awakening? It is to be aware of the Real, the True, the Good, and the Worthy. It is to act appropriately and worthily by giving all that is theirs and by accepting responsibilities before God and creation. It is to affirm the unity of the Real with incessant meditation and invocation. The Real totally dominates awareness. It is to see the face of the Real without turn. It is to recognize in every moment our being that we are always and essentially servants of the Real.

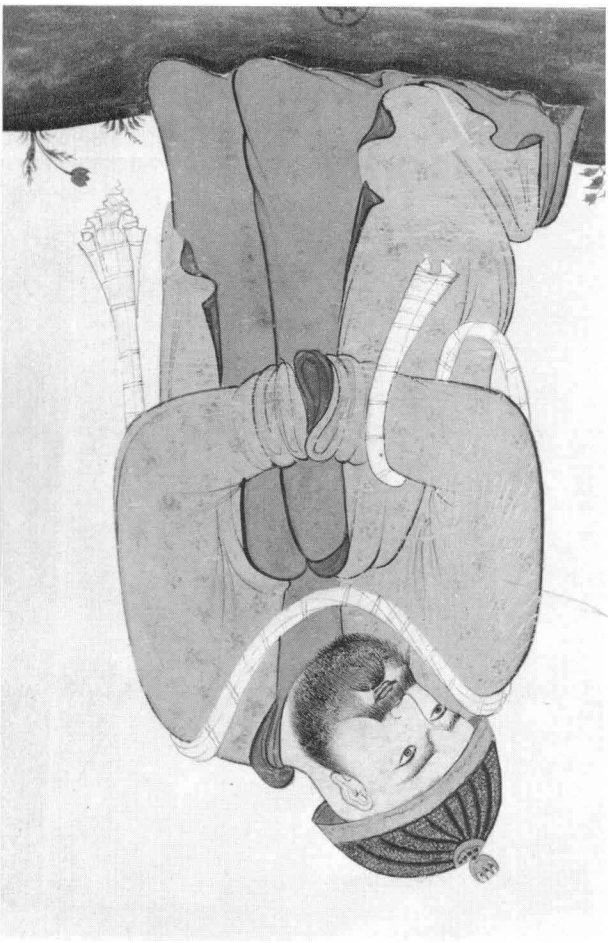
**EVERYONE FAMILIAR WITH** the teaching of Sufism knows that love frequently plays a central role in the process of awakening. About conformity with the Real, the goal of lovers is to embrace their beloved. The more lovers grow in love for God, the more they embrace him by assuming his attributes and character traits, the more difficult they find it to distance themselves from him.

The Sufi knows that he loves God, even when he loves other things. There is no beloved but God. The Real alone is the source of beauty, and everything lovable. Whatsoever can be nothing but his sign, his self-disclosure. Worthy love is recognizing that we love only God.

The Prophet said, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty.” To say that God is beautiful means that no one is more beautiful than God, and to say that God loves beauty means that no one truly loves beauty but God. If it is true that only the Real, it is even more



Real alone does the loving. As the Sufis put it, "None loves God but God." The Real alone is true beloved and true lover, and all love is nothing but his love. Human uniqueness comes down to being able to make this discernment and to live one's life appropriately. The possibility of waking up to love explains why humans



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alone are true lovers of God and true objects of his love. As the Koran implies, however, his love precedes their love. "He loves them and they love Him" (3:119). Rumi constantly sings of love's power to erase the distinction between lover and beloved. He points out that love is simply

word "deformity" (*ta'ailub*), derived from the same root as Allah). In both cases, the goal of human existence is understood to be conformity with the Real, for the Real alone is good, the Real alone is wise, and the Real alone is awake.

What then is awakening? It is to become aware of the Real, the True, the Right, and the Worthy. It is to act appropriately and worthily by giving all that have rights their right and by accepting one's responsibilities before God and creation. It is to affirm the unity of the Real with such incessant meditation and invocation that the Real totally dominates awareness. It is to see the face of the Real wherever we turn. It is to recognize in every fiber of our being that we are always and forever servants of the Real.

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The Prophet said, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." To say that God is beautiful means that no one is truly beautiful but God, and to say that God loves beauty means that no one truly loves beauty but God. If it is true that we love only the Real, it is even more true that the

most common invocation for disciples. The only rival to Allah itself, whose meaning he explains.

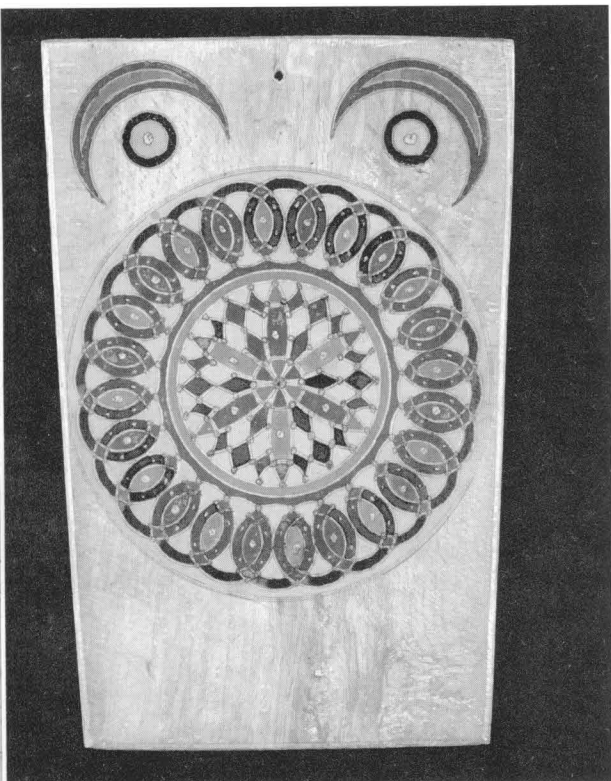
ING GOD, the goal is to recognize both his transcendence and to be constantly mindful of his children by the manifestations in the universe, society, and worldly remembrance demands a world rightly and appropriately words, the goal is to wake the way things are and to live in a state of wakefulness and

meditative significance of the all those who strive for wakefulness from the outset that "There but God." The Koran does among the divine "wake" it does express the idea with-ity. The famous "Throne" which is inscribed in the domes mosques, begins with the God, there is no god but He, the Ever-standing. Slumber not, nor sleep..." (2:255) and sleep are attributes of were created weak. Creatures stand up also lie down, the God, in contrast, is "the does not die" (25:58), the ing who does not sit, and the never sleeps.

human side, waking up, like ascent in the direction of the character "assuming the character of theologians like al-Ghazali, the process of actualizing the latent in the human sub- the same sort of context, philosophers often prefer the

another name for the energizing force expressed by the first Shahadah:

Love is that flame which, when it  
blazes up,  
burns away everything except the  
Everlasting Beloved.  
It strikes home the sword of “no god”  
and slays everything other than  
the Real.



KORAN  
WOODEN PANEL  
MOROCCO, TWENTIETH CENTURY

Look sharp—after “no god,” what  
remains?  
There remains “but God,” all the rest  
has gone.  
Bravo, O great, idol-burning Love!  
(*Mathnawî* 5: 588–90)

One of the more important scriptural  
sources for the Sufi understanding of  
love is the famous “hadith of voluntary  
works,” an authentic saying of the  
Prophet that puts the following words

into the mouth of God: “My servant  
never ceases approaching Me through  
voluntary works until I love him. Then,  
when I love him, I am the hearing  
through which he hears, the eyesight  
through which he sees, the hand through  
which he grasps, and the feet through  
which he walks.” The more the servant  
assumes the character traits of God, the  
more beautiful and God-like he becomes,  
and the more the distinction between  
lover and beloved fades away.

Ibn ‘Arabî, the greatest master of  
Sufism’s theoretical teachings, cites the  
hadith of voluntary works more often  
than any other saying of the Prophet.  
On occasion he stresses the fact that the  
verb “I am” (*kuntu*) in the saying means  
literally “I was.” In other words, God was  
the hearing and sight of the lovers before  
they ever came to know it. He also points  
out that this “was” has nothing to do with  
time, for temporality does not touch the  
Eternal. The Real is always and forever the  
lovers’ hearing and sight, their hands and  
feet and, says Ibn ‘Arabî, “Everyone in  
existence is a lover.” It is we who need to  
wake up to the fact of love, not God.

The Real is the Awake who never sleeps,  
the Living who never dies. We are asleep,  
and we wake up by dying to forgetfulness  
and heedlessness. This is one of the mean-  
ings of Ali’s famous maxim (often attrib-  
uted to the Prophet), “People are asleep,  
and when they die, they wake up.”

But to say that we wake up is not quite  
accurate. Rather, through the mystery of  
love, we somehow become aware that  
even now we sleep. Even now, the Real’s  
wakefulness is all that there is. There is  
no lover but the Real, there is no beloved  
but the Real, and there is nothing real but  
the Real. No one hears but the Real, no  
one sees but the Real, and no one is awake  
but the Real. ||