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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 observers.

The Koran considers unity a truth, voiced in every prophetic message: “We never sent a messenger but with the truth, except that We revealed to him: ‘Be not among the polytheists.’” (2:233) The verse goes on to say that such unity is implied in every prophetic message: “So say ye: ‘We have given you a law, and a spiritual practice, 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.

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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 **āyat** 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 treasuries 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, that there is nothing true, real, right, or just except and worthy but God. The more we stress this point, the more we affirm God's transcendence.

The Koran uses the word **baqq** 250 times, but only a few of these instances designate God per se. It uses the word to describe the attributes of the signs in various domains. It makes **baqq** an attribute of the Koran and other scriptures. It says that God creates everything in the heavens and the earth “only with the **baqq**.” In short, words, all revelation and all things in the universe accord with the truth, reality, righteousness, justice, and appropriateness. Everything is serving the purpose of God. As the Koran puts it, “I have nothing in the heavens and the earth that does not come to the All-Merciful 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 “serve Me” in the prophetic messages. Humans (along with the **jinna**, who include all those who have the option of rebelling against the Real, the Right, the True, and the Appropriate) (even if, from another point, this rebellion is itself a work of the Real’s love for his creatures). Human exceptionalism is observed plainly in the signs: “Have you no sense how to God prostrate themselves are in the heavens and all who in earth—the sun and the moon, the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and many of the people?” (41:30–31).

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-baqiq**. Translators usually render
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upon the concept of unbiased, non-
the immensity of the Real
his thinking of the transcendence and
impossible, to transform people into realistic
in short: the Kingdom and the division
depends on people's everyday experience.

Human exceptionalism is objective
on the reality, for the creation.

appropriate (can't from another standpoint)
the Real, the higher the tree, and the
the Reel's position is that a world apart
in the property of distinguishing, discerning
for the communication, sense of God,
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human dignity. however, there is to be a

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that does not come to the all-embracing
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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-Ghazâlî, 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’âluth, from the same root as Allah). In both cases, the goal of human existence is understanding, conformity with the Real, but for the Real alone is good, the Real alone is awake.

What then is awakening? It is to know the Real, the True, the Worthy, and the Worthy. It is to act appropriately and worthily by giving all that one has to God and by accepting responsibilities before God and creating the world. It is to affirm the unity of the Real with oneself, to know that the Real totally dominates all manifestation. It is to see the face of the Real who is the Real. It is to recognize in every aspect of our being that we are always and forever servants of the Real.

EVERYONE FAMILIAR WITH the teachings of Sufism knows that love frequently plays a central role in the process of awakening. About conformity with the Real, one of the qualities of lovers is to embrace their beloved, to draw near him, to embrace more lovers grow in love for God. The more they embrace him by associating him with attributes and character traits, the more difficult it is for them to find their way back to themselves from him.

The Sufi knows that he loves God, even when he loves others. He knows there is no beloved but God. God alone is the source of beauty, goodness, and every other lovable thing. Whateve else we may love, we can be nothing but his sign, hizrayn, and his self-disclosure. Worthy lovers know this; they recognize that we love only in response to love.

The Prophet said, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty.” To say that beauty means that no one is beautiful but 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 true that only the Real is awake.
The key, more than being love, is to recognize that our existence is understood to be a result of human experiences weighted according to the roles we play in the world. This includes understanding that our lives are shaped by the choices we make and the consequences of those choices. 

The key is to recognize that the real power of love is not in the feelings we experience, but in the actions we take. Love is not just a feeling, but a force that shapes our lives and the lives of those around us. 

In essence, the key is to recognize that love is a force for good in the world, driving us to make choices that benefit others and ourselves. It is through love that we can truly live a life of fulfillment and purpose.
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.

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 ‘Arabi, 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 ‘Arabi, “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 meanings of Ali’s famous maxim (often attributed 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.