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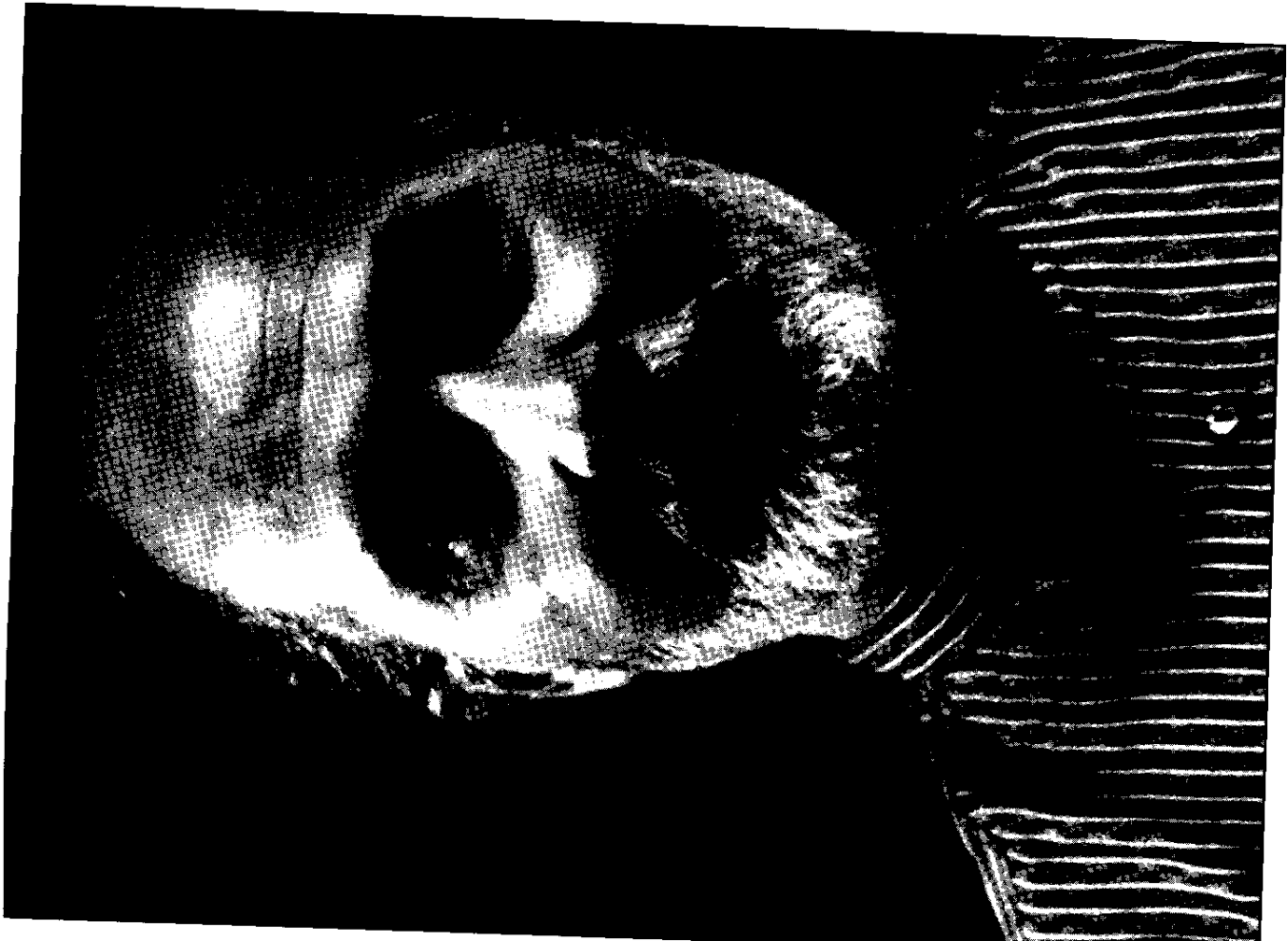
THE PHILOSOPHY OF
SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

EDITED BY

LEWIS EDWIN HAHN
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Since its founding in 1938 by Paul Arthur Schilpp, the Library of Living Philosophers has been devoted to critical analysis and discussion of some of the world's greatest living philosophers. The format for the series provides for setting up in each volume a dialogue between the critics and the great philosopher. The aim is not refutation or confrontation but rather fruitful joining of issues and improved understanding of the positions and issues involved. That is, the goal is not overcoming those who differ from us philosophically but interacting creatively with them.

The basic idea for the series, according to Professor Schilpp's general introduction to the earlier volumes, came from the late F. C. S. Schiller, who declared in his essay on "Must Philosophers Disagree?" (in *Must Philosophers Disagree?* London: Macmillan, 1934) that the greatest obstacle to fruitful discussion in philosophy is "the curious etiquette which apparently taboos the asking of questions about a philosopher's meaning while he is alive." The "interminable controversies which fill the histories of philosophy," in Schiller's opinion, "could have been ended at once by asking the living philosophers a few searching questions." And while he may have been overly optimistic about ending "interminable controversies" in this way, it seems clear that directing searching questions to great philosophers about what they really mean or how they think certain difficulties in their philosophies can be resolved while they are still alive can produce far greater clarity of understanding and more fruitful philosophizing than might otherwise be had.

And to Paul Arthur Schilpp's undying credit, he acted on this basic thought in launching the Library of Living Philosophers. It is planned that each volume in the Library of Living Philosophers include an intellectual autobiography by the principal philosopher or an authorized biography, a bibliography of that thinker's publications, a series of expository and critical essays written by leading exponents and opponents of the philosopher's thought, and the philosopher's replies to the interpretations and queries in these articles. The intellectual autobiographies usually shed a great deal of light on both how the philosophies of the great thinkers developed and the

William C. Chittick

THE ABSENT MEN IN ISLAMIC COSMOLOGY

Nearly thirty years ago, someone told me about a lecture that had recently been given by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. During the question and answer period, the great Orientalist Gustave von Grunebaum remarked that Nasr's talk presupposed a power structure. What was it? Nasr replied with a sparkle in his eyes, "The *rijāl al-ghayb*," and von Grunebaum along with those who caught the reference laughed. Like all good jokes, this one has an element of truth in it—mythic truth, no doubt—but it certainly helps explain the voice of authority that often surfaces in Nasr's writings, producing a variety of reactions in his readers.

The term *rijāl al-ghayb* means literally "the Men of the Absent," and in Sufi lore it refers to those human beings who live in the spiritual world and govern the visible world as God's representatives, thus fulfilling their cosmic and human functions. God created the universe, as the *ḥadīth* puts it, "in order to be known," and among all creatures, only human beings have the capacity to know God in his full amplitude and grandeur. In their historical actuality, human beings are indefinitely diverse, and their diversity pertains to every modality of their being and knowledge. It follows that some people are better at knowing God than others, just as some people are better at understanding mathematics than others. From the Sufi perspective, "knowing God" has relatively little to do with the rational sciences, and much to do with God's gifts to those whom he chooses as his friends (*walī* or "friend" being the term that is commonly translated into English as "saint"). The Prophet reported that God says, "My friends are under My cloak—no one knows them but I." These unknown friends of God are known as "the Men of the Absent," whether they be male or female (the Arabic word for "man" here has connotations not unlike those which allowed Latin *vir* or "man" to give rise to the word *virtue*).

According to some accounts, the Absent Men can be divided into two sorts. One sort, known as "the Men of Number" (*rijāl al-'adad*), fill a static, ever-present hierarchy, so their number never changes (some say it is 124,000, like the prophets from Adam down to Muhammad). Their chief is the "Pole," who is the most perfect human being of the time and the axis around whom the human world revolves. Outwardly, the Pole may be an ordinary and unremarkable person, but inwardly, as the texts put it, "He holds the reins of affairs in his hands." When the Pole dies, God replaces him with one of the two Imams, who had been the Pole's viziers, and he replaces the missing Imam with one of the four Pegs. Below the Pegs stand the seven Substitutes, below them the twelve Principals. Among the Men of Number, one manifests the perfections of the angel Seraphiel, three the perfections of Michael, five those of Gabriel, seven those of the prophet Abraham, forty those of Noah, and three hundred those of Adam. The ranks of the Men of Number are constantly replenished as people pass on to the next world. As for the second sort of Absent Men, their number is not fixed, and they play a variety of roles according to circumstances. Most of them fall under the authority of the Pole, but one group, known as "the Solitaries," stand outside his realm.

It is not clear how literally these reports are meant to be taken, but, however we understand them, they speak eloquently of a certain concept of human nature, and that concept underlies Seyyed Hossein Nasr's writings. It is a view that is usually ignored in modern studies of Islamic religious teachings, which tend to focus on superficial overviews of Islamic theology and brief descriptions of the duties and obligations imposed on believers by the *Sharī'ah*. Nonetheless, any investigation of the literature that informed the Islamic worldview, from the most technical philosophical and theological texts to the most popular poetry, will find that human beings are always given a unique role in the cosmos. Even texts on the *Sharī'ah* recognize it implicitly, because they set down duties and responsibilities that God has imposed on no other creature.

Nasr often speaks of the loss of the traditional Islamic worldview and the havoc wreaked on the Muslim mind by scientific theories about the universe. As he points out, and as is obvious to those conversant with the texts, we are dealing with two diametrically opposed ways of looking at reality, even if many contemporary Muslim intellectuals see no contradiction between belief in the Islamic God and belief in the objective status of scientific "facts." Throughout the Islamic world, two basic groups of Muslim intellectuals are found. One group, which is constantly becoming smaller, still lives more or less in the traditional worldview, while the other, ever on the increase, is led by the engineers, doctors, and other professionals trained on the Western model. These two groups do not speak the same language, and neither has

any real idea of what the other is saying. So utterly self-evident is the nature of the "world" to each group that they cannot imagine any other way of seeing it. The fact that they do not understand each other helps explain why contemporary mullās can preach about the necessity of studying modern science, employing the term *'ilm* or "knowledge" (which has always been recognized as the backbone of Islam), without recognizing that modern science has practically nothing in common with the traditional understanding of *'ilm* and that, in effect, they are encouraging the young to abandon their own intellectual heritage. Of course many if not most reflective Muslims are caught somewhere in between the traditional and modern perspectives, and this helps explain the "cultural schizophrenia" that Daryoush Shayeagan has written about and made manifest so eloquently.¹

In several of his works, Nasr has explained the main principles of the traditional Islamic worldview. I would like to reformulate certain aspects of this worldview—not in terms of his expressions, but in terms of my own understanding based on twenty-five years of studying Islamic texts. My purpose is not to claim that Nasr is right or wrong, but simply to reformulate, in a language as unencumbered by technical Islamic terminology as possible, the basic Islamic ideas on human nature as related to certain key notions in Nasr's writings, especially his evaluation of modern thought. I offer one person's opinion that Nasr's interpretation of the implications of the Islamic tradition for the contemporary world are firmly grounded in the classical texts, much more so than many of his critics want to acknowledge. The fact that he does not always cite Muslim authorities, but instead is likely to refer to authors such as Frithjof Schuon and Ananda Coomaraswamy, cannot be taken as evidence that his views do not have the Islamic support that he claims.

Nasr, of course, does not write only about Islamic teachings. Part of his relevance as a contemporary philosopher has to do with the fact that he claims a universal validity for a point of view which he and others (including Schuon and Coomaraswamy) usually call "traditional" and which observers have often called "traditionalist" or "perennialist." This perspective asserts that humanity, wherever it has been found, has recognized the reality of one unique Principle and received guidance from it on various levels. What makes human beings "human" is not the peculiar biological, social, and historical constraints placed on the species, but the fact that they have been given access to the Infinite, the Absolute. This access is *given* to them, which is to say that it comes to them from the other side, and they cannot reach it on their own; hence the necessity of prophets, avatars, buddhas, sages, shamans, and so on, and the necessity that the guidance be transmitted from generation to generation by "tradition." This is not to say that all claims to suprahuman guidance are true, or that all the forms that guidance takes

will lead to the same "place." Nor does this standpoint deny the important role played in the human world by misguidance and evil. Although Nasr does offer some general principles as to how truth is to be discerned from falsehood, by and large he leaves the issue of judging the correctness of specific teachings to the traditions within which they are offered. What is important for Nasr's own writings is the principle of the universality of the guidance that comes from the Absolute and the fact that it is always available to human beings.²

One of Nasr's subtexts is the relevance of Sufism to the contemporary situation and the catastrophic results that modern Muslims suffer by ignoring or rejecting Sufism. For a great variety of reasons, people in both the Islamic world and the West become suspicious at the mention of Sufism. In contemporary America, for example, it is often associated with gullibility, sentimentality, and New Ageism. In the Islamic world, Muslim modernists from the nineteenth century onward have taken Sufism as a kind of bugaboo that must be driven out if Islam is to enter the modern world. The more recent offshoot of modernism, "fundamentalism," has agreed with this assessment.³ However, relatively few Muslims have any idea of the historical role that Sufism has played, even though they all have strong opinions on the topic. A colleague who teaches at Harvard recounts with amusement that a young Egyptian studying at MIT took a course with him on al-Ghazzālī, who has universally been recognized as one of the greatest masters of the Islamic sciences and who is known especially for authoritatively establishing the central role of Sufism in Islam. At the end of the semester, the student submitted a paper beginning with the sentence, "Islamic *taṣawwuf* does not exist" (*taṣawwuf* being the Arabic term for "Sufism"). This opinion, despite its contradictions, is widely held among Muslims, and the historical record is considered of no account.⁴ Moreover, those who hold the opinion can draw support from the works of the early Orientalists, who saw Sufism as a clear example of borrowing from other religions (after all, they imply, the Sufis were loving, open-minded, and well-intentioned people, so they could hardly have been real Muslims).

Even specialists in fields like Religious Studies or Islamic Studies will sometimes remark, "Oh, but he's a Sufi," meaning, "You do not have to take him seriously, because he's a mystic," or, "You know, Sufism really has nothing to do with Islam, so don't pay attention to him." Yet for Nasr, and for the grand authorities like al-Ghazzālī who have spoken on behalf of Sufism throughout Islamic history, the diverse beliefs, practices, and institutions of Islam that are apparent to outside observers make up Islam's body, while Sufism is Islam's life-giving spirit. From this standpoint, Muslim modernists and fundamentalists, who violently reject the Sufi tradition, are trying to breathe a new sort of life into Islam's body, and this life can only be drawn from alien sources. The discussion here, of course, is

not about the history of the word *ṣūfī* (and its derivatives), since the term came into regular use only in the third/ninth century, but rather about what Nasr and many of the great authorities of the past have understood by it when they employ it.⁵

Although Nasr has written eloquently and persuasively about Sufism's centrality to the Islamic tradition, he cannot repeat these remarks in everything he writes, and even if he could, many observers reject this understanding of Sufism's role in Islam, so they feel no need to consider his position. I do not think that Nasr has helped his case by describing Sufism as "Islamic esotericism." In this he is presumably following Schuon (and to a lesser degree, Henry Corbin). Schuon has written voluminously employing the esoteric/exoteric dichotomy as a key conceptual tool for understanding religion. However, not more than a handful of English-speaking scholars have followed this practice, partly because few specialists have found it helpful in dealing with the actual texts.

One of the problems with the word *esoteric* is that, no matter how carefully terms may be defined, negative connotations cannot be eliminated. The word is suspect by its very aura, and little can be done about it. One of its many disadvantages is its high degree of abstraction, which results in a constricted semantic field that does not easily allow it to embrace the vast diversity of phenomena that have always been associated with Sufism. The restricted field becomes obvious if we compare the English word *esoteric* with the Arabic word *bāṭin*, of which it is sometimes said to be the translation. The two terms may indeed be employed in parallel ways on occasion, but *bāṭin* (which derives from the term *batn*, meaning "innards") has a concrete meaning and vast possibilities for metaphorical use. In other words, the basic meaning of *bāṭin* is "inner" or "inward," not "esoteric."⁶ If it is said that Sufism emphasizes the more "inward" teachings of Islam, few would object. The point is simply that Sufism's perspective contrasts with that of disciplines like *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *Kalām* (dogmatic theology), which emphasize the more outward and socially oriented teachings. The terms *inward* and *outward* are broad and inclusive enough so that everyone will understand an appropriate meaning without being drawn into irrelevant questions, such as the "elitism" that is typically associated with "esotericism." Both *esotericism* and *exotericism* introduce nuances and connotations that are not present in the Arabic terminology. It then makes perfect sense to criticize Nasr for being an "esoterist" or for supporting the views of contemporary esoterists—and people quite sympathetic to Sufism have done so (naturally, they ignore Nasr's nuanced definitions and appeal rather to the prevalent connotations of the word).

The cosmic role of human beings lies in the background of many of the criticisms that Nasr levels at the scientific worldview, criticisms that fly in

the face of popular opinion and raise the hackles of numerous scholars and thinkers, especially among Muslims. The notion of the "Men of the Absent" is one way of expressing some of the tradition's fundamental insights here, and the ideas lying behind it can help us understand why Nasr stands where he stands.

In the traditional, broad-based Islamic view of things, one cannot disengage anthropology from cosmology—though many contemporary Muslims, in their ignorance of Quranic teachings and their entrancement by modern thought, do so blithely. Of course, everyone recognizes that Islamic anthropology is rooted in theology, since Islam agrees with the Judeo-Christian tradition in holding that man was created in the divine image. But nowadays, the cosmic dimension of Islamic anthropology is much more difficult to understand and easy to ignore, not least because cosmology has long since been delivered over to physicists in the West. Moreover, most contemporary Muslim thinkers, in their eagerness to prove Islam's respectability in modern terms, have ignored or attacked all Islamic teachings on the universe and human beings that are difficult to reconcile with the rationalistic and scientific worldview of the contemporary world. Hence they have either gone straight back to the Quran, which, shorn from the commentarial tradition, is easy to interpret however one likes, or they have appealed to *Kalam*, which is the most rationalistic form of Islamic theology and the least concerned with the nature of God's ontological relationship with the universe. *Kalam* is polemical and voluntarist, devoted to nit-picking attacks on any form of thought that is deemed to threaten God's absolute legal authority. It asserts God's radical transcendence and argues vehemently for human responsibility before the divine law.

Most Muslims with a modern education see things in terms of the worldview that has informed the Western tradition since the beginning of the modern period. This worldview is rooted in what Nasr calls a "sensualist and empirical epistemology," and its net result has been the reification and objectification of the cosmos. The world and all its contents, including human beings in most of their roles, have been turned into isolated things standing in ontological, spiritual, and moral vacuums. Of course, the politicians and ideologues who rule the various countries of the Islamic world claim that they can adopt the science and technology without the moral vacuum. They blusteringly tell us that they will not suffer the social disorder of the West, because they will see to it that society observes God's commands as set down in the *Sharī'ah*—as interpreted by themselves, of course. Their first mistake is to suppose that the *Sharī'ah* can be imposed by modern states—with their historically unprecedented ability to indoctrinate and coerce—without turning society into another version of the monstrous totalitarianism that has too often characterized the twentieth century. The

Muslim leaders have offered no empirical evidence that this is possible, quite the contrary.

Even if we grant that the *Sharī'ah* can be applied by government fiat, without the individual religious conviction that has always given life to it in the traditional Islamic world, the legal constraints of the *Sharī'ah* pertain only to certain limited spheres of the human domain, and these spheres become more and more constricted under the dehumanizing effects of modern institutions. The pervasiveness of bureaucracy, technology, and the scientific worldview, and their steady encroachment on the human domain, mean that more and more of the world is reified and opened up to manipulation. Traditional moral constraints carry little weight in face of the institutions of modernity, especially at the time of crisis—and when has there not been a crisis?

In the West, ecologists of various stripes have recently attempted to show the short-sightedness of current conceptions of the world, usually in terms of an enlightened self-interest. Some have gone so far as to propose alternative cosmologies, but these are almost always "scientific" in that they take for granted the necessity for empirical verification and the nonexistence of any truly transcendent dimension to reality. The few who have recognized a need to recapture transcendence have, by and large, cobbled together diverse notions from science and various traditional worldviews with the hope that they can come up with a softened and sensitized scientific mind-set.

Nasr's critique of scientism and technology is rooted in the understanding that science, standing on its own, cannot conceive of what it means to be human. Many hard scientists, at least, are aware of these limitations, but not the popularizers of these sciences who have the greatest effect on how people perceive the world. As for the scientists and scholars who delve into biology, psychology, sociology, the humanities, and even theology, they seem much less convinced about the inadequacy of scientific findings, often because, without being aware of it, they take the universe of pop-science as reality and speak as if scientific theories provide us with undisputed "facts."⁷ As long as the truncated worldview of scientism remains the arbiter, no opening to the Infinite is possible, or, at best, people will devise an imitation that hardly lets them see beyond the horizons of popular culture.

There are many versions of Islamic cosmology, few of which have been studied in modern times.⁸ Common to all of them, and indeed to all Islamic thinking, is the idea of unity. Islam's fundamental axiom is that there is one supreme principle—an ultimately unnamable and unknowable principle—and that all things appear from it, whether through the divine command, or creation, or emanation, or various other modes that are

discussed in detail in different schools of thought. Once we recognize that this ultimate principle is there, it can be given various names, with the reservation that the names do not really help us to understand the named in itself. Nonetheless, naming the principle is a necessary stage in coming to understand its implications for human reality, and in the Islamic view of things, the only truly efficacious naming—efficacious in terms of the full reality of what it means to be human—comes from the principle itself.

Naming is efficacious by nature. When we name something, we situate it in a pre-existent view of reality that allows the name to have meaning. We deal with things in terms of the names that we give to them. If we name something a "chair," we sit on it, and if we name it "firewood," we burn it. The Islamic tradition—like other traditions—names the world and its diverse contents in ways that let people see the function and role of human beings, and this function and role is conceived of in terms of a divine compassion that has brought the universe into being in the first place.

The Quran tells us that "God taught Adam the names, all of them" (II:30). This verse epitomizes Islam's theology, anthropology, and cosmology. It alerts us to the three basic realities that must be taken into account if we are to understand the nature of things—God, human beings, and the cosmos, whose names God taught to human beings at their origin. It needs to be remembered here that in the Islamic view of things, Adam is not primarily the first sinner but rather the first prophet. He is the primordial recipient of divine guidance and the leader of all his children on the road to salvation. However, in order to deal with the cosmos appropriately and to reach the fullness of their own nature, Adam and his children need to understand the God-given names and act accordingly.

Human beings will always name things, because they are by definition "speaking animals" (*hayawān nātiq*). The Arabic expression is usually translated into English as "rational animals," in keeping with the way the ancient Greek expression entered the English language, but the Arabic *nātiq* or "speaking" preserves a nuance of the Greek that has been lost in English. Human rationality is articulate, uttered, spoken; and proper human speech is intelligent and rational. In the Islamic worldview, the full realization of this spoken, articulate rationality presupposes knowledge of the real names of things, and knowing the real names means knowing things in the context of God's knowledge of them, which only comes to us when He Himself names the things. If people do not name things in the context of God's naming, they will name them as they see fit. However, there is no possible way for them to know the real names of things without assistance from the divine Namer, because the real names are precisely those names that God himself bestows on the things before He creates them. In other words, God's activity is essential to the names, and any worldview that leaves out the

divine dimension will necessarily be dealing with inadequate names if not misnomers. The net result of misguided naming will be disaster for those who employ the names, if not for humanity as a whole—a "disaster" that is understood in terms of the whole human domain, not just the world this side of death.

One of the most fundamental differences between the Islamic cosmologies and modern scientific cosmology lies in the names of things. How do we name the ultimate and mysterious principles or realities that determine the configuration of the real world? What happens when the important names are "quasars," "quarks," "muons," "black holes," and "big bangs"? What is the spiritual fruit of naming the ultimate things with mathematical formulae? The basic characteristic of the mathematics that nowadays is deemed able to express with authority the nature of things is its abstraction, its abstruseness, its reconditeness—the fact that only a tiny elite are able to grasp its significance and explain it to the commoners. In the popular perception at least, the more the experts learn of the ultimate mysteries of the scientific universe, the more they find that it is impersonal, unintelligible (to the commoners), and arbitrary. The cosmos, the hard-nosed scientists tell us, is basically inhuman, and human beings are an oddity, a cosmic accident. Let a few romantics talk of "anthropic principles" or "Gaia hypotheses" if they wish, but these are simply the last gasps of the pre-rational urge to feel safe in an alien world, new versions of the old psychological props known as "gods" and "saviors."

Islamic cosmology begins with a transcendent, ultimate One, and then it names this One with a variety of names that are derived from the divine self-naming. None of these names is abstract or inhuman. In fact, the Islamic God is anthropomorphic, because the Islamic human is theomorphic. If God is understood in man's image, it is because man was created in God's image. Unless God is understood in human terms, an unbridgeable gap will remain between the ultimate and the here and now. *Re-igio* or "tying back" to God is impossible without images of God and imagining God. People need to take an active role in tying themselves back, and they can only do so in terms of themselves and their own understanding. They understand only what they are; if they do not display the traces of the divine in some way, they cannot tie themselves back to the divinity. People who live in such a traditional, anthropomorphic universe will necessarily deal with it in human terms. In contrast, those who live in an abstract universe will deal with things and living beings as abstractions. Those who live in a mechanistic universe will treat all beings as machines. Those who find the universe cold and uncaring will reciprocate.

It is of course true that *Kalām* and some forms of Islamic philosophy assert God's absolute transcendence and claim that the names of God should

not be understood in human terms. This perspective is necessary, since it helps preserve the primacy of God's reality and the understanding that things begin with God, not with us. In any case, Islamic anthropomorphism is not the crude sort that we know through various unsympathetic accounts of polytheistic worldviews. Rather, it is the recognition of the mercy, goodness, and wisdom that pervade reality, whether or not we are able to grasp how these qualities are present in any given circumstance.

Although the Quran's depiction of God is far from that of polytheistic myth (in the Hindu or Greek sense), it is certainly polynomial. The "ninety-nine" names of God, enacted and performed in the diverse modes of Muslim religious life, determine the Islamic mind-set far more than the abstractions of the *Kalām* experts or the rules and regulations of the legal scholars. Muslims, to the extent that they put their religion into practice and assimilate the teachings of the Quran, cannot fail to see God's wisdom in the "signs" (*āyāt*) that are the phenomena of the universe and the self, just as they see it in the "verses" (again *āyāt*) that make up the Quran and other scriptures. Muslim praxis is studded with the divine names. Every significant act begins with a formula that epitomizes more than any other the Muslim understanding of God and his relationship with his creation—"In the name of God, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate." God deals with the universe in terms of his own names, and his primary names assert his universal mercy and compassion. Every prayer, every supplication, every act of "remembrance" (*dhikr*) is highlighted by divine names. And every rational attempt to understand these names is propelled by the intuition that God lies infinitely beyond human conceptualization. God gives, and he takes away. He gives the names through his revelations, and he takes away our understanding of them through our attempts to understand them. The more we try to grasp their significance, the more they turn us back to the unknowability of God in Himself. These are the two movements of the divine and the human—descent and ascent, origin and return, revelation and concealment, disclosure and curtaining. They mark a creative dynamics in Islamic culture that has totally disappeared in the monolithic thinking of Muslim modernists and ideologues.

Muslims who practice the Prophet's *Sunnah* and live in the Quranic universe cannot help but think of the universe and themselves in terms of the revealed divine names. These are not strictly personal names, nor are they impersonal. God is Living, Knowing, Desiring, Powerful, Speaking, Hearing, Seeing, Creator, Life-giver, Death-giver, Forgiving, Pardoning, Avenging, Bestower, Withholder, and so on. The names of the ultimate reality establish the significance of what people encounter in the signs. The universe is imbued with purpose, and the individual instances of its purpose become clear when situations are understood in terms of the divine attributes

that become manifest through the names. Not that this is easy—how can we be sure if an instance of our pleasure displays God's mercy or his wrath, his compassion or his vengeance? We have no way of knowing the final outcome of affairs. How many things we delight in one day, only to regret the next. Even worldly successes or failures can be reversed in a moment, so what about acts and events that impinge on ultimate success and failure?

Traditional Muslims are confident, however, that things will work out for the best, no matter how badly they may go in any given situation. "In the name of God, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate" announces all the phenomena of the universe. The Quran says that God's mercy "embraces all things" (VII:156), and the Prophet emphasized the point with his famous saying, "God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath." This is an ontological and cosmic precedence, and it means that all is well in the divine scheme of things. It follows that, as the Prophet put it, "The believer is fine in every situation" (*al-mu'minu bi'l-khayr f'kulli ha'f*). Repeatedly the Quran commands the believers, "Trust in God," and the attitude of trust in God's mercy infuses the traditional worldview. Both the modernists and the "fundamentalists" ask Muslims instead to trust in military technology, utopian dreaming, and the latest demagogue. Then alone, they tell us, will Islam be put back in the driver's seat of history where it belongs. They never question the legitimacy of the impersonal view of reality that has allowed science and technology to dominate people's understanding of the world in the first place.

Although the One God in himself cannot be known, his manifestations cannot be avoided, so much so that it can be said that, from a certain point of view, nothing but the One can be known. However, knowledge of the One's infinitely diverse manifestations is infinitely diverse, though it can be put into general categories. Knowledge that clings to the data of sense perception (whether or not this is mediated through instruments) is limited to the surface, the outward, the superficial, the skin—all these terms understood as metaphors, not as literal, scientific designations. The One can only be truly known inasmuch as it names itself, and these divinely-taught names have everything to do with the genesis of the universe. A typical listing of the names that generate the cosmos begins with Living, Knowing, Desiring, and Powerful. Among these, Living is especially interesting. When the Sufi theoreticians explain the nature of the divine life, they are likely to employ the term *wijūd*, which is typically translated as "existence" or "being" and which was originally used in this meaning when Greek philosophical texts were translated into Arabic. However, the Islamic context allows for no wholly inanimate *wijūd*. "Existence" cannot be conceived of as dead matter. An implicit, and often explicit, side to the Islamic teachings

is that God's own life, awareness, and consciousness course through everything that exists, though these show themselves most clearly in what we call "living things"—plants, animals, and human beings.

The single, supreme Principle manifests itself through multiplicity, but this is an ordered and hierarchical multiplicity, one that begins with *twoness* and gradually differentiates itself into various cosmic levels. *Twoness* is an especially important notion in cosmological thinking, because it allows us to conceive of a world along with the supreme One. The duality that appears when we conceptualize the world next to God colors all the relationships between the One and the many and has repercussions throughout the cosmos. As the Quran puts it, "And of everything We created a pair" (LI:49).

For many cosmologists, the basic duality of God and the world gives rise to two complementary points of view. From one standpoint, God is utterly real and the world utterly unreal; from another standpoint, the world has a relative reality (when compared to pure nonexistence), and this reality can only derive from God. Inasmuch as we emphasize God's reality and the world's unreality, we conceive of God and the world in terms of unbreachable otherness. Inasmuch as we conceive of God as giving rise to the world through his activity and attributes, we conceive of God and the world in terms of unfathomable sameness. In other words, God is both transcendent and immanent (or, as I prefer to translate the Arabic terms, both "incomparable" with all things and "similar" to them). In terms of God's transcendence, the world is nothing. In terms of his immanence, it is something, because it displays the divine attributes and qualities that he bestows upon it. True life and consciousness belong to God alone, and everything else is strictly dead. But once we note the divine life in the cosmic signs, we see that everything is alive and aware to some degree.

The vertical duality that differentiates God from the world gives rise to the understanding of a horizontal duality in *divinis*—a duality sometimes referred to in Quranic terms as God's "two hands." Inasmuch as God is distant, transcendent, and incomparable, he is conceived of in terms of the so-called names of "majesty" and "severity"; inasmuch as He is near, immanent, and similar, he is conceived of in terms of the names of "beauty" and "gentleness." Ultimately, "God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath" because beauty and gentleness pertain to God's own fundamental reality, while majesty and severity pertain to God when conceived of in terms of distance from his creatures. But since creatures have no reality of their own through which to be distant from God, perforce they remain in nearness and sameness, despite the vagaries of time and the unfolding of the diverse possibilities for the manifestation of otherness.

From the point of view of Islamic cosmology, what is called "science" in the modern world is a reading of the universe that ignores all but the most

insignificant truths the universe has to offer. When the universe is named by names that apply primarily to dead things or to machines or to impersonal processes, we will understand it in terms of death and mechanism and impersonal process. We will necessarily miss the significance of the life, mercy, and awareness that suffuse every atom.

A Sufi axiom holds that "*Wujūd* descends with all its soldiers." *Wujūd* designates being, existence, finding, consciousness—it is God's "life" as found in himself and as reflected in all things in the universe. *Wujūd* leaves its traces in creation when it "descends," that is, when God creates the universe in a manner analogous to the way in which the sun gives rise to its own rays. In God, *wujūd* is pure, which is to say that God is simply pure *wujūd*, nothing else—pure being, sheer finding, undiluted consciousness, infinitely effulgent light. When God creates the universe, he does so by dimming the light in keeping with his infinite wisdom. Wherever anything finds and is found, this is nothing but refracted light. *Wujūd*'s soldiers are the divine attributes, the qualities by which *wujūd* in its purity is named. We come to know them when God names himself by them—the Living, the Knowing, the Powerful, the Compassionate, the Wise, and all the rest. Every name leaves its traces in everything in the universe, even if we fail to perceive the traces. The names are present in everything, because *wujūd* is present, failing which, the things would not be found.

Just as God is absent from all things because of his transcendence, absoluteness, and incomparability, so also he is present in all things because of his immanence, infinity, and similarity. Because of his reality in face of our unreality, he makes demands on us, and because of our relative reality, we have the power to respond to his demands. From one point of view, these demands are ontological and cannot be rejected, for we are his creatures, the rays of his light. But the relative fullness of God's presence in his own human image bestows upon people a certain mysterious freedom, and this results in moral and spiritual demands. They have no choice but to try to live up to the divine attributes found in themselves and the universe. There is no refuge from the divine demands, since the King and his soldiers are present in all things, in all "objects." There can be no moral vacuums, no hideouts for "pure objectivity" and "scientific disinterest," no ivory towers. Scientific "objectivity" and "disinterest" become at best ignorance, at worst moral failing and spiritual disaster.

If this view of things is inherent to Islamic cosmology, it may be asked, why was Islamic science the most advanced in the world for several centuries? The very formulation of this question raises several issues that need to be considered before any attempt is made to answer it (here Nasr's *Science and Civilization in Islam* can be consulted with profit). First, the great historians of Islamic science have believed implicitly if not explicitly in scientific progress, and they measure "advancement" in terms dictated by

this belief. The earlier historians in particular were interested in the Islamic texts (and in Western texts as well) because of the "scientific" elements in these texts, and they discarded everything that they considered theological, mystical, or superstitious—just as they discarded 90 percent of Newton's works so as to make him a father of modern science. Historians have continued to study Islamic science trying to discover why it did not follow the route that was followed by science in the West, as if modern science is by definition normative and has brought unquestioned benefit in its wake.

Second, even if we grant that some of these texts are "scientific" in a modern sense, their cultural context is every bit as important as their overt content. How did Ibn al-Haytham or al-Birūnī, for example, understand their own scientific works? Was their optics, mathematics, astronomy, and geology totally distinct from theology? And more importantly, how were their works read by their contemporaries? The work of the medieval Muslim "scientists" was understood in terms of the dominant worldview of the time.

Third, the modern Western tradition has ascribed the highest value to rational thinking, but rationalism has in fact played a more restricted role in Islamic history than historians suggest. Both modernist Muslims and Western scholars have highlighted the rational sciences in the Islamic past. The early Western scholars were busy tracing the origins of the types of thinking that they considered significant, and they were attempting to explain why rationalism did not follow the same enlightened path in Islam that it followed in the West. Causes for what they thought was aborted progress have usually been sought in the conflict between "free thinking" and "orthodoxy." On the Muslim side, the apologists have been eager to show that at the beginning, Muslims were enlightened, rational, good people, and that they were diverted from their glorious heights of scientific progress only by sinister and evil forces, if not by foreign invasions. It was not Islam, they tell us, but the un-Islamic intrusions, that led the Muslims to abandon scientific progress and devote themselves to obfuscation and darkness.

If we look at the Quran and the way it has been interpreted by the Islamic community as a whole—not just by its rationalistically oriented theologians and jurists—we see that it stresses both God's unity and his utter control of the universe. To speak of "control," however, is to use a scientific, rational term. We would do much better to speak of God's symbolic presence in all things through his signs, through the soldiers that follow *wujūd* in its descent. The net result of these two complementary ways of looking at God's relationship with the universe is that two different modes of knowledge became established among Muslim intellectuals. Knowledge through rational processes stressed God's distance and transcendence and became codified especially in *Kalām* and certain forms of philosophy, while knowledge through direct perception of God's presence in the things, or through the "symbolism" of the things, came to be codified in Sufism and

some philosophical currents. The former, rational approach seems almost "scientific," and hence it has been the focus of studies for most Western scholars and the Muslim modernists and fundamentalists. The latter, symbolist approach—branded "mystical," "irrational," and "superstitious," by the same people—came to be looked upon with contempt and was dismissed by the Muslims as "un-Islamic." If it is un-Islamic, it follows that the true Islamic cosmology can be recovered by ridding Islamic thought of the vestiges of Quranic language and pushing God as far as possible from the universe, so that there will be no need to pay heed to any of *wujūd*'s soldiers. Then it will be easy to justify the technological rape of the earth and the electronic impoverishment of the human soul—so long as lip service is paid to the Quran, the *Sunnah*, and the *Shari'ah*.

It was said earlier that names are efficacious by nature. Scientific names allow us to think of things "scientifically," which means that we can dismiss anything but quantifiable reality from our view. Islamic reality is not quantifiable, which is to say that real things possess the attributes of life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, hearing, seeing, and so on, and the degree to which they possess them has nothing to do with "quantity" and everything to do with "quality." Things possess these attributes through a subtle and immeasurable participation, and these attributes are divine, cosmic, and human. Thus the attributes that pertain to human beings also pertain to non-human things—including totally inanimate "objects"—because they pertain to God, the Creator of all things, "the Light of the heavens and the earth" (XXIV:35), who sends down his light on everything in a measure known only to himself. Once things have been named, we deal with them as their names allow. Cultural anthropology has illustrated the arbitrariness with which names can be given to things—especially if we take "rational" or scientific nomenclature as normative. But scientific nomenclature is itself arbitrary when viewed from the standpoint of any of the traditional cultural matrices, which bestow orientation on human beings by naming things in the context of grand master schemes of meaning.

What appears arbitrary to Islamic thinking is any system of naming that ignores the total nature of things and wrenches them from the qualitative contexts that allow us to see how they are connected with greater wholes and with the ultimately Real. God, after all, is the only reality that can be called "real" in a full sense. All other things, including the universe as a whole, take their reality from God's reality. People can, if they choose, close themselves off to reality, at least for a time—death marks the great awakening for everyone. As Sufi texts put it, then the apple will be split open and the worm will recognize the utter insignificance of what it had been calling the "real world."

The fundamental, governing insight of Islamic thinking, after the

assertion of the unity and ultimacy of the Real, is that the true nature of the world is inaccessible to human beings without help. Indeed, it is not difficult to see that it is precisely here that the great split occurred between the Western tradition and Islam (not to mention other traditional worldviews). Take, for example, Toby E. Huff's summary of the worldview and metaphysics of modern science:

We must keep in mind that the modern scientific worldview is a unique metaphysical structure. This means that the modern scientific worldview rests on certain assumptions about the regularity and lawfulness of the natural world and the presumption that man is capable of grasping this underlying structure. . . . [M]odern science is a metaphysical system that asserts that man, unaided by spiritual agencies or divine guidance, is single-handedly capable of understanding and grasping the laws that govern man and the universe. The evolution of this worldview has long been in process, and . . . we in the West simply take it for granted. . . . The rise of modern science was not just the triumph of technical reasoning but an intellectual struggle over the constitution of the legitimating directive structures of the West.⁴

The breakthrough to modern science occurred when people learned how to name things on their own, but this constrained the efficacy of the naming. Having assumed full responsibility for naming things, people remain blind and deaf to the Real and can never see beyond their own horizons.

In Islamic terms, the fact that God names himself is the key to the extraordinary efficacy of the revealed names—their ability to chart a happy course through all the worlds that follow upon death. God's primordial act of naming took place when he taught the names to Adam, and he has kept these names alive by sending the 124,000 prophets down to Muhammad. It is as if, by naming the cosmos, he bestowed sight on the blind. As al-Ghazzālī puts it, the Quran in relation to intelligence is like the sun in relation to the eye. By naming the cosmic order, God allows people to see its significance in the whole of reality. By naming the human order, he allows people to see their proper role in society and nature. By naming human attributes, he allows people to grasp the difference between a sick and a healthy soul. By naming right and wrong actions, he allows morality and ethics to have an efficacy that transcends limited human views of the world and society. The overarching order in all these domains can never be grasped by strictly human means, because the overarching order is God himself, the ultimately unnamable and unknowable. Until he names himself, human beings live in the darkness of misnomers.

From the standpoint of the Islamic cosmologies in general and the Sufi cosmologies in particular, the peculiar course of modern history is driven by the systematic application of inadequate names. No one will doubt that such

names have an efficacy all their own. The enormous power of modern technology and the unprecedented coerciveness of modern institutions became possible only when the human, anthropomorphic names were relegated to the domain of superstition and, at the same time, the "real names" were found through quantification and scientific analysis. Quantification makes sense in the context of mechanism, and conceiving of reality as a machine allows for manipulation without any restraints but the mechanical. When things are looked upon as mere objects, reality is perceived as objective and impersonal, and this demands that we treat things with objectivity and disinterest. If the immediate is impersonal, so also must be the ultimate. In contrast, anthropomorphizing—especially as carried out by those who see themselves as theomorphic—diverts people from contemporary "reality" and prevents them from becoming docile production-line workers and hard-nosed doctors, engineers, and CEOs, hence the real danger of "Sufism" for the Muslim modernists and fundamentalists.

Once I heard Nasr say in a lecture—no doubt with a touch of Oriental hyperbole—that as soon as a Muslim boy learns in school that water is in fact H₂O, he stops saying his daily prayers. I offer my own commentary:

The traditional view of the cosmos presses upon people the interrelatedness of the divine, cosmic, and human orders. The daily prayers that God commands people to perform are nothing but the natural activities of all God's creatures. As the Quran puts it, "Have you not seen that everything in the heavens and the earth glorifies God, and the birds spreading their wings? Each knows its daily prayer and its glorification" (XXIV:41). In the traditional Islamic worldview, "water" is not a substance to be quantified but a quality to be appreciated at every level of created reality. "God's throne is upon the water" (XI:7); "Of water We made every living thing" (XXI:30). Water is one of the four elements, which is to say that it is one of the four qualities or characteristics that allow us to speak of diverse tendencies in the visible universe. All visible things are made of these four elements, but the elements combine in differing proportions, thus helping to determine each thing's aggregate of attributes. Earth keeps things stable and low. Water allows for movement, flow, and the penetration of light. Air is permeable, subtle, naturally clear. Fire is inherently luminous, changeable, and ascending. Such notions are standard fare in texts on cosmology and permeate the thinking of traditional Muslims. People know intuitively the qualities associated with the four elements, with foods, with innumerable natural phenomena. Scientific thinking condemns such knowledge to superstition, or at best, condescends to recognize a certain poetic sensibility.

When science is taught in the West, it is typically taught by believers in a scientific orthodoxy who never question the objective truth of their beliefs. But in the Islamic countries, where the traditional worldview still shows signs of life, science is taught by converts, and they are much more fervent

than born believers in their denunciation of superstition and the old ways. Since the worldview of their fathers still persists, they consider it their moral duty to convert the young to the one and only truth.¹⁰ The Islamist rhetoric that may nowadays accompany their teaching is designed to wrench the still remaining Islamic teachings from the traditional context and politicize the students in keeping with the current ideologies. Such rhetoric simply hastens the reification of the cosmos by diverting Islamic sensibilities into an alien but very modern sphere.¹¹ The *muḥā* regimes have changed nothing here. They are just as enamored of the scientific worldview as anyone else, and in any case, the school teachers are the same. They have simply learned to toe the party line, which now means spouting religious pieties, whereas before it had meant reciting political slogans. The official, government worldview, though labeled "Islamic," is now totally politicized, and it owes its genealogy to the same ancestors that gave us Marxism and its descendants, well known on the contemporary academic scene.

In short, the Muslim boy who learns that water is H₂O is learning that the qualities his grandmother sees in things and the names she applies to them are primitive and superstitious, and he jettisons her understanding along with all its accouterments, including her daily prayers. If, nowadays, Muslim boys have started to pray again, as likely as not they are acknowledging their allegiance to the Islamist party, or protecting themselves against the dangers of not acknowledging such allegiance.

The notion of "the Men of the Absent" is a particularly potent way of presenting several Islamic notions in a coherent myth and showing the inseparability of anthropology and cosmology. The basic notions include unity, bilateralism or complementarity, hierarchy, and human theomorphism.

As already noted, the Islamic idea of unity recognizes two modalities. The first stresses the divine transcendence and absoluteness and rejects the idea that anything other than God can be one in any real sense; God is uniquely and utterly one and real, and all else partakes of inherent multiplicity and unreality. The other modality stresses the divine immanence and infinity and asserts that nothing can escape the umbrella of God's oneness, so all things, through their very multiplicity, display various aspects of the uniquely One. The simultaneous oneness of the Real and manyness of its creations or manifestations are prefigured *in divinis* by the divine names, each of which designates the One along with a specific quality of the One, different from every other quality.

By speaking of the Men of the Absent, Muslims assert God's transcendence and uniqueness by putting God at the pinnacle, beyond the universe, and they assert his immanence and polynomiality by conceiving of the basic structure of the universe in terms of human functions, each of which

manifests various divine attributes. Within the created order, God's unity is reflected in the fact that the Pole is always one, while the hierarchy of God's names is reflected in the fact that the Men of Number are ranked in degrees below the Pole. The mathematical progression of the Men—such as 1, 2, 4, 7, 12, and so on—reflects the modes in which the divine Principle unfolds its potentialities through a hierarchy of created realities. Cosmically, these numbers can be found in natural phenomena throughout the universe; here we have a traditional mathematical scheme, but one that is hardly abstract, since anyone can grasp it immediately by reflecting on the world. The number one appears in the unity of each individual thing; two in day and night, heaven and earth, light and darkness; four in the elements, the seasons, the directions, the humors; seven in the heavens and the planets; twelve in the zodiac.

Some authors explain the Absent Men by illustrating the interrelationship of all things in terms of the divine names. Thus, for example, the Pole manifests the name God, because the Pole is the fully actualized image of God, comprehending and embodying all the divine attributes without exception. The two Imams manifest the names King and Lord—that is, God as ruler and controller of the universe (the Absolute) and God as nurturer and protector of each thing in the universe (the Infinite). The four Pegs display the traces of the names Living, Knowing, Desiring, and Powerful (often called the "four pillars" of the divinity). The seven Substitutes reveal the properties of the names Living, Knowing, Loving, Powerful, Grateful, Hearing, and Seeing.

The bilateralism of transcendence and immanence is implicit in the term *Men of the Absent* because "absent" (*ghayb*) is the conceptual counterpart of "witnessed" (*shahādah*). Sometimes the two terms together are translated as "unseen and visible," as in the Quranic Name of God, "the Knower of the unseen and the visible." Islamic cosmology typically sees the universe in terms of two great primary worlds, the absent or invisible world and the witnessed or visible world. The witnessed world is what we see or can see in principle, and the absent world is what we cannot see. Our seeing or not seeing is not an accidental quality, but rather, essential to the two domains. In other words, the absent world is inaccessible to our senses by its very nature, not simply because we do not have the appropriate circumstances or adequate instruments. It pertains to a suprasensory domain that the senses will never grasp, though intelligence (or "intellect" as Nasr would say) does have access to it, because intelligence is that dimension of human reality that partakes of God's absoluteness and transcendence.

In short, the witnessed world is the body of the cosmos, and the absent world is its spirit. Like all bodily things, the witnessed world is indefinitely divisible, and its predominant characteristics are multiplicity, darkness,

grossness, opacity, fragility, evanescence, change. In contrast, the absent world partakes of unity, light, subtlety, transparency, strength, permanence, fixity. But these specific attributes are applied to the two worlds when they are envisaged in relatively impersonal terms. In fact, the absent domain partakes of all the personal, divine attributes in a relatively direct and active mode. Hence it is living, knowing, desiring, powerful, speaking, hearing, seeing, compassionate, forgiving, vengeful. These attributes can hardly be found in the witnessed world itself, though their traces do appear. We notice such attributes through deducing the absent attributes that motivate witnessed activities. Some acts suggest generosity, some vengefulness, some compassion. The fact that these attributes stem from an absent domain is acknowledged by traditional expressions such as "soul" and "spirit." The full actualization of these attributes can only be sought in the absent realm, which helps explain the special characteristics of angels, who are among that realm's inhabitants.

The many and diverse Sufi expositions of the nature of the universe are much more explicit than those of the philosophers and theologians concerning the utterly central role of human beings for cosmic reality itself. Modern sensibilities dismiss this "anthropocosmism" (to use Tu Wei-ming's term) for many reasons, not least because it seems to ignore the vast reaches of the universe brought to light by modern scientific techniques. But the Sufis were well aware that our specific world has no great significance in the overall scheme of things and that the universe is unlimited in time or space, except inasmuch as its createdness differentiates it from the Uncreated, which is "infinite" in the strict sense. One can easily imagine them shrugging their shoulders at the "revelation" that there are billions of galaxies and replying:

All that is of no account in relation to the human role in the world that we do know or may know through our own direct and personal experience. Our texts often speak of 18,000 worlds, and what is meant is everything created by God, just as the Chinese speak of the 10,000 things and mean "everything in the universe." Everyone knows that there are other worlds, and that God fills his worlds with his creatures, because nothing can hold back his infinite creative activity. There are certainly living things in other worlds, and no doubt human beings as well, or beings that play the same role there that human beings play here. But what does this have to do with our own function in the world that we face directly every day of our lives? Our world depends on us. It is we and no one else who can turn it into a realm of harmony or a cosmic waste. We alone have been given the responsibility to maintain it. Moreover, compared to the World of the Absent, the whole visible universe—this vast world of cosmic dust and galaxies that you might see if you had the right instruments—is, as the Prophet put it, but a ring lost in the desert. Human beings have been given responsibility not only for their own witnessed realm, but also for diverse

domains of the Absent World. When they treat the witnessed world as if it were the whole universe and ignore the demands of the Absent World, humans waste their precious talents and ignore their own human nature.

The relationship between the two worlds is analogous to the relationship between God and the universe. This means that, on a cosmic scale, the Absent World is infinitely more vast, powerful, active, intelligent, conscious, and compassionate than the witnessed world, even though the two worlds together are as nothing compared to God. Human beings possess the peculiar characteristic of being made in the image of God, and so they are also images of his whole creation, which is the sum total of the absent and witnessed worlds. Human reality pertains fundamentally to the absent realm, not to the witnessed realm, because people reflect the universe as it is, and absent reality is much more real and significant than witnessed reality. We recognize this even today to the extent that we find human significance in qualities such as love and compassion—qualities not found in the witnessed world, but perceived as essential characteristics of the divine and the human, wherever the interrelationship of these two is acknowledged. To say that the absent world is more real than the witnessed world is to acknowledge that qualities such as intelligence, love, forgiveness, generosity, discernment, justice, and pardon pertain to what is truly real, and that the more intensely these qualities are found, the more intensely reality is present. In no way are these qualities "epiphenomena" of the human order or any other order. To look at the universe in that way is to invert the normal, normative, human, and divine order of things; it is to take the highest as the lowest, and the lowest as the highest.

Because human beings are made in the divine image, they have the potential to manifest all the divine names in diverse degrees of intensity. They differ radically from all other creatures because they possess a synthetic and all-comprehensive nature, which allows them to manifest the most fundamental divine qualities in a fullness that is inconceivable in any other mode of being, absent or witnessed. Compassion, love, justice, and forgiveness are human qualities, and they are not found anywhere else in the universe as we know it, except in dim and metaphorical modes. It follows that human beings are the most real beings in the universe that we know. What modern scientism would call "objective reality" is as impermanent, evanescent, and insignificant as a cloud—as many physicists have been telling us. The only permanent realities, the only things that are truly real, are the divine attributes, and these become manifest to significant degrees only in the absent domain. What appear as "epiphenomena" to the proponents of scientism are the face of reality itself, hidden behind the veil of phenomena, and what appears to be real is in fact a fading illusion.

Where is the "real world?" Only in the absent domain, and it is fully actualized only in the absent domain of human beings. Even angels, though they dwell in the absent domain, are peripheral beings, which explains why God commanded them to prostrate themselves before Adam after he had taught him the names (II:34). Human beings alone can name reality in its fullness, because their innermost nature has access to every name God has taught. When they name reality as it names itself, they necessarily name the absent domains as the primary and most significant domains. This explains why those among them who have traditionally been recognized as the wisest and most humane have consistently affirmed the overriding reality of the absent—of all the hidden, divine attributes that need to be made manifest in terms of witnessed, social reality, through morality, ethics, and law.

The Absent Men do not live primarily in the visible world. They live with God, who manifests himself most directly through the divine qualities in the absent domain. Just as human beings play a central role in the witnessed realm because of the self-awareness that allows them to rule over the world by taking an active role vis-à-vis the relative passivity of all other creatures, so also they play a central role in the absent realm, since the great ones among them rule over the world of consciousness and awareness. The grand difference between the two types of rulership is that in the witnessed realm, rulership too often follows the whims of individuals and the vagaries of human institutions, while in the absent realm, the human rulers follow the divine King in perfect harmony. Those who deny or reject the authority of God's self-naming, or those who misinterpret it for their own aims, may attempt to govern the witnessed world according to their own misnomers. But those who name all things through the God-given names deal with them exactly as God himself is dealing with them through his continual recreation of the universe. True control belongs to God alone, no matter who appears to be in charge.

In this scheme of things, problems arise only from human beings, from their misunderstanding or misapplication of the divine names (Satan also plays a role, but not without the intermediary of human beings). But the Muslim view allows for no despair, because it recognizes that God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath, and that, in the last analysis, he holds the universe in mercy's hand. Those who fail to follow his instructions by submitting to him voluntarily, but who instead, like Satan, embark on their own courses, fit nonetheless into the divine scheme of things, and in the end, God's wisdom will be perceived even in the worst of men and the worst of evils. Everything will be well, but not according to our lights—unless, of course, our lights have submitted absolutely to the divine Light.

It is the recognition of this underlying mercy, I think, that allows Nasr always to put the best spin on things. For those who know him personally,

Nasr has always appeared as someone who sees the good side of reality, so much so that—contrary to what one might expect from some of his writings—he appears as an eternal optimist. Certainly, he never suggests that people should lose hope or cease trusting in God's wisdom and compassion. At the same time, he asks people to take advantage of the best in themselves to rethink their relationship with God and the world. On this note, I will let Nasr have the last word, as he offers in one of his most recent books the Absent Men's answer to the way out of the impasse that modern humanity has constructed for itself:

What is needed is a rediscovery of nature as sacred reality and the rebirth of man as the guardian of the sacred, which implies the death of the image of man and nature that has given birth to modernism and its subsequent developments. It does not mean the "invention of a new man" as some have claimed, but rather the resurfacing of the true man, the pontifical man whose reality we still bear within ourselves. Nor does it mean the invention of a sacred view of nature, as if man could ever invent the sacred, but rather the reformulation of the traditional cosmologies and views of nature held by various religions throughout history. It means most of all taking seriously the religious understanding of the order of nature as knowledge corresponding to a vital aspect of cosmic reality and not only subjective conjectures or historical constructs. There must be a radical restructuring of the intellectual landscape to enable us to take this type of knowledge of nature seriously, which means to accept the findings of modern science only within the confines of the limitations that its philosophical suppositions, epistemologies, and historical development have imposed upon it, while rejecting completely its totalitarian claims as *the* science of the natural order. It means to rediscover a science of nature that deals with the *existence* of natural objects in their relation to Beings, with their subtle as well as gross aspects, with their interrelatedness to the rest of the cosmos and to us, with their symbolic significance and with their nexus to higher levels of existence leading to the Divine Origin of all things.¹²

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NOTES

1. See his *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, translated by John Howe (London: Saqi Books, 1992).

2. Although it may not be obvious to those unfamiliar with the traditional understanding of the Quran, this principle is supported by numerous verses and is implicit in the double testimony of Islamic faith—"There is no god but God and Muḥammad is His Messenger." See S. Murata and W. C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1994), pp. 164-75.
3. In several works, Nasr provides a useful classification of contemporary Muslims into three categories—the modernists (who wish to make whatever changes necessary to "bring Islam into the modern world"), the "fundamentalists" (who differ from the modernists mainly in their Islamist rhetoric and political activism), and the traditional Muslims (who would like to remain faithful to both the spirit and the letter of the living tree of Islam). See, for example, the prologue to his *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*.
4. Westerners should keep in mind that most Muslims, especially in the West and despite the rhetoric to the contrary, know practically nothing of their own tradition, even if they can recite long sections of the Quran in Arabic. They take as their Gospel what they have learned in their family or local environment. They are not much different from those fervent believers in the American context who speak of their own sect as "Christianity," consider Catholics on a par with Hindus, and have never heard of Orthodoxy.
5. On Sufism's role in Islam, see Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972; republished as *Living Sufism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); see also Murata and Chittick, *Vision*; Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).
6. If one claims that "esoteric" is equivalent to the Arabic *bāṭini*, this is much worse, because this Arabic term is employed for heretical sectarians who reject the Shari'ah, and hence it carries negative connotations perhaps even stronger than the word *esoteric* in English.
7. At least belief in evolutionism is beginning to crumble, despite the fact that the vast majority of contemporary scholars take it for granted. There have been scientific and philosophical critiques all along, but these have largely been ignored. David Berlinski's recent article, "The Deniable Darwin" (*Commentary*, June 1996), along with the heated debate it produced (*Commentary*, September 1996), is now being cited by some observers as the beginning of the end for this pillar of scientific belief.
8. Nasr provides the historical context and basic teachings for three of these schools in his *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964). Sachiko Murata deals with cosmological schemes in the Quran and a variety of Muslim authors in her *Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992). The most detailed study of any Islamic cosmologist in a Western language is found in Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).
9. Toby E. Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China, and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 65.

10. This sort of fervor is not so obvious in the West, except in cases like the debates between "creationists" and "evolutionists," where the latter exhibit all the indignation of Puritan preachers—if the former do so as well, that is hardly remarkable.

11. If anything has characterized the traditional Islamic worldview, it is its apoliticism (when politics is conceived of in modern terms), despite all the false implications that are drawn from the highly questionable assertion that Islam has never distinguished between religion and politics. In *The Rise of Early Modern Science*, Huff provides an interesting analysis of the social and political institutions of the premodern Western world that allowed for the rise of science and technology and suggests, quite rightly, that the lack of such institutions in the Islamic world helps explain why science in the Islamic world did not follow the same route that it followed in the West. However, he implies that thereby Islam lost something of great worth, whereas it can easily be argued that thereby Islam was able to preserve its own integrity much longer than it otherwise might have.

12. Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 287.