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Status: In Process

Original Call Number: Bibliothèque de l'université Sudbury / University of Sudbury Library Periodicals -
pÂ@riodiques SUDBURY Periodical SUDBURY

Responder Call Number:

Title: Parabola

Author:

Publisher:

ISBN/ISSN: 0362-1596

Date (Monograph):

Edition:

Volume/Issue: 8.3

Pages: 18-25

Date (Serial): 1983

Article Title: The Words of the All-Merciful

Article Author: William Chittick

DETAILS

Requesting Library: Library, Carleton University

Supplying Library: Laurentian Bibliothèque J.N.
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Patron Category: OOCEF

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Media Type: Printed Journal

Max Cost: 0

Expiration Date: 25-JUN-2014

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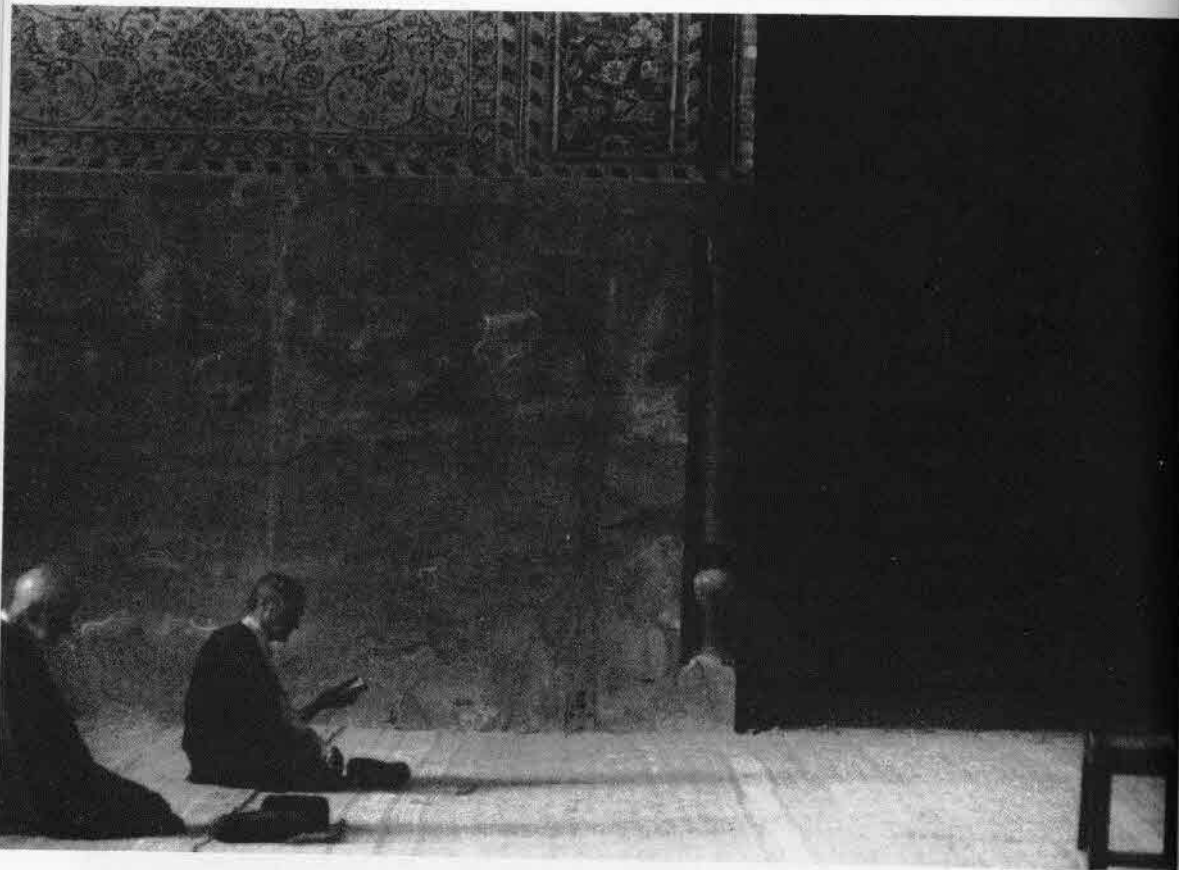
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The Words of the All-Merciful

WILLIAM CHITTICK

Photographs by Simon Goldschmidt



The Koran is the Word just as Christ is the Word. The images of the Koran are the pen and the tablet, letters, words, and verses of the Holy Book. The Prophet set the tone:

Read: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created man of a blank tablet.

Read: And thy Lord is the Most Gracious, who taught by the pen what he knew not.¹

Imagery connected with the word and the book suffuses Islamic culture and colors the everyday life of Islamic society. Ritual centers on the recitation of the Koran, architecture is designed to meet the needs of listeners and readers, and is adorned with written verse, calligraphy, and art regarded as the supreme art form. The preeminently Koranic recitation of the Koran literature, especially poetry, is valued by literate and illiterate alike for its resonance with the resonance of the word.

All the words of the Koran are His words, but the most fundamental are His Names. Islamic theology, both scholastic and mystical, is based on a commentary upon the Names of God, which reveal His nature to His creatures. The Books were revealed and the universe created, was His Word. Alluded to in the Old Testament as "I AM THAT I AM," it is rendered in the Koran as "Verily I am Allah, there is no god but I."² Allah is the Arabic word for "All-Comprehensive" or "All-Encompassing." It refers to God's very Self, the names mentioned in the Koran, and the Hadith (prophetic sayings) subordinate to it. It is Allah who is the Hearing, the Wise, the Very Powerful, the Forgiving, the

Merciful

The Koran is the Word made Book, just as Christ is the Word made flesh. The images of the Koranic revelation are the pen and the tablet, ink, paper, letters, words, and verses. The first verses of the Holy Book revealed to the Prophet set the tone:

Read: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created man of a blood-clot.

Read: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the pen, taught man what he knew not.¹

Imagery connected with the word and the book suffuses Islamic thought and colors the everyday life of Islamic society. Ritual centers on the recitation of the Koran, architecture is shaped by the needs of listeners and decorated with written verse, calligraphy is regarded as the supreme art, music is preeminently Koranic recitation, and literature, especially poetry—known by literate and illiterate alike—rings with the resonance of the Scripture.

All the words of the Koran are God's words, but the most fundamental are His Names. Islamic theology, both scholastic and mystical, is a great commentary upon the Names of God, which reveal His nature to mankind. God's primary utterance, whereby His Books were revealed and man and the universe created, was His own Name. Alluded to in the Old Testament as "I AM THAT I AM," it is rendered in the Koran as "Verily I am Allah: There is no god but I."² Allah is the "Supreme" or "All-Comprehensive" Name, since it refers to God's very Self. The other names mentioned in the Koran and in the Hadith (prophetic sayings) are subordinate to it. It is Allah who is the Hearing, the Wise, the Vengeful, the Powerful, the Forgiving, the Life-

Giver, the Exalter: "The Most Beautiful Names [i.e., the "Ninety-Nine Names of God"] belong to Allah, so call Him by them" (Koran).³ According to the Sufis, these very Names demand and bring about the existence of the cosmos. For what meaning has the Name "Creator" without creatures, "Light" without illuminating rays, "Forgiver" without sinners, "Life-Giver" without death?

In one of his sayings, the Prophet alludes to the "Breath of the All-Merciful"; and in the Koran God says, "My Mercy embraces all things."⁴ As the All-Merciful, God exhales His Breath, and the universe is born. The Breath is also referred to as the "Cloud" (*al-'amā*) that envelops the Divine Essence. When the Prophet was asked, "Where was God before He created the creatures?" he replied, "In a Cloud, neither above which nor below which was any space." Thus the famous Sufi Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240) writes that "in its state of existence the cosmos consists of the forms assumed by the Cloud . . . So the Cloud, which is none other than the Breath of the All-Merciful, is the substance, while the world and all the forms manifest within it are the accidents."⁵

But the Breath or Cloud is not a simple exhalation; it is the articulated speech of God. "Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it 'Be!' and it is."⁶ Elsewhere, in place of "Our only word," the Koran has "His only command."⁷ These terms are joined in the verse, "Our Command is but One Word, like the twinkling of an eye."⁸ Through the Command the One Word issues from its Source like a ray of light, refracting itself into the ontological words that

are the creatures. Thus Ibn al-ʿArabī writes, “The Cloud derives from His exhalation, while the forms that take shape within it, which are called the ‘cosmos,’ derive from the word ‘Be!’ So we are His words that are never exhausted.”⁹ Here he alludes to the Koranic verse, “Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea were ink—seven seas after it to replenish it—yet would the words of God not be exhausted.”¹⁰

The Koran repeatedly refers to God’s “signs” (*āyāt*), which are the creatures on the one hand and the verses of the revealed Book on the other:

Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the alternation of night and day are signs for men possessed of mind.

It is He who made the sun a radiance and the moon a light God created that not save with the Truth; He deploys the signs for a people who know.

A book We have sent down to thee, Blessed, that men possessed of minds may ponder its signs and so remember.¹¹

These signs, whether revealed in the cosmos or the Book, are the theophanies of God’s Names and Attributes:

Know that the creatures are pure and limpid water,
 shining within them the Attributes of Almighty God.
 Their knowledge, their justice, their kindness
 are stars of heaven reflected in flowing water.
 Kings manifest God’s Kingness,
 the learned display His Knowledge.
 Generations have passed, and we are a new generation—
 the moon is the same, but the water has undergone change
 All pictured forms are reflections in the river’s water—
 when you rub your eyes, you see that all are He!

—Rūmī, *Mathnawī*¹²

Because all creatures are signs displaying God’s Names and manifesting His creative Word, all are constantly speaking: “There is nothing that does not proclaim His glory, but you do not understand their glorification” (Koran).¹³ Ibn al-ʿArabī comments: “There is no form in the world—and the world is nothing but forms—that is not glorifying its Creator with a special praise with which He has inspired it” (*al-Futūḥāt*, II). Rūmī writes:

The speech of water, the speech of earth,
 the speech of clay—
 The Possessors of the Heart perceive
 each one with their outward senses.

—*Mathnawī*¹⁴

Man plays a unique role among the world’s creatures since he was created to be vicegerent (*khalīfah*) to Allah.¹⁵ According to the Prophet, man was created “upon Allah’s Form”; he manifests the All-Comprehensive Name and thus reflects all other Names as well. This is one meaning of the Koranic declaration that God “taught Adam all the Names.”¹⁶ Another meaning is that Adam was taught the names of all created things, which are the signs and “effects” (*athār*) of the Names.

Certain hadiths add that Adam was taught not only the names but also “100,000” languages. Here there is an allusion to the all-comprehensiveness—at least potentially—of human knowledge. In a similar vein, the expression “man is a rational animal” was translated into Arabic as “man is a speaking animal,” since it is speech—his knowledge of the names—that sets man apart from all other animate things.

Man, then, is the integral and summary reflection of the Divine Name—or Divine Word—Allah. Opposed to him stands the cosmos (*al-ʿālam*), which also reflects the Word, but de-



cause all creatures are signs displaying God's Names and manifesting the Creative Word, all are constantly glorifying: "There is nothing that does not proclaim His glory, but you do not understand their glorification" (Ibn al-'Arabī comments: "There is no form in the world—and the world is nothing but forms—that glorify its Creator with a praise with which He has initiated" (*al-Futūḥāt*, II). Rūmī writes:

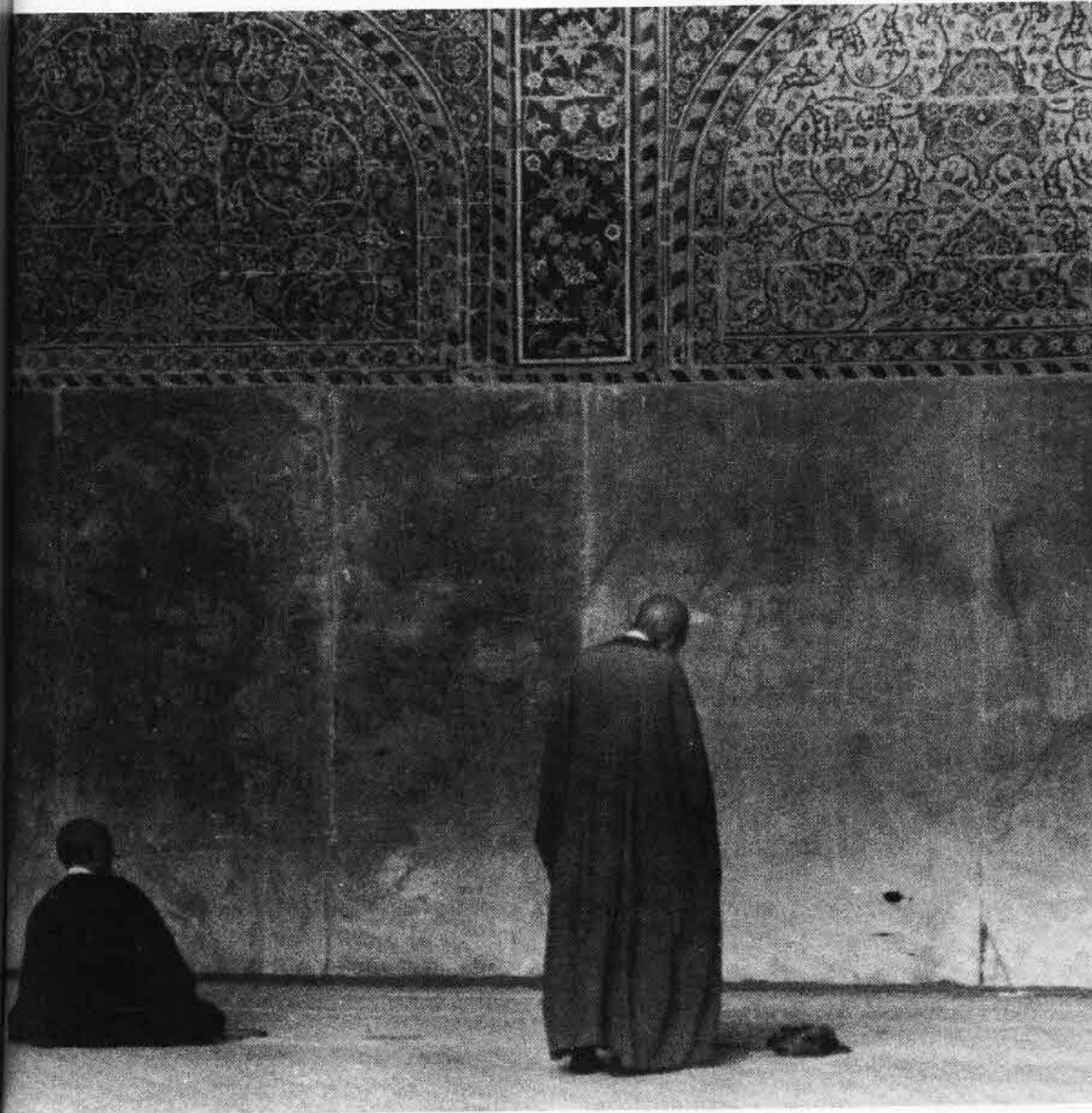
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divine. In hadiths add that Adam was taught not only the names but also the "100" languages. Here there is an allusion to the all-comprehensive Name—least potentially—of human existence. In a similar vein, the expression "man is a rational animal" translated into Arabic as "man is a speaking animal," since it is speech—knowledge of the names—that sets man apart from all other animate

creatures. Then, is the integral and summation of the Divine Name—the Creative Word—Allah. Opposed to the cosmos (*al-'ālam*), which also reflects the Word, but de-



ployed in its infinite possibilities of outward manifestation. Thus the microcosm corresponds to the macrocosm, a fact often referred to as the "collation of the two transcripts" (*taqābul al-nuskhatayn*)—again an image drawn from writing. Because of his knowledge of the names of all things, man is active, while the cosmos is the passive object of his perception. This is why some Sufis have said that man is the macrocosm, while the universe is the microcosm.

Though man is the slave (*‘abd*) of God, he is also His vicegerent; because he has knowledge of all creatures, they are his slaves: "Do you not see that God has subjected to you everything in the heavens and the earth?" (Koran).¹⁷ This power over other creatures helps explain the grave responsibility of the human state, the "Trust" (*amānah*) man accepted to bear even before his physical creation (cf. Koran VII:172, XXXIII:72). The responsibility for the corruption of the earth—or the destruction of its natural environment—lies squarely on his shoulders.

Man's superiority over all creatures extends even to the angels. They are "partial" or "peripheral" creatures, while the Perfect Man is known as the "Point at the Center of the Circle." According to the Koran, the angels were commanded to prostrate themselves before Adam because they had knowledge of only some of the Names: "We know not save what Thou hast taught us."¹⁸

Ibn al-‘Arabī summarizes the relationship between man and the Divine Names as follows: "Man is the utmost limit of the Breath The potentiality [or "power," *quwwah*] of every existent in the cosmos lies within him. So he possesses all ontological levels; that is why he alone was singled out for the Divine Form. He comprehends the Divine Realities—which are the Names—and the realities of the cosmos. Thus the Breath of the All-Merciful did not reach its farthest extension

within his existence until it gave to him the potentiality of all the ontological levels of the cosmos. In man becomes manifest that which does not become manifest in the separate parts of the world, nor in the individual Divine Names."¹⁹

To become the "vicegerent of Allāh" (*khalīfat Allāh*) is to act as a conscious locus of manifestation for all of God's Names and at the same time to encompass the myriad perfections of the macrocosm. When the Sufi hears the Prophet's words, "Assume the moral traits (*akhlāq*) of Allāh!" he understands this to mean that man must attain to a state of perfection wherein all of the Divine Names display themselves within him. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes:

"Allāh did not create the heavens and the earth and what is between them for vanity" (Koran),²⁰ nor did He create man "for sport" (Koran).²¹ He created him so that he alone might be "upon His Form." So everyone in the cosmos is ignorant of the whole and knowledgeable only of a part, with the sole exception of the Perfect Man. For God "taught him all the Names" (Koran)²² and [according to a prophetic saying] gave him the "all-comprehensive words." Hence he combines the Form of God with the form of the cosmos.

—*al-Futūhāt*²³

The Breath of the All-Merciful acts as a vehicle for the Creative Word "Be!" which appears outwardly as the ontological letters that make up the cosmos: "In the same way, the human breath encompasses all letters" (*al-Futūhāt*).²⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers develop the symbolism of the letters and words transmitted through the Breath into a complicated cosmology. For example, his son-in-law and chief disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274), writes that the things of this world exist in God's Knowledge before their creation as "non-manifest letters," though if we consider them in relation to their properties, attributes, and con-

comitants, they are called "non-manifest words." Then these letters and words become outwardly manifest within the Breath.²⁵ Elsewhere in similar fashion with phrases, chapters, and books. He comprehends the universal level of existence, from down to the physical universe. In the Scripture, and he declares that the Perfect Man is like the Koran, the Scripture that encompasses all other creatures:

The Perfect Man is a book that comprehends all the divine and created books . . . for he comprehends all both in the manner of summated unity in that of particularized deployment. The Prophet said, "Whoso knows his Lord knows his Lord" and all things. It is my son, that your meditation upon yourself is enough for you, since nothing outside of you Have you not seen the words of God? "Read your book, for self suffices you this day as a reckoning against you!" (Koran),²⁶ for whosoever his book has come to know what is, what is, and what shall be. So if you read all of your book, read of it what you can. Have you not seen God's words? "And in your selves: What, do you look?" (Koran).²⁷ And have you not seen His words? "We shall show them signs in the horizons and in their selves. It is clear to them that it is the truth. Suffices it not as to thy Lord, that His knowledge suffices over everything?" (Koran)²⁸

When the army of ‘Alī gained the upper hand over the army of ‘A‘ishah—upon them both—in the battle that took place after the murder of ‘Uthmān, the ‘A‘ishah's party held the Divine Form aloft with a spear so that ‘Alī's forces would not slaughter and rout them. Then ‘Alī said, "Oh people! I am the Living Book of God, but that is the stillness of God! Attack them and leave them."

In the same way God says, "Suffices as a witness between me and whosoever possesses knowledge of the Book" (Koran).²⁹ So this, my son, is the Book and the knowledge of the Book. And you are the Book, as we said. The knowledge of yourself is your knowledge of the Book. "And there is not a drop of water, neither wet," which is the world

his existence until it gave to the potentiality of all the ontological levels of the cosmos. In man become manifest that which does not manifest in the separate parts of the world, nor in the individual Names."¹⁹

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He did not create the heavens and earth and what is between them for nothing (Koran).²⁰ nor did He create man for nothing (Koran).²¹ He created him so that he might be "upon His Form." For no one in the cosmos is ignorant of the Divine Names and knowledgeable only of a part of them with the sole exception of the Perfect Man, who is the Form of God "taught him all the Names" (Koran).²² And [according to a prophetic tradition] He gave him the "all-comprehensive Form." Hence he combines the Form of the Perfect Man with the form of the cosmos.

—*al-Futūhāt*²³

The Breath of the All-Merciful acts as the vehicle for the Creative Word which appears outwardly as the Divine Letters, the sacred letters that make up the human form. "In the same way, the human form encompasses all letters" (*al-Futūhāt*).²⁴ Ibn al-^cArabī and his followers develop the symbolism of the letters and words transmitted through the Perfect Man into a complicated cosmology. For example, his son-in-law and disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1310), writes that the things of this world exist in God's Knowledge before their manifestation as "non-manifest letters," and if we consider them in relation to their essential properties, attributes, and con-

comitants, they are called "non-manifest words." Then these letters and words become outwardly manifest within the Breath.²⁵ Elsewhere he deals in similar fashion with phrases, verses, chapters, and books. He compares each universal level of existence, from God down to the physical universe, with a Scripture, and he declares that the Perfect Man is like the Koran, the Scripture that encompasses all other Scriptures:

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In the same way God says, "Say: 'God suffices as a witness between me and you, and whosoever possesses knowledge of the Book'" (Koran).²⁹ So this, my son, is the Book and the knowledge of the Book. And *you* are the Book, as we said. Your knowledge of yourself is your knowledge of the Book. "And there is not a thing, neither wet," which is the world of the



visible creation, "nor dry," which is the world of the Spirit and everything beyond it, "but in an Elucidating Book" (Koran),³⁰ which is you.³¹

Unless man "carries the Trust," the Names—or "moral traits"—encompassed by the Supreme Name remain as so many potentialities within him. He is a book, the manifestation of the Divine Word, but he is shut off to himself without the guidance referred to again and again in the Koran: "These are the signs of the Koran and a Manifest Book, a guidance, and good tidings unto the believers."³² Without the light of heaven, his book cannot be read, nor can the two transcripts be collated. Man is in need of God's guidance in order to regain his primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) according to which he was created, i.e., his Divine Form. Since man is a theophany of the Word, he must return to the Word. The Koran provides the means, for it is the One Word of God revealed to creatures in the form of a multitude of words; thus creatures, mired in multiplicity and dispersion, may be drawn back to Unity. All of Islamic ritual revolves around the assimilation of the Koran, the Word made Book, just as Christian ritual centers on the assimilation of the body and the blood of the Word made flesh.

One of the names of the Koran is "Reminder" or "Remembrance" (*dhikr*, *dhikrā*), while one of the Prophet's titles is "Remembrance of God" (Dhikr Allāh). As a result of the fall, man has forgotten the Trust and turned away from his primordial nature. The Koran is a Reminder, and the Prophet is the living exemplar of God's remembrance: "You have a good example in God's Messenger for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day and remembers God often" (Koran).³³

To recite the Koran and to imitate the Prophet are both means of remem-

bering God. But there is another act of remembrance, taught explicitly by the Prophet to some of his companions and mentioned in numerous Koranic verses, and that is the "remembrance" or "invocation" (*dhikr*) of God's Name. All believers remember God through recitation of the Koran and certain Divine Names at least five times a day, during the ritual prayer. But God has placed special power in the remembrance of His All-Comprehensive Name: "Recite what has been revealed to you of the Book, and perform the ritual prayer. The ritual prayer prevents indecency and dishonor—but verily, the remembrance of Allah is greater!" (Koran).³⁴

The relationship between the revelatory Book and the microcosmic Book is prefigured in the "Night of Power," during which the Koran descended upon the Prophet, and the "Night of the Ascension," during which the Prophet was taken through the heavens to God's Presence. The descent of the written Book results in the ascent of the human Book. The Muslims were not commanded to perform the ritual prayer until after the Prophet's ascent to heaven, during which it was taught to him. Thus the prayer is known as the "ascension of the believer" (*al-ṣalāt mi'rāj al-mu'min*), and its physical movements retrace the Prophet's experiences during his journey. The peculiarly physical nature of the Islamic prayer corresponds to the absolute necessity of reciting the Koran in Arabic for ritual purposes, since Arabic is the physical form of the descent, or the "body" of the Word made Book. The physical body of the human word is as much a manifestation of the Divine Word as his soul; therefore both prayer and resurrection are bodily.

But the greatest power of the recited word is found in the remembrance of Allah, which is greater than the ritual prayer (though invalid without it). The remembrance of many different Divine Names is practiced by the Sufi

orders. Often the spiritual "shaikh" will choose a Name as the basis of a disciple's particular practice. Once a character trait is developed through constant concentration on that Name, another Name may be given. Other masters prefer to direct the attention of their disciples' attention to the Supreme Name, upon whose remembrance the human was created. Through constant remembrance in the remembrance of the adept gradually turns his attention away from all other things.

NOTES

1. *Koran* VI 25, VIII 31, XXIII 1-2.
2. *Ibid.*, XX 14.
3. *Ibid.*, VII 180.
4. *Ibid.*, VII 156.
5. *al-Futūhāt al-makkiyyah*, III.
6. *Koran* XVI 40.
7. *Ibid.*, XXXVI 81.
8. *Ibid.*, LIV 50.
9. *al-Futūhāt*, II.
10. *Koran* XXXI 27.
11. *Ibid.*, III 190, X 6, XXXVIII 1-2.
12. Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, VI, 3172 ff.
13. *Koran* XVII 44.
14. *Mathnawī*, I 3279.
15. *Koran* II 30.
16. *Ibid.*, II 31.
17. *Ibid.*, XXXI 20.
18. *Ibid.*, XXXVII 164.
19. *al-Futūhāt*, II.

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orders. Often the spiritual master or "shaikh" will choose a Name on the basis of a disciple's particular need. Once a character trait is developed upon that Name, another Name will be given. Other masters prefer to turn all of their disciples' attention to the Supreme Name, upon whose Form man was created. Through constant perseverance in the remembrance of God, the adept gradually turns his attention away from all other things. His own

attributes are annihilated (*fanā'*) and only those of Allah subsist (*baqā'*).

This then is the ultimate power of the word: just as it creates man in the first place upon the Form of Allah, so in the end it reintegrates him into his prototype. He thus becomes what he ever was, the Logos, God's Word, the intermediary between God and creatures, the Vicegerent, the bearer of the Trust. "The All-Merciful taught the Koran. He created man, and He taught him the Explication" (Koran).³⁵ ■

NOTES

1. *Koran* VI 25, VIII 31, XXIII 83.
2. *Ibid.*, XX 14.
3. *Ibid.*, VII 180.
4. *Ibid.*, VII 156.
5. *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*, III.
6. *Koran* XVI 40.
7. *Ibid.*, XXXVI 81.
8. *Ibid.*, LIV 50.
9. *al-Futūḥāt*, II.
10. *Koran* XXXI 27.
11. *Ibid.*, III 190, X 6, XXXVIII 39.
12. Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, VI, 3172 ff.
13. *Koran* XVII 44.
14. *Mathnawī*, I 3279.
15. *Koran* II 30.
16. *Ibid.*, II 31.
17. *Ibid.*, XXXI 20.
18. *Ibid.*, XXXVII 164.
19. *al-Futūḥāt*, II.
20. *Koran* XXXVIII 27.
21. *Ibid.*, XXIII 115.
22. *Ibid.*, II 31.
23. *al-Futūḥāt*, III.
24. *Ibid.*, II.
25. Al-Qūnāwī, *Miftāḥ al-ghayb* (Tehran: 1905-6).
26. *Koran* XVII 14.
27. *Ibid.*, LI 21.
28. *Ibid.*, XLI 51.
29. *Ibid.*, XIII 43.
30. *Ibid.*, VI 59.
31. Al-Qūnāwī, *Mir'āt al-ārefīn fī multamas Zayn al-Ābidīn*, ed. and trans. by W.C. Chittick, forthcoming.
32. *Koran* XXVII 1-2.
33. *Ibid.*, XXXIII 21.
34. *Ibid.*, XXIX 45.
35. *Ibid.*, LV 1-4.