

لا إله إلا الله محمد بن عبد الله
١٣٧٢

REMEMBERING GOD
REFLECTIONS ON ISLAM

CHARLES LE GAI EATON

FOREWORD BY
SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

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Charles Le Gai Eaton

State of Texas

Foreword by

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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So remember Me, I will remember you
(Quran 2:142)

*Their skins and their hearts soften to the
remembrance of God!*
(Quran 39:23)

*Those who have believed and whose hearts
are at rest in the remembrance of God
truly it is in the remembrance of God
that hearts find rest*
(Quran 13:28)

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Foreword

This beautifully written book is a call from the East meant to reach the hearts of readers across the oceans, the barriers and borders that separate the West and the Islamic world. It is a work impregnated with the warmth of faith and the light of wisdom but written by a believer who has spent his whole life in a milieu characterized by scepticism, relativism and lack of faith. That is why this book is a rare and precious bridge between the modern West and the Islamic world. It addresses both worlds with a voice of assurance, nurtured by faith, with a clarity of thought reposing in wisdom and with the timeliness produced by a long life of experience of both the modern world and the traditional universe of Islam as well as other religions.

The author is an Englishman who received the best of education available in his home country and who has also had a close relation to French culture, as a result of which he came to be at home in both English and French. He traveled widely, served in the British Foreign Service, encountered the works of the masters of traditional doctrines such as Rene Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon and was totally transformed by them. He entered Islam nearly half a century ago and has served in the Islamic Cultural Centre of London for the past twenty years. He has lectured on Islam widely throughout the world and produced a number of very well known cassette and videos on Islamic subjects. Moreover, he has written a number of important essays and three remarkable books. *The*

Richest Vein, which deals with traditional thought and especially Guénon and Coomaraswamy; *King of the Castle*, dealing with the question of responsibility in the modern world from the traditional point of view; and *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, which is one of the best written and most profound books on Islam in the English language. These works have established Eaton as one of the most perspicacious and, at the same time, most eloquent Islamic authors writing in English today.

In order to understand *Remembering God*, one must understand something of the remarkable range of knowledge and experience of its author which the preceding brief account conveys to some extent. It needs also to be added that Eaton has mastery over the mainstream literature of both English and French as well as much of the literature of the Islamic world. He has deep intimacy with both the Quran and the Bible as well as the *hadith* and *sirah*. He knows traditional metaphysics and the tenets of the perennial philosophy in general as well as being fully aware of many of the attacks made against religion and traditional teachings in the modern world. He has met numerous Westerners, from writers to artists to politicians to religious figures. At the same time, he has known Muslims of all types and from all walks of life, from Sufis to rationalistic puritans, from traditionalists to modernists, from the pious to those who are Muslim only in name, from Malays to Arabs to West Africans and nearly every Muslim ethnic group in between, from simple students to *shaykhs* and from lowly bureaucrats to princes. All this is worth mentioning because it makes it possible for the reader to understand both the width and the depth of knowledge and experience which have made this book possible.

Remembering God consists of fourteen chapters divided into two parts, chapters which at first might seem to be unrelated and disconnected. Such in fact is not at all true. There is a profound unity in the book, resulting from the single traditional perspective which dominates over every page of the work and which itself is none other than the unitary vision of the author. In reading the book one might conceive of it as a travelogue

through which one shares with an author his or her experience of a journey. In such a case, the unity of the work is not in the various countries visited but in the traveler himself and his vision and interpretation of things seen and heard. In the case of *Remembering God* the journey is that of life itself and the vision of the traveler is one anchored in faith in God and a constant awareness of the end of the journey, which is something other than death and the encounter with the Creator. Therefore, although the book might appear to be disconnected on the surface, it possesses the greatest inner continuity and unity. It is a spiritual autobiography, a journey through the life of a person of exceptionally wide experience, deep knowledge, who also has the gift of being able to tell his own experiences and thoughts in a felicitous language which conveys the existential relevance of so much mentioned by the author to the lives of contemporary and future readers.

The author devotes Part I of his work to some of the most important issues involved in the relation between Islam and the West, the fundamental opposition between tradition and modernism and the whole problem of living a religious life in the modern and, what some would call, the post-modern world. In the first chapter Eaton deals with the whole problem of presenting Islam to the West and the obstacles in the Western mind in the way of understanding a religion which in so many aspects is close to Christianity and yet is the most difficult religion to understand for Westerners, either Christian or those who consider themselves as post-Christian. This leads him to a profound discussion of Islam's own problems in its confrontation with modernism, including science. Here Eaton reveals his years of experience with a class of educated Muslims, pious on a certain level, but totally blind to the real nature of modern science, and its consequences for the truth of the religious view of the world. This chapter alone should make this book required reading for modernized Muslims. The discussion of Islam and science is followed by a moving chapter entitled 'The Earth's Complaint' in which the author deals with the environmental crisis and the Islamic view

toward nature. The next several chapters deal with deep, complex and often misconstrued Islamic perspectives concerning politics, the role and position of women in society, war and peace, and views of the future and futurology. These chapters are replete with profound observations and can be considered among the most important written in English on these issues from the authentic Islamic point of view.

Part II of this remarkable work in a sense moves from the domain of contingencies to that of principles. In six chapters written, like the first part, with great lucidity, Eaton deals in the context of Islamic teachings with questions of religion and faith, with the remembrance of God and the meaning of His Names, with the doctrine of Divine Possibility related to the Divine Infinitude, with the significance of Sufism, eschatology, and finally with the significance of both spirit and form in religion and the question of the future of Islam. This section taken together as a whole is an adequate treatment, both concise and clear, of the main facets of the Islamic tradition in both its aspects of doctrine and practice, considered in themselves and also in relation to other religions, especially Christianity, with which many comparisons are made.

The book *Remembering God* is itself the fruit of the author's remembering God during the experience of diverse episodes of life and encounters with various currents of thought. Therefore the reading of the book itself is cause and occasion for the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), which is the goal of all Islamic rites and which is called greater than all else in the Quran. One cannot read this book without being deeply impressed by how a Westerner brought up in a secular environment could, through the Grace of Heaven and his God-given intelligence, turn to God, become deeply imbued with faith, embrace and gain profound knowledge of Islam while continuing to respect and revere the teachings of Christ, and then be able to criticize and evaluate, in the light of tradition and eternal wisdom, all the errors and half-truths which dominate the horizon of modern man and prevent the truth in its integral reality from shining

upon the life of the great majority of those who live in the modern world.

This book possesses a profound message for both Westerners who are in quest of authentic knowledge of Islam and interested in gaining better understanding of it and those Muslims who are caught in the labyrinth of modern ideas, new trends and who are searching for a compass in order to be able to navigate their way out of the bewildering maze in which they find themselves. Moreover, the book addresses "the people of any religious persuasion who is attracted to the call of the angels of the Spirit and who has become aware that all is not well in the kingdom of Denmark"

The past half century has been witness to the appearance of a whole *genre* of literature on Islam written by Westerners who have embraced the Islamic tradition and who have therefore been able to shed light upon Islam for Westerners on the one hand, and upon the modern West for Muslims on the other. This *genre* has included works of different types, ranging from the works of Muhammad Asad and Roger Garaudy to the recent writings of Murad Hoffman. It has also included the unsurpassed works of traditionalist authors such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt and Martin Lings. This work, in my perspective belongs to the second category and, in some of its concerns, to the first. In any case, it is without doubt one of the most important books in the *genre* in question. It is a work of authenticity, intelligence, and depth, one in which excellent translations of verses of the Quran and *hadith* are interlarded in perfect harmony with an English prose of the highest quality to create a book which is a veritable contribution to that small but growing body of authentic writings on Islam in English, and also a notable example of the use of English as an "Islamic language" in the same way that one can speak of Bengali or Punjabi as Islamic languages, although also spoken and written by non-Muslims. Hasan Gai Eaton is to be congratulated for creating such a work which warms the soul, illuminates the mind, and, most of all, reminds us that the alpha and omega of life should be the remembrance of God through all the diverse

experiences that together constitute our brief journey here below which we call life, but which actually is but the prelude to that veritable life everlasting, marked by birth into a clime where the sun never sets nor does the remembrance of God ever cease.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr
Bethesda, Maryland
November 1999 (A.D.)
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Part I

1

The Third Strand

So hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of God.
(Quran 3:103)

No compulsion in religion! Truth stands clear from error, and he who rejects false deities and believes in God has grasped a firm handhold which will never break.
(Quran 2:256)

The task should become easier with the passage of time. It becomes more difficult. Explaining Islam in all its dimensions to westerners, whether Christian, semi-Christian or agnostic, involves crossing a minefield. Misunderstandings, together with ancient fears and prejudices, lie just beneath the surface, ready to explode on contact, and I have learned over the years to watch where I place my feet. The task becomes more difficult for two reasons: firstly because of an increasing realisation that my Faith, like any major religion, has something in common with the breadth of the human world itself with all its ambiguities and subtleties; secondly because contemporary western culture is immensely complex both in its origins and in its character. Every generalisation that one tries to make is soon blown apart.

Brought up as an agnostic, I have been Muslim for some

fifty years, long enough to feel at home in the religion, but this does not alter the fact that I am a westerner and cannot entirely escape my early conditioning. Asked once by a young Muslim in America if I did not find this dual identity painful, I told him that I regarded it as a privilege comparable, perhaps, to being bilingual. Only those who have, in some measure, escaped from their European or American identity can know how suffocating this culture is. The term "political correctness" is of recent invention, but in fact the western mentality has always been subject to comparable restraints in one form or another. The orthodoxies of one generation may be turned upside down by the next, but the pressures to accept what all "right-thinking" people believe at a particular moment in history remain the same. When someone who has little interest in religion asks me why they should take an interest in Islam, my answer is: "To sample a different perspective and enjoy a breath of fresh air."

Whether in confrontation or in cautious dialogue, Muslims and Christians have faced each other and been obliged to deal with each other for the past thirteen centuries, and the very existence of Islam has had a profound influence on the changing patterns of western civilization. This civilization is commonly described as Judaeo-Christian in origin, but there is a third strand in the monotheistic "rope of God", the rope grasped by those who desire a good life and a good exit from this life: Islam. The three religions lay claim to a common ancestor, the prophet and patriarch Abraham, the first "monotheist" in the strict sense of the term. They are three facets of this adherence to an undiluted awareness of the divine unity and singularity. What they have in common outweighs their differences, but the intertwining of the three strands is fascinating and often illuminating. Jews, when they are able to put aside the politics of confrontation, usually feel closer to Muslims than to Christians and understand them better. Christians, since the Bible includes the Jewish scriptures, cannot escape from the Judaic tradition however savagely they may have condemned the Jews for rejecting Jesus. Muslims, in their turn, regard their Faith as the culmination of this triple revelation, while the Quran sug-

gests a preference for the Christians.

In the chapter of the Quran called *Yā Sīn* there is a parable usually taken to refer to Moses, Jesus and Muhammad: "The people of the city when those sent (by God) came to them—when We sent to them two, and they rejected them, so We reinforced them with a third, who said: 'See! We have been sent to you.' They (the people of the city) said: 'You are only mortals like ourselves. The Most Merciful one has revealed nothing. You are liars!'" This theme of rejection recurs constantly in the Quran because it has been a constant factor in human history and in human nature, which is drawn simultaneously in two different directions—towards two magnetic poles—the Light and the dark.

The term "Muslim" (with a capital letter) is properly applied only to those who follow the message of the Quran, but, when it takes the lower case, it has a far more universal meaning. In the first place, everyone and everything is *muslim* in the sense that all, knowingly or unknowingly, are subject to the Divine Will and cannot escape from it. The rock that falls by the force of gravity is *muslim*; so are the birds and the beasts of the field, so too is humankind as a whole. All submit to the will of their creator. Secondly, those who choose to obey guidance from above are *muslim* in a higher sense. When, in the Quran, the followers of Jesus confess, "We are muslims", they cannot have meant that they followed a messenger as yet unborn. There is, then, Islam as a recognisable religion, there is *islām* as the faith and practice of all who believe in God and, finally, there is the *islām* of creation as such. Nothing that enjoys the light of existence is self-sufficient. Everything depends upon the source from which it came and to which it will return when creation is wrapped up and submits to its own end.

In the past, when each religion was, so to speak, hermetically sealed in its own world of faith and custom, reciprocal understanding was both unlikely and unnecessary. Each could pursue its own way, caring little for the alien worlds which existed outside its circle of light. Today the situation is radically different. In the so called "global village" we cannot ignore

our neighbours and are obliged to speak to them. Yet for the Muslim who wishes to speak to Christians there is a problem peculiar to modern times. This is the amorphous nature of contemporary Christianity. When, some twenty years ago, I was first asked to talk to Christian groups about Islam, I thought I saw my way clear. While emphasising that we worshipped one God, I laid stress on the three Christian doctrines which divide the religions: the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity and Original Sin.

One of the first groups to which I spoke had come from Holland and, when I had finished my talk, a young woman rose to her feet, thanked me and then announced: "But we Dutch Protestants do not believe that Jesus was God. No, he was a good man, a messenger of God. As for Trinity—what is this Trinity? God is One. And then you mentioned Original Sin. No, no! That is a wicked idea. People are good." What could I say beyond suggesting that, if this was the case, the world's billion Muslims could, should they so wish, murmur out of the corner of their mouths: "By the way, we are also Christians." At one stroke the doctrinal barriers had been removed and, although this group was clearly untypical, it was—as I discovered later—by no means unique. More recently, I took an Englishman who, until then, would have recorded his religion as "Church of England", to be officially received into Islam by an Egyptian Imam. To test the man's sincerity, the Imam leaned forward and asked him: "Tell me, please, what is your honest opinion of the Trinity?" He then leaned back with an expression which said clearly: "This is the real test!" Needless to say, the only answer was a blank stare. This was not a matter to which the prospective convert had given a moment's thought.

So far as Western Europe is concerned, it might be possible to place all those who do not claim to be agnostics or atheists in three categories. First, there are the Christians who accept the principal doctrines of their Church, whether they understand them or not, and who attend acts of worship in the approved forms. Secondly, there are those who call themselves "Christians" but who believe that the essence of their religion is to be nice to other people and who are unconcerned with tradi-

tional doctrines which seem to them "irrelevant". Finally—and these seem to be in the majority—there are the people who, when questioned, say that they believe in God but have no use for "organised religion". They would, in earlier times, have been described as deists. Their "God" might, perhaps, be defined as the "gaseous invertebrate", a term favoured by atheists at the end of the nineteenth century.

So that is my problem. It would make sense, remembering those schoolboy essays structured in terms of "Compare and contrast . . ." to expound the Islamic perspective by comparing and contrasting it with Christianity. But which Christianity? There is one easy solution to the problem, and that is to focus on medieval Catholicism. This is dangerous and leads directly to the misunderstandings one is anxious to avoid. I shall use it none the less. Western culture is unique in that it has broken completely with its past except as an historical curiosity. Since the eighteenth century of the Christian era (if not before) people in the West have been incapable of understanding the mindset of their ancestors, incapable of empathising with those ancestors. There has been a break in continuity that has no parallel elsewhere in the human world. Belief in "progress" has made it possible to ignore and even to despise the men and women who lived as Christians in the European Middle Ages, the "Ages of Faith". They were ignorant. We live by the light of science. They were superstitious, but we know the world as it really is. The fact is that most of us today are comparable to amnesiacs who remember nothing that happened a few years ago and, if we are reminded of some important event in our past life, cannot make any connection with it.

If people today were capable of understanding their forebears they would have no difficulty in understanding Islam, but to say this is inevitably to step on one of those mines that litter the landscape. "Medieval" has become a derogatory term, a term of abuse. Even Muslims, when they have been subjected to a modern—therefore western—education, readily accept this definition of the European Middle Ages as a period of darkness, although they regard their own past very differently. The fact

remains that Islam is a religion of certainty and the Middle Ages were an age of certainty. Islam is a totally inclusive religion which leaves no crack or crevice outside its orbit; medieval Christianity was no less all-embracing. Christians accepted and Muslims still accept that the purpose of life is to attain a good death, one that opens the doors of heaven to the departed soul and closes the doors of hell. It would be almost sacrilegious for a Muslim to believe himself better and wiser than the early Muslims and he knows, if he has any knowledge of his religion, that the passage of time can only have brought about a falling away from the ideal, a dimming of the light. The Prophet Muhammad said that his own generation was the best, after that the next generation, then the next and so on, following a downward curve until the end of time. The contemporary Muslim hopes to model himself upon the "pious ancestors" of long ago and to share, not only in their faith but in their certainty. One thing that confuses the average westerner about the typical Muslim is that he is not confused.

• Certainty is out of fashion in the West, not least because so many people are certain that they are right when, in fact, they are blatantly wrong. This applies particularly to matters of religion, but certainty is still acceptable when it relates to science, even if so much of modern science is incomprehensible to the layman. Seen from a different perspective, unquestioning acceptance of the latest scientific theories cannot be justified. It depends upon blind faith, first in the total reliability of the human senses to perceive objectively what is "out there", secondly in the mental processes through which these observations are interpreted. Neither of these propositions can be proved. They are taken as self-evident. For Muslims, the truth of the Quranic revelation and the prophethood of Muhammad are self-evident. The doubter may ask: "Where is your proof?" The Muslim will answer: "I know the truth when I see it." The fact that religious certainty has led both to conflict and to oppression in the past is irrelevant. The only question is whether human creatures are capable of knowing anything with certainty. If this is denied, then there is nothing more to be said

and we must resign ourselves to living in darkness, no better informed concerning the nature of things than a worm burrowing in the earth. If, however, the possibility of true knowledge is affirmed, we must accept the existence of those who attribute certainty to their errors. The fact that there are blind people in the world does not extinguish the light.

The Muslim does not believe that his own very limited mental processes can in some way discover the truth. It is not discoverable by that means. Truth is revealed by Him who is named "The Truth" in the Quran. But revelation itself confirms and reminds us of what, in our deepest essence, we already know. As the Christian mystic Eckhart said: "The truth is native to us." It has been inherent in us from the beginning but has been buried under accumulated errors and illusions. When it is revealed from beyond ourselves, we recognise it as our birthright. That is why the Muslim is able to say: "I know the truth when I see it." Here, perhaps, a correction is in order. It is not the "Muslim" but the *mu'min* who says this. The distinction is important. There are three degrees of adherence to Islam. The first is that of the Muslim who submits willingly but, as it were, blindly to the revealed truth. The second is that of the *mu'min*, the "believer" or, more accurately, "the man or woman of faith". Thirdly there is the *muhsin* who has brought submission, faith and vision to their human peak and who is totally imbued with the truth that is both within and objectively revealed.

What is the proposition to which the Muslim submits, in which the *mu'min* has unquestioning faith, and which the *muhsin* exemplifies in his own life? It is expressed in four Arabic words: *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*, literally "No divinity if not God", which bears witness to the fact that God is One, supreme, without any partner or associate, without equal, and that everything, from the angel to the stone, is created by Him and depends totally upon Him. That is the doctrine of *tawhīd*. Divine Unity. According to the Quran, this is the central tenet, not only of Islam but of all religion: "We never sent a messenger . . . except to reveal, "There is no god but I, so worship Me."

There are many who would claim that, as they do not believe in “divinities” of any kind, the Islamic Confession of Faith has no meaning for them. They are wrong. If they have ever loved anything, desired it and valued it, then this is—for them—a “divinity”, and if they have treated it as independent of its creator, opaque rather than transparent, then it is a false divinity, the object of sacrilegious worship. “Have you seen,” asks the Quran, “the one who takes his own desires to be his divinity?” Of course we have.

At a deeper level, there is one false divinity which eclipses all the others. This is the human ego, the selfhood which thinks itself independent of its maker and acts as if it were its own master. Its commands, when it refuses guidance, are described in the Quran as “caprice”, which is a reasonable translation of an Arabic term derived from the word for “wind”. The Quran speaks of “he who has taken caprice as his divinity”. For such a one, “it is as if the birds had snatched him or the wind had blown him headlong into a place far away.”

The sense of total dependence, the awareness that we are not in charge of our own affairs, is very strong, even in the Muslim who takes his religion fairly lightly. It is expressed in a phrase which is the bane of westerners operating in the Islamic world: *inshā'Allāh* (“God willing”). The American or European businessman is giving a formal dinner party next day and invites his Arab associate, who says how much he looks forward to the occasion: “So, 8 p.m. then? I shall be there, *inshā'Allāh*.” But there is an empty place at the dinner table. There has been no previous telephone call and there is no subsequent apology. The businessman is worried. Can he have offended his friend in some way (these Arabs are so touchy)? In the days that follow, nothing is said and life goes on as usual. What is there to be said? The fact that the man did not turn up for dinner indicates quite clearly that God did not mean him to do so. Arrangements made for the future are always provisional. Tomorrow is not just another day. It is a new world, born out of the womb of night, and who can tell what tomorrow will bring? The fact that he may, at the last moment, have found the invitation inconve-

nient is irrelevant. It was not his destiny to dine out that evening. The westerner may be stupid (most unbelievers are stupid), but surely he could grasp this simple point?

The unwillingness to commit oneself, as a Muslim, to any future arrangement has another aspect. To take it for granted that I shall still be around tomorrow is presumptuous, a tempting of Providence. I may be dead by then. The hour of my death has been recorded in the divine Knowledge since the beginning of time but, unless I am on death row and all appeals have failed, I do not know whether it will be tomorrow or years from now. What I do know is that the Prophet, when asked how best to remove "rust" from the mirror of the heart—that mirror which reflects the divine Light—counselled constant remembrance of God together with much thought of death. We cannot hope to see our brief lives clearly and govern them wisely if we forget, even for a moment, that we must die. The Angel of Death will come for us when he is due. The common phrase "an untimely death" seems, to the Muslim, close to blasphemy: every death is right on time. Moreover to ask "Why?" when someone dies young is absurd. The question suggests that we expect to comprehend the total scheme of things, known only to God, and imagine that our strictly limited minds can grasp—or should be able to grasp—what is far beyond their compass.

There is, in fact, a third agent of purification which serves to remove "rust" from the heart: illness. "It is better to be purified here than hereafter," said the Prophet. Working in Madras in the 1960s, I contracted hepatitis. Obligated to postpone a visit to a wise old man in Hyderabad, I wrote to him expecting, in return, a letter of sympathy. His response was to congratulate me on contracting a serious illness. I was indeed fortunate to have been graced with such a trial. Initially surprised, I soon took the point. It is through such trials that we mature and, God willing, begin to face the reality of our situation. They free us from the illusions in which we take refuge from a light we dare not contemplate. They prise us away from our limpet-like attachment to the rocks of this world and remind us that these rocks are ephemeral. "You will see the mountains, which you

think so solid, evaporate even as clouds evaporate . . .”, says the Quran.

Among those condemned in the Quran are all who prefer this life to the hereafter. At first sight this may seem to leave little hope for most of us, but I think it is essentially a matter of priorities and a warning against short-sightedness. Attachment to what is, at best, a very brief life is natural, and Islam never condemns what is natural to the human creature. But this same attachment becomes a grave sin when it leads to forgetfulness of what is, again in the words of the Quran, “better and more lasting”. It is not that human life is worthless but that there is something worth infinitely more. If we are not obliged to face trials and disappointments in this world we make ourselves too comfortable here and drift into forgetfulness of all that lies beyond this little place. Even on the purely material level, the apparent vastness of the universe reminds us just how little this place is. But the whole aim of contemporary civilization is, precisely, to make us as comfortable—and therefore as forgetful—as possible. The Arabic word for “the world” is *al-dunyā*, which means “that which is close”, the immediate—our concerns, needs and desires today—and this recalls the Quranic strictures against those who live as cattle, thinking only of the patch of grass under their noses. What Islam requires of us is that we raise our eyes to the far horizon. Perhaps it is not as far distant as we suppose.

Let me return briefly to the western businessman who is making his fortune in the Middle East. He has perhaps entered into a partnership with an influential Arab who is full of enthusiasm for their joint enterprise. All goes well. Obstacles are overcome. But, one day, when he comes to see his partner, the businessman finds the situation has changed overnight. As in the previous case, he wonders if he has, unwittingly, given offence. The Arab is distant in manner. He seems completely indifferent to their enterprise and impatient to get rid of his visitor, preoccupied with some more important matter. All that has happened is that he has remembered that *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*, remembered that death is close and that earthly wealth counts

for nothing. He has remembered his priorities as a Muslim.

It has been said that the simple word *lā*—"No . . ."—in the Confession of Faith burns up the world as a self-subsisting reality, reducing this false deity to cinders. The "near" is annihilated and the "far" stands revealed in all its majesty. Truth slays error and illusion. It cannot do otherwise, which is why the Prophet told his wife Aisha that no one, not even the best of us, is saved from perdition except by the mercy of God. But the God who created the tiger is not without teeth, and those who do not believe in mercy or practice it cannot expect to be saved by it. Their situation might, perhaps, be compared to that of a man swept downstream in a raging torrent. The Hand of Mercy is extended just above his head. He need only grasp it, but he does not believe in it and therefore does not see it. The torrent carries him away. This is an aspect of the divine Wrath, a concept as familiar to Jews and Christians as it is to Muslims.

One of the names given to the Quran is "The Criterion"; in other words, the sword of discrimination. The very essence of intelligence is the power to discriminate, which is an aspect of seeing things as they really are. An act of discrimination is at the root of the Islamic Credo; discrimination between the Absolute and the relative, between God and all that is other than God (the "deities"), and between good and evil. The revelation lights up the distinction between black and white, but the wise man must also practice the art of discriminating between shades of grey by absorbing into himself, not only the letter of the Book, but also the spirit. Everything in this world, except the revelation itself, is of mixed substance; no pure white, nothing irredeemably black. Discrimination pertains to justice, and one of the Quranic Names of God—"the most Beautiful Names", as they are called—is "The Just". To discriminate with justice is to put each thing in its place in an ordered hierarchy; and here, incidentally, we have two terms which are anathema to contemporary "political correctness"—discrimination and hierarchy. Condemning discrimination based upon personal prejudice and condemning, equally, all self-proclaimed hierarchies, there are those whose aim it is to iron out the real differences and dis-

tinctions inherent in the nature of things, like King Canute defying the waves. Mixing metaphors, this might aptly be called "throwing out the baby with the bath water".

For the Muslim, there is no problem. He has a touchstone by which to judge with justice: "This is a Scripture wherein there is no doubt." Comparisons between the Quran and the Bible are misleading. The one is a single unit of revelation which descended upon the "obedient scribe", Muhammad, in the course of twenty-three years, whereas the other is a compendium of very different scriptures extending over a long period of time. The Christian may be allowed to doubt the accuracy of the historical books included in the Old Testament, available to him only in translation from a Semitic language which, by its nature, cannot be accurately translated. Once doubt has entered his mind, he may be tempted to apply it even to the Gospels. It is possible for him to doubt the virgin birth of Jesus without being cast into outer darkness, although how he can presume to know what happened—or did not happen—two thousand years ago is another matter. The Muslim does not have this liberty, since the Quran bears witness to Mary's virginity. If he says that he cannot be sure that Jesus (into whom God "breathed his Spirit") did not have a human father, then he is an apostate and has turned his back on the Faith.

To doubt any verse of the Quran is to question the most fundamental tenet of Islam: the infallibility of the Book as direct, unmediated revelation. Since this revelation comes directly from the creator of life—one of whose Names is "Life" or "the Living"—the Book itself might almost be compared to a living being. The meaning of the words which compose it is only one aspect of its power; the very sound of these words, whether they are understood or not, has an effect upon the attentive listener more profound than that of any music known to man. The written text in Arabic is so sacred that it may only be handled by those who have purified themselves beforehand. The Quran has, so to speak, fallen from heaven. It is not of this world.

So where does it come from? Who precisely is the revealer? Precision belongs to the things of this world. To define Allah—

God as such—is utterly beyond human power. “How,” asks the Muslim, “can dust comprehend the Lord of the Worlds?” Thought cannot reach Him, although He encompasses all thoughts. Thought is perishable, and He is the Imperishable. No idea that we may have of Him approaches the truth of His Being, and yet—this is the paradox—we must have ideas of Him if we are to worship our creator, who is closer to us than the closest thing we can imagine; closer than close. Here one of the inspired sayings of the Prophet, one of those in which God speaks directly to us through him, offers a solution. “I am as My servant thinks I am.” This might also be translated as, “I am as My servant expects Me to be” or even as, “I am in the opinion My servant has of Me.” Obviously, this *ḥadīth qudsī*, as it is called, must be treated with caution. Not every opinion is valid. If it were, quite monstrous ideas of God would be acceptable. But the mental image through which the sincere worshipper addresses his creator with a pure and humble heart, though it is quite inadequate, serves its purpose. God, in his mercy, makes this an effective channel of communication. Wise men have distinguished between “the God of the Faiths” and God as He is. For us, as mortal beings, “the God of the Faiths” must suffice, unless we are among those few to whom are unveiled mysteries which lie beyond all the images.

At the same time, the Revealer has revealed something of Himself in the Quran, not least in what are commonly referred to as “the ninety-nine Names of God” or “the Most Beautiful Names”. They are, in a sense, subordinated to the two names which open all but one of the chapters of the Book and which are on the lips of the Muslim when he embarks upon any enterprise, great or small: *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*. Perhaps the most accurate translation is “the All-Merciful” and “the Dispenser of Mercy”. The more common translation—“the Merciful” and “the Compassionate”—leads Christians to misunderstand an important principle in Islam. To be compassionate means, if the word is used with precision, to suffer with someone, to be moved by their suffering and to share in it. The notion of a suffering God is unthinkable in the Islamic perspective. A

swimmer, drowning in a rough sea, hopes to grasp something immovable, something that is unaffected by the turbulent waves against which he is helpless. The victim of time, with all its vicissitudes, seeks refuge in that which is beyond time.

This merciful God is "the All-Knowing" and "the All-Aware", from whom nothing is hidden. He is "the Witness" and, as such, described Himself as "the Seer" and "the Hearer". We see only what is before our eyes, with their very limited range, but no limit is set to His vision. We hear only sounds that are very loud or very close to us, but He hears everything, even the rustling of a leaf as it falls to the ground.

He is "the First", before whom there is nothing, and "the Last", after whom there is nothing; "the Outward", behind all the shifting scenes we perceive in this world, and "the Inward", for it is His power that moves and motivates all that exists. He is "the Creator" who gives each separate thing the light of existence by His command, "Be!", and "the Fashioner" who shapes it according to its nature and its purpose. Since mankind was, as the Quran says, "created weak", He is "the Relenting" who never tires of turning back to His creatures when they turn to Him in repentance. He is "the Ever-Forgiving" and "the Effacer (of sins)". Whatever people may do in the course of their lives, they have the opportunity to seek forgiveness so long as they have breath in their bodies. "Oh My servants who have damaged your own selves," says the Quran, "despair not of the mercy of God. Truly God pardons all sins. Truly He is the Forgiving, the Merciful. So turn unto your Lord repentant and surrender unto Him before the penalty comes upon you . . ."

There is a *ḥadīth* (a saying of the Prophet) which goes like this. The heavens and the oceans and the earth complained to their Creator of mankind's wickedness and corruption. "Let me fall upon them and crush them," pleaded the heavens. "Let me engulf them and drown them," cried the oceans, and the earth begged for permission to swallow them. But the Lord of the Worlds replied: "If you had created them, you would forgive them."

"Sinning" and "going astray" would have no meaning if God

had not shown His creatures the right way, “the straight path”. One of His Names is “the Guide”. We are assured that He has never left any nation or any group of people without guidance. To each He has sent a “messenger” to offer them a message of hope and to instruct them as to how they can, if they so wish, follow the path which leads to Paradise and, ultimately, to the supreme goal, called *al-Ridwān*, which means the “Good Pleasure” or “Satisfaction” of God Himself. Such is the nature of this goal that the pleasure and satisfaction are reciprocal: “He is pleased with them, and they are pleased with Him,” says the Quran. But the words we are obliged to use—“satisfaction”, “pleasure”—are so inadequate that they can have little meaning unless accompanied by a huge leap of the imagination. These messages have been clothed in the language and in accordance with the thought-patterns of the people to whom they were addressed so as to be clear and unambiguous, and the “messengers” have been men like other men, although in every way better than others.

The name “the Beautiful” is not among those contained in the Quran, but the Prophet is reported to have said (in one of his inspired sayings): “God is beautiful. He loves beauty”, and the word *hasan*, which means “good”, also means “beautiful”. The two go together. Conduct that is, in motive and in manner, beautiful is also the best conduct and the most pleasing to God. But there is also the beauty of what may be called the other Book, perfectly matching the Quran in its function. This is the natural world, the world of mountains and rivers, the ocean in all its wildness, the trees reaching to heaven and the flowers which turn to the sun; the birds too, and the beasts. All glorify their creator, “though you understand not their praise”. This world is a tissue of “signs”, of images which exist to remind us of our source and our goal. It would not be inappropriate to describe God as “the Spinner of Images”. It is for us to read them as best we can.

So how can I convey something of the flavour of Islamic piety? Once upon a time there was an old man living in a remote part of Africa, then a French colony and now called Mali.

He died in 1940 and might have been forgotten had not a disciple of his, Amadou Hampate B., published a little book entitled "*Vie et Enseignement de Tierno Bokar: Le Sage de Bandiagara*". I have translated the following extract because I find it deeply moving and because, for me, it is something very precious to set against the fevers of the "fundamentalists" and the rigidity of the Doctors of the Law. The "hero" of this incident is a dog, and that is itself significant. There are four Schools of Law in Sunni Islam. Three of them consider dogs to be inherently impure, but the fourth, the Maliki School, takes a different view. The Imam Malik maintained that all life is, by its very nature, pure and therefore no living creature can be considered impure. So Tierno speaks:

One day I set out to tend my fields, accompanied by my little dog, sworn enemy of the monkeys which ravaged the plantations. It was the season of great heat. My dog and I were so hot that we could scarcely breathe. I began to think that one or other of us would soon fall in a faint. Then, thank God, I saw a Tiayki tree, the branches of which presented a vault of refreshing greenery. My dog gave little cries of joy and turned towards this blessed shade. When he had reached the shade, instead of staying where he was, he came back to me, his tongue out. Seeing how his flanks were palpitating, I realised how completely exhausted he was. I walked towards the shade. My dog was full of joy. Then, for a moment, I pretended to continue on my way. The poor beast groaned plaintively, but followed me none the less, his tail between his legs. He was obviously in despair, but determined to follow me, whatever might come of it.

This fidelity moved me profoundly. How could one fully appreciate the readiness of this animal to follow me, even to death, although he was under no constraint to do so? He is devoted to me, I said to myself, because he regards me as his master and so risks his life simply to stay beside me.

'Oh my Lord,' I cried, 'heal my troubled soul! Make

my fidelity like that of this being whom I call, contemptuously, a dog. Give me, as You have given to him, the strength to master my life so that I may accomplish Your will and follow—without asking, Where am I going?—the path upon which You guide me! I am not the creator of this dog, yet he follows me in docility, at the cost of a thousand sufferings. It is You, Lord, who has gifted him with this virtue. Give, Oh Lord, to all who ask it of You—as I do—the virtue of Love and the courage of Charity!

Then I retraced my steps and took refuge in the shade. Full of joy, my little companion lay down facing me so that his eyes were turned to mine, as though he wished to speak seriously to me. Soon, my companion and I recovered from our exhaustion.

Protected and revived by this blessed shade, I began to reflect. The shade offered by living greenery provides, over the whole area it encompasses, a vivifying element which neutralises the suffocating element produced by solar heat. There is—I said to myself—a healing principle in green vegetation which is necessary to the maintenance of life in man and animal. This principle, derived from green vegetation under the influence of heat, made me think of Paradise, as it is metaphorically described in the Quran.

The 'green' of Paradise, I reflected, is nothing other than a spiritual Reality of which the greenery here below is a manifestation on the material level. I understood! Paradise, as it is described, is a symbolic Garden in which the greenery is eternal. This greenery attenuates for us the rays of the divine Light, which is too powerful to be bearable. In this forever green eternal Garden, the elect contemplate the Light of the divine Essence and assimilate the outpourings from the Source of eternal life.

'Oh my Brothers in God! While hoping to enter the celestial Garden tomorrow, respect here and now the great garden of earthly vegetation. Take care never to destroy without reason the smallest plant! It is a symbol which God draws from out of the earth for our instruction, our nourishment and our comfort.'

2

Lords of Misrule

Perfected is the Word of your Lord in truth and justice.

None can change His words. He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing. If you follow most people on earth they will lead you astray from God's path.

They follow only an opinion, they are but guessing.

(Quran 6:115-116)

I will tell the story again. I have told it before, more than once, because it seems to me so marvellously to the point. One winter's day during the war a friend of mine was shivering on a station platform, waiting for a train that seemed unlikely to arrive. Looking around him, he noticed a huge packing case, sprinkled with snow. A notice in large letters had been stencilled on the case, and he brushed the snow aside to see what it said. The message was as simple as it was disconcerting: "IN ORDER TO AVOID CONFUSION THE BOTTOM HAS BEEN LABELLED TOP."

To understand the problems faced by Muslims when they try to come to terms with the modern world—the dominant culture—it is essential to stand, as it were, outside the house, peering through a window at what is going on within; in other words, to see it from the point of view of a Muslim imbued with the principles of traditional Islam. To see it, in fact, from the

perspective of a traditional civilization which has not been entirely at the mercy of history.

“Upside down”, which implies its complement, “bottomside up”, is a familiar term. So is “topsy-turvy”, with its suggestion of disorder and of things out of place. This culture has reversed the beliefs and values which have sustained the Muslims and, indeed, all previous civilizations. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing may seem to be a matter of opinion. Most people today approve of this apparent liberation from the bonds of tradition and religion but, as the Quran tells us, “most people” are generally wrong. The fact remains that the reversal of values has brought us to a situation in which everything previously regarded as central to human life has become—or has come to seem—peripheral. Meanwhile the little things of the periphery clutter the centre, occupying our exclusive attention. The source of this transformation is not difficult to locate. For the Christians of earlier times, God was at the centre, in fact He was the centre. Everything else was orientated towards Him, its origin and its end. In our time and in the West, man stands firmly established at the centre and has become the measure of all things. He has brought his baggage with him.

It is a pity that so few people believe any longer in the *shaytān*, the devil, if not in a personalised shape, at least as an influence or a tendency. We need to be able to identify evil, not only when it manifests itself in genocide or torture, but in its roots and its ramifications. We need also to understand how subtly it can operate behind the scenes, seldom showing its true face. I recently came across the word “tentacular”. It is not in the dictionary, but I like it. The tentacles of western civilization have, in the course of this century, reached into every corner of the world, spreading ideas which are destructive of the traditional structures which provided the framework for ordered human living. The idea of the devil, in Islam as in Christianity, has been that of a force—an agency—which reverses values, making evil seem good, and good seem evil, just as “newspeak” in Orwell’s novel, “1984”, presents war as peace, peace as war and so on. It is hardly surprising if many Muslims, aware of the

corrosive effect which westernisation has had upon their world, see this process as "satanic".

Language itself has been twisted to suit this change of focus and, since we cannot think coherently without the use of language, our thought processes themselves have fallen into line. One particularly interesting example of the reversal of meaning is the transformation of the word "normal", a very significant word since everyone wants to be thought normal. In earlier times there was an aspiration toward a Norm, a perfection towards which we might strive but which we could scarcely hope to reach. The Christian ideal was summed up in the imitation of Christ, who represented the human Norm, as does Muhammad for the Muslim. Today normality means to be as like other people as possible. If the majority are in error, then to be in error is normal; if they are corrupt, normality takes the shape of corruption. The majority must be right. This assumption is the foundation of democracy. The trouble is that the majority changes its mind from one decade to the next.

At the same time there is, at any given moment, a high degree of unanimity. Modern society as a whole turns sharply one way or another to face in a new direction. This unanimity may not be apparent to those immersed in the culture. It is obvious to anyone who has stepped out of the frame and looks back upon what he has left behind. There are arguments and disagreements, there are what appear to be serious differences of opinion. Yet these disagreements take place against a background of assumptions accepted by almost everyone. When people say, "I think that . . ." or "I feel that . . ." they would do better to say, "It is thought that . . ." or "It is felt that . . ." They are expressing the *zeitgeist*, the assumptions taken for granted in their time. They remain within the frame, although the frame itself has moved and is constantly on the move. One word for this movement is "progress"; another is "instability", and yet another is "decadence". Why is it that Europeans have been, according to one view, the agents of progress or, according to another, the agents of worldwide instability—"Lords of Misrule?"

Two possible answers to this question come immediately to

mind. In the first place, Western culture is unique in its mixed and often mutually incompatible origins. Christianity itself contains elements which do not fit comfortably together: on the one hand the violence of Jewish history as it is presented in the Old Testament, on the other the Gospel message of peace and love. To this problematic amalgam was added the influence of Greek rationalism, so different in tone to both of these, while the ugly heritage of imperial Rome dominated the European identity until quite recently. Finally, somewhere in the background, there were the German and Scandinavian mythologies, rampantly pagan from the Christian point of view but never completely eliminated. It is little wonder that the peoples of Europe have been restless, sleeping badly at night, a prey to nightmares.

Secondly, a restless society is also an innovative one. Constantly ill at ease, it is inventive and eager to venture into the unknown. It is prepared to ignore the barriers placed by other cultures in the way of rash adventures; these fences on the edge of the abyss exist only to be trampled down. The Chinese, long ago, had the basis for what would now be called technological advance; so, more recently, did the Muslims. Both drew back from that path, as though commanded: "So far and no further!" The Europeans, taking the foundations of their science from the Muslims, had no such hesitation. They forged ahead and, in consequence, came to dominate the world. In Islam, innovation in matters of religion—which is all-encompassing—is among the gravest of sins. This is logical, since, for Muslims, the best is behind us and we must be constantly on our guard if we are not to lose our hold on it. Reversing this almost universal view of time, western culture looks to the future; the best is out there, somewhere beyond the far horizon.

The word progress needs to be qualified to have any meaning. It signifies an onward movement but does not tell us anything about the direction of this movement. Is it uphill or downhill? We speak of a progressive disease leading to death. If, however, we believe that we are on an ascending path, then we have to say by what standards ascent is measured. I remember a lit-

tle scene which I witnessed almost fifty years ago, rather as though it was an episode seen in a theatre when I and the world were young. The setting was a Jamaican waterfront bar, the actors a group of men, all of them black except for one "poor white" in a crumpled linen suit, the descendent of indentured labourers who were shipped to Jamaica in the eighteenth century. The white man, bleary eyed but determined, asserted that his race was superior to all others. They alone were responsible for human progress. His black friends, taking this in good part, asked him to prove it. He answered them triumphantly. "Who," he asked, "invented the motor car?" What more proof did they need? His friends slapped him on the back and bought him another rum.

Those who believe in an ascending progress may find more sophisticated arguments to prove their point, but it is still technological advance that truly convinces them and is thought to convince others. They may add that human nature has not kept pace with progress, hardly aware that this admission immediately undermines their argument. They may talk of some institution, such as the British monarchy, having to be dragged "kicking and screaming" into the twentieth—very soon the twenty-first—century without, for one moment, considering whether a kick and a scream might not be the most appropriate response from a swimmer dragged down by his companions. "Would you exchange that which is higher for that which is lower?" asks the Quran. Every judgement is made on the basis of a belief in progress combined with a vague reference to "human evolution". Change is therefore good in itself since it is assumed to be for the better. Change involves the destruction of what came before, so destruction, however painful, is also for the better. But, if faster motor cars are not the sole criterion, how is progress to be defined?

For Muslims there can be only one test by which to assess change. Does it promote piety—awareness of the divine Presence—or diminish it? Does it lead an increasing number of men and women to the gates of Paradise or does it encourage them to stray from "God's path"? Does it reinforce the divinely

revealed Law or does it blur the distinction between what is commanded and what is forbidden? There are, of course, other considerations but they must take a lower place in a fixed order of priorities. An increase in life expectancy is, obviously, a good thing, but it is worthless if these additional years do not lead to an increasing awareness of the divine Reality which we are soon to meet. There is nothing inherently wrong with the comforts provided by the modern world, better hygiene, better drainage, more convenient means of transport, but these count for nothing if their soft embrace encourages us to forget our origin and our end. Muslims also believe, in accordance with what the Quran teaches, that departure from the human Norm, when it reaches a certain degree, leads inevitably to destruction: "Have they not seen how many generations We destroyed before them?" These generations, these tribes or peoples, were given sufficient rope to hang themselves and they fashioned a noose for their own necks.

It is not only Muslims who fear for the world we have constructed for ourselves over the past three or four centuries. The Catholic philosopher Gustave Thibon compares modern civilization to a train which is hurtling towards the abyss or towards the buffers. With every mile that it covers the air-conditioning is improved and the seats become softer. It offers every convenience except for one. There is no alarm bell. Even if there were, who would ring it? And, if it was rung, is there a driver in the cab who might apply the brakes? It can only be the wind of "caprice" that drives the train ever forward and ever faster.

In the course of this headlong advance there has been, according to one point of view, a tremendous expansion of the human condition; from another, there has been a shrinkage. In fact both points of view are correct, according to where you stand. The expansion is obvious, not only in terms of comfort and convenience, but also in the possibilities open to human beings, compared with which medieval life appears intolerably narrow and limited. But expansion has been on the horizontal level, the level of the psyche, the mind and the material world.

Nothing is without its price, and the price paid for this enrichment of human life has been an almost complete loss of the vertical dimension. Quantity has replaced quality and multiplicity has overcome unity. Heaven is out of sight and God Himself has, only too often, been dragged down from the Empyrean. To use a term coined by J. B. Priestley in a book of reflections published during the war, *Midnight in the Desert*, modern man has become a "flat-earther" for whom only the visible world is real. The supernatural is now associated with little more than psychic phenomena, and reality is situated here and nowhere else. The very idea that our human world might be no more than a shadow cast by what lies infinitely beyond and above it has become meaningless, indeed that invisible but all-encompassing reality itself seems shadowy. It is not only values that have been turned "topsy-turvy"; the notion of what is real has suffered the same fate.

All this is bound up with the loss of continuity mentioned earlier, the rejection of the past (which actually existed) in favour of a future that does not exist and may never exist. Fifty years ago it was customary to refer to "primitive" tribes and sometimes to all non-white peoples as savages. There is a curious irony in this since the term would be better applied to ourselves in the late twentieth-century. A member of the simplest tribe, living in what are described as Stone Age conditions, has learned the history of his people, their myths and their values, at his grandmother's knee. He does not have to ask what—if anything—is the meaning of life. He has been told this secret, and he has been imbued from an early age with a culture which goes back to ancestors far closer to the source of things than he can ever hope to be. He tries to conform to the pattern of life exemplified by those semi-divine ancestors, just as the Muslim tries to conform to the pattern exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad. He is a whole man and his womenfolk are no less comfortable in their role, for this too was "given" from above. For them as for him, reality is what lies behind appearances, unseen but all-powerful. There is something both sinister and tragic in the situation of so many people in Europe or America

today who float, as it were, on the surface of the ocean, ignorant, unconnected and without a meaningful past. Disinherited, they do not know who they are, where they came from or where they are going. For them, everything is fluid, formless and meaningless. They are, quite simply, savages.

But they are not alone in being orphaned. It is more than sixty years since René Guénon published his book on *The Crisis of the Modern World*. Believing—and arguing with great force—that we are all living in the decadent age which precedes the end of time, he defined two very different forms of decadence. The first, exemplified by western civilization, was akin to a raging fever; the second, which he located in the East, was more like a degenerative disease. The situation has changed in the intervening years. The East, in fact the “Third World” as a whole, has caught the fever, as is already implied by the term “developing countries”. Development means neither more nor less than westernisation. Muslims are, for the most part, convinced that they can take on board the science, the technology and the administrative techniques of the West without being invaded by the ideologies and value system which gave birth to these apparent benefits. There are three particular reasons for this. In the first place they have no alternative if the Islamic peoples are to survive in the modern world. Secondly, they are dazzled by the power of the dominant civilization, its achievements and its glitter. Finally, basic human nature being the same everywhere, there is an element in every one of us that rejoices in the falling of barriers, the loosening of restraints and the freedom to stray far from the “straight path”. Western civilization is nothing if not exciting, though this is, precisely, a feverish excitement.

When, as sometimes happens, I talk to Muslim students in Britain or North America, I am able to denounce many aspects of contemporary Islam and to pour scorn on the behaviour of many of our fellow Muslims without upsetting my audience. They see this as valid criticism, being themselves deeply troubled by the shortcomings, political and social, of the community. It is only when I dare to question the benefits of science and

to cast doubt on the validity of the scientific method that I meet with opposition. They are ashamed that Islam, after such a promising start in scientific discovery and speculation, lagged behind the West. They feel that, in embracing modern science and technology, they are simply reclaiming what should always have been theirs. I think they are wrong. Islamic science was holistic. This term, which is of recent origin, is ambiguous. Sometimes it refers only to the recognition of inter-dependence between body and mind. It may then be extended to indicate the wholeness of the world as such, the earth, its vegetation, the animal creation and mankind. So far so good, but not far enough. The vertical dimension is still missing. If we speak of "holism" with reference to the Islamic perspective, then it can only refer to the governing principle of Islam, *tawhīd*; the Oneness of God and the unity of all that He has created.

For Muslims there can be no separate compartments, self-enclosed and self-sufficient. Everything that exists is inter-dependent and everything is dependent upon God. It is therefore futile to study one particular set of phenomena in isolation: not only futile, but misleading. They cannot be understood if they are amputated from the whole which infinitely transcends them and placed, as it were, on a dissection slab. Moreover, the Quranic revelation is paramount. Any attempt to study phenomena without reference to the revelation is doomed to failure because it has broken the link with Reality. It invites deception, and the Quran suggests that God "deceives" those who ask to be deceived (or He allows them to deceive themselves); He "plots" against those who plot to evade Him. Islamic science—that is to say the physical sciences—could not be independent either of cosmology or of metaphysics, for the lower forms of knowledge are necessarily dependent upon the higher forms. The Muslim scientist might legitimately be concerned with the way in which things function in the material world, but his primary concern was necessarily with their meaning as "signs of God". These familiar lines from William Blake could well have come from an Islamic source:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the Palm of your Hand,
And Eternity in an Hour.

The scientific method, as it has developed in western culture, is forbidden to take account of "eternity", which is outside the time process, or "infinity", which is beyond every possible series of numbers. That is obvious. But it is forbidden also to take account of the other-worldly dimensions that are like veils between the One and the many. It reduces the objects of its study to empty shells, deprived of all meaning and then, with good reason, declares them to be meaningless. It is obliged to do this. Only so can the world's richness be reduced to pure number and assessed in terms of mathematics. This might, of course, be one method among many others for dealing with phenomena. As such it could claim a limited legitimacy. But it is now the only acceptable method, and this is demonstrated by the misuse of the word "science" itself. This word means—or used to mean—knowledge in the widest, the highest and the deepest sense; all possible knowledge. The implication is clear and unmistakable. The physical sciences are the only basis upon which truth can be established. Everything else is mysticism, speculation or poetry. In relation to what men and women have believed through the ages and what Muslims still believe, this is a monstrous claim.

This claim has, to some extent, been undermined by the best among the physicists in the twentieth century. Quantum mechanics has deprived matter of the solidity it was thought to possess. Scientific knowledge is no longer knowledge of things as they are "out there" in an objective world but only of things in relation to an observer. In a sense, we see what we expect to see in accordance with our own mental patterns. The rigid distinction between subject (the observer) and object (the thing observed) has broken down. Technological success is taken to prove that the scientific view is in accordance with reality. All this actually proves is that the material world conforms to the

idea we have of it. Meanwhile, the physicists have penetrated into very strange regions.

In the words of the American writer, Huston Smith: "In these never-never, through-the-looking-glass abodes, parallel lines meet, curves get you from star to star more quickly than do Euclid's straight lines, a particle passes through different apertures simultaneously without dividing, time shrinks and expands, electrons jump orbit without traversing the intervening distance, and particles fired in opposite directions at a speed approximating the speed of light separate from each other no faster than the speed of light." According to Robert Oppenheimer, the position of an electron does not change with time, and yet its position does not stay the same; it is not at rest, but neither is it in motion. Common sense cannot deal with such paradoxes, and, when something of this sort was put to him, the French novelist François Mauriac remarked: "What this professor says is far more incredible than what we poor Christians believe." It is as though the physicists have been dealing with a series of Chinese dolls or boxes, each small doll or box containing a smaller one, and each smaller one another that is still smaller. In the end they must come to emptiness, and that is precisely what the material world is; a blank screen upon which are projected patterns from above.

But all this is far too abstruse and too paradoxical to mean anything to the general public. Science and the scientific perspective no longer have much connection. The latter, "scientism", is still rooted in the simplicities of the last century, which are taken for granted as being self-evident. The theory of evolution for example—Darwinism or neo-Darwinism—appears so obviously true that it requires no proof. How else could species have originated? The many possible answers to this question no longer seem credible because the mindset of our time has been cut off from the past. It can no longer accommodate alternative theories. It is marooned in a kind of time warp which imprisons us and from which very few escape, furnished with self-evident propositions which are the basis for the thoughts, opinions and feelings of its inmates. Reason, since it cannot operate in a vac-

uum, makes use of these propositions as its starting point. In the present age and in the West, although to an increasing extent throughout the world, scientism dominates the scene. It represents a mortal threat to the community of Islam. Revealed truths cannot cohabit with it.

Since I am laying considerable weight on the term "scientism", I had better define what I mean by it. The physical scientist observes phenomena and constructs ever changing theories on the basis of what he has observed—or thinks he has observed, since we can never be sure that things in themselves are as they appear to us. He assumes that, because something occurs a thousand times under laboratory conditions, it must always have happened in that way and always will. But he knows that he is dealing with probabilities, not with certainties. Scientism, on the other hand, is an ideology, a coherent view of the world and of the human condition derived from the popular understanding of science as it was some years ago. Scientific practice leaves room—or should leave room—for a touch of scepticism, although it cannot escape the tendency to transfer its inherent limitations to reality as such, resulting in what might be called a worm's eye view of the heavens and the earth.

Scientism, however, is dogmatic, taking theories for facts and assuming that what science claims to prove or, more often, to disprove is the final word. This is scientific fundamentalism, miopic and inadequate, the inflation of a partial view of reality. If it tolerates religion this is treated as a private opinion which lacks any convincing proof, that is to say any scientific proof. In debates between religion and science on television or radio, the religious participants, being men and women of our time, accept the terms of engagement set by their adversary and are therefore defeated even before the debate begins.

In the nineteenth century, Thomas Huxley (Darwin's faithful disciple) set about quite deliberately to create a "Priesthood of Science". His aim was to replace Christianity with a view of the world based upon his own prejudices, stealing the authority of the priesthood and bestowing it upon himself and his asso-

ciates. Under cover of a campaign to assert the truth, as he saw it, he was concerned primarily with power; power over men's minds. Truth was a secondary consideration. He claimed that Galileo had been tortured by the ecclesiastical authorities, which was untrue. He said that the clergy had opposed the use of chloroform in child-birth, which was untrue, and that they had been against the introduction of modern sanitation, which was equally untrue. There was more of the same, and facts which conflicted with this new gospel were consigned to the trash can. When it came to propaganda on behalf of an ideology the Nazis might have learned from him. But he was believed. Little has changed since then. His successors in the late twentieth century—propagandists such as Richard Dawkins and Desmond Morris—are treated with the respect once accorded to the priesthood.

The question one has to ask is why the majority of people in the West have been so credulous. It is commonly said that modern science, as it developed from the seventeenth-century onwards, changed the way people understand the world. It might equally well be said that a change in the way people understood the world made it possible for this science to develop in the way it did. A loss of the vertical dimension together with an impoverishment of faith and of the human imagination had to take place before a science confined to the horizontal could take root. This loss and this impoverishment did not occur in the Islamic community, which is why Islamic science, having reached a certain point, dried up. An invisible barrier had been reached and it was left in place. Educated Muslims today, dazzled by western achievements, are quite unaware of this. The so-called "fundamentalists" embrace technology with enthusiasm, while rejecting the spiritual dimensions of their Faith. They too are flat-earthers.

Muslims, although passionately concerned with the limits which religion sets to human behaviour and determined not to allow the degenerate practices of the West to invade their community, set no limits to technological advance. It seldom occurs to the Doctors of the Law that the categories of *ḥalāl* (what is

permitted) and *ḥarām* (what is forbidden) might apply in this field as elsewhere. They are greatly concerned if a woman shows a lock of hair from under her veil or scarf. They study the medication on offer to establish whether it contains a minute quantity of alcohol, which would make it *ḥarām*, and they are very firm in prohibiting any kind of dancing. They condemn western permissiveness without attempting to locate its root causes and examining these in the light of Islamic doctrine. They are comparable to the "blind guides" mentioned in the Bible who "strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel". Meanwhile the "camels" grow larger and larger and will soon be transformed into creatures unlike anything previously seen on earth.

The techniques of genetic engineering and transplant surgery advance year by year. It will soon be possible to conduct experiments which, until recently, belonged to the realm of science fiction or horror movies. The test-tube mating of man and monkey, the transplanting of an ass's head onto a human body and the replacement of most bodily organs with mechanical devices are only a few of the possibilities that lie ahead. In Europe and the United States such matters are the province of "ethics committees". The word "ethics" is—or should be—suspect. It is used to avoid any connection with a religious perspective or with any set of values that is other than "rational". In Quranic terms, "they follow only an opinion".

Unfortunately there is no such thing as a rational morality, unless there is agreement as to the meaning and purpose of human life. Ethics are inevitably dependent upon the way people feel at this moment in time. These feelings are in constant flux. What was unthinkable a few years ago is acceptable today, and what today arouses feelings of revulsion will, before long, be no less acceptable. Religious morality sets limits which do not change with passing fashions in public opinion. Ethical philosophy is governed by these fashions since it has no other yardstick by which to judge right and wrong. Christians believe—or believed—that, given a free choice between the highest and the lowest, most people will choose the lowest. Original sin makes this almost inevitable. Muslims are convinced that the same

choice will be made unless there is guidance from above, guidance enshrined in the religious Law. That is why the Quran is called "The Criterion": it sets the limits beyond which human-kind steps onto the slippery slope leading to perdition. It distinguishes between right and wrong because neither reason nor sentiment offer any certainty as to this distinction.

Our contemporaries, considering with great solemnity the ethical implications of the latest advance in science and technology, make one think of a blushing maiden, assuming that such maidens still exist, who knows quite well that she will surrender in the end but, out of modesty, pretends resistance. Perhaps she really believes that she will go no further—"No, Sir. Unhand me!"—but the cynical observer knows better. He has seen it all before.

So will she be happy? Shall we be happy? This is supposed to be the overriding question. The Quran reminds us that "each one has a goal towards which he turns." If modern western civilization has a goal, this can only be "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". Human feelings, however, have very little connection with reason or logic. People who have every reason to be happy are found to be miserable, while those who live under conditions which should make them utterly miserable are frequently happy. The "pursuit of happiness", an essential element in the American dream, sounds like a fine ideal. Unfortunately this particular will-o'-the-wisp has a way of escaping all pursuit. The faster we run the more cunningly it evades us, only to appear in corners where we never expected to find it. There is a story I was told which may or not be true but which is worth telling none the less. It concerns a young French anthropologist who decided to study a hill tribe in a remote part of India. He went to live with them for two years and, in an effort to enter into their feelings and share their lives, cut himself off from all contact with the outside world.

He was immediately astonished by the cheerfulness of these people. Their conditions were harsh, although they had enough to eat, and their possessions few. Their lifespans were relatively short, they accepted—with grief but resignation—the death

of many infants soon after birth, and such diseases as they contracted were usually fatal. Yet their joy was infectious. He shared in it. Since they had no access to television, they did not know that they were "disadvantaged" and thought that everyone in the world lived much as they did. They laughed often and serious quarrels were rare. After two years he returned to Paris. On the aircraft he was occupied in writing his notes but, in the airport coach, he began to look around him. He was seized with terror. It was obvious from the expressions of his fellow travellers that some dreadful disaster had occurred in his absence. There was not a smile to be seen. No one spoke to anyone else, avoiding eye contact as though afraid to face their shared grief. He himself did not dare ask what was wrong, knowing that he would find out soon enough and anxious to avoid the moment of disclosure. All that had happened, of course, was that he had forgotten the ways of his own people.

In terms of what is now the general opinion, those tribals had no right to be happy. They should have resented their lot and demanded their right to a better life. It seems that happiness is no longer the paramount consideration. Something called "justice" takes precedence. At a crucial meeting in the late 1930s the leader of the independence movement in Jamaica, Norman Manley, discussed with his colleagues the problems that lay ahead. They had no difficulty in identifying their greatest problem. This was the happiness of the people they meant to save from poverty and oppression. Without discontent there could be no advance. Jamaicans must be persuaded that they ought to be unhappy, had no right to be happy until their rights were asserted and won. In due course they became unhappy, bitter and violent, but they were still poor. This scenario has been repeated all over the world.

It takes different forms in one place or another. In Britain, notorious for the vice of envy, the demand for "rights" frequently takes precedence over every other need. It is a hunger that can never be appeased since those who make this demand, having entered upon a regime of discontent and resentment, will never be satisfied. In the United States we find a variation in

the scenario. Every misfortune, accident or "act of God" is somebody else's fault and therefore grounds for litigation. Resentment is then directed at destiny, personified in the individual or the organisation to which blame has been attached. This is, perhaps, an exercise in the "pursuit of happiness". In both cases, happiness is believed to be one of the basic "human rights", and the Quranic statement that, when misfortune strikes, "it is from yourselves" makes no sense at all.

Islam teaches resignation, which is a state of happiness that rises above the blows of fate. "And indeed We shall try you," says the Quran, "with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and crops, but give good news to the steadfast who say, when misfortune strikes them: 'To God we belong and unto Him we return'. These are they upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy. These are the rightly-guided." One of the principal virtues characterising the good Muslim is patience (*ṣabr*), and in the Quran God is specifically named "the Patient" (*al-Ṣabūr*). Islam commands us also to seek justice, but in a spirit of detachment and in the interests of society as a whole. It permits no strident demands for what we think are our rights as individuals. We cannot be judges in our own cause.

So, if rights are more important than happiness in the western scale of values, is there any other principle that tops the list? I think that there is. The modern obsession with health and safety reflects the belief that this brief life is all we have and that the darkness of death must be held at bay by every available means. Medical technology provides increasingly effective means for postponing the inevitable. The result of these advances has no connection with happiness, quite the contrary. People whose bodies have signalled that they are ready to close down are subjected to tortures little different to those inflicted in lands where torture is a part of state policy. This is said to be in the patient's interest. It is, more often, no more than an opportunity for medical practitioners to prove their skill in the interest of "progress". Here again, the Muslim must take a different view. Life is a gift to be cherished and to be used in accordance with the pattern set by revelation and in

accordance with the example of the Prophet, but what comes after is incomparably better. "The life of the world," says the Quran, "is only a passtime and a sport. Better by far is the abode of the hereafter. Have you then no sense?" The good man has nothing to fear when his time comes, and the bad man, still hoping for forgiveness, may be fortunate if he dies before his sins can accumulate still further. The desire to prolong life beyond its natural term can only demonstrate a lack of faith.

That is the Islamic point of view. The westerner, if he has read the Quran, may quote it, saying: "To you your way, and to me mine." What business is it of Muslims, he wonders, to find fault with the magnificent achievements of modern civilization? Can they do better in the light of their own traditions? He thinks not, and the evidence appears to support him. The Islamic world trails behind, only too anxious to catch up if it can. That, in fact, is the point. The Muslim *ummah*, the community, is engulfed by the inexorable spread of westernisation. The convictions, the values and the illusions which gave rise to this process are carried, like an invisible infection, with its products. Was it not with the end of colonialism that the real invasion got under way? Muslims have an obligation to study the roots, the "hidden agendas" and also the costs of what they prefer to call "modernisation" because this term appears neutral, independent of its origins. If they cannot avoid it—and, in practical terms, they cannot—then at least they must try to understand it and take account of the beliefs which made it possible.

This becomes increasingly difficult. Science and technology are now out of control. The speed with which they are developing increases incrementally and makes cool, considered judgement almost impossible. But we should remember Thibon's image of the speeding train. Someone has to sound the alarm before it is too late, and the West will not do it. Can the Muslims?

3

The Earth's Complaint

When the earth is shaken by a mighty shaking, and the earth yields up her burdens, and man cries out 'What ails her?'—On that Day she will tell her tales, as thy Lord will have inspired her. On that Day mankind will issue, separately, to be shown their deeds. Whosoever has done an atom's weight of good will see it then, and whosoever has done an atom's weight of ill will see it then.

(Quran 99:1-8)

Reinforcing the implications of this short *Sura*, the Prophet is reported to have said that, when the Last Day dawns, the earth herself will bear witness to everything that man has done. It might be said that we leave our fingerprints upon all that we touch, and they remain in place long after we have gone on our way. We forget so much of the past, but the past is still there and cannot be wiped out, unless God—under His Name “the Effacer” (*al-ʿAfū*)—chooses to erase it from our record. But how can this earth, upon which we walk so carelessly, be said to bear witness against us? The Quranic answer is that God will inspire it to reveal its secrets, but still one asks: how could this be? There are several possible answers to the question, but I will suggest only one. Among the divine Names revealed in the Quran is *al-Ḥayy*, the “Ever-Living” or, quite simply, “Life”. Since the Creator lends His attributes to

everything that He creates, there can be nothing in existence that does not possess a kind of life, even if we do not understand in what sense to take this. Like all the other rigid distinctions which apply in this world, that between the animate and the inanimate is provisional, not absolute.

This brings me, once again, to the problem of terminology and the way in which words change their meaning. The word "psychic" has come to refer to fortune-tellers, spooks and things that go bump in the night. Yet, when it takes a suffix and becomes "psychology", we know at once that we are dealing, not with magic but with the science of the soul as practised by scientists who do not believe in the soul. The realm of the psyche, the "subtle realm" as it is sometimes called, is not open to sense-perception but that does not mean that it is supernatural. It is the unseen face of the natural world. For Muslims it is also the realm of the *jinn*, those mysterious beings who form communities, as we do, and are equally capable of virtue or vice. The whole of nature has an unseen face, a "subtle" aspect of which we are generally unaware, although we speak sometimes of the "spirit" of a place without realising that that this "spirit" is just as real as the place in its physical presence. It is upon this hidden side of the natural world that we leave our inerradicable imprint.

There are no hiding places. We are, as the Quran reminds us in many different ways, surrounded by a host of witnesses, ranging from God Himself and His angels to the earth we tread. We can have no secrets from them. I have wondered sometimes if this is why the Arabs tend to be so secretive. Knowing that they are observed from every side, from above and from below, they treasure the only privacy they have, placing a discrete veil between themselves and their fellow men and women. In contrast, people in the West today eagerly confess all, not only to their friends but also on television and in the press. Believing themselves alone, self-enclosed and unobserved, they feel the need for self-exposure as a way of escaping from their isolation.

The spoor which we leave behind us on the earth is, however, only one side of the relationship we have with everything

around us, a relationship of reciprocity. We are not insulated but, as it were, porous. We soak up elements from whatever we see, hear or touch, absorbing them into our substance. When we treat the natural world as an object to be exploited and conquered, we are damaging ourselves. The environmentalists are, no doubt, correct when they predict that our abuse of the earth will have disastrous consequences for humanity as a whole, but that should be the least of our worries. The consequences are on many different levels; the higher the level, the more deadly they are likely to be. The Quran commands: "Work not confusion in the earth after the fair ordering thereof." When it says also that the earth and everything in it is created for our use, this does not imply a transfer of ownership; it is a trust delegated to us, and we are answerable to the "Owner of all things" for our stewardship. The Muslim is reminded again and again, both in the Quran and in the recorded sayings of the Prophet, that greed and wastefulness are among the major sins. We may use what is made so readily available to us for our sustenance, but that is all, and even that little is no more than theft if we have abandoned our human function and opted out of the universal prayer which carries the whole of creation back towards its source.

The Muslim is assured that the whole earth is a mosque for him. The walled buildings to which he is summoned for prayer are simply a convenience. The fields, the forests and the desert are equally fitting as places of prayer and therefore demand the same respect that is accorded to a conventional mosque. The link with heaven can be established anywhere and everywhere ("Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God"). One of the essential features of Islam is expressed in the Arabic word *ādāb*, which means "manners", "courtesy" or "correct behaviour", and it goes hand-in-hand with the dignity which the Muslim is required to demonstrate under all circumstances. God's Viceregent on earth is, after all, no mean figure, whether he is in robes or in rags. To show good manners, not only to our fellows but also towards everything that God has created, is a part of faith, for everything bears the imprint of His hand. The

man or woman who stands, bows and prostrates in the midst of nature is a member of a universal congregation, joining in a universal prayer. "All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God," says the Quran.

This is such a constant theme in the Quranic revelation that one can only be astonished by the fact that so many Muslims—unless they are Sufis—ignore it. "Have you not seen that all who are in the heavens and the earth glorify God, and the birds in their flight? Indeed He knows the worship and the praise of each, and God is aware of what they do." Moreover, He "disdains not to coin the similitude even of a gnat." How much greater the similitude of a lion or a swan, a mountain or a tree. Again, "See! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of night and day . . . and the water which God sends down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death, and dispersing all kinds of animals therein, and the ordering of the winds, and the clouds obedient between heaven and earth: (in these) are signs for people who have sense." Whatsoever He has created in the earth "of different colours" conveys a message to us. So: "Look therefore upon the imprints of God's mercy." They are everywhere.

The earth's beauties—its "ornaments"—are, the Quran tells us, a "reminder to mankind", a reminder to those who are disposed to remember their origin and their end. For such as these, the natural world sparkles with light, but it would be dark if unperceived by man as the central being in creation, that is to say the link between what is above and what is below. Here again there is reciprocity. This world is not some chance agglomeration of material atoms, unrelated to our innermost being. It gives and it receives. We receive and we give. There is intercourse and mutuality; the objective world and human subjectivity might be compared to two circles which intersect rather than float, separate and divided, quite independent of each other. This is already implicit in the Islamic principle of *tawhīd*, the unbroken unity of all that exists. It is implicit also in the word "cosmos" (as opposed to "universe", a neutral term that implies nothing). The cosmos is, by definition, an ordered

whole, organised and harmonious, in which the parts are interdependent. As such it has meaning and, as the English word "cosmetics" suggests, it is beautiful.

But to perceive, even dimly, the "signs of God" around us—those signs to which the Quran refers repeatedly—requires a child's eye preserved in maturity. The Prophet is said to have prayed: "Lord, increase me in marvelling!" This is how a child sees the world, fresh from the hand of God and full of marvels but, with the passage of the years and the passing anxieties which time imposes, the vision fades; yet, in the words of the Quran, "It is not the eyes that grow blind, but the hearts within the breasts that grow blind." Imbued with faith, the heart may still regain its sight, its insight. After the Call to Prayer, when Muslims have assembled in tightly packed ranks behind their Imam, their prayer leader, they are required to spend a few moments divesting themselves of the day's cares and all those urgent matters which had seized their attention, turning to face their Creator and address Him. It sometimes happens that the Imam turns to advise them: "Pray as if this is your last prayer!" So it will be for those fated to die before the next prayer is called, but one might equally say: "Pray as if this is your first prayer!" Every time we turn to God is a new beginning, a rebirth, and so it should be when we look, with awakened hearts, upon the world around us.

In doing so we have to remember that nothing is what it seems, or rather nothing is only what it seems. As with the verses of the Quran (the same Arabic word is used both for these verses and for the "signs" in nature), there is a literal meaning and, at the same time, a deeper meaning. The verses are sacred, and so are the "signs". It is here that we come to one the most dangerous symptoms of alienation; the loss of the sense of the sacred in the modern world, a loss—a deprivation—which affects the Muslim *ummah* as it does the West. The Quran condemns those who separate that which God has joined, and the fragmentation which we see today is an obvious example of this severing of connections. The French critic of our technological civilization Jacques Ellul, has pointed out that, in the past,

man's deepest experience of the sacred was his immediate contact with the natural world. It is almost impossible fully to comprehend religion as such—or the great myths that bore witness to the unity of the cosmos—when nature has become remote and wholly “other”. As Ellul says, the sense of the sacred withers when it is no longer rejuvenated by experience. The city dweller's awareness dries up for lack of support in his new experience with the artificial world of urban technology.

The loss of harmony between man and his natural environment is but an aspect of the loss of harmony between man and his Creator. Those who turn their backs on their Creator and forget Him can no longer feel at home in creation. They assume the role of bacteria which ultimately destroy the body they have invaded. “God's Viceregent on earth” is then no longer the custodian of nature and, having lost his function, he is a stranger who cannot recognise the landmarks or conform to the customs of this place; alienated—in the literal sense of “having become an alien”—he can see it only as raw material to be exploited. He may find riches and comfort in exploitation, but not happiness. He can never hope to sing with the Persian poet, Sa^cdī:

I am joyous with the cosmos,
For the cosmos receives its joy from Him;
I love the world,
For the world belongs to Him.

We are, according to the Quran, “the poor” in relation to God, needy from the moment of birth till the end of our lives, and another of His Quranic Names is *al-Kāfi*, “the Satisfier of all needs”. The source of this hunger, inherent in our substance as human beings, is the need for Him, however it may be disguised or sidetracked by worldly desires. Since He is the only ultimate satisfier of desire it follows that, when we turn our backs and walk away, we will be perpetually unsatisfied and, still seeking to assuage our hungers, exceed all bounds. Until the development of technology this may have harmed only the perpetrator, but it did little harm to the earth. Our range has now been extended immeasurably, and we have become the

great destroyers. One of the Buddhist hells is inhabited by huge creatures who were once men and women, ravaged by greed, but now their mouths are no bigger than a pin-head. Surrounded by a feast of nourishment, they can take in only the tiniest crumbs.

Today, whether we are Muslims or Christians, we seem to have lost the key to the language of "signs", God's language. It has become both incomprehensible and irrelevant. This is particularly dangerous for the Muslim for whom the Quran must eventually become a partially closed book if the constant references to the natural world as a tissue of "signs" no longer coincide with his experience or touch his heart. That world, when seen through the window of a motor car or from a height of 30,000 feet, has nothing to say to us, even if it presents a pretty picture. Moreover, since everything has to be spelled out nowadays, it is typical of the modern mindset to ask: what exactly do these "signs" mean? If they could be expressed in words they would be redundant. They touch us at a deeper level than articulate speech, but this is already so with the Quran which, when it is recited to those who have no knowledge of Arabic, still moves their hearts though they understand nothing in terms of human language. So God has at His disposal two languages, the one composed of words and the other of "signs", although it could also be said that, in practice, He has three means of communication, the third being our personal destinies. These too contain messages for us if we are prepared to understand, and even the most arid sceptic, when struck down by bitter misfortune, asks: "Why? Why me?" He is not supposed to believe that life has any meaning, but he believes none the less, or rather he knows in his heart what his mind denies.

To speak of the natural world is to speak of beauty. Since "God is beautiful" (according to a *hadīth*), beauty must in some sense be universally present as He is everywhere present. The common saying that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is one of those half-truths which can either enlighten or deceive us according to our disposition. A particular individual or a particular culture will find the sacred in places where it is hidden

from others who, in their turn, will discover it elsewhere. The same applies to the perception of what is beautiful. This does not make it any less real, any less objective. But saying that "God is beautiful, He loves beauty" is a statement about the nature of Reality, and it indicates something very important. Just as good and evil are on different levels—the former closer to the Real than the latter—so beauty and ugliness belong to different orders. Ugliness is not one of a pair, like hot and cold, black and white. It represents the spoiling of beauty, the unmaking of what has been well made. It might be compared to a stain on the fabric and belongs to that class of things which, the Quran tells us, last for but a short while and are then extinguished. This is why the Muslim, when he encounters things that are ugly or unseemly, tends to look away, not because he wishes to deny their existence but because not everything that exists is worth his attention. There is a story of Jesus in the Islamic tradition which makes this point. He was walking with his disciples when they passed a dead dog. "How it stinks!" said his companions. Jesus replied: "How white its teeth are!"

What is the beauty of nature if not an act of adoration, in that it reflects the divine Beauty? "Do you not see," asks the Quran, "that everything in the heavens and all that is in the earth pays adoration to God, as do the sun and the moon and the stars, the hills and the trees and the beasts . . . ?" There is a Turkish story of a spiritual teacher who sent his pupils to gather flowers for the house. All but one returned with the finest blooms they could find. One, however, was gone for a long time and, when he returned, held in his hand only a single, faded bloom. "When I went out to pick the flowers," he said, "I found them all singing the praises of their Creator and I dared not interrupt them. Finally I saw one that had finished her song, and this is the one that I have brought you." It would be a mistake to regard this little story as a poetic fancy. The blood that courses through our bodies may lend itself to poetry and to myth, but the fact remains that it has a very important practical function. When the Quran speaks of this perpetual and universal adoration it is doing neither more nor less than telling us

what happens, the down-to-earth reality of the situation. Our subjective awareness—or unawareness—cannot alter the facts.

If there is nothing in existence that is only and exclusively what it seems to be, then everything has its own particular significance. I can imagine someone saying: "This is too much! Women's rights, animal rights, even plant rights, and now you talk about the rights of sticks and stones! Where will it end?" It has no end. That is the only possible answer. We did not make the world, we do not own it. You cannot, the Quran reminds us, create even a fly. This vast picture-book, filled with the "signs" of God, is what it is. Appearances, as we are so often told, are deceptive and, if we float only on the surface of our world, then we are indeed deceived. There is always more to it than that, then more and then still more, until you have plumbed the depths and found—behind the "seventy-thousand veils of light and darkness"—the Face of God. The modern age is frequently condemned for its "materialism". Perhaps it is not materialistic enough, that is to say it no longer seeks, beyond the shifting surface of material objects—these clouds that constantly form and re-form—what it is that they both veil and reveal.

Two further Names by which God has defined Himself in the Quran are *al-Muḥīṭ*; the "All-Embracing" or the "All-Surrounding" and *al-Zāhir*, which means "the Outward". It follows that, ultimately and behind all the appearances, He is our "environment" and there is no other. But that is an intellectual statement which might seem to rob the things we see and touch of their due measure of reality. While we are in this life, situated amidst the "veils", they are the only reality we know, reflecting after their fashion the greater realities which remain hidden, too bright for our perception. It is their meaning rather than their material structure that should be our prime concern. The mechanism of a clock may be of practical interest, but the purpose of the clock is to tell the time.

The very sounds of nature may add to this universe of meaning, this flood of communication between Creator and creation. I remember a certain Sheikh who was about to deliver his sermon when the thunder sounded, rolling on and on. He fell silent

and kept silent even after the heavens had spoken. What could he have added? But we must be very patient and very attentive to catch, through hearing as through sight, that note of universal praise. When the Muslim is at prayer in the early hours of the day or in the act of remembering God, bird song, the ocean's roar or the drumming of rain do not disturb him, on the contrary they contribute to his remembrance. But the noise of cars or machinery introduces into the harmony of his worship a discord against which he is obliged to struggle.

Prayer and contemplation, supported by a cosmic environment which, in a sense, cries out to be seen, heard and understood are central to the religious life. But there is also involvement, for which we are still situated at a distance from the natural world. There are children in Europe and America who are not even aware of the fact that the packaged meat on supermarket shelves is the flesh of living creatures or that the vegetables from which every grain of earth has been washed once grew in open fields and took their time to grow. The patience of the agriculturist is unimaginable to an increasingly impatient generation. Their needs are satisfied in relation to the moving hands of a clock, not by the seasons or by the discipline imposed by the weather. They are "out of touch", and this phrase can have a profound significance. It represents remoteness, separation and—once again—alienation. In towns and cities the stars are blotted out by street lighting, their brightness hidden and their message dimmed. Here too, it is not only contemplation but also involvement that has been lost. "He it is," says the Quran, "who has set for you the stars that you may guide your course by them amidst the darkness of the land and the sea." We no longer need them. They can be left to the specialists who talk in terms of light years and have nothing to offer that would help us on our way through the darkness that has penetrated within our breasts and within our minds.

This, of course, is "progress", and it is certainly convenience, although one of the ironies of the situation is that our contemporaries in the West, freed from the labour once required of them in their encounter with the natural world and their

dependence upon it, now have to work harder than ever as ciphers in the industrial or bureaucratic machine to afford the lifestyle to which they have a "right". This work offers no spiritual nourishment. It is not expected to do so. It provides no contact with reality on any level and no involvement with the "signs" that point our way and remind us of who we are. An almost superhuman effort would be required for us to remember that we are God's "Viceregents", responsible for our province just as the farmer is responsible for his stock and his crops. We keep the wheels turning, but they turn to no purpose except to keep the speeding train on tracks which lead nowhere. Eventually it will hit the buffers, the invisible limits which frame our worldly existence.

↳ The Muslim tries to live within the limits of the *Shari'ah*, the road or path which leads safely to the watering place and so, beyond all limits, to Paradise and the ultimate satisfaction of all needs. Being human, we are free to wander from the road. The rest of creation does not have this freedom. In terms of the Islamic perspective, the animals and the plants, the mountains and the oceans have, each of them, their own *Shari'ah*. They are bound inescapably to the function decreed for them. They cannot be other than they are meant to be and there is, in this, a lesson for mankind. Our environment obeys God and encourages us to do the same. The rocks and the rivers are subject to the "laws of nature", the animals follow their "instincts"; this is but one way of describing the divine Decree which governs their existence. They cannot sin, they cannot break bounds, and this exposes the absurdity of the remark frequently addressed to vicious criminals by a learned Judge: "You are no better than an animal!" As human creatures we can be better than the animals or worse than them; we cannot, however, exist on their level since we are not subject to the laws which direct and enclose their lives. "There is not an animal on earth," says the Quran, "nor a bird flying on two wings but they are communities like you" (or "in your likeness"), and the verse ends: "And unto their Lord they will be gathered." It is not open to us to join one or other of their communities but we can, if we depart from the

Shari'ah laid down for us, become not only subhuman but sub-animal.

There is great confusion in the western mind concerning the animal species. Hardly a day passes that one does not hear someone say: "After all, we're only animals." This is not an opinion but an ideological statement regarding the origin and status of the human being. It proclaims an unquestioning adherence to the Darwinian theory and often sounds like a political slogan. The curious thing is that its implications are ignored. At least for the time being—although this may change—men and women are treated quite differently to animals. It does not occur to us to bring a pig to court, as sometimes happened in the Middle Ages, and charge it with a crime. The owner of an animal that is mortally sick is blamed for not having it "put down"; the same person will be tried for murder if he or she "puts down" a terminally ill patient. Most people believe that we are neither more nor less than clever primates (or so they are told), but they are horrified if human beings are treated as if they were apes.

It seems to me that there is also confusion, although of a different kind, in the Muslim mind. No religion lays greater stress on the good treatment of animals than does Islam, yet Muslims have in general a bad reputation in this regard (as did Christians until very recently). If we represent a religion—any traditional religion—as a circle or a sphere, then it is likely that its adherents will absorb and practice only a segment of the whole. They will also emphasise this segment, as though to fill the empty space, so that they are blinded to all that they have ignored. Their religion, one might say, is too big for them. You cannot pour the ocean into a pint pot. The fact that people of the same Faith may choose different segments for their exclusive attention is one of the reasons for conflicts within the religion, not least within the Islamic *ummah*.

The good Muslim's life is lived in imitation of the Prophet's example, followed as faithfully as circumstances permit. It is in this example, the acts and the sayings of God's Messenger, that we find the most uncompromising references to animal welfare.

If they are taken seriously—and how can the Muslim not take them seriously?—they have very grave implications for all who fall short in their care for the animals in their charge. Not only are there the famous stories of the woman sent to hell for shutting up a cat till it died of hunger and of the prostitute forgiven all her sins because she gave water to a dog that was dying of thirst, but there are also a number of small incidents in the record which emphasise the same principle. When the Prophet saw a donkey that had been branded on the face he cried out: “God curse the one who branded it.” A man who was about to slaughter a goat for food was severely reproached for allowing the animal to see him sharpening his knife. A prophet of earlier times was scolded by God Himself for burning an ants nest because an ant had stung him—“You have destroyed a community that glorified Me”—and there is, according to another saying, a reward in Paradise for whoever shows kindness to a creature possessed of “a living heart”. The law books instruct us as to what do if we find a poisonous snake in our garden. It is to be warned to leave. If it returns a second time, it is to be warned again, but if it makes a third visit it may be killed.

The Quran tells us: “Your Lord inspired the bee, saying: Choose dwellings in the hills and in the trees and in what is built; then eat all manner of fruit and follow humbly the ways of your Lord made smooth”; in other words, follow your *Shari‘ah*, for that is your path and your destiny. This again brings out the Islamic view that each of the diverse non-human “communities” has a particular relationship with its Lord, but the Lord is one; ours as well as theirs. The relationships differ and so the paths differ, but the goal is the same. It is the harmonious inter-action of all the components of the cosmos, both animate and inanimate, which reflects in countless different ways the unity of the Real. The killing of an animal except for food, and then only the permitted minimum, and even the unnecessary cutting down of a tree or uprooting of a plant goes, as it were, against the grain. It exceeds, from motives of greed, the bounds laid down for humankind. There is no place here, no excuse, for the luxuries of modern civilization.

Were it not for the divine Mercy, scattered like rain through-

out creation, and God's readiness to forgive all sins (except the association of other deities with the One) if they are followed by sincere repentance, we would be in a bad way, but what matters most is to keep these principles always in mind, and that is possible only if we observe what might aptly be called the Prime Directive of Islam: the constant "remembrance of God". All that we need to know and all that we are required to do is encompassed in this remembrance; it is the shield against temptation and the spur to keep us on the "straight path" made smooth for us. In choosing to follow it, we are in step with the animals, the plants and the earth itself which, then and only then, has no cause for complaint.

4

Cityscape

*As for me, I have been commanded to serve
the Lord of this City which He has sanctified,
and to Whom belong all things,
and I am commanded to be of those who submit (to God)
and to recite the Quran;
and if any accept guidance they do so for their own good,
and if any go astray, then say:—I am only a warner.
(Quran 27:91-92)*

Once upon a time—and yet not so very long ago in the scale of history—we were all nomads, hunter-gatherers or something of the sort. So, at least, we are told, although speculation about the human past is an uncertain game. Here and there, eventually almost everywhere, men and women settled down, becoming localised, village-bound, city-bound. As with every other choice made by mankind over the millennia, there were advantages and disadvantages. Security of a kind was balanced by a loss of the liberty to wander the earth as freeholders. When the Quran says, “He it is who has made the earth tractable for you, so walk in its paths and eat of His providence,” there is no mention of fences or frontiers. The remaining nomads despised these sedentary folk, and not without reason. The settled peoples in their nests were subject to rules and regulations which the wanderers would never have

tolerated; they had already begun the journey away from the natural world and the disciplines which it imposed. Eventually they would be hemmed in on every side by notices saying, "Keep Off the Grass".

The Touareg peoples of the Sahara still call themselves, in their own language, *D'Amazighem*, which means "Free Men". The balance between city and desert has been a constant theme in Islamic history, as has been the awareness that cities fall, are ruined and emptied, while the desert endures. Nothing that is settled and enclosed can last; only "the open" is forever. Moreover the symbolism of nomadic wandering is, at first sight, more eloquent than that of city life. Every man and woman alive is, from a spiritual point of view, a traveller engaged upon the journey either towards God or towards nothingness, and Time the Destroyer eventually reduces everything around us to barren desert. On our journey the past falls away from us and the future is a vast emptiness, since we cannot know what it may hold.

The contempt of the nomads for the sedentaries has been amply reciprocated. Today the adjective "civilized" is heavy with positive values, and "barbaric" is a term of abuse. The fact remains that, in terms of the virtues respected by Muslims, as also by Christians and Jews, the civilization of imperial Rome was in many ways inferior to the lifestyle of the Barbarians against whom it warred. Living in towns and cities does not necessarily foster human excellence. The Muslim historian, Ibn Khaldun, drew attention to the renewal and invigoration brought to the effete cities of Islam by nomadic invasions, a cure for decadence, a genuine renaissance. Those days are past. But, since every civilization slips and slides downhill in the course of time, we have a desperate need for renewal and no longer know where to seek it. Enclosed spaces become suffocating in the long run. We can be too well protected against the wind and the rain. But they are seldom gentle when they sweep down upon us, destroying our defences and reminding us of our fragility. The process of renewal is never painless.

Western orientalist of an earlier period thought that they

had discovered the secret of Islam in tracing its origins back to the desert, its poverty and austerity, its wide horizons and open spaces. This was the romantic view, accompanied by images of the Muslim warrior, his sword gleaming in the merciless light of the desert sun. On a different level, there was the popular image of the Arab Sheikh leaning down from his white charger to scoop up the timid maiden and carry her off to unmentionable terrors and delights. More recently the tendency has been to stress the social aspects of the religion and to see it as city-bound and most fully expressed in the traditional Islamic city. This is certainly closer to the truth, although the early cities were no more than dots in the vastness of the desert and, to this day, the town Arab instinctively seeks refreshment in those open spaces. Muhammad himself was a man of the city and the desert. As a child, like others of his age, he was sent out from Mecca to be fostered by a woman of a nomadic tribe which followed its flocks as they sought pasture in the arid land.

This practice maintained a balance between the open and the enclosed. Islam describes itself as the "middle way", the narrow way which lies between all possible extremes. This might sound like a recipe for avoiding commitment and for compromise rather than choice. It is, in fact, the opposite; a dynamic tension and stern discipline comparable to that of the helmsman of a sailing ship as he maintains his course through the turbulence of conflicting currents. It is only too easy to find rest in one extreme or another, but very difficult to steer a course between them, giving to each its due. The middle way does not exclude the extremes on either side; it includes and integrates them, but this requires the skill of the tightrope walker who can never relax, lest he fall either to the right or to the left. Such skill is rare, which is why Muslims have, only too often, fallen prey to the extremism which the Prophet himself condemned in no uncertain terms.

Islam, however, is a Faith which functions in terms of a Centre: in man, the Heart and, in the outer world, the holy city. In his five daily prayers the Muslim, wherever he may be, turns his face towards Mecca, or rather to the heart of Mecca, which

is the Kabah. His prayer is invalid if he deliberately faces in the wrong direction. This act of orientation has a profound significance. It represents an awareness that there is a right direction—the “straight path” mentioned in every unit of the ritual prayer—and that every other direction leads away from the goal of human life. At the same time, this act of turning towards the Centre, both within and without, is an act of integration in accordance with the basic Islamic principle of unity. We come back to this principle again and again: “Only connect . . .” bring the bits and pieces together, identifying their place in the total pattern, leave nothing out. This can only be achieved in relation to a recognised Centre and an established orientation. At the same time, the bits and pieces amidst which we live are not of equal weight. There is an order of priorities, there is a hierarchy of values. This is why the Quran is called “The Criterion”, teaching us to discriminate not only between good and evil but between the subtle shades of grey, the ambiguities, which surround us in our daily lives.

The discriminating eye recognises the radiance of holiness whether it is displayed in a place or in a person. In both cases there is an aspect of mercy and an aspect of danger. To desecrate a place or to insult a person sanctified by God is to invite a manifestation of the divine Wrath; God protects His House and He protects His Friends (the *awliyā* mentioned in the Quran). But how do we define a holy place, specifically a holy city? Obviously, this turns upon the notion of the sacred, so little understood in our time (a time in which centrality has given way to dispersion); a notion that has been devalued and almost forgotten. A sacred place is one in which God makes Himself present or in which the numinous is believed to be present. So far so good, but this can only be an ambiguous definition. God is everywhere present, whole and indivisible. This has been the view of all the traditional religions, and it cannot be said that He is less fully present in one place than in another. It follows that the sacred place, the holy place, is where we, with our poor sight (so inadequately adapted to the glory which surrounds

us), are best able to perceive the universal presence of that which lies beyond the range of ordinary perception.

From a subjective point of view, this is where a break in the clouds allows the sun's rays to penetrate directly and illuminate a parcel of earth when all else is in shadow. It is where the hidden becomes apparent and the Real emerges from behind the veils of relativity. Here, of course, we come back to the recurrent question: what is "subjective" and what is "objective". The answer can only be the one that I suggested earlier. In the presence of the sacred, the distinction is blurred because we have stepped into the domain of unity. Awareness of the sacred certainly depends upon the alertness and the openness of the subjective consciousness to what is there. But the initiative belongs to God. It is He—not this or that person—who has chosen the place in which His real presence may be most sharply perceived by those who have seeing eyes. The Prophet said that he had been sent to make our religion "easy" for us. While the sacred is everywhere, our human perception of it has been made easy by its crystallisation in certain places. It is as though God had said: "You are so unaware of what surrounds you on every side that it has become necessary to give it, here or there, an emphatic force which cannot be ignored."

I was talking once with an Egyptian who, in his youth, had been no more than a nominal adherent of the Faith. Arriving in Jeddah on business, he was asked if he would like to make the "Lesser Pilgrimage" to Mecca. This, sometimes called "the Visit", can be done at any time in the year, unlike the annual "Great Pilgrimage". He had no real wish to do so but, out of politeness to his hosts, agreed to it. When, having performed the rites, the time came for him to leave the *haram*, the sacred enclosure which has the Kabah at its centre, he could not—he told me—bear to walk out into the everyday world. He burst into tears. This might, I suppose, be attributed to his childhood conditioning, but I had no such conditioning. When I made "the Visit" many years ago I had no great expectations. Realistically, although with regret, I thought myself impervious to the impact of the sacred and had the usual westerner's suspicion of such

emotional reactions. But I too was overwhelmed. As I left the *haram* for the last time my steps grew slower, I turned round and began to walk backwards, my eyes fixed on the Kabah, my cheeks wet with tears.

We all know what the amateur psychologists would make of this and the question they would ask. How can anybody know that there is an objective validity to such experiences? I doubt whether any reply is either useful or necessary. Islam is a religion which, in many different contexts, says: "Take it or leave it!" This is one of the implications of the Quranic statement that there can be no compulsion in religion and also of the command given to the Prophet to say: "I am but a warner." "Truth stands clear from error," and this truth is something instinctively recognised by the honest and open heart, if not by minds cluttered up with theories. Of those who cannot or will not see what, to the believer, is so transparently obvious, the *Sūra Yā Sīn* says: "We have set chains upon their necks . . . and We have set a bar before them and a bar behind them, and covered them so that they see not. Whether or not you warn them, it is alike for them. They do not believe." No one "converts" anyone to Islam. Only God can do that. The Muslim's duty is simply to present what, for him, are the facts; in other words, to "warn", since these facts imply grave consequences. The rest is not in his hands.

A holy city is, almost by definition, one that has a sanctuary at its centre. The city is an appendage to the sanctuary, existing to serve it. This is pre-eminently the case with Mecca. Long before the coming of Islam there had been encampments around the Kabah, and only gradually had tents been replaced by solid buildings, a sign of increasing prosperity. The spiritual and the mundane are seldom entirely separated; in any case, this is a distinction which Islam—in principle if not in practice—refuses to recognise. Sanctuaries are profitable since pilgrims come with full purses and in a generous mood; moreover Mecca was ideally placed to be the centre of a web of trade routes extending throughout Arabia and beyond. The masters of the city, the pagan tribe of Quraysh into which Muhammad

was born, enjoyed considerable wealth as well as religious prestige. They were birds of splendid plumage, although their less fortunate neighbours commonly referred to them as "sharks".

But in the Islamic context, the notion of the "holy city" need not be confined to one that basks in the radiance of a sanctuary. The Arabic word commonly translated as "religion" is *dīn*; the word for a city is *madīna*. The city is a place where the *dīn* is practised and where this practice is facilitated; it is where the people are gathered together in worship and where their daily lives are organised both in terms of this worship and in accordance with the religious laws which govern human intercourse. Spiritual heroism is a fine thing, but Islam is a very practical religion and recognises that such excellence is rare and exceptional. Why make life difficult for men and women who are not by nature of a spiritual disposition? The traditional Islamic city was designed to make it easy. Each district had its mosque, and the Call to Prayer—resounding from the minaret five times a day—was as hard to ignore as is the ringing of a telephone in our time. Supported on every side by a man-made environment which, in its very structure, was modelled on the principles of the Quran and on the Prophet's example, it was very easy to be a Muslim. This is an aspect of Islam ignored by today's "fundamentalists" and reformers, who expect too much of people and resort to compulsion when their expectations are not fulfilled. Quite apart from the fact that this often has the opposite effect to the one intended; it betrays a lack of mercy and a stubborn ignorance of human nature.

The parallels between the city and the human body are fairly obvious. The colleges and centres of learning are the head, the sanctuary (or, failing that, the central mosque) is the heart, the market is the stomach, the gardens are the lungs, horses and donkeys are the legs, the people circulating in the streets are the blood cells, and so on. But what about the Ruler or Government? Typically, as in the cases of Baghdad and Fez, he or they were established outside the city, interfering very little in its organic life. The Ruler's chief function is defence, for the city must be a place of safety. The Arabic word for "faith", *īmān*,

has the basic meaning of "safety". To have faith and take refuge in God is the only ultimate security and, according to one of the inspired sayings of the Prophet, referring to the Islamic Credo: "*Lā ilāha illā Llāh* is My fortress, and whosoever enters My fortress is safe (*amīn*) from My punishment." At the same time, we live in the midst of physical threats, and it is against these that the Ruler must protect the city and its people, while ensuring that the countryside, from which its nourishment comes, is at peace.

Today we can speak only in the past tense. The incursion of the West, together with the forgetfulness of Muslims, has destroyed all but two or three of these cities, replacing them with conurbations fit only for the profane. This has happened within the lifetime of people now living, stripping them, as it were, of their protective shell. But, in principle, every traditional Islamic city was a "holy city", an inhabited centre ordered in accordance with priorities determined from above in which men and women fulfilled their destinies in harmony. They lived within a framework of law and custom which eased their way towards their Last End, proximity to God in the hereafter, yet provided here and now the prerequisites for a good life. The mosques which dominated each district and the Quranic schools catered for their spiritual life, while hospitals, markets, bath-houses and caravanserais (to house the traveller) answered the citizens' material needs. This is not simply the image of an ideal; this is how the Muslims once organised their earthly lives. Such a city was blessed. Such a city was home and might justly be called the *Dār al-Salām*, the House of Peace.

It might also be called the locus of remembrance, since the "remembrance of God" is the foundation of all Islamic spirituality. The inescapable Call to Prayer is a summons to remembrance, as is the call to read, memorise and recite the Quran, but so also were the dwelling houses until quite recently, closed and windowless on the outside but open to the heavens when they had an inner courtyard from which they took their light and air. These courtyards were little images—secret images—of Paradise, and the life of the home, over which women presided (and still in some measure preside), was a protected environ-

ment which excluded the disturbances of the street and fostered the practice of remembrance. But the street and the public domain to which it leads have their rights, since there can be no rigid separation in Islam between the vertical and the horizontal dimensions. The laws which maintained order in the city were not of human devising. They could not be changed by the dictates of the Ruler or in accordance with the whims of the people. Whereas most European cities were planned to facilitate the exercise of the governing power, the traditional Islamic city, with its secretive twisting lanes and alleys, excluded such an intrusion. The community took care of its own affairs and, as a community, was committed to mutual support in accordance with the laws which insist upon the relief of poverty and the care of the sick.

One feature of the traditional city still exists fairly widely in the Islamic world, the market, although this too is likely to be reduced to a subsidiary role as smart shops and chain stores proliferate. It is, as I suggested, the city's stomach, but it is also much more than that. This is where human beings meet each other to negotiate and to form relationships. Buyer and seller are not merely engaging in commercial transactions. They exchange courtesies and they exchange news, they get to know each other, and every meeting—opening with the holy Greetings of Peace—is of immense significance in the sight of God. No human encounter is fortuitous since every encounter is predestined, a thread in an eternal pattern. The news that is exchanged, this intricate web of information and gossip, is important to the life of the city and to its unity. The citizens are not isolated units, as they are in a modern western city, but members of a community held together by a shared faith and a common orientation. Those who meet in the market will also meet in the mosque, shoulder to shoulder and facing Mecca.

The articles on sale in the market, the "goods" (in itself a significant term), whether furnishings, carpets, utensils or apparel were, in the past, the work of craftsmen whose labour was also a prayer. Through their design, their ornamentation or their Quranic inscriptions, they reminded those who used them of the one and only Creator. There can be no more devastating

sign of the fall from sacred to profane than the replacement of craftsmanship by mass production. Neither sentimental nostalgia nor aesthetics have anything to do with this judgement. What is at issue is spiritual health, no less fragile on the rough paths of this world than physical health. The complete separation between art and craftsmanship is a relatively recent development and yet another symptom of the fragmentation of life and activity in the modern world. The beauty and the usefulness of an object were once inseparable because the perfection of the work required that it should be both beautiful and well adapted to practical use. This principle, common to the majority of pre-modern societies, has been forgotten, and yet the "remembrance of God", in its widest sense, includes the remembrance of such principles. At the same time, the craftsman, before technology made him redundant, worked with simple, often primitive tools and was obliged to compensate for their inadequacy by his own skill and discipline. The work he undertook in transforming rough material into a shaped object, by means of this skill and this discipline, was an image of the work which the spiritual man undertakes in shaping his own soul.

The progress of western culture since it too was informed by the sacred has been neatly summed up by an English Muslim writer: "From the spirit, to the mind, to the body and now to its waste products." If there was ever a sign of the times, this surely is the acceptance by apparently normal people of human excrement as an art object.

The decadence so apparent in the contemporary visual arts may be a direct result of the separation of what is now called "art" from practical craftsmanship. There has been a reversal of the normal relationship between the soul of the artist and his work; instead of chipping away the dark and chaotic elements in his own soul even as the sculptor chips away surplus stone to reveal an image of beauty, the artist's outward work now reflects the darkest elements within himself. He is encouraged to let them loose because this is "self-expression", and self-expression, we are told, is the purpose of art. The question as to which aspects of the multifaceted self should be exposed is never asked. I was recently invited to view the work of students

at one of the principal art colleges in London, and I was immediately reminded of an occasion long ago when I visited a friend in a lunatic asylum in Jamaica. On display was an exhibition of paintings done by the patients as a part of their therapy, and these paintings, by their chaotic character and their sinister colouring, demonstrated very clearly the sickness of the artists. In earlier times this might have been described as a release of demons. The question arises: what happens to these demons once they are released? Where do they alight if there are no Gadarene swine to absorb them?

Presumably the students at the art college were in reasonably good health, but they had been persuaded to dig up and express whatever ugliness they could find in themselves. If we are, as I suggested earlier, "porous" in relation to everything that surrounds us, then the poisons which have leaked onto the canvasses of so many modern artists (Francis Bacon comes immediately to mind) may be expected to seep into us. The notion of demons is, of course, outdated, but at least one can speak of evil influences set at large in the world to play among the innocent and the unguarded. As for television, it hardly requires the deliberations of a scientific committee to discover that this has an influence on the viewer, any more than a committee is needed to prove a connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy. On this subject Muslims are not in doubt. Art, in the Islamic context, must be useful at some level, either usable or spiritually edifying. Today the word "edifying" meets only with mockery. The notion that the arts should in some way improve our minds and our characters is regarded as absurd, although in earlier times it was taken for granted even in Europe. Muslims find this incomprehensible. Of what possible use are works of art if they do nothing to ease our way to a good life and a good death? They are not interested in the psychological traumas of the artist.

The market traders deal not only in useful objects which furnish our lives in this world. They deal also in a commodity without which we cannot exist: food. One of the Quranic Names of God is *ar-Razzāq*, "the Nourisher". All nourishment, whether spiritual or physical, comes from Him and perhaps the irreligi-

gious, since they refuse spiritual nourishment, might be compared to anorexics. Westerners, overfed and wasteful, can see no spiritual significance in the food they eat; only if they suffered starvation would they value it as it should be valued. It comes from the local supermarket, not from heaven. Yet it is—or can be—a powerful “reminder”. Here we are, in our bodily envelopes which appear closed and firmly sealed. In their way they seem to reflect our isolation from others made in the same image as ourselves and from the world beyond our skins. That is an illusion. The body depends for its continued existence upon taking into itself, digesting and absorbing material from outside. This offers a compelling image of the dependence of spirit and soul upon the “food from heaven” which nourishes and sustains us as whole beings walking on the “straight path”.

◀ The offering of food, whether to a friend or a stranger, has had a profound significance throughout history and in every part of the world, and in Islam there is an obligation to show hospitality as a religious duty. In a traditional market the striking of a deal is accompanied by the offer of tea or coffee and perhaps a sweetmeat, and to eat together is, in essence, a ceremonial occasion. In so-called “primitive” societies the exchange of gifts of food is an expression of trust and an assurance of peace, and in some cultures the climax of the marriage ceremony comes when the groom feeds the bride with a spoonful of food. This is both God’s bounty and the bounty of the earth. Our earliest and, possibly, most formative experience is of being fed by our mother. That is where love begins. Those who cherish a pet animal are told that it loves them only because they feed it. “Only” is a weasel word that inserts itself into modern discourse in an effort to reduce everything to its lowest common denominator. Human love, like animal love, thrives on a practical basis—the answering of real needs—whatever heights it may eventually scale, and to love God is, in the first instance, to love the giver of the most precious gifts.

This city, the holy city, is then a centre of inter-connectedness, of meeting and communion, in which the priorities are observed, the framework is intact, and the basic needs—physi-

cal and spiritual—of every man, woman and child are met. But everything on earth has its opposite. Are there “unholy” cities? Indeed there are. This world is full of gateways opening either onto what is above or what is below. If the holy city is a gateway to the fulfilment of the human function and, ultimately, to Paradise, then its opposite opens onto the infra-human and, ultimately, the purifying Fire which burns away accumulated dross.

Look, then, upon the modern metropolis in which people are packed together and yet remain strangers. In the subway, underground or “tube” they meet and yet never meet, experiencing the closest physical intimacy at the same time as total separation. If they make eye contact in the crowded streets they are embarrassed and hastily turn away. If one of their number falls to the pavement the rest avert their heads, fearing involvement. In solitary rooms and apartments a man or woman grieves or dies unnoticed. The rain that falls—that powerful reminder of the divine mercy—is grubby and polluted, and the drivers marooned in their stationary motor cars resist the temptation to express their rage in some act of violence. Everyone is in a hurry (“Haste comes from Satan”, according to a saying of the Prophet), slaves to a busy schedule, and everyone is locked into the prison of their own problems and anxieties. They behave like enemies, so unwilling are they to meet.

The priorities which govern the holy city have been reversed. We are sometimes puzzled by one of the “signs of the end”—the end of the world, the end of all things under the sun—predicted by Muhammad. He spoke of “the construction of tall buildings” as such a sign. Yet there is, surely, no mystery here? When we see buildings dedicated to the power of the State or to the accumulation of money rising high above a mosque or a church, then it is easy to understand that this titanic presumption might presage and merit universal destruction. Seek a church in a western city and you will discover it like a gemstone half-buried under pebbles. In New York, Los Angeles and London you will come across churches so completely dwarfed by the giant buildings which press upon them that they might be

taken for toys and may be treated as such. They have been allotted their place, and it is a very small place. One glance suffices to identify the priorities of this civilization. But the same thing is happening in the Islamic world. The metropolitan scene is no longer dominated by the minaret (which means, literally, "Lighthouse") but by the skyscraper. The message is set in concrete: "The spiritual no longer takes precedence over the worldly."

People build in accordance with their beliefs and express their view of the world and of the human function in the way they build. Modern architecture expresses the ideology of secularism—sometimes of nihilism—and supports it. If one of these buildings could speak, it might say: "I exist as a slot for the biped who lives only for this world and to satisfy his bodily needs. I remind him that, when he dies, he is dead for ever and his handful of dust will be scattered by the wind, never to be found again!" The arrogance and the pretentiousness of those glass and concrete constructions which display the triumphs of technology may remind the Muslim of a Quranic verse in which it is said of him whom God leaves to go astray that "He causes his breast to become tight and constricted as if he were climbing up to the heavens; thus does God lay ignominy upon those who will not believe." The heavens, so far distant, mock this puny effort.

The unholy city, dwarfing its citizens as an anthill dwarfs its builders, has not only reversed all traditional priorities; it has negated all human values. Nothing here is built on a human scale. It is like a suit of clothes ten times too big for the wearer. It does not fit, and is therefore unfit for human habitation, and it does not belong to the physical landscape into which it has been inserted. When the sacred is banished from sight, covered over just as—in Islamic doctrine—the true heart of the unbeliever (the *kāfir*) is covered by ugly encrustations, all that is specifically human is diminished. We may finally be left with a shell fit only for destruction. It is not God who is "dead" but the remembrance of God that has died.

5

Together, Yet Apart

Mankind were but a single community, then they differed; and, had it not been for a Decree that had gone forth from thy Lord, it would indeed have been decided between them regarding that wherein they differed.

(Quran: 10.20)

Since God is all-encompassing, Islam does not recognise any aspect of life or of human activity as situated outside its domain. The notion of a secular realm which might go its own way without reference to the truths enunciated in the Quran seems, to the Muslim, absurd, and it follows that politics cannot be separated from the religion. That, at least, is the principle. Whether it is always put into practice is quite another matter, and the most bitter conflicts within the *ummah*, the Community of Believers, revolve around this issue. As usual, however, we are dealing with a term which has a clear meaning in the West but which does not fit easily into the Islamic pattern. In traditional Islamic civilization there were rulers, their advisers and their officials; there were no professional politicians, nor did political theories have any part to play in public affairs. The Quran is concerned with the meaning of life and the way in which it should be lived, not with systems of government.

Man is a "social animal". This is the starting point of modern political theory, and already we have an inaccuracy which,

sooner or later, undermines all such theories. The past two centuries have been rich in theories, particularly utopian theories, and all have come up against the stubborn refusal of human beings to fit into the frameworks devised for them or to behave as they were expected to behave. We are not sheep nor even wolves. There are times when we act as if we were members of a flock or a pack, but only when we are in thrall to some passing illusion. We are what we are: creatures with a dual identity, only partly at home in this world. Animals live out their lives on the horizontal level (which is why most walk on four legs). We stand upright and, to a greater or lesser extent, are aware of the vertical dimension, the spiritual dimension. We are together with our fellows, needing them, joining with them, but we are also, each of us, apart and alone. If we do not know this in the midst of busy lives, we certainly know it when we are dying, no matter how many kind faces surround us. The Muslim family is a close-knit organism founded upon mutual dependence and support, yet the Quran gives warning of the ultimate separation, the ultimate solitude: "Oh mankind! Be aware of your Lord and fear the Day on which no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child of the least avail to his parent." No soul, we are told, can bear another's burden. There is no ultimate safety in the group.

This, one might say, is the Day of disentanglement, the disentanglement of motives and responsibilities previously shared with others. In this world a soldier acts under orders, an executive obeys his superiors, and a rioter participates in the fury of the mob. On that Day there are no more excuses. Each man and each woman is wholly responsible for what he or she has done.

The canonical prayers, when performed in a mosque, offer an image of unity, the worshippers standing shoulder to shoulder, bowing in unison and prostrating in unison, and yet each individual man or woman ignores those on either side, aware of standing before God in solitary communion. Their eyes are directed towards the *qibla* which marks the direction of Mecca. They glance neither to the right nor to the left. This prayer exemplifies the human situation: a community of solitaries, solitude in community. When the Hebrew Bible describes God

as "jealous", this might be linked to the Islamic Confession of Faith in its extended form: "No divinity if not God in His Oneness, no partner has He." This total and all-embracing oneness leaves no room for the "other", the "partner", helper or companion. If, according to a saying of the Prophet—its authenticity has often been questioned—man is made in the image of God and if, as the Sufis maintain, the dominant characteristic of the human creature is that he reflects the divine Names or qualities, then something of this uniqueness distinguishes each individual from all others. When he faces Judgement, he too "has no partner".

No political theory that ignores the vertical dimension has ever taken root. Marxism is a case in point. For sixty years every conceivable pressure was applied to create the "new Soviet man". As soon as the pressure was reduced, this new man disappeared in a puff of smoke. The Quran does not propound theories. It commands each individual believer to focus on a goal beyond the horizons of this world and, in doing so, to live at peace with all those who are travelling the same path. The system of government under which the people live is less important than the organic life of the community, the self-regulating community obedient to laws derived from the revelation and from the example of the Prophet, and yet each individual is alone responsible before God for his or her actions; there is no shared responsibility.

But Muslims now find themselves in a world shaped by western theories and western values. If we are to consider how Islamic communities conducted their affairs throughout the greater part of their history, it may be convenient to compare and contrast this way of life with the contemporary western model. Today the Muslims are urged to embrace democracy and are condemned for political corruption, while western scholars debate whether Islam can ever accommodate the democratic ideal. On the whole, they think not. Democracy, they believe, is a sign of political maturity and therefore of superiority. Western societies, since they are seen as democratic, exemplify this superiority. So there is one question that has to be pressed home: what, precisely, is meant by democracy?

Let me put forward an imaginary Arab who knows nothing of western ways but would like to learn about them. He is aware that the literal meaning of the word democracy is "mob rule", but understands that this is not what westerners mean by it. He wonders how this meaning has, in practice, been modified and, since his questions are directed to an Englishman, he is not altogether surprised to be told that Britain is the exemplary democracy. He learns that the people—all except children, lunatics and peers of the realm—send their representatives to Parliament to speak for them. He is assured that these representatives never accept bribes to vote against their consciences or against the wishes of their constituents. He enquires further and is astonished to learn that the political parties employ what are known as Whips, who compel members to vote in accordance with the party line, even if this conflicts both with their consciences and with the views of the people who elected them. In this case it is not money but ambition for office that determines the way they vote. "But is this not corruption?" he asks naively. The Englishman is shocked. "But at least the party in power represents the vast majority of the electorate?" This time the Englishman is a little embarrassed. It is not quite like that. The governing party, which enjoys absolute power through its dominance in the House of Commons, represents only a minority of the electorate. "Are there no restraints on this power?" There used to be, he is told. In the past there was a balance between the Crown, the House of Lords and the Commons, but that was seen as an undemocratic system so it was gradually eroded. The "sovereignty" of the Lower House is now untrammelled (except, quite recently, by unelected officials in Brussels). "So this is what democracy means?" Our imaginary Arab is baffled.

He investigates further and is told that, in the 1997 General Election, the British people spoke with one voice, loud and clear. A landslide victory gave the Leader of the Labour Party virtually dictatorial powers. Then he learns that the turn-out of electors was the lowest since the war. Even so, the Party received only forty-three per cent of the votes cast. He wonders if this can be the system which others wish to impose on his own coun-

try. He is aware that various freedoms, including freedom of the press, are essential components of a democratic society, but no one can tell him how these are to be guaranteed if the Ruler, supported by a supine—"disciplined"—House of Commons enjoys untrammelled authority. He knows a bit about rulers and the way in which they deal with dissent, and he suspects that human nature is much the same everywhere. Barriers to oppression soon fall when a political system eliminates all "checks and balances" and, however amiable the current Ruler may be, there is no certainty that his successors, inheriting all the tools of power, will be equally benign.

He turns now to an American and learns, with some relief since he himself has experienced the oppression of absolutism, that the American system restrains the power of the President by that of the Congress and the Supreme Court; moreover, the elected representatives of the people are more concerned with the wishes of their constituents than with the Party line. This, surely is a more democratic system? But he pursues his enquiries and soon discovers that election either to the Presidency or to the Congress requires the expenditure of huge sums of money, contributed either by business interests or by wealthy individuals. He suspects that these contributions may not be motivated by pure altruism. There is—he has heard it said—no such thing as a free dinner. Even if he is entirely persuaded of the virtues of democracy, he still wonders how this ideal can be put into practice.

In any case, he remembers from his reading of the prophetic traditions that a man once approached the Prophet asking for the governorship of a recently conquered province and was told: "Because you want this, you are not fit for it." He assumes, not unreasonably, that those who stand for election, whether in the United States, in Britain or elsewhere, seek power. Long before Lord Acton suggested that "all power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely", pious Muslims held this opinion, modified only in favour of those whose fear of divine Judgement and sense of their own unworthiness protected them. He wonders whether the candidate whose persuasive skills win votes is likely to possess the very different skills

which good government requires. This seems to him improbable. He would prefer to be ruled by wise men who assume this burden of responsibility unwillingly and dread the moment when they will stand before God and answer for their exercise of power. He knows, however, that this is no more than a dream of perfection, a form of utopianism, and that the Islamic world has not seen such perfection since the death of the last of the "rightly-guided" Caliphs, only twenty-nine years after the Prophet himself died. He sees now that what really matters is not so much the system of government, whether "democratic" or otherwise, but the power of the Ruler or the State and the means by which this power may be controlled and limited.

Since Muslims are urged to learn from the western exemplar and, if possible, to conform to it, they need to study very closely what has been happening in Western Europe and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in the United States over the past century. Not only has the State acquired means of control and interference unimaginable in an earlier age, but the people themselves have lost their fear of the State, turning to it as they might to a caring mother. It is so easy to shift responsibility onto willing shoulders and to forget that, with every grain of responsibility accepted by the State—the Government, the "authorities"—communities and individuals lose a little more of their autonomy. Dependency is a comfortable situation and its price is kept well hidden. This is not a situation that should appeal to Muslims who know that they cannot escape from responsibility both for themselves and for the welfare of their community. The payment of compulsory taxes, a proportion of which goes to the relief of poverty, is not quite the same thing as personal involvement in the welfare of our neighbours.

There is another aspect of dependence upon the State which gives cause for concern. This is the cult of "safety". At least in northern Europe, every disaster, whether major or minor, provokes a demand for new laws to be passed, although the citizens of these countries are already tied hand and foot by laws intended to protect them from one another and from what used to be called "acts of God". It is forgotten that freedom costs lives and that, where freedom exists, it was achieved only through

the sacrifice of human lives.

Those who listen occasionally to discussions on the radio or television in Britain will often hear opinions which shock them. I have no doubt as to the most shocking remark I have ever overheard. I tuned in by chance to such a discussion, without knowing what the topic might be, in time to hear one of the participants say: "If one life can be saved by tightening the law, then the law should be tightened." That was all. It was enough. The implications stretched far into the future, down a very slippery slope. At the same time, the priorities of a secular culture which can find no higher value than the preservation of a human life were clearly exposed. Death which, for the Muslim, is a gateway to truth and clarity—the removal of the veils which obscure our vision here—was, for this man, the ultimate evil, perhaps the only evil. He might have added that, if indeed freedom costs lives, then freedom itself is to be abhorred. In Britain there is almost universal condemnation of what is described as American "gun culture". The men who framed the Constitution distrusted the power of Government. It must have seemed to them unthinkable that lethal weapons should be placed exclusively in the hands of the State, leaving the citizens completely at its mercy. The "right to bear arms" was the guarantee of freedom. But, of course, innocent people are shot. Freedom does, indeed, cost lives.

For Muslims, as for Christians of an earlier time, our brief sojourn in this world is best defined as a period of trial in which we expose our virtues and our vices to the light of day. Without risk there can be no testing of our metal. Regarding the misfortunes from which few of us escape, the Quran says: "These are only the vicissitudes which We cause to follow one another for mankind, so that God may know those who believe and may choose witnesses from among you." This implies a clear space around each individual in which he can demonstrate all the dimensions of his character and either save himself or condemn himself by his actions. Vicissitudes which "follow one another" are what we most dislike, but they are not only a means by which we are tested. They are also a way of purification ("It is better to be purified here than hereafter"). In any case, the only

place in which we are effectively protected against them is the prison cell, out of the wind and the rain, but untried and unrec-tified.

If Christianity is defined as “the religion of Love”, then Islam—on the horizontal level—is “the religion of Law”. The laws which frame the Islamic community and those which bind western nations in a protective web differ in root and in branch. Setting aside the secular laws introduced only recently into the Muslim world, Islamic law is derived entirely from the Quran and from the example set by the Prophet. It’s primary concern is to provide a framework within which the community is led towards the gates of Paradise and, at the same time, to ensure the good order of this goal-oriented community. No one who reads the newspapers is likely to be unfamiliar with the Arabic word *Shari‘ah*, since the Islamic movement cries out for its implementation in an “Islamic State”. In the West it is commonly equated with the amputation of thieves’ hands. Yet there is an important distinction, often ignored by Muslims them-selves, between this “highroad” to Paradise and Islamic law as such. The *Shari‘ah* is the way of life ordained by the Quran and exemplified by the Prophet. Since God’s Mercy is, according to the Quran, all-encompassing; the *Shari‘ah* is saturated with mercy. The law, *fiqh*, is the codification of its legal implications. There is a subtle but important distinction between the two. The *Shari‘ah* comes from God and is therefore unalterable. The great body of *fiqh* is, however, the work of men; wise and pious men certainly, but fallible men who did their best under the cir-cumstances of their time—more than a thousand years ago—to formulate laws in accordance with the basic principles of the religion. Except where these laws are directly based upon the Quran, they are not, therefore, set in concrete.

The mentality of the lawyer differs very little from one cul-ture to another. He seeks to cover every possible contingency, to cross every ‘t’ and dot every ‘i’. He cannot leave well alone. The great jurists of early Islam were true to type, their suc-cessors even more so. At the same time, they were realists. A trivial example will suffice. If you go to the mosque for the com-munal prayers taking something of value with you, it must be

placed in front of you. If you put it behind you, then your concentration will be disturbed by the thought that someone might steal it. This is, in its way, typically Islamic. It combines a concern for the single-mindedness of worship with a recognition that there are thieves even in mosques and recalls the Prophet's saying: "Tether your camel, and trust in God." The worshipper who does not take reasonable precautions is a fool; if, after that, he does not put his trust in God, then he is lacking in faith.

In the lifetime of the Prophet there were wide areas of choice, leaving space for the operation of individual consciences. This space was eroded by the lawyers, but the result of their sometimes pettifogging labours was the establishment of a framework for human living which ensured social stability through a thousand years of political turbulence, an astonishing achievement. That long period of stability has come to an end. The modern world presents problems which the law-makers could never have foreseen and there are no longer any easy answers to the moral dilemmas which face the Muslims today. The *Shari'ah* is not outdated, but the laws derived from it are no longer entirely adequate to the conditions of our time. They cannot, however, be amended in terms of some superficial compromise, as certain modernists would have it. There is work to be done and no certainty that there are, today, men (or women) of a calibre to undertake so daunting a task.

The general principle that the laws and customs which govern the community can only be binding if they are derived from the revelation and from the Prophet's example remains as valid now as it ever was. In the Islamic view, man can no more make laws for himself than he can be judge and jury in his own case. When he attempts to do so he is prompted only by "caprice", and there can be no lasting stability when the wind of public opinion—constantly changing direction—governs legislation. "If the truth were in accordance with their likes and dislikes," says the Quran, "then indeed the heavens and the earth and all the beings therein would have been corrupted." Our likes and dislikes are by nature capricious, and the Prophet is reported to have said that Paradise is surrounded by things we dislike, hell by things that we like; this is to be expected in view of the

human tendency to choose the lowest rather than the highest when deprived of divine guidance. Christians who still accept the doctrine of Original Sin are likely to agree. Secularism takes the opposite view.

The democratic legislator, if he wishes to be re-elected, must go with the tide of public opinion, and public opinion is governed by personal, subjective feelings; in effect by likes and dislikes. This tide is, in itself, mysterious, and there are those who have suggested that there is a kind of "psychological virus" which spreads through a whole society. It certainly seems as though we "catch" opinions in the way that we catch influenza. How else can one account for the fact that one generation will completely reverse the opinions—that is to say the "feelings"—of the previous generation, approving what was formerly condemned and condemning what was previously approved? Homosexuality is a case in point. When I was young homosexuals were sent to prison, but the general opinion was that they ought to be shot or castrated. Today disapproval of sexual deviation—even if this disapproval is based on unalterable religious principles—is described as "homophobia". Can one really believe that millions of people, "thinking for themselves" as they are commanded to do in the modern age, have come independently to almost identical opinions in this matter? That would be an extraordinary coincidence. In whatever terms we define the wind which drives such changes in the *zeitgeist*, there can be no stability in a legal system which responds from day to day only to passing fancies.

Since likes and dislikes are decisive in the framing this torrent of legislation, there is a question that has to be asked: do most people in the West like to be free? Certainly they do, provided there is no price tag attached to freedom. As soon as the cost becomes apparent, other considerations take precedence including, as I mentioned earlier, safety, but including also convenience, efficiency and, above all, the principle most passionately cherished by the British—"fairness". Since the world is, by its very nature, "unfair", and since human beings are not equal in quality or in their destinies, the attempt to impose all too human notions of what is fair requires rigid control by the State

and a whole catalogue of laws. These laws are accepted and generally obeyed, however restrictive and however unrealistic they may be, because they are considered just. Whereas, in the past, individual choice prevailed over a wide area of human life and activity, today anyone who ignores the latest edict from the legislators is wrong-headed if not criminal; certainly lacking in compassion.

Muslims too are profoundly concerned with justice. One of the divine Names is "the Just" (*al-'Adl*) and the Quran explicitly forbids oppression. God's estimation of men and women is far removed from considerations of race, rank or sex. The best among mankind are the pious, the God-fearing and those who spend a good part of such wealth as they may possess on the relief of the poor, the widow and the orphan. In the long run, nothing else counts and worldly glory soon turns to dust. But justice, for the Muslim, does not mean uniformity, the ironing out of real differences; indeed variety is one of the marvels of creation and reflects, however dimly, the infinite variety inherent in the Creator. In so far as it can be realised in this world, it requires that each thing should be in the right place and given its due weight, no more, no less. In human communities it means that each man and each woman should occupy the place in society for which he or she is perfectly fitted, performing the appropriate functions within a harmonious whole. This place, whether exalted or humble, is equal to all the others when seen from a vertical perspective, that is to say it offers the same opportunity for ascension or descent. The ladder which reaches to heaven is as well founded in the hovel as in the palace.

It follows that envy is one of the great sins and resignation one of the great virtues. We have been placed where we are because that is where we belong. To be consumed with the desire for a different station is both a distraction from the life of worship for which we were created and a cause of disorder in the community. This, however, assumes a society in which the powerful are humble and the rich are generous, as they must be if they are truly *muslim*, ever conscious of God. That is an ideal which may seldom have been realised but there was, I think, a

period in the history of Islam when it came close to realisation, and it therefore stands as a model for the kind of society to which Muslims aspire. What matters is that the model should not be allowed to sink out of sight and, even today, there are powerful men and rich men in the Islamic world who, fearing God and seeking His good pleasure, try in all sincerity to live up to the ideal. They are unobserved because they do not boast of their humility or advertise their generosity.

It is precisely because we are indeed creatures of two worlds, functioning both in the horizontal and the vertical dimensions, that we find it difficult to live together harmoniously. The Quran, therefore, is as much concerned with social harmony as it is with our ultimate destiny. Not that the two can be divided; it is not only by our faith but also by the way in which we deal with our fellows that we are ultimately judged. Faith is proved in action, and action is illuminated by faith. Defining true piety, the Quran tells us: "Piety is not that you turn your faces to the East or to the West, but pious is he who believes in God and the Last Day . . . and spends his wealth—for love of Him—upon kinsfolk and orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and beggars and the freeing of human beings from bondage, and who is steadfast in prayer and regular charity; and those who fulfil the contracts they have made, and the patient in times of tribulation and adversity and stress. Such are the sincere. Such are the God-fearing."

Peace and harmony lie at the heart of Islam, even if this is not immediately apparent from the history of the Muslim peoples, and it follows that a peaceful and harmonious society is alone in tune with the good order of the cosmos as a whole. Discord is a breaking of the unified pattern which reflects *tawhīd*, the divine Unity. It is an aberration, not only in terms of human wellbeing but in relation to the whole of which we, in our earthly existence, are a part. "Corruption has appeared on land and sea on account of what men's hands have done," says the Quran. It commands us to "make peace among mankind", to control our anger and forgive our fellows. God is "full of grace towards mankind"; it is not for us to interrupt this flow of grace by our quarrels and by hostility one to another.

The *hadīth* literature—the sayings and acts of the Prophet—reinforces this message and applies it to every aspect of human life. Mutual love, affection and friendship bind the community in silken ropes. The Prophet was talking one day with a group of people when a man passed by, saluted them and went on his way. One of the companions remarked: “I really love that man!” “Then go after him and tell him so,” said the Prophet. But trade and business dealings are also a link which unites, provided these activities are free from greed and all dishonest motives. This is why both the Quran and the *hadīth* deal so extensively with what may appear, to the non-Muslim, such mundane concerns. Honest dealing is a part of faith, and there is no true piety without it. To break a contract, to overcharge for goods in the market or to cheat in commercial dealings is to invite God’s Wrath and, although retaliation for injury is permitted—since human nature has its rights—forgiveness is always preferable and, in effect, mandatory for those who expect to be forgiven by God.

What we have here, in ideal and sometimes in practice, is a society in which good habits prevail, since habit is one the principal motives of human conduct. The danger of sudden change—even if it appears beneficial—and, in particular, the threat posed by revolution is the shattering of the network of habits which ensures stability. But there is another factor which disrupts the harmony of the good society. This is what Christians call sin and what Muslims see as infringements of the religious Law. People will always commit sins, they will always—with rare exceptions—break the Law, so how are the effects of this human tendency to be minimised? The answer which Islam has provided to this problem is, quite simply, secrecy. There are two Arabic terms which can be translated, in a variety of contexts, as “covering”. When God forgives our sins, He “covers” them, not in darkness but in light, a light under which they shrivel and are “effaced”. At the opposite extreme, the unbeliever or infidel “covers” the faith with which he was born—the faith implanted in his heart—with a layer of rejection and self-interested argument. The *kāfir* (the atheist) con-

ceals even from himself the knowledge of God which defines his humanity. To be human is to know.

The Prophet is reported to have said that a hundred sins in the sight of God are preferable to one sin in the sight of mankind. For westerners that is an invitation to hypocrisy, although this saying would have been approved only a hundred years ago in terms of what is now described as "Victorian hypocrisy". The logic of concealment is, however, impeccable. Today, in the West, acceptable conduct is whatever most people do. A glance at the advice columns in the popular press offers clear evidence of this. Those who seek advice, particularly concerning sexual practices, want to be assured that what they are doing is "normal". Do other people do the same? If so, they have nothing of which to be ashamed. Most have no other marker in terms of which they can assess their own actions.

A sin—or infringement of the Law—known only to God is what it is and has no social repercussions. Nothing that we do can affect the Creator in His majestic reality. Forgiveness is His way, His nature, and upon that we rely when we wander from the straight path. The Quran tells us repeatedly that we harm only ourselves by this departure from the Norm. There have been Christians who said much the same. The *Curé d'Ars*, with perfect courtesy, asked an unrepentant sinner: "Sir, will you not then have pity on your own soul?" But when this sin or infringement is made public, then the social dimension comes to the fore. A bad example has been set, an example which others are likely to follow unless society itself strikes the perpetrator with severe punishment to preserve its own integrity. This is not so much a matter of justice—God alone is perfect in justice—as a social imperative. The disintegration of the well-guided community begins with small cracks in the structure. If it were to proceed unchecked, then disorder would invite oppression because the independence of the community depends upon its integrity, resistant to the power of the Ruler, the State.

Not only is the Muslim expected to keep his own shameful secrets discretely hidden. If he discovers the secrets of his neighbour or acquaintance, he must guard them as he does his own and, if he only suspects that a friend is up to no good, he

should still think the best of him unless there is clear evidence of wrong doing. The Quran condemns "suspicion", as it does derision and defamation. "All believers are brothers. So make peace between your brothers and remain conscious of God . . . Oh you who believe! No man shall deride [other] men; it may be that those are better than themselves. And no woman [shall deride other] women; it may be that those are better than themselves. Neither shall you defame one another, nor insult one another by epithets. Evil is the imputation of iniquity" There is no place for "busybodies" in an Islamic community. Always in the background is the awareness that, if we expose the sins of our neighbour, God will expose our own hidden sins. It is better to turn a blind eye to what may be going on in the privacy of his home (unless it harms others) in the hope that the ill we ourselves have done will be "covered" by God when we come to Judgement.

This is closely connected with *ādāb*, "manners", to which Muslims, at least in the past, attached great importance, and indeed civil society cannot exist without a cult of good manners. A degree of formality in social encounters smoothes the rough edges which are always to be found when human beings come together. This includes keeping a guard on one's tongue, for it is only too easy, in a moment of inadvertence, to express some passing sentiment which cannot then be taken back but lingers on to poison relationships. Western culture in our time is chiefly concerned with "sincerity", although a great Christian writer, Gustave Thibon, has written eloquently about the "subtle and venomous sin of sincerity". He has in mind the multi-layered nature of the human personality and the basic insincerity of transient emotions which, when they are openly expressed, achieve a fixity, a permanence, to which they have no claim. This applies particularly to the marriage relationship, whatever may be said by contemporary "counsellors". The anger or resentment which bursts out of one partner, and which he or she forgets next day, may persist in the memory of the other for years and fester there. The Prophet compared the guarding of the tongue from rash or offensive speech to the guarding of the

genitals from infringement of the laws which govern sexual relations.

The good society, as Muslims see it, has a building block without which it would collapse. That building block is the family, the extended family. The binding nature of the blood tie and the marriage bond is deeply rooted in human nature, although its strength may be diminished by cultural fashions and by the "welfare State", as has been happening in the West. It is within the family that the Muslim learns responsibility, a lesson which can then be applied to society as a whole. This family is not an island; kinship connects it with other extended families, themselves related to others more remotely situated. There are no gaps in the network. But everything starts with the "near of kin". The Islamic way is to go with the grain of nature, just as a good carpenter goes with the grain of the wood, rather than to ignore it in favour of some political or social theory. It has always been—and still is—a cause of deep shame and social disgrace if parents who are growing old, or elderly relatives, are cast out either to fend for themselves or to be cared for by the State. I remember meeting an Arab businessman living in London as an exile and wondering why he could not return home. I asked an acquaintance of mine from the same country if he knew the reason for this. "That man behaved badly to his mother when she was getting old!" All was explained.

For those who have no family to support them in misfortune or old age, there is *zakāh*, the "poor due", one of the five "Pillars" of Islam, a religious tax paid by all who can afford to pay it and administered, not by the Government but by the mosques. There is also *ṣadaqa*, "charity", offered by men and women who wish to "purify" their wealth by giving freely to those in need. In a Muslim society there is nothing demeaning in accepting this charity since all good things come from God and the giver of *ṣadaqa* is no more than a channel through which His gift passes. Moreover, in this changeable world in which God "exalts whom He will and abases whom He will" for entirely inscrutable reasons, the wealthy may be poor tomorrow—themselves in need of charity—and the poor may be wealthy. Giving and receiving are simply another thread in the net which holds

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the community together.

Wealth, if it has been gained by legitimate means, is to be relished like any other gift from above but never squandered, and the responsibilities which come with it are a heavy burden. Since the rich man is exposed to temptations which do not gather around the poor, he knows that his good fortune is also a test, both profound and severe. If he seeks increase—no sin in itself—he must work for it. The Islamic prohibition of *ribā*, “usury”, is uncompromising. In modern practice this is understood to mean the giving or receiving of loans at a fixed rate of interest, and that is why it is so difficult to find an accommodation between the Islamic system and western banking. A mass of books and papers have been published on this subject, but the basic principle is not in doubt. The investor must in some way be involved in the enterprise in which he has invested his funds, sharing in the risks, enjoying the profits or accepting the losses as the case may be. Personal involvement whether in economic activities, charity, making peace between neighbours or maintaining good order in the community is at the heart of the good society, the truly Islamic society. So where does this leave the Ruler, the Government, State power as such?

The hard saying that, “People get the Government they deserve” applies here, if nowhere else. The State steps in when the citizens fail in their duty and neglect their responsibilities. There is a simple equation: each small failure on the part of individuals in the community will involve a corresponding increase in the power of the State, power which will sooner or later be abused. If the citizens cannot keep order among themselves, then order will be imposed. If they do not make themselves responsible for the welfare of the poor, the task will fall to the “authorities”. Their administration will be more efficient and more equitable, yet something very precious has been lost. People have become numbers rather than names, an impersonal bureaucracy has replaced the human face and the human touch, and there is a chill in the air.

None the less, however well the community may order its affairs, there has to be a Leader, a Ruler, whose primary task is the defence of the community against its enemies. He, like

everyone else, is bound by the provisions of the Law although he will almost inevitably try to exceed his authority. The manner in which he is chosen—or in which he imposes himself—is probably less important than the restraints which the Law imposes upon him and the resistance of the self-regulating community to his interference, but there is one Quranic principle which cannot be ignored by any Islamic Ruler if he is to be considered legitimate: this is the principle of *shūrā*, “consultation”. Many contemporary Muslims maintain that this proves the democratic nature of the Islamic system. That depends upon what one means by “democratic”, as I suggested earlier, and also upon whom the Ruler should consult. Is he to seek the opinions of all and sundry regardless of their qualifications? Should he base his authority on the popular vote in some kind of general election? This is, to say the least, doubtful. A traditional *shūrā* Council or consultative body is composed, ideally, of men who are both pious and learned, competent to represent the community but expressing opinions based upon their own piety and learning. The final decision in all matters which fall within his competence rests with the Ruler since he is responsible before God for what is done in his name. But, if he is wise, he will follow the example of the Prophet and give due weight to the views of his counsellors.

The principles based upon the Quran and upon the prophetic canon have been ignored often enough in the course of history. Power has been abused and consultation denied. This is hardly surprising. It is the way of the world. But the fact remains that this system functioned effectively for a thousand years and, however wicked or incompetent the Rulers may have been, their impact upon the integrity of the Muslim peoples was minimal. The Law and, above all, the example of the Prophet determined and maintained an Islamic way of life century after century until the impact of a very different civilization with very different priorities shattered it. The Muslims today have one overriding concern: how do we put the pieces together again? And, if this is impossible, where do we go from here?

6

The Believing Women

*Indeed the men who surrender (to God)
and the women who surrender,
the believing men and the believing women,
the obedient men and the obedient women,
the truthful men and the truthful women . . .
the men who remember (God) often
and the women who remember—
for them God has prepared forgiveness
and a vast reward.*

(Quran 33:35)

Glory to Him Who created all the (sexual) pairs.

(Quran 36:35)

Some years ago when I was taking tea with a very distinguished Arab woman, a lecturer in a major British university, she suddenly put a question to me for which I was not prepared. "Why do they put up with it?" she asked. "Why does who put up with what?" "These English women," she said; "Why do they put up with it? They're treated like dogs!" She went on to quote a saying of the Prophet which may or may not be authentic: "You should cherish your woman from the perfume of her hair to the tips of her toes." I remembered how often

I had been asked by non-Muslims to explain why women in the Islamic world put up with the oppression inflicted upon them. Here were two very different perspectives. Which was the true one? I can offer no simple answer.

When, as has sometimes happened, I have talked to Christian groups about Islam the lecture has always been followed by questions about the position of women. One way or another, I have avoided dealing with the subject. It is far too complex to be covered in a few words and, in any case, the only question that really matters is never asked: does Islam offer women an effective path to salvation? Only when that question has been answered can other, more peripheral questions be considered. The Quran and the traditions of the Prophet answer with an unqualified affirmative, and the majority of Muslim women, whatever their condition, have no doubts on this score. They may complain—and often do complain—that their menfolk fail to live up to the principles of the religion, but that is a different matter. “Boys will be boys”; women tolerate their boyishness—their “macho” pretensions—with a mixture of patience and humour. Men are fragile creatures, both physically and emotionally.

But it is pointless to consider any single component of a religious tradition or culture in isolation from the whole from which it cannot be isolated and into which it fits like a piece in a jigsaw. The separate pieces may seem strangely shaped. A foolish person might try to reshape them, removing the odd protuberances in the interests of neatness, but this will leave a gap in the total picture. Nor can you remove bits and pieces from an organic whole simply because they offend the tastes and prejudices of the time without damaging the whole structure. Employing a different image, one might compare a religious tradition—a coherent form or framework—to a crystal. Only if it is shattered can a particular fragment be removed. Once it has been shattered, the splinters may still reflect light—they are still crystalline—but they will be separated, in conflict, and the crystal as such has been destroyed for ever. With the passage of time, a revealed religion may be seen and understood from different angles but it cannot be reformed—that is to say

“re-formed”, moulded into a different form—in accordance with what Islam calls “caprice”. What is given is given, like it or not.

No social system is or can be perfect and every system is open to abuse. When one is rejected on account of its imperfections, another is immediately invented so that it too can be abused. A friend of mine was involved, at the age of eighteen, in the French student revolt of 1968 (the “events”). These young people wished to abolish the authority of the State and its instruments, together with that of their parents and teachers. My friend joined a “commune” and, within a month, was expelled for disobeying the rules, rules far more rigid and authoritarian than those which had been rejected. An ancient, dilapidated and illogical system is full of holes which allow considerable freedom to the individual; a bright new one, born out of utopian zeal, permits no delinquency.

When westerners, while paying lip-service to the spiritual aspects of Islam, denounce the Islamic social system and, specifically, the sexual discrimination which seems to them inherent in it, they are acting true to form. The imperial tradition did not expire in the 1950s. It changed its focus, and the triumphant civilization still thrives on the conviction of its own superiority. Notions of right and wrong are in a state of flux, but, at any given moment, western values are not open to question. The fact that these values were different a few years ago is irrelevant; “progress” validates the current fashion in morals and in political correctness. Islam does indeed discriminate between male and female. Put simply—perhaps too simply?—contemporary western culture tries to minimise the differences between the sexes, whereas Islam maximises them and glories in them. An awareness of differences is an aspect of intelligence, an aspect of being human. An act of discrimination is at the root of the Islamic Credo: “No divinity if not the Divinity.” Intelligence discriminates between the Absolute and the relative, God and all that is “other than God”, truth and falsehood, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance; not least between the active and the receptive or, in terms of the Chinese imagery now so widely used, between Yang and Yin. Above all, discrimination perceives facts as they are, not as some might wish them to be.

Not that Islam lacks arguments even in terms of western norms. The creation stories in the Quran and the Bible appear, at first sight, very similar, but there is an important difference. In the Bible Eve, under the serpent's spell, is the instrument of the Fall. Although this story may be thought irrelevant in the modern age, it has had immense significance for western—Christian and post-Christian—culture. It seems to imply that the woman is the source of evil, a “vessel of wrath” as St. Paul said, and certain early theologians disputed as to whether or not women possessed souls. The snigger which often accompanies references to sexual intercourse even today may be a dim echo of that fear of a fall from grace, immersion in the mud of earthiness, that haunted an earlier age. Many Christians are still shocked by any association of sexual pleasure with the sacred except in a sentimental context scented with orange blossom.

In the Quran the First Couple are jointly tempted and together tumble out of the earthly Paradise. They are equally guilty—or are they? The woman is by nature receptive, the fertilised rather than the fertilising, and it might be said that Eve was more vulnerable than her mate. Adam, on the other hand, should have known better. It was his duty (not hers) to wage war—*jihād*—against the “enemy of mankind”, and it was his duty to protect his mate. Moreover the Biblical statement that Eve was created from Adam's rib (the famous “third rib”) finds no echo in the Quranic account. Both male and female were created “from one soul”. Again, the pains of childbirth are, according to Genesis, a punishment for Eve's sin. A woman questioned the Prophet: “Men go to war and have a great reward for that, so what do women have.” He answered: “When a woman is pregnant, she has the reward of someone who spends the whole night praying and the whole day fasting; when the contractions strike her, no one knows how much reward God gives her for having to go through this, and when she delivers her child, then for every suck it draws from her, she receives the reward for keeping a soul alive.” He said also that, if a woman dies in childbirth, she is counted as a martyr, and the reward for martyrdom is Paradise.

Respect for women on account both of their maternal function and of their vulnerability, and respect for the sexual act because it is a joy approved by God, is inherent in the Islamic perspective. I have already mentioned the importance of *ṣadaqa*, the generous act which has its reward hereafter. The Prophet astonished his Companions one day by telling them: "In the sexual act of each of you there is a *ṣadaqa*." "Oh Messenger of God," they asked, "when one of us fulfils his sexual desire, will he be given a reward for that?" They were told that this was so provided, of course, that the act was within the bounds of the religious Law.

On a more mundane level, the Quran gives women rights which they did not gain until thirteen centuries later in the West. The most important of these was the married woman's right to keep control of her property including, of course, the dowry paid over to her by her husband at the time of the wedding. It is only just over a hundred years since the British Parliament passed the Married Women's Property Act which, for the first time, gave wives a degree of independence from their husbands. Whatever may be said by certain misguided Muslims, education is not simply a right but an obligation for women just as it is for men. To seek knowledge throughout his or her life is a duty incumbent upon every Muslim, regardless of sex, and so is the sharpening and deepening of the gift of spiritual intelligence for which God has singled out the human creature alone among created beings. There is, however, one thing that Islam does not favour: this is the distortion of human nature in accordance with the latest theory of how things should be or to fit some abstract notion of "fairness". Justice, as I have already suggested, requires that round pegs should be fitted into round holes and square ones into square holes. The alternative is uncomfortable for all concerned.

Anecdotal evidence concerning the position of women in the Muslim world is conflicting and often depends upon the cultural environment to which it relates. Sometimes practice and principles coincide. More often, they do not, and this is a serious matter for those who neglect their obligations. According to one of the Prophet's "inspired sayings" (*āḥadīth qudsīyah*) God

has said: "I will not observe the right of my servant until My servant observes My right." It is said however that God usually foregoes His rights but does not show the same indulgence towards infringements of the rights of human beings. Our offences against Him are forgivable, since they cannot touch Him, whereas our offences against each other are less readily forgiven by the Creator, Sustainer and Protector of creation. The Prophet is reported to have said: "The best of you is the one who is best to his wife." It follows that the "worst" Muslim is the one who treats his wife badly. There are two reasons for the abuse of women: first, misunderstanding or indifference regarding the teachings of the Quran and of the Prophet; secondly, the corruption of human nature.

Even the closest among the companions were often astonished by the freedom which the Prophet allowed to his wives and by the respect he showed for their wishes. This was not at all in accordance with the customs and the habits of the Arabs. While none of his followers would have dreamed of criticising him, it would hardly be surprising if—after his death—old habits reasserted themselves and did so increasingly with the passage of the years. This certainly happened in the matter of warfare. In terms of Quranic principles and all that the Prophet said, the idea that Muslims might kill each other should be unthinkable, an unforgivable atrocity, and yet—within a few years of his death—Muslims were fighting each other. The history of Christianity, in essence the religion of peace, offers an equally stark reminder of the fragile hold which religious principles have even upon the most sincere believers. The dark side of human nature is immensely skilled in the arts of self-justification and self-deception.

To return however to the different but complementary roles of men and women in the world and to understand them, it is useful to turn to theatrical imagery. We come from elsewhere and, after a brief performance on this stage, return whence we came. Before our coming and after our departure we are not at all the persons we presented to the audience here, although the role we play in this theatre is an aspect of what, in truth, we are. The fact that the word "person" comes from the Latin *per-*

sona, meaning “the mask worn by a player”, is of profound significance. It implies with unmistakable clarity that the personality of this man or this woman encountered here—the face intimately known or merely glimpsed in a crowd—is not the true being in its totality. I am incalculably more than that. He is incalculably more than that, and so is she. But we are confined within the cosmic limits and must play our parts within these limits.

There is a common term which has only a negative meaning in modern culture but which, in traditional cultures, takes on a positive value. This term is “role-playing”. No one doubts that, beneath the surface personality, men have a feminine side and women a masculine side. Nothing in this shadowy world of ours is clear-cut and unambiguous. But, in the Islamic context, men are expected to exemplify masculinity, women femininity. We exist to act out symbolically certain immutable principles; call them, if you will, Yang and Yin. But we have to distinguish between the being as such (fully known to God alone) and the role that he or she is destined to play in this world, much as we distinguish between an actor and the part in which he is cast. Not that this comparison should be taken too literally, since the actor’s role does not necessarily reflect an aspect of his true identity.

The symbolism of the “sexual pairs” and their union, prefiguring the reunion of all the opposites in God, is so fundamental and of such significance that the condemnation of homosexuality in Islam as in Christianity and Judaism becomes inevitable. It is not so much a moral “sin” as a cosmic dissonance. The pairing of like with like is meaningless, irrespective of subjective feelings or “commitment”, whereas every valid act has a meaning, a symbolism that extends beyond our sphere. At the same time, it must be said that traditional Islam has been tolerant of departures from the norm provided these are not made public so as to imperil the social structure; according to the Quran, God may choose to forgive all aberrations except for the association of other “deities”, other powers and other agents, with Him.

Pursuing the theatrical image a little further, it might be

said that the actors and actresses in this unfolding human drama perform against a background of stage scenery and have at hand the "props" needed for the performance. It is in this sense that the world was created for mankind. The scenery does not outlast the play. The Quranic verse quoted earlier—"You see the mountains and think them solid, but they will evaporate even as the clouds evaporate"—ends with the words: "God's artistry, who disposes of all things in perfect order." Everything in this world is insubstantial and in constant flux. Only the spirit endures and, with it, the meaning with which the Artist has invested these passing events.

As so often, Shakespeare makes the point:

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances . . .

A good actor, whether in the lead or in a minor role, plays his allotted part to the best of his ability, and the roles are not interchangeable. The best performance is not necessarily that of the lead, but each is judged on its merits. To hanker after a different role instead of perfecting one's own is disruptive of the drama as a whole. Just so, an ordered society, convenient to its members, requires a degree of stratification rather than competition for the best parts. As Muslims see it, competition between men and women on the same field of battle can only create disorder in society and, eventually, lead to a real "war of the sexes" and to disharmony precisely where harmony is most essential to human well-being. The emphasis which Islam places upon the masculine/feminine polarity (and complementarity) results, quite logically, in a separation of social functions. But it is important to understand that this separation is not, in practice, as rigid as it appears. Every system of human organisation must allow for exceptions and every system varies according to the personalities involved. If the Islamic system were as rigid as it sometimes appears to be it could not have survived. Rigidity and death go together, and an inflexible sys-

tem is bound, sooner or later, to be shattered by circumstances.

In general, however, the Muslim woman's sphere of operation is the home, in which she is the dominant figure. It is for the man to go out into the storm, fighting in defence of his family and his people, struggling to earn the money to maintain his household, standing firm against the overweening power of those who hold power in their hands. In a certain sense, when he returns home, he is returning from war to peace. This distinction of functions is abhorrent to modern sensibilities. It seems inherently "unfair". It would seem less so if the balance between work and home had not been so gravely disturbed. Most people in the West today identify themselves by the work they do. Their home is their dormitory. The "job" is what matters and, at a certain level, "professionalism" is a source of pride. This is an ugly word. It implies the subordination of every other aspect of life to the activity by which people earn their livelihood. In Europe and America today young professionals have neither time nor energy left over for their personal lives, let alone for their spiritual lives, and this is a slow death of the soul. It might be better to reserve the term "professional" for the profession of prostitution. One of the advantages of the prayers which the Muslim is commanded to perform five times each day is that they interrupt his work and draw him back from the lesser to the greater activity. The "job" and all the anxieties associated with it are put in their place, subordinate to the act of "remembering God" and giving Him His due.

In Islam, home and family are firmly situated at the centre of life in this world and of society as such. A man's work in competition with his fellows cannot take precedence over the private realm, the realm in which woman is Queen. Only when this order of priorities is reversed can her role be seen as less significant and less useful than that of her husband. She represents stability and, very often, the practical realism which restrains the male tendency to ignore facts in favour of theories. In this context, I cherish a remark attributed to the widow of Karl Marx: "How good it would have been if Karl had made some capital instead of writing so much about it!" But general-

isations always have to be qualified. As elsewhere, there are Muslim marriages in which the husband is not merely dominant but tyrannical. There are others in which the wife is clearly in charge and her husband is putty in her hands. The dominant Muslim woman, particularly among the Arabs and the Sudanese, is an awe-inspiring figure; a Queen whose dignity is unassailable. She does not seek "liberation". She has no need to do so.

But what about equality? This word has been a slogan ever since the French Revolution and means whatever this or that ideologue wants it to mean. In practice if not in principle it has become associated with "sameness" since it implies comparison of like with like. Are a tiger and a lion equal? The question has no meaning. Since every human being is unique, the egalitarian is obliged to advocate social engineering in favour of some current theory, often a disruptive process because custom and habit are the basis for a stable society. The one thing that all of us have in common is the potential to approach close to God, but each in his or her own way. It has been said that "there are as many paths as there are human souls," although these paths run in parallel on the highways provided by the traditional—revealed—religions and lead to the same destination. Arguments as to whether men and women are equal in Islam lead nowhere. Men are superior in one context, women in another. Perhaps one should conclude simply that both are superior.

The Quran says that "men have a degree above women." The sky, from which the fertilising rain falls, has a degree above the earth, but they complement each other. In Islam as in other traditions the first fracture in the unity which transcends all multiplicity is the separation of sky and earth. In this life man, as distinguished from woman, has three functions (in addition to that of fertilisation): he leads the ritual prayer, a "priestly function"; he fights when it is necessary to defend the home, and he labours to earn his family's daily bread. The third function is variable. The Prophet's first wife and principal support in the early years of his mission was a successful and prosper-

ous businesswoman. The Quran says: "I do not suffer to be lost the work of any worker among you, male or female." But the first two functions are invariable and the man who fails to fulfil them has no "degree" at all. William Blake's saying, "If only the men would do their duty, the women would be such wonders," has an Islamic ring about it, and Jalaluddin Rumi, the poet and mystic, wrote: "If one could become a 'man' by virtue of beard and testicles, every young buck has enough hair and beard . . . !"

If we were to set up the scales, placing on one side the positive aspects of femininity and, on the other, the advantages of the male, they would balance, but the important point is that the contents of the two pans would be completely different. It is this that makes comparisons so difficult. Moreover the factors to be weighed relate to different levels of human existence. The receptivity attributed to women may be seen as weakness and inferiority (in the literal sense of occupying a subordinate station) on the social level. At a different level, that of the human relationship to God, it is the highest virtue. Receptivity to what comes to us from above is the only perfection of which the human creature is capable. This is *faqr*, "poverty", implying an emptiness waiting to be filled, to be fertilised, and impotence before the overwhelming splendour of the Divine. It is here that the feminine side of the male, hidden in his worldly role, comes into its own. Every man must be Yin—passive, receptive—under God or else suffer imprisonment in his own shell, blind to the light and starved of spiritual nourishment.

"Paradise is at the feet of the mothers," said the Prophet. I mentioned earlier the immense respect which motherhood enjoys in the Muslim world and the social condemnation visited upon those who fall short in their respect for the woman who bore them. It is as potential mothers that girls are guarded by their male relatives who must, if necessary, lay down their lives to protect them from harm. Since receptivity is, almost by definition, beautiful, it is something to be protected from the evils abroad in the world, evils which rage today as freely as they ever did. But when does protection become imprisonment, and

when does the guard become the gaoler? This happens, of course it does. The philosopher Kant remarked that "out of the crooked timber of humanity nothing straight was ever made." The Muslim adds: "Except for God's prophets and by His grace."

"The whole world is to be enjoyed," said the Prophet, "but the best thing in the world is a good woman." In a different context he remarked that women provide the greatest trial that men face in their lives. Since life as such is—in the Islamic perspective—a trial, a testing, this suggests (as does the reference to "the best among you") that men stand to be severely judged if they mistreat the women under their protection. In every culture and in every historical period there have been men who abused their power over women. The abuse of power is a universal phenomenon, but this is a special case. What is it that men—some men—fear in their encounter with the opposite sex? No doubt there are a hundred possible answers, none of them exhaustive, but, since this fear is to be found in every culture, its roots must lie deep in the human situation. In its extreme form it becomes grimly comic, an example of black humour.

A western reporter who visited Kabul soon after the so-called Taleban captured the city recounted an incident which illustrates this very well. A group of soldiers came upon a woman walking down the street with only the lower part of her face covered. They screamed at her to go home and put on a face-mask. Instead of doing as she was told, the woman stripped off her half-veil and announced that she was going to remove all her clothes. Did these soldiers respond by beating her or at least scolding her? On the contrary, young men who had faced the enemy guns without flinching fled in terror. For them, a woman's eyes held a magical power which both tempts and destroys independent manhood, and her naked body would have drawn the life-breath from them.

What we seem to have here is a profound fear of "the other". Is this perhaps a reflection of the supreme fear of the supremely "Other", God, who drinks up our souls leaving only a husk behind? We come into this world from Him, and we emerge into earthly life from the mother's womb. In self-assertion, we try to distance ourselves from our origin—seen as an incomprehen-

ble darkness—so that we can sport for a while in the daylight. It is a case of self-protection, not in the usual sense of the term but in a deeper sense: the protection of the isolated selfhood—the hardened ego enclosed in its brittle shell—from dissolution in the sex act or in selfless adoration of our Creator. God demands that the shell be broken if we truly desire Him and that we come out from ourselves, naked and defenceless; moreover, although God is always “He” in a patriarchal religion such as Islam, the fact remains that the only divine Name equivalent to the Name Allah is *al-Rahmān* (“Call upon Allah”, says the Quran, “or call upon *al-Rahmān*”) and this all-encompassing Name—“My Mercy encompasses all things”—comes from a root meaning “womb”. To take this further would be to walk on eggshells, but the implications are clear.

“Men are the protectors of women,” says the Quran, “because God has given the one more strength [than the other] and because they support them.” It may not be entirely fanciful to suggest that the male ego harbours a fear of redundancy. Leaving aside obscene procedures in a test tube, one man would suffice to impregnate thousands of women in a lifetime. If women no longer require protection in order to fulfil their feminine role and to nurture the next generation, then one is entitled to ask how many men are really necessary for the survival of the tribe, the people, the race. It is precisely this problem that has arisen recently in the West, where men are said to be confused regarding their effective role. If women no longer need men, this has not diminished man’s need of woman. There are subtle differences in the sexual drives of the two sexes. For men there is often a sense of home-coming in the act of intercourse, a sense of finding shelter and comfort. The Quran says: “Of His signs is this: that He created for you mates that you might find rest in them and that He ordained between you love and mercy.” An Indian Muslim friend told me of his father’s death at a great age. The family had gathered around the bed and craned forward to hear the old man’s last words. About to draw his final breath, he murmured: “I pity him!” “Whom is it that you pity, Baba?” they asked. With a great effort he replied: “I pity the

man who has never known the comfort of a woman's body."

The Prophet is reported as saying: "Marriage is half the religion." On another occasion he said: "When a Muslim intends to come to his wife, God writes for him twenty good deeds and erases for him twenty evil deeds; when he takes her by the hand, God writes for him forty good deeds and erases for him forty evil deeds; when he kisses her, God writes for him sixty good deeds and erases for him sixty evil deeds." And again: "I counsel you to be kind to your wives, for they are your helpers. You have taken them only as a trust from God." Those who "fear the meeting with their Lord", as does every Muslim (at least in theory), dare not abuse this trust or claim that their wives "belong" to them; the wife belongs only to God. It follows that love between husband and wife is not a private matter, depending entirely upon passing sentiments, but a strand in a pattern of love which extends from heaven to earth. According to a *hadith qudsi*, God has said: "My love is obligatory for those who love one another for My sake."

Protection however is mutual. Nothing in this complex interplay between the sexes is one-sided. The Quran says: "[Your wives] are clothing for you and you are clothing for them"; clothing that covers our nakedness and shields us, men and women, from the icy wind. The Prophet's dictum that "marriage is half the religion" may perhaps imply that the human being is only complete as a bi-unity; man-and-woman, woman-and-man. It has sometimes been suggested that the primordial "Adam"—the first creation—was a hermaphrodite, subsequently split into two, just as the heavens and the earth were split asunder. It is little wonder that these two ache to be reunited, and so Islam, unlike Christianity, does not in principle sanction sexual intercourse exclusively in relation to procreation. The act as such has a significance beyond the propagation of the species and achieves its perfection in Paradise.

It could be said that this act transcends the participants and is not, therefore, dependent upon contingent circumstances. The Christian Mass is valid before God even if the officiating priest is corrupt, and the canonical prayers of the Muslim are

equally valid even if the Imam who leads the prayers is of bad character or insincere. Just so, the coming together of a man and a woman in physical union is what it is, regardless of whether the couple understand the significance of what they are doing. The moment that the vertical dimension enters our flat world, a ritual or ceremonial element is present; thus Ibn Abbas, one of the close companions of the Prophet, said: "I love to adorn myself for the woman, just as I love that she adorn herself for me." In Quranic terms, the word "adornment" already suggests the presence of a trace—a flickering reflection—of Paradise. There is therefore an obligation to strive for perfection, even if perfection is unattainable in this world. All the orthodox jurists of Islam, the founders of the four Schools of Law, agreed that it was incumbent upon a husband to keep his wife happy and satisfied, as it was for the wife to satisfy her husband. When they said that a woman's genitals needed "protection", this is understood to mean that the husband must satisfy his wife's needs so that she is not tempted to stray out of frustration. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Three things are counted an inadequacy in a man: first, meeting someone he would like to get to know but parting from him before learning his name and his family; second, rebuffing generosity that another shows to him; thirdly, going to his wife and having intercourse with her before talking to her and gaining her intimacy, satisfying his need from her before he has satisfied her need from him."

◀ The glorification of the physical act seems alien to the Christian perspective, as it is to post-Christian idealism, and yet the basic principle is universal. Multiplicity, proceeding from the One—eternal and all-inclusive—begins with the number two, begins with the creation of the "pairs". Their re-union within the whirligig of time is, as it were, an anticipation of the return, beyond time, of all that exists to the One which is both its origin and its end. This "return", this in-gathering of multiplicity, is a constant theme in the Quran. It is pre-figured in the love which living creatures feel for each other, as it is in prayer and in the physical union of the polar opposites, male and

female. These pre-figurations partake of Reality more fully and more deeply than do the disharmonies, conflicts, hatreds and rivalries which appear to dominate our world. "Is it not to God that all matters come back?" asks the Quran.

It would be absurd to suppose that the majority of Muslims think in these terms but, as long as an integral Islamic civilization existed, the full implications of the Faith—as well as its guiding principles—were integrated into daily life and did not need to be spelt out or even understood. It sufficed that they were lived within a social milieu crafted by the revelation and by the example of the Prophet. Now, amidst the shards and fragments of a civilization that has been broken asunder, one can speak only of individuals or couples who survive in the wreckage as exemplary Muslims. Whether they are few or many alters nothing. Just as nothing that we do—no sin, no revolt, no blasphemy—can reach God, so nothing that Muslims do in a degenerate age diminishes by one iota the principles of the Faith, unchanged and unchangeable. When the end of all things approaches and the folding up of the cosmos is at hand, then, if there remains one true Muslim couple on earth, Islam will still be intact.

7

Peace and War

God guides whosoever seeks His good pleasure onto paths of Peace. He brings them from darkness into light by His Decree and guides them onto a straight path.

(Quran 5:16)

God summons to the House of Peace and leads whom He will to a straight path.

(Quran 10:26)

They accuse each other, and there seems to be no end to this argument. Christians still see Islam as a religion of war, dedicated to conquest. They have inherited the fear which obsessed their ancestors when Muslim civilization was dominant and Christendom trembled before the "heathen" threat. Those who have turned their backs on Christianity still share these fears and these prejudices, and they associate Islam with two horrors: savage punishments and "Holy War".

Muslims, from their side of the fence, see Christianity and its heirs as inherently aggressive (having been at the receiving end of this aggression). Since the Bible includes the Jewish scriptures, the learned preacher in a mosque has no difficulty in quoting texts to support this conviction. In Deuteronomy God's people are commanded, when they enter a conquered city, to "leave nothing alive that has the breath of life, but you shall utterly destroy them", and in Ezekiel there is the further com-

mand to "slay utterly both old and young, maids and little children . . ." These texts were taken seriously by the Crusaders (notably in the Christian conquest of Jerusalem) and in the European religious wars. They cannot be brushed aside as historically irrelevant and, in the light of the Quran, Muslims find them profoundly shocking. Many are convinced that, even today, "the Christians" (as they tend to describe all westerners) will shred them with missiles if they step out of line, a line drawn by Europe and America. They react either with impotent fury or with a degree of subservience, but always with a deep sense of injustice.

There is, then, no end to this argument, so let me leave it where it is and consider what Islam actually teaches about peace and war. In doing so, I am concerned with principles rather than practice, in other words with the ideal and not with the way in which this ideal has, only too often, been betrayed. Religion is one thing, decadent human nature quite another, and the truths inherent in a particular Faith are not effaced by the misbehaviour of its adherents. The truth stands; eventually everything else falls away as if it had never been. Stupidity and wickedness belong to the category of *al-bātil*, a Quranic term which means "the empty" or "the illusory". Emptiness has no hold on substance, and illusions are a mist which is dissipated when the sun rises.

The very notion of peace carries with it a certain ambiguity. There is peace defined simply as the absence of war—one of a pair indissolubly linked—and there is a peace beyond all the opposites in terms of which our world functions, called by the Christians "the peace which passeth understanding". The one is relative, the other absolute. The one is situated amidst the vicissitudes of time and can never be more than a temporary condition, dependent upon a precarious balance of forces; the other is unassailable because it is rooted beyond time. But relative, worldly peace is itself ambiguous. If we describe someone as "peaceful" we may mean that he is filled with the milk of human kindness, striving and making sacrifices in the cause of peace. We may, on the other hand, mean only that he is cow-

ardly or lazy, that he will not stand up for the right and, when he sees evil done, turns away and covers his eyes. A life based on the principle of "peace at any price" is not a life well lived.

For that matter, a nation which conducts its affairs on such a principle does not long endure. There are those who believe that a policy of non-violence can be effective against aggression, as well as being the path of virtue. This illusion has been fostered by the example of Gandhi, a noble example but not one that can be followed in the world as it is. Gandhi faced a toothless lion, the British Empire in decline and governments which had lost the will to rule. It was left to his own people to kill him. But I am sometimes haunted by the thought of the Arawaks, the original inhabitants of Jamaica, so very different to the warlike Caribs of the southern Caribbean; simple fisher folk who lived off the riches of the ocean and did not know how to fight. The Spaniards arrived in Jamaica and tried to enslave them. The Arawaks lost their will to live, lay down and died. This is perhaps the logical conclusion of a policy of non-violence, one way of responding to the world's wickedness. But it is not the Islamic way.

The word *islām* is a variation of the Arabic verbal root, *S L M*, which gives us also *salām*, meaning "peace", at the same time defining peace in terms of "wholeness", "health", "well-being" and "soundness". In certain contexts *salām* comes very close to the Christian concept of "salvation". The Quranic term, "the House of Peace" (to which the "straight path" leads us) is Paradise in which God's greeting to the blessed is "Peace! Peace!" Discord is inerradicable in the world simply because this world is so far from Paradise. Were it not for that distance it could not exist, and discord is the price it pays for existence. Hence *jihād*, the holy effort to minimise discord, to maintain the balance between contrary forces and to defend what is worth defending against corruption.

So what does this word *jihād* actually mean? Its basic meaning is "effort"; wholehearted, dedicated effort which strains every sinew of our being on every level. The Prophet, returning from a military campaign, told his people: "We are now return-

ing from the lesser *jihād* to the greater one." In other words, we are returning from the comparatively easy task of defeating the enemies who threatened us bodily to face and overcome the enemy within our own souls, the evil impulses from which no human creature is entirely free. The lesser and the greater "holy war" have the same objective: the eradication of evil, including all those evils which lie at the root of discord and therefore of war as such.

The jurists distinguish four ways in which the religious obligation of *jihād* may be fulfilled: this is by the heart, by the tongue, by the hands or by the sword. The first, "the greater Holy War", concerns the individual's struggle against the evil within, so that he may comply wholeheartedly with God's will, purifying both his soul and his actions. His weapon is the constant "remembrance of God". The second and the third forms of *jihād* relate to the duty, when we see something amiss, to put it right with our hands or by our speech and—as the Quran commands—"to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong". This is a question of morality, both individual and collective. It includes encouraging others to mend their ways, not by self-righteous preaching, but by reminding them of the risks they run in disobeying their Creator. Only with the fourth of these categories do we come to actual combat against the enemies of the Faith and the community. Even then, according to the jurists, this does not necessarily involve taking up the sword. Combat may be waged by political and diplomatic means; only when all else fails, do we come to armed warfare.

In terms of the laws which govern—or should govern—the *ummah* of Islam, war can never be regarded as anything but a lesser evil. This phrase in itself indicates that there are worse evils than fighting, including oppression, persecution on grounds of faith and the massacre of innocents. Corruption would spread like a giant stain across the face of the earth if it were not checked, if necessary by force.

The Prophet remained in his native city of Mecca for thirteen years after he received the first revelation and, during that period, he and the converts to the new Faith suffered bitter per-

secution at the hands of the pagans. They bore this in patience, as they were commanded to do. In Christian terms, they “turned the other cheek”. Only when persecution changed into a grim determination to destroy the community and its leader was permission given, first for them to emigrate to a place of safety and then to take up arms. This came in two verses of the twenty-second chapter of the Quran: “Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged because they are oppressed, and God is well able to help them; those who have been expelled from their homes without just cause, only because they say ‘God is our Lord’. And had it not been for God repelling some people by means of others, cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques in which God’s Name is much remembered would have been destroyed”

There we have it, and the priorities are clear. “Holy War” is in defence of holiness and all that is holy. The mention of churches and synagogues is significant. There is a duty to defend faith as such, religion as such, against those who would stifle the remembrance of God. These verses establish the principles of armed *jihād*. Fighting is permitted in self-defence, in defence of religious faith, on behalf of the persecuted and, in particular, those driven out of their homes to become refugees. There is however a third case, in practice open to various interpretations (and misinterpretations): this is war to prevent the spread of corruption, that is to say of some great wickedness which threatens to engulf a wide area and to pervert a great number of human souls. There are, of course, some among today’s Muslims who see western civilization, with its displacement of God from the centre of human existence and its permissiveness, as just such a case.

Jihād is the only legitimate form of warfare permitted in Islam—anything else must be regarded as mass murder—but, human nature being what it is, no one should be surprised if rulers or governments, going to war for reasons that have nothing holy about them, have sought to justify themselves by claiming that their aggression falls within the limits of *jihād*.

Their punishment, in the light of Islamic doctrine, cannot be other than severe.

There is one particular illusion, long current in the West, which must be swept away at once. Writers in the last century—and some in this century—have maintained that Islam was spread by forcible conversions, but the Quranic verse “No compulsion in religion” was revealed after the verses sanctioning limited warfare. Faith cannot be imposed, and in fact the Arabs of the early period thought themselves so privileged in possessing a divine revelation which had come through one of their race that they were often unwilling to share it with non-Arabs. In any case, the Muslim is commanded to speak gently to those who do not share his beliefs, both out of respect for their common humanity but because, in the words of the Prophet, “God gives (a reward) for gentleness that He does not give for harshness.” Moreover he knows, or should know, that personal example achieves more than words can ever do and that hostility to those who are unresponsive to the message only provokes a reciprocal hostility.

This principle is enunciated again and again in the Quran, and the Prophet never treated the unbeliever as an enemy unless the unbeliever himself chose the path of enmity. In a verse in the ninth chapter of the Book, revealed at a time when the Meccan idolaters were waging war against the Muslim community of Medina, we read: “And if any of the idolaters seek your protection, grant him protection so that he may hear the word of God, and afterwards convey him to a place of safety.” The Quran always makes a distinction between the individual and the collectivity. The individual is commanded to show forbearance in dealing with other individuals, to forgive them and deal kindly with them. It reminds us that he who is your enemy today may, tomorrow, become your good friend. Nothing in this world lasts and every situation is in a state of constant flux. Friendship, since it is by nature positive, partakes of reality and, indeed, of Paradise, whereas enmity has a shadowy existence rooted in error and illusion.

This is why the Quran tells us repeatedly to “repel evil with

good", just as light dispels the shadows: "Since good and evil cannot be equal, repel evil with something better"; and again: "These it is who shall receive a twofold reward for having been patient in adversity and for having repelled evil with good. . . and, whenever they hear foolish talk, they turn away from it and say 'Unto us our works and unto you your works. Peace be upon you!'" So the God-given greeting of "Peace!" is not offered only to those who seem to deserve it, for God alone knows who are the deserving. Commenting on this verse, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said of those who receive a twofold reward: "When they are deprived of anything, they give; and when they are wronged, they forgive." Al-Ṭabarī, one of the greatest of the early Quranic commentators, explained: "They repel the evil done to them by doing good to those who did it . . ."

The enemies of Islam, when they sue for peace, are to be given the benefit of the doubt, even if their sincerity is questionable. "If they incline to peace," says the Quran, "incline thou also and place thy trust in God. Truly, He alone is the all-Hearing, the all-Knowing. But should they seek only to deceive—Behold, God suffices thee." Concerning those who ask for peace because they face defeat, "although, had God willed to make them stronger than you, they would certainly have made war on you; yet, if they let you be . . . and offer peace, God does not permit you to harm them." In short, armed combat is unavoidable only when the enemy, convinced of his own superior force, refuses even to consider the way of peace and conciliation. The Muslim is then prepared for martyrdom in the defence of his Faith and of his brothers and sisters on the "straight path". In principle an attack on any section of the *ummah* of Islam is an attack on the whole body of believers. The fact that, in our time, this principle is barely given lip-service—except by a few who are denounced as "extremists"—is conclusive evidence of how far the *ummah* has fallen.

Martyrdom is a concept little understood and little respected nowadays in the West. No doubt the experience of the First World War devalued it. It was not only men who died in the filth of the trenches; many ideals died with them, including that of a

“noble death”. Nobility cannot be associated with such ugliness. But this experience made no impact upon the Muslims and the ideal of sacrificing one’s life in defence of the Faith—not, it must be said, in defence of a nation state—retains all its power. The Arabic word for witnessing to the divine Unity, by which a man or a woman joins the community of Islam, is *shahādah*; the word for a martyr is *shahīd*, one who carries this witnessing to a human summit. Its excellence is apparent as soon as the disproportion between this world and what comes after is recognised, and the idea of violent death as an alternative to the sad decay of the ageing process does not horrify Muslims as it does westerners.

We speak of someone being a believer, but without being able to indicate to what degree faith may have penetrated their human substance. There are many degrees between the superficial and the profound. The tale is told of a Companion of the Prophet who was traveling in the desert with a small group when, without warning, an enemy stabbed him in the back. Instantly, spontaneously, he cried out with his last breath, “I have triumphed!” Faith had saturated his whole substance. He had achieved martyrdom.

The Muslim is constantly reminded by the Quran of life’s inevitable brevity. “The likeness of the life of this world is but that of rain which we send down from the sky and which is absorbed by plants of the earth from which men and beasts draw nourishment; until, when the earth has assumed its fine adornments and has been embellished, and those who dwell on it believe that they have gained mastery over it, there comes down upon it Our Judgement by night or by day, and We cause it to be like a field mown down as if it had never been.” This is followed by another reference to “the House of Peace” and to the “Straight Path”.

So we know where the end of the Path is situated, leading as it does into the very heart of true peace. To quote the Quran again: “Clearly have We spelt out these messages to people who are willing to take them to heart. Theirs shall be the House of Peace with their Lord, and He shall be close to them because of

what they have done." What they have done, in effect, is to spread a message of peace, and "the true servants of the All-Merciful are only those who walk humbly on the earth and who, when the ignorant address them, reply with words of peace."

The issue here is the distance which separates the Centre from the periphery. At the Centre is peace, on the periphery is discord, only temporarily overcome when a channel opens between the two. Our human nature dwells, expands and then contracts, amidst the opposites. This is our situation, obliged always to look to right and to left—peace and war, good and evil, joy and pain—and subjected to two mighty forces: the one centripetal, the other centrifugal. It follows that the ultimate, unalterable peace lies beyond these dichotomies; beyond them in transcendence but also in the deepest inwardness to which we have access only through self-surrender to That which is both the highest and the deepest. God has said in the Quran: "I am the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward." Between the transcendent Reality and the immanent Reality lies this playground, this theatre in which we perform, buffeted by contrary winds.

The Christian phrase mentioned earlier—"the peace which passeth understanding"—is pregnant with meaning because our human understanding can function only in terms of the opposites. It comprehends "Yes" and it comprehends "No", but it cannot encompass within its limited range what lies beyond "Yes" and "No". We have now left the sphere of "good" and "evil". Let us substitute for them the terms "centripetal" and "centrifugal"; the winged flight towards the Centre, and the leaden fall—as though drawn downwards by the force of gravity—towards the periphery which borders on nothingness. The Centre, which we call God but which we may equally, if we wish, call simply "That which is", the fullness of Being, is perfect Peace. If we are receptive, then it draws us to it just as the sun causes plants to incline towards its light. But such open receptivity as this is not easily achieved. Our worldly desires and fears—without which we would not survive here—jostle for attention and block the view. They readily occupy our capacity

for receptivity to the exclusion of all else. Hence the “greater Holy War”; the effort to keep a space open for what comes from the Centre.

But we—you and I, all of us—are constantly at war. Even our bodies, from the moment of birth, wage an unceasing battle against hostile invaders. The phenomenon of AIDS indicates only too clearly what happens when our defences are down and the body is at the mercy of its enemies. The immune system fights its own *jihād*. On the level of the psyche we can never expect, in this life, to be entirely free from the downward pull, the temptation to lose ourselves in chaos. Why are Muslims commanded to pray five times each day throughout their lives? To many who stand outside the community of Islam, this seems excessive. It is barely adequate. Prayer is the most effective weapon against the centrifugal force, against the tendency, with each hour that passes, to slide downwards, away from the light; it is also the polish which removes “rust” from the heart (a phrase used frequently by the Prophet). It halts the slide, but only temporarily, which is why it has to be constantly repeated. At the same time, it polishes that inward “mirror”—the mirror of the heart—which is capable of reflecting the light of heaven but is soon obscured (as a metal mirror is obscured by rust). In everyday life it interrupts work which we may think is urgent and important, putting it in its place in the scale of things. Significantly, the root from which the Arabic word *ṣalāh* (the prayer rite) is derived also has the meaning of “connection”. When the connection is broken, things fall apart.

This prayer is defined in the Quran and in the sayings of the Prophet in terms of the “remembrance of God” and “God-consciousness”. To forget the God who is ever-present with us is, simultaneously, to forget who we are, where we are and why we are; to forget our function as human creatures and fall into the realm of “caprice”. Here, if we seek the causes of warfare, we will discover its root. *Jihād* is an effort to hold chaos at bay. Profane conflicts—unholy wars—take place in the midst of chaos. The Prophet said that one of the signs of the end of time would be that the killer no longer knows why he killed, nor does

the slain man know why he was slain. I am reminded of a few lines which I learned as a schoolboy from a poem by Matthew Arnold concerned with the retreat of the sea of faith:

And we are here as on a darkling plane,
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

And yet, ignorant as most of us are of our true situation in the all-encompassing divine Presence, nothing can eradicate from our innermost being the glint of light and the seed of peace. However far we may fall from the human norm, which is dominated by that light and that peace, we are never—so long as the breath of life is in us—completely lost. Islam lays great emphasis upon repentance and, if this word is stripped of its purely moralistic connotation, its basic meaning is a “turning back” towards the light after facing in the wrong direction; in other words, a reversal of our orientation as though a Muslim at prayer who had turned his back on the direction of Mecca were to recognise his error and turned round to face in the right direction. The followers of Islam and the “People of the Book” know that God waits patiently to respond to this act of repentance, nor does He ever tire of waiting for it so long as we live.

Armed *jihād*, if it is to be truly what it should be, requires those who fight to situate themselves in the Centre, not on the whirling periphery. Once when Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law, was engaged in single combat with a pagan Meccan, his opponent fell to the ground but, as he did so, spat in the victor’s face. About to deal the death blow, Ali put aside his sword. He was angry, and he knew—being imbued with the spirit of the Faith—that to kill the man in anger would be a grave sin. It would be difficult to find a more illuminating example of what it means to fight for God, not for oneself, for one’s country or for some political cause. Detachment, free from any personal animus, is the essence of *jihād*, on whatever level it takes place. The “greater Holy War”, the struggle against oneself, is in essence a struggle for detachment in which there is no place for anger or distress; no place even for shame because shame is an

emotion we feel when we would like to be proud of ourselves, and pride has no role in this. There is only the cool assessment of what is wrong (the heat of anger would distort our judgment) and the painstaking effort to put it right. The requirements of the greater and the lesser *jihād* are the same.

Up to this point I have referred to armed warfare as though it was the same whatever the weapons used, but it is in weaponry that the greatest progress has been made since the time of the Prophet. Modern war has very little in common with the battles he fought. Consider the Battle of Badr, certainly one of the very few decisive battles in human history. The number of men killed on both sides was between seventy and eighty. Then consider any of the many indecisive battles fought in the First World War or on the Russian front in the second. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands died. Finally, consider a nuclear war which would dwarf these casualties beyond measure. Can we use the same word, "war", to cover both Badr and, say, the Somme, let alone what may yet come? Perhaps one should speak instead of "holocausts" in which those who kill do not truly know why they kill and the slain do not understand why they were slain.

The Prophet laid down a strict rule that, in fighting, the enemy's face must never be touched. This is understandable in view of the fact that the face mirrors the soul and, in a certain sense, transcends the physical body; moreover the Quran refers frequently to the "Face of God" to indicate His holy essence. When the first Caliph of Islam, Abū Bakr, sent out an expedition to put down rebellions which had broken out after the Prophet's death, he gave precise instructions to the military commander. Not only were places of worship and men of religion such as Christian monks to be respected, but no tree or plant that gave sustenance to man or beast was to be destroyed. It was unnecessary for him to add that no woman or child should be harmed. Such an outrage would have been unthinkable. Even among the pagan Arabs, a warrior who laid a rough hand on either would have died of shame. This too offers an instructive contrast to modern warfare, with its slaughter of the

innocents and its devastated landscapes. Is it possible to wage a "holy" war in which civilians, particularly women and children, are killed or wounded? Is this any longer *jihād*? Modern weapons are indiscriminate. Are they therefore *ḥarām*, forbidden?

Curiously enough, little if any attention seems to have been given to these questions of contemporary Muslim jurists. Perhaps they have simply been overwhelmed by the dazzling progress in lethal technology and no longer feel able to deal with it. And yet, when it comes to questions such as how the Muslim woman should dress, many of them insist that the guidelines laid down by the Prophet still apply. Why, I wonder, are the guidelines applying to warfare ignored? The answer, no doubt, is fairly obvious. The Muslims are not Arawaks. They have a right to defend themselves by every available means. But one still has to ask: is this *jihād*? I read somewhere that the reason the Mamluk rulers of Egypt were defeated by the Ottoman Turks was that they considered gunpowder to be *ḥarām* since it killed indiscriminately. I was later told by a historian that there was no truth in this story, which seems a pity. I would have liked it to be true.

We have, however, progressed a long way since then and gunpowder is no longer the issue, although the bomb or missile which can be guaranteed not to injure its victim's face is yet to be invented. The strict limits laid down by the Prophet and his immediate successors with regard to physical combat have long been forgotten, not least by those Muslims who are commonly described as "terrorists". Anyone who wishes to condemn Islam root and branch, can find ammunition in the activities of the Groupe Islamique Armee (G.I.A.) in Algeria in the 1990s, activities which figured prominently in the western press. They ask, not without reason, how these outrages could be reconciled with the basic principles of the Faith. Not even the most zealous apologist had anything to say. There are certain manifestations of evil which defy analysis. If they do nothing to promote faith in God, they certainly encourage faith in the satanic force which is, by its very nature, situated outside the circle of rational

analysis. It might be said that Satan does not bother with bars and brothels when he—or it—has much richer fields to explore and exploit. The subversion of religion offers unique opportunities for transforming good into evil, truth into error.

But the Islamists are no different to others, whether religious or irreligious, who feel—and “feel” is the operative word—a burning sense of injustice and, in consequence, believe themselves exempt from all moral rules and considerations of humanity. Justice as such is an unqualified good, but the belief that universal justice is attainable in this world is a symptom of the Utopianism which has caused such havoc in the twentieth century. People forget that Hitler was a typical utopian, however much we may dislike his particular ideal of the perfect society. Lenin was the same. The goals differed, but not the method. Those who believe they can attain the unattainable are obliged to kill and kill again. Islam, certainly, opposes injustice wherever it is found, but this is a practical religion which recognises the limits of human action. When it is possible to establish justice without, in doing so, provoking even greater injustices, then the Muslim is obliged to act. When this is not practicable, he is commanded to show patience and endurance, cleansing his heart of anger. In so doing he may grow in stature, both spiritually and psychologically. *Jihād* is always subject to the laws of practicality, bearing in mind that this world is not Paradise and can never aspire to be Paradise.

One thing is sure. We cannot change the fundamental character of the *dunyā*, the “near”, the world as we find it, but we can in some measure change ourselves. When the Day of Judgement comes, it is not nations or tribes that stand trembling before their Creator; it is individual men and women, stripped naked (so the Prophet said) and unsupported by their own people. It may be that outward peace depends ultimately upon the inward peace “which passeth understanding”. Those who scorn such a view as “quietist” must come forward with a better solution or hold their tongues. Is it really surprising if the way out of an earthly maze should be from the Centre, which is the point at which heaven and earth meet? Moreover,

inward peace, by its very nature, shows itself in outward conduct. Every act of love, every act of friendship and every act of kindness is like an axe taken to the roots of war.

The Prophet, speaking of *ṣadaqa*, included among acts of voluntary charity “meeting your neighbour with a smiling face”. This may seem a small thing, but it is none the less an act of defiance against anger, ill will, malevolence and all the negative forces which, issuing out from our dark side, stain the earth with the blood of conflict. In self-surrender to the Will of God, which is the essence of Islam and its meaning, we have to accept that what must be will be, and that everything, down to the falling of a leaf in autumn, is in the hands of an all-merciful Creator.

Nothing is perfect and nothing lasts for ever except the One, the Eternal; no world, no state of existence, no phase in the unfolding of the human story. The Day will come when, in the words of the Quran, “the stars are put out, and the heavens are riven asunder and the mountains are blown away . . . when the oceans are poured forth and the graves are overturned.” Then and then only will we see clearly what we have done and what we have left undone. Although no living creature can know when that Day will come, as Muslims we live now and always in awareness that its coming is certain. When this awareness is rooted in our hearts, then all else falls into place.

8

Future Shock

By the declining day: truly mankind is in a state of loss, save for those who believe and do good, who exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to patience.

(Quran 103)

If God were to hasten on for mankind the ill [they have earned] as they would hasten on the good, their respite would already have expired. But We allow those who do not expect the meeting with Us to stumble on in their contumacy.

(Quran 10:11)

Some years ago, in an idle moment at my desk in Whitehall, I came across a document prepared ten years previously by a section of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office whose job it was to predict the likely situation in various parts of the world at the end of the decade. They did not need a crystal ball. They had at their disposal a wealth of information, not only from ambassadorial reports but also from the Secret Intelligence Service, the CIA and the Government listening post in Cheltenham. They were probably the best informed people in the world. On this basis they looked into the future and attempted to predict coming events.

By the time I read these predictions the future was already the present. Had they got it right? They had in a few cases. For

the most part they had missed the mark by a wide margin. Above all, the major events which had occurred in these ten years were nowhere to be found in the report. Like unseen land mines in what was thought to be a safe area, they had exploded on contact. There is one certainty we can have about the future, with or without a wealth of information. The unexpected will happen. Events creep up behind our backs while our attention is focused elsewhere; old enemies take cover while new ones are on the prowl, and what heaven decrees is seldom what man anticipates. But it is often forgotten that an obsessive interest in the future is a modern phenomenon. It is certainly alien to traditional Islam.

Muslims are not encouraged to speculate about what is to come. There is an element of self-discipline in this restraint. Things to come are already present with God. He is the "All-Knowing", and He does as He wishes. Human attempts to predict the future impinge upon His omniscience and betray a desire to explore territory which is concealed from us for our own good. At the same time, they demonstrate a lack of trust; our business is in His hands, and that is where it belongs. It is enough that we stride forward, from one moment to the next, into the unknown, trusting in Him. We have plenty to do here and now without worrying about tomorrow and the next day. It is said that fortune tellers and the like take their cue from certain of the *jinn*, the unseen beings, who have travelled as close as they dare to the heavens and overheard the conversation of the angels. Except for a few scraps, they misunderstand what they have heard and these few truths are mixed with a mass of errors. The result is confusion, the nurturing of false hopes and disturbing fears.

The Muslims of earlier times had but one certainty regarding the future, the conviction that—at a time known only to God—this world which we experience in our waking lives will end, the Last Day will dawn, the "trumpet" will sound, and all that is framed in time and space will be extinguished. Those who keep this constantly in mind may surmise, when they look around them, that the end cannot be far distant. Fourteen cen-

turies have passed since the Prophet said: "I have been commissioned when the end of time is close." He said also that the Angel of the Last Day "has already raised the trumpet to his lips." Jesus, almost six centuries earlier, had said much the same. The Quran tells us that a "day" in the sight of God is "as a thousand years of what you plot," and it is true also that time, as perceived by a prophet, a messenger of God, is not necessarily the same as the mathematical time by which we calculate, but neither of these prophets could have meant the opposite to what they said. Only in the modern age have people believed in a future stretching thousands, even millions of years ahead; and contemporary opinions are not, in general, a very reliable guide to the truth.

The western media occasionally carry predictions that the sun will explode or turn into a black hole at a time unimaginably distant from the present. Presumably there are people who actually worry about this. The Muslim seldom worries over the fact that the world may end tomorrow. What is to come will come, and finally death itself will be extinguished with all the rest. A friend of mine was once in a small group in a Cairo mosque listening to a preacher famous for his air of ferocity. Fingering his beard and glancing, with piercing eyes, at each of the group in turn, the preacher described the extinction of humanity, of the earth and the stars and, finally, of the angels. Last of all, he said, God would summon into His presence the Angel of Death. In conclusion, pointing with outstretched arm at my friend, he roared: "Then will God Most High—glorified be He above all associates—point with his finger at Death and issue His command—'Die!'" No doubt his text had been the Quranic verse: "And there will remain only the Face of thy Lord, the Owner of all Glory and Munificence." Creation returns whence it came, drawn back by an irresistible force and over incalculable distances, to the Creator.

There is, however, a bleak alternative to this dramatic conclusion to our affairs. Those who have forgotten God and live only for this world are allowed to "stumble on" for a while, thinking themselves secure, but this does not mean that their

“respite” will last indefinitely. It is stamped with a date, the date upon which the divine Wrath will become manifest. The Quran refers repeatedly to “earlier generations” destroyed on account of their forgetfulness of God and rejection of their prophets. Since mankind is created for worship and for no other purpose, they had become useless, redundant. Every civilization and every culture decays with the passing of the years, losing touch with its life-giving source, and we read in the seventeenth chapter of the Quran: “There exists not a community but We shall destroy it before the Day of Resurrection or visit it with dire punishment.” In the Gospels Jesus is reported to have warned of successive calamities leading to “the great tribulation, such as was not seen since the beginning of the world.” The American Indians—or “native Americans” as they are called nowadays—having watched the desecration of their lands, expect a “Day of Purification” when all the rubbish, the cities and man-made constructions which disfigure the holy face of the earth will be swept away as by a mighty hand.

The Quranic references to peoples “destroyed before your time” are usually taken to mean tribes, nations or civilizations which had strayed so far from the “straight path” that their deviance could no longer be tolerated. But the contemporary Muslim must be aware that, today, no human group lives in isolation and that a uniform civilization, that of the West, has spread over the greater part of the globe and is still spreading. There are those who believe that this uniformity will lead, eventually, to universal peace when everyone on earth shares the same values and the same ideals: secularism, democracy, development, technology, social justice and so on. For some at least among the Muslims this has sinister implications. It implies the universal triumph of a civilization based upon the rejection of divine guidance and of the wisdom brought by the prophets; a civilization that is therefore ripe for destruction. They anticipate some great disaster which will tear the fabric apart, a geological or ecological catastrophe which will “purify” humanity, leaving but a handful of men and women to live on among the ruins.

Such warnings as this, however significant they may be in terms of a traditional perspective shared, in the past, by many peoples and many Faiths, carry little weight with the majority of our contemporaries. But this does not mean that they feel secure in a world threatened by nuclear and biological weapons as also by many other dangers on the horizontal level: the rebellion of the dispossessed multitudes, population growth, the disturbance of the planet's ecological balance, the exhaustion of natural resources or the emergence of new and deadly viruses. They take some comfort from the thought that their leaders, aided by technological advances, will find solutions to these problems. Man, so they have been told, is a creature capable of mastering not only nature but also his own destiny; he has become, in Islamic terms, a "deity", claiming a kind of independence from the One who is "without associate". The average "man in the street", the office worker, factory hand or housewife does not for one moment suppose that he or she would be able to govern a modern nation effectively. Why, I wonder, should they suppose that their rulers are better qualified or more competent than they are? It is more than two thousand years since Plato dreamed of rule by philosophers, schooled in wisdom. In all these years no method has ever been devised by which men or women fit to rule might be brought to the seats of power. The Ships of State sail on through time, captained by fumbling deck-hands.

It is more than fifty years since the late Wendell Wilkie proclaimed, triumphantly, that the twentieth century was "the century of the common man". Where, then, should we seek for uncommon men fit for this tremendous task? They are unlikely to be found in an age which refuses to discriminate between the great and the small, the superior and the inferior amongst the men and women who compete for light and air. Particularly in the Anglo-Saxon sector, the concept of "nobility" has become meaningless and the idea that some men and women might be truly superior to their fellows is, to say the least, distasteful. English people will actually boast of being "ordinary", with the implication that there is something rather shameful about

being extraordinary. There exists a cult of mediocrity based upon envy and upon a doctrinaire egalitarianism, and "elitist" has become a derogatory term. People vote for men and women as ordinary as themselves, then turn angrily upon them because, precisely, they are no better than ordinary. If, by some fortunate chance, the system—whether "democratic" or "undemocratic"—throws up someone of truly exceptional talent and integrity, there is little they can do, drowning under a deluge of events.

It is, perhaps, necessary to have observed the workings of government at close quarters to understand that political leaders nowadays are so over-worked that they have no time to think. This is one of the most neglected and yet one of the most significant impediments to wise and far-sighted rulership in our time. Political leaders in the closing years of the century struggle to keep their heads above water from one week to the next, while keeping one eye on the electorate. Decisions must be made on the instant and the sheer volume of paper requiring their attention threatens to suffocate them. The human mind cannot function effectively under these circumstances. Idleness—or what appears to be idleness—is essential if ideas are to emerge and mature, nor is it possible to look ahead when the issues of the day demand immediate action. This is, of course, an argument for the Islamic ideal of the self-governing community and the responsible individual, an ideal which leaves only minimal action in the hands of the ruler or government.

Does all this matter? We live in a technological civilization, and who can doubt that advances in science and technology will solve most of our problems in the long run? There are many in the West—though few in the Third World—who are unconvinced. No culture known to us has advanced in a straight line and continued to advance with undiminished vigour. Sooner or later the graph has always turned downwards and irreversible decline has set in. The arts in a number of earlier cultures reached a peak and then fell away into decadence, and it is reasonable to expect that technology will follow the same pattern.

Already we see the production of gimmicks and useful toys replacing more substantial achievements. The inventiveness which changed the world is becoming dissipated and, in Europe if not yet in America, there is a weariness in the air. Perhaps that was already apparent when the leading European nations allowed their empires to slip from them some forty years ago.

Beyond this there is little that can be foreseen through the mist which shrouds the future. Europe's decline may be hastened rather than halted by a union imposed from above at a time when people's sense of identity no longer depends upon religion, but upon nationalism; moreover, "democracy" as commonly understood is of very recent growth in most of continental Europe and is not deeply rooted. It is seldom acknowledged that the shadow of Adolf Hitler has lain over Europeans for the past fifty years. Whatever he thought, said or did was, by definition, evil. The fact that Lenin, Stalin and Mao—not to mention Pol Pot—were no less evil is irrelevant. Hitler was, for Europeans, "one of us"; they sense and yet try to deny a sense of kinship with this man who exemplified qualities inherent in their nature (witness the Crusades and the ages of imperial conquest). But Hitler's influence upon thought and ideology, creating so many taboos, will fade and the unthinkable will again occupy the minds of a new generation for whom he will be no more than a remote historical figure. It is impossible to guess what direction these thoughts will take when the shadow has been blown away by time, but they may not be kind or compassionate.

What relevance does the future of the western nations have to that of the Islamic *ummah*? There is a simple answer to this question. For so long as the West remains dominant in military and economic power, in technology and, to a large extent, in culture (dominating the field of higher education), the Muslims cannot pursue an independent path into the unknown. Their future depends, at least for the present, upon what happens outside the "House of Islam"; their cities and their homes remain wide open to the invasion of alien ideas. Authority is gone from the *ummah*, and the more desperately the Muslims

struggle to escape from the net, the more surely they are trapped. The remnants of a specifically Islamic civilization are embedded in a foreign matrix and have shrivelled in the course of this century.

To many Muslims it seems that the West has a simple message for them: integrate or perish. They do not always blame the West; very often they blame themselves—or each other—for allowing such a situation to arise. The Prophet is reported to have spoken of a time “when the people will summon one another to attack you, just as people, when eating, summon one another to share their dish.” The Companions asked: “Will this be because of our small numbers at that time?” “No,” he said, “you will be numerous at that time, but you will be scum and rubbish like that carried down by a torrent, and God will take fear of you from the breasts of your enemies and cast enervation (*wahm*) into your hearts.” Someone asked: “What is ‘enervation’, Messenger of God?” He replied: “Love of the world and aversion to death.” This seems like an answer to the recurrent question asked from Morocco to Indonesia, as it is by the sons and daughters of the immigrants in Britain and America: “What’s wrong with us?” As for the “Fundamentalists”, their pride is in overcoming “enervation” by taking the path of violent action. They are quick to condemn their fellow Muslims, particularly those who compromise with western civilization, as “scum and rubbish”.

Titus Burckhart, who studied under a Sufi Master in Fez in the early 1930s and, later, wrote incomparable books on the arts of Islam, began—too late in life—to dictate his Memoirs. He died when only a few pages had been completed, but they include a significant passage on the city revisited after some thirty years:

At the time I first knew it, men who had spent their youth in an unaltered traditional world were still the heads of families. For many of them the spirit that had once created the Mosque of Cordova and the Alhambra was nearer and more real than all the inno-

vations that European rule had brought with it. Since then however a new generation had arisen, one which from its earliest childhood must have been blinded by the glare of European might and which, in large measure, had attended European schools and henceforth bore within it the sting of an almost insuperable contradiction. For how could there be any reconciliation between the inherited traditional life which, despite all its frugalities, carried with it the treasure of an eternal meaning and the modern European world which, as it so palpably demonstrates, is a force oriented entirely to this world, towards possessions and enjoyments, and in every way contemptuous of the sacred? These splendid men of the now dying generation whom I had once known had indeed been conquered outwardly, but inwardly they remained free; the younger generation, on the other hand, had gained an outward victory when Morocco gained independence some years ago and now ran the grave risk of succumbing inwardly.

I have quoted this passage at length because it has a universal application. One phrase, "the sting of an almost insuperable contradiction", should always be kept in mind when considering the situation of the Muslim world today. The American Islamicist Clifford Geertz has written about the "disjunction" between the forms of religious life and the realities of everyday life which, he suggests, verges on "spiritual schizophrenia". This too makes the point. But there is another very significant observation in Burckhart's reflections. The traditional Muslims he knew when he first lived in Fez had been outwardly conquered but "remained inwardly free". In this uncertain life, inward freedom is the only freedom of which we can be assured. Nothing can destroy it, no invading hordes, no tempest. It is inviolable. Outward freedom, on the other hand, is always at the mercy of events, and such victories as may be won on the field of battle carry with them no guarantee against subsequent defeat. Those who struggle today to free the *ummah* of Islam

from foreign domination seldom ask themselves whether they may not already have been conquered inwardly; whether their souls may not have been colonised even if their bodies enjoy freedom from bondage.

From this point of view, the Iranian Revolution is an interesting case. The western media described it as a return to "medievalism". They were wrong. Khomeini may have looked like a figure from the Middle Ages, but his revolution was, in essence, a break with the medieval tradition in favour of an Islam transformed by the influence of western ideologies, and no man could have been more representative of this trend than the sociologist Ali Shariati who, although he died in England (so often the refuge of dangerous men) in 1977, did much to prepare the ground for Khomeini's success. He had been a friend of Sartre, an admirer of Franz Fanon—the apostle of Third World revolution—but he differed from his mentors in perceiving that a people as deeply committed to their Faith as the Iranians could not be seduced by a secular ideology. He had to use the instrument at hand, and that instrument was Shi'ite Islam.

For many centuries the Shi'ite sector of the *ummah* had accepted the political eclipse of their Faith as a sign of the times—darkness before dawn—and as a prelude to the return of the "hidden Imam", much as the Jews had waited patiently for the coming of the Messiah. The Muslims had once been all-powerful, now they were weak, but this was in the nature of things. They could be content with the knowledge that God always has the last word. Such ideas were anathema to Shariati. His first task, as he saw it, was to discredit traditional Islam, casting aside a thousand years of wisdom and experience so that the feverish dynamism of the West could be reflected in a dynamic "Islamic ideology", a "Protestant Islam", as he called it once. This politicised Faith could not—he proclaimed—depend upon knowledge or virtue; in other words, the headless and heartless man had the right to reconstruct Islam. Even the sacred rites were to be reinterpreted. The Pilgrimage to Mecca, for example, was really meant to signify "rebellion against a damnable fate guided by evil forces". This travesty of the Faith

had its appeal beyond the borders of Iran. Young Sunnis found, in Shariati's "Protestantism" and in the Revolution itself, an excuse to cloak their political zeal in an Islamic garment.

The western image of the typical Muslim is often an image of lethal anger. The television viewer watches, from the safety of his armchair, mobs on the rampage; "hallucinated automata", to quote Wyndham Lewis's phrase. He sees faces contorted with fury and hears voices made hoarse by the shouting of slogans. If these were indeed religious manifestations, one would be justified in abandoning all hope for the future of Islamic piety. But they are nothing of the sort. "Anger", said the Prophet, "burns up good deeds just as fire burns up dry wood". Anger is a powerful manifestation of the disordered ego, and the very meaning of the word *islām* implies the subordination of the ego to the spirit, its chastening and its purification. "Holy anger", when the circumstances demand it, is detached, calm and just; it is an act of discrimination into which subjective feelings have no entry. It is therefore very rare, and those who experience anger in the face of blasphemy or the denigration of God's messengers need to examine their consciences very carefully to make sure that they are indeed angry on God's behalf, not on their own.

A senior academic in a Tunisian university once remarked to me, with mild surprise, that when he was a young lecturer forty years earlier his students had all been enthusiastic Marxists. If some were, none the less, of a religious disposition, they kept quiet about it for fear of mockery. Today, he said, almost all his students were enthusiastic Islamists—a term that seems to me preferable to "Fundamentalists"—and, if any of them did not share this enthusiasm, they kept their mouths shut for fear of persecution. One has a right to ask whether these young people's *islām* was any less superficial than was the Marxism of an earlier generation. Perhaps it was. Perhaps they had indeed become pious. But the question must be asked. A friend of mine, an English Muslim who speaks perfect Arabic, travelled some while ago in Upper Egypt and met a young man, heavily bearded and with a mouthful of slogans, who led a group of fanatical warriors determined to drive all Christians from the land. Some

two years later, walking down a street in Cairo, he thought he recognised a face in the crowd and stopped to speak to a beardless young man in jeans who had a western girl, an Australian, on his arm. The former warrior had been transformed into a thoroughly westernised youth. I would not wish to draw any conclusions from such anecdotal evidence, but it offers food for thought.

Here again we are in the presence of Burckhart's "sting of an insuperable contradiction" which makes it possible for someone to cross from one extreme to the other but leaves little room for a middle course. Those who complain that Muslims refuse to fit in with what are described as "civilized values" are quite unaware of the gap to be crossed. The French writer Jacques Ellul has tried to define these values, now a "spontaneously accepted frame of reference", as the basis for a view of the world which all accept, whether their political stance is of the left or the right. First, says Ellul, man is now the measure of all things; nothing is to be judged in relation to an absolute or to a transcendent reality. Secondly, man is both judge and criterion of judgement. There is no higher court of appeal or source of pardon. Thirdly, whatever happens occurs within earthly time, for human existence stretches only from birth to death. Man's earthly life is therefore unconditionally important; to live is the supreme value, for at death "the game is over and lost". In consequence, the greatest of crimes is the attack on man's physical life. Fourthly, everything that cannot be rationally proved is to be rejected; tradition, religion as such, metaphysics and even political systems (such as monarchy) which are not based on rational principles are fuel for the bonfire. And, finally, there is the conviction that man is basically good; the evil which surrounds him is never his fault. It can be blamed on institutions, on society, the economic system or defective education.

These beliefs, so readily taken for granted, cannot be reconciled with Islam or, for that matter, with traditional Christianity. Their source, as Ellul (himself a Christian) says, is "atheistic humanism", even if many of those who accept them as unquestionable still believe in God. The few Muslims who are

fully aware of the situation are astonished by the compromises with modernism made by the Christian Churches. They see religion as a citadel resistant to decadence and to changing tides of opinion, not as one strand in the pattern of modern life—the western way of life—but as an alternative to it. Those who have gone astray are invited to return, and that is that. For Muslims, there is one fixed mark, set down in the midst of time's flow, and that is the Faith as it issued from God through the instrumentality of the Prophet. But this does not mean that men and women who profess Islam are necessarily safe from the influence of the times and from the effects of their increasing distance from what the Prophet described as "the best generation".

None of the three monotheistic religions has been immune to these influences or to this distancing. The Christian Churches have tried desperately to keep up with the times, believing that if they go out to the people—there, where the people are assembled—they will bring them home; but, in doing so, they have been in danger of forgetting their own way home. The Jews have transformed a mystical faith in a return to the Holy City at the end of time into political Zionism. The Islamists, enraged by the humiliations which the *ummah* has suffered, give themselves body and soul to an activism which lacks both head and heart, while ordinary Muslims are inclined to trap themselves in pettifogging legalism. These phenomena are, indeed, "signs of the times", and they have this in common: they indicate a descent from the spiritual to the worldly. Hostility to mysticism, in the highest sense of this ambiguous word, is common to all of them. Another way of putting this would be to say that their faith and practice are focused almost exclusively on the horizontal level. The vertical is largely ignored, and this inevitably involves the enfeeblement of religion. The horizontal depends upon the vertical, the outward depends upon the inward and, when the spiritual element is pushed into the background, then practical—down-to-earth—religious practice falls away. It no longer has any solid foundation in the transcendent

reality which, by its very nature, gives all things under the sun their proper weight, no more and no less.

The Islamists—the Muslim activists—fear and despise the Sufi dimension of their religion, dismissing it both as “quietism” and as an “innovation”. The Jews are concerned with the fate of the ill-defined “People of Israel” and have little use for their own rich mystical tradition. Many Christians believe that the essential message of their Faith and of its founder is the social message. “Heaven can wait”, so the salvation of human souls from the menace of damnation is less important than their physical welfare and the assertion of their rights. It is significant that the Catholic organisation Opus Dei, which is increasingly influential in Latin countries, is far more interested in canon law than in theology, let alone spirituality. And yet, in our time, the surest way for the religions to contribute to their own decline is through superficiality, an exclusive concentration upon moral rules and social questions. We face the paradox that, the more religion becomes involved in worldliness, even if the intention is to sanctify the world, the greater the danger to its survival. Neither morality nor social activity can endure unless they are deeply rooted in the spiritual dimension, tethered to the Real. Practical religion is, in the long run, impractical.

In the Quran God offers the similitude of the “good tree, its roots set firm, its branches reaching to heaven, giving its fruit in every season by the permission of its Lord”, and contrasts with this “the bad tree, uprooted from the earth, having no stability”. For Islam, stability is rooted in the constant “remembrance of God”, which is equivalent to awareness of His presence: “He is with you wheresoever you may be.” We are commanded, in a famous saying of the Prophet, to pray as if we actually saw God before us; “for, though you see Him not, yet He sees you.” This awareness of the divine presence and of being seen at every moment of our lives is, in essence, a contemplative virtue. It is lost in violence and uproar. It is veiled by anger. The Muslim is certainly commanded to be active in this world

but, to be effective in action, he is also required to be a contemplative.

The contrast between past—the recent past—and present is strikingly illustrated by the case of Algeria in the 1990s. While it is probable that many of the atrocities attributed to the Islamists have in fact been committed by the agents of the regime itself, the fact remains that a sector of the Islamic movement has taken the path of insensate violence. The G.I.A. can justly be accused of being no less “un-Islamic” than their rulers. They have slaughtered indiscriminately. For Islam, this is unacceptable. They have killed women. For Islam, this is an obscenity. They are alleged to have murdered Christian monks. For Islam, this is an act specifically forbidden. They have soiled the face of the *ummah*, the worldwide community. Consider, in contrast, the life of the Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir who, in the 1840s.. united the tribes to resist the French invasion of Algeria. This man, the son of a Sufi Sheikh, was himself a mystic, a contemplative. He was also a warrior and a model of chivalry. Even his enemies recognised his nobility, and the French Governor, deeply impressed by his spiritual presence, compared him to Jesus. A more apt comparison would be with the Prophet himself, for ‘Abd al-Qādir lived out the prophetic example and was no less merciful than his exemplar. Finally defeated and exiled in Damascus, he devoted the rest of his days to the study of the theosophical works of Ibn ‘Arabī, interrupting his studies to take the Christians of the city under his protection when they were threatened with death at the hands of the Druze. This was a man. This was a Muslim.

Today it might be said that the element “revolution” has overwhelmed the element “Islam” in the minds and hearts of the activists. Revolutionaries, whether they kill in the name of religion or of a political ideology, share common characteristics: puritanism and tunnel vision. Tolerance can have no place here and mercy quits the field. There are various reasons for the fact that many who see themselves as holy warriors seem, in their actions, quite alien to the spirit of the Faith, its comprehensiveness and its subtleties. One particular aspect of this dislo-

cation casts a shadow over the *ummah* as a whole. This is a reliance upon the letter of the Law in the face of problems to which the Law, formalised more than a thousand years ago, can provide no answers. As I suggested earlier, Islamic *fiqh* provided the community with a framework and an ordered living space for many centuries, but security usually has its downside. Since there were simple and clear-cut answers to every moral problem, the Muslims of those times had no need to consult their consciences or to struggle with painful dilemmas. The capacity to do so atrophied (except among the Sufis). In our time it has to be reawakened and exercised. The law books remain valid within their proper sphere, but that sphere has shrunk. There are now wide areas in which only the spirit of Islam—its inner reality—can provide solutions to contemporary moral problems. It must be remembered that the “Five Pillars” of Islam, which everyone quotes as representing the essence of the Faith, are indeed pillars, supports; they are not the house itself.

There is another reason why those whose impulse it is to leap into action whenever their disapproval is aroused should pause for thought. The Prophet foresaw a time when Islam, which began “as a stranger” in the world, would become once more a stranger, a time when “one who sits will be better than one who stands, the one who stands better than the one who walks, the one who walks better than the one who runs.” All who rush to involve themselves in the activities of such a time must take care that they do not travel in the company of those who hasten towards a precipice. He asked his Companions, “What will you do when you are left among the dregs of mankind . . . ?” and answered his own question: “Then keep to what you approve, abandon what you disapprove, attend to your own affairs and avoid the generality.” Even if this time has not come yet, there are still good reasons for sitting a while in peace before rushing into action.

He predicted also that, eventually, his people would follow the downward path “span by span and cubit by cubit until, if they [the misguided] go down into the hole of a poisonous rep-

tile, you will follow them down.” One of the Companions questioned him about the evil times to come. Then, he said, “you must adhere to the community and to the leader of the Muslims.” What should be done, asked another, if there remained neither community nor leader? He was told: “Then withdraw from all the factions, even if you have to cling to the root of a tree until death overtakes you in that state.” The reference to the root of a tree is immensely suggestive, and it may be that in our time, a leaderless time when the community is divided, we have no choice but to cling to the root of the Faith, the *dīn al-fiṭrah*; the primordial religion, the essential. Only the root is inviolable.

One of the glories of Islam, until very recently, was the quality of serenity associated with it and recognised by westerners when they visited the Muslim world (still outwardly colonised, but inwardly free). This was a serenity so majestic and so luminous that the encounter with it converted a number of strangers to the Faith. It was accompanied by a spirit of resignation and detachment, together with a certain indifference to the fruits of action (provided the action itself was righteous); a logical consequence of the belief that the world might end tomorrow or be “purified” by catastrophe. In a celebrated *ḥadīth* the Prophet said that, if a man were to find himself with a palm shoot in his hand when the Last Hour strikes, he should plant it. Since the palm tree is a source of nourishment and since it takes time to grow, this offers a key to positive action regardless of what is to come. We control our own actions. We have no control over their consequences which are therefore not our concern. A good action is beautiful, and beauty is its own justification, moreover its reverberations extend far beyond this theatre of common experience into dimensions which are out of sight.

What I have said about the Muslim *ummah* in our time must appear, to the western mind, pessimistic. Those serene and inwardly secure Muslims of an earlier time would not have seen it as such. There are hidden compensations in evil times that are not available until the skies darken and we cry out for help. It has been said that, as we distance ourselves from the

divine Mercy, so Mercy bends down to us ever more closely. The Prophet is reported to have said: "All is well with the believers under all conditions" or "in every circumstance", which recalls the saying of the Lady Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well . . ." The believer cannot be a "pessimist", but he or she can be a realist, facing facts as they are. Moreover, our assessment of which facts and which actions are truly important is inevitably faulty so long as our only concern is with the *dunyā*, that which is "close", the world we experience here and now. Elsewhere, over our horizon, these values may, for all we know, be reversed, so that what seems small here—the planting of a palm shoot or a small act of kindness—may be seen as momentous there when all things are weighed and measured, when the drama ends and the theatre is closed down. We do not know. We do not need to know. We do what we can.

Unwilling to make predictions, since no one can guess what is around the next corner, I have been concerned mainly with the present condition of the *ummah*. I understand the desire of the Islamists to re-establish a truly Islamic order in their House. I believe that they are on the wrong track and, in pursuing it blindly, have overstepped the mark set by the Quran and by the example of the Prophet. Even if they remained within the bounds established by the Faith, they would still be the victims of a typically western illusion; the illusion that to change the "system" is to change human nature and that virtue can be imposed by edict. History, particularly the history of puritan regimes, proves them wrong. Where, now, is the "new Soviet man"? The future of the Muslims does not lie in that direction. So much, at least, can be said with some assurance.

Public achievements do not long endure. They are carried away by the tide, like sandcastles built too close to the water's edge. Even the most excellent political order, once it has been established, has already begun to decay. But the achievement of individual excellence belongs to a different order. It reverberates in the community and provides an example which is loved and imitated by others. At the same time, on the vertical which

extends from earth to heaven, it establishes a link with the eternal Perfection and acts as a channel through which the divine Mercy pours freely into the world. We were born out of that Mercy—*rahmah*—and depend upon it for our nourishment. He, God, is *al-Razzāq*, “the Nourisher”, but we must open our mouths if we are to be fed. Nothing that occurs now or in the future, however shocking it may be, can prevent any man, any woman, from achieving excellence, *ihsān*, if they will allow themselves to achieve it.

In the last resort, predictions about the times to come are not only uncertain; they are unnecessary, irrelevant. Whatever demands are made upon the Muslim, testing his metal to the limit, he must respond as best he can. In doing so, if he does well, he not only justifies his own existence, he also redeems the *ummah* as a whole and sets an example which—if God so wills—is followed, not from compulsion but because beauty of character and behaviour is inherently attractive. Throughout the centuries, it has been the example of individual Muslims, an example compounded of serenity, strength and compassion, that has drawn men and women to Islam, making them eager to join the caravan of those who travel by this route to journey’s end.

Part II

9

The Link: Religion and Tradition

Indeed those who believe [in what has been revealed to you] and those who are Jews, and Christians and Sabaeans— whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and who does right —truly their reward is with their Lord.

No fear shall afflict them, neither shall they grieve.

(Quran 2:62)

Say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and in that which has been revealed to you.

*Your God and our God are One God,
and to Him we submit.*

(Quran 29:46)

Catholic priests, when required to instruct a potential convert who seems incapable of grasping the simplest points of doctrine, speak sometimes of “invincible ignorance”. This is an interesting phrase; wilful ignorance, not stupidity, is the problem, and nothing penetrates this wall. It frequently happens that a lack of interest is mistaken for stupidity. Most of us are incapable of understanding matters in which we have no interest, whereas those who are passionately interested will

master a subject which, to others, appears complex and abstruse. Interest is the motor which drives the mind and the imagination.

I once had a friend who edited a small magazine of "Comparative Religion". One day his neighbour accosted him over the garden fence. "I'm told you're involved in religious matters," he said, adding with the pride of an independent thinker: "I feel I should tell you that I am an atheist!"

My friend expressed mild interest and asked the man if he had ever read Plato or Plotinus. He had not. "Perhaps you have studied St. Augustine and Aquinas? No? Pascal might be more to your taste? Ah, then perhaps you have ventured further afield. The Upanishads?" "Never heard of them," said the man. "The Quran?" "The what?" This went on for a while until my friend sighed and told his neighbour: "You're not an atheist. You're an ignoramus."

Here we have a mystery that merits investigation. Borrowing from Pascal, let us suppose someone is told that a treasure of inestimable value was buried years ago at the bottom of his garden. He need only dig for it and he will be a rich man. He may be sceptical, and with good reason. This seems an improbable story, to say the least. But would anyone in his right senses not be tempted to get out his spade and start digging? The religious traditions which have "descended" upon mankind (to use the Quranic phrase) claim to offer a passport to heaven. If this is true, it is indeed a treasure beyond price. What is one to think of those who cannot be bothered to investigate? Pascal answers: "This carelessness in a matter which concerns themselves, their eternity, their all, moves me more to anger than to pity; it astonishes and shocks me. It is, to me, monstrous." But Pascal has another argument to convince the unbeliever, and this is his famous "wager". Summarised, it goes like this. You are obliged to make a bet on whether religion—in this case, obviously, Christianity—is true or false, although "according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions." You accept the challenge and make your choice. "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is," says Pascal. "Let us estimate

these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing." You will never be offered such odds in Las Vegas or Monte Carlo. This argument should appeal to the modern sceptic who claims to be certain of nothing and cannot, therefore, be certain that there is no God. He might just as well wager on the remote chance that he is wrong, having all to gain and nothing to lose.

It is, perhaps, in rather the same spirit that the Quran asks: "Have you considered—if this is (indeed) from God, then you reject it—who is further astray than he who is in clear discord?"

To many people this must seem a chilly proposition. They associate religious conversion with powerful feelings and passionate commitment. It is true that the gift of faith may well up from the centre of the being, self-evident and compulsive, but that is a rare event. For the most part, will and deliberate intention are decisive, and this is why Islam condemns the unbeliever, not for holding the wrong opinions or failing to be emotionally moved by the truth, but for a perverse act of the will. I remember the mockery suffered by the chief witness at a famous spy trial in America who told the press that, on a particular evening, he and his wife had vowed that they would begin to believe in God at midnight. They sat in their kitchen, their eyes on the clock, atheists until the moment when the hands came together on the number twelve. Thereafter they were believers. In other words, they had made the wager.

So why is it that, with so much to gain and so little to lose, very few atheists and agnostics are prepared to make it? Ignorance, certainly; carelessness and laziness, but there are many reasons for the rejection of traditional religion in Western Europe. The situation in the United States is different, although not as different as it might appear. The majority of people still attend their churches regularly and many read the Bible or, in some cases, thump it. But, among what are known as the "opinion formers"—influential people in the media, writers and scientists—scepticism is the rule rather than the exception. As the Arabs say, "a fish rots from the head down". In every society, it is the leaders of opinion, the voices most often heard,

who eventually prevail. The "silent majority" may protest, but they listen. They cannot avoid listening. They are men and women of their time, and this time is, in all its aspects, hostile to religious doctrine and subversive of unquestioning faith. But perhaps "hostile" is too strong a word. It is more often a case of indifference, and this may be even more difficult to overcome than outright hostility. Religion is tolerated in the West. You are free to believe in fairy stories if you wish. An English doctor of my acquaintance who was a practising Christian told me that her colleagues in the hospital where she worked treated her with affectionate amusement, rather as though she had some odd and slightly eccentric hobby. "It takes all sorts!", they said with an indulgent smile.

Muslims usually take the opposite view. Faith is central, unbelief is eccentric in the sense of being "ex-centric", far from the Centre, out in the wilderness. If they are able to feel indulgent to the unbeliever it is because this man or this woman is assumed to be stupid and ignorant, lacking intellect—"Have you then no sense?" the Quran asks again and again—and such idiocy verges on insanity, which is forgivable.

So we have indifference, ignorance and in some cases, active hostility requiring explanation if we are to account for the displacement of religion from the centrality it once enjoyed. So far as hostility is concerned, one argument is presented again and again. Religious people behave no better than their unbelieving neighbours, sometimes worse. They are often cruel, sometimes violent, towards those who do not share their dangerous certainties. They preach compassion and are far from compassionate, and their hypocrisy goes hand-in-hand with smug self-righteousness. One of the most famous of science-fiction writers, Arthur C. Clarke, recently published a new book supposedly predicting the human situation at the end of the next millennium. Apart from populations living in vast space stations and "brain caps" by means of which everyone has access to all knowledge (however useless), he predicts that religion will be outlawed as a source of evil and cause of war. Among his multi-

tude of readers there are, no doubt, many who will think this a sensible measure.

When war, violence and cruelty are attributed to religion, then it is a short step to the conviction that belief in God is a self-serving illusion, and a dangerous one at that. Yet the argument is faulty and provides clear evidence of incomprehension. The way in which religious people behave—or misbehave—is irrelevant. It may tell us a great deal about human nature, but it tells us nothing else. There is only one question to be asked and to be answered. Is there a Reality above and beyond us, our Creator, Sustainer and Judge? If the answer is in the affirmative, then the actions of those who acknowledge this fact are immaterial. They may incorporate its implication into their lives or they may not. A fact is still a fact, regardless of how people react to it. We all know that the sun exists and is the source of our life. The fact that some people will suffer sunstroke or skin cancer does not make us doubt its existence. This argument against the truth of religion betrays a very significant absurdity. It really amounts to the proposition that only what serves our immediate interests can be true; whatever is thought to be contrary to these interests must be false. Truth and falsehood are assessed in terms of human welfare, understood in the narrowest sense, and there is no other criterion.

“God is the light of the heavens and the earth,” says the Quran. Truth revealed is light, penetrating the secret recesses and illuminating what was previously obscure. Light brings out what is already there, the hidden evil as well as the hidden good, which is precisely why Muslims understand the Quran as an instrument of discrimination. Those who are astonished that there should be religious people who are also wicked have not faced the fact that, as Muhammad said, each one of us has a personal devil or, in Quranic terms, a “selfhood inciting to evil”. This “devil”—or the dark side of the ego—sleeps, at least much of the time, in many people. For it to awaken it needs an excuse for self-justification. Inevitably, adherence to a religious group offers those who seethe with suppressed violence an opportunity to indulge in violent acts with social approval. They dare not kill on their own behalf. That would bring down upon them

rejection by their society, a rejection which all but psychopaths fear. Group violence is quite a different matter. Now, says this evil inclination, I can kill! Now I can hate all who oppose the truth which we possess! But what does this prove? Only, as the Prophet is reported to have said, that "the devil courses through man like his blood."

If life itself represents a test, as Muslims believe, then religion is the supreme test. It brings out the best. It may sometimes bring out the worst. It points the way to heaven or to hell, and God, says the Quran, both guides and misleads. Those who, through an evil disposition which may previously have been dormant, are willingly misled, expose their true nature so that it can be clearly seen. Caught under the light, they hasten towards darkness, they hasten home to where they belong. If we return to the image of the devil—such a convenient personification—it is logical to suppose that he does not waste much time on obvious "sinners". There is more profit to be had in mosques and in churches where self-righteousness invites his entry. A faith that is not accompanied by humility is a wound open to infection, and the comparison is apt because religious faith does indeed wound us; it makes a break in the protective shell in which we tend to enclose ourselves. It opens us up to what comes from above; inevitably, it exposes us also to what comes from below. Among the Sufis, at least in earlier times, there were some who became known as *Malāmatiyya* ("people of blame"). These were men and women of profound piety who so feared the public approval that their piety would attract—inflating their egos and tempting them to self-righteousness—that they deliberately acted in ways that would make them look foolish and of bad character. The Sufi writer al-Hujwiri said: "In the Path there is no taint or veil more difficult to remove than self-esteem, and popularity does more than anything else to deter human nature from seeking to come to God."

But who is a true "believer"? Between faith and its absence there are innumerable degrees. In Islam we are obliged to assume that whoever calls himself a Muslim is, indeed, *muslim*, submissive to God in recognition of His supreme reality, unless

there is clear proof to the contrary. But people who are born into that sector of humanity are automatically designated "Muslims"; indeed, in the Russian Empire before the Revolution, this was a designation of nationality rather than religious adherence. Particularly in this age of disintegration, when the chief supports of faith and practice have been destroyed, a majority of "the Muslims" are not necessarily *muslim*. The religion as such is blamed for their misdeeds, as it is also for the actions of extremists amongst whom pious zeal is combined with ignorance and stupidity. There is nothing unusual in this situation; the Christian Crusaders, eager for booty, were not always devotees of the God of Love and Compassion. The Prophet said once that people are like camels: "out of a herd of a hundred, you are lucky if you find one good riding beast." God seeks good riding beasts who follow the "Straight Path". He does not find many among those who pay lip-service to Him.

So religion, the alleged cause of so much mayhem, arouses feelings of hostility in unbelievers who notice its existence, but at least they notice it. For many people in the West today it does not exist, except as an historical curiosity. Even among those who say, when questioned, that they suppose there is some sort of God, out of sight and out of mind, this admission leads nowhere. Having made it, they return to their usual occupations and their minds are filled with other concerns. If they have some passing interest in the nature of the world and the origin of their species, they are satisfied that science has explained—or will soon explain—everything. That is the function of science, which defines itself as "knowledge", the only certain knowledge available. And no certainty seems more firmly established than the theory of evolution, Darwinism and its offshoots. To question it is as absurd as it would be for the traditional Muslim to doubt the authenticity of the Quran, indeed it carries with it the imperative usually associated with religious faith.

"The idea," says the molecular biologist Michael Denton, "has come to touch every aspect of modern thought, and no

other theory in recent times has done more to mould the way we view ourselves and our relationship to the world around us." It represents, he says, a more significant intellectual revolution than even the Copernican and Newtonian revolutions. But Copernicus revealed a fact which had been known to others before him, and Newtonian physics have, in some measure, been superseded. Darwinism stands on its own and, although the Christian Churches have come to terms with it, the Christian religion has been devastated. God is no longer the Creator, except in some vague sense of having set the ball rolling, and the human creature is no longer unique, "made in the image of God". Islam has not yet experienced the full impact of this revolution and educated Muslims, who have no choice but to accept what western science tells them, prefer not to face the full implications of the revolution. And yet the theory has been questioned recently, not least by Denton (in *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*) and a few other scientists. In a recent radio talk Prince Charles, heir to the British Throne, remarked, "After all, the likelihood of life beginning by chance is about as great as a hurricane blowing through a scrapyard and assembling a Rolls-Royce." Heresy has dared to raise its voice, but only in special circumstances. In most cases, a scientist who expressed doubts would see his career ruined, while a science teacher (in Europe, though not necessarily in the United States) who suggested to his pupils that evolution is more fiction than fact would be out of a job. Whenever some proposition is universally taken for granted and doubt has become taboo, then some at least among us begin to suspect that "the King has no clothes".

In fact the theory of macro-evolution, unsupported by any convincing evidence, is beginning to crumble, and its most ardent defenders argue for it with all the ferocity normally associated with religious believers whose faith is under threat. The fact that the Vatican has recently endorsed it may even be a further indication that its days are numbered. A Catholic acquaintance, himself a distinguished scientist, was provoked into remarking with wry humour that his Church "always

jumps on the bandwagon just as it is about to go over the precipice." The present situation suggests an interesting parallel with Marxist Communism. Until very recently everyone who held any position of authority in the Soviet Union was a "Communist". To question Marxist dogma was to invite severe penalties and, in any case, there appeared to be no available alternative. Today, these same people insist that they were never really taken in just as, in Germany after the war, it was difficult to find anyone who had been a convinced Nazi. Nothing is more swiftly buried than an exploded theory, political or scientific, and its former adherents—having no wish to be buried with it—dissociate themselves from it overnight. If Darwin's burial is postponed for a while, this will only be because naturalistic scientists have no alternative theory at hand, such as would enable them to escape from the terrifying possibility that God acts in this world and that secondary causes are, at most, the instruments of His action.

What effect would the collapse of the evolutionary theory, including the odd notion that life arose spontaneously in the primeval slime, have upon belief and opinion in the coming years? A former French Minister of Culture is said to have remarked that the twenty-first century would either be "a holy century" or it would not exist. An interesting observation, with which many Muslims could agree. There are indeed limits to how far we can travel down the slope before the link with the Creator is finally broken and we ourselves cease to exist. But there remains the problem of ignorance. Even if the hold that "scientific truth" has had on people's minds is loosened, none the less old habits die hard. The perceived conflict between religion and science has enforced an attitude which assumes that religious faith is somehow quite separate from objective, intellectual truth. Piety has been a private matter, sometimes a little shame-faced, and people have "believed" in spite of—rather than because of—what are supposed to be the facts. The intellectual underpinning, without which faith cannot survive, has been eroded.

This means that ignorance has afflicted the believer as it

has the unbeliever. Returning briefly to the question of evolution, many Christian fundamentalists cling to what they suppose the Book of Genesis says (as does the Quran) regarding the creation of the world in six earthly days. They take literally, not the Bible, but a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact the word *yom* or *yawm* is effectively the same in Hebrew and Arabic. It means a delimited period of time such as a day, but it covers any period—however long—to which a beginning and an end can be assigned. The Quran tells us that a “day” with God is fifty thousand years; it could as well be fifty million or fifty billion years. This is not to deny that God could have created the world and all that it contains in a millisecond, had He so wished, but in fact neither Genesis nor the Quran limit creation to any specific period of time. This kind of ignorance, together with ignorance of metaphysics and theology, would do no harm if religious faith were not under intellectual attack. Simple faith is, to say the least, adequate for salvation, and to disturb it is a grave sin. But it is already gravely disturbed and under constant threat. There is a “hot” faith and a “cold” one; the first is passionate, emotional rather than intellectual, while the second dwells in the mind rather than the breast and is a function of the intellect. Ideally, these two go together, each supporting the other. Faith today, when it is sincere, relates more to heat than it does to light. “Hot” faith on its own is vulnerable and therefore leads to intolerance.

Even if other factors which tend to undermine religion in the present age are put to one side, there is one problem which cannot be evaded. That is the plurality of religions in the human world. It is a relatively new problem. Until quite recently these religions were geographically separated from each other, except on certain borders, and their adherents could pursue their own particular path without being troubled by the knowledge that others in far off lands lived within the framework of quite different systems of belief. Facility of travel and communication, together with the movement of populations, has put an end to this comfortable situation. The Hindus and, to some extent, the Buddhists can accept the plurality of reli-

gions with untroubled minds, and the Jews have been obliged to accept it. Muslims, although the majority assume that Islam superseded all other Faiths, making them redundant, have in the Quran the basis for a universalist perspective. It is Christians who face this problem in its most acute form and, since western culture has its origins in Christianity and is now dominant throughout most of the world, this is what matters. The influence of what Europeans and Americans think—what they question and what they doubt—is almost irresistible.

It is unhelpful to answer questions before they have been asked. The answer is unlikely to be understood. So long as men and women of faith feel secure in their own perspective and are untroubled by the existence of religions other than their own, they should be left in peace. To say to them, "Yes, you are right; but the others are also right" can only confuse them. Awakened, however, to the obvious contradictions between the great traditional Faiths they may conclude, as many people have done in our time, that since all cannot be true, all must be false. When they have come to this point—when they ask the question—they deserve to be answered, but the answer is not readily accepted. It involves an act of brutal destruction, destruction of the belief that our notion of what is logical applies universally, beyond our little home. God does not obey the laws which govern our mental processes. A very significant statement is attributed to the Danish physicist Niels Bohr, one of those rare scientists who broke through the barriers which modern science has established. What he said was this: "A superficial truth is an affirmation the opposite of which is false; a profound truth is an affirmation of which the opposite is also a profound truth." And there we have it. Our human minds are so shaped that they cannot tolerate contradictions. Reality, however, is incomprehensible except in terms of contradiction. The cosmos, said Ibn Arabi, is *huwa / lā huwa*; He/not He. It is not other than God, for there is nothing else but God. Yet it is other than Him; He is not the cosmos, and, in all that exists, "there is nothing that is like Him."

There are many who see such statements as impossibly

complicated. Perhaps they have forgotten—or failed to notice—that, as human beings, we live in an immensely complicated situation, suspended between the Absolute and the relative, heaven and earth. The traditional religions are links, or a single multifaceted link, between different orders of Reality. Each religion is a form, a shape, a pattern. Forms are, by their nature, limited. Were this not so, they would be of no use to us, and the religions exist to be used. The link is also a ladder and a well-trodden road (hence the Islamic *Sharī'ah*, the road to God). Frithjof Schuon has coined the term “the relatively absolute”; the fact that this is a contradictory term makes it all the more valuable as a key to the contradictions inherent in our situation. If the Revelations given to enlighten our darkness appear to exclude each other, “This,” he says, “is so of necessity because God, when He speaks, expresses Himself in absolute mode; but this absoluteness relates to the universal content rather than to the form.” If a divine Revelation contained blatant contradictions, it would break the bounds imposed by earthly existence. If it did not contain everything that we need to know, it would not be of divine origin.

Yet, on the margin of each religion, there are hints which offer a glimpse of different perspectives, a fact which bears witness to the universality of the content. It is said that the Prophet Muhammad once had a vision in which he saw an endless procession of camels passing, each burdened with two chests. In each chest there was a world comparable to ours, and in each of these worlds there was a “Muhammad”. It is said also that the Prophet asked the Angel Gabriel—the instrument of Revelation—what this vision meant and received the answer: “To tell you the truth, I do not myself know the meaning of this.” The angel knew only what was consistent with the religious form of Islam. This was what he had been commanded to convey to Muhammad in the world familiar to us. The concept of the “multiple states of being” (the phrase is Guénon’s) has no place in Islam and might confuse the faithful, who have no need of such a doctrine. They have all the information they require to carry them over the seas to the further shore, but in this age—

this extraordinary age—keys which were not needed in the past may be useful. The modern mind raises questions which were never asked before. That, precisely, is why we have to understand the reason for the plurality of revelations.

But the questions so freely asked today are, as it were, unripe. They are asked by people who are not yet prepared to accept the answers, answers which cannot be fitted into their frame of reference. There is a curious and unjustified assumption that we are capable of understanding everything intellectually, rationally. Why we should have this strange notion is a mystery. Perhaps it is necessary for our survival? A human being without illusions might not be viable. The question as to how the contradictions between the different traditional religions can be reconciled is meaningless. Why should they be reconcilable in terms of our limited, earth-bound ideas of what does or does not make sense? Why should God bow down before our peremptory demand for rationality?

The Quran says: "You do not measure God by His true measure." Indeed we do not. How could we? The little man with his ruler and his reason can measure earthly things, but nothing else. Since God is measureless, it is inconceivable that He could communicate all that He wishes to say within the confines of a single form, however vast that form. The content of His message requires different containers which, to the human mind, may appear mutually exclusive. Reproaching those who regard religions other than their own as necessarily false, Ibn 'Arabī accused them of showing bad manners towards their Creator. They try to tell Him what He can or cannot do, and that is—to say the least—ill-mannered. The place in which we find ourselves, this cosmos, is defined by its limits. Nothing found within these limits can be limitless, as He is. Everything here is relative. Within the relative, we track the spoor, the traces of the Absolute, but we cannot expect to find the Absolute as such. "Far exalted is He above all that you attribute to Him," warns the Quran.

God forbid that I should think so ill of Him as to suppose that, throughout history, He has allowed a majority of His crea-

tures to walk on ways which lead only into the wilderness. God forbid that I should accuse Him of allowing a multitude of men and women to have heartfelt faith in lies. God forbid that I should think he has encouraged some of them to achieve heroic sanctity under the wing of false deities, only to condemn them to the Fire. Once we are faced with the mystery of plurality, its apparent contradictions and reciprocal exclusions, we are challenged to acknowledge the immeasurable vastness of the Divine. "God," wrote Rumi in his *Fīhi mā fīhi*, "is not the sort of King for whom a single herald would suffice. If all the atoms of the universe were His heralds, they would have been incapable of making Him known adequately."

But what of the laws, the moral rules, which differ from one Faith to another? Christian churchmen frequently condemn "moral relativism". They are right. Unfortunately, they are also wrong, since everything in this world is "relative". That is the nature of the world. But, within the framework of a particular Faith, morality is, indeed, "relatively absolute", derived from the doctrine which is its backbone. Muhammad blamed the Jews for not obeying meticulously the laws of Judaism. He did not suggest that Muslims should obey them. Christianity cannot tolerate divorce (whatever the compromises made today), but divorce is tolerated in Islam. In each case, the moral laws relate to the particular perspective given in the Revelation. Principles do not change, they are absolute, but their reflections in the mirror of the human world are differentiated and may appear to conflict. The same is true of the divine Names given in the Quran when their effects are seen here.

One example of this is the case of suicide. Islam and Christianity forbid it. The principle is clear: we did not create ourselves, we did not give ourselves life, and we have no right to end it when we choose to do so or because we cannot face certain bitter trials. In the Shinto tradition a different principle, no less unchangeable, determines a different perspective. This relates to man's inherent dignity and his divine ancestry. To be human is an honourable estate. Facing dishonour or humiliation, the loss of dignity and therefore the loss of his humanity,

the follower of Shinto lays down his life in an act of self-sacrifice and with the appropriate rites. He had been the guardian of the honour bestowed upon him from above. When it was threatened, he withdrew honourably.

But what we cannot do is mix forms and confuse perspectives. Each is self-sufficient and each is separate. Still less can we pick something from this Faith, something from another and then another, as though roaming through a supermarket. The result can only be confusion, spiritual, psychological and moral. The reason is obvious: you cannot be in two places at once. The wisdom inherent in a particular religion is available to all, but the specific colouring of each Faith, together with its basic principles, its rites and moral rules, have to be accepted whole and without dilution. The fact that there are many paths to God and the fact that they meet at journey's end does not mean that the individual man or woman can pursue more than one of them in a brief lifetime. That is enough, more than enough. But modern man is restless, both restless and greedy. He wants it all, and chafes within the confines of a traditional path, hence the rejection of what is described as "organised religion". In the Quranic story of Noah and his Ark there is an element which is missing from the Biblical account. Noah calls to his son: "Oh my son! Come, sail with us . . ." The answer came: "I shall climb a mountain, and that will save me from the waters!" And so "a wave came between them, and he was among the drowned."

The symbolism of the Ark is rich in meanings, but there is certainly one upon which Muslim, Christian and Jew can agree. The Ark which carries its passengers safely over the raging waters is an image of God-given religion, the precious vehicle of salvation. This image goes back as far as the Hindu Vedas. It is, in the words of the Quran, "a mercy to mankind", as is the Scripture itself. "Oh mankind, there has come to you an admonition from your Lord, healing for that which is within the breasts, a guidance and a mercy for believers. Say: In God's bounty and in His mercy—in this let them rejoice. It is better than what they hoard." To reject a gift and to turn one's back upon a mercy is a grave matter, particularly if one is—as we all

are—destitute, possessing nothing that is truly our own. In the Quranic text the terms “unbelief” and “ingratitude” are virtually synonymous.

With what equipment does the solitary mountaineer proceed? There are many “spiritual people” today who attempt this feat, and some equip themselves with what they think is the “wisdom of the East” or with the guidance of a cult leader, others with “New Age” esoterism, but they are eventually stripped bare. Their equipment falls away on the rocky path they have chosen to follow. Since “with God all things are possible” and since heaven takes account of sincerity and good intentions, a few—if they are pure of heart—may reach the goal. The majority perish on the mountain.

So why do they take this huge risk when help is at hand? Perhaps we should ask the “ignoramus”, now no longer an atheist but a believer in God, though still ignorant. Here the fault lies in part with the teachers and preachers who have reduced the religion for which they speak to its simplest outline. They say nothing of its breadth or of its depth. They do nothing to encourage exploration or to arouse the boundless capabilities of the human imagination. They never suggest that divine Reality has many faces, many aspects and many colours to meet the multiplicity which is creation. Those who listen to them are not stupid, but their interest is seldom aroused and so they become stupid. When someone tells me, “I do not believe in God”, I am tempted to ask: “For God’s sake, what God?” I want to know what shabby image it is that they have rejected, perhaps with good reason.

Among all the Faiths and Traditions given to humanity, Islam has been the most adamant in prohibiting the idolatry of forms and images. The Quran goes further than other scriptures in emphasising God’s incomparability and His utter remoteness from all that we can conceive or imagine. The reason sometimes given for this can have little appeal to the modern mind, so arrogantly sure of its superiority and competence. It is said that the Quran, as the final and definitive Revelation, allows for the decline in intelligence through the ages; intelli-

gence understood as the capacity to grasp certain aspects of Reality. In earlier times men did not stop at the signpost pointing beyond itself, but advanced in the direction indicated. In these latter days, according to this opinion, we mistake the signpost for God and worship it accordingly. This is idolatry. But the fact remains that even the Muslim must have some image of God in his mind if he is to think of Him, remember Him and pray to Him.

Bearing in mind the fact that no image is remotely adequate to the divine Reality, the choice of images is a matter of practical efficacy. Since He—the incomprehensible Real—bends down to meet our needs, our poverty, the images through which we worship Him are filled out by His Mercy; they become serviceable links. It is as though He were to say: "I am nothing like that—for I have no likeness—yet I will meet you through the idea you have of Me." This He owes us, having created us as we are. In the present age, however, many of the images on offer are no longer functional, not that God has absented Himself from them but because they no longer attract our passionate interest. It may be that the contemporary preacher's task is to clear people's minds of debris and to ask them to think again, refreshing themselves at the source of the Faith and in the teachings of men who were closer to the source than we are. Only one thing matters: the strength and the lucidity of the link with God, which is the dictionary definition of "religion".

There is a notion common among those who reject traditional religion, that all the images worshipped throughout the ages were man-made in response to fear of the unknown and as answers to the perennial questions: why are we here? What should we do? As usual, they have got things the wrong way round. In this case the answers came before the questions. Revelation, complementing an inward knowledge unawakened until the light of Revelation falls upon it, has always been accessible. The Quran assures us that no people on earth, from the very beginning of human time, was left without a "message" from God. It assures us also that we recognise the "message" as true because it corresponds to a truth inherent in our own

being. Our business is not to analyse what has been given to us in terms of our inherent mental patterns, but to use it. The same may be said of the rites and rituals of a particular tradition. They too are links, objective because God-given, which need not be fully understood to be effective. They too are for our use. It does not matter that most Muslims, lacking any knowledge of Arabic, may not understand the meaning of the words used by the Imam in the canonical prayers. They have stepped into a sacred rite which is, for them, an Ark, fit to carry them over the waters. The mind, compared by the Chinese to a restless monkey, is stilled; its limitations are overcome.

“To each nation We have given rites which they are to perform,” says the Quran. These rites, bridges between earth and heaven, are traditional, that is to say they have been handed down through the centuries. It is here that we come to the dividing line which separates modern civilization from everything that came before, as it does from the religion of Islam and from Christianity as it was before the Reformation. The link of tradition has been broken and discarded. This separates us, in the West, not only from our own past but from the human family as it was, generation after generation, from the very beginning. The cup has been broken. It is more than forty years since I read a book by an American anthropologist, Ruth Benedict. I remember nothing about it except for one quotation which has remained in my memory. A native American had said to the author: “In the beginning God gave to each people a cup of clay and from it they drank their life.” He added, with inconsolable sadness: “Our cup is broken.” What God has made cannot be remade by man. The broken vessel cannot be glued together by human ingenuity. And this is what tradition means, in religion, in cultural practices and in the crafts. It is what has been given from above and faithfully transmitted either in writing or by word of mouth. Over the course of time it has been enriched by the wisdom of those who lived within the tradition, and this too has been handed on as a precious gift. It is the buried treasure for which we no longer seek.

The cup, brimming with nourishment for those to whom it

has been given, contains all that is needed. Among such tribal peoples as still survive, its origin may be attributed to God, to "the gods" ("We must do what the gods did in ancient times" is a common saying), to prophets, to seers or to the semi-divine ancestors. What matters is the quality of "givenness" and the clear implication that all good things, not least the guidance by which we navigate our lives to the distant shore, come from an Elsewhere which is invisible to us. This, together with the care to hand down what has been given from generation to generation, is what all traditional societies have in common. But there is a second principle which they all share. Each people was given one cup; not a variety of vessels, one for their spiritual life, another for their work and their crafts, a third for their social organisation. They were given but one cup; a container for every aspect of human living at every level.

This is "wholeness", reflecting the indivisible oneness of the Revealer. Its basis is the inter-relatedness of every element in human experience from the highest spirituality to the most mundane affairs; religion in the strict sense of binding, the binding of man to God or to That which his perspective recognises as ultimate Reality. It is reflected in the binding together both of the individuals who make up a particular society and of the different levels which make up the human personality. Muslims often object to the translation of the Arabic word *al-dīn* as "religion" on the grounds that it indicates a total way of life from which nothing is excluded. Perhaps the word "Way" will suffice, without qualification, but only because the word "religion" has been diminished in meaning and is now taken to indicate only a particular department of human experience. Here again, we need to look back to those despised tribal people, the so-called "primitives", for whom everything in their daily lives is a link with heaven. For them, as for the Muslim, everything must have a use, answering a real human need, and this concept of usefulness ignores the distinction our contemporaries make between sacred and secular. The aspiration to holiness, the crafting of a cooking pot, the gestures that a fisherman makes when casting his net, a warrior throwing his spear

or a householder building his hut are in accordance with the tradition. These actions take place here, in time, but they imitate what takes place there, elsewhere, and time thereby reflects eternity. Just so, the traditional Muslim aims to model his every action and every gesture upon what he understands to have been the actions and gestures of God's Messenger, Muhammad.

Those who lived within such a pattern, a traditional way of life, did not need to ask themselves how to apply God-given principles to their situation in the world any more than we, when we walk from here to there, have to ask how to apply the principles of balance to the exercise of walking. We walk. That is all there is to it. And this has an important implication. If we lose that sense and are obliged to consider how to put one foot in front of the other, we stumble and, very probably, fall. This is why traditional societies—including the community of Islam—have been so terribly vulnerable to the destructive impact of modern civilization. Their sense of balance has been disturbed, so they are no longer sure how to walk. Sudden changes in a traditional society, whether due to conquest by an alien culture or to internal revolution, undermine the habits which are the guarantee of social stability. Then chaos is come again.

Such societies or cultures live unashamedly in the past, in the sense that the guidance which has determined their structure and their whole way of life was given long ago. They cannot entirely escape the effects of time's erosion, but they resist so far as this is possible. The ideal, the exemplar, to be imitated is safe from change so long as it is remembered. The people know that they have been carried downstream but that an invisible thread, running through the generations, still connects them with what was, in a sense, a timeless moment. Time's work, therefore, is neither more nor less than the process of ageing, which afflicts all created things. It represents, not a dynamic, ever-hastening progress towards a beckoning future, but a simple matter of wear and tear.

Where is the common ground between contemporary ideas of progress and the traditional perspective? I cannot find it. As

between the believer and the unbeliever, there are many degrees, and no one can place the boundary between them with any certainty. But those who look to the future and those who look to the past have their heads turned in opposite directions. The link, however,—the link which connects us with Reality—has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. On the one hand, it is our connection with God; on the other it is our connection with the past, in which the sources of all guidance and wisdom are situated. It does not extend into the future. There is no going back. The broken cups cannot be re-assembled. But, because they once existed, the nourishment they contained is still accessible.

This is why the “ignoramus”, if he wishes to find meaning in his existence, should seek to acquaint himself with his own heritage and, if he chooses, with other cups from which men formed like him once “drank their life”. These treasures are his, if only he will stir himself to seek them out.

10

Seeing and Being Seen

He indeed is the Aware, the Seer of His servants.

(Quran 17:30)

*Truly We created man and We know
what his innermost self whispers within him,
and We are closer to him than his jugular vein.*

(Quran 50:16)

In this, truly, there is a lesson for all who have eyes to see.

(Quran 3:13)

Where am I? It is hard to tell. My mind and my senses tell me that I am in a world of solid objects and of people who are no more and no less than they appear to be. But the Quran tells me, as do other scriptures, that—here and now—I am in the presence of God. My absence from Him is due only to my blindness or to the covering which encloses me and all who are with me, shutting out this tremendous presence. Years ago, in India, I met a strange man known everywhere as “the German Swamy”. He came to our home one evening in his grubby dhoti and fumigated the house with the acrid smoke of cheap cigars, and he told me a story. It was a story that depended for its point upon an English word, so he could not have heard it told in Tamil, the local language, or in German. Perhaps he had invented it for my benefit.

There was once a hermit, he said, who lived for many years

in a cave, subjecting himself to bitter austerities in his search for God. Finally, in despair, he chalked on the cave wall the words "God is nowhere!" Then he walked out into the world or, perhaps, to his death. Some time later a shepherd boy took refuge in the cave. He was almost illiterate and traced with difficulty the letters which the hermit had left as his empty testimony. N-O-W, "Now". Having got that far he rested briefly before tracing the remaining letters: H-E-R-E, "Here". Light flooded his mind and joy possessed his heart. He had it. "God is now!" "He is here!" In a flash he reached the goal that the hermit had sought in vain. As the Quran constantly reminds us, "God does as He wishes"; and again, we "plot", but He is the better "plotter". We think that we understand, but He alone understands. He chooses as his agents and for His greatest gifts men and women whom we may think unworthy; His justice and His weighing are not like ours. "Far exalted is He above all that you attribute to Him," says the Quran.

There are, indeed, people—a few people—who have been enabled to see beyond and behind the stage set which is "reality" for the rest of us. Since they still live in this world, they have acquired a kind of double vision. In Ibn 'Arabī's phrase, they "see with two eyes". They walk among the one-eyed. They mix with them and bestow blessings upon them, having access to the ocean of mercy. But limited vision is what makes earthly existence possible. If we were all capable of perceiving, clearly and permanently, what lies beyond the screen, this world of trial and testing would have no function; it would no longer be what it is and what it is meant to be. St. Augustine referred to the fall of Adam as a "happy sin"; the fall from Paradise brought this non-paradisaal world into being, and the Quran tells us that it was created "in truth" or "by the Truth". In other words, it was created in accordance with the divine intention as the theatre in which we play our parts as though this theatre were all that there is. Hence the need for Revelation, for guidance, for the "messages" which come to us from elsewhere.

But the fact remains that this is not all that there is. It is impossible that the cosmos should be a closed system. That

would be contrary to the basic Islamic doctrine of *tawhīd*, the oneness of Reality, and those few who “see with two eyes” bear witness to the thinness or transparency of the shell in which we appear to be enclosed. So, of course, do what are commonly described as “miracles”. Muslims are less concerned than are Christians with miraculous events. They see no need to explain them. Whether God chooses to act in accordance with the customs of this place, that is to say the “laws of nature”, or to do as He will regardless of local customs is of little concern to those who recognise His limitless power. For the time being, our understanding even of the material world extends only so far as is necessary for our survival. This is true of all living creatures. Each has a vision of the world around it which is determined by the limitations of its senses. Some see colour, some do not (having no need to do so). Some see only what is immediately before them, whereas others have a power of vision far beyond ours. As usual, the Germans have a word for this, the word is *Umwelt*, the reality—the “real world”—perceived by a particular living species. Even among human beings there is no uniformity in the way that individuals perceive physical reality, and this has implications for each person’s relationship to ultimate Reality—to God.

So the question as to just where I am at this moment and in this place is not so easily answered, but of one thing I can be sure: I am seen. The Quran names God again and again as *al-Baṣīr*, the All-Seeing, and as *al-Khabīr*, the All-Aware (“Not a leaf falls but He knows it”). And again: “He perceives the secret thoughts and what is even more hidden.” There is no limit to “what is even more hidden”, the secret dimensions of our being which remain for ever beyond the grasp of self-knowledge. But here, I think, we are on dangerous ground. I have known people brought up in a Christian environment who have turned against religion precisely because, as children, they were taught that God is some kind of “super-spy”, an Old Man in the sky who sees all that they do, just waiting to catch them out and punish them for those shameful secret thoughts which they hardly dare acknowledge even to themselves.

This is not the way that Muslims understand God’s all-see-

ing presence. They find it reassuring. They are glad not to be isolated and alone in an alien universe. They want to be understood and know that they are understood. It is all too easy to deceive our fellow human beings (a case of "taking candy from a child"), not least because they often ask to be deceived. Yet even the most successful deceiver must have moments when he regrets his own success and respects those few who see through him. According to one of the inspired sayings of the Prophet, "God loves to be known." So do we, His creatures, yet we fear that if our neighbours and our colleagues are allowed to see through us they may take advantage of this. It suffices that there is One who knows us through-and-through, far better than we know ourselves. There is an element of completeness and fulfilment in being totally known. Most people, if they are honest, see themselves as an assembly of fragments, some of them in conflict with each other. In Him we are whole and everything fits. But still we seek the perfect lover, the perfect friend, from whom nothing is hidden, then rage or grieve when disillusionment follows. The illusion was to suppose that any other but God can satisfy this need.

One of the Names by which He names Himself in the Quran is *al-Walī*, "the Protecting Friend". The Sufis have dared to go further and name Him "the Beloved", but that is a private matter. Only those few who have denuded themselves of all self-interest and surrendered totally can approach Him entirely without fear. These are they who have taken heed of the Prophet's counsel, "Die before you die!" and for whom—in all possible worlds—there is only the One without associate. This God is no tyrant. He made us as we are, and He alone can understand us, He alone can forgive us. "Does not your Lord suffice," asks the Quran, "since He is Witness over all things?", and one of the divine Names is *al-Kāfi*, meaning "He who satisfies". It is precisely His witnessing that gives us sufficiency, the assurance that—whatever happens and whatever the deprivations imposed by time—nothing is lost; no longer here, it is still there in His Knowledge. Unseen yet ever present and never inattentive, He turns to us in mercy at the very instant we turn

to Him. In Quranic terms, our “turning” is repentance, and His is forgiveness; “And God desires to turn to you in mercy.” He has named Himself *al-Tawwāb*, literally “He who turns back”, usually translated as “the Ever-Relenting”.

The Arabic word for “turning back”, when it applies to the human side of this reciprocal relationship, can usually be translated as “repentance”, but there are subtle differences in the way this term is understood as between Muslims and Christians. The Christian who repents is possessed by feelings of guilt and shame. He may, indeed, feel that he has offended God by his sins as though he had grieved a loving parent: “*Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*”, in terms of the traditional Catholic confession of guilt and bitter regret. In the Islamic perspective God cannot, properly speaking, be offended. He is far above all that, and grief does not touch Him. The Muslim simply registers an objective fact. He has broken the Law. He has disobeyed God and fears the consequences. This follows logically from the common definition of Christianity as “the religion of Love” and Islam as “the religion of Knowledge”. It might even be said—in comparing the two religions—that Christianity is dominated by the subjective reality, Islam by the objective reality. Yet such definitions always require qualification. Nothing is as clear-cut as the rationalists would have it. Among the Sufis—quite particularly among those for whom God is “the Beloved”—guilt and grief may be allied to repentance, and the same feeling of personal distress is often found among Shi’ah Muslims.

The act of turning towards God is, in effect, the same as “remembering Him”. The Arabic word for “remembrance”, *dhikr*, can also be translated as “mentioning”. To remember someone is, in effect, to mention them inwardly. The Quran tells us: “When My servants question you concerning Me, then truly I am close. I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he cries out to Me.” And, according to a *ḥadīth qudsī*: “I am with My servant when he makes mention of Me. If he mentions Me to himself, I mention him to Myself; if he mentions Me in company, I mention him in a better company than that; and if he draws near to Me a hand’s span, I draw near to him an arm’s length .

..” The simple act of mentioning or remembering might not seem to amount to very much. It requires no great effort, except that “the world, the flesh and the devil”—to use a Christian phrase—will always try to frustrate this effort, but in Islam it is the key both to faith and to practice.

To remember God is to remember where we are. This is no more than a matter of realism. If I think that I am in the United States when in fact I am in France, then I am likely to get everything wrong and make a fool of myself. I shall take wrong turnings, make constant mistakes and speak the wrong language. I shall blunder through the streets as in a dream. Moreover, if I do not know where I am, I will not know who I am. A verse of the Quran warns us: “They forgot God, therefore He has caused them to forget themselves.” We can only know ourselves if we are situated in the real world. Self-knowledge depends upon an awareness of the divine Presence. It cannot be achieved in the midst of a dream, in the grip of a fantasy.

Here I come to a vexing problem. The suggestion that our life experience on this earth is a dream has cropped up from time to time in European literature, including Shakespeare. The Prophet is reported to have said that death is an awakening, presumably from a state of dreaming, and many people are familiar with the Hindu term *Maya* (mistakenly thought to mean “illusion”), applied specifically to the world of the senses. What is meant by this term is not that the world is unreal but that we take it for something other than it is. The same applies when life is described as a dream. Taken literally, this is absurd. We all know the difference between dreaming and waking life. The problem is to find some easy way to explain that there are degrees or levels of reality. Nothing that we experience can be completely unreal, otherwise it could not be experienced. But when, in the grip of a vivid dream, we think that we are awake, then we have made a simple error which is corrected as soon as we awaken. Those who compare our life experience to a dream do not mean that it is any less real than we suppose; they mean only that there are still higher degrees of reality to which we may awaken when this experience is ended;

there is something more which we cannot even imagine while in our present state.

Shakespeare said it all in that valedictory masterpiece, "The Tempest":

These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud capped towers and gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a wrack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on.

Yet here—as elsewhere in our human experience—there is a paradox (where can we escape paradox, except in the divine Presence?). This world is less real than we suppose, but only if we mistake it for the sole reality, beyond which there is nothing and again nothing. From a different point of view, it is more real than we suppose. If God—or the Absolute or "Heaven"—is everywhere totally present, as the religions tell us, then every moment of what we experience here and now has a profound significance. It is shot through with splendour on every side.

In terms, however, of human limitations (blind to the surrounding splendour) it is essential to understand that God, quite apart from the various concepts which the believer may have of Him, is the ultimate Reality. All else is—as Ibn 'Arabī expresses it again and again—"Imagination", a term which he distinguishes sharply from subjective fantasy. It is, in other words, a tissue of images, even a language of images, which we perceive and experience on many different levels, some no more substantial than passing clouds, others pregnant with power and significance; or it is a tissue of symbols and a language of symbolism. The suggestion I made earlier that the world is a theatre in which we play our designated roles is simply a variation on this theme. Behind the stage scenery is a vast world,

quite beyond our compass, and there is far more to the actors in the drama than is apparent to those who know them only in their current role. But does any of this matter from a practical point of view? I think it does. We have a thirst for ultimate truth and we are capable of the truth. That—and not our cleverness—is what distinguishes us from the animal creation.

There is, as I have already suggested, a yet more obvious practicality involved. If we do indeed live perpetually in the presence of God, the greater Reality, the Spinner of images, then this has the most profound implications for our daily life. If we were constantly aware of our situation, moral rules would be unnecessary. It is impossible to imagine disobedience or misbehaviour in that presence, nor could temptation approach us in any form. Moreover, God is not only the Judge whom we dare not ignore. He is also Beauty itself and therefore the object of passionate desire, and we should need no promise of Paradise or threat of hell to urge us on. In the chapter of the Quran called "The Night", those who strive to be truly conscious of God and who spend of their possessions to help their less fortunate fellows are described as doing so for one reason only: out of longing for "the Face of their Lord". Longing is the key, and inherent in our nature is the wish to please the one we desire. After death, when we stand, willingly or unwillingly, in the Presence no longer veiled by forgetfulness, all that we formerly "associated" with Him, all that we coveted in this world, fades and falls away as if it had never been. There is none other we could either love or fear.

Meanwhile, here we are, usually forgetful, occasionally aware. The Prophet's counsel to pray to God "as if" we saw Him, "for, though you see Him not, yet He sees you", has a wide application, indeed it might be applied to almost everything we do. The words "as if" are a key to the good life. In a sense they even compensate for our apparent absence and make a break in the veil which cover us. In the deepest darkness, we can still act as if we stood in the light and, of course, imagine that we are in the light. The man of bad character may decide to act as if he were better than he is and perhaps become better by doing so. Those

whose faith is no more than a flickering candle can still worship as if there were an unquenchable radiance in their hearts. Even those who have fallen into the pit of despair may transform their situation as if all were well. For a bad man knows that goodness exists, the doubter knows that faith exists, and the victim of misfortune knows that happiness exists. Here again there is a contrast between the possibility open to the Muslim and the corresponding attitudes in the contemporary West. The westerner emphasises what he calls "honesty" and "sincerity", having no use for "as if". We should not, he believes, pretend to be other than we are—or other than we think we are—and we should always face up to the facts: our bad character, our lack of faith or our misery. Once again, he will accuse the Muslim of hypocrisy. I think he is wrong. This is not hypocrisy but an aspiration towards the heights as an alternative to wallowing in the depths. And that is a matter of orientation.

Muslims are, of necessity, profoundly concerned with orientation, facing in the right direction, looking in the right direction. The five daily prayers are invalid if the worshipper has turned in the wrong direction (away from Mecca), unless this is done through ignorance after making every effort to establish the true *qibla* (the correct orientation). He will worry if he thinks he may be even a couple of degrees out in his calculations. There is an obvious and widely applicable symbolism in this. The "straight path"—a phrase that occurs in every unit of the prayer—leads directly to God and to felicity. The correct orientation of the body in prayer is a sign that the soul too is focused in the right direction, travelling on the straight path. As in the prayer itself, with its standing, bowing and prostration, body and soul go in harness. Physical orientation and physical postures point the way.

I said earlier that, for Muslims, the remembrance of God and the constant awareness that we must die are the most effective method of removing "rust from the heart". The heart which has rusted over is, in effect, blind. The first essential of the spiritual life is to restore its vision of Reality. If we forget how soon we shall have to die, behaving as though we expected

to live for ever, then we are living in a fantasy world. When the end comes, says the Quran, "you will think that you tarried [in this world] for no more than an hour." According to another verse, God will ask us: "How long did you live on earth, counted in hours?" We will answer in confusion: "We lived for a day or part of a day—ask those who can count!" Then the Creator will pose another question: "Did you think that We created you for no purpose and that you would never come back to Us?" There are some who regard preoccupation with death as "morbid". They must, surely, be very bored, for it is precisely the awareness of life's brevity that gives it its intensity, and every meeting is precious because every meeting contains a hidden farewell. A life with no certain end to it would be immeasurably tedious.

We may live for a little longer than a butterfly, but we can hardly fail to notice that everything around us is changing and perishing from one moment to the next. It is only when we awaken and pay attention that the perishable, now recognised as such, points with a kind of silent eloquence towards the Imperishable. All that seems lost in time point towards the Timeless, and human vision—the heart's vision—pierces through surface appearances. "I am blind and I do not see the things of this world," said a native American sage of this century (quoted by Frithjof Schuon in *L'Oeil du Coeur*), "but when light comes from On High it illuminates my heart and I can see, for the eye of my heart sees all things."

For Muslims the Quran is the final Revelation, after which there is no more to be said. This is why it conveys such a sense of urgency. "Don't waste time!", it seems to be telling us, "You have so little to spare." And a Muslim philosopher wrote: "Neither eat nor drink nor sleep without presence of heart and a seeing eye." In other words, remember where you are and observe God's "signs", scattered all around you. We are required to be attentive at every moment, and it is said that the Prophet, when he was sitting down, sat in the position of one who is prepared to jump to his feet instantly on God's command.

So there is yet another word, another idea, closely linked to

the "remembrance of God" and this is "attentiveness". There is a story I once read, so long ago that I have forgotten where I found it; an Islamic story, but it might well be found in other traditions. Once upon a time a certain man who had been inattentive throughout his earthly life found himself, after he had passed through the trauma of death, facing a high wall which revolved slowly before his eyes. He was told that, once in every thousand years, a gate into Paradise would come level with where he sat. He must wait patiently for that moment, ready to seize the opportunity when it came and step easily into eternal joy. There is, according to the Quran, just such a wall separating the blessed from the damned, "a wall wherein is a gate: the inner side encompasses grace and mercy, the outer faces towards perdition."

For nine hundred and ninety-nine years, eleven months and a number of days this man—or this being who had been a man on earth—waited, never taking his eyes off the wall which revolved inch by inch before him. No other thought occupied his mind but the prospect of the Garden, its rivers, its palaces, its peerless maidens, and its delicious fruits. But there came a moment—no more than a moment—when some distraction diverted his attention; a memory, perhaps, of the world he had left behind him. His attention wavered, and it was at this instant that the gate came level with his place of waiting and then continued on its unending round. Another thousand years of attentiveness lay before him.

Speaking of those whose attention is unfocused, wandering or asleep, the Quran says: "They forgot God, therefore He forgot them." If we are truly awake, we have something of the alertness of an animal in the forest, watchful of every movement, our ears tuned to the cracking of a branch. A certain sense of insecurity may be essential to a vigorous life, and one of the unseen dangers of life in the West, so safe and so sheltered for the time being, is that it allows this sense of danger to atrophy; it allows adults to doze like babies in their cradles. I once knew a man, a quite exceptional man already in his sixties, who had never in all his years known pain or suffering or insecurity. With a small

private income and, so far as I could judge, entirely free from sexual desire, he passed his days happily enough. He was the most immature individual I have ever met. He had never grown up.

For him, the world of struggle and pain and love was a foreign land. It is commonly said that the insane have lost touch with reality, and that is a misfortune. But there is something worse than that, which is to lose all awareness of the One Reality; a disaster so momentous that we cannot even assess its extent or its consequences. In the Islamic perspective, we are born with an inarticulate awareness of that Reality (Revelation spells it out). It is imbedded in our human nature, indeed, according to some of the Sufi writers, it is embedded also in all living things, animals and plants, although in a manner incomprehensible to us. But there is much to distract us in this busy, noisy world, just as the man who sat watching the revolving wheel was distracted. We forget, and therefore we are in danger of being forgotten.

To remember is to attend, and attention is not static. It is, by its very nature, an act and therefore a movement towards its object, a movement of the intellect, the will and the emotions. Life offers no better example of this than the attentiveness of a predatory animal stalking its prey, unless it be that of an archer about to loose his arrow or a rifleman with his finger on the trigger. The orientation of the animal, the archer or the rifleman is towards the target and, in this undeviating concentration, stillness and movement are one single act. At such a moment there is neither past nor future, but only the here and now. For every man and every woman, it is only here in this place and now at this instant that God is to be found or the encounter with Reality consummated. We cannot act in the past, which has been filed away and sealed, nor can we act in the unborn future.

Correct orientation requires the gift of sight if we are not to miss the target. The Quran repeatedly contrasts the "seeing" with the "blind" on the spiritual level and warns that "those who are blind here will be blind hereafter", but this is the blindness of those who refuse to see what is plainly to be seen, "hav-

ing hearts wherewith they understand not, and having eyes with which they see not, and having ears wherewith they hear not. These are as cattle. No—they are worse. They are the heedless.” Cattle see well enough, after their fashion, but the focus of their attention is the patch of grass before them. We, on the other hand, are commanded to look up from our worldly affairs.

The Quran asks: “Is he who goes groping on his face better guided than he who walks upright on a straight path?” Those who walk upright see what is ahead, far ahead, and they take the path indicated by their orientation. The rest, “worse than cattle”, live beneath the human level, and—“blind” hereafter as they were here—“drink as the camel drinks” in that dark place where the inattentive dwell after their earthly sojourn. They have broken a solemn compact made when we were all “in the loins of Adam”, awaiting birth, and acknowledged our Lord with a resounding acknowledgement. But all that I have said—all that Islam has to say—about the target set far above this world, invites misunderstanding. It might be supposed that, in paying single-minded attention to what lies beyond the theatre of existence, the Muslim is required to ignore the grassy fields such as preoccupy the cattle. He does not ignore them, but he sees them transfigured, he sees them scattered with the “signs” of God, or rather he knows that this scattering is a fact of life as if he could see it. The basic Islamic principle of *tawhīd* prevents us from separating any reality, however humble, from the Real as such.

The Quran advises us to look upon the heavens: “Do you see any rifts? Turn your vision [upon them] again, and yet again; your vision will fall back upon you, dazzled . . .” Just so, between the highest and the lowest there are no “rifts”, no separating walls except those that logic requires for its operation, and human logic is a stepping stone, not a universal principle. Those whose attention is primarily focused on what lies beyond the here and now (but is hidden in the here and now) are precisely the ones whose alertness in the everyday world never falters, for it is in this world that we find the “signs” pointing to what lies on the other side of the wall, and it is in this world that our fitness for what is “better and more lasting” is

assessed. If human life is, from one point of view, a "dream", it is also a crystallisation of all that lies unseen and undreamed of elsewhere. This is already clear from God's statement that He created the world "in truth" or "by the truth". Nothing in creation can be false in itself, but much can be—and is—veiled, as the sun is veiled by clouds. The Quran may often seem to be urging us not to place too much value on our human life, but we surely need no encouragement to over-value it. On the other hand—and there is no contradiction here—there is an Arab saying to the effect that "only the dead know the value of life". There are open doors while we are here in the world. The doors close and the opportunities are lost when our time is up.

There is a question that is often asked but need not be asked, since most people can discover the answer for themselves if they consider for a moment their own experience. How can someone who "remembers God constantly" (as the Muslim is commanded to do) attend efficiently to his daily business? How can an obsession with what lies ahead and above allow time for activity in the world? Most people have, at some period in their lives, been in love, and many will have known a time when the thought of the beloved was at the back of their minds and treasured in their hearts from morning to night. This did not stop them working, playing, and socialising, but, in the midst of these activities, they never lost sight of the beloved. If it is possible to be obsessed in this fashion with another person, then it must certainly be no less possible to be obsessed with God while still living a normal life. The capacity to function simultaneously on different levels is a specifically human gift.

We are given no desire or tendency that cannot be put to good use if rightly directed. The fact that we are capable of obsession suggests that there is a proper and appropriate object of obsession. That object is the One who is ever-present and all-seeing. There is, of course, an important difference between remembrance of a person and remembrance of God. In the one case we have a clear image, in the other we have an image that is both bright and obscure, present and yet unattainable. Yet this has not presented any problem to the those immersed in

the act of remembrance. The thought of God may be inarticulate, impossible to pin down for analysis, but it is no less real for that ultimately, it comes from Him, is given by Him, and it is He who opens a window for us. He is, after all, "the one who suffices us".

In all this there is a kind of reciprocity, absurd in theory—how can there be reciprocity between the Infinite and the finite?—but effective in practice. The fact that the Infinite "speaks" to the finite (which responds in the same mode) is proof of this, as are many of the Names by which God has named Himself in the Quran. The Creator already implies a creation, the Guide seeks those who require guidance and the Protector seeks those who need protection, the Forgiving would have no function if there were none to forgive, and the Life-Giver becomes apparent in the living. As between the Divine and the human, distance and proximity are never divided and do not contradict each other. He is the far and He is the near. We, for our part, are—as it were—suspended between the two in a state of dynamic tension. We worship Him who is far from us, the utterly transcendent, and we communicate with Him who is near, "closer than the jugular vein", never at rest till we reach God, yet already at home in His presence. And, though we see Him not, nothing—if we are set on the straight path—can prevent us from living as if we saw Him.

11

Possibilities

*Everyone's destiny have We fastened around his neck,
and on the Day of Judgement We shall bring forth for him
a record which he will find wide open.*

(Quran 17:13)

And you will journey on from plane to plane.

(Quran 84:19)

Most people take it for granted that we can communicate quite adequately by language; they are, in consequence, frequently misunderstood. Uneducated people in Britain are less sure of this and end almost every sentence with the query: "Know what I mean?" They are mocked for doing so. They should not be mocked. This is a question we might all ask: "Do you really understand what I have just said?" Back in the 1930s there was a famous radio personality, Professor Joad, who, whenever he was asked a question, replied: "It depends what you mean by. . ." He too was mocked, and he too should not have been mocked. Language may be all we have as a means of communication, but thought is truncated when it is verbalized. There are those who claim that primordial mankind—humanity before history began—was able to communicate telepathically. Who can tell? But there is a native

tribe in South America who are said to have extraordinary telepathic powers. They call this silent tongue "the old language".

For my part, I like the Jamaican phrase: "If is not so, is nearly so!" This invites the listener to grope for the precise meaning behind the imprecision or else to understand that there are truths which can never be pinned down—like butterflies on a board—but can only be suggested figuratively. Those of us who speak or write of what lies beyond and above the everyday world need to qualify almost every statement by the warning that it should not be pinned down. It is, at best, a way of putting things that may serve as a pointer, an indication, and in this context it is useful to recall Niels Bohr's remark that "the opposite of a profound truth is also a profound truth", although this too should not be taken quite literally. Even in casual conversation, the listener has work to do, the work of unravelling the thoughts behind the words. But that is easy compared with deciphering the meaning behind abstract statements concerning metaphysics, the science of all that lies beyond the realm of physics, the supreme science. When we step into this area we have left familiar landmarks behind us, and the limitations of human language are starkly exposed. It is sometimes necessary to say: "This is not exactly what I mean, but it is for you to awaken your intuitive powers and your imagination to reach behind my words." If what one says is the truth—or an aspect of the truth—then a meeting of minds is still possible, recalling Eckhart's words: "The truth is native to us."

The science of metaphysics ("science" in its proper sense, knowledge as such) is unfashionable nowadays. In the universities it is avoided as though it were a plague carrier, the plague in question being belief in the "supernatural", not—it is thought—a proper subject for academic discourse outside departments of Theology. I once met a learned professor who belonged to the new breed of jet-setting academics. He was constantly commuting between Europe and the United States, much in demand as a lecturer on his particular discipline. I asked him what this was. He explained that he was an ontolo-

gist. He lectured on the concept of Being, what we mean when we say that something is. I felt some sympathy for his students, since this question cannot be answered outside a religious framework or, in other words, in ignorance of the vertical dimension which is, precisely, the "supernatural". But if he had described himself as a metaphysician—which is what he should have been—his career would have ended abruptly. Only if "ology" is added to a word does it become academically respectable (hence "methodology" when what is meant is "method").

In view of all this, I am obliged to offer some definitions which make sense to me and by which I abide. Philosophy, as I understand the term, is quite simply the love of wisdom; that, after all, is what the word means, and every Muslim is commanded to seek wisdom and to love it. Theology is concerned with the doctrines of a particular religion and their rational interpretation. The Muslim is commanded to think about his religion and should therefore be a theologian. The physical sciences deal with the way things work—or appear to work—in the light of human perceptions, and the Muslim is commanded to see the Hand of God in the operation of cause and effect. Metaphysics embraces all three while going beyond them. The physical sciences can only operate against a metaphysical background since the scientist necessarily makes certain assumptions about the nature of things. But everyone, going about his or her business, makes similar assumptions. They may not be philosophers, theologians or scientists, but they are certainly metaphysicians. Like the character in Moliere's play, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, who was astonished to learn that he had been speaking prose all his life without knowing it, they are quite unaware that the principles they take for granted are essentially metaphysical principles. Everyone has an idea as to what is real and what is unreal, and everyone lives and works and loves on the basis of this idea.

That brings me to the doctrine of "possibilities", a metaphysical doctrine which, when I first came across it almost fifty years ago in the books of René Guénon, seemed to me to offer a key to understanding what we are and why we are. Guénon

himself was only interpreting what he had found in the writings of Ibn 'Arabī and members of his school. It made sense then, and it still makes sense to me; my problem is simply one of communication. At that time, fired by this new discovery, I saw no problem in talking about it. I was living in Jamaica and my first book had just been published. I was invited to address the sixth form in a local school on a subject of my choice. This subject was, of course, the "possibilities" The pupils assembled, and with them, their teachers, eager to hear my words of wisdom. I spoke well or so I thought, using simple words. When I had finished I looked around me from the faces of the teachers to the faces of the boys and girls. I realised that they had understood not a word of what I had said. I might as well have been speaking in Chinese. Perhaps they were too old to understand. Small children often ask questions about the ultimate meaning of things—metaphysical questions—and a very few have even been known to provide answers, as though they were still so close to their source that they knew what others have forgotten. But the adult world ignores both question and answer, and the child soon learns not to be so childish.

What do we mean by the word "God", which is bandied about so freely and so carelessly? It has been defined as a "*port-manteau*" word, covering different aspects and different levels of one Reality. In Islam *Allah* is described as the "all-comprehensive" Name, which both includes and transcends all the other attributes of the one Reality. There is however an important difference between the two. "God" or the equivalent in other European languages is a word among other words, significant only in terms of that which it designates. It does not, in itself, inspire awe. *Allah*, on the other hand, is a revealed Name—the revealed Name, above all others—and it has a theurgic power, as though the overwhelming power of the revelation itself were concentrated in these two syllables. To invoke this Name, silently or in company, is to come closer to Him who has named Himself as a means of approach to Him. In written form it has something of the nature of an icon upon which the dying hope to focus their eyes, seeing nothing else until dark-

ness takes their sight. When it is pronounced in a sermon or a public address, the speaker will usually add, "Glorified be He and Exalted [above all that they associate]." Many Muslims feel uneasy when they hear it on the lips of an unbeliever, sensing a profanation of something that is truly sacred.

Seen from here—seen from the human standpoint—it is possible to discern three levels of ultimate Reality, all three included in the concept of "God". The first, the highest, is what Islam calls the divine Essence (*al-Dhāt*). In the language of Christian mysticism it is the Godhead. The Essence is so far beyond articulate understanding that nothing can be said of it, except that—in speaking of it at all—one is already saying something. Yet what is said can only be couched in negative terms. It is not this, it is not that. It has no image that we can grasp, and nothing in the heavens or the earth provides a comparison which might point towards it. This is a light so brilliant that it appears to us as darkness; a silence in which no pin drops, no whisper explodes. It is the Word still unspoken. The Prophet is reported to have told his people: "Reflect upon all things, but do not reflect upon the Essence." There is nothing upon which to reflect or, to be more precise, there is no "thing" which might be the object of human reflection. A Muslim poet said that you can no more see it "than you can see the pupil of your own eye." So why even mention it? Because it is, in itself, the source of all things, the core of all things, the reality of all things.

Secondly, there is the "God of the Faiths", to use Ibn 'Arabī's term, who has revealed Himself to His creation and described Himself in the Quran by the "most beautiful Names". Now we can speak and now we can worship. This is God in all His Glory: the Merciful, the Forgiving, the Powerful, the Majestic, the Holy, the Sustainer, the Generous, the All-Seeing, the All-Hearing, the Responsive, the Cause, the Life-Giver, the First, the Last, the Outward and the Inward. This is God enthroned—the "Throne" is an important element in Quranic imagery—"Master of the Day of Judgement". This is the God about whom the theologians and sectarians argue until they are hoarse or

until the pen drops from their weary fingers, the God whose various banners are held high by clashing armies. But He is One, always One, totally self-sufficient. The "God of the Faiths" is the Face which the Essence turns towards creation without any alteration in its total transcendence, but radiating outwards as the sun, our local light, radiates by its very nature.

Thirdly, there is the personal Lord, my Lord, not yours. God sees, not only the whole of creation as one single entity in its wholeness, but also each particular in its uniqueness ("Not a leaf falls but He knows it"), and the connection which each individual has with his source is unique to that individual. The image which he has of his Lord is an aspect of his particular nature as an individual and it is through this image that he worships and pleads. It is to my Lord and not to the Almighty established on His Throne that I make my little supplications: "Lord, please help me!" How could I dare address Him who has named Himself the Majestic, the Most High, with my trivial requests? Why should He care? But I have an approach to Him, secret and intimate, because He is not only everyone's Lord, He is also specifically and uniquely mine. And this relates to an important concept in Islamic thought; it relates to my *sirr*, my innermost essence, hidden from others and hidden even from myself; the core of my being.

The divine Essence is, as I said, beyond any concept we might fashion in our minds, nameless (like the Tao of the Far-Eastern tradition). But, according to this doctrine, it contains the possibilities of everything that could ever exist or be conceived or be imagined. Everything is there in that impenetrable light, always has been and always will be. "There is nothing," the Quran tells us, "of which the treasures are not with Us, and We send it down in a known measure." There is, as the Quran reminds us, no change in God's treasures, His words. They are possibilities, but in what sense? In the sense that it is possible for them to find expression, manifestation, in the theatres of creation. The Quran explains: "He alone is the all-knowing Creator, and His command, when He intends a thing, is 'Be!', and it is." Responding to this command, they come out into exis-

tence. "To exist", traced back to its Latin origin, means to emerge, to become visible. But here, already, there is an error, for the possibilities as such do not "come out". How could they, since they are not subject to change? It would be better to say that they project into time and process what is inherent in them. They express themselves, without this involving any alteration in their eternal and unique identity. That is understandable if we return to the image of an actor in the theatre, except that, in this case, he is not playing a fictional character. He is playing himself.

One of the greatest of the early Christian theologians, Origen, suggested that we come into this world "from our life as seeds in the mind of God." This can only refer to a very similar doctrine on the margin of Christianity, but it does not quite fit into the Islamic perspective. In the first place, Muslims never refer to the "mind of God", a term that is not to be found in the Quran. Substitute the word "Knowledge" for "mind", however, and the objection is removed. Secondly, seeds, when they germinate, do not endure as seeds, whereas the possibilities remain as they ever were. The actor does not sacrifice his own identity when he comes on stage. He has lost nothing through acting out his personal drama. But this doctrine, theory or whatever one chooses to call it (truth, perhaps?), has another very interesting aspect. According to Sufi writers, the possibilities contained in the Essence—or in the divine Knowledge—have a longing to express themselves, and God's command "Be!" is the response of Mercy to this desire for self-expression. They have been, as it were, drowned in the divine Light; they long to project their secrets into the relative darkness of existence so that their own little lights may be seen.

The Essence is limitless. Existence, wherever it may be found, is framed in limitations. The possibility which seeks expression will choose the framework, the theatre, which corresponds most closely to its needs and construct its instruments from the available materials. It must clothe itself in a body. To exist it requires a vehicle and here, in our world, this is made of "water and clay"; an animal body with certain variations. To act

and, indeed, to survive it needs a brain, marvellously fashioned from the same materials, perfectly adapted to this environment but, none the less, limiting. The limitations of a particular world, a particular theatre, are the price that must be paid for entrance into the drama.

A solitary traveller arrives on a small island far from home, of which he has only a fragmentary recollection, and even that will soon fade away. He is not here by chance. This is where he is meant to be and, although he is now unaware of it, he chose the time, the place and the parents required by his essential nature. He arrives naked, bringing nothing with him. He must build a vehicle from whatever is at hand in this locality and weave for himself a personality adapted to this place. He must build a temporary home from whatever is at hand. If this is a tropical island, he may use palm trees and stones from the beach. If it is Scandinavia, he will find what he needs in the forests or, if it is the Arctic, ice and compacted snow will serve. He will forge instruments of wood or stone. He is bound by the limitations of his island ("Why can't I fly like a bird, why can't I walk on water?"). Eventually the dwelling, the bodily clothing and the instruments will wear out and then it is time for him to return whence he came. But did he every really leave home, or has he been dreaming dreams?, God knows the answer. The traveller does not.

These are crude images, but what can one do? They are the only available currency with which to purchase understanding of things that are not easily understood. Images and language share the limitations of our state. If they point in the right direction they have fulfilled their function. A dog looks expectantly at the pointing finger, but human creatures try to see what the finger indicates, far away in the distance. The Quran is filled with such indications. They are addressed to "people who understand", not to those who stop at the image and examine it under a microscope.

But there is one further step to be taken before we can grasp the full implications of this complex doctrine. Although most of us think of our cosmos as "the cosmos", Muslims are not oblig-

ed to believe that God, who is infinitely creative, has not seen fit to create any number of other cosmic units, other worlds, other "islands". In the Hindu tradition this is taken for granted, but such ideas are irrelevant to Muslim religious thought and practice. They are, however, relevant to the doctrine of possibilities and have their place in Islamic metaphysics. The strange vision which the Prophet is reported to have had in which he saw an endless procession of camels, each bearing other worlds in each of which there was a "Muhammad", has its place here. As it happens, something similar is current in the modern West. People talk of "parallel universes" but, in so doing, betray the extent to which modern thought operates only on the horizontal level. In the teachings that I have in mind, these other worlds are like pearls strung on a vertical cord. They are ranged hierarchically, each richer and more ample than the one beneath it, less so than the one above. They are unimaginably different, but all have certain features in common. Since God is the Seer, the gift of sight must be everywhere present. Since He is the Hearer, the gift of hearing is never missing. "As above, so below", according to a Hermetic saying. But the manner in which these faculties operate depends upon the conditions prevailing in each world, cosmos or universe. Here we see, at best, for a few miles. Elsewhere we might be able to see objects a thousand miles away. Here we cannot walk on water. Elsewhere we might take our morning stroll over the waves. There must still be limitations, but the limitations will be different. There will still be something corresponding to "matter", but "matter" will be different. The theatre is a different theatre.

So now I must turn to yet another set of images. The Essence radiates. So each of the possibilities inherent within it has the power to radiate, once the command "Be!" has been issued. Imagine the different states of being—the different worlds—no longer as pearls but as discs strung on a thread. Suppose, then, that each particular possibility, in response to the command "Be!", emits a ray which passes through these discs, one after another, until it fades out in impenetrable darkness. Wherever it finds conditions which correspond to some

aspect of its innate nature—its eternal nature known only to God—it will crystallise an existence which manifests its qualities. This, precisely, is the full self-expression for which it longed. What if it precipitates a number of different existences as it passes on its way? We read in the Quran: “I swear by the afterglow of sunset and by the night and all that it enshrouds and by the moon when she is full that you will journey on from plane to plane.” Should one think of these “planes” as simultaneous or successive? There is no answer to this question because time, as we experience it here, is a local condition and we cannot guess what form duration might take elsewhere.

Such speculations as these do not concern the mass of believers so long as they are content, following a path that leads to the right destination. Under normal circumstances it would be better not to disturb them with ideas of which they have no need. But, as I have said repeatedly, the circumstances of our time are not normal. The human pot has been stirred as never before and what were formerly settled certainties have been fractured in the stirring. Questions which lay dormant at the bottom of the pot have been brought to the surface. Men and women whose faith was satisfied with the mysteries deep in the heart of things ask to be told the why and the wherefore. It seems to me that Sufi writers of more than five centuries ago were writing less for their own time than for the present age. They suggested answers to questions which, until now, were seldom posed. But nothing that they said diminishes the mysteries as such. All that anyone can do is to throw some light upon peripheral obscurities which surround “the cloud of unknowing”.

The doctrine of possibilities has profound implications for the way in which we see the world and, above all, for the way in which we see ourselves. It is quite common to hear someone exclaim: “I didn’t ask to be born!” The answer, obviously, is: “Oh yes, you did!” Many people, in times of misfortune, ask: “Why me?” Answer: “Because you are you!” Whatever happens to us, for good or ill, is in accordance with that eternal identity which we are now acting out in time, a destiny written down before

time began. The Quran warns that "no disaster befalls either in the earth or in yourselves but it is in a Record before we bring it into existence . . . So do not grieve for the sake of whatever has escaped you, not exult on account of whatever has been given." A woman said to the Prophet: "Messenger of God, you are still afflicted each year with pain from the poisoned mutton you ate." He replied: "I am afflicted with nothing due to it that was not decreed for me while Adam was still a lump of clay."

"Whatever evil visits you," says the Quran, "it is from yourself." This statement is repeated, in one form or another, a number of times. Ask a Muslim what is the origin of the evil, the pain and the suffering which few escape in this life, and there is only one answer he can give. But his answer serves only to raise another question; no longer a simple "Why me?", but "Why? Why is this world shot through with evil, with pain and with suffering?" There is no answer to this question that would satisfy our demand for neatness and lucidity, and there is no reason why we should expect to be satisfied. Who do we think we are? What right do we have to know everything? But it is still possible to speculate, as mankind has done through the ages, and there is one particular line of enquiry which may provide a glimpse of the truth. God is perfect. No religious perspective denies this, but how does one define perfection? If we say that something is perfect we mean that it lacks nothing proper to its nature; nothing can be added to it or subtracted from it that would make it more perfectly what it is meant to be.

Since God—or, if you will, the ultimate Reality—is total, all-encompassing, all-inclusive, His being lacks nothing whatsoever. He is therefore the one and only Perfection, and everything else must be, in some way, imperfect. The Bible describes Him as a "jealous" God and, although the Quran does not actually employ this term, it proclaims the same message: He has no associate, no equal in His perfection. Everything that is—or appears to be—other than Him is deficient, indigent and incomplete. The possibilities, while they rest within His holy Essence, are each perfect in their own way, but when they project them-

selves into the outer darkness, their "otherness" is exposed. They are no longer whole, but fragmented in time. Fragmentation involves discord, and the parts no longer fit together in faultless harmony. Aspects of their eternal nature which had no scent of evil about them while they were integrated into the whole, now smell of mortality. Evil stalks the theatre because this theatre is distant from God and has to be distant if it is to maintain its apparent independence. There is, in effect, equivalence between the presence of evil and our distance from the source of all good, and the pain of separation is translated into individual suffering.

But if the evil which visits you is "from yourself", it cannot be avoided. You cannot be other than yourself, and your unique destiny was written down from the beginning, before the beginning. The Prophet is reported to have warned his people that they must never say, when misfortune came upon them, "If only I had done such-and-such, this would not have happened." Ali is reported to have said: "No man will taste the joy of faith until he realises that he could never have escaped what has befallen him, nor enjoyed what escaped him." Once an event has happened we know that nothing could have prevented it and futile regret serves only, as the Prophet said, "to provide an opening for the devil." The "divine Decree", which determines everything, is not subject to change. In the words of the poet Housman:

The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.

So we have come to the question which has been argued through the ages, often in anger, always in bafflement; the question of free will and predestination. Muslim theologians have struggled no less than Christians to find an answer that satisfies both faith and reason, and no definitive answer has been forthcoming. The way in which we deal with the problem separates the men from the boys, the women from the girls,

because it is the ultimate test of whether we can hold two contrary propositions in perfect balance and whether we are capable of going beyond the categories of human logic. This is not a mental exercise—the mind is impotent now—but a spiritual one, comparable perhaps to the exercise which Zen Buddhists perform when they meditate upon a Koan; an impossible, self-contradictory proposition. In doing so their object is to break the bounds imposed by their mental habits and see, with the eye of the heart, a reality far removed from any rationalism we may practice here.

We are faced with two facts which appear irreconcilable but from which we cannot turn away. God is eternal. No revealed religion denies this. He is therefore above time and holds in His Knowledge all time from beginning to end. Any other assumption would reduce the Creator to the level of His own creation, and that is absurd. Equally absurd is the notion that He does not know what is to come but waits, like any mortal creature, to see how things will turn out. The Bible puts this succinctly in the book called Ecclesiastes: "That which has been is now, and that which is to be has already been." According to the thirteenth-century Sufi Najm al-Dīn Rāzī, "People act out an affair which He has finished." In the divine Knowledge, which is total and unlimited, past and future belong to a single pattern laid out in all its amplitude with no demarcation line to separate them. The human creature is like a man who walks through a long tunnel with a torch in his hand; from moment to moment the torch picks out details of the pattern inscribed on the walls. He cannot however focus the beam on what lies ahead but sees only that section of the design which is level with him. As for the past, that is no longer seen, known only in the flickering light of memory, though it will become present again when he stands naked—all his accoutrements stripped from him—before his Creator on the Day of Judgement.

For the believer this is true, and it cannot be denied. At the same time we know, beyond any possibility of doubt, that we have what we experience as free will and that we are responsible for the choices we make in the course of our lives. We are

commanded to follow a "straight path" but are not compelled to do so; the crooked paths extend before us on either side, tempting us to diverge. If we are not, in truth, free to choose our way, we act—and must act—as if we had unfettered freedom of choice, and this is all that matters. The Prophet warned his people in the strongest terms not to argue about this matter, but that has not prevented Muslim theologians from debating the topic. Those who have given precedence to determinism have found plenty of Quranic verses to support their stand, and those who have favoured free will have readily seized upon other verses to prove their point. The fact is that the Quran holds a perfect balance between the two. Theology, by its very nature, can only deal with alternatives: if this is true, that must be false; "Yes" and "No" are irreconcilable opposites. Metaphysics takes a leap into the dark—or into the light—and answers: "Yes and No!" And this recalls Ibn 'Arabī's statement that the cosmos and all that it contains is "He/not He". But to accept this there must be some abatement of the uproar in our minds; the uproar of rational argument which refuses to break out into the open, where all things are possible.

Fatalism, as an attitude to life in general, is retrospective. Only when something has happened can we say that it had to happen. The notion that it makes people inactive is disproved by experience. The courage of the Prophet's Companions, going into battle against overwhelming odds, must certainly have owed something to the conviction that the outcome of the battle was in God's hands, not theirs, and that they would die not a moment before or after "a time appointed". If their time had not yet come, the enemy's weaponry would prove to be no more dangerous than a child's toys; if they were fated to meet their end that day, nothing they did could prevent this. In our time, countless men and women suffer extreme stress in their work, and this is often due to the belief that "everything depends on me". For the Muslim, everything depends on God; nothing "depends on me". Paradoxical as it may seem, the conviction that all is pre-ordained is liberating, whereas belief in total freedom of choice creates, for those who hold it, a prison of anx-

iety and uncertainty. It is for us to act. The outcome of our actions is God's business, not ours. It is for us to do what is right under all circumstances. Subsequent failure does not mean that right action was, after all, wrong.

But there is something more (there is always something more). The universal conviction that we have freedom of choice and that the choices we make are decisive is so deep-rooted that it cannot be a simple illusion. The Christian doctrine that man is made in the image of God finds an echo in a saying of the Prophet to the same effect. This saying is rejected as inauthentic by many of the *'ulamā'*, the learned Muslims, but it has its place in the Islamic perspective since it exists and has influenced many thoughtful believers. In any case, few Muslims doubt that, in some mysterious way, we participate—each according to his measure—in the divine Qualities, not least in the life we borrow from the Living (*al-Hayy*). If this is so, then God's absolute freedom must in some way be reflected in the human creature, not in our working personalities, so finely tuned to the exigencies of this world, but in the total selfhood of which the personality—the mask—is only a passing manifestation.

The closer that a man or a woman comes to God, to the source, to the Real, the more surely will they taste this ultimate freedom, His and theirs. But this is a mystery which goes far beyond the limitations of our state, and logic cannot deal with it. There is no place for mental gymnastics here. Participation in the divine freedom at the very core of our being depends both upon submission and proximity. Proximity, through submission (*al-islām*), is achieved only through the constant remembrance of God, which includes remembrance of who we are. The Prophet is reported to have said: "He who knows himself (*naf-sahu*, his own soul) knows his Lord." True knowledge is indivisible, and in its radiance all things fall into place.

12

Out of Sight

And every soul comes, together with a driver and a witness. You were heedless of this; now We have removed from you your covering, and piercing is your vision this day.

(Quran 50:21-22)

Enter the Garden, you and your wives, to be made joyful. Herein is all that souls desire and eyes find sweet. Here you are immortal. This is the Garden which you have inherited because of what you did. Herein for you is fruit in plenty.

(Quran 43:70-73)

No soul knows what is kept hid from it of joy.

(Quran 32:17)

Sometimes the silences of the religions are almost as interesting as their affirmations. God communicates with mankind. That is something no believer denies, although the very notion of the Infinite communicating with the finite is so astonishing as to be, in the proper sense, miraculous. He communicates, according to the Quran, "by a sudden illumination or from behind a veil, or He sends a messenger to reveal, by His leave, whatsoever He will." Revelation is defined as a mercy, as a promise and as a warning. We are told what we need to know, and this principle of "need to know" (so familiar to gov-

ernment servants) is, I believe, fundamental. Above all, since it is the divine intention to preserve creation until its "respite" is ended, God takes care not to puncture the fragile membrane which protects our world—our "bubble"—from all that lies outside it. If He spoke directly to humankind or if He revealed more knowledge than we can use and assimilate, He would speak only once. That would be the end of our world.

It is axiomatic in Islam that "all knowledge" is implicit in the Quran, but the Book itself tells us that: "If all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean, with seven more oceans to help it, [were ink], God's words would not be exhausted." Quite apart from the fact that this implies the necessity for different revelations (though the essential message is the same), it indicates that God is subject to self-imposed limitations when there are not enough trees or oceans to suffice, as there never can be. There are two kinds of knowledge that we really need and which are therefore given to us. The first relates to our last ends, the "straight path" which leads to felicity and "a vast reward". The second concerns our social and family life, which must, of necessity, be well regulated if the path is not to be encumbered with distractions. Islam is intolerant of useless knowledge, typically the flood of trivial information which inundates our minds in the present age. Life is too short for that. We have urgent business while we are here and there is no time to spare for trivialities. At the end, so the Quran tells us, it will seem as though we spent only a day, perhaps one evening or one morning, in the *dunyā*, a dilapidated house that is already on fire.

The fact remains that our normal vision does not penetrate beyond the confines of this place, so how is revelation, whatever form it takes, to convey some inkling of all that lies out of sight? It can only be done by using images of what is familiar to us, hence the *amthāl*, the "similitudes", which God coins throughout the scriptures. There is no deception in this, since the unity of creation at all its many levels means that there is a correspondence—a "resemblance"—between the things of this earth and whatever has its being elsewhere. Concrete images of

the afterlife are to be taken both literally and metaphorically. The Quran means what it says and, at the same time, means more than it says. Other Faiths, aware—as all must be—of the inadequacy of the available imagery to suggest the vast landscape which is out of sight, have chosen to keep silence. Judaism actively discourages speculation about “what came before and what comes after”. Hinayana Buddhism says, in effect: “Your only concern is the way you conduct yourself in this life. The rest is not your immediate concern.” Confucianism has sealed lips, leaving it to Taoism to explore what may lie beyond obedience to the “Mandate of Heaven” here and now. God chooses sometimes to reveal and sometimes to conceal.

Perhaps because it is the final Revelation—this is one of the few “dogmas” of Islam—the Quran speaks at length and in concrete images of the hereafter. Belief in the reality of the Last Judgement, heaven and hell is one with faith in God, and Muhammad is described both as a bringer of good news and as a warner; news of reward and forgiveness, warning of judgement and the pains of hell. This is at the heart of the “message” he was commanded to bring to humanity in the last days which precede the inevitable end. “All who believe in God and the Last Day, and do good, no fear shall come upon them neither shall they grieve,” says the Quran. The Arabic words translated as “Last Day” are *yawm al-ākhirā*, which might also be translated as “the Day of what comes after”. These, it seems, are the three conditions of what Christians call salvation; there are no others. Most Muslims would insist that these beliefs are valid only within the framework of Islam, but the Quran says what it says.

Talking once with an Anglican priest and trying to define the most basic difference, not between Christianity and Islam, but between modern Christians and the assured faith of Muslims, I suggested that unquestioning belief in the hereafter might be the point of divergence. Rather to my surprise, he nodded sadly and said: “Yes, we have great difficulty with that.” I noticed that he did not say “some of my parishioners have difficulty in believing in Judgement, heaven and hell.” He said “we”.

There is a hoary old joke that has been going the rounds for at least half a century but which has many applications. A traveller asks an Irishman the best way to his destination. After some thought, he replies: "If I were going there, I wouldn't start from here." The problem for many Christians when they consider the afterlife or try to defend belief in an afterlife is that they "start from here". That is to say, they start from assumptions made by contemporary sceptics regarding the nature of reality, assumptions which are thought to be "scientific" and therefore unquestionable. When, as often happens, they are involved in a debate on television or radio, they are too polite or perhaps too uncertain of their own position to tell their opponents: "Nothing that you say can carry any weight with me because it is based upon a fundamental error concerning the nature of things." Truth—the intended destination—cannot be reached from here.

The Quran speaks in terms of a "change of form". We cannot exist in any "world" or at any level without a form, both body and psyche. This applies, although in ways beyond our understanding, in heaven or hell as it does elsewhere. This form is necessary clothing for the naked spirit, the nucleus, the "possibility". Wherever the 'I' who once walked upon this earth may find itself when its familiar clothing has dropped away, it will always have a form, very different and yet comparable to what it wore here. There is, as usual, a paradox: ties and connections are broken at death, but, in accordance with the doctrine of *tawhīd* there remains a connection at a deeper level, a connection which can never be broken since that would represent a "rift" in the whole structure of creation.

At the moment of death the being who was once a man or a woman quits the cosmos. Since the cosmos is defined by its limits, its boundaries, everything is now possible. But nothing can exist in a vacuum. It follows that this being must enter into a new framework also defined by its limits, whether wide or narrow. In hell, they are oppressive walls closing in on the tormented soul. In Paradise they are so wide that, according to a saying of the Prophet, "there is in Paradise a tree in whose

shade a rider can travel for a hundred years without coming to the end of it, and the length of a bow for one of you in Paradise is better than that upon which the sun rises and sets." Moreover, this beatific state in which the limitations are not even perceived as such is open to the sky. It is open to the divine radiance and basks in it.

Since everything is possible, we cannot fault the images of the hereafter woven by the religious imagination. None can be adequate, few can be rejected out of hand. I remember, years ago, paying an official visit to the small island of Grand Turk, situated to the east of the Bahamas. Apart from sun, sand and sea there was little of interest so the Administrator took me to meet the oldest inhabitant, a centenarian. She, in her turn, showed me her prize possession, a fine coffin occupying the place of honour in her front room. Beside it, draped over a chair, were her best clothes. She intended to be laid out in these when death seized her. It was only right, she said, that she should meet her Maker looking smart and tidy. Whether she would in fact stand before God on the Day of Judgement dressed just as she wished is a meaningless question. What mattered was her intention. For all that one knew, this fine dress and these clean under garments might, on that Day, be transfigured into something splendid.

There are many in the West who, despite a rejection of the God of the Churches, expect to meet again a beloved parent, husband or wife in some kind of heaven. The sophisticated intelligence dismisses such hopes as naive and absurd, but the sophisticated intelligence is out of its depth when it attempts to deal with such matters. No meeting and certainly no relationship situated in the here and now is without significance. Every human encounter reflects or prefigures a meeting elsewhere, although those who met before were then very differently clothed and those who are to meet again will not be found in a human form. Yet there will be mutual recognition. This is one of the interpretations of the Quranic statement (specifically applied to the Day of Judgement) that "they will recognise one another".

Many deracinated believers who are indifferent to doctrine

and dogma think of the hereafter as a kind of disembodied, "spiritual" existence. It is little wonder that they seldom look forward to it. But this is entirely contrary to the teachings of Islam as also of Christianity regarding the resurrection. The human nucleus which spun around itself an envelope in this world is perfectly capable of spinning a new set of clothing and new instruments of emotion and sensation elsewhere. This is one way of putting it. Since, ultimately, God is the only Creator, the only spinner, the Quran necessarily speaks in terms of the divine action which creates a new body for the voyaging spirit: "They say: 'What! When we are bones and dust, shall we really be raised up, a new creation?' . . . Then they will say: 'Who will cause us to return [to a bodily form]?' Say: 'He who created you in the first place.'"

At this point a digression is necessary because of the growing belief in Britain and the United States in what is described as "reincarnation", a belief which has no place in Islam. It is strange that anyone should find comfort in such a notion since our identity is bound up with memory and a new existence in which the chain of memory—and therefore the sense of still being "me"—is lost could be of little interest to us. But this belief is, in any case, based on a misunderstanding. The Hindu masses are allowed to believe in reincarnation in this world just as simple Christians are allowed to believe in a heaven which is a prolongation of this world, only much nicer. Speak however to a learned Hindu and he will tell you that there can be no return to this place. Brahma, the creative power, breathes out with every exhalation a multitude of "worlds", so that their number is beyond the sum of all the grains of sand in all the earth's oceans. The likelihood that any being might be brought to life again in the same theatre is incalculably remote. So why—he may be asked—should so many people be left in error? The learned man will be surprised by the word. This, he will say, is no error. It is, so to speak, the representation on a flat surface of a multi-dimensional reality, which brings us back to the fact that continuity between the different states of being is never broken. In terms of Hindu doctrine, the simple man who

believes that he may be “reincarnated” as a monkey or a snake is still on the right track because, in every possible world, there will be something that corresponds to a monkey or a snake. Remote as such ideas may be to Islamic doctrine, the fact remains that the Quran speaks of the inhabitants of hell as “drinking as the camel drinks”, and says also that God has turned certain sinners into the likeness of “apes and swine”.

Within the Islamic perspective, we can still retain the notion of vastness, unimaginable vastness, which is expressed in the divine Name *al-Wāsiʿ*, “The incomparably Vast”. This universe, as it appears to our eyes and to our instruments, encompasses great distances expressed in terms of light years, but it would scarcely fill a thimble when set against creation in its totality, and creation itself is nothing in comparison with all that lies beyond it. But what does size matter? One human soul which has realised its potential is greater still. The “Viceroy of God on earth” does not bow down before stars and galaxies. He prostrates himself only before God, *al-Wāsiʿ*, who communicates with him through an open channel, extinguishing distance.

He returns, as the Quran constantly reminds us; returns to the Source from which he issued, and he is judged. In principle the Muslim is required to put last things first. He may not always do so, but he knows that this is what he should do. Not only does the religion command this. Logic requires it. So brief is our life span (“You will think that you stayed but for an hour”) that its meaning is necessarily in its end, when all the fragments are assembled to make a coherent whole. At the Last Judgement every tiny piece is rediscovered and takes its place in the jigsaw. “Though it be but a grain of mustard seed,” says the Quran, “and though it be in a rock, or in the heavens or in the earth, God will bring it forth. See! God is the Knower, the Aware.” He waits, unseen, at the end of every road, and His is the presence behind the flimsy stage furniture as it is behind the mirages which surround us. “The thirsty one supposes it to be water till he comes close to it and finds that it is nothing, but

finds in its place God, who pays him his due; and God is swift in reckoning.”

The Quran refers frequently to those who “purchase the life of this world at the price of the hereafter”, those who thereby sacrifice an enduring joy and inexhaustible satisfaction for the sake of joys that last but an instant and a satisfaction that never suffices. “This world is journeying and moving away,” said the Prophet, “and the hereafter is journeying and approaching.” The halt on this journey is at the Last Judgement, which determines all the rest. He said also that, as the end approaches and Judgement looms closer, time contracts—as indeed it does in old age—“a year being like a month, a month like a week, a week like a day, a day like an hour, and an hour like the kindling of a fire.” Few will deny that, in the present age—characterised by haste—the hands of the clock move faster than they ever did before, and the disintegration of ancient, stable patterns of living recalls another prophetic saying regarding the “signs of the end” to the effect that things will fall away “like beads of a necklace falling one after another when the string is cut”. This “string” is the conscious recognition of the link between what is above and what is below; it is the “remembrance of God”.

The Judgement is, in truth, unimaginable, but the fact remains that we have been given the power to imagine things far beyond our range and we are not forbidden to employ this power. I do not think I am breaking the rules if I indulge in a fantasy based upon the famous *hadith* regarding the prostitute who was pardoned because she gave water to a dog that was dying of thirst. It could have been any animal saved from a painful death, so I will substitute a fox for the dog in this scenario. Imagine that unimaginable scene. All who lived on earth are now assembled, millions and millions of them, all naked and defenceless. A woman has been summoned to stand before her Lord. She no longer commands her own speech, but her limbs and her organs bear witness against her (the Quran tells us that this will happen). “We refused no man,” they confess;

“We sold ourselves to all comers.” Silent, the woman trembles, betrayed by her own body.

At this moment a faint whining sound is heard. A small vixen picks her way through the crowd and crouches before the Judge, set high upon His Throne. In this world God has given the power of speech only to mankind, but now the very rocks speak and bear witness, as do the beasts and the birds. “I was starving,” says the vixen; “My mate had been killed. My cubs were close to death. I had no hope, and yet I still had hope in my Lord, as every creature does. This woman put out food for me in that bitter time. I ate. My milk flowed, and my cubs lived.” And then that sound which is beyond known music is heard by all who ever lived and by the transfigured earth; the word of total forgiveness, total reconciliation. The woman weeps for joy, all her sins effaced.

Is this fanciful? Of course it is, but it makes a point. Too many Muslims think they know precisely by what measure they will be measured when the time comes. No one knows, because Mercy intervenes unpredictably and a simple human act of kindness may outweigh a mountain of sins, just as a life lived in strict adherence to the religious Law may count for little if this man or this woman has been merciless in dealing with their fellow creatures. “God summons to Paradise and to forgiveness,” says the Quran, and, according to one of the divinely inspired sayings of the Prophet in which his Lord speaks through him: “Oh my servants, I have made oppression unlawful for Myself, and I have made it unlawful for you . . . My servants, you are sinning night and day, but I forgive all sins so, if you ask me for forgiveness, I will forgive you.”

Here and now there is an apparent conflict between Truth and Mercy. Truth is hard, for it cannot be other than it is; it cannot transform itself into error in order to spare those who have offended against it, and it cannot sever the connection between cause and effect. This action has been taken and it has certain consequences, here or hereafter. The divine Name “The Wrathful” is, perhaps, another name for Truth. Mercy, on the other hand, is gentle. It breaks the connection because it

lessens or may even efface the seemingly inevitable consequences of wrong action. In Buddhist terms, it interrupts the almost mathematical pattern of "action and reaction". This is where the divine Name *al-ʿAfū* ("The Effacer") comes in. God, if He will, can wipe from the slate which records our every action those which, according to the Law, should result in punishment. But no man—no woman either—dare count upon this. We must assume, for practical purposes, that we shall pay for what we have done amiss, while keeping in mind this Quranic text: "Oh my servants who have offended against their own souls, do not despair of God's mercy. Truly God forgives all sins. He, indeed, is the Forgiving, the Most Merciful. And turn towards your Lord and submit to Him before the punishment comes upon you. Then you will not be helped."

After death we can no longer ask to be forgiven, though God—in His sovereign freedom—may still choose to forgive for His own reasons, reasons which are beyond our comprehension. There is a story told by al-Ghazzalī (allegedly based on a saying of the Prophet) which, he warns the reader, should not be passed on to all and sundry for fear that they might rely upon it. A great company of evil doers stand before their Creator and are condemned to the Fire. One group hastens at once towards the hungry flames, but their Lord calls them back saying: "You seem to be in a hurry to meet your doom". They answer: "Lord, throughout our earthly lives we never once obeyed you. Now, though it avails nothing, we obey!" "You are forgiven." The second group is then addressed: "Did I not order you into the Fire? Why do you hesitate?" "Lord," they say, "despite everything, we have never lost faith in your infinite Mercy." "You too are forgiven."

But Truth remains what it is, and hell is real. Today's Muslims do not, as a whole, doubt this, but contemporary Christians are very unwilling to accept the fact that God—a loving God—could possibly condemn even the worst sinners to perpetual punishment. There has been, no doubt, a reaction against the "fire and brimstone" preachers of earlier times, preachers who sometimes appeared to relish the notion that all

who disagreed with them would be plunged into hell. One suspects that they themselves were of so fiery a nature that their only proper home would be the Fire. But this reaction is based upon sentiment and wilful denial of the scriptures. Only recently, at a major conference on this subject in Rome, one of the principal speakers started his address with the words "I feel that . . ." What, I wonder, did he suppose that "feelings" have to do with the matter? If we adhere to one of the revealed Faiths, we cannot pick and choose. The Muslim is not permitted to ignore Quranic verses which may not please him, and the Christian cannot claim the right to take a blue pencil to the Gospels and cross out all references to a dreadful place where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" Even small offences expose the Christian soul to dire punishment. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew Jesus warns that "whosoever shall say [to his brother] 'Thou fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire." In the same Gospel, he is reported to have said that, when the Day of Judgement comes, God will say to "those of the left hand": "Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire." The thunder of God's curse reverberates throughout creation, but only the human creature is of a stature to deserve it.

For the Christian such warnings are a bitter pill to swallow, but, for the agnostic, they are a denial of human freedom. A well known journalist, writing recently in *The Times*, made a point which expresses the beliefs of a great number of people in the West, beliefs derived from the unchristian conviction that human beings are "basically good". The notion that we need to be "frightened into virtue by threats" appalled him. Virtue, he suggested, is its own reward. People should behave well only because they are personally convinced that this is right, "or not at all". It seems to follow from this that those who do not feel in the mood to do the right thing should on no account do it. This is, in any case, pure sentimentality and blind idealism. God, however, is a realist. He knows that, given the chance, we will "spread corruption in the earth". He knows that our usual reaction to temptation is to fall into it headlong. He knows also that every one of us has a devil within who will prompt us to evil if

we have no shield against him. Very often, the only effective shield is fear of the consequences of what we do. The Christians recognise this in their own way through the doctrine of "original sin".

"Fear is the beginning of wisdom" is a saying common both to Islam and Christianity. There is much to fear in this world. Why should anyone suppose that there is nothing to fear in other states of being, so long as they fall short of Paradise? It is the "beginning of wisdom" because it is the foundation of realism. An animal—unless it is a lion or a tiger—soon falls prey to a predator if it is without fear, and we too have our predators, even if they are unseen. Fear is also the beginning of rectification, the rectification which moulds us into readiness for Paradise, and it is here that the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory enters the scheme of things. The images of hell by which the Quran warns us are in fact images of purification. There could be no point in purifying beings destined never to come out into the light. Muslims often fall into the error of referring to an "eternal" hell, but only God is eternal; everything else is transient. The Quran tells us that the condemned will suffer in the Fire for "as long as the heavens and the earth endure", and that, in itself, sets a term to their suffering. But, according to a saying of the Prophet, God will say: "Bring forth from hell all who have remembered Me at any time or feared Me in any place." Moreover, there will be intercession by the angels, the prophets and the believers for the People of the Fire until, at the last, God himself brings out a great handful of those in whom neither angels, prophets nor believers could find so much as a grain of good.

It is, surely, a question of fitness, a question of readiness and ripeness? Most of us, transported directly to Paradise after death, would come tumbling out of the Garden in an instant. Justice, as I said earlier, puts everything in its right place, high or low, and—as the Quran reiterates again and again—God is never unjust to His servants. The Garden is for those who have been made fit for it, purified here or hereafter, all dross burned away. In Catholic doctrine, only the saints have immediate

access to heaven. In terms of pre-Christian Germanic religion, only "heroes" enter Valhalla. Among the teeming multitudes on this earth there are few saints and few heroes.

That said, a different map of the hereafter must be unrolled. Logically and in terms of doctrine, only the rare jewel found in a pile of pebbles can escape burning in the Fire "whose fuel", says the Quran, "is men and stones". But this excludes the miracle of forgiveness, a miracle in the full sense since it shatters the web of cause and effect. As I mentioned earlier, the Arabic word for the Forgiver is "He who covers"; covers this poor substance—so unfit for glory—with His glory, covers impurity with His purity, His holiness. The most obvious example of this is the fate of the martyr who, until the moment at which he gave up his life for his Faith, may have piled sin upon sin, as unfit as any miserable wretch for the radiance of Paradise. Now all that is gone—all the excrescences accumulated through a lifetime. By a single act, he has readied himself, and he will be at home in the light. But small actions far short of martyrdom—small acts of kindness—may win the same reward if they demonstrate a spontaneous tendency of the being, a tendency towards the pole of Mercy rather than towards the pole of Wrath. Here, as elsewhere in the Islamic perspective, orientation is what counts.

If we knew what the prophets have known and if we had seen what they have seen, we could not speak of the purgatorial Fire without trembling. Perhaps we should tremble still more when we attempt to speak truly of Paradise with our unworthy tongues. Human language is not designed to describe such splendour, nor can human thought rise to the occasion. What could we do but babble incoherently? It is possible to imagine pain and suffering on a different level of experience, even if we cannot imagine what form they might take. But the joy of heaven is quite a different matter. We commonly speak of good and evil as though they were a pair, although the Quran assures us that they "are not equal". We fall into the same trap when we speak of heaven and hell as though these also could be paired. Hell is a dark corner, a narrow pit, whereas heaven is mea-

sureless. If there were one hole, one small gap in the wall surrounding hell, the light of heaven would invade it and the rivers which water the Garden would put out the fire.

What distinguishes Paradise from all else that we can conceive or envisage is its proximity to God, separated from Him only by the thin veil which prevents it from being, as it were, lost in Him, and even this veil is pierced when He looks upon the blessed and they, looking up from their rejoicing, are stilled in a greater joy. There is an important distinction in European languages between "joy" and "happiness", though it is often blurred. In this life we may be happy or unhappy, usually alternating between the two, but joy is something else: a moment of perfection, a moment out of time. It takes us unawares, a bird that alights briefly on a branch, then takes flight. We cannot grasp it. We cannot delay its going. The notion therefore of enduring joy, increasing and still increasing even when it might be thought to have reached its limit—that is something that neither mind nor imagination can accommodate.

The Prophet is reported to have said: "In Paradise there is what no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard; what has never occurred to the heart of man," and he recited a Quranic verse: "No soul knows what is kept hid from it of joy." And one of the close Companions of the Prophet said: "By Him who sent down the Book upon Muhammad—God's blessing and peace upon him—those who dwell in Paradise increase in beauty just as, in this world, they increase in decrepitude"; so the day of entry into the Garden is called "the Day of Increase". But beauty is nothing if not seen and enjoyed, and no meeting or encounter elsewhere can compare with the communion of the blessed, the joy they receive from one another and the joy they give. There is a tradition (whether directly from the Prophet or not is irrelevant) that each of the people of Paradise will see himself in his mate, and she will see herself in him, without either of them losing their personal identity. Such an image as this corresponds to a profound human need for perfect communion and total mutual understanding, a need which many hope to satisfy in sexual intercourse, but which remains unattain-

able here. In the great love duet in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Tristan sings, "I am Isolde!" And she replies, "I am Tristan!"

We poor humans have been given desires, hopes and longings which can only find fulfilment in a place out of sight. "There," says the Quran, "they have all that hearts desire, and there is more with Us." That simple word "more" takes us into the unimaginable region of constant and unending "increase". But however remote and however inconceivable the satisfaction of "all that hearts desire" may be, the Quran never fails to emphasise the connection between what is above and what is below: "As often as they are regaled with fruit [of the Garden], they say: 'This is what we were given aforetime', for they are given these things in similitude." Throughout the great web of Being there is always difference and there is always similitude, just as there are changes of form and yet there is continuity of form.

The traveller on the path which leads from here to there carries with him a talisman, a guarantee of safe conduct. This is the "remembrance of God"; a shield against a host of enemies. He is going home. According to a tradition, even the lowest of the low—"the last man released from the Fire"—recognises his true home in Paradise when he reaches it, though he had been "burned to a cinder". After the long voyage through strange lands in which monsters abound and mirages deceive, the traveller returns.

13

The Well-Scrubbed Mirror

*And the foremost in the race, the foremost in the race;
these are they who are brought near.*

(Quran 56:10-11)

*Men whom neither trade nor profit can divert
from the remembrance of God.*

(Quran 24:37)

*Seeking only the Countenance of their Lord,
the All-Highest.*

(Quran 92:20)

I return yet again to the problem of words, not so much the problem of their meaning as that of the resonance they have in people's minds. A good word, accurate and adequate, can still ring false when it has fallen into bad company. "Sufism" (in Arabic *taṣawwuf*) is "the mystical dimension of Islam". True. But one has to ask what the word "mysticism" means to most people in the West today. There is an unfortunate association with occultism, which has nothing to do with spirituality. Fortune tellers at a fair are described as "mystics"; so are "psy-

chics" in general, as are some very odd characters whose hallucinations have provided the motivation for aberrant cults. A useful alternative term is "esoterism", but this too has become tarnished, at least in English (the equivalent in French is less damaged). It suggests secret doctrines jealously guarded by a select few who claim to know what no one else knows but refuse to tell us what this is. The fact remains that true mystics, true esoterists, have struggled against the barriers which human language presents in order to communicate what they have glimpsed and what they have come to understand of the inner meaning of things. They would be glad if everyone in the world understood them. The problem, as always, is one of communication.

So what is the origin of the word "Sufi" (or rather its Arabic equivalent)? One suggestion is that it refers to the simple garments of wool (*ṣūf*) worn by the early ascetics of Islam, another that it is derived from *ṣafā* ("purity") or from *ṣaff*, which refers to "the first rank". Yet another harks back to the "People of the Bench" (*ṣuffah*), contemplatives in the time of the Prophet. Perhaps each of the four derivations makes a point: simplicity, purity, exceptional piety and contemplation.

The early definitions of what Sufism is in practice make another, very significant point. "It teaches us how to purify ourselves, improve our conduct, and build up our inner and outer life . . ." It is "renunciation of all selfish pleasures" and "the building up of good habits and keeping the heart from evil desires." Yet again, quite simply, it is neither more nor less than "good manners" towards God and towards our fellow creatures. Another early writer defined it as "goodness of disposition", adding that "he who has the best disposition is the best Sufi." A certain Abū Muḥammad Ruwaym, when asked "What is Sufism?" replied: "It is nothing else but submitting one's own will to the will of God" (which is a good definition of Islam as such). Later, Junayd—one of the great Masters of the Path—said that "the Sufi is dead to himself and alive to God." Another major figure, Jīlānī, explained that the Sufi is "at rest in body, contented in mind . . . his face shining with the light of God, with an enlightened heart, oblivious to all things due to his

nearness to God." Finally, the Sufi is one who "grasps the realities".

What the early definitions have in common is that they could just as well be applied to the Muslim as such, the good Muslim, one who lives his or her *islām* as it should be lived. No matter how far the Sufis of later times may have travelled on the mystical path, the root is still the same: the religion of Islam as revealed in the Quran and as exemplified by the Prophet. Sufism is not, as has sometimes been suggested, a "sect", let alone an aberration. It is the Faith carried to its logical conclusion, without ever losing contact with the revelation; indeed, it is primarily an exploration of the full implications of the revelation.

The Sufis themselves have never had any doubt as to where it all began. They trace their spiritual ancestry back to the Prophet himself and to the most eminent of his Companions through what is called a "chain of transmission", a chain in which every single link is meticulously recorded through some forty generations. This is, in effect, their family tree which they have acquired through their oath of adherence to a living Master, one who has passed on to them, by the joining of hands in a rite of initiation, a spiritual influence descended from the foremost of the Muslims, Muhammad.

There is a good reason for pious Muslims to treasure this link with their ancestors. As I mentioned earlier, the Prophet said that his was the best generation, after that the next (known as "the followers") and then the third generation ("the followers of the followers"). From then on the inevitable loss of excellence proceeded under the destructive influence of time, though not uniformly. When, after the death of Ali (the fourth Caliph), the seat of power—the Caliphate—moved from Medina to Damascus, the most pious among the Muslims remained in Medina, turning their backs upon the glory of Empire and the acquisition of wealth. They might reasonably be called the first "Sufis", although the term itself did not come into use until the ninth century of the Christian era. By the eleventh century it was already possible for Hujwīrī to write that, in the past, Sufism had been a reality without a name, whereas in his time

it was a name without a reality. As it happens, his pessimism was misplaced. The full flowering of Islamic mysticism was still to come. Sufism developed, as it were, against the tide, providing the community with an anchor which delayed—although it could not prevent—the onset of decadence.

This anchor has many names but, of these, *faqr* is the most important. The man or woman we identify as “a Sufi” does not usually lay claim to this title. He or she is a *faqīr* (feminine *faqīrah*), one who is poor, indigent, needy. The Quran says: “Oh mankind! You are the poor, He is the rich” or “He is plenitude.” This is addressed to all Muslims, indeed to all believers in God, but the Sufi tries to make this awareness of total dependence actual in every moment of his or her life. It is the shield against vanity, pretentiousness and every temptation to self-aggrandisement. It is the basis for our understanding of who we are. This has nothing in common with the sentimental humility, often a mask for pride, to which some religious people lay claim. It is realism, an acknowledgement of our actual situation in relation to God. So long as this dependence is acknowledged, there can be no straying from the Path; when it is absent, the Path is lost. *Faqr* is a state of emptiness ready to be filled. Only those who have swept from their hearts—from the centre of their being—the clutter of worldly hopes and desires, dreams and memories, can receive something of the divine Plenitude and live off this inexhaustible nourishment. Since we do not and cannot control that flow, there is only one thing for us to do: that is, to make ourselves fit to receive it. This is our “work”; the rest is pure gift, pure bounty from beyond ourselves.

As I mentioned earlier, there is another image by which to illustrate this process; the image of the Heart as a mirror which reflects—or fails to reflect—realities far beyond the mind’s grasp. As the Prophet said, rust accumulates on the surface of the mirror unless it is constantly polished, and the most effective way to keep it clean is the remembrance of God. Although He is always present, it is only the remembrance of Him which makes us aware of this presence, and only when we are aware of it does the rust dissolve, leaving the mirror as bright and as reflective as it was when we were first created. Amidst the com-

plexities of modern life and the forgetfulness which they encourage, it may take more than polishing to offset the dimming of the Heart's vision. It needs to be well scrubbed if its inherent purity is to be restored and maintained.

There is, here, no distortion of human nature; on the contrary, this is a return to the form in which we were created, called in Arabic *fiṭrah*, a term which comes from a verse in the thirtieth chapter of the Quran: "So turn your face towards religion as a man by nature upright; the nature in which God created mankind." Like so much else in Islamic teaching, this represents a return—a return to where we started when we issued from the hand of God. Hence the emphasis, particularly in Sufism, upon "purity" (which is almost equivalent to *fiṭrah*). In the Christian tradition, purity has come to be associated almost exclusively with virginity and sexual continence. Islam adheres to the literal meaning of the word; a pure substance is one that is free from any adulteration or any admixture with other substances. Pure gold is gold and nothing else. The man or woman who has achieved purity has, in effect, sloughed off all those elements and influences which have diluted human nature in its primordial, God-given form. With this goes the virtue of sincerity (Sufism has been defined quite simply as "sincerity") since falsehood—whether lived or spoken—is a distortion of what I am and what you are. The Prophet is described in the Quran and in Muslim prayers devoted to his praise as "unlettered", and this too is a kind of purity; he was uncontaminated by any knowledge that did not come directly from God, and he was therefore the perfect instrument of revelation.

In the course of time Sufism developed, both outwardly and inwardly. Outwardly it took on an organisational character. In the place of isolated individuals, pious ascetics who had distanced themselves from the increasing laxity of the community, we have the *ṭurūq* (plural of *ṭarīqah*), usually translated as "brotherhoods", although the word *ṭarīqah* simply means "path". A particular Sheikh—a spiritual Master—would gather around him disciples who recognised in him a true leader and teacher on the path to God. It could often happen, after his death, that one or other of these disciples, having reached a

spiritual level comparable to that of his Master, would form a new *ṭarīqah*, while another assumed the leadership of the old one. In this way a great variety of different brotherhoods arose, not in conflict or disagreement with each other but offering different techniques for reaching the same goal. Since human temperaments differ as do the circumstances of time and place, this has offered the aspirant a path that suites his or her particular needs.

At the same time, the *ṭurūq* attracted to themselves many people who remained simple Muslims, without any inclination to scale the heights, but who sought the companionship of a holy man and the comradeship of the brotherhood. This is why the definition of Sufism as the mystical dimension of Islam has to be qualified. A great Sheikh had and still has around him three concentric circles. First, there are those who are dedicated to the spiritual Path, to the exclusion of all other considerations. Secondly there are many who seek to follow the same Path but who, by inclination or necessity, give due weight to their worldly concerns. Finally there is the outer circle of ordinary people, going about their daily lives, who ask only to be attached, however loosely, to a man they admire and to an organisation which offers them shelter and support. The fact that there is no "Church" and no "priesthood" in Islam has been an added motive for this attachment. In times of trouble—civil war, conflict or oppression—Muslims have often turned in great numbers to their local *ṭarīqah* as a haven of security in the storm. It is said that, during the Soviet occupation, there were areas of the Caucasus in which almost half the population was attached to one brotherhood or another, and this was what kept the Faith of Islam alive despite merciless persecution and "anti-God" propaganda.

The early pietists (not yet called "Sufis") were dominated by a sense of their own unworthiness and by fear of the Day—that tremendous Day—when they would stand before their Lord, naked and alone, to be judged. This was the "dry" path to God, though moistened by the tears of repentance. It was a phase which could not be expected to last for very long since the divine

Mercy has precedence over the divine Wrath. With a growing awareness of Mercy came love; a fervent, self-transcending love. In no way was this a descent from severity to sentimentality; on the contrary, it might be described as a logical progression on the Path. Sufism aims to eliminate, so far as is humanly possible, every trace of obsessive self-concern. To be obsessed with the fear of hell is, in itself, a symptom of self-concern. Moreover, to ask oneself constantly, "Am I destined for the Garden or for the Fire?" is to demonstrate a lack of one of the most essential virtues: *tawakkul*, "trust in God". At the same time, a sense of our own unworthiness—though fully justified—may also involve, not only undue self-concern, but also a refusal to take seriously the Quranic command never to despair of the divine Mercy. As has been wisely said: "It does not matter what you are; all that matters is what God is." The common saying that "a cat may look at a king" is a useful reminder that our faults and our sins cannot prevent us from fixing our eyes upon that distant splendour unless we choose, deliberately, to look elsewhere.

Dhū ʿl-Nūn, who lived in the first half of the ninth century, is one of the earliest figures celebrated in Sufi writings, and a host of legends surround what little is known of his life. It is said that he was walking one day beside the Nile when he came upon a young slave girl in whom he recognised at once the marks of proximity to God. He asked her: "What is the end of love?" She answered: "Oh simpleton! Love has no end." He asked her why, and she replied: "Because the Beloved has no end." He himself is reported to have said: "Oh God, publicly I call you 'My Lord'; in solitude I call you 'My Beloved'."

Even earlier there lived a woman who has caught the attention of westerners interested in mysticism and in the Path of Love, Rābiʿah al-ʿAdawiyya. She had been born into slavery but had been released by her master when he realised that this was no ordinary girl over whom he had been given command. It is said that she walked one day through the city of Basra carrying, in one hand, a burning torch and, in the other, a pail of water. "I want," she said, "to throw fire into Paradise and pour

water into hell so that these two veils will disappear and it will become clear who worships God out of love, not out of fear of hell or hope for Paradise." She is said to have prayed: "My Lord, whatever share of this world you bestow upon me, bestow it upon your enemies, and whatever share of the next world you give me, give it to your friends. You alone suffice me." In the centuries that followed, the Sufi poets took up this theme, singing of a love that annihilated all thoughts of heaven and hell. Although vegetarianism is rare in Islam, it is said that Rābi^cah abstained from all animal products and that, in consequence, no animal fled from her. Men, on the other hand, seem to have been a trifle intimidated; she never married.

Not everyone, to say the very least, is a Rābi^cah or a Dhū-l-Nūn (a name which might be translated as "the Whale man"), and few are qualified to reach even the lower slopes of the peaks which they climbed. It should be quite unnecessary to say this, yet it needs to be said. People in the West often compare the religion of Islam unfavourably with Sufism, as though the two could be separated. To coin a phrase that has probably been coined often enough before: No *ṭarīqah* without *Sharī^cah*. Sufism is not a substitute for the religion of Law but its fulfilment, and, for love to cast out fear, it is obvious that fear must be there in the first place. There is a long, dark tunnel to be traversed before we can come out into the light and warmth of love, and this tunnel is made up of renunciation, self-discipline and obedience to God's decrees. For the ordinary believer to address the Lord of the Worlds as "Beloved" would be an absurd impertinence. So long as we care what happens to us, it would be equally absurd to pretend indifference as to whether we end up in Paradise or in the Fire. Those who read Sufi poetry—which is so often love poetry—see only the end of the Path and remain unaware of its flinty surface, the mountains climbed, the rivers crossed and, above all, the pitfalls along the way.

Because the word love is so often misused and trivialised, the Sufis have usually preferred the term "ardent longing". They have also spoken of "hunger", no doubt having themselves experienced the pangs of physical hunger as most of us in the

West have not. Speaking in the past tense—aware, like so many others, of decadence—Junayd (tenth century) said: “Hunger was what brought people to the Sufi Path, and that Path itself was neither more nor less than a struggle to return to one’s origin.” He whose struggle is accomplished has reached the state “in which he was before he was”. This is a reference to the primordial Covenant, before the creation of the heavens and the earth, when (according to the Quran) God brought out from the loins of Adam all his descendants until the end of time and asked them, “Am I not your Lord?”, to which they—we—answered with a resounding “Yes!” The offence of the unbeliever is, precisely, that he has broken the Covenant and perjured himself by denying that he ever acceded to it. This theme of return to the origin is not specific to Islam. The native Americans speak of the “salmon leap” which the human creature must make if he is to fulfil his destiny, and this is a striking image for anyone who has watched salmon fight their way upstream, against the current.

There is a story I read somewhere, years ago, which illustrates the urgency of “ardent longing”, as it does that of hunger and of all profound human needs. It is said that a certain Sheikh was walking by a canal with a young disciple who kept pestering him to be told when he could expect to “find God”. “What must I do, Master? Tell me at once!” In his eagerness he grew careless, stumbled and fell into the water. The Sheikh knelt down and held the youth’s head under water until he was more than half-drowned, then dragged him out and said: “When your need to find God is as powerful as was your need just now for a breath of air, then you will be on the way to what you seek.” At least in normal times—but not, perhaps, today—those whose desire was less compelling had no need to interest themselves in the Sufi Path or to harbour spiritual aspirations which were not only beyond their capacity but also exceeded their genuine needs.

The way of love, with its intimacy and its ecstasies, has an honourable place in Islam as it does in Christianity and in Hindu practice, but the way of knowledge—always combined

with love—may be more in accordance with the Islamic perspective, which emphasises clarity and understanding. God is named *al-Haqq*, “the Truth” or “the Real”, and wisdom is one of the principal goals of the Muslim’s life. The transformation of faith into knowledge and of belief into certainty is the supreme achievement. Faith is always vulnerable. Certain Knowledge is impregnable. When the Prophet said that whoever knows there is no divinity—no object of worship—other than God may be sure of Paradise, he warned his Companions “not to tell the people, lest they trust in this alone”. They would have thought that belief sufficed, whereas he had referred to knowledge beyond all possibility of doubt. It is a long journey from thinking there is a God to knowing that there is a God. Sufism has often been defined as *dhawq*, which means “taste”, providing the certainty which we associate with physical sensations. To apply such a term to the highest spiritual awareness might at first seem strange. Surely these are opposites? They cannot be so in the unitarian Islamic perspective.

It is through our physical senses that we gain knowledge of the world around us. Whether they convey pleasure or pain, their impact upon us has a quality of immediacy greater than that of thought or emotion. Our bodies are instruments of sensation and, therefore, of knowledge at a certain level. Since the spiritual realm—or realms—is more real than anything we encounter here, our perception of these greater realities must have an even greater immediacy. This is why it has been said that the purpose of Sufi meditation and contemplation is to make the abstract “concrete”; in other words, to go beyond thought and so achieve a perception as solid as our awareness of any object of taste or touch here on earth. When the Prophet exposed his upper body to the rain, this was to experience a manifestation of the divine Mercy on his skin, and there is in fact a strong tactile element in the Muslim’s religious experience.

Moreover, the greater realities which may seem so far distant are already here, present in what we taste and touch, as well as in what we see and hear. The poet ‘Irāqī wrote: “His

glory shines from every particle in the universe; only layer upon layer of presumption has come as a veil in between." Schuon has compared the wall which obstructs our contact with these greater realities as a wall of ice, and ice can be melted. It can be melted by fervent love, as it can by a knowledge which recognises it for what it is—a "presumption"—and so eliminates it. The Sufi Bāqī-Billāh said: "When you come to know that this is reality, you find that nearness and distance are a creation of your own imagination. There was no distance between you and God which required an effort to come close to Him." To make the abstract "concrete" is also to bring the distant near, except that there is nothing that needs to be done (save for the melting of the ice) since God has told us in the Quran that He is always with us, near to us—"nearer than the jugular vein"—and even nearer to the dying man than those who stand grouped around him, "though you see not".

The directly inspired sayings of the Prophet, together with the Quran, have been the foundation upon which the vast and often complex doctrine of the Sufis has been built. One of these sayings is the following: "My servant ceases not to draw near to Me through devotions of his free will until I love him; when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, and the sight with which he sees, and the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks." The human substance is then saturated with the divine Being. But this is the point at which I enter dangerous territory and must step carefully. *Faqr* is, as I said, the key to progress on the spiritual Path, which is why the traveller on this Path is called a *faqīr*. Its culmination is *fanā'* usually translated as "extinction". What is it that is extinguished? In theory selfhood, "I-ness", so that the empty space left by this extinction is filled by God Himself. Then the words spoken by the human tongue are spoken by God, which is why the Sufi Mansūr al-Hallāj exclaimed, "I am the Truth" or "I am the Real" (and was executed for doing so).

Eventually the Confession of Faith, *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*—"No divinity if not God"—comes full circle. From being a testimony to utter transcendence it has become a testimony also to total

immanence. It has always been extended to mean "No love if not the Love", "No power if not the Power" and so on; finally it is understood to mean "No 'I' if not the divine 'I'", no self if not the Self, and so—in the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī—"No existence if not His existence". There is now nothing in the whole of creation (or beyond creation) but the One without partner, without "other"; He is, as the Quran tells us, both "the Outward and the Inward", so where could we find anything but Him here, there or anywhere? The Prophet is reported to have said: "If you let a rope descend to the lowest depths of the earth, even there it will assuredly touch God." It is only a short step from this to say: If you let a rope descend to the deepest depth of yourself, there too it will touch God. This may be one of the meanings of another prophetic saying: "He who knows himself knows God." But to penetrate to the deepest point at which God—and God alone—is present requires the removal, the extinction, of everything else that we contain, including awareness of our isolated, individual selfhood.

Dangerous territory, as I said. Islam sets its face inexorably against any notion of union between God and the human soul. This is expressed in a saying universally accepted by the Sufis: *al-'abd yabka'l-'abd*, which means, "The servant remains the servant." The creature never becomes the Creator. Here and hereafter, it remains what it is. The greatest of Muslim metaphysicians, Ibn 'Arabī, although frequently accused of preaching a doctrine of union, said specifically that no such union is possible. What is possible is an inward sense of union, which wipes out everything but the awareness of God, beside whom there is nothing but nothingness. Rūmī, the greatest of the Sufi poets, offers us the image of a piece of iron, cast into the fire until it becomes so hot that it and the fire are one; yet the iron is still iron. This state is necessarily temporary, or else it exists in parallel with consciousness of what, in fact, we are: humble servants totally dependent upon our Lord. In any case, if the 'I' disappeared into its source, for ever extinguished, who would be left to experience union or to speak of it? "Each thing," said al-Ghazzalī, "has two faces: a face of its own and a face of its Lord.

In respect of its own face, it is nothing. In respect of the face of God, it is Being." This is another indication of the dual identity of the human creature, who is all and nothing.

There are today millions of Muslims who are attached to one Sufi order or another and who try, according to their capacity, to follow this Path. It would be absurd to suggest that any but a tiny minority venture onto the upper slopes. They try to scrub their hearts clean of debris and rubbish, they follow the Islamic *Shari'ah* as faithfully as they can, and they rejoice in the presence of a Sheikh who points the way to God. There are degrees in Sufism as there are in Islam as such. The Algerian Sheikh al-[°]Alawī, perhaps the greatest spiritual Master of the twentieth century, drew into his circle a great number of very simple people who were, so to speak, lifted out of their condition as by a miracle; pebbles transformed into jewels. One of his principal disciples (quoted by Martin Lings in his biography of the Sheikh) explained: "That the soul should be opened to the divine Light, even with so small an opening as to allow only a glimmer to pass through, was enough to satisfy the utmost aspirations and capabilities of the vast majority for the rest of their life on earth." But these, for the most part, were people still living a simple, traditional life. Their human substance was open to the influence of a great Sheikh and their hearts required little cleansing. Some seventy years later, there are not many people left of whom this can be said.

The necessity for a Sheikh—a true spiritual guide—particularly in the early stages of this journey is universally acknowledged. No inexperienced climber in his right senses would attempt to climb a high mountain without a guide, and it is said that, "He who has no Master has Satan for his Master." The ego is, as I suggested earlier, very powerful and very cunning. There is nothing it cannot turn to its own greedy purposes, given the chance, unless there is someone at hand not only to point the way but also to warn and prevent. It is not for the man or woman stumbling hopefully on this ascending path to assess their own spiritual progress. Although a lack of self-concern is an important aspect of Sufism, it is only too easy to imagine

that one has achieved this state of holy detachment when it has not been tested. The story is told of a man who took pride in the claim that he was indifferent to whether good or ill befell him. Pleasure and pain were equally welcome, since both came from his Lord. So God caused him to suffer an agonising “retention of urine”, whereupon he complained bitterly and, by complaining, finally acknowledged his human weakness and his unalterable state of dependence.

Just as there are false and presumptuous Sufis, so—inevitably—there are false and presumptuous Sheikhs. The lack of any structure of authority in Islam means that almost anyone can claim to be a Sheikh provided he can persuade enough people of his authenticity. Whereas the monastic orders in Catholicism are strictly controlled by the Vatican, there is no one to exercise this control over the Sufi orders. No one, that is, except the community as such and the learned men of the community. Hostility to Sufism among some elements in the community has existed since the fourteenth century and, although it has been based upon false premises, it may sometimes have exercised a restraining influences upon excesses from which the Sufis have not been immune. In itself, however, it has no effective arguments.

There have been and still are those who have claimed that Sufism is *bid'ah*, which means an innovation, and there could be no more serious accusation than this. The Prophet is reported to have said: “Every innovation is misguidance, and misguidance leads to perdition.” Given the Islamic perspective according to which humanity slips and slides downhill in the course of time, given also the repeated statements in the Quran that “there is no changing the words of God”, the Muslim is constantly on guard against any dilution of the original Message; any attempt to add to it or subtract from it. The notion, for example, of making it “relevant” to the modern age is seen—and rightly so—as a betrayal and as a fatal compromise with decadence. If people choose to go astray or do so because that is in the nature of our world, then there is all the more reason to maintain the integrity of the Faith, even if this involves “clinging to the root of a tree” when all else is being swept away.

So is Sufism an innovation? If this were so, then *fiqh*, the great body of Islamic Law, would also have to be dismissed as an innovation, as would the rich intellectual heritage of the Faith. There was, as I have said, nothing that bore the name "Sufism" in the time of the Prophet or of the first four Caliphs, but neither was there any formulation of the Law such as came about in the eighth century of the Christian era. As it happens the pious ascetic Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, regarded as the "patriarch of Islamic mysticism", was an older contemporary of Abū Ḥanīfa, the founder of the first of the "Schools of Law", which endure to this day. Early in this century there arose a movement called the *Salafīyyah*—the way of the "pious ancestors"—which took up this theme of innovation, although for quite different reasons. They claimed to hark back to original, unpolluted Islam, but, in practice, they were modernist reformers, and it is for this reason that their influence persists. The Sheikh al-ʿAlawī made no secret of his disdain for these people and liked to quote a Quranic verse which has a particular relevance today: "And when it is said to them, 'Do not cause corruption in the land!', they say: 'We are simply reformers'. No. Unknown to themselves, they are workers of corruption."

It was European orientalist who introduced another critique of Sufism. Unable to believe that the religion of Islam, for which they had little respect, might possess a spiritual tradition, they accused the Sufis of borrowing from Hinduism and even from Christianity many of their ideas and practices. They had no conception of the fact that different religions may have come to the same conclusions simply because these conclusions are true. Their successors have been more ready to acknowledge that Sufism has its roots in the Quran and in the sayings of the Prophet, but the accusation of "borrowing" had already been taken up by modernist Muslims and by others who see their Faith as a religion of Law and nothing else. The orientalist were also responsible for persuading many Muslim scholars that Ibn ʿArabī, called by some the *Sheikh al-akbar* (the greatest of all Masters) and regarded by others as a heretic, was a "pantheist". Pantheism is defined as a denial of the divine transcendence and no Sufi has ever denied this fundamental princi-

ple of the religion. Few critics of Ibn ʿArabī have read his works, but this is hardly surprising since the most important of these runs to some 17,000 pages. They seize, at second or third hand, upon statements taken out of context and anathematize them.

There is, none the less, one accusation brought against the Sufis which is sometimes justified. This is the imputation of what has been described as "Sheikholatry". There are and have been Sufis who have gone beyond the respect and obedience due to a spiritual Master and come perilously close to worshipping him. I suspect that an element of vanity is present in such cases. If a disciple says, "My Master is the greatest of all", then a hidden implication follows: "So I am a very important person!" As for the Sheikh who is the object of such blind devotion, he himself is exposed to grave spiritual peril unless firmly anchored in *faqr*. Islam forbids us to bow down before any man, however wise, and it counsels moderation in all things.

Today, however, the main attack on Sufism comes from the Islamists or "Fundamentalists", who see it as a path of quietism and inactivity which deprived the Muslims of their combative virility. Their ignorance of their own religion, for which they claim to do battle, is astonishing and their contempt for the traditional values of Islam is shameful. I have already mentioned the great mystic and warrior, the Emir ʿAbd al-Qadīr. There have been many others (including Shāmyl in the Caucasus) who provided leadership against foreign invasion when there was no other leadership among the Muslims. These Sufis have come to the fore, unwillingly but effectively, whenever the Faith was under threat. Moreover, an Islam from which the spiritual dimension has been detached is liable to degenerate into senseless violence and to lose contact with the virtues—not least the compassion—which are inherent in it. To return briefly to the case of Algeria in the 1990s, the most savage factions in the Islamic movement are amongst the fiercest opponents of Sufism. By transforming their religion into a modern political ideology, without depth and certainly without tenderness, they have in fact demonstrated their opposition to religion as such. They murder in the name of a shell.

Rather different, by all accounts, is the Hamas movement in

Palestine, although they too have been guilty of indiscriminate killing. I recently watched a television programme which showed members of the organisation marching through a town on the West Bank. They were shouting in unison a single word or name: "Qassām". Whether most of them were aware of it or not, they were paying tribute to a Sufi Sheikh. In the early 1930s Sheikh 'Izz al-Dīn al-Qassām of the Qādarī order—he was also an initiate of the Tijaniyyah—mounted a *jihād* both against the British occupation of Palestine and against Zionist colonisation. He understood, as many of his compatriots did not, the threat to his homeland, and he understood also the necessity for a religious revival, if this threat was to be repelled. Because he had a sense of priorities, he summoned his people to the "Greater Holy War"—which he described as "the war against the self"—in the midst of earthly combat. He was martyred by the British at the age of fifty-three in 1935.

This union between contemplation and action, between the spiritual and the practical, as also between the here and the hereafter, demonstrates the very essence of Islam. But I may have given the impression that the spiritual dimension of Islam is confined to the Sufi brotherhoods. If so, this is a false impression. Some years ago a young Egyptian woman came to see me and raised an important question. She was interested in Sufism, but she told me that the finest man she had ever known had been an uncle of hers who exemplified all that was best in the Faith of Islam. His perfect serenity had been accompanied by qualities of generosity and compassion which she had found in no one else. Yet he was not a Sufi. So what, she asked, could the Sufi Path offer that was not within the reach of every truly pious Muslim?

What it offers, in addition to the "chain of transmission" and the guidance of a wise Sheikh (if one can be found), is a method, a practical method by which the soul is opened to God, and His proximity is known rather than acknowledged as an article of the Faith. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Everything has a polish, and the polish for hearts is the remembrance of God. Nothing is more calculated to rescue from God's punishment than the remembrance of God." He was asked if this did

not apply also to *jihād*. He replied; "Not even if one should apply his sword until it is broken." And in the Quran we read: "Woe to those whose hearts are hardened against the remembrance of God. These are in plain error." In the next verse, there is a reference to the rightly guided "whose skins and whose hearts soften at the remembrance of God."

How is this "remembrance" to be made effective? It is certainly better to think of God often than seldom or never to think of Him, but thought as such does little to soften skins or hearts. The Sufis, as soon as they were organised into brotherhoods under the guidance of competent Sheikhs, developed a method—or different but similar methods—of remembrance, and this is why the term *dhikr* itself is always associated with their practices. In this context it is best translated as "invocation". The Sufi method of increasing and intensifying "God-consciousness" consists in the repetitive invocation, aloud or inwardly, either of a revealed formula such as the Confession of Faith or else in the repetition of the supreme and all-inclusive divine Name, Allah. This may be accompanied by meditation upon the multi-faceted significance of the Name, and there is no end to the exploration of its meaning. There are other practices which assist in opening the Heart to grace: repeated pleas for forgiveness, litanies in praise of the Prophet, rhythmic movements of the body accompanied by drumming, as well as retreats during which there is nothing to disturb the silent invocation or divert attention from it. But the act of remembrance, made actual and effective, is the key which a Sheikh places in the hands of his disciples.

Arguments regarding the legitimacy of Sufism are ultimately of little importance. Its influence upon the very shape and nature of Islam over the past twelve centuries has been so pervasive that even those who oppose it cannot escape its influence. It is in the air they breathe as believing Muslims, and to tear it from the body of the Faith is impossible. For the Sufis themselves—invoking the Name of their Lord day and night—it is the fulfilment of what the Quran commands and what the Prophet counselled. It is both the way and the refuge of those who remember God.

14

Finally

Truly to God we belong, and truly to Him we return.
(Quran 2:156)

*Lead us on the Straight Path, the Path
of those you have favoured; not of those upon whom
is wrath, nor of those who wander astray.*
(Quran 1:5-7)

So much depends upon where you are standing. The view from here is quite different to the view from there, as is the visibility. This is one good reason why people fight and argue, each of them seeing quite clearly what they see and enraged by the blindness of those who claim to see something else. There must, they think, be but one truth, and so there is, but to see it they would need to stand where God stands or so close to Him that He has said (in the words of the famous *hadīth*): “I am the hearing with which he hears, and the sight with which he sees . . .” And then they would be neither here nor there. Meanwhile, we face the relative, not the Absolute, and we deal in approximations.

Those who try to communicate ideas which are not everyday currency are sometimes obliged to say: don't always take me literally, but open your imagination to possibilities which you may not, until now, have considered. Nothing is quite what it seems,

and—unless we are gifted with direct vision—only the imagination can explore what lies behind appearance. “If is not so, is nearly so!” I spent many years in Jamaica and treasured, a few common Jamaican sayings. I remember another one which can be applied both to non-Muslims who pass ill-informed opinions on the religion of Islam and to certain Muslims who think that their own narrow opinion is the only truth. It is this: “Him is so ignorant that him don’t even know him don’t know.” In Islam, ignorance—when knowledge is available—counts as a sin.

The truths of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet invite us to exploration and adventure. They are fruitful, not sterile. If there is one good thing about the shattering of Muslim patterns of thought in the modern age it is that, over recent centuries, the believers have tended to rest on these truths and what is offered in these sayings without using their God-given faculties to deepen their understanding. More recently many have turned their backs upon the fruits of this tree, the tree rooted in Quran and *hadīth*, not least upon the sweet fruits of Sufism. There is need for a return, not only to the source—the root—but also to the wisdom of those who, in the past drank deeply at that source. Exploration must always start from a firm base. The base cannot be ignorance. Muslims are commanded to acquire knowledge, neglecting no opportunity to do so—“Seek knowledge, even in China,” said the Prophet—and this command is second only to the command to worship, to glorify and to remember.

I have been accused before, and am likely to be accused again, of painting an idealised picture of Islam which bears little resemblance to the “reality” encountered by westerners who have worked for a time in the Arab world. What some at least claim to have seen, from their privileged bunkers, is corruption, hypocrisy and cruelty. Others, whose knowledge of Muslims is derived only from the media will point to the excesses of the Islamists or to the oppression and corruption prevalent in a number of Muslim countries. “How,” they ask, “can you reconcile such things with what you claim is a religion of mercy and tolerance?” I see what they see, and the sight is more painful

and far more enraging to me than it is to them. But what has this to do with the Islam of the Quran, exemplified in the life of the Prophet? It is—if I may be allowed to use such an archaic expression—the work of the devil. Moreover, contract workers in the Middle East seldom meet the pious Muslims who redeem the *ummah* of Islam; men and women, saddened by what they see around them, fearing God in all that they do, but with no illusions about human nature or about the nature of this world, this short-lived *dunyā*. It must be remembered that most westerners today are by inclination utopians and, of course, progressives. Muslims are realists.

On the other hand I recall a remark made to me by a Saudi Arab who had just read my book, *Islam and the Destiny of Man*. “This,” he said, “is very different from the Islam I learned from my parents.” He paused for a moment before adding: “I like it much better!” No doubt what his parents had offered him were the bare bones of the religion. I had tried to clothes these bones in living flesh. If this Arab’s reaction had been exceptional, I would have been pleased but unworried. What does worry me is the number of young Muslims born in the West of immigrant parents who have said much the same. Why should I worry? One of the most sinister features of modern life is that people feel free to write whatever they choose, to paint whatever they choose and to present on television violent or corrupt—and therefore corrupting—material. Those who do so seem quite unaware of the terrible responsibility which weighs on all who make their beliefs or opinions public or expose the darkest aspects of their nature. We affect human lives, sometimes in a profound and decisive way, and Islamic doctrine tells us that we must answer for this. Although no one can bear another’s burden, we are at least partly responsible for what is done by those we have influenced, whether for good or ill.

So I come to the key questions: what will be the shape of the Faith and practice of Islam in the West when, after a few decades, it has assumed a specific character and colouring? Secondly, what will be the role of these “fish out of water”, these Muslim communities in Western Europe and the United

States? The reaction of many Muslims to the first question may be a sense of shock at the notion that Islam can assume different "shapes". Of course it can. The religion is sufficiently universal and sufficiently malleable to flow into different moulds in accordance with the different mentalities found amongst human communities. It has done so often enough in the past. The "feel", the colouring, of Islam in, say, Morocco, the Arabian peninsula and Indonesia is perceptively different without there being any alteration in the basic principles of the Faith.

The distinction between the spirit and the letter of a given religion is unmistakable. A majority of Arabs and arabised Muslims have tended to be almost exclusively concerned with the letter: the Law and outward forms. This, as I said earlier, has served to preserve the Faith and to provide a framework which, until modern times, protected the *ummah* of Islam against the forces of destruction over many centuries. Outward forms are indispensable, and their erosion can be fatal to the integrity of the Faith. But these forms themselves are in grave peril if they are unenlightened by the spirit; they become desiccated and brittle. Their usefulness terminates in a particular kind of decadence. Ideas of good and evil are then defined only in term of a set of rules, and the intuitive sense of what is or is not in accordance with the spirit of the religion becomes atrophied.

The western mindset and the western temperament in this "post-Christian" age incline to the opposite extreme. The spirit is what matters. Forms and, in particular, rituals are irrelevant. "What you have in your heart" is the only true guide. This is pure subjectivism and ignores the fact that the heart is easily corrupted, whereas the whole point of forms and rituals is that they are objective. They are unaffected by private inclinations. You step into them, and whether you like them or not is relatively unimportant. They are given—given, in fact, by the tradition—and are therefore seen nowadays as imposed from without. Yet the spirit, however enlightening and however intoxicating it may be, remains disembodied, inactive if it has no ready-built home in this world. It comes and goes, it hovers

over us and is blown away by the first high wind. It no longer keeps company with us when we have our backs to the wall. While an imposed framework in social life is accepted almost without question, sincerity and spontaneity are the order of the day in religion, and "feelings" are more important than dogma. I need hardly add that such feelings are seen by Muslims as neither more nor less than "caprice".

In principle a balance between the spirit of the religion—any traditional religion—and the letter, must be established, however difficult this may be; and it is very difficult for most people. Extreme positions always offer a certain comfort. You can take your rest at the extreme. Tension and effort are involved in maintaining a balance, together with skill and judgement. Those who watch ballet with enjoyment may think, if they know little about the technique of the dance, that it looks easy. They do not know that the dancers sometimes have blood in their shoes. A dancer achieves balance through training and discipline, but also through the conscious cultivation of a talent that is innate. Contrary forces must be kept in perfect equilibrium. The Buddhists speak of "the marriage between wisdom and method" and this too is a matter of balance and complementarism. Wisdom is the spirit, method is the form, and there is indeed a marriage. The form, the letter, is penetrated by the spirit in an act of intercourse.

Young Muslims living now in America or Western Europe—the sons and daughters of immigrants—face a very particular challenge. These young people, together with the converts to Islam, are situated on the interface between two almost irreconcilable perspectives, but so, to a lesser extent, are all Muslims, since they live in a westernised world even if their homes are within the borders of the "House of Islam". It seems to me that, in the coming century, the *ummah* as a whole will be obliged to look to those of their co-religionists who actually live in the West to guide them in dealing with their own situation. These are the men and women who will have to determine how to hold the necessary balance and how to shape the religion in a way that will preserve its integrity while making unavoid-

able compromises. They will almost certainly be more adventurous, more enquiring and less hidebound than the earlier generation.

The question as to when—and when not to—compromise with the overwhelming psychological and cultural impact of modern civilization is crucial. It can only be answered by those whose priorities are sound and who know how to distinguish between the essential and the peripheral.

Not long ago I gave a talk to an Islamic Society in a British university. Afterwards, a young man came to me and said, very politely: "I cannot agree that we have to make any compromises with this infidel society—even in outward things!" I looked at him. He was wearing jeans and a "biker's" leather jacket. Taking him by the sleeve, I asked him: "What is this?" Embarrassed, he murmured something about the cold climate, ignoring the fact that Muslims living in much colder climates are still happy to wear traditional dress.

This might seem a small matter, but the clothing we choose to wear is a badge of identity, an assertion of identity. Any style-conscious westerner will be happy to draw attention to his or her costume and say: "This is me!" This costume is both culturally and psychologically significant. Traditional dress varies from one part of the Muslim world to another, but its abandonment in favour of western dress is at least a partial renunciation of Islam. There is a great deal of fuss and argument as to how Muslim women should dress, but men feel free to ignore the advice and example of the Prophet. The detached observer in a western city will often witness a spectacle which appears to him ridiculous. A scruffily dressed man, bare-headed and tight-trouserred, is followed down the street by a woman wearing a head scarf and long skirt or perhaps clothed from head to ankles in a black shroud. He can see at once that the woman is a Muslim, but he has no way of knowing what the man is. Could he be a Muslim? It seems unlikely. This individual has done nothing to veil the outlines of his body or to cover his head with a turban (as recommended by the Prophet) or at least a scarf. There is an old English proverb which seems particularly apt in

this context: "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander." There are dress codes for Muslim women. There are rules also for Muslim men. In both cases there can be many variations, but the basic principle is composed of dignity, modesty and discretion. Contemporary western dress, indicative of the way men and women see themselves in the present age, is neither dignified, modest nor discreet. It is, however, perfectly fitting for a "naked ape".

In practice everyone, even the most fanatical Islamist, makes compromises if only to survive. The Muslim who drives a car, travels in an aircraft, uses a computer or watches television has compromised. No one blames him for doing so. But we cannot escape the fact that these things, on account of the ideology which made their development possible, carry with them not only cultural residues, but also spiritual implications. That is why a sense of priorities is so important, and this can only be developed through a profound awareness of the spiritual dimensions of the Faith. It is no longer enough to know the rules. We have to understand what lies behind the rules.

There is, of course, fertile ground here for disagreement and dispute. It is often asked why Muslims quarrel so readily among themselves on points of Doctrine or Law, each side convinced that its own perspective is the only truth and ready, far too often, to hurl accusations of *kufir*—unbelief—at their opponents. In doing so they take appalling risks. We are told that, if we accuse someone who is at heart a Muslim of *kufir*, then we ourselves will be judged by God as though we were unbelievers. These zealots are, in principle, candidates for the Fire. Whatever he may suspect, the sensible man does not imperil his own salvation in this way, aware, as he must be, that God alone knows the secrets of hearts. One of the Companions of the Prophet, when the enemy he had subdued in battle cried out *Lā ilāha illā Llāh* at the very last moment, drove his sword home none the less, assuming that the man was insincere. The Prophet reproached him, asking sarcastically: "So did you cut his heart open to see if he was speaking the truth?"

Why, then, are so many of my fellow Muslims prepared to

risk all in their stubborn self-righteousness? As usual, I have a theory. I call it the theory of "leakage". Islam is based upon a few unshakeable certainties: the Oneness of God, who is without partner or associate; the purity of the Quran as undiluted divine Revelation, and the role of Muhammad as the final Prophet and Messenger of God. Accustomed to being certain of these propositions, too many Muslims attribute the same degree of certainty to their own opinions. In this way certainty leaks into the realm of subjective judgement. They fracture the unity of the Community and bring disgrace upon their fellows, firmly convinced that they are doing God's work. But this is a familiar pattern. In the past many early Christians were equally stiff-necked. As I said earlier, the path of religion is full of temptations, littered with pitfalls.

There is, however, one fact upon which all can agree. The gulf between the contemporary western way of life and the way in which Muslims believe we should conduct our lives is wide and not easily bridged. A time may come when the gulf can no longer be crossed, a time when the West's rejection of tradition and its indifference to religious forms has progressed so far that the true Muslim has no choice but to say: "So far and no further!" He can still enter into dialogue with believers in other Faiths and with sincere seekers after God, but when there is no longer any common language—the language of religion—in which to talk, then he will fall silent and withdraw into the citadel of *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*. He may, however, find himself in a minority. It seems likely that the majority of his companions will be carried away by the tide, outwardly resistant but, in Burckhart's words, inwardly conquered. The "sting of an almost insuperable contradiction" will, in that case, have become a mortal wound.

Most educated Muslims accept, usually without reflection, the western notion of progress. Sooner or later they are likely to be tempted to follow the Christian precedent. On the assumption that we are wiser and more humane than our forefathers, they may see a need to bring their religion up-to-date, a need to make it "relevant". This is logical once the idea that humanity

has progressed since the time of the Prophet is accepted. I mentioned earlier the *ḥadīth* according to which a time will come when most of the believers will follow the unbelievers and the misguided even "if they go down into the hole of a poisonous reptile", and the Prophet is also reported to have said: "Islam began as a small religion and will return [as the end of time approaches] to the state in which it began. Then blessed will be the few who hold to it." The modern age detests what it calls "élitism", but excellence (as the word itself suggests) has always been the prerogative of "the few", and human life itself is a winnowing process. Quality, not quantity, takes precedence. What has been lost in the modern age is the readiness of the majority to look up to an elite and try, according to their capacities, to rise from mediocrity to something better. But, of course, since "a fish rots from the head down", it is the decadence of western élites, both aristocratic and intellectual, that has resulted in this loss.

There are, I think, signs which suggest that the dominant culture is moving steadily further away from anything that can be reconciled with traditional religion and therefore with Islam. In every age there comes a defining moment, seldom identified at the time but clearly identified by historians. It is possible that just such a moment occurred in Britain in September 1997, following the death of the Princess of Wales. Britain holds a significant position in the modern world because it is part of Europe and yet closely linked, culturally and historically, with the United States; it therefore offers a mirror to the contemporary western, secular mindset. Popular reaction to this sudden death exposed the true character of secularism, naked and unashamed. This reaction was echoed in North America and, in some extent, in continental Europe. It was immensely significant and will, no doubt, be the subject of analysis for many years to come, but already the salient features may be discerned.

Superficially, there was a tremendous outpouring of love and grief, focused upon an image created by the media. The troubled young woman who had done incalculable damage to

the British monarchy, and who had been devoured by the need to be loved, disappeared behind the image. In fact, there was a great deal of anger, resentment and confusion underlying a display of passionate emotion and, behind the display, it was possible to detect an emptiness crying out to be filled. The need to worship and adore—a very human need—had seized, not upon something above us, a vision of perfection or a noble ideal, but upon the all-too-human; an icon composed of just those weaknesses which afflict so many people in the present age. Educated Muslims living in Britain were appalled. They had thought they were beginning to understand the people amongst whom they were living. Now they realised that they had been mistaken. They felt like aliens with no clue to the feelings of the host community. But it was not only Muslims who had a sense of alienation. There were many ordinary people in Britain who believed they had caught a whiff of totalitarianism in the air and were very frightened by it. The British people, at least according to the media, insisted that everyone should weep for a woman most had never met. The Queen herself was dragged from her refuge and compelled to demonstrate that she shared in this grief. Neither dissent nor indifference could be tolerated.

Amidst the flood of verbiage in the press, a few phrases revealed the significance of this event. A Sunday newspaper carried a banner headline: "The Nation Unites Against Tradition." Setting aside the fact that the nation was far from united, though dissenters were silenced, this makes a point. Britain, in common with other colonial powers, had destroyed the traditions—"the cups from which they drank their life"—of so many conquered peoples, particularly in Africa, leaving chaos in their wake. Now this destructive impulse was turning inwards upon its perpetrators. If this newspaper was to be believed, the last threads of continuity with the past were about to be severed and a brave new nation, a disinherited nation, was in the process of being born. The lay-lines, the well-trodden but invisible tracks by which we find our way across the earth, were due to be erased. There was a dim echo here of China's Cultural Revolution (and of Pol Pot's murderous regime): "Old

is bad. New is good." In the present case, the choice was between being "modern" and being "out of date", a choice which must be made again and again if modernism is preferred. What is modern today is out of date tomorrow, and the race to keep up only serves to increase the speed of Thibon's express train hurtling towards the buffers or the abyss.

No less significant was a single sentence in a sickening eulogy of the Princess. "She was more than a saint, she was human." So the very idea of sanctity must go or has already gone, which means, in effect, that the vertical dimension is finally being absorbed into the horizontal. Islam answers this with the answer it provides to every problem when all else fails: *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*. The false divinity—the *ilāh*—is now Humanity or, as Christians must see it, fallen man (with fallen woman at his side). If we speak of the human in Islamic terms, this can only refer to the norm, exemplified by the Prophet and expressed in the concept of *fiṭrah*, the state of perfection in which the creature was made and shaped and given the breath of life.

In this context one can only marvel at a comment heard on the radio. The Princess, said the speaker, was "so perfect because she was so flawed". And there we have it. Language has been turned upside down, or rather downside up ("The bottom is labelled top"). Perfection, if it means anything, is complete freedom from flaws of every kind. It is equivalent to holiness. The implication—a sinister implication, as I see it—was that we are all perfect precisely because we are none of us perfect, all flawed, all stained. There is no need for repentance and so there can be no hope of forgiveness, no redemption either. "Man is the measure of all things", therefore everything is to be measured in relation to "fallen" man and tarred with the same brush. Islam can have no truck with this. God is the measure of all things. Man is worthless except as the servant of God. On that there can be no compromise. The Muslim is at his best and most truly human in the two prostrations which are made in every unit of the canonical prayer. His proud head is humbled before the splendour of the Real. The Christian faces his Lord

on his knees, a poor sinner who still hopes to be saved.

Here again, throughout the British media, we have that curious by-product of egalitarianism, the glorification of "ordinariness". Islam is commonly described as an egalitarian religion because it sets no store by social rank or racial origin, but it sets great store by human quality and Muslims are quick to recognise differences in human quality. The concluding sentence of a letter concerning theological disputes in the Church of England, published recently in "The Times", illustrates precisely what I mean: "Let us have less of Jesus the Messiah and more of Jesus the ordinary man." It is even possible that the writer considered himself a "Christian". For a Muslim to describe a messenger of God as "ordinary" would be unthinkable. Such men are, by definition, extraordinary. They are rare beacons of excellence.

I have dealt at some length with this curious incident, the death of a very "modern" woman—"one of us", so people said—because it exemplifies the triumph of the horizontal over the vertical. Adoration of this "secular saint" (sanctified by popular acclamation), if not in itself a cult, has the flavour of cultism. There has been much debate as to whether there is a religious revival in the West. What we are witnessing today is, I think, an intensification of spiritual hunger, and that is not quite the same thing. This hunger is ambiguous. It brings some people to authentic religion, but it exposes others to great dangers and leads sometimes to the belief that a house can be built without foundations. There is no shortage of charlatans quick to offer immediate satisfaction at no real cost to the greedy ego. They may demand worship from their followers, but they do not demand worship of the Transcendent (which dwarfs the ego), indeed they deny the very concept of transcendence. These pseudo-religions operate only on the horizontal, that is to say the realm of the senses, the psyche and the emotions. In some cases science-fiction provides a weird doctrinal background; heaven, for example, is in a distant star system. In others, we find borrowings from Hindu Vedanta or from Sufism.

A revealed religion has a spiritual reality at its core, but it

caters for human needs. This "rope of God" is made up of many strands, closely inter-woven. These include certain basic principles, certain dogmas, rituals, symbols and myths. There are also stories—decorated, embroidered—of noble, heroic or saintly individuals, together with a voluminous record of reflections, insights and apologetics, which are part of every believer's heritage. Even if it were possible to separate these threads, cherishing some and rejecting others, this could only result in an impoverishment of the Faith. It is the whole—the "package"—that is an effective channel of communication with heaven. We tamper with it at our peril.

There can be no objection to the adherents of a traditional religion seeking confirmation and discovering useful insights in other Faiths and, as it were, translating these truths into their own language. It might be said that the Islamic ideal is a combination of wisdom and virtue. According to the Quran: "He gives wisdom unto whom He will, and he unto whom wisdom is given has indeed received abundant good." The Prophet said that all wisdom is "the believer's lost camel", and when he told his people to seek knowledge—spiritual knowledge—"even in China", he clearly meant anywhere in the world. But such discoveries must be compatible with the belief system into which they are integrated. Cults which claim some kind of traditional authenticity are usually anti-traditional in character. They lap up the cream but discard the milk. Those which borrow from Sufism have no use for its bedrock, the religion of Islam. Others, drawing upon the doctrines of Hindu Vedanta, give no thought to the austerities and self-abnegation demanded of the Hindu, if he seeks liberation from the bonds of time and mortality. Separated from the matrix in which they belong, these borrowings have no power to enlighten or to save.

The rejection both of transcendence and of religion as such goes with the glorification of the human ego. That is the hidden agenda of all these cults, and it is this that most clearly distinguishes them from every authentic Faith. "New Age" religion in its various aspects abhors the very idea of submission to that which is high exalted above our human littleness. Humility is

condemned as a “lack of self-esteem”, and its adherents speak in terms of self-development, the realisation of our potential—though never our potential to rise above ourselves,—and they speak in terms of “empowerment”. To this the simple answer is provided by a favourite saying of the Prophet, repeated by almost every Muslim in moments of weakness or failure: “No strength and no power except with God.” For Islam the only true glory within our reach is *faqr*, poverty; the acknowledgement of our weakness and dependence, and submission to the Real. In ourselves we are nothing, as al-Ghazzali said, but in submission we are the Viceregents of God on earth. Whoever heard of a Viceregent who was his own Master?

In all this it may be that I have paid too much attention to the majority (or at least to those whose voices are most often heard), overlooking the Quranic warning that “if you follow the majority they will lead you astray”. Whenever public opinion, as expressed in the media, swings in one direction, there always remains a substantial minority who hold firm. It was no coincidence that Mother Teresa died at almost the same time as the Princess. Here was a Christian woman who followed the Way of the Cross, deaf to the siren voices of her time and not in the least up-to-date. Her good works earned her popular acclaim, but her beliefs were anathema to the modernists. For the Princess, as for most of her contemporaries, human suffering was an intolerable affront, without any positive feature. For Teresa, as for any traditional Christian, it was the road to redemption. She loved the poor, not because they were “human” as the term is usually understood, but because they were creatures “made in the image of God”. Suffering, if it occurred in the presence of selfless love, was comparable to the work of a sculptor who chips away surplus stone to reveal the image. This Christian belief, shared to a large extent by Muslims, makes no sense to the majority of people today for whom suffering would not—or should not—exist in their fantasy of Utopia.

No one is helped, least of all the hungry multitudes (hungry for certainty and a clear direction), when the spokesmen for a traditional religion try too hard to fall in with the passing fash-

ions—both doctrinal and moral—of a particular age. They have a secure citadel which was not fashioned by human hands. It is their duty to keep the doors open and welcome those who choose to enter. It is not for the guardian to go out into the badlands, hoping that the people there will cry: “You are one of us!” In the present age religion exists as an alternative, which is precisely what many are seeking. Islam itself was just such an alternative in the pagan milieu of seventh-century Arabia. That, perhaps, is what it is today.

So, if the two paths, the traditional and the modern, draw ever further apart, “the few” among the Muslims, among the Christians and among the Jews—three strands in the “rope of God”—have every reason to recognise what they have in common and to secure their respective citadels, open to all comers but fortified against the enemy. As the Quran tells us, had God wished to unite humanity and allow no space in which the wanderers could wander astray, he would have done so. As it is, since “there is no compulsion in religion”, the Muslim invites to the “straight path” and leaves the rest in other hands. The invitation is to fear God, to love Him and to remember Him. It is a timeless invitation, unaffected by the passage of the centuries, looking only towards the end.

Written by the best-selling author of *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, *Remembering God: Reflections on Islam* is a profound and timely work that addresses the most urgent concerns and questions facing us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Contrasting modern, secular society with religion in general and with Islam in particular, Gai Eaton clarifies the human need for spirituality, religion and values based on eternal principles. The ideas behind *Remembering God* are that religion is not an isolated part of human life which can be disregarded at will and without consequences; that total rejection of the past cannot be the basis for the future and that a truth with Heaven modifies all the decisions and actions of society. The continuing harmony of the religious perspective contrasted with the dislocation and alienation of modern society is the theme that runs throughout the book. Touching on religion in principle: metaphysics, knowledge of the divine and of oneself; supplication, the necessity for purifying the ego; and on the application of religion to society: politics, architecture, the environment and gender relations. Charles Le Gai Eaton illustrates the subtle harmony of a religious perspective and its ability to transform both the individual and society.

"This book possesses a profound message for both Westerners who are in quest of authentic knowledge of Islam . . . and for Muslims who are caught in the labyrinth of modern ideas and trends." from the Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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Charles Le Gai Eaton was born in Switzerland and educated at Charterhouse and King's College, Cambridge. He worked for many years as a teacher and journalist in Jamaica and Egypt (where he embraced Islam in 1951) before joining the British Diplomatic Service. He is now consultant to the Islamic Cultural Centre in London.

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