



**Reflections of a Sufi**

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### Preface

The fifty-three chapters (not counting appendices) that make up the main body of this book encompass lectures, articles, and letters/e-mails written over a period of about eleven years (from about 1998 through 2009). The material covers a variety of thematic topics both within Islam, in general, as well as in relation to its mystical dimension of tasawwuf – known in the West as ‘the Sufi path’ or ‘sufism’ – in particular.

As is the case with most of my other written efforts, the present book does not have to be read in any particular order. The reader can navigate around the chapters as she or he pleases without losing much, if anything, in the way of comprehension since, for the most part, none of the chapters presuppose any of the other chapters ... with, perhaps, the exception of the two articles near the end of the book dealing with ‘idols’ in which the second of the two chapters does, to a degree, presuppose the first of the two entries concerning idols.

The chapters are intended to be complementary to one another. Furthermore, the appendices provide additional information that do not neatly fit into a chapter format but that also are intended to offer material that is complementary to the previous fifty-three chapters.

Almost all of the chapters and appendices in the book are pretty straightforward and accessible to the general reader, whether Muslim or non-Muslim (or Sufi or non-Sufi). There are, however, a few chapters (for example, the chapter entitled ‘Wahdat-i-Wujud and Wahdat-i-Shuhud’) that explore advanced topics, but even these chapters are capable of being understood with a little effort.

Taken collectively, I believe the chapters and appendices provide a very good introduction to both the Sufi path and Islam. More importantly, since many of the chapters entail responses to queries from people in different parts of the world, I believe there is a dynamic quality to much of the material that is directed toward thinking about some of the problems of everyday life.



### The Sufi Path – A Brief Introduction

The Sufi path is, in a sense, an apprenticeship process. In such a program, an individual associates with a spiritual elder or master -- that is, someone who has gained mastery over herself or himself.

Although in the beginning this association might take place in the context of physical proximity, this association is, in essence, a function of the spiritual relationship between a teacher and student. Consequently, once the proper seeds have been sown and begun to take root, the association can carry on quite well even if considerable physical distances might separate the two people.

The purpose of the aforementioned association is to provide the individual with an opportunity to realize varying degrees of spiritual potential that are inherent in the nature of the human being. The degree of this potential that might be realized depends, in part, on the character of the commitment and spiritual capacity of the individual who is seeking realization.

Ultimately, of course, capacity and struggles notwithstanding, the extent of spiritual realization depends on the grace of God. In fact, an individual's spiritual capacity as well as one's willingness and strength to struggle in the way of God are both, themselves, manifestation of God's blessings.

One of the most fundamental dimensions of the previously noted issue of the apprenticeship process revolves around the authenticity of the spiritual elder who is to oversee the individual's journey on the Sufi path of Self-realization. The legitimacy of a given teacher or elder is underwritten by a chain of proven and accepted (by God) masters, each of whom has been entrusted by his or her own guide, to assume the responsibility of transmitting, if God wishes, the methods, insights, wisdom and understanding of the mystical sciences that constitute the Sufi path.

However, none of these spiritual teachings can take root essentially and then, God willing, bear fruit, unless the teacher has the God-given capacity to help establish and engender the quality of nisbath in the person seeking realization. Nisbath is the medium, so to speak, through which spiritual nourishment is transmitted to, and received by, a seeker on the mystical path.

An individual may have considerable knowledge of the Sufi path, and this person may even have acquired, through various means, certain

extraordinary spiritual gifts of one description or another, but if this individual does not have, by the grace of God, the capacity to help engender and nurture nisbath within the seeker, then such a person cannot serve as a viable spiritual guide. Nisbath is the umbilical cord of the Sufi path.

Alternatively, if the seeker does not permit herself or himself to grasp hold of, and be opened up to, the spiritual possibilities entailed by the nisbath being offered through a teacher, then no amount of spiritual practices will effect much transformation in such a would-be wayfarer of the mystical path. Many people make the mistake of assuming that the Sufi journey is merely a matter of the acquisition of the requisite kinds of technique and method, when, in reality, technique and method are relatively useless without a healthy nisbath linking spiritual elder and seeker.

Like any other contract, the relationship between student and teacher is organized by the conditions of offer, acceptance and consideration that give expression to the etiquette and nature of the Sufi path. Unless the conditions of the contract are honored, then, in point of fact, the contract becomes null and void.

God willing, an authentic spiritual guide always will fulfill the terms and conditions of the contract of nisbath. Unfortunately, this often is not so when considered from the seeker's side of fulfilling the duties and obligations that are entailed by the spiritual contract binding teacher and student on the path of Self-realization.

Sufi mystical sciences are intended to help the individual seeker to realize her or his true identity and essential capacity. These sciences involve, among other things, providing a means of gaining insight into the quality of one's true Self as a manifestation of Divine attributes.

Furthermore, Sufi mystical sciences offer the individual an opportunity, God willing, to activate one's unique, essential capacity to know, love, cherish, serve and worship Divinity. Moreover, when this capacity is fully realized, one can fulfill one's responsibilities properly with respect to being a caretaker of, and source of mercy for, all of creation.

All aspects of the Sufi mystical path give expression to an infinite, unconditional and sustaining love. This love is an essential binding and

transformational force that colors, shapes and orients all the various facets of Sufi methodology.

Without this love, there is no mysticism, irrespective of whatever rituals, practices or appearances may remain. The Sufi mystical sciences constitute the enduring passion play in which human beings both seek, and are sought by, their Creator through the currents and eddies of an ocean of Divine manifestation.

The presence of this unconditional love that is manifested through the spiritual guide should not be assumed to be a sign of license being extended to the seeker in which anything is permitted. Moreover, such unconditional love does not mean that love can be morphed into anything one cares to offer.

Unconditional love is a Divine gift that establishes a constructive framework of compassion, trust, acceptance, tolerance, wisdom, forgiveness, and encouragement that helps enable the seeker to struggle with the mistakes and problems that are inevitable parts of an individual's journey along the Sufi path. Unconditional love provides the degrees of freedom necessary to provide the individual with the sort of working environment through which one has an opportunity, God willing, to overcome, and transform, those facets of human nature that are inclined to error, distortion and rebellion concerning the truths being manifested by means of, and that stands behind, human existence.



Mystical Science

At various junctures throughout this book, the terms mystical or Sufi "sciences" are used. This is not a loose or empty usage of the idea of science.

Sufi sciences give expression to the following principles:

(a) Science, of whatever kind -- mystical or otherwise -- is rooted in empirical experience. However, one of the primary differences between physical sciences and mystical sciences is that the latter explores, in a rigorous fashion, experiences that come from sources beyond the usual biological modalities of hearing, seeing, smelling, touching and tasting.

(b) The use of instruments plays an important role in the process of science. In the physical sciences instruments (such as microscopes, telescopes, particle accelerators, oscilloscopes, gas chromatography, seismographs, and so on) extend the range of sensory experiences to which we have access.

In Sufi sciences, human beings have a variety of internal instruments (e.g., mind, heart, sirr, spirit, kafi and aqfa) that allow the individual, God willing, to gain access to realms of reality beyond the purely sensory. These internal instruments, however, as is the case with all instrumentation, must be properly calibrated before they can give reliable results. The calibration process is done under the guidance of the spiritual teacher.

(c) All forms of science depend on a recursive methodology to help explorers achieve, hopefully, closer and closer approximations to the structural character or nature of various aspects of the phenomena being studied. A recursive methodology is merely a series of steps that is repeated again and again such that the results of one cycle of steps is fed back into -- and, therefore, shapes, colors and orients -- the next cycle of experimental steps. The intention underlying this recursive aspect of the scientific process is for the sequence of cycles to progressively converge toward uncovering deeper and deeper dimensions of the truth of things.

In Sufi sciences this process of recursive methodology also plays a fundamental role. The seeker, under the guidance of the spiritual

elder, repeats a cycle of methodological steps that are adjusted in the light of the results obtained from previous applications of those steps. Such recursion or repetition, with certain variations, leads the seeker, if God wishes, to deeper, richer and more refined 'openings' to the truth of different dimensions of existence.

(d) There are some aspects of physical sciences that make use of "unobtrusive" measures -- that is, ways of studying phenomena that do not interfere with, distort or damage, that which is being studied. Nonetheless, most methods employed by physical sciences do alter, to varying degrees, the processes and structures of reality that are being investigated.

In Sufi sciences, great emphasis is placed on seeking to implement the use of "unobtrusive" methods in all aspects of the seeking process. This requires one to work on removing as many sources of distortion, bias, prejudice, presupposition, and so on, from the exploratory process as is possible.

In fact, the spiritual condition of gnosis refers to a way of knowing reality that is not mediated by concepts, emotions, beliefs, thoughts, senses, or language. As such, gnosis is, in a sense, an example of an unobtrusive measure (of a qualitative rather than quantitative nature) that does not impose anything foreign onto the reality that is being engaged through such a way of knowing. One experiences reality from within the modality of its manifestation rather than in separation and at a distance.

(e) At the heart of physical and biological sciences is the notion of "replication". In order for an experimental result to be accepted by the community of knowers that constitutes the jury of peers who will be evaluating the authenticity of one's scientific work, the people on such a jury must be able to repeat the requisite set of methodological steps indicated in a given experiment. Moreover, the people on the jury of scientific peers, must be able, after following the indicated steps, to arrive at an empirical result that, within a certain range of allowable differences, verifies the character of the results obtained by the scientist who first conducted the experiment.

Similarly, replication plays a central role in Sufi sciences. However, there are differences from what is the case in relation to physical/biological sciences.

For example, the seeker who is to run the experiment is not, yet, a member of the community of knowers. Consequently, the spiritual seeker is not in a position to understand and appreciate the character of the experimental results generated by his or her predecessors on the Sufi path.

Instead, the seeker is performing the set of experiments that previously has been completed successfully by the spiritual masters who preceded the seeker on the Sufi path. If the seeker can, by the grace of God, replicate the results of the Sufi masters across a broad spectrum of spiritual "experiments", then this person also becomes part of that community of knowers through the successful completion of the assigned exercises.

In other words, through the process of replication, the seeker has verified -- for herself, himself, or themselves that the truths to which the Sufi masters allude in their talks and discussions are, in fact, the case. However, this is not a matter of judging from the "outside" the rightness or wrongness of the results obtained by the community of knowers of the Sufi path who have preceded the individual. Rather, it is a process of experiential confirmation that comes from the "inside" of the truths being explored and discussed.

(f) "Objectivity" is one of the watch-words of physical and empirical sciences. Generally speaking, objectivity is contrasted with "subjectivity".

One's experimental engagement of reality should not be shaped and colored by personal allegiances, beliefs, vested interests or desires. This is so because all of these processes are considered to be unwarranted subjective intrusions into the realm of scientific inquiry.

One should permit oneself to be opened up to what reality is trying to tell us, in the way it is attempting to tell us. As much as possible, the explorer should -- to borrow a term from hermeneutics -- 'merge horizons' with the character of the phenomena being studied.

In Sufi sciences, the key to objectivity lies in the conditions of fana and baqa. The former involves the passing away of the false self, with all of its attendant currents of subjective biases and distortions. Baqa, on the other hand, involves the realization of the identity of the true self, that is,

in essence, a manifestation of Divinity and, therefore, gives expression, according to the spiritual capacity of the individual, to total objectivity.

(g) Finally, as indicated in (e) above, the community of knowers plays a fundamental role in both physical, as well as, mystical sciences. In both instances, in order for a person to be considered to be a legitimate member of those respective communities, the individual has to have passed through a rigorous set of purifying transformations. God willing, these transformations infuse the individual with some minimal level of competence in the methodology, principles, values, procedures and conduct that mark the quality of a authoritative member of the community of knowers.

In physical and biological sciences, competence is frequently judged according to the mastery that a person displays in the use of logic, mathematics and conceptual analysis in relation to experimental explorations. In Sufi sciences, competence is a function of: whether or not the individual has realized, by the grace of God, her or his true, spiritual identity, as well as, whether or not the person is able to give, God willing, active expression to one's essential, and unique, capacity to bear constant loving and faithful witness to the presence of Divinity in an individual's being.

The only person who can testify to the competence of a seeker of truth is someone who, himself or herself, is, by the grace of God, possessed by such competence. This competence has been acquired not through personal accomplishment, but through the generosity that has come to the seeker through the channel way of spiritual transmission that is given expression in the relationship of nisbath between seeker and spiritual guide.

Unlike the community of knowers in physical and biological sciences, the members of the community of knowers in Sufi sciences do not establish the standards, principles, rules, values, methods and so on that characterize mystical science. Rather, these members reflect the result of submission to Divine standards, principles, rules, values and methods. Consequently, they see, feel, and act in accordance with Divine wishes.

If, and when, one is admitted, by the grace of God, into the community of knowers of Sufi sciences, one will, in one's own unique fashion, reflect Divine wishes as well. The absence of this quality of

reflectivity of Divine wishes is an indication that the seeker has not, yet, arrived, at the goal and purpose of the Sufi path, and, therefore, has not mastered the science of the Sufi way.



A Rose By Any Other Name

Someone wrote in and asked the following question: "I notice you often seem to shy away from using the word 'Allah'. Instead, you often use words like 'God', 'Divinity', and so on. Why is this? Why don't you use the name that is the Supreme name more often?"

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There are a number of reasons for proceeding as I do in relation to the issue that you raise. Some of these reasons are a reflection of what is permitted by Divinity, while some of the other reasons are historical in nature, and, finally, some of the reasons for doing this are cultural.

First of all, the name 'Allah' really gives expression to 'al-lah that means, literally, 'the God'. This name is said to be the all-inclusive name of Divinity because that Reality to which the name 'the God' refers is ultimate, absolute, and all-encompassing, and, therefore, whatever ways one may choose to make reference to this ultimate Reality is entailed by the latter ... is entailed by 'the God'.

Divinity does not refer to the aforementioned ultimate, all-encompassing Reality by just one name alone, even when such a name is considered to be the supreme name. In the Qur'an, Divinity discloses 99 beautiful names that can be used to make reference to one, or another, dimension of that Reality. Furthermore, one should not suppose these 99 names exhaust the names by which 'Reality' might be called. Instead, such names are those that have been selected by God to reveal to humankind.

What is: 'Allah', 'al-lah', 'the God'? Or, approached in another way: what is in a name?

We humans say words so easily, without giving much attention to the reality for which the name is but an entry way. In fact, all too frequently, human beings get far too caught up in words and neglect the reality to which the words make reference.

All of the names of Divinity are important and have significance. If this were not so, God would not have disclosed them to us.

Nevertheless, as important as the Divine names may be, what also needs to be stressed is the intention with which the names are said. Some people say: "Allah, Allah, Allah" and are devoid of spirituality, while certain other people are present with Reality, and their use of the Divine names would not bring them any closer to the Truth than they already are.

There are a multiplicity of Divine names, but there is only One to which all of these names make reference. As long as a person says these names with sincerity, love, and devotion, I do not believe Allah minds, and I am not aware of any verse of the Qur'an or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that would demonstrate otherwise.

Secondly, and most unfortunately, there are individuals who call themselves Muslims who, through a failure to control their own lower soul, or nafs, have created, by their actions, an atmosphere that has led to much disrespect being directed toward the name Allah on the part of people who don't know any better and whose lack of understanding can, in no small way, be laid at the feet of Muslims who, through the latter's aforementioned, reprehensible behavior, have failed to show those people who do not know any better that the holiness of the name, Allah, is quite independent of human foolishness.

More specifically, today, many people associate the name 'Allah' with killing, terrorism, and inhumanity because, on far too many occasions, there are, and have been, those individuals who refer to themselves as Muslims that have presumed to be acting under Divine authority when, in point of fact, no such authority has been given for their acts of barbarity toward innocent individuals -- including women, children, and the elderly who are specifically designated as non-combatants under Islamic rules of engagement. Furthermore, such, so-called Muslims do not even have the requisite depth of self-understanding to realize that they have neither the wisdom nor the right to determine who should live and who should die, even among those who may not be so innocent.

Such individuals have helped create an atmosphere of hatred, anger, hostility, fear, vengeance, and misunderstanding concerning Islam and the word Allah. Consequently, the vocabulary that may be used, from time to time, is, in part a reflection of the historical conditions in which we all find ourselves. Therefore, choice of words is, sometimes, intended to help circumvent, or soften these historical atmospheric conditions, by using words that are less likely to place unnecessary obstacles in the way of speaking about the underlying principles and issues -- principles and issues that are far more important than feeling compelled to force certain words into the discussion ... however appropriate the use of such words may be.

Finally, while many people in the West have heard the term "Allah", nevertheless, from a purely cultural perspective, some of them may feel more comfortable using and reading words such as: Deity, God, Divinity, and so on. If the purpose is dialogue, discussion, and communication, then one should consider the nature of the cultural context through which this purpose is being pursued as one of the factors that constructively (one hopes) helps shape, color, and orient the flow of ideas being communicated.



Ten Differences Between Spirituality and Religion

1.) Religion tends to be heavily preoccupied with the world of concepts. These concepts -- whether in the form of theology, dogma, philosophy, or personal interpretation -- play fundamental roles in mediating and coloring an individual's understanding of Reality or Divinity.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is preoccupied with the different levels and dimensions of the experience of Reality or Divinity. In other words, spirituality is advocating that one's spiritual experience, at some point, should not be mediated by concepts, theories or interpretations.

Concepts may be acceptable up to a certain point, but the general consensus of the perspective of spirituality is that, ultimately, concepts lead one away from the truth, not toward it. This raises the problem of how one is to go about differentiating between, on the one hand, imagination or fantasy, and, on the other hand, truth or reality, but this is another matter.

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2.) Religion often gives emphasis to issues of salvation. As such, one of the key motivations underlying many religious acts involves doing something because that action will help one gain heaven, while simultaneously helping one to avoid projected negative ramifications that come from sins of commission or omission and that are collectively entailed by the idea of 'hell'.

Spirituality doesn't deny the metaphysical realities or issues of salvation that are associated with the positive or negative consequences of our actions. The motivational orientation of spirituality, however, is entirely different.

In spirituality, one's motivation should be to do things because of the intimate nature of our essential relationship with Reality or Divinity, and not because of what we might receive as reward or avoid in the way of negative consequences. The emphasis should be on doing things out of love, service, sincere worship and gratitude rather than as a means to some further, personal end or desire.

In short, religion is about what human beings seek from God. Spirituality is about what God seeks from human beings.

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3.) Generally speaking, religion operates on the basis of trying to change people from the outside in. Spirituality concentrates on helping people to change from the inside out.

More specifically, religion is concerned with imposing a doctrinal framework onto the individual. This framework must be internalized in order for the individual to be considered a properly functioning member of the religious collective.

Spirituality is concerned with the realization of one's true identity and essential capacity. Proper intention, thinking, understanding, awareness and activity all flow from a realized inner nature, not internalized external doctrines.

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4.) Religion tends to place great emphasis on the exoteric. In other words, one usually is required to perform rituals, irrespective of whether one understands the nature and purpose of those rituals. The important feature is to comply with the ritual and, therefore, conform to the letter of what is perceived to be religious law.

In spirituality, the emphasis is much more on the esoteric dimension of whatever forms of practice one may pursue. One should try to be receptive to the spirit of a practice. One should seek to understand the nature and purpose of such practices, not just conceptually, but experientially.

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5.) In religion, faith is, all too frequently, a matter of a blind, static, rigid, narrow acceptance of some belief, value or practice. In spirituality, on the other hand, faith is intended to be a dynamic, living, flexible, continuous growth of understanding concerning the nature of one's relationship with Reality or Divinity.

Religion often equates faith with an emotional or conceptual commitment to a belief system. Spirituality treats faith as a species of knowledge rooted in realizations drawn from personal experience.

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6.) Religion often becomes entangled in politics. This is so both within a religious collective as well as in the manner in which a given religion relates to the surrounding world.

Spirituality, by and large, seeks to avoid the political sphere, preferring to contribute to society directly and, where possible, anonymously. These contributions come through the beneficial effects of moral qualities such as compassion, patience, charitableness, tolerance, kindness, honesty, integrity, forgiveness and so on.

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7.) Religion tends to gravitate toward an authoritarian *modus operandi* in which submission is demanded of individuals. Spirituality, on the other hand, is revolves around the command and respect that a person's recognition of the authoritative nature of Truth brings. Submission is freely given.

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8.) Generally speaking, religion is governed by rules, whereas, spirituality is governed by principles. In religion, one needs to know what the rules are before one can act, and in the absence of specific rules, one tends to become disoriented. In spirituality, once one understands the principles, one is able to deal appropriately with any situation even if none of the available rules seems to be relevant to the present situation.

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9.) In religion, the participation of the individual often revolves primarily around interaction with an institution such as a church, temple, mosque or synagogue. Personal interaction with the leader of that institution tends to be of a secondary nature, if it takes place at all.

In spirituality, on the other hand, participation primarily revolves around one's personal relationship with a teacher or guide. Participation in some kind of institutional activity is of secondary importance, if it occurs at all.

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10.) The term "deen" in Islam does not mean religion. Deen refers to those methodological and experiential processes that are directed toward helping the individual to realize various dimensions of the essential nature, or *fitra*, of human spiritual potential.



A Provocative Statement

When Muslims are informed in the Qur'an about God having brought to completion their deen, it is not a religion that has been completed. Rather, what has been completed is the establishing of the Divine means, methods, or ways that, God willing, can assist human beings to work toward fulfilling and realizing the purpose and nature of created existence.

I am going to start out with a rather provocative statement -- something that goes to the heart of the difference between the spiritual perspective and most religious or theological approaches to life. More specifically, salvation does not equal Self-realization; rather, pursuit of the former is, at best, only a preliminary step in the quest for the latter.

To be pre-occupied with the attainment of heaven (or the avoidance of hell) tends to be an obstacle to making much progress on the Path to Essence. The former not only mistakes the periphery for the Center, but, as well, confuses spiritual cost benefit analysis with a 'gnosis of love' (and a love of gnosis) that cannot be attained through the portals of a reward and punishment orientation.

This is not because the words 'heaven' and 'hell' refer to metaphysical figments of imagination, but because, from a mystical vantage point, the purpose of life has never been about heaven and hell, but, instead, is about coming to understand, on the basis of direct experience, who, in essence, we are, and what unique spiritual capacity each of us has through which to participate in the Divine passion play of Creation.

Tasawwuf is the preferred term used by Sufi masters to make reference to the 'way' or deen of mystical science. In the West, and even in many parts of the Muslim world, this path is known as 'Sufism', but this latter term is problematic from the outset because 'the way path or deen is not an 'ism' -- that is, it is not a theoretical, conceptual system that is being projected onto reality, but, rather, tasawwuf is the means that, if diligently and sincerely pursued, permits, God willing, a 'merging of horizons' (to borrow a term from hermeneutics) with different dimensions of Truth and the Real.

Contrary to what many might suppose, the term 'mystical science' is not an oxymoron -- that is, a contradiction in terms. In fact, if anything, true mysticism is a far more rigorous, comprehensive, and exacting process of

seeking truth and understanding concerning the nature of reality than is any modern science.

Furthermore, contrary to the confusions that have shaped much of the mentality of today's world, the 'occult' is not a synonym for the 'mystical'. The two are focused on entirely different realms of Being and the intention, purpose, nature, methodology, and understanding of each are at opposite ends of the spectrum of possibilities from one another.

Similarly, spirituality should not be conflated with, or confused for, spiritualism. The latter is predicated on the belief that it is possible for the living to make contact with the dead through the agency of a medium, whereas the former is rooted in the knowledge that it is possible for human beings to come to realization of the true nature of the Self through the help and guidance of a mystical master.

Tasawwuf is the mystical path that, God willing, is intended to take one to the very core of one's being. In fact, the mystics always have tried to remind us, even before Shakespeare, that 'there is more to heaven and earth than is dreamt of in our philosophies'.

The spiritual potential of human beings runs far deeper than theologians suppose, and, in fact, these dimensions entailing the incredible depth and richness of life's potential is what scares many theologians because that Reality reduces, to relative insignificance, the very limited concerns and interests that characterizes the 'work' of many theologians. Indeed, like the days of old, the latter group tends to fear that if one travels too far using the maps of the mystics, then one will fall off the edge of the universe into a bottomless abyss of 'who knows what'. However, since they have never made the journey, they really are in no position to comment intelligently on what lies at journey's end.

### The Two Obligations

Although perhaps somewhat oversimplified, there are, from a spiritual perspective, only two obligations in life. If we focus on these requirements, everything else, God willing, looks after itself.

These two obligations are: (1) to sincerely seek the Truth in all things; (2) to live in accordance with what we know of the Truth we have discovered, as best we have the capacity to do so. All of the other facets of spirituality -- whether of an exoteric or esoteric nature -- are but details entailed by, and inherent in, the two foregoing principles ... details designed either to assist one to learn how to struggle toward realization of one, or the other, of the aforementioned two principles, or that are intended to give clarification and context with respect to the nature of these principles.

For instance, to sincerely seek the Truth in all things encompasses, among other possibilities, the following issues. What is the Truth concerning our origins? Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? How should we spend our time here? What happens after we pass away from this world? What abilities do we have that enable us to sincerely seek the Truth? Who can assist us in this quest? How can we identify such individuals, and why should we trust them? How do we distinguish between Truth and falsehood? What problems, difficulties, and obstacles might prevent us from fulfilling this obligation? How did we come to inherit such an obligation, and why should we honor it?

Alternatively, to live in accordance with the Truth we have discovered -- as best we have the capacity to do -- encompasses issues such as: what capacities do we have that might permit us to comply with our understanding of the Truth? What if our understanding of the Truth is incomplete? How do we know we are doing the best we can? What are the ramifications of not living in accordance with what we know of the Truth? What resources are available to lend support to our efforts to bring our understanding of the Truth and actions into harmony? Can different kinds of action be in compliance with the Truth, or must these actions be uniform in nature? Did we choose this obligation or was it made incumbent upon us, or, possibly, are both, simultaneously, true?

If one sets aside such issues as differences of vocabulary, styles of expression, or historical influences and, instead, concentrates on the essential

teachings of the great spiritual traditions that have been manifested over time, and from place to place, one arrives, God willing, at a very interesting and, I believe, extremely significant realization. More specifically, if one studies the esoteric traditions of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and indigenous peoples, one comes to understand that the methodologies, principles, techniques, practices, values, and so on which are being, and have been taught, are all directed toward helping the individual to struggle toward maximizing human potential to seek the Truth and to live in accordance with such Truth as is realized to the best of our capacity to do so.

Across spiritual traditions, one learns that Truth is One; Truth is all-encompassing; Truth is universal; Truth is within; Truth is beyond all words and concepts; Truth is manifested everywhere; all things are measured by Truth; Truth is eternal; Truth governs all levels of Being; Truth is independent of understanding, and understanding is dependent on Truth. Across mystical traditions, one is taught that in order to realize Truth, as well as to work towards living in accordance with whatever dimensions of Truth are realized, one needs to: purify oneself; empty oneself; render oneself receptive and open; transform those aspects within which are in opposition to, or rebel against, the Truth; struggle against those forces that are seeking to undermine Truth, and so on.

Across spiritual traditions, qualities such as: humility, kindness, compassion, sincerity, nobility, courage, steadfastness, patience love generosity, selflessness, honesty, justice, tolerance, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, gratitude, remembrance, knowledge, certainty, faith, devotion, reliance, repentance, spiritual aspiration, trust, and balance are sought not only for their capacity to help us to acquire a condition that is conducive to realizing Truth, but, as well, for their capacity to assist us to live in accordance with the nature of Truth according to our capacity to do so. Similarly, across mystical traditions, qualities such as anger, jealousy, greed, hatred, selfishness, back-biting, pride, stubbornness, lying, cheating, cruelty, oppressiveness, suspicion, lust, and injustice are to be avoided, controlled, or eliminated precisely because they interfere both with a sincere seeking of Truth, as well as our capacity to live in accordance with whatever degree of Truth that may have been realized.

Across spiritual traditions, the degree of freedom we enjoy is a direct function of the extent to which we realize the presence of Truth as well as act in accordance with that presence. Across spiritual

traditions, we accomplish goodness precisely to the extent that we realize Truth and act in accordance with the nature of Truth.

Across spiritual traditions, to be able to give expression to the purpose of our lives, we must sincerely seek the Truth and live in harmony with its requirements. Across spiritual traditions, our happiness depends on the degree to which we seek the Truth and intend actions that reflect that Truth. Across mystical traditions, knowledge, Self-realization, and fulfilling essential potential are all tied to sincerely seeking Truth, along with acting in concordance with such Truth.

Across spiritual traditions, the stages, states, experiences, conditions, and stations of the spiritual journey are all indications of the extent to which we have realized Truth together with the extent to which our actions mirror this Truth. Across spiritual traditions, the delays, lacunae, problems, doubts, errors, and misunderstandings are all a reflection of the degree to which we have not sincerely sought the Truth and/or failed to live in accordance with what is known of Truth.

All of the authentic spiritual traditions of the ages, irrespective of the names given to them, are agreed that there is only one safe way through which to seek and realize Truth, as well as shape actions to be in conformity with such Truth. This way is the way of apprenticeship with an authorized spiritual teacher, guide, elder, or master.

No one, on his or her own, can come to Truth in any ultimate, essential sense without benefit of the direct assistance, counsel, support, and protection of an authorized manifestation of Divine guidance. No one has the ability, on his or her own, to bring actions into full compliance with the requirements of Truth.

Realization of Truth, and the manner in which identity, essence, Self, potential, and purpose are manifestations of Truth comes through a direct, spiritual transmission that transforms the individual -- from one who is ignorant, to one who knows; from one who sins, to one who is pure. There is no amount of conceptual work, reading, or individual work, considered in isolation from the aforementioned direct transmission of transformation, that is capable of attaining to Truth or living in accordance with that Truth.

Yes, individual efforts must be made. Individual struggle must be endured.

However, these efforts and such struggle do not 'cause' a person's spiritual transformation. At best, they place one, God willing, in a position of being ready to receive that grace or blessing that may be transmitted through the locus of manifestation known as a teacher or guide and that, alone, is the sufficient condition for bringing an individual to spiritual realization and the sort of concomitant conduct that is in compliance with the Truth to which such spiritual realization gives expression.

For a seeker after the spiritual path, the issue is not a matter of whether one should become aligned with this or that religion. Rather, the critical issue is whether, or not, one can find, or be introduced to, or 'happen' upon, a spiritual elder who has been authorized to serve as a locus of manifestation through which the requisite sort of spiritual transmission is capable of being transmitted under, God willing, the appropriate circumstances of sincere effort on the part of the seeker.

Truth is not about names, labels, ideas, concepts, opinions, conditioning, historical contingencies, theories, biases, or prejudices. The way of Truth is now what it always has been.

The authorized agents of this 'way' have been the Divine Books of Revelation, the Prophetic tradition, and the spiritually realized people who have been befriended by that tradition. If this were not so, there would have been no need of Revelation, Prophets, or those who were close followers of the Prophets. The latter exist because the way of Truth calls for them to serve in such a capacity.

One cannot choose any path and call it the way of Truth. Furthermore, one cannot point to just any person and refer to that individual as a spiritual guide of the mystical way.

One is constrained by what, in fact, the Truth is. But, if one chooses a path and guide who are, by the grace of God, manifestations of the way of Truth, then irrespective of the name that might be associated with that path and guide, one has gained access to a doorway that marks an authorized point of entry to the way of Truth.

Everything depends on the authenticity of a path and whether, or not, the path constitutes an authorized agency of spiritual guidance and transformation concerning one's access to, and realization of, essential Truth. If a path is authentic -- in the sense of having been authorized and

sanctioned by Divinity, then one has an opportunity to fulfill, God willing, the two basic obligations of life. If, on the other hand, a given path is not authentic -- i.e., has not been authorized and sanctioned by Divinity as a Way to essential Truth -- then one is beset by a major obstacle with respect to fulfilling the two basic obligations of life.

The foregoing matter cannot be settled by scientific, theological, conceptual, or philosophical argumentation, and the thousands of years of futility ensuing from rational attempts to do so only serve to demonstrate this fact. Nonetheless, one might do well to reflect very carefully on the following point: namely, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, a variety of spiritual traditions have arisen in, apparently, disparate contexts of time, place, history, language, and peoples have all displayed a remarkable degree of agreement about not only what constitutes the fundamental obligations of life, but, as well, how one should go about fulfilling those obligations.



On Being Invited to the Qur'an and Sunna

During the time that The Spiritual Health Learning Community has been online, the e-mail box has been fairly active. Among the comments and questions that have arrived are a number from well-meaning people who have invited me to the Qur'an and the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Apparently, to be Sufi, automatically raises questions about one's knowledge of, love for, and commitment to the Revealed Word of God and the example of the final Rasul and Nabi (messenger and prophet) of Islam, Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Sometimes these transmissions are expressed in very respectful tones. On other occasions they are given a non-respectful edge that can range in character all the way from mildly disapproving to being very contemptuous in a self-righteous manner.

I am not surprised by these kinds of statements or perspectives since I have been exposed to them for nearly 35 years. Moreover, these points of view are neither new to me nor are they new to the debate/discussion that has been going on for more than fourteen hundred years (Hijra calendar) with respect to the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of Islam.

Better people than me on both sides of the discussion have commented extensively on these matters, and I seriously doubt that I could offer something that is either different from, or better than, what already has come forth from very learned minds and hearts. So, what is given here is merely a reminder of sorts.

Islam is not just about being Muslim. To be a Muslim is a starting point and does not exhaust what human beings are invited to either by the Qur'an or the Prophet.

The Qur'an and the Prophet both invite us not only to be Muslim but to be Mu'min and Mohsin as well. These are not referring to one and the same condition or spiritual state. Distinctions are being made.

Of course, all those individuals who, by the grace of God, have attained the latter two spiritual stations are also Muslim, but not all Muslims can automatically be considered to be in either of these two latter categories simply because a person calls oneself a Muslim.

There are many, many ayats (verses) of the Qur'an that address these distinctions. For example, these distinctions are touched upon, in part, when the Qur'an instructed the Prophet to tell the Bedouins who had come to him professing their belief in Allah and the Prophet that the Bedouins should not say that they believe but they should say they submitted to Allah and the Prophet because belief or iman (faith) had not, yet, entered into their hearts.

The Prophet, himself, had said that one could characterize faith or iman in the following way. Faith consists of a profession of the tongue, a verification of the heart, and a putting into action by the limbs of whatever is being professed by the tongue.

Many people go from the first (that is, professing of the tongue) to the third (that is, putting what is professed into action) with not so much as a "how-do-you-do" to the second aspect of faith mentioned above -- namely, verifying with the heart what is being professed by the tongue and summarily being put into action. This is one of the reasons why so many of our actions are given expression with a lack of hikmat or spiritual wisdom or insight, since our hearts have never come to verify and, therefore, develop some degree of understanding concerning that which is being uttered by our lips and being put into action.

There is a long hadith (tradition) that is transmitted by 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) in which he talks about a man unknown to the Companions of the Prophet and, yet, whose clothes showed no sign of travel. The stranger came to the Prophet and sat knee to knee with him, as intimate friends in those days would do, and began asking the Prophet, among other things, to tell the meaning of Islam (pillars), iman (faith) and 'ihsan (spiritual excellence).

Each time the Prophet gave an answer to these questions, the stranger told the Prophet: "Yes, this is correct," and 'Umar (May Allah be pleased with him) indicated how all the Companions were puzzled over, if not incredulous about, the manner in which this stranger responded as if he were waiting to verify whether the Prophet's answers were correct or not.

After all the questions had been asked (and there were more questions than just the above three), and the stranger had departed, the Prophet was silent for a long time. Finally, the Prophet asked 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) if the latter knew who the stranger was.

The Companion indicated that Allah and the Prophet knew, but the Companion did not know. The Prophet said:

"That was Archangel Gabriel, and he has come this day to teach you your deen."

Again, distinctions are being drawn. Not every individual who, by the grace of God, professes submission to Islam also has attained to the level of faith, and not every person who has, by the grace of God, attained to the level of faith, has, as well, attained to the level of spiritual excellence.

People recite the attestation of submission to the fact that there is no God but (or except, or other than) Allah and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of God. Then they recite the similar kalimah of faith as if they were saying the same thing again but in slightly different words.

However, the two are not the same. The second involves (or, at least, it should) a verification of the heart that is not necessarily present in the initial attestation of submission, and, yet, many people tend to gloss over the distinctions that are implicit in the two.

We all tend to make the mistake of equating what we think about things as being the authoritative and indisputable version of the way things are. People of insight tend to be a little more cautious in their appraisal of the situation.

The Prophet has said that the Qur'an has an outer and an inner meaning. Furthermore, this inner meaning has an inner meaning and so on to seven levels of significance.

There is resonance between the above hadith and another saying of the Prophet in which he indicated that Allah has 300 traits and that if one could make even one of these attributes to be a part of one's own character, one would attain paradise.

Surely, the Prophet, better than anyone, had an appreciation for the infinite nature of Divinity, and the very nature of infinity is that it cannot be exhausted. Similarly, the Qur'an cannot be limited to, although it most certainly begins, in part, with -- at least, from the human side of things -- a linguistic phenomenon.

Yet, the Qur'an did not begin in language per se. The Qur'an manifested itself through a linguistic locus of manifestation known as Arabic, but the origins of the Qur'an are, on a certain level, in the Word of God that, despite its label as "Word", is not a linguistic entity.

The Arabic language was not a sacred language before the Qur'an. It was the Qur'an that made the language sacred.

Arabic did not invest the Qur'an with its richness. It is the Qur'an that invested this language with its spiritual richness.

Arabic is dependent on Revelation for its spiritual value. The Qur'an in its ultimate sense is not dependent on Arabic in any way.

The language is the palpable, exterior doorway through which one is drawn back to the non-linguistic Source. Indeed, it is to this very verity that our attention is being directed when we are told that all of the revealed Books are contained within the Qur'an, yet the entire meaning of the Qur'an is contained in Surah Fatiha, and further, that the complete meaning of this Surah is contained in the opening line: "In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful", and that, finally, the full meaning of this line is contained in the dot below bey, the first Arabic letter of 'Bismillah' -- in, or through, the Name of Allah.

This dot is the portal of this world through which we, if God wishes, gain access, according to our God-given capacities, to whatever portions of the infinite Ocean on the other side that God has made available to the spiritual potential of human beings. It is this Ocean that is being pointed to in the Qur'an when we are informed that if all the oceans of the world were ink and all the trees were used as pens, these would not be enough to write the proper praises of the nature of Allah.

The Word of God has been manifested in other linguistic loci of manifestation prior to the coming of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is simply, and not so simply, the last locus of manifestation in this series of Revelatory descents. All of these descents are different manifestations of one and the same Word of God.

Every Muslim believes the Qur'an is the uncreated Word of God. In its uncreated dimension it both transcends, while simultaneously incorporates, the linguistic text -- whether spoken or written.

In any case, describing the Qur'an as having seven levels of inner meaning, or talking about Allah in terms of 300 traits, this, in one sense,

is just a way of alluding to Truth that cannot be reduced to either seven nor 300 characteristics or dimensions. Reality transcends both, and the Prophet, by the grace of Allah, knew this, but he was required to speak to people who did not -- people who had to be given something with which they could deal in a concrete and limited manner.

What the Prophet said in these foregoing respects was the truth and these numbers were not arbitrarily chosen. Nonetheless, at the same time, the delimited quality of these statements was made in a context of an abiding and overriding infinity in relation to both Allah and the Qur'an.

However, let us, for the sake of argument, limit the discussion to seven levels of inner meaning of the Qur'an. When people invite me to examine the Qur'an, the very nature of this invitation is ambiguous, since I do not know to which of the seven levels of meaning they are calling me.

Moreover, there can be no complete understanding -- as far as human beings are capable of such completeness -- of any level of the Qur'an without taking into consideration the modulating influences of the other levels of meaning that engage one another in a complex, non-linear dynamic of depth, richness, nuance and subtlety that is beyond the comprehension of the purely rational mind and requires, instead, those spiritual insights that come by way of Divine support and inform the understanding of, for example, the heart, rather than the mind.

There are, indeed, dangers involved in trying to stay afloat amidst the cross-currents of the aforementioned complex dynamic involving the kernels of unending Divine meaning, and there have been those whose spiritual ship has been wrecked on the rocks of confusion and error marking the boundary between spiritual truth and falsehood that is related to the above dynamic. To navigate through these dangers, one needs a lot of expert help.

In fact, one of the most important decisions an individual can make revolves about this question of who really is qualified to assist one. If, by the grace of Allah, this decision is made correctly, then one has, God willing, a much better opportunity of surviving the ups and downs of the mystical path. If, on the other hand, one has the misfortune to make the wrong choice in this matter, one may, unless God intervenes, be headed for spiritual disaster.

Even on the surface level of meanings, Allah describes the Qur'an as having both clear verses as well as those that, while clear with the proper understanding, are, nevertheless, stated in the forms of allegories, metaphors and similes. In addition, quite a few chapters of the Qur'an begin with just Arabic letters such as Alif Lam Meem or Ya Seen

The Qur'an testifies that none but Allah knows the meanings of these letters. Yet, Allah has promised to teach the meanings of so many of the kernels of Truth that are manifested through the Qur'an, to those who have, as the Qur'an urges us again and again to seek out, the proper kind of intention, sincerity, humility, and piety in their dealings with Allah.

The Qur'an is a Book from which nothing has been left out. And, everything in the Qur'an is for the benefit, instruction and use of human beings, including the mysterious letters alluded to previously.

Even on the most exoteric, or outermost level of the Qur'an, there is an incalculable wealth of healing, direction, support and instruction. However, the aspects of the Qur'an that do not specifically deal with the fundamentals of bearing witness, prayers, fasting, zakat, hajj, along with the specified proscriptive and permitted limits of human conduct, are not mere window dressing ... a Divine aside, so to speak, that merely introduces themes that have nothing to do with the essential character of human existence.

In fact, these ayats or verses concerning specific promulgations constitute only about five hundred out of a total of more than six thousand verses in the Qur'an. Consequently, the majority of the Qur'an deals with issues, themes, questions, and so on, that even though they may touch upon, and have ramifications for, the determination and application of religious law, they also address many, many other issues and themes.

In broad terms, one might refer to these differences as ones of rules and principles. The basic requirements or obligations concerning, say, prayer, fasting, zakat, and so on, are, to a large extent, stated in terms of rules of one sort or another -- in other words, what one can and can't do, or what is halal and haram, respectively.

Yet, there is another dimension involving principles that cannot be reduced down to rules. For instance, there are no rules capable of circumscribing what is entailed by love, compassion, kindness,

charitableness, commitment, sacrifice, longing, sincerity, tolerance, forgiveness, humility and so on.

The vast majority of the Qur'an deals with principles and not just with rules or laws. The laws and rules may be appropriate under certain circumstances (and what these circumstances might be is not as straightforward an issue as many Muslims may suppose), but the Qur'an cannot be reduced to them.

Considered from another, but related perspective, the Qur'an distinguishes between people of the left, people of the right, and those who are among the foremost. People of the left are those who have condemned themselves to wasted lives, spiritually speaking.

People of the right are said to refer to the generality of Muslims of a certain quality of devotion -- of whom Allah indicates there were many among the earlier times, and there will be many among the later times. But, who are the foremost?

Allah knows best, but the foremost are not the same as the people of the right or else there would be no point to the distinction. And, Allah does not make distinctions in an idle manner.

There always is a purpose to these distinctions. Divinity is attempting to draw our attention to something of importance -- something upon which it is worthwhile reflecting.

Allah describes the people of the foremost as being many among the earlier generations and few among the later generations. Whoever these foremost people may be, God and his Prophet are not equating them to the generality of Muslims.

Being Muslim means one has been graced with entrance into a certain kind of spiritual house. Nonetheless, this house is a 'mansion with many rooms'.

Who among us can say we have explored all these rooms and can inventory all the secrets and mysteries that God has stored there? Who among us would be so foolhardy as to say we know it all, and we can itemize absolutely, unequivocally and exhaustively what is contained therein?

Although we all must be concerned about not making Islam -- whether considered exoterically or esoterically -- into something that it is not, at the same time, we should not try to deny the possibilities

that are inherent in Islam either. In all boundary disputes, there usually are differences of opinion about what belongs where or what is appropriate under certain circumstances, and, so too, in the on-going tension arising out of the boundary conflict between those of exoteric inclinations and those of esoteric inclinations, there will be differences that extend across a variety of issues and themes.

Even some of the great Sufi shaykhs have clearly indicated that not just anything is permissible in tariqat or the mystical path. For instance, in *Kashf-ul-Mahjub*, al-Hallaj quoted a historical predecessor as saying:

"Once the Sufi mystical path was a reality without a name, and now it is a name without a reality."

The foregoing was spoken some thirteen hundred years ago (Hijra calendar). It alluded to the fact that during the time of the Prophet, many of the Companions of the Prophet were esoterically or mystically inclined even while adhering fervently to the requirements of Shari'ah or Divine Law, and, yet, there was no label of Sufi in existence at that time.

These Companions learned the mystical path from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Indeed, among his many other duties and responsibilities, the Prophet was, and continues to be, the first Sufi shaykh -- the Shaykh of all shaykhs, the guide of all guides, who has been given the capacity to do so by Allah.

Over time, however, there were those who drifted away from the mystical path laid out by the spiritual understanding given to the Prophet through the grace of Allah. Some of these erring people referred to themselves, or were referred to as by those who didn't know better, as 'Sufi'.

Nonetheless, there were others who also were said to belong to the Sufi path who had not abandoned the esoteric dimension of the Prophet's teachings. These Sufi individuals got a bad name from the misdeeds of the former group who were considered by some, mostly those who made up such pseudo-mystical groups, to be Sufi.

There were so many of these erring pseudo-Sufi practitioners running about here and there causing their own unique brand of

mischief, that, in many ways at least as far as this errant category is concerned -- it was as if the Sufi path had become a name without a reality. Nevertheless, there still were authentic followers of the inner-teachings of the Prophet who persisted in the face of that kind of adversity, and there continue to be, today, such authentic followers of the inner, as well as the outer, path of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The problems outlined by al-Hujwiri are still with us. More specifically, there are those (both from within Islam, as well from without) claiming to be Sufi but who are not, while there are others, and Allah knows best who they are, who are legitimate practitioners of the Sufi path -- that is but one of the terms (the more proper term being: tasawwuf) that are used to refer to those who continue to look to the Qur'an and the Prophet to provide guidance on the inner path.

In between are a lot of people who are confused about who belongs to which of these categories. As a result, a lot of backbiting and character assassination go on -- neither of which is permitted by Islam -- but this has not stopped many from indulging in these practices.

The confusion, uncertainty, and controversies that swirl around this area are so numerous and frustrating that some people attempt to make a unilateral ruling and claim there is no mystical dimension to Islam. In doing so, they become unwitting allies for all the dark forces, within us and without us, that are attempting to prevent human beings from taking the steps necessary to inherit our full spiritual legacy -- the one that concerns the human capacity for knowing, loving and serving Allah independently of considerations of heaven or hell -- though these latter realms are quite real in all their seven levels.

The foregoing comments notwithstanding, is there something wrong with having a himma or spiritual aspiration that seeks the highest possible rather than the minimum necessary? If one has a God-given exploratory nature and wishes to discover what lies at the spiritual heart of life, identity, purpose, meaning, understanding, truth and human potential, and if the individual undertakes this journey in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an and the sunna (actions of the Prophet) -- considered in their entirety and not just in some arbitrarily truncated version of those teachings -- then where is the error in this?

It is not a matter of one kind of inclination (e.g., the exoteric) being right and the other kind of inclination (e.g., the esoteric) being wrong, rather they are both part of the spectrum of possibilities to which Allah is calling all human beings. As such, they both conform to the requirements of not transgressing the bounds that Allah has set.

There are boundaries established by rules, and there are more complex boundaries established through principle. Both aspects give expression to the nature of shari'ah.

When one Sufi teacher was asked what the mystical path of Islam was all about, the shaykh paused for a moment, and, then, replied: "Adab". The Prophet had indicated that everything has a right, of sorts, over a person, including one's parents, spouse, children and neighbors.

Similarly, every spiritual station that is possible, together with every instrument of spirituality within us -- whether the sir (the mystery), heart, spirit or kafi (the more hidden), and all of which are mentioned in the Qur'an -- have a right over us. Our problem is that we do not honor these rights, and the Sufi path is about teaching those who are interested how to struggle toward honoring those rights.

Each person makes one's own choice in these matters. Allah is, God willing, happy with both, and, therefore, there is no justification for either kind of aspiration to make disparaging judgments about the other kind of aspiration.

### The Origins of Evil

All the great shaykhs of the way of tasawwuf -- that is, the mystical science of love, truth, and Self-realization -- have taught there is a huge difference in understanding between those who have, by the grace of Allah, attained to a station of Divine intimacy and those who, unfortunately, have not. This difference in knowledge, wisdom, and insight has a great many ramifications in the nature and quality of life, but, perhaps, one of the most critical differences revolves around the consequences of ignorance.

Individuals who have been blessed by unveiling know -- in a profound, intense, intimate, varied, and on going manner -- that all of creation is woven together as a set of manifestations giving expression to an underlying Divine Purpose that is complex, yet, unified. The nature of this unity is such that whatever we do affects the rest of Creation ... for better or worse.

Our actions cannot alter or undermine the Divine Purpose being manifested through creation, but we serve as loci through which certain kinds of Divine transactions enter into the world of appearances. And, the sort of transactions for which we are the cosmic doorway can be affected, within certain degrees of freedom by the way we filter what is being transmitted through us.

The 'Divine transactions' mentioned above have to do, in part, with the realm of 'rizq' that determines, from birth to the grave, what will be provided to us, as well as whether we will have to: (a) satisfy certain conditions in order to draw from the Divine storehouse, or (b) merely be given certain things independently of effort. Whatever comes to us -- through effort or not -- in the way of material goods, possessions, career achievement, health, family, monetary wealth, fame, physical qualities, intellectual abilities, talents, friends, and spirituality is pre-set, so to speak.

There are many things that we all receive quite apart from any efforts on our part. Existence, air, water, sun, mountains, the moon, earth, stars, rain, consciousness, seasons, weather, night, day, and a soul, are just a few examples of this.

Furthermore, each of us receives certain 'gifts' in life that find their way to us even if we do not seek them or try to acquire them. These sorts of things vary from person to person.

On the other hand, there are other facets of life for which conditions have been laid down. For these aspects of life, efforts must be made.

Looked at from the foregoing perspective, life consists of an extremely large collection of rizq transactions, and you and I serve as so many loci of manifestation through which many, but not all, of these sorts of transaction are conducted. However, our intentions, attitudes, understanding, and spiritual condition can lend 'color' to these events.

More specifically, while Divinity establishes the parameters of conditions, gifts, and assigned portions that are destined for us in relation to every dimension of our lives, and while fundamental aspects of these parameters are entangled in struggle, you and I tend to filter the character of what is being transmitted through us in positive and negative ways. These positive and negative qualities are the ways in which we lend color to those facets of rizq transactions with which we are associated -- facets, one might add, that give expression to part of our assigned rizq even as we are serving as loci of manifestation for rizq transactions that are being directed to others.

For example, if we are charitable -- the positive way in which we serve as a loci for giving -- this is part of our rizq destiny, just as the giving that flows through us to someone else is part of the other individual's rizq destiny. At the same time, our charitable nature may be a gift of God for which little, or no, effort needs to be expended in order to be realized, or, on the other hand, we may have had to struggle long and hard to be able to act in a charitable fashion.

Alternatively, if we are selfish, resentful, and/or hateful with respect to various rizq transactions that are manifested through us and in which something we have (possessions, money, time, talents, and so on) is transferred to someone else to whom it has been assigned by God -- at least on a temporary basis -- then although we serve as a locus of transference, we have colored the transaction with various sorts of negative attitudes, feelings, and intentions. In short, we have added a certain degree of malevolence, negativity, destructiveness, or evil, if you will, to the transaction.

The person who has been assigned by Divinity to be the recipient in the foregoing transaction is acquiring at least three portions of rizq. First, there is whatever money, material object, possession, help and so on that

is being transmitted through the person who has been assigned to serve as locus of giving. Secondly, there is the negative coloring of the transaction that has been added by the one through whom the giving is manifested. Thirdly, there is the opportunity being extended to the recipient, by God, to deal with both the giving and the 'value added' coloring in a spiritually appropriate or inappropriate manner -- and the choices made concerning the form that this 'dealing' will take becomes a locus through which further rizq transactions are conducted.

The individual who, by the grace of God, has been given knowledge of the Self, understands that all of existence is a theater of Divine manifestation that gives expression to Creation's Purpose by means of a woven mosaic of rizq transactions in which human beings -- and, indeed, all created being -- are rooted as loci of transmission and receipt with respect to the play of Divine Names and Attributes ... a play that is for the benefit of all Creation. The individual who, through the blessings of Divinity, has attained to Self-knowledge understands her or his role in the scheme of things and seeks to be a loci -- whether of transmission or receipt -- that filters the rizq transactions through a pure process of submission to Divine purpose and a desire to serve all of Creation, not to rule over Creation. The person who, by the mercy of Allah, has had the nature of the Self unveiled, understands that God's Purpose intends nothing but good for all of Creation, including human kind, and such people dedicate their lives to doing whatever they can to share with others whatever they know concerning this good.

The individual who has not, by the grace of his or her own lower self, attained to knowledge of the Self, and, as a result, knows only the 'self', has not acquired something of the 'taste' of Divine purpose, and, consequently, fails to grasp the manner in which all of creation is united in the tapestry of rizq transactions for a common Divine Purpose. The person who, due to the ignorance in which such an individual is entangled, does not grasp his or her role in the scheme of things, and, therefore, tends, in a variety of ways, to resist and rebel against the rizq transactions that are being transmitted through that person ... ways that might not serve the best, long-term interests of the individual but which do not deter the Divine Purpose from being given unfettered manifestation through a multiplicity of dimensions entailed by the complex set of rizq transactions that constitute Creation. The person who, through self-absorption, tends to undermine and

sacrifice the Divinely-given opportunity to be opened up to spiritual unveiling, does not understand that God's intentions toward creation and human kind are beneficent in nature.

Ignorance sees through lenses of spiritual darkness. All events in the view of ignorance are filtered through, and colored by, those lenses.

Ignorance seeks to usurp the role of God, because the nature of ignorance is not to know any better since ignorance veils, and is veiled from, the truth of Divine Purpose. Ignorance, by 'virtue' of the very nature of ignorance, is steeped in impatience and wishes to place its own timetable upon God's Plan. Ignorance, due to its essential lack of knowledge and understanding, seeks to impose its darkness on everyone else, and will not be content until all of creation falls beneath its shadow.

The shaykhs of the path of tasawwuf indicate that one must struggle toward repentance, sincerity, tolerance, patience forgiveness, nobility, justice, kindness, love, compassion, and remembrance because the way to Self-realization is lit by these spiritual stations. Ignorance has little regard for such qualities and believes that, somehow, a lack of wisdom, insight, and understanding will be triumphant.

The nature of ignorance is to not understand its own presence. Ignorance is inclined to miss the fact that the shapes it sees are merely ones that have been superimposed upon reality by the character of the ignorance involved.

Ignorance kills. Ignorance destroys. Ignorance tortures. Ignorance distorts. Ignorance persecutes. Ignorance oppresses. Ignorance terrorizes.

To whatever extent we permit ourselves to filter the network of Divinely ordained rizq transactions that give expression to the Purpose of Creation through the lenses of ignorance, to that extent will we be inclined to kill, destroy, torture, distort, persecute, oppress, and terrorize -- both others and ourselves. If we wish to understand the origins of evil, let us look to the spiritual ignorance within us ... for that is where it all begins.

Jesus (peace be upon him) and the Crucifixion

Someone wrote and raised several questions about the Quranic account of Isa (peace be upon him) and the crucifixion. This person wanted to know how to reconcile the fact that many historians indicate Jesus (peace be upon him) died on the cross, whereas the account given in the Qur'an differs from what most historians seem to indicate.

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You have asked several questions. One is about the writing of history and the other involves the issue of Isa (peace be upon him) in relation to the question of crucifixion.

History is written by individuals who, on the basis of certain presuppositions, biases, interests, experiences, and purposes, weave together a narrative account of certain events that might, or might not, reflect the reality of the existential circumstances being recounted. The vulnerabilities of memory, understanding, motivation, beliefs, emotion and "evidence" can all skew the character of history.

The 'history' of winners tends to be very different from the 'history' of losers. Similarly, the 'history' of the oppressor is often at odds with the 'history' of the oppressed. One culture tends to write the history of other cultures as a function of the perspective of the former rather than the latter.

Institutions, governments, nations, and communities often want to project certain images to others. People who write history tend to be inclined to re-frame and filter events through a hermeneutical or interpretive set of glasses that alters the way reality is seen and understood.

Finally, even when biases, presuppositions, and the like can be kept to a minimum, one is confronted by the unavoidable fact that reality is always much richer than our capacity to describe it. Histories constitute a process of sifting in which -- depending on the gauge of the holes in one's methodological sieve -- only certain facets of reality are retained for examination ... the rest of reality is lost.

If one supposes that everything which happens, happens for a reason, then the decision to treat certain events as important, while relegating other events to relative insignificance, means that one's understanding of the ecology of history and the way that even,

seemingly insignificant events may have profound effects on other aspects of existence [in the parlance of modern chaos theory, this is known as the butterfly effect], and this may result in very distorted conceptions of what went on at a given time and place. If, on the other hand, one supposes that everything is a matter of random, chance events, then the quality of one's sampling techniques, together with one's skill in interpolating and extrapolating amidst the random phenomenon of life will play a key role in how one views history.

Should one conclude from the former comments that there is no such thing as 'true history'? Well, if by 'true history' one means the complete truth, then yes, there is no such thing as 'true history' when considered from the perspective of human beings ... even taken collectively. Nevertheless, there can be substantial qualitative differences in the accuracy and value of various historical accounts, but in saying this, one is alluding to the tremendous difficulties that permeate and surround the process of writing good history.

The fact of the matter is, one would be incorrect to say that "much of written history claims he [Jesus (peace be upon him) was crucified]". The proper statement would be: much of Christian history claims that Jesus (peace be upon him) was crucified -- and in making this statement one is only testifying to the truth of what has been written by this or that Christian historian and not necessarily about the truth of what did, or did not, happen more than 2000 years ago.

Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Aborigine, Jewish, Taoist, Shinto, Confucius, indigenous, Muslim, agnostic, communist, and atheist historians do not necessarily claim that Jesus (peace be upon him) was crucified on the cross. These individuals and groups write quite different histories that might, or may not be, true, to one degree or another.

The Qur'an says the following:

"And their saying: Surely we have killed the Messiah, Isa son of Marium, the apostle of Allah; and they did not kill him nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them so (like Isa) and most surely those who differ therein are only in a doubt about it; they have no knowledge

respecting it, but only follow a conjecture, and they killed him not for sure." (4:157)

Depending on one's perspective, one may consider the Qur'an to be revelation, storytelling, history, myths, or creative fiction. For those who believe, revelation is not history, but rather, it is the uncreated Word of God giving expression to certain truths that require further assistance from Divinity in order to be properly understood.

Let us leave aside for the moment the issue of whether, or not, Jesus (peace be upon him) was, or was not, crucified. Let us, instead, look at a related issue -- namely, whether this issue should assume the importance it does in the minds and hearts of many people?

Most people desire salvation -- that is, they wish to attain to Paradise and avoid Hell. In some theologies, the significance of the alleged death of Jesus (peace be upon him) on the cross plays a central role in the passion play surrounding the issue of salvation.

Thus, in John 3:16, one finds:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Even if one granted the truth of the foregoing statement, what does this concession have to do with the problem of learning how to emulate, as best one can, the example of Jesus (peace be upon him) so that one's manner of being is a testament to the loving, living presence of Jesus (peace be upon him) in one's everyday life? How can anyone be said to believe in Jesus (peace be upon him) if the individual does not incorporate the principles of love, sacrifice, kindness, charity, tolerance, forgiveness, honesty, nobility, and integrity of character into one's lived life that Jesus (peace be upon him) taught through both his words and his deeds?

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"Faith consists in: profession of the mouth, verification of the heart, and action of the limbs."

One cannot be said to have to believe in, or have faith in, say, Jesus (peace be upon him) unless one not only talks the talk, but walks the walk, and, as well, experientially verifies in one's own heart the truth of what is being said and done.

People, including historians, use theology to interpret the events of life. The histories that arise out of these theologically framed accounts tend to reflect theology more than reality.

Some people use theology to separate people, not unite them. Jesus (peace be upon him) was not a theologian, but this or that theology and/or theologian attempts to use the authority of Jesus (peace be upon him) to spread division and dissension. Some people do the same with respect to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), or Moses (peace be upon him), or the Buddha (peace be upon him), or Krishna (peace be upon him).

You and I, and so many others, were not there at the time of Jesus (peace be upon him). We know what the Bible says, and we know what the Qur'an says, and we know what so many historians and theologians say.

However, I would suggest that the issue of the crucifixion is not of fundamental importance. What is of fundamental importance is to seek to live the kind of life that Jesus (peace be upon him) led. The teachings of Jesus (peace be upon him) have to do with his life and not with what might, or might not, have happened in relation to the cross.

If one is pinning all one's hopes on the possible meaning and significance of a crucifixion, then I think one has missed the point of the life of Jesus (peace be upon him). In fact, I will state this in a stronger way: anyone who claims to believe in Jesus (peace be upon him) and orients his or her life around the possible significance of the cross to the relative exclusion of the loving, tolerant, forgiving, kind, generous, courageous, noble, spiritual example to which the life of Jesus (peace be upon him) gave expression by the Grace of God, then I would question to what extent such a person truly believes in Jesus (peace be upon him) ... and this raises the question of whether John 3:16 even applies to such an individual.

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There was a follow up question concerning the ambiguity surrounding the issue of crucifixion in the Qur'an. A person wanted to know what really happened.

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There are many things that Divinity does that are left ambiguous and mysterious. There are many Divine purposes for arranging the different dimensions of creation in this manner.

One such purpose is that if everything were made clear and evident to one and all, then, as the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) is reported to have said:

"God has seventy thousand veils of light and darkness; were they to be removed, the Glories of God's face would burn away everything perceived by the sight of God's creatures."

The veiled, layered, multi-dimensional structural character of Reality serves Divine purposes. For instance, the Prophet is reported to have said:

"This life is but a tillage for the next, therefore, do good deeds here that you may reap benefits there -- for, striving is the ordinance of God, and whatever God has ordained can be attained only by striving."

One must strive for knowledge, understanding and wisdom. One must rigorously explore life and, if God wishes, then, the truth about this or that aspect of existence may be disclosed to some degree – but Allah gives to whomsoever Divinity pleases ... irrespective of how much one has striven:

"God possesses the keys of the heaven and the earth." (Qur'an, 42:12),

and, as well:

"O people, you are the poor toward God, and God is the Independent, the Praiseworthy." (Qur'an, 35:15)

All of life is a test -- a test of sincerity:

"True believers are only those who have in faith in Allah and the Messenger of Allah and have left doubt behind, and who strive hard in Allah's cause with their possessions and their lives. They are the ones who are sincere." (Qur'an, 49:15)

Leaving doubt behind does not mean becoming dogmatic about issues. It means having yaqeen or spiritual certainty about what is known and accepting that what is not yet known has been kept from one for a reason, and despite this, we continue to strive and struggle to operate in accordance with God's Himma, or aspiration, not our own.

The people in Alcoholics Anonymous begin every meeting with the Serenity Prayer:

"God, grant me: the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."

One of the things that we cannot change concerns those things that, for whatever Divine purpose, are kept a secret. We cannot storm the spiritual counterpart to the Bastille and demand the release of what we wish to know.

Faith is not blind belief. Rather, faith is an acceptance of what has not, yet, been disclosed on the basis of what has been, by the Grace of God, already been disclosed, so that faith in the unseen is rooted in knowledge of truth -- but in accordance with the extent to which Divinity has apportioned this knowledge.

One should strive, struggle, seek, rigorously explore, reflect, contemplate, study, and question. Yet, there comes a time when one also has to accept that one has done as much as one can, and the results must be

left to God for disposition -- this includes all facets of the pursuit of knowledge.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has been reported to have said:

“Knowledge is the lost property of believers, so every Muslim is under an obligation to strive for knowledge.”

Or, the Prophet also is reported to have said:

“Seek knowledge, even unto China.”

Our responsibility is to seek and to strive. How, if, or to what extent such striving is engaged by Divinity is the business of Divinity.

A man once went to a Sufi shaykh and spoke about a litany of problems that were besetting the man's life. The man asked the shaykh what should be done in the face of such problems. The shaykh said: “Learn to swim.”

There are many waves, currents, dangers, storms, and mysteries in the ocean of life. We can wonder why the ocean is the way it is or take exception with this or that aspect of the way the ocean works, but whatever we do, there is one thing that no one can avoid doing -- we need to learn to swim irrespective of whether, or not, we understand the nature of the ocean of life.

Knowing the answer to the question that you are asking is not going to help you learn how to swim and survive amidst the ambiguities, puzzles, and mysteries of ocean life. Learning how to swim despite these ambiguities is what is needed.

Everybody has been given a capacity for free will. The test of life is a function of how we exercise this capacity while swimming about the ocean of Being.

Those who seek to do mischief in conjunction with life's mysteries transgress against their own souls and do injustice to life's purpose. Work with what God gives, strive to improve one's understanding,

knowledge, and wisdom, but leave what is clearly a mystery alone until God permits one to do otherwise -- and the issue concerning the crucifixion is clearly a mystery that if God wished for human beings to know the nature of that mystery and the underlying Divine purpose for it, then he would have disclosed the matter within Revelation but this was not done, and "to God belongs the conclusive argument". (Qur'an, 6:149).

Marriage and the Muslimah

Someone wrote and asked a question in relation to a set of events in a certain book. Those events revolved around a woman who had accepted Islam but was married to a non-Muslim. There were several questions raised in conjunction with the indicated events, but the essential issue concerns marriage and Muslim women.

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The character in the story to which you refer is a little different than the one you have outlined in your posting. Initially, the false shaykh said the husband of the woman was an unbeliever.

The issue was not that the woman had accepted Islam and, therefore, because the man was not Muslim, then, as a result, he was impermissible to her. The man to whom the woman was married was said to be an unbeliever.

This, of course, raises the question of what constitutes being an unbeliever. Very instructive in this regard is the fact that Iblis/Satan is an unbeliever -- not because he is an atheist or because he believes in more than one God but because he does not act, or try to act, with sincerity in relation to Divinity.

Iblis/Satan knows God exists. Iblis knows it was God who raised him in spiritual station to associate amongst the angels and to even teach them. Iblis knows God has dominion over all things -- and this is why, as the Qur'an indicates, Iblis asked God's leave for respite from the judgment against him in order that Iblis could lie in wait on the sirat-ul-mustaqueem (the straight path) and try to lead human beings astray.

So, if Iblis accepts the existence of God, then why is he an unbeliever. He is an unbeliever because he seeks to serve his own agenda -- one that is not rooted in the adab of spirituality and sincerity with respect to God.

Iblis does not seek to serve God or be a servant of God. He seeks to push his own likes and dislikes, quite apart from what God wishes of those beings -- such as jinn and humankind -- who have the capacity to struggle with issues of good and evil.

The man to whom the woman in the book in question was married claimed he believed in God. Yet, nothing he did was consistent with such a claim.

He lied. He abused others -- including both his wife and children, as well as previous wives and their children. He molested and raped a number of women. He used people for his own purposes and self-aggrandizement.

Furthermore, the things that, on the surface, this man in the story seemed to do for others, were really exercises in image-management in order that others would think of him in a positive way ... a public image that was totally at odds with how he acted in private and behind people's back. He did these things not as acts of charitableness but so no one would suspect him of being such a cruel, controlling, abusive individual toward his wife and his children.

Or, when this man did things "for" his wife, he always did what he felt like doing and not what she needed him to do in order for her to be able to feel safe and secure and out of harm's way. For example, no matter how many errands a husband will run for a wife (or vice versa), what difference does this make if the woman (or man) feels constantly in danger and afraid of what his or her spouse will do to one?

The man in the story did not act out of any sort of ultimate principle. He acted totally in accordance with his own likes and dislikes.

The word "God" may have come out of his mouth. But the awareness of God's presence was to be found nowhere in that man's heart.

Consequently, the man in the story did not even have the belief of Iblis/Satan. At least Iblis -- when he wanted something -- asked God's help in satisfying his selfish, evil desire to dissuade human beings from the straight path.

A person -- in the case of the story being discussed, a woman -- who accepts Islam becomes impermissible to an unbeliever in the foregoing sense ... as is indicated in the Qur'an -- believing men for believing women, and unbelieving men for unbelieving women.

Now, if the husband of the woman in the story had been Christian or Jewish or a believer in one God (but with some other spiritual designation), then the issue becomes somewhat different. And, here, it is important not to get caught up in labels and names as is done so often

these days when people, on all sides of the issue, like to refer to anyone who does not share their point of view as "infidels" or unbelievers.

God is the One Who sees into our hearts. God is the One Who knows whether, or not, sincere belief is present in someone's inner being.

To be sincere does not necessarily mean that one is perfect. Almost all human beings make mistakes and commit sins.

To be sincere is to seek to persistently strive and struggle toward Divinity as best one can. When one makes mistakes, one repents for what one has done wrong and tries not to return to the errant behavior.

To be sincere is to seek to learn about how to implement principles of spirituality. To be sincere is to seek to learn how to realize the Divine purpose in one's life.

Whether a person calls himself or herself a Christian, a Jew, a Sabian, a Unitarian, or nothing in particular the litmus test to be -- in some minimal sense -- a believer is to make a concerted effort over time to live a morally, socially, and spiritually constructive life in accordance with one's understanding of the principles that God has given to human beings in many different geographical locations and historical periods.

A person may call himself or herself a Muslim or Christian or Jew or whatever, and, yet, not meet the foregoing standard with respect to what it is to be a believer. However, one needs to keep in mind that one does not have to be a perfect, or even a very good, believer in order to be a believer in a minimal sense.

This is why one should not be too quick to claim that such and such a person is a non-believer. One must also keep in mind that at one point in an individual's life he or she may be an unbeliever in the foregoing sense, and, yet, by the Grace of God, become a believer later in life ... or, one can be a believer -- as was Iblis before his fall -- and, then, when God withdraws Divine support, one may become an unbeliever.

Irrespective of label, if a person is a believer in the foregoing sense, then that individual should seek to be married to a like-minded and like-hearted individual -- not necessarily with respect to all issues and ideas, but, in general, the core of belief must be present in each individual for them to be permissible to one another as appropriate spiritual partners in marriage.

Life is such, however, that sometimes God changes the heart of one person in a marriage without changing the heart of the other person. For instance, one person becomes inclined toward Islam but the other person does not become so inclined. What should be done?

If the person whose heart is not inclined to Islam is a believer in the foregoing sense, then everything possible should be done to preserve the marriage -- even if the person who is non-Muslim stays non-Muslim, but strives to be a believer in the aforementioned sense. If the person who is not inclined to Islam is a non-believer, then after a reasonable time (and different people will have different ideas about what constitutes a 'reasonable' time here), the person who has accepted Islam should begin to find a way to disengage himself or herself -- in a marital sense -- from such an individual, because the relationship is not based in anything essential or real or constructive ... either for the individuals or for anyone else around them, including children.

Among the mullahs and theologians, there is a belief that a Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian or Jewish man or any man who is other than Muslim. Muslim men, however, are accorded the right to marry Christian or Jewish women.

Ostensibly, the reason for this difference is that these mullahs and theologians say the children of such a marriage belong to the man. Consequently, they claim that a Muslim man who is married to a Christian or Jewish woman would ensure that the children are brought up as Muslims, whereas a Muslim woman could not do this.

In truth, children belong to God, not to human beings, and we humans are merely entrusted, for a short period of time, to look after the needs of the children of God who are assigned to us by Divine decree. In essence, marriage in Islam is a contract between two people, and if the nature of that contract serves the basic principle of helping children to become believers in the aforementioned sense -- that is, as people who persistently strive to live life in accordance with spiritual principles that will serve God's purpose, then I am not sure what the limiting principle would be to extending the same right to Muslim women as Muslim men.

One should try to keep in mind that some of the things that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said while in this physical world were said in a context of seeking to reform Arab society from its days of ignorance. Not everything that he said was necessarily for all time but,

rather, may have been said to deal with the ways things were at that point in time, while continuing to work toward the reformation of Arab society over a period of time.

One cannot take sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) out of their full, spiritual, ecological context. They must be considered in conjunction with a great many spiritual principles in order to try to arrive at a considered judgment about how to proceed in this day and age in a manner that is consistent with the entire body of spiritual teachings -- not just this or that isolated precept.

The Prophet proved himself to be a very reasonable, pragmatic, and flexible individual. He would never do anything to violate the purpose of God, but, rather, everything he did was done in full cognizance that there are degrees of freedom present within every aspect of shari'ah.

One should not transgress those limits. However, there is nothing wrong with exploring what some of those degrees of freedom might permit in order to serve God's purpose. This is one of the reasons why there exist 5 different schools of Islamic jurisprudence, and, moreover, one should not suppose that the door to ijihad has closed in this respect.

Unfortunately, much of the Muslim community has long ago abandoned striving to explore the degrees of freedom that shari'ah actually permits. We see the sad results of this decision in every part of the Muslim world.

Degrees of freedom do not imply license. The challenge is to look for those degrees of freedom that, if God wishes, will serve the Divine Himma or aspiration for human existence vis-à-vis spirituality and life's purpose.



Seeking Blessings and Gender

A person -- who is non-Muslim -- wanted to know why there was a difference in how one used 'peace be upon him' in relation to the Prophet Adam, but used 'may Allah be pleased with her' in conjunction with Eve. The individual making the inquiries wanted to know if this was part and parcel of a patriarchal mentality within Islam in which a woman's task and role was to be pleasing to God and others.

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Without a doubt, there are substantial elements of Muslim belief (as opposed to Islamic -- since Muslim refers to human beings who aspire to follow the deen or way of Islam, whereas Islam refers to the way itself, and the questions that surround the nature of deen are at the heart of many differences of opinion and understanding among Muslims) that are couched in, shaped by, and informed through patriarchal notions. These misogynist/patriarchal-laced influences were prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia and Persia, and, then, they joined forces with the misogynist/patriarchal presence in India and a great many other cultures -- including North/South America and Europe -- where despite all the self-serving talk about the rights enjoyed by women, nevertheless, the latter are still treated, to a large extent, as second and third class citizens when it comes to work, education, economic opportunities, status, rights, protections, and political influence.

The nature of Islam is to introduce change in a manageable way. Among other things, 'manageable' means to take into consideration the many weaknesses and shortcomings of human beings -- whether male or female -- that might undermine or obstruct the path to societal reform.

This happened in conjunction with many of the basic pillars of Islam -- such as ritual prayer, fasting and Hajj -- that were not present when Islam first began to be spread in the Hijaz, or Arabia, via the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him). These practices only were established over time.

Similarly, the injunctions against the imbibing of alcohol only were gradually introduced over a period of time. First, came the Quranic warning that said, in effect, there is both good and bad inherent in the use of alcohol, but the bad outweighs the good.

Later, the use of alcohol was completely banned. In fact, when the announcement concerning the revelation dealing with this ban began to spread through the Muslim community, several close Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) were in the process of sampling some wine that they had made, and the streets of the city became wet with the containers of wine that were emptied by the Muslims who, up until that time, could partake in the drinking of alcohol.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Qur'an followed the same path of gradual reform with respect to women. Women were brought from a status -- or lack thereof -- in which female babies were buried alive in pre-Islamic Arabia, to the point, at the end of the Prophet's earthly life, where women enjoyed many of the same rights as did men. The Prophet -- in his farewell sermon of his last Hajj -- referred to the rights of women and enjoined the Muslim community to honor and protect those rights.

I have no doubt that if the Prophet had continued to live for another 1400 years, then, with God's permission and direction, the Prophet would have continued the process of reforming the cultural practices of the society in which he lived -- not only in relation to women, but in many other ways as well. Unfortunately, or fortunately, it is in the nature of things that all human beings must die, and, unfortunately, it is in the nature of human beings to begin to become heedless when a spiritual presence is removed -- at least as manifested through a physical form such as a Prophet, Companion, or saint of God.

So, when the Prophet passed away, gradually darkness began to seep into the everyday lives and consciousness of people. This darkness was spoken of, in different ways, by the Companions.

When the Companions began to die, further darkness entered the community. As various great spiritual luminaries have passed from this world, additional darkness has filtered into the lives of human beings.

Spiritually speaking, we live in dark times ... not spiritually enlightened times. Modern human beings tend to pride ourselves on how much we allegedly know and understand -- but, spiritually speaking, we (collectively considered) are among the most ignorant people who have ever lived ... and the proof of this is all around us in the form of genocidal wars, mass-starvation and hunger, economic, political, and spiritual oppression, lack of charitableness, rapes, sexual molestation,

and yes, the rendering of women into third, fourth, and fifth class 'citizens' of the world.

The distinction that is drawn between seeking Salaam or peace on someone who has passed from this physical presence, rather than seeking for God's pleasure for a human being who has passed away, follows the line that divides Prophets from non-Prophets, irrespective of whether the people involved are men or women. According to tradition, there are said to have been some 124,000 Prophets who were sent to human kind by Divinity, and in the Qur'an only some 25, or so, Prophets are mentioned by name.

Thus, there are some 123,973 individuals whose identity, as well as gender, is unknown. People, whether Muslim or non Muslim can generate whatever theories they like about the identities of such individuals, but, in truth, we just don't know anything about any of this.

The use of either "peace be upon him/her" or the phrase "may God be pleased with him/her" is, in actuality, a prayer of sorts. The person who says or writes these phrases is seeking blessings from God upon these personalities -- whether these blessings be in the form of Salaam, Peace, that is one of the Names of God, or in the form of God's pleasure toward, or being pleased with, the spiritual station of such an individual.

It is not the task of just women to be pleasing to God. This is the task of every human being.

One can, in this regard, mention the Biblical story about the Talents -- a denomination of money -- that was either squandered, buried or put to good use by several individuals. To be pleasing to God is to find ways to spend the Talents or gifts that have been bestowed upon us for the spiritual betterment of ourselves and the community in which we live.

In addition, the use of such phrases is an attempt to maintain a spiritual presence in language -- that is, to invoke the blessings of God through the manner in which we speak and write. Unfortunately, this practice is more and more absent from the modern landscape in which the sacred is all but lost amidst billions of bytes of mere information.

One does not have to be a Sufi or Muslim to participate in the online 'Spiritual Health Learning Community'. One only has to be interested in seeking the truth, and I don't believe that either Sufis or Muslims have cornered the market on truth ... in fact, as has been the case in many

traditional societies -- whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Jain, indigenous peoples, Taoist, or Buddhist -- the sad fact is that more and more people are losing, or already have lost, contact with the truth ... a loss that parallels the spiritual darkness that surrounds us and permeates us and renders so many of us vulnerable to one form or another of spiritual abuse and spiritual fraud -- whether in the shape of certain so-called Sufi shaykhs, who are nothing more than charlatans, or in the form of some other kind of alleged teacher who claims to espouse the truth, even as he or she is abusing, exploiting, and hurting people in the name of truth and the sacred.

We human beings are in quite a predicament. The troubling nature of these circumstances have helped lead to the creation of the 'Spiritual Health Learning Community' that is intended to serve as sacred-leaning (i.e., oriented) places through that people can, as with an oasis, stop and rest for a while from their spiritual journey amidst like-minded and like-hearted individuals who also are, God willing, seeking the truth ... or, at least, as much of the truth as our individual capacities are capable of realizing, if God so pleases -- whether we be men or women, Muslim or non-Muslim.

Spiritual Abuse, Karma, and Seeking

Someone wrote to me and described some of the spiritual abuse that this individual had experienced. Among other things, the person indicated how hard it was to start over again spiritually after feeling so betrayed.

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As someone who has been on the receiving end of spiritual abuse, I have an abiding empathy for the sense of betrayal (spiritual, emotional, social, and intellectually) that you have felt and are feeling with respect to your past experiences with people who purported to be authentic mystics, but, unfortunately, as events over time proved, are not. The grief that one feels when one's holy longing has been trampled upon is very deep and cuts to the core of who one is or aspires to be.

There were a variety of issues that you raised in your posting. I will try to respond to a number of them, but what I am saying is merely food for thought, and you should not feel, in any way, that I am seeking to make judgments about you or your life ... my comments are more directed toward the structural character of the framework you were induced to adopt through which to view the Sufi path -- a framework that others built for you and that you, in all innocence and sincerity, accepted as being true.

I do not know your previous 'teacher'. You say the individual was a pious and sincere Muslim ... perhaps, yes ... perhaps, not necessarily.

I spent around 10-11 years with a man (and I used this term advisedly) who professed to be a Muslim and a Sufi shaykh. For 10-11 years I believed that person to be sincere and pious, until the unfolding of events made it clear there was a huge difference between how this individual invented a persona for public consumption that was at great odds with his private behavior.

Many people, including me, thought this individual was a pious and sincere person. Moreover, this person didn't speak about a form of Sufism or tasawwuf that was at odds with the Islamic spiritual tradition, but something that went to the very heart of that tradition and that was completely compatible with both the exoteric and esoteric teachings that have been taught over the years by the great scholars of Islam.

However, talk is cheap. Deeds and what goes on in the darkness of someone's heart is quite another matter.

To me, it is an oxymoron for someone to seek to convey the idea that they are a pious and sincere Muslim and, simultaneously, teach principles and values that cannot be reconciled with either the Qur'an or the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Neither the idea of karma, nor a belief in re-incarnation are supportable by original texts -- whether Divine (i.e., revelation), Prophetic (i.e., traditions), or from any of the great shaykhs.

A remember a conversation I had with an authentic Sufi shaykh (who was my first teacher and prior to my encounter with a false shaykh) about the issue of karma. If one takes karma as being a universal principle that operates independently of Divine Grace and forgiveness, and if one takes karma as an explanatory principle that seeks to account for why there are inequalities and disparities in the world that are independent of the Divine rizq (allotment) that is assigned by God according to Divine purposes, and if one takes karma as a way of saying "what goes around, comes around" that is independent of the trials and tribulations that come into everyone's life (including the Prophets and saints) and have nothing to do with any self-contained principle of retribution and reward for the quality of one's conduct -- then, given the foregoing, from the Sufi perspective, there is no such thing as karma, but, rather, karma is a theoretical idea that has been invented by some to explain why suffering exists and, in the process, seeks to by-pass the fact that God alone is supreme and Divinity does with Creation whatever Divinity wishes.

Karma does not explain why a person makes the initial choice that leads in certain directions. Nor, does karma explain how someone falls from grace, nor does karma explain how such a person becomes raised up from the depths of human degradation, despite having done nothing to deserve such Divine favor.

The great shaykhs have all said that one should not count on one's prayers, fasts, zakat, pilgrimages or good deeds to save one. Our actions do not control Divine activity and response, and, yet, there is a need for prayers, fasting, charity, and good works -- for the constructive impact these have on the quality of our lives, and not because the universe is set up according to a quid pro quo arrangement between Divinity and Creation

that is played out on a game board that is ruled by principles of karma and reincarnation in an eternal 'Groundhog Day' temporal warp.

God's supremacy is such that the Sufi shaykhs have indicated that on the Day of Judgment there will be a few people who will be delivered into Paradise despite having done nothing good in their lives. God's Mercy does have precedence over Divine wrath, and Divinity is the One Who has attested to this truth.

The issues surrounding reincarnation are similar to the foregoing. Reincarnation is a theory that has been invented in order to try to account for, or make sense of, various experiential data. There is nothing in either the Qur'an, nor the Prophetic traditions, nor the teachings of such notables as al-Muhasibi, Junayd, Qadir Jilani, al-Ghazali, Ibn al-'Arabi, Ahmad Sirhindi, or others (may Allah be pleased with them all) that says anything but the fact that we only get one kick of the can, and this world is the only place we get to take a kick at the can of life and the spiritual challenges encompassed by life that are inherent in the Divine purpose.

These truths that are given expression in the Qur'an, the Traditions, and the teachings of the great spiritual masters of the Sufi path, indicate that one of the reasons life is so precious is because it is a non-renewable resource as far as realizing the purpose of one's life is concerned. The purpose of life is not perfection, for only God is perfect, and to aspire to perfection is arrogant -- rather, we should seek out the Divine Himma, or aspiration, for us -- a himma that is inherent in our fitra or essential, spiritual nature.

We are who we are. To desire to be other than that is foolhardy and sets us up for nothing but frustration and disappointment.

What people suppose to be evidence for the existence of reincarnation (e.g., the fact that some people seem to be able to re-experience earlier lives) is a misinterpretation of such data. Another phenomenon (in which the souls of different people have become entangled to the point of feeling a sense of identity) is going on which is altogether independent of issues of reincarnation, and one can no more suppose that such a phenomenon constitutes evidence for reincarnation than one can suppose that because one is able to watch the History channel on television that one is witnessing a previous life -- something is being communicated through such experiences, but this 'something' is not a previous life, but, rather information about

someone's experience that has been tapped into and with which one has identified and interpreted it as one's own when it is someone else's.

Descartes said: "I think, therefore, I am". He might have been more accurate to say that 'something thinks, therefore something is'.

There are many channels through which human beings are sensitive to the universe -- sometimes this sensitivity is touched through physical events, or dreams, or spiritual experiences. However, none of this sensitivity to the array of influences in the universe requires us to be forced to resort to the theory of reincarnation as the only way to make logical or spiritual sense out of such experiential data.

Now I know you understand the foregoing -- or, at least, your posting suggests you do. I have gone into a little detail with respect to the foregoing as a prelude to answering your question -- namely, are there now, or have there ever been, any authentic Sufi groups who have espoused such doctrines as karma and reincarnation? The answer to this question is an unqualified "No!"

As far as your feeling is concerned about how difficult it is to start over again, please consider the following. While on the one hand, I appreciate this aspect of your situation more than you can know, nevertheless, on the other hand, not only do we have no other real choice in the matter - - since the alternative is to let such frauds (especially the chief of all spiritual charlatans, Iblis or Satan) win the day by succumbing to the plan that Satan announced to God after his fall from Grace ... that is, the plan that involved the respite for which Satan asked and that was granted by God and with respect to which he promised to lay in wait along the sirat-ul-mustaqueen and seek to dissuade human beings from the straight path.

These spiritual charlatans -- like your teacher and the one with whom I interacted -- are part of the ambush that Satan has set in place in order to destroy our faith, to discourage us, to send us into tailspins of despair, depression, grief, and to induce us to become alienated from the struggle into which we were born through Divinity in order to have an opportunity to work toward realizing our spiritual potential.

Yes, the pain of spiritual betrayal is terribly debilitating and painful. The pain that ensues from allowing ourselves to be ruled by this pain and

debilitated condition is to add insult to injury -- an insult that is totally self-inflicted.

Iblis and his minions can lead us to the brink of wishing to destroy ourselves spiritually. But, we are the ones who make that final, sometimes irrevocable choice, that permits ourselves to be taken over by such forces -- and, remember, the Qur'an clearly points out in relation to Iblis's request for a respite and his plan to create a detour for human spiritual aspiration that only those who permit themselves to fall under the sway of this plan will fall. If we do not make that fateful choice, things may be difficult, but the first step down the slippery slope of opening oneself up to Satanic suggestion, 'guidance', influence, delusion, and illusion will not have been taken ... as we are enjoined in the Qur'an, 'do not despair of the mercy of thy Lord'.

There is a well-known story with which you may, or may not, be familiar. More specifically, a man is reviewing his life and notes that at many junctures in his life there are two sets of footprints that mark his journey through life, and he understands this to mean that God was walking with him at such points. But, then, he comes upon a portion of his life in which there is only one set of footprints, and the individual interprets this to mean that God had abandoned him when, in truth and as Divinity points out to him, such places mark the place where we are carried by God.

Whether you presently believe so, or not, your participation in this 'Spiritual Learning Community' (which is focused on learning about issues affecting spiritual health) is an oasis provided for you, and others (including myself), to permit you some time to refresh yourself, heal, be nurtured, gain perspective, and find, God willing, encouragement, support, and constructive assistance. How did you come here? What set of forces were in play to not only permit you to find this Community but to go ahead and join, despite your previous experiences?

I agree with you that the so-called 'community of scholars' -- whether Muslim or non-Muslim -- lack a great deal of intellectual and spiritual rigor in their examination and acceptance of this or that person as being an authentic exemplar of the Sufi tradition. This is one of the most alarming things that has bubbled to the surface of my consciousness over the last year, or so. The sad fact of the matter is, most of the so-called Islamic scholars in North America -- and, indeed, in many

other places, in the world as well -- really don't have any, or much, insight into determining the authenticity of an alleged Sufi guide.

People confuse surface hype with the reality of what is hidden in the lives of many of these so-called teachers. People conflate book learning and actual mystical understanding. People suppose that they would be able to differentiate frauds from the real deal if confronted with such individuals, and, in most cases, they cannot, but in keeping with the story about the 'Emperor who had no clothes', these so-called Muslim scholars have convinced themselves, or have been induced by others to believe, that all manner of alleged 'shaykhs' are clothed with legitimacy when, in truth, most of the latter group are buck naked -- wearing nothing but, spiritually speaking, the birth day suit with which they came into this world.

This 'Spiritual Health Learning Community' has been created not as an end, but as an opportunity to learn while we wait and search for whatever remnants of spiritual authenticity might be left in this world. That such remnants do exist follows from the fact that the world is still in existence and the greater events of the Latter Days have not, yet, transpired (i.e., the coming of the Mahdi (may Allah be pleased with him), the dajjal (the spiritual imposter), Isa (peace be upon him), the Beast, the rise of Gog and Magog, and so on.

Originally, I was thinking of naming this Community: 'Waiting for Shams'. It was intended to serve as a sort of way station for the spiritually disaffected and abused among us who were seeking some sort of process through which to re-orient or re-right themselves spiritually by interacting with the holy longing of others and benefiting from the support of other Community members through discussing and reflecting on a variety of spiritual issues, problems, and questions.

The Community was, and is, intended as an opportunity to do something constructive while biding our time and waiting in case a real Shams-like figure comes along. The Community was, and is, intended to serve as a means of exchanging information, hopes, possibilities, ideas, understandings, and concerns with one another about spirituality -- including the discovery of potentially authentic shaykhs.

But, all of the foregoing is intended to occur within a responsible environment. In other words, without wishing to throw the mystical baby out with the dirty bath water of spiritual fraudulence and, as a result, abandoning the spiritual/mystical quest altogether, we each have a

duty of care to the other members of the Community to critically reflect upon a variety of issues and try to explore matters in a balanced manner that will not cause us to make the only two kinds of mistake one can make -- namely, we should try not to accept a false hypothesis as true, and we should try not to reject a true hypothesis as false. The difference between the two lies in the details, and it is these details that need to be critically examined in order to serve as a constructive source of insight from which well considered spiritual decisions might be made -- each in our own way -- and without any expectations as to how we each should live our, respective spiritual lives ... for, this is the grist around which individual choice grinds.

I would say that, in one sense or another, most of the people who will become members -- whether temporarily or somewhat longer -- are people who are looking for a new start. Maybe, they have been spiritually abused; maybe, nothing that they have tried so far has spiritually clicked or resonated with their hearts; maybe, they are disappointed in one, or another, facet of spiritual life and feel a need for the kind of meaning, purpose, guidance, and relationships to which one can commit oneself constructively; maybe, they have been turned off by the rigidity, if not fanatical fundamentalism, of various approaches to spirituality, and, yet, do not feel that one can make up the rules as one goes along; maybe, they have become disillusioned in the so-called 'spiritual leadership' that, thus far in life, has been available to them.

Starting over is not a defeat or an end, it is a beginning that recognizes that the direction in which we have been traveling is not satisfying our holy longing. Every time we learn something new, we begin again from a new place, with a new understanding, and sense of appreciation both for what we have learned, as well as that which we do not yet know or understand.

We may not rise to the spiritual station to which we aspire, but this is not the purpose of life. The purpose of life is to discover the station to which Divinity wishes us to aspire to and, then, set about doing the best our capacity permits to serve, love, and worship Divinity through that station.

I am not a shaykh. I am a fellow seeker.

I may understand some things, while there is much that I do not understand. I am prepared to share whatever I have with others, and I hope others will be willing to reciprocate.

The goal of this reciprocity is not to reach an agreement about how to proceed in life and, then, to start a social/spiritual movement of some kind to give expression to that shared framework of values. The goal of this reciprocity is to help one another struggle toward being the best human beings we can be.

Love, kindness, tolerance, empathy, integrity, peace, sincerity, hope, inspiration, honesty, nobility, generosity, forgiveness, and patience -- to mention but a few -- are the woof and warp through which our relationships with one another are to be woven. These qualities are far more important to establish as a venue through which to explore mysticism/spirituality than are a body of theological doctrines.

An Open Letter to the Muslim Community

As-Salaam-u-'alaykum! (Peace be upon you)

There are many issues that need to be addressed by the Muslim community. Without wishing to say I have any of the answers, there are a great many problems surrounding the hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation) of such concepts as ijma, qiyas, and ijihad, all of which have, in different ways, contributed to what appears to be the rather moribund state of modern understanding concerning various facets of shari'ah and tariqa.

I have no wish to reinvent the spiritual wheel, and I have no desire to deviate from the teachings of either the Qur'an or the sunna (actions of the Prophet) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). However, quite frankly, what many people take those teachings to encompass may be quite other than what the actual original intention underlying what is being said may be.

For example, many people confuse tafsir and ta'wil, and even in the latter case, some suppose that ta'wil means interpretation. In reality, ta'wil alludes to the process of being brought back to first principles through Divine assistance ... something quite different than interpretation and of great significance since interpretation (or the veiling of Revelation through personal, rational predilections) of the Qur'an is forbidden --- a prohibition that went unheeded both by the proponents of kalaam and philosophy, and we suffer today as a result of the distortions that have arisen through the varied forms of these 'disciplines'.

Many people believe the doors of ijihad closed in the 11th-12th century, and such individuals believe this is quite appropriate. I feel such a belief is both arrogant and dismissive of the fact that Divinity continues to be manifested (even if not in the form of Revelation or a continuing Prophetic tradition) in the form of ijihad and, therefore, should not necessarily be arbitrarily foreclosed on by human beings but, rather, ijihad should be examined for traces of how Divine guidance exists in modes that, God willing, might serve to complement the two basic sources of Divine assistance (i.e., Qur'an and the sunna of the Prophet), and, thereby, be used by human beings to address problems of today in circumstances that are, in some ways, quite different from the time of the Prophet.

Some Christians are fond of the letters 'wwjd' ... what would Jesus (peace be upon him) do. An Islamic counterpart might be 'wwmd' -- what would Muhammad (peace be upon him) do, and the fact of the matter is I am not convinced that a lot of Muslims (and I am not necessarily excluding myself here) understand the nature of the *niyat* and insight that go into giving expression to action ... not only with respect to themselves, but especially in relation to the Prophet. For a non-Prophet to try to figure out what a Prophet might do in a given set of circumstances is, I think, a rather risky business ... and, yet, many people suppose they understand where the Prophet is coming from when he says the things that are reported in the *hadith*, or they believe they understand how a Prophet would balance different considerations, or what weights to assign, or what priorities are to be given to various principles, or whether something that has been recorded was intended for the parties to whom it was said only, or to the generality of Muslims who lived at that time, or in some more universal fashion.

All too many people make pronouncements based on their interpretation of things or someone else's interpretation of things, and, unfortunately, there often is not much dialogue going on about the hermeneutical problems that are entailed by the process of interpretation or the possibilities that might be encompassed by different modalities of *ijtihad*, or why the process of reasoning should be limited to *qiyas*, or even what the structural character of *qiyas* actually is -- since there are a wide variety of bases in which analogical reasoning can be rooted. Similarly, everyone supposes they understand the scope and character of *aql* ... that usually reduces down to the manner in which they, themselves, think ... much as we suppose that common sense reflects our own way of doing things.

Many Muslim thinkers have painted the Muslim community into an almost untenable position. Many of the rest of us have let them.

Perhaps, it is time for something new and different to be tried ... but something that is fully reconcilable with the spirit of the Qur'an and *sunna*. *Ijtihad* is the bridge here, but trying to find the right framework of *ijtihad* or an appropriate set of principles for this project is the challenge before us.

I don't want to revolutionize Islam -- because Islam is God-given and quite adequate to the needs of human beings as it is. What needs to be

revolutionized are the ways in which Muslims understand the nature, principles, and essence of the many dimensions and levels encompassed by Islam.

One should not try to reduce Islam down to what this or that group of Muslims think or say. Presumably, this may be one of the reasons why the Prophet said:

"My community will never agree in error,"

and I believe it is an error to seek to stifle the voice of ijtiḥad.

In saying this, I do not mean to say that every exercise of ijtiḥad is correct. There is a difference between permissible degrees of freedom and seeking to take license.

Although the Prophet warned against bi'daḥ -- those innovative measures that transgressed sacred boundaries -- many Muslims have used this warning as a bludgeon to attack anything with which they disagreed, and, then, they cite the hadiths concerning bi'daḥ in order to defend such attacks. However, most, if not all, of the hadiths concerning bi'daḥ tend to be of a general, ambiguous nature, and later Muslims merely have inserted their own theological antipathies into this ambiguity, claiming that what they mean is what the Prophet meant.

This is not only a specious mode of reasoning, it is, spiritually speaking, extremely dangerous to suppose one knows what the Prophet thought and meant on any given occasion. Only God and the Prophet know this, and unless God provides the sort of Divine assistance that gives insight into such matters, then, in reality, one is merely voicing an opinion ... that might, or may not, be well-formed.

When Hazrat 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) introduced the public saying of tarawih prayers -- despite the fact the Prophet, with the exception of the first few nights, said these prayers in private -- Hazrat 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) described this as a good innovation. So, obviously, not all innovation should be confused with the kind of innovation or bi'daḥ against which the Prophet sought to warn us.

Similarly, if all innovation is inappropriate then, why was the Prophet reported to have said:

"If a person sets down in Islam a good custom (sunna hasana), that is put into practice, that person will have written for oneself the wage of those who put it into practice, while nothing will be diminished from the wages of those who put the custom into practice; and, if a person sets down in Islam a bad custom that put into practice, then, this person will have written for one the load of those who put it into practice, while nothing will be diminished from the load of those who put the custom into practice."

Ijtihad -- along with other uses of reason, discussion, and rigorous examination -- may be necessary to struggle toward being able to differentiate between good customs and problematic customs.

Clearly, the onus of moral responsibility is on anyone pursuing ijthad, just as spiritual responsibility rests heavily upon any individual (s) who would initiate laying down a new custom in Islam. But, then, isn't this the nature of human existence -- to strive, in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity, toward a healthy, constructive faith, not only for oneself but the community as well?

Jihad is not primarily about risking oneself physically against an armed antagonist, but, rather, jihad -- and ijthad is, as the root of the word suggests, a form of jihad -- is embedded in a willingness to struggle against ignorance, bias, hatred, prejudices, negative emotions, likes and dislikes ... all of the processes within us that impair and distort understanding of, and acting upon, the truth.

The Qur'an says:

"O ye who believe, fight against those infidels close to you." (9: 123).

There is no infidel closer to each of us than our own nafs, and ijthad is to struggle against the tendencies within the nafs to be kufr and, in the process, seek both to hide, as well as to hide from, the truth ... not only with respect to ourselves, but also in relation to others, Creation, and Divinity.

If the five pillars were all there is to deen, then, why do the Qur'an and the sunna deal with so much more than those five pillars? If the so-called 'religious law' was all there was to deen, then why are such matters

restricted to just 500, or so, verses in the Qur'an. If the five pillars were all there is to deen, then why did the Prophet speak about iman (faith), ahsan, (spiritual excellence) tariqa (the way), and haqiqa (the reality)? If being Muslim exhausted the possibilities of Islam, then why did the Qur'an and the Prophet also speak about being Mu'min and Mohsin?

If the five pillars were all there is to deen, then why would the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) be so pleased with Mu'adh ibn Jabal (may Allah be pleased with him) when the latter indicated, after being asked by the Prophet what his judicial envoy to Yemen would do if he could not find an answer to a legal question in either the Qur'an or the sunna, that he (Mu'adh -- may Allah be pleased with him) would form his own opinion concerning such matters? Why would the Prophet say, upon hearing this response:

"Praise be to God Who hath guided the envoy of His envoy to what pleases the envoy of God"?

All too frequently affairs in mosques and Muslim communities all around the world are controlled by the rule of pedigree rather than the principles of spiritual understanding. For example, if someone knows Arabic, then, ipso facto, this aspect of pedigree is apparently supposed to make someone's opinion superior to that of someone who does not speak or read Arabic. Yet, nowhere in the Qur'an does one find anything to support such a presumption.

Rather, the criterion that is mentioned in the Qur'an as a means of differentiating among Muslims is the condition of taqwa. Taqwa is not dependent on one's linguistic skills but on the condition of one's heart, the purity of one's niyat, or intention, and the propriety and judiciousness, God willing, of one's actions.

Arabic will not necessarily help one penetrate to the meaning of the Qur'an. Indeed, among the many verses in the Qur'an that indicate this are the following:

"Say: My Lord, increase me in knowledge." (20: 114),

and:

"We raise by grades (of Mercy) whom We will, and over every lord of knowledge, there is one more knowing. (12:76)

Our need is for Divine Grace and support, not necessarily Arabic ... although knowledge of Arabic can be one form of such Grace. Arabic is not the Source of Grace, but, rather, God is, and knowledge of Arabic is but one manifestation of such Grace.

Knowledge of Arabic did not help the people of pre-Islamic Arabia. God had to intervene before Divine assistance came in the form of an Arabic tongue -- namely, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to whom revelation was given. Moreover, since Arabic is a created thing, one cannot reduce the Qur'an, that is the uncreated word of God, down to created being. At best, Arabic is a locus of manifestation through which uncreated Divine guidance is given expression.

Obviously, knowledge of Arabic is not of any assistance to those who feel their facility with Arabic gives them the right to kill innocent people. In fact, these killers of innocents, place their own interpretation of things above the Qur'an. The Qur'an says:

"Whoever kills a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if that person killed all of humankind, and whosoever saves the life of another human being, it shall be as if that person had saved the life of all humankind." (5:32)

I have been looking in the Qur'an and the sunna for some mention of Osama bin Laden and how God has appointed him and his associates to tell the rest of humanity about what constitutes corruption. I also am looking for a detailed explanation of how one would go about establishing, demonstrating and verifying the evidence that "proves" that, for instance, all of the people who died, when the World Trade Center's two towers collapsed, were guilty of corruption.

The last time I looked, the charge of corruption requires a judicial proceeding in an authorized court (and what constitutes an

"authorized" court for judicial review is another matter altogether). Such matters cannot be decided through fiat, fatwa, or in absentia ... even if we were to assume (which is a highly contentious assumption) that any of the self styled, would-be hijackers of Islam have jurisdiction in matters that happen beyond their own borders and localities.

Without feeling at all inclined to side with the perpetuation of Israeli atrocities against innocents in the occupied territories of Palestine, the fact of the matter is, despite knowledge of Arabic, the leaders and followers of Hamas and Hezbollah continue to kill innocent people in Israel -- people about whom such leaders have no knowledge about whether, or not, such people are guilty of manslaughter or corruption in the earth. Furthermore, even if such people were guilty of corruption, I have seen no evidence which warrants that such life and death decisions have been arrogated by Allah to organizations like al-Qaeda, and, surely, it is an exercise in self serving hubris for the leaders of such organizations to claim they have been appointed by God to look after such matters.

There is no difference between, on the one hand, terrorists like Osama bin Laden and, on the other hand, those individuals who are either fraudulent Sufi shaykhs or who seek to force everyone to submit to their individual brand of exoteric, dogmatic theology. All of these categories of individual are spiritually abusive toward those who may be mesmerized by them because neither bin Laden, nor false mystical guides, nor theological zealots are not interested in helping people toward the truth, but, rather, seek to induce people to become committed to the self-serving agendas of such spiritual narcissists. Each of these sorts of individual perpetrate spiritual terrorism in relation to their followers before they seek to do damage -- whether socially, economically, politically, physically, or spiritually -- to those who are 'considered other' and, therefore, treated as alien and inhuman by the self-appointed "leaders".

Moreover, alleged "leaders" such as bin Laden, or the 'shaykhs' who become idols to their mureeds, or the exoteric theologians who insist that their way is the only way to understand Islam induce their followers to suppose that the belief system being promulgated represents a 'ticket to heaven'. Yet, such "leaders" continue to avoid the fact that little, or none, of what they are doing -- as opposed to what they are giving lip-

service to -- reflects either the teachings of the Qur'an or the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

For example, the Qur'an says:

"Say: Surely, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death are all for Allah, the Lord of the worlds." (6:162).

There is nothing in this about paradise or 70 virgins, and in fact there is no verse in the Qur'an indicating that 70 virgins are the reward in the hereafter for Muslims.

In fact, what the terrorist "leaders" are counseling the suicide bombers to do (and the same argument could, with slight modifications, be extended to mystical charlatans, as well as many exoteric theologians) is an exercise in shirk, for the alleged "leaders" are waving the promise of Paradise and sexual favors before such individuals, and this is nothing less than associating partners with God since niyats are being formed and actions are taken that are being done for other than the sake of God ... instead, under such circumstances, the focus is on the reward rather than the a willingness to offer service and, if necessary, sacrifice one's life and death for the Purpose or Himma of Allah, without any thought of compensation - as the Qur'an indicates:

"Those who spend their wealth for increase in self-purification, and have in their minds no favor from anyone for which a reward is expected in return, but only the desire to seek for the Countenance of their Lord Most High." (92: 18-20)

If what such "leaders" are telling the followers were true, then why don't we see these leaders doing precisely the deeds that, in a form of exploitation, they are encouraging Arabic-speaking children to do? Why do these "leaders" always use proxies to suffer the consequences of their (that is, the leaders') beliefs? If Paradise is the purpose of life -- and I don't know anywhere in the Qur'an where it says that Paradise, per se, is the purpose of life -- then why aren't these brave "leaders" assuming the roles of

presumed martyrs rather than sending children and others to do such things? 'O ye of little faith'.

And, less anyone may misunderstand the foregoing words, I am not advocating that the "leaders" actually should, themselves, go around terrorizing or killing innocent people rather than using children to do this. Irrespective of whether children are exploited to undertake such acts or "leaders" actually walk the walk instead of just talk the talk, what is being done (the indiscriminate killing of innocent people) is wrong from any Islamic perspective one cares to examine.

Muhammad (peace be upon him) never killed anyone. However, he was always in the midst of the most dangerous part of any battle.

Jesus (peace be upon him) will not hide from the dajjal (the spiritual imposter or anti-Christ). Jesus (peace be upon him) will seek out and confront the imposter directly.

Obviously, people like bin Laden don't have much faith in the rightness and justness of their cause. They hide in the shadows and seek to get others to risk their lives ... apparently believing -- unlike Muhammad (peace be upon him) and Jesus (peace be upon him) -- that God will not be with them if they should come out into the open and fight with integrity and nobility rather than through terrorizing the innocent from afar via proxy agents.

Imam Hussein and Imam Hassan (may Allah be pleased with them both) each knew he would be killed prior to the time of his death. Yet, this knowledge did not cause them to shy away from what had to be done, nor did such knowledge sway them to harm either innocent people or not-so-innocent individuals.

Indeed, as the Qur'an indicates:

"You express your desire for death if you are truthful." (62:6)

However, since the aforementioned, terrorist "leaders", such as bin Laden, only express the desire for the death of others (whether this be their followers who are duped or the innocent victims of the carnage that such individuals let loose on the world), and do not express a desire for their own death, one might well question the truthfulness of what such

so-called leaders pronounce to the world. But, since these people speak Arabic, well, I guess, we should all bow down to what they say -- rather than to Divinity -- because if it is spoken in Arabic, then it must be true.

I don't have a problem with people who speak, read, and write Arabic. I have a problem with people who try to argue that because they speak, read, and write Arabic that this facility, in and of itself, grants them some sort of superior understanding of Islam or the Qur'an or the life of the Prophet. If this were really true, the Muslim world would not be in such a mess, for the spiritual mess with which the Muslim community is faced has been created, in no small part, by Arabic-speaking people -- whether these be national leaders, imams, the members of local mosque councils, mullahs, academics, theologians, or terrorists.

In fact, my experience of the last 35 years as an aspiring Muslim and seeker of truth has shown me, again and again, that many -- although not all -- of the so-called leaders of various Muslim communities are practitioners of emotional, social, educational, and spiritual terror. In other words, all too frequently, such so-called "leaders" seek to terrorize anyone (and they utilize many techniques to accomplish this ... from: rumor mongering, to: campaigns of slander, outright lies, and character assassination) who does not agree with them and who is unwilling to be a servant of taqlid -- that is, blind following of a dogma that they have dressed in the clothes of Islam for public consumption.

The time is long overdue for the Muslim community to reclaim Islam. However, the people from whom Islam needs to be reclaimed are not those in the West who seek to distort or undermine Islam through various kinds of media, educational, and intel-op mischief. Rather, the ones from whom Islam needs to be reclaimed -- and such knowledge is a birthright of every human being -- are those within the Muslim community who seek to exploit Islam and Muslims to serve the agendas of their (that is, the 'leaders') own nafs and entanglements in dunya.

Islam is supposed to be a deen that is unmediated by any form of clerical intervention. Yet, everywhere one looks within the Muslim community, there are imams, theologians, mullahs, official-sounding councils, educational institutions, media moguls, and politicians that are seeking to become the intermediary between individuals and Divinity.

Not only do we live in an age in which the door to ijtihad should not be closed, we live in times when this form of rigorous striving toward truth is more necessary than ever. The challenge before us is to learn how to use this process wisely -- in a constructive manner that gives expression to all facets of the Qur'an and the sunna of the Prophet and not just selected portions that have been removed from the full spiritual ecology of Islam in order to subjugate and exploit the minds, hearts, and lives of the Muslim community -- both individually and collectively.

Each individual has the responsibility to strive to realize the truth according to her or his God-given capacity to do so. This responsibility cannot be contracted out.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"Islam began as something strange, and it will revert to being strange as it was in the beginning, so good tidings for the strangers." Someone asked: "Who are the strangers." The Prophet said: "The ones who break away from their people for the sake of Islam."

Islam may be reverting to something strange as it was in the beginning. The people from whom the strangers must break away are those who claim to understand Islam but, on the basis of their actions, clearly do not.

However, the process of breaking away through, among other things, the exercise of ijtihad is not a child's game. We must all be sobered by the fact that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"There are 71 sects among Jews, and only one of them is correct. There are 72 sects among Christians, and only one of them is correct. There are 73 sects among Muslims, and one of them is correct."

Ijtihad is the process of seeking for the truth. It does not constitute a license to create or advocate one of the 72 other sects.

Moreover, clearly the Prophet was indicating there are truth seekers amongst both the Christians and Jews, for he spoke about the 'true

way' to be found all the different sects in both the Jewish and Christian spiritual traditions. Consequently, a person should seek out all those -- whether Muslim or non-Muslim -- who are sincere seekers of the truth.

In fact, did not the Prophet counsel us: "To seek knowledge, even unto China"? Furthermore, this was said at a time when one might suppose there were no people who had declared Shahadah in any formal sense, and, yet, the Prophet was alluding to the existence of knowledge even there.

Knowledge, understanding and wisdom are not the preserve of Muslims. God gives to whomsoever Divinity pleases.

However the duties and obligations of a Muslim extend far beyond the Muslim community. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"Assist any person who is oppressed -- whether Muslim or non-Muslim."

In addition, the Prophet is reported to have said:

"If you love your Creator, then love your fellow human beings first."

Or:

"Creation is like God's family, for its sustenance is from Allah. Therefore, the most beloved unto God is the individual who does good to God's family."

And, finally,

"What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted; to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured."

There is no preference to be given to Muslims over non-Muslims in any of the foregoing. We must strive, through the process of *ijtihad* -- both individual and collective, as well as in conjunction with both Muslim and non-Muslim -- to find constructive, creative solutions to the many problems with which humankind is confronted. Truly, we are all in this realm of Creation together, and we must sever the shackles of *taqlid* that have been holding the Muslim community -- and, now, the rest of the world -- hostage for years.

No one except God and the Prophets has a right to tell me what Islam is about. My duty, as it is the duty of every human being, is to rigorously explore the teachings of God and the Prophets, and the followers of the Prophets, in order to try to discover the nature of *deen* that is the God-given means of helping me to realize *fitra*, my innate, spiritual capacity.

I am willing to listen to, and discuss issues with, almost anyone in relation to the foregoing spiritual quest. But, I do not feel under any compulsion to accept what someone else says just because they may have been born into a Muslim family, or because they speak Arabic, or because they studied what they claim is *shari'ah* in Mecca or Medina, or because they have a title such as *imam* or *shaykh*.

I would be remiss in my spiritual duties to give any of these people a free, critically unexamined ride -- although there is an *adab* to this process of critical examination. Moreover, these people who claim to understand Islam would be lacking in humility to presume that things should be any way other than this.

Of course, one of the tactics that is used by "leaders" attempting to retain their power, influence, status, fame, jobs, and/or funding is to claim that the foregoing ideas are divisive and undermine the unity of the Muslim community. I hate to be the one to break the news to these ill-informed, yet often-calculating, "leaders", but there is no unity in the Muslim community ... this is part of the problem.

There is no consensus within the Muslim community on how to proceed, or what to do, in relation to any number of problems with which the Muslim community is confronted. The Muslim community does not speak with one voice - it speaks with 73 voices and the 72 false voices are attempting to drown out, if not confuse the process of striving for truth -- indeed, these 72 false voices all say, with respect to anything, that differs from their point of view, that the unity of the Muslim community is

being undermined and threatened by, for instance, the exercise of ijihad.

As we approach closer and closer to the Latter Days (if we have not already entered them), I do not know -- prior to the second-coming of Jesus (peace be upon him) and his victory over the dajjal or anti-Christ -- if there is a part of the Divine Purpose that will permit the Muslim community to attain any semblance of unity ... especially, since, for nearly 1400 years, successive Muslim community has squandered countless opportunities to accomplish this very thing. However, the absence of such unity notwithstanding, every Muslim still has a responsibility to seek the truth ... indeed, the Prophet is reported to have said that:

"The seeking of knowledge is an ordinance obligatory upon every Muslim,"

and just so we are clear about what kind of knowledge the Prophet is referring to, he also is reported to have said:

"Should the day come wherein I increase not in knowledge wherewith to draw nearer to God, let the dawn of that day be accursed",

and again:

"No person will be learned unless one puts one's knowledge into practice."

Consequently, for people to cry foul with respect to the issue of "Muslim unity" in order to stifle a sincere discussion about, and search for, the truth is a red-herring. Such ploys are nothing more than an attempt to control the discussion in a manner that is favorable to the perspective in which they have a vested interest and, unfortunately, all too often, wish to impose on others (and this is done in nearly every Muslim country and community on the face of the earth, and not just among the Taliban of

Afghanistan) -- even though, according to the Qur'an, there is supposed to be no compulsion in matters of deen.

Time is running out -- both individually and collectively. How we use the time that remains is of great importance. As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"Every person who rises in the morning either does that which will be the means of one's redemption or one's spiritual ruin".

We should not be so arrogant as to suppose we know everything there is to know about such matters or that our way of understanding the Prophet's or the Quranic teachings is correct -- either wholly or in part.

We must continue to strive and struggle for the truth. Ijtihad is one of these ways.



### The Beautiful Names Art Project

Traditionally, many Muslims have placed certain restraints on the forms through which visual arts are given expression. More specifically, with certain exceptions, much of the Muslim world has restricted visual artistic expression, across the ages, to roughly four forms: (1) architecture -- which includes both the aspects of design, as well as that of construction; (2) calligraphy in its various modalities ranging from the rectilinear kufic style to the very fluid Neskhi style; (3) geometric patterns -- one well-known example being that of the arabesque, and, finally, (4) crafts which encompass the creation and production of such things as tapestries, rugs, jewelry, clothes, and many items used in the course of a day - from pottery to furniture.

Almost invariably, all of the foregoing forms refrain from the use of human images. Among other things, this restriction is frequently traced to a well-known hadith, or saying, of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that warns believers against trying to assume the role of the Creator through acts of generating images of the human form.

This Prophetic cautioning is also often linked, by many Muslims, to a Quranic principle which indicates that human beings have been created in the image of Divinity. As a result, those Muslim artists who might be inclined to venture in the direction of generating human forms are being warned that the territory through which they seek to travel is sacred in a variety of senses and might be best avoided altogether.

Nevertheless, there have been a few historical periods of artistic expression in some parts of the Muslim world that have departed from the aforementioned general rule. One such exception involves the use of human figures in what have come to be known as "Persian miniatures".

A compromise, of sorts, explored by some Muslim artists is the use of certain elements from nature. However, such elements rarely are the central focus of a work of visual art and, instead, tend to be play a secondary, decorative or ornamental role that is incorporated into more fundamental motifs involving architecture, calligraphy, geometric patterns and/or craft work.

Having said the foregoing, a natural question to ask is the following. What is the purpose of art in an Islamic context?

In general, one of the primary intentions underlying such art has always been to use beauty as a means of inviting believers to contemplate Divine Attributes through aesthetically pleasing arrangements of space, form, medium, color, style, perspective, and vision. Properly implemented, Islamic art gives expression to a perennial wisdom that is manifested through a beauty that integrates form, medium, color, and perspective in a manner that points forcefully and persuasively in the direction of important universal principles.

Harmony, balance, equilibrium, peace, purity, transcendence, imminence, unity, integrity, nobility, absence, presence, stability, transformation, and precision are some of these universal principles. These are principles of sacredness that are given expression through an artistic beauty that are intended to help lead believers toward reflecting on qualitatively expansive, universal truths rather than quantitatively constricted, individual truths.

The beauty of an instance of art -- whether architecture, calligraphy, geometric pattern, or craft work -- resides in its capacity to praise God through reflecting one or more universal principles whose origins lie within the Divine Names. The beauty of a given exemplar of art lies in its ability to induce believers to reflect upon these principles and be drawn back to their Origin that gives nourishment to these principles, and, therefore, serves as the Foundation upon which sacred art derivatively rests.

The original prototype of Islamic art is Arabic calligraphy. This art form is rooted in the Divine Word that was given expression through the Qur'an, the Divine Book of Revelation, transmitted to the heart of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) via the agency of Archangel Gabriel, just as Divine Books of Revelation had been transmitted to the hearts of, among others, Jesus, Moses, David, and Abraham, (peace be upon them all) at previous junctures of sacred history.

Interestingly enough, however, the Qur'an is, first and foremost, an oral/aural tradition, not a written one. Furthermore, this revelation -- as is true of all sacred revelations -- is said to be the uncreated Word of God.

Consequently, calligraphy constitutes a study of, or exploration into, some of the universal principles that are inherent in the Word of God. The forms of the letters, their proportions, continuity, rhythm, precision, and style all combine to create a beauty that points in the direction of the

Divine Source of their inspiration as well as in the direction of their Object of praise, adoration and worship.

In addition, there is not only a beauty of form entailed by sacred calligraphy, the letters and words also convey Divine meanings. In other words, the letters and words have an additional -- and much more primary -- sacred, aesthetic dimension because they serve as so many loci of manifestation for Divine communication to, and with, human beings.

Some commentators have pointed out that the woof and warp of the Holy Qur'an are the Divine Names of God that are said, traditionally, to be ninety-nine in number. Of course, ultimately, Divinity is infinite in Nature and, therefore, cannot be circumscribed by just ninety-nine Names. Nonetheless, these are the Names that God has chosen to use to help human beings reflect upon the qualities of Divinity that are woven into the fabric of the Qur'an and given manifested form in the parables, stories, history, teachings, values, principles, and guidance of this Holy revelation.

One of the traditional ways of reflecting these Names in artistic form is to use calligraphy. Throughout the Muslim world one will find various modalities of calligraphic representation of these Names, both individually, as well as, collectively.

The Names Project that is being proposed seeks to approach the artistic expression of the ninety-nine Names of God from a somewhat different perspective than that which traditionally has been used to convey something of the beauty of those Names. More specifically, rather than using just calligraphy, the Names Project would like to use a variety of colors, dynamic relationships, impressionistic forms, objects and so on, to try to open up additional thematic possibilities for reflection that could be used in conjunction with traditional Arabic calligraphy and, yet, which are both intimately tied to the sacred meaning being transmitted through the Arabic letters that make up the written form of a given Name of God, and which, simultaneously, do not violate any of the aforementioned restrictions that have been true of most traditional forms of sacred art within the Muslim community.

The series of exploratory studies being proposed by the Names Project is intended to be complementary to, as well as supplemental to, traditional calligraphic representations of the Names. The use of colors, forms, patterns, designs, and relationships to be pursued in the Names Project is

intended to serve as but one, very limited way of giving visual expression to some of the meaning inherent in a particular Name of Divinity and that, if successful, could help enhance the beauty of the traditional calligraphic representation of such a Name.

Furthermore, use of the term "beauty" in the previous paragraph is intended in the sense that was outlined earlier. In other words, whatever artistic additions are introduced in conjunction with a traditional calligraphic representation of a given Divine Name, such new elements must help serve as loci for the manifestation of sacred, universal principles that, in turn, reflect some dimension of the Divine Wisdom being transmitted through a given Name -- just as is the case with a purely calligraphic expression of this Wisdom.

If successful, the supplementary and complementary artistic modalities being suggested by the Names Project, are intended -- in harmonious conjunction with their calligraphic counterparts -- to become a visual zikr or mode of remembrance of Divine Qualities and Attributes. If successful, this approach to one dimension of sacred art, will use beauty to resonate with the soul and spirit of a believer, and help induce the individual to remember, reflect on, and, return to the Original Source of the underlying universal principles that link art form and the human being.

Sacred art is not a creation. It is a mirror that reflects The Names of Divinity in manifested form according to the capacity of the mirror. Beauty can arise nowhere except through Divinity. In conveying something of the quality of Beauty, art merely places this quality in its proper Divine context, and invites the believer to understand that every artful mirror sings the praise of God in its own manner by reflecting Divine Names in accordance with its nature.

The Names Art Project is an open invitation in the following sense. We hope all those artists whose hearts and spirits are sincerely attracted to the idea of seeking to create visual zikrs as ways of assisting others, and themselves, in the remembrance of God, will begin to work individually, and with one another, to explore the unlimited possibilities that are inherent in this dimension of Islamic/mystical art.

### The Silsilah

Community and family are two words that are much in vogue these days. The idea of a 'silsilah' shares certain features in common with the notions of family and community, but, as well, the former concept also differs in important respects from the latter terms.

Construed in its best sense, a community is not just a collection of people who happen to reside within a given physical space, but involves a set of values, principles, practices, and goals that bind together the people in that community. The purpose of such a collectivity is to enhance the physical, emotional, educational and spiritual welfare of its members.

Similarly, a family -- at least, the ideal of a family -- consists of a set of relationships that goes beyond biological connections and envelops qualities of love, caring, support, and assistance. These qualities are intended to constructively embrace the members of the family so that they can strive toward realizing their potential -- both individually and collectively.

Like true communities and constructive families, a silsilah exists to enhance the welfare of its various constituents, and is woven together through certain shared aspirations, beliefs, standards, and understandings. However, although a silsilah is not unmindful of the material needs of its members, its primary emphasis is on providing spiritual sustenance.

Of course, there are communities and families that also are pre-occupied with matters of spirituality and, as a result, seek to make all other considerations a function of the underlying dimension of faith. Nonetheless, while both communities and families have traditions and histories, of one sort or another, the tradition and history of a silsilah is rather unique. On the one hand, a silsilah is tied, in particular ways, to the essence of the Prophetic tradition, considered as a whole, and on the other hand, a silsilah gives expression to the personal histories of spiritual struggle and sacrifice that have characterized the passing on of the light of gnosis from one shaykh to the next down through the spiritual lineage of a silsilah.

Communities and families can, in some ways, be constructively dynamic, thrive, and continue to exist even if there is no one within the community or family who possesses the understanding that comes through gnosis, or esoteric Self-realization. Furthermore, families and communities of substantive quality have existed without necessarily being tied

to the essence of the Prophetic tradition in any direct fashion. However, a silsilah cannot be constructively dynamic in a mystical sense, nor thrive, nor continue to exist, with any manner of spiritual vibrancy, if there is no one within its current manifestation capable of giving expression to the presence of gnosis. Moreover, and to state the flip side of the same 'coin of gnosis', a silsilah that does not possess a direct link to the essence of the Prophetic tradition cannot legitimately be said to be a silsilah.

Every shaykh, guide, or spiritual master of the Sufi path has been appointed as such by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who is the essence of the Prophetic tradition. Moreover, every individual who has been so appointed is provided with the spiritual wherewithal that is needed to fulfill, God willing, whatever duties might arise within the context of the silsilah's particular sphere of influence.

Without such an appointment and the spiritual potential that this entails, then the dimension of a silsilah is missing ... which, by God's leave, helps make spiritual transformation possible. As much as the philosophy of 'rugged individualism' would like to maintain that, among other things, mystical realization is achieved through personal accomplishment, the fact of the matter is that one cannot rise up spiritually without being aided through the support, nurturing, protection, guidance, love, and generosity that comes through the series of legitimately authorized loci of gnosis manifestations that is known as a silsilah.

To believe that one can achieve mystical realization and Oneness with Divinity by individual efforts alone is to make the same mistake as Iblis or Satan did when he refused to bow, when commanded by Allah to do so, before the locus of manifestation through which the Divine breath was being blown -- namely, the Self-realized human being ... a realization that was itself an expression of the Divine breath. The way to God always has come via a door -- a door that has been especially constructed for the purpose of guiding people through the process of becoming open to the spiritual potential that God had kneaded into our being as so many hidden treasures and jewels.

Communities and families are immersed in social relationships of one kind or another and become dysfunctional when there are, for whatever reasons, disruptions in the social fabric from which those relationships are constructed. A silsilah is not about social relationships, although, sometimes, people become confused about this and treat a silsilah as if it were a social

entity that existed for the purpose of maintaining certain kinds of social relationship.

In fact, on occasion, there are individuals who come from backgrounds that suffer from family and/or community dysfunction and are looking for something to replace that problematic history. As such, they approach the silsilah with the desire that it fill the community or family void in their life, and, quite frequently, such individuals become disillusioned when they begin to discover that the purpose of the silsilah lies in quite another direction ... although, certainly, enhancement of one's spiritual condition can help one, God willing, to establish more healthy relationships with other people, whether within or outside of the silsilah.

A silsilah is about spiritual relationships. This involves, first and foremost, one's relationship with the individual who has been properly authorized to serve as a doorway to spiritual realization -- that is, the shaykh, guide, pir, teacher, master, elder, or whatever term is used to designate such a role or function. Moreover, through this doorway one is introduced to the spirit of the Muhammadan Reality -- both through the locus of manifestation of the teacher's presence as well as through the locus that lies waiting within one's essential being and permits one to realize one's intimate and unique relationship with Divinity.

A silsilah embodies the collective spiritual struggles of a series of individuals who, link by link, can be traced back to the household of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Person by person, across this series of individuals, there is a direct, spiritual linkage with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through the process of spiritual authorization, and person by person, there has been an activation of spiritual potential and gnosis that, God willing, enables those individuals to do the spiritual work of the silsilah.

Many people today -- even those who have not stepped onto the Sufi path, have heard of Rumi, the great mystical poet of Konya located in what is now known as Turkey. Yet, a friend of God once was reported to have said:

"There have been so many Rumi's who have never uttered a word."

The foregoing pronouncement was not a criticism of Rumi. Rather, it was an allusion to a larger reality.

More specifically, there are very few masters of the Sufi path who have been selected by God to become known to the world. Most Sufi shaykhs exist, or have existed, in anonymity.

They sought God in anonymity. They struggled in anonymity. They suffered in anonymity. They sacrificed in anonymity. They became realized in anonymity. They conducted the work of their silsilah in anonymity.

Few people -- with the exception of their guides, a few other spiritual masters, and, later, perhaps, some of their close mureeds or students -- knew, or had any inkling, of the spiritual greatness of such hidden luminaries. Yet, through their efforts, the torch of the silsilah continued, by the Grace of Allah, to be lit from one generation to the next.

A seeker who, by the Grace of God, finds her or his way to an authorized door of spirituality enjoys a tremendous opportunity -- an opportunity that cannot be realized in any other way. Such a seeker has been provided with all that is necessary to embark on the mystical quest as long as, of course, the seeker possesses the right kind of spiritual intention and sincerity, both of which are rooted in a desire for God and God alone.

A silsilah is more than community or family. It is the lighted pathway of loving guidance that comes from Divinity and leads back, God willing, to Divinity.

### The Seekers Dilemma

As indicated previously in other chapters, there is no form of the Sufi path that is capable of being traversed in isolation from a relationship with a spiritual teacher, guide, master, shaykh, mentor, or elder. Through this relationship one is initiated into the essential teachings of the Divine revelation the Prophetic tradition, and, ultimately, one's true identity and unique, spiritual capacity for knowing, loving, and serving God, and, thereby, realizing the purpose of one's life.

Yet, for reasons best known to God, locating and identifying an authentic spiritual guide is not, necessarily, a straight-forward issue. The logistics of this search are rendered more problematic since not everyone who professes to be a true teacher, necessarily, is.

Thus, on the one hand, a spiritual mentor who is an authentic locus of manifestation for Divine assistance with respect to the spiritual struggle toward Self-realization is considered essential to anyone who wishes to journey along the mystical path -- at least, until such time as the primary means of spiritual transmission comes through one's essential Self, as opposed to through the essential Self of one's teacher ... that, in truth, are just variations on the same, underlying reality. On the other hand, not all that glitters is spiritual gold, and, as a result, one has to be on the lookout for the spiritual counterpart to 'fool's gold'.

The foregoing matter is further complicated by the fact that the seeker is surrounded by 'associates' who do not have the seeker's best spiritual interests at heart. Among these associates are those who do not believe in the reality of the mystical way, and, therefore, try to dissuade one from either stepping onto, or continuing with, the spiritual path, or both. In addition -- and, perhaps, surprisingly to some -- among the associates who do not have one's best spiritual interests at heart are certain, unredeemed dimensions of the seeker, herself or himself -- namely, the lower soul, or nafs, that houses a human beings tendency toward rebellion against Divine purpose.

A further member of the associates who seek to hinder one's movement toward, or along, the mystical path is Satan, or Iblis -- who, from a Sufi perspective is not a fallen angel (since angels are, by nature, incapable of doing other than what God commands), but one of the species of beings known as jinn that, like human beings, have the capacity to struggle between good and evil and, as a result, become spiritually transformed. Today, of course

many people, under the tutelage of modern psychology are much too 'sophisticated' to believe in the Devil, and, indeed, as has been said, one of Satan's greatest accomplishments is, through various means, to induce people to believe he doesn't exist and, consequently is not a force with which one must reckon.

There is much that could be said concerning the adverse impact that Satan/Iblis, as well as those who disbelieve in the reality of mystical possibilities, can have on a person's spiritual seeking. Nevertheless, today, the focus of this essay will be on the problematic effect that the individual, himself or herself, might have on the process of seeking to find an authentic, spiritual guide.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said that:

"The movements of nafs [the lower, unredeemed, carnal soul] are more difficult to detect than the movements of a black ant on a smooth rock in the dead of night."

Often times, the nafs seeks to cloak its hidden agenda (which is, decidedly, non-spiritual) through an array of manipulative devices that give plausible denial to the fact that one's spiritual intentions are being corrupted by the hidden agenda that is seeping in to one's understanding, motivations, and intentions through the lobbying activity of the nafs.

Hazrat Ra'bia of Basra -- who is not just a great woman saint, but, by the grace of Allah, one of the great saints of the Sufi path -- was once in the company of a man who had been initiated into the mystical tradition. They were reported to have been on a hillside, overlooking the town below.

The man was indicating how many of the people in the town sinned by not observing their daily prayers, and by not fasting during the month of Ramazan, and so on. These comments concerning the town's people were followed by statements in which the individual indicated how he had never missed any of the daily prayers, and that he not only fasted during Ramazan but did so many additional, non-obligatory fasts.

The man was about to go on when Hazrat Ra'bia stopped him with an intense look. Then, she is reported to have said: "Your existence is a sin with which none other can compare

This 'existence' to which Hazrat Ra'bia was alluding is the sense of 'selfhood' that the nafs helps cultivate -- a sense of self that is in opposition to God because this is the doorway through which, among other things, the individual becomes entangled with purely sensory, material, worldly, and selfish matters, and, in the process, forgets all about one's relationship with Divinity and the purpose for which one was given the gift of life. Oddly enough, and as the foregoing story of Ra'bia and the would-be Sufi illustrates, one can be fortunate enough to find an authentic teacher, become initiated, and start the mystical journey, yet, still be vulnerable to the machinations or secret workings of the nafs as it tries to take control of the individual's life -- whether directly, or through proxy.

A person may believe she or he is seeking God, but, in reality, under the influence of the nafs, may be seeking fame, or an enhanced self-image, or an ability to perform 'wondrous deeds', or to feel superior to others, or even to achieve paradise (heaven). The fact that the latter prospect -- namely, seeking paradise -- might be considered as being something quite apart from seeking God, may, initially, appear to be somewhat odd, but consider the following.

Again, using the teachings of Ra'bia as a point of reference, one of her sayings runs along the following lines. 'Oh Allah, if I worship Thee out of desire for paradise, then, deny me paradise, and if I worship Thee out of fear of hell, then, throw me into hell. But, if I worship Thee for Thee and Thee alone, then, grant me Thy vision.'

The focus of her prayer is clearly on God and on nothing else. To desire heaven, or to seek to avoid hell, is to seek for something other than Divinity.

In the West, one of the character traits that is extolled and encouraged is independent thought or to be an individual who is the captain of one's ship. Now, within certain limits and in certain contexts, individuality and independence of thought can be positive qualities, but, from a Sufi perspective, one cannot say this without appropriate qualifications.

A person who believes that she or he knows more than, or better than, an authentic spiritual guide with respect to the proper way to pursue the mystical way will not long be on that path -- assuming, of course, such an individual even gets as far as becoming initiated into a Sufi Order. True individuality is when the person becomes spiritually realized, and, thereby, becomes capable, God willing, of giving expression to the unique spiritual potential that Divinity has bequeathed to that person.

There is a story told by Sufi masters about a seeker who has spent many years on the Path and, at some juncture in the individual's life, learns there is a certain, spiritual teacher who knows, and can teach, a deep secret of the mystical way. After much struggle and many years of austerities, the seeker discovers the location of the aforementioned master and travels to the indicated place.

Knocking on the door, a voice, from within, asks: "Who is there?", and the seeker answers: "It is me, so-and-so", and this is followed by the command; "Leave".

The seeker goes away in accordance with the directive and begins to reflect on various, personal shortcomings that might have interfered with the door being opened. So, many more years of hard spiritual work follow, and then once again, the seeker approaches the hallowed door.

Once more, the knock is made, and a voice from within asks: "Who is there?" The seeker replies "It is I, so and so, of such and such a location." Once more, the seeker is commanded to leave.

Further years of meditation, contemplation, austerities and struggle follow for the seeker. Finally, after a time, the individual returns to the same door and knocks, yet, again.

The same voice asks the same question: "Who is there?" to which the seeker responds: "It is Thou," and the door is opened.

One must learn to give up the self, to attain to true Selfhood, and, unfortunately, many people have quite the wrong idea about this. They think the purpose of the path is to enhance the 'self'.

When the activities of the nafs dominate a person's consciousness, understanding, and intentions, one is not receptive to spiritual guidance.

Indeed, one is not even in a position to recognize whether a given person is an authentic guide or not, that, under the best of circumstances, is not an easy issue to navigate.

In order to, God willing, have the best chance of finding one's way to a true spiritual guide, one needs to realize that one needs God's help to do this. One needs to realize how precarious one's predicament is, and how vulnerable one is, and that there is much that one does not know -- including who is, and who is not, an authentic teacher.

W.C. Fields once made a movie called: 'You Can't Cheat an Honest Man' that consisted in a series of episodes that indicated how dishonest many people were, and, therefore, how easy it was to cheat them through their own quality of dishonesty. If a person's spiritual seeking is sincere, then such an individual has, by the Grace of God, placed herself or himself in a position to benefit from Divine help in the matter of finding a suitable, authentic, spiritual guide, but, if a person's spiritual seeking is dishonest, then that person is at great risk unless Divine Mercy takes the individual by the hand and does not allow nafs to befog the person's vision when the opportunity for meeting an authentic teacher appears during the course of events.

The dilemma of a seeker is this. How spiritually honest is the seeking?

This is a question that echoes along the corridors of one's heart and mind far beyond the matter of needing to find a true spiritual guide. Many times our tendency is to answer from the perspective of the self, rather than the Self, and, as many times, the door of essential spirituality may remain closed to one.



### Some Considerations

Some scientists and mathematicians often speak, quite enthusiastically, about how various structures and phenomena can exhibit the characteristic of being an 'emergent' property of a system -- a property that could not have been predicted on the basis of what is known about the physical forces believed to be at work in such a system, and, yet, under the 'right' circumstances, the synergy of the interacting components of a system are thought to be capable of giving rise to interesting, unpredictable results.

Moreover, these same individuals also tend to speak about how powerful the process of 'recursion' is that is operative in the aforementioned systems. In other words, as a result of certain processes happening again and again, while feeding the results of one cycle back into subsequent cycles, even very simple systems have been observed to generate very complex, novel results.

Yet, if one were to mention to these same scientists and mathematicians that recursion also plays an extremely powerful and prominent role in Islam, and, as a result, one also can observe emergent properties arising out of this process of recursion, their reaction might be rather skeptical, and the information concerning recursion and emergent properties might not be quite so enthusiastically received.

Nonetheless, zikr Allah -- that is, the repetitive chanting of different Names of God, or various Quranic verses -- has been shown to be associated with transformational qualities in individuals ... qualities that are truly emergent in the sense that one could not predict, on the basis of 'merely' repeating certain words, that such qualities would be likely to ensue.

According to one of modern astronomy's popular theories involving black holes, as certain kinds of star begin to collapse at a given juncture in their life-cycle, the radius of the star becomes smaller and smaller, and in the process, enormous gravitational forces and energy are released. Such forces and energy are said to have the capacity to curve space-time. Some scientists believe that as the foregoing process of collapse continues, a space-time singularity is created that, from a purely theoretical perspective, eventually becomes a dimensionless point that, simultaneously, is a source for, virtually, infinite gravitational forces -- so great, in fact, that many laws of physics tend to breakdown.

If, on the other hand, one were to talk about how laws of physics breakdown or are suspended in certain spiritual states, many of those who champion the aforementioned theory of black holes and feel no discomfort with, simultaneously, maintaining that a dimensionless point can, inexplicably, generate infinite gravitational forces, such people might, very likely, feel some degree of intellectual discomfort with the idea that mystical forces can, if God wishes, lead to the superseding of certain physical laws, leading to the observance of 'kiramah' or 'wondrous deeds', sometimes associated with the friends of God.

A famous scientist (perhaps the biologist J.B.S. Haldane) once said, in connection with modern science, that:

"Reality is not only stranger than we suppose; it is stranger than we can suppose."

These words often have been quoted in many popularizations of science and, presumably, are intended to bring a smile to one's lips, as well as a sense of intense awe and wonder, concerning the paradoxes, anomalies, and strange discoveries of many facets of modern science.

But, if the foregoing words of the physicist were uttered in conjunction with the realm of mysticism, the smile on the lips of many people today would not be one of awe and wonder but derision and contempt. Apparently, for many individuals who are enamored with the awe and wonder of science, what is good for the goose of physical science is not, similarly, good for the gander of mystical science, and, in fact, many of the former individuals would object to the idea that there could be anything called "mystical science", as if this were an oxymoron, or contradiction in terms.

Ever since Faraday, the idea of a unified field theory has captured the imagination and efforts of many scientists and mathematicians. Einstein spent the last thirty-five years of his life trying to reduce physical reality to geometry.

Moreover, over the last 30-40 years, there have been a whole series of grand unified theories (GUT) -- ranging from super-symmetry, to super-gravity, to string theory, to twistors. None of these theories have been proven, experimentally, to be true, and all of them contain numerous

problems and unanswered questions, and, yet, such theories are being entertained seriously by a not insignificant group of people from the scientific and mathematical worlds.

Nevertheless, if one were to indicate that Islam -- that encompasses both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions, across all levels of Being -- has been operating from a perspective of a grand unified framework for thousands of years, such a statement would not be given much, if any, serious consideration by the same people who are chasing theoretical-ghosts, of one species or another. And, one might add that the grand unified perspective of Islam does not limit itself to merely the physical universe. Such a perspective includes man, society, and the metaphysical (in its original sense as that which lies beyond the physical), as well as the physical universe.

Scientists and mathematicians speak quite confidently in terms of n-dimensions, the compactified spaces of Kaluza-Klein theories, the infinite dimensionality of Hilbert space, and the infinitesimal nature of the dimensions to which strings supposedly give expression. All of the foregoing are entirely invisible to our senses -- even when boosted by various instruments, are impossible to visualize and have not been verified empirically.

Yet, if one speaks of the hidden levels of Allah's universe, or of the realms of the 'unseen' -- that are invisible to human senses and that are said to fall beyond even human imagination, many people from the scientific and mathematical communities can hardly contain themselves before criticizing how 'unscientific' and unverifiable such assertions are. Scientists and mathematicians seem to be far more forgiving of their own theories than they are of those things about which they know almost nothing.

An observer of the history of ideas once remarked that "One society's technology is another society's magic." With a little modification, this statement can be given an interesting, thought-provoking twist.

More specifically, Edgar Allen Poe once wrote a short story called 'The Thousand and Second Night' that was intended to be a continuation of the 1001 tales of the Arabian Nights as told by Scheherazade to the Sultan in an effort to prolong her life. In the story written by Poe, Scheherazade did not speak of Sinbad and Aladdin, nor did she speak of magic and sorcery, as she had done in the previous tales.

Instead, she told of the scientific and technological wonders of 19th century America and Europe. She spoke of the steam engine, the telegraph, and the telescope.

After listening to her tale, the Sultan was critical. He said that when she had spoken of jinn, magic, and sorcery, such things were believable, but her present tale of steam engines and such was quite preposterous.

What one considers to be preposterous depends a great deal on the conceptual framework out of which one engages and interprets experience. When scientists speak of grand unified theories, infinities, n-dimensions, the breakdown of physical laws, and emergent properties, despite the rather amazing, if not preposterous, character of much of what they say, they are like the Sultan who is prepared to believe in that with which he feels comfortable, despite the many paradoxes, inconsistencies, anomalies, lacunae, and non-empirical nature of what is being asserted.

The technology, if you will, of essential spirituality is merely the magic of modern science. Whatever one does not understand, has something of the magical about it, and although no Muslim, Mu'min or Mohsin would claim to know everything, nevertheless, they know what they know, irrespective of whether, or not, individuals from the worlds of science and mathematics accept what the former individuals have to say, or even understand the former.

Comments On A Hadith

The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Surely, your soul has a right against you; your Lord has a right against you; your guest has a right against you, and your wife has a right against you. So, give to each one who possesses a right against you.”

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The character of any given hadith might be understood in terms of something that operates in accordance with rule-governed criteria or as something that operates in accordance guidance principle-governed criteria. There are differences that emerge through each of these approaches.

If one engages the foregoing hadith as a rule, one might suppose the only ones to whom one is bound by the duties that arise out of the rights others have over us is that of one's soul, one's Lord, one's guest, and one's wife -- that is, the only specific categories that are mentioned in the hadith. Moreover, if one treats the hadith as a rule, rather than a principle, then, one might suppose that the added sentence in which one is counseled to: "give to each one who possesses a right against you" merely serves as a reaffirmation of what already has been stated.

A rule is a linear prescription that states the categories of relevance and the conditions of relevance that govern the application of a rule. If certain categories and conditions fall beyond the stated context of a rule, then, generally, speaking, the rule in question is not considered applicable to such categories and conditions.

Rules are resistant to the use of either interpolation or extrapolation. In other words, for the most part, rules follow a-what-you-see-is-what-you-get sort of scenario.

For example, when a person uses the English spelling rule of 'i' before 'e' except after 'c', then one has a way to proceed to spell such words as: niece, piece, and pierce, but not seize. The latter word falls beyond the capacity of the rule to guide one and constitutes either an exception to the rule or something that operates in accordance with either some other rule, principle, or way of doing things.

Principles, on the other hand, tend to be much more subtle and nuanced than are rules. One has to try to penetrate to the form of logic that is being given expression through a principle, and, as such, principles, tend to be non-linear in character -- that is, they do not follow any simple set of conditions and properties of relevance.

Rules, sometimes, are complex, (such as, say, the scoring rules in gymnastics and diving) while, on the other hand, sometimes, principles can be stated very simply and, yet, give expression to an idea that is not easily, if at all, reduced down to a set of rules. When Jesus (peace be upon him), for example, is reported to have said: "Love thy neighbor as thyself," there is said to be a complex dynamic that ties together love, neighbor, and self, and no set of rules can exhaust the ways in which this dynamic may be understood or satisfied.

The difference between a rule and a principle tends to reside in the structural character of the logic that is at the heart of a given idea, precept, counsel. Love, kindness, compassion, integrity, and courage -- all of which are rooted in principle-governed understanding -- have a logic that is quite different than do the rules that govern, say, baking a cake or spelling certain words or calculating overtime pay within a union.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) did not specify whether the words he spoke were rules or principles. Furthermore, he did not, for the most part, indicate whether what he said was context bound -- that is, directed only to the ones who were present at the time he spoke, or, whether, the context was intended to be broader and more universal.

For example, there is a hadith in which the Prophet interacted with a man who had broken the fast of Ramadan. The man wanted to know what he had to do to make amends for his mistake.

The Prophet went through a number of possibilities. Included among these were the following: fast for two months; feed the poor; distribute what I (the Prophet) give you to the poor, and, finally, take what I give you and feed your family because you are among the poorest people within the valley of Mecca, and this will be your amends for having broken the fast.

One question to ask in conjunction with the foregoing is this: Was the counsel of the Prophet to this man meant only for this man, or was it

meant as a general principle? If the latter is the case, what is the nature of the principle entailed by what the Prophet said to the man?

Let us return to the hadith concerning those who have rights over us. If one treats the hadith as a rule, then since husbands are not mentioned, then, presumably, the hadith does not apply to them, and, as a result, husbands have no rights over their wives. Or, to use the example that someone used in a previous posting, if one treats the hadith as a rule and since children are not mentioned, then, on this reading, children have no rights over their parents.

If, on the other hand, we treat the hadith in question as a principle rather than a rule, then the four categories of those who have rights over us that are mentioned in the hadith serve as exemplars of possible categories that are encompassed by the hadith and do not serve as limits on the categories of relevance. Furthermore, the concluding sentence of the hadith we are considering -- namely, "give to each one who possesses a right against you" gives expression to the governing principle ... that is, to whomever and whatever has a right over you, then one must give what is appropriate to satisfy that right -- as such, this sentence is not a re-affirmation of giving to the four categories of relevance that preceded it (i.e., your soul, your Lord, your guest, and your wife), but, rather it says that one must consider the issue of rights and duties more broadly than what the four specific categories that are mentioned.

Notice that the hadith in question does not mention anything about what the nature of the rights in question are, nor is anything said about how to give what is due in order to satisfy those rights. The hadith says only that such rights exist and that one must strive to not only discover who and what enjoys such rights over one -- above and beyond the four categories of relevance -- but one must strive to determine how to satisfy those rights.

Whether one considers the hadith being discussed to be a rule or a principle, there are definite limits to what the hadith is counseling us to do. Whether one considers the hadith to be a rule that is applicable only to four categories of relevance (i.e., your soul, your Lord, your guest, and your wife) or one treats the hadith as a principle that is alerting human beings to the fact that many things may have rights over us and that we have an obligation to honor or fulfill those rights, as previously indicated, nothing is being said about what the nature of those rights are or how they are to be fulfilled.

What often happens is that when people talk about such hadiths, they take the ambiguity that is inherent in the hadith -- that is, the conditions and properties that are not explicitly explored within the hadith but are, instead, merely alluded to (and in the present hadith what is being alluded to without specification is the existence of rights and duties that are inherent in our relationship with not only God but different aspects of Creation), and such people interject whatever their theological stance demands in the way of (in the present case ... rights and duties) and try to claim that the hadith constitutes support for what they are saying or that the hadith actually is referring to their theological approach to things, rather than some other possibility understanding.

When many individuals do tafsir (a form of Quranic exegesis), they often approach it as a rule-governed process. In other words, they take a look at the historical circumstances surrounding a given piece of Quranic revelation or the saying and reporting of a hadith, and, on the basis of such historical circumstances, seek to establish the rule that links, say, a Quranic ayat or hadith to the historical circumstances.

However, historical circumstances are merely the locus of manifestation that serves as the occasion for a given aspect of the Qur'an to be revealed or for something to be said by the Prophet. More work is needed to try to determine what, if any, relevance historical circumstances have to the guidance that is being given, and, it is very risky to suppose that the relationship between what is being revealed or what is being said by the Prophet is necessarily rule-bound, as opposed to principle-bound, and even once one establishes that is the case, one still is faced with the problem of trying to determine what the structural character of the rule or principle in question is.

Ta'wil, which some people believe to be a process of interpretation, is actually a process of being led by God back to the original spiritual principles that are operative in this or that aspect of Quranic revelation or this or that saying of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). More often than not, such operative principles are non-linear and dynamic, rather than rule-based and static.

Unfortunately, all too many people suppose that the Qu'ran and hadith are rule-based, linear, narrow, rigid, and static, rather than principle-based, non-linear, broad-based, with degrees of freedom and dynamic. Insight -- which comes only by Divine assistance -- is

necessary for understanding spiritual principles, and one cannot probe the depths of spirituality through a rule-based concept-laden approach ... no matter how appropriate such rules may be within certain limits and in certain contexts.



Rumi Meditations

Rumi has said:

"All your suffering comes from desiring things that cannot be had. Stop desiring and you won't suffer."

The quote from Rumi is, actually, a central teaching in virtually every mystical tradition. The Sufi mystical path is no exception to this essential teaching related by Rumi that identifies desiring as a key element underlying the cause of our suffering.

To desire, is an expression of the nafs. Even the desire for heaven, or the desire for spiritual realization, or the desire for mystical experiences are all expressions of the nafs.

Ra'bia of Basra (may Allah be pleased with her) prayed:

"Oh Allah, if I worship Thee out of desire of heaven, then, deny me heaven, and if I worship Thee out of fear of hell, then, throw me into hell, but if I worship Thee out of love for Thee and Thee alone, then, grant me Thy vision."

Some might say that even this prayer has a hint of desire in it because of the manner in which the process of loving Divinity has a sort of rider attached to it -- namely, if one loves God for God alone, then the possibility of having a vision of Divinity is mentioned. Some might wish to comment in passing that this very dimension of vision should not have been mentioned at all for this might undermine the sincerity of loving God for God and God alone.

To love God for God and God alone is self-contained and independent of everything else. Love is both a means to itself and an end in itself, and, as such, love does not allude to anything beyond itself.

There is a hadith qudsi that says:

"The ones who love Me for my sake, deserve My love. The ones who give what comes to them in abundance to others deserve My love. The ones who visit and frequent each other for My sake deserve My love."

Here, again, the emphasis is on having niyat focused on seeking and doing for the sake of Allah, with nothing beyond this ... no ulterior motive, no quid pro quo, no conditions placed upon service and worship and striving.

There is another famous story associated with Ra'bia (may Allah be pleased with her) in which she rebukes a fellow Sufi who disparaging those Muslims who, unlike the fellow he rebuked, were less than regular in their observances of ritual prayers, fasting, and so on. Ra'bia (may Allah be pleased with her) is reported to have given the man a hard look and said: "thy existence is a sin with which none other can compare."

Indeed, our own sense of self (with a small 's') is the veil that stands between our essential fitra (spiritual nature/potential) and our Lord. As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) indicated once:

"Life is maintained in illusion".

One of the primary means through that each of us maintains illusion is through desire. A Sufi shaykh once said that we should become like a dead person in the hands of the one who performs the ritual ablution and turn whichever way we are moved. Now, while this guidance was given in conjunction with what the mystic felt should be the relationship between a mureed and his or her murshid, the fact of the matter is, as has been recorded in the verbal traditions of the Prophet:

"The hearts of all of the children of Adam (peace be upon him) are like a single heart between two of the fingers of the All -Merciful, and the All-merciful twists this heart in whatever way is willed."

We should not desire out of our individual selves, but, rather, we should aspire (which is not the same as desire) to seek to discover what God's will is for us. It is not our will that is important, but God's will that is

fundamental and essential. In this regard, Hafiz of Shiraz (may Allah be pleased with him) once said:

"Do not worry for the One Who is looking after your affairs is already looking after your affairs. Worry adds nothing but worry to your affair."

What comes to us from God is more important than what goes to God from us. It is not our prayers, fasting, zakat, zikr, iman, ahsan, or pilgrimages that will save or sanctify us -- as necessary as these activities may be. Rather, it is God's Grace that alone is sufficient.

The problem facing us is how do we learn to aspire not to desire? How do we open ourselves up to the Divine Himma? How do we submit to this? How do we get out of the way and permit Divinity to work through us without our opposing this? How do we stop being part of the problem and start being part of the solution -- both with respect to oneself as well in terms of what is happening within our communities.

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Ibn Ata'allah (may Allah be pleased with him) has said:

"Don't ask Him to remove you from one state in order to use you in another. If He wanted to, He could use you without removing you."

Ibn Ata'allah is providing counsel. He is advising against one kind of approach, and, simultaneously, he is seeking to bring an important principle into our consciousness.

Why is he doing this? If everything were determined and happened irrespective of what we did, then such counsel would serve no purpose. The very fact that he says something implies that he believes there is a difference between doing things appropriately and inappropriately, and, even more importantly, that by pointing out such differences, the way in which people use the gift of free will that has been given to us may be induced to pursue one direction -- a better one, God willing -- rather than a direction that is not in our best spiritual interests.

I remember my first shaykh -- my only authentic shaykh -- saying not too long (just a matter of days, really) before he passed away that although we had free will, we didn't have as much of it as some might suppose. Whatever degree of freedom we have, we have enough of it to be held accountable for our deeds and misdeeds.

I also remember -- and this took place within the same timeframe as the foregoing words were spoken (perhaps even the same conversation) -- that he indicated he had had a vision in Ajmer, India during that a variety of things were disclosed to him. Among these disclosures was that his spiritual work was done.

The time had come for him to move on to the next stage of things. Although most of the people who listened to him that evening -- including me -- did not realize what we were being told, just a few days later -- maybe, a week, at most, he passed away.

The reason I am recounting this incident is the fact that it touches upon the issue of having spiritual work to do. Yes, God is the One Who arranges everything and gives and withholds ... the One Who raises up, and brings down ... the One Who changes spiritual states and conditions, but despite all of this, it is the fate of human beings to struggle.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"This life is but a tillage for the next, therefore, do good deeds here that you may reap benefits there - for, striving is the ordinance of God, and whatever God has ordained can be attained only by striving."

The Qur'an says:

"Shall we tell you who will be the greatest losers in their works? Those whose striving goes astray in the present life while they think they are working good deeds." (18:104)

And, again:

"True believers are those who have faith in Allah and the Messenger of Allah and have left doubt behind, and who strive hard in Allah's cause with their possessions and their lives. They are the ones who are sincere."  
(49:15)

That one strives and how one strives, are two issues of fundamental importance. Suluk -- or traveling on the path -- is a process that requires effort. Knowledge about the kind of effort one should pursue is an essential part of the guidance that comes through revelation, the Prophetic tradition, and tasawwuf.

However, knowledge is not enough. Putting the knowledge into practice is also required -- as the Prophet is reported to have said:

"No person shall be learned unless one puts one's knowledge into practice,"

and, again,

"The best thing in the Scale on the Day of Judgment will be a beautiful character."

Character is not about potential. It is about realized, active being. Ibn Ata'allah (may Allah be pleased with him) also says:

"Do you not see that while He grants gnosis of Himself to you, you have only deeds to offer Him? What He brings you ... What you bring Him -- What a difference there is between them!"

Yes, what a difference, but the existence of a difference suggests that there is something to be compared. In this case, what is being compared is the Richness of Being and the poverty of created existence. We are created with a potential from God, and it is our obligation to strive to realize such potential -- although neither the striving, nor the realization, nor the potential are possible without the presence of Divine Grace.

Hafiz of Shiraz (may Allah be pleased with him) says:

"Do not worry about your affair;  
The One Who is looking after your  
affair is already busily doing so;  
Worry adds nothing to your affair but worry."

And, yet, Hafiz (may Allah be pleased with him) had to struggle his whole life and go through many austerities to reach this understanding. The truth of what is being said -- whether by Hafiz or by ibn Ata'allah (may Allah be pleased with them both) remains irrespective of what we do, but striving is, none the less, mandated to come, God willing, to the realization of such a truth.

How does one differentiate between a desire and love? One can agree that there is a basic difference between the two, but what is the nature of this difference, and how does one come to gain insight into this difference? A story from Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) is appropriate here.

Once Moses (peace be upon him) came upon a poor, simple shepherd who seemed to have strange ideas about how to love God. First, the shepherd would comb God's hair, and, then he would wash God's feet, and after that the man would give God milk to drink.

After witnessing these actions, Moses (peace be upon him) chastised the shepherd, telling the man that God's majesty and nature are far beyond needing the Divine hair combed, or the Divine feet washed, or the Divine appetite to be fed. God was independent of all such issues. Moses (peace be upon him) told the man to worship God in spirit, not in form."

After Moses (peace be upon him) left, God came to him in the form of a vision in which he was chastised for taking the shepherd to task. God said the shepherd's manner of worshiping and showing love for Divinity was perfect as it was and did not need to be changed.

Immediately after being chastised by God, Moses (peace be upon him) went in search of the shepherd -- to repent and make amends to the man. When he met the shepherd again, Moses (peace be upon him) disclosed what had been divulged to him by God. In addition, he apologized for

his wrong-doing and encouraged the shepherd to continue to worship and love God in the same fashion as had been the case.

The shepherd, however, had a confession of his own. He indicated that he thought about what Moses (peace be upon him) had said, and the words of the Prophet were like an epiphany that opened up a whole new way of approaching the idea of worshiping and loving God. Consequently, he would not return to his previous practices.

Moses (peace be upon him) changed. The shepherd changed. The truth remained as it is before their encounter, during their encounter, and after their encounter.

Moses (peace be upon him) and the shepherd engaged and were engaged by the Truth. Everything that took place -- including the chastisement (whether by God or a Prophet) -- was an expression of God's Himma (Aspiration) in action and points to the fact that there are degrees of freedom that are inherent in how one engages, or is engaged by such, Truth. Some of these ways may be better than others, and these are the ones for which we should strive through our efforts.

The Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) strove in sincerity, was chastised for his mistake in judgment, and he developed, by the Grace of Allah, a deeper appreciation for the breadth of Love's path. The shepherd underwent a similar process.

Indeed, it is not our deeds that makes transformation possible, but God's Grace alone, and God's Grace follows its own timetable. A friend of God once said: "What comes to you from God is more important than what goes from you to God," but, nevertheless, what goes from us to God is not unimportant and enters into a non-causal dialectic with God's Himma that constitutes the point-counterpoint of the Divine Passion play between the seeker and the Sought, as well as the Seeker and the sought.

We are commanded by God to seek knowledge and truth, and to give expression to love and justice. To do this can be done through desire or through himma, but spiritual aspiration, or himma, is the way in which fitra, or primordial spiritual potential, responds to the Divine entreaty to seek out Divinity. Desire is the manner in which nafs goes about things ... between himma and desire there is a huge difference, and a great deal of striving is necessary to begin to, God willing, realize the nature of this difference ... a

difference that is reflected in the previously cited quote of Ibn Ata'allah (may Allah be pleased with him) as well as the story of Rumi (may Allah be pleased with him) ... each in a unique way.

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The other day someone read to me something from a book about the life of Rumi and Shams (may Allah be pleased with them both). In the passage that was read, mention was made of the fact that Shams (may Allah be pleased with him) apparently took exception with some of the teachings of ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) and, according to passage read, felt that, in certain respects, ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) may have strayed from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Now, it is possible that the alleged dispute involving Shams and ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with them both) might be akin to the supposed difference between the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi and ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with them both) in which, among other things, great emphasis has been placed on the alleged difference between the doctrine: Wahdat-i-Wujud, or, 'Oneness of Being' (the doctrine promulgated by ibn al-'Arabi, may Allah be pleased with him) and the doctrine: Wahdat-i-Shuhud, or, 'Oneness of Witnessing' (the doctrine proposed by Ahmad Sirhindi may Allah be pleased with him).

I remember once that I talked to my shaykh about this issue. Although he had done his doctoral dissertation on the teachings of Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him), he was quite conversant with the teachings of ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) as well. My shaykh said that after all was said and done, he really didn't find any significant differences between the two doctrinal positions ... other than terminology.

Everyone, including the great shaykhs, has only their own experience and their spiritual hermeneutics of that experience to go on. The nature of Divinity is infinite, and every human being constitutes a unique creation (that is, the Divine does not repeat any particular aspect of Creation, but is always giving expression to new tajalli or manifestations with each 'Now'). Consequently, one should not be surprised to find that different people engage and understand the Infinite, each in his or her own way, and it is quite conceivable that one could place these seemingly different views next to one another without any real contradiction being

indicated concerning the nature of Truth and Reality since, as Shaykh 'Uthman Hawarni (may Allah be pleased with him) indicated – “there are many keys to the Divine Treasure.”

Problems arise, however, when the uniqueness of hermeneutical experience is used to judge other people. This is not to say that Truth and Reality are whatever we wish to make them, but it is to say that there are many degrees of freedom inherent in that Truth and Reality, and, as a result, the road to God may be both wider and narrower than we imagine -- and what is narrow for us, may be broad for someone else, and vice versa.

Interestingly enough, both Shams and ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with them both) maintained that one should not filter one's relationship to Divinity through the writings of other people. In other words, one should derive one's knowledge, insight, and understanding directly from Divine inspiration and not be shackled to the hermeneutical nuances of this or that doctrine written by this or that person.

We should consult what others have said to develop a sense of the lay of the land, and we should learn from others who truly know about the possibilities and dangers that populate the spiritual landscape, and we should spend time in the protection of such guides of the way until we are ready to begin exploring on our own (and, unfortunately, some people incorrectly gauge one, or more, of these important caveats of the mystical path. However, there will come a time, God willing, when one needs to establish one's own relationship with Divine tajalli, and when this occurs, if Allah wishes, then the understanding one has reflects that relationship of the heart between the seeker and the Sought (or is that the Seeker and the sought) rather than reflecting what appears in this or that book.

The writings of the great shaykhs are but postcards from a distant country with an inscription that says: 'Wish you were here'. Those writings are not the same thing as the Reality of what is being alluded to in those writings, any more than a travelogue is the same thing as actually being in the country being described.



Rizq, Livelihood, and Potential

There is a concept of rizq in Islam that, usually, is rendered as referring to the Divine apportionment for Creation -- both collectively and individually. Often times, when people speak about rizq, they do so in terms of permissible and impermissible means of striving for what is fated for one.

Rizq does not refer to just material goods. It encompasses everything, on every level, in every realm within Creation.

The rizq of spirituality transpires at the same time as the rizq of material gain and losses. In fact, Creation gives expression to a multi-dimensional set of rizq transactions ... everything that occurs is the manifestation of the principles of rizq at work, and rizq is but a simple term that is underwritten by the Divine play of Names and Attributes in accordance with Divine purpose.

The profits, the losses, the blessings, the Divine gifts, expansion, contraction, illness, well-being, family, talents, birth, death, spiritual progress, sin, repentance, wisdom, understanding, learning, forgetting, insight, faith, unbelief, redemption, food, comforts, difficulties, poverty, and wealth are all manifestations of the principles of rizq transactions at work. Human beings stand at the heart of such transactions and, unlike the rest of creation (with the exception of the species of being known as jinn) human beings have a unique role to play with respect to rizq transactions.

More specifically, through our choices, through the degrees of freedom that are extended to us, we align ourselves or oppose ourselves to the rizq transactions that take place. The choices we make will not affect the rizq transactions that take place one way or the other, but the intentions with which we engage those transactions matter -- to us and to God.

To engage rizq transactions with the right intention is what forms the basis of, among other things, right livelihood. When the right intention is present, then work becomes a form of ibadat (worship) and zikr, for one realizes that whatever happens this is a manifestation of the Divine Himma in the form of a rizq transaction of which one is a part.

All rizq transactions have a right over us because such transactions constitute the way in which God wishes events to unfold. We can work with

such wishes or we can seek to treat them with kufr and shirk – that is, we can cover up/deny the truth of what is transpiring or we can propose alternative ways of accounting for what is going on that give explanations that are dependent on something other than Divinity as the causal principle for what takes place.

Everything in existence is unique --- even if it shares some similarities with other beings of its class of Creation. The nature of Divine creation is such that nothing is repeated ... everything manifests ever different modalities of Divine beauty and majesty in infinite combinations of possibility.

Each human being is unique. Each human being has a unique role to play with respect to the realm of rizq transactions. God uses each of us differently to serve as loci of manifestation for rizq transactions.

Our souls have a right over us in this respect for each of must seek to find what is uniquely inherent in the fitra that is our spiritual potential and, then, we must strive to, God willing, give expression to this. There is a beauty, harmony and spiritual quality that arises from rizq transactions that are engaged through the right niyat or intention ... a niyat that is rooted in awareness, understanding, faith, integrity, submission, dependence, love, and character. Such beauty, harmony and spiritual quality are themselves part of the rizq transactions that God ordains.

The lives of the prophets and saints bear witness to the foregoing. There is the aura of beauty, harmony, and spiritual quality emanating from their lives as they engage in the dance of rizq transactions that is utterly captivating.

One's heart and mind are drawn to the purity and sincerity of intention by means of which rizq transactions are manifested through their lives. We seek to follow their example as best we can according to the rizq of spiritual potential we have been apportioned.

To do what is right for oneself and, simultaneously, right for the world is to enter into rizq transactions with the quality of intention that is most pleasing to God. To achieve this level of quality is a very difficult thing to do for it consists of, God willing, purifying, calibrating, and bringing into active form all of the different dimensions of the human being -- including mind, heart, sirr, spirit, kafi, and aqfah -- that give expression to the 'so-called' perfect human being ... which is not really perfection per se (for only God

is perfect) but rather the expression of capacity to its fullest extent -- something that varies from person to person.

No matter what one does for an occupation, there should be an vocation or calling that underwrites it. The vocational aspect is the spiritual quality with which one seeks to embrace all of life, including the means through which God uses to provide one with the material rizq of day-to-day living.

There are many people who earn their livelihood through permissible means. There are very few people who do this with the sort of spiritual balance, beauty, wisdom, and quality that transforms such means of livelihood into the acts of worship and zikr that human beings have been given the capacity to achieve if God wishes.



Wahdat-i-Wujud and Wahdat-i-Shuhud

Someone asked a question about the issues of Wahdat-i-Wujud and Wahdat-i-Shuhud. Moreover, they did so in the context of a discussion about a thesis written by Dr. M. Qadeer Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) a modern day Sufi master who taught a variety of courses on Islam and the Sufi path at the University of Toronto's Middle East and Islamic Studies Department and who passed away about 30years ago.

The thesis written by Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) who was my shaykh for nearly 16 years, was on the life and teachings of Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) . This latter individual was a proponent of the doctrine of Wahdat-i-Shuhud, or the unicity of witnessing. This doctrine is often contrasted with the position of ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) that is known as Wahdat-i-Wujud, or the unicity of Being ... although ibn al-'Arabi never actually used the term in question.

When Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) completed his thesis, A.J. Arberry, who was the external reader at the doctoral oral examination for the aforementioned work, described the dissertation as being the best treatment of the subject in the English language that he had ever encountered. This is high praise, indeed, coming from one of the major academic figures to introduce the teachings of the Sufi path to a Western audience.

Below is my response to the questions being asked. The first, shorter part deals with Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) and his thesis. The second portion provides a brief attempt to reconcile the doctrines of Wahdat-i-Wujud and Wahdat-i-Shuhud -- perspectives that are generally considered to be in opposition to one another.

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The short answer to part of your question -- namely, do I have a copy of the thesis of Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) -- is 'no'. Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) left explicit instructions that his writings not be made available to anyone after his passing away -- and, I am included among those who were not meant to not have access to what he wrote.

I can think of a variety of reasons why Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) did things in this manner. For example, he was always

updating his thesis in the light of, among other things, the spiritual experiences of his many chillas, retreats, or seclusions.

However, this project of updating the thesis was always on the back burner because he did not consider the matter as important as other considerations. Therefore, he was not able to spend as much time as would have been necessary for the written side of things to be up-to-date with his experiential understanding a variety of issues.

He would have not wanted incomplete writings to mislead people, nor would he have wanted other people trying to use incomplete writings to claim that Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) was claiming this or that, and, thereby, trying to use the authoritativeness of the name of Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) to support this or that position or agenda. So, he made the unfinished project unavailable to people.

Secondly, in the light of what has transpired following his passing away, I feel there was great wisdom in placing strict limits on access to his writing. There would have been considerable temptation for certain people to misuse the work of Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him), and, consequently, he was merely removing temptation from the path of individuals, and, in the process, trying, as best he could, to protect people from themselves.

From time to time, during his years on this Earth, Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) did talk about the ideas of Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him), as well as the ideas of many other luminaries of the Sufi Path -- including Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him). However, the fact of the matter is that he tended to de-emphasize such issues as being relatively unimportant with respect to his teaching function.

His teaching -- at least, as I understood it -- was always more practically oriented, and, as a result, more given to issues of: purification of niyat (intention), adab (spiritual etiquette), basic practices, shari'ah, community service, saying of fatiha, living in accordance with one's knowledge, and so on. And, this is how I spent the vast majority of my, approximately, 16 years with him.

Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) did not want people drifting away in flights of fancy and imagination. He wanted them to focus on the here and now and to do so with a sincere faith.

So, what I am about to say I do not attribute to Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him). At the same time, I do feel that what follows is thoroughly rooted in what Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) taught me, for one must take into account not only what comes to one on the surface of things, but, as well, through more subtle and hidden ways of *sina-bin-sina* -- heart to heart transmissions -- that can inform, shape, color, and direct discursive thinking even when the latter cannot comprehend how this takes place, nor fully fathom the depths of such transmissions. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the foregoing comments, whatever mistakes are committed in the following discussion are entirely due to my own shortcomings and lack of understanding.

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Many, many books have been written about the alleged controversy or dispute between the doctrines of Hazrat ibn al-'Arabi and Hazrat Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with them both). Ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him), of course never participated in this controversy because all of the writings about the issues entailed by the controversy arose after he passed away.

In other words, on the one hand, ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him), himself, never had an opportunity to respond -- at least in this world -- to Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him). The preface or prolog or introduction to the Meccan Revelations or Openings indicates that despite the voluminous nature of this work (covering numerous volumes and thousands of pages), nevertheless, what ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) wrote was but a small part of what could have been written, and what could have been written was but a small part of what he knew, and what he knew was but a small portion of what there is to know.

Consequently, if given the opportunity, who knows how he would have responded to the charges and allegations of Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him). I am fairly certain, however, that much more could have been said that might have cleared up some of the 'apparent' differences and points of contention.

As anyone knows who has even a passing acquaintance with the writings and work of ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him), there is a great deal of what he said that is deliberately obfuscated and rendered almost impossible to penetrate unless one has had the requisite experiences or one has assistance from someone who knows and

understands what is going on. One cannot take just the passages that seem to be relatively clear and straightforward and suppose that everything can be reduced down to such passages.

In addition, language has its limitations. As such, language is only a very imperfect vehicle for expressing an understanding that is not rooted in linguistic structures, but in the epistemic nuances and currents of understanding of the heart, spirit, and the like.

Therefore, one must distinguish between someone's understanding and the manner in which they choose to speak or write about that understanding. So, many philosophical, theological, and spiritual discussions have gone awry simply because of people's tendency to raise language usage to a level that transcends non-conceptual understanding, rather than realize that, at best, language use is a translation of something that takes place in a non linguistic environment ... irrespective of whether this latter environment is a matter of concepts, emotions, psychological events, or the phenomenology of spiritual life.

Another point to consider before entering into the fray is that a great deal of what has been written about this controversy has taken place through the works of those who are of only marginal concern ... marginal in the sense that they are not the principles themselves and, so, rightly or wrongly, are seeking to speak for one principle or the other. As a result, one becomes, at a minimum, removed from the original context, and one must entertain the possibility that one is talking about a given person's understanding of someone else's understanding of the latter individual's own experience that might, or may not, have been experienced and understood by the person who is doing the speaking/writing, once or twice removed from ground zero.

Did Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) properly understand ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him)? This is an important issue, but it may take one in directions other than dealing with the essence of the issues that need to be addressed.

Did those who wrote commentaries in defense of the writings of ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) correctly understand him? This is another good question, but, again, pursuing it is likely to obfuscate issues because one is filtering the original light through -- potentially --

something other than itself that often tends to lend distortion to the subject matter.

I do not propose to defend or criticize either ibn al-'Arabi or Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with them both). Rather, I would try to go to the issues themselves.

At the heart of the controversy between the so-called doctrines of Wahdat-i-Wujud and Wahdat-i-Shuhud is the following question: What is the relationship between Creation and Divinity? And, actually, this question may have to be refined in the following manner: What is the relationship between Creation and Dhat or Divine Essence?

There are a number of correlative themes that are entangled in the foregoing question. For example: What is the nature of Being? What does it mean to speak about non-existent fixed forms? What is illusion? In what sense does that which is non-existent have a reality, and what kind of reality is this? What is the relation of the attributes and names of Divinity to Dhat? What is the relation of the world to the realm of names and attributes? What is meant by immanence and transcendence? What is the nature of any given tajalli or manifestation? What does it mean to say that manifestation is identical with the One Who makes such manifestation possible? What is the relation of experience to manifestation? What is the relation of understanding to experience? What does it mean to say one has knowledge of something? What is the relation of fitra -- or primordial nature -- to tajalli, experience, understanding and knowledge? What is the nature of mystical experience, and what is its relation to wahiy or revelation?

The alleged dispute between Wahdat-i-Wujud [the position associated with ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) but that he never actually delineated through such terms] and Wahdat-i-Shuhud [the position associated with Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him)] addresses the foregoing questions and themes.

Depending on whom one reads or listens to, there is either a world of difference between the two perspectives, or, on the other hand, the only substantial difference between the two is a matter of how terminology is used, together with how such terminology is understood, and that when one seeks to lend a judicious hermeneutical process to both perspectives, one ends up -- such differences aside -- with essentially the same sort of spiritual understanding -- although Ahmad

Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) rejects the latter possibility and feels, instead, that ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) lacked the necessary mystical experiences that would have served to lend maturity to the understanding of the latter, and, in the process, would have helped ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) to avoid the mistakes that Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) believes are inherent in, as well as entailed by, the idea of Wahdat-i-Wujud -- or the Unity of Being.

Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) believes that ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) is a pantheist and that the latter individual holds that Dhat (Essence), sifat (attributes), 'asma (names), and Creation or the World (in the extended sense of the comprehensive Universe, including all of its many dimensions and realms) are all identical with one another. This draws attention to the issue of 'identity' -- what is it and does it necessitate one saying that because Divinity makes something possible, that, therefore, what is made possible must be the same as that which made it possible.

When someone thinks a thought, there is a sense in which the thought is an expression of the one who thinks it. However, would one say that the thought and the thinker are the same?

I think the clear answer is: "no". The thought is definitely related to the thinker, but the thought is circumscribed by the limitations of its structural character -- that is, the form of the thought -- in a way that the thinker of the thought is not.

Among other things, the thinker causes the thought, whereas the thought is totally dependent on the one who brings the thought into manifest being. Thoughts are structured by something that is transcendent to the thought -- namely, the creative thought process.

The thought is neither the thinker nor is it other than the thinker. The thought has a sort of interstitial -- or in between, status -- because the thinker cannot be reduced to the thought, and, yet, the thought cannot exist apart from the process or means through which it came into being.

Similarly, the drop of spray that is separated from the Ocean and, then, returns to the Ocean is neither the Ocean, nor other than the Ocean. It has the same sort of interstitial -- in between -- status as does a thought.

Sifat (attributes), asma (names), tajalli (manifestations), experience, understanding, capacity, fitra (primordial spiritual capacity), fixed forms, the universe, and knowledge all give expression to this same interstitial state of Being. Only Dhat is necessary and sufficient -- everything else is contingent and dependent. Only Dhat is unknown and unknowable -- everything else is known through the nature of its tajalli or manifestation that is made possible through the 'thought' of the Thinker or the 'drop of spray' of the Ocean.

Everything is a manifestation of some combination of veils of light and darkness. Everything is known as a function of our God-given capacity to engage and penetrate these veils of light and darkness. What is made manifest and what is made known is done so through the imminent actions of a Dhat that is totally transcendent and beyond the Beyond however deeply such immanence may be given expression.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"Reflect upon all things but reflect not on the Dhat (Essence) of God."

Any attempt of the lesser to reflect on that which is beyond the Beyond and beyond the beyond of the Beyond cannot lead but to error.

We are counseled to reflect upon all things other than the Dhat because these 'things' are manifestations for which we have been given, by God, a potential to understand, according to one's capacity to do so. And with respect to such things, "over every lord of knowledge, there is one more knowing" (Qur'an 12:76) we know only what Divinity permits us to know and what Divinity has given us the capacity to know.

We will never know how manifestation arises out of Dhat because we will never penetrate to the nature of Dhat. Yet, manifestation is rooted in Dhat because the latter makes the former possible, just as the thinker makes the thought possible, and the ocean makes the drop of spray possible without the two being either identical or other than.

To say -- in line with the reported hadith of the Prophet that 'he who knows himself knows his Lord' -- is to make a contingent statement in a double sense. The statement is contingent upon actually having knowledge (as opposed to theoretical or conceptual understanding) of one's complete nature (from the physical to the spiritual), and, in addition, the statement

is contingent upon knowing God through the presence of Divine manifestation that gives expression to the same interstitial, existential status as everything else.

One can know God only to the extent that God permits. What we know in this way is neither other than Divinity, nor does it encompass Divinity. Just as the thought belongs to the thinker, and the drop of spray belongs to the ocean, so, too, do manifestation and understanding belong to God, and to this extent, manifestation and understanding are neither other than Divinity, nor can Divinity be reduced down to such manifestations.

Wahdat-i-Shuhud or the witnessing of manifestation through sensory experience, reason, kashf (unveiling), ilham (brief flashes of spiritual illumination), hal (states), maqam (station), and wahiy (revelation) means that we can never understand or access more of the Real than we have the God-given fitra or potential to do, and, therefore, our understanding of Divinity will always be colored and shaped by the limitations that have been built into fitra. Fitra was made for manifestation, not for Dhat.

Wahdat-i-Wujud, or the Unity of Being means that whatever we experience as a function of our different levels of potential (from sensory, to rational, to mystical, to revelatory) cannot be other than God, even while, simultaneously, Divinity can never be reduced down to such manifestations. Everything is Divinity even though our capacity to understand how this is so -- due to the interstitial character of all levels of manifested existence -- is of a delimited nature.

Wahdat-i-Wujud says that everything that can be known and experienced is an expression of the fact that there is no Reality but Divinity. One cannot equate the former (i.e., everything that can be known) with the latter, but, nevertheless, the former (i.e., that which can be known) is not something other than Divinity.

How does a thought differ from the thinker? How does manifestation differ from the One who made such manifestation possible?

Neither Wahdat-i-Wujud nor Wahdat-i-Shuhud can answer these questions. However, the former (i.e., Wahdat-i-Wujud) approaches things from the direction that whatever is known, experienced, or realized cannot be said to be other than That which has made it possible, even

though such manifestations can never exhaust nor circumscribe the Source of their being -- whether this 'being' is construed as a something that is nothing, or a nothing that is something. And, Wahdat-i-Shuhud approaches things from the perspective that whatever is known, experienced, witnessed, or realized is delimited by the nature of the fitra that has been bequeathed to us through Divine Himma or aspiration.

Consequently, according to Wahdat -i-Shuhud, no matter how much we come to know, by the Grace of God, there will always be a distinction to be drawn between the servant and his or her Lord -- a distinction that indicates that we are other than Dhat. On the other hand, according to Wahdat-i-Wujud, no matter how much of a distinction one wishes to make between Dhat and Created being, the latter can never be completely separated from, or other than, Divinity, and this interstitial reality is inherent in the Shahadah.

Indeed, this is why the Shahadah does not stop with proclaiming that 'there is no reality but Allah' and, instead, proceeds on to maintain that 'Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.' There is no reality but Divinity, and, yet nevertheless and paradoxically, Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Rasul of Allah.

As has been reported in a hadith qudsi -- which consists of those extra-wahiy or extra-revelatory instances in which Allah speaks through the mouth of the Prophet:

"I am Ahmad without meem (m)."

That is, when one removes the letter meem from Ahmad, one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), one is left with 'Ahad' -- the One -- one of the beautiful names of Allah ... and one should keep in mind that something more than a spelling lesson is being alluded to here.

There is a tawhid, or unity, in Being, and there is a tawhid, or unity, in knowing, and there is a tawhid in the relationship of: being and knowing, existence and realization, experience and potential. We are Divine to the extent that there is nothing other than Divinity, but the Divine transcends

any of the manifestations that are made possible through the nature of Divinity.

We can know the Divinity that makes us possible only to the extent of our realized capacity to do so. However, no matter how great this realized capacity may be, it will never exhaust or grasp the unknowable and inaccessible depths of the Dhat that is beyond everything that has been brought into created being.

What we can know of Reality is both substantial and illusory. It is substantial in as much as our capacity to know has been 'wired' by Divinity to gain access to the Real -- up to the limit of capacity. Just because the ocean does not fit into a glass of water, this fact does not make the water in the glass any less real.

On the other hand, what is known is illusory because what lies beyond its horizons is totally beyond the realms of comprehensibility - and, there is more beyond the horizons than is contained by, or within, them. In other words, what is known is illusory because Reality is always more than what our knowledge understands Reality to be -- and this is so no matter how extensive, deep, rich, and insightful such knowledge may be.

Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) uses the example of a stick, one end of which has been placed in a fire. When the stick is picked up and moved in a circle, the illusion of a circle is created.

Although the circle is an illusion, nevertheless, it is an illusion that people can see and describe (in terms of, for example, color, location, size, and shape). Through this process of consensual validation, the illusion has a certain 'real' status, even though its existence is totally dependent on the stick, the fire, the heating, and the movement for it contingent mode of being. Moreover, although the circle is an illusion, its fleeting character is, nonetheless, underwritten by that which has -- to some degree -- a substantial reality.

One can catch a glimpse of the Chinese-puzzle-box-like nature of Reality by reflecting on the foregoing example. If one were to posit or assume that the circle of light had self-awareness and some capacity for understanding, then the circle of light might understand, among other things, that its existence was ephemeral -- that is, 'life' or being would last only as long as one end of the stick was sufficiently hot and only as long as the stick was moved and only as long as other conditions existed that lent support to the creation of the

illusion (for example, that there was oxygen, that there was a fire, that the stick could be made to catch fire and glow, and so on).

However, when one turns to issues such as why does the illusion have the shape it does, or why does the illusion appear at certain points and not others, or why is the illusion permitted to start and, then, stop, or what happens to the consciousness of the illusion, once the physical form of the illusion is discontinued, or does the illusion serve any purpose, then, with such questions, one is venturing into areas of meaning, significance, and the truth of 'things'.

How, and to what extent, does the consciousness of the illusion penetrate to the intentions of the That which makes the illusion possible? Surely, the answer to such questions is this: only to the extent and in the ways that are permitted by That which makes the illusion possible.

The logic, so to speak, is one of tautology. In other words, once one understands the nature of what is packed into the premise of being, then everything that comes to be known, by the Grace of God, is contained in the character of one's starting premise that, in the case of human beings, is known as 'fitra. All of life is a matter of seeking to unpack that which is given from the beginning. Whatever is not packed into the starting premise of one's being can never be known.

In a hadith qudsi, Divinity is reported to have said:

"I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known, so, I brought forth Creation."

We know whatever can be known -- at least by humankind -- of this hidden treasure by the light of Allah ... that is, we know God by God and only to the extent that God wishes.

No matter how much we may be permitted to know there is always a Beyond which lies hidden 'outside' (and, this 'outside' is not spatial but ontological and epistemic) the horizons of our experience, knowledge, and understanding. For Divinity to have said that "I loved to be known" does not necessarily entail exhaustive, definitive, complete knowledge but, rather, encompasses only as much knowledge as God loved to be the case with respect to the Hidden Treasure, and this capacity for knowing

the Hidden Treasure was factored into the Creation when it was brought forth:

"None of us there is but has a known station." (Qur'an 37:164).

Every dimension of being -- other than Dhat (Divine Essence) -- constitutes an 'effect' relative to the realm of being through which that dimension of manifested being is given expression. That is, the former (the effect) has a borrowed, contingent, relative, illusory quality of being relative to the latter (that which makes the 'effect' possible).

Even the Divine Sifat (Attributes) and 'Asma (Names) presuppose the existence of Dhat. Therefore, the qualities and character of Sifat and 'Asma do not manifest themselves independently of Dhat. Instead, they are the effects -- manifestations -- of the unknown and unknowable Dhat of Divinity.

Sifat and 'Asma are manifested in accordance with the nature of the Divine purpose or himma through which the actions of the Names and Attributes are made possible. Names and Attributes are the servants of Dhat, and the patterns that are woven by the work of these Servants reflect the Divine purpose or himma according to the nature -- taken both individually and collectively -- of these Names and Attributes.

According to our essential spiritual capacity and according to the nature of what Divinity permits in relation to this capacity, we know something of the nature of the Names and Attributes through the manifested effects of these Names and Attributes. Such knowledge does not provide us with any insight into the nature of Dhat or the Divine Essence other than the fact that such Names and Attributes are made possible by Dhat.

Experience is 'real' to the extent that some realm of being makes such experience possible and to the extent that God has given human kind the capacity to establish consensual validation with respect to the properties and qualities of such experience. Experience is illusory to the extent that it is the effect of something that is transcendent to it and that only makes things appear as they do under certain circumstances that are all established through the action of That which is Transcendent to the lesser, illusory realm of being.

God says:

"We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that God is the Real." (Qur'an, 41:53)

Nothing is said here about what lies beyond those horizons nor about what lies beyond the God-given capacity or fitra within us for realizing the signs of Divinity that are manifested there -- yet, whatever is made clear to us, there is no doubt (and God is the authority for what is said here) that in an interstitial (or in between) sense, what is being witnessed is nothing other than the Real.

In the Qur'an one finds the following:

"Verily, God does not forgive the ascribing of divinity to aught besides Him, although He forgives any lesser sin unto whomever He wills: for he who ascribes divinity to aught besides God has indeed contrived an awesome sin. (Qur'an 4:48)

Some may suppose that what is being said in the foregoing overview of the doctrines of Wahdat-i-Wujud and Wahdat-i-Shuhud borders on, if not crosses the boundary, that divides acceptable faith and unacceptable shirk -- that is, the ascribing of partners to God or the ascribing of Divinity to anything other than Allah -- that is mentioned in the above ayat of the Qur'an. However, none of the foregoing discussion ascribes Creation as a partner to God -- in fact, quite the opposite since Creation cannot be other than the servant of Divinity.

Furthermore, Divinity -- in the sense of the One Who makes all manifestation possible, and in the sense of the One Who is totally transcendent, and in the sense of the One Who is the master, possessor, and generator of all Names and Attributes, and in the sense of the One Who holds human kind and jinn accountable on the Day of Judgment -- is not being ascribed to Creation. Rather, attention is being directed toward something of a conundrum for those who wish to dismiss all talk such as: 'in essence, human kind is Divine, but we are not Divinity in Essence' ... namely, if nothing exists but God (as both the first pillar of Islam, as well as

the first article of iman or faith stipulate), then what is the ontological status of Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the creation that arose from the light of the spirit of the fitra of the being of the one who would become the seal of Prophethood and, yet, according to another tradition of the Prophet, existed when 'Adam (peace be upon him) was between water and clay'?

Where does Divinity leave off and Creation begin if there is no reality but Divinity? What is the precise character of the relationship between Divinity and Creation?

One can mention such things as non-existent potentials, zil (shadow or adumbration), possible existents, emanations, and all of the other categories of logical sorting that philosophers, theologians, academics, and mystic commentators use to try to make sense of the foregoing questions. However, the bottom line is this: there is no way to talk about Creation independently of the Reality that subsidizes such being, and this remains so irrespective of whether one refers to this latter, created mode of being as contingent, dependent, derivative, non-existent, possible, or potential.

To the foregoing extent, then, there is something of the Divine that is present -- mysterious though this presence may be -- in human beings and in the rest of Creation. Moreover, this can be said without requiring one to claim there is an identity between the two (i.e., Divinity and Creation) and without requiring one to claim Creation is something other than a mode of being that is intimately related, in an interstitial (or in between) manner, to the presence of Divinity.

States, Stations, Stages, and Practice

To borrow a phrase from fractal mathematics, the Sufi path tends to be 'self-similar' rather than 'self-same' when considering the experience of different individuals. In other words, since every human being is unique, even while sharing in the general set of properties that differentiate human beings from other species of being, and since the tajalli of Divinity (the descent or rupture of Divine modalities into manifested form) do not repeat themselves in any self-same manner, one cannot necessarily speak of suluk, or spiritual travel, as consisting of a linear sequence of states (hal) and stations (maqam).

Different individuals have outlined the path in varied ways that reflects their own experience of suluk rather than necessarily reflecting some set of hard and fast steps that must be taken in a 'just so' order. Thus, some people say the Sufi path consists of 'x' number of states and 'y' number of stations, while other commentators say that tasawwuf entails 'r' number of states, and 't' number of stations.

In addition, there are, sometimes, disagreements about whether a certain stage of spiritual travel involves a hal or a maqam. Again, such variation in opinion are more indicative of the differences that people bring with them to the path than they are necessarily reflective of 'truths' independent of human engagement of reality.

Generally speaking, a hal is characterized as a temporary spiritual condition with respect to which intentional effort of striving has not been expended or directed, and, therefore, comes as a gift of Divinity. Maqam, or station, on the other hand, is often characterized as more permanent than are hal, and, as well, are said to be spiritual conditions for which struggle and striving must be exerted in a concerned manner. As such, maqam tend to be described as spiritual conditions that must be earned, while hal are not earned per se.

However, since spiritual effort does not cause spiritual progress, but is, at best, a necessary condition, then whether one is talking about states or stations, these are both gifts of God and could not be experienced or sustained without Divine succor. Moreover, although there are instances in which individuals who are not on any particular spiritual path are recipients of Divine Grace in the form of this or that manner of hal, then the likelihood of undergoing one or another spiritual hal tends to be increased when one is

actively and sincerely pursuing the mystical path under the guidance and care of an authentic shaykh.

Yet, one might keep in mind that the Qur'an stipulates:

“If Allah were to take humankind to task for their wrong -doing, God would not leave herein a living creature, but God reprieves them to an appointed term.” (16:61)

So, whether one is talking about hal or maqam, neither is deserved but comes by the Grace of Allah.

Finally, some expressions of hal are longer lived than are other manifestations of hal. Therefore, whether one believes one is talking about a condition of hal rather than maqam may be somewhat arbitrarily decided.

Spiritual conditions share some of the same qualities as dreams. This is especially so in the sense that both dreams and spiritual conditions require the presence of insight by an experienced guide or knowledgeable and Divinely supported individual in order to properly appreciate the nature of what is transpiring through either the dream or a given spiritual condition.

Najm al-Din Razi (may Allah be pleased with him), in his book: *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return*, uses the example of fire to illustrate the complexity of the problem. Someone who is traversing the path of tasawwuf may see the attribute of fire and -- depending on the nature of one's spiritual condition -- this attribute will have a different meaning in different states and stations.

For some, the appearance of fire is an indication that the quality of anger is dominant. For others, the presence of fire may signify the light of zikr or the individual's ardor for the spiritual quest. For still others, the fire may exemplify the presence of guidance as with the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him), or it may give expression to the quality of devilry as with Iblis. And, for still other individuals, the quality of fire may symbolize the condition of gnosis or love or witnessing. There also are additional modalities of fire that indicate the presence of other manner of states and stations.

The attribute of fire is but one of many, many qualities that might emerge within an individual's experience and serve as a tell-tale sign of a person's spiritual condition. However, as with dreams, insight is needed to understand the significance of the presence of a given quality.

Similarly, when an individual passes through stations involving the attributes of clay, water, air, fire, firmaments, heavenly bodies, the malakut (or soul) of the planets and the stars, animals, and a thousand other realms, different kinds of tajalli may be manifested according to circumstances and an individual's spiritual condition. Just as there is no reliable book of dream interpretation in which all one has to do is scour the index for a given dream and, then, proceed to the page with 'the' correct interpretation, so too, there is no standard dictionary of spiritual states and stations that always are manifested in the same way across individual experiences.

I recall, once, when my shaykh, Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him), talked about such matters. He indicated that in very special cases -- and he referred to such instances as being among the most supreme of spiritual conditions -- an individual may traverse the journey of suluk and not have even one 'mystical' or anomalous, non-ordinary experience. These are individuals from whom God has kept secret the nature of their own spiritual condition.

Many people speak about the alleged great differences between, say, the doctrine of Wahdat-i-Shuhud (the Unity or Oneness of Witnessing) and Wahdat-i-Wujud (the Unity or Oneness of Being). In fact, great controversies have been instigated on the basis of such differences of approach to the hermeneutics of experience, and yet, once again, I remember that my shaykh, Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him), said that after all was said and done, there really wasn't much difference between the two.

I might add a brief note at this point to indicate that Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) wrote his doctoral dissertation on the life and teachings of Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him). The latter shaykh was a champion of the doctrine of Wahdat-i-Shuhud. One of the examiners for Dr. Baig's (may Allah be pleased with him) thesis was no less an authority than A.J. Arberry who considered the thesis to be the best exposition of the Sufi path to be written in the English language up to that time.

Following many of his forty day seclusions, Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) would set about revising and improving his thesis on the basis of what had been experienced and disclosed during the previous period of seclusion. In many ways this was a life-long project for him that never saw the light of day -- that is, a “finished”, written book was never released to either the general public or even to his mureeds ... although in many senses the finished book was Dr. Baig himself.

Among other things, the process of constant revision in the light of subsequent experience is a hallmark of the path. This process of needing to continuously revise one's understanding of the path represents one of the reasons why one should refrain from speaking about the path as if it were a static thing in which one can sum up its components in some simple, linear fashion.

When I first stepped onto the path, more than 45 years ago, I must confess that my head was filled, to a certain extent, with ideas of ‘wondrous deeds, powers, exalted, non-ordinary states of consciousness, and other such artifacts of ignorance. Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) had an interesting way of dealing with such nonsense.

To those who came to the path from a very conceptually-laden direction – that is, treating the Sufi Path as if it were just another species of philosophy about which one could read, learn, and debate -- Dr. Baig (may Allah be pleased with him) would assign some treatise of one, or another, Sufi Shaykh that was of such a difficult nature that the individual would soon come to the realization that he or she didn't really know much of anything, irrespective of how much the person may have read prior to arriving at Dr. Baig's doorstep. To others, such as myself, whose heads were preoccupied with other-worldly states and stations, he would assign the book *Introduction to Islam* by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah (may Allah be pleased with him) that was quite excellent but very down-to-earth, dry, and rooted in practicality.

Many people are familiar with the following prayer of Ra'bia of Basra (may Allah be pleased with her):

“O Lord, if I worship Thee out of desire of Paradise, then deny me Paradise, and if I worship Thee out of fear of Hell, then throw me into Hell,

but if I worship Thee out of love for Thee and Thee alone, then grant me Thy vision.”

Without wishing to criticize this great saint -- because I really am not fit to carry her sandals (if she had any) -- nevertheless, I do have a question. Why make the last part of the prayer conditional?

Is not Divinity present in the state and/or station of sincere love? Is not Divinity present in every aspect of experience, and indeed, experience is not possible without giving expression to the underlying play of Divine Names and Attributes that makes such experiences possible and provides them with their structural character?

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“This world is prohibited to the people of the next world, and the next world is forbidden to the people of this world, and they are both forbidden to the people of Allah.”

Seekers are seeking what? They are seeking something beyond what they believe to be present even as what they are actually seeking -- as a poem of Hazrat Muin-ud-deen Chishti (May Allah be pleased with him) points out -- is with us night and day ... hiding in plain sight. Yet, we go seeking -- from horizon to horizon -- for what is already present.

Instead of seeing Divinity, we see veils. The veils, of course, mark the presence of Divinity, as well, but we want an unveiled look at Divinity, when, in truth, we can only see what God has given us the capacity to see at any given time or instance.

All practices -- from: shahadah, to: prayers, zikr, fasting, seclusion, fatiha, hajj, contemplation, meditation, sacred turning, various forms of charitableness, service to the shaykh, and the performance of good deeds -- have one thing in common: namely, the realization and expression of truth. Each kind of practice engages the truth, reality, or Haq from the perspective of the form and character of that practice.

When we exclude practices, then we cut ourselves off from ways of engaging different facets and dimensions of the truth. As one friend of Allah said, ‘there are many keys to spiritual realization, if one key does

not work, then try another' -- and one might add, if it is not already implicit in what was said, one should not just try a given key once but on many different occasions, because one never knows when all the tumblers will fall into place and be receptive to the use of a given key.

Similarly, each state and station serves as a locus of manifestation for the kind of truth to which such a state or station gives expression. The truth of expansion is not the truth of contraction. The truth of patience is not the truth of repentance. The truth of longing is not the truth of arrival. The truth of love is not the truth of dependence. The truth of difficulty is not the truth of ease. The truth of chastisement is not the truth of ascension.

Yet, when one weaves together all of these different modalities of truth in the form of experiential tajalli, then an individual approaches the fullness of truth as a limit, and in mathematics as in life, a limit is a function that approaches more and more closely to a given point, without ever reaching that point except, theoretically, at infinity. However, in the latter case, the Qur'an has something of relevance to say here:

“and over every lord of knowledge, there is one more knowing.” (12:76)

The truth -- reality -- cannot be exhausted. It is infinite, and, consequently, there are no set of stages, states, or conditions that can encompass the infinite.

We engage truth according to our essential capacity, fitra, or 'ayn al-thabita. We engage truth according to the condition of being veiled that constitutes our spiritual condition and degree to which our spiritual potential has been realized.

Different individuals have different capacities. The spiritual capacity of the Prophets is not the spiritual capacity of non-Prophetic saints, and the spiritual capacity of ordinary believers is not the spiritual capacity of the saints, whether Prophets or other manner of awliya. Moreover, within these different categories of human beings, there are gradations -- as indicated in the Qur'an:

“We have made some of these prophets to excel others” (17:55)

and,

“We raise by grades (of Mercy) whom We will.” (12:76)

Mind, heart, sirr, ruh, kafi, and aqfah are potentials of fitra (one’s primordial spiritual capacity). Consequently, these potentials cannot exceed their limits.

On one occasion, the son of Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) came to the shaykh and presented something of a conundrum to the shaykh. The young man indicated that he had an experience in which he seemed to rise higher than the station of the Prophets, and since this contradicted what was understood to be possible, the young man was confused by the experience.

Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) resolved the problem in the following manner. He said that associated with every human being there are two points -- one marking the station of origin and the other marking the station of ascension.

He further indicated that, on occasion, the ascension of a non-Prophet might rise higher than the station of origin of a Prophet. However, in no case would the station of ascension of a non-Prophet ever rise higher or approach the station of ascension of a Prophet of God.

Thus, for each of us, the station of origin and the station of ascension are fixed within the degrees of freedom that are permitted by Divinity. Consequently, the ways in which mind, heart, sirr, kafi, ruh, and aqfah (all spiritual faculties within the individual) are given expression depends on the character of the fitra or fixed-form potential in question.

Some people define heart, mind, spirit, and soul in ways that are all-inclusive. In other words, for such people, the heart constitutes our entire potential for realizing the truth, and, then they proceed to describe different stages, states and stations of the heart that outline the path to ultimate realization -- such as: (a) breast, (b) qalb, (c) the aspect of the heart that is preoccupied with the love of human kind; (d) fo’ad (the seat

of vision), (e) the dimension of the heart that gives expression to an exclusive love for Divinity; (f) the core of the heart that involves spiritual kashf or unveiling concerning the realms of the unseen about which angels have no knowledge; and, finally, (g) mohjat al-qalb that, when realized, gives expression to the lights of Divine attributes.

Other people do this in conjunction with the nafs. For example, people speak in terms of: (1) nafs-i-ammara (the soul that commands to evil); (2) nafs-i-mulhameh (the soul that is inspired by God with knowledge of lewdness and God-fearing); (3) nafs-i-lawwama (the reproachful soul); (4) nafs-i-mutma'inneh (the tranquil soul); (5) nafs-i-radiya (the contented soul in which God is well pleased with them, and they are well-pleased with God); and, (6) nafs-i-safiya, the pure soul.

Others talk about the attributes of the spirit: (1) luminosity (with its branches of hearing, speech, and vision); (2) love (with its branches of sincerity, yearning and seeking); (3) knowledge (with its branches of will and cognition); (4) forbearance (with its branches of modesty, tranquility, dignity, and endurance); (5) familiarity or uns (which gives expression to a primordial intimacy with one's Creator and encompasses the branches of compassion and pity); (6) permanence or baqa (with its branches of persistence and steadfastness); and, finally, (7) life (with its branches of intelligence and understanding).

However one parses human nature -- and, therefore, irrespective of where in one's theoretical typography one locates such faculties as mind, heart, sirr, ruh, kafi, and aqfah -- there have been different practices that have been recommended by shaykhs down through the ages as aides to drawing out the potential of such faculties. For example, the practice of zikr is often mentioned in conjunction with the qualities of the heart ... as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"There is a polish for everything that takes away the rust of that which is polished, and the polish for the heart is the remembrance (zikr) of God."

Nevertheless, there are many forms of zikr, and different shaykhs go about this in different ways. Zikrs vary in length, content, whether they are open-ended (said as many times as one likes), or closed-ended, said aloud or quietly, as well as the time of day and circumstances in which they are said.

Moreover, the nature of zikr may not be encapsulated within a certain Quranic formula. In other words, since every event is a word in the lexicon of the All Merciful that is Self-referential, there are many ways of doing remembrance that are not necessarily tied to the repetition of a phrase or ayat (verse) from the Qur'an.

Furthermore, some may suppose one can remove a zikr from the context of its spiritual ecology and believe that the zikr will continue to operate with the same efficacy as is the case when such a zikr is recited within the context of a specific spiritual ecology -- that is, having a relationship with an authentic shaykh in a given silsilah. This is not necessarily so, and one proceeds at one's own risk.

Another practice is that of muraqaba. This is described, alternatively, as a careful watching of, or over, the condition of the heart or as an emptying out of the sirr that, when the latter is operating properly, is said to guard the heart from being receptive to any influences that are other than the remembrance of God.

Alternatively, there is the process of fana in which -- seemingly sequentially, but, in reality, these are all different variations on the same theme -- one 'passes away' in a loving awareness of one's shaykh, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and, ultimately, Divinity. There is no one way or no one set of steps that leads to the evaporation of self (small-s)-awareness.

Ahmad Sirhindi (may Allah be pleased with him) described the process of fana in the following way. If one is outside at night on a clear evening and far from the lights of a city, one can see the stars very clearly. But, when the sun rises, the stars are no longer visible to the naked eye due to the overpowering radiance of the sun.

Similarly, when something of the reality of one's shaykh, the Prophet, or Divinity rises in one's consciousness, then awareness of the self disappears. Yet, the self still exists just as the stars continue to exist despite being rendered invisible by the presence of the sun.

There are many ways to help an individual to struggle toward fana. There are many ways to induce an individual to remember Allah. There are many ways to assist a person to empty the sirr of all other influences other than Allah and to keep a close watch on the condition of the heart. There are many ways to illumine the heart. There are many ways to traverse the

stations of repentance, longing, dependence, sincerity, gratitude, patience, piety, and love.

How does one clean and furnish a house? One uses whatever works as long as such methods fall within the code book for: permissible house cleaning practices and as long as the methods for preparing the house take into account the structural limitations of that house.

Similarly, there is no set recipe for spiritual realization, although there are a variety of general guidelines that are intended to be used in flexible ways within variable contexts. Everything depends on the nisbath or relationship between an authentic shaykh and the seeker.

Whatever is given, whatever is undertaken, the purpose is always to provide one with another opportunity to engage the Real and to revise one's understanding of the True and to act in accordance with what one knows on the basis of what has been disclosed to one through direct experience. There are many ways, God willing, of helping to transform the nafs, or purify the heart, or illumine the spirit. These ways are overlapping, reinforcing and not mutually exclusive in the sense that, for instance, what helps the heart, helps the nafs to transform, and the spirit to be enlivened, and, similarly, what transforms the nafs also has benefits for the heart and spirit, and so on.

Ultimately, the only thing that really matters is the presence of Divine Grace. Talk of methodology, states, stations and stages have their place, but one should never confuse the surface phenomenon for the Realities that make such contingencies possible.

One follows the teachings and practices of a shaykh because, God willing, these have the capacity to help open us up to the baraka that courses through these practices and teachings as extensions of the presence and support of a silsilah rooted in the Prophetic tradition. These practices and teachings are the excuses that Divinity uses to extend different kinds of blessings to us, and through these blessings our understanding and behavior are affected.

Once, back in my days of even greater ignorance, I happened into a store in a rural area and, along with some friends, got an ice cream cone -- one which was hand-scooped by one of the employees of the store. The ice cream cone I got was enormous, and I muttered words to the effect of: "Boy, I'll have to remember this place." The person behind the counter

responded with: "You should remember the person who gave you the cone."

Many people think about the Sufi path as a supply depot from which one can acquire whatever one needs in the way of teachings, practices, and format in order to be able to make progress on the spiritual path. In truth, as with the ice cream story above, one needs to remember the person through whom one gets whatever one gets, for it is the person who, by the Grace of Allah, makes all the difference ... not the place.



### The Search for Authenticity

A person wrote and expressed a certain amount of confusion about how a fraudulent shaykh, with whom the former individual spent many years as a mureed, could exist in the midst of a certain, esteemed silsilah of the Sufi path. The person who wrote in also was uncertain about how to proceed, now that the realization of having been spiritually abused by a so-called shaykh had arisen in the individual's understanding. Should the individual stay with her present silsilah -- but avoid contact with the alleged shaykh -- or go in search of something else that has spiritual authenticity.

Mixed in with the foregoing issues was the concern of how to go about finding an authentic shaykh. In this conjunction, the person asked a question about the possible authenticity of another silsilah different from the one with which the person had been associated previously.

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While I agree that the tariqa you mention is a very noble esoteric tradition, the fact of the matter is, this may (and I emphasize "may" here) have little to do with your present situation. A lot depends on who, really, is the person whom you have been calling a shaykh for much of your life.

There are people who have spent time with a Sufi silsilah -- who may, or may not, have been initiated -- and, then, these people go on to set up shop on their own. Sometimes these people do so on the basis of some non-ordinary kind of experience (which could be Satanically inspired or the work of nafs, or both together) that they interpret as a sign from God that what they are doing, or about to do, is spiritually appropriate.

It used to be that one of the signs of spiritual authenticity was the existence of a sehjrah or document listing the chain of spiritual transmission. Unfortunately, such documents are very easy to counterfeit and invent these days.

The questions that are roaming about in your consciousness are similar to the ones that still haunt the corridors of my own consciousness. You spent more years with your fraudulent guy than I did with my charlatan, but, in general, the situations are, in certain respects, very similar.

I don't know how much time you spent in the presence of your alleged shaykh, but I spent a fair amount of time in the presence of the person to whom I referred as a shaykh for twelve years, or so ... although nowhere as much time as I spent with my first teacher who was, by the Grace of Allah, an authentic teacher. In any event, based on my interaction with the spiritual charlatan -- at least what I was permitted to see, and there were a lot of things that, in time, I came to find were hidden from me -- the individual to whom I referred to as a 'shaykh' knew a great deal about Islam, the Qur'an, hadith, and the history of the Sufi path.

I have seen him in action with people who are virulently anti-Sufi and he would have them eating out of his hands inside of an hour. Through direct experience, I know something about the path and, as well, I have read relatively extensively, and I never knew him to make a mistake -- according to my understanding -- about any of the "facts" of Sufi teachings ... plus, he had a way of putting information and ideas together that was quite captivating.

In addition, I have no doubt he possessed worldly kashf to some degree. In other words, he was capable -- within certain limits -- of reading people's minds or projecting thoughts and, maybe, even had a certain capacity to see 'future' events.

In relation to his capacity with respect to worldly kashf, I have been witness to a fair number of such instances of that ability being used in conjunction with my own life. I also have seen it exercised to dramatic effect in the lives of others.

Such abilities lend credibility, of sorts, to the aura of being known as a spiritual master. However, worldly kashf is not spiritual kashf, and real tasawwuf depends on the latter, not the former ... and the questions that need to be raised involve the latter, spiritual form of kashf.

I don't know what the actual relationship was between the person I called a shaykh and the person he called his shaykh. In fact, I don't really know the spiritual status of the person my "teacher" referred to as his "teacher".

The spiritual pedigree of the silsilah can be verified as authentic only prior to the last three individuals. The actual status of these three individuals is uncertain.

It is possible that the two people prior to the individual I called "shaykh" may have been authentic and only the person with whom I interacted is a false teacher. It is possible that only one of the other two is authentic, or, conceivably, none of them are.

Another consideration is that the person whom I called "shaykh" was, at one point, authentic, but -- to borrow a phrase from Star Wars -- got seduced by the dark side. Such things have been known to happen ... there are no guarantees on the path ... as the paradigmatic exemplar of Iblis demonstrates, one can be raised to great spiritual heights, and one can, just as quickly if not more so, be lowered to the depths of a spiritual abyss that lies at the feet of every being -- whether human or jinn -- who has been saddled with the responsibility of seeking, and acting upon, the truth.

In the face of all these possibilities, there is a reasonable question to ask myself. Do I have any actual relationship with the silsilah in question?

If the person with whom I took ba'yat (initiation) is not now, nor has never been, an authentic shaykh, then I really don't have a spiritual connection with the silsilah in question -- that is, the part which is authentic -- because the individual who initiated me had no authority to do so. And, if this is the case, then what, exactly, is the nature of the obligation of that silsilah toward me?

Other than the duties that one Muslim owes to another -- that is, to treat one another with decency and to provide assistance wherever one can -- the fact of the matter is, such a silsilah owes me nothing and is not, as far as I can see, under any obligation to provide me with guidance or seek blessings for me just because someone invoked their name inappropriately. (I am not saying the grand shaykhs of such a silsilah wouldn't do this -- only that they are under no obligation to do so because, in truth, there is no real spiritual connection or nisbath between us.)

If false shaykhs can place authentic silsilahs under some sort of obligation just by invoking the names of the latter, then really, we can dispense with the idea of ba'yat, silsilahs, and teachers altogether. All anyone has to do is think warm thoughts about this or that spiritual personage and -- bam -- one is on the Sufi path, enjoying the guidance and blessings of whomsoever one had warm thoughts about.

Your friends have encouraged you to stay with the tariqa so that you can continue to enjoy the blessings of association. Yet, not only is the whole issue of precisely what kind of association -- if any -- there is, up in the air, but if one doesn't need an authentic shaykh through which to link to a silsilah, then why does one have to stay with a group of people who refer to themselves as a tariqa in order to enjoy the blessings of association -- since the blessings come from God through particular spiritual personalities and not through a group, per se.

It is one thing to stay with a group of people if one derives spiritual benefit from one's interaction with such a group. Unfortunately, just this issue is at question because no one can definitively answer if the group is being guided by an authentic chain of spiritual transmission.

What you do know is there is at least one missing link -- namely, the person who is referred to as the current shaykh of the silsilah. The questions facing you with respect to this person are the following: was the person ever an authentic shaykh? If not, what implications does this carry with respect to the alleged relationship of that individual with the person who, allegedly, immediately preceded him in the sehjah of the silsilah? Was his predecessor authentic and how does one verify this independently of what one's so-called shaykh claims is the case? If, on the other hand, the person was, at some point, authentic, then this raises a whole set of further questions ... among these is the issue of whether anything can be done to constructively alter the situation, and, this is a very slippery and delicate issue, with many pitfalls all the way around.

You have alluded to many things that your so-called shaykh has done. Some of this may be known by you directly and other things may be known only via sources that you consider to be credible witnesses who have no vested interest or axe to grind that might cast doubt on their claims.

All of this has to be sorted out. This is part of what debriefing with a 'compassionate witness' involves.

Yes, I realize there are concerns such as keeping these kinds of matters private, issues of backbiting, and similar prohibitions that help maintain the silence. However, I do know that Hazrat Imam Ghazali (may Allah be pleased with him) indicated that, within limits, establishing the truth takes precedence over such matters. I also know that my first shaykh did permit, within reason, discussion of such matters if the end result would be to establish the truth and permit people to be better off

spiritually than they would have been without such a discussion. I do know that none of the collections of hadith would have been possible (whether this is good is another matter) if the people who made those collections did not ask questions about the integrity, honesty, and reliability of the people in the isnad of a given tradition. I also know that court trials within Muslim jurisdictions would not be possible if such questions could not be raised and discussed. I do know that the nature of one's niyat makes a huge difference in the permissibility of such matters. I do know that God is a forgiving God and that if Divinity sees that the intention of an action is to discover the truth and through the truth to serve God better, then I do have faith that even if certain mistakes are made along the way, these mistakes are not a matter of major shirk ... which is said to be the one unforgivable sin a person can commit.

To have taqwa is not to be afraid of God's power and capacity to chastise -- although, surely, God does have such power. To have taqwa is to be aware that, indeed, God is present and knows all that we do, think, feel, or intend ... and, on the basis of this awareness, one proceeds with caution to aspire to act in accordance with this understanding and consciousness.

If one harbors doubts, questions, and criticisms in one's mind and heart, how is this different than if one explores these issues with another human being? Is not the reason for mulling things over in one's mind to try to reach the truth of things, and is not the reason for talking about problems with one's shaykh to try to reach the truth of things, and is not the reason for discussing such matters with a compassionate witness to try to reach the truth of things ... is not reaching the truth, but doing so within limits, and doing so as an expression of a niyat or himma that aspires to the truth, the deciding matter here?

Hazrat Uthman Harooni Makki (may Allah be pleased with him), the teacher of Hazrat Mu'in-ud-din Chishti Ajmeri (may Allah be pleased with him), once wrote to the latter and indicated that one of the tasks of the Sufi path is to not only to not speak ill of others, but, as well, to not think ill of others. One of the sayings for which Hazrat Mu'in ud-din Chishti (may Allah be pleased with him) is famous is: "Malice toward none, Love toward all."

However, there are several things to note in relation to the foregoing. Both of the aforementioned saints are talking about lofty

spiritual stations -- something to work toward and not something that most of us are capable of doing right now. Secondly, seeking the truth need not be about bearing malice toward anyone, and, moreover, the fact of the matter is that we cannot love without the truth for it is through the truth that love is given expression -- love is not blind but is rooted in awareness ... the more spiritual awareness one has, the more love, God willing, for which one becomes open to serving as a locus of manifestation.

One should not linger on the past, but one does have to come to terms with it. This can only be done through the truth, and if we could all establish the truth on our own, then there would be no need for guidance, or spiritual guides, or, in line with a tradition of the Prophet, to seek counsel from one another and to discuss matters among ourselves in order to reach the best result, God willing, possible.

For more than a year, I had the opportunity -- the blessing really -- to discuss with one person the controversies surrounding the person to whom I had referred to as a shaykh for 12 years. The person with whom I discussed these matters was my compassionate witness, and I was that individual's compassionate witness -- for, we both had been betrayed and lied to and exploited by one and the same so-called spiritual guide.

I know, by the grace of Allah, that my condition is far better today as a result of this debriefing process with a compassionate witness than it would have been otherwise. The statistics and clinical findings on spiritual abuse across different spiritual traditions bear this out. Those people who are able to talk with a compassionate witness concerning such abuse do much better -- physically, socially, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually -- than do those individuals who try to go it alone.

Balance, flexibility, reasonableness, fairness, honesty, and appropriate intentions are all the hallmarks of adab or spiritual etiquette. However, rigidity, dogmatism, and blindness are not signs of adab. The Muslim community has sought to bury its problems beneath a burqa of silence, and, then they have tried to raise such a burqa to the status of a virtue.

We see all around us -- both in North America and abroad -- the destructive consequences of such a policy. Without attempting to say that gossip or backbiting or rumor-mongering should be the adab of the day, one does not have to endorse such license in order to provide the degrees

of freedom that are necessary to discuss problems openly, intelligently, justly, and constructively.

The Sufi community is facing a huge problem today that no one wants to talk about. This problem is the existence of a plethora of false teachers all across the world.

False teachers are not just an inconvenience and a spiritual hazard, they are spiritual terrorists who spread as much, if not more, chaos, bitterness, destruction, fear, heartache, and uncertainty across communities as do those terrorists that wield bombs and guns. No one who opposes physical terrorism -- and this is something we all ought to condemn -- should remain indifferent to the brand of terrorism that is being introduced into communities through spiritual agents of evil such as Satan, dunya, and the nafs -- whether these agents be so-called Sufi shaykhs or mullahs, imams, and theologians ... the only difference is the choice of weapons, and I believe far more damage has been done over the years through the shaykhs and imams of spiritual abuse than has been accomplished by all of the fanatic al ideologues who arrogate to themselves the right to kill innocent people.

Many people have been abused and exploited by such charlatans, and this abuse is continuing because most people are afraid to discuss this matter. People are afraid not because of taqwa or adab, they are afraid about what they might lose -- namely, Divine favor. Ra'bia of Basra (may Allah be pleased with her) had a prayer with which you, probably, are quite familiar that is appropriate here:

"O Lord, if I worship Thee out of desire of heaven, then deny me heaven, and if I worship Thee out of fear of Hell, then throw me into Hell fire, but I worship Thee out of love for Thee and Thee alone, then grant me Thy vision."

We should be motivated not by the benefits of doing something or by the fear of personal loss if we do not do something (or fail to do it), but, rather, by our himma for Divinity, and seeking truth should be at the heart of this himma. Searching for the truth is a risky business, and many would-be explorers have been lost on such expeditions, but it is not possible to make progress on the spiritual path without taking risks ... one of the

purposes of guidance is to ensure that the risks one takes are reasonable and justified.

However, people like you and me are in a situation where we have to take certain risks in the absence of any overt, direct physically present guidance. We have to engage in *ijtihad* and take our best shot at seeking the truth when the answers that we need are not readily apparent in either the Qur'an or the hadith.

I would maintain that the questions that are staring each of us in the face do not have plainly visible answers in either the Qur'an or the hadith. Rather, we must struggle to find the less readily apparent truths that are there through the exercise of *ijtihad* -- that is not a matter of interpreting the Qur'an and hadith, as much as it is a matter of trying to open ourselves up to being led back, by Allah, to the root principles that are present (which is the real meaning of *ta'wil*).

Spiritual principles are not rules. Reflection, contemplation, meditation, and discussion are necessary to work toward understanding the non-linear degrees of freedom that are present in principles, but which are not present in the structural character of rules that are engaged as linear phenomena.

Unfortunately, all too many people in both the general Muslim community, as well as the Sufi community, do not seem to understand the difference between rules and principles. And, even when this distinction is appreciated, all too many people -- whether exoterically or esoterically inclined -- take degrees of freedom to mean license rather than a matter of determining the truth about how to give everything its due, and, thereby, do justice, as best we are able, to creation and Divinity.

As far as your question about the authenticity of the 'such and such' *tariqa* is concerned, the problems that you and I are facing remain the same. Both the devil and Divinity are in the details, and, unfortunately, there are some strains of the *tariqa* being alluded to which are bedeviled by individuals claiming to be *shaykhs* who, in my opinion, are not -- and in such cases one can even raise the question of whether one is talking about an actual *tariqa* any more, or something that carries such a name but, in truth, has abandoned *tasawwuf*.

However, notwithstanding this contention, one must try to remember that in the case of all alleged *tariqahs*, one must go on a

case by case basis. And, the problem here is that we both have seen how easy it is for sincerity to encounter those who are not sincere, but discovering the presence of insincerity can take -- as each of us has discovered -- many years.

To say one should trust one's heart and how it feels when one comes into contact with a candidate is a risky business because, among other things, if our hearts were sound to begin with, we wouldn't be in need of a teacher. There is a reason why certain manifestations of the heart are known as qalb (or, that which turns) for it is in the heart, not the mind, that the battle for truth takes place. It is in the heart that the decision is made to align oneself with one set of forces rather than another, and, sometimes, despite the best of intentions, the heart can be fooled because it is vulnerable when it is a state of relative ignorance ... not everything that glitters is gold. And, the spiritual condition of a seeker is that of one who is in relative ignorance and, on one level, this marks the difference between mureed (the seeker) and murad (that which is sought) ... both within ourselves as well as without.



Arrival and Spiritual Abuse

Today is the day on which I am observing the anniversary of the passing away of my first -- and to date -- only authentic shaykh. I thought that one way in which I might mark this occasion is to offer something that I believe to be reflective of, and in resonance with, my shaykh's spiritual demeanor -- although, naturally, any mistakes contained herein are mine and should not be attributable to the influence that my shaykh had, by the Grace of Allah, on my life.

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There was a posting in an Internet group that someone showed me recently. The person who responded to the posting asked me both about the issue as well as how the issue might fit in with the problem of spiritual abuse.

The posting in question advanced the idea that all Sufis ought to ask themselves a thousand times a day whether or not they have arrived. This idea reminds me of what a shaykh is reported to have replied when asked what he thought about Yezid -- namely, "I am so busy singing the praises of Hussein (may Allah be pleased with him) that I have no time for Yezid."

People who are concerned about spiritual arrival are, I feel, concerned about something other than God. I do understand there may be a point to asking the question about arrival (for example, as an exercise in humility that serves to remind us that if we have not "arrived", then perhaps, one should be more tolerant toward, and willing to consider -- with an absence of dogmatism and impatience -- perspectives different from one's own). Nonetheless, this purpose -- as well-intentioned as it may be with respect to asking oneself (sincerely and not as a spiritual posture) where one stands in relation to Truth or Reality -- is asked from the perspective of *ghayr* or otherness ... it is like the seeker who is rebuffed from gaining access to the inner sanctum of truth so long as he or she continues to respond with: "It is I" -- rather than with: "it is Thou" -- when, upon knocking at the door of Truth, one is asked 'who is there?'

From another perspective, the idea of arrival may be somewhat misleading -- at least, in the sense of an all-or-none phenomenon -- because, in a certain sense, arrival is, I believe, an on-going part of *suluk* or spiritual travel. God willing, at different junctures, one arrives at:

tauba (repentance), sabr (patience), shukr (gratitude), ikhlas (sincerity), ihsan (spiritual excellence), taqwa (piety), or ishq (intense love), and the arrivals continue ad infinitum because neither Divinity nor our essential capacity to be opened up to Divine disclosures ever ends. Indeed, one of the meanings of bewilderment on the Sufi Path refers, I believe, to God's ability to disclose things faster than our capacity to understand.

There is an implication associated with the term "arrival" that suggests there is a 'point' or 'place' or 'juncture' at which one finally comes to understand and know everything ... that is not possible, and this is so, I feel, for several reasons. First, the very nature of Divinity is to be Beyond and Beyond the Beyond, and Beyond the Beyond of the Beyond of any horizon -- conceptual, physical or spiritual -- one cares to artificially construct.

Dhat is: beyond, unfathomable, impenetrable, unknowable, inexhaustible, and infinite in ways beyond the imaginings of a Georg Cantor or David Hilbert. There is no arrival here except -- as Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) has indicated -- to come to the realization of our own inability to know Divinity in any sense of definitiveness.

We can only know -- God willing -- what our God-given fixed form has the capacity to know. We can come to know who and what we are.

Although I disagree with Kant that our modes of knowledge are set by the forms of sensory and temporal perception that we have been bequeathed, I do believe that our modes of knowledge are fixed by the modalities of understanding that are part of our indigenous, spiritual natures as created beings. This includes the heart, sirr, spirit, kafi, and aqfah -- all of which are different forms of instruments for realizing the knowledge and understanding of Self that is possible for humankind.

Just as there are said to be different orders of mathematical infinity (say, the difference between natural and real numbers), so too, there are different orders of infinity -- some having to do with creation and some having to do with the Creator, and the former are encompassed by the latter, just as the natural numbers are encompassed by real numbers, although the latter cannot be reduced to the former.

There are some who say that conditions such as fana and baqa constitute forms of arriving that transcend the process of suluk. I believe

such discussions involve a misunderstanding of the human-Divine relationship.

We can only ever understand -- according to our capacity and as God permits -- the ocean of who we are in essence. And, although, in essence, we are Divine, we are not Divinity in Essence.

This ocean -- as Hazrat ibn al-'Arabi (may Allah be pleased with him) pointed out -- is an ocean without shores. There can be no arrival at such an ocean for, in truth, we are already there, and our spiritual or life journey is but a way of discovering different facets and dimensions of that ocean. There are only greater and lesser understandings of this reality.

The foregoing is prelude to the following. Spiritual abuse -- whatever the particulars of its manifestation in a given context -- is always a matter of the way in which someone who claims to be a teacher -- or who claims to 'Know' -- and who, as a result, invites us to have trust in that person's status as an authentic spiritual guide or 'knower'. Such a person commits kufr, if not shirk, with respect to the truth ... that is, the individual behaves as someone who obfuscates the truth or seeks to offer something as true that is other than the truth and does so knowing that he or she either does not have the requisite insight into essential truth, and/or has not been authorized to perform the functions of a locus of manifestation for such authenticity.

It is possible, in ignorance, to talk about issues such as arrival, and even to do so in an opinionated way, without being spiritually abusive. Stated in another way, not all breeches of adab are necessarily a function of spiritual abuse.

Moreover, it is possible to talk about issues such as arrival and be incorrect in what one says without necessarily being spiritually abusive. Furthermore, it is possible, without being spiritually abusive, to be well-intentioned and offer inappropriate advice in conjunction with issues such as arrival despite the fact one's understanding regarding these matters is faulty or problematic.

Spiritual abuse creeps into the conversation when someone purports to know the truth of things but does not, and, yet, fails to offer, or couch, pronouncements concerning, say, arrival within a context of tentativeness, caution, opinion, possibility, or belief, but, rather,

camouflages such ideas in the garments of authority, certainty, and intolerance. In this sense, someone who claims to be a shaykh, but isn't, commits spiritual abuse no matter what they say – even if correct -- because they operate out of a pretext of being something they are not and, as well, under the pretext of being authorized to say such things when such is not the case.

However, someone who speaks as an imam, theologian, mullah, qadi, scholar, parent, or regular teacher -- and presents herself or himself as someone who has insight into the truth, but who does not (as measured by Haq Itself), then such a person is also committing spiritual abuse. Anyone who insists that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) means this or that, or that the Qur'an means this or that and seeks, in the process, to convince others there are no other possible alternative understandings that are to be permitted also, in my opinion, commits spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse is just terrorism in a different guise, and instead of blowing up innocent people, one destroys (or seeks to destroy) spiritual lives through ill-considered words, ideas, and actions. Indeed, spiritual abuse, in one form or another, is the breeding ground of all forms of terrorism -- from that of state-sponsored terrorism, to individual acts of barbarity by those Muslims who seem to be in denial with respect to the Quranic injunction that 'there can be no compulsion in matters of deen'.

There can be no physical compulsion. There can be no emotional compulsion. There can be no social compulsion. There can be no spiritual compulsion. There can be no political compulsion. There can be no economic compulsion. There can be no educational compulsion. There can be no familial compulsion. ... but I won't compel you to accept the foregoing.

For those who might wish to argue that if there can be no compulsion, then how is society or family life possible, the Qur'an offers, among other possibilities, the following for reflection:

“To everyone, We have appointed a law and a way.” [Qur'an 5:48]

Shari'ah and “a way” are not necessarily the same thing -- although they are, likely, both complementary and illuminating with respect to one

another. Or, alternatively, a law and a way may be different manifestations of a deeper, underlying Reality. Or, perhaps, 'a way' provides the sort of spiritual compass and map that is needed to find one's way through the landscape of shari'ah.

There are spiritually abusive ways to chart one's course through shari'ah, and, there are non-spiritually abusive ways to do so. There is the hadith that gives expression to the incident about the man who came to the Prophet and confessed that he had, intentionally and illicitly, broken the fast of Ramadan. The man was asking how to go about making amends for this breach of deen.

The Prophet indicated several solutions to the man's problem. First, the man could fast for two consecutive months. But, the man said that since he could not even fast one month without faltering, how was he supposed to accomplish two such months?

The Prophet further indicated that the individual could feed so many poor people. The man replied that he had no money or provisions through which he could feed the poor.

The Prophet had foodstuffs brought, and he gave them to the man, instructing him to distribute the goods to the poor people of the region. The Prophet informed the man that in this way the latter could expiate his sin of having broken the fast.

The man said that in the whole area, there was no one who was poorer than he and his family. The Prophet told the individual, in the light of what the man had disclosed, the person should take the foodstuff home, feed his family, and that would be his atonement for his sin.

The Prophet dealt with shari'ah through a beautiful way. There are ways, and, then, there are ways (such as in relation to the Taliban and the Wahhabis) for engaging the shari'ah ... not all ways are equal. Some of these ways are spiritually abusive, and some of these ways permit the very best of humanity to surface.

Iblis is the father of all spiritual abusers. For, just as the cardinal sin that Iblis committed was the act that preceded his failure to bow when commanded to do so -- that is, his rebellion against the truth (the truth about Divinity, the truth about man, the truth about Iblis), so too, the cardinal sin that all spiritually abusive people commit is to rebel against both truth as well as the search for truth, and, in the process, seek to

mislead, exploit, manipulate, or damage other people through such rebellion.

Spiritual abuse is the process of seeking to convince others that one has arrived at the truth when, in point of fact, one is actually busily attempting to undermine the truth, or one is seeking to proceed at some acute or oblique angle in departure from the truth. While one can arrive, all too easily, at the doorstep of falsehood, a spiritual abuser is one who -- lacking humility, perspective, and understanding -- wishes to leverage such pseudo-arrival by exploiting the inherent vulnerability of people with respect to matters of trust and knowledge and, through misdirection, give the illusion of truth through the form of falsehood.

Spiritual Depression

Someone said in a posting that:

“I know the medicines that will help, I don't know why I am depleted of the energy to take these. But I will. I tell myself every day, I should. Insha' allah!

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If you will bear with me and journey through the following meanderings, perhaps, you will be able to place some of how you indicated you felt in the foregoing quote in a different perspective.

People interested in the Sufi path are familiar with the idea of baraka that emanates, by the Grace of Allah, through the locus of manifestation known as a shaykh. The shaykh really constitutes the local opening of the underground spring of spirituality that feeds a given silsilah ... a spring that is shaped in the form of Muhammad (peace be upon him), and that helps dispense some of the waters of Divinity.

People interested in the Sufi Path sometimes spend less time thinking about the idea that there is such a thing as 'anti-baraka' that is an active agent that poisons the drinking places of spirituality. Iblis has been busily trying to poison the drinking places of spirituality for thousands of years, and he has many dajjal (spiritual imposters) under his command who are busily engaged in this process as well.

From a Satanic perspective, the most effective poisons don't necessarily kill right away. Rather, the 'best' poisons linger in the system and cause suffering over a long period of time.

A Sufi shaykh once demonstrated the importance of association in the following manner. He instructed someone to place a stone in a garden and leave the stone for a period of time.

Eventually, the shaykh instructed that the stone be removed from the garden and had the stone passed around among his mureeds to be smelled. The stone had absorbed the fragrances of the garden and everyone could detect the influence of the garden upon the stone.

Next, the shaykh indicated that the same stone should be taken to the outhouse and left. When, after a time, this stone was removed and passed around among the mureeds, the stone had a very different aroma.

The human heart is far more porous and vulnerable to the influences within a given environment than is a rock. This is why both the Prophet and shaykhs have warned people about the importance of the company that one keeps ... one will be influenced by the forces at work in such company -- be this for good or bad.

Consequently, even when the talk may be about spiritual issues and even when what is written may be about spiritual issues, the fact of the matter is, there may be other influences at work beneath the surface that are affecting us in ways about which we may not be immediately aware. Only later might we begin to pay attention to the unwanted -- but very present -- elements that have seeped into our lives.

Spiritual betrayal and abuse are highly toxic poisons. The effects of these influences linger on long after the source of the poison and toxicity has been withdrawn from a given spiritual ecology -- whether this is an individual or a group.

Amongst the people whom I have encountered who have experienced spiritual abuse -- whether directly or indirectly -- and this includes me, I have noticed there tend to be certain elements that these people share with respect to dealing with the aftermath or aftershocks of the spiritual earthquake that has struck at the 10.0 level of the spiritual Richter scale, with the epicenter running through one's heart. More specifically, all of them experience: profound grief; a deep sense of betrayal with a concomitant loss of trust; spiritual depression; considerable alienation (both within themselves, as well as in conjunction with others); a listlessness that is the result of spiritual disorientation; a feeling of spiritual disconnectedness; a growing awareness that those who have not experienced such spiritual abuse really have little understanding or appreciation of the nature of the problem in which one is ensconced, and, finally, a sense of cynicism toward the process of spirituality but not necessarily toward God.

To gain some insight into the horror of all this one has to understand that something more is at play than merely being mistreated at the hands of another human being. Furthermore, one is not

talking about a situation in which another person has made a mistake, and one has been adversely affected by that mistake.

There is a malevolence underlying and running through the spiritual abuse. Iblis is not interested in just misleading human kind. He wishes to destroy the potential for spirituality that resides within human beings. He does not want to just put human beings through difficult times, he wants to poison the spiritual well forever.

The so-called teachers or shaykhs who are frauds and charlatans may be described as people who merely let their nafs get the better of them and, in the process, got too caught up in issues of power, status, wealth, sexual adventures, and the exercise of worldly kashf. I don't believe this ... I believe there is much more active collusion with Iblis that is taking place than many people might suppose.

There are four broad ways in which a false teacher can seek to destroy another human beings spiritual life. First, they can waste that person's time with activities that, on the surface seem to be of spiritual value but, in reality, carry no, or extremely limited, baraka due to the absence of a supporting silsilah that is authentic and intimately tied to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Secondly, a charlatan can introduce teachings that, although alluring in this or that way, are, in fact, false or problematic teachings that introduce spiritual poisons and toxins into a person's body, mind, heart, and soul -- poisons and toxins that often are extremely difficult to flush from a person's interior life. Thirdly, the spiritual abuser can leave the person who has been abused with such a sense of betrayal, mistrust, cynicism, alienation, and disconnectedness that the abused person never recovers from the abuse. Finally, fourthly, the abusive person can wreak havoc on the marital, social, economic, financial, psychological, and familial life of an individual to such an extent that it takes years, if it happens at all, for a person to recover from the trauma of the life problems that have been introduced into one's life via the lies, exploitations, manipulations, and malevolent intentions of the spiritual charlatan.

A spiritual imposter or dajjal does not care which – or which combination -- of the foregoing four possibilities befall an individual. Anything that will wall-off the life of another human being from spiritual pursuits of a constructive nature is, for the abuser, a desirable thing.

It is not that these people know not what they do, but rather, they know all too well. Like Iblis, these people can believe in God and, yet, seek to do malevolent deeds nonetheless.

Such abusers get a kick out of doing evil. Even if there should be consequences for such evil ... they don't care. They are enjoying themselves too much in the here and now by performing deeds that they know are evil ... indeed, this is the drug on which they are hooked -- doing evil while they know it is evil. They find it very, very arousing and stimulating and intoxicating.

When a person encounters such malevolence -- and no matter how seemingly loving, kind, compassionate, and learned a person may appear on the surface of things, what is going on is, nevertheless, malevolence in action -- it affects one in very tangible ways. For instance, a person might not lose faith in God, and, yet, still find themselves unable to actively pursue a spiritual life.

One may know that doing zikr, reading the Qur'an, saying Fatiha, observing prayers, performing fasts, and doing service are all good things to do. Yet, a spiritual malaise has permeated one's consciousness and acts as something of an impenetrable boundary between what one knows would be good for one and what one actually does.

In this condition, one comes to appreciate -- in a very visceral, intimate manner -- that one has a lot of assumptions, attitudes, ideas, biases, misunderstandings about how God goes about the Divine Himma and purpose. In other words, one accepts that what is going on is in accordance with Divine purpose, but one no longer understands how one fits in with that purpose -- not that one ever did before one became aware of the presence of spiritual abuse.

We have always believed that if we did zikr, or fatiha, or other forms of spiritual activity with sincerity, then everything would kind of work out for us spiritually. Yet, we have substantial evidence -- in the form of an fraudulent spiritual guide -- that what we formerly believed or held to be true might not be true ... at least not in the way we supposed.

God does not need, nor does Divinity have to accept, anything that we do. God is entirely independent of us.

Indeed, the great shaykhs have warned us that we should not look to our prayers, and fasts, and seclusions as somehow being the 'cause' of

Divine favor. Practices are necessary, but they are not sufficient ... and they never will be.

People who have been spiritually abused have been given a tremendous opportunity -- an opportunity that is there for everyone but that is very difficult to recognize when there is no overt, pressing, compelling reason to do so. Once Divinity has thrown our lives into spiritual disarray by uprooting us from our sleep of 'pleasant spirituality' (i.e., our lives before realization of the presence of spiritual abuse), then we have the opportunity to engage in spiritual practices for no reason whatsoever ... for no reward or ulterior motive or to gain in spiritual station or due to a desire for this anomalous hal or that altered state of consciousness.

Oddly enough, the spiritual path may only become confusing -- and potentially dangerous -- for people who have experienced this or that 'mystical' experience. Absent such experiences, the spiritual path is really quite straightforward ... follow the sunna (and not necessarily the hadith, for we were never instructed to do the latter, only the former) of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) -- that is, seek to be: kind, generous, forgiving, tolerant, compassionate, noble, patient, grateful, humble, just, honest, sincere, considerate, helpful, loving, charitable, repentant, willing to struggle with the negative and problematic qualities of the unredeemed nafs.

The Qur'an keeps directing our attention to all of the foregoing qualities, and quite aside from whatever 'reward' value the basic pillars of Islam may have, one might be better off to look at the pillars as activities that can better assist one to follow the sunna of the Prophet:

"So, the one who has obeyed the Messenger has obeyed God" (Qur'an 4:80)

and, again,

"Say Muhammad: "If you love Allah, then, follow me, so that God may love you." (7:198)

What does it mean to follow the Prophet? Perhaps, the most important manner of following the example of the Prophet is to seek to

emulate, according to one's capacity to do so, the intention of the Prophet -- and, his intention was always to be the 'abd, or servant, of Divinity. I do not believe there was ever one single time in the life of the Prophet when his intention to do something was because of his desire for Paradise or due to a fear of Hell, or even a desire for this or that maqam (station) or hal (state) -- although the Prophet very much feared not being the servant of Allah, and, thereby, doing something that might displease Divinity. This fear did not revolve around what would be lost (e.g., Paradise, spiritual states) or gained (i.e., Hell) but, rather, concerned not being what God had given him the potential to be and as God wished him to be --

“Nor doth he (Muhammad) speak of his own accord” (Qur'an 53:3)

and the speech of the Prophet was through his sunna, or actions, as well as his words.

The actions or sunna of the Prophet are, in a sense, much easier to understand than are the hadith of the Prophet because actions such as: kindness, patience, gratitude, humility, modesty, honesty, sincerity, nobility, integrity, compassion, charitableness, repentance, courage, forgiveness, forbearance, and love carry their own universal context, and are instantly recognizable as such for what they are. However, the context in which hadiths are said or recorded is not always clear, nor is the intention or intended scope underlying such sayings always clear, and, furthermore, there are a great many other sayings of the Prophet that can be cited that have the capacity to modulate any single saying of the Prophet in a variety of different directions.

Theologians, mullahs, and others often seem to easily forget that every single saying of the Prophet is part of a much larger body of sayings and actions that have the potential for affecting the significance and role of any single saying. Instead, such individuals often tend to like to raise single utterances of the Prophet to the status of a filter through which everything else the Prophet did and said must be screened and understood ... rather than the other way around in which any single saying of the Prophet must be filtered through the entire body of teachings and actions that were manifested through the Prophet.

Shabistari (may Allah be pleased with him) has said:

“Dream not of lights,  
Of marvels, of miracles  
For your miracles are contained  
In worshiping the Truth;  
All else is pride, conceit,  
And illusion of existence.”

Implicit in the words of this great shaykh are the following list of things for which one ought not to seek or dream:

“Worry not about states,  
nor stations, nor Paradise nor the terrors of Hell.  
For everything is contained  
In sincerely seeking the Truth;  
All else is dunya, mere fantasy  
a collusion between nafs and Iblis.”

The foregoing is relevant not just to the Sufi path but to the actions and teachings of any so-called community leader -- whether imam, mullah, mufti, qadi, -- who seeks to terrorize, exploit, or abuse people through the dynamics of exploitation, manipulation, lying, corruption, fear, prejudice, disinformation, and misinformation. The problem of spiritual abuse within the Muslim community is a great deal more inclusive than just a matter of this or that fraudulent shaykh.

We live in the times of the increasing presence of dajjals (spiritual imposters) -- both of the exoteric, as well as esoteric kind. All dajjals have a malevolence about them, for they have, at heart, a hatred for the truth ... and it makes no difference whether this is propagated through terrorist cells, or from ‘the member’ during a Friday khutba, or through the poisonous presence of toxic ‘shaykhs, or via the diatribes of those who

are seeking power, name and fame and, as a result, seek to confuse people about the nature of deen and fitra.

One of the poisons that is introduced into our systems by the various forms of dajjal -- exoteric and esoteric -- who are in abundance these days is the assumption that one can only pursue life through the channels that are being established by the abusers. Once we accept this assumption, then we feel disconnected from things, and we have trouble motivating ourselves spiritually, because we suppose that whatever we do has no real value because it is being done outside of the 'accepted' channels of spirituality and, therefore, will not have the desired effect.

The blessing of coming to the realization that one has been spiritually abused is to come to understand something special about the Quranic ayat:

“The Real has come and the unreal has vanished away. Lo! falsehood is every bound to vanish.” (Qur’an, 17:81)

More specifically, part of the Reality that has come is to understand that -- quite innocently -- one has been going about things in the wrong way, with the wrong intention.

The five duties that we have in our life are these: (1) always, and everywhere, to sincerely seek the truth; (2) always and everywhere to act in accordance with what we know of the truth; (3) struggle to realize the potential of the God-given fitra within us; (4) use this potential to be a servant to the Divine purpose; (5) do all of the following in the light of the assistance that has been extended to us through the hidayat or guidance of the Books of revelation the Prophetic tradition, and the authentic practitioners of the truths that are given expression through the spiritual traditions.

“O Humankind! There has come to you a direction from your Lord, and a healing for the diseases in the hearts, and a guidance, and a mercy for those who have faith.” (Qur’an 10:57)

This passage of the Qur'an could refer to the Qur'an, and/or to the Prophet, and/or the People of Truth, and/or the light of our own spiritual condition.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was happy with the person he was dispatching to Yemen as a judge designate -- namely, Mu'adh ibn Jabal (may Allah be pleased with him) -- when the latter indicated he would he would strive to find the light of his own heart (i.e., perform ijihad) if he could not find an answer to a problem within either the Qur'an or the sunna.

"Say (O Muhammad): This is my way. I call to God upon insight -- I and whoever follows me." (12: 108)

There is a hadith of the Prophet that says one should eat that which is nearest one's hand. Presumably, this is because what has placed nearest to one is that which is part of one's rizq and one should not seek to obtain what is beyond the boundaries of one's rizq.

The same principle holds, I believe, with respect to spiritual issues. Seek to grasp that which is closest at hand ... literally or metaphorically.

If there is no authentic shaykh -- who is readily identifiable as such [and this has been made a far more difficult, tricky and dangerous task than most people suppose because of the confusion, poison, and toxicity that have been spread by the numerous dajjals (both exoteric and esoteric) who are roaming the planet)], then one should seek to grab hold of what is close by, and this is the God -given potential we have been bequeathed for seeking to realize the nature of our own fitra and God's purpose.

This has nothing necessarily to do with states, stations, Paradise, Hell, miracles, powers, or the like. It has to do with our rizq -- of going in search of our destiny.

Destiny can only be discovered through the truth of things ... including ourselves. Real freedom can only be exercised through the truth of things ... including ourselves. One can only become a servant of one's rizq -- and, therefore, Divine purpose -- through the truth of things about ourselves.

The purpose of ijihad is to struggle for the truth of things. The nature of ijihad is to struggle toward being sincerely open to the truth and, then, through the insight that Allah provides ... and, this is the way of the Prophet -- to proceed toward uncovering, God willing, even more facets of the truth of things.

If an authentic shaykh is part of our rizq, this will happen, God willing. However, from our side of things, we can do nothing but struggle, if God permits, toward the truth with all of the body, mind, heart, and soul that one can muster. Let our intention be for the truth and our application of the truth according to our capacity to do so -- nothing else.

The experience of spiritual abuse has, God willing, stripped us of any pretenses in this regard. We are naked before Divinity, and we can nothing but seek refuge in Allah from Allah.

The person to whom – mistakenly -- I referred to as my shaykh for 12 years, or so, tried to taunt me before I severed all connections with him. He said that now I would have to be content to be an ‘ordinary’ man.

However, this is a very revealing taunt, and it says more about the one who is doing the taunting than the one being taunted. The desire to be other than ‘ordinary’ is a deceit of the unredeemed nafs and the whisperings of Iblis and the teachings of dajjals. In fact, the spiritual charlatan does what he or she does out of a desire to be other than who, in essence, he or she is ... and this, most assuredly, is an expression of the greater form of shirk ... a desire to be extraordinary when only Divinity is qualified to be so.

Our goal should be to become ordinary human beings for only God is truly extraordinary. Everything is derivative from this extraordinariness, and none of that belongs to us as individuals -- although if Divinity wishes, we may be honored with this or that visitation of extraordinariness in the form of various tajalli ... but, then all of life is a function of tajalli, and, as a result, all of life is quite extraordinary.

The goal of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not to become an extraordinary servant, but to become a servant of God. We should seek to follow his example, and let the chips fall where they may ... because the chips really won't fall in any other fashion.

Witch Hunts and Other Forms of Authoritarian Activities

Recently, there were some postings and replies that revolved around Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. The initial posting began in the following way.

"Last night I went to the theater to see the play *The Crucible*, written by Arthur Miller. It is a play inspired by the events and records of the Salem witchcraft crisis in Massachusetts in 1692.

"At one time it was practically inconceivable to me how an entire community of people could have let these injustices occur to their friends, neighbors, and family members. What kind of mass hysteria was involved? Who could believe in spirits and witches and the devil himself walking into Salem? Worse yet, how did these belief systems help to create the atmosphere of fear that, despite the truth, caused the collapse of traditional bonds between people? The director of the play wrote:

"Out of this tragedy comes a uniquely human story of individuals tested by the parameters of their morality".

"Well, Satan did walk right into Salem -- just not in the form the inhabitants were on the look-out for. Iblis manifested in the form of the inquisitors and neighbors turning against neighbors.

"In some present day Sufi communities, with the backdrop of all the wonderful stories of mystical happenings, spiritual and worldly kashf, and the like, the atmosphere is not unlike the atmosphere in Salem in the 17th Century. If the Sufi teacher is a just and decent person, no harm, foul.

"But some imposters use this atmosphere to create distrust and create the same circumstances that gave rise to the Salem witch trials -- a belief in other than the truth."

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Someone, while responding to the foregoing ideas, wanted to include the evolutionism/creationism controversy as a modern-day example of how hysteria and beliefs rooted in other than the truth can create similar sorts of problems as exemplified by Miller's *The Crucible*. My comments begin with this issue of the creationism versus

evolutionism conflict, but, then, proceed on to a variety of other issues. There is going to be a tendency of many who read the following -- at least, the initial portion -- to go glassy-eyed when going through the material. This response -- should it occur -- is, actually, part of the evidence that I would site for how the issues of *The Crucible* have relevance (or vice versa) to what I would like to try to draw people's attention.

So, buckle up your conceptual seatbelts, check your paradigms at the door, and allow yourself to consider certain possibilities. Be careful, however, for forces of hypnosis may be in play.

First, although I agree that creationism -- at least as propounded by many people of religion -- is an abuse of scientific methodology and, in a lot of ways, represents little more than a religious philosophy wrapped up in a modicum of scientific word play, nevertheless, there are some important matters of which one should not lose sight in the process of people getting carried away with the point-counterpoint of the creationist and evolutionist acrimony that has been going on since at least the time of the John Scopes trial. More specifically, I would make the rather audacious claim that 99% of the people who argue about such matters -- irrespective of which side of the ledger on which they wish to be listed -- know little, or nothing about evolutionary theory in any essential way.

By "essential way" I am talking about such things as prebiotic chemistry, molecular biology, the biology of energy gradients, the complexities of membrane functioning, cytology (or cell biology), protein formation, DNA/RNA synthesis, and the different theories of proto-cell etiology ... that is, the origins of the original cell of life that serves as the alleged common ancestor for all cellular-based life that supposedly ensued. One could add such topics as meteorology, hydrology, atmospheric chemistry, and theories of planetoid formation.

For those who are interested, there are a series of interconnected essays in the book *Evolution And The Origins of Life*. That work explores the fundamental scientific issues -- not creationist ones -- that surround origin of life theories.

To make a long story short, there is no [as in NONE], even remotely, tenable theory of evolution concerning the origins of life on Earth. There is not even such a thing as a good working theory with respect to this topic.

If you read the aforementioned book, you will be able to view the evidential and methodological foundations underlying this claim for yourself, but, the going is likely to be too technical for most people. Consequently, I will just list some of the findings of the more detailed work.

There is no tenable theory of how nucleic acids -- with or without an oxygen radical -- were synthesized. There is no tenable theory of how functional proteins -- as opposed to dysfunctional proteinoids -- arose through principles of natural selection, broadly construed. There is no tenable theory of how, on a chance basis, lipids that were biologically viable were formed. There is no tenable theory of how energy gradients were established that were able to develop tri-phosphates as a means of energy transfer, or how working membranes were established -- and, please, the tri-laminate organelles that form when lipids are placed in certain kinds of liquid environments are not working membranes. And, finally, there is no tenable theory for either how the information of a working protocell got converted into DNA/RNA strands that were capable of storing such information for posterity, or, alternatively, how a protocell survived for the millions of years that would have been necessary to keep genetic information intact and capable of being passed on to daughter protocell structures.

There are working models of population genetics -- good models ... models for which there is considerable evidence to support them. However, population genetics is not a viable model for explaining origins of life issues, and, quite frankly, population genetics is not even a good model for trying to account for how totally new processes of cellular biology came into being -- except within the limited context of the potential already inherent in a given gene pool of a specific species population.

99% of the people who talk about evolution are not conversant with any of the foregoing issues. Yet, pronouncements are made about whether evolution did, or did not, take place.

There is nothing necessarily inconsistent with the idea of God working through evolutionary processes if that is the way things were done. As Creator, God gets to do things whatever way Divinity pleases.

But, part of the evolutionary model is that there was no intelligent purpose or design underlying the origins of life. Everything that took place occurred through chance phenomena working in conjunction with the shaping potential of natural selection -- but, as Einstein said in an entirely different context (that is, the argument which he had with many of the architects of quantum theory): "God does not play dice."

A few years ago, when I finished researching and writing the book on evolutionary theory in conjunction with origin of life issues, I contacted quite a large number of people who had web sites dealing with various aspects of evolutionism and creationism, and I sought to engage them in discussion. Among other things, I gave them a free copy of the above mentioned work, and I sought their critical comments concerning the topics being raised within the e-book.

I approached people on both sides of the issue -- that is, those who were committed to imposing creationism on others, together with those who were committed to imposing evolutionism on others. I got back very, very few responses to my invitation ... none of which gave any indication of actually having read the material I had sent them.

Like the Church fathers who would not even look through the telescope of Galileo because they had no wish to compromise good theology with unsettling facts, neither the proponents of evolution, nor the advocates of creationism, wished to look into the conceptual telescope to which I was inviting them. Like some people in some governments I know, they seemed to feel that blind, steadfast commitment to their idea of things was more important than trolling for the truth.

I also remember a number of years ago when I was participating as a member of a committee that had been formed by the Ontario provincial government to look into matters of textbook bias concerning, among other issues, Islam and Muslims. One of the people on the committee was a professor of anthropology at a local university.

I can still remember the look of utter contempt and incredulity on his face when he discovered that I was not a fellow-believer in evolutionary theory as a tenable explanation for the origin of life. The professor may have known a great deal about anthropology, but he knew next to nothing about the actual issues at the heart of scientific arguments concerning origins of life, and, yet, he couldn't fathom how someone could be

a graduate of Harvard University and the University of Toronto and still hold to such antediluvian ideas.

It is not just in 17th century Salem, or in countless other localities in medieval Europe, where people's minds, hearts, and souls are bedazzled by belief systems that rendered them, in many ways, defenseless against the techniques of undue influence, mind-control, and other dissociative states. There is susceptibility to these forces going on today ... the case of evolution, outlined above, is a case in point.

The vast majority of people accept or reject evolutionary theory not because of any basic understanding of the evidential, methodological, and hermeneutical principles involved in such issues, but because they have been induced to accept a belief system under threat of being considered different, or uncivilized, or unscientific, or unspiritual, or rebellious, or a trouble -maker, or an activist, or uneducated.

Consider, for a moment, the perception experiment of Solomon Asch done back in 1955. Although subjects, when alone, were able to identify that line was the same as three other sample lines 99% of the time, nonetheless, when these same subjects were required to make similar kinds of identifications when answering after confederates (that is, people who were in the know about, and playing a role for, the experiment) who clearly misidentified the two lines that were the same, more than 33% of the subjects went along with an answer that was clearly incorrect and that they knew to be incorrect when questioned later about why they answered as they did.

If one can get this kind of compliance with something as seemingly 'objective' as matching that line is the same as three other lines, then what happens when one gets into murky, ambiguous areas such as: philosophy, politics, spirituality, and emotionally charged relationship? Moreover, one can add to the Asch experiment, Leon Festinger's study *When Prophecy Fails*, or Stanley Milgram's study in obedience, or Philip Zimbardo's prisoner study at Stanford, or Jane Elliot's 'Blue-eyed and Brown-eyed' experiment in prejudice with her 3rd graders, or any of Robert Cialdini's work in the ways in which six principles of influence can be used to alter the beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and behavior's of people without the latter understanding anything of how they are being manipulated to move in certain emotional, conceptual, and behavioral directions.

Rudyard Kipling once said that the most powerful drug known to man is language. Many people have been lured into states of belief through the skillful use of language that persists quite independently of evidence, reason, and critical judgment -- the theory of evolution being one such instance, and there are, unfortunately, so many other instances that could be cited which have been bequeathed to us through what is sometimes referred to as 'education' but that is, more often than not, the induction of beliefs states -- many which will become quite resistant to change -- that give expression to quite a few of the same characteristics as are in evidence with a post-hypnotic suggestion.

I am currently reading a book by Stephen Heller, who passed away a few years ago, who is considered one of the foremost proponents of an Ericksonian-like mode of hypnotic induction technique. The book has a lot of very useful information.

There is one quote that he borrows from Bandler and Grinder -- namely, "the map is not the territory" that is of relevance to the foregoing. However, before discussing this relevance, I find it interesting that Bandler and Grinder who are considered the co-founders of Neuro-linguistic programming are locked in bitter legal disputes over such mundane issues as money, recognition, and proprietary motives, although, supposedly, NLP is the royal road to unlocking the true potential of human beings ... as someone once said in conjunction with a friend's use of a rabbit foot to ward off ill-luck: 'why are you using it, it didn't do anything for the rabbit?'

In any event, the fact of the matter is, our maps of reality are not the same as reality itself. In fact, most of us live in the past, not in the present since we are engaging reality through our maps, rather than reality itself -- we see reality through our belief systems, many of which have been learned through circumstances of classical and operant conditioning in which we may not even be aware of why we become committed to such beliefs, or why we continue to use those belief systems long after everyday experience indicates that there is something dysfunctional about such systems.

My first Sufi guide who, by the Grace of God, was an authentic spiritual teacher once told me that one should stay away from hypnosis. In essence, he indicated that permitting oneself to enter into a hypnotic state rendered

one vulnerable to forces about which most hypnotists had no knowledge or understanding.

In some ways, many -- although not necessarily all -- hypnotherapists are like medical doctors who prescribe pharmaceuticals without a real understanding of what such drugs do to a person or even how those chemical agents work. For instance someone I knew about thirty years ago suffered a mental breakdown and became psychotic ... that is, the individual's beliefs about the nature of reality were far removed from what reality appeared to be to the rest of us (although one could say the same of many saints, and, yet, there seems to be a difference in moving away from consensual reality, and moving toward a more fundamental dimension of Reality).

This person was given chlorpromazine, which was one of the first generation neuroleptics used to treat people with psychosis of one kind or another. It helped dampen hallucinations, and, thereby, brought a person in closer touch with what the rest of us consider reality to be, but, it did this with a huge price.

The youngster developed tardive dyskinesia that consists of a series of uncontrollable twitches and tremors that is brought on by one of the side-effects of this drug -- namely, that it depletes the neurotransmitter dopamine that plays an important role in enabling human beings to have control over physical movements, even as an excess of dopamine seems to play a role in the onset of certain psychotic symptoms.

The doctors who prescribed chlorpromazine for the young man did not intend for the latter to develop irreversible twitches and tremors. But, this is what happened before they understood why tardive dyskinesia would show up in people taking chlorpromazine.

When the first Quranic injunction came with respect to the use of alcohol, the Divine counsel was that there was both good and bad in the use of alcohol, but that the bad outweighed the good. Later on, another revelation came that said that both alcohol and gambling were the snares of Iblis, and, therefore, one should abstain from them altogether.

Hypnotism is like alcohol. There is both good and bad in it, but the bad outweighs the good -- because every time one induces a state of hypnosis in another human being, one not only opens that individual up to other-

worldly forces that can be injurious to the individual (and, like the prescribing of chlorpromazine in earlier days has side-effects that are not properly understood by the people prescribing such drugs), but, as well, one renders the individual more susceptible to various techniques of undue influence, mind-control, and the like which are very prevalent in the modern world -- ranging from: education, to: politics, the media, and religious institutions (in the form of terrorism, as well as in the form of the abuse of religious leaders -- mystical or the common garden-variety of clerics who seek to impose their beliefs on others).

The social construction of reality employs many techniques of hypnosis, mind-control, and undue influence. Techniques that exploit emotions such as: fear, desire, greed, wanting to belong, jealousy, and ego-enhancement, are employed through the 'teaching' systems of many facets of socialization -- especially, the process of education.

Many people have belief systems that are rooted in motivations, emotions, biases, assumptions, and the like which are very difficult to dislodge once they arise. Many other individuals can be induced to adopt new belief systems in which the same underlying system of emotions, fears, anxieties, needs, and so on can be used to motivate a transition from one belief system to another, without reality ever being consulted.

Spiritual abuse -- like political, economic or educational abuse -- is a reality that happens quite independently of the issue of whether the person being abused deserves to be abused. No one deserves to be abused, but people can, and do, end up in circumstances in which, through uninformed choices, they become vulnerable to the ravages of abuse -- domestic, spiritual, political, social, and economic.

The lessons of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* are very wide-ranging. Anything that is touched by belief systems, together with a desire of people to exploit techniques that can manipulate such belief systems to serve the agenda of another human being through inducing heightened states of suggestibility by means of the use of undue influence is entailed by the central themes of Miller's play ... the evidence is all around us, and within us, for those who have eyes to see and ears with which to listen and hearts with which to understand and discern.

### The God Gene

Near the very beginning of an Internet article about the 'God gene', Dr. Hammer, a molecular biologist by trade, speaks about an inherited capacity for spirituality. The very first problem that I see with this idea is that it seeks to reduce spirituality down to material or physical phenomena. Even if one were to assume, for the sake of argument, that there is a genetic component to spirituality, why should one suppose this component is causal or essential in nature, as opposed to being merely modulating, or helping to give expression to, the process in some way?

For example, Dr. Hammer discusses the gene VMAT2, that stands for 'vesicular monoamine transporter no. 2. There are a number of different kinds of neurotransmitters associated with monoamine production -- among them are: serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine ... all of which are mentioned in the article.

Many of these kinds of neurotransmitters play a role in coloring mood, but, some of them also are implicated in psychotic symptoms. Thus, one theory of schizophrenia is that some of the symptoms of psychosis -- such as hallucinations and problematic affect (either too much, or too little) -- might be the result of an excess of dopamine. When neuroleptic drugs are given, these drugs affect the quantity and flow of the dopamine neurotransmitter.

What is not explained in such theories is how the chemical imbalance came to be in the first place. Excess dopamine production is the result of something else causing such an anomaly within brain biochemistry, and, as such, excess dopamine does not necessarily give expression to the cause of schizophrenia.

Staying, for the moment, with schizophrenia, there have been a number of genetic studies done in conjunction with this disorder. What they have found can be summarized in the following way:

(1) if you have a sibling or parent with schizophrenia, your chances are one in ten of also having schizophrenia;

(2) among identical twins, irrespective of whether they are raised together or apart, if one of them suffers from schizophrenia, the likelihood that the other twin will also suffer from schizophrenia is one in two;

(3) if one has an identical twin with schizophrenia, the odds are six in ten that the co-twin will be similarly afflicted if they shared a single placenta while in the uterus;

(4) adopted children who are raised by someone who develops schizophrenia very rarely develop schizophrenia.

Taken together, the foregoing suggests there may be a strong genetic component to the etiology of schizophrenia. However, item 2 and 3 both indicate that genetics is not enough to explain the presence of schizophrenia -- for, if this were the case, then 100 % of the co-twins would be schizophrenic if the other twin suffered from schizophrenia, and this is not the case.

Item (3) above also indicates that a cause of schizophrenia may have something to do with what is transmitted via the placenta during pregnancy. One suggestion in this regard involves an, as yet, unidentified viral agent that is passed from mother to child (children) via the placenta.

Consequently, although genetics may predispose us to certain conditions, so does life. To say that genetic factors are correlated with psychotic disorders and/or spirituality says absolutely nothing about the causal mechanism.

Identical twins share precisely the same genetic structure. Yet, not all twins will manifest the same mental, emotional, or medical condition, and, therefore, the answer (even in cases as well-researched as schizophrenia) tends to be quite complicated and messy.

Spirituality is more than mood. It encompasses knowledge, understanding, intention, character, identity, and behavior as well. Are we to suppose that VMAT2 -- the so-called 'God gene' -- is responsible for these other dimensions of spiritual being as well?

The human brain consists of billions of neurons, and these billions of neurons are interconnected by billions of more synaptic junctions that constitute the microscopic spaces where neurons exchange information in the form of neurotransmitters. What neurotransmitters are to be released from these axon terminals, and in what quantities, and when, and for how long, and whether or not such neurotransmitters are to be reabsorbed (called re-uptake) back into a neuron, and so on is an

enormously complicated business that scientists are not even remotely close to resolving into a clear picture.

The flow of neurotransmitters is a function, in part, of the summation histories involving the firings of billions and billions of action potentials within the neurons of the brain. When certain threshold levels are reached, neurons fire, and when such levels are not attained, then the firing of neurons is inhibited (no one knows, yet, how these threshold values come to be established for different neurons).

One can really throw a monkey wrench into the grand theorizing that goes on concerning the biochemistry of the brain when one considers the work of John Lorber who, among other things, studied people suffering from hydrocephalus that arises when the ventricles in the brain become blocked in some manner, thereby preventing the flow of continuous circulation of cerebral-spinal fluid. Instead, what happens in people with this condition is that the blocked cerebral-spinal fluid begins to accumulate within the ventricles of the brain. In time, the brain begins to be squeezed against the skull, and if this goes on long enough, the brain is almost compressed out of existence, with just a thin millimeter-thick residue left lining the interior of the skull ... the rest of the skull cavity is filled with cerebral-spinal fluid.

Usually, these individuals suffer from profound mental retardation. However, Lorber came across a few people who, despite having no brains, functioned quite well -- in fact, one of them was an honors graduate in mathematics from Cambridge University in England. Articles about this were written back in the 1970s -1980s with such titles as: '*Do you need a brain to think?*', and they appeared in such prestigious journals as *Science*. So, even if one were to come up with a theory that captured the entire neurochemistry and physiology of the brain so that one could trace from beginning to end how different thoughts, emotions, and behaviors came into existence, one would still have to account for the fact that such theories don't apply to those people who, seemingly, function quite well without the complexities of action potentials, neurotransmitters, and synaptic junctions.

Dr. Hammer talks about the implications of VMAT2 for the idea of spirituality. Taken out of context, this fact seems interesting. Placed in context, and one has to wonder just what it is that he thinks he has discovered with respect to the issue of human beings and spirituality.

The good doctor speaks about the use of a "self-transcendence scale". He says that this scale seeks to measure a person's sense of 'at oneness' with the universe in a way that is independent of religious beliefs. Dr. Hammer goes on to say that the self-transcendence scale actually consists of three different sub-scales.

One of these sub-scales is known as: self-forgetfulness that purports to be an index of an individual's capacity to "completely lose themselves in what they're doing", both with respect to everyday activities, as well as in relation to spiritual activities. According to Dr. Hammer, those individuals who score high on self-transcendence tend to be less preoccupied with themselves. They tend to be more focused on everything outside of themselves. In addition, those who score high on the self-transcendence scales supposedly "see the connections to things".

Aside from glossing over precisely what "connections" are being seen by such self-transcendent ones, and whether, or not, there is any relation between such connections and the 'truth' or reality of things, one might also question the whole manner in which self-forgetfulness is being characterized. For example, why should one accept the idea that someone who has forgotten oneself should automatically be more focused on everything outside of oneself?

The condition of fana is not a matter of being more aware of either oneself or the external world. Rather, the condition of fana has been characterized as being such that the presence of Divinity is so overwhelming that both one's sense of self and the external world are eclipsed ... there is only awareness of Divinity's presence ... nothing else.

One also wonders what sort of set of neurotransmitter transmissions via VMAT2 -- the God gene -- give expression to the condition of fana? Perhaps, just as one can speak about a television's capacity to receive signals without confusing that capacity with the signals (signals that are quite independent of the television set) being generated (into a picture) by the television set, so too, maybe, while VMAT2 affects -- to some degree -- the quality of the 'spiritual' signal being received, it does not cause such a spiritual signal. More importantly, the existence of VMAT2 does not preclude the possibility that many, many, many other factors -- both material and non-material -- may also be affecting the experience of the 'signal' to which the Divine gives arise.

According to Dr. Hammer, "The best interpretation is that the monoamines are affecting higher consciousness. By higher consciousness, I mean the way that we perceive the world around us and our connection to it.

"Affecting higher consciousness" is not the same thing as causing higher consciousness. One can, if one wishes, permit VMAT2 to have a modulating role without, in any way, supposing that it plays a central or causal role with respect to spirituality.

Eating too much, or sleeping too much, or being with people too much, or being too self-involved can all affect higher consciousness. This is why there is something called "suluk" (spiritual journeying) that encompasses, among other things, a discipline for trying to suppress the problematic modulating effects on higher consciousness that such activities have. However, trying to reduce this all down to the activities of the VMAT2 gene seems ultra-reductionistic and with limited heuristic value as far as coming to understand the essential nature of spirituality is concerned.

According to Dr. Hammer, a second component of the 'self-transcendence' index is suppose to involve a psychic element known as "transpersonal identification." This is said to refer to having a sense of unity with the rest of the universe.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of why one should refer to this sense of oneness with the universe as a psychic element -- thereby confusing the occult with the mystical -- let us assume that I have such a feeling. Or, let us suppose that I answer all the items on the 'self-transcendence' index which suggests that I have a sense of being one with the rest of the universe.

Let's ask a question about this. What is the reality of my sense of things?

By this, I am not asking whether, or not, we are at one with the rest of the universe because this raises the further question of what is the relationship between the 'universe' and Divinity. Conceivably, one could have a sense of connectedness with the universe that is not necessarily spiritual in nature if there is a distinction between the universe and That which has made the universe possible and that lies beyond the universe.

Instead, the aforementioned question is about whether or not I have behaviorally realized the spiritual station of oneness with the rest of the universe. In other words, am I in a position to give behavioral expression to the knowledge, insights, wisdom, discipline, and stations, that are made possible by such a realization of oneness or connectedness.

I am willing to wager that if one were to have a billion people undergo the self-transcendence index talked about by Dr. Hammer, then, at best, not more than a very few might actually be able to walk the walk and not just talk the talk with respect to spirituality. Furthermore, it strikes me that someone who was actually realized would not be much interested in taking such a test in the first place.

People tend to be very poor judges of where they are -- in reality -- spiritually speaking. This is one of the reasons why authentic guides are necessary since, among other reasons, as Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) has indicated, the one who would step onto the mystical path without an authentic guide has Iblis (Satan) for a guide ... and, undoubtedly, Iblis counsels many people to interpret the results of an index like the self transcendence to mean that when they feel or believe they are one with the universe, then they should assume that they have actually realized this condition.

Dr. Hammer also speaks about a third sub-scale of the self-transcendence index that is known as “mysticism” or “spiritual acceptance”. According to Dr. Hammer, this sub-scale touches upon such things as one’s belief about whether, or not, everything can be explained by science, or whether one is open to the idea of phenomena such as ESP, or whether one feels that one’s life has been changed by mysticism.

Again, one might ask the question of what, if anything, such a sub-scale has to do with either spirituality or mysticism ... as a reality and not just a belief system.

One doesn’t even have to touch upon the issue of mysticism in order to be able to agree that there are all kinds of things that science cannot explain. For instance, science can’t explain consciousness, or intelligence, or creativity. In fact, science can’t explain the very processes that are used by human beings to do science ... for example,; how do ideas come into being? From where do insights come? What is the source of logic? What makes talents such as art, music, writing, and invention possible? How is language possible?

Science is often very good with setting up linear systems of mathematical description that are capable of reflecting some of the facets of experience to an extent where certain kinds of limited problems can be solved. Unfortunately, most of the physical universe is non-linear in nature, not linear, and, as a result, much of science -- despite all of its accomplishments -- is, for the most part, looking at reality in a rather limited fashion.

Once one throws spirituality and mystical issues into the fray, things get really confusing and problematic ... very quickly. Science can't proceed unless one accepts its assumptions that spirituality is a physical phenomenon and that material instruments (whether physical or mathematical) can be devised that are capable of accurately probing the realm of spirituality.

If spirituality is not a physical phenomenon, then what good is a discipline that demands that everything be reducible to physical phenomena before one pursues developing theories and doing experimentation with respect to such issues. One cannot assume one's conclusions, and if spirituality is a non-material set of phenomena, then there is absolutely nothing that modern science, as presently conceived, has anything of value to say about such matters ... and, of course, this explains why so many scientists are so insistent on either reducing spirituality down to material/physical phenomena, or dismissing all things spiritual as being unscientific.

This sort of dismissal of spirituality is supposed to have import. After all, if something is not scientific, then its reality is not worth pursuing and the 'substantive' nature of such phenomena does not belong in the realm of the important discourse of the sciences.

How self-serving of scientists. They discover a phenomenon that is entirely beyond their capacity to understand or even study with their methods and instruments, and, so, they relegate such phenomena to the dust bin of the trivial, uninteresting, unreal, and unimportant.

Or, they do the condescending two-step dance in which they say that although spirituality is not unimportant, nonetheless, it is not scientific, and, therefore, not of much value when it comes to trying to understand fundamental things about 'real' issues. Many scientists are like the drunk who was seen crawling around beneath a street lamp looking for his keys and when asked if that is where he lost them, he replies: "No, but this is the only place where there is light."

Dr. Hammer indicates that scientists rounded up a bunch of people and had them take the self-transcendence measure. These researchers, then scoured the genes of such individuals looking for differences, and they found that the gene VMAT2 was correlated with people who also scored high on the aforementioned self-transcendence index. The monoamines that are synthesized through the activation of this gene have, according to Dr. Hammer “a lot to do with emotional sensitivity.”

Now, apparently, spirituality is to be defined as being a function of “emotional sensitivity.” In fact, the neurotransmitters that are synthesized through the activation of the VMAT2 gene (and, remember, nothing has been said about what causes a VMAT2 gene to become synthesized in the first place, and, so, at, best, VMAT2 activation is a result of something else, and not a cause of anything in and of itself) are implicated in a lot of different functions ... not just emotional sensitivity.

For example, dopamine is involved in the regulation of muscle movement. That is, in order for muscles to be used in a controlled fashion, there must be adequate supplies of dopamine available.

Tardive dyskinesia is an affliction that is caused by the way in which certain drugs -- for example, chlorpromazine, a first-generation neuroleptic given to schizophrenics -- deplete the supply of dopamine in the brain. So, while the depletion of dopamine does seem to help reduce certain symptoms of schizophrenia (such as auditory hallucinations), unfortunately, in the process it also may interfere with normal muscle functioning, and, consequently, in some patients who are given such dopamine-depleting drugs, they develop uncontrollable tics and tremors.

This is an irreversible process. Once the damage is done, its results remain even if the person discontinues taking the drug.

To oversimplify mysticism and spirituality as merely variations on a condition of emotional sensitivity -- as Dr. Hammer does -- is one problem ... a huge one. To oversimplify neurochemistry and to say that monoamines only function as mood stabilizers -- as Dr. Hammer does -- is another big problem. To fail to say anything about whether the group of people who were rounded up for the self-transcendence/VMAT2 gene correlational study was a randomly selected group and, therefore, capable of, possibly, reflecting something about populations in general is a third problem. To fail to note -- as Dr. Hammer failed to do in the article -- that correlation is not necessarily an

index of causation is a fourth problem. And, to try to claim that the self-transcendence index is an accurate measure of spirituality or mysticism is a fifth problem ... also a very substantial one.

Toward the end of the interview with Dr. Hammer, the person conducting the interview asks why the doctor does not wish to use the VMAT2/self-transcendence study as a basis for saying anything about the existence of God. Dr. Hammer replies that he feels that such research is really agnostic with respect to the question of whether spirituality is all in the mind or due to the presence of some higher power. He goes on to point out that the research concerning the so-called God gene is really only about the way in which the mind operates and, as a result, perceives things.

I remember when I was going through an oral defense of my honors thesis when I was an undergraduate. One of my examiners was Robert Rosenthal famous for, among other things, the Pygmalion Effect (roughly, and over-simplistically perhaps, the expectations of teachers concerning students influences both student performance as well as the evaluation of such performance) who -- at one point, in response to something I said in conjunction with the issue of proving God's existence -- said words to the effect of: "To prove the existence of God, all one has to do is take a group of people and ask them whether they believe in God." I replied that this didn't prove the existence of God; it only proved what people believe about the idea of the existence of God.

Similarly, the whole idea of the 'God-gene' really has not much to do with anything. At best, it reflects the beliefs of some researchers, such as Dr. Hammer, about their interpretation of that research concerning the correlation of the VMAT2 gene and how people score on a self-transcendence scale.

The short version of their understanding is this: there is a gene (VMAT2) that, when called upon to do so by some other dimension of the human being, synthesizes monoamines that, under some circumstances, have been implicated in affecting mood, and, possibly, emotional reactivity. In addition, there are certain people who score highly on one, or more, of the sub-scales of a self-transcendence index who, statistically, have been shown to be correlated with (and no indication was given in the interview of just what the strength of this correlation was,

so we have no way of knowing if where it was between 0 and +1) with people who also have the VMAT2 gene.

It is only the worst kind of loose use of language, scientific methodology, and extrapolation that results in calling VMAT2, the 'God gene'. The gene really has not been shown to have anything to do with spirituality, mysticism, transcendence, or anything similar unless one accepts the assumptions underlying the self-transcendence scale as being accurately reflective of what spirituality, mysticism, and transcendence involve ... and that scale is just not a good, reliable, reflective instrument in any of these respects.

What is the meaning of the correlation between the presence of the VMAT2 gene and spirituality/ mysticism/transcendence? The truth of the matter is we don't know.

Bad science leads to problematic conclusions, and that is precisely where Dr. Hammer has brought us with his talk of a 'God-gene'. Furthermore, contrary to his contention that all his research shows is the way the mind perceives things, the fact of the matter is he really hasn't even demonstrated this. Quite a few more empirical pieces of the puzzle of perception, interpretation, and understanding will have to be filled in before one will be in a position to make such a claim.

### Falling Into Grace

Many people appear to believe something was lost when human beings succumbed to a dimension of themselves that was vulnerable to being incited to not heed the command of God about refraining from interacting with a certain aspect of the Garden of Eden. In other words, when both Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them both) rebelled against God's command (and they were equally at fault for listening to that which they should not have), they were cast out of the Garden and sent down to Earth.

As a result, some people maintain that human history is, in part, a story about human beings seeking to regain Paradise. According to such a perspective, life is about retrieving that from which we were removed so long ago.

As such, the focus of this approach to things is on how our lower carnal soul is the enemy within which must be purified and transformed. Consequently, much of the emphasis of this way of looking at things is toward redeeming the lower soul through good works of one kind or another.

Unfortunately, this perspective tends to gloss over a very essential, but not readily obvious, aspect of the story of Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them both). Although, on the one hand, their disobedience was due to human weakness -- something with which God has created human kind -- nonetheless, on the other hand, the aspiration for knowledge is not a function of our capacity to rebel but, rather, is a dimension of the human being that transcends that capacity and gives expression to an entirely different facet of human spiritual potential.

Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them both) did not rebel for the sake of rebellion. They rebelled because: (a) they had a carnal soul that was vulnerable to pursuing things in an unauthorized fashion, and (b) they had an innate himma or aspiration within them that was not satisfied with the Garden of Eden ... an aspiration that sought something-- namely, knowledge -- that transcended this garden ... a kind of knowledge that was unlike anything else in the Garden of Eden and to which both Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them both) were inexorably drawn.

This wellspring of aspiration was also created by God. God had foreknowledge of the choice that human beings would make – that is, their capacity to disobey God's command, but human beings freely chose that of which God had foreknowledge.

The way through which Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them) pursued this inner, inarticulate, ineffable thirst and desire for knowledge did not meet with God's approval. Nonetheless, God did approve of the aspect of the *niyat* or intention that sought out that (i.e., knowledge) which was beyond the Garden of Eden, and, in effect, it is a choice that God wished for human beings to make for, through that choice, human beings would, God willing, begin their journey toward the secrets of the Hidden Treasure that concerned humankind and for which Creation was brought forth to know (each creature in accordance with its capacity), but this time they would have to do so through an approved way or path, as well as in accordance with a law, that was authorized by God.

In a sense, both the very best and the very worst of human potential was on display in the choice that led to Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with both) being expelled from the Garden of Eden. Being expelled was the opportunity to seek the knowledge that was off-limits while they were in that garden ... in other words, human beings, via our ancestors Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them both), fell into Grace.

People who wish to restrict the purpose of life to just matters of heaven and hell, or the regaining of Paradise, are failing to understand something of essential importance about the alleged Fall. There is an innate dimension within us that craves the knowledge about which God commanded Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them both) not to approach. There is something within us that is willing to risk much in order to seek out such knowledge.

Human beings didn't create this potential. God did.

One of the lessons of the Fall is that there are right ways to do things and wrong ways, as well. Another lesson of the Fall is that God is forgiving and merciful. Still another lesson of the Fall is that we have not been exiled from the Garden of Eden as a punishment but in order to set in motion an opportunity ... an opportunity that God wished human beings to grab hold of during their life on Earth.

Some individuals seem to be of the opinion that what God forbade under certain circumstances and conditions was an absolute prohibition in which human beings should never seek that for which they had a God-given aspiration. As such, life for these individuals is often all about self-denial and never wishing to do anything that would risk the return to Paradise. For such individuals, the himma for knowledge is something that we should shy away from even now because they appear to believe that the prohibition is still in effect.

There are others who believe the Fall was merely one act in the Divine Passion Play -- an act that was staged by a God Who knew that which we did not. Such individuals believe the Fall was arranged by God to serve a higher purpose. Human beings were set up by Divinity so that our spiritual Phoenix might, God willing, rise from the ashes of disobedience.

Adam and Eve may have been wrong for how they went about things ... but, then, what did they know. However, they were not wrong for aspiring to that which God wished to invite them through the very presence of that aspiration.

'The law', God willing, creates the space necessary for 'the way' to have an opportunity to be pursued. And, in turn, the way, if God wishes, creates the space through which the truth of reality, or haqiqa, is, God willing, realized.

The Fall is not an indelible stain on the soul of humanity. The Fall is how we, with God's assistance, "pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and start all over again" with respect to the real purpose of existence.



Tafsir and Evil

Within a certain Internet group, a discussion arose about various ways of translating certain words within 42:40:

“And the recompense of evil is a punishment like it, but whoever forgives and amends, he shall have his reward from Allah. Surely, Allah does not love the unjust.”

One of the foci of that discussion revolved about the portion of the ayat that contains the words, according to one English rendering: "a punishment like it" and, more specifically, what might be a good or better translation for this portion of the Quranic text.

Another focus of the discussion concerned the issue of evil. Among other things, this concern involved the problem of how to deal with evil. The following is a response to both aspects of the discussion being alluded to in the foregoing.

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When talking about translations of the Qur'an, it may be important to remember what a translation is. In effect, a translation is the linguistic and hermeneutical engagement of a human being in relation to that which is the uncreated Word of God -- a 'Word' that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) indicates has an outer meaning and inner meaning, and that the inner meaning has an inner meaning, and so on to seven levels. This is why no translation, no matter how good it may be, can really capture all of the nuances and dimensions that are being conveyed through the language of the original text.

This is not to say, of course, that Arabic syntax and semantics are not important considerations in trying to struggle toward rendering ourselves, God willing, to be receptive and open to Divine Revelation. However, one might exercise a certain amount of caution in attending to the properties of created language unless such attention obfuscates the baraka of the Uncreated that is pouring through the locus of manifestation that is formed by the syntax and semantics of a given language ... in this case Arabic.

Similarly, some people misuse the process of tafsir and seek to make it an instrument of interpretation (which one is not supposed to do in conjunction with the Qur'an -- rather, as the Qur'an instructs us:

"If you are God-fearing, then, He will give you discrimination." 8:29;

"Who is further astray than he who follows his caprice without guidance from God." 28:50;

"Do you worship what you yourself carve." 37:95;

"Only those who possess the kernels remember." 39:9;

"Those are they whom God has guided and those - they are the possessors of the kernels." 39:18;

"Say [O Muhammad]: This is my way. I call to God upon insight - - I and whoever follows me." 12:108)

In reality, all that tafsir can and should do is to try to establish an historical context in which a given facet of Revelation arose so that we might let these historical happenings wash over our beings as a form of psychological and spiritual ablution that helps ready our inner beings to be open to the possibilities of any truths or kernels that God may visit upon our hearts.

Whether one renders the Arabic text of 42:40 as 'an act of evil' or 'instances' of evil, or 'punishment (recompense) like it', or translates this in some other way, one of the themes being alluded to may be a reminder that evil tends to always implode upon itself and has nothing but evil as company. So, if we respond to evil in some direct fashion, then the recompense of evil may be an 'instance' or 'act' or 'punishment' of evil like unto the original act that set things in motion ... that might be one of the reasons why forgiveness, forbearance and making amends are better for all involved.

This resonates with the words attributed to Jesus (peace be upon him) when he is reported to have said:

"Ye have heard that it has been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That you resist not evil." (Matthew verse 38-39)

Having said the foregoing, it may serve us well to remember that what we call evil is nothing other than a manifestation of Divine purpose -- as the Qur'an indicates:

"And we test you by evil and by good by way of trial." (21:35)

Moreover, the Names and Attributes of Divinity come in both jamali as well as jalali forms, and while we accept that:

"Where so ever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115),

sometimes the way in which the reality of God is manifested is terrible to behold and experience.

When things happen -- evil things, for example -- our natural tendency is to interpret them in a certain way ... usually in a very limited fashion. A natural tendency is for us to hate evil and be repelled by it, and, yet:

"It may happen that you hate a thing which is better for you." (2:216)

Evil is an opportunity provided by God to grow and develop spiritually. Evil is an opportunity to struggle. Evil is an opportunity to put into practice the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that 'when someone treats you with nafs, treat them with ruh' that reflects the Quranic teaching that we should "repel evil with that which is better." (23:96)

When Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) responded to his enemy by lowering his sword rather than killing his physical opponent when the latter spit on him in one last act of defiance, Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) was both treating his opponent with ruh rather than nafs, as well as attending to the Quranic teaching:

"O ye who believe, fight against those infidels close to you" (9:123),

and, surely, the infidel who is closest to us all is our own nafs. The conflict afforded him the opportunity to be reminded by Divinity -- who is the mover of both his external and his internal enemy (nafs-i--amaarah) -- of how to place things in perspective.

A man once came to a Sufi shaykh and complained about all the troubles in his life. After listening to the man, the shaykh replied that the very things about which the man was complaining, the shaykh found to be keys to spiritual growth in his own life.

All the acts that we witness are the acts of Divinity. As Hazrat Muin-ud-din Chishti (may Allah be pleased with him) was once informed in a letter by his teacher: "do not criticize any of the creatures of Creation" for all of these creatures give expression to the interplay of the Divine Names and Attributes that serve God's purpose -- and everything that takes place is a 'creature' of Divinity ... including the presence of evil.

Evil occurs because God permits it. Perhaps, we should not turn our gaze away from this but, instead, try to place it in proper perspective both in relation to trying to understand, to whatever extent we can, how such evil fits into God's purpose, but, as well, to serve as an opportunity for working on ourselves as a result of all the ways in which evil seeks to seduce us and incite us to respond through nafs-i-amaarah rather than ruh. To respond to evil through ruh rather than nafs is, indeed, a bad or evil recompense in relation to evil, for evil has been seeking another kind of response altogether ... one that will serve as company for evil as an act or instance or recompense like it -- that is, something distasteful to the recipient of such behavior.

We tend to lose sight of the whole when we only look at events in limited or partial ways. God is one, but God's oneness gives rise to a mansion of many rooms, and some of these rooms contain evil.

God has permitted such evil to exist in those rooms to test us and provide us with opportunities for spiritual growth. One might look at evil as a form of tough love ... for love doesn't always come in the form of a rose ... sometimes it comes in the form of the thorns that are part and parcel of the whole plant ... not just the part that is appealing to us:

"And surely We shall test you with some hunger and loss of wealth and lives and crops; but give glad tidings to the steadfast -- who say when misfortune strikes them: "Surely to Allah we belong and to Allah is our returning." (2:155-156),

and as well:

"We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that God is the Real." (41:53)

Lest anyone misunderstand some of the foregoing, let several qualifications be made. As God indicates in the Qur'an, human beings have been made weak and, therefore, only by the Grace of Allah do human beings have the strength, courage and integrity to respond to evil in the way that has been suggested by the Prophet and Jesus (peace be upon them). On our own we do not have the capacity to overcome our own weaknesses, but, we must always look to Divine support and understand that there is no support other than Allah.

Secondly, because we are weak, the human tendency is to want to restrict our movements to those rooms of the Divine mansion that are jamali (given to beauty, kindness, and generosity) in character. However, God knows that which we do not, and Divinity wants something more for us than we can imagine on our own – and sometimes the only way to discover is through coming face to face with evil, being conscious, through Allah's help, of what is at stake and moving in the

direction of the call of the greater jihad ... which is to do battle with the tendencies of the lower self to rebel against the truth.

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Following the posting alluded to near the beginning of this essay, a member of the group indicated that while they liked the majority of what was said, nevertheless, they had some problems with the idea that tafsir should only be reserved for reporting on, and discussion of, the historical circumstances surrounding a given instance of Quranic revelation.

This individual felt that a "true tafsir", gives expression to an opening or disclosure that comes to a heart and illumines that heart with respect to some of the spiritual significance of various verses of the Quran. The material below constitutes a response to that person's understanding.

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The key to the point being raised, and with which one would not disagree, lies with the phrase "true tafsir" since this suggests there are tafsirs that are not true. Indeed, Shaykh Al-Alawi testifies to this effect when he says:

"I thank HIM in that HE never made our understanding dependent on the understanding of those who preceded us,"

and, as well:

"And the passing of time and the recitation of those who recite The Quran will never have an effect on it, until it appears as if it were coming from the Trusted Spirit, if not from the Most Merciful HIMSELF."

Obviously, not everyone who comments on the Qur'an is being guided by the Trusted Spirit or the Most Merciful. In such cases, all that is happening, and all that should happen, is that issues concerning the historical contexts through which Revelation arose may be discussed without anyone supposing that anything more than this is being said.

There is another term that might be applicable here and that is "ta'wil". This word is erroneously rendered by some as meaning 'interpretation' but, in actuality, refers to a process in which things, by the Grace of Allah, are taken back to first principles (of a spiritual or metaphysical -- that is, beyond the physical -- nature) through what is disclosed to one, or another, of a given human being's interior faculties ... such as the heart, sirr, ruh, or kafi.

When an individual's interior, spiritual faculties are guided by the Trusted Spirit or the Most Merciful, then understanding is illuminated, and something of this illumination is translated into the commentary that occurs in conjunction with this or that ayat of the Qur'an. This is an instance of ta'wil occurring during the exercise of tafsir and, as such, does not really alter the fact that tafsir is only about the historical circumstances surrounding the occasion of Revelation. This added dimension of ta'wil is what makes a tafsir true and distinguishes such instances from all of the other instances of tafsir that are not enveloped by baraka.

Because of the foregoing distinction, it is better to limit use of the term tafsir to just the act of providing information concerning historical circumstances. When this process is supported by the presence of Divine assistance such that ta'wil occurs, then something else is taking place in the context of tafsir, and this 'something else' is not the tafsir, itself, that is true but rather the insight which gives value added to the historical data ... value that goes beyond that purely historical data because it is informed by the Unseen and deals with different dimensions of the wealth of wisdom contained in the uncreated Word of God.

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Upon reading the foregoing response, the same individual who originally raised the question about the nature of tafsir replied a second time. Although this individual indicated he accepted that the newest material on tafsir reflected the understanding of the author of the piece, nevertheless, he said he wanted to stick with the idea that tafsir encompassed something more than mere unpacking of the historical context out of which revelation arose.

He went on to provide an excerpt from Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi's Al-Bahr Al-Masjur:

"Whoever wants to have tranquility of mind, let him not start this (Tafsir) exegesis until he has passes over all the chapters according to their sequence because it is like a staircase to receiving HIS secrets. And let him tread with good opinion as much as he can. And let him not draw any analogy of what he finds and compare it to what he has found before because it is far from being the same, and because the speech of the soul (ruh) is different from the speech of the Mind. Most of it has come through the Specific Tongue in which we do not have a great deal of activity except as a sort of patronage received from the presence of Allah. The meaning here being that this is not from our effort and action, for I am not free of myself (nafs), and from my shortcomings, and I do not forget the presence of the good in it."

"And Allah is well aware of all that you do." (Qur'an 3:180)

"Then know that this exegesis (Tafsir) has come to me in this order with the intention that I remind a portion of the Book of Allah intended for general purposes. Then we will remind you of what can be extrapolated of its rules, and this is more specific than the first explanations. Then we expand it by indication (ishara) according to the sayings of the people of Allah. Then we mention a speech that is more specific than that, referring to it as the tongue of the soul. And you will see these four rivers;"

"Each group knew its drinking place." (Qur'an, 2:60)

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The response to the foregoing is as follows. There is nothing in what shaykh Al-Alawi (may Allah be pleased with him) has said that actually is inconsistent with has been said previously with respect to tafsir. The word "exegesis" is an English rendering of the process of tafsir.

The shaykh has indicated that the speech of the ruh (which might best be conveyed by the English word 'spirit' rather than soul -- although it is all too easy to get hung up in language) is different from that of the mind. He goes on to say:

"Most of it has come through the Specific Tongue in which we do not have a great deal of activity except as a sort of patronage received from the

presence of Allah. The meaning here being that this is not from our effort and action, for I am not free of myself (nafs), and from my shortcomings."

In effect, what appears in the context of the tafsir that is offered are Divine illuminations -- which means that while engaging in tafsir, something extraordinary happened, and those who follow the instructions of how to engage this may, if God wishes, reap the benefits thereof.

The shaykh also says:

"Then know that that this exegesis (Tafsir) has come to me in this order with the intention that I remind a portion of the Book of Allah intended for general purposes. Then we will remind you of what can be extrapolated of its rules, and this is more specific than the first explanations. Then we expand it by indication (ishara) according to the sayings of the people of Allah. Then we mention a speech that is more specific than that, referring to it as the tongue of the soul."

The aspect of the order of things that is intended for "general purposes" is the usual sense of tafsir. In conjunction with this he speaks about reminding the reader about: "what can be extrapolated of its rules", and, again, this is consistent with the traditional nature of the process of tafsir.

Finally, the shaykh indicates that he will augment the usual sense of tafsir with ishara from the sayings of the people of Allah, followed by the insights that come from the tongue of ruh. None of the foregoing really is at odds with what has been said in a previous posting. Indeed, the shaykh says:

"Let him [the reader] not draw any analogy of what he finds and compare it to what he has found before because it is far from being the same."

What is being offered through the tafsir of the shaykh is not the same as what, traditionally, is offered through the usual practice of tafsir, and the shaykh has made references to these differences in a number of different ways. If a person wishes to use the word 'tafsir' to refer to the entirety of what shaykh al -Alawi (may Allah be pleased with him) does (or, more accurately, is done through him) in the context of tafsir, then this is a matter of individual choice.

However, the shaykh has given warnings that what is being done through him, by the Grace of Allah, is not the same as what normally happens when people do tafsir. Unfortunately, all too many people suppose that when they do tafsir, this is the same sort of thing as what happens in relation to people of the spiritual stature of shaykh Al-Alawi (may Allah be pleased with him), and as the shaykh indicates, this is simply not the case. In order not to confuse the generality of people, they should know that the usual sense of tafsir is very restricted in what it has to offer ... in other words, there are limited rules of extrapolation that can be applied to looking at the historical circumstances in which Revelation emerges and using those circumstances to draw conclusions concerning the meaning of whatever portion of revelation may arise through such circumstances.

### Sunna and the Qur'an

An individual had heard, or read, on several occasions that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) discouraged certain people from keeping written records of his sayings. This led to the question of whether hadiths were important and whether one should rely on only the Qur'an for guidance. The following thoughts arose in relation to the foregoing issues.

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The idea that the Prophet discouraged people from writing down or keeping hadiths is a piece of information that is actually quite illuminating with respect to the issue of hadith. Let us explore this.

Naturally, some hadiths may have been destroyed because they were not accurate. Other hadiths may have been destroyed because they were not intended for a general audience.

The first reason for discarding hadiths reflects part of the methodology used by the compilers (such as Bukhari, Muslim, Da'ud, and so on) of hadiths ... that is, the rule is one should not perpetuate sayings attributed to the Prophet that are not accurate or cannot be verified as such through reliable sources. The fact the Prophet may have had some hadiths destroyed could be a reflection of this principle at work.

A second reason (i.e., they are not meant for a general audience) for having certain hadiths destroyed finds support in an incident involving Hazrat Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) who compiled one of the earliest collections of hadith. More specifically, it is reported that Hazrat Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) once said to another person sitting with him -- 'there are two sets of hadith ... one about which you know, and another, which if I were to tell you about them, you would slit my throat.'

The foregoing words allude to the possibility that there were things told to different Companions that were of such a nature that if the wrong sort of understanding were to hear such teachings, the person, or persons, possessing such an understanding would kill the individual who related such hadiths. The understanding of people tends to reject -- and, sometimes, violently so -- what is not consistent with what such people believe they knew ... irrespective of whether that which they believe they know actually is true or not. Consequently, the Prophet may have had some hadiths destroyed that touched upon areas that would

not necessarily be properly understood or well-received by some who might hear such a saying or teaching.

There are instances in which some of the Companions destroyed compilations of hadiths they had collected during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). For instance, Hazrat Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) once handed over a collection of some 500 hadiths to his daughter Hazrat 'Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her). However, the next morning he retrieved this collection and destroyed it indicating that there might be certain things within the compilation that did not accurately reflect what the Prophet said on some given occasion or occasions.

In, yet, another instance, when Hazrat 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) was Caliph, he once asked other Companions what they thought about the idea of compiling and codifying a set of authentic hadiths. All of the individuals to whom he spoke felt the idea was a good one.

Nevertheless, Hazrat 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) continued to reflect on, and pray about, this issue of compilation and codification. Finally, he decided against the plan because he was afraid that since people in the past had a habit of neglecting Revelation and concentrating, instead, on the conduct of this or that Prophet, he did not want to set in motion any precedent that might lead people to give more emphasis to the conduct of the Prophet than to the Divine word of the Qur'an.

The issue for Hazrat 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) was not whether hadiths were, or were not, accurate. Rather, the issue was whether, or not, compiling hadiths might serve to distract attention away from the importance of the Word of God given through the Qur'an.

Historical scholarship indicates that at least 50 of the Companions -- including Hazrat Hura'irah (may Allah be pleased with him) -- had compiled, to one extent or another, collections of the sayings of the Prophet's sayings. In the light of what has been said previously, we should approach the issue of hadiths carefully. Among other things, this means we should appreciate some of the concerns that have been issued and outlined above.

Thus, in the case of Hazrat Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) he was concerned about the accuracy of the hadiths that he, himself, had collected, and he did not wish to be a source for passing on anything that was in error to subsequent generations. In the case of Hazrat 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) he did not want people to give preferred emphasis to the conduct of the Prophet over that of Divine Revelation. Finally, in the case of Hazrat Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him), he was aware that not all hadiths were intended for a general audience.

Nevertheless, having said the foregoing, let us examine a few considerations. God willing, these considerations may help place the idea of hadiths in an appropriate perspective.

Hadiths are the data through which one can excavate and sift in order to try to discover the sunna -- or principles of action -- through which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) acted. Hadiths give clues -- some more direct than others -- about the principles inherent in the teachings of the Prophet.

Neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet ever said: 'follow the hadiths.' The directive was to follow the sunna or actual actions of the Prophet. The Qur'an says:

"Say Muhammad: If you love Allah, then, follow me, so that God may love you." (3:31),

and, again:

"So the one who has obeyed the Messenger has obeyed God." (Qur'an, 4:80)

Thus, it is the Qur'an itself that informs us that following the Qur'an can be complemented with following the example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

How is one to do this? The Qur'an provides a possible clue.

"Say (O Muhammad): This is my way. I call upon God upon insight - I and whoever follows after me." (12: 108)

Insight, when it is real and veridical with respect to Divine truth, is a wonderful blessing. However, the wrong sort of insight can lead one far away from the straight path even as things are made fair-seeming to one through the influences of nafs and Iblis:

"... it is not their eyes which are blind, but the hearts in their breast." (Qur'an, 22:46)

When one has sincere love for, and taqwa (piety) in relation to, the Prophet, then if God wishes, one is given insight through which to call upon and to serve God. As the Qur'an informs us, in Muhammad (peace be upon him) we have the best of examples.

The example of the Prophet is best illustrated through what he did, and not just in what he said. The beauty of the Prophet is most easily understood through the beautiful nature of his conduct. Among the actions of the Prophet were: prayers, fasting, zakat, hajj, shahadah, kindness, patience, honesty, gratitude, nobility, humility, integrity, forgiveness, tolerance, forbearance, courage, fairness, dependence on God, self-sacrifice, preferring others to himself, perseverance, modesty, love, zikr, reflection, humor, striving for knowledge, repentance, taqwa, sincerity, and submission.

If one followed only the actions of the Prophet and left aside the things that were reported to have been said by him, then one would be, God willing, in very good shape. One looks through the hadiths to try to gauge how the Prophet was acting in different situations and what the principles at work were.

Unfortunately, there are those -- who are all too many -- who try to reduce the Prophet down to what was said rather than try to understand that what was said (even if accurate) can only be understood in terms of the Prophet's life as a whole. When the Prophet said

something to someone, was the information meant only for the individual or for a particular context or was such counsel meant to be considered as a universal prescription that applied to everyone and for all times?

We don't know what the intention of the Prophet was in such circumstances and, therefore, anything that is derived from such sayings runs the risk of presumption with respect to claiming to understand the intention of the Prophet.

When the Prophet acts in a loving manner, one does not have to search for the meaning of the underlying intention because the intention is given expression through the action. The same is true for all of the other aforementioned actions of the Prophet.

There are many sayings of the Prophet that are of a general nature and can be understood as the espousing of a general principle of action that is being recommended for everyone. For example, when the Prophet said that one should seek knowledge even unto China, one understood that the Prophet was indicating that knowledge was extremely important and should be pursued.

However, to what kind of knowledge was the Prophet referring? Was he talking about theological knowledge or academic knowledge or physical knowledge, or was he talking about that kind of knowledge that was of direct benefit to the soul? One has as an additional clue about what he may have meant when one considers his prayer that indicated:

"Oh Allah, if the day should come in which I do not seek knowledge which will bring me closer to Thee, then, may that day be accursed."

If the Prophet instructed that his sayings be destroyed, then perhaps, part of the reason for doing is because he was afraid that people would turn his words into static idols rather than treat them as the utterances of a living, dynamic spiritual emissary of Divinity whose reality went much deeper than just words. Perhaps, he was aware there were degrees of freedom built into what he said that needed elaboration and that he never had the opportunity to elaborate upon because the right question was never asked (indeed, the Companions, out of respect, asked very few questions of the Prophet).

For instance, on the occasion of Hajj, a Companion would come to him and say that he had done the sequence of rituals for Hajj in such and such a manner, and the Prophet would indicate that what that person had done was acceptable. Then, another Companion would come indicating that he had done things in a different order, and the Prophet indicated that such an order of doing things was permissible.

The foregoing events happened a number of times, with a number of different sequences being delineated by this or that Companion, all of which were deemed permissible. But, if these questions had not been asked, and only one way had come down to us, then the mullahs would be very dogmatic in how things had to be.

At a certain point, there were disagreements among the Companions about how to recite the Qur'an. When these disputes were brought to the Prophet, the Companions learned that the Prophet of God had taught different people, different ways of reciting the Qur'an ... all of which were correct. Indeed, there are seven major ways of acceptable recitation of the Qur'an with 14 minor variations on these major themes.

Again, posterity only knows about this because of disputes that broke out among the Companions and about which, until asked, the Prophet never said anything about. So, can one necessarily suppose that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) ever fully elaborated upon the things he may have said on any given occasion?

I can remember an occasion in which I asked my shaykh, Dr. Baig about the issue of how near to the time of the rising and the setting of the sun could one say prayers. He seemed to be somewhat evasive in his answers.

I pressed him on the issue. He became upset with me to some degree, but he answered my questions.

I do not believe he was upset with my impertinence to press him on an issue that he was reluctant to discuss – even though I should have become silent in the light of his initial evasiveness concerning my question. In retrospect, I believe he became upset because in inducing him to answer my questions I may have foreclosed degrees of freedom for myself.

Before I asked him about whether I had done something incorrectly, I did so unknowingly, and God is most forgiving. After getting answers from Dr. Baig, I no longer had those degrees of freedom -- now

I knew what the correct parameters were -- and if I violated those parameters, my situation might be different with respect to God than it had been previously before such knowledge had been imparted.

Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them) made the same kind of mistake in the Garden of Eden. They pursued an issue from which they had been warned to stay away, and when they transgressed the boundaries, they became responsible for things for which they were not previously held accountable.

People used to come to the Prophet and confess their sins and want to know what they should do to make repentance for what had been done. The Prophet never encouraged people to do this, and, in fact, he urged them to confess their sins to God alone and seek repentance through Divinity ... that would be best and God was most forgiving.

Once knowledge became public, then the Prophet, as head of the community, would have to act in accordance with his public function within the community as the arbitrator of wrong-doings. As long as such wrong-doings were kept hidden, then people had the opportunity to seek repentance directly through God rather than having to work through the judicial system of the community and be required to be dealt within the confines of that system, rather than the much broader degrees of freedom of God's infinite mercy.

People have a tendency to want to read their own ideas, understandings and limitations into the words of the Prophet. If we stuck to the actions of the Prophet, we all, I believe, would be on a lot safer, spiritual ground.

Some people try to argue that the verbal utterances of the Prophet are part of the actions of the Prophet. For these individuals, the hadith are equivalent to the sunna -- some of which encompass physical actions, and some of which encompass verbal actions.

The foregoing is an interpretation of what the Prophet meant when he indicated that those who followed his sunna would never go astray.

The sad truth of the matter is that all too many people have gone astray through their hermeneutics of some of the Prophet's words, but anyone who seeks to emulate the actions of the Prophet along the lines that I have outlined toward the beginning of this discussion is, I believe, far less likely to go astray, God willing, than someone who gets caught up in

theological exegesis of Prophetic words ... especially when such exegesis is based only on supposition and guessing when it comes to the actual intent of the Prophet in relation to some of the things that he is reported to have said.

Notwithstanding the foregoing considerations, one should keep in mind that there are various dimensions of worship that become known to us only through the words of the Prophet. For example, the Qur'an does not give the specifics either of how to say prayers nor how to do ablution, and, we discover how to do such things through the hadith of the Prophet.

Consequently, both the Qur'an and the sunna of the Prophet are necessary. However, as is true with respect to the Qur'an, we understand the sunna of the Prophet through being given insight into what is being taught and, then, in accordance with the Quranic injunction, we follow the Prophet on the basis of that insight and not upon the basis of invented theologies. As the Prophet is reported to have said:

"Be careful concerning the vision of a mu'min (one whose heart has been opened up to certain dimensions of Divinely rooted understanding or faith - this parenthetical expression is mine, not that of the Prophet), because such a person sees by the light of Allah."

### Adab

The first half of the Shahadah indicates 'there is no reality but God'. Indeed, every locus of manifestation, irrespective of the labels which we humans may assign to such loci, gives expression to the Names and Attributes of Divinity in various combinations.

Notwithstanding the importance of the foregoing theme, there are a variety of other issues that arise in conjunction with accepting the idea that everything in existence shows or reflects a Face of God. For example, if God is the only reality, then why even bother with a second half of the Shahadah? Why are distinctions being made?

If God is everything, then who is Muhammad (peace be upon him). Is Muhammad (peace be upon him) God?

Well, perhaps, an answer to the above is to say: yes and no. That is, there is a sense in which there is something of the Divine that makes Muhammad (peace be upon him) possible and to which the life of Muhammad (peace be upon him) gives expression, but, at the same time, one cannot equate the created with the Creator. In essence, Muhammad (peace be upon him) might be Divine, but he is not Divinity in Essence.

Among Sufi masters, the notion of 'ayn al-thabita' is mentioned as a way of referring to the realm of fixed forms that constitute the created capacities of different facets of creation, including human creation. An individual's spiritual capacity is a function of such a fixed form creation.

Understanding, light, will, consciousness, and love are among the potentials of one's fixed form. These are primordial currents flowing through that capacity, and how one exercises intention or choice with respect to such currents has an impact on how things flow, in what direction, and to what extent.

Someone once asked a spiritual guide to characterize what it meant to be a Sufi. The teacher reflected on the matter briefly and responded with: "adab".

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"Surely, your soul has a right against you, and your wife has a right against you, so, give to each one who possesses a right against you."

All of creation, every Face of the Creator has a right over us, and at the heart of 'adab' are acts of doing justice ... of giving everything its due.

Every fixed form has its potential. Being cognizant of that potential is not enough. One also needs to understand how to interact, or whether to interact, with that potential.

A cobra is one of the modes of Divine manifestation. This does not mean that one acts in relation with a cobra as one would act in relation to a baby -- although each is owed a duty of care, the nature of which is shaped by the character of the potential with which one is confronted at a given time.

Consider the following hadiths:

(1) "You will not enter Paradise until you have faith, and you will not complete your faith until you love one another.

(2) Assist any person who is oppressed -- whether Muslim or non-Muslim.

(3) By no means shall you attain to righteousness until you spend benevolently out of what you love.

(4) If you love your Creator, then, love your fellow beings first.

(5) This life is but a tillage for the next, therefore, do good deeds here that you may reap benefits there -- for, striving is the ordinance of God, and whatever God has ordained can be attained only by striving.

(6) The root of all prayers is renunciation of the world, and love of the world is the root of all mischief.

(7) Deal gently with people and be not harsh; cheer them and do not condemn them.

(8) Creation is like God's family, for its sustenance is from Allah. Therefore, the most beloved unto God is the individual who does good to God's family.

(9) Shall I not inform you about a better act than fasting, charity, and prayer? -- making peace between one another. Enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by the roots.

(10) What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being; to feed the hungry; to help the afflicted; to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured.

(11) Every person who rises in the morning either does that which will be the means of one's redemption or one's spiritual ruin.

(12) One's knowledge calls to be acted upon. If not satisfied, it will depart.”

One could go on almost indefinitely along the foregoing lines. And, one of the commonalities shared by all of the above mentioned teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is that each principle revolves around the realm of action.

Therefore, to whatever degree (according to one's fixed form capacity) one understands the idea that there is no reality but Divinity, unless such an understanding involves not just action but the right kind of action, then such an understanding is deficient. Understanding how to do justice or observe adab with respect to the various facets of that manifested Reality is also needed.

It is possible to be a traveler of the path without having experienced fana and/or baqa. It is possible to be a traveler on the path without having experienced kashf (unveilings) or mystical states and stations. However, it is not possible to be in suluk (making spiritual progress through incorporating and acting upon the experiential lessons of the Sufi path) without adab – that is, without seeking to find ways to understand how to do justice to each and every locus of manifestation that is, simultaneously, rooted in the Names and Attributes of Divinity, as well as the fixed form potential of a given aspect of creation.

A spiritual charlatan is one of the loci of manifestation that gives expression to Divine Himma or purpose. However, one does not act toward a spiritual charlatan in the same way one would act toward an authentic, spiritual guide -- although each requires that one give what is due to each locus of manifestation of Divine purpose as a matter of justice ... as a matter of adab.

Similarly, one does not act toward a cobra as one would act in conjunction with a milk snake, even though both are snakes.

Distinctions are called for, and inherent in these distinctions are an array of duties of care with respect to God, snakes, others, and oneself.

Everything and everyone has something to teach us. But, everything and everyone does not necessarily give expression to the same life lessons.

Someone (Ben Franklin I believe) once described insanity as doing the same thing over and over again but expecting a different result. To expect a cobra to be and act differently than it is and does, may border on being out of touch with the distinctions that are inherent in Creation. To expect a spiritual charlatan to be other than who and what she or he is, is to lose touch with important distinctions concerning the manner in which Divinity is manifested as well as the life lessons God may wish one to derive from such distinctions.

Of course, one can pray that God will come into the life of a spiritual charlatan, or a pedophile, or a serial killer, or a tyrant, and, as a result, such a person's life will change toward a more constructive, adab-based form of dynamic and interaction with the world. Moreover, the fact that someone is a spiritual fraud, pedophile, serial killer, or tyrant does not entitle one to transgress boundaries of appropriate adab even in the context of such manifestations, but, nonetheless, one should try, God willing, to establish what those boundaries are and to maintain propriety with respect to such boundaries.

Notwithstanding the former considerations, it is entirely appropriate to exercise certain degrees of caution and discretion in conjunction with those who may be inclined toward acting as a spiritual fraud, serial killer, pedophile, or oppressive tyrant. To ignore such 'facts' is to fail to do justice to one's knowledge, to one's soul, to God, to one's family, to one fellow human beings, and to creation in general.

Although there is a great deal of similarity between the form of the Shahadah and the first article of faith, some people seem to have difficulty answering the question: what is the difference between the two. As the bedouins of the desert were informed by Allah, there is a difference between submission and faith.

Faith is not a matter of belief. Faith gives expression to a potential for action that is rooted in an understanding of how things are.

The deeper that understanding is, the more informed, so to speak, is the dynamic that might arise out of such understanding. Adab -- which gives expression to action or behaviors -- is rooted in a knowledge and understanding of how to go about giving everything its due ... of how to go about and treat each manifestation in an appropriate fashion.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"Should a day come in which I increase not in knowledge through which to draw nearer to God, then let the dawn of that day be accursed."

Knowledge is important, but the purpose to which such knowledge is applied is also extremely important. To do suluk, to be engaged in spiritual travel, involves more than, God willing, attaining certain stations of knowledge and understanding.

One seeks knowledge in order to learn how to use all of the potential of one's fixed form as a harmonious instrument of worship -- that act for which human beings and jinn were created. In this respect, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"I have been given all the Names and have been sent to perfect good behavior."

Good behavior, or adab, is not only knowing what is due but doing what is known to be so. The Prophet is reported to have said:

"Do not attend the circle of a learned person unless that individual asks you to give up five things in favor of accepting five other things:

- doubt in favor of faith;
- hypocrisy in favor of sincerity;
- worldliness in favor of asceticism;
- pride in favor of humility;

- enmity in favor of love.

Some people today -- even some who are called spiritual guides -- might give lip service to the foregoing, but might not give expression to this teaching in their own lives. We are drawn to people like the Prophet (peace be upon him) because, among other things, they lived what they taught.

The Prophet did not teach: do as I say, not as I do. Indeed, the way he lived his life established the standards of, among other things, proper adab.

If the Prophet indicated that people should be kind to one another, he practiced what he advocated. If he indicated that, as much as possible, one should refrain from such things as anger, hatred, and jealousy, again, he acted in accordance with what he was seeking to instill in others.

Back in the days when Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward were helping to unravel a presidency, they were allegedly told by their anonymous government source 'Deep Throat' to follow the money, and by doing so, they would discover some important truths about, among other things, the sleazy politics being practiced by various 'leaders' within the Republican party. Somewhat analogously, if one wishes to learn about people, follow their behavior, not their words.

Spiritual charlatans, sociopaths, tyrants, pedophiles, abusive spouses, demagogues, and many political leaders use language to misdirect attention and understanding away from their actual behavior. Such individuals are very good at inducing others to accept as true, a particular way of framing reality that serves the interests of the charlatan, tyrant, political leader, and so on, but not the interests of the individual or individuals who are being exploited or misled.

Real adab is largely absent from the lives of spiritual frauds, sociopaths, tyrants, pedophiles, abusive spouses, and all too many political leaders. In fact, such people often use the sense of adab that other people may have as a weapon against the latter and, as a result, exploit various principles of adab like kindness, compassion, empathy, friendliness, and fairness as a means of manipulating people.

Unfortunately, discernment takes time. Despite what some people claim, the sort of discernment that enlivens the realization of -- and commitment to -- adab is not a conceptual exercise. Rather, it is an

existential exercise that cannot be learned at a distance from life but only by struggling with the varied modalities of Divine manifestation and seeking to arrive at an understanding through which behavior might be informed in a manner which will do appropriate justice to the distinctions which Divinity is making through varied manifestations.

The distinction between the lesser jihad and the greater jihad is not necessarily a matter of the struggle that goes on within us versus the battles that are fought in the world -- and the Prophet understood this even as he was making the distinction between the two kinds of jihad. The greater jihad is always a matter of seeking to give everything its due, whether in relation to one's own soul or in conjunction with the souls associated with all other fixed forms of created being.

As such, there is always both an inward dimension, as well as an outward dimension to the greater jihad. This is the nature of adab, and this is the nature of justice.

Some people have distorted the Prophetic teaching concerning the different kinds of jihad. As a result, such individuals have tried to suggest that the Prophet was saying the greater jihad is only about a person's internal struggle with his or her soul, and this struggle carries few, if any, ramifications for interacting with the external world. The Prophet's entire life serves as a rebuttal to such an interpretation.

Grasping the basic idea of the first part of the Shahadah -- namely, that there is no reality but God, is relatively simple. Realizing the truth of that principle through the essence of one's fixed form capacity is quite another matter.

Understanding the second half of the Shahadah -- namely, that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Rasul or Messenger of Allah, is, on the surface, fairly straightforward. Incorporating the adab that is inherent in the second part of the Shahadah as well as living in accordance with the many principles entailed by such adab is, unfortunately, a far less traveled road.

Some people wish to restrict shari'ah to observance of the five pillars, along with paying lip service to the six articles of faith. Of the more than 6,000 verses that comprise the Qur'an, only about 500, or so, verses deal directly with different aspects of those four pillars of Islam with which many autocratic and rigid proponents of shari'ah are concerned.

The remainder of the Qur'an -- that is, 11/12ths of the entire Revelation -- focuses on issues of history, understanding, knowledge, wisdom, remembrance, faith, duty, discernment, as well as the Names and Attributes of Divinity. All of this revolves around, or carries essential ramifications for, matters of adab and doing justice to both God and creation.

All manner of spiritual abuse is being perpetrated by groups like al-Qaida, the Taliban, fundamentalists, terrorists, as well as oppressive, theocratic governments from: Saudi Arabia, to: Khomeni's Iran that claim to be Islamic but almost entirely misunderstand those aspects of the spiritual tradition that are rooted in matters of adab. All manner of spiritual abuse is being perpetrated by those theologians, mullahs, imams, and teachers who appear to wish to teach shari'ah in the absence of the whole realm of adab.

In fact, the reason why, ultimately, so many so-called Islamic governments fail, and the reason why so many 'back to basics' Islamic movements fail, and the reason why so many Wahhabi, and salafi-like attempts to 'purify' the faith fail, is because, for the most part, none of these governments, movements, theologians, and 'leaders' have any insight into the dynamic role that adab must play in the observance of shari'ah. They have failed to come to terms with the fact that shari'ah, as they understand it, deals with only 1/12th of the Qur'an and, furthermore, they do not appreciate the fact that no form of shari'ah that marginalizes the other 11/12ths of the Qur'an will flourish.

Earlier, 12 simple hadiths of the Prophet were given. These were but a small sampling of a much larger set of hadiths that could have been given.

One of the amazing facets of those aforementioned hadiths is that they could be understood as having relevance and significance to living a spiritual life quite independently of the formal requirements of, say, observing fasting, prayer, zakat, and hajj. In fact, one of the hadiths previously mentioned indicated:

"Shall I not inform you about a better act than fasting, charity, and prayer? -- making peace between one another. Enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by the roots."

The principles of adab are meant to shape, color, and inform how one goes about observing the basic pillars of Islam. However, all too many mullahs, imams, teachers, theologians, and would-be leaders of revolutionary movements tend to ignore adab and focus on only a restricted, impoverished form of theology – a system of belief that is missing the dimensions of adab that do not pertain to a totalitarian imposition of the basic pillars and articles of faith upon people ... a form of understanding that seems to have forgotten the Quranic injunction that there can be no compulsion in matters of deen ... a form of understanding that demands that there be religious police who seek to ensure that everyone does things in accordance with such an understanding and quite apart from what God may actually want from human beings.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Many are there among you who fast and, yet, gain nothing from it except hunger and thirst, and many are there among you who pray throughout the night and, yet, gain nothing from it except wakefulness.”

There is an adab to fasting that has more to do with niyat or intention than it does with the outer formalities ... although the latter are not without their importance. There is an adab to praying that has more to do with niyat or intention than it does with the outer form of prayer ... although the latter is not without its importance.

In addition, there is an adab or set of spiritual principles with respect to engaging all of life that has to do with more than just observing the basic pillars of Islam. Such adab is not only meant to shape, color, and inform observance of the basic pillars, but it is meant to influence one's entire manner of interacting with others. We ignore this adab at our own peril ... not only spiritually, but socially, politically, and economically as well.

It is not just people like Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers who have failed to understand the nature of adab. The sad fact is that most of the governments of the world -- both Muslim and non-Muslim -- also seemed to have failed in this respect ... they have failed to grasp the fact that adab is more important than government policy ... that how one treats

people and how one behaves toward others, can undermine and corrupt, if not done in accordance with adab, whatever noble cause one may purport to be pursuing that has the effect of destroying, oppressing, exploiting, manipulating, corrupting, and abusing the lives of ordinary people who have become the pawns in a government's self-serving game of tyranny ... a game in which words, rhetoric, propaganda, indoctrination, the media, and education are used to camouflage intentions and behaviors that are devoid of adab.

Theology Is Not The Answer

In the global village of the modern world we are often required to interact with those who do not share the same spiritual perspective as the one to which we may be committed. This brings us face to face with the question: how should we conduct ourselves in the face of these differences?

Just as there are sectarian differences among various segments of the Muslim community, or differences among Orthodox, Conservative and Reform branches of Judaism, there also are huge differences among various denominations of Christianity that go beyond the broad split between Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. While there are many factors that have led to this cascade of bifurcations, one force that has had a very fundamental shaping role involves theological considerations.

However, perhaps the answer to so many of the problems with which we are confronted -- including sectarian differences -- does not lie in attempting to work out the nuances of theological doctrine such that only "lunk-heads" and down-right evil people could fail to grasp the certainties that are uncovered through the niceties of theological methodology. Unfortunately, more often than not, theology tends to lead to separation and alienation from one another instead of bringing any kind of existential resolution to tensions and differences.

People are so caught up in arguing, in terms of theological doctrine, about what "the" meaning of revelation is, or about what the nature of God is (e.g., unitarian, trinitarian, multitarian, or is God a She, He, It, or none of these, or all of them and more), or about what the proper name(s) of God is (are), or about whether the reality behind everything is even deistic, or about how to go about gaining brownie points by pointing the finger of judgment at others so that one can think oneself superior to, and more self-righteous than, the rest of humanity, and, as a result, have a favored place in paradise or heaven or the next life, that none of us can see the forest through the trees anymore.

Many of us believe there is some Absolute Reality. Our understandings and interpretations may differ, but we can feel in our hearts, soul and spirit that there is something more to things than the apparent world reveals.

Not until Jesus (peace be upon him) comes again for a second time [and this information is something that might help dispel some of the mistrust that some Christians feel toward Islam since Islam also teaches about the second coming of Jesus (peace be upon him) and that he will do battle with the Anti-Christ -- or, the dajal (imposter) as the Muslims refer to the anti-Christ -- and, by the Grace of God, Jesus (peace be upon him) will be victorious] ... not until the second coming will some of these issues be settled, and, maybe, not even then. There will be many who will deny Jesus (peace be upon him) when he comes the second time, just as there were those who denied him during his first ministry.

I would prefer to leave the theology to God since Divinity alone is the only One Who knows the truth of the matter. The rest of us argue out of ignorance, fear, hostility, foolishness, jealousy, and rivalry, yet, we often are so convinced in the correctness of our own interpretation of things that we feel this sense of self-serving conviction entitles us to harbor all manner of contempt for, and condescension toward, others, that in turn is interpreted as a Divine signal to inflict whatever cruelty upon others that we deem to be appropriate.

If we look to the example of the lives of Jesus, Muhammad, Moses, David, the Buddha, Krishna, and so on (peace be upon them all) , the answer is staring us all in the face, and we would see it if we weren't so intent on gratifying our egos in an attempt to prove that we are theologically right and everyone else is wrong. These remarkable, blessed individuals were all, without exception: loving, kind, compassionate, thoughtful, considerate, reflective, forgiving, tolerant, understanding, charitable, sensitive, respectful, encouraging, helpful, supportive, practical human beings.

They were not theologians. We are the theologians, and we have taken things that they have said -- or, which we think they have said -- put our own interpretations on these sayings, and, in the process, have become prepared to abuse and/or distrust and/or dislike every man, woman and child who does not agree with us.

Let us listen to what they did, not just to what was said, not because what they said was unimportant, but because actions often speak so much more clearly and eloquently than words. One does not have to have a theology of kindness to observe or recognize many, if not most, acts of

kindness. One does not have to have a theology of love to observe love in action.

If we love these people, if we love Jesus, if we love Muhammad, if we love Moses, if we love Krishna, if we love the Buddha, (peace be upon them all), then why not become preoccupied with following their actions? Let God worry about the theology.

If we love for the sake of God or Allah or Jehovah or Yahweh or The Great Mystery, if we are kind for the sake of Divinity, if we are tolerant and forgiving for the sake of Divinity, if we are charitable for the sake of Divinity -- if we do all of these things because of love for Divinity and not out of hope of heaven or fear of hell -- then, I believe, we will be much, much further ahead of the "game", so to speak.

Every human being has existence due to the love and compassion of the Great Mystery, God, or the Void of Infinite Fullness. If we minister to people -- irrespective of how wrong we may feel their theological perspective may be and irrespective of how wrong that perspective may, in fact, be -- if we minister just with love, charity, kindness, forgiveness, and so on, and not with theology, and not in order to win converts or gain influence or the like, but because people are more likely to turn to the light and truth that Divinity has planted within them when cared for in a respectful way, then, I believe, we are going to have a much better chance, God willing, to improve the wretched condition of the world.

We are so busy arguing over the theological shape of the table, like they argued over the shape of the table during the Paris talks on Vietnam, that we never get to the really important issues -- namely, how are we going to treat one another? We each may have our own why or intention or motivation or goal, but the actions themselves all can be precisely the same.

When one receives kindness, it makes no difference whether it comes through Buddhist theology, Christian theology, Taoist theology, Muslim theology, Hindu theology, Native theology, or Jewish theology. Kindness is kindness, and all kindness is a gift from the Great Mystery. We are merely the loci of manifestation through whom it comes.

Let us all purify ourselves of the jealousy, hatred, prejudice, selfishness, bias, greediness, hostility, envy, desire, insensitivity and so on

which stand in the way of our being beacons of love, charity, forgiveness, tolerance, and compassion, that, ultimately, come from Divinity, or the Absolute, or the Void (which is Fullness), or the Great Mystery, and not from ourselves. It is only our pride and ignorance that makes us think otherwise.

These actions are the common language of all the great spiritual traditions, irrespective of whatever theological differences may have arisen over time. All the mystical dimensions of these great traditions point in precisely the same direction.

The idea of love is worth little. A system of thought with love at its center is worth little.

Only actions of love have value, and love has no theology since it is done out of only love for Divinity or the Absolute, as well as being a reflection of the love that the Void or the great Mystery has for us, in giving us the capacity to love, and be kind, and be charitable, and be forgiving in the first place.

If we can't induce others, through gentle and wise ways, to believe in, or accept, our theologies, then let us share the gift of love and compassion with these people. I don't know about you, but I would rather have the actuality of love and compassion any day, rather than a theology of love and compassion, no matter how eloquently it was expressed.

Let us be love, and be kindness, and be sensitivity. Let us not just talk about these things.

The foregoing may seem rather simplistic in principle, but it is extremely difficult to accomplish in practice. Moreover, whether it is simple or difficult, I believe that, God willing, it is the only way out of the theological conundrum into which we have painted ourselves.

Spiritual Chemistry and Seeking a Teacher

A person inquired about how to go about finding a Sufi teacher. After exchanging several e-mails on the issue, the individual expressed interest in becoming affiliated with a certain silsilah within the Chishti Order. The following constitutes an amalgamation of some of the points and suggestions that were given during the aforementioned inquiries.

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The question you are raising is one of the most important and, simultaneously, one of the most problematic issues that confronts an individual seeking to set foot on the spiritual path. Its importance is rooted in the fact that the need to find an authentic spiritual guide (and the emphasis is on "authentic") is fundamental to spiritual health and progress. The problematic aspect of this question revolves around the issue of authenticity -- as in: who is and who isn't.

It would be a violation of adab (or spiritual etiquette) for me to give you a list of people to stay away from even if what I was telling you were true. All that can be said at this juncture is there are a lot of spiritual quacks running around who are claiming to be authentic Sufi teachers but who are not, and, therefore, one must exercise a certain amount of caveat emptor (i.e., let the buyer beware).

Your own heart plays an essential role in the process of trying to locate an authentic guide. If you are sincere, then God willing, such sincerity will be rewarded, but you must try to listen carefully to what your heart is saying and not allow this inner communication to be sullied by the whisperings of ego, the limitations of rationality, the call of the world, or the dark influences of satanic suggestion -- all of which are working day and night to keep possible seekers away from the Sufi path.

However you decide to proceed with your pursuit of things Sufi, there are several points that ought to be made. These points are offered for your consideration in the hope that this process of reflection will help you to proceed in a way that will be constructive for you and not harmful.

Although you have made contact with our silsilah, the leads given in the previous e-mail were put forth for a purpose. Without wishing to over-emphasize the following point (since it can be misleading and end up in confusion if not properly understood) -- namely, there is such a thing as spiritual chemistry.

In effect, what this means is that an individual's heart is sometimes more receptive to the spiritual guidance that comes through one mode of manifestation rather than another, even though, ultimately, all guidance comes from One and the same Source. Therefore, before jumping into something, a person should check things out a little to see if one is drawn more in the direction of some given mode of Divine guidance rather than another.

Now, as indicated above, this search for spiritual chemistry can be problematic and confusing in a variety of ways. For instance, a seeker can go hunting for an epiphany (a spiritual unveiling characterized by intense ecstasy and deep insights) in his or her beginning relationship with a shaykh, and this event(s) may never occur, or may not occur until a much, much later time.

If this doesn't take place right away, the individual may conclude – perhaps incorrectly -- that this means the given shaykh at whose doorstep the person has arrived must either not be an authentic guide or may be an authentic guide but not a very great one. By setting expectations and pre-conditions on what should transpire in such relationships, a seeker becomes veiled and may wind up further from the Truth than when she or he began the spiritual quest.

Nonetheless, having given the foregoing caveat, there still can be a spiritual chemistry that is important to find -- if God should choose this for a given seeker. Such chemistry is important because the Sufi path is a very long one, and there are many difficulties along the way, and, in many cases, all one has to help one through those difficulties is one's relationship with the shaykh.

When the aforementioned spiritual chemistry is present, then this can make holding on through the 'dark night of the soul' easier to do than if such spiritual chemistry is not present. Consequently, the suggestion that you make contact with some of the other shaykhs mentioned in the previous e-mail is for your potential benefit rather than merely passing on information that can be discarded.

Of course, another problem that can arise out of the foregoing – and it is somewhat related to the epiphany syndrome -- is that a person spends so much time looking for the "perfect" shaykh for herself or himself, the individual never does settle down and get on with the process of real spiritual struggle. Another problem is that a seeker may begin to make

judgments about the spiritual station of a given shaykh and this is not a good thing to do since, among other things, the seeker is not competent to make such judgments

None of the foregoing is intended to push you away from us. Rather, the counsel is for 'you to look before you leap' while balancing this with 'he (she) who hesitates is lost'.

Another suggestion involves the issue of reading. Although reading is not an absolutely essential pre-requisite to the Sufi path, nonetheless, within certain limits, it can play a supportive and constructive role. I don't know what or who you have been reading, but both "what" and "who" can make a big difference in terms of the kinds of problems one might encounter on the path. Just as there are all too many spiritual quacks running around professing to be Sufi shaykhs, pirs, guides, teachers, or masters, there also are many authors who claim to have spiritual insight into the Sufi path but who do not.

Finally, in the light of certain things that you have said in your previous e-mails, a further point needs to be made, and you may do with this what you will. A spiritual teacher is not an advisor, although, clearly, advice does come through such an individual.

A Sufi shaykh is a locus of manifestation of Divine guidance in the form of an individual who is rooted in a spiritual silsilah (or chain of spiritual lineage) that can be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) back through all of the 124,000 Prophets -- including Adam (peace be upon him) the first Prophet -- who have been sent by God to help humankind and all of creation. A Sufi teacher has been authorized to serve as a guide by none other than God and, through Divinity's permission and design, by the Prophet of God, Muhammad (peace be upon him).

If one is contemplating taking initiation with a given spiritual guide, then understand in Whose Hand one is placing one's hand. Furthermore, if one does not have confidence in what is being said here, then one ought to stay away from such things so that neither the seeker's time is wasted, nor the time of the spiritual guide.



Ups, Downs, Dangers and Distances on the Sufi Path

One of the individuals who e-mailed me wanted to know something about the dangers, pitfalls, and the ups and downs of the Sufi path. This person also wanted to know if being at a physical distance from the teacher might be a problem to a prospective seeker on the mystical path.

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With respect to your first question -- namely, "could you share with me some of your personal pitfalls and dangers you faced during your Sufi path" --- I will approach your inquiry obliquely but hopefully, not opaquely. Part of the reason for doing this is because the pitfalls and dangers that occur along the way are very contextual and, consequently, tend to be a function of the unique way in which personal history engages particular circumstances. This makes things a little bit too complicated and boring to relate.

In reality, however, the pitfalls and dangers that exist on the path are all variations on a set of central themes. The axis about which these problems rotate is known as the "nafs", or the seat of our tendency to rebel against acting in accordance with our essential nature and spiritual capacity.

Every human being, without exception, is born with the same capacity for rebellion. The human inclination toward envy, greed, hatred, pride, jealousy, arrogance, ignorance, darkness, desire, density, heedlessness, dishonesty, selfishness, and so on are inherent in the nature of being human, and it is the circumstances of our life history that shape how, and to what extent, and in what directions, we permit ourselves to be shaped by these tendencies.

We are vulnerable to these forces. Furthermore, there exist forces in the universe -- both within us and without us -- which attempt to enhance the scope and intensity of this vulnerability.

When a person steps onto the spiritual path, one does not leave the aforementioned rebellious inclinations behind. They are baggage that we bring on board, along with our spiritual aspiration.

One of the purposes of the spiritual journey -- although many people do not fully realize this at the beginning of the undertaking -- is to come to realize how worthless such baggage is in its unredeemed form. As long as we continue to carry our rebellious tendencies around with us, then we

stand in peril and danger of falling off the spiritual express on which we have booked passage to take us to our destination.

When we are under the influence of any of the hydra-like aspects of the nafs, or when we are under the influence of those forces that seek to incite and manipulate these sorts of vulnerability within us, we are not able to see the incorrectness of what we are doing. As a result, when we are in this state, we prefer our own opinions to that of the spiritual guide or we begin to believe that we see things more deeply and clearly than our teacher does.

This condition brings the spiritual journey to a screeching halt. If this condition should persist, then rebellion soon leads to criticism of the guide, and from there, it is just a hop, skip and jump to criticizing God.

Naturally, there can be no question of making spiritual progress under such circumstances. Furthermore, if one is unlucky, then one may not only just fall away from the spiritual path, but one can become an active antagonist toward that path as well.

Such antagonism can range from: a disbelief in, and opposition to, all things spiritual, to: the invention of one's own "mystical path". The proliferation of spiritual paths that is being observed today is not necessarily a healthy sign and in many cases, in fact, may be a reflection of the activities of the nafs as it seeks to arrange the spiritual realm according to its own likes and dislikes, and the whole concoction is made to be fair seeming in its eyes.

Although there is certainly more than one legitimate way to God, not everything that calls itself a path is capable of assisting the individual to realize her or his spiritual potential and true identity. It simply is not true that all paths lead to the same End.

There are a small number that do, and they do so because they come from a Divine Source. Most do not because they are merely expressions of human speculation and ignorance

Anybody can fool around with chemicals. Not everyone knows how to combine things in precisely the right manner for each unique individual case in order to be able to, God willing, set in motion a process of healing and curing of the spiritual diseases that afflict a given individual ... a process of healing and curing without problematic, debilitating and destructive spiritual side-effects.

Moreover, some people have removed certain facets of spiritual wisdom from the original context in which that wisdom-fragment is rooted. Such individuals are operating under the influence of mechanistic and technological thinking that presupposes that everything consists of modules that can be transferred from one context to another without any problem.

Even when such uprooted wisdom-fragments still retain some partial efficacy, they can never, in and of themselves, bring an individual to the point where the person comes to realize his or her true identity or comes to realize one's essential spiritual capacity -- a capacity that is duplicated nowhere else in the universe. And, the realization of true identity and essential capacity are the woof and warp of the mystical path -- everything else is purely peripheral, and as such, a distraction away from the proper destination of the mystical path.

My response to another of your wonderings -- more specifically, whether I "wouldn't mind sharing some of your [that is, my] ups and downs of [my] path" -- is similar to the foregoing. In other words, I will respond, but, perhaps, not in the way in which you would like or for which you might be hoping.

In reality, there are no downs to the mystical path -- only ups. We learn from experience -- both difficult ones as well as those that are felt to be easy.

If the significance of what is learned is taken to heart in terms of what it says about ourselves, or the human condition, or the nature of existence, or our relationship with Divinity, then the experience becomes a constructive influence during our journey on the path. Anything that is constructive in this fashion is an up, irrespective of its phenomenology being pleasant or painful.

The "downs" of the path are when we forget the foregoing perspective and try to impose our own moods, attitudes, limitations or agenda upon the mystical journey. We all do this in different ways, and, thus, it does not necessarily help another person to describe the biographical details of how a particular individual came to lose one's focus in a given set of circumstances.

Having said this, nonetheless, many of the aphorisms, poetry, stories, and anecdotes that are related by the Sufi masters are often

designed to help remind us of what the proper "up" perspective is. These teachings tend to help deflect us from our all too frequent condition of being "down" and push or drag us back toward an upward direction with respect to the way we go about interpreting and understand the spiritual significance of the events in our lives.

As far as your query about the issue of physical distance between an initiate and a spiritual teacher is concerned, there are several things that can be said. First of all, one of the hardest lessons to learn for many who set foot on the mystical path is for these individuals to come to appreciate and truly understand that the relationship with the teacher has nothing to do with physical/material contiguous affiliation.

That such an obstacle should play so prominent a role in the journey of so many individuals is rather ironical. The path is about spirituality, not physical or material reality.

If spirituality were a physical force that was subject, like most such forces, to the inverse square law and, consequently, diminished with the square of the distance from the epicenter of the locus of boson exchange, then, perhaps, physical proximity might be an important spiritual issue. This, however, is not the case.

The issue of physical juxtaposition is a psychological issue, not a spiritual one. Psychologically, and emotionally, people like to have a sort of hands-on relationship with their teacher. This tends to provide individuals with a sense of access, immediacy, security, belonging, and participation -- all of which are important to the individual's psychological equilibrium, but none of which are spiritually essential.

Notwithstanding the foregoing remarks, the actual nature of a relationship between a Sufi shaykh and an initiate is probably a compromise of the two positions outlined above. In other words, the relationship consists of a mixture of physical proximity and physical separation.

What the precise ratio of these two will be in any given instance will vary from case to case. This always has been the way of things since even the days of old there would be those initiates who would visit, or be visited by, the shaykh only once or twice in their lives, whereas other individuals would be in the company of the shaykh on a much more regular basis.

One thing is certain, however. There is no necessary relationship between physical proximity and spiritual progress.

There may be some who, although quite close to the shaykh physically, do not, for whatever reasons, make a great deal of spiritual progress. On the other hand, there may be those who are physically far removed from the shaykh who, nonetheless, make tremendous spiritual progress.

In time, if God wishes, one comes to understand that although one might enjoy and treasure one's opportunities for physical proximity to the shaykh, this enjoyment should not be confused with what is necessary for spiritual progress. In truth, the shaykh is with one all the time, but in all too many cases, the reverse is not so even when there might be physical proximity.



### Doubt and its Antidote

Previously, the person to whom the following e-mail was sent had spoken about being, from time to time, beset with deep doubts not only about the degree of Truth to be found through the Sufi mystical Path onto which the individual had stepped, but, as well, had certain doubts concerning the spiritual guide with whom the person had taken initiation. The individual who wrote the e-mail also talked about a very powerful spiritual experience that occurred during college days -- an experience filled with light and love and manifested through the form of a human being.

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Doubt is a natural part of the path in the sense that Allah, the Infinitely Wise, has given us this capacity for doubt -- a capacity that is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, there are many facets of life experience that need to be treated with caution, circumspection and critical reflection, and doubt can play a valuable role in this process of holding up experience to close scrutiny.

On the other hand, doubt can also be the scourge of faith since it seeks to eat away at the fabric of our relationship with God, as well as with the prophets, the saints, those who are appointed to guide us from darkness into light, and even our own essential selves.

The perennial question, of course, is when should we trust doubt and when should we shun it. This question really has two possibilities associated with it that are like the two kinds of mistakes that can be made in science -- known as Type I and Type II errors.

A Type I error is when an individual accepts a hypothesis as true, when, in reality, the hypothesis is false. A Type II error is when one rejects a hypothesis as false, when, in fact, the hypothesis being rejected is actually true.

Is one's shaykh a true guide or a false guide? If the shaykh is authentic, and one rejects the shaykh, one has committed the spiritual equivalent of a Type II error. If one's teacher is a false guide, yet, one accepts the "teacher" as authentic, then one has committed the spiritual counterpart to the Type I error mentioned above.

The spiritual problem is complicated by the presence of a variety of forces that are actively seeking to confuse the issue. These include: nafs (the seat of rebellion and resistance to the Divine Plan), Iblis

(Satan), mischievous jinn (beings who like human beings have the capacity to choose between good and evil), dunya (the world in which our desires entangle us), and unbelievers (those who do not believe in Divinity as the ultimate Reality and Source of all other relative realities) come together separately and in combination with one another in an attempt to undermine our spiritual judgment.

The Mercy, Love, Generosity, Support, Protection, and Kindness of God shield us from the relentless pursuit of those enemies of ours who constantly are seeking openings of personal weakness through which to attack us. On our own, we have no chance to defeat the forces that have been set against us by the Divine Plan of God.

One of the potential weapons with which God has equipped those who step onto the Sufi path is 'nisbath' or, roughly speaking, the spiritual umbilical cord that links a seeker with his or her shaykh, and, through the shaykh, to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and, ultimately, to Allah -- although, in reality, the nisbath, shaykh, and Prophet are but different expressions of one and the same Reality -- that is, one's relationship with Allah.

The nisbath is with one even in pre-eternity ... that is, the 'time', so to speak, or state of being we had prior to coming into the physical universe. However, it is in the crucible of physical existence that the nisbath either grows or withers. It is that potential about which we are warned in the Qur'an toward the beginning of Surah Shams -- namely, those who cause this potential to wither will fail in the purpose of life, while those who seek to increase it, and with God's help, do so, succeed in life's purpose.

A seeker must distinguish between the false self and the essential self. There is much spiritual and moral ugliness to which the false self gives expression, and during the heat of spiritual struggle, supposing that one is, in essence, this ugliness becomes a very easy thing to do even though such is not the case.

Nevertheless, we have responsibility for what goes on with our false selves. This means we have the task of striving to make sure that what goes on with the false self does not spill over into the realms of commission and omission, and, thereby, induce us to transgress the bounds of propriety.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) did not say the feeling of anger was wrong. He indicated that what was wrong was not swallowing the anger once it started to rise within one.

Even such a spiritually seminal eminence as Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him), the son-in-law of the Prophet, showed, very clearly, there is a difference between the false self and the essential self. You may be familiar with the story of Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) in which he was in battle with one of the unbelievers.

Eventually, by the Grace of Allah, Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) was able to put the person against whom he was fighting in a vulnerable, submissive position. This latter individual chose this time to spit in the face of Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be please with him) as one, last act of defiance and contempt.

When this happened, Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) immediately withdrew his sword and walked away from the defeated antagonist. This action of Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) astonished his opponent.

The latter asked Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) why he had lowered his sword and walked away when he was in the superior position and easily could have vanquished his enemy. Hazrat Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) replied that when the man spit in his face, the nafs of the Hazrat reared up and demanded that the opponent be run through.

When this happened, Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) knew the real enemy was within and that it would be far more important to cut to shreds the inner, invisible antagonist than to vanquish the external, physical one. Consequently, he lowered his sword and walked away.

Both you and I are far removed from the spiritual capacity of Hazrat Ali (may Allah be pleased with him). Yet, here is an individual of unbelievably great spiritual stature who admitted to the existence of the force of nafs within him.

Anger is just one of the ways in which the nafs is manifested. Doubt also can be another form of expression that is assumed by the nafs.

Through a process of self-hypnosis, the nafs tries to induce us into supposing we are this doubt or anger or pride or lust or jealousy and, that, therefore, we should run with such feelings when they arise. But, the

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and Hazrat Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) have shown us that we must make a distinction between the emanations of the false self and the potential of the essential self ... the potential that, with the help of Allah, permits us to see the nafs as something other than who we, in essence really are ... an essence that has the God-given ability to resist anger when it arises, and to swallow it as Hazrat Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) did during the heat of battle.

Al-Muhasibi (may Allah be pleased with him), the great early mystic of Baghdad, was one of the first spiritual psychologists. Part of his method was to examine the contents of consciousness and trace these entities back to their origins in order to see what was at the root of some given thought, feeling, or the like.

Whenever a feeling or thought arose within him, he would seek to probe the underlying intention and determine what was moving force, so to speak, within such a feeling or thought and whether it concerned intentions such as trust, sincerity, love, friendship, or whether the underlying motivating intention, was due to insincerity, hypocrisy, doubt, deceit, or the like?

When doubt arises in you, try to trace this state of consciousness back to its origins. Be like the astronomers who take their electromagnetic radiation readings from their instruments and, then attempt to figure out how far back in time such a radiation signature began and what the significance of that radiation is to the meaning of things in the world of today.

The Sufi shaykhs talk about the term 'dhawk' that means tasting in an experiential sense. Every experience has its own characteristic taste.

However, many years of work and study are required before an individual can become, by the Grace of Allah, a spiritual connoisseur and, thereby, be able to discern what elements have gone into the 'cooking' of any given experience merely by the "taste" of the experience. By examining the contents of one's consciousness and exploring the forces that are operative in generating and shaping those contents and lending to them their experiential 'taste', the individual takes the first necessary steps toward becoming a master "chef" of the way.

As indicated earlier, sometimes the origins of doubt are rooted in appropriate intentions, concerns, and motivations. On other occasions, this is not the case.

You must learn to distinguish between the two. Furthermore, when doubt is from a spiritual injurious source, one must understand that this 'source' is not our essential self even while we realize that, essential or not, it must be resisted with our nisbath for Allah, the Prophet, the awliya (friends of God), and the shaykhs of the way.

Our nisbath is our sincere love for the Truth, for the Reality of Being that both transcends us, as well as underwrites, our created existence. When nisbath is fully realized, the individual comes to understand that "we" are one with that Truth/Reality even while that Truth/Reality can, in no way, be limited to our participation in such Oneness.

All the practices of the way are designed to help nourish protect, support, and assist the growth of nisbath. Our relationship with our shaykh is for the purpose of bringing to full realization the significance and value of nisbath, for it is through nisbath that we find our way to our true, essential identity and our unique spiritual capacity for worshipping Divinity.

When we doubt our shaykh, we doubt our essence (assuming, of course, the shaykh is an authentic spiritual guide. When we doubt the spiritual luminaries of 'the way', we become aligned with the forces of dissolution. When we spin out of control under the influence of such doubt, we permit ourselves to become hypnotized by the mesmerizing hype of the unholy four -- dunya, nafs, Iblis and the unbelievers.

The presence of the foregoing sort of doubt is a warning sign. Spiritual alarms are ringing to inform one that one must try to shake loose from the spell that doubt has cast upon one before it is too late.

Shake loose through critical self-examination like that practiced by al-Muhasibi (may Allah be pleased with him). Shake loose from the would-be hypnotic forces by holding tightly to the hem of the tresses of one's spiritual guide ... assuming, of course, that the shaykh is authentic.

Clear one's spiritual perception by realizing that one is not the doubt, but, rather, the doubt is being generated by one or more of the unholy four working on, and through, one. Free oneself from the maelstrom of the

false self that would suck one down into the darkness that is far from the light, beauty and truth of the essential Self.

You must work on your nisbath with your shaykh -- and through your shaykh, the Prophet (peace be upon him), and, ultimately, Allah. Your nisbath is the key to everything.

Guard your nisbath with your life, for your happiness depends on its continued security and growth. It is the amana (trust) that has been vouchsafed to you and that must, as the Qur'an indicates, be given back to the One from Whom it issued originally. It is what you will bring with you on the Day of Judgment and which will be placed in the Scales of Discernment, and it is that about which you will be questioned in the grave.

Do not permit the sweet nothings that doubt whispers to your heart and mind dissuade you from suluk or traveling along the path of sobriety. Remember well that in the end, the kind of doubt of which you speak will leave you in a soiled state, ashamed before your Creator, if you should let it seduce you.

Know that Allah is beyond all comprehension and know that no matter how many spiritual experiences with which one may be graced, these are but quantum drops in an ocean of Infinite dimensions, and that this ocean or Muhammadan Reality does not exhaust Divinity. Know that Allah is One, and there is no other, for the other is an illusion of absence in which something less than Presence is being manifested to understanding and consciousness of which the manifestations of a given understanding or consciousness is attending to Presence in an absent, or unfocused and distracted, sort of way.

All these questions and doubts about whether there is some other Reality beyond the God of Creation is merely the idle chatter of that which does not know. It is in the nature of that which does not know to engage in such idle chatter since it has no Reality with which to work except the reality of its own emptiness of understanding and spiritual insight.

You were blessed at an early age with a wonderful and very powerful experience. It showed you possibilities. It showed you potential. It provided you with something to work with and toward.

But, it was not, and is not, all that can be. Divinity cannot be exhausted by one experience nor an infinite series of such experiences, all different from one another.

Just as the archangel Jibril (peace be on him) was, on occasion, manifested in human form (as is attested to in the hadith), so too, the attributes and names of Allah may be manifested in human form. For example, the Prophet (peace be upon him) reported having seen God in the form of a beardless youth.

Manifestation -- whether in the form of an archangel, a beardless youth, or a luminous being of overflowing love and generosity such as appeared in the experience of your early years -- do not, and cannot, circumscribe Divinity, but are, in fact, made possible through Divinity. The luminous figure you saw is a potential within you -- it is a potential within all of us and is not necessarily something external to you.

Do not permit doubt to divert you from meeting up with the Reality of which your earlier experience was merely a 'taste'. Do not permit your doubt to prevent you from realizing your true fitra or primordial, spiritual nature.

But, the choice is in your hands. More specifically, it is in the hands of your nisbath.

When we let the shaykh come into our lives and wash us clean of the sins of ignorance and rebelliousness, like the one who washes the dead body, we submit to a process that is necessary for our spiritual health and protection. Submission to the truth is in our best interests, but the doubts of nafs, Iblis, dunya and unbelievers would try to convince us otherwise.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) has counseled us to be careful about those with whom we spend time, for our spiritual condition is greatly affected by the quality of such companionship. Companionship is as much an internal matter as it is an external issue.

If one spends time with doubt, one's spiritual condition will be dyed in the color of doubt. If one spends time with a loving, encouraging, hopeful, sincere, committed, supportive nisbath, one's consciousness will be dyed with this color. Be careful whom you take as an internal companion.



Dreams -- A Sufi Perspective

The following response is to an e-mail inquiry concerning some dreams that several friends had on the same night involving the mother of the person who sent the e-mail. The purpose of this response is not to interpret the dreams in question, and, indeed, I do not encourage visitors to my web page to send their dreams in search of such interpretations.

This response is intended to point out a few of the general features of the dream world from a Sufi perspective. As such, the discussion below may help readers to develop a broad orientation through which to engage some of the principles that are given expression by the nature of dreams and their formation.

These comments are not, in any way, meant to be definitive. They are merely an introduction to an experiential phenomenon that can play an important role in our lives.

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As far as the dreams your friends had are concerned, one should try to keep certain things in mind. Relatively speaking, very few dreams are true in a literal way.

On occasion, indeed, some people do see what is to come in the future in their dreams in a way that can be remarkable in the detail it shows of the forthcoming reality. By and large, however, dreams are not straight forward and, therefore, like life events, dreams require interpretation.

You should understand that the dream world is a barzakh, or isthmus, that links two different worlds. These are the material/physical world, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the spiritual world.

The events, people, objects, happenings, processes, and so on that take place during dreams constitute symbolic forms or similes (likenesses) that bring together the aforementioned two, very different modalities of being or ontology (i.e., the physical/material and the spiritual). Thus, when trying to understand a dream, one needs to grasp the fact that the language of dreams is trying to find a way to combine these different worlds in a manner that keeps the essence or message of the dream intact, even if the surface form or symbol through which the dream is given expression, becomes somewhat distorted and/or confusing in the process.

The two dreams that your friends experienced may have had nothing to do with your mother whatsoever. Yet, your mother's likeness was in the dream because the language of dreams felt that of all the symbols that could be drawn upon that might be understandable to your two friends, for whatever reason, the form of your mother was seized upon to give expression to a part of what was being communicated to them in the dreams.

The reason why your mother's form may have been selected could be because of some quality, trait, mannerism, or the like, that your mother has which the language of dreams chose to put into the dream as the best way to communicate some aspect of the dream-message. And, oddly enough, although your mother's form may have been selected by two different people on the same night, the reason why her form was selected may have been very different in each case.

To one friend, your mother's image may have been used in order to try to communicate one particular kind of quality or character or theme or issue that might be associated, in that person's way of thinking and understanding, with your mother in some manner. To your other friend, the process of dream formation may have "felt" that your mother's image was the best choice to communicate some other particular quality or character that is associated with your mother in the context of this other person's life.

Your mother's figure was a common factor in both dreams, but something different may have been meant in each case. While there always are exceptions to the rule, there are, for the most part, no universal dream symbols that mean precisely the same thing to every human being.

There may be certain forms of symbols that are common to the dream experiences of a wide variety of people. Nonetheless, the process of dream formation invests these common forms and symbols with very different meanings, purposes, significance, and so on.

Dreams are very contextual and tied to the person having the dream. After all, the communication is to them, not to your mother ... and the dream is not necessarily about your mother, per se, either.

A further consideration is the following. When we dream, we do not dream in our heads or our bodies.

To be sure, our bodies and minds do exhibit patterns of activity -- such as EEG readings and rapid eye movements (i.e., REM) -- which can be correlated with, but do not necessarily cause our soul's point of departure to alam al-mithal -- the world of symbols and similitudes. Nonetheless, the patterns of activity of the brain and the body that are associated with the dream state, are preparatory for the dream state rather than being either the same as, or a cause of, dreaming.

In point of fact, our souls are the locus of manifestation through which we experience dreams. The soul becomes a locus of manifestation for the dream state when we travel to the realm of alam al-mithal -- the world of symbols and similes or likenesses.

While visiting that realm, we can "run into", so to speak, other souls who live in the physical/material world, as well as the spirits of those who have passed atheist meetings have their own spiritual significance.

In any case, let us suppose for the sake of argument that your friends ran into your mother while she, herself, was traveling in that realm and having her own dream encounter. Now, your friends have their own life-preoccupations, and when, they see your mother's soul in alam al-mithal, each of your friends, according to the "logic" of symbol formation that goes on within the language of dreams, seizes on the form of your mother as just the "right" way to say what needs to be said in this facet of the dream of each of your friends.

It is like in everyday life when we are walking along and we bump into someone. Something about the person we bump into triggers a realization that we have to do something, or we have forgotten to do something, or that someone is coming later to visit, or some such thing.

What has been remembered may have nothing to do with the person we bumped into except there is something about that person's quality, character, appearance, and so on which has triggered-off a response in our memory banks. The language and logic of memory programming, as it were, has seized upon the 'chance' meeting with a given individual to generate symbols that can be translated into a form that can be recognized as having importance to some other aspect of our lives -- i.e., the realization of things left undone, or forthcoming dinner parties, appointments, birthdays, meetings, and so on.

For example, in computer technology and software development, there are different levels of translation that need to take place as one moves from, say, machine language, to compilers and assembly language, and, finally, to the higher-level of programming languages (such as HTML) that can be used so dummies like me can have a chance of goofing up. Similarly, in dreams, there are different levels of compiling and assembling of dream language syntax and semantics so that the finished product can be in the form of a symbol or likeness that the dreamer might have a chance of understanding and using.

The dreamer may find it maddening that the language of dreams can't be clearer about what it has to communicate. Nevertheless, there are reasons for this, just as there are reasons why various kinds and levels of computer language should be structured the way they are, despite the frustration that many of us may feel for the, seemingly, unnecessarily obscure, dense, and roundabout character of its logic and syntax.

The particular symbols involving your mother in the dreams of your friends probably have meaning and significance, but they have meaning and significance in the context of those people's lives, personality and problems. One cannot abstract dreams out of a concrete framework and say this is absolutely what their dream means.

Najm al-Din Razi (may Allah be pleased with him) once described how the single symbol of fire could have tremendously different meanings - from the very lowest, to the very highest, realms of existence - - depending on the person doing the dreaming and depending on the circumstances in that individual's life, as well as the person's position within the realm of spirituality. Consequently, as far as the dreams of your mother that your friends experienced, I would try to put things in the foregoing perspective.

In short, there could be some non-coincidental reason why both people dreamed about your mother on the same night. One possibility, of course, is that the dreams really were about your mother (as a soul) and not just as a repository of likenesses from which the process of dream formation could seize upon in order to communicate something or other to the one's doing the dreaming.

Nonetheless, one cannot take the seemingly ominous nature of their dreams as necessarily meaning that something dark and sinister is going to happen to your mother. For example, sometimes when different Names

and Attributes of Allah are in dynamic tension with respect to a given individual, this tension can be expressed in the form of being shot at.

Furthermore, the symbol of being given a lethal injection might mean that something within your mother is dying, but need not mean that she is dying, or going to die, in the near future in a biological sense. Sometimes symbols of death can be a good thing, as when we are dying to our attachments, desires, biases, grudges against others and so on.

The other possibility is that the two dreams on the same night were still not coincidental, and, yet, they had little to do with your mother. Your friends dreamed about her because they may have, as indicated earlier, "bumped into" her soul in alam al-mithal and this provided a seed of likeness or simile out of which the language of dreams fashioned a symbol to communicate something of significance to your friends, but for different reasons in each case.

Our lives are in Allah's hands. God twists our hearts between the forefingers of Divinity in whichever way is deemed appropriate for the real purpose of our lives.

We all must taste death. We all should live with death as a constant companion, knowing that the Angel of Death is ready to perform the duty of whisking us away from life at God's command -- but not one second before that command is given.

As Hafiz of Shiraz has said:

"The One Who is looking after your affairs is already busy looking after your affairs. Your worry adds nothing but worry to your affair."

I do not feel the dreams of your friends have to do with the possibility of your mother's impending demise. Yet, if they do deal with that issue, then this may have to do with when it happens and not now.

Now, you should be busy letting your mother know how much you sincerely love her and appreciate her. Now, you should be busy doing things for her and serving her.

Don't let it be said of you on the Day of Judgment that when your mother's time to go came, that there were kind, loving and compassionate things you could have done for, or with, or said to, your

mother which were left undone or unsaid. Now, you have opportunities to interact with your mother, so don't let them pass you by.

The future is already looking after itself. Your duties lie in the present.

On the Nature of Spiritual Fear

The following thoughts arose in response to a question by an individual who wanted to know if a shaykh thought negatively toward those seekers associated with the spiritual teacher who did not fulfill all the requirements of spirituality -- whether exoteric or esoteric. Furthermore, this person wondered how, or if, a fear of Divinity fit into a Sufi framework.

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It is not the business of a shaykh to think badly of one's mureeds (i.e., the seekers that God has entrusted to the shaykh's care). It is the business of the shaykh to assist a mureed.

This assistance may take a variety of forms in ways permitted by God. The primary objective, however, is to help, God willing, the individual mureed, to discover his or her true identity, as well as to help the individual, God willing, to come to know one's essential, unique capacity for knowing, loving, cherishing, worshiping and serving Divinity.

Notwithstanding the love, compassion and concern that, God willing, a shaykh has for a mureed, the foregoing should not be construed to mean that the shaykh does not see the problems a mureed creates for herself or himself -- that is, for the mureed. If the shaykh sees, by the light of God's Grace, something that is creating obstacles and veils in the spiritual life of a mureed, then the thoughts, efforts, and concentration of the shaykh will be toward working, God willing, on how to help the person remove those difficulties.

A person's worship or non-worship of God does not, respectively, make God a greater or lesser God. This merely makes the individual a greater or lesser, human being.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was once asked about what the proper relationship should be between hope in relation to God's Mercy concerning our spiritual mistakes and fear of God's displeasure with respect to our spiritual rebellion. The Prophet responded that the two should be in balance with one another.

The sort of balance to which the Prophet was referring could be illustrated by the well-known Yin/Yang symbol of the Taoist tradition. At the heart of each side of the symbol, which is divided in the middle by a sine-like curve, there is a dot.

The color of the dot in each side is in opposition to the color of the side it is in. Thus, within each side, there is an element of the other opposing side.

In other words, there is some quality of yin in yang, and there is some quality of yang in yin. Neither side is free or independent of the other.

Similarly, in Islam, and on the Sufi path, there is, or should be, an element of hope in fear, and there should be an element of fear in hope. From the human side of things, neither hope nor fear can be, or should be, independent of the other.

The nature of this fear, however, should not be translated in terms of the emotion that people have in trepidation of the consequences that are believed to be forthcoming for having not been a nice, good, well-behaved little boy or girl. The nature of the fear to which the Prophet is alluding is rooted, partly, in having a deep, abiding awe, respect, and heartfelt awareness (according to our capacity) of being constantly in the Presence of Divinity Whose sheer majesty, incomparability, might, grandeur, inexhaustibility, and complete transcendence, renders human existence to the level of insignificance and infinitesimal value, except to the extent that God gives that existence significance and value.

Will the gnat not tremble before the Sun? If the gnat is ignorant and foolish, then, perhaps, no such trembling will take place. But, if the gnat is wise, then surely there will be trembling before the Divine Attributes that are jalal (the array of Divine attributes that are subsumed under the general category of Might and Majesty) ... and this would be true even if the fate of our heart's did not lie, as is indicated by one of the hadiths or sayings of the Prophet, between the forefingers of a Divine hand (metaphorically speaking) that can turn those hearts in whatever direction is desired by Divinity.

However, our fear also should be rooted in the following kind of understanding. More specifically, one of the reasons why God may get angry with us is because, in going astray from the sirat-ul-mustaqueem (the spiritually straight path) that God has laid out for us with indescribable care, kindness, compassion, wisdom and consideration, we undermine all the spiritual goodness, happiness, love, joy, felicity, nearness, and so on that God wishes to lavish upon us.

We have to want what God wants for us. The stupidity of human beings is that most of us believe that one can equate what the ego/nafs wants with what God wants, and that in pursuing the former, one is supposedly pursuing the latter.

This can never be. Yet, we continually delude ourselves into supposing this to be the way of things.

From Divinity's side, which really is the only side that matters, God wants to give and give and give to us ... without end and without measure. From our side of things, which is the only side that does not matter except to the extent that Divinity wishes it to matter, we, in effect, are telling God to drop dead.

In our arrogance, pride, ignorance, stubbornness, density, darkness, rebelliousness, forgetfulness, heedlessness, insincerity, ingratitude and meanness of being, we are saying that we know better than the One Who has created all the worlds and whatever is in them. We are saying to God: despite what You have told us in Your books of Revelation; despite the warnings of the 124,000 Prophets who have come (from Adam to Muhammad, peace be upon them all); despite the testimony of the Companions, both male and female, of these Prophets; despite the teachings of the people of spiritual insight and excellence; despite the evidence of history for all nations and all times, and despite what we ourselves know to the contrary from our everyday experience, we are saying that our friends are: nafs (the seat of rebellion in human beings), Iblis (Satan), dunya (the realm of worldly desire) and the unbelievers (anyone who denies the supremacy of Divinity in all matters).

Why are we saying this? We have allowed ourselves to become habituated to, and hypnotized by, the belief that the ways of Iblis, nafs, the world, and the unbelievers are easier, more convenient, more interesting, more fun, and more liberating than are the ways of Divinity.

As a result we command ourselves to follow the example of the aforementioned unholy four, in preference to all that is good, just, true, beautiful and noble ... within us and without us. In doing so, however, we become bogged down in a morass of spiritual and worldly false-economies through which we have deluded ourselves into believing that we are getting something for nothing when we align with the unholy four, only to find out subsequently, that there are many, many

hidden costs of pain, suffering, and torment for having bartered away a spiritual way of life for extremely ephemeral pleasures and comforts.

We should fear God because we Love Divinity. For, with love, comes the fear of not wanting to let down or disappoint the One we profess to love. We should fear disappointing God or putting ourselves in this kind of situation where such disappointment becomes the inevitable result of our choices and actions.

We should fear having to be dragged before Divinity in the chains of shame with which we shackle ourselves through our problematic acts of commission and omission. This fear comes from the dread of having to face One Who has done so much for us ... Who has been so kind and loving and giving and compassionate toward us.

When we look to the quality of God's love for us, and, then, we look to the quality of our love for Allah, should we not fear the Day when we can no longer run away from the disparity between the two? Does ingratitude not fear being reminded of its own ingratitude?

Should we not fear that appointed meeting when we must stand mute before the magnificence of Divinity and listen in agonized silence to the unseemly testimony that is brought against us by our hands, feet, eyes and other dimensions of being for having squandered our spiritual inheritance in such thoughtless, ill-conceived, greedy and grasping ways?

Our fear of God is misdirected. We have nothing to fear from Divinity and everything to fear from ourselves. Yet, in a typically human sleight-of-hand, we project our fears on to God because we are in denial about what is the real cause of our fear.

Since God is associated with our fears, we say we fear God. In reality, we fear having to stare into the mirror of Truth concerning ourselves, and poor God takes the rap.

We fear God because Divinity knows the truth about the many times we have soiled ourselves by betraying the trust that has been extended to us. This trust is not just the free will that has been extended to us, nor the spiritual potential that God has secreted within us, nor the responsibility of being God's khalifah throughout creation.

No! God has trusted us to do right by Divinity; to do right by creation; to do right by others, and to do right by ourselves. We have trampled upon this trust. Should we not fear the One Who serves as a

reminder to us of these facts ... even if nothing at all should be said when we meet with Divinity?

Relative to the bounties and blessings that God is constantly injecting into our lives, very little is being asked of us in return. Mostly, it is a matter of demonstrating some sincere gratitude.

Sincere gratitude is that sphere of human endeavor that is backed up with something beyond a mere profession of the lips. Rather than bear witness to the Oneness of Divinity, or say prayers, or fast, or give zakat (a kind of charity), or do Hajj (pilgrimage to the holy places in and about Mecca during the early part of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar) out of fear of God, why not do these things out of gratitude to Divinity?

Once, after having spent, yet, another night in prayer with, and remembrance of, God, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was asked if it was true that God already had granted the Prophet Paradise. When the Prophet replied in the affirmative, a further question followed: "Then, why do you spend all night in prayer and worship?" The Prophet's reply was simple. "Should I not be a thankful servant?"

If we are not appreciative of God's kindness to us, God is not hurt or upset for the sake of Divinity. Divinity does not need humanity or its thanks -- or lack thereof.

Instead, God feels hurt for our sake. Similarly, God is angry at us for our sake.

God is upset with us because we have brought, or are bringing, upon ourselves, our own spiritual demise. We are spoiling everything.

All aspects of created existence are governed by laws, rules and principles. There are consequences for violating these laws, rules and principles on every level of existence – from: the physical, to: the social, psychological, and spiritual.

If we befoul ourselves by transgressing various aspects of the ordered character of the universe, then our own wretched spiritual condition becomes the consequence with which we must live for having transgressed in such ways. Indeed, we become our own self-created and self-imposed punishment.

God knows how the universe works. Divinity is the One Who has set it up with the nature that it has.

God knows how human beings work. Divinity is the One Who has given us our constructive spiritual possibilities as well as our potential for destructiveness.

If, by God's Grace, we are able to realize our spiritual potential -- which alone is at the heart of why we have been given existence at all -- then all praise for this is due to God. On the other hand, if, by the grace of our own nafs, we are not able to realize our spiritual potential, then we ourselves seal and determine our fate.

God will not have to lift a finger against us on the Day of Judgment. We will have done it all to ourselves.

We will have inflicted grievous spiritual harm upon ourselves, and God merely has to leave us to our own choices and devices. In effect, we will be told: 'Alright, if this is what you want, then this is what you will get ... in spades'.

People who have spent time in sensory deprivation tanks, or similar situations, speak about a variety of stages that an individual goes through during this process. At some juncture, a stage may come in which the individual is thrown back on to themselves and they began to hallucinate, and their internal life of fantasy and imagination becomes the woof and warp of experience at that point.

We conveniently forget that everything that is positive and interesting in our interior lives is a Grace from God. This includes fantasy, memory and imagination.

What would be the condition of our interior lives, if everything positive were removed, and we only had emptiness, darkness, worthlessness, loneliness, and boredom for our eternal companions? In the sensory deprivation tanks, people at least have fantasy or imagination to fall back on, but what if we were brought face to face with what we actually have to offer independently of God's Grace -- namely, our own nothingness?

Furthermore, what if these "companions" were bathed in an intense, unrelenting awareness both of what the truth about ourselves is, as well as in a realization of what might have been but, now, is eternally lost? All of this is compliments of our nafs and our free-will offering of allowing ourselves to give in to the incessant whining and nagging of the unending desires of the nafs.

While in this condition of deprivation, we will not be able to go to sleep as we can now when we get too tired of ourselves. Moreover, while in this state, we will not be able to distract ourselves, as we can now, with various diversionary tactics in which -- in addition to the participation of our own nafs -- the world, Iblis and the unbelievers also are quite active.

Instead, all we will be able to do is experience the full horror of our own being, devoid of all spirituality and all of the positive supports, capacities, and endowments that God has generously bestowed upon us in this life.

We will not be able to idle away the time using our intelligence and creative imagination to amuse ourselves. Intelligence and creative imagination are gifts of God, and these do not belong to us. They will be summarily stripped from us, like the signs and marks of honor are stripped from a disgraced officer who has been found guilty of traitorous activities in a court-martial.

All we will have is our awareness of the wretched, pitiful, foul, sickening, and agonizingly painful nature of our spiritually and ontologically empty condition -- the one we have spent a life time on Earth in creating. And, we will have the deep, abiding awareness that we have brought ourselves to this lowly condition.

Our fear of God is the realization we have, however dim this realization may be, that when we meet God, then God will let us know, in no uncertain terms, what we have done to ourselves and just how we may have ruined all the good things that God had planned for us. Divinity wanted to shower us with blessings, and we said: "Thanks, but no thanks."

And, God may say to us: "Then, no thanks it is, and in you go to the mother of all sensory/intellectual/spiritual deprivation tanks: Hell. I hope you will enjoy what you have wrought and bought with your life." But, of course, we won't... not even a little.

God has said of Divinity:

"My mercy doth take precedence over My wrath."

Yet, God also has warned us of what the consequences are for those who treat the purpose of this Earthly life with contempt.

We should fear our meeting with God for the unwelcome situation in which we have placed Divinity. Now, the difficult decision must be made as to whether, or not, God should permit the human being's capacity as a free agent (as one who has been given the discretionary power to make decisions in life) to take precedence over God's mercy.

Should God honor our status as creatures who have been entrusted with a free will? Or, should Divinity save us from ourselves one last time?

Human beings are very quick in this life to take exception with the possibility that God might be interfering with our precious free choice. In effect, many human beings are saying: 'if the choice is really mine, then let me do what I want, and I don't want any interference'.

If this is how we want it in life, then why should God change the arrangement in the next life just because we no longer wish to accept responsibility for the consequences that go with the territory of free choice? If God does not change the arrangement, then Divinity permits our freedom to take precedence over Divine mercy -- but, remember, this has been our wish all along.

God loves us and doesn't want this for us. At the same time, Divinity respects our individuality and the way we exercise the free choice that is at the heart of that individuality.

If we go to the mother of all deprivation tanks, it is because we have chosen to do so and God is merely honoring our wish. We did not want Divinity to interfere on Earth, so now Divinity may stay out of the matter in the next life as well.

We are alive now. Sooner or later, we will not be.

When our time is up, so are our opportunities. If an individual will not do things for Allah's sake, then the individual might think about doing them for her or his own sake.

Know that whatever transgression one commits, one commits them, first and foremost, against oneself. If one, for example, does not say prayers or does not fast, then it is the soul of the one who is abstaining from these things that suffers and no one else -- certainly not God. It is such a person's soul that is condemning itself and bringing itself one step closer to possible spiritual ruination.

Doing things as Allah wishes is the best way because these methods serve as the spiritual protocols or algorithms, so to speak, that God has made available to us for helping us to generate solutions concerning what it is that God wants us to realize about our true spiritual identity and essential spiritual capacity. These Divine protocols or algorithms are known by Divinity to be effective in bringing about the spiritual transformation of the individual -- as opposed to our own philosophical and scientific inventions that have no capacity for a spiritually transforming efficacy whatsoever.

God has given us all a secret potential. This potential is a partial manifestation, reflection or expression of the 'hidden treasure' alluded to in a well-known hadith qudsi (a non-revelatory saying that comes from the mouth of the Prophet but conveys the communication of Divinity).

This treasure is the intention behind, as well as the purpose of, existence. If one turns one's back on all of this, then one is working in opposition to the whole fabric and character of being.

God is longing for us with an unfathomable longing. This longing is not for the sake of Divinity since Divinity already has all that can be had. God's longing is for us to come and know and share in what Divinity already knows and is.

This Divine longing is God's wish for us. If we work in accordance with that wish, then we will find, God willing, that Divinity is happy and overjoyed for our sake. If we work in opposition to that Divine wish, then we may find, God forbid, that Divinity is angry with us for our sake ... at what we have denied ourselves.

As a Sufi once said, the real faqir (one who practices austerities and denies himself or herself) is not one who chooses God over the world. The real faqir is one who chooses the world over God. A person must decide that kind of faqir he or she wants to be.



Hal (states), Maqam (stations), and Seeking Spiritual Guidance

An individual wrote about a powerful spiritual "event" that took place when this person was a teenager. The description of this event was fairly detailed and, among other things, mentioned both a deep feeling of oneness with God and the universe during this experience, as well as an overwhelming sense of understanding concerning the very depths of reality.

The aforementioned spiritual episode was infused with a deep, abiding joy, but the individual also experienced an almost primal fear in conjunction with the experience. Although the intensity of the event faded, to a degree, with time, the person who underwent this event has been trying to gauge its meaning, as well as seeking to integrate that experience into his everyday life, ever since -- mostly without success.

The person's lack of success in this struggle is what prompted the individual's initial e-mail to me. This led to a series of exchanges of e-mails

During one of these follow up e-mails, the person raised a number of other issues. These ranged from: wanting to know if becoming a student within our Order was possible, to: questions about the nature of 'subject' and 'object', as well as: indicating that the individual had, on occasion, assumed the responsibilities of teaching others about spirituality. The following is our response to various themes raised in one, or another, of these e-mails.

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I have received and have read your e-mail. I do not know if you will recognize your reflection in the following, but, nonetheless, as the old rock group Buffalo Springfield once suggested, take it "for what it's worth" -- and oddly enough, there is a resonance with certain aspects of that song echoing in this e-mail.

Your experience appears to be (only an authentic spiritual guide could confirm or disconfirm this) one of spiritual kashf or opening -- as opposed to worldly kashf ... although many people often confuse, and conflate, the latter with the former -- but more on that shortly. And, while your experience may be quite authentic and legitimate, you seem to be making an assumption about that experience that is not legitimate.

More specifically, you have had one spiritual opening and appear to have jumped to the conclusion you have reached the summit of spiritual

realities in the experience you have described. This is like someone walking through the Catskills and being overwhelmed by the beauty there and believing there could be nothing more beautiful, intoxicating and illuminating than this set of experiences -- never suspecting there are mountain ranges such as the Rockies, Andes, Alps, Urals, and Himalayas that are higher, more spectacular, and more overwhelming than anything the Catskills have to offer ... as beautiful and real as they may be.

God is infinite and cannot be exhausted, nor circumscribed, by one experience or a series of experiences. What you have experienced is a beginning -- an opening to possibilities -- not a terminus.

God, with a flourish of Divine generosity and baraka or blessings, has come into your life. Nevertheless, there is a distinction to be drawn between hal (state) and maqam (station).

To some extent, there are instances in which hal and maqam merge together in such a way that one cannot tell whether what is going on experientially is a case of maqam or hal -- and, in some ways, and at certain times, the distinction may be rather arbitrary. On the other hand, there are certain features that tend to characterize each.

For instance, instances of hal or states are considered to come by Divine Grace without necessarily having been earned through spiritual efforts of one sort or another. Instances of maqam, on the other hand, tend to be preceded by spiritual efforts and rigor of one kind or another.

Moreover, instances of hal or states, often are relatively short-lived in duration as far as the immediate intensity of such experiences are concerned, whereas, maqam are, more or less, permanent and on-going. Now, to be sure, the nature of an experience of hal may be such that it stays in memory and in one's heart for the rest of one's life and can have a significant impact on how one lives one's life, but it does so in a somewhat faded, if you will, manner, whereas there is an immediacy, accessibility and intensity to instances of maqam or stations that generally is not present in hal and/or that cannot be sustained over long periods of time in the latter condition.

As you describe your experience, it has the properties of hal and not maqam. And, as important as hal may be as signs on the mystical path, they are not the spiritual way stations that are of fundamental importance to a true and lasting progress on the mystical journey.

The foregoing points to something else that you said in your e-mail. You indicated you have achieved something that many mystical paths -- including that of the Sufi way -- claim is obtainable only through initiation into a given Order or silsilah under the guidance of a spiritual teacher or master.

Naturally, God can give to whomsoever Divinity pleases, and can give without stint, and God certainly is not answerable to human beings as to whom can get what, when, and how much. Nonetheless, just as with everything else in the created universe, there, generally, are principles at work in the vast majority of cases that govern how things operate and how things must proceed for the generality of created beings.

There are laws of physics, chemistry, and biology that constrain, direct and regulate life on earth. Similarly, there are laws of spirituality that constrain, direct and regulate journeys along the mystical path, and an individual ignores these laws at her or his own peril, just as living organisms who try to do an end around the laws of the physical universe do so at their own peril -- even though, on occasion, someone or something, by the grace of God, seems to get away with pushing the envelope, so to speak, in such instances.

However, one cannot use the exception as the norm. There are reasons for exceptions just as there are reasons for the norm, and one cannot suppose that because exceptions do occur, therefore, one can live one's life on the edge, if not beyond, in expectation of exceptions ruling the day, and permitting one, somehow, to always come away unscathed. This is the stuff from which tragedy is often born.

The norm of the mystical path is initiation. The norm of the path is to seek out and obtain the oasis of the spiritual guides who are provided by God to nurture and protect the seeker against the surrounding desert with its predators, brigands, scorpions, snakes and unforgiving elements.

You, yourself, have divulged something very telling in this respect. You admit you have no idea what the ultimate meaning and significance of your experience might be. Furthermore other than shaping your life in a broad sort of way so that it is oriented toward Divinity in a certain vague sense, your experiences have not provided you with intimate, detailed, certain and precise insight about who you are or what the specific purpose of your life -- as opposed to anyone else's -- is.

You also indicate your experience has not been an unalloyed blessing. You allude to the difficulties you have had in trying not to be overwhelmed by the Presence that you have felt and being sucked into a vortex of unknown nature, significance or ramifications.

This is the kind of thing with which a spiritual guide can help you. This is one of the functions of such an individual.

In addition, there are practices that can be done that help strengthen an individual's spiritual condition. Between a seeker's efforts and the support and help of a spiritual guide, the individual is gradually introduced into a condition of being through which one can live with, and, yet, still effectively function, while immersed in, or influenced by, such conditions.

Many people today believe they can read some books or listen to a spiritual guide, take some of the practices that are mentioned, and, then, go off by oneself and put it altogether so that neither initiation, a teacher, nor an Order or silsilah are necessary to achieve spiritual realization. Some of these people may even have certain sorts of extraordinary experiences that they take as indication that they are on the right path -- when, oftentimes, nothing could be further from the truth.

As the Qur'an indicates:

"Shall I tell you about who are the greatest losers in their works -- those whose efforts go astray in the present life, while they believe they are doing good deeds."

This applies as much to the realm of mysticism as it does to the world of exoteric litanies. The road of history is strewn with the bodies -- spiritual and physical -- of those who thought otherwise.

In your e-mail, you indicate that while there is nothing overtly spiritual about your life, you do, sometimes make certain hidden adjustments of people in the world about you. You don't say what these adjustments are, but whatever they may be, who has given you the authority to interfere with those people's lives in this manner? By what set of criteria are you evaluating the 'goodness' of such adjustments?

According to the Sufi masters -- and God is their authority for what they say -- there can be no compulsion in matters of deen ... deen being the path that leads to the realization of one's inner, essential, original nature or fitra. You might feel you are doing these people a favor, but you are usurping one of the most important elements in all of this -- a person's right to choose how, when, or if, they wish to place herself, himself, or themselves under those influences.

Toward the very beginning of this e-mail I alluded to a distinction between spiritual kashf and worldly kashf. Your original experiences were instances -- although God knows best -- of spiritual kashf. Your use of whatever psychic, telepathic or other powers with which you may have been linked are instances of worldly kashf.

With the exception of those -- Prophets and certain other friends of God -- who have been given specific permission to use gifts of worldly kashf under certain conditions, the Sufi masters have warned seekers and initiates against the use of such gifts. Such gifts are considered to be more of a spiritual trial than anything else.

Having a capacity is one thing. Exercising that capacity is quite another thing.

Each of us has a capacity to kill, but this doesn't entitle us to kill others. Each of us has a capacity for sexuality, but this doesn't mean we have the right to exercise that capacity whenever we choose to do so.

For many of those who are inclined to the mystical path, there is often a confusion in their minds and hearts about acquiring and using various 'powers' or 'gifts' of one extraordinary sort or another. Unfortunately, all too many people pursue these and forget about the real purpose of the path that is to discover one's original nature or fitra, together with the unique spiritual capacity and purpose that has been assigned to us by Divinity as part of that fitra.

Furthermore, the masters of the Sufi path warn initiates and seekers that a very rigorous and exacting examination will be conducted of anyone who exercises instances of worldly kashf. My own shaykh has told me of some very great shaykhs who confessed to him of their wish to be able to go back and taken another path than the one that permitted them to be seduced by this aspect of things.

In your previous e-mail to me, you seem to be under the misunderstanding -- although this may be purely a matter of terminology -- that the Sufi path focuses on the purification of the ego. Depending on what you mean by ego or what is entailed by this notion, this is not necessarily what the Sufi way is about.

There is only one I. This is Divinity.

The ego -- at least as it is commonly used in everyday language, is really the false self. The 'nest of rats' to which you refer in your e-mail is as good a way of describing it as any.

The Sufi term is nafs ... the seat of those tendencies in humankind that tend toward rebellion against deen (the spiritual way) and fitra (spiritual capacity), and, therefore, God's intention for human beings. While it is true that these tendencies must be constrained, purified and redirected to constructive activities rather than destructive ones (for oneself as well as others), it represents only one of the dimensions of the human being with which the Sufi path is concerned.

There are many spiritually, related potentials within human beings. These are: the heart, the sirr or mystery, the ruh, (spirit), the kafi (the hidden), and the aqfah (most hidden) that is intimately related to our essential fitra or original nature.

Purification of the nafs is but a very early precondition, if you will, of proceeding on with the rest of the spiritual journey. Without purification of the nafs, further progress is unlikely.

You "started" with a very intense experience and have been trying to integrate this into your waking life. However, proper integration of such an experience cannot take place without attending to the stages of the path that involve purification of the nafs, as well as bringing online, so to speak, one's other spiritual modalities.

The reason why your attempt at integration and reconciliation have never succeeded is because, in my opinion, you lack the proper methodology to do so, and, even more importantly, you are trying to do so in a spiritual void -- that is, without the help, support, guidance and protection that comes from an authentic Order or silsilah (or its counterpart in other mystical traditions) and that is transmitted through one of the spiritual guides who has been appointed to serve as a locus of such transmission ... a transmission extending back through all of the shaykhs of

a given Order, to the Prophets of God, and, ultimately, of course, to Divinity Itself.

At the end of your initial response to my e-mail to you concerning your experience during your teenage years, you inquired about whether or not I, or my designate, would be willing to take on the responsibility of providing spiritual guidance for you. You indicated you "understand somewhat ... what it takes to be a reasonable student".

My own personal experience, along with that of others I know who are on the path, suggests that most of us don't really know what it takes to be a 'reasonable student' prior to the fact of stepping onto the path. This is something one tends to learn, if one is lucky, as one goes along.

Many things that we take to be reasonable about ourselves in the beginning often turn out to be quite unreasonable, if not burdensome, later on. If one knew, prior to the spiritual quest, where, precisely one was going, or how, or if, one would get there, or what one would find out about oneself when one got there, there would be no need for such a venture.

The nature of our essential spirituality is, with apologies to a Star Trek movie, the real 'undiscovered country'. The great cloud of unknowing that shrouds this country both attracts and terrifies us.

Sir Alec Guinness said at the beginning of his autobiography, when he was invited to jot down thoughts on his life and career -- 'my ego was flattered, but I was terrified'. When one contemplates the possibility of setting out on the great spiritual voyage, there are many facets of the ego that get enamored with the idea of mystical pursuits, but there also are deeper, more knowing dimensions of the self that have good reason to feel an intuitive terror since the journey often tends to be long, difficult and rigorous, with many pitfalls along the way.

Like Dorothy, we all feel the ecstasy of setting out on the yellow brick road with the whole town of Munchkins to see us off -- singing, waving, laughing and dancing. But, soon the town and its people are left far behind, and we have only the unknown with which to deal, and we begin to realize that we are not in Kansas any longer.

Not everyone who starts out, finishes. And of those who do finish -- each of them is slain by God.

You spoke about your absolute attraction to, as well as your absolute terror of, your experience. Notwithstanding what has been said above, it is your ruh or spirit that is absolutely attracted by that to which you were given a brief opening so many years ago, and it is your nafs or carnal soul that is absolutely terrified by what it senses to be the significance of the potential that was given expression by the experiential portal to which, by the Grace of God, you were given a threshold exposure.

Your spirit wishes to return to its original relationship with Divinity -- the one that it enjoyed in pre-eternity prior to coming into this world. The nafs is terrified because it must become completely transformed if the ruh is to be able to return 'Home'.

For the nafs, transformation is death. This is why I said earlier that every individual who reaches the desired goal of spirituality or mysticism is slain.

All that we think of as 'me', 'I', or the 'self' must be effaced and reconstituted. One must become absent from the influences of self, so that one can become open to the Presence of Self.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has said the movements of the nafs or carnal soul within us is more difficult to detect than the movements of a black ant on a smooth rock in the dead of night. We must surrender to Haq or Reality, and, yet, more often than not, every time we feel we are surrendering fully, we come to learn we only are surrendering to one or another concept of things that we have, or to one or another attachment that we have, or to one or another orientation of the nafs.

The nature of the phenomenology of experience is there always tends to be a sense of fullness about it. The fetus has no conception of the external world, and, yet, there is a fullness entailed by its experience in the womb.

The child has no conception of adult love and feels that whatever is experienced during childhood has 'fullness' to it. The adult gains success, fame and material goods and wonders what more could there

The one who aspires to heaven and listens to the descriptions of paradise says, surely, there could be nothing beyond this. A person falls madly in love and believes this is the be all and end all of experiential possibility, until the same individual falls even more deeply in love with something or someone that had not been conceived at the time of initially falling in love.

The fact your spiritual experience had a sense of fullness about it is like the foregoing. You may feel there is nothing more that could be added to it, but you are being influenced by the phenomenology of that experience and not by the Nature of Reality.

The Sufi Masters speak of "bewilderment" being one of the highest stations or maqams. Those who are in this station are bewildered because they cannot keep up with the openings of the Infinite that are being disclosed to them on a continuous basis.

The very nature of Infinity is to be inexhaustible not be circumscribed. Whatever one's experience may be, and as full and complete as it may seem at the time one is undergoing it, nevertheless, will, in time and if one is blessed, be shown to be but one of an endless array of possibilities.

And, prior to arriving at the station of bewilderment, there are many other maqams or stations that must be experienced in order for the individual to become complete and fully operational, so to speak. Different individuals have different ways of "talking" about this journey of stations.

For instance, one way of describing the stations is as follows. First there is compatibility, then inclination, fellowship, passion, friendship, exclusive friendship, ardent affection, enslavement, and, finally, bewilderment.

Another approach to the same sort of journey of stations uses a different vocabulary. Thus, there is repentance, longing, fear, sincerity, patience, dependence, and love.

Whatever the vocabulary that might be used, there are a number of things that are going on during the journeying from station to station. The nafs, heart, sirr (mystery), ruh (spirit), kafi (hidden), and aqfah (more hidden) -- which are different instrumentalities, if you will, of human potential -- are being calibrated and brought on line so that the individual becomes, God willing, a fully functioning and realized servant of Divinity.

This process of spiritual journey or suluk is not a matter of one or a small handful of experiences. In fact, there may be no "mystical" experiences, per se, attached to such a journey.

It is faith, understanding, certainty, and commitment that is being alchemically transformed. This transformation may, or may not, be

accompanied by mystical experiences of a particularly intense and overwhelming sort.

The experience that you had was, as indicated in my previous e-mail, not a maqam. It was a harbinger of possibility.

A maqam is a very great thing in which, by the Grace of God, one abides on an on-going basis. Its influence is not that of a distant experience that still reverberates in one's memory, but of a fully present companion that informs the individual directly, presently, and intensely according to the nature of that station.

Your faith, understanding, and commitment were, to a degree, affected by your experience. But, a great deal of work still needs to be done. A great many stations remain to be traversed. There are many dimensions of your potential that have not been calibrated and brought on line.

This is not work that can be done on a trial and error basis or in isolation. Hazrat Ali (may God be pleased with him) who was the son in law of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and who is one of the great Sufi Masters, once said: 'The one who would step onto the spiritual path but does not have a spiritual guide, has Satan or Iblis as a guide.'

Iblis is not a myth suitable only for scaring impressionable children. Iblis is a real, metaphysical force capable of affecting all that we feel, think and/or do.

The one who seeks to undertake the spiritual journey without proper support, protection and assistance, has absolutely no compass, map, or means of determining whether the provisions and drink one finds along the way will be helpful or lead to one's destruction. As a result, such an individual is vulnerable to the urges, direction, and whisperings of Iblis to the nafs.

Everything becomes a mirage. Reality is lost. What seems reasonable may not be. Judgment becomes suspect.

In such a condition, one really is not ready to teach others. How can the blind lead the blind?

Under such circumstances, trying to serve as someone else's guide becomes burdensome because we are being informed by something true within us that we are not currently suitable for such an undertaking, and, yet, we are seeking to swim upstream against this current of understanding. When the time is right, when the call to service has been

made, when the proper spiritual authority and support are present, then sincere seekers are never experienced as a burden, for service to humanity becomes service to Divinity.

Being a spiritual guide is not an individual choice to do or not to do. Being a legitimate spiritual guide is an appointment given through a lineage of spiritual authority that, ultimately, is sanctioned by Divinity.

The truth, value, weight, and authoritativeness of guidance comes not from an individual but from Divinity. The individual is the one that has been selected and prepared to serve as a door of manifestation of such guidance.

It is the spiritual lineage that stands behind an individual guide. And, Divinity, in turn, underwrites, all that is done through the spiritual lineage ... if the lineage is an authentic one.

In order to bring balance into another person's life, one must, first, come to know what balance is, and, one must struggle to inculcate such balance in one's own life. In this regard, many of us have a habit of putting the cart before the horse.

We may feel we know what we are doing when we direct energies toward this or that person, but, more often than not, we are like Mickey Mouse in the Sorcerer's Apprentice portion of the movie, *Fantasia*. In reality, it is more akin to practicing medicine without a license, and the fact no one complains does not necessarily mean, therefore, no harm is being done.

There is no object and subject. There is only Divinity.

Object and subject are experienced in a state of epistemological and phenomenological separation from Divinity. When, by the Grace of God, full spiritual realization is achieved, then, manifestation comes to understand its essential nature and true identity: in essence we are Divine, but we are not Divinity in Essence.

There is a sound to one hand clapping. But, it helps to know whether one is talking right hand or left hand.

The sound of the left hand clapping is that of misguidance and illusion. The sound of the right hand clapping is that of God calling us back to our original Home.

Learning to tell the difference between the two is not an easy task for there are many forces and factors that impact on this

differentiating process. The mystical path is the means by which one comes to learn, understand and apply the difference between the two sounds of clapping.

I asked you about your family situation because a person does not pursue the Sufi discipline outside of a social/family/community context. You should speak to them about what you are thinking of undertaking.

You should see if they have worries, concerns or questions about the process. It is always easier to pursue a spiritual path when one has the support and encouragement of one's family.

You don't want to appear to them like Richard Dreyfus in 'Close Encounters' who, much to the chagrin of his children and wife, is constructing strange shapes and forms at the supper table with the mashed potatoes. Although you will not have to do anything strange like this on the Sufi path, nonetheless, to a casual observer, the whole idea of mysticism can seem rather bizarre, if not irrational, and, consequently, loved ones may wonder if a person who is contemplating stepping onto the path has lost her or his mind.

This brings us full circle to where the present e-mail began and your e-mail ended. As such, it raises the question of just what do you think becoming a student of a given spiritual guide entails?

Dealing With Insanity Near the Latter Days

A Christian wrote in seeking the perspective of a Muslim concerning the troubled times in which we all live. More specifically, the individual was wondering about how to deal with the considerable intolerance and hatred that seems to surround us today -- even within various religious traditions. In addition, this individual was interested in whether peace on Earth was realizable given the extent of hostilities that exist in the world today.

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George Bernard Shaw once said of Islam and Muslims something along the following lines. Whenever I read the Qur'an and look at the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), my heart is filled with joy and love, so I want to rush and become Muslim. However, whenever I look to Muslims and see how they live their lives, I want to run away from the religion altogether.

Many Muslims are fond of saying that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Whenever I hear this I am tempted to say, and sometimes do say, that Islam is also the fastest dying religion in the world because more and more Muslims are losing touch with the real spirit and essence of this tradition.

There is a huge difference between Islamic history and Muslim history. Most people, however, both Muslim and non-Muslim, confuse the two and assume that the latter is synonymous with the former, and this is not the case.

For instance, one does not have to do a great deal of research to demonstrate that vested western political, economic, cultural and religious interests have played a huge role in shaping what is going on in most Muslim countries -- including the present 'crises' in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these truths, Muslims need to take a good, long hard look at themselves in the mirror to understand what role they, themselves, have played in bringing the Muslim world to its present unenviable position -- economically, legally, politically, scientifically, environmentally, morally and spiritually.

I have started out in this way, because I want you to understand that the problems that you are facing within the Christian tradition are

not unique to you. Most people, irrespective of their spiritual tradition, who are serious about spirituality -- both in terms of its possibilities as well as in terms of its responsibilities -- are deeply concerned about the increasing size of the gap between what a spiritual tradition offers and what all too many people are doing, or not doing, with respect to what is being offered through our spiritual traditions. None of what went on in either of the first two Gulf Wars, for example, can be reconciled with what Jesus or Moses or Muhammad (peace be upon them all) taught. As the old rock group, The Buffalo Springfield once wrote in a song called: 'For What It's Worth': "nobody's right, if everybody's wrong".

The people on both sides of this conflict try to justify what they are doing with talk of principles involving rights, freedom, democracy, truth, justice, fairness, and so on. In reality, no such principles are involved.

It is all about money, resources, control, selfishness, hatred, ignorance, pride, prejudice, illusion, bias, false presuppositions, hostility, darkness, power, authoritarianism, fear, greed, and stupidity. Saddam Hussein is not the only possible madman and thug involved in these proceedings.

The situation vis-à-vis the Gulf, and it appears that this scenario may be played out again in the near future, gives expression, in miniature, of what is going on throughout the world. The Gulf situation reflects the ugliness of the human condition -- a condition that is everywhere apparent on the world stage.

Some of this ugliness we hear about and know about now. Some of this ugliness, we only come to know about later. And, some of it -- a great deal of it, actually -- we may never come to know about -- at least, not in this world.

What does all of this have to do with your original inquiry? We live in insane times, and our problem is that we would like everybody to live in accordance with the principles of spirituality rather than the rule of ego and the desires of the carnal soul that seemingly are so much easier to abide by -- although in reality this is a totally false appearance.

The challenge facing us, and people like us (that is, those who are fed-up with all of the carnage and hostilities), is how do we proceed in the midst of such insanity? How do we proceed when confronted by the duplicity

of what people profess -- whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Native American, or whatever -- and what they actually do?

Part of the answer comes in realizing, as one of the characters in the comic strip "Pogo" announced more than forty years ago, "We have met the enemy, and they is us. We must understand that there, but for the Grace of God, go we, and even with the Grace of God, we ourselves sometimes become caught up in the same insanity that so revolts us.

Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, the Buddha, Krishna, and so on (peace be upon them all) were all hated in their times by different portions of the population. Other people in their times feared what these individuals were calling people to -- in other words, to God or Truth Or Reality -- and away from the world, human desires and vested interests.

Their times were insane as well, and, presumably, this is why these individuals arose -- to help people deal with the insanity.

And, even if the insanity only could be curbed for a time, and not completely defeated, then these individuals, by the Grace of God, came to teach people how to live in spite of, and in the midst of, such insanity.

I do not believe that it is possible to achieve heaven or paradise on Earth. Indeed, if the aforementioned individuals, who are the greatest among human beings to ever walk the face of God's good Earth, could not, with God's help, establish heaven or paradise on Earth, then I think only the greatest of arrogance could suppose that far lesser human beings could achieve what such spiritually gifted individuals did not, and, in fact, were not permitted to, achieve, by Divinity.

Whatever peace, joy, happiness, ecstasy, stability, harmony and love is going to be realized must, God willing, come from within. It will not come from without, except in very ephemeral, limited ways.

The spiritual heroes and heroines were happy and loving and compassionate despite the insanity. Indeed, they ministered, each in their own way, to the insanity -- knowing, I believe, that even if one could not eradicate the disease (the false-self), nonetheless, they could, God willing, help some individuals to learn how to fight-off and cope-with, this human malady and even, if one were extraordinarily blessed, how to realize the true Self -- of which each of these individuals were unique, magnificent, beautiful, wonderful, inspiring expressions.

In short, they taught that the source of the insanity is within each of us. They also taught that the solution to that insanity lies within as well, but at a deeper, more essential level.

What inspires me, drives me, directs me, orients me, guides me, informs me, colors me, sustains me, and shapes me is my relationship with my mystical/spiritual teacher. Such teachers carry on the work of the great spiritual personalities who have preceded them.

In fact, such teachers are but different manifestations of one and the same spiritual reality. The truth that flowed through Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, and so on (peace be upon them all), also flows through such individuals -- although not everyone who claims to be such a teacher actually is (a problem discussed in other chapters of this book).

Everything that I know about Islam, I know through the spiritual guide who was kind enough to take me on as a reclamation project many years ago. Unfortunately, there are many Muslims who would claim that what is being taught by such individuals is un-Islamic.

Just as you are caught up in a contradiction in which the spiritual tradition in which you believe teaches principles and values that are not reflected in the social/spiritual milieu of which you are a part, so too, I am faced with the same sort of problem. In all of this, the only thing that makes sense to me is my relationship with my spiritual guide.

In reality, the guide is none other than Divinity. But, just as Divinity manifested Reality through various historical loci in the form of, say, Jesus, or Krishna, or the Buddha, or Moses, or Muhammad, or David, and so on (peace be upon them all), so, too, Divinity can be manifested in, and through, the forms of other spiritual personalities.

These latter spiritual beings may not be on the same spiritual level as the great ones that preceded them -- and my teacher would be the very first to admit this -- nonetheless, these beings or spiritual guides are the only links we have in present times with the great spiritual personalities of yesteryear, as well as with the Self within, as well as with the One Who is responsible for doing things in this fashion for reasons best known to Divinity.

One can have a personal, mystical relationship with Jesus or Muhammad or Moses or Krishna or the Buddha, or whomever, (peace be upon them), but one has to be helped to learn how to bring that personal

relationship to fruition. Exoteric traditions were never intended to do this. This task was always within the province of the esoteric or mystical dimension associated with, and at the heart of, really, the outer or exoteric aspect of a spiritual tradition.

The evidence to which you have alluded in your previous e-mail with respect to the discrepancy between the spiritual love in which you believe and the tradition of hate in which you have been reared bears witness to this. People have tried to make the exoteric facet of a spiritual tradition do what it was never intended to accomplish, and the result has been disastrous.

This is true in the Christian community. It is true within the Muslim community. It is true in the Jewish community. It is true in the Hindu community. It is true in the Buddhist community. It is true in the Native American community.

I believe that in essence, we are Divine, but we are not Divinity in Essence. In other words, in essence, we are one with God, yet, there is still a distinction between Creator and Created and What God is in Essence is completely transcendent to us.

One comes to understand the nature of Truth in relationship to ourselves and the world of creation about us when one comes to realize experientially (not conceptual speculation or theorizing) what one's relationship with Divinity is. The love that you seek, within yourself and within others, is rooted in the experience of Self-realization.

Our task then becomes a matter of giving expression to what has been realized. Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, the Buddha, Krishna, and so on (peace be upon them all) did not think about these things. They were these things, and whatever thinking went on, came after the fact and was colored by this essential realization.

We cannot think our way to being these things. We have to be transformed by someone who is herself or himself appropriately transformed.

Such people have, in a sense, become spiritually radioactive, so to speak. As a result of this, the spiritual transformation of others goes on by being in spiritual proximity with such people.

However, one must be tuned into, or receptive to, that which is being radiated in order for, God willing, this transformation process to be

realized. Consequently, sincerity of intention becomes very important because it is through this sincerity that we are connected to the Source of all spiritually radioactive/transformational realities.

Native Peoples have a practice, when they are gathered together spiritually, to leave an opening in the circle. This space signifies their willingness to be open to the possibility of the unexpected and the unanticipated dimensions of the moment.

We all would do well to keep that expression of spiritual wisdom close to our hearts. Sometimes, spiritual possibilities are staring us in the face, but if we are not receptive to them, they pass us by, and, then, we become the poorer for it.

As you indicated in your e-mail, for the most part, we only have two options toward which we can work: world peace or human extinction. The problem is that much of human history has been played as a zero-sum game in which someone gets peace and someone gets extinction -- real or de facto.

As to whether or not this is the time that the "Spirit of Creation" has established as the time for our extinction, I do not know what is in store for human beings. However, I do believe that human existence was set in motion as a process of, among other things, sorting out those who, by the grace of God, seek out and find the truths of spiritual essence, from those who, despite the grace that God has extended to them, rebel against the possibility of seeking out and, if God wishes, finding the truths of spiritual essence.

I do not believe the purpose of Creation is any less well served due to the presence of those who are inclined to reject the spiritual potential that God has placed within them. In fact, I believe it is part of the plan.

All of life is a struggle and a test. One of the signs of a fair struggle or test is that everybody can gain and lose in the same way, and this is the risk we take when we develop our strategies of free-will offerings concerning whether we choose to seek out the light of spirituality or the 'black-light' of spiritual ignorance and antagonism.

As a Christian you know that the truths of the Book of Revelations lie in wait for human beings. As a Christian you know that the Anti-Christ is coming.

Muslims share these beliefs. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) spoke of many signs -- both lesser and greater -- concerning the latter days before the days of humanity on Earth will come to an end.

All of the lesser signs mentioned by the Prophet are in place. All that remains to happen are for the greater signs to occur ... two of which are the coming of the Anti-Christ (or dajjal -- the imposter -- as he is known in Islam) together with the second coming of Jesus (peace be upon him) who, among other things, will do battle with, and by the grace of God be victorious over, the Anti-Christ and those forces that are aligned with him.

These times will be tumultuous and very difficult for everyone -- whether believers or non-believers. Not everyone will survive as a believer. Not everyone will realize her or his spiritual potential.

This is one of the reasons why life is so poignant and has the potential for great spiritual tragedy. There is so much that God is offering us, and there may well be some of us who are going to come up empty with respect to this spiritual opportunity.

Like the Parable of the Talents in the New Testament, the issue becomes one of what we do with the Talents that we are given. The Talents are the spiritual possibilities that God has extended to everyone -- will we squander them? Will we bury them? Or, will we spend them in good works?

The goal is to learn how to develop, realize and use that spiritual potential irrespective of theological considerations. In other words, within broad parameters, how we seek to achieve this purpose is less important than that we sincerely undertake to, God willing, accomplish it in accordance with the very best that we have to offer in terms of understanding, effort, love, compassion and integrity.



Invasion of the Body Snatchers

One individual related in an e-mail about being concerned with his/her spiritual condition. Although this person did go through periods of saying prayers, reading the Qur'an, and so on, nonetheless, there also would be times when the individual would lose interest in such things. In addition, when the person was in this condition, this individual also lost interest in friends, family and other aspects of life.

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As far as your comments are concerned with respect to how you feel about your spiritual state, there are, perhaps, a few things that should be kept in mind. What follows may have a bit of a science fiction flavor to it, but I trust that when all is said and done, the moral, so to speak, of the story still will be evident, God willing, vis-à-vis spirituality.

Years ago, in the fifties, a movie director, Don Siegal, did a movie called the 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers'. It starred Kevin McCarthy and, I believe, Dana Wynter.

About twenty years, or so, ago, a remake of this movie was made. It featured a couple of Canadian actors -- Donald Sutherland and Art Hindle, and the picture also starred Jeff Goldblum, Brooke Adams, Angela -- or was it Veronica -- Cartwright and Leonard Nimoy.

In any event, the basic premise of the story was, and is, this. From deep space comes a form of life that somehow drifts to Earth and lands in the form of spores that take root and begin to go through their life-cycle.

Part of the life cycle of these alien spores is the capacity to latch onto sentient, conscious, intelligent life forms of Earth and withdraw the life force, bodily characteristics, intelligence, personality, and consciousness of Earth creatures -- especially human beings -- and assume the identities of those whom they 'take over'. This transfer and transformation would take place when the spores have grown into plants that gave rise to huge pods out of which the pseudo-human would arise when the pod was placed near to a human being and when the intended target was asleep.

These alien duplicates were identical to the bodies they snatched in every way but one. The body-doubles had no emotions.

The way the aliens saw things is that they were the solution to human problems. They felt that most, if not all, of the turmoil and

tragedies of the world are due to the way in which emotions adversely affected life. Since there would be no jealousy, envy, hatred, selfishness, greed, pride and so on when the alien life forms assumed human identities, then 'human beings' finally would have peace and harmony. The human beings who stumbled onto the invasion conspiracy, however, had a different take on the situation. According to them, if there were no emotions, then there would be no love or passion connected to life either, and they believed that these emotions went to the heart of what it was to be a human being.

For the human heroes and heroines of the film, the "offer" of getting inner and worldly peace in exchange for losing the essence or soul of what made human beings human was just too high a price to pay and that humanity would just have to try to work, or stumble, toward peace and harmony in some other way. Naturally, this differing point of view of the humans led to a life and death struggle with the would-be alien antagonists and, therein, lays the dynamics of the story as it unfolded during the course of the picture.

In the original movie, the character played by Kevin McCarthy is finally able, with a bit of the coincidental luck of dramatic license, to convince the authorities that he is not crazy and that the story he has been recounting is the truth and that, consequently, humanity is in imminent peril of destruction should the invasion of the body snatchers be allowed to continue unchecked. However, in the remake of the movie, the end of the story is much more ominous, and the movie-goer is left in an ambiguous state concerning whether or not humanity is going to survive the invasion.

What has all of this got to do with your unhappiness concerning your spiritual state and your feeling of emptiness and lack of emotion concerning family, friends and life? You must realize that you are being invaded by, among other things, a body snatcher known as "nafs".

Spiritually, you are drifting between sleep and wakefulness. While you are asleep, nafs latches onto your being and begins its process of transforming you according to its pre-programmed agenda.

Like the alien forms of life in the 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', the nafs is offering you a form of peace -- the peace that comes from not struggling to realize that which is most essential to the human being, namely spiritual love and passion for things Divine. Just as in the movie,

however, the price that must be paid for accepting this offer is the loss of that which actually defines your human nature and spiritual potential.

The deadening of your feelings for your family, your friends, and your life are signs of the kind of peace nafs has in mind for you. However, since the transformation process has not been completed, you, by the grace of God, snap out of this state from time to time.

This process of snapping out of it takes place when there is some degree of spiritual awakening that comes to you through whatever means -- whether in the form of prayers, zikr, fasting, Fatiha, or in some other way. To the extent you are awake in this sense, then the transformation process cannot proceed -- in fact, it is forced to reverse course.

On the other hand, when, spiritually speaking, you go back to sleep, the process of imperialism and colonialism starts up again and seeks to take over more and more of your humanity through guile and, if necessary, force. This battle takes place in your heart or qalb.

One of the meanings of "qalb" in Arabic is "that which turns". The heart has the capacity to turn, on the one hand, toward the nafs, dunya (the world of turmoil created by the entanglement of the nafs of the world's people) and Iblis/Satan, or, on the other hand, the qalb can turn toward the realm of spirit and Divinity.

When the qalb turns, by the grace of God, toward the spirit and Divinity, it begins to wake up. When the qalb turns toward nafs and so on, it goes to sleep.

Spiritually speaking, sleeping aides the cause of nafs, dunya and Iblis. Awakening invigorates the quest of spirituality.

What you must come to understand from the bottom of your soul is that you are being forcefully invaded by an alien presence within you. This is not science fiction, it is the truth.

The shaykh is playing the part of Kevin McCarthy and trying to warn people of the imminent danger to which their spiritual lives are being exposed as a result of this invasion of the body snatchers. Of course, few people believe this individual and consider the words of the shaykh as the rants and ravings of a mad person or a possessed individual.

Moreover, because there are many "people" in the world who already have become transformed and, therefore, no longer are human, in

any essential sense, but, now, are alien in nature, these allies of the invaders help to work against any attempts that are designed to assist people to awaken from the horrors of the nightmare that are all too real. Consequently, there will be many who will beckon you to go back to sleep and who will claim that you will feel much better when the transformation is all over and you too have become an alien in human form.

Just like the heroes and heroines of the movies, you are engaged in life and death struggle for your spiritual survival. If you go to sleep too deeply and for too long a period of time, you may very well spiritually die. If, with God's grace and the assistance of those whom God has appointed to serve this purpose, you struggle to wake up, then you have the chance to stay human and resist becoming alien to your essential Self.

One of your problems is that you don't know that movie, so to speak, you are in. Are you participating in the original version where the hero -- in this case, hopefully, you -- finally convinces the authorities (that is, your intelligence and motivational capacities) that steps must be taken to avert the tragedy that is threatening human existence (namely, yours)? Or, are you in the re-make of the original version in which all may be in the process of being lost to the onslaught of the alien invasion going on within you?

You are the script writer, director, actress and producer of your film. The ending is yours to choose.

Be very clear, however, that your film is not about fiction. It is real, and it is unfolding before your eyes -- both internally and externally, both spiritually and physically.

To borrow from another film, 'Lawrence of Arabia', I am reminded of the words that Omar Sharif's character says to the Peter O'Toole character as they are crossing, I believe, the Nefu desert, where to go to sleep can mean death. "Be warned, you were drifting", the Arab friend cautions Lawrence as the latter is caught napping while riding his camel.

A similar caution could be directed to you: 'Be warned, you are drifting'. Your emotional state is evidence of this.

You cannot afford to go to sleep, or you risk losing everything of value, even if your physical life remains intact. Wake up to the horror of the alien life form that is within you, and be mindful of the dangers to

spiritual life that are lurking all about you -- any, and all, of which can destroy you -- as might be true of a person journeying across a physical desert.

Hold tightly to the hand of friendship that is being extended. On the path, we need company to help keep us awake and alert us to the dangers that are hiding in the night and waiting to pounce upon us should we relax our vigilance and forget the purpose and destination for which we have undertaken the journey.



Ministering to the Muslim Heart

An individual who wrote to me felt called to minister to the Muslim heart but was uncertain about what this entailed or what would be the best way of going about such a process. In addition, there were questions concerning the nature of a spiritual teacher. The issue was further complicated by a relationship with an individual who was not drawn to, or interested in, Muslims or Islam.

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In reality there is only one spiritual teacher and that is God. However, for reasons best known to Divinity, and as Divinity has indicated in the Qur'an, God does not deal with human beings except through veils.

Thus, both facets of the Shahadah have importance. Not only are we invited to bear witness to the reality of God's Oneness, but, seemingly, in a contradictory move, we are asked to bear witness that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Rasul or Messenger of Allah.

The latter invitation is only apparently contradictory to the initial statement of exclusive tawhid (doctrine of unity) because the Prophet -- as is true of the other 124,000 prophets and the community of awliya (friends of God) who follow them -- are but so many loci of manifestation of the Names and Attributes of God. This is not pantheism, since the Sufi masters are very clear that although in essence, we humans are Divine, we are not Divinity in Essence, and, thus, a distinction -- albeit a mysterious one -- is made between the Creator and the created.

Sometimes these spiritual veils that give expression to "guidance" and a learning process come in the form of spiritual experiences. Sometimes these veils come in the form of the nisbath -- or spiritual connection and relationship -- one has with a spiritual guide.

Ultimately, all guidance -- whether in the form of revelation, dreams, kashf (unveiling), hal (state), maqam (station), or the teacher/seeker dynamic -- gives expression to the truth of the Shahadah. All teaching flows to humankind, by God's leave, through the spiritual lineages, or loci of spiritual manifestation, set in motion by God's Rasul -- Muhammad (peace be upon him).

To know and experience the Muslim heart one does not have to go to Muslims, per se, one merely has to look within. The one who knows oneself

knows one's Lord, and in knowing one's Lord, one sees the reflection of the Muslim heart, for the Muslim heart is the one that acknowledges the powerful gravitational attraction that is possessed within the call by God to our internal fitra or nature: 'Alastu bi rabikum' -- Am I not your Lord?

To minister to the Muslim heart, one must first learn to minister to one's own heart. Through sincerity to the covenant of love between one's heart and God, the individual, God willing, derives the tawfiq, or enabling power, to help others -- again, as a locus of manifestation of veiled guidance and mercy that comes from God to those for whom it is intended.

One can minister to the suffering of Muslims through acts of compassion, zakat (charity), kindness and love in various places of conflict and deprivation around the world. One also can minister to the suffering of Muslims through helping them, in Buddha-like fashion, to come to understand what the real source of their suffering is -- namely, themselves, or, more exactly, the influence that the nafs (one's own and that of others) has on our lives. After all, the miseries of the world are merely the life of the nafs writ large on the scale of history.

I remember something my spiritual guide told me. There was a conversation about miraculous deeds and how different awliya or friends of Allah could, by God's leave, heal the sick and even raise the dead as Jesus (peace be upon him) had done with Lazarus.

My Shaykh listened to the conversation for awhile. Finally, he said words similar to the following: 'Tell me, what good is it to raise the dead, if one does not raise their spiritual condition as well? What is the worth of an extended life if it does not achieve the spiritual purpose for which it was created in the first place?'

He was not being critical of Jesus (peace be upon him). Rather, he was trying to direct people's attention away from that which is superficially miraculous (the raising of people from the dead or the healing of people's physical maladies) to that which is truly miraculous and this is the healing of a diseased heart. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the king of all those, along with Jesus (peace be upon him) and the other 124,000 Prophetic emissaries of God, who specialized in curing, by Allah's leave, the diseases of the mind, soul, heart, and sir (the mystery which guards the spiritual heart).

With respect to your concerns about the individual with whom you have a relationship being non-Muslim, do not worry. As Hafiz of Shiraz has said:

"The One Who is looking after your affairs is already busy looking after your affairs. Your worry adds nothing but worry to your affair."

As my shaykh told me:

"The purpose of Islam is to bring hearts together, not to separate them."

I believe, God willing, there may be something of Omar ibn Kittab in your friend, and given that Omar (may Allah be pleased with him) went through a spiritual transformation while on a mission to kill the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), one should not suppose that an individual's initial indifference to, or hostility toward, Islam, will be, God willing, a permanent condition.

These things take time. If we accept the fact that it took twenty-three years for the Arabs who converted to Islam at the hand of the Prophet to become fully practicing Muslims, then we ought to give people in today's chaotic times as many degrees of freedom as are possible in order for them to come to understand, if God wishes, where their true, essential freedom lies.

If you love the individual to whom you refer in your letter and if that person loves you, then realize that this is a reflection of God's love for you both. Love is a very powerful force, but it follows its own course to our individual hearts.

If you are concerned that your desire to commit yourself to Islam full time will create problems within your possible future family life, then one should begin to contemplate on such matters with hikmat (wisdom) and gentleness, as the Prophet has counseled us to do, in order to try to find a way of doing that to which your heart is calling you without creating tensions in your relationship with your companion. This may take patience, sacrifice and compromise, but it need not be a hopeless challenge.

To paraphrase an old saying: "God also serves those who only stand and wait." But, I do not think Allah would be opposed to your taking a few baby steps in the direction of service and submission to Divinity, and there may be blessings in this not only for you but for your friend as well.

Origins, Sects, and Where Do I Go from Here

An individual wrote in with various questions about: (a) the origins of Islam, (b) various sects within Islam, and (c) with whom she or he should speak if the person wanted to become Muslim.

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Whoever told you the roots of Islam are in Africa is giving you, at best, misleading information, and, at worst, incorrect information. In fact, this information, if it can be called that, is problematic from a number of perspectives.

As you may or may not know, one of the root meanings of the term "Islam" is peace. This is the peace that comes to an individual who, with God's guidance and support, brings to fruition one's essential and unique fitra or spiritual potential.

This capacity to know, love, serve and cherish Divinity is the root of Islam. History, geography, race, ethnicity, language and so on, are all secondary, derivative, and after-the-fact as far as understanding the origins of the Islamic spiritual tradition is concerned.

Islam refers to the primordial and eternal bond between humankind and Divinity. As such, it predates earthly history.

God sent some 124,000 prophets into history in order to remind human beings across the ages of the fact that Islam is not a matter of concepts, ideology, theology, historical events, founding peoples or human invention. Islam is about one's relationship with one's Creator and what the purpose, meaning and significance of the act of creation entails.

Who are we? Why are we here? What are the possibilities? What are our responsibilities, and why are we obligated in these ways?

The answers to all of these questions were known to Divinity before the first human being walked on the face of the Earth. History -- both personal and collective -- is the process that we go through to determine whether or not we will ever come to gain deep, abiding and transcendent answers to these questions ... answers that have been within our being from the very beginning of time -- and even from before time, as indicated previously, during 'pre-eternity'.

Spiritual knowledge is a matter of an unveiling of what already is. It is not a discovery or invention or creation of something yet to be.

Islam has not evolved. It is now what it always has been.

Unfortunately, different people feel that it is necessary to impose ideas, values, assumptions and biases upon what is primordially true in order to better understand the nature of that reality. Thus, sects come into existence.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said that among Jews there were 71 different ways of approaching Judaism, but only one of these ways was correct. He further said that among Christians there were 72 different modalities of engaging Christianity, yet only one of these modalities was correct. Finally, he said that among Muslims there were 73 different paths to Islam, and only one of these was the right path.

The correct way of Jews, Christians and Muslims are not three. They are one.

When properly understood, these ways are seen to be different manifestations of one and the same underlying reality. This underlying reality is given expression through realization and fruition of one's essential spiritual identity and capacity.

The first Prophet was Adam (peace be upon him). The last Prophet is Muhammad (peace be upon him). In between these two were 123,998 other Prophets.

They all brought and taught one spiritual tradition. Although various components of the exoteric facet of this tradition may have varied, in certain respects, from one historical/social and geographical set of circumstances to the next, in the esoteric or inner dimensions of this spiritual tradition, the truth concerning our relationship with Divinity remained always what it was and is.

Were the emissaries and servants of God African, Arab, Israelites, Asian, European, Japanese, Chinese, North American, South American, or Australian? Yes, they were, although these particular identifying terms were, for the most part, not in existence at the time these people lived their lives.

Were they black, brown, red, yellow, or white? Yes, they were. Were they male or female? Yes, they were.

From a spiritual perspective, does it matter which came first in any of the foregoing respects? No, it doesn't.

As soon as one starts throwing geography, language, ethnicity, gender, and/or race into the mix, one already has departed from the truth of things. For reasons best known to Divinity, various circumstances, individuals, peoples, tribes, races, languages and so on were selected to be the loci of manifestation of spiritual guidance at certain junctures in human existence on Earth, but this guidance was primarily about the relationship of each and every created entity with Divinity and only secondarily about this or that group, race, tribe, and so on. Indeed, the latter were to serve as exemplars -- whether positive or negative -- that were intended to focus our attention, efforts and commitments on the essential ... our relationship with Divinity.

With respect to your concern about whether the same sectarian 'stuff' is going on in Islam as is going on, or has gone on, in Christianity, I would phrase things a little differently. Unfortunately, the kinds of 'stuff' to which you are alluding does go on, and has gone on, among Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and so on.

However, what goes on amongst the professed or alleged adherents of a spiritual tradition should not necessarily be confused with the spiritual tradition. Islam cannot be reduced down to what Muslims do or fail to do, anymore than one can reduce the teachings of Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, or Krishna (peace be upon them all) down to what, respectively, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus do or fail to do.

It does not matter what someone believes or feels or thinks or hypothesizes or theologizes or conceptualizes about a given spiritual tradition. What matters is coming to experientially and essentially understand what God knows the tradition to be.

Coming to this latter sort of realization and understanding is a tricky and subtle business. There is much room for error, illusion, and delusion to creep into this quest. This is one of the major reasons why having an authentic teacher is so important to the mystical path.

The kind of understanding to which I am making reference cannot be achieved by reason, although one cannot abandon reason while engaged in the struggle to become open to such knowledge. The secret is in balance, harmony and perspective -- that is, in understanding when reason is appropriate and when it is inappropriate, as well in understanding not only how to reason about different issues, but also how to bring

rational abilities and spiritual insight together into a relationship of positive synergy.

Furthermore, the understanding being alluded to is not just a matter of having various kinds of anomalous experiences and assuming that because such experiences are different from anything one has encountered previously, then therefore, these experiences must be mystical and veridical. Nafs (the source of our inclination to rebel against, deny, distort, corrupt, and hide from spiritual truths), dunya (the world which is created by the conflicting, unending and, ultimately, destructive web of human desires and negative emotions), and Iblis (the prototype of all who would seek to deceive and dissuade would-be seekers of spiritual truth) are all, whether considered individually or in combination, capable of generating anomalous experiences that are not truly mystical in nature but can be used to mislead and confuse would-be seekers of spiritual truth.

Many different individuals from a variety of faith groups have gone on to develop their own approach to spirituality based on some rationalistic invention or pseudo-mystical set of experiences or some combination of the two. Others have done the same sort of thing after having and, then, misunderstanding the actual or real character of some legitimate spiritual experiences that they have undergone.

The sects that one sees proliferating across history and in the context of various spiritual traditions are all expressions of this. These sects are the product of people who are not God's Prophets or messengers, trying to act as if they were.

There might be some good that accrues from these sects. For example, the lives of individuals might change, to a degree, in a spiritually positive sense, or the quality of life in a given community or region might improve in certain ways.

Generally speaking, however, these effects -- whether in relation to an individual or a community -- are only transitory, and, therefore, they are, most decidedly, not capable of penetrating to the heart of life's purpose that is, indeed, a mystery. In any event, eventually, sects beget more sects as irresolvable misunderstandings arise or promises go unfulfilled or scandal of one sort or another is uncovered, and, as a result, people create other sects as they attempt to correct or compensate for the perceived errors of those who have gone before them.

Moreover, one could just as easily argue that similar sorts of "beneficial" transitions have occurred in relation to various philosophical, economic, political, cultural, or scientific movements. Yet, none of these movements necessarily brings one any closer to God or understanding one's true identity or essential spiritual capacity.

Islam is one thing. Muslims might be quite another matter, depending on who is being considered and the circumstances being examined.

Unfortunately, Islamic history is, to a very great extent, not the same things as Muslim history. Islamic history is restricted to the Prophets, their companions, and the lives of the saints or friends of God, whereas Muslim history is preoccupied with what those who call themselves Muslim do, irrespective of whether or not what these individuals do, alone or in conjunction with one another, is a proper reflection of Islam.

If one accepts the Qur'an as one of the revealed Scriptures or Books that has been given to humankind from time to time via the Archangel Gabriel through certain Prophets -- in this case, Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- then certain aspects of what is taught, for example, by the Nation of Islam is incorrect. Most importantly, in this respect, is their recognition of Elijah Muhammad as a prophet of God when the Qur'an clearly specifies that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the Seal of the Prophets and there would be no Prophets after him in this cycle of time.

It was this truth, among others, that entered into the heart of Malcolm X when he went on Hajj or pilgrimage. When he returned from this set of spiritual experiences, he renounced many fundamental features of the teachings of the Nation of Islam, and it was for these acts, apparently, that he was assassinated by some misguided souls.

The son of Elijah Muhammad, W. Deen Muhammad, broke with his father and the Nation of Islam for many of the same reasons as did Malcolm X. Subsequently, W. Deen Muhammad became a Muslim who follows the teachings of the Qur'an and the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

I agree with your comments concerning the positive influences that the Nation of Islam has had upon many black individuals and communities. The lives of many individuals in the black community have been turned

around in a very positive fashion, by the grace of God, in response to some of the work that the Nation of Islam has been doing.

In addition, in certain parts of the United States, representatives from the Nation of Islam have been willing to take on, struggle against, and by the grace of God, be victorious over neighborhoods that had been infested with all manner of drugs and the problems associated with drug pushing and usage. In doing this, they have done, with God's help, what many people in the regular Muslim community have been unwilling to even attempt to do.

Furthermore, I find a great deal of the political, economic, legal, educational and social analysis of some of the leaders of the Nation of Islam to be right on the money. They have, by the grace of God, developed a keen insight into a wide variety of the corrupt and sordid aspects of many dimensions of both the domestic and foreign policies of certain segments of American government activity.

Nevertheless, in a way, this only serves to underline the points being noted in the foregoing comments. Although the Nation of Islam serves as a source of constructive and beneficial influence for many people in the black community, nevertheless, it accomplishes this at the expense of, in effect, misleading these same people with respect to a variety of more fundamental and essential truths concerning the nature of the spiritual relationship between Divinity and human beings.

Whatever injustices, inequities and racial prejudices that are being addressed, and rightly so, by the Nation of Islam, these are being used, knowingly or unknowingly, to veil truths that are equally, if not far more, important to the spiritual well-being of individuals in both the short run, as well as the long run. Why limit oneself to the teachings of -- at least, from an Islamic perspective -- a non-Prophet (namely Elijah Muhammad) and, thereby, deprive oneself of the teachings of, and, more importantly, the Grace or baraka that, by the leave of Allah, flows through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as well as the book of revelation that came through the Prophet?

If one is going to take on the responsibility of invoking the name of Islam as the Nation of Islam has done, then one ought to abide by all the duties, observances, etiquette, values, beliefs, and principles that are entailed by the term "Islam". One is not free to invent whatever set of beliefs and actions one likes and call that Islam simply because it might prove to be

convenient or expedient to do so in relation to one's political and social agenda.

Why not address the sort of problems in which the Nation of Islam is interested without sacrificing the unlimited spiritual possibilities that are inherent in the original Divine guidance of Islam but that are not inherent in the sectarian creation of a non-Prophet, irrespective of however well-intentioned that human invention might have been? The Nation of Islam has done well with borrowing a few of the pages of the Book of Islam, God willing, they would do even better if they accepted the entire book.

There are two major (and numerous very minor) exoteric groups among Muslims. These are the Sunni and the Shi'a.

The Sunni comprise somewhere between 80 to 85% of the world's Muslim population of 1 billion people. The primary form (there are a number of secondary and tertiary forms) of the Shi'a community constitutes about 10 to 13% of the Muslim population around the world.

Both of these groups agree upon the first five "pillars" of Islam as well as the first six articles of faith of this spiritual tradition. In other words, they both agree that: [pillars] (1) one must attest to the fact there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of Allah; (2) there are five periods of obligatory worship each day that must be observed; (3) providing one is physically and circumstantially able to do so, one must fast each year during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar calendar; (4) if an individual has savings accrued over a year that are above and beyond the basic necessities of life, then one must purify that money through the payment of a zakat -- which works out to be approximately 2 and 1/2 % of such savings; (5) if one is physically and financially in a position to do so, then at least once in one's life time, one must perform the rites and observances of Hajj or pilgrimage to the holy places in and around Mecca and Medina.

In addition, both groups agree that: [articles of faith] (a) there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of God; (b) one believes in the angels of God; (c) one embraces the Books of revelation that have been sent by God to humankind through certain Prophets via the agency of Archangel Gabriel; (d) one accepts all of the Prophets of God; (e) one acknowledges that there will be a Day of Judgment in which one will be

held accountable before God with respect to the nature of the intentions underlying one's actions; (f) one maintains that God alone is the sole determiner of good and evil.

These two approaches -- that is, the Sunni and Shi'a -- to Islam arose after the Prophet passed away. Mostly, they involve differences concerning whether or not the leaders of the Muslim community must be of the Prophet's blood lineage (Sunni say no; Shi'a say yes) and whether or not these leaders are considered to be both spiritual and political heads of the community (Shi'a position), or just the political heads of the community (Sunni position).

The foregoing is, of course, a gross over-simplification of the situation and, therefore, leaves out many nuances, details and historical events. In essence, however, the divisions are along the lines indicated above. The rest of the debate tends to be derivative from these basic differences.

As far as your comments about not thinking "too much about heaven and hell" are concerned, rest easy, I do not hear what you are saying in a "bad light". Instead, I hear what you are saying with my heart and soul.

Ra'bia of Basra -- who was not just a great woman saint of Islam/the Sufi Path but one of its greatest saints irrespective of gender issues -- used to say a prayer along the following lines. O Allah, if I worship Thee out of desire for heaven, then deny me heaven, and if I worship Thee out of fear of hell, then throw me into hell, but if I worship Thee out of love for Thee and Thee alone, then grant me Thy vision.

If your concerns and interests revolve about salvation/heaven/hell -- and there is nothing wrong with this since these are legitimate spiritual issues and aspirations -- then the people associated with the mosques might be the people who, God willing, are best able to help introduce you to the basics of Islam as seen from that perspective. Simply go to one of the many mosques in any large metropolitan area near where you live, state your intention to the imam there, and, God willing, this individual should introduce you to people who might be able to provide you with whatever instruction, direction, and so on that might be necessary to help you work toward fulfilling, if God wishes, your stated intention.

If, on the other hand, your concerns are not primarily with matters of salvation -- as seems to be the case -- then you would, God willing, be much better off getting your introduction to Islam with someone who shares your perspective -- namely, authentic practitioners of the Sufi path or tasawwuf (mystical science). A reputable and authentic Sufi master of your choice would be happy, God willing, to help you work toward realizing your true spiritual identity as well as your essential, unique capacity for knowing, loving, serving and cherishing Divinity.

However, if you are genuinely and sincerely interested in coming to Islam by way of tasawwuf, then the most important consideration for you is in the choice of a spiritual guide or shaykh. Unfortunately, there are quite a few people roaming about in North America, and elsewhere, these days proclaiming to be a Sufi teacher but who are not necessarily what they claim to be.

You have asked me: "can I guide you?" The answer to your question is that I cannot guide you because I am not a shaykh ... merely someone who is attempting to be constructively helpful in a limited way.

Should you learn from an African-aligned mosque? Should you go to a regular mosque first and, then go to a Sufi group? Should you go straight to a Sufi group?

The Qur'an informs us there can be no compulsion in matters of deen or in, that is, the process of spiritual realization involving one's essential capacity and true identity. Therefore, the decision must be, and, in fact, can only be, yours. God willing, you should go where the inclinations of your heart and the sincerity of your intentions take you.



To What Extent Can Sufi and So-called Pagan Approaches to Spirituality Be Reconciled?

An individual who is a proponent of a pagan spiritual tradition sent an e-mail that suggested such a person (i.e., a pagan) and a Sufi had nothing in common about which to talk. This person was of the opinion these two approaches to spirituality were inherently opposed to one another.

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In view of what you have said about our having nothing to talk about and how we are destined to be "perpetual opponents", I pursue that which follows with a certain amount of 'fear and trembling'. Nonetheless, I wonder if there might not be -- at least, up to a point yet to be determined -- more of a commonality than you might suppose between your polytheistic perspective -- which, admittedly, I do not know much about -- and the kind of monotheism that is at the heart of the Sufi mystical tradition to which I subscribe.

To begin with, I fully agree with you concerning your critical commentary on the way people of all spiritual stripes have an ugly habit of using force to impose their way of thinking on anyone who disagrees with them. The Qur'an, which is the Holy book of Islam, clearly states there can be no compulsion in matters of spirituality. Each individual must be able to freely make her or his own choice in such matters.

Unfortunately, there are all too many Muslims -- as well as individuals from other spiritual traditions -- who have glossed over this boundary of propriety and delegated to themselves the right and duty to try to tell others how to live their lives. We all have values that we believe are right, and, as well, we all consider certain other values to be incorrect, but this does not justify violence, killing and cruelty in relation to other individuals who do not share our particular hierarchy of values.

Although Sufi teachers maintain there is one ultimate Reality that makes everything in the 'seen' and 'unseen' worlds possible, nonetheless, Sufi masters also indicate the structural character of the created world, on whatever level, is the result of an interplay of Divine Names and Attributes. Each of these Names and Attributes has its own 'personality', if you will, or its own sphere of responsibility and activity through which the dynamic or potential character of that Name or Attribute

is given expression in accordance with an underlying and unifying Divine Will.

These Names and Attributes combine in dynamic, complex ways to color, shape, orient, and structure what goes on in created reality. Moreover, these Names and Attributes generate an array or spectrum of opposites.

Light and dark; hot and cold; presence and absence; fullness and emptiness; wet and dry; good and evil; truth and falsehood; beauty and ugliness; pain and pleasure; struggle and ease; clarity and confusion; the known and the unknown; strength and weakness; health and sickness; just and unjust; - these are just a few of the opposite pairings. In order to understand one of the aspects of any given pairing, one must come to know, in some way, that which is in opposition. For instance, one cannot come to appreciate the nature of light unless one has had some experience with darkness.

While Sufi masters maintain that the overall play of these opposites is ultimately harmonious, nonetheless, on a given level, the clash of opposites can appear to be, and can be experienced as being, quite fractious. Furthermore, during this clash of opposites, different Names can seek to acquire dominance in a person's life.

In addition to the foregoing, when a Sufi seeker is given a certain chant by the teacher, this chant often focuses on one or several of the Divine Names and, in effect, is calling upon God to manifest Divinity in the form in an individual's life toward Whom the chant is directed. At different times or circumstances, and at different stages on the mystical path, different chants, featuring different Names and Attributes of God might be given to the individual seeker.

These Names and Attributes might be both female and male in character. Alternatively, they, also, might be neither primarily male nor female in character.

In fact, one needs to develop an appreciation of, and insight into, just what the notion of 'male' and 'female' might entail when talking of Divinity. Unfortunately, people on all sides of this issue who are caught up in various aspects of the gender wars fail to realize that in a spiritual context, maleness and femaleness have nothing to do with biology or a socialization processes.

Instead, the aforementioned qualifiers of 'male' and 'female' refer to, among other properties, a principle of acting, or being acted, on. In other words, whenever some aspect of reality operates on or acts on another aspect of reality, then the first, relative to the latter, is said to manifesting a property of maleness, whereas the latter, relative to the first, is exhibiting female properties.

In actuality, there are very few manifestations, if any, of Divinity that do not give expression to female and male qualities simultaneously. This is true even in the realm of biology and gender since we all are often simultaneously required to both act on, as well as be acted upon by, different dimensions of reality -- whether our own or that of different facets of the world around us.

If one separates-off some of these individual manifestations from the underlying Oneness of Divinity, then one easily might begin to speak about distinct male gods and female goddesses. In effect, in doing so, one has chosen to emphasize and deify a given particular manifested aspect of the figure/Ground relationship through which Divinity gives expression to Itself.

The decision to give emphasis to figure or Ground -- or, multiplicity or unity, selves or Self-- is a conscious choice made by an individual to go in one hermeneutical direction rather than another. That is, if one construes hermeneutics as having to do with the problem of interpretation -- whether in relation to a written text or the text of Being, then an individual who is committed to a spiritual tradition populated by gods and goddess is someone who has chosen to construe his or her experience through a particular kind of hermeneutical lens that has certain optical properties associated with it.

From a Sufi perspective, the use of such a lens has both revealing as well as problematic features. The revealing side is that those who would use this kind of interpretive lens of perception concerning experience do grasp, to varying degrees, that Divinity operates in Creation through the Agency of Divine Names and Attributes, each of which has various qualities or dimensions of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' (in the foregoing sense) associated with It. The problematic side of the use of such an interpretive lens -- at least from the point of view of a Sufi -- is that in following the aforementioned sort of interpretive orientation, one risks

separating off manifestation from the One that is making these manifestations possible.

In effect, one creates gods and goddesses without necessarily understanding what Divinity is. As such, one runs the risk of conflating manifestations of Divinity in the form of a given Name or Attribute with the hermeneutical judgment that such manifestations are evidence for the existence of separate gods and goddesses.

From a Sufi perspective, one who is interested in the way Divinity is manifested through different modalities and combinations of 'male' and 'female' properties is not necessarily wrong in having such an interest or set of beliefs, and such an individual need not be wrong in wishing to act in accordance with this hermeneutical perspective. After all, on a certain level, and from a certain hermeneutical orientation, one is committed to, and wishing to act on, the way Truth manifests itself under certain circumstances. On the other hand, difficulties can arise when such an individual permits this kind of perspective to get in the way of further spiritual explorations that have the potential of taking one back to the underlying Ground out of which the manifestation of Divine Names and Attributes arise.

A Sufi master would agree with those so-called pagan spiritual traditions that teach that every created thing, whether animate or inanimate, has a spirit that can be contacted and that can offer assistance of various kinds to the one who has made the appropriate kind of contact. Indeed, from a Sufi perspective, since everything in creation is a function of some combination of Divine Names and Attributes, then the spirit of a thing --- whether animate or inanimate --- merely gives expression to the way Divinity chooses to manifest Its Will through any given locus of created existence.

The healing properties of plants and herbs or the effect that various kinds of minerals have upon us are just a small indication of how this interplay of Names and Attributes might come to the surface of our everyday lives. Similarly, the respect that we owe to all dimensions of creation is a reflection of the sacred presence of these Names and Attributes in every single aspect of Creation.

I could go on, but I think enough has been said to let you know some of the basic features of a Sufi perspective vis-à-vis certain aspects of so-called pagan spiritual traditions. Perhaps, in addition, enough has been said

to suggest there might be more points of commonality and overlap in our respective perspectives -- as divergent as those perspectives might seem from certain vantage points -- than you previously might have believed to be the case. I suppose a lot depends on whether we wish to emphasize our differences or whether we want to see where we can cooperate and come together in order to help heal a troubled world.



The Muhammadan Reality

During the course of a series of e-mail exchanges, a person had begun to feel there was more to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) than that of being restricted to a purely historical figure of central importance to Muslims. The individual asked whether this intuition was correct.

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The historical Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the most perfect manifestation of what is referred to by the Sufi shaykhs as the "Muhammadan Reality". All of creation is, on the one hand, a tapestry woven from the Names and Attributes of God, and, on the other hand: a manifestation of those Names and Attributes through the capacities of the "things" that constitute the created Universe and that collectively are encompassed by the Muhammadan Reality.

The facet of created existence that has the greatest potential capacity to give expression to the Names and Attributes of Allah in a balanced, knowing, conscious and loving way is a human being. Al-insan kamil -- the perfect human being -- is the one who has realized this purpose of life by giving expression to that dimension of the Muhammadan Reality in accordance with the spiritual capacity each has been given the capacity to do so by Allah.

All of the 124,000 Prophets who have been sent to the peoples of different nations in different times, as well as the Companions of these Prophets, along with the shaykhs and awliya (friends of God) of Allah who were not physical Companions of these Prophets together with the generality of believers and non-believers are all made possible through the nature of the Muhammadan Reality ... all are derived -- in one mode or another -- from the light or nur of this underlying Reality ... with the historical Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) being the brightest, most noble, most beautiful expression of this Reality.

However, in truth, every manifestation of this Muhammadan Reality is unique. As Sufi shaykhs say -- God does not repeat Divine Self-disclosures as given reflected expression through the locus of manifestation of this or that modality of the Muhammadan Reality.

This means we each have a responsibility to do what we can to work toward bringing to light the unique spiritual capacity for giving

expression to our role or participation in the full realization of the Muhammadan Reality. This leads to the following question: Why do we have this responsibility or amana (trust)?

An allusion to the answer is given in a hadith qudsi in which Allah indicates that the first thing that was created was the light of spirit of Muhammad (Peace be upon him) -- which is the Muhammadan Reality. From this light, Allah brought forth the lights of the angels, jinn, Prophets, saints, believers, non-believers and so on.

We each have been given the opportunity to participate in the Muhammadan Reality that is the hidden treasure for which Allah brought forth creation. Our mode of participation can be co-operative or it can be rebelliousness.

If we co-operate, this is the path of deen (the journey of Self-realization). Through deen, we find our way back to our fitra, or original spiritual nature, which is none other than a manifestation -- according to our unique capacity to do so -- of the Muhammadan Reality.

If we fail to co-operate, and, therefore, rebel and transgress against our own Self, we will not find our way back to realizing our original nature, and, consequently, we will be a veil of darkness with respect to this underlying Reality. As such, we become our own punishment, since by being veiled, we separate ourselves from -- as far as awareness, knowledge, and conscious participation in the Muhammadan Reality are concerned -- from our true nature or fitra. And, in this separation, we distance ourselves from our Lord who is longing to disclose Divinity to us through that nature (fitra) by virtue of God's Names and Attributes.

When a person says Darud (seeking blessings upon) on the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), one is, in reality, saying Darud on all of Creation -- including your own true Self, since all of Creation is derived from the light of the Muhammadan Reality that is at the heart of the historical Muhammad (peace be upon him). In saying Darud on the Prophet (peace be upon him), one is saying Darud on all of the 124 00 Prophets, their companions, the awliya (the saintly friends of God), as well as the shaykhs and mureeds of the different silsilahs -- this is so because, each in her or his own way, are unique manifestations of that Muhammadan Reality toward whom the Darud is being directed, even while the historical Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the most prominent, noble and perfect manifestation of this Reality that is being addressed.

Tasawwuf, Sufi, and Sufism

Someone inquired by e-mail whether or not Sufi was the same thing as Sufism. Possibly, this question might have been asked in jest, I am not sure.

However, serious or not, there is actually an important issue that arises out of this query. The issue has to do with the fact that although the "S" words -- Sufi and Sufism -- have widespread currency as a part of the western mystical idiom, in point of fact, neither term is the proper one.

The following is a response to the foregoing question.

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The generally accepted technical term among many, if not most, Sufi shaykhs for the mystical dimension of Islam is "tasawwuf". Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons -- some historical, some cultural, and some linguistic -- the "S-words" (i.e., Sufi and Sufism) have gained ascendancy in the West, and even in some parts of the East, to the almost total exclusion of the term "tasawwuf".

Nevertheless, because the "S" words are better known in the West than the "T-word", I have used one of the two "S-word" possibilities in the web page name as a means of providing potential visitors to the web site with some relatively familiar wording that could indicate what the Page might be about. If I had called the page, say, 'Tasawwuf's Approach to Self-realization', I doubt many people would have entered 'tasawwuf' in as a keyword in any of the search engines that they might have used.

Having said the foregoing, I ought to point out that from the perspective out of which we -- that is the silsilah (a Sufi order) to which I belong -- operate, the term "Sufi" actually is more defensible to use than is the other 'S-word' "Sufism". Although there is some discussion that still goes on in certain circles, most people who have the minimal requisite degree of knowledge about this area of study tend to agree that, etymologically, the word "Sufi" is likely to have been derived from the Arabic word "Suf" (in its transliterated form).

It is believed by some (e.g., al-Hujwiri) that the use of the term Sufi arose as a way of linguistically referring to those faqirs or ascetics who, among other practices, wore coarse woolen garments as a means of helping to undermine the body's desire for comfortable attire. In addition, the wearing of these woolen garments helped put a lid on the ego's inclination

to wear fancy clothes as a means of gaining approval and acceptance in the eyes of other people as a person of standing in the community.

In the early days of Islam, there were few terms that had common currency within the Muslim community that seemed capable of embracing the spectrum of types of people who were drawn to the Sufi path. For instance the terms "faqir" and "dervish" were often associated with particular kinds of practices and cultures but these usages tended, rightly or wrongly, to be too narrowly conceived in the minds of many people to be used as a more generic, more inclusive term.

Through a complex mingling of historical, cultural and linguistic influences, the term "Sufi" seemed to catch on across a number of linguistic and cultural regions as the word to use when talking about those who were interested in, or practitioners of, the mystical dimension of Islam. Yet, among the followers of this path, the term "Sufi" generally would be used only while communicating with people from outside the mystical path since it was the term with which the latter (i.e., the outsiders) were familiar, whereas among the practitioners themselves (the "insiders" as it were) the term "tasawwuf" frequently was used to refer to the mystical path of Islam.

In contrast to the foregoing, the term "Sufism" really is misleading in a variety of ways, some more crucial than others. First of all, the mystical tradition of Islam is not an "ism" like, say, capitalism, communism, socialism, idealism, realism, fundamentalism, surrealism, and so on.

The Reality to which mystical language and practice alludes is not the invention of some human being or group of people. At the same time, one must admit that there are those who do invent their own particular hermeneutic, or theory of interpretation, concerning the nature, meaning and purpose of what the aforementioned Reality is supposedly all about.

The true mystics are those who become absent to themselves (that is, there ego) and present to their Lord. The "inventors" of mystical hermeneutics, on the other hand -- that is, those who impose a theory onto the nature of Reality -- insist on becoming present to themselves (i.e., their false sense of self) and absent from the Reality of Divinity for which human beings have the God-given potential of realizing.

Actually, true mystics are scientists in the best sense of the word. The pseudo-mystics are merely philosophers who have projected their speculative meanderings onto the Face of Reality and, thereby, veiled themselves from the actual nature of existence in the process.

To be a scientist in the mystical sense of the word, one must be willing, if necessary, to put one's physical life (but not the lives of others) on the line in one's quest for the true character of issues involving, among other possibilities, being, identity, purpose, meaning, justice, knowledge, integrity, and love. And, even if one is not called upon to sacrifice one's physical life, one must seek to sacrifice one's ego or false self on the altar of submission to Reality. In short, in one way or another, one must be prepared to die to oneself.

Contrary to the opinion of many, the statements of the true mystics can be empirically tested. However, one has to go through an appropriate process of supervised training in order to become a competent and qualified participant, God willing, in the discipline of mystical science.

If a person called oneself a physicist, a chemist, a medical doctor, or an engineer without having gone through the necessary education and training, few would accept his or her statements concerning the reality of these disciplines, and even fewer people would entrust one's technical problems to such people. Although anybody has the right to voice an opinion, not all opinions are informed, insightful or qualified in the required minimal manner, and this dimension of ignorance renders those opinions unworthy of being listened to as coming from someone who knows, within varying limits, whereof she or he speaks.

For example, one doesn't come in off the streets and begin doing physics and, as a result, immediately grasp the breadth and depth of the relationship between, say, experiments in particle physics and the theory of quantum mechanics. A great deal of time and study is required to be able to reach a point of understanding why and how various experimental outcomes do, in fact, help verify various aspects of quantum theory.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the mystical sciences, many physicists, chemists, doctors and engineers do not see the irony of their proffering opinions on various facets of mystical science despite not having gone through even step one of the long training and learning process that is necessary to become, God willing, a bona fide, qualified mystic --

someone who knows something about the issues entailed by mystical sciences. Many of the same people who would reject, out of hand, the pronouncements of people who did not possess the appropriate sort of credentials of expertise in their respective fields, somehow seem to feel that all this should change when it comes to their own pronouncements about a discipline like mystical science in which they have no expertise, training, education or credentials.

At the very least, such people are being very inconsistent, if not hypocritical, in their use of ideas such as 'expertise', 'competence' and 'mastery' with respect to a given discipline. A more problematic ramification is when such people attempt to use their authority as scientists of one kind to cast aspersions on scientists of a kind with which they are unfamiliar. It is as if a non-mathematician were to ridicule mathematics simply because such an individual had no idea what the field actually involved due to a lack of education, experience and understanding.

Of course, this very same kind of argument can be, and often is, used by spiritual or mystical frauds in an attempt try to cover up their spurious deeds and pronouncements. Precisely because true mystical science lies beyond the horizons of most people, almost anyone can come along and say something and claim that what they have said is the truth.

If someone were to express skepticism in relation to such behavior or statements, the come-back of the pseudo-mystic can always be: "You just don't understand". Unfortunately, there have been so many of these charlatans, the whole area of mysticism -- and in what follows I am taking poetic license with a statement made by Winston Churchill in a much different context -- is something of a mystery, wrapped up in an enigma, surrounded by a seemingly impenetrable cloud of unknowing.

One of the ramifications of this muddying of the waters has been to lead many people to confuse the occult, magic, astrology and spiritualism with the mystical path. The latter has absolutely nothing to do with the former four areas of study, and vice versa.

Furthermore, most people are not prepared to take the time that is required to be able to begin to sift out the true from the false when it comes to mystical issues and questions. Consequently, many people withdraw in utter frustration from the whole area and consider these matters to be mere figments of the imagination.

In some cases these people would be correct. In other cases they would be quite wrong. The ability to be able distinguish between the two is a function of Divine guidance.

The mystical path is not irrational, but it does have trans-rational dimensions at its core that extend beyond the handling capacities of linguistic and rational modalities of logic. These trans-rational dimensions can inform rational processes, and, thereby, help generate, God willing, spiritual insight and personal transformation, but rational analysis has no access to these realms.

The mind can work in concert with these dimensions and, thereby, be in a position to make use of the numerous treasures that can be brought back from the realm of the Unseen for the betterment of all creation. Or, the mind can act in opposition to the trans-rational dimensions alluded to earlier and, as a result, enter into a mind-set of oppression, denial, and antagonism in relation to mystical issues.

In any event, because of the trans-rational, ineffable, relatively inaccessible qualities that are associated with the esoteric dimension of Islam, some people -- unilaterally, and, frequently, quite arbitrarily -- have taken it upon themselves to contend that if they do not understand what the mystical tradition is all about, then it must be the invention of some overly active imagination.

As a result, in the minds and hearts of such people, the mystical realm tends to be reduced to an "ism", like so many other, conceptually invented 'isms'. Whether we like it or not, words have the capacity, both connotatively and denotatively, to influence the way we think about a variety of issues -- from religion, to politics, to society, justice and the nature of life.

The term "Sufi" has an actual historical root that attempts to make identifying reference to a specific kind of rigorous perspective, whereas, in many respects, the word "sufism" has become divorced from the historical and ontological realities out of which the word "Sufi" originally arose. Consequently, all too frequently in our times, "sufism" has come to mean whatever any given person wants it to mean, and, in the process, tends to become conflated with the occult, the vague, the magical, the mythical, the strange, and the wishful.

The best term is "tasawwuf". After that, the word 'Sufi' is more given to misunderstanding than is tasawwuf, but is less problematic than the term "sufism", and, moreover, the word "Sufi" is historically and etymologically, more defensible than is "sufism".

"Sufism" carries the connotation of all isms -- that is, of being made by human beings. Furthermore, "sufism" is a derivation of a derivation and, therefore, twice removed from the original situation. In being twice removed, it has accumulated some questionable philosophical baggage.

Unfortunately, the term "Sufi" is, by association", becoming increasingly undermined in its meaning by the problems surrounding many of the current usages to which "sufism" is applied. Nonetheless, it is better, in many respects from the other "S-word".

Nevertheless, until such time as the word "tasawwuf" becomes more prominent, if it ever does, then one is kind of stuck with the lesser of two evils, so to speak. For reasons outlined in the foregoing, one can use the term "Sufi" rather than "Sufism" in order to engage western vocabularies, and, in the mean time, whenever one has the opportunity, such as right now, one can indicate that "tasawwuf" is the proper word to use.

Quest for a Spiritual Teacher

The following comments are in response to a number of people who have inquired about how to go about finding a spiritual teacher and what are some of the factors that ought to shape an individual's decision to take initiation with a given guide.

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Asking a person to be one's teacher is, relatively speaking, easy to do. However, the issue is anything but straight-forward.

For instance, there are many kinds of teacher. From one point of view, for example, anyone from whom we learn is our teacher.

The learning that we gain from this interchange does not necessarily entail any kind of reciprocal responsibility, except, maybe, a certain amount of courtesy, civility and respect. In addition, we ought to have gratitude toward both God as well as the physical/material locus of manifestation through whom the blessing of learning comes -- whether this be another human being, a non-human life form, so-called 'inanimate' nature, or whatever.

If an individual feels he or she is learning, by the Grace of God, various things through the web page, then I am happy this is the case. And, if this is so, then in a sense, I already am such a person's teacher and no additional request has to be made for what is going on.

This relationship can continue. Whatever questions this person might have, I will do my best, God willing, to provide her or him with an answer to them -- that is, an answer construed in terms of how I look at, or understand, such things from a Sufi perspective, but not necessarily something that should be considered as providing this individual with "the" answer to his or her questions.

My original offer of friendship is just that. It is an offer of friendship without any strings attached. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has counseled us to help any human being who might be in need of assistance, irrespective of whether that person is, or is not, a Muslim.

However, when someone asks another person to be one's teacher and the context is a spiritual one, then the arrangement can no longer be governed by just, or only, informal considerations of everyday etiquette

involving the sort of politeness and civility that gets most of us through the day with respect to our interactions with others. The spiritual journey is a difficult one, and, consequently, if a person wishes to acquire the services of a "professional", so to speak, in order to help guide one through the unknown countryside through which the mystical quest takes an individual, then one needs to have a fundamental trust in the guide's abilities to do, God willing, his or her job -- and, this sort of trust is rooted in something more than merely politeness and/or civility.

If one is traveling through a swamp filled with alligators, poisonous snakes and spiders, as well as quicksand and all manner of other life-threatening possibilities, an individual would be foolish to seek out someone who is capable of guiding one safely, God willing, through such dangerous territory and, then, not heeding a guidance that is rooted in many years of experience with the region through which they are venturing. Similarly, an individual would be a fool to retain the assistance of a mystical guide and, then, proceed to follow the dictates of one's own likes and dislikes rather than the counsel of the spiritual guide.

In reality there is only one spiritual teacher and that is God or Allah. However, for reasons best known to Divinity, and as Divinity has indicated in the Qur'an, God does not deal with human beings except through veils.

Thus, the two facets of the Shahadah, or the attestation of faith in becoming Muslim, both have importance. Not only are we invited to bear witness to the reality of God's Oneness, but in a, seemingly, contradictory move, we are asked to bear witness that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Rasul or Messenger of Allah.

The latter invitation is only apparently contradictory to the initial statement of exclusive tawhid (unity) because the Prophet, as is true of the other 124,000 prophets and the community of companions, disciples, followers and so on who follow them, are but so many loci of manifestation of the Names and Attributes of Allah. This is not pantheism, since the Sufi masters are very clear that although in essence, we humans are Divine, we are not Divinity in Essence, and, thus, a distinction of mystery is made between the Creator and the created.

In any event, sometimes the aforementioned veils that give expression to "Guidance" or the "Teacher" come in the form of powerful dreams, states or spiritual experiences of one sort or another. Sometimes these veils come in the form of the special relationship one

enjoys with, or the deep spiritual link one has to, and feels for (i.e., nisbath), a spiritual guide.

Ultimately, all guidance -- whether in the form of revelation, veridical (true) dreams, kashf (spiritual unveilings), hal (transitory spiritual states) or maqam (more or less permanent spiritual stations), or a spiritual master- gives expression to the truth of the Shahadah. All teaching flows to humankind, by God's leave, through the spiritual lineages, or loci of spiritual manifestation, set in motion by God's Rasul -- Muhammad (peace be upon him), along with the rest of the spiritual lineage of the Prophets, and the subsequent heirs to their knowledge. Spiritual guides or teachers continue, in part, some of the functions of the Prophets. In a sense, just as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the paradigm for a Perfect Human Being who mirrors or reflects, in complete harmony, all of the Names and Attributes of God, so, too, Sufi masters are among those individuals who mirror, or who are reflections, - - each according to his or her own spiritual capacity and degree of realization -- of the aspects (i.e., the Names and Attributes) that are reflected by the Prophets (and, necessarily, both this capacity and its degree of realization are, in the case of Sufi shaykhs, substantially less than any of the Prophets).

The relationship between a true teacher and a sincere seeker is of essential importance to any mystical path -- whether this refers to the Sufi way or some other way. Unfortunately, there are many people of all different kinds of religious and spiritual affiliation who are proclaiming to be true teachers but who are not necessarily what they proclaim themselves to be.

The foregoing considerations point to a very difficult and fundamental problem for any would-be seeker of the path. In other words, establishing a relationship of deep, abiding trust in these times of con games, manipulation and abuse becomes something of a spiritual mine-field.

On the one hand, an intelligent individual must be somewhat cautious and wary of such situations and be prepared to protect himself or herself against charlatans. On the other hand, if one is too skeptical and suspicious, then someone who is a legitimate teacher might be ignored or passed by because of such concerns and worries.

A legitimate spiritual guide will not ask one to engage in immoral activities, nor try to convince someone that what is immoral is really okay. A mystical teacher will not ask one to break the law.

Nonetheless, having said that, a true teacher might (but not necessarily in any direct fashion) ask one to consider doing various things that most of us probably consider even worse than engaging in immoral or illegal activities. This fate worse than death involves going against the likes, dislikes, habits, prejudices, assumptions and so on of one's ego or nafs.

Whenever someone begins to interfere with vested interests, then irrespective of whether those interests belong to a corporation, government official or a person stepping onto the spiritual path, a struggle will ensue. This is always a struggle between two dimensions of the human being: one potential within each of us seeks to live harmoniously in accordance with, among other things, the truth of life's purpose and the nature of one's essential identity; the other potential within each and every human being is the inclination to rebel against the realities to which the first potential is being called through revelation, Prophets, saints and spiritual guides.

Moses (peace be upon him) was a man of God. Yet, there were many individuals among the Israelites who constantly questioned the ability of such a noble and gifted Messenger of God to be their guide. During the long, difficult trip to the Promised Land, these kinds of individuals frequently were critical of his directives and counsel, and they incessantly second-guessed his way of doing things. Such people grumbled about, and rebelled against, him because he was a threat to their likes, dislikes and preconceptions of how things should be.

Jesus (peace be upon him) was, and is, the Logos or Word of God made flesh. Nonetheless, there were some, even among his close disciples who had many doubts concerning such a shining example of spirituality -- indeed, so brilliant and attractive is his spiritual light that people are still being deeply and fundamentally influenced by his example and teachings some two thousand years later.

In any event, there were those who saw Jesus (peace be upon him) walk on water but were afraid to venture out of their boat when invited to join him. Moreover, someone as close to Jesus (peace be upon him) as Peter (may God be pleased with him) still denied him three times. Or, consider

Judas, who, despite having been with this emissary of Divinity and, and as a result, having had extensive opportunities to be exposed to so many wonders, nevertheless, is reported to have betrayed Jesus (peace be upon him).

These individuals who doubted Jesus (peace be upon him), or denied him, or betrayed him, did so because the reality of Jesus (Peace be upon him) was at odds with their own ideas about how "reality" works. Or, they found the teachings of Jesus (peace be upon him) to be at odds with some of their own internal and external ingrained habits and/or vested interests.

A Sufi teacher is neither Moses nor Jesus -- nor any of the Prophets (peace be upon them all) -- but she or he gives expression to, and with the Grace and support of God, helps to keep alive the spirit of the same spiritual tradition. As such, the guide is in the business of, among other things, interfering with, or calling into question, the likes, dislikes, habits, biases, expectations, illusions, delusions and preconceptions of those who claim to seek after the truth concerning matters of essential and fundamental importance.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is -- as is the case with all of God's emissaries, including Jesus (peace be upon him) -- someone who specializes in curing, by God's leave, the diseases of the mind, soul, heart, and sir (mystery), as well as the maladies of the body. The shaykhs of the Sufi way continue to carry on this work according to their capacity to do so -- and, while these Sufi masters are not Prophets of God, they do enjoy the spiritual support of all the Prophets -- most particularly, of course, that of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Without nisbath (the link of spiritual reciprocity and sincere commitment between a shaykh and a seeker that is nourished and shaped by the Prophetic tradition) -- and, trust is but one component of this complex and multi-layered relationship between a shaykh and spiritual seeker -- nothing is possible on the Sufi path. The Sufi path begins and ends with nisbath, for this nisbath is but a reflection of the relationship between, on the one hand, the individual and Divinity, and, on the other hand, the individual and the Prophetic tradition that begins with Adam (peace be upon him) and ends with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and includes some 124,000 other Prophets between the two who have been sent to humankind by God.

There are a lot of sources of doubts and misgivings, both within us as well as without us, that will attempt to disrupt, undermine and corrupt the relationship of nisbath between a seeker and teacher. This is but one of the reasons why -- however important this path might be -- nevertheless, the mystical quest is not an easy journey

When an individual takes an oath of allegiance with a spiritual guide, that individual is putting her or his spiritual life in the care of that teacher. If the spiritual "elder" is a true guide and, therefore, enjoys the support and blessings of God then all, God willing, is well. If, on the other hand, the guide is a false-or pseudo-guide, then the initiate might be in deep trouble unless God intervenes and saves the seeker from such a charlatan.

Even when a guide is authentic, there are forces at work -- within and without the seeker -- which will attempt to sway the initiate away from keeping faith with the oath of allegiance that binds a teacher and the one seeking guidance. Although the oath of allegiance is not a license for the guide to do anything she or he pleases, and while the nature of the oath is such that, as previously indicated, it can never call the seeker to do that which is immoral or spiritually harmful, nevertheless -- and this is the voice of experience speaking -- the oath of allegiance can be, if God wishes, a very hot coal to handle.

A true spiritual teacher is the best of friends. But, friendships can, and do, get tested. If you doubt this, then go and ask Prophet Job (peace be upon him) what he thinks about the matter. In fact, this is part of the story of all the Prophets since they all have had their friendship with the Friend tested in a variety of ways.

One of the problems with much of what has been said in the foregoing with respect to warning would-be-seekers against the existence of spiritual charlatans is that a false teacher will tell one much the same thing as that which has been outlined above. They will do so in an attempt to bind the would-be-seeker to them in a way that will resist any and all attempts to dissuade the individual that he or she has taken the wrong way by accepting initiation with such a pseudo-teacher.

Maintaining an abiding trust without abdicating one's critical faculties or capacity for reasoning is not an easy thing to do. It is not easy because if we knew when to trust in our reason and when to trust in that

which transcends reason, we would be an enlightened being and, therefore, not in need of a teacher to help guide us to such a condition.

The seeker is someone who realizes the need for trusting in something or someone that understands spiritual matters more deeply than the individual does, but the seeker also is someone who does not know in whom, or in relation to what, or when, or where, or how one should exercise that trust. Unfortunately, oftentimes, our tendency is to trust in the wrong things, at the wrong time, in the wrong way, to the wrong extent, and for the wrong purposes or reasons.

Learning about the ups and downs, along with the ins and outs, of trust constitutes a fundamental part of the Sufi path. Trust ties together issues of faith, reason, love, friendship, doubt, purpose, identity, truth, rebellion, struggle, transcendence, dependence, fear, hope and vulnerability.

In order to find a teacher, one must find someone with whom one is prepared to enter into the rigors, problems, difficulties, questions and struggles entailed by the issue of trust. One must find someone in whom one is willing to trust with the matter of trust -- a seemingly circular paradox.

The first step on the Sufi path is an act of trust. But, it is an act of trust that need not be, indeed, should not be, devoid of critical reflection.

Interestingly enough, much, but by no means all, of this critical reflection should be directed toward oneself, and not just the teacher. W.C. Fields once made a movie called: "You Can't Cheat an Honest Man" that spent much of the length of the film showing how because many of the characters in the movie had larceny in their hearts, this very quality proved to be their own undoing even while they busily were preoccupied with scheming about how to take undue advantage of one or more of the other characters in the film.

If an individual comes to the mystical path with larceny, so to speak, in her or his mind, heart, and soul, then that person becomes very vulnerable to the sweet spiritual nothings of every charlatan who comes along. If we are insincere with God, then God will leave us to our own devices, and we will have to pay the consequences.

Therefore, the seeker needs to examine his or her own motivations, sincerity and intentions before taking the plunge and undergoing initiation with any given spiritual guide. This, of course, is a very tricky

proposition since most of us frequently are inclined to lie to ourselves about what is actually going on within ourselves psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Nonetheless, tricky or not, the would-be-seeker must critically reflect upon the state of his or her own mind heart and soul. Only she or he can make the determination of how sincere the desire for the spiritual path is.

If the individual's heart is truly sincere in this matter, then, in many ways, the decision concerning a legitimate teacher becomes much easier. The heart of a such a seeker will tell the individual much, even if not everything, of what one needs to know concerning who, where, when, why and how in relation to a spiritual guide.

On the other hand, even sincere seekers after Self-realization are vulnerable to the machinations of false spiritual guides. Ignorance – whether associated with sincerity or insincerity – is, by its very nature, vulnerable in relation to all that lies beyond the horizons of that condition.

One final consideration to put before you is this. A person's decision need not be an either/or kind of deliberation.

An individual does not necessarily have to decide right away what one wants to do vis-à-vis the mystical path. This can be something on which one might want to mediate or reflect on over a period of time.

One needs to strike a balance between: (a) he/she who hesitates is lost, and (b) one should look before one leaps. 'How long can one hesitate before one stands to lose (and just what is it that one risks losing)', and 'how long should one look before one leaps (and at what should one be looking)', are complex problems of judgment and evaluation in spite of their simplistic appearance. And, when one plays one off against the other, the dynamics can become very interesting.

In the literature the foregoing dilemma is known as a mini-max problem. And, your mission, Mr. or Ms. Phelps, should you decide to accept this assignment, is to find an optimal solution to the foregoing stated problem. Naturally, if either you, or any of your IM team, should be caught while carrying out this mission, the State Department will disavow all knowledge of your existence. Good luck, Jim ... or Jean.

Truth, True Teachers and Spiritual Capacity

A person wrote in asking about whether or not everyone had the ability to recognize spiritual truth.

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All of us have within us the capacity to recognize the truth. When one encounters truth in the writings of someone, like is attracted to like -- that is, the truth within one is drawn to the truth within that which one is reading.

But, let me pose several problems for you. Let us assume someone is reading a book, and there is truth in the book, and something within the individual recognizes that truth as truth. Is the truth that is recognized as true, true because of who said it, or because of something in the nature of what is being said, along with something inherent in the individual doing the reading, and, therefore, it would be true independently of who said it?

False teachers are experts -- some more so than others -- at being able to write things that contain, to varying degrees, elements of the truth and, yet, such people do not participate in, or have any gnosis of, such truths, even though their books might contain such truths. Unfortunately, we all have a tendency to confuse, sometimes, the message and the one through whom the message might come. When we do this, we tend to assume that the one conveying the message is capable of conveying the message because the message reflects what is within these people, but this need not be so.

Some people use the capacity within them for recognizing the truth and prostitute that capacity for the purposes of ego -- namely, the wish to be considered by, and treated by, others as a spiritual guide and teacher. Such people might speak the truth -- within certain limits -- because they are adept at picking up on the truth spoken by others who are, unlike themselves, one with the truth so that message and messenger are for this latter sort of individual (a true teacher) but different sides of the same coin.

False teachers are parasites on the truth conveyed by true teachers. As such, when an individual consumes any truth that might be transmitted by means of a false teacher, then like consuming any food infested with parasites, there might be problematic consequences for

those who swallow such foods, even though the intentions of the one who is hungry might have been quite innocent and sincere.

Recognizing the truth and conveying the truth are not sufficient for someone to be a true teacher. The mystical path is not about ideas, concepts, theories, or the like, nor is it an intellectual exercise, and consequently, one can only get extremely limited flashes of the reality of things through written works.

Someone can write nice, uplifting, informative, interesting, amusing, thought-provoking, and even true books, but this does not mean that such people are capable of being the venue through whom baraka or grace is transmitted, and this alone is the key to spiritual progress and the lifting of spiritual veils. In being drawn to the truth of something, one has to understand Who is doing the drawing and who it is that is being drawn, and just what it is that one is being drawn to, and the means of one's being drawn.

Furthermore, although we all have within us the capacity to recognize the truth, we all also have within us the capacity for veiling and distorting and turning away from the truth. If the matter were simply a matter of being able to recognize the truth when we came into contact with it, then no one would need a teacher or spiritual guide, and everyone would be a realized mystic. Since this is not the case, the answer must lie elsewhere and be more complex and subtle than that.

Truth/Reality is infinite. There are many forces within us and without us that are dedicated to ensuring that we never realize the full extent of the truth for which we have been given the capacity to do by Divinity.

Consequently, sometimes what we feel or believe or think to be the truth because it seems to resonate with something within us, this is nothing other than the ego looking at a mirror. So the problem is, how does one distinguish within oneself that dimension of one's being that is capable of recognizing the truth from that dimension of one's being that is capable of veiling and distorting the truth for its own non-spiritual purposes?

We read something in a book. It resonates with something within us. Because of the experience of resonance, or familiarity, or attraction that we have concerning what is said, we might say: "Ah, this is the truth."

But, is it? How do we know? How can we be sure? How do we test it? What are the criteria of evaluation that are to be used? What instruments are to be used in this process? How are these instruments to be calibrated so that we can trust the readings that they give? Who will confirm our findings, and how do we know that we can rely on such confirmation?

Who is doing the recognizing in any given case of calling something the truth? Is it the true self, or the false self? None of these questions can be answered on one's own. One cannot discern the truth of these matters merely through effort, concentration and diligence. Much, much more is needed, and that can only be found by associating (spiritually) with an authentic guide.

There are people who can speak and write volumes about the mystical path -- much of it might even be true (up to a point), but they do not have the least taste of the reality of Being to which the mystical path invites each of us. The process of realizing the truth of one's true identity and one's essential, unique spiritual capacity goes beyond what can be recognized as true on the surface of things.

In fact, when one fully realizes the truth, the surface of things becomes completely transformed in the process. What one recognized as true previously is still true -- assuming it was true at all -- but it becomes something much more in the process ... so much so, that one realizes that what one recognized as true previously was itself really a tremendous distortion of the Truth, even though it was true within its own framework of understanding.

So, in relation to the question that you have asked, the answer depends on what one means by recognizing the truth of something. Who is doing the recognizing, on what level is the truth being engaged, how did the truth come to one, and what degree of noise-to-signal ratio, so to speak, is involved in that which has been received or recognized.



Mystical Paths, Validity, Dogma and Truth

Someone wrote in after reading the "Nine Questions" interview (see Appendix Four). This individual wanted to know if one could distinguish between valid and dogmatic claims that are made by different people with respect to whether or not the Sufi path needed to be rooted in Islam in order to be a fully effective mystical path. This person also wanted to know if a spiritual tradition that was more ancient than a modern spiritual tradition was automatically better than the latter.

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A given mystical path is not valid simply because it is based in antiquity. After all, there have been many theories, mythologies, philosophies, metaphysical belief systems and so on which have come to us from antiquity but that are not necessarily true just because of their seniority or longevity.

A tradition -- whether spiritual, religious, or mystical -- is rendered valid to the extent it is rooted in the truth concerning the way Reality is on some given level of being. If a system that is new -- relatively speaking -- reflects, to whatever degree, the truth, whereas another system that is rooted in antiquity does not do so -- or does so to a very small degree -- then the newer system has more validity or authenticity to it than does the ancient system.

Authenticity or validity in anything is a function of the extent to which something gives expression to, or manifests, the truth. This is true of modern science, and it also is true of mysticism, religion and spirituality.

A mystical experience isn't valid, or it is limited in its validity, precisely to the extent to which it is not an expression of the Truth of things. The issue has nothing to do with what is, or is not, more rooted in antiquity.

As far as the "personal" dimension of mysticism is concerned, I agree with you up to a point. The boundary of the personal is demarcated by the divinely given unique qualities of spiritual or mystical capacity that any individual brings to the path.

The Sufi tradition holds (at least, my understanding of it does) that while each of us is Divine in essence, we are not -- either individually or collectively -- Divinity in Essence. Consequently, each of us is capable of giving expression, according to our capacity to do so, only to certain attributive properties of Divinity in manifested form.

Furthermore, the masters of the Sufi way maintain that Divinity never repeats manifested being in the same way twice. Necessarily, therefore, each

of us has something that comes along only once in the history of manifested being.

This uniqueness that goes to the heart of who we are individually is very personal. It doesn't get any more personal than this -- indeed, this unique-never-to-be-repeated-again quality of ours goes to the very heart of our ultimate identities and the purposes for which we have been brought into existence by, and through, Divinity.

However, having said the foregoing, this is not the same as saying that anything and everything we believe, value, say or do accurately reflects, or gives expression to, what is most personal about us in the above sense. In other words, all authentic, valid mystical traditions make the distinction between the false self and the essential Self, and whenever something we think, feel, believe, say, or do is colored and oriented by the false self, this is not a valid or authentic manifestation of what is most personal about us in the mystical sense of the word that has been outlined previously.

There are authentic modes or modalities of being, and there are inauthentic modes or modalities of being. When an individual personalizes a mystical tradition in order to cater to, or satisfy, the whims and delusional forces that are active within the false self, then this kind of personalization of the mystical is problematic because it serves to veil and distort the truth rather than unveil and give accurate expression to whatever dimensions of the truth we have the capacity to reflect or give expression to.

As you have indicated in your e-mail, the present moment is the only moment that matters, and much rides on how we engage that moment. If we engage it through the false self, then all is lost -- including ourselves. If, on the other hand, we engage the present moment through our essential Selves, then we are working toward realizing, God willing, the purpose of our lives.

As far as the issue of dogmatism is concerned, there are several comments that can be made. First, one can as easily argue that those who insist on separating the Sufi tradition from Islam are as dogmatic as those who wish to claim that the Sufi tradition is indigenous to Islam.

Secondly, in a sense, the Truth is inherently dogmatic, although mystic masters certainly do not tend to be dogmatic about this. The Truth is what it is, or Reality is what it is, and no amount of sophistry or

philosophical slight-of-hand is going to change this, no matter what our ambitions and hopes might be.

The challenge facing us is to attempt to determine, as best we can, what the nature of the Truth is. The issue is not, nor has it ever been, whether, or not, there is a Truth underlying, making possible, and being manifested through the various realms of existence.

Mysticism is not a relativistic enterprise in the sense that the Truth must be prepared to bow down to our individual agendas concerning what we are, and are not, prepared to recognize as true. We must accommodate ourselves to the Truth -- whatever that might be -- and Truth has no need to accommodate Itself to us.

The Truth will remain what it is whether we recognize it as such or not. Truth is not made more true or less true as a function of our beliefs, likes, dislikes, and so on.

It is only our varying, limited capacities to see, understand and give expression to the Truth that makes it seem as if Truth is a relative phenomenon. What is relative is our individual perspectives and not the Truth that is Absolute on every level of being and throughout all of created existence.

Dogma is a conceptual phenomenon. People who get caught up in their conceptual systems and ways of characterizing or representing various dimensions of reality tend to become dogmatic and narrow in their understanding of any given issue.

Therefore, I would agree with you that 'dogma' and the 'mystical' are mutually exclusive of one another. This is the case because the mystical path is not rooted in concepts, but is rooted, instead, in direct, unmediated (by any set of theories or ideational content) experiential engagement of some dimension of Truth or Reality.

Yaqueen, or spiritual certitude, comes from being tied to Truth in an essential, experiential and trans-rational manner. Being convinced of the correctness in one's conceptual position does not necessarily have anything to do with this aforementioned state of yaqueen although many, many people confuse the two.

When a person is in a state of yaqueen, the experiential insights and understandings that, by the Grace of God, accompany this state informs or directs the way such an individual uses concepts, and, consequently,

the concepts that are chosen to describe -- where possible -- a mystical perspective are rooted in mystical experiences first and foremost. However, there is a limit to how far this process of description of a mystical understanding can be carried since mystical experiences tend to outstrip or transcend the capacity of language to accurately describe the content, character richness, and dynamics of true mystical experiences.

In dogmatism, on the other hand, people's understanding is conceptually, rather than experientially (in the mystical sense), driven. They are convinced their understanding of things is correct not because the Truth has experientially visited them and shown them how things are, but because their ego demands that things be such and because their belief or value systems satisfy certain emotional, ideological, behavioral, habitual or vested interests.

The one who is dominated by dogma seeks to dominate others in the same way. As such, the former individuals need to have everyone busily trying to force fit round blocks into square and triangular holes.

Those who would remove the Sufi path from the context of Islam have no historical or mystical justification for doing so. There is absolutely no evidence that any of the great Sufi masters of the past said that one can pursue this mystical path independently of Islam.

Some of these great mystical teachers have said that not everyone who calls himself or herself a Muslim is a follower of Islam. Furthermore, they have indicated there is more to Islam than just the mechanical and lifeless adherence to a set of exoteric, theological rules.

Unfortunately, there have been some individuals who have taken what some of these teachers have said -- sometimes with pointed humor and irony -- and used such statements in a way that violates the original spirit with which teachings were uttered. People have done this kind of injustice because they have their own axes to grind and agendas to push.

Quite frankly, I have not come across any of these so-called modern versions of the Sufi path that can demonstrate the truth of what they are claiming or maintaining. They assert that this is so, but Truth is not a function of assertion, rather whatever is asserted must be capable of being shown how it accurately reflects, is consistent with, and gives expression to, the Truth.

People who try to impose their own extra-Islamic value system of likes and dislikes onto the Sufi path cannot prove that what they are saying truly reflects the complete teachings of any of the great Sufi masters of the past or even correctly reflects the very origins of the term "Sufi". In stark contrast, however, anyone who cares to take the time to research matters can easily show that what historically has been known as the Sufi path is inextricably woven from the fabric of Islam when considered in all of its depth, breadth and subtlety.

The burden of proof in this matter is not on those who link the Sufi path to the proper practice of Islam. Rather, the burden of proof is on anyone who would attempt to argue that the Sufi path is entirely independent of Islam ... although possibly conceding something to the effect that there might have been a time when, for reasons of historical convenience and circumstance, the Sufi path might, temporarily, have set up a liaison of sorts with the Islamic religious tradition.

If these people of 'mysticism by assertion' are not the ones who are being dogmatic, then let them come forth with their proofs to the contrary of what is being said in the foregoing. Let them demonstrate that their understanding is not merely a matter of "truth" by stipulation.

These would-be Sufi teachers are counting on people to uncritically swallow whatever is being said in this respect. And, indeed, quite a few individuals have accommodated themselves to this hope since many of these latter individuals are all too prepared to accept such stipulations as the gospel truth that cannot, and should not, be questioned simply because these sorts of stipulation fit in with their biases, prejudices, assumptions and so on concerning the Islamic religious tradition.

Someone calling herself or himself a Sufi teacher might offer certain practices and teachings that carry benefit for an individual even though these practices and teachings have, in various ways, been taken out of their original and proper context. Moreover, someone who undertakes these practices or follows these teachings in a sincere fashion might have certain mystical experiences that, seemingly, confirm the truth of what is being said.

What many people fail to understand about the mystical quest is that it is not, ultimately, about having such experiences. The mystical path is about arriving at that destination that allows one to have intimate and permanent insight into the nature of one's true identity as well as one's

essential, unique capacity to serve God as God wishes and not as a function of what we want or don't want.

Only when one is absent from the false self, can one be truly present to God. And, only when one is truly present to, with, and for Divinity, can one's true identity and essential spiritual capacities being unveiled.

One could have thousands of mystical or mystical-like experiences (not everything of an experientially anomalous nature can be considered mystical) and never be one step closer to the goal of the Sufi path. When one takes initiation with a Sufi shaykh, it is the goal, purpose and destination of the mystical path that must orient the teachings and practices.

A false mystical teacher might help, if God wishes, an individual to take a few steps toward accomplishing the purpose of the mystical quest. But, such a teacher will never be able to transport an individual to the end of the mystical line, no matter how much of what is stated might be true -- as far as it goes in its out-of-context manner -- in disclosing the nature of different facets of the Truth.

Divinity has established certain mystical paths for the purpose of helping human beings realize the goal of the mystical quest. These paths are variations on one and the same thing, and, consequently, despite whatever differences might exist from one variation to the next, each of these paths that have been provided by Divinity are, God willing, fully capable of transporting the sincere and committed individual to the desired destination when this person works in conjunction with those who are have been established by Divinity as spiritual guardians of these pathways.

If one does not enter the mystical path through the doorways that have been provided by Divinity -- both with respect to the authenticity of the teacher as well as the authenticity of the Path -- then one will, sooner or later, begin to spin one's wheels, spiritually speaking. Under these circumstances, the individual has a tendency to mistake circular motion on the horizontal plane of temporality for being spiritual progress in an essential, vertical realm that transcends temporality.

Sweeping dust from one place to another does not clean a room. Digging many holes does not necessarily permit one to find the water is

seeking irrespective of how welcome one finds the constantly changing venue to be.

The proof of things is, so to speak, in the pudding. This is what choice and freedom are all about.

People are free to make mistakes or choose correctly. People are free to misguide others or be themselves misguided. People are free to believe that they are getting on a mystical train that they believe will carry them to a distant destination, and not realize that the chosen vehicle is purely local and does not have such destinations on its itinerary or within its capabilities.

Ultimately, the issue is not whether one should, or should not, label some given set of activities as being "Sufi". Ultimately, the issue is whether or not that in which one is engaged is able, God willing, to help one realize the purpose of life, the nature of identity and one's essential, unique capacity to love, worship, cherish, reflect, and serve Divinity.

Whatever choices an individual makes in this respect has a lot riding on them. This is so precisely because there is falsehood and error, delusion and distortion, and so on.

Not every choice takes one closer to the Truth. Not every choice leads to the same destination. Not every choice will help one, God willing, to work toward realizing essential human possibility.

If one could ascertain the truth of these matters before hand, there would be no need for a mystical path, a spiritual teacher, or Divine guidance. But, in reality, we are not always able to distinguish the true from the false.

We need help in these matters. Our choice of who we want to help us makes all the difference in the world -- both with respect to this present world, as well as in relation to the next world.



Interfaith Spiritual Peace-Quests in the Light of the Babel Problem

The following is a lecture given at Fordham University. The occasion was an interfaith conference.

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Genesis 11: 1-9

(1) And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech.

(2) And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there.

(3) And they said one to another, let us make brick and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.

(4) And they said, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top might reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

(5) And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children built.

(6) And the Lord said, Behold, the people are one, and they all have one language, and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them which they have imagined to do.

(7) Let us go down there and confound their language, that they might not understand one another's speech

(8) So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of the earth, and they left off to build the city.

(9) Therefore is the name of it called Babel [confusion]; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of the earth.

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For the purposes of this talk, it doesn't really matter whether one considers the passage from Genesis to be historical narrative, myth, a moral teaching story, revelation, or some combination of these possibilities. From whichever perspective one wishes to engage the Babel-theme, there are some instructive elements for what is going on in the world today.

Some of the themes encompassed by the foregoing Biblical passage concerning Babel are:

-- Choice/free will ... the capacity to select among possible avenues of behavior ... in the case of Babel, choosing to make a tower. God permitted this to happen but only up to a point, and, so, there are limits beyond which God will not permit things to proceed.

-- Another theme of the Babel story concerns intention ... the motivation for doing things, and in the case of Babel the intention was for the people to make a name for themselves so that in the event that they came to be scattered across the earth, people would know of them and what they had accomplished.

-- A third theme of the Babel passage involves methodology ... the way that is chosen through which to implement one's intention ... in the case of the people of Babel the methodology was expressed in terms of the exterior physical world, technology, and rational planning. However, God already had provided humankind with an esoteric, internal, way to approach Divinity – at least to the extent of the capacity that humankind has been given – and the way that Divinity had provided to humankind was not through outward, superficial, very limited and often distorted theological or rationalistic means.

Therefore, on one level God was angry with the people of Babel because they had sought to invent their own modality for reaching God. They had sought to reinvent the wheel of spirituality and rejected the mode of spiritual transportation with which God had provided them.

The bricks of stone and the slime used for mortar symbolize the arbitrary, rule-governed systems of logic – whether theological, scientific or rational -- which were being used to reach up toward God. The people of Babel committed the foregoing error in methodology and so have all too many Muslim, Christian, and Jewish theologians down through the ages.

-- Another theme that is present in the Babel story is that of creative imagination ... the inspiration through which a plan or method is conceived. In the case of Babel, the manner in which creative imagination was to be used by the people was not pleasing to God. Among other things, it showed a lack of appropriate restraint concerning human behavior as well as a lack of insight concerning so

many dimensions of Being ... especially with respect to the fact that life did not exist primarily for human purposes but rather Creation existed for Divine ones.

-- the issue of consequences is also present in the Babel incident... for every choice we make, there are consequences ... sometimes the consequences are fortuitous and sometimes the consequences are not so fortuitous... and, as with almost everything else, what turns out to be a problem for some becomes a potential boon for others.

The consequences for the people of Babel were that they became scattered and were isolated from one another due to problems of communication and confusion. Furthermore, one of the consequences of the Babel event was that although the people did make a name for themselves – after all, thousands of years later they are still being talked about – nonetheless, and as previously indicated, this did not come about in the way that the great thinkers of Babel had envisioned.

Consequently, one should be careful of what one intends because while we humans have our plans, God also has Divine plans, and as the Qur'an indicates God is the best of planners [Qur'an 8:30] ... and to God belongs the conclusive argument [Qur'an 6:149]

On the other hand, however difficult the consequences might have been for the people of Babel, the good news is that they and history got to continue. And, here we find ourselves today with an opportunity to reflect upon, and, possibly, make use of some of the lessons of Babel.

In the matter of Babel, the wrong choice was made [namely, how to use the gift of time], the wrong intention underlay that choice [in other words, to serve ego rather than to glorify Divinity], the wrong methodology was used to try to reach God [i.e., that of external, legalistic, arbitrary, rule-governed methods rather than through principle-bound indigenous, esoteric methods] and creative imagination was inappropriately used and called upon to serve human purposes rather than Divine purposes, and although the people of Babel got their wish – a name for themselves – it was not quite what they had in mind when they started their venture.

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Today, we [meaning the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim peoples], who are the inheritors of the Abrahamic Prophetic tradition often find ourselves to

be uneasy if not hostile neighbors of one another. We find ourselves this way because, among other things, of what we have inherited from the times of Babel ... we have become separated through the confusion of communication ... we have become separated and isolated from one another through our collective wrong choices, and our collective wrong intentions, and our collective use of problematic methodologies, and our collective use of inappropriate modes of creative imagination, and of our collective failure to take responsibility for the many consequences that are the direct and indirect result of all that we, collectively, are doing wrong with respect to choice, intention, methodology, and creative imagination.

We always have grievances against one another, and only very rarely do we have grievances against ourselves. Yet, the world is like it is today because we are like we are today... it is not the other who is at fault, it is we who are at fault. Benjamin Franklin is reported to have said that insanity is to keep doing the same things while expecting different results, and if this is the definition of insanity, then, many of us qualify to be so diagnosed.

What is going on between Palestine and Israel is insane – and I mean there is insanity transpiring on almost every side of this issue. What is going on in Iraq is insane. What is going on in Darfur is insane. What is going on in Afghanistan is insane. What is going with respect to terrorism – both in relation to its perpetration [by individuals and by nations] and the manner in which it is handled – all of this is insane. What is going on in the United States, as well as around the world, with respect to violence, poverty, health care, injustice, race hatred, sexual and spiritual abuse, as well as environmental degradation are all expressions of the presence of pathology.

Yet, the beat of insanity goes on in all these places. We keep doing the same things, but we expect different results.

Do we need more proof than the foregoing abbreviated list of collective tragedies to demonstrate that we all seem to be having problems communicating with one another? Do we need more proof that the consequences of Babel are still with us -- that the people of the Abrahamic prophetic tradition are (to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw) one people divided by a common spirituality?

There are those within the Muslim community who have arrogated to themselves the delusional mission of being the saviors of Islam and, as well, they believe, the saviors of the whole of truth. There are those within the Christian community who have arrogated to themselves the delusional mission of being the saviors of Christianity, and, so, they believe, the saviors of the world. There are those within the Jewish community who have arrogated to themselves the delusional mission of being the saviors of Judaism and, so, they believe, the redeemers of all humankind.

God does not need such saviors. God has the whole thing under control ... even if we don't think so. Things will take place and events in this world will end nowhere but in accordance with Divine edict.

The reason why I refer to the messianic fervor that influences so much of the behavior of certain theological elements within the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities as being delusional is because, among other things, all of the people to whom I am alluding seem to be of the opinion that they are greater than every one of the Prophets who make up the Abrahamic tradition. Such people are deluded because they believe that they can accomplish what no Prophet was ever able to accomplish... namely, the redemption of the world and all humankind.

During the time of the Prophets, some of the people, by the Grace of God, believed in the sacred, spiritual nature and purpose of existence, and some did not. Yet, if all of humankind were destined to realize their essential identity and unique spiritual capacity, then this would have happened in the time of the Prophets but it did not happen then, it definitely is not happening now, nor do I believe this will happen in the future.

Yes, God willing, the Messiah will come and, yes, God willing, Jesus (peace be upon him) will come a second time. And perhaps, who knows, Jesus (peace be upon him) and the Messiah (peace be upon him) might turn out to be identical with one another.

For those who have ears with which to hear, and eyes with which to see, and a heart through which to know, there shall be, God willing, great blessings. But, this will be brought about through Divine generosity and not through the oppression and killing of other people by those who have grandiose, arrogant, self-serving flights of self-delusion about their place in the scheme of the universe.

Indeed, oppression is so odious to God that the Qur'an indicates it is worse than killing [Qur'an 2:191, 2:217] However, one might never know this by looking at the Muslim world ... a world in which many Muslims oppress one another, as well as others, in a variety of ways.

All of the deluded individuals (that is certain of the Muslims, Christians, and Jews who are being alluded to) are secretly and openly plotting, planning, fighting, quarreling, manipulating, exploiting, abusing, and maneuvering to bring about the final reckoning – to bring about Armageddon so that their delusion might become everyone else's nightmare. Apparently, all such people believe that fighting and killing are the only way in which Divine purposes can be achieved.

Why is it that so many people are willing to trust God when killing is their method of choice to bring about so-called just ends, yet, they do not seem to be willing to trust God and use peaceful means to realize such just ends?

Albert Bandura, a psychologist, once indicated that people usually do not engage in harmful conduct until they have justified the alleged 'morality' of their actions to themselves. This is what all too many Muslims, Christians, and Jewish individuals have done ... convinced themselves that harmful conduct toward others has been sanctioned by Divinity... convinced themselves that God has sanctioned the declaring of war on anyone who does not think, act, pray, dress, speak, believe, worship, or live as they do.

This is all the legacy of Babel. This is the legacy of the wrong choices, the wrong intentions, the wrong methods, and the wrong forms of creative inspiration that are the signatures of the Babel event. We continue to live out our version of the Babel myth in the most modern and most destructive of ways.

If you dislike the idea of insanity being the governing principle at work in much of what goes on in the world today, then I have another – possibly even more sobering -- idea to put before you. A fair amount of psychological research indicates that 1 in every 25 people has sociopathic inclinations.

These individuals are scattered across every strata of society and every kind of occupation ... from the poorest to the richest, and from the business world, to military, educational, governmental, and religious institutions. These are people who, among other things, are indifferent to

the suffering that their actions cause for others and who camouflage their conscienceless motivations with political, philosophical, economic, and/or religious rhetoric.

What is even more disturbing is that as experiments like those of Stanley Milgram at Yale back in the 1960s and early 70s have shown is that a great many of the general population can, under the right circumstances, be induced into becoming what I term 'ideological' or 'theological sociopaths'. These are people who are willing to inflict a great deal of harm and suffering on others because the former individuals have been unduly influenced (by other individuals, groups, religious leaders, the media, or government officials) to believe that the damage or pain that is being inflicted is okay ... that it allegedly serves some 'higher' purpose and, therefore, is supposedly justified.

More than seventy years ago, W.B. Yeats, the Irish poet, once wrote, in reference to the sort of circumstances in which we find ourselves to day, that:

Things fall apart;  
the centre cannot hold.  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned,  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

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The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“There are 71 sects among the Jews, and only one of them is correct. There are 72 sects among the Christians and only one of them is correct. There are 73 sects among the Muslims, and only one of them is correct.”

At the heart of the Abrahamic Prophetic tradition, there are those Jews, Christians, and Muslims who give expression to a set of choices, intentions, methods, and use of creative imagination that reflects Divine guidance and purposes. Ah, but who are those blessed people?

It is said that there are four kinds of individuals. Those who know and know that they know. These are the Prophets and saints, and one should follow them. Then, there are those who know but don't know that they know. These people are asleep and need to be awakened. Then, there are those who don't know and know they don't know. These people are capable of learning and, therefore, should be taught. Finally, there are those who don't know and don't know that they don't know. These are the ignorant, and one should stay away from them.

The truth of the matter is that within each of us reside these same four kinds of individuals. There is a part of us that knows and knows that it knows, and, God willing, it gives expression to the very best of our spirits, hearts, and souls. There is also a part of us that knows but needs to be woken up because that part of us is asleep to the truth of things even though we have the capacity to know the truth. As well, there is a part of us that knows that we do not know, and, consequently, we have a desire to seek and learn the truth. And, finally, there is a part of us that does not know and doesn't know that it doesn't know, and this is the ignorance and darkness of our egos.

The problem is that when we are ignorant we often have delusions of grandeur and believe that our ignorance is the part of us that knows and knows that it knows, when, in reality, it is the part of us that does not know and doesn't know that it doesn't know. This is the mode of "being full of passionate intensity" that marks the worst of us and against that Yeats warned us in his poem.

When we are unduly influenced by this aspect of ourselves, we are so certain and convinced that we are right, we are prepared to insist that everyone see and do things our way. In such a condition, we are prepared to impose our solutions for life and death on others. We are prepared to sacrifice others on the altar of our own sense of self-righteousness.

The Qur'an warns about such wrongheaded, wrong-hearted, and wrong-spirited conviction when it says:

“Shall we tell you who will be the greatest losers in their works? It is those whose striving goes astray in the present life while they believe they are working good deeds.” [18:104]

So, who are the ones among the Jewish, Christian and Muslim peoples to whom the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was alluding in the previously cited hadith concerning those who are correct.

In the Qur’an, Surah Shams begins with the following:

“By the Sun and his brightness,  
And, by the moon when she follows him,  
And by the Day when it reveals him,  
And by the Night when it enshrouds him,  
And by the heaven and He Who built it,  
And by the earth and he Who spread it,  
And by the soul and Him Who perfected it,  
And inspired it with knowledge of lewdness and God-fearing.  
He is indeed successful who causes the soul to grow,  
And he is indeed a failure who stunts its growth.” (Qur’an 91:1-10)

My spiritual guide taught me that the rhetorical style of the Qur’an is such that whenever God wishes to draw attention to the importance of something, an oath is used ... such as ‘by the moon’, or ‘by the sun’, or ‘by the heavens’ or ‘by the earth’ and so on. Nowhere else in the Qur’an does one find as many oaths heaped on one another as one does in the opening verses of Surah Shams.

So, to what is God seeking to direct our attention that is of such importance God is directing our attention to the choice with which we all are faced – namely, the choice between being among those who devote themselves to the spiritual growth of the soul and, God willing, succeed, or being among those who are the ones who obstruct the spiritual growth of the soul and, as a result, fail in life’s purpose.

Who are the ones among the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim peoples who, God willing, have found the right way? Well, the following list of qualities is by no means definitive, but it offers up some spiritual food for thought:

The ones to whom the Prophet is referring are the ones who, in accordance with Surah Shams spend their lives purifying their own souls rather than trying to purify the souls of others. They are the ones who, in accordance with the Qur'an know that "ritual worship preserves one from lewdness and iniquity, but, verily, remembrance of God is more important." [29:45]

They are the ones who, in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- and in accordance with what has been the teaching of all of the Abrahamic Prophets -- are likely to agree with the reply of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he was asked about what actions are most excellent and is reported to have said:

- "to gladden the heart of a human being;
- to feed the hungry;
- to help the afflicted;
- to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful;
- to remove the wrong of the injured."

The correct ones among the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities are the individuals who know, and act upon such knowledge, that they must die before they die ... not kill before they die.

In this regard, one might note the instance in which a fellow Sufi once was talking with Ra'bia of Basra (may God be pleased with her) on a hillside overlooking the city and the man pointed to the town below and said in a somewhat condescending tone that the people of the city often did not fast or pray or go on hajj, but the man quite proudly indicated how he had done so many extra fasts, prayers, and pilgrimages ... above and beyond what was required of him. The man was about to go on when Ra'bia (may God be pleased with her) gave the man a hard look and said: "Thy existence is a sin with which none other can compare." It is the death of the existence of the ego that is to be sought before we die our

biological death, and when we kill others we rob them of the opportunity to do this.

The ones to whom the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was referring are the ones who are likely to agree with the Qur'an when it says:

“Say: Surely my prayer and my service of sacrifice ... my life and my death are all for God, the Lord of the Worlds.” [6: 162]

There is nothing in this about killing others.

The ones to whom the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was referring are the ones who are likely to agree with Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) when he said: “Realization of our inability to attain comprehension of God is itself comprehension.” These are the people about whom Yeats said that the best were those who lacked conviction because they know that reality and the whole truth are beyond the capacity of any single individual to circumscribe, and, as a result, they had great humility when it came to the truth and who realized that above every person of knowledge there is One who possesses still greater knowledge [Qur'an 12:76].

The correct ones among the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim peoples to whom the Prophet alluded are the ones who are likely to follow the guidance of the Qur'an that says: “So follow the deen? [the way] of Abraham, the upright. He was not of the idolaters. [3:95]

The correct ones to whom the Prophet alluded are the ones who understand and who act in accordance with what the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) meant when the Prophet is reported to have said:

“This world is maintained in existence by illusion.”

And when the Prophet is reported to have said:

“Assist any person who is oppressed, whether Muslim or non - Muslim.”

And when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Your most hostile enemy is your soul enclosed between your two sides.”

And when the Prophet is reported to have said:

“Kindness is a mark of faith and whoever has not kindness has not faith.”

And when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“You will not enter Paradise until you have faith, and you will not complete your faith until you love one another.”

And, when the Prophet is reported to have said:

“There is no person who is wounded and pardons the giver of the wound but God will exalt that person’s dignity and diminish that person’s faults.”

The ones among the Jewish, Christian and Muslim peoples to whom the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is alluding in the previously cited saying of the Prophet are those who would find resonance with the prayer of Ra’bia of Basra (may God be pleased with her):

“O Allah, if I worship Thee out of desire for heaven, then deny me heaven, and if I worship Thee out of fear of Hell, then throw me in Hell, but if I worship Thee out of love for Thee and Thee alone, then grant me Thy vision.”

The Qur’an says:

“Allah does not change the condition of a people, until they change their own condition.” [13:11]

The insanity of our choices, intentions, methodologies problematic use of creative imagination, and the consequences ensuing from such pathology will not change until we begin to struggle toward changing our own spiritual condition.

The problems of the world will not change as long as our energies and efforts are mostly directed toward trying to change others through violent, oppressive, or presumptuous methods. The problems of the world will change from insanity to sanity when, God willing, we begin to work to change ourselves.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) often stressed the importance of character. For example, he is reported to have said all of the following:

-- “The best thing on the Day of Judgment will be a beautiful character.”

-- “The most perfect of the faithful in faith is the most beautiful of them in character.”

-- “I have been given all the names, and I have been sent to perfect good conduct/behavior/character.”

The individuals among the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim peoples who focus on the acquisition of character or akhlaq are among those who, if God wishes, are on the right path.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also is reported to have said:

“Shall I not inform you of a better act than fasting, charity and prayer? Making peace between one another – enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by the roots.”

Making peace is considered to be better than fasting, charity and prayer ... three of the five pillars of Islam.

If and when we follow such guidance, then, God willing, we might, finally, free ourselves from the legacy of Babel. When we learn to listen to the spiritual – and not theological -- voice through which God is addressing our souls, hearts, and spirits (our essential identity) then, and only then, will the confusion brought into our lives by the din of egos all trying to speak over one another begin to subside and we will be able to join one another in a peace quest ... I do not know if we will ever reach such a propitious moment, but our fate lies in our respective willingness to change ourselves and not try to change others.

Such a peace-quest can only be pursued when we are ready to enter into a monologue with God ... where Divinity speaks to us, and we listen with our souls, hearts, and spirits such we all become united in one voice ... that of God.

In closing I would like to refer to an anecdote involving Enrico Fermi, one of the great physicists of the twentieth century who is reported to have said:

“Before hearing your lecture on this subject, I was confused. Now having heard you, I am still confused, but on a higher level.”

I hope that perhaps having listened to me, that, at the very least, if you are still confused about things, then, God willing, I hope you are confused on a higher level.

### The Nature of Idols

With a few exceptions, the vast majority of the Muslim groups, organizations, professionals, and individuals I contacted with respect to the web site and e-book concerning spiritual abuse in relation to the Sufi mystical tradition have not replied back to my overtures. I'm sure there are many reasons for their failure to communicate, but one of the reasons for what is going on is out of fear.

Just as the so-called leaders of the Catholic church were reluctant to rigorously investigate the allegations of sexual abuse that surfaced in many parts of the world for more than sixty years, so, too, Muslims, in general, as well as the Sufi community, in particular, do not want to look into the abyss created by the many dark, troubling questions that are raised through the presence of the many forms of spiritual abuse being perpetrated across an extensive number of Muslim and Sufi communities around the world. Muslims would rather criticize Israelis for the latter's occupation of Palestine than criticize themselves for permitting hundreds, if not thousands, of honor killings to continue within Muslim communities, or criticize themselves for permitting mutilation of female genitalia to be passed off as an ordinance of God rather than as a whim of some very sick individuals. Muslims would rather criticize America for its imperialistic and oppressive behaviors than criticize the Taliban in Afghanistan, or the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia, or the many strains of dogmatic, rigid, cruel forms of Muslim fundamentalism that oppress Muslims in many part of the world, and, even now, seek to gain hegemony within American, European, and Canadian Muslim communities through their own fundamentalist brand of imperialism. Many so-called Sufis would rather point a condescending finger at exoteric theologies rather than examine the abuses that are being perpetrated in the name of esoteric possibilities.

Many alleged Sufis do not want the whole issue of spiritual authenticity opened up for discussion. They wish to continue to enjoy their status, influence, and self-image as being not like "ordinary" Muslims, but, somehow better ... more elite, more in the know, more self-realized, more in tune with the music of the spheres.

Many so-called Sufi shaykhs do not want their self-serving interests called into question -- whether this has to do with power, prestige, authority, or the sexual and financial exploitation of people who are

seeking truth, but encounter a form of truth for which they had not bargained in the locus of manifestation who refers to himself or herself as a mystical master. Many so-called mureeds do not want to have to question whether the path they are on is, or is not, authentic ... or whether they have been wasting their time ... or spending some portion of their lives being deceived and living in blissful ignorance of the real truths that are hidden potentials within a human being.

In a lot of respects, many people who fancy themselves to be Sufi have become idol worshipers. They worship their shaykhs as if the latter were the Creator rather than among the created. They worship their own egos as reflections of Divine light when, in truth, more often than not, there is nothing but darkness parading as light.

The situation, in some ways, is similar to what is going on in Jerusalem. More specifically, Muslims consider the Dome of the Rock as being the third holiest place in Islam. It is considered sacred because, among other things, the Prophet is believed to have offered up prayers within the cave (which is in the rock) with all the Prophets who preceded him and, then departed from that location when he went on miraj or ascension, following his night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem.

Jewish people consider the space occupied by the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque sacrosanct because, among other things, it not only marks the location where Abraham (peace be upon him) and his son were each, in their own way, prepared to offer up a Divinely commanded sacrifice, but as well, the location marks the place where two previous temples of the Jewish Nation lie and, as well, the place where they believe they must build the third temple. Building the Third Temple is of supreme importance to the religious minded among the Jewish people for a variety of reasons.

To begin with, of the roughly 613 commandments in the Torah, the Temple service accounts for about 240 of these. In effect, Jewish people cannot fully observe their religious obligations without the reconstruction of the Temple, first constructed by, Solomon, the son of David, (peace be upon them both).

Secondly, Midrash Tanhuma, which is a compilation of various interpretations of the Torah given by different rabbis over a period of time, indicates that Israel is the center of the world and the Temple Mount is said to be the center of Jerusalem. Moreover, the center of the Temple is

referred to as the Holy of Holies, and at the center of the Holy of Holies is the Ark of the Covenant, and the Foundation Stone is in front of the Ark, and this stone constitutes the point of Foundation for the world with respect to Divinity.

Jewish people believe the promised Messiah will rule from the Temple Mount, and through this rule, all the pain that has been experienced by the Jewish nation will be removed. The Jewish people believe this will be the source of redemption and salvation for the Jewish nation.

When, as a result of the Six Day War of June, 1967, Israel gained control over large portions of the biblical territory of Samaria, Judea, Gaza and Sinai, a variety of radical, fundamentalist rabbis began to urge people to settle into these lands in order to hasten on the time for the appearance of the Messiah through whom the Jewish people would be redeemed.

Samaria, Judea, Gaza and Sinai are not necessary for Jews to practice their faith. This land grab is the result of a belief of some fundamentalist Jews who feel they can speed up God's time table through pursuing actions that are a violation of the Ten Commandments as well as the covenant that was originally made between God and the Jewish people and is at the heart of the Sacred Temple, within the Holy of Holies.

However, the construction of the Third Temple is an integral part of the Jewish people being able to pursue the essential tenets of their faith. Without the Temple, more than a third of the commandments that believe have been enjoined upon them by God cannot be observed ... in a way, it would be like some hostile force taking control of the Kaaba and refusing to let Muslims perform Hajj ... which constitutes one fifth of the basic, spiritual requirements of a Muslim.

Unfortunately, just as there are people among the Jewish nation who treat Judea, Samaria, Sinai, and Gaza as if they were idols to be worshiped at any cost, there are many Muslims in Palestine, and elsewhere, who treat the Dome of the Rock as an idol to be preserved at all costs. Yet, in neither instance -- that is, in the case of Jews, Greater Israel, nor in the case of Muslims, the Dome of the Rock -- is any essential religious obligation at stake.

The Prophet did not say -- Muslims must preserve the cave within the Dome of the Rock at all costs ... this is your sixth pillar of faith. The Qur'an does not say all Muslims have an obligation to protect the Dome of the Rock. What demands this is idol worship.

The First Temple was erected at some point near 1000 BC. This temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, a Babylonian king, around 586 B.C., when he both enslaved the Jewish people, as well as sent them into Babylonian exile.

Some seventy years later, Jews returned from exile and rebuilt the Second Temple. The Romans burnt the Second Temple to the ground in 70. A.D. In between the building of the Second Temple and its destruction, the Jewish people worshiped at the Temple for centuries.

Between 688 and 691 AD, the caliph Abd al -Malik ordered the construction of the Dome of the Rock. Consequently, in terms of temporal priority, both the First and Second Temples existed long before the Dome of the Rock or al-Aqsa mosque. Furthermore, in terms of spiritual priority, neither the Dome of the Rock nor al-Aqsa mosque play as essential a role within Islam as does the Sacred Temple within Judaism. Muslims can say prayers anywhere on the face of the Earth -- indeed, this is one of the gifts that has been bequeathed to Muslims, but for the Jewish people, the 240 different commandments involving the Sacred Temple in Jerusalem need to be observed if their faith to be fully and properly observed.

If the Jewish and Muslim people were truly interested in securing peace -- and, unfortunately, there are many people on both sides of the issue who are driven by dogmatic theology rather than spiritual necessity -- then a deal would be struck in which Palestinians would be given back the land that was taken from them and, in exchange, the Jewish people would be permitted to build the Third Temple on the Temple Mount. If the Jewish people were really sincere and wise, they would try to find some way of incorporating, if possible, the Dome of the Rock -- or, at least, the central cave and al-Aqsa mosque (or, at least part of it) into the design of the Third Temple, but whether they did this or not, Muslims should be prepared to let go of their idols (i.e., the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa mosque) just as those among the Jewish people should be prepared to let go of their idols ... namely, the land that they have taken from Palestinians and that is being used to further a dogmatic, radical, fundamental theology that says that by stealing land and abusing

Palestinians, God will speed up the process of sending a Messiah to redeem the Jewish nation.

Most Muslims would be shocked and outraged at the suggestion that is being made above, and, yet, I feel confident that if the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) walked the Earth today in physical form, he would be the first to sacrifice mere rocks and buildings for the sake of lasting peace and the cessation of bloodshed. After all, it was the Prophet (peace be upon him) who is reported to have said:

“Shall I not inform you about a better act than fasting, charity, and prayer? ... making peace between one another. Enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by the roots.”

Here, the Prophet (peace be upon him) is clearly indicating there is something more important than three of the five pillars of Islam. And, surely, settling the Palestinian/Israeli internecine hostilities would, God willing, bring peace to a troubled land.

Of course, there will be those who will try to claim such things as: the Prophet (peace be upon him) was only addressing Muslims, or the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not really mean that making peace was better than three of the five pillars ... it was just a way of talking. I have one thing to say to such people ... prove that what you say is the truth of the matter. Show me that you understand the Prophet (peace be upon him) better than he understands himself. And, then, show me where the Qur'an states that Jewish people are not people of the Book and, as a result, are not to be treated with respect or that it is okay to oppress the Jewish people as they attempt to carry out their spiritual duties.

There are numerous other teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Qur'an that can be called upon that are completely consistent and resonant with the foregoing hadith. There is very little -- although there are a few things of which I am aware -- in either the hadith or Qur'an that might serve as a contraindication to what is outlined in the foregoing. For example, the Prophet is reported to have said that the place that marks the location from which the Prophet went on miraj constitutes one of the three places where travel for spiritual purposes is permitted ... the other two being Mecca and Medina. However, since neither the

Dome of the Rock nor al-Aqsa mosque existed during the lifetime of the Prophet, it is the spot at which he led the prayers and from which ascension began to which one is being directed, instead of buildings or structures per se. Furthermore, the matter of visitation is a Divine permission that is being given and not a religious obligation.

In legal circles one speaks in terms of the weight of precedence with respect to any given issue. In essence, this means one weighs the principles that support a given action and measures this against those principles that might lend support to some other action.

I believe the weight of precedence is -- by a considerable and substantial amount -- in favor of what has been provided in overview above. Surely, it would be totally in keeping with the spirit of the Treaty of Hudaibiyah when, despite the grumbling of some of the Companions about what a bad deal it was, the Prophet (peace be upon him) considered it a great victory because, among other things, the treaty established a peace within which Islam could grow and thrive ... and history has proven the Prophet (peace be upon him) to be correct in his assessment of the treaty.

Moreover, there are two other facets of the Treaty of Hudaibiyah that are of relevance here. First, the Meccan leaders objected to the words: "Bismil-laa-hir Rah-maan-ir Ra-heem" (In the Name of God the Beneficent, the Merciful) appearing on the Treaty. They said they didn't believe in such things, and, so, they wanted these words removed from the Treaty. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) complied with this stipulation.

Secondly, not only did the name Muhammad appear on the treaty, but, as well, there were words present that indicated that he was the Messenger of Allah. The Meccan negotiators also wanted the words "Messenger of Allah" removed because they did not believe Muhammad was such a Messenger ... indeed, this issue was one of the primary sources of contention between Muslims and non-Muslims at that time.

The Prophet asked Hazrat 'Ali (May Allah be pleased with him) to cross out the words that were unacceptable to the Meccan chiefs. Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) could not bring himself to do this. Since the Prophet was unlettered and, as a result, could not read nor write the Arabic language, he asked for the 'problematic' words to be pointed out to him. He, then, proceeded to scratch them out.

What is the connection between the foregoing semi-digression and the present state of the Sufi community? In a phrase: "idol worship". All too many people who allege to be on, or interested in, the mystical path of tasawwuf are not prepared to closely examine their own souls or the behavior and teachings of those who claim to be shaykhs in order to determine whether, or not, idols are being worshiped rather than the Truth ... just as all too many Palestinians and Jews are unwilling to look critically at their own beliefs in order to determine the extent to which idols have taken over their respective forms of worship, and, thereby, hold peace hostage to dogmatism and to beliefs that have nothing to do with being able to pursue spirituality.

Surely, if the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) can strike out the words "Bis-mil-laa-hir Rah-maan-ir Ra-heem" and if he can strike out the words "Messenger of Allah", then, if necessary, Muslims should be ready to release their hold on material things -- namely, the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa -- which are standing between them and peace. If necessary, it is better to live in peace without the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa than it is to live without peace and maintain attachment to rock and walls rather the spirit of the principles by which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) lived.

We honor the Prophet, and ourselves, by living in accordance with the sunna of the Prophet. We honor neither by living in accordance with theologies that bow only to belligerence, war-mongering, bloodshed, pride, and oppression.

Similarly, it is better for the Jewish people to give up their claim on large portions of Samaria, Judea, Gaza and Sinai in order to permit Palestinians to have their own state in return for the Jewish people being permitted to build the Third Temple so Jews can fully observe the requirements of their faith. Moreover, great good would be established if the Jewish people could, somehow, permit as much of the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque to be preserved as possible ... to become incorporated into the design of the Third Temple.

Yet, even if the foregoing accommodations were not, for some reason, possible, nonetheless, in words that are attributed to Prophet Isa (peace be upon him): 'blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of Cod.' Seeking the baraka of God is far, far more important than seeking to preserve rocks, caves, walls, earthly rivalries, conflicts, grudges,

tribal warfare, heartache, bloodshed, self-righteousness, or the narrowness and rigidity of dogmatism.

Dream not of lights,  
Of marvels, of miracles  
For your miracles are contained  
In worshiping the Truth;  
All else is pride, conceit,  
And illusion of existence.

Shabistari

### The Nature of Idols - Part 2

The following was written in response to a critical e-mail I received concerning a Sufi Reflections podcast. The podcast contained, among other things, a commentary that dealt with, in part, the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. More specifically, the commentary focused in on some possibilities concerning the role that the Temple Mount and al-Aqsa mosque might play in a peace negotiation. The title of the original commentary was 'Idols'

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In your e-mail you say:

"If I followed your argument, you feel that building the Third Temple is essential for Jews to practice their religion whereas the site is really of little significance in Islam other than featuring as an idol for the Muslim community."

Actually, I didn't argue either of these points.

I did say there are Jews who consider the building of the third temple to be essential to the full practice of Judaism. What I consider to be essential for the Jewish tradition is irrelevant, but, I have taken note of the fact that there are those within the Jewish community who do fervently believe in the need to rebuild the temple for the salvation and redemption of the Jewish people.

I also have taken note of the fact that the Qur'an warns that "oppression is worse than murder". These words are embedded in still other words. More specifically:

"They ask you about the Sacred Months and fighting therein: say, "Fighting therein is a sacrilege. However, repelling from the path of God and disbelieving in Him and in the sanctity of the Sacred Masjid, and evicting its people, are greater sacrileges in the sight of God. Oppression is worse than murder. They will always fight you to revert you from your religion, if they can. Those among you who revert from their religion, and die as disbelievers, have nullified their works in this life and the Hereafter." [Qur'an 2: 217]

A lot of the foregoing has to do with one group of people preventing another group of people from pursuing the path of God, disrespecting a sacred place of worship, and forcing people to be evicted from their place of worship. Since the Qur'an describes the Jews as people of the Book, and since the Qur'an speaks about Prophets, such as Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, and Issac (peace be upon them all) who are dear to the hearts of the Jewish people as well as Muslims, and since the Qur'an instructs us not to make any divisions among the Prophets, then one might wish to tread a little carefully with respect to making judgments about what peoples, sacred places, and modes of worship might be candidates for oppression – or, whether anyone -- even if that individual might be wrong, in certain ways, concerning a mode of worship -- deserves to be oppressed or that anyone has a carte blanche right to oppress another human being.

My read on some of the Israeli political scene is that among the driving forces at work that shape and color much of what goes on within Israel are two, in particular, on which we ought to reflect ... both of which were alluded to in the most recent pod-cast. First, there is the belief about an alleged covenant between God and his 'chosen people' with respect to 'Greater Israel' involving Samaria, Judea, Gaza and Sinai. Secondly, there is the issue of the building of the third temple.

The two issues really have nothing to do with one another except to the extent that they both play roles within Israeli politics and 'bleed' over into the lives of other people ... whether this bleeding-over process involves Palestinians or Lebanese, or Syrians. In fact, the issue about the land is not so much a function of the covenant supposedly governing this aspect of things, but, rather, many fundamentalist Jews believe that by occupying this land, the fact of occupation, in and of itself, will hasten the return of the coming Messiah ... not seeming to understand that all of these 'events' are beyond our capacity to either hasten or delay ... indeed, this is what fuels the whole Israeli settlement issue, an issue that is, and has been, manipulated by various Israeli politicians and so-called 'leaders' for their own political agenda.

As I pointed out in the pod-cast, the land issue is just an expression of someone's theology and has nothing to do with the issue of being able to observe the Jewish faith ... that is, the land is not needed to observe the requirements of Judaism. What the actual nature of the covenant was, or

whether there were conditions associated with the covenant, or whether such conditions were observed by the Jewish people, or with whom, precisely, the covenant was made, or whether the covenant was to be understood metaphorically or literally are all matters of relevance, but irrespective of how relevant these matters might be to the issue of the specific nature of the covenant, these issues really have nothing to do with the requirements that are necessary to observe Judaic practice ... at least as this has been explained by some of those who purportedly are in the know about such matters.

The second point that should be made in relation to the foregoing excerpt from your e-mail is this. I never said that the Temple Mount was unimportant to Muslims, nor did I say that the Temple Mount constituted an idol.

Idols are fashioned by human beings. Idols have to do with the 'attachments' and theologies and false ideas that are developed by human beings in relation to objects.

There cannot be an idol independent of human conceptual and emotional machinations. Indeed, as is indicated in the Qur'an, on the Day of Judgment, that which has been treated as an idol will disavow all that has been attributed to it by human beings.

The meaning and significance of the Temple Mount exists quite independently of our thoughts about it. It is not the task of the Temple Mount to submit to our ideas about it, but, rather, it is our task to submit to truths concerning the Temple Mount, and a little later in this e-mail I will have something more to say on this theme.

In the meantime, let the following observation suffice. Just as the issue of land in relation to 'Greater Israel' plays no substantive role in whether, or not, Jewish people are able to observe the tenets and requirements of the Jewish faith, so, too, the Temple Mount plays no essential role in Muslims being able to practice their faith. Yes, the historical and spiritual events associated with the Temple Mount might have a place in our hearts, but if the Temple Mount were to, somehow, mysteriously disappear from the face of the Earth, nothing in Islam would suddenly become inoperative.

You go on to say in your opening paragraph that you believe my idea [the one about possibly swapping peace and land for releasing the Temple Mount so that Jews can build the third temple]:

"is wrong and [my] argument lacking foundation in Islam -- perhaps it is based in the erroneous propaganda circulating around the West, and America in particular, that Islam equals peace or in quasi - sufi teaching best summed up by the Beatles' 'All You Need Is Love."

While 'peace' is one meaning associated with the linguistic root of the word 'Islam', there are, as you know, other meanings associated with that root -- one of which is 'submission'. Where much disagreement arises is in conjunction with the question: 'submission to what'? ... and/or 'what is the nature of this submission?'

There are a lot of theories and theologies that have arisen about the nature of submission. The Prophet, himself, alluded to this when he is reported to have said:

"There are 71 sects among Jews, and only one of them is correct. There are 72 sects among Christians, and only one of them is correct. There are 73 sects among Muslims, and only one of them is correct."

Notwithstanding the foregoing cautionary note, I believe there is an approach to this issue that allows one to gain some degree of insight into the matter and, at the same time, link up the theme of submission to that of peace in a way that points to deeper levels of significance.

Submission has to do with truth, the purpose of life and the essential nature of being human. We were created for a purpose, and we have been given a capacity for truth, and by realizing the potential of that capacity, we have, if God wishes, the opportunity to fulfill the purpose for which we were created. And, in the fulfillment of that purpose, there is peace ... that is, essential peace, spiritual peace, emotional peace, physical peace, and psychological peace all come through submitting ourselves to the purpose of creation.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

"There is no peace for a believer other than in meeting one's Lord."

Through fulfilling the purpose of life, through realizing our essential spiritual nature or fitra, we do meet our Lord within our capacity to do so, for as the Prophet is reported to have said:

"The one who knows oneself knows one's Lord."

In the Qur'an, one finds:

"I created humankind and jinn only to worship Me." [Qur'an, 51:56]

So, now the question becomes: what is the nature of worship?

Some would wish to argue that the five pillars of Islam are the essence of worship. Although I believe these to be important forms of expression of spiritual life, none of these expressions is worth much except with the appropriate niyat or intention that is, presumably, why the Prophet (peace be upon him) indicated that there are many who fast and receive nothing but hunger and there are many who keep the night vigil engaged in prayer and receive nothing but tiredness.

Moreover, without wishing in any to minimize the importance of the five pillars as acts of worship, nevertheless, taken in only their literal and restricted sense, the five pillars of faith do not encompass the broad expanse of what constitutes worship. By all means, let people observe the five pillars in the restricted sense, but bearing witness that God is one and Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger of God is more than mouthing a few words ... 'bearing witness' encompasses one's whole life -- along with everything that is done within and through that life.

Similarly, prayer is more than just saying the five prayers at their appointed times. The Prophet is reported to have said that prayer is only acceptable to Allah when the heart is aware, and, in addition, he is reported to have counseled that one should pray without ceasing.

The Qur'an indicates that:

“Lo! Ritual prayer preserves one from lewdness and Iniquity, but, verily remembrance of Allah is more important [Qur'an, 29:45]

Here is a very important indication that while ritual prayer is important, it is not the be all and end all of things. One can take the foregoing notion of remembrance and align it with the Prophet's counsel to pray without ceasing to acquire a richer sense of this facet of worship or ibadat.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said that:

“The root of all prayers is renunciation of the world, and love of the world is the root of all mischief.”

Not even ritual prayers can be said without the intention to renounce the world, and this includes renouncing the desire of a reward for the observing of prayers.

Prayer, in whatever form – ritual or otherwise – consists, according to the Prophet, in service, drawing closer, and joining. All of life can be prayer in this sense if God wishes.

As a minimum, fasting is only required once a year, for 29 or 30 days. However, the greater fast should extend throughout the rest of the year – this greater fast is really rooted in the principles of the lesser, more limited fast.

Fasting is not only about what we take in physically but, as well, what we imbibe emotionally, psychologically, financially, socially, and spiritually. Fasting during the month of Ramazan is an opportunity to disengage ourselves from the machinations of nafs (the carnal soul) and dunya (the collective entanglements of everyone's nafs) ... fasting is an opportunity to disengage ourselves from the worldly rhythms of life and become more under the sway and influence of the spiritual rhythms of Creation – both within us and without us.

There is a hadith qudsi which stipulates that:

“There is nothing more pleasing to Me than when my servant does that which I have made obligatory upon that person.”

But, then, this hadith goes on to say:

“My devoted servant does not cease to draw nigh unto Me with acts of free-will offering until I love him, and when I love him, I am the eye with which he sees, the ear with which he hears, the feet, wherein he walks, and the hands by which he acts.”

The foregoing hadith is said, first and foremost, in reference to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), but there is relevance in that hadith for each of us according to our capacity.

Fasting during Ramadan is a good thing. Nonetheless, the matter of fasting does not stop there. It is merely a beginning. Fasting in the ritual sense, like bearing witness through saying the Shahadah, and ritual prayer, is to be understood, simultaneously, in both its limited and more expansive meanings.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“When Ramazan begins, the garden is opened; the gates of the Fire are closed; Shaytan is bound in chains; and a caller calls: ‘Come forward, O you who desire good, and retreat O you who desire evil.’”

Surely, we should seek to preserve and observe the spirit of Ramazan throughout the year. Let the garden be opened. Let the gates of fire be closed. Let the shaytan (devils) be bound in chains and let us heed the call of the caller to do good and avoid evil.

Or, let us, for a moment, consider charity. In its exoteric sense, Charity can easily be calculated. Take 2 1/2 % of one’s yearly savings, and give it to any of the categories of permissible recipients that are mentioned in the Qur’an.

Charity in its more extended sense is far more demanding. The Qur'an indicates:

"And they ask thee (O Muhammad) what they ought to spend (in the way of Allah). Say: that which is left after meeting your needs." [Qur'an, 2: 219]

And, again, the Qur'an says:

"Whoever submits one's whole self to Allah and is a doer of good has indeed grasped the most trustworthy handhold." [Qur'an, 31:22]

By way of partial elaboration on the foregoing, the Prophet has been reported to have said:

"By no means shall you attain to righteousness until you spend benevolently out of what you love."

We tend to love ourselves and our possessions, so, unless, one gives benevolently of these things, some of the lessons of zaqat have not been learned, and the doorway of opportunity which zaqat constitutes, as a potential passageway to a life-long form of spiritual charity, might close.

The Qur'an indicates:

"Those who spend their wealth for increase in self-purification and have in their minds no favor from anyone for which a reward is expected in return, but only the desire to seek for the Countenance of their Lord Most High." [Qur'an, 92:18-20].

Even with respect to Allah, there is only the desire for seeking the Divine Countenance and not the expectation of its realization.

Finally, Hajj, in the lesser sense, refers to the set of activities that transpire during a period of days in the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar calendar. But, in reality, all of life is a pilgrimage – “we come from Allah, and to Him we are returning”. Life is the great journey of return.

In life we repent and seek Allah’s forgiveness as did Adam (peace be upon him). The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Satan never feels more dejected, crestfallen and humiliated than on the day of Arafat”

... the day when pilgrims stand in the Plain of Arafat and seek God’s forgiveness. The Prophet is reported to have counseled those who were with him:

“Shall I tell you about illnesses and its remedy?” They replied: “Indeed, O Messenger of Allah.” He said: “Your illness is your sins, and your remedy is repentance.”

All of the different rites of Hajj are – or can be – reflected in the events of everyday life. As the Qur’an says:

“O Humankind! Surely you are toiling towards the Lord, painfully toiling, but you shall meet Him you shall surely travel from stage to stage.” [Qur’an, 84: 6, 9]

As is the case with Hajj, every day of our lives should be a matter of seeking Allah, remembering Allah, worshiping Allah, repenting to Allah, asking for forgiveness, eschewing Satan as did the Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him), circumambulating the Ka’bah of our heart, running in a frenzy between the hillocks of need and dependence, as did Hagar (may Allah be pleased with her), and being willing to sacrifice ourselves (not others) in the way of Allah – As the Qur’an indicates:

“Say: Surely, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death are all for Allah, the Lord of the worlds.” (Qur’an, 6:162)

As was noted earlier, in your e-mail you throw out the possibility that, perhaps, I am working under the influence of the sort of Western propaganda that proclaims that: “Islam equals peace or in quasi - sufi teaching best summed up by the Beatles' 'All You Need Is Love.” You go on to say that:

“While I know that your briefs usually touch on politics, your using tasawwuf as the only lens in which to examine issues sometimes becomes misleading. My former shaykh (Allah be pleased with him) always stressed that one could not be a true sufi by ignoring any of Allah’s commandments, however much they might seem personally unpalatable.”

The foregoing comments open up a lot of doors that might be explored. For instance, one could ask what the nature of tasawwuf is and what kind of lens it constitutes and whether there were other lenses that might be better in some way and what the criteria are that are to serve as identifying that which is “better”. Or, one might inquire into what it means to be a “true sufi”? Or, one might ask about whether there are distinctions to be drawn among aspirants, initiates, travelers, and those who have arrived in relation to the Sufi path. Or, one might explore the issue of what the commandments of Allah are and according to whom and on what grounds? Or, one might seek to discover the nature of love and whether love is all you really need and, then, proceed on to the question of ‘need for what’?

I don’t propose to address all the issues, some of which are noted in the foregoing, that are raised by the previously quoted excerpts from your email. Nonetheless, there are some observations that can be stated.

To begin with, no one – irrespective of what kind of lens is used – sees or understands anything beyond what one’s capacity permits or beyond what Allah bestows in the way of baraka or Grace. Furthermore, the methodology, purposes, and components through which, for which, and from which any given lens is constructed can be very

complex. Historical, social, philosophical, political, emotional, theological, and personal motivations can all color and shape the character of a given lens through which we seek to engage reality.

An important dimension of any spiritual quest is to seek objectivity in the lenses that are made through our efforts. That is, we endeavor to construct lenses for engaging reality that are as free from biases, prejudices, falsehoods, distortions, and problems as we can render those lenses.

This is why the Sufi path emphasizes the importance of a process of purification of the nafs, heart, sirr, kafi, and spirit – each of which is spoken of in the Qur’an – for example, the Qur’an says:

“God knows the secret (sirr) and that which is more hidden (kafi).”  
[Qur’an, 20: 7]

– and, each of which has its own methodologies, nuances, functions and capabilities.

In Surah Shams one finds:

“By the Sun and his brightness,  
And, by the moon when she follows him,  
And by the Day when it reveals him,  
And by the Night when it enshrouds him,  
And by the heaven and He Who built it,  
And by the earth and He Who spread it,  
And by the soul and Him Who perfected it  
And inspired it with knowledge of lewdness and God-fearing,  
He is indeed successful who causes the soul to grow,  
And He is indeed a failure who stunts its growth.”

According to my shaykh (may Allah be pleased with him), the rhetorical style of the Qur’an is such that when Allah wishes to emphasize the importance of something, the medium of oaths is used. In Surah

Shams, one finds oath upon oath upon oath upon oath by the Sun, and by the moon, and by the Day and by the Night, and by the heaven, and by the earth, and by the soul, and by Him Who built the heavens, and by Him Who spread the Earth, And by Him Who perfected the soul and inspired it With knowledge of lewdness and God-fearing.

On many occasions I heard my shaykh say that nowhere else in the Qur'an does one encounter so many oaths heaped on one another as in the opening verses of Surah Shams. Clearly, God is seeking to draw our attention to something of crucial importance – and this emphasis or focus has to do with the things we do that can either purify the soul and help it grow, or the things we can do to sully and obstruct the growth of the soul.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Every person who rises in the morning either does that which will be the means of one’s redemption or one’s ruin.”

Each day we either pursue the purification and growth of the soul or we do not.

Elsewhere in the Qur'an, one finds:

“That person prospers who purifies oneself, invokes the name of one’s Lord, and prays.” [Qur'an, 87: 14].

Throughout my adult life I have sought to do each of things – sometimes more so and better than at other times.

The foregoing is also why such emphasis is given on the Sufi path to the development of character for in character lies the capacity to do justice to the truth, irrespective of its personal costs. Thus, the Prophet is reported to have said:

“I have been given all the Names and have been sent to perfect good character and conduct.”

The Prophet also is reported to have said that:

“The best thing in the Scale on the Day of Judgment will be a beautiful character”,

and he is also reported to have said that:

“The most perfect of the faithful in faith is the most beautiful of them in character”.

In addition, the Prophet was asked:

“Which part of faith is most excellent?” He is reported to have replied: “a beautiful character”.

And, finally, the Prophet is reported to have said:

“Allah has 300 attributes, and the person who acquires just one of these for one’s own character, will inherit Paradise.”

Clearly, the lenses that are constructed by us and through which we engage, interpret, understand, and act in relation to reality are very important. Clearly the methodologies and processes through which we fashion, shape, color, and orient the qualities that are made into such lenses are of critical importance. Clearly the intentions with which we undertake such a lens constructing project are of essential importance.

You indicate that the lens of tasawwuf that you allege I use to examine many issues can, sometimes, be misleading. You also say, as quoted earlier, that the Whitehouse Briefs portion of the Sufi Reflections Pod-cast usually touch on politics.

Actually, although some of my comments might “touch on politics” in the sense of involving critiques of various political positions, I am not interested

in politics per se; I don't participate in politics; I am not a member of any political party, and I believe that politics is firmly entrenched in the realm of dunya and nafs, and, therefore, the farther away one stays from politics, the better off one is.

At the same time, I do seek the truth, and I do attempt to do justice to the truth as I understand it and according to whatever insights, if any, God might have blessed me with in relation to the realms of truth, action, knowledge, understanding, and justice in the activities of humankind. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Live in this world as if one were going to live for a thousand years and live for the next world as if one were going to die tomorrow,”

and, surely, part of this means that with respect to this world, one should do unto others as one would want others to do unto oneself, and, with respect to the next world, one should attempt to busy oneself with activities that might, if God wishes, have value in the life to come.

With respect to this world, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have asked and, then, answered the following question: ‘What actions are most excellent’, by stating:

“To gladden the heart of a human being; to feed the hungry; to help the afflicted; to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful; to remove the wrong of the injured.”

How I do any of this is my responsibility. I try to follow the example of the Prophet according to my capacity and understanding, and I do not feel duty bound to follow what another human being says is my duty unless there is merit in what is said. In this respect, I try to take into consideration a variety of points of view, and, then, I reflect on these matters, and, then, God willing, I make a judgment concerning an issue, and, then, I try to act in accordance with that judgment --- this is a judgment for which I – and no one else -- will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment, and it is a judgment about which I pray a prayer of the Qur'an:

“O my Lord, increase me in knowledge.” [Qur’an, 20: 114].

As the Qur’an indicates:

“No soul benefits except from its own works, and none bears the burden of another. Ultimately, you return to your Lord; then He informs you regarding all your disputes.” [Qur’an, 6:164]

In the Qur’an one finds:

“To everyone We appointed a Law and a Way.” [Qur’an, 5:48].

I have my law, and I have my way, and I seek to apply myself to both and gain greater insight into each of these as I travel on my journey of return ... my pilgrimage back to Allah.

The Qur’an says:

“Say: Each works according to one’s own manner.” [Qur’an, 17: 84].

I have the fitra or primordial capacity that God has given me, and I seek to realize, if God wishes, some of the constructive potential of that capacity.

To do – or try to do -- the foregoing, one needs more than love. Among other things, one also needs: faith, commitment, perseverance, courage, compassion, sincerity, honesty, humility, kindness, tolerance, forbearance, repentance, equitability, piety, patience, dependence on Allah, balance, knowledge, modesty, and strength. This is what the Sufis teach, and this forms part of the lens through which I attempt to engage the events of life. Byazid al-Bistami (may Allah be pleased with him) once said:

“The contraction of the heart lies in the expansion of the nafs, while the expansion of the heart lies in the nafs’ contraction.”

Truly, there is much that is unpalatable to the nafs that nurtures the heart, spirit and soul. However, what is unpalatable to the nafs is not necessarily this or that commandment that is being alleged as having been issued from Divinity.

Islam is about opportunity, not necessarily obedience. Islam is about unique potentials, not necessarily rewards. Islam is about the sort of faith that one must verify with one’s heart, not a blind adherence to that which has been invented by this or that theologian. Islam is about principles and not necessarily legalities or rules. Islam is dynamic not static. Islam is flexible not rigid. Islam is about realizing the purpose of life and not necessarily achieving Paradise – as real as the latter might be. Islam provides a way for every spiritual capacity, and Islam is not necessarily just one narrowly defined way to which everyone must acquiesce.

What the nature of the aforementioned: opportunity, unique potential, faith, principles, flexibility, dynamism, and way alluded to above might be has been outlined in the foregoing discussion. It is not quasi-Sufi, but fully Sufi, and, despite your belief to the contrary, the foregoing lays a fully Islamic foundation for dealing with the sorts of objections that you wish to make concerning the idea that offering the Temple Mount to the Jewish people in exchange for peace, land and full sovereignty of the Palestinian people is somehow un-Islamic.

Before stating what you consider to be Islamic objections to the foregoing idea, you state a few things that you believe can be offered from what you believe to be the Jewish side of things. For example, you state:

“You mentioned at least twice in your brief that Jews could not worship properly without their temple, being a center of their world and a source of redemption for them. This struck me as odd, as if it were so terribly important, one ought to inquire about how the Jews have gotten along for the last two thousand years since Titus destroyed the second temple.”

The short answer to your question is: the Jews have gotten along in relation to the practice of their faith only with difficulty as far as the portions of their faith are concerned that cannot be observed due to a lack of the sacred temple. Part of these difficulties have been due to the Diaspora, and part of these difficulties have been due to a lack of a space and the power to effect the building of the third temple, and part of these difficulties have been due to the totalitarian, manipulative, and oppressive manner in which the modern state of Israel was created and all of the totally unnecessary – but all too real -- problems that that strategy entailed.

When you can't do what you need to do, you do what you can. And, so, the Jewish people have tried to make do as best they can without the presence of the third temple. However, it doesn't necessarily follow that because they have been able to make do without the third temple, that, therefore, one should continue to create difficulties for the Jewish people in relation to this aspect of their faith.

You go on to say that you:

“... came across a quote from a Jewish work entitled Avoth de - Rabbi Natan wherein is described a conversation between Rabbi Yehosua and Rabbi Yochanan. The former lamenting the destruction of the second Temple, the later replied that redemption was now arrived at via “loving kindness” as stated in Hosea 6:6 “I desire loving kindness and not sacrifice.” Another source from the Babylonian Talmud states that two rabbis, Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eleazar relate that while the Temple stood, its altar atoned for Israel's sins, and now that it is gone “one's table atones,” i.e. that kindness and charity were the path of redemption. Additionally, the liturgy of the Days of Awe state that prayer, repentance, and piety atone for sin. So, it seems the Temple is not so central in redemption after all.”

Actually, all your stated research shows is that there were some Jewish Rabbis who felt there were ways of proceeding in the absence of the physical presence of the third temple that might serve, if God wished, as a temporary substitute for the role played by that sacred structure. The Rabbis you mention had inventive, constructive, moral and flexible ways of dealing with the difficulty represented by the absence of the third temple.

If necessary, one can get along without all manner of things, and in the process, adapt to the exigencies of the circumstances. A person who is blind, or deaf, or physically challenged in some way can find ways of adapting to, and, perhaps, even thriving in the face of adversity, but this doesn't mean that if the opportunity for the regaining of sight, hearing, or overcoming some other form of physical impairment came along, one should just stick with an interim mode of adaptation.

Secondly, I do not think it is the place of Muslims to tell the Jewish people what is, or is not, central to redemption, any more than I believe it is the place of Israel to try to impose on Palestinians Israeli notions of what constitutes justice and fairness. I am sure that many Jewish people would agree that one cannot eliminate individual efforts in the seeking of personal redemption and salvation, but the redemption of a nation might require something more than individual acts of atonement ... however important these personal acts might be.

Next you say:

"Additionally, the majority of Jews believe that the third Temple should and/or will be built in the era of the Messiah. The minority position is that the Temple ought to be rebuilt whenever possible. That minority position would also not be inclined to give up land. The main reason, it seems, for Jews to wait for the Messiah is that the dimensions of the Temple are not actually known. Well, they know all the measurements in cubits, but there is disagreement on what exactly a cubit is – an issue that only the Messiah can resolve."

I have not conducted any polls that identify what the majority, or minority, of Jews believe with respect to the Third Temple. I haven't seen any such polls, and I don't know how accurate and reliable the polls are to which you allude in your comment. However, if we use your claims as a working hypothesis, then I have the following suggestions to make: for those who believe that the Third Temple should not be constructed until the arrival of the Messiah, then, as a gesture of good faith on both sides, why don't Muslims say that when the Messiah arrives, the Jews might have the Temple Mount for the building of their third temple, but, in the mean time, let the Muslims continue to pray there and, moreover, the Israelis should

give back the lands and sovereignty that have been taken from the Palestinians. As for those among the Jews who believe that the temple should be constructed now, then permit the Jewish nation to proceed with this, but in the meantime, the Jewish people should observe the ten commandments that are also part of their faith and, as a result, not covet the property of their neighbors nor steal from their neighbors nor kill their neighbors. If the Jewish people wish to build the third temple in order to be able to observe all of their faith, then, they should practice all of the rest of their faith as well ... don't pick and choose what will be observed in the way of spiritual practice and what will not be observed with respect to such practices.

You follow up your foregoing comments with the following:

“One should also note that the rebuilding of the Temple is something that all Jews pray for, but which is not a principle of faith.”

If all Jews pray for the building of the Third Temple, and if, as you claim, it has nothing to do with observing their faith, then why do they pray for it? What role, function, or purpose does the Third Temple serve in their lives? Is it merely a matter of representing sentimental value? And, if it is merely of sentimental value, then, what difference does it make whether, or not, one waits for the Messiah in order to get the measurements right?

You continue by saying:

“I would argue that if it actually were an article of faith that the Temple must be rebuilt, it would have been done so by now as the Israelis have had effective control of the Temple Mount since the Six Day War. On the contrary, the Israelis, despite their apparent military superiority and ability to enforce their will, have left the management of the Temple Mount in the hands of the Islamic Waqf, in whose hands it has been since the Muslims conquered the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 637 CE.”

I disagree with your contention that if the rebuilding of the temple were really an article of faith, then the Israelis, with all their military superiority, would have enforced their will on the Temple Mount. First of all, if what

you argued earlier were true – that is, if the majority of the Jewish people believe it is necessary to wait for the advent of the Messiah before rebuilding the temple -- then they can afford to bide their time and wait for the appropriate events to unfold, doing nothing in the meantime ... in fact, even being able to assume a certain aura of magnanimity by ‘allowing’ the Muslims to retain control of the Temple Mount. Secondly, if the Israelis were to forcibly evict Muslims from the Temple Mount, they would risk igniting a real public relations nightmare for Israel around the world, not to mention an on-going human tragedy – for both Muslims and Jews -- of incredible proportions.

With the active help of American religious leaders, journalists, media leaders, and members of Congress, Israeli politicians have been able to get away with many forms of oppression, torture, destruction, and injustice with respect to the Palestinian people. However, I think that Israel would be signing its own death warrant with respect to its respect to its ability to get away with things as it has in the past if it were to lay waste to the Temple Mount and/or forcibly evict Muslims from that area and I believe the Israelis understand this. They have left management of the Temple Mount in the hands of the Islamic Waqf because it is prudent for them to do so under the present circumstances.

In the next portion of your e-mail you move on to what you consider to be Islamic arguments against the idea of thinking about arranging a swap of lands, peace, and sovereignty for the Palestinians in exchange for the Jewish community’s right to build their Third Temple. More specifically, you claim:

“Unlike some Muslims today, the early Muslims believed that Islam was the perfection and final religion, abrogating all other religions.”

Actually, Islam always existed – right from the time of Adam (peace be upon him). It might have received its final name and form in the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), but spiritual traditions that were pursued by the 124,000 Prophets, and that were disclosed through various revealed books – including the Divine revelations given to Jesus, Moses, David, and Abraham (peace be upon them all) – all contained the

essential spiritual guidance needed by human beings to realize the purpose of life.

Nothing in the way of essential spirituality was abrogated. To be sure, mistaken and false theologies that had arisen over the course of time were corrected. This was accomplished through God sending more Prophets and books of revelation to humankind, to renew the message of truth that already had been given to earlier generations.

This renewal of spiritual truth had to do with the nature of life, faith, justice, love, worship, compassion, kindness, patience, sincerity, piety, remembrance, methodology, practice, mankind's relation to divinity, the life to come, warnings, moral principles, and so on. I challenge anyone to name one authentic Prophet to whom these spiritual truths were not given.

You use the term "perfection" in relation to religion. I agree with you that the Qur'an says that "on this day I have perfected your religion", put what, exactly, did Allah mean by this? How was the deen perfected? What was added or changed?

Are you saying that what human beings were given prior to the time of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was but a pale imitation of the real truth and but a shoddy piece of workmanship? Are you saying that what human beings were given prior to the time of the Prophet was filled with error, problems, and was lacking in what human beings needed to realize their essential primordial nature? And, if you are saying this, then what significance should be given to Prophets and revelation prior to the time of the Prophet -- especially since we are told to make no divisions among Prophets and especially since we are told that the Qur'an has incorporated within its contents all of the previous revelations that have been sent to humankind?

What are we to make of the Quranic injunction:

"So follow the deen of Abraham, the upright. He was not of the idolaters." [3: 95]

Or, again,

“Who forsakes the millati of Abraham save him who deludes himself.” [Qur’an, 2: 130]

What are we to make of all of the traditions related in the Qur’an that extol the character of earlier Prophets and use their lives to inspire, instruct, guide, warn, and teach Muslims of today? Are we to suppose that none of this was part of the perfection to which you are alluding?

In the section of your e-mail where you talk about the fact that God had perfected the deen of Muhammad and completed God’s favor upon the Prophet, you mention the part of Surah 5, verse 3 that states how Allah has “chosen for you Islam as your religion.” What seems to be missing from your account is that Allah had chosen Islam for all of the prophets.

God didn’t choose some other religion for the Prophets prior to Muhammad (peace be upon him). There might have been certain practices that were given to Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his followers (e.g., fasting, prayer, and pilgrimage in their current form) that were not bestowed on earlier Prophets and their followers, but the beliefs in the Oneness of Divinity, the angels, the prophets, revelation, the Day of Judgment, and that God is the determiner of good and evil, were all present from the time of Adam (peace be upon him). Similarly, prayer, remembrance, worship, charity, and the performance of good deeds were also observed by earlier Prophets and their followers.

Whatever differences of guidance and practice that exist among the different Prophets are variations on the same underlying deen. One is not talking about different spiritual traditions, even if some people gave different names to the essential deen and sought, over time, to introduce practices and teachings that had not been inherent in the original Divine guidance given to such Prophets.

You continue on with:

“As far as abrogating all previous religions, Allah says, “Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam will never have it accepted of him, and he will be of those who have truly failed in the hereafter.” (Koran 3:85) ...”

What is the deen of Islam? The deen of Islam is what is transmitted through the Qur'an, and what is transmitted through the Qur'an encompasses what has been passed on through the other Prophets and the previous revelations that is true.

The best exemplar of the observance and practice of Islam is the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). However, it is the Prophet's entire body of intention, understanding, knowledge, and practice that constitutes this example ... not just what we presume that practice to be.

Many people maintain that they grasp the intention, understanding, knowledge and practice of the Prophet. I have my doubts about such a position.

Only someone of the Prophet's spiritual stature could possibly understand the Prophet, and, therefore, since the rest of us are not of that stature, we are left to grapple as best we can with the clues that are left behind in the form of the Qur'an and the sunna (actions) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The Qur'an says:

"So, the one who has obeyed the Messenger has obeyed God."  
[Qur'an, 4: 80]

And, when the Messenger instructs me to do something, then, God willing, I will strive to do that which is indicated for me. However, there are far too many people running around claiming that the Prophet is instructing me to do this and instructing me to do that and, yet, in many, if not most, cases, what I am being told is little more than someone's interpretation of the Qur'an or someone's interpretation of the life of the Prophet ... interpretations which often are rooted in very questionable and arbitrary assumptions, premises, and leaps of logic.

The Qur'an teaches many things, and the Prophet teaches many things. How one balances those teachings, how one forges a spiritual vector that is capable of combining different, sometimes conflicting, teachings into a wise course of action in any given set of circumstances, is something which needs to be explored, discussed, reflected upon, questioned, and analyzed in considerable detail by the Muslim community.

I believe in the concept of shura – at least in the sense of having public forums concerning issues of the day in which everyone comes to those forums and is given an equal opportunity to express their perspective, concerns, questions, ideas, and the like. But when someone in another country – whether this someone is an imam, a shaykh in the non-sufi sense, a mullah, a mufti, a qadi, an Ayatollah, a Caliph, an alim, and even, unfortunately, many who refer to themselves as Sufi shaykhs (there are all too many inauthentic spiritual guides these days who are masquerading as something they are not) – issues a fatwa and tries to argue that they are speaking on behalf of the Prophet or God and that people must submit to the dictates of such a fatwa and if they do not then they are among the unbelievers, then I begin to suspect that nafs and dunya are at play, not spirituality and certainly not Islam.

For many, Islam means the five pillars and the enforcement of one of the five schools of Muslim jurisprudence. For me, Islam means the five pillars – in both their literal and more expanded senses – along with the use of all of the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet to construct an expression of public deen that operates in accordance with spiritual principles that should have been part of the basis of traditional Muslim jurisprudence but were not and, God willing, in the near future, there will be an elaboration of precisely what is being alluded to here within a number of pod-casts that are, at this time, in the planning stages (This is reference to a book that now has been published entitled: *Shari'ah, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*)

In the meantime, let me say the following: I take exception with the idea that unless an individual adheres to someone's checklist of Muslim legitimacy, then their spiritual pedigree becomes suspect and such individuals deserve the oppression that comes their way at the hands of those who consider themselves to be spiritually pure. Whether someone is submitting, or trying as best she or he can, to submit to Islam, is not a judgment that should be left in the hands of other than God or His Prophets.

If a person were to say there were no Prophets, or there are no angels, or there were no books of revelation, or there is no Day of Judgment, or that God is not the determiner of good and evil, or that God is not One, then all of this would be to promote a deen that is other than Islam. Or, if one were to say that God is uninterested in whether, or not,

we struggle to spiritually purify ourselves, or that God does not encourage human beings to learn how to worship properly, or to remember Divinity, or to do justice or to serve human beings or to establish character in our lives or to be loving, kind, forgiving, patient and compassionate with respect to other human beings, or if one were to claim that God said or taught that human beings have no duty of care to Creation, then, all of this would be seeking something other than Islam.

There are many Christians, Jews, Native Peoples, Buddhists, Hindus, and people of a few other spiritual traditions I have met or whom I have read who would not have a problem with any of the foregoing principles and practices of Islam, even if those individuals might give expression to such principles and practices in a way that is somewhat different from how I might have understood things. There are many Muslims I have met who do not pray five times a day, or who have not gone on pilgrimage, or who don't always observe the different aspects of halal and haram, or who do not keep the fast of Ramazan. Have these people rejected Islam? Not necessarily, but they seem to have misplaced or given insufficient attention to some of its components.

There are a fair number of Muslims I have met who are quite religious about observing the five pillars of Islam but who are absolutely repugnant in terms of how they treat other people, or with respect to the high opinion they have of themselves, or in relation to the lack of character they often exhibited during the course of everyday life. Are these people really embracing the fullness of Islamic deen and, if not, should we say that, perhaps, they are not acting in accordance with the requirements of Islam and have, to this extent, rejected Islam?

Why should only those people get spiritual credit for that which is dear to the hearts of some people – for example, observing the five pillars – even as some of those 'observant' individuals go about their lives as cruel, unjust, manipulative, uncaring, abusive individuals. And, why should those people who strive, for the sake of Divinity, to be loving, kind, compassionate, just, honest, charitable, forgiving, peaceful, patient, humble people not get spiritual credit for this even if they might be somewhat lax when it comes to certain forms of worship.

Islam is all inclusive. However, one engages Islam according to capacity and God's Grace, and, therefore, being Muslim involves working on a continuum of spiritual possibilities.

“To God belongs the conclusive argument” [Qur’an, 6, 149]

... to God - not to human beings-- belongs the conclusive argument. People who are inclined to make judgments about who is and who is not a Muslim have ascribed to themselves God-like qualities to which they are not entitled.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Muslims are brothers and sisters in deen, and they do not oppress one another, nor abandon assisting each other, nor hold one another in contempt. The seat of righteousness is the heart; therefore, that heart which is righteous does not hold a Muslim in contempt.”

To label someone who is seeking to submit to the truth -- as best she or he is able to do under a given set of circumstances -- as being not a Muslim simply because the spiritual offerings of those individuals does not precisely reflect one’s own sense of what it means to be a Muslim, seems to me to be lacking something in the realm of righteousness, and it borders on, if not crosses over into, the domain of contempt for someone who might be a Muslim in God’s eyes even if that person does not appear to be a Muslim in one’s own mind’s eye.

You go on to speak about the perennialist philosophies in the following way:

“The perennialist philosophies might point to commonality in all religions, to which Muslim scholars simply say that Allah sent messengers to every people, this accounts for similarities, and points out that Allah has perfected His religion in Islam. Perennialists often point to the verse, “The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, as do men of faith. Each one of them believes in Allah, His angels, His Books, and His messengers. They say, ‘We make no distinctions between any of His messengers.’ And they say, ‘We hear and obey: We seek Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the end of all journeys.”

(Koran 2:285), but again Muslims see this merely pointing out that Islam was and is Allah's religion, inclusive of all the prophets and messengers, and that Muhammad (Allah's peace and blessing be upon him) was the last and through him came the perfection of religion – not that all religions have the same end.”

I am not a perennialist. I do not believe, among other tenets within the perennial perspective, that there is a transcendental unity of religions (see the last chapter – prior to the appendices – of this book). However, I do believe that many – but not all -- of the spiritual systems now in existence have their roots in truths that were disclosed to different peoples in various times and places by an array of Prophets and Books of revelation. Moreover, because God has given human beings both a limited capacity for free will, as well as capacities for both spiritual growth and spiritual ruination, the tendency was that many people lost touch with all, or part, of the truths to which they once were heirs, or people corrupted those truths with their own ideas, conjectures, beliefs, and theories.

Where different spiritual traditions hold things in common, it is because of the truths that are jointly shared as part of the spiritual legacies that have been bequeathed to them through the Prophets and Books of Revelation that were sent to them. Yet, this is saying something quite different than the idea of a transcendental unity of religions.

There has only ever been one authentic spiritual tradition. The plurality of religions has arisen as a result of error, misunderstanding, corruption, and rebellion in relation to the truth.

Notwithstanding the foregoing contention, I do not necessarily agree that the understanding of any given Muslim constitutes an accurate expression of the essential truth. As previously indicated, even the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) knew there would be 73 sects within the Muslim community and only one of them would be correct.

Moreover, the Prophet is also reported to have said:

“Every child is born according to fitra (primordial nature), then, that person's parents make that child a Jew, Christian, or a Zoroastrian.”

Fitra is now what it always has been ... our capacity for acquiring spiritual truth and essential realization. It is religions that have drifted away, to varying degrees, from the truth concerning the nature and potential of fitra.

Neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet spoke in terms of Sunni, Shi'a, or madhabs. These are all human inventions.

I am Muslim, but I consider myself to be neither Sunni nor Shi'a. So, what am I?

The Prophet is reported to have said the following:

"Islam began as something strange, and it will revert to being strange as it was in the beginning, so good tidings for the strangers." Someone asked: "Who are the strangers?" He said: "The ones who break away from their people for the sake of Islam."

This is what, God willing, I am. That is, if God wishes, I am one of the strangers to whom the Prophet referred. By the Grace of Allah and for the sake of Islam, I not only have tried to break away from the tribes of religion, imperialism, materialism, oppression, capitalism, militarism, and the like, but I have sought to break away from as many of the erroneous sects existing within the Muslim community as God has permitted me to do so and to the degree that Allah has permitted.

In the next portion of your e-mail, one finds:

"From the Islamic perspective, the Temple Mount is a holy site – as you know, the third most holy site in Islam. While you said that is because of essentially a lot of warm, fuzzy feelings about the Prophet (upon him peace) being there for the Isra and Mi'raj, I would ask you to consider another idea."

Before proceeding on with the idea that you wish me to consider, there is a problem with the way you have characterized what I said in the podcast concerning the significance of the Temple Mount and the al-Aqsa mosque. I did not say, nor did I imply, that this

area constitutes the third most sacred site in the Muslim world because of a “lot of warm, fuzzy feelings” about the Prophet (upon him peace) being there during the Night Journey and the point from which his mi’raj, or ascension, began.

The import of the night journey and the ascension is established by the Qur’an and the testimony of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). ‘Warm, fuzzy feelings’ have nothing to do with this, and, rather, this is a description that you have imposed, without justification, on the words I have spoken.

That being said, the idea to which you wished to draw my attention is the following:

“First, one ought to clarify the meaning of Masjid Al-Aqsa, which literally means “the furthest place of prostration.” Early Muslims understood this to be the entire Temple Mount, and not what is now called Al-Aqsa Mosque, that was originally called Omar’s Mosque because Omar bin Khatab ordered it to be built. I make this point because it is the whole of the Temple Mount that is considered a sacred site and not just the Al-Aqsa Mosque.”

The spiritual significance of the Temple Mount is over - determined in the sense that its sacredness derives from a multiplicity of events that are not restricted to the role it played in the night journey and spiritual ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The Temple Mount is also the site of the place where the First and Second temples of the Jewish people had been built.

One might even dare to raise the question of why was the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) brought to this location. Obviously, the space was sacred quite independently of what happened that night in conjunction with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Indeed, all of the Prophets were led in a prayer of prostration on the Temple Mount because the sacred precincts had spiritual significance for all of them ... not only because of what was about to happen, but, as well, it was hallowed ground because of what had happened there in the past.

I do not have a problem with the distinction that you are making between, on the one hand, the Temple Mount and, on the other hand, Masjid

al-Aqsa, or the mosque of Umar (may Allah be pleased with him). In fact, it only strengthens the point I wish to make, because it is all of the Temple Mount that is to contain the building of the third temple and not just the site where the al-Aqsa mosque resides.

You continue by saying:

“The mosque Omar built was merely to facilitate Muslims making prayers while on pilgrimage to the site. Abdul Malik’s intention, when he ordered the Dome of the Rock to be built, was to protect visiting Muslims from the weather – but in doing so, created one of the world’s most beautiful expressions of love to Allah.”

The reason why the Jewish people wish to re-build the Third Temple is to facilitate worship. Their intention in this respect is no different than that of Hazrat Umar (may Allah be pleased with him ). And, while one might agree with you that, indeed, the Dome of the Rock is a beautiful expression of love for Allah, is it not possible that the Jewish people could also construct, with God’s help, a beautiful expression of love for God? In fact, wouldn’t it be doubly beautiful if, somehow – if it were possible – that the mosque could be preserved even as the temple was build around it?

You state:

“Muslims hold this place in high regard not merely because the Prophet Muhammed (upon him peace and blessings was there, but that many other prophets were there as well. We know from the sunna that Muhammed (upon him be peace) led all the prophets in prayer before making his ascent into Heaven. Thus we know the Rock to be the spiritual locus for Islam. By Islam I do not mean here merely those that follow the Prophet Muhammed (upon him peace), but Islam as Allah’s religion – the religion of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and all the other prophets (upon them all peace and blessings).”

Yes, many other Prophets were there including many that are held in common reverence by both Muslims and Jews. You seem to think that the

Temple Mount is of spiritual significance only to those whom you consider Muslim in a restricted sense of the term of 'one who submits' according to your way of thinking about things.

God has identified the Jewish people as people of the Book. They have been given a book of spiritual guidance, just as the followers of Muhammad (peace be upon him) have been given a book of spiritual guidance.

In the Qur'an, God has spoken in loving and eloquent terms about the problems, crises, and events that have occurred to some of the Prophets that are dear to the hearts of Jewish believers. So, I'm not exactly clear why you feel that the Temple Mount should be of more spiritual significance to the followers of Muhammad (peace be upon him) than the followers of Moses (peace be upon him).

Jews might not call themselves Muslims, but, in point of fact, to whatever extent they seek to submit themselves to God, then a rose by any other name is still a rose. And, in essential terms, we ought not to make any arbitrary categories of whom and what constitutes 'proper submission to God'.

Your perspective continues on with:

"As a beautifully written and sung litany moves the heart closer to Allah, the Dome of the Rock is also meant to be such an expression. The Dome of the Rock is considered to be the prime example of spiritual architecture in Islam. Additionally, the Rock was the first qibla in Islam, and will be again in the future after Mecca and the Qaba are destroyed in the time of the Dajal and Messiah. We cannot say that Abdul Malik was trying to build a monument in order to keep Jews from building another Temple because that thought, I can say with certainty, would not have occurred to him."

Assuming, for the purposes of discussion, that the Temple Mount was the first qibla or direction of prayer rather than Jerusalem, in general, nevertheless, one needs to ask the following question. Why was the Temple Mount made the qibla?

Isn't it possible that Prophets Ibrahim, Issac, Jacob, Solomon, David and Moses (may Allah be pleased with them all) had something to do with this? Isn't it possible that making the Temple Mount serve as the

qibla was a way of paying tribute to the spiritual history that coursed through Jerusalem and that constitutes fundamental aspects of the Jewish spiritual tradition -- just as making the Ka'bah, the new qibla was a way of paying homage to the original construction of the first house of worship by Adam (peace be upon him) along with its being re-built by Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him)? Why is it acceptable for Muslims to build and rebuild the sacred mosque, but it is not acceptable for the Jewish people to build, and rebuild, and rebuild again their sacred house of worship?

A little later in your e-mail -- during which you repeat a verse of the Qur'an you cited previously -- you state:

"Unlike some Muslims today, the early Muslims believed that Islam was the perfection and final religion, abrogating all other religions. Allah says, "This day have those who reject faith (kafaru) given up all hope of your religion: Yet fear them not but fear Me. This day have I perfected your religion for you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion." (Koran 5:3)."

I don't know which Muslims of today you are referring to, but I might choose a different way of saying things than the manner that you have chosen to do in the foregoing excerpt. More specifically, Islam was the deen of Adam (peace be upon him) as it was the deen of all the Prophets who came after him. Although the exoteric aspect changed with circumstances -- that is, although the formal, ritualized nature of worship assumed different forms among different people, nonetheless, the esoteric essence of Islam has never altered. At no point was any of this esoteric essence abrogated, and, furthermore, although there were certain ritual changes from time to time, as God saw fit, none of this abrogated the spirit of Islam that was taught through the Books of revelation or prophetic examples during any given period of time.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) followed the Jewish practice of fasting (Ashura) until God ordained that a different kind of fasting be observed by those who were his followers. The followers of Muhammad (peace be upon him) had no particular form of prayer until after the ascension of the Prophet, and the form of this

prayer, both in terms of number and positions, were, respectively, due to the urging of Moses (peace be upon him) to return to Allah and ask for a reduction in the number of daily prayers, and, a request that was made by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to Allah for permission to incorporate into the ritual prayers different positions of the angels who were engaged in worship and that the Prophet witnessed during his ascension.

Jews believe in the oneness of God. Jews perform prayers – although more akin to what Muslims used to do in the way of prayer before the gift of formal prayer was given during the time of ascension. Jews fast in their own way. They are charitable. They do their pilgrimages to the Wailing Wall that is all that is left of the sacred temple.

Some of them might even accept the idea that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a Messenger of God. However, even if they do not accept Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a Messenger and Prophet of God, nonetheless, they subscribe to many of the same moral values, teachings and practices as did the Prophet that they have derived from their own Prophets, and in doing that, they indirectly pay homage to the same spiritual truths that were expressed through all the Prophets, including the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

If you wish, you might fault some Jews for the short-coming of leaving out something that you consider to be important to Islam. But, if you should do this, perhaps, you might keep in mind the following passage from the Qur'an:

“If Allah were to take humankind to task for their wrong-doing, God would not leave herein a living creature, but God reprieves them to an appointed term.” [Qur'an, 16: 61]

None of us is perfect. We all make mistakes. There are shortcomings in all our forms of worship – whether Muslim or non-Muslim. We all need to repent and be forgiven for our transgressions.

As for those who believe their worship is perfect, then I would remind them of the counsel of Hazrat Ra'bia (may Allah be pleased with her) that was said to a fellow Sufi who was quite enamored with his own dedication to the pillars of Islam. She is reported to have said:

“Thy existence is a sin with which none other can compare.”

Next, you maintain:

“As far as abrogating all previous religions, Allah says, “Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam will never have it accepted of him, and he will be of those who have truly failed in the hereafter.” (Koran 3:85), i.e. one must practice the perfected religion of Islam.”

I do not see either the Jews or Christians – and, actually, adherents of a number of other faith traditions -- as necessarily seeking a deen other than Islam – although I will admit that in certain respects they might be pursuing an earlier edition of Islam, and I also will admit that Jews and Christians, like Muslims, suffer from the fact that there are many different sects within their communities, not all of which are necessarily correct.

However, I do disagree with your interpretation that “one must practice the perfected religion of Islam.” Every person practices some form of Islam, whether willingly or unwillingly, because we all have to submit to the nature of Reality and to the course of historical events that God has set in motion. We all have to submit to the physical principles that govern the universe. We all have to submit to the fact that we have certain biological characteristics in which we are rooted.

Those individuals who are spiritually inclined seek to submit themselves spiritually to God. They pursue and observe and practice what they can of Islam as they understand it, and each of us will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment, that is, yet, another aspect of Islam to which we will submit, willingly or unwillingly.

Islam might have been perfected. But, you and I, are not, yet, perfected ... although we might, each in our own way, aspire to be better than presently might be the case. Many people aspire to be better than they currently are, and, so I am unsure why you and I should be cut some slack for our imperfections, while others who also aspire for spiritual betterment ought not be cut any slack for their imperfections.

You conclude the foregoing portion of your e-mail with:

“So, to sum up, Muhammed (upon him peace) is the last of Allah’s messengers, and through him Allah perfected religion thus no other past or future religion will be accepted by Him.”

There are a number of issues that are being conflated in your above statement. First, one could agree that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the last of the Messengers, and one also could agree that Islam came to be perfected through the Prophet.

Nevertheless, one could also argue that although known by another name, Judaism is not really a Deen that is essentially different from Islam. Yes, there are some new things that have been introduced (e.g., a book of revelation in Arabic, and the requirement of pilgrimage if one is physically and financially able to do so), and some new modalities were given to already existing forms of worship (e.g., prayer and fasting), and, as well, some things were no longer permissible (for example, consumption of alcohol – yet, even here the Qur’an permitted the use of alcohol, as it had been permitted to the Jews and Christians, until the behavior of some of the Arabs while under the influence of intoxicants brought about a Divine prohibition.)

Nonetheless, the purpose and essence of dīn remained the same. The Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Qur’an did not introduce anything of an essential nature that did not already exist in the time of Adam (peace be upon him). Some of the details were changed, but not anything of the essence. The deen of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a completion of the teachings, values, guidance, and methods that had been brought to humankind through earlier Prophets and Books of revelation, including the Prophethood of Moses and Aaron, as well as the Torah.

Were there unwarranted innovations that arose within Judaism? Yes, there were, and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has testified to this fact through the earlier quoted hadith concerning the existence of 71 sects in Judaism but only one of which is correct. But, to keep things in perspective, there were also unwarranted innovations introduced into

the deen of Muhammad (peace be upon him) by Muslims who came after the Prophet.

So, when you say that no past or future religion other than Islam will be acceptable to Allah, to which Islam are you referring? Are you referring to one of the 72 sects existing among Muslims that are incorrect, or are you referring to the one that is correct, and what is your evidence for your claim? And, shouldn't we remember that one of the sects being pursued within the Jewish community is correct and, therefore, this really is an expression of essential Islam?

Moreover, we all would do well to remember the Quranic ayat that says:

"Shall we tell you who be the greatest losers in their works? It is those whose striving goes astray in the present life while they believe they are working good deeds." [Qur'an, 18: 104]

Most of us would like to believe that our striving in the present life is not in vain – that we are doing deeds that are acceptable in the eyes of Allah -- but, the foregoing ayat indicates that such might not be the case and, therefore, we ought to be very cautious about being overconfident and arrogant with respect to where in the scheme of things our beliefs, values, and practices fit into the purpose of Creation.

This leads to a further point. Are you saying that only a perfected Islam can be practiced? If so, then who among us will be so foolish as to claim that they are adhering to the perfected Islam in a perfected way? And, if there are unanswered questions concerning the degree of authenticity of the Islam one is pursuing and if there are unanswered questions concerning the quality of that pursuit, then what business do we have judging the suitability of someone else's pursuit of Islam in their own manner?

Who is the better Muslim? Someone who observes all the five pillars of Islam and, yet, is largely devoid of compassion, kindness, tolerance, empathy, forgiveness, patience, charitableness, love, and humility. Or, is there something of value to be said for those individuals who might struggle, in one way or another, with observing the five pillars but who sincerely seek to exhibit compassion, kindness, tolerance, empathy, forgiveness, patience, charitableness, love, and humility in relation to others?

Undoubtedly, the best case would involve a situation in which someone does both with, by the Grace of Allah, equal facility – that is, observes the five pillars as well as gives expression to the spiritual stations of character. However, I suspect that someone who was able to accomplish both facets of such practices would not be spending his or her time trying to assess and judge the quality of Islam observed by another human being ... they would be too busy seeking, praising, remembering, worshiping, serving, and loving their Lord.

You go on to say:

“Therefore, it may be said that in Abdul Malik’s mind, from the Islamic perspective, Jews building a third Temple was a non-issue for the divine intention was that everyone follow Islam, which does not require a Temple.”

If the foregoing captures the thinking of Abdul Malik, then it is just the sort of thinking that has so endeared Muslims to the rest of the world. A temple is a house of worship. The names of God are mentioned there. God is praised there. Prayer takes place there. People remember God there. People serve God there. People come together as a community of believers there. People give expression to moral virtues there. People are on sacred ground there. Divine revelation is recited there. Spirituality is pursued there.

Which of the foregoing activities is not required? Are you saying that the world would be a better place if none of these activities took place?

According to the Qur’an:

“Each one does according to his rule of conduct, and thy Lord is best aware of the one whose way is right.” [Qur’an, 17: 84]

The last time I checked, Abdul Malik was not our Lord. So, I’m wondering why, if his thinking was as you say it was, he feels justified in usurping what is clearly a Divine and not a human prerogative with respect to the proclaiming of awareness concerning whose way is right.

Contrary to your contention, I don't consider such thinking to reflect an Islamic perspective. In fact, in many ways, I would consider such thinking to be antithetical to appropriate Islamic adab.

In the next portion of your e-mail, you state:

"Essentially there are two worlds – Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb – the definitions of which have changed over time. Many shayukh that I know define Dar al-Islam as anywhere a Muslim might practice the essentials of his faith peacefully while Dar al-Harb is anywhere a Muslim is unable to practice the essentials of his faith. These days, much of the world would be in different shades of grey. It would be difficult to classify countries that espouse equality, freedom, and tolerance as part of Dar al-Harb, but some "democratic" countries in the West may blindly be on that path."

You know, I've looked in the Qur'an and I've looked in the hadith, and, so far, I've not come across any mention, definition, or discussion of either Dar al-Islam or Dar al-Harb. You indicate that the definitions for these terms have changed over time, and, perhaps, this is because these terms give expression to changing theological ideas that are being imposed on Islam by those who have their own agenda ... an agenda that is not necessarily Islamic.

I also find it strange that I probably have more freedom to practice the essentials of Islam in North America, than I would have in places like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan (under the Taliban), Sudan (with its genocidal governmental militias in Darfur), Somalia (under the present Islamic Courts militias), and so on. Whatever the constraints might be for observing Islam in North America – and there are some -- at least no one is seeking to oppress me with their conception of Islam and threatening me with prison, death, punishment, and charges of heresy should I decline their "invitation" to submit to their version of Islam.

To be sure, the West has its own brands of imperialism, oppression, and injustice. Moreover, from time to time, the West engages in the wholesale slaughter (e.g., Cambodia, Vietnam, Iraq (twice), Indonesia, Native Peoples, Panama, Guatemala, etc.) and exploitation of peoples around the world, including Muslims ... but, since the current topic has to do with where

one can practice the essentials of Islam in relative freedom, let's stick to that issue for the present time.

You maintain:

“As for what is considered Dar al-Islam proper, it includes those countries where the majority of people living there are Muslims, and some may occasionally include areas in countries where Muslims make a clear majority (as in western China) or lands that were historically part of one of the past Islamic empires but may be controlled now by non-Muslims (such as Palestine).”

This raises the question of what constitutes a Muslim country. There are all too many so-called Muslim countries that turn a blind eye to the issue of honor killings and the mutilation of female genitalia. There are all too many so-called Muslim countries that oppress women and treat them as less than second or even third class citizens. There are all too many so-called Muslim countries that continue to practice slavery – and, they do not even observe the appropriate adab when it comes to this and that were clearly enunciated during the time of the Prophet. There are all too many so-called Muslim countries that do not feed or house their poor. There are all too many so-called Muslim countries whose leaders steal from their citizens and who expropriate resources that should belong to everyone. There are all too many so-called Muslim countries who borrow money from the IMF, and, then, not only rob their citizens of essential social services as part of the conditions for obtaining such loans but which enables the leaders to live in luxury and benefit from the military aid that comes through such loans and by means of which those leaders intimidate and oppress their citizens, but, to add insult to injury, the leaders of these so-called Muslim countries make the citizens foot the bill for the subsidization of their own oppression and exploitation.

Next you say:

“It is also stated by Allah, “Fight those who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day and who forbid not what Allah and His messenger have forbidden – who do not practice the religion of truth, being those who have

been given the Book – until they pay the poll tax (al-jiziah) out of hand and are humbled.” (Koran 9:29).

First of all, the foregoing English rendering of the Quranic verse is misleading. The Qur’an does not say to fight the people of the Book, nor does it say that the people of the Book are among those who do not practice the deen of truth. The Qur’an is instructing the Prophet to fight against those among the people of the Book who do not practice the religion of truth -- indicating that a distinction is to be made between those who are People of the Book who do practice the deen of truth, and, as well, there are some individuals within those communities to whom a Book of revelation has been sent who do not practice the deen of truth.

In addition, you seem to have missed the point that it was not ‘People of the Book’ who were being addressed in the ayat you cite, but, rather, “those who do not believe in Allah, and the Last Day and who forbid not what Allah and His messenger have forbidden – who do not practice the religion of truth.” Jews do believe in God and the Last Day, and there are many Jews who do practice the religion of truth. Moreover, they also forbid many, if not most, of what Allah and His Messenger have forbidden in the way of what constitutes permissible and impermissible foods (alcohol being something that was allowed to Jews and Christians but not to Muslims), as well as with respect to general moral and spiritual values.

Jews were commanded to remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy. Muslims, on the other hand, were given the special prayers of Friday and, then permitted to go about their business throughout the rest of the day – thereby, not being restricted in the same manner as the Jews had been restricted with respect to conduct on the Sabbath.

Are there slight differences here and there concerning prohibitions and permissions when comparing Jews and Muslims? Yes, but there is far more that binds us than separates us, and, therefore, the Quranic ayat you cite does not really apply to Jews.

The Qur’an says:

“Surely, those who believe, those who are Jewish, the Christians, and the converts -- anyone who believes in Allah and believes in the Last Day

and leads a righteous life will receive their recompense from their Lord. They have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve." [Qur'an 2: 62]

Virtually the same set of conditions is recited in 5:69 of the Qur'an. So, I really think that the Qur'an provides plenty of evidence to strongly suggest that your understanding that People of the Book are being referred to in the verse you cite – namely, 9:29 – is quite problematic and untenable.

Secondly, with respect to the verse of the Qur'an that you cited earlier, the Prophet is not necessarily being told to kill people who reject Allah and the Last Day or who do not forbid what Allah and His Prophet have forbidden, or who do not practice the deen of truth. Rather, the Prophet is being told to fight them, and there are a lot of ways to fight what people do other than through armed conflict. There is such a thing as nonviolent resistance and there were many times when this is the form of fighting that the Prophet observed ... and, the treaty of Hudaibiyah is a very good example of this as is the manner in which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) treated the Meccans when they were finally conquered.

Thirdly, jihad should not be restricted to armed conflict. Speaking truth to power is jihad. The Hajj that is accepted by Allah is jihad. Engaging in the purification of one's nafs is jihad.

Jihad, as I am sure you know, means 'struggle'. Armed conflict might be one form of struggle, but one cannot reduce jihad down to armed conflict without distorting, in grotesque ways, the rich degrees of possibility and freedom associated with this term. Consequently, with respect to your contention that:

"Most all scholars (and certainly all scholars in the past) are of the opinion that when non-Muslims invade a Muslim country from within or without, jihad is obligatory,"

there are certain qualifications that should modulate such a perspective.

To begin with, I doubt that you have read all scholars of the past, and, so, I do not believe you are in a position to make the sort of categorical

statement you have made. Furthermore, in passing, one might wish to raise the question of who is a scholar.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Verily God does not take away knowledge from the hands of His servants but takes it by taking away the learned so that when no learned people remain, the ignorant will be placed at the head of affairs. Causes will be submitted to their decision, they will pass sentence without knowledge, will err themselves, and lead others into error.”

Just as there are all too many charlatans posing as authentic shaykhs, so too today, there are all too many ignorant people posing as learned scholars, and, as a result, a lot of people are being led into error.

People tend to misunderstand the nature of the Quranic command to which you are referring and that I have quoted from you earlier. God was not instructing Muslims in general to fight whoever they believed to be among those who did not practice the deen of truth, but, rather, permission was being given specifically to the Prophet, because it was the Prophet who had been given the Divine discernment of when to engage in armed conflict and when to engage in some other form of struggle.

Who among us in this day and age has the spiritual insight and discernment of a Prophet that would permit us to understand when, and how, and why to engage in the sort of struggle that involves, potentially, killing other people?

Lest we forget the momentous nature of such a decision, we should remember what the Qur’an counsels in this regard:

“Whosoever kills a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if that person killed all of humankind ...” [Qur’an, 5: 31]

Now, there might be those who believe that they know, with certitude, who the spreaders of corruption in the earth are, but more often

than not such people are like the individual who came to Moses (peace be upon him) and manipulated the latter to fight on that individual's behalf, and, as a result, a person ended up dead. By the Grace of Allah, subsequently, Moses (peace be upon him) came to understand that he had been entangled in the machinations of another's person's nafs, and, consequently, when the same individual as before sought to induce Moses (peace be upon him) to fight on his behalf once again, Moses (peace be upon him) refused the invitation.

Much of the Muslim world is like the foregoing situation involving Moses (peace be upon him). So-called Muslim leaders are always trying to induce one to become part of their cause, but it is hard to know what manipulations are going on amidst these overtures.

For example, in the 1980s, Iraqis and Iranians were, with the assistance of the United States and Israel, killing one another by the tens of thousands. Muslims are forbidden to kill one another, and, yet, both sides were seeking assistance from other Muslims to join them in the killing spree.

Was Iraq, with the encouragement of the US, the aggressor? Yes, it was, but both sides were equally wrong because they both committed atrocities that should never have happened if either side cared anything about Islam ... which apparently did not seem to be the case.

Just because someone from the Taliban, or al-Qaeda, or Hezbollah, or Hamas, or the Islamic Courts in Somalia, or the Muslim militias in Darfur, or some terrorist organization, or some shura council tells me that it is my duty to fight on their behalf, I actually am not under any obligation to follow their way. In all too many cases these groups are themselves spreaders of corruption in the earth, and, God willing, like Moses (peace be upon him) I am not going to permit myself to become caught up in the machinations of another's nafs-based and dunya-based projects.

Do I believe that there are all kinds of evil going on in the world? Yes, I do, but as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has warned us, there will come a time when walking is better than running, and standing is better than walking, and sitting is better than standing, and lying down is better than sitting, and I believe that such a time has come upon us.

I do jihad as God gives me the understanding and courage to do this, and in the manner that, God willing, seems to be most judicious and

efficacious. Although God has said to obey those who have been placed in authority over me, the so-called leaders of the world – especially Muslim leaders -- have not been placed in authority over me, but, rather almost all of them – even when elected – have deceived, cheated, manipulated, bought, murdered, and/or usurped their way into authority.

Moreover, the Qur'an also indicates that although we should obey our parents, if they seek to bring us to something other than Islam, then we have the right to not obey them ... although even this must be done with the appropriate adab as was the case with Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) and the respectful, caring, and kind manner in which he treated his idolatrous father. So, if one is not obligated to obey one's parents when they seek to induce us to submit to something other than Islam, how little duty is owed to so-called Muslim leaders and scholars who would seek to induce one to become entangled in their struggles of nafs and dunya?

Next you assert:

“In the case of Palestine, this is clearly an invasion by a non-Muslim force with the intent to remove Muslims from their land – a textbook case for jihad.”

While I am not so naïve as to suppose that the Israeli state, supported by many Jews – both secular and religious – has hands that are free of blood, theft, oppression, dishonesty, torture, exploitation, and all manner of injustice, I also am not so naïve as to suppose that the Palestinian people – both secular and religious – have hands that are free of blood, oppression, dishonesty, theft, torture, assassination, exploitation, and all manner of injustice. The leaders of Hamas, Fatah, and the PLO are not devoid of corruption, error, and oppression

I remember when the first intifadah took place in 1987. The weapons of choice by the participants of that uprising were rocks as, like Prophet David (peace be upon him), they slung them at, as irony would have it, the Goliath of Israel.

I saw a television piece on the intifadah in which a Palestinian picked up a small stone and asked a journalist if he knew what this was.

The journalist appeared somewhat confused, and the Palestinian answered that it was gold.

The man went onto explain that when Palestinians sought to attack the aggressor – i.e., Israel – with small stones against the military might of the Israeli state, the public relations value was worth its weight in gold, and, indeed, much world opinion was swung away from Israel and to the Palestinians during that period of time.

Now, all too many so-called religious leaders in Palestine have become lazy, impatient, and foolish. Almost all of the good will that was created during the first intifadah has been lost in the explosions of suicide bombings.

Many of these so-called leaders have become the dupes of those clever evil-doers in Israel who know exactly how to push all of the buttons of the Palestinian psyche and can induce the Palestinians to engage in the revenge game of tit for tat. The Palestinian leaders who advocate a philosophy of violence are doing precisely what their Israeli oppressors want ... to keep Palestine destabilized with an endless cycle of revenge-driven murder and destruction and, thereby, gift wrap the plausible deniability and reframing that the Israeli state covets to provide them with an excuse to go back into Palestine and punish the terrorists, as well as generate a great deal of collateral damage.

Spiritually speaking, the Israelis who support such oppression are fools but, so too, are the Palestinians who permit themselves to be manipulated by a counter-terrorist strategy that is designed to keep the Palestinians in a state of chaos, mayhem, destruction, poverty, and despair. The Israelis, despite all their vaunted military and political might, have not been able to crush the Palestinian spirit, and, so, why do those Palestinian leaders who favor violence suppose that they will accomplish through armed conflict what the much superior forces of Israel have not been able to accomplish?

If either side in this internecine conflict is of the belief that God is an admirer of any facet of their exercise in nafs and dunya, then they are operating under a huge dysfunctional and debilitating delusion. The killing, the destruction, the oppression, the assassinations, the theft, the power-mongering, and the deceit on both sides will continue, because no one seems to have the sense to understand that the only one who is happy about that state of affairs is Satan ... and he is laughing at

everyone involved because both sides talk about God, justice, truth, love, beauty, peace, rights, and so on, yet few, if any, of the participants appear to have the courage or intelligence to change their fate:

“God does not change the condition of any people unless they themselves make the decision to change. If God wills any hardship for any people, no force can stop it. For they have none beside Him as Lord and Master. [Qur’an 13: 11]

Indeed, if one takes an example from the history of the Jews – an example that is attested to in the Qur’an -- one of the worst periods of oppression in recorded history that lasted for many more years than has the present oppression of the Palestinians by the Israelis, was when Pharaoh subjugated the Jews and reduced them to the status of slave laborers and bare subsistence living. The Jews were delivered from their terrible predicament not by force of arms, but through the Grace of Allah.

When one depends on oneself, not much, if anything is possible except as God permits. When one depends on God – as Moses and Aaron (peace be upon them both) did -- then virtually anything becomes possible ... if God wishes.

Now, it seems that all too many Israelis look to their history with extensive blindness and fail to see that they now have become Pharaoh and are seeking to reduce Palestinians to subsistence living. The Israelis are oppressing the Palestinians just as Pharaoh used to oppress the Jews. The Israelis are seeking to humiliate and denigrate Palestinians at every turn as used to be the case with respect to the Jews during the time of Pharaoh.

The Qur’an says:

“In their hearts is a disease and Allah has increased their disease and grievous is the penalty they incur because they are false to themselves.” [Qur’an, 2: 10]

The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said:

“Help your brother, whether he is an oppressor or he is an oppressed one.” People asked: “O Allah’s Apostle. We understand why one should help a person if that individual is oppressed, but how should we help that person if that individual is an oppressor?” The Prophet is reported to have replied: “By preventing him from oppressing others.”

If the Palestinians who are violent do not wish to help their Jewish brothers and sisters or their own community, then they can continue on their present course of destruction. But, if they really want to help themselves and their Jewish neighbors, then they need to find nonviolent ways of helping the Jewish people to stop oppressing themselves through their oppression of other people.

You continue on with:

“Allah says, “Fighting (al-qitaal – mortal ‘combat’) is prescribed for you, and you dislike it. But it is possible that you dislike a thing that is good for you, and that you love a thing that is bad for you. But Allah knows and you know not.” (Koran 2:2 16).

This Quranic ayat does not begin: ‘O ye who believe’. So, to whom is it addressed?

Is the Qur’an saying that all Muslims should become engaged in al-qitaal. Or, is the Qur’an addressing -- first, foremost, and primarily -- people in the time of the Prophet who are involved in a specific time, place, and situation ... while addressing those who come later in only a very indirect manner – that is, as a possible reminder that under the appropriate circumstances, there might be occasions in which armed conflict becomes necessary and one might dislike it? But, for those of us who do come later, for those of us who are not necessarily caught up in the same sort of circumstances as was the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his followers, who is to determine what constitutes the appropriate set of circumstances when al-qitaal might be necessary?

Truly, as the Quranic ayat that you cite says at its end – “Allah knows and you do not.” Consequently, I am wondering who it is that claims to know what God knows -- but we know not -- with respect to whether fighting is prescribed for one in any given set of circumstances?

The mission of the Prophet is one thing. That mission carried certain responsibilities that were unique to the function of a Prophet.

I feel it might be presumptuous for anyone today to assume that he or she is on some sort of Prophetic-like mission in which the same sort of responsibilities exist now as existed in the time of the Prophet. I feel it is presumptuous for anyone today to assume that he or she has the right, like God, to prescribe fighting for anyone else.

When people misread or misunderstand the Qur’an and try to induce others to believe that God is commanding something to be done when this might not be the case, then a very dangerous step is being taken. Indeed, for such people it might be the case that:

“Their commerce profited them not, and they are not rightly guided.  
[Qur’an, 2: 16]

And, possibly, it might be that people who like to fight might ‘love a thing that is bad for them’ when circumstances do not warrant it.

You go on to state:

“The Prophet (upon him peace) himself said that “I have been commanded to fight people until they testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammed is the Messenger of Allah, and perform the prayer, and pay zakat. If they say it, they have saved their blood and possessions from me, except for the rights of Islam over them. And their final reckoning is with Allah.” (related in Bukhari and Muslim).”

You seem to miss the obvious. The Prophet is reported to have said that he was commanded to struggle with people under certain conditions. The Prophet did not say: We have been commanded to do this, or that Muslims have been commanded to do this.

In addition, as far as the hadith you cite is concerned, the Prophet indicated that if people fulfill the conditions that are mentioned, then “they have saved their blood and possessions from me”. He didn’t say they had “saved their blood and possessions from” Muslims.

The Prophet was commanded to fulfill his prophetic function. He did this.

He is a Prophet. We are not, and we should try not to arrogate to ourselves functions and responsibilities that might belong exclusively to a Prophet and not necessarily to the generality of Muslims.

You go on to make reference to a hadith of the Prophet – namely:

“To go forth in the morning or evening for the cause of Allah is better than the whole world and everything in it.” (related in Muslim) is often used in the context of jihad – and that can certainly be one of the causes of Allah – but, obviously, its meaning has broader implications.”

As is alluded to in the last sentence of the foregoing excerpt from your e-mail, the way or cause of God might be broadly construed to include a variety of activities that transcend and are completely unrelated to the theme of armed conflict. Moreover, while it is true that some people do seek to equate the cause of Allah with jihad in the sense of armed conflict, it is also true that many of these same people seek to induce people to believe that only armed conflict will do as the cause of Allah, and, in so doing, they commit an error of fundamental proportions.

You follow up with:

“A truce may be called for various reasons, but only for a period often years as set by the example of the Treaty of Hudaibiya, though such a truce can be renewed after it expires. Anab, it seems that you are unaware that the treaty that you talk about in your pod-cast as an example of Muhammad’s (upon him peace) love for peace was not a permanent treaty.”

Actually, I am quite aware that the treaty of Hudaibiyah was not a permanent document, as I am also aware that the non-Muslim side was the

first to break that treaty and that this, in turn, led, in time, to the final conquest of Mecca. The point of my referring to the treaty of Hudaibiyah had nothing to do with whether it was a permanent or temporary arrangement. Rather, the treaty was used as an example of the Prophet's willingness to make concessions to the other side, as well as an example of his willingness to not remain attached to even issues of doctrinal importance ... such as when he was prepared to cross out references to himself as the Messenger of Allah in order to gain an arrangement that would lead to a peaceful environment that was conducive to the spread of Islam.

I also used the case of the treaty of Hudaibiyah as an example of how Muslims often don't know when they are well off. Even some of the associates of the Prophet were grumbling because they saw things through a very jaundiced understanding rather than through the lens of insight ... as I am sure there are some Muslims who listened to the previous podcast and considered the idea of swapping sovereignty and land for Palestinians in exchange for the right of Jews to build their temple on the Temple Mount as being a ludicrous, if not sacrilegious idea. You, then, go on to maintain:

"The People of the Book are respected in the sense that they have a revealed religion from Allah and are permitted to practice their religion but must pay the poll tax as a token of their submission to Muslim authority. Indeed, in a religious context, it must be Islam above all other religions and philosophies. Tolerance may seem anomalous with what is said above, but ..."

and, then you go on to cite verses 255 through 257 from the second Surah of the Qur'an. Within the aforementioned two verses, one finds: "let there be no compulsion in deen", so, I am getting a little confused about all the talk of fighting, force, battle, and armed conflict.

Furthermore, I'm more than a little confused about the idea of someone having been given a revealed deen, and, yet, that revealed spiritual tradition seems to be treated by you as something other than essential Islam -- although some of the exoteric aspects of these traditions might differ from what the followers of the Prophet

Muhammad (peace be upon him) might observe. I am not aware of any other deen other than Islam, so, I am wondering what this other revealed deen is if it is not Islam in some sense of the term?

You say that non-Muslims must pay the poll tax as a token of their submission to Muslim authority. Yet, this seems to be saying that Muslims are trying to encourage other human beings to commit shirk and submit to something other than Allah.

In addition, it is not the People of the Book who are to be humbled by being compelled to pay a poll tax to the Prophet. Rather, the Quranic ayat to which you refer clearly indicates that the poll tax is directed toward those who are rejecters of faith ... including those who come from People of the Book but have rejected their own Prophets and Books of revelation.

Furthermore, you said earlier in your e-mail that:

“The poll tax is usually defined as a five percent tax on all income (a better deal than what the IRS gives us, in my opinion) paid by all People of the Book living in Muslim lands and is a religious requirement.”

Since Muslims are only required to pay 2 1/2% on yearly savings above and beyond their needs, and since this is incumbent only on those people who are sufficiently wealthy to be so fortunate as to have yearly savings, then I really don't see the justice or fairness in demanding, as a religious requirement, that people of the Book be treated as second class citizens in which they not only have to pay twice what Muslims have to pay, irrespective of whether they can afford to do so or not, but, as well, they must calculate the underlying percentage on the whole of what they own, rather than merely on what has been saved over the course of a year.

Moreover, whose religious requirement is this so-called poll tax? Are you saying that it is a religious requirement of Muslims to impose this tax, or that it is the religious requirement of non-Muslims to pay it?

Presumably, you are saying it is the former ... that is, Muslims have a religious obligation to impose a poll tax on non-Muslims who are living in their lands. However, while the imposing of tax on non-Muslims might have been indicated by the Qur'an with respect to those who reject faith, I think you have your percentages and character of the tax somewhat mixed

up. The tax was not as tribute to Muslim authority, but to Divine ordination, and the equitability of the tax – even with respect to non-Muslims -- was that in exchange for the money given, non-Muslims would receive services from the Muslim authorities, including protection against brigands and invading armies.

In other words, if people – whatever their spiritual orientation might be -- are going to be living within the boundaries of a given state, and if those people are going to enjoy some of the services of that state, then, presumably, it is only fair that those individuals should give something toward underwriting the costs of providing those services. This is a matter of equitability and reciprocity rather than a paying of tribute to Muslim authority.

The nature of the religious obligation is not the imposition of a tax, *per se*, but, rather, the establishment of an equitable arrangement between a government and its citizens. The issue is one of justice and equitability, and it is not a matter of a religious obligation to either assert Muslim authority, *qua* authority, or to try to oppressively extort money from people of the Book with nothing of value being given back in return. Duties of care run in both directions.

Finally, the humbling of the non-believers and rejecters of faith (and, again, this is not directed toward People of the Book) is before the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) whom the rejecters of faith hated. Consequently, the humbling being referred to in the Quranic ayat you cite is not necessarily in relation to Muslims *per se*. People ought to show respect and have humility in relation to their treatment of a Prophet, who is dear to God, and if they cannot observe this *adab*, then they will be humbled by God in one way or another, and one of these ways is for such individuals to have to pay a tax to a Prophet whom they disliked and in whom they did not believe.

Toward the end of your e-mail, you say:

“Above, I stated that the Temple Mount, the Masjid Al-Aqsa, was the qibla before Mecca and will be again after Mecca is destroyed ...”

I’m not sure what your authority is for asserting that the qibla will revert to the direction of Jerusalem following the destruction of Mecca about which

the Prophet spoke in relation to some of signs of the Latter Days, but there certainly is nothing in the Qur'an of which I am aware that would justify such a contention. When Jesus (peace be upon him) returns, he will do so under the banner of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), so why should there be any change with respect to the guidance that has been given in the Qur'an?

It is the precincts that are sacred, not just the buildings that have been established there. This is true in the Temple Mount and it is true with respect to Sacred Precincts in Mecca.

The Jewish people believe that the center of the universe runs through the Sacred Temple. I have heard it said that for Muslims the center of the universe runs through the Ka'bah and that, metaphysically speaking, the Ka'bah sits beneath the Divine Throne.

God was once described by someone as a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Whatever the shortcomings of this definition might be, the foregoing idea does suggest the possibility that the nature of reality is such that it can accommodate multiple centers of the universe. Be this as it might, the prayer niche is an empty space in Islam indicating both the Presence and Absence of the Divine, as well as the fact that Divinity is not a thing and, consequently, is neither this nor that, but, rather, an 'emptiness' that gives expression to fullness.

The Ka'bah marks a point of intersection between the physical and spiritual worlds. The Ka'bah is not the object of prayer, but, rather, it is a sign post pointing in the direction of That which is both immanent in, as well as, transcendent to, all of Creation.

Therefore, whether, or not, there is any building present at the Ka'bah is irrelevant, since it is to God that we pray. Both the Ka'bah and the Qibla, or direction of prayer, are but reminders of this central theme of Islam.

You go on to say that the Temple Mount:

"has been under the care of the Waqf, or Islamic endowment. The Waqf is a trust for Muslims now and in the future, and one would be hard pressed to find an honest scholar that would accept the idea of giving up anything from an endowment to assist in the disobedience to Allah."

Well, I guess if one is to use your measuring rod, I must neither be a scholar nor honest, because I do not see anything wrong with permitting the Jewish people to regain control of the Temple Mount in exchange for giving back other lands to the Palestinians and restoring their sovereignty as a people. In fact, I might even go one step further.

You say that the Temple Mount is a trust that is being kept for Muslims – both now and in the future. You go on to say that “in fact, in Islamic law, it is forbidden to give lands or monies to help any other religion based on that principle” – the principle here, according to you, being one of rewarding people for their alleged disobedience. However, if the Jews were to return stolen land and sovereignty to the Palestinians, they would not be guilty of disobedience but, instead, they would be acting in accordance with the requirements of Divine justice. Moreover, Judaism – despite its name – is, in its essence not really a deen that is other than Islam, whatever the differences of exoteric particulars might be – so nothing would be given to people who were not of the Book and who were not part of the Prophetic tradition.

In addition, I believe a case can be made for the fact that you cannot hold in trust that which did not belong to you originally. For example, if I illicitly take property from an orphan and, then, declare a trust consisting of the money and property I have usurped from the orphans, this would be impermissible according to principles of jurisprudence that are rooted in the Qur’an.

Originally, Muslims did not own the Temple Mount. Initially it belonged to the Jewish people and, then, was taken from them and, subsequently, transferred to a succession of rulers who claimed the land as their own.

If the Palestinians – along with much, if not all, of the Muslim world – believe that the requirement of justice demands that lands and sovereignty be restored to the Palestinians, then, surely, it follows that land that was illicitly taken from the Jewish people, and, then transferred from ruler to ruler down through the ages, should also be restored to the original owners of that land. One cannot be committed to the first application of justice without also being committed to the second application of justice.

You next claim:

“Muslims cannot look at it through relativism as you have – i.e. the Temple is important to Jews and the Dome of the Rock is not too important to Muslims – because every Muslim must believe in the Word of Allah in the Koran, and in this case that Judaism has been abrogated by Allah Himself. For myself and many, many Muslims, your proposal is untenable.”

I do not believe I am looking at the Temple Mount issue in a relativistic manner, nor have I said that the Temple Mount is unimportant to Muslims. And, contrary to what you assert, I propose what I do because I do believe in the Qur’an and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the nabi and rasul of Allah.

The essence of Judaism has not been abrogated. Rather, the teachings of the Jewish Prophets and the Torah have been added to, completed, and brought to perfection through the Qur’an and the Prophetic mission of Muhammad (peace be upon him). We are talking about a transformed continuation of what had been, not a wholesale rejection of the teachings, values, beliefs, and practices of the Jewish faith.

The Torah was not abrogated but is, in fact, contained in the Qur’an. The teachings of Moses and Aaron (peace be upon them) have not been abrogated but they have been given life through the Qur’an.

Original teachings, principles, beliefs, and values have been confirmed, added to, as well as modulated in this way and that way. However, nothing of essence has been abrogated. Nowhere has Allah said in the Qur’an that I abrogate the Torah or the teachings of Moses (peace be upon him).

Nowhere does Allah say that Jews must become Muslim, but, instead, that they are among the believers who if they practice the deen of truth and do good deeds will be among those, God willing, who will have nothing to fear and will not grieve.

Allah does say -- as you have pointed out and as I have previously discussed -- that only Islam will be accepted as a deen from humankind. However, you seem to be caught up in a sort of inverse nominalist trap in which if different things are labeled differently, then

somehow both of the labels can't give expression to a common underlying and essential set of truths.

You go on to ask and answer:

“Moreover, why even bother? The majority of Jews – and certainly those of the orthodox – believe that the Messiah will come and take care of the Temple business. Muslims too believe that the same Messiah will come and straighten out all the problems. This has really been the unspoken agreement that we have – wait for the Messiah. It is the voices of radicalism, from Jews and Christians, which are really inflaming the issue.”

And, of course, Muslims have nothing to do with any of the problems of the world. It is always someone else who is the troublemaker.

The issue is really quite simple. If Muslims will give back what does not belong to them, then, perhaps, the Jewish people will be encouraged to give back what does not really belong to them.

Yes, God willing, when the Messiah comes, a lot of problems might be sorted out. However, until that time arrives, we all have moral responsibilities and duties of care to observe.

One can, of course, adopt a point of view that says: let the Messiah sort things out, but in the meantime let us all make one another's life hell and be as mean, hateful, destructive, and malignant as we can be. Or, perhaps, one can try to live, now, in accordance with what Islam actually demands of us all and, with God's help, take a few of the burdens from the shoulders of the Messiah before he arrives.

Next, you state:

“We obviously live in a world where we need signs and symbols to help us – the Koran is the clearest proof of this. The Dome of the Rock has its sign and secrets to help you to draw closer to Allah, if only you know how to read them.”

It has been said that in prostration is the mi'raj (ascension) of a believer. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) prostrated on the

Temple Mount, and, then came the ascension in which he left the world behind ... these are some of the secrets of the Temple Mount for those who have eyes with which to see and ears with which to hear.

The lines of poetry from Shabistari with which I ended the earlier podcast go directly to the point of some of the essential secrets of the Temple Mount, so I will give those lines again:

“Dream not of lights,  
Of marvels, of miracles  
For your miracles are contained  
In worshipping the Truth;  
All else is pride, conceit,  
And illusion of existence.”

You go on to say:

“Just as it is important to have a good and proper shaykh and good friends on the path to Allah, sacred places, whether empty deserts as the Plain of Arafat or decorated buildings as the Dome of the Rock, are also important for any spiritual journey – they are all mubarak. Visiting sacred places and saintly people can open your heart more than can sometimes a book or a dhikr. All these things – places, people, journeys, books, litanies, dhikrs, buildings – all these things open the gates of the heart to Allah if only you possess the knowledge to unlock it.”

What good are “all these things – places, people, journeys, books, litanies, dhikrs, buildings – all these things “which supposedly “open the gates of the heart to Allah”, if they cannot assist us to treat other human beings humanely and enable us to interact with them justly? The Qur’an says:

“O ye who believe! Be steadfast witnesses for Allah in equity and let not hatred of any people seduce you so that you do not deal justly (with

them). Deal justly, that is nearer to your duty. Observe Your duty to Allah. Lo! Allah is informed of what you do." [Qur'an 5: 8]

Finally, at one point in your e-mail, you claim:

"So, I would argue that pawning the Dome of the Rock off for peace and land will not be a cure for your diagnosis of idolatry."

The foregoing actually misconstrues my point. I did not say that exchanging the Dome of the Rock or Temple Mount was the cure for idolatry. I said that idolatry, on both sides, is what prevents people from doing what is right in relation to the Temple Mount and the Palestinian people ... and, thus, to an extent, I end where I began in the original podcast and to which you responded via your e-mail to me.

### Traditionalism -- Unity of Religions

The following commentary delves into some difficult areas. Some of the difficulty is a function of the subject matter that does not lend itself to simple, easy, straightforward description. Some of the difficulty is a result of the manner in which certain biases have come to hold sway over the imaginations of a variety of people to such an extent that these biases have attained the status of truisms that are sacrosanct and inviolable ... at least in the minds of some individuals.

Reading the material below requires both concentration and reflection. However, if one perseveres through to the end, I believe there are some important issues that are being raised.

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One of the central tenets of the so-called traditionalist position revolves about an idea known as the 'transcendental unity of religions'. Presumably, one of the principles inherent in that perspective runs somewhat along the following lines: all spiritual roads lead, ultimately, to the same 'Place', so to speak – that 'Place' being, among other things, an expression of one's realization of a transcendent unity of knowledge concerning the relationship between God and Creation.

Alternatively, implicit in the foregoing idea of transcendental unity is a belief that whatever doctrinal differences there might be among various religious traditions on an exoteric level, these surface differences disappear when one enters into the realm of the esoteric realities that transcend such superficial considerations. In other words, while there might be exoteric differences that separate one spiritual tradition from another, esoteric experience and understanding demonstrate that beyond such differences there is a unity of Being about which individuals from different spiritual traditions can agree.

I believe that the idea of 'transcendent unity of religions' is problematic and misleading. In fact, a more appropriate way of stating things might be to speak in terms of: the unity of reality and/or truth that -- according to the nature and capacity of a person's understanding -- tends to be both immanent as well as transcendent.

Any given spiritual tradition – whether considered exoterically or esoterically – might, or might not, give expression to, or provide a methodology to assist one to realize some dimension of, such reality or truth.

Nevertheless, one cannot make the assumption that any, and all, religious traditions are capable of doing this – such an assumption is unwarranted ... such an assumption stands in need of demonstration. Consequently, one cannot automatically assume that all religious traditions will lead one to the same “Place”. Nor can one assume that all religious traditions are necessarily equipped to assist people to make the transition from the realm of the exoteric to the realm of the esoteric. Nor can one assume that all facets of the realm of the esoteric are equally accessible, if at all, from any given religious tradition. Nor can one assume that despite whatever surface similarities there might be among the descriptions of spiritual wayfarers from different religious traditions concerning this or that spiritual experience that what is being described in each instance constitutes the same reality, truth, or realization.

Not every expression of theology, doctrine, belief, or spiritual world view necessarily reflects the truth. Not every spiritual methodology is necessarily efficacious. Not every anomalous experience is necessarily either exoterically or esoterically valid.

However, nothing should be read into the foregoing with respect to which religious traditions or that spiritual methodologies or that exoteric/esoteric understandings do, or do not, provide a means of realizing the transcendent unity of reality/truth. Any given spiritual tradition might, or might not, permit one to gain insight about, or to realize the nature of, some dimension of the transcendent unity of reality or truth. However, there is no necessary and incontrovertible link that ties such a spiritual tradition to the essential nature of reality in any way that extends beyond the mere fact that all of reality – even falsehood – is made possible by that which is independent of Creation and, yet, gives rise to the latter ... there is no necessary linkage unless Divinity has invested such a spiritual tradition with that special, intimate linkage.

The purpose of this exercise is to not to denigrate or favor any given religious tradition. The purpose of this exercise is to suggest that no longer should anyone suppose that what one believes about religion or spirituality necessarily, and automatically, permits one to claim that if one travels far enough, or rigorously enough, along a given path, then this necessarily will lead one to, and permit one to realize, the transcendent unity of reality/truth.

From the perspective of Reality/Truth, everything is given. From the perspective of human existence everything begins steeped in a

cloud of unknowing and whatever truth or reality is to be known, and to whatever extent this is to be known, only comes as a result of struggle, and there is no guarantee where this struggle will lead with respect to truth and falsehood.

Moreover, struggle by itself is not sufficient. Struggle must be graced with the elixir of spiritual transformation.

One of the things that might be lacking in the idea of the 'transcendental unity of religions' is any principle of discernment that permits one to distinguish between the true and the false. The transcendental unity of religions is not a conclusion based on an argument that stipulates evidence, demonstrations, and proofs that unequivocally lead to such a conclusion.

Rather, the transcendental unity of religions is a conjecture that is offered as an explanatory framework that seeks to unify disparate ideas, experiences, practices and values as being acceptable variations for understanding the nature of truth/reality, and/or journeying toward such truth/reality, and/or realizing that truth/reality in a manner that is fully reconcilable, on a transcendent level across all spiritual traditions. One cannot assume one's way to the validity of such a conjecture ... the conjecture stands in need of demonstration.

Immanence and transcendence are relational in character. Reality or Truth, in and of Itself, is neither immanent nor transcendent, but always what It is and is not.

Certain dimensions of that Reality/Truth might become immanent when experience engages what is and comes away with a particular understanding that might, or might not, be accurately reflective, to some degree, of That which has made such experience possible. When understanding fails to grasp the character, depth, subtlety, richness, or nature of Reality/Truth, then such understanding is transcended by Truth/Reality and in a relativistic manner, Truth/Reality is described as being transcendent.

However, in both instances Reality/Truth is neither immanent nor transcendent in and of Itself but remains what It is. As such, there is no transcendental unity of religions but only, at best, a form of understanding that exceeds what other modes of understanding consider to be the boundary of possibility for imminent understanding.

Is it necessarily the case that all forms of understanding that exceed what are considered to be the usual boundaries of immanent understanding will constitute a unity ... and, if so, what kind of a unity is being alluded to? I know of no argument that successfully demonstrates even the likelihood of such a necessity, let alone, the actuality of such a necessity (And, if someone believes she or he does have such an argument, I would be very interested in learning about it) ... in fact, to the extent that a distinction between the mystical and the occult is accepted, then this alludes to a prima facie case that suggests that not all anomalous experiences necessarily give expression to the same dimension of Reality/Truth.

The proof of every spiritual pudding is in the tasting. That taste either accurately conveys something of the truth concerning reality, or that taste, having been corrupted in some fashion, does not accurately convey something of the truth concerning reality and, instead, constitutes a veiling of the reality of That which is being tasted (which is its own kind of reality). Moreover, in either case there is nothing which necessitates that, ultimately, all forms of tasting must agree on the meaning, nature, significance, value, or purpose of the experience in question or that all such forms of tasting are equivalent to one another or that all forms of such tasting are a sampling of one and the same dimension of Reality/Truth.

There is a very strong facet of human behavior that is shaped and driven by a need to establish consensual validation – that is, the tendency to need others to verify that what one is experiencing is real or that one’s way of understanding something is correct. The doctrine of ‘the transcendent unity of religions’ might be little more than an attempt to invent consensus where either none exists or where such a drive for consensus might be the source of considerable error.

The quest for truth might, at certain points, be at odds with the human desire for consensual validation We might find it comforting to believe that we are in consensus with others, but consensus does not guarantee truth, and, in fact, quite frequently, being sincere with the truth requires one to go in opposition to many movements toward consensus.

When two individuals say that the essential truths of the mystical way are ineffable or cannot be properly conveyed through the use of either

language or rational methods of inquiry, one cannot automatically suppose that although the surface features of such statements are in agreement that, therefore, the quality of the understanding out of which such statements arise are necessarily equivalent. Furthermore, the mere fact that two people refer to the same symbol within the context of their respective experiences this does not necessarily mean the two are having the same experience ... fire, light, and whatever other symbol one cares to choose might have vastly different hermeneutical significances in the context of two people who might have different spiritual capacities, or are at different stages of the spiritual journey, or who have been bequeathed different spiritual gifts of unveiling or insight in the form of one and the same symbol.

The notion of there being a 'transcendent unity of religions' is a comforting, ecumenical thought. It suggests that, to some extent, the choice of path isn't all that important because, ultimately, all paths are connected to, and have access to, Reality/Truth.

Life, however, might be like one of those sort of mazes in which there are many false paths leading in all manner of directions, and the task of life is to try to find a path, if any, that is capable of transporting one through the chaos of the journey to a destination that is truly 'Home'. While it is quite conceivable that there might be more than one path that is capable, at least in principle, of accomplishing such a journey, it is also quite conceivable that there might be more than one path that will lead one astray from the desired goal or lead one into a cul-de-sac that merely wastes whatever allotment of time one has.

To argue against the idea of a 'transcendental unity of religions' is to argue for the need to acquire discernment. To argue against the idea of a 'transcendent unity of religions' is to give emphasis to the possibility that not all spiritual paths will necessarily assist one to realize whatever capacity one has to realize the nature of Truth/Reality, and, therefore, the choices one makes in this regard might entail more problematic ramifications than the notion of a 'transcendent unity of religions' tends to imply.

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With the foregoing considerations in mind, one might switch gears, somewhat, and develop a more visually oriented counterpart to the above discussion. More specifically, let us suppose that human beings

have an innate inclination to dig holes because there is a sense that with the right kind of digging, one will be able to unearth buried treasure.

Within the context of such a scenario, we might further suppose that from infancy, all human beings, in one way or another, learn about both the theory and practice of hole-digging. This is learned from one's family, schools, books, movies, CDs, MP3s, friends, personal experience, the Internet, and so on.

Hole-digging is so much a part of the psyche – both individually and collectively -- that everyone knows about the idea of hole-digging and has some experience digging holes or has been exposed to different theories and methods of hole-digging. As a result there is a certain overlap of commonly shared experiences, understanding, and descriptive language concerning the digging of holes.

Consequently, among other things, people talk about the motivation for, and evaluation of, the hole-digging process. For example, some say that digging holes is a waste of time ... one won't find anything.

Some people who have not found anything begin to wonder if such people might not be correct. Other people say that the problem is that you just haven't dug deep enough or in the right place.

Some dig holes because they feel more fit when they dig holes than when they don't do this. Such people don't care if they find anything because they enjoy the process.

Some dig holes because everybody else is digging holes. Some dig holes as a vocation and some dig holes as an avocation.

Some individuals dig holes because they have heard some of the stories that have been told around the campfire and they imagine themselves becoming the people about whom future generations will tell tales while sitting around the campfire. Some people dig holes, but they are not quite certain what it is they are looking for or how they would recognize the treasure even if they were to hit the mother-load.

Some people worry about hole-digging and tend to shy away from it because they have heard about various disasters that befell some individuals who dug too quickly, or who picked the wrong partners with whom to dig, or who experienced cave-ins, or were overcome with noxious gases or drowned when the hole became flooded from underground

rivers. Some people believe they can avoid all of the hard work of digging and just think or imagine their way to the buried treasure.

As one might expect, conflict tends to erupt because there are so many varied theories concerning methods of digging, purposes for digging, styles of digging, claims about who has, and who has not, found treasure, along with arguments about the nature of the treasures that allegedly have been found. Whole societies worry about the hole-digging gap that they perceive to exist between their society and other societies, and, as a result, industry, government leaders, scientists, engineers, military troops, and the intelligence community are placed on a war footing in an effort to gain the moral and tactical high ground with respect to hole-digging.

In the midst of all the foregoing, someone comes along and writes a book that claims that all hole-digging activity and the holes that result from that activity will, eventually, lead to the same place. The author indicates there is a transcendental unity to the process of hole -- digging.

Why should anyone accept such a claim? Everyone might agree that the same Earth is being explored through hole-digging. Moreover, almost everyone – except those who do not believe that hole digging is a worthwhile activity – might believe in the value of trying to find the hidden treasure and that hole-digging seems to be the only method one has to actually try to uncover that treasure ... even though there might be a great deal of disagreement about the kind of digging instrument one should use, and about the size, depth, safety features, and location of such holes, as well as about just how much time one should spend digging such holes or where one should study to learn about hole digging, or whether, or not, one should have an individual who has been duly certified to supervise the whole process of hole digging.

People might even agree that, in principle, there is nothing to prevent people from digging holes that crisscross, or intersect, one another at certain junctures along the way, and, thereby, have portions of their journey occupy the same sort of space (albeit engaged from different directions). But, why should anyone accept the idea that all hole-digging will, necessarily lead to the same place or, roughly speaking, have the same result?

Such an author might counter this sort of query with something along the following lines. Thus, the author might say, 'well, don't you see

that the Earth has a center and all hole digging will necessarily be directed, ultimately, to that center and will meet at that center point?’

However, the fact of the matter is that hole-digging can take place at almost any angle. There is nothing that necessitates that holes be dug toward the center of the Earth.

In fact, there is nothing to prevent someone who is delusional to imagine that they are digging toward the center of the Earth even as they are merely making digging motions in the air or in their mind’s eye or within their dreams.

Furthermore, there is nothing to prevent someone from digging toward the center, passing through the center – not realizing that one is supposed to stop – and proceeding right on through to the other side of the world. In addition, there could be technical arguments over where, precisely, the center of the Earth is and doesn’t this depend on how one calculates and measures distance (starting from Death Valley will give a different result than if one starts from the top of Mount Everest).

Or, what happens if one doesn’t have the capacity, means or resources to make it all the way to the center of the Earth? Is there any treasure short of the center, and, if so, is this treasure different from, or the same, as that which is alleged to be at the center of the Earth? Has the purpose of life not been realized if someone fails to make it to the center, and, isn’t it possible that all of this emphasis on reaching the center has distorted the actual nature of why hole-digging takes place at all?

To claim there is a ‘transcendental unity to religions’ is as problematic as to suppose there is a transcendental unity to digging holes. To be sure, someone might wish to argue that what the transcendental unity of either hole-digging or religions refers to is really the original, primordial, essential sense of hole-digging or religions, and, then, one proceeds to spell out one’s theory about what this ‘original, primordial, essential sense’ of religions and hole digging entailed – but that is just the point ... all of this is nothing but a theory that stands in need of being shown to be correct.

A further question arises in conjunction with the foregoing scenario. Namely, why is it so important for such people to prove their theory of transcendent unity of religions or hole-digging?

Perhaps, such individuals want to show that their ideas about what constitutes 'real' religion or how to go about digging holes properly in accordance with original, primordial, essential teachings is the correct way to understand religion and/or dig holes.

If so, the plural form of religion is misleading, because they don't really mean the transcendent unity of religions in general but, rather, they mean that their perspective concerning religion is the only one that correctly shows one how one should go about digging holes.

If true, their perspective would have a certain degree of authoritativeness to it. If wrong, there is tremendous room for such a perspective to become very authoritarian and elitist in orientation.

In either event, as it now stands, it is nothing more than a theory that requires a great deal more evidence to substantiate it than presently has been brought forth. It constitutes more of an attitude or way of thinking about things than it is necessarily constitutes a reflection of the way things have been, are, or should be.

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In a commentary concerning the foregoing essay, a person (DSL) has raised the following question:

"Don't the Traditionalists believe that it's not just all religions, but Revealed religions ... that is, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Abrahamic ones – as far as this cycle of time is concerned, that have a greater or lesser efficacy in Salvific function and pursuing the interior life (assuming Grace and sincerity of heart ... etc.)"

The foregoing comment tends to give the impression that Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monolithic in character and, consequently, that everyone is agreed upon what is Revealed – as opposed to invented – with respect to such traditions. Furthermore, there are, at least, three spiritual traditions (namely, Jain, Tao, as well as indigenous native perspectives such as those from Australia, the South Pacific, and North/South America) that are not mentioned in the comments of DSL above that some might want to include among 'Revealed religions' ... that is, spiritual traditions that are based, in some way, on the disclosure of truths concerning the nature of reality, human

beings, creation, and life. Furthermore, I am sure there are some individuals who would wish to maintain that certain other spiritual traditions, still not mentioned, should be added to the foregoing collection of 'Revealed religions'.

However, whatever traditions one decides to include in such a list of "Revealed religions", one is faced with the same issue (a problem implicit in the assumption alluded to above through use of the term "monolithic") that when one mentions a name – like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and so on – and refers to it as a "Revealed religion", then does this mean that everything connected with such a name is necessarily an expression of something revealed? In fact, there are two questions that must be addressed by anyone who seriously seeks to pursue the issue of 'revealed truth' – namely, what is the truth about 'revealed disclosures' and how does one know this to be the truth

Isn't it possible that it is not necessarily those religions that are alleged to be revealed that are one, but, rather, it is the Truth that is one and that might, or might not, be given expression through this or that tradition that is said, by some, to be rooted in 'revealed truth'? Moreover, even in the case of those spiritual traditions that are (we will assume for the moment) rooted in 'revealed truth', one cannot assume that such traditions encompass all of Truth or exhaust Truth or give expression to the Truth equally. In addition, if such assumptions turn out to be unwarranted or problematic in some way, then what implications do such failed assumptions carry for the idea of the 'Transcendental Unity of Religions'?

To speak of the 'Transcendental Unity of Religions' there are a number of questions that need to be asked. What is meant by 'transcendental'? What is meant by 'unity'? What is meant by 'religion'? And, once one has come to some – one would hope – correct (whatever this might mean) understanding of such terms, then one can ask a further question, how does one know that all of these terms, taken collectively, is true in the way indicated?

For instance, when Schuon wrote: *De l'unité transcendante des religions* in 1948, was he operating out of a framework of revealed truth? What was the basis of his understanding and insights? What sort of epistemological status should one assign to Schuon and what justifies one

doing so ... whether this assignment is favorable or critical or a bit of both?

Or, if one would like to recede further into the mists of history in an attempt to trace the roots of what has come to be called 'Traditionalism', then one can ask similar questions of Rene Guenon. In other words, when Guenon wrote, say: *A General Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrine* in 1921 or, several years later, *Man and his Becoming According to the Vedanta* was Guenon writing from a direct, certain, spiritual 'insider's' grasp of the Truth concerning either Hinduism or the Vedanta, or was it merely an intellectual exercise that, by the Grace of God, might have had some degree of resonance with the Truth concerning those perspectives?

More than 25 years ago, I read many of the seminal works of 'Traditionalists' such as Guenon, Schuon, Burckhardt, Coomaraswamy, Lings, and others. I enjoyed those books, I learned from those books, and, most importantly, perhaps, I began to reflect on a lot of ideas and possibilities as a result of having had engaged their thoughts.

However, enjoying something does not make it true. Learning something does not guarantee that what one has learned is the truth. Moreover, being stimulated to reflect and think does not make the stimulus true, nor does it necessarily follow that even if the original stimulus gives expression to the truth that whatever reflective process I engage in concerning that stimulus necessarily gives expression to the truth.

Agreeing with something that someone says does not make that which is agreed upon true. Disagreeing with something that someone says does not necessarily make either side of the disagreement an expression of truth.

If one says there is a 'transcendental unity of religions', then how does one come to know this is true? Surely, in order to know that such is the truth one would have to attain whatever state and/or station permits one, God willing, to see and understand that, yes, there is a transcendental unity of religions. In addition, one would have to know, with certainty, that such an understanding was veridical or true.

One can believe something to be true and, in fact, that something might be true. Nonetheless, believing that something is true and knowing that something is true are not the same.

I know that Schuon believed there was a transcendental unity of religions. What I am asking is something different – namely, I am asking whether Schuon knew, with certainty, that there was a transcendental unity of religions? From what metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological station was Schuon speaking when he wrote about the idea of the ‘transcendental unity of religions’? And, how does one verify any of this?

Alternatively, from what metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological station was Guenon speaking when he wrote about Hinduism and the Vedanta? Was he giving expression to the truth concerning the realities of such matters or was he merely giving expression to his understanding of things ... an understanding that might, or might not, have touched upon certain aspects of the Truth concerning such spiritual traditions?

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“There are 71 sects among Jews, and only one of them is correct. There are 72 sects among Christians, and only one of them is correct. There are 73 sects among Muslims, and only one of them is correct.”

Just restricting ourselves to the Abrahamic expressions of ‘revealed religions’, and if one accepts the foregoing saying of the Prophet (which I do), then which version of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is being alluded to in the foregoing hadith as that which is correct? And, more to the point with respect to the current discussion, the idea of the ‘transcendental unity of religions’ becomes quite problematic in the light of the above saying of the Prophet – not because there is no truth, but, rather, because there are so many counterfeit versions of the truth.

Furthermore, even if one were to be able, by the Grace of God, to identify which of, respectively, the 71, 72 and 73 sects of these different expressions of Abrahamic-based spirituality, does it necessarily follow that if there is only one correct choice in each case, then, therefore, these are all correct in

the same way and to the same extent? This is not a matter of asking whether one kind of correctness might be better, in some sense than another kind of correctness, but, rather, it is raising a question about the nature of the unity of such correctness ... what does it mean to say that three -- possibly overlapping, but possibly different -- expressions of revealed truth constitute a unity?

Is it the religions, per se, (even the 'correct' ones) which form a unity? Or, is the Truth which forms a 'oneness' that is participated in, to varying degrees and ways, by spiritual traditions that are linked by Truth not by religions? Is it not the Truth that serves as the measure of correctness of the manner through which a given spiritual tradition is understood, and isn't this Truth quite independent of any given religion, whether correct or not?

In the Qur'an one finds:

"Verily, We have sent messengers before thee, among them are some of whom We have told thee, and some of whom We did not tell thee.' (40:78)

So, the question arises: What constitutes a revealed religion?

From an Islamic perspective, there are many degrees of freedom inherent in the foregoing Quranic verse for considering this or that spiritual tradition as being potential candidates for constituting a 'revealed religion'. At the same time, any such considerations are haunted by the implications of the aforementioned hadith about the many different counterfeit sects that are present within Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, since all of this raises the question about where, precisely, do authentic disclosures of revealed truth lie, and even if and when such authenticity can be identified, does this necessarily mean that all such disclosures give expression to Truth in the same way and to the same extent -- especially in the light of the often expressed Sufi precept that Divinity never discloses the same manifestation twice ... that all manifestations of the Truth are unique in some way? Consequently, one wonders how the idea of the 'transcendental unity of religions' fits into all of the foregoing questions and considerations.

According to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“All of the Revealed Books are contained in the Qur’an. And, the meaning of the Qur’an is contained within Surah al-Fatiha. And the meaning of Surah al-Fatiha is contained in Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Raheem, and the meaning of Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Raheem is contained in Bismillah, and the meaning of Bismillah is contained in the dot beneath bey (b).”

The Prophet is also reported to have said:

“Truly, the Qur’an has an outward and inward dimension, and the latter has its own inward dimension, and so on, up to seven dimensions.”

What is the Truth that is contained in the dot beneath bey (b)? Does it have an outward and an inward dimension? How many inward dimensions does it have? Seven? If so, what are these? Do all revealed religions give expression to the same number of dimensions and in the same way?

Perhaps, authentic religious traditions are a way of helping to orient one to the Truth and a way of providing – God willing – efficacious means to struggle toward the Truth (and, therefore, to these extents, expressions of the Truth). Nevertheless, the realization of Truth is a function of human capacities and a Divine Grace that are quite independent of any given religion and, in fact, pre-date the advent of even the very first ‘revealed religion’?

Moreover, although whatever the number of dimensions there might be are all expressions of the Truth, nevertheless, the very fact of dimensionality indicates difference. Consequently, such dimensions are united in the Truth, but in different ways, and, if so, the idea of unity might be far more complex – indeed, potentially, infinitely so – than the notion of the ‘transcendental unity of religions’ might suggest.

Based on the foregoing, one objection to the idea of the ‘transcendental unity of religions’ is that the phrase seeks to place constraints on the Truth and seeks to say what Truth can and cannot be. The phrase appears to lack humility, perspective, and discernment because some of the hermeneutical activity surrounding engagement of the phrase

seeks to serve as a measuring rod of the Truth, when, in fact, Truth is the measuring rod for all such statements.

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During the aforementioned commentary on the comments of DSL concerning the original essay on the idea of the “Transcendent Unity of Religions’ perspective – one of the central tenets of so-called ‘Traditionalism’ – DSL states:

“...coming to this traditionalist understanding forced me to respect the notion that Religion, when defined as God’s Disclosure to Man as to what can bind man, once again, to the Divine, (religio) is essentially one phenomenon that has Providentially run the course it has. It has increased my respect for the way of Muhammad without lessening my respect for other faith traditions. ... In other words, there is no such thing as converting religion – simply a matter of adopting the most authentic or latest form.”

One might agree with almost everything that DSL says in the above quoted comment and simultaneously continue to maintain that the notion of the ‘transcendental unity of religions’ is misleading and problematic. First of all, even if one accepts the foregoing definition of religion [‘God’s Disclosure to Man as to what can bind man, once again, to the Divine’ (which doesn’t address the questions of: ‘bind how or to what extent’ and ‘for what purpose’ and ‘through what faculties’ and ‘at what price for failure’ and ‘to what extent does one have control over this binding process?’)], a person still could take exception with the idea that the ‘binding process’ is one phenomenon, or, alternately, one could ask just what kind of one phenomenon is it?

This is like saying life is one phenomenon, or awareness is one phenomenon, or intelligence is one phenomenon, or realizing potential is one phenomenon, or disease is one phenomenon, or health is one phenomenon, or pain and suffering are one phenomenon. One can say such things, and there even might be a certain amount of truth being expressed through such statements, but ultimately, if one insists that all of the foregoing constitute just one phenomenon, then one loses touch with the fact that diversity exists, and such reductionism leads to a distortion or misunderstanding of the phenomenon in question.

If one says that the process of going from a caterpillar to a butterfly is one phenomenon, there is a certain truth to this because the phenomenon in question is the life cycle of the species in question. Nonetheless, this life cycle goes through a number of distinct stages that are not the same as one another even as they (the stages), individually, give expression to one and the same life cycle.

The modalities of expression of each stage are different. The needs of each stage are different. The struggles of each stage are different. The capabilities of each stage are different. The biochemistry, physiology, and anatomy of each stage are different, despite the presence of overlapping degrees of similarity and/or sameness.

The life-cycle of a species might be likened to the Providential Plan of Divinity for a given community of human beings. Different communities might have different kinds of life-cycle, even as all these different modalities of life-cycle share not only the themes of experiencing a beginning, middle, and end, but, as well, the universal theme of being tested. As the Qur'an indicates:

“And We test you by evil and by good by way of trial. (21:35)

Are evil and good one phenomenon? Is the process of testing one phenomenon? Will people be held accountable in the same way?

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) indicated that this Companions benefited from having been in direct contact with him and from having been present at the time of Revelation and, consequently, if they left out even 1/10<sup>th</sup> of what was obligatory upon human beings, then they would earn Hell-fire. However, there would come a time when there would be those who did not see the Prophet and, yet, if they did even 1/10<sup>th</sup> of what was required, then, nevertheless, they would achieve Paradise.

How is this all one phenomenon? Distinctions are being made.

The way in which a human being binds to Truth/Reality is as a principle, not a rule. Rules are linear and self-same – that is, the logic of a rule is applied according to a set, fixed, and determinate logic that does not vary across applications. On the other hand, principles are non-linear and exhibit self-similarity, not self-sameness, that means that there are degrees of freedom inherent in principles that are not present in rules.

There is no rule for love. That is, there is nothing in the essence of love that requires one to act in precisely the same way across all instances of seeking to give expression to love.

Love is a principle that can be expressed through words, looks, touch, silence, thoughts, feelings, gestures, and acts with almost infinite variety. Love is not one phenomenon, but, rather, love is a quality of incredible, if not infinite, subtlety that gives expression to a variety of phenomena, all of which share a rather complex relationship with one another in as much as they can be understood as being self-similar manifestations of love, even though there is no one property – other than the indefinable, perhaps, ineffable principle of love -- which must be present in all instances in order for something to be labeled as an instance of love.

Was the test that faced Adam and Eve (may Allah sanctify their souls) the same as the tests that were faced by later human beings? How could it be, given that no human being had ever encountered such a test prior to Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them)? Was the test that Adam (peace be upon him) faced precisely the same kind of test that Eve (may Allah be pleased with her) faced? Was the test that Iblis faced the same as the test that Adam and Eve (may Allah be pleased with them) encountered?

In the hadithic literature one finds that the most severely tested of human beings are the Prophets, and then after them, the non-Prophetic awliya (friends/intimates) of Divinity, and then, finally, the rest of humanity. Distinctions are being made among spiritual capacities indicating that the process of binding to Divinity is not one phenomenon but varies, like a principle, from case to case.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“This world is prohibited to the people of the next world, and the next world is forbidden to the people of this world, and they are both forbidden to the people of Allah.”

People have different capacities for binding to Divinity? How are we talking about one phenomenon here?

Furthermore, Divinity is not one 'thing' to which something can be bound. Binding to the Infinite can take place in as many ways as Truth/Reality permits.

Different communities were given different modalities of guidance and Divine Law. Sometimes the guidance was just to stay away from eating the fruit of a particular tree, or to refrain from ham-hocking a certain she-camel, or to observe a fast in a given way, and so on.

The very fact, as pointed out earlier, that the Prophet said all of the Books of Revelation were contained in the Qur'an implies that these Books were not all the same even if they all gave expression to the Truth in one way or another. People and communities were given guidance according to their circumstances, needs, capabilities, and the ways through which they would be tested by good and evil.

Even within the context of the Qur'an -- considered in and of itself -- the fact of the matter is that Muslims were called upon to do different things over time within the framework of one and the same Book. At certain times, early on during the Prophetic mission of Muhammad (peace be upon him), Muslims were not required to observe ritual prayer (although there was a non-ritual form of prayer that was observed) or obligatory fasting (other than for Ashura that was instituted by the Prophet Muhammad -- peace be upon him), pilgrimage, or the paying of zakat. The process of binding oneself to God went through a variety of transformations over the course of time.

By criticizing the idea that there is a 'transcendental unity of religions', one need not assume a perspective that radiates less respect for the faith of another human being just because such an expression of the faith might be different than the way I might go about things. In fact, if anything, given the nature of the perspective that is being delineated here, one is required to be even more vigilant and cautious because one does not know what arrangements Divinity has made with any given human being as far as what are permissible and impermissible ways for that human being to seek to bind with Divinity.

One does not know who is going to be held accountable for what, or who is going to be forgiven or not forgiven. One does not know that actions -- small or large -- might be received favorably by Divinity or rejected. One does not know whose offerings are going to be accepted.

A person of limited spiritual capacity and experience might be judged in a very different way than an individual of considerable spiritual capacity and opportunity. The judgments might be different, but justice will be done in each case.

Truth binds everything together. However, there is more than one phenomenon going on.

According to the previously quoted passage from DSL's commentary on my earlier Blog, "there is no such thing as converting religion – simply a matter of adopting the most authentic or latest form." Why equate authenticity with what is latest? Authenticity is whatever Divinity says is authentic ... whatever Divinity is willing to accept as authentic.

Let us suppose that someone has respect, even love, for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) but does not observe four of the five pillars (the only one that is acted on, to varying degrees, is the first pillar). Let us further suppose that this individual has both read about, and seeks to live by (according to their capacity and understanding), some of the sayings attributed to the Prophet ... sayings such as:

(1) "If you love your Creator, then love your fellow beings first."

(2) "By no means shall you attain to righteousness, until you spend benevolently out of what you love."

(3) "Creation is like God's family, for its sustenance is from Allah. Therefore, the most beloved unto God is the individual who does good to God's family."

(4) "If someone treats you with nafs, then treat them with ruh."

(5) "Shall I inform you about a better act than fasting, charity, and prayer? – making peace between one another. Enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by the roots."

(6) "What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being; to feed the hungry; to help the afflicted; to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured."

(7) "Meekness and modesty are two branches of Iman."

(8) "Shall I tell you about your illnesses and their remedy?" They replied: "Indeed, O Messenger of Allah." He said: "Your illness is your sins, and your remedy is repentance."

(9) The Prophet said: "Do not attend the circle of a learned person unless that individual asks you to give up five things in favor of accepting five other things:

- doubt in favor of faith;
- hypocrisy in favor of sincerity;
- worldliness in favor or asceticism; - pride in favor of humility; -
- enmity in favor of love."

(10) "Kindness is a mark of faith, and whoever has not kindness, has not faith."

(11) "One performs the best jihad when one stands up and speaks out against injustice in the face of tyranny and oppression."

(12) "Allah has 300 Attributes. The one who acquires even just one of these Attributes for one's own character will inherit Paradise."

(13) "Generosity is a characteristic of the people of Paradise."

(14) "Assist any person who is oppressed – whether Muslim or non-Muslim."

(15) "The best thing in the Scale on the Day of Judgment will be a beautiful character."

(16) "I have been given all the Names and have been sent to perfect good behavior."

(17) There is no human being who is wounded and, yet, forgives the giver of the wound, for whom God will not exalt the injured party's dignity and diminish such a person's faults."

What will happen to such a person on the Day of Judgment? What will happen to a person who does not observe obligatory prayers, fasting, zakat and pilgrimage and, yet, seeks to live in accordance with the foregoing, seventeen principles? The truth is: we don't know how Divinity will calibrate the Scales of Justice for any particular individual.

Alternatively, what happens if a person seeks to observe the five pillars but is, shall we say, lax with respect to the principles being espoused in the foregoing seventeen sayings? The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Many are there among you who fast and, yet, gain nothing from it except hunger and thirst, and many are there who pray throughout the night and, yet, gain nothing from it except wakefulness.”

What is the form of authenticity? Is it necessarily the latest manifestation of guidance? Is such a form rule-governed or is it governed by principles? Is form a matter of just the outer aspect of behavior or does it also depend on the interior form out of which behavior arises? What degrees of freedom will Divinity permit with respect to the observance of authentic form – whether interior or exterior? What does it mean when Divinity says:

“My mercy doth take precedence over my wrath”?

Am I trying to say that anything and everything is permissible? No, I am not.

What I am saying is that the relationship between any given human being and Divinity cannot be reduced down to one phenomenon, or one set of rules, or one set of behaviors.

Moreover, in all of this, it is Truth that determines what is acceptable, not religion – as the Qur’an indicates:

“O people, you are the poor toward God, and God is the Independent and Praiseworthy.” (35:15)

It is Truth that is transcendent, not necessarily religion. As the Qur’an indicates:

“We raise by grades (of Mercy) whom We will, and over every lord of knowledge, there is one more knowing.” (12:76)

It is Truth, not necessarily religion, that is unified. As a hadith qudsi stipulates:

“I am Ahmad without meem (m).”

The Qur’an says:

“Lo. Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Sabaens, and Christians – whosoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does right – there shall be no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve.” (5: 69)

The foregoing does not say that all of these categories are equal. The foregoing does not stipulate who will get what. The foregoing does not indicate that all of these individuals will necessarily believe in Divinity and the Last Day in the same way or that they will do the same kind of ‘right’ or good. Rather, the Quranic passage says that those people who, in a way determined only by Divinity, satisfy such conditions in some minimally acceptable manner will neither fear nor shall they grieve.

There is no ‘transcendental unity of religions’ necessarily implicit in the foregoing. What is being alluded to is a promise of Divinity for those who are found acceptable by their Lord ... and there are many keys, God willing, to such acceptance. What is right for one people to do might not be what is right for another people. How one people go about acting upon their faith in Divinity and a principle of accountability might vary from case to case, and, yet, all of these might be acceptable to God ... Allah knows best.

What is the optimal way of journeying toward God? The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Everything lives and develops in accordance with that for which it has been created.”

The Prophet also indicated that:

“Every child is born according to primordial nature (fitra),”

And the Qur’an indicates:

“To everyone, We have appointed a Law and a way.” (5:48)

But, at the same time, the Qur’an stipulates that:

“God charges a soul only to its capacity.” (2:286)

On the one hand, the latter quote suggests that not everyone has the same spiritual, emotional, intellectual, or physical capacity. On the other hand, the Quranic verse just prior to the last ayat does not specify whether the Law and ‘a way’ being indicated are the same in all cases – although some might wish to argue that this is so.

But however one considers the matter, one needs to find an authentic expression of ‘the Law’ and ‘a way’ that will assist one to realize as much of one’s fitra as possible so that one comes to understand that for which one has been created and for which one is developing through different stages.

Not anything that calls itself a ‘law’ will necessarily help one to accomplish the foregoing. Not everything that calls itself ‘a way’ will necessarily assist one to realize the potential of fitra. Not everything that calls itself a ‘revealed religion’ retains what is necessary for the full development of fitra simply because there are so many counterfeit forms that are seeking to pass themselves off as the truth about what actually has been revealed to humankind.

While there might be various degrees of freedom that, God willing, are capable of giving expression to authenticity, of one kind or another, not every degree of freedom is necessarily authentic. The idea of the ‘transcendental unity of religions’ is one of these degrees of freedom to which imagination has given expression but that does not necessarily reflect anything that is true or real either ontologically or metaphysically.

The journey from caterpillar to butterfly is a long difficult one, filled with many struggles and trials. Not all species of caterpillar are the same and not all such journeys are the same, although there is a sort of self-similar familiarity and quality to the multiplicity of processes that give expression to the law and way governing any given instance of the development of fitra in an individual species.

There is no necessary realm consisting of a 'transcendental unity of religions'. Rather, "God embraces all things in Mercy and Knowledge", and one of the manifestations of this quality of Mercy is the fact that:

"We have not sent you (Muhammad) except as a mercy to all the worlds (21:107),

and included in those worlds are those who seek the Truth according to a wide variety of processes ... and who will be the one who claims to know who will not be the beneficiary of such mercy or the one who claims to know how such mercy will be dispensed and manifested?

Appendix One – Sainly Insights

The world has no substantive reality. Rather, it exists as a shadowy play.

-- Shabistari

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The Truth, or al-Haqq, desired to see the essences of the most perfect and beautiful Divine Names -- which are inexhaustible in number. God wished to see Divine essence manifested through a universal object that is endowed with existence by God and is given the capacity of recapitulating the entire Divine Order and, thereby, display the mystery of Divinity to Divinity.

-- Ibn 'Arabi

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Do not commit foul deeds, for you should understand that even our so-called "fair" deeds appear foul in the sight of our most beautiful Loved One.

-- Rumi

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The individual who looks toward creation fails, while the one who returns to the Truth prevails.

-- al-Hujwiri

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Close the doorway of your heart through which 'otherness' enters. Your heart is God's House of worship. Be vigilant with respect to the closing of the doorway of otherness, and remain in God's House until you meet Divinity. -- Niffari

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No act finds greater favor with God than struggling against passion, for destroying a mountain with one's fingernails is far easier than is resisting passion.

-- Junayd

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Do not wander idly from contingent event to contingent event, since such wandering is like the beast of burden of grinding mills. This being plods along and, yet, the destination sought by this animal is none other than the place from which it began. Instead, you should travel from creation to the Creator.

-- Ibn 'Ata'illah

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Death is a bridge which joins the lover to the Beloved.

-- 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sulayman

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Do not permit misfortune or poverty to cause you distress, for just as gold is purified and forged in the fire, so the believing seeker is immersed in trials.

-- 'Ali

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Most human beings are like those who are addicted to, and under the influence of, alcohol -- completely unaware of their own condition. The wise are fully conscious, far removed from the somnolent state of the addicted.

-- Ansari

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The world is a field which belongs to Satan (Iblis), and people "of" the world are tillers in his field.

-- Isa (Jesus) -- Peace be upon him)

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The one who knows God has no interest in Divine gifts, but the one who neglects God and, therefore, is ignorant of God, this person is insatiable concerning Divine gifts.

-- Ahmad al- 'Alawi

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Love the One Who, when you no longer exist, will continue to Be, so that you might become one with That which will never cease to be.

-- Abu Sa'id ibn Abi 'l-Khayr

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The individual of least spiritual capacity is the one who demonstrates the least capacity for self-correction.

-- 'Ali

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Oh my child, the entire mystical Path consists of spiritual sacrifice. If you are inclined to this, then this is good. If you are not so inclined, then do not pursue the difficulties of the Sufi path.

-- Abu Muhammad Ruwaym

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An individual is spiritually perfect only when honor and humiliation, or bestowal and denial are considered alike by the heart.

-- Abu 'Uthman al-Hayri al-Nisaburi

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The people who are most separated from God are those knowers who are separated by their knowledge, and those devotees who are separated by their devotion, and those ascetics who are separated by their asceticism.

-- Bayazid al-Bistami

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Aspire to withdraw all traces of self-interest from your transactions with God. For, as long as self-interest is present, sincerity or ikhlas cannot be achieved. Worship motivated by self-interest is like work done for wages, whereas worship motivated by sincerity is work done in the service of God without thought of return.

-- Abu 'l-Qasim Bishr - Yasin

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Each individual hears God speak in accordance with the degree to which the essential Realities have penetrated the individual, since God establishes each thing in its place.

-- Jili

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There are those for whom death is like a draught of pure water for the thirsty.

-- ibn al-'Arif

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Nothing impels one like illusion (al-wahm).

-- Ibn 'At'illah

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The whole of existence is nothing but imagination within imagination, while Being is God alone.

-- Ibn 'Arabi

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The veil between God and you is not a matter of heaven or the earth, nor is it a matter of the Throne or the Footstool. Rather, your illusions and sense of selfhood are the veils. When these are removed, then the curtain of separation will disappear.

-- Abu Sa'id ibn Abi 'l-Khayr

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Those whom Love draws near are the most severely tried.

-- 'Attar

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Place your sin beneath your feet, and place your virtue beneath your sin.

-- Niffari

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In truth, your fear of death is actually only your fear of yourself. You should clearly see that from which you are fleeing.

-- Rumi

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Restoring one dead heart to the eternal life is better than restoring life to a thousand dead bodies.

-- Pir Murad

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The alchemical process of spiritual transformation both begins and ends with fire.

-- Ibn Bishrun

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I did not arrive at Truth through either a series of proofs or sequence of steps in reasoning, but by means of a flash of light which God placed in my soul.

-- al-Ghazali

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Since I have known God, neither truth nor falsehood has entered my heart.

-- Abu Hafs Haddad

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Do you not understand that the light of the sun is but the reflection of the Sun beyond the veil of our ignorance.

-- Rumi

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Your eye does not have enough strength to gaze at the burning sun's light, but you can watch its brilliant might at length through the sun's reflection, which is mirrored in the water. So, too, can the reflection of Absolute Being be viewed in the mirror of non-being. For nonexistence -- being the Opposite of Reality, is Able to reflect an Image.

-- Shabistari

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All opposing truths are unified in the Truth which is One.

-- Jili

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You are but an atom, and God is the great Whole. But, if, for a few days, you will meditate with care on the Whole, you may become one with It.

-- Jami

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What is worship? To realize Reality!

-- Ansari

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Tawhid (unity) is the return of a human being to one's origins so that the person will be as one was before coming into being.

-- Junayd

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Perhaps, God may open the door of obedience to you , yet the door of acceptance remains closed. Maybe, God ordains sin for you, yet this becomes a means to realization.

-- Ibn 'Ata'illah

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A single atom of God's love in one's heart is worth more than a hundred thousand paradises.

-- Bayazid al-Bistami

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The Double only appears to be, but the One is. Give yourself to self-annihilation, so that this false Two in that true One may live.

-- 'Attar

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Glory be to Him who veils Himself with manifestations of His Light and manifests Himself through drawing a veil over His Face.

-- Jami

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The one who sees by Illumination sees Divinity first in all things.

-- Shabistari

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When one's eye is filled with love of the world, the vision of the heart is extinguished.

-- Ibrahim ibn Adman

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The understanding which leads to renunciation is rooted in a realization that relative to what is being received, what is being renounced is of small value.

-- al-Ghazali

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Appendix Two – Some Terminology

The following list of terms is, by no means, complete. However, the various terms that are briefly described in this section do provide something of a foundation on which to build since they are in fairly common usage in many discussions of the Sufi path and, therefore, are of some importance.

One note on pronunciation -- most of the terms have been broken down into syllables to assist the reader with pronunciation. Many of the syllables will be shown with an 'h' in parenthesis "(h)".

I call this a "virtual h". Whenever it occurs, one should pronounce the syllable in which it appears as if there were an "h" where the (h) is.

In reality, however, there is no h-sound that is present. I find that using the 'virtual h' often seems to help give a better sense of how to pronounce the syllable of which the 'virtual h' is a part.

The scheme is not fool-proof and is certainly not a recognized rule of any kind. Nonetheless, use of the 'virtual h' has helped some people to approximate proper pronunciation somewhat more closely than otherwise might be the case.

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Abrar: [A(h) - braa(h)r] -- Those servants of God who are, by the Grace of Allah, observant of, and conscientious about, their duties to God.

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adab: [a(h) - da(h)b] -- The principles of spiritual etiquette that form an essential aspect of Islamic mysticism. There is a balanced, harmonious, wise way to deal with every dimension of existence in an equitable, just, respectful and loving fashion that, God willing, will be pleasing to Allah. This way is encompassed by the principles, understanding and practice of adab.

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af'al: [a(h)f - `aal] -- The acts to which the dynamics of the Divine Names give expression in the form of the creatures, processes and properties of Creation.

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`alam: [ʾaa(h) - la(h)m] -- a world of either a physical, imaginal, spiritual and/or metaphysical description.

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`alam al-mithal: [ʾaa(h) - la(h)m al - mi(h) - thal] -- The world of symbols and similitudes. This world brings together aspects of both the physical world and the imaginal realm.

It is the world to which we are brought when we have dreams. Since the language of dreams is a function of both physical and imaginal influences, the forms of the dream come as symbols and similitude that have to be interpreted.

This realm is also a place of meeting the spirits of different beings -- some of whom are helpful and, God willing, can provide guidance to the individual, and some of whom are dangerous and can help lead the individual astray. The help and protection that is provided through the spiritual guide is of fundamental importance when journeying through this world.

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`alam al-nasut: [ʾaa(h) - la(h)m al - na(h) - soot] -- The world of materiality and corporeality. The world of physical and biological existence.

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angels: {malak [ma(h) - la(h)k]} -- These are beings born upon pure light and are incapable of doing other than the will of God. There are many, many different kinds of angels who serve Allah in various ways.

All physical, material and biological phenomena have angels who are associated with them and who have been entrusted by God to oversee these phenomena. In addition, there are angels who are engaged in constant worship and glorification of Divinity.

Indeed, the positions of the ritual prayers are all derived from the postures of different groups of angels who gave expression to their particular modality of praising God through such positions. While on mi'raj or ascension, the Prophet had witnessed this and was so taken by it that he sought, and received, permission to incorporate some of these postures into the form of the five daily prayers.

There also are angels who are so enraptured with Allah that they do not know of the existence of either creation or human kind. There are

other angels who are constantly circling about the Throne of God engaged in singing the praises of their Lord.

There are guardian angels and attendant angels. There are angels who travel about the Earth and convey the greetings to Allah of those who submit and believe. And, there are angels who are travelling between Earth and the heavens, informing Allah (although Allah knows already) about the activities of remembrance in which the servants of God are engaged.

Some of the angels with known names are:

(a) Gabriel (peace be on him), the angel associated with the delivering of Revelation from Divinity to a Prophet; (b) Israfil (peace be on him), the angel who, by the command of God, will, on the Day of Resurrection, blow into a Trumpet that will signal the termination of the present order of things in the visible world; (c) Michael (peace be on him) who, among other things, is charged by Allah to provide nourishment for bodies, as well as knowledge for souls; (d) Ridwan (peace be on him) who has been given command over Paradise; (e) Malik (peace be on him) who has charge of hell; (f) Nakir and Munkar (peace be on them) who have the responsibility for questioning people in the grave concerning the identity of the Lord of such people, as well as the nature of their faith, and their relationship to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and (g) Izra'il (peace be on him) who has the task to take the souls of people at the time of death.

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`arif: [a(h) - ri(h)f] -- One who recognizes and knows Allah through spiritual unveilings. This knowledge is direct, experiential and independent of all conceptual modalities of understanding. This kind of knowledge is known as: Ma'rifat.

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`ars: ['a(h)rsh] -- The Throne. On the one hand, this gives expression to the nafsi- kolliya [na(h)f - see ko(h)l - lee - ya(h)] or Universal soul. Looked at from another perspective, this refers to the dimension of Divine Names out of which manifestation arises.

In the human being, the heart is the metaphysical counterpart to the Throne. In the physical world, the Ka'bah, or Sacred House of Worship in Mecca, corresponds to the Throne.

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asma': [a(h)s - ma(h)'] --The Names of Allah. These give dynamic expression to the relationship between Divinity and Creation. Allah, as the all-inclusive Name of Reality, both makes possible, as well as relates to, Creation as a function of the dynamics of the Divine Names.

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awliya': [a(h)w - li(h) - ya(h)'] -- Those people who are said to walk in the footsteps of the Prophets and, in doing so, are the friends of God. The singular form of this reference to a saint of Allah is: wali [wa(h) - lee].

The awliya of God are human beings who have been given responsibilities by Divinity to assist individuals and to help them with the disposition of their affairs. These matters are still in the Hands of Allah, but God has chosen these people to serve as the locus of manifestation through which some of the help and baraka of Allah is given expression and outlet into the everyday, working world of the 'average' human being.

In addition, just as miracles do not define what a Prophet is or does, so too, wondrous deeds, or kiramat, do not define what a saint is or does. A given saint might never "perform" any acts that overturn the norms of the laws of nature, but the absence of such acts does not mean, in and of itself, that the individual is not a saint of God. God frequently hides His saints beneath the canopy of anonymity and prevents them from doing anything (e.g., manifesting wondrous deeds) which would draw attention to them.

These friends of God tend to be characterized by qualities of: sacredness; purity; integrity; nearness to, and intimacy with, Divinity; sincerity; compassion; an abiding and consuming love of Divinity, and a persistent striving to work in harmony with the desire of God. Consequently, they have been given a spiritual office by God. With this office comes a mandate, together with certain discretionary degrees of freedom within which to exercise the duties of that mandate.

Every Messenger and Prophet of God is, first and foremost, a wali of Allah. While their roles as Legislative Messengers and Prophets are limited to this world, their essential nature of saintliness lasts throughout eternity.

On the other hand, although all Prophets are saints, not all saints are Prophets. Moreover, the degree of saintliness of Prophets is far above even the best of those saints who are not Prophets.

One of the differences between Prophets and non-prophetic saints is the following. Whereas Prophets are protected from sin because God protects them from even the desire to commit a sin, non-prophetic saints might have both the desire and inclination to commit certain sins, but Allah prevents them from doing so or prevents them from persevering in such error.

At any given moment of time, there is one initiatory set of saints who are fixed in number. This number is 589, and can be organized into 35 categories of saints, consisting of both women and men. Collectively, they form the spiritual government of the higher and lower worlds, and their activities are hidden from the view of the vast majority of humankind.

Among these categories are the following:

(a) the Qutb, or spiritual Pole of a given age (there only can be one Qutb at any one time) who is the "place" of Allah's gaze in the cosmos, and who is the gawth [ga(h)wth] or one who helps;

(b) two Imams -- one of the right, who watches over the physical/material world, and one of the left, who watches over the world of spirits;

(c) four awtad: [a(h)w - taad], or pillars, who guard the four directions (east, west, north and south);

(d) seven abdal: [a(h)b - daal], or substitutes, who oversee the seven climes;

(e) twelve nuqaba': [nu(h) - qa(h) - baa'] -- leaders or seekers, whose number is the same as the number of signs in the Zodiac, and who have knowledge of the ninth heaven (the heaven without stars), as well as knowledge of all aspects of the revealed law;

(f) eight nujaba': [nu(h) - ja(h) - baa'], or Nobles, who have knowledge of the eight heavens (the heaven of the fixed stars and the seven planetary heavens) and whose favor with, and approval by, God is clearly manifest in their condition not through their choice but because they are governed by their spiritual state;

(g) forty rajabiyyun: [ra(h) - ja(h)b - e - yu(h)n], or the people of Rajab, who give expression to their spiritual duties and abilities only during the lunar month of Rajab;

In addition to the foregoing, there is another set of saints, consisting of both men and women, who are not fixed in number. These saints give expression to a variety of spiritual categories and functions, and a given saint might serve more than one of these categories or functions.

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ayat: [ay - a(h)t] -- This can refer to either a verse of the Qur'an or to a sign within creation through which Allah teaches us about ourselves or about Divinity.

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bai'at: [ba(h)y - a(h)t] -- The conscious, intentional act of taking an oath of allegiance with an individual who is referred to as a: shaykh, pir, murshid or Sufi master. This latter individual is someone who has been appointed by the Prophet Muhammad, with the permission of Allah, to take responsibility for helping initiates to travel toward realization of one's true identity and one's essential capacity for serving, knowing, cherishing, loving and worshipping Allah.

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baqa': [ba(h) - qa(h)'] -- The condition of spiritual subsistence in which the true, Divine nature of the human self is established.

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baraka: [ba(h) - ra(h) - ka] -- The Divine Grace that can take manifold forms, both spiritual and material.

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capacity: The spiritual potential that Allah has given to an individual and that marks the extent to which, and manner in which,

the individual is capable, if realized, of uniquely knowing, reflecting and drawing close to Divine Reality.

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dhāt: [(z)thaat] – DivineEssence ... unknowable to human beings.

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dhawk: [(z)thawk] -- The experiential taste that all states and stations have, spiritual as well as non-spiritual, each as a function of the character of that state or station. Until one has this taste, one cannot even begin to understand what is being alluded to when an individual talks about the states and/or stations of different kinds of experience.

Although many of us are familiar with the dhawk or taste of many everyday experiences, few of us have any acquaintance with the dhawk of many spiritual experiences. The mystical path entails the possibility of a wide variety of experiential tastes that are alien to most of the people of the world.

One learns to discriminate spiritual dhawk under the guidance of a Sufi master. Indeed, in part, it is, by the Grace of God, the shaykh's ability to discriminate among spiritual tastes that enables the teacher to help guide the individual along a path in which there is a great potential for error unless one is given proper discrimination in matters of spiritual taste.

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dunya: [dou(h)n - e - a(h)] -- The network of desires and actions that are functions of the inclinations of our bodies and nafs, together with the emotional, conceptual and intentional entanglements that these inclinations engender within us.

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fana: [fa(h) - na(h)] -- The spiritual condition in which the false self has been dissolved through the awareness of the presence of Divine beauty and majesty. The person in this condition loses sight of, and consciousness of, one's individual existence and is focused entirely on the presence of Divinity that has been unveiled.

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faqr: [fa(h) - q(h)r] -- One who observes a life of material poverty and humility of being as a result of recognizing, being aware of, and submitting to, the incomparable beauty and majesty of the Beloved.

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fiqh: [fi(h)qh] -- The form of spiritual jurisprudence that deals with applying the principles of the Qur'an and the sunna to situations that might not be directly addressed by either the Qur'an or sunna.

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fo'ad: [fo(h)'- aa(h)d] -- A dimension of the heart that has the spiritual capacity to see, or have vision of, what the qalb knows to be true.

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hadith: [ha(h) - deeth] -- Sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). These have been assembled into various collections in accordance with a methodology that applies a variety of tests before a given saying that is attributed to the Prophet is accepted as authentic and sound.

However, the Prophet gave a number of statements indicating that his sayings should not be compiled. Consequently, there are many questions and problems surrounding the use of such sayings ... especially in those contexts in which human beings are legally or forcibly required to comply with the content of such sayings.

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hajj: [ha(h)jj] -- The obligatory Pilgrimage during the twelfth month of the lunar calendar at the appointed time within that month. Hajj consists of, among other things:

(a) seven circuits of the Ka'ba {this process of circumambulation is called tawaf [ta(h) - waaf] upon arrival in Mecca;

(b) the observance of Sa'i [sa(h) - `ee] or the making of seven trips between the two hillocks - Safa and Marwa, near the Ka'ba;

(c) to seek Allah's forgiveness for one's sins on the plain of Arafat;

(d) to stop at Muzdalifah, near Mina, and spend the night in remembrance of Allah;

(e) to perform rami [ra(h) - mee] or the throwing of pebbles at the pillars, or jamrahs, in the town of Mina, not too distant from Mecca;

(f) the offering of a blood sacrifice, and, in the case of men, shaving of the head;

(g) the farewell tawaf of the Ka'ba;

and, finally,

(h) visiting the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.

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hal: [ha(h)] -- a spiritual state in which, through Allah's Grace, the ruh or spirit overpowers (in accordance with the nature of such a state) the nafs (the carnal soul), as well as the aspect of the heart that is known as the qalb. Such states are usually considered to be temporary and do not necessarily leave a permanent change in the character of either nafs or qalb.

When the nafs and qalb become infused with a given state such that they are permanently dyed with the colors of that state, the term maqam (spiritual station) is often used, and is considered to be relatively permanent

Whereas a hal might come without effort on the part of the individual, a person usually has to struggle and make efforts in order for, if God wishes, a maqam to be realized.

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halal: [ha(h) - la(h)] -- That which is permissible for a Sufi to eat. This usually has to do with, for example, whether or not the intention with which an animal has been slaughtered has been done for the sake of God, as well as with whether or not the procedure by which an animal is slaughtered meets certain conditions.

In addition, the term halal also is used to refer to the acceptability of the means of livelihood through which food is purchased. If one's means of earning a living is illegal or immoral, then the food that is purchased with such money becomes impermissible, and, therefore, not halal.

Whatever has received the designation of "kosher" by a Rabbinical Council is also considered to be halal. Indeed, many, if not most, of the dietary restrictions that are observed by the faithful in the Jewish community are also observed within the Muslim community.

In general terms, a Sufi is not permitted to drink alcoholic beverages or eat any foods that contain, or have been marinated in, alcohol. Moreover, no intoxicating drugs are permitted.

A Sufi should not consume anything that contains pig. Some people believe this includes those products that are made with ingredients, such as the enzymes pepsin and rennet, when these come from pigs.

The term that is used to refer to such impermissible food and drink products is: haram [ha(h) - ra(h)m]. This term encompasses both those kinds of consumables that, through either ingredients or the nature of the production process, are impermissible, as well as those consumables that, although otherwise halal, have been made impermissible through one's immoral or illegal means of earning a living.

----

hidaya: [hi(h) - daa - ya(h)] -- Guidance from Allah. Although the Source of guidance is always the same, the locus of manifestation through which the guidance comes into a person's life might assume an indeterminately large number of forms and guises. Normally speaking, guidance comes from a Book of Revelation or one of the Prophets of God or from a spiritual teacher of some kin, and, indeed, these are the best forms through which guidance can come.

However, guidance also can arrive as 'kernels' of meaning that are embedded in forms such as: illness; "chance" remarks; television programs; movies; novels; classrooms; relationships; dreams; 'random' thoughts in the mind; articles in a newspaper; problems; 'accidents'; incidents at work, or encounters with nature. Whenever God brings us together with the events of life and, then uses those events as a medium through which to communicate truth and understanding to us concerning our relationship to God, or concerning our spiritual responsibilities and possibilities, then these constitute instances of hidayat or guidance.

This does not mean, of course, that guidance is a matter of whatever meanings we wish to impose upon, or take out of, such forms or mediums. In order for us to understand what is being communicated or demonstrated, we have to be receptive to that which Allah is trying to tell us.

Guidance occurs when we understand what God means by a given event, and is not a matter of what we interpret that event to mean on the basis of our own ignorance and veils. In fact, the reason we need guidance is because our ignorance and veils are in the way, and we need something -- namely, guidance -- to bring light into the darkness of our ignorance and help tear away the veils of our biases, prejudices and presuppositions.

As is the case with guidance that comes to us through a Revealed Message or a Prophet, the individual who is brought into contact with these other venues of guidance might refuse to listen or take heed. Nevertheless, on the Day of Judgment, there will be no one who will be able to legitimately say that she or he did not receive guidance from God.

Guidance, like many other blessings of God, is descending on us all the time, like a heavy, constant rainfall. We are the ones who have chosen to be oblivious to what God is bringing into our lives and trying to draw our attention.

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himma: [him - ma(h)] -- Spiritual aspiration; gives active expression to the condition of an individual's nisbath or degree of loving receptivity to the guidance, teaching and assistance of the shaykh. In a sense, himma is nisbath in action.

God responds to His servants in accordance with their opinion of Him. Consequently, himma and nisbath are fundamental factors in shaping, coloring and orienting an individual's opinions and intentions concerning Allah, thereby, playing a very important role on the Sufi path. More specifically, as the purity and sincerity of an individual's himma and nisbath become enhanced through spiritual struggle, then God responds to this by helping the individual to perfect the character of her or his himma and nisbath through association with the shaykh.

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ilham: [i(h)l - ha(h)m] -- Spiritual intuition that often come in flashes of insight. The depth, intensity and character of such flashes of insight are quite variable.

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`ilm-i-ladonni: [i(h)lm - e - la(h) - do(h)n nee] -- Knowledge that is given directly by God.

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al-insan al-kamil: [a(h)l - in - sa(h)n a(h)l ka(h) - mi(h)l] -- The perfect human being. The one whose fitra or primordial, spiritual nature has, by the Grace of God, been fully realized. This is one who reflects all the Names of Allah in harmonious fashion according to the spiritual capacity of the individual.

-----

`irfan: [i(h)r - fa(h)n] -- The condition of gnosis in which the individual has direct, certain, experiential access to certain dimensions of spiritual knowledge. This knowledge cannot be grasped by, or arrived at by means of, the exercise of rational, discursive thought.

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Islam: Allah gave this name to the completed system of deen that had been revealed to the Prophet over a period of 23 years. The term: deen, does not refer to religion; rather, this term encompasses a process for learning about, and implementing, spiritual service to Allah, as well as entailing a potential means for helping the individual to gradually come to a realization of the character of the primordial, spiritual nature, or fitra, of human beings.

Islam consists of, at least, three streams of realization. A muslim is one who shows a willingness to submit, within certain limits, to the general principles and practices of deen. A mu'min is one into whose heart faith has arisen and whose commitment to the principles and practices of deen run deeper than those of a muslim. Finally, a mohsin [moh - sin] is one whose spiritual condition is that of ihsan or the realization of spiritual excellence in which the individual worships God as if one could see Him.

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jazb: [ja(h)zb] -- A condition or state of attraction to Allah that is often accompanied by some degree of ecstasy due to the nature of the experience that characterizes this state. This experience can vary in depth and intensity, and involves an unveiling in relation to a Divine nearness that is being given expression through such a state or condition.

-----

Ka'ba: [ka(h)' - ba(h)] -- The house of worship in Mecca that is built on the site where Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) constructed the first house of worship, and where Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) re-built another house of worship on the foundations of the original house of worship constructed by Prophet Adam (peace be upon him).

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kafi: [ka(h) - fee] -- The spiritual faculty or latif [la(h)-teef] (subtle essence) which is said to be the locus within the spiritual capacity of human beings for giving expression to experiential manifestation in relation to the lights and mysteries of the world of Dominion or Malakut.

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karamat: [ka(h) - raa - ma(h)t] -- The breaking of the norms of the natural laws by which the world normally operates that is often associated with, and manifested through various awliya or friends of God. When similar acts occur in conjunction with a Prophet of God, they are known as miracles.

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khalifah: [kha(h) - lee - fah] -- Someone appointed by a shaykh to serve the silsilah in relation to certain kinds of spiritual responsibilities. There might be different kinds of khalifah, with different duties, who are appointed or deputized by a shaykh.

This term also refers to the spiritual potential within human beings to serve as God's vice-gerent throughout creation. However, this potential cannot be fully and properly activated until one becomes, God willing, a perfect, spiritually realized, human being.

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kashf: [ka(h)shf] -- A state or condition through which certain aspects of reality become unveiled, to varying degrees, according to the character and nature of this process, and in accordance with the capacity of the individual who is undergoing this process. Unveilings can be of two kinds: worldly kashf and spiritual kashf.

Sufi shayks encourage the initiate to seek after all of the spiritual kashf of which they are capable. However, they warn the individual to stay away from worldly kashf that deals with being able to see how things will unfold or are unfolding, in different parts of the world, in the material/historical realm.

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korsi: [ko(h)r - see] -- The Footstool. Described as encompassing the seven heavens and is considered to be the threshold to the Throne. The metaphysical counterpart to this in the human being is said to be the sirr or mystery.

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kufri: [ku(h)f - r] -- to disbelieve in the existence of God. One who conceals or covers the truth of the ways in which Reality manifests the Names and Attributes of Allah within, and through, creation.

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Lote tree: This is in the seventh heaven to the right of the Throne, and it is the realm of Gabriel. It serves as the boundary between both multiplicity and unity, as well as between what is outwardly knowable and what is hidden from such knowledge.

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lowh: [lowh] -- The Tablet. Refers both to the realm of undifferentiated manifestation, as well as to the Uncreated Source of Revelation out of which the Qur'an, along with other Divine Books, arose.

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mahabbat: [ma(h) - ha(h)b - ba(h)t] -- A hal or state of love. When such a state is in its most intense form, it manifests itself as ishq, or intense love. Either manifested form of love is a gift of God and has the capacity to push (from the individual's side of things, so to speak) and pull (from the Divine side of things) the individual along the spiritual path.

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malakut: [ma(h)l - a(h) - koot] -- The world of Dominion. This refers to the invisible world or the world of the unseen in which the inward natures of created beings are rooted. This Kingdom also encompasses: the angelic realms; the Throne; the Preserved Tablet and the Pen.

On the one hand, this world can be contrasted with *alam al-mulk*, the world that is visible. On the other hand, the realm of *malakut* can be contrasted with *alam al-amr* [a(h)m - (h)r], the world of Command, that concerns supra formal manifestation.

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*maqam*: [ma(h) - *qaam*] -- A spiritual station considered to be relatively permanent, as opposed to a *hal* or transitory spiritual state. Although different Sufi shaykhs list various stations as important to the Sufi path, quite a few shayks speak of such stations as:

- (a) repentance [tauba: tau(h) - ba(h)h]
- (b) hope [raja: ra(h) - jaa']
- (c) fear [khawf: kha(h)wf]
- (d) nearness [qurb]
- (e) gratitude [shukr: shu - k(h)r];
- (f) patience [sabr: sa(h) - b(h)r];
- (g) yearning [shawq: sha(h)wq];
- (h) love [ishq];
- (i) trust [tawakkil: ta(h)w - wa(h)k - kil] and,
- (j) intimate familiarity [uns]

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*mi'raj*: [mi(h)'- ra(h)j] -- This refers primarily to the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) when he was raised up by Allah through the seven heavens and past the Lote Tree, that marks the outermost boundary between, on the one hand, what is knowable with respect to manifest reality, and that which is in the realm of the unseen. The Prophet's *mi'raj* was described in the Qur'an as coming to within "two bow lengths, or closer" of nearness to Allah.

The Prophet's *mi'raj* serves as the prototype for all experiences of spiritual ascension by someone on the Sufi path. Obviously, however, no one else ever has been brought to the station of nearness that was true of the Prophet. Each individual only can be brought to a 'point' of nearness to Allah that is consistent with the individual's spiritual capacity.

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mureed: [mur - eed] -- On one level, a mureed is anyone who takes initiation, or bai'at, with a Sufi master. On another level, the term, mureed, refers only to a sincere traveler on the mystical path who has, by the Grace of God, established a deep realization of the significance, purpose, and meaning of spiritual association with Allah and the Prophet through the locus of manifestation of the shaykh.

On a still deeper level, the mureed is the one who seeks the murad [mu(h) - rad] that is the object of the seeker. The true Mureed is Allah, and the object for which God is seeking, is the aspect of the hidden treasure that can be given expression through the spiritual capacity of the initiate, providing this capacity becomes realized by, God willing, a successful traversing of the Sufi path.

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nafs: The seat of rebellious tendencies against Divinity that have been placed within the human being by God. When the nafs is spiritually undisciplined and unruly, then it gives expression to the worldly whims of desire and anger that can be woven together in a variety of emotion-laden combinations. When, however, the properties of the nafs are spiritually transformed, then the object of desire becomes God, rather than the world, and anger becomes transmuted to the practice of justice with respect to maintaining the integrity of this transformed desire.

Nafs is a term that also can be used as a collective term for the range of potential encompassed by the soul. As such, there are different dimensions of the soul that correspond to certain stages of spiritual transformation. Thus, there is:

(a) nafs-e-ammare: [a(h)m - maa - re(h)] -- the soul that commands to evil;

(b) nafs-e-mulhame: [mool - ha(h) - me(h)] -- the soul that is inspired by God with knowledge of lewdness and God-fearing;

(c) nafs-e-zalem: [(z)thaa - le(h)m] -- the oppressive soul;

(d) nafs-e-lawwama: [la(h)v - va(h) - ma(h)] -- the reproachful soul;

(e) nafs-e-mutma'inne: [moot - ma(h)' - een - ne(h)] -- the tranquil soul;

(f) nafs-e-radiya: [raa - di(h) - ya(h)] -- the contented soul in which God is well pleased with them and they are well-pleased with God;

(g) nafs-e-safiya: [sa(h) - fi(h) - ya(h)] -- the pure soul.

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niyyah: [ni(h)y - yah] -- Intention. On the Sufi path, all intentions should be shaped, colored and oriented by one's submission to, and love of, Allah, without any thought of reward or recompense beyond the opportunity to be in the service of one's Lord.

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nur: [noor] -- Spiritual light. This light can come in many different modalities: light of Islam; light of zikr; light of wudu (ablution); light of the intellect; light of the spirit; light of prayer; light of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the light of the Attributes or Names of Allah are just a few examples.

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qalam: [qa(h) - la(h)m] -- The Pen. This refers to the metaphysical means through which differentiated manifestation is brought forth from the Tablet of undifferentiated manifestation. Furthermore, the Pen refers to the Universal Intellect or Muhammadan spirit that was the first thing that God created, and, consequently, the "medium" through which dimensions of undifferentiated reality are given formal expression in the realm of manifestation.

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qalb: The aspect of the heart that is susceptible to the influences of, on the one hand, the world and nafs, and, on the other hand, the ruh or spirit. The qalb is the battleground on which an individual's personal jihad or spiritual struggle takes place.

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rasul: [ra(h) - sool] -- A Prophet who has been given a Message or Divine Revelation. Not all Prophets receive a Divine Revelation, and those who do not receive such a Message are known as: nabi [na(h)- bee]. All Messengers are Prophets, but not all Prophets are Messengers.

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rida: [ri(h) - (z)tha] -- The maqam or station of being spiritually satisfied and well-pleased with what Allah has bestowed.

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ruh: [rooh] -- The Spirit. The spiritual seat of the human potential for loving Allah in such an intense and focused fashion that nothing else matters except honoring the contracts, responsibilities, duties and requirements of this love. The ruh seeks to win over the allegiance of the heart's qalb away from the influences of the body and nafs, to which the qalb also is receptive.

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sadaqah: [(s)tha(h) - da(h) - qah] -- The giving of charity in addition to that of zakat. For instance, giving charity, on the occasion of `Id marking the end of Ramadan, is known as: Sadaqah fitr. Sadaqah can also be given, by those who can afford to do so, on the 1st of the lunar month of Safar.

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salik: [sa(h) - li(h)k] -- One who is journeying on the Sufi path. To journey on the path entails something beyond mere initiation. To be salik, implies that some kind of progress has been made along the path toward Self-realization.

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Salikin: [Sa(h) - li(h) - ki(h)n] -- Those servants of Allah who, through God's Blessings, are spiritually sound and well-rooted.

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Saum: [(s)thaum] -- Obligatory fasting. This occurs during the ninth month of the lunar calendar - namely, Ramadan. If one is not travelling, ill or pregnant, then every individual, both woman and man, who has reached the age of reason, bears the responsibility of observing the fast during the designated month.

The fast begins approximately 1 and 1/2 to two hours before the rising of the sun. It ends when the sun has completely set.

During this period of time, the individual cannot eat, drink, take medicine, smoke, or chew gum. In addition, sexual relations between husband and wife, that otherwise might be permissible, cannot take place.

Before the fast begins, the sunna or tradition of the Prophet was to have a very light meal known as sahri [sah - ree]. When the day of fasting is

over, one breaks the fast with a small amount of food, such as three dates. This process of breaking the fast is referred to as iftar.

Aside from refraining from food, drink and sexual relations, the individual should resist becoming entangled in the machinations of nafs, dunya and Iblis. It is not just the mouth, stomach and sexual organs that should fast, the eyes, ears, intentions, desires, thoughts and emotions should fast as well.

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Shari'ah: [Sha(h) - ree - a(h)] -- This refers to Divine Law in its entirety and on every level of existence. Many Muslims think of shari'ah only in an exoteric or outwardly legal sense that deals with what is claimed by some to be permissible, not permissible, recommended, and required of an individual to live in accordance with Divine Law. However, as the Qur'an indicates in the second Surah, there can be no compulsion in matters of deen.

In reality, shari'ah encompasses everything that has to do with helping the individual to realize one's fitra or primordial nature. The outer, exoteric aspect of Islam tariqa (the inner path or way) and haqiqa (the Truth or Reality) are both expressions of the depths inherent in shari'ah.

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shirk: [shi(h)rk] -- To associate partners with, or ascribe partners to, God. This is a fundamental breach of the basic pillar of Islam, in general, and the Sufi path, in particular - namely, to bear witness that there is no reality but God.

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sirr: [si(h)rr] -- The secret; a spiritual faculty that is said to be the locus of witnessing. As such, the sirr is one of the experiential modalities through that a Sufi, God willing, spiritual engages Allah. When the sirr is emptied of other than Allah, it becomes the guardian and protector of the heart and ensures that nothing other than the remembrance of Allah enters into the heart.

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silsilah: [sil - si(h) - lah] -- The chain of spiritual authority, made up of successive shaykhs, that constitutes the locus through which Divine

baraka is transmitted to initiates of that silsilah. This chain of spiritual authority can be traced back to the Prophet and his household (i.e., Hazrat Ali, Hazrat Hassan, Hazrat Hussein, and Hazrat Bibi Fatima, (may Allah be please with all of them). Ultimately, in order to be authorized to give instruction and guidance concerning the Sufi path, silsilahs must receive a spiritual mandate to do so from Allah via Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

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sobriety: A spiritual condition in which the individual is, inwardly, spiritually intoxicated, but who is, outwardly, sober and, therefore, capable of interacting with people in a constructive, productive and competent fashion. In a sense, these people have a foot in both the world of spirituality, as well as in the everyday-world, such that these individuals can, by the Grace of God, help the people of the every-day-world by means of the former people's rootedness in the realities of the spiritual realm.

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suluk: [su(h) - look] -- The spiritual journey.

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sunna: [soon - na(h)] -- This refers to the actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which, along with the Qur'an, serve as the basis for the model of life of a Sufi. One attempts to follow the example (in both an inner, as well as an outer sense) of the Prophet, as exemplified in his actions or sunna.

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tafsir: [ta(h)f - si(h)r] -- A process of commenting on the historical and social conditions surrounding the emergence of various verses of Quranic revelation. One should never use tafsir as a way of interpreting the Qur'an.

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tajalli: [ta(h) - ja(h)l - lee] -- The ways in which the Names and Attributes of Divinity are manifested through any given locus of manifestation. In fact, the locus, itself, constitutes a tajalli. Indeed, the entire nature of both form and the processes that arise in conjunction with such a form are all expressions of tajalli.

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taqwa: [ta(h)q - waa] -- A condition of spiritual piety that gives expression to an intensely humble quality in the life, understanding, intentions, and actions of one who has a respectful wariness of, and awe toward, the majesty and beauty of Allah.

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tasawwuf: [tas - aw - wu(h)f] -- The proper term for the empirical Islamic mystical science concerning the soul's journeying to Allah through an initiatory relationship with an authorized spiritual guide.

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tawfiq: [ta(h)w - fi(h)q] -- The enabling power that comes from Allah and permits the individual to do what needs to be done along the Path to nearness to Divinity.

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tawhid: [ta(h)w - heed] -- The principle of Divine Unity that reconciles metaphysical opposites, together with the differences among various dimensions of the created universe, in a harmonious and seamless expression of the Names and Attributes of Allah.

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ta'wil: [ta(h)'- wi(h)l] -- interpretation of the Qur'an. One should not try to interpret the Qur'an by imposing one's ideas onto the meanings of the Qur'an. Instead, one should try to become receptive to Allah's message and let Allah teach one concerning the various layers and levels of meaning of the Qur'an.

To the extent one interprets the Qur'an, one is far from the Truth inherent in this revelation. One will never be able to penetrate, by means of any process of interpretive exploration, into the significance of Quranic verses because God alone knows the meanings or kernels of the Qur'an, and God will not share any aspect of these meanings with the individual who insists on imposing himself or herself onto the text of the Qur'an.

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ummah: [oom - mah] -- The community of Islam that is made up of: muslim, mu'min, mohsin, and beyond.

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`umrah: [ʿu(h)m - rah] -- Sometimes referred to as the lesser Hajj. It consists largely of tawaf (i.e., the circumambulation of the Ka'bah) seven times, together with the observance of Sa'i or the running between the hillocks, Safa and Marwa seven times. In each case, various prayers are recited or said while performing these rites.

`Umrah can be performed at any time of the year and as often as one likes. The only time that `umrah is not being observed by many people in the Great Mosque in Mecca is during the saying of the five daily obligatory prayers that are said in congregation.

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veils: The physical, emotional, conceptual, intellectual, motivational, intentional and spiritual obstacles that conceal the Ever-present nearness of Divine Reality.

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wahy: [wa(h) - hee] -- Revelation from God, to a Prophet, through the agency of the Archangel Jibril [Ji(h) - bri(h)] or Gabriel (peace be upon him). This includes: the Qur'an, given to Muhammad (peace be upon him); the Injil or Gospel given to Jesus (peace be upon him); the Torah given to Moses (peace be upon him); the Zaboor or Psalms given to David (peace be upon him), and the Sahifah given to Ibrahim (peace be upon him).

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yaqin: [ya(h) - qeen] -- the state or station of certainty. There are different kinds of yaqin. (a) ilm al-yaqin: the certainty of knowledge that comes from various kinds of proof. (b) `ayn al-yaqin: the certainty that arises from direct spiritual experience as a result of contemplation, sometimes referred to as the 'eye of certainty'. (c) haqq al-yaqin: the certainty that comes from being immersed in the reality of Truth as a result of the contemplative glance of the Real.

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zikr: [zi(h) - k(h)r] -- The remembrance of God. Although this normally refers to the process of chanting either the Names of God or verses of the Qur'an that focus on some dimension of one's relationship to Allah, the nature of remembrance can encompass all activities that are done with the sincere intention of submitting to, and being aware of, Allah.

Zikr is rooted in niyat [ni(h) - ya(h)t] or intention. If one does something with an intention that is colored by one's awareness of Allah, then the intention gives expression to, and supports, activities of remembrance ... whatever the particular form of these activities might be.



Appendix Three – Frequently Asked Questions

1.) What is the goal or purpose of the Sufi path?

There are many correct answers that could be given to this question. They would all be variations on the same theme.

The goal or purpose of the Sufi path is to realize our true identity and unique spiritual capacity for knowing, serving and loving God. If, by the grace of Allah, the individual comes to such a realization, then she or he will understand the essential nature of one's relationship with Divinity, along with the nature of true worship, as well as what being God's khalifah or vicegerent actually entails.

Some people mistakenly believe that the purpose of the Sufi path is to acquire spiritual powers, and/or to enhance psychic abilities, and/or to develop the ability to see the future, and/or to undergo various 'cool' altered states of consciousness. In reality, all of these possibilities are entirely secondary to, and even distracting from, the main task of the Sufi mystical journey.

One could have a bushel basket full of mystical treats and gifts and, yet, never come close to realizing the purpose of one's life. The lure of powers, states and so on is a challenge to the would-be seeker ... namely, very early on, the individual must make a decision about what is more important: God or spiritual powers and states.

When the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) went on his spiritual ascension and was brought to within a few 'bow lengths' of closeness or proximity to Allah, the Qur'an indicates that the Prophet looked neither left nor right, despite the fact that all manner of secrets and mysteries were being displayed in these directions.

The focus of the Prophet was solely on the meeting with his Lord. The novice would do well to keep this example of the Prophet in mind and heart as she or he travels on the path toward God

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2.) What do Sufis consider to be the greatest sin an individual can commit? Ra'bia of Basra once said something to another seeker on the Sufi path that addresses, I feel, the foregoing question. The person to whom Ra'bia directed her remarks had been criticizing other Muslims for their failure to properly observe prayers, the fasts, the

requirements of hajj, and so on, while simultaneously extolling his own 'accomplishments' in these areas. She told the individual:

"Thy existence is a sin with which none other can compare."

One might also say that failure to be inclined to seek repentance could be a good candidate for what the Sufi masters consider the greatest sin. On the Sufi path, everything begins with repentance.

If we are not prepared to acknowledge the many ways in which we transgress against our own souls, not to mention against the rights of others, as well as against the rights that are due to our Lord, then one cannot even take the first stumbling step toward the Truth. This sort of inability is usually rooted in delusions, illusions, assumptions, and biases concerning our unwarranted beliefs about our lofty place in the scheme of things.

When we are filled with self-conceit, arrogance, and pride, there is no room for admitting our short-comings. When we are tied to the appetites of the false self, we have no taste for the pre-requisite of humility and sincerity ... which is repentance.

Satan prefers to see us perform 1,000 prayers a day with the self-serving belief that our worship has placed us squarely on the straight path, than to see us offer only one prayer a day with the sincere belief that we are in need of God's forgiveness for our many faults. For Satan, the former case is ripe with opportunity for misguiding individuals by virtue of the self-conceit through which the prayers are offered, but when a person knows that he or she has been wrong and is in need of God's forgiveness, then Satan finds dealing with this kind of person very difficult.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was without sin, and, yet, he used to repent to God seventy times a day. The Sufi masters have advised us that, as is the case with so many other aspects of life, we should follow the example of the Prophet with respect to the issue of repentance.

Therefore, a case can be made for claiming that the greatest sin is a failure to repent, or a failure to be inclined to seek repentance. On the other hand, this failure could be seen as just one facet of why it is that

Ra'bia would say that our existence -- that is, our false sense of self -- is a sin with which none can compare, for surely, the primary reason for inability to repent is one's submission to the false self rather than to God.

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3.) What is the highest station of the Sufi path?

To be the 'abd or servant of Allah. This follows in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who, when given a choice of whatever he wanted, wished only and always, to be the servant of God.

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4.) Does an individual need a high I.Q. in order to make progress on the Sufi path? After all, aren't there many subtleties and intricacies on the Sufi path that only could be understood by someone with considerable intellectual ability?

The mystical path is not about intelligence per se. In other words, spiritual progress does not depend on the extent of one's intellectual capabilities but depends, instead, on God's baraka or blessings.

To be sure, there might be some individuals who have been gifted with both considerable rational abilities as well as mystical insight, and, as a result, have the capacity to give eloquent expression to various mystical teachings and perspectives. However, one must understand that it is the mystical insight that illumines and inspires eloquence through such rational abilities. The latter abilities, no matter how extensive they might be, have no means of penetrating to the depths of spiritual knowledge.

In fact, most realms of mysticism cannot be given expression in rational, discursive terms. This does not mean that the Sufi path is irrational; rather, it is trans-rational and, as such, falls beyond the farthest reaches of intellectual functioning.

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5.) Doesn't the Sufi path just cater to elitist ambitions and, in doing so, serve the ego or nafs?

Anyone with elitist ambitions does not last very long on the mystical journey unless, by the Grace of God, these ambitions are transformed in substantial ways toward becoming that rarest of entities ... a selfless servant of Allah. The Sufi path invites the would-be

seeker to a life of humility, poverty, modesty, repentance, and service to others, and, consequently, there is no room here for the arrogance, pride and self-centeredness of elitist ambitions.

Sometimes, an individual might misinterpret the sincere modesty, shyness, humility, and selflessness of a practitioner of the Sufi path as signs of aloofness toward, disdain for, and a sense of superiority over others. This sort of misunderstanding might be the basis of some people's belief that Sufi circles are elitist in nature. In truth, anyone with a genuine interest in pursuing the Sufi path is welcome to associate with such circles and be accepted as sisters and brothers of the mystical journey.

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6.) What role do spiritual powers play on the mystical path?

While many popularizations of the mystical path often tend to play-up the idea of the miraculous-like spiritual powers possessed by some of the better-known saints of the Sufi path, such emphasis is misguided. In fact, the Sufi masters themselves are constantly warning spiritual seekers and travelers against becoming preoccupied with such things.

Sufi teachers tend to view these powers as distractions from the true purpose of the path. Indeed, Allah might lend such gifts to an individual in order to test the individual's spiritual sincerity concerning his or her true interests in relation to the spiritual path.

This is not to say that these gifts might not be used, by Allah's leave and under certain circumstances, to help people or creation. However, more often than not, those who have insight into these matters and, thereby, understand what is involved tend to resort to the use of such capacities and abilities very sparingly, and there is a great mystery in their inclination to proceed in this fashion.

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7.) Some people refer to the spiritual condition of 'fana' as being a state or station of annihilation. Is this the case, and if so, what is being annihilated?

Use of the term of 'annihilation' in conjunction with the spiritual condition of fana is misleading since nothing of substance actually is destroyed. What disappears is one's awareness of the false self.

In effect, one's consciousness is overwhelmed with an awareness of the beauty and majesty of the Divine Presence. In this awareness, there is no room or place for that which is false, since, of necessity, the false is bound to perish before the Reality of Divinity.

If Allah wishes, one of the effects manifested through sincere commitment to the Sufi path is the transformation of those aspects of the self that are the seat of our tendency to rebel against the truths of created existence and spiritual reality. When these previously rebellious facets of ourselves are spiritually transformed by the alchemical properties of the baraka of God, then we come into a condition of purified readiness to receive whatever Divinity wishes to reveal with respect to the manifestation of the Attributes of Divine beauty and majesty in varying combinations and modalities.

When these Divine Realities descend upon the 'space' that has been prepared in accordance with our spiritual capacity and station, then our false, illusory consciousness of what we believed to be a realm of multiplicity recedes, and the experience of the attributive unity of the Divine Presence comes into ascendancy within our awareness. This condition is known as fana.

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8.) What is the difference between hal (state) and maqam (station)?

Although there are different ways of addressing this question, generally speaking, a state is considered to be more ephemeral or transitory than is a spiritual station. Furthermore, there tends to be more effort and struggle associated with the stations than with states.

States often come as a pure expression of Divine baraka that might be largely, or entirely, independent of considerations of having been preceded by spiritual effort and striving on the part of the individual who is the beneficiary of such a state. At the same time, these states tend not to constitute permanent spiritual conditions, and might leave as quickly as they arrive.

On occasion, a hal or state might last a relatively long time. This tends to give rise to a question of whether to continue to treat the condition as a state, or whether, in fact, it is more of a station.

Stations usually are acquired, if at all, only after many years of spiritual struggle and traveling on the mystical path. Nonetheless, one cannot say that such stations are caused by the individual's struggles, however necessary such struggles might be as a prerequisite to the advent of these sorts of spiritual station.

Unlike states, that tend to replace one another in serial fashion, stations, once established, continue to exercise their influence even as other stations are being experienced and traversed. As such, stations tend to complement each other as well as enter into a synergistic dynamic with one another.

When these Divine Realities descend upon the 'space' that has been prepared in accordance with our spiritual capacity and station, then our false, illusory consciousness of what we believed to be a realm of multiplicity recedes, and the experience of the attributive unity of the Divine Presence comes into ascendancy within our awareness. This condition is known as fana.

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9.) If one wishes to be a Sufi, does one have to retreat to a mountain cave or live in a jungle hut for the rest of one's life?

The Sufi path is intended to be pursued and observed in the midst of everyday life. While there might have been some mystics who, -- either temporarily or for long periods of time -- did retreat to remote, isolated locations, these instances would have constituted, for the most part, exceptions rather than the rule.

One can be a fully practicing Sufi and still have a job, family life, and be involved in community activities. The trick is to work toward understanding how to be 'in' the world without being 'of' the world and, as a result, becoming entangled in the world's machinations, chaos and deceptions.

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10.) The Sufi path doesn't seem very practical in today's world, so why should one pursue it?

Practicality is a relative concept. If one is committed to greed, selfishness, hatred, jealousy, dishonesty, injustice, and so on, then yes, charitableness, humility, love, compassion, honesty, and justice will be very impractical principles to incorporate into one's life.

On the other hand, if one is seeking a means of coping with the tendencies of the modern world to: destroy our peace of mind and heart, or to alienate us from our relationship with God, or to estrange us from our true selves, or to distance ourselves from one another, then, the Sufi path is imminently practical. In short, when we value peace, harmony, identity, and love of God, then the world cannot supply us with what we need in order to be able to secure that which we value, and, consequently, the ways of the world do not offer very practical solutions to our spiritual difficulties.

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11.) Do Sufi teachings embrace pantheism?

The short answer to this question is no. Pantheism rests on a confusion between, and conflation of, the Essence and the realm of Divine Attributes.

The Sufis always have maintained that there is a distinction that must be maintained between Creation and the One Who has made such Creation possible. Creation is a manifestation of the interplay of Divine Attributes, while the One Who has made such manifestation possible is beyond all Attributes, descriptions and circumscription.

One cannot reduce God down to that which Divinity gives expression to through manifestation. Yet, pantheism is the doctrine that God can be regarded as synonymous with, and contained by, such manifestations.

The Sufis never have advocated anything remotely similar to pantheism. The doctrine of tawhid, or Oneness of Being, is a unity of manifestation and not a unity that claims that Creation is coextensive with dhat or Divine Essence.

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12.) To what extent are Sufi practices, values, beliefs and principles merely a borrowing from, and rehashing of, other mystical traditions?

To be sure, there undoubtedly are similarities among, as well as a certain amount of overlap of, different mystical traditions simply because all spiritually legitimate mystical paths are but different manifestations of one and the same set of underlying truths and

realities. Nevertheless, the Sufi tradition is wholly independent of all other mystical systems.

In other words, the Sufi path is directed toward a direct, conceptually unmediated set of experiential engagements of Divine Reality or Truth. These experiences were not garnered while reading some book on mysticism or while involved in a discussion of mystical issues with a proponent of some other mystical tradition.

In effect, the charge that the Sufi path is merely a borrowed set of beliefs and practices from other mystical traditions is the same kind of allegation that has been leveled against Islam in general. In other words, over time, a number of people have tried to claim that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) 'developed' Islam as a result of some chance encounters with various Christians and Jews during his days as a traveling businessman.

In reality, Islam arose out of the experiential guidance that the Prophet received from God. There was nothing borrowed about it.

The similarities of, for instance, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism is because these traditions all come from, and are rooted in, the same Source -- namely, God. However, the experiences of Muhammad, Jesus, and Moses (may Allah's peace and blessings be on them all) were a reflection of their individual, direct relationships with Divinity, rather than being a matter of derivative experiences drawn from one another or from other Prophets before them.

The same is true of the esoteric dimension of Islam known as the Sufi path or tasawwuf. This is especially so since the Sufi masters consider the Prophet Muhammad to be the shaykh of all shaykhs and, therefore, everything entailed by the Sufi tradition comes, by the grace of God, through the Prophet and not through some other spiritual or mystical path.

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13.) Must one have mystical experiences in order to be considered a true traveler of the Sufi path?

Authentic mystical experiences can be valuable sources of direction, encouragement and faith during the long journey along the Sufi path. Furthermore, these experiences can serve as indicators of spiritual progress that mark passage through greater and lesser way stations of the mystical way.

At the same time, there is no necessity that ties such experiences to making progress on the Sufi path. In fact, sometimes the very absence of these kinds of experiences might indicate the existence in the individual of a much deeper spiritual achievement and faith than would be indicated by the presence of such experiences.

Sometimes mystical experiences come by the Grace of God because the individual is in need of such things to strengthen and enrich her or his faith. In other cases, however, faith takes root, grows, flourishes and bears a multiplicity of spiritual fruits without benefit of mystical experiences of any kind.

Both conditions are through the Grace of God. But, one is accompanied by, and manifested through, various mystical experiences, while the other is not.

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14.) Why are the Sufis so secretive about many aspects of their path?

The human capacity to misunderstand is enormous. This is one of the reasons why the Prophet counseled people to teach others in accordance with the capacity of an audience to understand what is being taught.

If Sufis are silent about many aspects of the mystical path or about their experiences while traversing that path, it is because they know that most people will not properly understand what is being said. In addition, there are many dimensions of the mystical journey that cannot be adequately conveyed through words, logic and concepts. Since any attempt to do so is going to be distortive of Reality in essential and fundamental ways, they decide that discretion is the better part of valor and are secretive about that which is meant to be a secret.

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15.) If we translate the effects of Sufi practices into modern terminology, don't these techniques allow people to tap into different energy centers associated with the human body?

It would be a mistake to make spiritual realms a function of various kinds of physical and/or material processes. Energy is a concept of physics and chemistry and is an appropriate and useful vehicle to use in describing such processes.

Extending the idea of energy to the spiritual realm is without merit or even coherence. What do we even mean by the notion of spiritual energy?

There are subtle forms of energy that are associated with different centers of the body. Some of these we know about through the discoveries of science, while other modalities of such subtle forms of energy are alluded to in various treatises and accounts of spirituality.

Nonetheless, one cannot argue that by uncovering more and more subtle forms of energy that, eventually, we will come to something called spiritual energy. Spiritual principles and modes of being can affect, shape, direct and constrain the manifestation and distribution of physical/material energies without themselves necessarily being an instance of such energies.

After all, all things are encompassed by God's knowledge, but this doesn't make such knowledge the same as the things that it encompasses -- although, obviously, there is an intimate relationship between the Hidden and 'the seen'. The relationship between the Knower and the known is one of mystery and not necessarily of physical/material processes and concomitant energies.

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16.) What do Sufi masters think about the idea of jihad or holy war?

There is nothing holy about war, and those who would seek to glorify the killing and maiming of others do Islam, in general, and the idea of 'jihad', in particular, a great disservice. While at a certain juncture of Muslim history, God did give permission in the Qur'an for Muslims to be able to defend themselves under certain conditions, authorization was not being given to wage war on anyone one liked and label it "jihad".

In fact, Jihad cannot be properly translated as "war". There are other words in Arabic that are used when the idea of war is being discussed.

Jihad means spiritual struggle. The best jihads have been described by various hadiths in terms of, among other things, fasting, hajj, speaking the truth in the face of tyranny, and seeking to constrain the activities and desires of our individual carnal souls that are the seat of our rebellious tendencies concerning spirituality.

Sufi masters are all for the idea of struggling against our inner spiritual ignorance, darkness and stubbornness. They are opposed to: the killing of innocent people and animals, the waging of hostilities against children and old people, as well as the destruction of crops, along with the means of livelihood, with which a people sustain themselves.

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17.) Don't Sufi shaykhs and saints call upon their followers to worship them as idols?

In reality, true Sufi shaykhs and saints do precisely the opposite. They, better than anyone else, know that all praise is due to God.

A Sufi shaykh has indicated that one always can tell a false teacher by the fact that such a person will invite people to worship him or her, whereas the true servant of God invites people to worship God and only God.

Sufi shaykhs and saints know with certainty that we are the poor and God, alone, is the rich. Everything good that comes to human beings comes by the blessings and leave of Divinity.

Nothing comes by human agency. At most, human beings can serve as the locus of manifestation through which Divine agency is given expression ... thus the miracles of Prophets and the kiramah or wondrous deeds of the non-prophetic saints of Allah.

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18.) Is there a difference between the mystical and the occult?

Yes, there is a fundamental difference between the mystical and the occult, although, quite frequently, people confuse and conflate the two, treating these terms as if they were synonyms for one another. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The occult encompasses the realms of magic, sorcery, spells, potions, incantations, control of jinn, and satanic alliances. Those who are interested in these things generally do so out of a quest for power, manipulation of people and the world, greed, as well as self-aggrandizement.

The devotees of the occult have no interest in being brought closer to Divinity. Moreover, they wish to be lords of creation rather than learning how to become the servants of the Creator.

The mystical realm, on the other hand, extends from the world of nasut or the material realm, to the world of the fixed forms of things. This includes the world of angels and the world of Divine Names and Attributes.

Those who are sincerely committed to the mystical path seek only to serve their Lord and Creator. This quest is undertaken with an intention that combines elements of humility, longing, repentance, gratitude, awe, and love within the context of an intense spiritual aspiration (i.e., himma) to be brought into closer and closer spiritual proximity to the object of one's seeking -- namely, God.

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19.) Are the spiritual experiences of Sufi mystics the same as prophetic revelation?

No matter how exalted the spiritual experiences, unveilings, elevations, insights, states and stations of a Sufi mystic might be, they do not begin to approach the quality or status of the spiritual experiences, unveilings, elevations, insights, states and stations of the Prophets. Among other things, these differences between the two indicate that the teachings and guidance given by the Sufi mystics cannot be considered to be, or treated as equivalent to, the Divine Revelation that is transmitted to, and through, the Prophets of God. The former are always subservient to, and, at best, a derivative, more limited reflection of, the latter.

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20.) Do Sufis believe in reincarnation?

No! We all have but one opportunity to get things right in this realm of existence. Once we have passed from this physical/material dimension of being, there are no second, third or more chances to improve ourselves spiritually during any future returns to this world.

Some people might find a certain amount of comfort in entertaining the idea that we are not faced with the pressure of having to solve the spiritual mystery of life within the delimited, finite temporal framework of one lifetime. However, such people would do well to keep in mind the counsel of the Buddha that one ought to get busy now with the process of freeing oneself from the causes of human suffering, rather than leave this issue to some later time when one's

spiritual condition might be far more rooted in, and entangled with, our self-generated diseases of the heart and soul.

Irrespective of where one comes down on the issue of whether there is more than one round of existence on this level of being, the fact is, the Buddha never advocated that the individual ought to dillydally in relation to the issue of spiritual liberation. Consequently, Sufi masters would agree with the Buddha's efforts to induce human beings to get busy as quickly as possible with freeing ourselves from the illusions and delusions that shape most of our lives.

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21.) Do mystical methods of chanting, fasting, meditation, contemplation and seclusion bring about or cause mystical states and stations?

The chants, mediation and other practices might be the occasion for the onset of a given mystical state or station, but they are not the cause of these conditions. The Will of God, that is entirely transcendent to, and independent of, the Created realm, is the sole cause of spiritual transformations.

Spiritual practices are akin to the clearing of a space that permits, if God wishes, something of a spiritual nature to become established. As such, one might liken these techniques and methodological activities to an advanced form of wuzu or ritual ablution.

A Muslim performs ritual ablution in order to be in a state of purified readiness to receive whatever blessings that Allah might wish to confer on us for activities -- whether obligatory or otherwise -- which take place while in this condition. Similarly, the aforementioned spiritual practices help one assume a state of purified readiness for being open to whatever baraka or blessings that God wishes to confer on one while one is under the influence of that state of purity.

Different kinds of blessings come through different conditions of purified readiness. Nevertheless, the condition of readiness is not the cause of the blessings ... just the doorway through which such baraka might enter into our lives.

Spiritual seekers sometimes make the mistake of assuming that the mystical journey demands an attitude like someone who is intent on storming the Bastille in which individual strength, courage, talent and

ability are considered to be essential ingredients to a successful operation. One can storm the mystical fortress until the rivers all run dry, and one can do so with the utmost virtuosity, yet one might not come even remotely close to the desired objective.

This is so because spiritual success does not depend on what the individual believes she or he has to offer to Divinity. Rather, spiritual success depends on what comes to us from the treasure chest of Divine generosity.

Making efforts might, by the grace of God, put one in a position of readiness to receive. However, neither efforts in general, nor the particular practices to which such efforts are applied, can be considered to be what causes God's blessings to come forth. As such, these efforts toward becoming ready to receive are what might be referred to as necessary, but not sufficient pre-conditions on the spiritual path.

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22.) With what intention should an individual approach the Sufi path?

There are a number of intentions with which one ought to engage the mystical dimension of things. Among these are: sincerity, humility, repentance, awe, longing, gratitude, and love.

One should approach the Sufi discipline without expectations concerning mystical experiences, spiritual gifts, miraculous deeds, states, stations or accomplishments. One should approach the Sufi path with the understanding that one is the most abject, impoverished sort of spiritual beggar and that if Allah will not assist one, then nothing is possible.

One should approach the mystical journey with the intention of giving up whatever has to be abandoned, and seeking to change whatever is indicated as being in need of transformation. One should approach the Sufi path as a servant ready to serve.

One should engage the whole process with the intention of being patient and having commitment. One needs to be prepared to settle down for a long struggle with one's false self, the world, Satan, and all those who would attempt to dissuade one from this path.

However, given that very few people are capable of having such a spectrum of intentions at the beginning of the journey, being prepared to

place one's spiritual life in the care of an authorized shaykh is very necessary. Everything else should, God willing, follow from one's nisbath (spiritual connectedness) with one's teacher.

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23.) What exactly does the process of initiation or ba'yat involve?

Essentially, initiation is a spiritual contract. On the one hand, the guide is indicating her or his willingness, if not complete commitment, to helping the seeker, in whatever ways are possible and permitted by God, to work toward realizing the nature of that person's true identity and essential spiritual capacity. On the other hand, the would-be initiate is indicating his or her willingness, if not complete commitment, to try to follow, and act in accordance with -- to whatever extent permitted by Allah -- the teachings and counsel of the shaykh.

There are no guarantees of salvation or mystical success that can be given at the time of initiation. Initiation is but a door of spiritual opportunity.

Standing before this threshold is not enough. One must, God willing, take steps to cross this threshold of opportunity, as well as to explore the possibilities, face the challenges, and overcome the obstacles that one might encounter on the other side of the doorway of initiation.

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24.) Are there any differences among the Sufi Orders, and, if so, are some of these Orders better than others?

There are no essential differences among any of the Sufi Orders. There do tend to be, however, some differences of spiritual temperament, emphasis and practice from one silsilah to another.

For example, some Orders permit sacred turning (e.g., the so-called Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi Order), whereas other Orders might not allow such activities. Similarly, some Orders permit sacred music during spiritual assemblies of audition, whereas certain other Orders might not allow this to take place ... although these latter Orders might permit singing unaccompanied by musical instruments to occur.

Some Sufi Orders might give emphasis to zikrs that are said aloud while other Orders might prefer silent forms of remembrance. Some Orders might encourage organized service to, and for, the

community, whereas certain other Orders might de-emphasize this kind of activity while emphasizing some other kind of commitment or service.

Whatever these differences of temperament and emphasis might be, they are not essential in nature. All of the Orders are in basic agreement concerning the essential nature, purpose, scope and origins of the Sufi path.

Since all Orders come under the same Divine umbrella of baraka, and because all Orders take their spiritual direction and guidance from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), there can be no sense in which one Order is better than another. Every Order is fully capable, God willing, to assist any given individual to work toward, and, hopefully, realize the purpose for which the mystical path exists.

When the Madhi (may Allah be pleased with him) appears as one of the greater signs of the latter days, he will, among other things, oversee the dissolution of the idea that Sufi Orders are entities or institutions that can be considered as being either separate from one another, or separate from Islam. This will be difficult for both some Sufis as well as some Muslims, to accept since it undermines some people's preconceptions concerning how things are even though things are not this way at all except within the confines of such preconceptions.

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25.) Must one kiss the hand of a shaykh as a sign of respect?

Not at all! Certainly, no true shaykh expects this, although for various reasons (none of which are self-serving), the shaykh might permit it to happen.

At the same time, shaykhs often will bend over backward to avoid offending people or rebuffing their desire to make physical contact. Consequently, since many people come to a shaykh with the mistaken belief that kissing the shaykh's hand is expected of them and/or with the desire to have some form of physical contact -- however small this might be -- with the shaykh, the shaykh might permit their hands to be kissed even though they personally do not want or care for this sort of activity.

The fact that things of this sort go on in the presence of a shaykh does not necessarily reveal anything about the reasoning employed by a

shaykh concerning such occurrences. In fact, the motivations, intentions and adab of a shaykh might be far removed from the sorts of unseemly intentions, motivations and values that would-be critics might seek to impose on the shaykh.

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26.) Does a shaykh promise to solve all of the problems of an initiate or mureed in exchange for unswerving loyalty?

Any shaykh who would do this is not a legitimate shaykh, and this is so for a number of reasons.

To begin with, a shaykh is not a position to promise what only God can give. Secondly, for a shaykh to offer to solve all of the problems of an initiate is not necessarily in the best interests of the latter individual.

The character of life and the mystical path are exercises in struggle. Spiritual growth is nourished through such struggle. By solving all of the problems of life for the seeker, the initiate is denied the opportunity to struggle in the way and cause of God that might, God willing, lead to spiritual transformation.

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27.) Aren't Sufis really inviting people to submit to a form of shirk or polytheism?

In reality, Sufi masters are urging all of us to give up the many forms of polytheism that populate and shape our lives. We might give lip-service to the Oneness of Divinity and to the obligation not to associate any partners with God, but we belie our profession of faith with each flicker of self-congratulations we might feel for allegedly having accomplished this or that, or for having known this or that, or for having done this or that.

Even the belief that we say prayers, or we fast, or we perform hajj, or we give charity is an admission of polytheism, for we are, in effect, claiming that we are somehow responsible for these things getting done or observed. In this way, we are associating partners with God.

In addition, many of us assume that our thoughts, ideas, creations, inventions and so on are ours. By taking credit, in however small a way, for these things we are denying the reality that all praise is due Allah, and thereby, we are guilty of shirk.

We believe that we deserve our degrees and our promotions. We believe that we are earning our way to paradise through our efforts and good works. We believe that others like, love or respect us because we are nice, attractive, intelligent, talented, or pious people, and in believing this, we commit shirk because we are associating partners with Allah.

We think we worship God. In reality, we often worship ourselves, and, consequently, we feel that God should find us to be every bit as winsome as we find ourselves to be.

When these unpleasant realities are brought to our attention through the baraka of insight and guidance that God has lavished on the servants of Divinity, we tend to get upset. A classic response under such circumstances is what is known as reaction formation in which we attempt to project on to another what we, in fact, are guilty of doing ourselves.

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28.) From whom do shaykhs receive their authorization to give spiritual instruction?

Ultimately, of course, all spiritual authorization comes from God. In terms of the venue through which such authorization comes, one must look, first and foremost, to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

All Sufi Orders receive their instructions through the Prophet. This includes decisions concerning who is to serve as shaykh in a given silsilah, at a given time, and in a given locality.

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29.) Are Sufi saints to be considered equal to, if not better than, the Prophets who were concerned largely with exoteric rituals and litanies?

Decidedly not! Although all Prophets have the quality of being an awliya or friends of God, not all those who are awliya of God are Prophets.

In effect, this means there are different levels of saints. According to the shaykhs of the Sufi way, no non-prophetic saint can match or exceed the potential for spiritual ascension of those saints who also are Prophets.

Outwardly, despite being given the responsibility of ministering to a range of spiritual needs, Prophets often appeared to be concerned with exoteric matters. This was the case because the largest segments of their

communities tended to be more preoccupied with these sorts of issues ... to the extent such people were interested in such things at all.

Although God had granted the Prophets the highest forms of spiritual ascension possible, the Prophets had come back from those spiritual heights to act as 'ordinary' people in the world in order to assist, minister to, encourage, support, and care for people who were, for the most part, worried about, and preoccupied with, a host of everyday problems and struggles. In short, the Prophets chose servanthood, and, by the grace of Allah, this enabled them to teach the way of servanthood, and its many levels and dimensions, to the entire spectrum of spiritual capacities that resided in their spiritual communities.

Non-prophetic saints have never been faced with such responsibilities. And, this is just one of many reasons why Prophets are spiritually far superior to even the greatest of non-prophetic saints and servants of God.

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30.) Is everyone under an obligation to become a Sufi?

Not at all! As the Qur'an indicates, there can be no compulsion in matters of deen or the process of realizing the spiritual potential of being human.

What any given individual decides to do in relation to the issue of spirituality must come as a free-will offering. While all human beings do have a minimal responsibility to return the amana, or trust, that has been extended to them by God through the gift of being, human beings are not under any obligation to realize the full extent of the spiritual potential that is entailed by the trust being offered to us.

To be sure, if we do not seek to maximize such possibilities, the lost will be ours, but we will not necessarily be held accountable for failing to do so. As such, there is no obligatory dimension associated with the Sufi path.

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31.) Given that the term 'Sufi' is not mentioned in the Qur'an or the hadith, what does it have to do with Islam?

Hanafi, Sha'fi, Hanbali, Maliki and Ja'fri are not transparently mentioned in the Qur'an or the hadith either, but this does not stop some

Muslims from deferring to the wisdom that is entailed in their writings or in living our lives, at least in part, in accordance with the directives that are given in those perspectives. Furthermore, neither the Qur'an nor the sunna directly address the principles on which the so-called 'science' of hadith is based, and, yet, certain collections of hadith are accepted by the majority of scholars while other alleged sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are rejected as being unreliable, unsubstantiated or false.

In any case, too much is being made of terminology. The reality to which the word in question (namely, 'Sufi') alludes most definitely was taught and practiced during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). One can deny this only by approaching the Qur'an and the sunna in an extremely dogmatic, superficial and ill-considered fashion.

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32.) Isn't the Sufi path really a matter of bi'dah or innovation and, therefore, should be condemned and shunned?

While there are many warnings given by the Prophet concerning the introduction of innovative practices into the fabric of Islam, many people make the mistake of supposing that whatever they happen to disagree with is precisely what the Prophet had in mind whenever he mentioned the idea of such problematic bi'dah practices and beliefs. In point of fact, not all bi'dah constitute the sort of innovations against which the Prophet was speaking.

Hazrat Omar (may Allah be pleased with him), for example, introduced the public observance of tarawih prayers even though the Prophet had withdrawn from this sort of observance during the latter's lifetime. The practice carried on by Hazrat Omar (may Allah be pleased with him) and subsequent Kalifahs was referred to as a 'good innovation'.

To be bi'dah in the negative sense, an innovation must satisfy certain conditions. First, it must require people to stop doing that which they are obligated to do according to shari'ah. Or, such a practice must insist that some given action or belief is, according to shari'ah, obligatory when this is not the case. And, finally, in order to be considered bi'dah in the negative sense, the intention behind introducing something new must be motivated by some clearly

dubious purpose rather than -- as Omar (may Allah be pleased with him) did in the aforementioned case of tarawih prayers -- being offered with the idea of helping or strengthening the spiritual condition of the Muslim community.

The teachings and practices of the Sufi path do not satisfy any of the aforementioned conditions of bi'dah against which the Prophet warned Muslims. Unfortunately, there are those with an axe to grind concerning the mystical dimension of Islam who engage in a form of sophistry that attempts to mislead people by equating the Sufi path to the kind of bi'dah practices, values and ideas about which the Prophet Muhammad was attempting to warn Muslims. Such people do this despite failing to possess any reliable and authoritative proof capable of demonstrating that the Prophet had the Sufi path in mind when he spoke about the notion of that which is bi'dah.

Finally, one finds in the hadithic literature reports of the Prophet that extol the virtue of introducing good practices or customs among a people, while warning against the introduction of bad or evil customs among a people. The Prophet indicated that those who introduce good customs are given blessings equivalent to that received by all those who follow such a custom without lessening the blessings accruing to the latter group, while those who introduce evil customs earn an amount of bad deeds that is equivalent to that earned by all those who follow such an evil custom without lessening the sin of the latter group.

Clearly, therefore, simply because something new is introduced does not make this "innovation" good or evil in and of itself or merely due to the quality of newness that it has. One must measure the value or worth of such a practice against the full body of teachings of the Qu'ran and sunna (actions of the Prophet).



Appendix Four – Nine Questions

The individual who e-mailed the following questions was doing a school project on religion at a mid-Western university and was interested in finding out about the Sufi tradition.

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Question 1) Historically, how did Sufism originate?

In one sense, the esoteric or mystical dimension of Islam has been in existence as long as human beings have been walking the face of the Earth. However, the outer or exoteric manifestations associated with such a spiritual tradition have varied in structural form according to times, circumstances, needs, and so on.

Some commentators have used the image of a wheel with spokes to help give expression to the relationship between the esoteric and exoteric aspects of spirituality. The various spokes symbolize so many different exoteric sets of beliefs, practices and values, while the hub of the wheel, where the spokes join, constitutes the mystical unity that underlies all surface differences.

When one looks at things from the perspective of the rim of the wheel, spirituality looks like so many separate and, often, antagonistic solitudes. When one, on the other hand, follows, by the grace of God, the surface differences back to the Source, all of the currents of separation tend to disappear.

Nonetheless, despite having said the foregoing, if one is using the term "Sufi" to refer to a historical phenomenon that arose in the context of a specific religious tradition, then the Sufi path, or "tasawwuf" (mystical sciences), originated through Islam. But, in point of fact, tying tasawwuf to Islam does not really contradict anything that has been said previously.

One of the root meanings of the Arabic word "Islam" is 'peace'. This is, among other things, the peace that, God willing, arises when an individual comes to realize, with certainty and in an experientially trans-rational way, the spiritual purpose of one's life – namely, to come to understand the nature of one's true, essential identity, as well as to bring on-line, so to speak and if God wishes, one's unique, spiritual capacity for loving, worshiping, cherishing, serving and knowing Divinity.

Muslims -- that is, those who sincerely seek to align themselves totally with God's wishes concerning life on Earth -- do not look at Islam as being the youngest in a series of religions. Indeed, when one considers the idea of Islam as encompassing the spiritual currents within ourselves -- as well the spiritual currents in the lives of those around us -- that seek to draw one toward peace in the foregoing sense, then every exoteric tradition that is authentic, and, therefore, gives expression to Divine guidance and wisdom, is a manifestation of Islam in the aforementioned sense.

Furthermore, the foregoing perspective also is intimately related to another root meaning of the word Islam. This pertains to the individual's submission to -- or better yet, absorption in -- the will of God concerning the nature and purpose of life, as well as submission to or absorption in, the moral, methodological and practical ways through which one should try to work toward and implement this nature and purpose.

Consequently, both exoterically as well as esoterically, there is a sense of unity in origins. Everything flows from One Source, One Reality, One Truth, One Purpose.

However, given that this Oneness is infinite -- if not beyond infinity -- then what is being said above does not mean that any single conceptual representation of such Reality or Truth is capable of capturing the richness, breadth, depth, and subtlety inherent in such Oneness. Unfortunately, many people -- from all manner of exoteric and even esoteric traditions -- suppose that human beings are able to intellectually penetrate to the bottom of everything, and this is not so ... and this remains the case irrespective of whether one is talking in terms of mystical states and stations, or one is talking in terms of the most elaborate and nuanced of theological systems.

Many truths can co-exist as so many manifestations of the One underlying Truth. Similarly, many realities can co-exist, again as so many modalities of expression or manifestation of the One underlying reality.

This is why one can say that the Sufi path existed, in a sense, even before humanity came into being, because the reality, or haqiqa, to which the term "Sufi path" makes identifying reference existed in pre-eternity (our spiritual time before being brought into physical temporality) in the form of our primordial relationship with Divinity. At

the same time, one can, with equal justification, restrict the origins of the Sufi path to the set of practices, values, beliefs, relationships and so on which arose during the historical time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

In wanting to point to the esoteric or mystical dimension that is, and always has been, inherent in the potential of human beings, some people begin to throw the term "Sufi" around and try to claim that it pertains to anything that has to do with the esoteric life. When people do this, they tend to confuse and conflate issues, and in the process, mislead people, including themselves, about the true nature of the origins of the Sufi path.

Taoism, many of the different forms of yoga, Zen and certain forms of Tibetan Buddhism, various aspects of Native spirituality, different kinds of Christian mysticism (which have virtually, but not entirely, disappeared in this day and age), and the esoteric dimension of Judaism (sometimes referred to as the Kabbalah, but this term can be very misleading) all have justification to claim for themselves a certain spiritual authenticity and legitimacy with respect to things mystical. Yet, none of these can correctly be said to be the Sufi path ... although there might be a working equivalency among all of these traditions in relation to various values, beliefs, purposes, practices, teaching techniques, life style and so on that tend to be shared by all of them in one way or another.

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Question 2) What are the basic principles or beliefs of the Sufi path?

There are many ways in which one might respond to this question and all such responses, if thoughtfully done, would be -- each in its own way -- more or less correct. However, a person, somewhat arbitrarily, also could answer this question with three words: "fana", "baqa" and "adab". Starting with the last word first, adab encompasses the entire framework of relationships that one has with creation and one's Creator.

There is not a single moment or circumstance of life that does not have its adab or appropriate spiritual etiquette. Parents, spouse, children, relatives, non-relatives, strangers, teachers, fellow travelers of the path, those who are not interested in the spiritual life, vegetation, animal

life, the mineral realm, angels, Prophets, awliya (friends of God), people younger and older than oneself, various spiritual states and stations, as well as oneself all are owed fiduciary entitlements ... that is, the entitlements that God, or the Reality underlying and making possible all being, has set as being proper to people and circumstances and with which human beings have been entrusted..

There is no 'rule book' that can exhaust how one should discharge the foregoing responsibilities. Rather, one must engage these tasks through the idea of non-linear principles that retain a recognizable essential spirit even as they shift and change according to the structural character of the life-context under consideration.

For instance, love, sincerity, charitableness, forbearance, tolerance, forgiveness, integrity, kindness, and so on are not capable of being reduced down to rules such that whenever one comes to a certain kind of situation, then one always responds in a particular rule-governed fashion. These situations are quite different from, for example, being required to fill out a form before seeing a civil servant at a given gate or window (although even here there might be discretionary room for exceptions to these sorts of rule as well).

As such, a rule -- plus its exceptions -- does not add up to a principle. Rules tend to operate on an algorithmic basis (the recursive application of some set linear formula), whereas principles are non-algorithmic in character.

Exoterically oriented individuals often tend to try to stuff everything in life into a rule-governed category of one kind or another, with, sometimes, problematic, even disastrous, consequences. As such, they engage the idea of adab, or spiritual etiquette, from a very narrowly conceived point of view of what is permissible or impermissible.

The people of tasawwuf operate out of a framework in which there tend to be more degrees of freedom for finding an acceptable solution to an adab-issue ... that is, one which is reconcilable with the character of the principle and problem under consideration. Therefore, not everyone is necessarily required to resolve a given situation in precisely the same way, and, yet, these solutions will all bear what Wittgenstein referred to as a "family" resemblance to one another. In

other words, they will be understood as having recognizable similarities to one another without being considered as the same.

None of what has been said in the foregoing should be construed to mean that anything and everything is compatible with putting a principle into motion. In fact, in many ways the rule-governed character of shari'ah, or Divine Law, places limits and sets parameters of appropriateness within which principles might operate with some degree of flexibility while, simultaneously, meeting the requirements of the exoteric rule-governed parameters.

At the same time, when rule-governed behavior is isolated from the spiritual principles at the heart of Islam -- and, therefore, when they are isolated from the properties of tasawwuf -- the letter of the law often becomes empty of the very qualities that are necessary to modulate and temper the narrowness, harshness, and rigidity that tends to characterize a great deal of rule-governed behavior. In these circumstances, blind, unbalanced, superficial, uninspired, mechanical, self-serving, and thoughtless activity is let loose upon the world to wreak havoc in personal, family, community and international life.

The relationship between proper rule-governed behavior and legitimate principle governed behavior has a sort of yin-yang quality to it. In order for either one to function properly, it must be circumscribed, informed and guided by the other.

Although a Sufi should be concerned about all matters of adab, and although a great deal of the Sufi path can be described from a perspective of coming to an essential, full and certain understanding of what, in reality, adab is all about, the sine qua non of adab on the Sufi path is the relationship between the mureed (seeker) and the Sufi shaykh who is, in turn, and according to the spiritual capacity of the shaykh, a reflection of the mureed's relationship with both -- each in its own way -- the Prophetic tradition and Divinity. The heart and spirit of the mureed, shaykh, and Prophetic tradition are but different reflections and manifestations of the Divine Names and Attributes of God.

As such we are talking about the reflection (for example, the heart of the mureed) of a reflection [e.g., the heart of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)] of a further reflection (the light of the heart of the Macrocosmic being) of the Names and Attributes of Allah or

God. This same idea can be expressed in terms of the symbolism of nested shadows (zil) in a similar way.

In broad terms, "fana", the second of the three terms that are crucial to the Sufi perspective mentioned at the outset of the current answer to your question, represents the passing away of the false-self. This is the self through which we normally engage ourselves and the rest of the universe, as well as the medium through which we approach Divinity.

The false-self is filled with, and vulnerable to, all manner of forces that generate distortion, error, bias, lacunae, ignorance, blindness, rebellion, misunderstanding, heedlessness, selfishness, and so on. When, by the grace of God, the false-self is dissolved in an ocean of baraka (Divine blessings) by means of one's relationship with one's teacher (this is the medium of Agency and not of Causality), the individual becomes overwhelmed with the nearness, majesty, beauty, compassion, greatness, and love of Divinity, and, as a result, loses sight of one's created individuality.

One Sufi shaykh explained the notion of fana along the following lines. When one ventures outdoors on a clear, moonless night, and goes far enough from the lights of the city, then one can see a sky filled with -- as Carl Sagan used to say -- billions and billions of stars. If, however, one went outdoors during the daytime, the stars of the previous night would no longer be visible.

The stars have not disappeared. Instead, their feeble light is overwhelmed by the brightness of the Sun's relative nearness to Earth.

Similarly, when the false-self is dissolved, it is not that the individual per se no longer exists, but, rather, the feeble light of our normal sense of individuality is engulfed by the presence of Divinity. This Divinity is always, and everywhere, Present, but, unfortunately, the nature of the false-self is such as to be able to induce a sort of state of self-hypnosis in which we are oblivious, for the most part, to everything except our own feeble light of awareness.

Some people talk in terms of three kinds of fana. These are, in turn, fana-fil-shaykh, fana-fil-Rasul, and fana-fil-Allah. In other words, supposedly the progression of awareness is away from one's false-self and toward, in succession, an understanding and awareness of the

reality of the teacher, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and Allah.

In truth, however, these three things are merely different manifestations of one and the same 'phenomenon', if you will -- namely, one's relationship with Divinity. If one truly understands either one's essential nature, or the essence of one's spiritual guide, or the essence of the Prophet of God, then one realizes that one has come face to face with manifested or reflected Divinity.

Baqa -- the third of our initial three terms -- involves a further unveiling, beyond that of fana. Whereas fana is the dissolution (whether temporarily or permanently) of the false-self, baqa constitutes the spiritual ascendancy, or coming on-line, of one's true, essential self. When, if God wishes, this occurs, then one comes to understand in a direct manner of gnosis (and more) that in our essence, there is Divinity, although this is balanced with a countervailing understanding that we are not Divinity in Essence.

In short, there is a distinction between Creator and the created, but this distinction is enveloped in a Divine mystery. Those who are, by the grace of God, opened-up to this dimension or potential of the human being both understand and, yet, are bewildered by the constant on-going way in which Divinity is manifested in ways that are never repeated.

One of the facets of this aspect of non-repeatability of manifestation is that every human being has within herself or himself a unique way of giving expression to, and, therefore, serving Divine purposes. Yet, if the condition or station of baqa is not established within us, then we can never be sufficiently free to be able to transmit, with all of its radiance and beauty, the full fruition of our essential spiritual uniqueness.

If we return to the issue of adab, for a moment, the brief discussion of fana and baqa has ramifications for the observance of adab in any given set of circumstances. As long as the false self is present -- and we are absent from our true, unique, essential selves -- we cannot properly discharge the fiduciary responsibilities associated with the sincere observance of adab or spiritual etiquette, and this is true no matter what the nature of the relationship one is considering..

Pursuing adab on all of its levels leads one, if God wishes, toward fana and baqa. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, we cannot properly satisfy the requirements of adab until fana and baqa have, with God's blessings and support, taken place.

Similarly, one will never get to the heart of principle-governed behavior until fana and baqa have occurred. One uses rule-governed behavior -- that is, shari'ah -- to work toward a proper insight to the nature of principle-governed behavior, but one can never properly understand shari'ah until the spiritual transformation that comes through fana and baqa have transpired and become firmly established.

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Question 3) Who are some key people in Sufi history?

A teacher of my first shaykh once said:

"There have been so many Rumis who have never uttered a word."

Among other things, the teacher meant by this that one cannot ascertain the status or spiritual station of someone merely by what is visible in the physical/material world, and, therefore, we are not necessarily in a good position to judge who -- from a Divine perspective -- can be said to play key roles in the history of the Sufi tradition.

Indeed, God has said that the saints are gathered beneath a canopy that Divinity keeps concealed from all except those to whom God wishes to divulge such secrets. One might suppose that the relationship between the known great shaykhs of the Sufi path and the unknown great shaykhs of this same mystical path are a little like the relationship of the visible portion of an iceberg with those portions that lie beneath the water's surface.

Of the great shaykhs who have become known, for reasons best known to Divinity, to the world, there are far too many to list. A few of them are as follows.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was -- in fact, is -- the first Sufi and the shaykh of all subsequent shaykhs. The members of the

Prophet's immediate household also have played fundamental roles in helping to perpetuate the Sufi tradition. This household includes: the Prophet's daughter, Hazrat Bibi Fatima (may Allah be pleased with her), his son-in-law Hazrat 'Ali, and the two sons that came forth from this marriage -- namely, Hazrat Hassan and Hazrat Hussein (may Allah be pleased with them all).

Many of the male and female Companions of the Prophet were very great Sufi exemplars. In addition, one has people such as, in no particular order, historical or otherwise: Ra'bia of Basra, Hasan of Basra, al-Muhasibbi of Baghdad, al-Hujwiri, al-Hallaj, Abu Yazeed, Shams Tabriz, Rumi, Farid-ud-din Attar, Ansari, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Abdul Kadir Gilani, Muinuddin Hasan Chishti, Ibn al-'Arabi, Hafiz of Shiraz, al-Jili, Sherafudeen Muneri, Najm al-din Razi, Ahmed al-Alawi, (may Allah's blessings be upon all of these individuals), and on and on and on and on.

All of these individuals had, by the grace of God, important roles to play in the history of the Sufi path. However, there were many others whose names might not be as familiar or whose names might have been lost with the passage of time who also played significant roles of service to the Sufi tradition. What recorded history remembers does not exhaust the truth of these matters.

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Question 4) How did sufism change when it was brought to the U.S.?

The reality of the essence of the Sufi path did not change at all. What changed was the understanding of many people here concerning the nature of the Sufi path. In effect, there were a number of individuals who called, or are calling, themselves Sufi shaykhs who began imposing their own likes, dislikes and confusions onto the Sufi path.

In time, many people have come to take these invented versions of the Sufi path to be the reality of, and truth about, that path. As a result, it would seem that what is referred to as the Sufi path has undergone a transformation, but this is not the case.

Tasawwuf remains what it always has been. Those who are embraced and supported by God's blessings and insight understand this. The rest do not, or do so only through very distorted glasses, and, consequently, they have become confused themselves and have, in turn, led others into confusion.

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Question 5) How can a Jew, a Hindu, and a Taoist all be Sufis?

Actually, this is, in a sense, the wrong question. The issue is not how individuals from different faith groups can step onto the Sufi path; rather, the issue is: can one pursue the Sufi path to its logical conclusion and remain, say, a Jew, a Hindu or a Taoist?

The answer to this latter question is that one cannot. At some point a person has to make a choice about which specific mystical path she, he, or they are following and to which one is going to be committed and faithful.

There are a number of mystical paths -- each of which is, at least in principle, and if God is willing -- fully capable of transporting the individual to the desired spiritual destination. But, one must stick to that path and not start digging for spiritual treasure in lots of different places.

A number of people these days are under the misapprehension that mysticism is a technology in which one can borrow from a variety of different spiritual traditions and reassemble such a set of eclectic practices in a context that is removed from the original spiritual context from which the practices and techniques were exported. This is not so.

Spirituality is an ecosystem in the fullest sense of this word. When one starts to fool around with the balance, intricacy, subtlety, and interconnectedness of such a system, then either the system or the individual, or both, are destroyed eventually.

All too many individuals seem to assume that if they have an anomalous experience after engaging in some mystical practice or practices that have been picked up from here or there, then such an experience must be veridical or authentic. This need not be so.

There are many forces, within and without us, which are intent on generating obstacles to the sincere pursuit of spirituality. These forces are fully capable of inducing altered states of consciousness within us, but not all altered states of consciousness necessarily reflect some mystical truth or reality.

People from diverse spiritual backgrounds have encountered people during their travels that might or might not be authentic Sufi teachers. False teachers often can be heard saying that a seeker after spiritual realization does not have to become Muslim in order to be Sufi.

This is misleading as it stands. Although it is true that someone can start out coming from any number of possible spiritual or non-spiritual traditions, and, as such, could become initiated into an authentic Sufi Order without becoming a full-fledged Muslim right away, nonetheless, the very act of taking initiation with a true Sufi teacher requires one to say that one believes in God and in the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who is the Messenger or Rasul of Allah.

This also happens to be the first step in becoming a Muslim. However, even in the time of the Prophet, the Companions did not become full-fledged Muslims (in the sense of observing all the basic five pillars that are required of a Muslim today or in following all the, say, dietary restrictions that are followed today). For instance, ritual prayers, fasting, Hajj, and the complete prohibition of alcoholic beverages only took place over a period nearly two decades.

So, it is possible to be inclined to the Islamic spiritual tradition without necessarily fulfilling all of its requirements right away. Another example concerns those individuals who grow up in Muslim families, whether in North America or elsewhere, but who do not -- nor are they expected to by their families or the rest of the Muslim community -- to become full-fledged practicing Muslims overnight.

There can be no compulsion in matters of deen, or the process of spiritual realization of one's essential nature and capacity. Each person must be allowed to go about this process in a way that is most manageable by them.

There are some Sufi Orders who will not, under any circumstances, accept someone into the chain of spiritual transmission known as a silsilah who has not first accepted Islam. There are other Orders that will not allow a person to go through the initiation process unless this individual has been a staunch, practicing Muslim for many years prior to seeking initiation.

There are, on the other hand, some authentic Sufi Orders and shaykhs who will not insist on this. They allow non-Muslim people who wish to step onto the mystical path to start out slowly and gradually, God willing, work their way into the rest of the requirements of Islam beyond an initial statement of commitment to the Oneness of God and the recognition that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Messenger or Rasul of God.

These people might be Jews or Christians or Native Americans or Buddhists, and they might remain this way in many ways for some time. Eventually, however, they will come to understand, God willing, that if they wish to pursue the Sufi mystical path rather than some other authentic mystical path, then they are going to have dive off the high board into the pool of Islam.

How long this will take, or if it will ever occur, depends on the individual. Those people who do not make this spiritual transition and adjustment will travel only a very limited distance along the Sufi path, but they always will be accepted with love and kindness by the shaykh even if they decide to remain Christian, Jewish, or whatever.

Stepping onto the Sufi path is not the same thing as being a traveler on that path. Moreover, being a traveler does not mean that one has, or ever will, arrive at the ultimate destination of the Sufi journey.

A person who takes initiation might or might not have certain legitimate mystical experiences. In fact, it might be that someone who has resisted becoming Muslim in a fuller, more committed sense, might, at least initially, have more spiritual experiences than a person who has decided to become Muslim and make the requisite commitment.

The first person might be in need of such confirmational experiences to help the individual understand that mystical truths are real and capable of being tasted, to varying degrees. The second individual might not need such experiences because the faith already is quite strong and not in need, at least at this particular junction in time, of being confirmed or "proven" in some fashion through such experiences.

Sometimes what happens, however, is that someone who has not made a final decision about what to do about the 'Islam-thing' might, by the Grace of God, be given a mystical experience. Unfortunately, some people proceed to interpret this to mean that one does not have to be Muslim in order to undergo mystical experiences.

The foregoing conclusion is most assuredly true, as far as it goes, since God gives to Whomsoever Divinity chooses, and can give without stint or reservation. But, what is problematic with such an understanding is the belief that often accompanies it which stipulates that these sorts of mystical things will continue to happen or that spiritual progress can continue to be made outside of the fold of

Islam, and, therefore, there really is no need to become Muslim. This belief is, most assuredly, incorrect.

Given that the Sufi path can be a very long and difficult journey, having a few authentic experiences does not necessarily mean anything other than that the Divine touch of baraka has entered into such a person's life for a short while, or, possibly, a little longer. If one, for instance, were to speculate, arbitrarily, that 2000 mystical experiences were necessary to complete the mystical journey (and, things do not work this way on the Sufi path) before one would undergo both fana and baqa, then even if one were to have 500 authentic experiences, one still would have three-quarters of the path lying before one.

Consequently, even if one were to arbitrarily speculate that it were possible to travel one-quarter of the spiritual distance necessary to reach the goal of the Sufi mystical quest without becoming Muslim in any formal sense, one still would become stuck at this one-quarter water mark and not be able to travel further along the Sufi spiritual path.

If the purpose of someone stepping onto a mystical path is to realize the object of that quest, then having come only one-quarter of the way toward that goal is as good as being a googolplex of spiritual light years away from the desired spiritual destination. Whatever mystical experiences one might have had and whatever spiritual capacities one might have acquired, by the grace of God, within that one quarter of the way spiritual journey, these are relatively worthless when considered in relation to the primary goal of the Sufi path.

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Question 6) What are some Sufi practices?

The short answer to this question is as follows. (A) Disciplining the nafs or carnal soul or ego through various kinds of austerities such as fasting, seclusion, or keeping the night vigil. (B) Polishing the spiritual heart through zikr Allah or the remembrance of Divinity through repetitions or the chanting of any of the 99 Names of God. (C) Emptying the sirr of preoccupations with the world by means of contemplative exercises. Once, God willing, the sirr becomes emptied, it is capable of guarding the heart from anything other than the remembrance of Allah. (D) Traversing the spiritual stations of the heart such as longing,

fear, gratitude, patience, sincerity, dependence, and love through one's nisbath or relationship with, and service to, the shaykh.

The foregoing notwithstanding, one must understand that none of these practices are sufficient unto themselves. One, for example, could chant until the cows come home or until hell freezes over, and if this zikr were not supported and accepted by God, one would go absolutely nowhere. Consequently, these practices are often seen as necessary but not sufficient conditions for attaining spiritual realization.

Some Sufi Orders also use spiritual music or sacred turning (e.g., the so-called 'whirling dervishes' of Turkey's Mevlevi Order ) to help bring about, God willing, various spiritual states. Or, sometimes these processes help heal various maladies of the soul and heart through one's participation in them.

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Question 7) What is the process of being initiated or becoming an 'official' Sufi?

The answer to this question can vary with the Sufi Order being considered. Some of these initiation processes can be very involved and ritual-laden. Others might be very simple.

The essence of any of these processes, irrespective of whatever surface differences that might distinguish them, is the contract of nisbath or relationship between seeker and spiritual guide. Each of the participants in the initiation process is obligating himself or herself to the other in various ways.

The seeker is indicating his or her willingness to sincerely attempt to learn from, and implement, in one's personal life, the values, commitments, practices, beliefs, and so on which characterize the Sufi journey as delineated and exhibited by the shaykh. The seeker is further committing herself or himself to be loyal to the process of instruction.

The teacher, on the other hand, is committing himself or herself to look after, and attend to, engendering, with God's support and blessings, the development and health of the inner, spiritual life of the seeker. Furthermore, the shaykh is committed to working diligently and

constantly to assist the individual, God willing, to the end to the spiritual journey.

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Question 8) How do Sufis receive their "Sufi names"?

First of all, it is not absolutely necessary to change one's name after stepping onto the Sufi path, although, in the West, there are many who do this in an attempt to have a concrete, palpable touchstone of starting out on a new, different journey from what has transpired previously in their lives. Usually, the way this is done is that the shaykh opens the Qur'an -- seemingly at "random"-- and according to a certain method of selection, settles on the first root or word that can form the basis for constructing an acceptable name.

The belief is, of course, that this is not a random process and that God has led the shaykh to just this name as being most appropriate for the initiate. Moreover, since the name has special significance in as much as it has come from one of the Books of Revelation, the meaning and baraka associated with this name is believed to play a role in the spiritual life of the individual.

Sometimes, a spiritually inappropriate name may be chosen by this method in conjunction with some non-Sufi context. For example, maybe the person converted to Islam before stepping onto the Sufi path and was given a name at the time of becoming Muslim that, say, weighed too heavily on the individual's physical and spiritual being. Upon initiation, shaykhs sometimes have been known to change the initial name to something else that will not have the adverse effect on the person as the original name did such as making the person particularly vulnerable to certain kinds of physical ailment and the like.

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Question 9) Do you have any idea on how widespread sufism is?

I do not have any quantitative statistics, but in all likelihood, there is not a country anywhere on Earth that does not have one or more authentic practitioners of the Sufi path. Nonetheless, however large or small this total number of current followers of the Sufi path might be, it is diminishingly small compared to the number of people who journeyed along the mystical dimension of Islam in earlier years.

Indeed, the number of people who follow the Sufi path will continue to drop as we approach the latter days prior to the Day of Judgment. In fact, the last saint on Earth, who will be a descendent of the Prophet Seth (peace be upon him), will spend his entire life calling people to Islam and the Sufi path but no one on Earth will heed the call.

Appendix Five -- Another Interview

The following interview arose out of a term project assigned to a student in a course on religious studies at a university in England. Although there have been a few minor modifications in the material, the interview remains, for the most part, essentially as it was when given to the student originally.

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1. How did you become a Sufi Muslim?

There is a long answer and a short answer to this question. I will give the shortened version.

I was working in Canada and had become interested in exploring various mystical traditions. I did a great deal of reading during this period -- including works dealing with Carlos Castaneda, Buddhism, Yoga, Taoism, Christian mysticism, the Kabbalah, transpersonal psychology, the Sufi path, as well as material on, and by, Gurdjieff.

My heart was drawn to various aspects of all of the foregoing traditions, but the first practical taste came with a Gurdjieff group in Canada. Eventually, I discovered that many of the original teachers of Gurdjieff were Sufi masters also known -- depending on geographical location and linguistic influences -- as pirs, shaykhs or murshids. Consequently, I began to look at the Sufi path more closely, as well as read a great deal in this area.

Through a somewhat circuitous route, I, finally, was introduced to a professor who taught in the Department of Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto. This individual also was a Sufi teacher or shaykh from the Chishti Order of Tasawwuf (path of mystical science ... a term that is used by the mystics of Islam rather than the term "Sufism" since Tasawwuf is not an "ism" like capitalism, socialism, communism, and so on, that are purely conceptual systems and theories).

Early on in my research, I believed that mysticism was one thing and spiritual traditions like Islam were something entirely different. Eventually, I came to understand that the esoteric or inner aspect of a spiritual tradition was intimately linked with the exoteric or outer form of a given tradition.

More specifically, I learned from the aforementioned Sufi shaykh that one could not be a true Sufi without being a Muslim. Indeed, the mystical dimension is at the heart of Islam.

So, I became Muslim by stepping onto the Sufi path and learning that one could not do the latter without also attending to the requirements and obligations of being Muslim. However, there was never any pressure on me to become Muslim, and I was permitted to attend all of the Sufi gatherings that were arranged by the Sufi guide, and, therefore, I was permitted to come to my understanding of the relationship between the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions of Islam at my own rate.

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## 2. How do you give worship to Allah?

There are many different ways to offer worship to God. Indeed, the basic pillars of Islam [namely, (1) the shahada or attestation of faith, (2) daily obligatory prayers, (3) Ramazan -- the month of fasting, (4) zakat -- the giving of charity, and (5) the Hajj or pilgrimage) are all different ways of worshipping Allah. In addition, there is zikr or remembrance (chanting), contemplation, meditation, sacred turning, recitation of the Qur'an, and sama or audition (listening to sacred music). In fact, every act that is done with the intention of remembering, serving, thanking, loving, singing the praises of, and submitting oneself to God is an act of worship.

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## 3. Which festivals are important to you?

The two Eids (Eid al-fitra -- after the completion of the month of fasting, and Eid al-adha -- observed during the period of Hajj by Muslims all over the world) are, of course, very important. The birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- Milad an-Nabi - - which is observed around the 12th of Rabi Awwal and throughout this auspicious month, is another celebration of importance.

In addition, there is the 10th of Muharram. This commemorates, among other things, the martyrdom of Hazrat Hussein (may Allah be pleased with him), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), along with the martyrdom of those who fell with Hazrat Hussein (may Allah be pleased with him and his associates) at Karbala.

Another date of importance is the 21st of Ramazan. This occasion marks the anniversary of Hazrat 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) who was the son-in-law of the Prophet.

The night of power (said to be an odd numbered night between the 20th and 28th of Ramazan, and celebrated by many on the 27th of this month) -- when the Qur'an was initially revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) through the agency of the archangel Gabriel (peace be on him) -- is another important date of observance. The 27th of Rajab -- commemorating the Prophet's night journey to Jerusalem and, then, his ascension through the seven heavens to the Lote tree and beyond -- is also important.

Finally, there are a number of occasions during the year that mark the passing away of spiritual personalities important to various silsilahs (chains of spiritual lineage) of the Sufi way. There are hundreds of these dates that populate the calendar, and there is not one day of the year in which a commemoration of the passing away of one special friend of God, or another, is not observed through festivals of celebration in various parts of the world.

The date of passing away from this world marks the transition to the real life of the world to come. Therefore, among the Folk of the Way (the Sufi Path) this time of passing away is an occasion of joy and happiness since it marks the time of meeting with their Lord -- the One to whom these people have, by the Grace of Allah, dedicated their whole lives in seeking and serving.

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4. How do you view the Hajj and have you ever been to Mecca on pilgrimage?

I am not exactly sure what you mean by the first part of this question. The Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, and this rite is incumbent on every adult Muslim at least once in one's life if one is financially and physically able to make the journey.

The Hajj offers an opportunity to participate in observances marking, and drawn from, important spiritual events in the lives of, among others, Prophets Adam, Ibrahim, and Ishmael (may Allah's peace be upon them all). It is an opportunity to seek forgiveness from God for one's transgressions against Divinity, others and oneself. It is an

opportunity for spiritual awakening, purification and re-commitment.

By the Grace of Allah, I had the good fortune of going on Hajj approximately 20 years ago. It is a set of experiences that I treasure and remember with fondness, tears and gratitude.

The time spent in Mecca is only one part of the Hajj. One also spends time in Mina, the plains of Arafat, and Muzdalifah that are outside of Mecca. In addition, no Hajj is really complete without visiting the mosque of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in Medina.

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5. As a Sufi how do you view Sunni and Shi'a Muslims method of worship and beliefs?

The Sunni and Shi'a approaches to Islam represent different people's understanding of what is being taught through the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). There are different schools of thought within the Sunni tradition, just as there are different schools of thought within the Shi'a tradition.

On some issues, these different schools of thought agree. On some issues, they differ.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) has said that there are 71 sects among the Jews, and only one of these ways is correct. He also said that among the Christians, there are 72 sects, yet only one of these paths is correct. Finally, among Muslims, there are 73 sects, yet only one of them is correct.

People of tasawwuf (i.e., the Sufi path) are committed to finding the Truth of Being. Theological debates do not interest them -- only realization of the Truth interests them.

The more time one spends in debates with others or pointing fingers at others, the less time there is to spend on struggling toward self-realization of the Truth that is being manifested through each of us according to our individual capacities.

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6. How do you feel Sufism is viewed by Sunni and Shi'a Muslims?

One really can't make a generalization in responding to this question. There are some people from a Sunni background who

disapprove of what they believe the Sufi tradition entails. On the other hand, there are some individuals from a Sunni orientation who are in empathy with what they believe the teachings of the Sufi path to be. The same split of opinion can be found among people of the Shi'a community.

However, many of these people -- irrespective of whether they dislike, or are attracted to, the Sufi Path -- do not have any real understanding of what the Sufi path is about. And, ultimately, what people from these respective communities feel or think about the Sufi Path (whether positive or negative) doesn't really matter.

The Sufi path is what it is. If it is a valid way to knowing God, then those who view it in a negative light are irrelevant. If it is an invalid way for knowing God, then those who view this path in a positive light are also irrelevant.

In short, what matters is the Truth of things, and not people's opinions about that Truth. Truth is not a function of our likes and dislikes, theories, theologies or feelings. An individual must learn how to permit the Truth to shape, color, permeate and determine a person's understanding. Everything else is but speculation -- regardless of whether, or not, this is positive or negative speculation.

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7. Do you believe that Sunni, Shi'a and Sufi Muslims are seen equally in the eyes of Allah?

What I believe really has nothing to do with how God sees individuals from the Sunni and Shi'a communities. We all are sinners in one way or another. We all make mistakes in one way or another. We all misunderstand in one way or another. We all see, hear, think, and act through a set of veils.

Allah loves all of creation. Unfortunately, we veil ourselves from this love by our biases, emotions, blindness, opinions, presumptions, assumptions, speculations, judgments, and theological dogmas.

The Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teach us to be tolerant, loving, forbearing, forgiving, patient, empathetic, helpful, generous, courteous, honest, thoughtful, respectful, just, and kind in our dealings with other people -- whether these others are Sunni or Shi'a Muslim or they are non-Muslim. If one busies oneself with what one has been counseled to do, one will have no time to wonder how God

sees the differences between Sunni and Shi'a, and one will know that however Allah sees these respective groups, the individuals therein will be treated with fairness, justice, and mercy and that no wrong will be done to any of them by Allah.

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#### 8. What do you believe will happen to you after death?

The vast majority of us will face a Day of Judgment in which we will be held accountable for our deeds and misdeeds. There will be some (a relatively small group) who will face no Day of Judgment and be admitted directly into a felicitous, joyous, intimate and eternal state of being brought near to Allah. God alone will decide who will be in which group.

For those of us who will face a Day of Judgment, God will not be our judge on that Day. Rather, our own deeds, intentions, and motivations will judge us. As it indicates in the Qur'an, our hands and feet will testify against us, and as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) intimates, the niyat or intention of our hearts in relation to any given act will also testify against us.

As a result of this judgment, some people will enter into one or another level of hell that marks separation and distance from awareness of God's Presence. For some, this stay will be eternal, while for others, the stay will mark a period of purification from which they eventually will emerge and be permitted entrance into a realm of paradise appropriate for them.

For still others, one or another level of paradise will be given as a reward for the good works that have been manifested through them. These rewards are described in both the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet as consisting of all manner of desirable experiences.

The 'people of tasawwuf', however, are concerned with neither heaven nor hell, but only with the Beloved. For them, to do things out of desire for heaven or fear of hell is to prostitute the true nature of Love such that God is seen as merely a means to an end other than God (i.e., attaining heaven or avoiding hell), rather than the End.

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#### 9. What views do you feel to be uniquely Sufi?

There are many, many things that could be said here. Perhaps, one of the most important of these is the following -- the purpose of life is neither a matter of attaining heaven nor avoiding hell ... the purpose of life is to realize one's essential spiritual identity and the unique spiritual capacity associated with this identity that each of us has been gifted in order to be able to bear loving, reverential, and constant witnessing to the fact there is nothing in existence but Divinity.

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#### 10. What practices do you feel to be uniquely Sufi?

Practices like zikr (remembrance/chanting), contemplation, meditation and sama' (audition/listening to sacred music) are often associated with the 'folk of the path'. In point of fact, however, many people who are have not been initiated onto the Sufi path participate in these practices ... although they might do so in their own fashion and not in accordance with the teachings of the Sufi shaykhs concerning the proper observance of these practices. Consequently, one cannot necessarily treat these practices as, necessarily, being uniquely identified with the Sufi path.

One might come closer to a better answer to your question if one were to mention the "practices" of fana and baqa. In one sense, these two terms do not so much refer to practices in the usually accepted senses of this term, as they are conditions of Being. On the other hand, every practice is, in reality, a condition of Being of one kind or another, so whether or not one refers to fana and baqa as practices depends on one's point of view.

Roughly speaking -- very roughly -- fana is being immersed in Divine Presence while being absent from self. Baqa is being present to Self as manifested Divinity. Those who are preoccupied with exoteric matters are, generally speaking, uninterested in pursuing either fana or baqa and, as such, they tend to pursue practices that are unlikely to carry them -- although Allah knows best -- in the direction of either fana or baqa.

The 'folk of tasawwuf', on the other hand, undertake a journey that takes them, God willing, to nowhere but the practice of fana and baqa. Indeed, these are the culmination of all other practices in which seekers might engage.

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11. To what extent does the Qur'an influence your moral judgments and which other authorities would you seek if your situation was not covered by the Qur'an?

The two primary sources of guidance are the Qur'an and the sunna (actions) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). But, there are many different ways of, if you will, hermeneutically (having to do with the theory and methods of understanding), engaging the primary sources that is why different schools of jurisprudence, theology, and philosophy have arisen over time in various places within the Muslim world.

The 'folk of the path' do not believe in hermeneutics. They recommend direct tasting, drinking and immersion in the Reality of Being.

Do not read the Book. Become the Book ... according to one's capacity to do so. Do not read about the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Become the sunna of the Prophet, according to one's capacity to do so.

Do not try to grasp the Qur'an and the sunna of the Prophet with just one's mind. Grasp this guidance also with one's heart, sirr, ruh, kafi and aqfah ... the spiritual potentials that Allah has placed in us and through which one can come to a direct knowing of Divine guidance and the sunna of the Prophet.

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12. To what extent do you feel the hadith is an important guide in your life?

The Prophet did not tell people to follow his hadith. He told them to follow his sunna.

One examines the hadith in order to try to gain an understanding of what the sunna of the Prophet entails. To properly understand the sunna, one must try to gain insight into the niyat of the Prophet in relation to such sunna. One can never do this on one's own. One needs the help of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The Qur'an asks a question of the believers: "Shall I tell you who will be the greatest losers in their works?" And, then, Allah gives the answer: "those who works go astray in the present world while they believe they are doing good deeds."

There are many people who believe they understand the *niyat* of the Prophet concerning his *sunna*. Those who believe this and who have arrived at this understanding through their own individual efforts will invariably be wrong. Only those who are rightly guided will come to know something (according to their capacity to do so) of the *niyat* of the Prophet concerning the meaning of his *sunna*.

Furthermore, the *sunna* of the Prophet cannot be taken in piecemeal fashion and, therefore, out of their proper context. Like the verses of the Qur'an, the meaning of any given *sunna* (*ayat* in the case of the Qur'an) can best be understood in the light of other *sunna* (verses of the Qur'an) of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Just as the Qur'an must, ultimately, be taken as a whole, so, too, must the *sunna* of the Prophet, and any attempt to consider things in isolation from that whole are doomed to failure and misunderstanding.

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13. Which sins do you regard as most wrong and what repercussions do you believe befall those who commit such sins?

As Ra'bia of Basra said to a fellow Sufi who was quite taken with his own sense of spirituality -- "Thy existence is a sin with which none other can compare." The existence being referred to here is that of the unrealized servant of Allah ... the one who believes that he or she has an existence that is independent of, and apart from, God.

All sins are committed in this condition of ignorance. For, only through the belief that we are separated from Allah do we permit ourselves to be seduced by our lower selves, or Iblis or *dunya* (the realm of entanglements with the world by virtue of our desires).

God, alone, knows what will happen to us for the transgressions we commit. Allah is most merciful and forgiving and is ready to forgive all sins -- except the sin of *shirk* in which we die in a state of associating partners with God -- and this includes associating ourselves as real entities apart from Divinity ... for we have no such existence, and it is only our inclination to *shirk* that supposes otherwise.

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14. What difficulties do you find, if any, in dealing with a non-Muslim society as a Muslim?

To be frank with you, I have encountered far more difficulties living with Muslims who -- in direct contradiction to the teachings of the Qur'an and the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- are all too frequently prepared to be unjust toward, and intolerant of, both Muslims and non-Muslims. Neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet teaches us to be full of hate, prejudice, bias, meanness, arrogance, insensitivity, cruelty, and so on. Yet, unfortunately, time and again, my experience has indicated there are all too many Muslims who seem to believe the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teach otherwise.

There is a reason why the condition of the Muslim world is like it is. Unbelievers are merely the agents being used by God to construct the mirror of conditions that reflect the sad state of all too many elements of the Muslim community.

There are, to be sure, good people in the Muslim ummah. But, to borrow from the New Testament, why do so many Muslims complain about the mote in the eye of our non-Muslim brothers and sisters, while we refuse to address the beam in our own collective eye?

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15. How do you view non-Muslim's status spiritually and what do you think awaits them after death?

I pray for the spiritual redemption of all who go astray -- whether they are non-Muslims, Muslims ...including myself. All of our affairs are in the hands of God's Mercy, and only God knows what will happen with those who transgress against their own selves.

No one can take anything for granted. Even the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) indicated that he would not achieve Paradise except through the Mercy of God, and he was a man without sin in his life ... so what can be said of the rest of us? What right do any of us have to look with presumption and contempt on the sins of others when we have so many of our own misdeeds staring us in the face?

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16. How do you regard the status of women in Sufism and in the Islamic world as a whole?

If you are asking me whether I believe women are being treated with equity and justice in the Muslim world considered as a whole, then I

would have to say that their status is abysmal. If you are asking me what the spiritual potential of women is, then one must acknowledge the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet concerning this issue ... namely, women have a capacity for self-realization just as men do, and that each woman has a unique capacity to give expression to that essential Self, just as each man does.

Some people, both men and women, have been given greater spiritual capacity than have some other men and women. However, some people of lesser spiritual capacity -- both men and women -- might achieve far more of their potential, by the Grace of Allah, than do some people of greater spiritual capacity ... both men and women. Whatever one's capacity might be, the goal should be to realize that capacity for it is through that realization that we are best able to worship God that, as the Qur'an points out, is the reason why human beings and jinn have been created.

The purpose of the Sufi path is to help each individual realize his or her spiritual potential -- both in terms of essential identity, as well as in terms of spiritual capacity. It has been my experience that all legitimate Sufi shaykhs are engaged in equitably helping all individuals -- whether women or men -- achieve life's purpose.

At the same time, some of those who have stepped onto the Sufi path but who have not, yet, realized that purpose might treat others -- those on and off the path -- with injustice. Being on the Sufi path is not a guarantee of freedom from misogyny.

People step onto the path with a great deal of emotional and ideological baggage. The task of the shaykh -- through the help and support of God -- is to encourage people to move toward the light of spiritual freedom and away from the darkness of oppression ... whether of oneself or others.

One who oppresses another is himself or herself oppressed. One must get to the root of this self-oppression if one is to have any hope of getting the individual to move away from the oppression of others.

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17. To what extent do you view Allah as personally approachable?

We are told in the Qur'an that God is closer to us than our own ventricular vein. I don't think you can get any more personally approachable than this.

Our problem, however, is that we are blind to the presence of Divinity within us. God is quite prepared to have a personal, intimate relationship with us, but it is we who keep refusing the invitation.

However, to say that Allah is personally approachable does not mean we can circumscribe or exhaust Divinity. There are dimensions of Divinity that are entirely independent of, and transcendent to, creation.

We can know Allah personally to precisely the extent that God has given us the capacity to do this. Yet, just as there are aspects of other people -- even those with whom we are very close and intimate -- which will never be known by us, so too, there are dimensions of Divinity that are off-limits to humanity ... even the Prophets.

Nevertheless, the relationship for which we have been especially created is that of a deep, intense, abiding and personal love between the seeker and the sought. Which is which, is not always easy to sort out.

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18. What do you feel to be the goal of the human spirit?

I feel I have answered this in a previous response. However, to reiterate the matter, the goal of the human spirit is to realize one's essential spiritual identity and unique capacity for manifesting that identity through loving worship of, and servitude to, God.