

The 4th Meeting of
**Guerrand Hermes Forum for
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Spiritual Life**

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Text 1

About Time: What Does Buddhism Teach About Time?

By Barbara O'Brien

We all know what time is. Or do we? Read some explanations of time from the perspective of physics, and you may wonder. Well, Buddhist teaching about time can be a bit daunting, also.

This essay will look at time in two ways. First is an explanation of measurements of time in Buddhist scriptures. Second is a basic explanation of how time is understood from the perspective of enlightenment.

Measures of Time

There are two Sanskrit words for measurements of time found in Buddhist scripture, ksana and kalpa.

A ksana is a tiny unit of time, approximately one seventy-fifth of a second. I understand this is a generous amount of time compared to a nanosecond. But for purposes of understanding the sutras, it probably isn't necessary to measure ksana precisely.

Basically, a ksana is an imperceptibly small amount of time, and all kinds of things happen within the space of a ksana that elude our conscious awareness. For example, it is said there are 900 arisings and ceasings within each ksana. I suspect the number 900 is not meant to be precise but rather is a poetic way of saying "a lot."

A kalpa is an aeon. There are small, medium, great, and uncountable (asamhyeya) kalpas. Over the centuries various scholars have attempted to quantify kalpas in various ways. Usually, when a sutra mentions kalpas, it means a really, really, really long time.

The Buddha described a mountain even bigger than Mount Everest. Once every hundred years, someone wipes the mountain with a small piece of silk. The mountain will be worn away before the kalpa ends, the Buddha said.

The Three Times and Three Time Periods

Along with ksanas and kalpas, you may run into mention of "the three times" or "the three periods of time." These can mean one of two things. Sometimes it just means past, present, and future. But sometimes the three time periods or three ages are something else entirely.

Sometimes "three periods of time" refers to the Former Day, Middle Day, and Latter Day of the Law (or Dharma). The Former Day is the thousand-year period after the life of the Buddha in which dharma is taught and practiced correctly. The Middle Day is the next thousand years (or so), in which dharma is practiced and understood superficially. The Latter Day lasts for 10,000 years, and in this time the dharma completely degenerates.

You might notice that, chronologically speaking, we are now into the Latter Day. Is this important? It depends. In some schools the three periods of time are considered important and discussed quite a bit. In others they are pretty much ignored.

But What Is Time, Anyway?

These measurements may seem irrelevant in light of the way Buddhism explains the nature of time. Very basically, in most schools of Buddhism it is understood that the way we experience time -- as flowing from past to present to future -- is an illusion. Further, it could be said that the liberation of Nirvana is liberation from time and space.

Beyond that, teachings on the nature of time tend to be on an advanced level, and in this brief essay we can do no more than stick a tip of the toe into very deep water.

For example, in Dzogchen -- the central practice of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism -- teachers speak of four dimensions of time. These are past, present, future, and timeless time. This is sometimes expressed as the "three times and timeless time."

Not being a student of Dzogchen I can only take a stab at what this doctrine is saying. The Dzogchen texts I have read hint that time is empty of self-nature, as are all phenomena, and manifests according to causes and conditions. In the absolute reality (dharmakaya) time disappears, as do all other distinctions.

Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche is a prominent teacher in another Tibetan school, Kagyu. He said, "Until concepts are exhausted, there is time and you make preparations; however, you should not grasp onto time as truly existent, and you should know that within the essential nature of mahamudra, time does not exist." Mahamudra, or "great symbol," refers to the central teaching and practices of Kagyu.

Dogen's Being and Time

Zen master Dogen composed a fascicle of Shobogenzo called "Uji," which usually is translated as "Being Time" or "The Time-Being." This is a difficult text, but the central teaching in it is that being itself is time.

"Time is not separate from you, and as you are present, time does not go away. As time is not marked by coming and going, the moment you climbed the mountains is the time-being right now. If time keeps coming and going, you are the time-being right now."

You are time, the tiger is time, bamboo is time, Dogen wrote. "If time is annihilated, mountains and oceans are annihilated. As time is not annihilated, mountains and oceans are not annihilated."

Text 2

Uji: The Time-Being by Eihei Dogen Translated by Dan Welch and Kazuaki Tanahashi
from: The Moon in a Dewdrop; writings of Zen Master Dogen

1 An ancient buddha said: For the time being stand on top of the highest peak. For the time being proceed along the bottom of the deepest ocean. For the time being three heads and eight arms. For the time being an eight- or An ancient buddha said:

For the time being stand on top of the highest peak.
For the time being proceed along the bottom of the deepest ocean.
For the time being three heads and eight arms.
For the time being an eight- or sixteen-foot body.
For the time being a staff or whisk.
For the time being a pillar or lantern.
For the time being the sons of Zhang and Li.
For the time being the earth and sky.

"For the time being" here means time itself is being, and all being is time. A golden sixteen-foot body is time; because it is time, there is the radiant illumination of time. Study it as the twelve hours of the present. "Three heads and eight arms" is time; because it is time, it is not separate from the twelve hours of the present.

2

Even though you do not measure the hours of the day as long or short, far or near, you still call it twelve hours. Because the signs of time's coming and going are obvious, people do not doubt it. Although they do not doubt it, they do not understand it. Or when sentient beings doubt what they do not understand, their doubt is not firmly fixed. Because of that, their past doubts do not necessarily coincide with the present doubt. Yet doubt itself is nothing but time.

3

The way the self arrays itself is the form of the entire world. See each thing in this entire world as a moment of time.

Things do not hinder one another, just as moments do not hinder one another. The way-seeking mind arises in this moment. A way-seeking moment arises in this mind. It is the same with practice and with attaining the way. Thus the self setting itself out in array sees itself. This is the understanding that the self is time.

4

Know that in this way there are myriads of forms and hundreds of grasses throughout the entire earth, and yet each grass and each form itself is the entire earth. The study of this is the beginning of practice. When you are at this place, there is just one grass, there is just one form; there is understanding of form and no-understanding of form; there is understanding of grass and no-understanding of grass. Since there is nothing but just this moment, the time-being is all the time there is. Grass-being, form-being are both time. Each moment is all being, is the entire world. Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment.

5

Yet an ordinary person who does not understand buddha-dharma may hear the words the time-being this way:

For a while I was three heads and eight arms. For a while I was an eight- or sixteen-foot body. This is like having crossed over rivers and climbed mountains. Even though the mountains and rivers still exist, I have already passed them and now reside in the jeweled palace and vermilion tower. Those mountains and rivers are as distant from me as heaven is from earth.

It is not that simple. At the time the mountains were climbed and the rivers crossed, you were present. Time is not separate from you, and as you are present, time does not go away. As time is not marked by coming and going, the moment you climbed the mountains is the time-being right now. If time keeps coming and going, you are the time-being right now. This is the meaning of the time-being. Does this time-being not swallow up the moment when you climbed the mountains and the moment when you resided in the jeweled palace and vermilion tower? Does it not spit them out?

6

Three heads and eight arms may be yesterday's time. The eight- or sixteen-foot body may be today's time. Yet yesterday and today are both in the moment when you directly enter the mountains and see thousands and myriads of peaks. Yesterday's time and today's time do not go away. Three heads and eight arms move forward as your time-being. It looks as if they are far away, but they are here and now. The eight- or sixteen-foot body moves forward as your time-being. It looks as if it is nearby, but it is exactly here. Thus, a pine tree is time, bamboo is time.

7

Do not think that time merely flies away. Do not see flying away as the only function of time. If time merely flies away, you would be separated from time. The reason you do not clearly understand the time-being is that you think of time only as passing. In essence, all things in the entire world are linked with one another as moments. Because all moments are the time-being, they are your time-being.

8

The time-being has the quality of flowing. So-called today flows into tomorrow, today flows into yesterday, yesterday flows into today. And today flows into today, tomorrow flows into tomorrow. Because flowing is a quality of time, moments of past and present do not overlap or line up side by side. Qingyuan is time, Huangbo is time, Jiangxi is time, Shitou is time, because self and other are already time. Practice-enlightenment is time. Being splattered with mud and getting wet with water is also time.

9

Although the views of an ordinary person and the causes and conditions of those views are what the ordinary person sees, they are not necessarily the ordinary person's truth. The truth merely manifests itself for the time being as an ordinary person. Because you think your time or your being is not truth, you believe that the sixteen-foot golden body is not you. However, your attempts to escape from being the sixteen-foot golden body are nothing but bits and pieces of the time-being. Those who have not yet confirmed this should look into it deeply. The hours of Horse and Sheep, which are arrayed in the world now, are actualized by ascendings and descendings of the time-being at each moment. The rat is time, the tiger is time, sentient beings are time, buddhas are time.

10

At this time you enlighten the entire world with three heads and eight arms, you enlighten the entire world with the sixteen-foot golden body. To fully actualize the entire world with the entire world is called thorough practice. To fully actualize the

golden body - to arouse the way-seeking mind, practice, attain enlightenment, and enter nirvana - is nothing but being, is nothing but time.

11

Just actualize all time as all being; there is nothing extra. A so-called "extra being" is thoroughly an extra being. Thus, the time-being half-actualized is half of the time-being completely actualized, and a moment that seems to be missed is also completely being. In the same way, even the moment before or after the moment that appears to be missed is also complete-in-itself the time-being. Vigorously abiding in each moment is the time-being. Do not mistakenly confuse it as nonbeing. Do not forcefully assert it as being.

12

You may suppose that time is only passing away, and not understand that time never arrives. Although understanding itself is time, understanding does not depend on its own arrival. People only see time's coming and going, and do not thoroughly understand that the time-being abides in each moment. This being so, when can they penetrate the barrier? Even if people recognized the time-being in each moment, who could give expression to this recognition? Even if they could give expression to this recognition for a long time, who could stop looking for the realization of the original face? According to ordinary people's view of the time-being, even enlightenment and nirvana as the time-being would be merely aspects of coming and going.

13

The time-being is entirely actualized without being caught up in nets or cages. Deva kings and heavenly beings appearing right and left are the time-being of your complete effort right now. The time-being of all beings throughout the world in water and on land is just the actualization of your complete effort right now. All beings of all kinds in the visible and invisible realms are the time-being actualized by your complete effort, flowing due to your complete effort. Closely examine this flowing; without your complete effort right now, nothing would be actualized, nothing would flow.

14

Do not think flowing is like wind and rain moving from east to west. The entire world is not unchangeable, is not immovable. It flows. Flowing is like spring. Spring

with all its numerous aspects is called flowing. When spring flows there is nothing outside of spring. Study this in detail. Spring invariably flows through spring. Although flowing itself is not spring, flowing occurs throughout spring. Thus, flowing is completed at just this moment of spring. Examine this thoroughly, coming and going. In your study of flowing, if you imagine the objective to be outside yourself and that you flow and move through hundreds and thousands of worlds, for hundreds, thousands, and myriads of eons, you have not devotedly studied the buddha way.

15

Great Master Hongdao of Mt. Yao [Yaoshan], instructed by Shitou, Great Master Wuji, once went to study with Zen Master Daji of Jiangxi. Yaoshan asked, "I am familiar with the teaching of the Three Vehicles and twelve divisions. But what is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the west?" Zen Master Daji replied:

For the time being have him raise his eyebrows and wink.
For the time being do not have him raise his eyebrows and wink.
For the time being to have him raise his eyebrows and wink is right.
For the time being to have him raise his eyebrows and wink is not right.

Hearing these words, Yaoshan experienced great enlightenment and said to Daji, "When I was studying with Shitou, it was like a mosquito trying to bite an iron bull." What Daji said is not the same as other people's words. The "eyebrows" and "eyes" are mountains and oceans, because mountains and oceans are eyebrows and eyes. To "have him raise the eyebrows" is to see the mountains. To "have him wink" is to understand the oceans. The "right" answer belongs to him, and he is activated by your having him raise the eyebrows and wink. "Not right" does not mean not having him raise the eyebrows and wink. Not to have him raise the eyebrows and wink does not mean not right. These are all equally the time-being. Mountains are time. Oceans are time. If they were not time, there would be no mountains or oceans. Do not think that mountains and oceans here and now are not time. If time is annihilated, mountains and oceans are annihilated. As time is not annihilated, mountains and oceans are not annihilated. This being so, the morning star appears, the Tathagata appears, the eye appears, and raising a flower appears. Each is time. If it were not time, it could not be thus.

16

Zen master Guixing of She Prefecture is the heir of Shoushan, a dharma descendant of Linji. One day he taught the assembly:

For the time being mind arrives, but words do not.
For the time being words arrive, but mind does not.
For the time being both mind and words arrive.
For the time being neither mind nor words arrive.

Both mind and words are the time-being. Both arriving and not-arriving are the time-being. When the moment of arriving has not appeared, the moment of not-arriving is here. Mind is a donkey, words are a horse. Having-already-arrived is words and not-having-left is mind. Arriving is not "coming," not-arriving is not "not yet."

17

The time-being is like this. Arriving is overwhelmed by arriving, but not by not-arriving. Not-arriving is overwhelmed by not-arriving, but not by arriving. Mind overwhelms mind and sees mind, words overwhelm words and see words. Overwhelming overwhelms overwhelming and sees overwhelming. Overwhelming is nothing but overwhelming. This is time. As overwhelming is caused by you, there is no overwhelming that is separate from you. Thus you go out and meet someone. Someone meets someone. You meet yourself. Going out meets going out. If these are not the actualization of time, they cannot be thus.

18

Mind is the moment of actualizing the fundamental point; words are the moment of going beyond, unlocking the barrier. Arriving is the moment of casting off the body; not-arriving is the moment of being one with just this, while being free from just this. In this way you must endeavor to actualize the time-being.

19

The old masters have thus uttered these words, but is there nothing further to say? Mind and words arriving "part-way" are the time-being. Mind and words not arriving "part-way" are the time-being. In this manner, you should examine the time-being. To have him raise the eyebrows and wink is "half" the time-being. To have him raise the eyebrows and wink is the time-being "missed." Not to have him raise the eyebrows and wink is "half" the time-being. Not to have him raise the eyebrows and wink is the time-being "missed." Thus, to study thoroughly, coming and going, and to study thoroughly, arriving and not-arriving, is the time-being of this moment.

On the first day of winter, first year of Ninji [1240], this was written at Kosho Horin Monastery.

Christianity

Texts selected by Piotr Sikora

Asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he [Jesus] said in reply, "The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For behold, the kingdom of God is within/among you." (The Luke's Gospel 17, 20-21)

But at daybreak on the first day of the week they [some women] took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb; but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were puzzling over this, behold, two men in dazzling garments appeared to them. They were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. The men said to them, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day." And they remembered his words. (The Luke's Gospel 24, 1-8)

What must a man contribute by his own actions, in order to procure and deserve the occurrence and the consummation of this birth [of the Divine Word] in himself? Is it better to do something toward this, to imagine and think about God? - or should he keep still and silent in peace and quiet and let God speak and work in him, merely waiting for God to act? Now I say, as I said before, that these words and this act are only for the good and perfected people, who have so absorbed and assimilated the essence of all virtues that these virtues emanate from them naturally, without their seeking; and above all there must dwell in them the worthy life and lofty teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. They must know that the very best and noblest attainment in this life is to be silent and let God work and speak within. When the powers have been completely withdrawn from all their works and images, then the Word is spoken. Therefore he said, 'In the midst of the silence the secret word was spoken unto me.' And so, the more completely you are able to draw in your powers to a unity and forget all those things and their images which you have absorbed, and the further you can get from creatures and their images, the nearer you are to this and the readier to receive it.

(Meister Eckhart, Sermon 1/101, p. 33)

If you would be free of any taint of [spiritual] trading, so that God may let you enter this temple [of your soul], then you must do all that you can in all your works, solely to God's glory, and be as free of it as Naught is free, which is neither here nor there. You should ask nothing whatever in return. Whenever you act thus, your works are spiritual and godly, and the merchants are driven right out of the temple, and God is in there alone, for one is thinking only of God. See, that is how your temple is cleared of merchants! The man who considers neither himself nor anything else but God alone and God's glory, he is truly free from all taint of commerce in his deeds, and

seeks naught of his own just as God is entirely free in all His works and seeks not His own.

I have also told how our Lord said to those that sold doves, "Take this away! Take this hence! " He did not drive these people out or rebuke them harshly, but said quite mildly, "take this away! " as though to say it is not wrong, but it is a hindrance to the pure truth. These are all good people; they work purely for God's sake, not for themselves, but they work with attachment, according to time and tide, before and after. These activities hinder them from attaining the highest truth, from being absolutely free and unhindered as our Lord Jesus Christ is absolutely free and unhindered, and conceives himself ever anew without pause and out of time from his heavenly Father, and in that same Now is perpetually born back with praise and thanksgiving, perfect, into the Father's majesty with an equal glory. Thus, to be receptive to the highest truth, and to live therein, a man must be without before and after, untrammelled by all his acts or by any images he ever perceived, empty and free, receiving the divine gift in the eternal Now, and bearing it back unhindered in the light of the same with praise and thanksgiving in our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Meister Eckhart, Sermon 6/1, p. 67/68)

It must of necessity be a virgin, the person by whom Jesus was received. 'Virgin' is as much as to say a person who is void of alien images, as empty as he was when he did not exist. Now the question may be asked, how a man who has been born and has reached the age of rational understanding can be as empty of all images as he was when he was not; for he knows many things, all of which are images: so how can he be empty of them? Note the explanation which I shall give you. If I were possessed of sufficient understanding so as to comprehend within my own mind all the images ever conceived by all men, as well as those that exist in God Himself – if I had these without attachment, whether in doing or in leaving undone, without before and after but rather standing free in this present Now ready to receive God's most beloved will and to do it continually, then in truth I would be a virgin, untrammelled by any images, just as I was when I was not.

(...)

Now attend, and follow me closely. If a man were to be ever virginal, he would bear no fruit. If he is to be fruitful, he must be a wife. (...) Hence I have said, "Jesus went up into a citadel and was received by a virgin who was a wife." (...) Married folk bring forth little more than one fruit in a year. But it is other wedded folk that I have in mind now: all those who are bound with attachment to prayer, fasting, vigils, and all kinds of outward discipline and mortification. All attachment to any work that involves the loss of freedom to wait on God in the here and now, and to follow Him alone in the light wherein He would show you what to do and what not to do, every moment freely and anew, as if you had nothing else and neither would nor could do

otherwise - any such attachment or set practice which repeatedly denies you this freedom, I call a year; for your soul will bear no fruit till it has done this work to which you are possessively attached, and you too will have no trust in God or in yourself before you have done the work you embraced with attachment, for otherwise you will have no peace. Thus you will bring forth no fruit till your work is done. That is what I call 'a year,' and the fruit of it is paltry because it springs from attachment to the task and not from freedom. These, then, I call 'wedded folk,' for they are bound by attachment. They bring forth little fruit, and paltry at that, as I have said. A virgin who is a wife is free and unfettered by attachment; she is always as near to God as to herself. She brings forth many and big fruits, for they are neither more nor less than God Himself. This fruit and this birth that virgin bears who is a wife, bringing forth daily a hundred and a thousandfold! Numberless indeed are her labors begotten of the most noble ground or, to speak more truly, of the very ground where the Father ever begets His eternal Word: - it is thence she becomes fruitful and shares in the procreation.

(...)

there is a power in the soul which touches neither time nor flesh, flowing from the spirit, remaining in the spirit, altogether spiritual. In this power, God is ever verdant and flowering in all the joy and all the glory that He is in Himself. There is such heartfelt delight, such inconceivably deep joy as none can fully tell of, for in this power the eternal Father is ever begetting His eternal Son without pause, in such wise that this power jointly begets the Father's Son and itself, this self-same Son, in the sole power of the Father. (...) Yea, though God were never to vouchsafe him any further taste of heaven than this, he would yet be all too richly rewarded for all that he had ever endured, for God is in this power as in the eternal Now. If a man's spirit were always united with God in this power, he would not age. For the Now in which God made the first man and the Now in which the last man shall cease to be, and the Now I speak in, all are the same in God and there is but one Now. Observe, this man dwells in one light with God, having no suffering and no sequence of time, but one equal eternity. This man is bereft of wonderment and all things are in him in their essence. Therefore nothing new comes to him from future things nor any accident, for he dwells in the Now, ever new and without intermission.

(Meister Eckhart, Sermon 8/2, p. 77.79)

Texts selected by Christian Rutishauser

Texts from the book "Spiritual Exercises" by Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556)

SE 1: First Annotation. The first Annotation is that by this name of Spiritual Exercises is meant every way of examining one's conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions, as will be said later. For as strolling, walking and running are bodily exercises, so every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one's life for the salvation of the soul, is called a Spiritual Exercise.

SE 45: It is a meditation with the three powers on the first, the second and the third sin.

It contains in it, after one Preparatory Prayer and two Preludes, three chief Points and one Colloquy. Prayer.

SE 46: The Preparatory Prayer is to ask grace of God our Lord that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the service and praise of His Divine Majesty.

SE 47 First Prelude. The First Prelude is a composition, seeing the place. Here it is to be noted that, in a visible contemplation or meditation -- as, for instance, when one contemplates Christ our Lord, Who is visible -- the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is found which I want to contemplate. I say the corporeal place, as for instance, a Temple or Mountain where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is found, according to what I want to contemplate. In an invisible contemplation or meditation -- as here on the Sins -- the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination and consider that my soul is imprisoned in this corruptible body, and all the compound in this valley, as exiled among brute beasts: I say all the compound of soul and body.

SE 48: Second Prelude. The second is to ask God our Lord for what I want and desire. The petition has to be according to the subject matter; that is, if the contemplation is on the Resurrection, one is to ask for joy with Christ in joy; if it is on the Passion, he is to ask for pain, tears and torment with Christ in torment. Here it will be to ask shame and confusion at myself, seeing how many have been damned for only one mortal sin, and how many times I deserved to be condemned forever for my so many sins.

SE 49: Note. Before all Contemplations or Meditations, there ought always to be made the Preparatory Prayer, which is not changed, and the two Preludes already mentioned, which are sometimes changed, according to the subject matter.

SE 50 First Point. The first Point will be to bring the memory on the First Sin, which was that of the Angels, and then to bring the intellect on the same, discussing it; then

the will, wanting to recall and understand all this in order to make me more ashamed and confound me more, bringing into comparison with the one sin of the Angels my so many sins, and reflecting, while they for one sin were cast into Hell, how often I have deserved it for so many. I say to bring to memory the sin of the Angels, how they, being created in grace, not wanting to help themselves with their liberty to reverence and obey their Creator and Lord, coming to pride, were changed from grace to malice, and hurled from Heaven to Hell; and so then to discuss more in detail with the intellect: and then to move the feelings more with the will.

SE 51: Second Point. The second is to do the same -- that is, to bring the Three Powers -- on the sin of Adam and Eve, bringing to memory how on account of that sin they did penance for so long a time, and how much corruption came on the human race, so many people going the way to Hell. I say to bring to memory the Second Sin, that of our First Parents; how after Adam was created in the field of Damascus and placed in the Terrestrial Paradise, and Eve was created from his rib, being forbidden to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, they ate and so sinned, and afterwards clothed in tunics of skins and cast from Paradise, they lived, all their life, without the original justice which they had lost, and in many labors and much penance. And then to discuss with the understanding more in detail; and to use the will as has been said.

SE 52 Third Point. The third is likewise to do the same on the Third particular Sin of any one who for one mortal sin is gone to Hell -- and many others without number, for fewer sins than I have committed. I say to do the same on the Third particular Sin, bringing to memory the gravity and malice of the sin against one's Creator and Lord; to discuss with the understanding how in sinning and acting against the Infinite Goodness, he has been justly condemned forever; and to finish with the will as has been said.

SE 53 Colloquy. Imagining Christ our Lord present and placed on the Cross, let me make a Colloquy, how from Creator He is come to making Himself man, and from life eternal is come to temporal death, and so to die for my sins. Likewise, looking at myself, what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ. And so, seeing Him such, and so nailed on the Cross, to go over that which will present itself.

SE 54 The Colloquy is made, properly speaking, as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master; now asking some grace, now blaming oneself for some misdeed, now communicating one's affairs, and asking advice in them. And let me say an OUR FATHER.

SE 65: FIFTH EXERCISE. IT IS A MEDITATION ON HELL

It contains in it, after the Preparatory Prayer and two Preludes, five Points and one Colloquy: Prayer. Let the Preparatory Prayer be the usual one. First Prelude. The first Prelude is the composition, which is here to see with the sight of the imagination the length, breadth and depth of Hell. Second Prelude. The second, to ask for what I want: it will be here to ask for interior sense of the pain which the damned suffer, in order that, if, through my faults, I should forget the love of the Eternal Lord, at least the fear of the pains may help me not to come into sin.

SE 66: First Point. The first Point will be to see with the sight of the imagination the great fires, and the souls as in bodies of fire.

SE 67: Second Point. The second, to hear with the ears wailings, howlings, cries, blasphemies against Christ our Lord and against all His Saints.

SE 68: Third Point. The third, to smell with the smell smoke, sulphur, dregs and putrid things.

SE 69: Fourth Point. The fourth, to taste with the taste bitter things, like tears, sadness and the worm of conscience.

SE 70: Fifth Point. The fifth, to touch with the touch; that is to say, how the fires touch and burn the souls.

SE 71: Colloquy. Making a Colloquy to Christ our Lord, I will bring to memory the souls that are in Hell, some because they did not believe the Coming, others because, believing, they did not act according to His Commandments; making three divisions: First, Second, and Third Divisions. The first, before the Coming; the second, during His life; the third, after His life in this world; and with this I will give Him thanks that He has not let me fall into any of these divisions, ending my life. Likewise, I will consider how up to now He has always had so great pity and mercy on me. I will end with an OUR FATHER.

SE 72 Note. The first Exercise will be made at midnight; the second immediately on rising in the morning; the third, before or after Mass; in any case, before dinner; the fourth at the hour of Vespers; the fifth, an hour before supper. This arrangement of hours, more or less, I always mean in all the four Weeks, according as his age, disposition and physical condition help the person who is exercising himself to make five Exercises or fewer.

Texts selected by Swami Atmapriyananda

Herewith some sources from the Hindu tradition on Time:

(1) Source: **Bhagavad-Gita** (considered as one of the most authentic Hindu scripture, literally meaning, The Song of God)

Chapter 11, Verse No.32: The first line: *kaalo'smi loka kshayakrit pravriddho, lokaan samaahartum iha pravrittah.*

Meaning:

The great Lord said: "I am Time who am engaged in and responsible for the destruction and decay of the (manifested) world, I absorb into Myself the worlds (projected by Me at the beginning of creation)".

Significance: Time is an aspect of the Supreme Being which projects (creates) the worlds to bring them into manifestation, the Lord Himself, as Time, sustains (protects) these worlds, and finally the Supreme Person, the Lord, as Time, absorbs or withdraws the entire manifested world unto Himself. Thus, Time is identical in a sense with the Lord Himself when seen and understood as the Great Creator, Protector and Destroyer.

(2) Source: **Mahabharata** (considered as one the greatest epics of the world literature, particularly of Hinduism and a vast mine of spiritual and secular wisdom. In fact it is popularly said that whatever is not found in the Mahabharata cannot be found elsewhere, that is, Mahabharata is a source of all wisdom.

Ref: Yakshaprashna, the question-answer discussion between the Yaksha (a demi-god) and Yudhishthira, the eldest of the five Pandava brothers and the most sagacious and considered the maturest among them. This question-answer discussion in the Mahabharata is considered to be veritable repository of wisdom of all aspects of human life, both secular and spiritual.

Question: What's the news (on earth, in the world)?

Answer: The news is: Time (the great Cook) is cooking all beings in the huge cauldron of great delusion (maha-moha) with the help of the sun as fire, night and day as fuel, month and seasons as spoons to stir (as in a soup).

Significance: Time gradually, slowly but surely takes all beings in the manifested world towards decay and destruction. Compare with the scientific concept of 'entropy' which says that any closed system will inevitably move towards greater and greater degree of disorder and chaos as time moves from the past, through the present, into the future. Movement towards the future means movement towards decay and death. That means, the degree of disorganization, the degree of disorder, in the universe is always on the increase and this is an inviolable law called the Law of Entropy, or the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Out of chaos emerges once again the Cosmic Order. Refer to a famous book by the Nobel Laureate Prigogine, Order out of Chaos. Compare also, Shankaracharya's famous hymn to Shiva called 'Prayer for Forgiveness to Shiva' in which he calls Time as the 'Great Devourer of the world'.

In short, Time is a flow from the past, through the present, into the future, pointing towards greater chaos.

(3) Source: **Hindu mythology**--the philosophical and spiritual significance of the various gods and goddesses of Hinduism.

Shiva is called Mahakala (literally, 'Great Time'--male) and Shiva's Divine Spouse Kali is called Mahakali (literally, 'Great Time' --female). Both of them are pictured as dancing their mad dances, meaning that Time is dancing, advancing, resulting in decay and ultimately destruction of the manifested world. A remarkable image is that is Shiva's damaru, a drum with a double-conical structure, that Shiva holds in His hands and sounds during his dance. This is the famous light-cone or time-cone with which Physicists is familiar: it is a double-cone, with the central point as the Present moment (which is like a Euclidean point with no dimensions), extending to Infinite Past (to minus infinity as Physicist's would call it) on one side and to infinite Future (to plus infinity) on the other side. Shiva plays this drum, this double-conical structure, holding to the central point, which is the Present. Thus the Past and Future oscillate and vibrate with the Present being held in check. Philosophical and spiritual significance is that, when Time becomes stilled in the Eternal Present (kala baddha vartamane), liberation from the clutches of Time, which is getting catapulted into Timelessness, into Eternity, into the Absolute beyond Time from the region of the relative which is time, takes place.

Texts selected by Acharya Shrivatsa Goswami

TIME: Past, Present and Future: A Hindu Understanding

Kāla, Sanskrit for time, is one of the fundamental idea of Hindu culture. It is understood both in its transcendental form as Māhakāla, the absolute time and the phenomenal or mundane time as kāla. When time operates through the primordial quality of being (sattva) it initiates the creation process under Brahmā, when mediated by goodness (rajas) it is sustained by Viṣṇu and due to the quality of darkness (tamas) creation dissolves under Śiva. Thus Brahmā the creator is the past, Viṣṇu is our present life and Śiva is the future via death.

Time as interacting in human history has been divided into a cycle of four yuga or eras—Sat, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali. There is a progressive decay of value system—the dharma.

It is interesting to note that the spiritual disciplines are prescribed as per the era. In Sat Yuga meditation, in Tretā ritual offerings, in Dvāpara worship and in the age of Kali chanting the Divine Name is the perfect path. Whenever the humanity suffers due to “loosing its path”, the divine intervenes/incarnates in human history. In our time one such intervention was as Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1533). He focused our attention to the supreme efficacy of divine name. He said:

*That which cleanses the mirror of the mind,
Which extinguishes the forest fire of the heat worldly life,
Which spreads the radiance of the moonlight of auspiciousness,
Which is the life of the bride of knowledge,
Which expands the ocean of joy,
Which even on the first day of waxing gives nectar of the full moon,
Bathing the souls of all, that Krishna-nāma-saṅkīrtana (singing of Divine Names)
conquers all with its excellence.*

*You have propagated your many names,
By them you have delegated all your own power,
You have established no time for the remembering of them.
O Bhagavān (The Absolute), such is your mercy.
But such is my misfortune that there has not been born in me any profound
attachment to them.*

*O Jagadīśa (The Lord of Universe),
I do not desire wealth,
or offspring,
or a beautiful women,
nor poetic genius,
But that from birth to birth spontaneous bhakti (loving devotion) be in me towards
you.*

*When, in taking your name,
Will the streams of tears from my eyes wet my cheeks,
And my voice choke,
And my body be thrilled?*

The Divine Name is what remedies the carried over karma from the past. It makes our present life happy through Divine Love. It also makes us long for a happier future. A seeker doesn't want freedom from time cycle of birth and death, rather wants to take births after birth to taste the Divine Love.

PHILOSOPHY

Time: Our Hindu View

Musings on the perennial value and profound implications of our vast cycles of yugas and kalpas spanning trillions of years

BY DR. ARVIND SHARMA

THE HINDU VIEW OF TIME HAS OFTEN BEEN described as cyclical, and often contrasted with the Western view of time, which is characterized as linear. That is to say, the Abrahamic religions believe that there was a point before which the universe did not exist, and God then brought it into existence "out of nothing." It will continue in existence until God similarly brings it to an end. A straight line connects, as it were, these two dots, of its coming to be and its ceasing to be. This Western view of time is said to be conducive to progress, as one marches forward in linear time. Hinduism, however, does not admit those two dots—the one indicating the beginning of the universe, and the other indicating its end. In mainstream Hindu, as well as Buddhist and Jain thought, the universe is without a beginning and an end. But, although without a beginning and an end, the universe does not stay the same—it undergoes phases of manifestation and occultation. Each phase of such manifestation has its beginning and end, followed by an equally long period when it remains dormant—until the cycle starts again. Within this large cycle there is another cycle during the period of its manifestation, as one Age succeeds another. This cycle consists of the four yugas: Sat (or Krta), Treta, Dvapara and Kali repeating themselves endlessly. This explains the description of the Hindu view of time as cyclical. In fact it could even be called bi-cyclical.

The duration of one cycle, called a mahayuga, is said to be 432 million years. A thousand of these cycles constituted a kalpa. The kalpa therefore is a period of immense duration. The Buddha replied with the following simile when asked how

long a kalpa was. Imagine a mountain of solid rock, four leagues (perhaps 6 miles) in its dimensions. Imagine further that someone would come at the end of every century and wipe it with a piece of cloth made of the finest silk of Banaras. That mountain would wear away sooner than the kalpa would come to its end. And yet this kalpa is but a day in the life of Brahma, whose life consists of a hundred years! When Western Indologists first came in touch with temporal vistas of such duration, they were inclined to dismiss them as merely fantastic. Moreover, as we were supposed to be living in the Kali Yuga, which commenced in 3102 bce, an age in which things were supposed to go from bad to worse, this scheme was considered pessimistic as well, apart from being fantastic.

The time has come, however, to reassess both these appraisals. The early Western Indologists were accustomed to the view that the universe was created in 4004 bce, as calculated by Bishop James Ussher. According to modern cosmologists, however, the universe is approximately 13 billion years old since the Big Bang. So these vast conceptions of time can no longer be dismissed as fantastic. In fact, it could even be argued that it was when the West became aware of the possibility of such vast expanses of time, after being exposed to them in Indian culture, that its own mind was liberated from the confines of earlier biblical calculations and could begin to entertain the possibility of vast geological time spans, and subsequently vaster astronomical time spans.

But what about the historical pessimism implied by the doctrine of the four yugas? The standard explanation offered by many Indologists is that while decline is built into the cosmic structure of the system and cannot be averted, Hindu metaphysics allows the individual to save himself or herself from within the process, because in this evil Kali Yuga even a little virtue goes a long way and salvation is achieved with less spiritual effort than in previous ages. The dark cloud of Kali Yuga came with this silver lining—that one can save oneself and become liberated, if one cannot save the world. This is soteriologically true as far as it goes, but is ultimately misleading if it leaves one with the impression that human beings are at the mercy of the Kali Yuga socially and politically. The fact of the matter is that the Hindu view of time may be cyclical, but it is not fatalistic. It is true that Kali Yuga is described as characterized by bad rulers but this raises the critical question: are the rulers going to be evil because the Kali Yuga as a period is said to be evil, or is the period evil because the rulers are evil? Or, in other words, is the king the maker of the Age, or is the Age the maker of the king?

In the Mahabharata, this question is posed by Yudhishtira to Bhisma, and Bhisma's reply is worth remembering: "O Yudhishtira, this is a question regarding which you should not entertain any doubt—the king is the maker of the Age." Even the Manusmṛti, which in its earlier sections describes the four Yugas, in the usual way, says in a section dealing with kingship: "The king is the maker of the Age. When the king sleeps it is Kali Yuga or the Iron Age; when he wakes, it is Dvapara Yuga or the Brazen Age; when he is ready to act, it is Treta Yuga, or the Silver Age; and when he actively moves, it is Sat Yuga, or the Golden Age." Small wonder then, that many

kings in Ancient India epigraphically claimed that within their rule the golden age (Kṛta Yuga) had commenced, despite the fact that the one was supposed to be formally going through the Iron Age. Hindu political thought thus imparts to the Hindu concept of time a dynamism which overcomes its cyclical inertia. The Hindu concept of time thus turns out to be neither fantastic nor pessimistic.

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TIME by Osho

“TIME has two meanings. One is chronological time, the clock's time. I cannot say much about it. You have to ask a physicist; only he can say something about it. That is not my dimension of work. If you ask the physicists, Albert Einstein and others, they will say time is the fourth dimension of space. But that does not make much sense, the mystery remains. The mystery remains as mysterious as it was before Albert Einstein.

Saint Augustine is reported to have said, "I know what time is if nobody asks me; if somebody asks me then I don't know."

Time is a mysterious quality. Everybody lives in it, everybody feels it, everybody knows it, and yet it is inexplicable.

The physicist has come to a certain understanding -- that it is the fourth dimension of space -- but that too does not demystify it. In fact it becomes even more mysterious. We have never thought of space and time as one; now physicists say that they are not two. They use a single word for both: spatiotime.

But that is not my world, science is not my world. There is another meaning of time, and whenever I use the word 'time' I use it in that other sense -- psychological time - - which has significance, more significance than chronological time.

What is psychological time? Mind is psychological time. Mind is time. If you don't have any mind and you are simply silent with no thought moving within, there is no time for you, not psychological time. The clock will go on moving, but for you the inner clock stops -- time stops, the world stops. That is my dimension, the dimension of meditation.

As you go deeper into meditation time disappears. When meditation has really bloomed there is no time found. It happens simultaneously: when the mind disappears time disappears. Hence down the ages the mystics have said that time and mind are nothing but two aspects of the same coin. Mind cannot live without time and time cannot live without mind. Time is a way for the mind to exist.

Mind creates future through desire, through dreaming. The future does not exist, it is only in imagination, and mind creates the past. The past also does not exist, it is only in the memory. The past is no more, the future is not yet, but both exist in the mind. And because of the past and the future you have the feeling of time.

Time is not divided into three parts as it is usually divided. Mystics divide time into two parts: the past and the future. Time has only two tenses: past, future. And what about the present? Mystics say the present is timeless because the present is mindless. When you are utterly in the present, herenow, there is neither mind nor time. You transcend time and mind both, you enter into eternity. You are beyond time. You are in a totally different world -- transformed, transmuted, transported.

When I talk about time I mean this time that is created by the mind. Mind clings with the past and clings with the future. It is not ready to renounce the past, it is not ready to die to the past, because it is in the past that it can have its roots. And it is not ready to renounce desiring, dreaming, because it is in desiring and dreaming that it can live. It needs space; it creates a very false space for itself: tomorrow, which never comes. Mind knows of yesterdays and tomorrows, and nothing of today.

Hence all the Buddhas have insisted, "Live in this moment." To live in this moment is meditation, to be simply herenow is meditation. Those who are simply herenow this very moment with me are in meditation. This is meditation: the cuckoo calling from far away, and the airplane passing, and the crows and the birds. And all is silent, and there is no movement in the mind -- you are not thinking of the past and you are not thinking of the future. Time has stopped, the world has stopped.

Stopping the world is the whole art of meditation. And to live in the moment is to live in eternity. To taste the moment with no idea, with no mind, is to taste immortality.

Time is mind. Time is death. Going beyond time is going beyond mind and beyond death.

But if you want to know about chronological time you have to ask a physicist; that is not my concern. Psychological time is my basic concern. That's my whole work here: to help you get out of psychological time."

<http://oshoworld.com/onlinemag/august2005/htm/infocus.asp> Accessed on 26.4.2014 8:54am.

Text selected by Haviva Pedaya

From Franz Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*

The Sabbath

In the course of the weekly portions, which travels through the whole of Torah once a year, the spiritual year is paced out in long strides, and the paces of this course are the Sabbaths. Every Sabbath is by and large like every other, but the change of the scriptural portion distinguishes each from the other, and in this that differentiates them lets them know that they are not a last link but only the single links of a higher order, of the year; for only in the year does that which differentiates the single links again close into a whole. The Sabbath grants existence to the year. This existence must be created anew every week. The spiritual year is always completely partial in the weekly portion to the now current week; it knows only so to speak what “occurs” in this weekly portion, but yet only first turns into the year by being only a passing moment each week; only in the expiring sequence of Sabbaths is the year made round into a wreath. Precisely the regularity in the sequence of Sabbaths, just this fact that, up to the weekly portion, one Sabbath is essentially like the other, makes them into the foundation stones of the year; the year in spiritual guise is first and foremost created through them: they precede everything that is perchance still to come; they even go their steady gait uninterruptedly alongside all these holidays, amid all the abundance of them; amidst the surging up of joy and pain, of suffering and bliss that comes and goes with the holidays, the steady flow of the Sabbaths goes along, and its steady flowing first makes possible those whirlpools of the soul. In the Sabbath the Creation of the year takes place, and thus it is itself already in itself in its place inside the liturgy that which is also first of all ascribed to it as its meaning: the holiday of remembering the Creation.

For God created heaven and earth in six days and on the seventh he rested. Therefore the seventh day as “day of rest,” as “Sabbath,” becomes celebration of the “remembering of the work of the beginning,” more exactly the completion of that work— “and heaven and earth were completed and all their host.” The Sabbath reflects the Creation of the world into the year. Just as the world is always there and is entirely there before any even enters it, so too the ordering of the Sabbaths precedes all holidays that represent any one even and uninterruptedly runs its course through those. And just as the Creation is not exhausted in the fact that the world was created once long ago, but is first completely fulfilled in its renewal of every morning, so the Sabbath as the holiday of the Creation cannot be a holiday of once a year, but must be renewed through the entire cycle every week as the same holiday and yet as a different one every week by means of the weekly portion. And just as Creation is already entirely complete and thus Revelation brings nothing to it

that does not already lie hidden in it as a prediction, so too the holiday of the Creation must already have in itself the whole content of the holidays of Revelation; in its own inner expiring from evening until evening it must be entirely prediction.

The great prayer repeated three times a day contains on the Sabbath, as distinguished from the work days, poetic interludes which from the simple repetition render an unbroken continuous expiration. The prayer of the eve is linked by means of its addition to the establishment of the Sabbath in the Creation of the world. The final word of the story of Creation—"and they were finished"—is spoken here; and it is therefore also said after the return home from the public divine service in the holy halo of the home before the divine creating of the earthly is attested amidst the light of the Sabbath candles, in the blessing over bread and wine as the divine gifts of the earth and with this the entire day from its beginning is consecrated to the holiday of the Creation. Bread and wine are of course extremely perfect products of man and can no longer be surpassed and yet are not to be compared to other products in which his inventive mind artificially assembles the gifts of nature and in the assembly continually surpasses himself to a superior artificiality, but they are nothing other than enriched gifts of the earth; the one is the created ground of all life force, the other of all joy in life; both are finished from the beginning of the world and from man upon it, and neither ever grows old; every mouthful of bread and every sip of wine tastes as marvelous to us as the first one tasted to us, and certainly no less marvelous than they tasted to men since time out of mind who harvested bread from the earth for the first time and picked the fruit of the vine.

If the eve became particularly the celebration of the Creation, so now the morning becomes the celebration of Revelation. The interlude to the great prayer here sings Moses' joy for the divine gift of the Sabbath. And following the exultation of the great recipient of Revelation, with whom God spoke face to face as a man speaks with his friend, and whom God knew like no prophet in Israel since him, there is now in the order of the day the reading out of the weekly portion before the community by the delegated ones of the community. On the eve it was the knowing about the createdness of everything earthly that shaped the text of the consecration; in the morning it is the awareness of the chosenness of the people through the gift of the Torah and planting that took place in this gift of eternal life in its midst. With the former, the awareness of chosenness, the one called up from out of the community goes up to the Book of Revelation; with the latter, awareness of eternal life—he turns his back on it and disappears again in the community. With this awareness of eternal life, however, he climbs even within the Sabbath over the threshold that still separates Creation like Revelation from Redemption. The afternoon prayer becomes the prayer of Redemption.

In the interlude of this prayer Israel is more than the chosen people, for here it is the "one," the "only" people, the people of the One. Any fervor that forces the Kingdom hither with which this holy word "one" is filled in the mouth of the praying Jew here comes alive. Twice a day, morning and night, the community is created, first in the

summons to the “listening”; afterwards in the addressing of God as “our God,” his immediate presence is testified to, God’s “oneness” is called out as his eternal Name beyond all name, beyond all the present; and we know that this calling out is more than a fleeting word, that in it, since the individual “takes upon his shoulders the yoke of the Kingdom of heaven,” the eternal unification of God with his people, of his people with humankind, takes place. All this rings, too, in the Sabbath afternoon prayer in the hymn on the one people of the One. And the songs of the “third meal,” for which in the twilight of the sinking day gray-haired ones and children are united around the table set long ago, are completely drunk by the transport of the future of the Messiah, which is surely drawing near.

But this whole traversed path of the day of God is included in the daily cycle of the single Sabbath only as a preview that can only be further fulfilled in its specific holiday. The fulfillment does not yet take place in this Sabbath itself. It remains a holiday of resting and of closely reflecting. It remains the resting groundwork of the year into which, apart from the succession of the weekly portions, the cycle of the holidays is first set into motion. Like ornaments only, there seem to be carved into this frame already the pre-explanations for those meanings of Revelation that are destined to be fixed into the frame as images one after the other. The Sabbath itself is not at all exclusively a holiday, but at least as much a mere day of the week. It is set in relief in a different way than the actual holidays against the year, which is in fact on the contrary built up from it; but against the week. And therefore it also plunges back again into the week. Just as the community greeted it rejoicing—the groom greeting the bride—when it entered into the house of God, so it disappears again like a dream into the everyday. The smallest cycle set by man, the workweek, begins again. A child holds the fire-brand that an old man kindles, awakening with the last goblet emptied with closed eyes, from the dream of perfection that the holiday of the seventh day had woven. Outside of the sanctuary it is a matter of again finding the road into the everyday. Upon the alternation of holy and ordinary, of seventh day and first, of fulfillment and beginning, of old man and child, the year is built, life is built.

The Sabbath is the dream of perfection, but only a dream. And only because it is both of these, it really becomes the foundation stone for life, and precisely as holiday of the perfection is always renewed Creation.

For this is what is last: in conformity with its institution, the Sabbath was above all remembrance of the work of the beginning and as such lasting, solid ground of the spiritual year; on the other hand its installation however within Creation was already the first sign of Revelation—yet in the words of its being instituted, there appears for the first time in Scripture, veiled, the revealed name of God; but finally it

consists of being two things, both sign of Creation and first Revelation, and as well and even above all anticipation of Redemption. For what else would Redemption be than this, that Revelation and Creation are reconciled! And what else would the first indispensable precondition of such reconciliation be than man's rest after work performed in the world! For six days he has worked and arranged all his affairs, but on the seventh he rests; for six days he has spoken many useful and un-useful words, as the weekday called upon him to do, but on the seventh he follows the bidding of the prophet to rest his tongue from the everyday chit-chat and learns silence and listening. And this sanctification of the day of rest through the silent hearing of God's voice must be mutual for his whole house; it must not be disturbed by the noise of orders; even servant and maid must rest, indeed precisely for the sake of their rest, it is written, the day of rest is instituted; for if rest has reached them also, then in truth the whole house will be freed for its rest from the noisy chatter of the workdays.

Redemption should mean rest, not the composure for new work. Work is always a beginning again; the first workday is the first day of the week, but the day of rest is the seventh. The holiday of the Creation is the holiday of completion. Whilst we celebrated the holiday, in Creation we step beyond Creation and Revelation. In the great prayer on the Sabbath, those entire intermediate petitions for the "needs of the individual" are cancelled, not only the petitions of the creature like the one for a good year and a successful crop, for health, one's own sound reason and a good government, but also those of the child of God for the forgiveness of his sins and for his final redemption; and besides the petition for the coming of the Kingdom and for peace there are still the petitions of the individual as there are those of the community, just praise and thanks. For on the Sabbath the community feels, as far as it can in any such anticipation, as if redeemed—already today. The Sabbath is the holiday of the Creation, but of a Creation that took place for the sake of Redemption. The Sabbath is revealed at the end of Creation and as the meaning and goal of Creation. For that reason we celebrate the holiday of the very first work not on the first day of Creation, but on its last—on the seventh day.

Text selected by Peta Jones Pellach

Isaac Luria's theory of creation.

This selection from Louis Jacobs' *Jewish Ethics, Philosophy and Mysticism* includes a translation from Hayyim Vital's *Etz Hayyim* (Treatise 1, Part 2) with a commentary by Jacobs. The passages from *Etz Hayyim* are in bold, and Jacob's commentary follows. It can be found on myjewishlearning.com.

Know that before there was any emanation and before any creatures were created a simple higher light filled everything. There was no empty space in the form of a vacuum but all was filled with that simple infinite light. This infinite light had nothing in it of beginning or end but was all one simple, equally distributed light. This is known as "the light of *Ein Sof*."

These extremely difficult meditations are those of Isaac Luria but were written down by his disciple Hayyim Vital. Vital wrote a number of books expounding his master's theories and they are the major source of books on the Lurianic kabbalah. The Zohar holds that the world was created by means of ten emanations, the Ten *Sefirot*. The Lurianic kabbalah considers what happened even before these were caused to be emanated. This is more than an effort to explain the ancient puzzle of how creation came to be. By this teaching, Luria wants to explain the continuing relation between the Infinite and the finite, and to lay the groundwork for explaining how evil came into the good God's creation. *Ein Sof* (without limit) is the kabbalistic name for God as He is in Himself, i.e. apart from His self-revelation to His creatures.

Two things have to be said before studying this passage. First, although the kabbalists use terms like "before" and "after" in describing *Ein Sof's* creative activity, they really think of these processes as occurring outside time altogether. (It is, of course, impossible for us to grasp this idea of existence outside of time, but for the kabbalists, as for some of the philosophers, time itself is a creation.)

Secondly, all the illustrations of a vacuum, an empty space, a line and the like are seen by the kabbalists as inadequate pointers to spiritual realities. They never tire of warning their readers not to take them literally as if there really is, for instance, a space in God. God is outside time and space. Similarly, terms like above and below are only figurative.

There arose in His simple will the will to create worlds and produce emanations in order to realize His perfect acts, His names and His attributes. This was the purpose for which the worlds were created.

Note the way in which it is avoided saying that *Ein Sof* willed directly, because this is considered as touching on a mystery too deep for human understanding.

***Ein Sof* then concentrated His being in the middle point, which was at the very center, and He withdrew that light, removing it in every direction away from that center point.**

In the Lurianic kabbalah, creation is only possible by God withdrawing Himself. The logic is simple. Where there is God there cannot be any creatures since these would be overpowered by His majesty and swallowed up, as it were, into His being. This idea of Luria's is known as *tzimtzum* (withdrawal).

There then remained around the very center point an empty space, a vacuum. This withdrawal was equidistant around that central empty point so that the space left empty was completely circular. It was not in the form of a square with right angles. For *Ein Sof* withdrew Himself in circular fashion, equidistant in all directions.

The reason for this was that since the light of *Ein Sof* is equally spaced out it follows by necessity that His withdrawal should be equidistant in all directions and that He could not have withdrawn Himself in one direction to a greater extent than in any other. It is well known in the science of mathematics that there is no more equal figure than the circle. It is otherwise with the figure of a square, which has protruding right angles, or with a triangle or with any other figure. Consequently, the withdrawal of *Ein Sof* had to be in the form of a circle.

Ein Sof is infinite and it cannot, therefore, be said that He is nearer one point than another. The great difficulty here lies in the whole concept of a limitation of the Limitless.

Now after this withdrawal of *Ein Sof* (which left an empty space or vacuum in the very center of the light of *Ein Sof*, as we have said), there remained a place in which there could emerge the things to be emanated, to be created, to be formed and to be made. There then emerged a single straight line of light from His circular light and this came in a downward direction, winding down into that empty space.

Even after God's withdrawal there has to be something of *Ein Sof* in the empty space otherwise nothing could exist there (nothing can exist without God's power). Therefore a line of light is said to wind downward into the empty space. The figure is of a kind of deep hole in the center down into which the line of light winds itself. In the empty space left after *Ein Sof's* withdrawal, the various worlds emerged. In the kabbalah there are four main worlds, corresponding to the four infinitives mentioned. These are: 1) The World of Emanation (the realm of the Sefirot) 2) The World of Creation (lower in degree than the former); 3) The World of Formation (lower in degree than the first two); 4) The World of Action (or Making), the world as we know it, the physical universe (or, as many kabbalists understand it, the spiritual source or counterpart of this world of ours). All four worlds are seen as emerging in the empty space or vacuum.

Texts selected by Muhammad Suheyl Umar

“...As if thou seeth Him” – Islamic Perspective on Spiritual Life

Two representative selections from the basic texts

PERSPECTIVE

As a prelude I would record two basic insights that inform our perspective on spiritual life. The first pertains to the human condition and the second to the way humans relate themselves to the Infinite.

1) The basic question is “What does it mean to be human?”¹ What is a human being? A body? Certainly, but anything else? A personality that includes mind, memories, and propensities that have derived from a unique trajectory of life-experiences? This, too, but anything more? Some say no, but religion, and of course, all spiritualities, disagree. Underlying the human self and animating it is a reservoir of being that never dies, is never exhausted, and is unrestricted in consciousness and bliss. This infinite center of every life, this hidden self, is no less than the Godhead. Body, personality, and this infinite center– a human self² is not completely accounted for until all three are noted. That is not only our fundamental position; it is the shared “anthropocosmic” vision of all wisdom traditions of the world and all great wisdom traditions of mankind remain our most resourceful guides to the Infinite. We recognize that this hidden Self, the Infinite within, is called by many names but all point to a single Reality. Hindus call it Brahman that is “End of all love-longing.”³, vouchsafing the “unshakeable deliverance of the heart”⁴ in Buddhism which Christianity terms as “Beauty so ancient and so new,”⁵ For the Jews it is “Eternal”⁶ which, in Islam, it is “closer to us than our jugular veins.”⁷ Question could be asked that if this is true and we really are infinite in our being, why is this not apparent? Why do we not act accordingly? The answer lies in the depth at which the Eternal is buried under the almost impenetrable mass of distractions, false assumptions, and self-regarding instincts that comprise our surface selves and prevent us from realizing true universality. A lamp can be covered with dust and dirt to the point of obscuring its light completely. The problem life poses for the human self is to cleanse the dross of its being to the point where its infinite center can shine forth in full display and transcendence comes into sharp focus.

2) C. G. Jung once wrote, “The telling question of a person’s life is whether or not [she or] he is related to the Infinite.”⁸ There are, however, different ways, and more importantly, degrees in which the human person relates to the Infinite. Islamic worldview, informed by its basic texts, looks at this distinction in terms of those whose aspirations stop short at the legal minimum requirements for saving

their souls (salvation النجاة) and those who aspire after sanctification (قُرب\تقَرَّب) in this world and Presence of God in the posthumous/final state the human subject. The same point could be made in a less faith specific language in the following manner.

Religiously, people tend to fall into two categories. Some find the meaning they seek in religious forms- commandments, observances, and texts straightforwardly, largely literally interpreted- while others, without bypassing or abandoning these, sense their provisional character and reach out for meanings that the forms contain but which cannot be equated with those forms. If we call the first type of person exoteric, out of his or her concern for meanings that attach to outward or manifest forms, the second type that is drawn to the meanings that underlie those forms conveniently designated esoteric.

Both types turn up in all the historical religions and very likely in tribal ones as well, but nowhere does the difference surface quite as clearly as in Islam. Exoterically, outwardly, and explicitly- Islam is the *sharī'a*, a revealed, canonical law by which the faithful should live. Concomitantly, though, the Qur'ān and the *Hadith*, or authoritative Traditions that were instituted by the Prophet Muhammad, abound in references, frequently veiled, to profound, metaphysical truths which the forms of Islam enfold and protect in the way husks protect and conceal their kernels. Esoterics see these references as invitations to search out those deeper truths and make them the centre of their lives. At their best, Sufi orders are associations of such esoterics that epitomize Spiritual Life in Islam. The underlying premise of our perspective is that rather than an obstacle to a progressive Islamic social consciousness, Islamic spirituality is the necessary ground for all religiously directed action.⁹

In what follows, two short representative selections from the basic texts of Islam (Qur'ān and Prophetic sayings [*Hadith*]) are presented on the subject of "Spiritual Life". These texts that have served as the foundational texts throughout the ages, inviting generations of Muslims to "relate themselves to the Infinite" in a more meaningful, fulfilling and profound manner, i.e. enter into a Spiritual Life. The first comprises representative verses from the Chapters 56 and 24 of the Qur'ān. The second is a Prophetic saying (*Hadith*). These, as well as a multitude of other verses and Prophetic sayings have played a normative role in defining the attitudes and aspirations of not only the adherents of Islamic spirituality (mystics/Sufis) but also of the pious among the Muslim community; serving as a perpetual reminder and attraction that can create reverberations in the higher reaches of the soul and awaken a spiritual longing for achieving a higher degree of excellence in the relationship between the Divine and the human, that is, entering into a spiritual life and cultivate a line of connection between the Absolute and the relative that strives

for going beyond the outward, ordinary, legal and mechanical that usually lacks in fervor, depth and sincerity.

**1-A *Al-Wāqī'ah* (The Chapter of the Inevitable)
Qur'ān-- 56: 10-40**

In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful

... The Foremost are the Foremost. They are those who are brought near (to God) (muqarrabūn). Many among the first (generations) and few among the last..... and Companions of the right. Many among the first (generations) and many among the last.

**1-B *Al-Nūr* (The Chapter of the Light) Qur'ān-- 24:
37**

In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful

رِجَالٌ لَا تُلْهِيهِمْ تِجَارَةٌ وَلَا بَيْعٌ عَنْ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَإِقَامِ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءِ الزَّكَاةِ ۚ يَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا
تَتَقَلَّبُ فِيهِ الْقُلُوبُ وَالْأَبْصَارُ

(..He is glorified morning and evening by men whom neither business nor trading distract from remembering God, keeping up prayers, and paying the welfare tax. They fear a day when their hearts and eyesight will be upset unless God rewards them for the **finest** things they may have done , and gives them even more out of His bounty.

Commentary:

Islam is spoken of in general throughout the Qur'ān as “the Way of God,” that is, the path ordained by God, which may be said to include both esoterism and exoterism. But “the Way to God,” mentioned only in these two suras, is clearly the

esoteric path, and the causality here is strengthened by the word “Reminder”– that which produces remembrance (*dhikr*), which is itself the essence of Sufism.

By the time that Islam had become firmly established in Medina, the esoterists were already a minority. This is clear from a Revelation that came not long after the *hijrah*, which speaks of “a group of those that are with thee” (LXXIII, 20) in reference to those of the companions who followed most closely the practices of the Prophet and who may therefore be considered to form a spiritual elect. Natural pleasures consecrated by praise and thanks were the *dhikr* of primordial man, and it was as a mode of remembrance of God. The golden mean of the Prophet, the balance between abstentions for the sake of God and natural pleasures spiritualized by gratitude to God and by intellectual perception of their Divine Archetypes, has always had a powerful strain of representatives among the Sufis– not the least illustrious.

All that these verses suggest is fully confirmed elsewhere, likewise at the outset of the Revelation. In another of the earliest suras (LVI), the Islamic community is spoken of as comprising two groups, “the Foremost” and “those on the right.” This second group is the generality of believers, in contradistinction to “those on the left,” who are the damned. As to “the Foremost,” they are said to be “many among the first (generations) and few among the last,” whereas “those on the right” are “many among the first and: many among the last.” “The Foremost,” who are to be eventually the esoteric minority, are further described as “brought nigh (to God)” (*muqarrabūn*), a term used to distinguish the archangels from the angels. This nearness, we are told in another sura, means the privilege of having direct access to the fountain of *Tasnīm*.

A third group also is spoken of in the earlier Revelations, namely, “the Righteous” (*al-abrār*). This does not alter the main twofold division of the community, for the Righteous are given to drink a draft that has been flavored at *Tasnīm* (LXXXIII, 27–28), the same fount at which “the Nigh” drink directly. This suggests that the Righteous are following in the foot-steps of the Foremost and that their aspirations are set toward the station of nearness. In a parallel way, they are not yet fully realized; nonetheless, esoteric status is confirmed in another very early sura where they are said to drink a draft that has been flavored at the fountain of *Kāfūr* (LXXVI, 5–6). Those who are privileged to drink directly from this other supreme fountain are named “the slaves of God” (*‘ibād Allāh*).¹⁰

The Sufi, formed by the Qur’ān, has the obligation to be primordial not only in his aspiration to regain the original perfection of man– the preliminary goal of every mysticism– but also in what might be called “creation-consciousness.” It is reasonable to suppose that our first ancestors were of all men the least in need of being reminded how they and the world came into existence. If religion was not yet necessary, that was because the “ligament,” after which religion is named and which it seeks to renovate, was still vibrant. To use the traditional symbol of the tree as an image of the cosmos– both of macrocosm and microcosm– the first men were profoundly and directly aware of being attached to their Divine Root, and they extended this subjective certainty to all that surrounded them. Everything was an object of wonder, in virtue of the Transcendent Reality which it manifested, the Hidden Treasure which it had to make known. The failure to live up to that attitude– the failure to maintain the consciousness of the symbolic nature of each object, the

choice of something for its own sake regardless of its archetype– was the cause of the fall.

2– *The Hadith of Gabriel– (Muslim, I, 1.)*

The Hadith of Gabriel contains in capsule form the Islamic vision of religion of the followers of Muhammad and presents a picture of Islam as a three-dimensional reality.¹¹

This is the text:

*Umar ibn al Khattab¹² said: One day when we were with God’s messenger, a man with very white clothing and very black hair came up to us. No mark of travel was visible on him, and none of us recognized him. Sitting down before the Prophet, leaning his knees against his, and placing his hands on his thighs, he said, “Tell me, Muhammad, about islām (submission).” He replied, “Submission means that you should bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s messenger, that you should perform the ritual prayer, pay the alms tax, fast during Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to go there.” The man said, “You have spoken the truth.” We were surprised at his questioning him and then declaring that he had spoken the truth. He said, ‘Now tell me about īmān (faith).’ He replied, “Faith means that you have faith in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and that you have faith in the measuring out, both its good and its evil.” Remarking that he had spoken the truth, **he then said, ‘Now tell me about ihsān (Excellence /doing what is beautiful).’ He replied, “Doing what is beautiful means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.....***

Then the man went away. After I had waited for a long time, the Prophet said to me, “Do you know who the questioner was, ‘Umar?’” I replied, ‘God and His messenger know best. “He said, “He was Gabriel. He came to teach you your religion.”¹³

The hadith of Gabriel provides us with a picture of the religion of the followers of Muhammad. The first three questions and their answers suggest that in the Islamic view, religion comprises three main elements. We may refer to these elements as dimensions. The first dimension of Islam is submission, and it comprises a series of activities, such as bearing witness, praying, and fasting. The word for submission is *islām*, the same word that is used to refer to the religion as a whole. *islām* has other meanings as well. In this context, it refers to the activities that a Muslim must perform.

The second dimension is *īmān* (faith). The Prophet does not tell his listeners what faith itself is, no doubt because he assumes that they already know. Rather, he tells that what the objects of their faith should be. What is it that they must have faith in? The answer is God, the angels, the scriptures, the messengers (i.e., the prophets), and so on.

The third dimension is *iḥsān* (Excellence/doing what is beautiful). The Prophet is asked by the archangel “What is excellence?” The Prophet does not look at the activity itself, but the motivation for the activity. An act cannot be beautiful if it is done without the awareness of God. God is the criterion for the beautiful, the good, and the right. His answer was nonetheless parallel to the second testimony of Islam in that it traces out a line of connection between the Absolute and the relative: “Excellence is that thou shouldst worship God as if thou sawest Him. And if thou seest Him not, yet He seeth Thee.”

Thus one could say that “submission” is religion as it pertains to acts, “faith” is religion as it pertains to thoughts, and “Excellence/doing the beautiful” is religion as it pertains to intentions, motivation, sincerity. These three dimensions of religion coalesce into a single reality known as Islam.

Commentary:

In the case of the Prophet himself- and by extension the saint- that line of connection between the Absolute and the relative is operative in both directions. “As if thou sawest him,” which has a more negative implication than the Arabic original, could almost be translated, “as one that seeth Him”; it could, moreover, be paraphrased “as one whose heart is awake,” and the Prophet said on another occasion, “My heart is awake.” Also relevant are the words of the already quoted holy tradition “and when I love him . . . I am the eye wherewith he seeth.” For those whom God loves, the Absolute “lends” its sight to the relative so that the primordial line of vision from earth to heaven, disconnected by the fall, may be reestablished. The essential function of man is mediation, which means that human excellence depends precisely on access to the Transcendent. As to “worship,” it includes faith and practice, both of which the archangel had asked the Prophet to define before asking him about excellence .., (*iḥsān*). “To worship God as if thou sawest Him” thus means excellence of faith (*īmān*) and excellence of conformity (*islām*) to the Divine Will, expressed by the Law.

This amounts to the addition of a third dimension to faith and practice, that of height and depth, the axis of man’s mediation between heaven and earth. Nor are the Sufis alone among Muslims in holding that *iḥsān* is the domain of mysticism or esoterism, that is, of Sufism.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ See Muslim, *Birr*, 115; Bukhārī, *Isti'dhān* 1.

² Let us see what does this Divine form imply. To put the issue in its larger perspective first of all one has to take into consideration the immense variety of creation and the special position that the human beings hold in the hierarchy of manifestation.

God produces an inconceivably enormous cosmos with an infinite diversity of created things. If we investigate the creatures one by one the task can never be completed but if we speak in general terms, it is possible to classify created things into categories. The cosmos can be divided into two basic worlds, the unseen and the visible, sometimes referred to as “the heavens and the earth”, or “the spiritual world and the bodily world.” We have mentioned during our discussions that there is a third world that is both similar to and different from these two basic worlds, called the “world of imagination”. If these three worlds represent the general structure of the total macrocosm, the human being can be called a microcosm, since three parallel domains are found within each individual: spirit, soul, and body.

When we want to look at other bodily creatures; that is, those physical things that fill the visible universe we find inanimate objects, plants, and animals. What is interesting for our purposes is how these three kinds of creature manifest the signs of God; the divine attributes that become visible through them. Which attributes become visible in inanimate objects? Perhaps the best way to answer the question is to say that more than anything else, inanimate objects conceal God's attributes instead of revealing them. They tell us what God is not rather than what He is.

In contrast to inanimate things, plants display several obvious divine attributes. It is easy to see that plants are alive, and life is the first of the “Seven Leaders”, the seven divine attributes that predominate in creation. Plants have certain knowledge. They certainly have desire: they want water, sunlight, fertilizer, and they trace elements. If you treat them well and give them what they really desire—like nice, rich manure— they even show their gratitude by producing enormous crops; they are not ungrateful truth-concealers. Plants have power and can destroy stones and concrete, but they need time. But all these divine attributes are found rather feebly within plants, so *tanzīh* outweighs *tashbīh*.

In contrast, the divine attributes found in animals are much more intense. Moreover, animals add other attributes that are difficult to find in plants. The knowledge possessed by animals can be extraordinary, though it is always rather specialized. Bees can tell their hive-mates exactly where to find the best honey, but they don't know much about vinegar. Monarch butterflies know the precise location of their valley in Mexico, but they cannot be trusted to take you to New York City. The animal kingdom represents an incredible diversity of knowledge and skills, divided among a vast number of specialized organisms. Desire is also clearly present in animals, but each species desires different things, and thus a great natural harmony is created where, as Rumi puts it, “Everything is both eater and eaten.”

Both plants and animals represent a tremendous variety of specific signs. Each plant or animal species is a special configuration of divine attributes that is not reproduced in any other species.

Human beings are a species of animal, and they share many characteristics with them. But there is one remarkable characteristic that differentiates them from all other animals: Each

animal is what it is, with little or no confusion. But human beings are unknown factors. Each species of animals is dominated by one or a few characteristics. The human being is infinitely malleable. What then is a human being? What brings about this fundamental difference between human beings and other animals? Muslims answer these questions in many ways. The easiest approach within our current discussion is to investigate the nature of the relationship between human beings and the divine attributes. Every creature other than a human being is a sign of God in which a specific, limited, and defined configuration of divine attributes is reflected. In contrast, a human being reflects God as God. In other creatures, some divine attributes are permanently manifest while others are permanently hidden. In human beings, all divine attributes are present, and any of them can become manifest if circumstances are appropriate. The Prophet ﷺ referred to this peculiar characteristic of human beings when he repeated the famous saying found in the Bible— a saying that has also played an important role in Jewish and Christian understandings of what it means to be human— “God created Adam in his own image” though we will employ “form” for “image,” in keeping with the Arabic text. Many authorities understand a similar meaning from the Qur’anic verse, “God taught Adam the name, all of them” (2:31). In effect, all things are present in human beings, because God taught them the names or realities of all things.

When it is said that everything is within human beings, this is not meant in a literal sense. The principle here is easy to understand if we return to the discussion of the divine names. God created the universe as the sum total of his signs. The signs explain the nature of God inasmuch as he discloses and reveals himself. What does he disclose? He discloses his attributes, such as life, knowledge, power, and speech. The cosmos in its full temporal and spatial extension – everything other than God – illustrates all God’s manifest attributes. Hence the macrocosm is an image, or form, of God.

The human being was also created in God’s form, embracing all God’s attributes. The difference between the whole universe and the human being is that the signs are infinitely dispersed in the universe, while they are concentrated into a single, intense focus in each human individual. The concentration of the attributes within human being makes people God’s vicegerents, that is, creatures who can perform the same functions as God, with all due respect to *tanzih*. Human beings manifest all God’s attributes, but in a weakened and dim manner, demanded by the fact that, although they are similar to God in respect of having been created in his form, they are different in respect of spatial and temporal limitations. God remains infinitely beyond any human being.

God created human beings in his own form, which is to say that he taught them all the names. Adam had an actualized knowledge of these names, but he was still susceptible to temporary forgetfulness. The rest of the human race is born into a heedlessness that is more than temporary. The divine qualities are latent within them, but these qualities need to be brought out from latency and be embodied in people’s minds and activities.

God had created Adam to be his vicegerent. Vicegerency is the birthright of his children. However, they will only achieve the vicegerency if they follow the prophets. They must adopt the faith and practice given by God through the scriptures: “God has promised those who have faith and work wholesome deeds to make them vicegerents in the earth, even as He made those who were before them vicegerents” (24:55). To be God’s vicegerent means, among other things, to manifest all the divine attributes in the form of which human beings were created. Only by embodying God’s own qualities can human being represent Him. But we know that most people do not live up to their potential. Even if they do have faith and work wholesome deeds, they never become dependable servants of God, because caprice and heedlessness often make them ignore or forget their proper duties.

³ Hinduism (Upanishads).

⁴ Buddhism.

⁵ Christianity (Augustine).

⁶ Judaism.

⁷ Islam (Qur'an).

⁸ Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Pantheon, 1963), 325.

⁹ No aspect of Islamic thought and practice has been more overlooked in recent studies of Islam than spirituality. For most observers in Western countries, Islam embodies three traits that are antithetical to liberal views of religious expression: traditionalism, legalism, and authoritarianism. The spiritual dimension of Islam is seldom mentioned except with respect to Sufis. This blindness to the spiritual side of Islam is the result of a prejudice. According to this view, 'real' Islam is traditionalistic and legalistic but not deeply spiritual. When Sufi spirituality is brought up, it is usually not as a religious perspective within Islam but rather as an importation of spirituality from the outside. Since Sufi spirituality is not seen as 'real' Islam, Sufism is often treated as a separate sect or even as a *de facto* alternative religion. The underlying premise of our perspective is that rather than an obstacle to a progressive Islamic social consciousness, Islamic spirituality is the necessary ground for all religiously directed action. Not only is spirituality the soul of Islam, but it also constitutes Islam's most valuable contribution to world religions.

Meg Greenfield wrote in *Newsweek*, in 1979:

"We are heading into an expansion of the American relationship with that complex of religion, culture and geography known as Islam. There are two things to be said about this. One is that no part of the world is more important to our own well-being at the moment- and probably for the foreseeable future. The other is that no part of the world is more hopelessly and systematically and stubbornly misunderstood by us."

Why is it that Islam is so "hopelessly and systematically and stubbornly"- three exceptionally severe adjectives -misunderstood by the west? One answer is that the west's separation of church and state makes it next to impossible for it to understand people who not only lodge religious belief at the center of their individual conduct, but also at the center of their politics. This is indeed a major obstacle, but there are two others, the first of which again relates to politics. During most of their history, Muslims and Christians have been at odds, and rivals are not known for having the most objective views of each other.⁹

Once we think of them, these two causes of misunderstanding are obvious; but the third one is not. Religiously, people tend to fall into two categories. Some find the meaning they seek in religious forms- commandments, observances, and texts straightforwardly, largely literally, interpreted- while others, without bypassing or abandoning these, sense their provisional character and reach out for meanings that the forms contain but which cannot be equated with those forms. If we call the first type of person exoteric, out of his concern for meanings that attach to outward or manifest forms, the second type that is drawn to the meanings that underlie those forms conveniently designated esoteric.

¹⁰ A designation that has two distinct meanings in the Qur'ān, one inclusive of all beings - even Satan is a slave of God - and the other, as in the present context, exclusive of all who have not realized the essence of slavehood, which is extinction in God. The slaves of God not only drink directly from *Kāfir* but they cause it to flow at will, "making it gush forth

abundantly.” This suggests a spontaneous and inevitable cause– effect connection between the “irresistible” emptiness of the slaves, in themselves the personification of spiritual poverty (*faqr*), and the extreme plentitude of Divine Riches symbolized by the fountain. “Seek to draw nigh unto Me by that which I have not.” By making nearness the result of poverty, these words of God to the Sufi Abū Yazīd Baṣṭāmi, often quoted by Ibn ‘Arabī, imply that “the slaves” are, in fact, “the brought nigh.”¹⁰ The same identity, which is in the nature of things, is also implicit in one of the first commands addressed to the Prophet: “Prostrate thyself and draw nigh” (XCVI, 19), and in his commentary, “The slave is nearest his Lord when he prostrateth himself,” prostration being the posture of *faqr*.¹⁰ Moreover, nearness to God has a double significance analogous to that of slavehood. Metaphysically speaking, nearness, like slavehood, is an inescapable fact that concerns everybody. This truth, already in the Divine Name *al-Qarīb*, the All-Near, is affirmed by the Qur’ān: “We are nearer to him (the dying man about whom ye are gathered) than ye are but ye see not” (LVI, 85). Mystically speaking, however, “He is Near to us; we are far from Him”¹⁰ Only those who directly perceive the truth of nearness can be called near.

¹¹ Religion is a right or correct way. The hadith of Gabriel suggests that in the Islamic understanding, religion embraces right ways of doing things, right ways of thinking and understanding, and right ways of forming the intentions that lie behind the activity. In this hadith, the Prophet gives each of the three right ways a name. Thus one could say that “submission” is religion as it pertains to acts, “faith” is religion as it pertains to thoughts, and “doing the beautiful” is religion as it pertains to intentions. These three dimensions of religion coalesce into a single reality known as Islam.

¹² One of the closest Companions of Muhammad and the 2nd Caliph of Islam.

¹³ To begin explaining the meaning of this hadith let us flesh it out by adding some background information that would be obvious to the original listeners but not to a reader situated many centuries and miles away.

Try to imagine the situation. The Messenger of God, at the time the greatest human being on the face of the earth (as far as his companions were concerned– and the historical record bears them out), is sitting at the edge of an oasis in Medina with a group of his companions, that is, people who have accepted that he is the mouthpiece of God. Suddenly a man appears whom no one recognizes.

Medina, at the time, is a tiny community in the midst of the desert (with a population of several hundred or perhaps a few thousand). Everyone knows everyone. If a traveler arrives, it is no small event, given the difficulty of travel and the small population. Everyone learns about new arrivals within hours. The system of personal relationships established by familial, tribal, and other bonds ensures that news is spread around much more efficiently than can ever be accomplished by today’s six o’clock news. A man appears whom no one knows, but no one has arrived in town for several days, except the uncle of so and so, whom several of them have already seen. Not only do the companions fail to recognize the man, but he also shows no signs of travel, which is very strange. If they do not know him, then he must be a newly arrived traveler. Someone would not be able to freshen up that quickly after several days of travel in the desert, even if he had traveled only by night on the back of a camel. As soon as the man arrives, everyone is all ears. Who can this person be, and how did he get here without our knowing about it? Next strange fact: The man is obviously on familiar terms with the Prophet of God. He comes right up to him and kneels down in front of him, his knees against the Prophet’s knees. Notice that the Prophet himself is kneeling, not in prayer as modern Westerners might kneel, but simply because kneeling is, for most Orientals, the simplest and at the same time the most respectful way to sit. Remember that, even in houses, chairs were unheard of. People sat on the ground, as they still do in much of

the world– and this includes some of the richest and most sophisticated parts of the world, such as Japan. For most of the ancient world, chairs were the prerogative of kings.

You would not go right up to a person and kneel with your knees touching his unless he were, for example, your brother or a very close friend. The normal procedure, even if the person sitting there was just an ordinary person, would be to greet him from a respectful distance and keep the distance. But the stranger from the desert obviously knows Muhammad very well. He even places his hands upon Muhammad's thighs, which would be an unheard of piece of effrontery if the man were a stranger. Then the man addresses Muhammad by his name, whereas people always address him by his title, Messenger of God. The man begins talking without introduction as if he had been part of the conversation all along.

Once Muhammad answers the man's first question, the man says, "You have spoken the truth." Umar remarks, "We were surprised at his questioning him and then declaring that he had spoken the truth." This is an enormous understatement. More likely, the companions were flabbergasted. What kind of insolence is this? To come up to God's own messenger and begin to grill him, and then to pat him on the head as if he were a school boy! This is inconceivable. But then again, the companions took their clues from Muhammad. He was acting as if all this were perfectly normal and natural. What could they do but follow his example?

After the man leaves, Muhammad waits awhile, allowing his companions to think about this strange event. Finally, he tells them what had happened. They would not soon forget, and you can be sure that by that night, everyone in Medina had heard about Gabriel's appearance. No one was supposed to forget about this visit, for the Prophet had just presented them with their religion in a nutshell. If they ever wanted to know what was essential in Islam, all they had to do was remember the strange events of this day.