

as God's perfect servants and also as creatures created by God as His valid interlocutors. In Sufism, humanity is the mirror reflecting all God's Names and Qualities; we are beings created, according to a famous *ḥadīth*, "in the image (*ṣūrah*) of God," *image* meaning here not form in the ordinary sense, for God is formless, but rather reflection of the Divine Names and Qualities. Sufism also understands "in order to worship me" to mean "in order to know me," a knowledge (*ma'rifah*) that is possible only through the realization of our perfect servanthood. That realization means etymologically not only obeying God as our master, but also realizing that all things ultimately belong to God and that in ourselves we are nothing but the poor (*faqīr*), the term *faqīr* being in fact one of the most common names for a follower of the Sufi path. The Persian term *darwīsh*, which entered the English language as *dervish*, implies the same truth. It means humbling oneself before the threshold of the Divine Reality. The highest meaning of servanthood is in fact the realization of our "nothingness" before God. It is only by passing through this gate of "annihilation," or what the Sufis call *fanā'*, that we are able to gain subsistence, *baqā'*, in God and to reach the root of our "I" and also therefore the Divine. Human beings qua human beings cannot enter the Divine sanctuary, but there is within us a reality that is already Divine. To be fully human is to realize our perfect servitude and to remove the veil of separative existence through spiritual practice so that God, transcendent and immanent within us, can utter "I."

#### A COMMENTARY ON THE OPENING CHAPTER (*AL-FĀTIḤAH*) OF THE QURAN

Sufism looks upon all Islamic acts of worship from the point of view of actualization of perfect servanthood, which makes possible for us to realize, through faith, acts of worship and spiritual practices leading to intellectual and illuminative understanding, who we really are, and who God is. All acts of worship are for the purpose of remembering God and drawing nigh unto Him or, more precisely, realizing this already existing nearness and intimacy, for as the Quran says, "If my servants ask about me [O Muḥammad], (tell them) I am indeed near" (2:186). Nowhere is this Sufi view of worship, which leads to both self-knowledge and knowledge of God combined with love and devotion, more evident than in Sufi commentaries upon the opening chapter of the Quran, called *sūrah al-Fātiḥah*, which is repeated over and over

in the daily canonical prayers that Muslims perform five times a day throughout their lives after reaching adolescence. Such commentaries have been written by many spiritual authorities over the ages to the present day.

The text of the chapter, which is the first *sūrah* of the Quran, is as follows:

In the Name of God—the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful  
Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds,  
the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful,  
Master of the Day of Judgment.  
Thee we worship, and in Thee we seek help.  
Guide us upon the straight path,  
the path of those on whom Thy Grace is,  
not those on whom Thine anger is,  
nor those who are astray.<sup>3</sup>

*Quran 1:1–7*

Let us try to study this chapter from the point of view of the significance of worship in relation to the human state. But before doing so, it is important to mention that every word and letter of the Quran in the original Arabic has not only an outward but also an inward meaning, including a numerical symbolism, similar to what one finds in the *gematria* associated with the Kabbalah and Hasidism. Moreover, the Quran has many levels (seven, according to some) of inner meaning, of which the highest is, according to the Sufis, known only to God. Sufi commentaries, which are called *ta'wīl*, that is, spiritual hermeneutics, are not humanly contrived meanings but rather the exposition of meanings already contained in the Sacred Text but hidden from the eye of outwardness. The word *ta'wīl* means to take something back to its origin, and in fact spiritual hermeneutics, in unveiling the inner meaning of the Sacred Text, also takes it back to its origin, for manifestation implies going from the inward to the outward so that metaphysically speaking the inner and the origin are ultimately the same reality.

Coming back to the *Fātiḥah*, I shall provide a commentary based on one aspect of the inner reality of this text related to the question of what it means to be human and not, of course, addressing all aspects and levels of its inner meaning (about which Sufis over the ages have

written numerous commentaries, some of them book length). Like all other chapters of the Quran save one, the *Fātiḥah* begins with the formula “In the Name of God—the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful.” Now God has many Names, but the two Names *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, the Infinitely Good and the All-Merciful, are the gates through which the revelation of the Quran pours forth for the guidance of human beings. *Al-Raḥmān*, which is a Name of the Divine Essence, is also the Divine Name that the Sufis associate with the existentionation of the cosmos itself. They believe that God breathed His Goodness, which is also Mercy, upon the latent archetypes residing in the Divine Intellect and Divine Knowledge and that through this “Breath of the Compassionate or the Infinitely Good” (*nafas al-Raḥmān*) the world came into being. Therefore, were it not for God’s infinite Goodness and Mercy, nothing would have come into existence, including us, nor would there be a revelation to guide us out of the labyrinth of our ego and psyche toward full self-knowledge leading to the knowledge of God and of His creation and our ultimate deliverance from all limitation. The formula at the beginning of the first chapter of the Quran, which is called *basmalah* in Arabic, not only consecrates the Sacred Text but also establishes the metaphysically necessary basis for the descent of the revelation and its reception.

The text of the chapter itself begins with “Praise be to God,” and this statement is on behalf of human beings although here it is uttered by God. The word for praise is *al-ḥamd*, and the attitude inherent in it constitutes an essential aspect of being truly human. The Quran asserts in several verses that all things praise God, but the praise by men and women is of special significance because human beings have been given the possibility of not praising God and of not being thankful to Him. The term *al-ḥamd* “li’Llāh, or “praise be to God,” which also implies gratefulness to Him, is so significant that it penetrates the daily life of all Muslims. Its constant repetition in daily discourse creates a perpetual attitude of praise of God and thanksgiving. Traditional Islamic sources assert that on the Day of Judgment all Muslims who have followed their religion faithfully will assemble under the “flag of praise” (*liwā’ al-ḥamd*) carried by the Prophet.

In Sufism *ḥamd* and the inner attitude associated with it are central. Followers of the Path are expected to be always grateful to God and to praise Him no matter what their circumstances. According to a Sufi story, one day a master and his disciples were sitting together. The mas-

ter asked one of the disciples, “What are the conditions under which we should say *al-ḥamd* li’*Llāh*?” The disciple replied, “Whenever one receives bounty or a gift from God one should say *al-ḥamd* li’*Llāh*.” The master responded, “What then is the difference between you and the dog sitting in front of us? If I throw him a piece of meat, he wags his tale in gratitude and praise of God. And when I do not do so, he simply sits there awaiting something from me.” The master added, “A *darwīsh* is a person who, if he receives a gift or bounty from God, says ‘*al-ḥamd* li’*Llāh*’ and if he receives nothing and is in the greatest state of difficulty and need, he still says ‘*al-ḥamd* li’*Llāh*.’” The attitude of praising God and being always grateful to Him, with the awareness that in ourselves we are poor and God is the Rich from whom all blessings flow—from the life we have to the air we breathe to the food we eat to the earth upon which we walk—is necessary for being truly human. It is a significant component of our humanity and is a basic way for us to realize who we are and to reach the state of perfect servanthood.

The greatest gift of God to us, however, is His Word or revelation, which enables us to return to Him. “Praise be to God” at the beginning of the *Fātiḥah* may be understood in the sense that we praise God and are grateful to Him for being worthy of receiving His revelation, and we say *al-ḥamd* li’*Llāh* because God has created us as human beings and spoken to us, that He has placed us in a state in which we *can* say consciously *al-ḥamd* li’*Llāh*. The grandeur of the human state is not in that human beings can make complicated machines or conceptualize complex theories, but in that men and women are worthy of being addressed by God and being considered worthy of receiving His revelation and guidance. This opening *al-ḥamd* li’*Llāh* may be said to be not only an opening for the rest of the Quranic revelation that follows, but above all gratefulness for our being human. To be human is to be capable of hearing the Word of God and being led back to Him. The fact that in the Islamic rites each Muslim—man and woman—stands directly before God in the daily prayers without any intermediary indicates from the Sufi point of view not only that each Muslim has a priestly function but also that there is a nexus linking each soul directly to God. As Rūmī says,

There is a connection, without diminution, without comparison,  
Between the Lord of the soul and the soul of human beings.

*Mathnawī*, 4:761

One answer that the Sufis give to the question about human nature is that the human person, the *anthropōs* (including the male and the female), is a being created to be able to be addressed by God and to address Him in turn, consciously and with free will. Our relation to God, which means also the Divine Self at the center of our being, determines who we really are and what we are meant to be. We can each start with the question “who am I?” and if we search enough be led step by step to the Sufi answer that we are beings who can address God directly by praising Him and being grateful to Him, that is, by saying *al-ḥamd* “li’*llāh*, and in turn be worthy of being addressed by Him and consequently to reach Him, and to realize that ultimately He is the only I.

This verse of the *Fātiḥah* continues by speaking of *Allāh* as the Lord of the worlds. This means metaphysically and cosmologically that God is the master of all space and that we are beings situated in one of many worlds, in all of which He is the Lord. To say “Lord of the worlds” is to realize that space is not simply quantitative extension measurable in Cartesian coordinates. Rather, it is symbolically the realm of Divine Presence, which permeates all places in which we live and move and have our being in this and in all other worlds. This verse speaks of *worlds* in the plural, which means, first of all, that reality is not limited to this world and, second, that there is no world—that is, other states of being, not worlds of modern science fiction—into which we can journey in soul and spirit in which the lordship of God is not the central reality. There is no extraterritoriality with respect to God’s dominion, His laws, and our responsibility to Him as human beings, as beings defined by our having responded to Him even before the creation of the world when He asked us “Am I not your Lord?” with a resounding affirmation. To be fully human is to realize our servitude toward God and to be always aware of this lordship wherever, in whichever world, we happen to be.

The *Fātiḥah* follows with the repetition of “the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful” to remind us that all the worlds in which God is Lord are also filled with His Goodness, Mercy, and Compassion. Moreover, since this verse is followed by the one concerning time, it might be said that the repetition of *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* is the means for us to be reminded that although our lives are bound by the conditions of space and time, it is the presence of Divine Goodness and Mercy that stands between these two parameters and constitutes the reality in which we actually live and have our being.

The next verse, “Master of the Day of Judgment,” concerns the flow of time at the end of which there is death and meeting with God. To be aware of our human condition is to realize that we are on a journey in this life, which ends with death followed by resurrection, and that we are destined for the unavoidable meeting with God, which means that although we die, we are also immortal. The profound reality of our consciousness cannot be eradicated by the accident of bodily death. The verse speaks not only of the Day beyond all days, but also of Judgment. This eschatological assertion is of the utmost significance for our life here on earth. It reveals the grandeur of the human state and the fact that actions in this life on earth have consequences beyond the life of this world.

Now, these are matters widely accepted by people of faith everywhere. The Sufis take a further step, however, and seek to die and be resurrected here and now and to experience the encounter with God while still here in this world through spiritual practices and by climbing the ladder of perfection. In the deepest sense those who have already achieved the goal have already died, been resurrected, met the Master of the Day of Judgment, been judged by the Supreme Judge, and rest in the Paradise of Divine Proximity. The Prophet of Islam was once asked about death and resurrection. The Prophet answered, “Look at me; I have died and been resurrected many times.”

If we put aside the opening *basmalah*, the first three verses of this seven-verse opening chapter of the Quran deal with the nature of God while having consequences for the human state. The fourth and middle verse, “Thee we worship, and in Thee we seek help,” concerns the human state itself in relation to God. The *raison d’être* of being human, as already mentioned, is to worship God and to seek His help in realizing our utter dependence upon the Divine Reality. The normal human being is a being who worships the Divine in whatever form It might be, as the long history of various human societies—excluding the secularized part of the contemporary world, which is an anomaly—reveals. For Sufis, worship (*‘ibādah*) is not merely one of the activities of human beings, it is the activity defining the state of servitude (*‘ubūdiyyah*) and therefore of being human. Moreover, in Sufism the highest form of worship is knowledge of God, which is always combined with love. According to a sacred *ḥadīth*, God asserts through the mouth of the Prophet, “I was a Hidden Treasure; I desired (or loved) to be known. Therefore I created the world so that I would be known.” This famous

*ḥadīth*, so often cited in classical Sufi texts, has many meanings, the most evident of which is that knowing God is the purpose of creation. To worship God through *maʿrifah* or unitive knowledge is therefore the fulfillment of the very purpose of creation and the highest form of worship. The definition of *iḥsān* or virtue, which is that of Sufism itself, is “To worship (or adore) God as if thou seest Him and if Thou seest Him not, then He seeth Thee.” This sacred *ḥadīth* refers to the same truth, for vision is directly related to knowledge.

As for seeking His help, of course all believers ask for God’s help in time of need. The Sufis, however, are those who realize that, being poor in the ontological and spiritual sense, they are always in need of God and dependent upon His help. The earnest prayer, “in Thee we seek help,” also strengthens our reliance upon God and our awareness that ultimately He alone can help us. To be fully human is to be constantly aware of this dependence and reliance, or *tawakkul*, about which classical Sufi texts speak again and again.

Standing before God who is Infinitely Good and All-Merciful, who is the master of space and time, whom men and women worship and whose help they seek, what does the servant ask from the Lord? It is to be guided upon the straight path. The last three verses of the *Fātiḥah* contain in brevity the complete doctrine of human salvation and our existential situation vis-à-vis the reality of Universal Existence. These verses specify three possibilities: the straight path, which is “the path of those on whom Thy grace is”; the path of “those on whom Thine anger is”; and the path of “those who go astray.” In relation to the Divine Reality, which is both transcendent and immanent at the center of our being as the Self, there are only three paths one can follow. The first is to march upward toward that Reality, the second to descend away from It, and the third is to neither ascend nor descend but to go horizontally, sideways, drawing spiritually neither closer to nor farther away in relation to the vertical axis of existence. Our existential situation can be further clarified by recourse to geometrical symbolism. We are situated at the point of the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes of a cross. We have a choice to ascend the vertical axis and be among those “on whom Thy grace is,” or to descend on the same axis into ever lower states of being as one of those “on whom Thine anger is.” Finally, we can wander along the horizontal line of the cross among “those who go astray.” Eschatologically these three possibilities correspond from a certain perspective to the paradisaical, infernal, and purgatorial states.

While the cross is a symbol that ordinary Muslims do not take in its Christian sense, since Islam does not identify the cross with the death of Christ, there does exist in Islamic esoteric teachings, both Sufi and Shi'ite, an elaborate doctrine of the metaphysical significance of this symbol and its relation to the reality of the Universal Man, which will be discussed shortly. In any case, the Sufi understanding of the inner meaning of the *Fātiḥah* reveals this existential situation, one of whose spatial symbolisms is the cross, of the human being as he or she stands before God.

All Muslims believe in the central significance of the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*), and Islam itself has been called by some the religion of the straight path. This basic Quranic image and symbol has many aspects and diverse meanings. As far as the path of life is concerned, the Sufis ask what this straight path is, and when told that it is the path that leads to God, they seek to follow it to its end while in this life. They want to climb the vertical axis of the cross, like the ladder of Jacob, to Heaven here and now. For Sufism, "the straight path" is ultimately the *Ṭarīqah* or the Sufi path itself, which begins with the *Shari'ah* or Divine Law. It is the path of return to the Source or the *Ḥaqīqah*, of which we have already spoken. For them the "straight path" is also the path of ascent.

To repeat the *Fātiḥah* at least seventeen times a day in the various daily canonical prayers combined with movements and other words that complement its meaning and to be aware of its inner significance, some of which we have outlined here, is to realize true servanthood before God. For the Sufi it is to realize what it means to be truly human. With the aid of the Quran, which plays such a central role in all of Islam including Sufism, the person of inner vision comes to realize the significance of being God's servant, which leads ultimately to the realization of our annihilation before Him (*fanā*) and subsistence in Him (*baqā*). In this way the human being becomes aware of the ideal to which he or she must dedicate all of life.

## THE UNIVERSAL MAN

In classical Sufism the answer to the question, "what does it mean to be human?" is contained fully in the doctrine of what is usually translated as the Universal or Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), whose detailed exposition is to be found in the writings of such famous authorities as