

Name'), towards the middle of the eighteenth century in Poland. It first spread through Eastern Europe and finally all over the world.

⁴ Let us remember that Arabic, like Hebrew, is written from right to left.

⁵ For genuine Hassidic teaching translated into English, see *Liqutei Amarim* (Collected Essays) by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, trans. Dr. Nissan Mindel (Brooklyn, N.Y.: "Kohet" Publication Society, 1962).

⁶ Elie Wiesel, *Célébration hassidique* (Paris: Ed. Seuil, 1972).

⁷ Leo Schaya, *La Doctrine Soufisque de l'Unité*, p. 88-89. (Ed. Adrien-Maisonnette: Paris, 1962) [author's translation].

The Complementarity of Contemplative and Active Lives in Islam

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

An hour of meditation is better than sixty
years of acts of worship.

Prophetic tradition—hadith

Knowledge without action is like a tree
without fruit.

Arabic proverb

The quotations cited above, in the light of the discussion at hand, express the just relationship between contemplation and action in Islam, a religion which because of its unitary perspective has never allowed contemplative and active lives to become divorced from each other. For the modern world, which is so completely immersed in a way of acting and doing bound to purely terrestrial ends as to have lost sight of the meaning of contemplation—let alone its primacy over action—it is hardly conceivable that in a civilization such as the Islamic, action and contemplation should exist harmoniously. Today it is difficult to imagine a universe of thought, action, and being in which contemplation leads to action, and action on the spiritual plane becomes the way of access to the inner garden of contemplation.

Contemplation in Islamic spirituality, as in other integral traditions, is essentially a knowledge that relates the knower to higher modes of being. It is identified with *shubûd* (vision) or *ta'ammul* (literally "to regard attentively") and is related to *tafakkur* (meditation) in traditional Islamic sources. It is referred to

constantly in the Qur'an, which commands man to contemplate the beauties of the Universe and their divine prototypes. The essentially gnostic character of Islamic spirituality in fact lends a contemplative air to all the authentic manifestations of Islam, including, of course, its sacred art, and causes the soul of the Muslim to tend towards contemplation as that of a Christian tends toward sacrifice. There lies deep within the texture of the soul molded by the message of the Qur'an a tendency to pull its roots from the world of multiplicity and to establish itself in the center of that "void" which reflects Divine Unity and which is reflected in virgin nature and Muslim sacred art. There is the tendency to contemplate a single flower, a blade of wheat, a solitary bush or tree, which, being all epiphanies of the Divine, provide even more than the contemplative eye needs to behold, and all serve as the gateway to the Infinite. For as the Persian poem by Hâtif of Ispahan states,

If you dissect the heart of an atom
you shall behold a sun within it.

Moreover, in the Islamic context, this contemplation has been forever wed to action understood in its traditional sense. The contemplative form of Islamic spirituality has never been contradictory to correct action, and has in fact often been combined with an irresistible inner urge to action. It is this inner unity that made Islamic civilization at the height of its power one of the most virile and active in human history while harboring within itself a most intense contemplative life.

Here again the message of the Qur'an expresses the rapport which was divinely ordained for the Islamic community concerning the question of the relation between contemplation, or knowledge, and action, between *al-'ilm* and *al-'amal*. Throughout the Qur'an the injunction to contemplate God's wisdom in creation as well as in its metacosmic reality, is followed by injunctions to act correctly and according to principles derived from that wisdom. The call to prayer in its Shi'ite form, based on formulas drawn from the Qur'an, summarizes the hierarchic relationship between God's wisdom, man's knowledge of it, and the action which issues from this knowledge. The second part of the call to prayer (*adhân*) consists of

three phrases: *ḥayy 'alâ al-ṣalât*, hurry to prayer; *ḥayy 'alâ al-falâḥ*, hurry to salvation; *ḥayy 'alâ khayr al-'amal*, hurry to the best act, good works, or correct action. Prayer, which in its highest form is contemplative and unitive, leads to salvation or deliverance of the soul from all bondage and imperfection and this in turn leads to correct action. Without prayer or contemplation one cannot be in a state of grace or goodness, and without being good one cannot do good. Correct action depends on the correct mode of being, which in turn issues from the correct relation with the source of all existence through prayer, which in its most exalted mode is contemplation.

Therefore, while contemplation and action are complementary, they are not on an equal footing. Contemplation and meditation—they are closely related—stand above action, as the *ḥadīth* "An hour of meditation is better than sixty years of acts of worship" reveals. At the same time correct action follows from contemplation and is related to the realized aspect of knowledge which contemplation in fact makes possible. Theoretical knowledge is incomplete if not brought into realization—which in turn leads to a transformation, in fact man's "death and resurrection," and thus the correct mode of action issuing effortlessly from the newly acquired mode of being. Contemplation alone can turn this theoretical knowledge into realization, leading in turn to correct action which may be inward or outward depending on the conditions chosen for man by the hands of destiny. It can turn the theoretical metaphysical doctrine which is like a purifying snow in the mind to a fire in the center of the heart, a fire which not only melts the heart but also enlivens the limbs and provides them with a new vitality.

The relationship between contemplation and action in human life thus described is an echo in the matrices of time and space of the principal domain and an image, although in reverse, of the cosmogonic act itself. In the Qur'an the act of creation, the *fiat lux*, is expressed in this majestic verse: "But His command, when He intendeth a thing, is only that he saith unto it: 'Be' and it is" (XXXVI, 81, Pickthall trans.). Creation is related to an act which at the same time bestows existence and knows all things in principle. The act of God is at once the Word of Logos (*al-Kalimah*) and the Intellect (*al-'aql*). Therefore not only does God utter the word *kun!*

(Be!), but also the spiritual root (*malakūt*) of all things resides in His presence.

Furthermore, in Sufi metaphysics and cosmology, which are based directly on the Qur'anic revelation, the creation of the world is conceived as a "breathing" by God upon the immurable archetypes (*al-a'yān al-thābitah*), which are God's knowledge of all things as well as the spiritual essence of all things. The "breath of the Compassionate" (*nafas al-Rahmān*) externalizes the divine possibilities in the form of external objects. The divine act creates the world through contemplation, a world which itself is the result of God's contemplation of Himself. For it was in order to contemplate His own Beauty that God created the Universe.

Likewise, according to the Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina, the very substance of the Universe is the result of God's contemplation of Himself. By contemplating Himself the necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) brings into existence the First Intellect, and the First Intellect, the Second Intellect, down to the world of generation and corruption in which man resides. Contemplation and being are interrelated, and on the highest plane God's act and self-knowledge are ultimately the same.

In the process of spiritual realization, which is in a way the reversal of the cosmogonic act, a journey by means of the arc of ascent (*al-qaws al-su'ūdī*) through all the degrees that have been traversed in the descending arc (*al-qaws al-nuzūlī*) of cosmic manifestation, contemplation and action are also interrelated. Contemplation leads to correct action, and action, conceived as inner spiritual travail as well as external acts which put the soul in the right state to undergo the inner alchemy, leads to the doors of contemplation. But because man must know in order to act, contemplation, as primary, always precedes action. Thus the contemplative man is held in higher esteem in traditional Islamic society than the man of action, as testifies the famous *hadīth* stating that the ink of the man of knowledge is more worthy than the blood of the martyr.

But precisely because there is no monasticism in Islam, because Islam is a society "of married monks," because the Divine Law of Islam (the *Shari'ah*) is at once a code of action and a way of preparing

the soul for the flights of contemplation of the spiritual world, and because of many other factors, the ink and the blood have never been totally divorced and the Islamic order has preserved a remarkable balance between the contemplative and active lives, a balance which cannot be fully understood by a mere theoretical discussion of the subject from the outside. As long as man does not participate in tradition in an operative manner and does not benefit from the grace or *barakah* issuing from its rites and other sacred forms, the complementarity of the contemplative and active lives is most difficult to conceive.

The many men who rely only on reading traditional sources, and simply speak about tradition without practicing it, are never able to perform correct action in the spiritual sense, not to speak of reaching states of contemplation, which by definition belong to the traditional Universe alone. The man who does not practice a spiritual way cannot experience that inner certitude, that inner attachment of one's being to the Divinity, which makes of action an application of immutable principles and the gateway to the world of contemplation, and which brings about a state of unity whereby contemplation and action are wed in an indissoluble union. In fact, what is invocation (*dhikr*) but such a wedding between action and contemplation at its highest level? There is an immeasurable difference between the man who does not practice a tradition and does not live "existentially" attached to a traditional world and one who participates actively in such a world and feels motivated at every moment by the "hands" of God, according to the Qur'anic verse "The Hands of Allah are above their hands" (XLVIII, 10). As the Alexandrian Sufi Ibn 'Arāf Allāh al-Iskandarānī states,

He who is negligent awakens by
considering what he should do,
And he who is wise by considering
what God will do with him.¹

There is an immense difference between the two, even in the context of the traditional world. How much greater is the difference in a world in which many men live in a state of total amnesia or at best a simply theoretical and cerebral understanding of tradition. In either case there is obscured the possibilities of practicing the traditional

life in an active way, and of opening inner doors to the world of contemplation amidst external circumstances and situations which, seen only from the outside, appear as opposed to such possibilities and incongruent with the spiritual life.

As previously mentioned, Islam bans monasticism, but this institutional ban does not imply by any means that the door to the life of contemplation is closed. On the contrary, Islamic spirituality activates a tendency toward contemplation which is combined with combativeness (*jihād*), understood in its esoteric sense of removing all the obstacles which veil the Truth and make It inaccessible. Sufism, the main manifestation of Islamic esotericism, contains within itself the possibility of the most intense contemplative life, not because it is a *monachisme errant*, as some orientalists have called it, but because such a perspective lies by nature within the Islamic revelation and constitutes its essence.

The unitary principle of Islam, however, could not permit this contemplative way from becoming crystallized as a separate social organization outside the matrix molded by the injunctions of the Divine Law or *Shari'ah*. It had to remain as an inner dimension of that Law and institutionally as an organization integrated into the Islamic social pattern and inseparable from it. As a result, contemplatives of the highest order often have combined their life of contemplation with the most intense form of activity, and throughout Islamic history outstanding Sufis have been known to be scholars, artists, teachers, and even administrators and rulers.

One often finds it difficult to understand the possibility of the contemplative life for a woman in Islam. Putting aside the case of certain female ascetics like Rābi'ah, most contemplative Muslim women have, like men, found the possibility of the contemplative life within the matrix of the Muslim social order itself. To accept one's destiny as the wife and mother who is of necessity concerned with small daily problems and to submit oneself to one's social position and duties with the awareness that this is in reality submitting oneself to Divine Will, has led many a Muslim woman to an intense contemplative inner life amidst the active life of being a wife and mother. Her acceptance of her role and duty as specified by Islamic teachings echoes the state of *fanā'* or "annihilation" in

God and can lead, when combined with true piety and devotion to spiritual practices, to that state. For both men and women in Islam the contemplative life lies, not outside, but within the active norms of life specified by the *Shari'ah*.

The most essential rapport between contemplation and action in Islam is to be found in prayer, especially quintessential prayer, which is the invocation (*dhikr*) practiced by the Sufis. Perfect action which is the *dhikr* leads to contemplation (*shuhūd* or *mushāhadah*), while contemplation is itself the *dhikr* inasmuch as the *dhikr* is unified with "Him who is involved" (*mudhikr*). In perfect invocation, he who invokes or performs the act of invocation (*dhikr*) becomes united with the *dhikr* and the *mudhikr* in a supreme union which transcends the dichotomy between action and contemplation, knowledge and existence, the knower and the known; in this supreme union all polarities are embraced within the essential and at the same time primordial unity.

The incantatory methods of Sufism, if practiced under the direction of a master and within the protective matrix of traditional orthodoxy, are all forms of contemplative action at the highest level, leading ultimately to union with God. Inasmuch as the process of realization is in a sense the reversal of the cosmogonic act, the traversing of the ascending arc (*al-qaws al-su'ūfī*) to return to the Source and Origin results in going from a state in which knowledge and existence are separated to a state of union. As a result, in a mysterious fashion the agent who performs the contemplative act is able to transcend his own limited existence as agent through his very action. The secret of this paradox lies in the fact that in the *dhikr* man performs an act, but an act preceded by contemplation, an act which is also a state of being, an act which is ultimately not the act of man but the act of God. Hence in the same way that, through the Word, God created the world, again through His Word—the *dhikr*, which is mysteriously the act of man participating in the eternal and immutable act of God—creation returns to its source. Quintessential prayer is the act which leads to pure contemplation and finally union.

As for active contemplation, it too is the *dhikr* from another point of view. Sufism is not a passive form of mysticism. It is a journey

(*sulūk*) after Divine Knowledge, the attainment of which leads to union and the overcoming of the separation between man in his fallen state and man as the Universal and Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), who is in union with God because he is the perfect mirror in whom the Divine Names and Qualities are reflected. There is then in the very method of Sufism or the *dhikr*, as it is combined with various forms of meditation (*fikr*), an active contemplation of the spiritual realities. For those who actually tread the path, the *sālikūn*, in contrast to the stationary members of Sufi orders who remain satisfied with being simply blessed with the grace of initiation (the *mutabarrikūn*), the whole of the spiritual work is continuously combined with the element of active contemplation in which progress upon the spiritual path is achieved through an active participation of the whole being of the adept.

That is why in Islam one of the symbols of the Universal Man, who embodies the full realization of the truth and in whom the *dhikr* has become fully operative, is the seal of Solomon, of whose triangles the one with the base toward heaven symbolizes contemplation and the other, in the reverse position, action. It is this perfect wedding between the two that makes the act of the contemplative at once the sword that discriminates between truth and error and establishes harmony and justice, and the brush that paints upon the canvas of time and space the beauties of the spiritual world and thereby opens the gate of return to that world.

The relationship between action and contemplation thus described on its most essential level in quintessential orison is reflected also on the plane of the study of nature and of the creation of art. Islamic science certainly enabled man to gain knowledge of nature and also to act upon nature, as we see in agriculture, medicine and the like. But the final goal of this science was to enable man to contemplate nature and to aid him to act upon himself and to remake himself with the help of the contemplative knowledge thus gained. Islamic science was concerned with a process which also implied the possibility for nature considered as the Divine theophany (*tajallī*) to act upon the soul of man, as well as the possibility for man to "act" upon nature through the contemplation of its epiphanies. Islamic science thus began with an objectiviza-

tion of nature which made it an "object" of study to end with a unitive knowledge which finally integrated man with his own prototype as well as the prototype of nature, so that at the end nature became a "thou," an intimate witness to the Divine Presence. Moreover, action upon nature has always been regulated and limited because the traditional Muslim knows fully that ultimate happiness comes not from endless action turned outwardly toward the plundering and devastating of nature but from acting inwardly upon oneself to tame and "Islamize the satan of one's own being," as the Sufis would say.

In direct contrast to this perspective, modern science has sought since the seventeenth century to drive a wedge between man and nature by extending further and further the edge of objectivity, with the end result that this objectivity has finally led to total alienation of man from his natural environment, an alienation which, combined with a theory of action conceived of as an aggressive externalization of human energy, an indiscriminate reaping and plundering, has led the world to the present environmental crisis. The relation between contemplation and action in the Islamic sciences of nature derived from the central relationship described contains a message of the utmost importance for modern man seeking to save himself from his own folly.

Likewise in Islamic art there is an intimate relation between action and contemplation which recaptures in the world of forms the complementarity existing between these two in the principal order. Whether it be the courtyard of a mosque, an arabesque design, a verse of Sufi poetry, or a traditional musical composition, various forms of Islamic art serve the function of strengthening the wings of the soul for its contemplative flight into the empyrean. Their beauties are in fact so many reminiscences of the beauties of paradise, which man can taste even here on earth on the wings of contemplation and spiritual vision. In Islamic art, as in the Islamic sciences of nature, contemplation and action are intertwined and complementary, while the hierarchic relation of contemplation over action is always preserved.

The complementarity between contemplation and action in Islam has naturally found its most perfect terrestrial embodiment in the

life of the Prophet. He remains the perfect model (*uswab*) to follow, and in him the union of action and contemplation manifests itself in that blinding *coincidentia oppositorum* which transcends all duality and opposition.

The end of human life according to Islam is to act according to the Divine Will and finally to reach through purity such a state of knowledge and vision or contemplation as to see God everywhere. The Prophet was that perfect being who acted according to the Divine Will at every moment of his life while having his gaze fixed at every moment on the Divine realities, contemplating God everywhere in every speck of His creation. Thus one finds in the Prophet the perfect manifestation of the complementarity of contemplation and action culminating in union which lies at the heart of the Islamic way of life and which characterizes at the highest level of meaning the central method of realization in Islamic spirituality.

¹P. Nwiva, *Ibn 'Atâ Allah et la naissance de la Confrérie Sâdiite* (Beirut, 1972), p. 133, no. 106.

Ibn al- 'Arabî's Theory of Journeying

YUSUF IBISH

Lo! We are Allah's and Lo! unto Him we are returning.
Qur'an II: 156

Lo! We it is Who quicken and give death,
and unto Us is the journeying.

Qur'an L: 43

The path of Allah, unto Whom belongeth whatsoever
is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth.
Do not all things reach Allah at last?

Qur'an XLIII:53

Allah's is the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth, and
all that is between them, and unto Him is the journeying.

Qur'an V: 18

The Qur'anic verses cited above, among others, define the general Muslim conception of the cosmos and its relation to the Divine Origin as well as the Divine End. It follows that the study of the universe and its component parts is not only a valid but a necessary step toward the knowledge of Divine Realities. The world is nothing but the work of Allah and the study of it becomes incumbent on the believers as part of their religious duty. "The universe at all levels of its existence emanates from Pure Being and ultimately returns to it."¹ Therefore nature is not to be studied as an object of curiosity, or just because it is around us, or for its own sake. The study of nature cannot be an end in itself but only a means to an end: to

FOREWORD

colloquium on contemplation and action helped to shape the vocation of the Rothko Chapel.

It had been prepared by a journey that John de Menil made to Rome, Geneva, Paris, Taizé and Beirut, to Lagos, Ife, Abidjan and Bouaké, to Cairo, Tehran and Delhi, to Dharmasala, Madras and Kanchipuram. The warm welcome, the openmindedness he found everywhere confirmed him in his wish to have a truly ecumenical encounter at the Rothko Chapel. An encounter where the initiative would be taken by the East, rather than held tightly by the West.

In the fall of 1971, in Lebanon, John de Menil met Yusuf Ibish, professor at the American University of Beirut. In May 1972 he invited him to Houston to draw plans. The visit resulted in a timeless bond of friendship, and in a colloquium organized by Dr. Ibish. The Rothko Chapel provided the hospitality.

It was an active hospitality guided by the thought that "no one has the right to say that his view of God is the only view," as one of the authors wrote in this book. It was a warm welcome, stimulated by the Qur'an's affirmation that "every nation has a prophet" and strengthened by the conviction that tradition is a fire to which each generation brings its own wood. And, after all, "the depths of God can only be known by the spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11).

Dominique de Menil

¹A *Thomas Merton Reader*, Revised Edition ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1974), p. 371.

²Ibid., p. 375.

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Contemplation and Action in World Religions

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“Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action”

Edited by

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