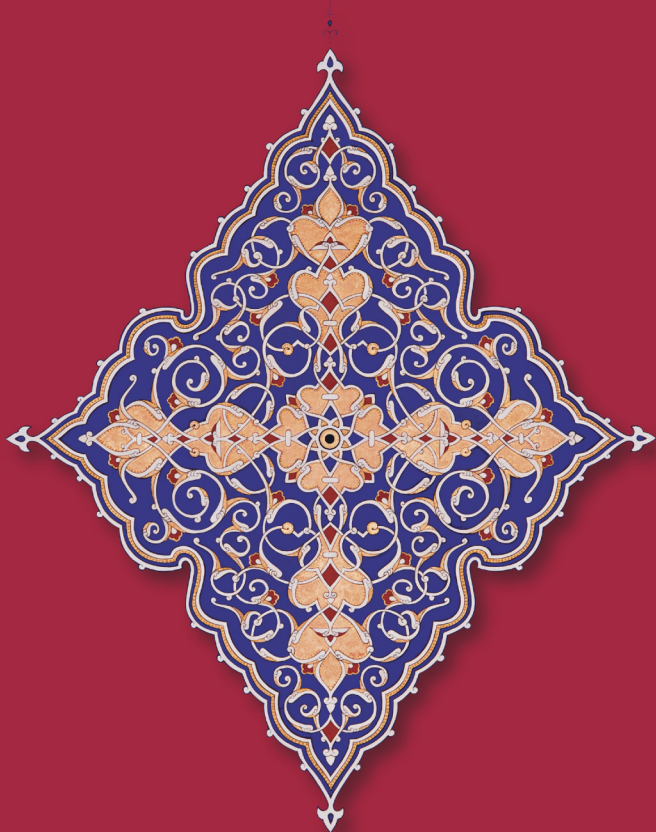


I of the Heart

*Texts and Studies in Honor of
Seyyed Hossein Nasr*



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BRILL

al-Ḥayāʾ

The Dignity of Shame

Oludamini Ogunnaike

Verily, *al-ḥayāʾ* and faith go together. If one of the two is missing, so is the other.¹

ḤADĪTH

• • •

Every religion has its character, and the character of Islam is *ḥayāʾ*.²

ḤADĪTH

• • •

God never tries a heart with anything more severe than plucking *ḥayāʾ* from it.³

MĀLIK B. DĪNĀR

• • •

As you were past all shame,—Those of your fact are so—so past all truth⁴

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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- 1 Al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl, *al-Adab al-mufrad*, Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2017, *al-ḥayāʾ*, 56, no. 9.
 - 2 Ibn Māja, Muḥammad b. Yazīd, *Sunan Ibn Māja*, Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2013, *al-ḥayāʾ*, 37, no. 82.
 - 3 Qtd. in Elshinawy, Mohammed, “Ḥayāʾ: More than just modesty,” in *Yaqeen Institute*, 15 December 2023.
 - 4 Shakespeare, William, *A winter’s tale*, Act 3, Scene 2, lines 89–90.

It is perhaps not accidental that the Arabic word and central Islamic concept of *ḥayāʾ* (often translated as “shame,” “modesty,” or “shyness”) is very difficult to translate into modern English,⁵ given the profound differences in the world-senses animating the two discourses.⁶ Likewise, the modern English notion of “dignity,” although Islamic sources have played an indirect role in its development,⁷ does not have a single, exact equivalent in classical Islamic discourse,⁸ but *ḥayāʾ* covers much of the same ground. At first blush this appears to be a paradox, as dignity and shame are often described as opposites: shame has been described as a violation of dignity, and a dignified person is not ashamed. However, even in English, this issue is more complicated, as illustrated by another seeming paradox: *shameless* people do the most *shameful* of deeds. Indeed, the early Sufi author al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) wrote that “One of the signs of those who possess shame is that one will never see them in a shameful condition.”⁹ Thus, in the face of the brazen shamelessness of recent political and business leaders and practices, numerous social campaigns—from the non-violent, coercive protest movements of Gandhi, MLK Jr., and the Civil Rights movement to the more recent environmental,

5 A summary version of this article appeared earlier on the website of *Renovatio*, the full article is published here with that publication's permission. The author would like to thank Dr. Sangu Delle for his support of this research and writing.

6 The closest equivalent to *ḥayāʾ* may be the Ancient Greek concept/goddess *Aidos* (Αἰδώς), which designates a similar reality. *Aidos* is defined as a kind of shame, reverence, or reticence which keeps people from doing what is wrong. It is also what the rich should feel in the presence of the poor, being aware that the difference in their stations is ultimately undeserved, a kind of sentiment of “there but for the grace of God, go I.” See Cairns, Douglas, *Aidos: The psychology and ethics of honour and shame in ancient Greek literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

7 For example, the central argument of Pico della Mirandola's famous “Oration on the Dignity of Man” (*Oratio De Hominis Dignitate*), that human beings have the highest rank in the world because they have no fixed station and contain everything in the cosmos *in potentia*, bringing together the physical and the intellectual/spiritual, seems to come from Ibn ʿArabī or al-Ghazālī via Hebrew Kabbalistic texts. Moreover, the work begins with a quotation of an “Arab” authority (most likely Ibn Qutayba) and was heavily influenced by al-Ghazālī's *Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-anwār*) and the “Book of Love” from his *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Girdner, Scott Michael, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Johanan Alemanno, al-Ghazālī's *The niche of lights*,” in *Philosophy East and West* 68.2 (2018), 371–385). See Bevilacqua, Alexander, *The republic of Arabic letters*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018 for more examples.

8 See Kamali, Mohammad Hashim, *The dignity of man: An Islamic perspective*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002.

9 Knysh, Alexander and Muhammad Eissa (trans. and ed.), *Al-Qushayrī's epistle on Sufism: al-Risāla Al-Qushayrīyya fi ʿilm al-taṣawwuf*, Garnet & Ithaca Press, 2007, 228.

social justice, and anti-war shame campaigns and boycotts targeting companies¹⁰ to the #MeToo movement—have attempted not only to deploy shame to change behaviors and conditions, but (especially in the cases of Gandhi and the civil rights movement) to reinstitute the principles of moral shame in domains dominated by shamelessness in order to restore or safeguard the dignity of both oppressed and oppressors. So while shame has been criticized and even pathologized by certain sectors in modern academic and pop psychology, especially in the self-help and wellness industries (even as they often weaponize shame to sell their products) in favor of notions of self-esteem and dignity, the latter are not so easily separable from the former. This relationship can even be discerned in the United Nations' 1948 Declaration of Human Rights (a foundational text for modern, neoliberal notions of dignity), whose first article reads, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."¹¹ This faculty of "conscience," which recognizes and respects dignity and condemns its violations is closely related to shame, or rather, *ḥayā'*. Another piece of literature adopted by the UN, a short poem from Sa'dī (d. 691/1292) *Gulistān*, articulates this relationship between *ḥayā'* and human dignity in a more Islamic mode:

The children of Adam are limbs of one whole
Created from one substance, one soul
If one limb should be afflicted with pain,
All the others shall uneasy remain.
If you have no feeling for others' pain,
The name of human you shall not retain.¹²

As we will demonstrate below, beyond the ordinary connotations of "shame," "shyness," and "modesty," *ḥayā'* is precisely identified with this "feeling for oth-

10 See Bloomfield, Michael, "Shame campaigns and environmental justice: Corporate shaming as activist strategy," in *Environmental Politics* 23.2 (2014), 263–281.

11 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (last accessed: 15 June 2024).

12 Shaykh Mushrifuddin Sa'di of Shiraz, *The Gulistan (rose garden) of Sa'di*, trans. Wheeler Thackston, Bethesda: Ibex Publishers, 2008, 22. Rhyming Translation by M. Aryanpour, see <https://wist.info/author/saadi/> and <https://www.un.org/ungifts/persian-carpet> (last accessed: 20 July 2024).

ers' pain," making it the very essence of human dignity. Thus, *ḥayā'* is not dignity's shadow, but rather its very spine.

1 What Is *ḥayā'*?

There are several accessible articles and even a book in English exploring the scope and significance of *ḥayā'* in Islamic sources,¹³ so I will endeavor to keep this discussion relatively brief. While shallow understandings of *ḥayā'* as "shyness" or mere "modesty" have recently been used to attempt to silence outspoken women and young people in some Muslim spaces,¹⁴ the Islamic tradition provides a much more profound account, with one *ḥadīth* recording: "We were with the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, when modesty (*ḥayā'*) was mentioned to him. They said, 'O Messenger of God, is modesty part of the religion?' The Prophet said, 'Rather, it is the entire religion.'" ¹⁵

Derived from the Arabic root *ḥ-y-w*, which it shares with the Divine Name *al-Ḥayy* (the Living) and the words for life (*ḥayāt*) and alive (*ḥayy*), *ḥayā'* is considered an essential attribute of living beings, especially human beings, naming a kind of awareness of being the object of moral gaze, as Hanbali scholar and Sufi, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), writes:

Ḥayā' is of the most superior qualities, of the greatest in status, and of the most beneficial. Indeed, it is quintessential to humanness, for whoever carries no *ḥayā'* has no share of humanness other than flesh, blood, and outward appearance. Likewise, there is no potential for good in a person [without it]. Were it not for *ḥayā'*, many people would not have fulfilled any of their obligations, nor acknowledged the rights of any being, nor kept the ties of kin, nor even shown kindness to parents. The driving element in these acts is either religious, namely hoping for its good outcome [ultimately], or it is worldly, which is the *ḥayā'* of its doer from the [eyes

13 For example, see Elshinawy, "Ḥayā'" which is mainly an accessible summary of al-Muqaddim, Muḥammad Ismā'īl, *Fiqh al-ḥayā': Understanding the Islamic concept of modesty*, Riyadh: IIPH, 2015; al-Qushayrī's *Risāla* has a wonderful short chapter on *al-ḥayā'* as well, available in English translation, see Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī's epistle* 226–229.

14 For example, see this short twitter thread: <https://twitter.com/AnwarOmeish/status/1614074359877976065> (last accessed: 15 June 2024).

15 Al-Bayhaqī, Aḥmad b. Ḥusayn, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutūb al-ʿIlmiyya, n.d., *shahādāt*, no. 20808.

of] creation. Therefore, were it not for *ḥayā'* from either the Creator or the creation, one would not have engaged in these acts.¹⁶

- 16 Qtd. in al-Muqaddim, *Fiqh al-ḥayā'* 52. As al-Muqaddim summarizes in his *Fiqh al-ḥayā'*: "In *Madārīj al-sālikin* (following al-Qushayrī) Ibn al-Qayyim subdivided *ḥayā'* into ten categories:

1. The *ḥayā'* of guilt; this is like the *ḥayā'* of Ādam (upon him be peace) when he fled in Paradise after committing a sin. It is reported that God said to him, "Are you fleeing from Me, O Ādam?" He said, "No, my Lord! Rather, out of *ḥayā'* from You."
2. The *ḥayā'* of inaptitude; this is like the *ḥayā'* of the angels who tirelessly glorify God by night and day. Then, once the Day of Resurrection begins, they say, "Glorified You are! We have not worshipped You as You deserve to be worshipped."
3. The *ḥayā'* of awe; this is the *ḥayā'* of being deeply acquainted with the greatness of God. This *ḥayā'* intensifies in proportion to the slave's knowledge of their Lord.
4. The *ḥayā'* of generosity; this is like the *ḥayā'* of the Prophet ﷺ from those he invited to Zaynab's wedding dinner. They overstayed their welcome, but he ﷺ was too shy to tell them, so he simply stood and left.
5. The *ḥayā'* of chastity; this is like the *ḥayā'* of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (may God be pleased with him) which prevented him from asking the Messenger of God ﷺ about washing away pre-seminal fluid, as he was married to his daughter.
6. The *ḥayā'* of humility; this is like the *ḥayā'* of the slave from his Lord, the Mighty and Majestic, when he asks Him for his needs. This may stem from the asker belittling himself and realizing the enormity of his sins, or from grasping the greatness of the One being asked.
7. The *ḥayā'* of love; this is the *ḥayā'* of the lover of his beloved. It is so powerful that whenever his beloved, who is absent, simply comes to mind, an unexplainable *ḥayā'* may flare in his heart and heat his face. Most people do not realize why they tremble and become bashful upon suddenly seeing their beloved. This is caused by the heart sensing the beloved's authority over it, and hence that thrill and fear overtakes it.
8. The *ḥayā'* of servitude; this *ḥayā'* is necessitated by a blend of love, fear, and recognizing that a person must serve God, but can never do so adequately due to His incomprehensible grandeur.
9. The *ḥayā'* of dignity; this is the *ḥayā'* of a noble soul when it feels that it acted towards others in a way that is beneath its standards of dignity, be it in sacrifice, generosity, or kindness.
10. The *ḥayā'* from oneself; this is the *ḥayā'* of a noble soul when it detects its own deficiency, or that it has settled for less. It is almost as if one has two souls, one ashamed of the other. This is the most complete *ḥayā'*, for if people were to be ashamed of themselves, then by greater virtue, they would become ashamed in front of others."

Al-Qushayrī recounts the following kinds *ḥayā'*: "God—praise be to Him—revealed to Jesus—peace be upon him: 'Admonish yourself. If you heed the admonishment, then admonish others. If not, then be ashamed before Me, when you admonish others!' It is said that there are different kinds of shame. One is the shame of transgression, as in the case with Adam—peace be upon him. When God asked him, 'Are you fleeing from Me?,' he answered, 'No, I am fleeing from shame before You!' Another is the shame of falling short (*taqṣīr*), as in the case of the angels, who told [God]: 'We have not worshiped You as

The Quran describes God as not having *ḥayā'* to "set forth a parable of a gnat or something smaller" (Q 2:26) or "to tell the truth" (Q 33:53) which "the Prophet has too much *ḥayā'* to mention" (Q 33:53): that people lingering to speak with him would bother him. Indeed, the Prophet, the epitome of Islamic masculinity (*murūwwa*) is described as being more intense in *ḥayā'* than a virgin girl in her room.¹⁷ What a difference between his ﷺ *beautiful example* (Q 33:21) and those of most online "masculine" influencers. Thus, far being simply a "feminine" virtue, as Imam 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet's son-in-law and paragon of Islamic chivalry (*futuwwa*) said, "*ḥayā'* is the key to all goodness."¹⁸

In the *ḥadīth* literature, even God is described as having *ḥayā'*: "Verily, God has *ḥayā'* and is generous. He would have *ḥayā'*, when a man raises his hands to Him, to turn them away empty and disappointed."¹⁹ Al-Qushayrī reports a tradition, popular in later Sufi works, that on the Day of Judgement, God will hand each of his servants a sealed letter containing all of their deeds, and they will be ashamed to read it, but God has also written in this letter, "You did what you did, and I am ashamed to show it to you. Go, for I have forgiven you."²⁰ In

You deserve [to be worshiped]!' Another type of shame is the shame of reverence (*ijlāl*). It was characteristic of [the angel] Isrāfil—peace be upon him—who wrapped himself in his wings out of shame before God—may He be great and exalted! There's also the shame of generosity, which pertained to the Prophet—may God bless and greet him—for he was ashamed to ask [the people of his] community (*umma*) to leave him alone. Therefore God Most High [had to] say: '[And when you have had the meal, disperse,] neither lingering for idle talk.' Another type of shame is the shame of embarrassment, which was characteristic of 'Alī—may God be pleased with him—when he asked (bearing in mind the status of [the Prophet's daughter] Fāṭima—may God be pleased with her) al-Miqdad b. al-Aswad to ask the Messenger of God—may God bless and greet him—for a ruling concerning the emission of the sperm resulting from foreplay. Then there is the shame of humility, which was characteristic of Moses—peace be upon him—when he said: 'When I need something from this world, I am ashamed to ask You [for it], my Lord!' To which God—may He be great and exalted—responded, saying: 'Ask Me, even for salt for the dough of your bread and the fodder for your sheep!' Finally, there is the shame of [divine] beneficence. This is the shame of the Lord—praise be to Him—when He gives His servant a sealed book, after he has crossed the bridge leading to the Hereafter. In this book it is written: 'You did what you did and I was ashamed of showing it to you. Go now, for I have forgiven you!' I heard the master Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq say regarding this issue that Yaḥyā b. Mu'adh said: 'Praise be the [Lord] Who is ashamed before His sinning servant.'" (Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī's epistle* 227).

17 Al-Bukhārī, *al-Adab al-mufrad*, *al-rifq*, 26, no. 6.

18 Ibn Abī Ṭālib, 'Alī, *Ghurur al-ḥikam wa-durar al-kalim*, ed. 'Abd al-Wāḥid Āmidī, Qom: Intishārāt-i Anṣariyān, 2001, no. 340.

19 Al-Sijistānī, Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2008, *al-du'ā*, 8, no. 73.

20 Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī's epistle* 228.

the same work, al-Qushayrī recounts a related saying of the early Central Asian Sufi, Yahyā b. Mu‘ādh, “If a man is ashamed before God Most High while being obedient, God will be ashamed of [punishing] him, when he sins.”²¹ As Sa’dī also wrote in his *Gulistān*, “Look at the generosity of God: the servant sins, and God feels ashamed!”²²

Angels are also described as having *ḥayā*’ before God due to their inability to praise Him adequately, and in one narration, the Prophet said of his companion, ‘Uthmān, “Should I not feel shy (have *ḥayā*’) before a man before whom the angels feel shy (have *ḥayā*’)?”²³ The Prophets are also described as having *ḥayā*’ before God and others, as al-Qushayrī writes that after Adam’s fall, “when God asked him, ‘Are you fleeing from Me?’ he answered, ‘No, I am fleeing out of shame before You!’”²⁴ However, the semantic range of *ḥayā*’ covers everything from traditional notions of modesty to being considerate and conscientious with people—refraining from doing or saying anything that might cause them discomfort or harm (unless necessary to prevent greater harm)—to remaining clothed even when alone out of awareness of being in the sight of God, the angels, and the natural world.

But what unites all of these forms of *ḥayā*’ is a sense of conscientious “shame” or “reticence” resulting from the awareness of being the object of the moral gaze of others, whether stones, plants, animals, other people, angels, God, and ultimately, oneself. Just as most of us would be ashamed to do something wrong in front of a small child, someone we respect, or even a mirror, God is even more deserving of our *ḥayā*’, and the complete integration and internalization

21 Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī’s epistle* 229. In the same work, al-Qushayrī records another similar tradition, “God Most High said: ‘My servant, as long as you are ashamed before Me, I will make people forget your sins and I will make all corners of the earth forget your sins. I will erase all your transgressions from the Mother of the Book and will not take you to account on the Day of Judgement.’” (Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī’s epistle* 227).

22 Shaykh Mushrifuddin Sa’di of Shiraz, *The Gulistan* 2.

23 Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d., *faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 44, no. 39.

24 Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī’s epistle* 228. Al-Qushayrī also writes, “They say about the words of God Most High, “For she [the wife of Potiphar] desired him and he would have taken her, but that he saw the proof of his Lord” (Q 12:24), that the “proof” here was that she put a piece of cloth over the face of an idol [stationed] in a corner of her house. Yusuf—peace be upon him—asked her: “What are you doing?” She answered: “I am ashamed of him.” Then Yusuf—peace be upon him—said: “And I am even more ashamed of myself before God Most High!”” (Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī’s epistle* 227).

of this awareness is regarded as the loftiest form of *ḥayā'*. The *ḥadīth* tradition also distinguishes between "good," "positive," or "intelligent" and "bad," "negative," or "stupid" *ḥayā'*, the former resulting from the correct prioritization of these different moral gazes.²⁵ Indeed, much of the modern aversion to shame can be understood as a preponderance of the negative forms of *ḥayā'* and the paucity of the positive forms.

In Islamic sources, the highest level of *ḥayā'* is usually described as that in which the Divine gaze and individual human self-regard coincide. Thus, Imam 'Alī held that "the most beautiful/lovely/excellent (*aḥsan*)²⁶ form of *ḥayā'* is *ḥayā'* before one's own self,"²⁷ which Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya describes as

the *ḥayā'* of a noble soul when it detects its own deficiency, or that it has settled for less. It is almost as if one has two souls, one ashamed of the other. This is the most complete *ḥayā'*, for if people were to be ashamed of themselves, then by greater virtue, they would become ashamed in front of others.²⁸

Thus defined, *ḥayā'* is closely related to the central Quranic terms of *taqwā* (reverent, mindful awareness of God) and *iḥsān* (beauty/loveliness/excellence), defined in the famous Ḥadīth of Gabriel as "worshiping God as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He sees You." As numerous Sufi commentators have pointed out, the original language of this tradition can also be glossed another way: "for if you are not, [then] you see Him, and He sees you."²⁹ This realization of one's nothingness, one's absolute dependency or transparency before God, or the perfect polishing of the mirror of the heart reflecting the Divine Names and Attributes (to use another metaphor from the *ḥadīth*) is known as *faqr* or "poverty" in Sufi literature, in accordance with the Quranic verse: "O

25 One narration attributes the following statement to the Prophet, "There are two kinds of *ḥayā'*; one of them comes from one's weakness and the other, from one's strength, Islam and faith in God." (Ḥarrānī, al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī, *Tuḥaf al-'uqūl*, Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2001, 418.) Similarly, Imam 'Alī is reported to have made a similar distinction, "*ḥayā'* is of two kinds: one is from intelligence and the other, from stupidity; Thoughtful *ḥayā'* is based on knowledge whereas the stupid kind comes from ignorance." (al-Majlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir, *Bihār al-anwār*, lxviii, Qom: Shirkat-i Ṭab'-i Bihār al-Anwār, 1960, 331).

26 Anas b. Mālik reported that the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, said, "Whenever there is modesty in a thing, it adorns it. Whenever there is indecency in a thing, it debases it." (al-Bukhārī, *al-Adab al-mufrad*, al-*ḥayā'*, 30, no. 64).

27 Ibn Abī Ṭālib, *Ghurur al-ḥikam*, no. 6369.

28 Qtd. in Elshinawy, "Ḥayā'."

29 *Fa-in lam takun tarā*, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *īmān*, no. 5.

people, you are the poor towards God, and He is the Rich/Self-Sufficient, the Praised" (Q 35:15). This is one meaning of the Prophet's statement, "Poverty is my pride," (*al-faqr fakhri*)³⁰ symbolized by the crescent moon, whose "horns of glory" come from its hollowness or poverty. Al-Qushayrī records the following saying, "*al-ḥayā* is the abandoning of all [personal] pretensions before God," and our independent existence is one such pretension, rather, it is the root of all such pretensions.

Thus, *ḥayā* is the humble awareness of our true status before and absolute need of God, even (perhaps especially) in praiseworthy actions and states, as al-Qushayrī relates the following account of another early Sufi, "Occasionally, I would pray two prayers to God Most High then come away ashamed as if I have robbed someone."³¹ In his celebrated *Aphorisms* (*Ḥikam*), Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309) explains, "An act of disobedience that grants humility and need/poverty is better than an act of obedience that grants pride and arrogance"³² and

The source of every disobedience, indifference, and passion is self-satisfaction. The source of every obedience, vigilance, and virtue is dissatisfaction with one's self. It is better for you to keep company with an ignorant man dissatisfied with himself than to keep company with a learned man satisfied with himself. For what knowledge is there in a self-satisfied scholar? And what ignorance is there in an unlearned man dissatisfied with himself?³³

This is the secret of so much of the poetry of Ḥāfiẓ and other great Sufi poets who condemn self-admiration (*ujb*), ostentation (*riyā*) and other forms "self-seeing" (*khūd bīnī*) as the most dangerous and deadly of faults, constituting the hidden idolatry (*al-shirk al-khafī*) against which the Prophet warned.³⁴ Ḥāfiẓ writes:

30 Al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār* lxxii, 30, no. 26.

31 Al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār* lxxii, 229.

32 Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh, *The book of wisdoms*, trans. Victor Danner, New York: Paulist Press, 1978, 55.

33 Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh, *The book of wisdoms* 71.

34 "The Messenger of God came out to us when we were discussing the Dajjāl (the anti-Christ) and said: 'Shall I not tell you of that which I fear more for you than Dajjāl?' We said: 'Yes.' He said: 'Hidden polytheism, when a man stands to pray and makes it look good because he sees a man looking at him.'" (Ibn Majā, *Sunan, al-riyā' wa-l-sum'ā*, 37, no. 105). Imam 'Alī famously said, "Know that the slightest ostentation (*riyā*) constitutes associating others with God (*shirk*)."

As long as you are proud of [your] learning and intellect, you have no
 real knowledge (*maʿrifat*)
 Let me tell you a subtle point, see not the self and be saved.³⁵

And even more powerfully:

There is no obstacle between the lover and beloved
 You are your own veil, Ḥāfiz. Get out of the way!³⁶

Shame makes us want to vanish or disappear from view, and according to many Sufi exegetes, it is precisely this ability to “get out of the way” of God, to realize our own nothingness before the Divine Reality and be transparent before or reflective of the Divine Qualities, that makes us capable of being God’s vicegerents (*khulafāʾ*), those behind whom God acts.³⁷ From this perspective, shame (*ḥayāʾ*) and poverty (*faqr*) are the very life (*ḥayāt*) and spine (*faqār*) of human dignity.

Moreover, perspectives based on this rigorous cultivation of *ḥayāʾ*,³⁸ can paradoxically have profoundly egalitarian social consequences. For example,

35 Saberi, Reza, *The Divan of Hafez*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2002, 504.

36 Saberi, *Divan of Hafez* 316.

37 For example, commenting on the verse, “We offered the trust (*amāna*) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and feared it, but man bore it. Truly, he is unjust, ignorant” (Q 33:72), the great 20th-century Senegalese Sufi Shaykh and scholar Ibrahim Niasse interprets this “trust” to refer to man’s vicegerency (*khilāfa*) of God in creation, explaining that only humanity could bear this burden, since only we combine all levels of the spiritual and the physical in our being. But then Shaykh Ibrahim goes on to provide two interpretations for the second part of the verse, the first being the common interpretation that human beings disobey God and were ignorant of the gravity of the trust we undertook, but the second interprets the “unjust” as referring to the oppression of our lower nature, and the “ignorance” as meaning “aware of God (*ʿurifān bi-Llāh*) to the point that he was ignorant of all other than He and [this is] the ignorance of the core of the Essence Whoever is ignorant of the core of the Essence after he has arrived there, he finds that ‘his inability to perceive It is his perception of it.’ His ignorance of the reality of the core of Its Essence is his knowledge of It. And so this is the vicegerent (*khalīfa*), unjust and ignorant. That is, having transgressed the bounds of mortal humanity, being characterized by the attributes of Lordship, and ignorant of the core of the Essence because it has no end, and he only reaches it after having lost himself. ‘O Lord, how can one reach you? Leave yourself and come.’ If you leave yourself before coming, then how can you know It? There is no one there to know it. This is the ignorance which is the utmost limit of ignorance, and it is a station of praise from this perspective.” (Inyās, Ibrāhīm, *Fī riḡāḍ al-taḡsīr* v, 87; qtd. in Ogunnaike, Oludamini, *Deep knowledge: Ways of knowing in Sufism and Ifa. Two West African intellectual traditions*, College Park: PSU Press, 2020, 187–188).

38 For example, Ibn ʿArabī writes, “Among what is indispensable for the seeker is that you

al-Qusharyī approvingly quotes the saying of another early Sufi that, “Whoever thinks that his soul is better than the soul of Pharaoh has shown pride”³⁹ and according to a *ḥadīth*, “None shall enter the garden who has in his heart a mustard seed’s worth of pride.”⁴⁰ Similarly, the great North African Sufi master and scholar, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1230/1815) declared that “There is no difference between a believer and an infidel (*kāfir*) in terms of humanity (*fī l-ādamī*)”⁴¹ and the same shaykh related a Prophetic tradition of warning, “Do not exalt yourselves over God by (exalting yourselves over) His lands and His servants. Whoever exalts himself over the servants (of God), exalts himself over God, thinking himself greater (than God).”⁴² But as the previously cited *ḥadīth* warned, “*al-ḥayāʾ* and faith (*al-īmān*) are together. If one of them is removed, the other is removed.” In the second half of this essay, we will explore two of the most severe, but perhaps less-obvious, consequences of the joint loss of *īmān* and *ḥayāʾ*: the conjoined catastrophes of colonial capitalism and the climate crisis, and the accompanying deformations of dignity.

2 The Loss of *ḥayāʾ*, the Crises of Modernity, and the Deformations of Dignity

While many would associate the loss of *ḥayāʾ* with the proliferation of online pornography and the perennial complaint about the poor manners of youth, these more obvious signs are but symptoms of a deeper spiritual crisis, whose more profound and prior consequences, namely the degradation of the envi-

should observe and take account of your animal self (*muḥāsabat al-naḥs*) and pay close attention to your inner thoughts and impulses (*khawāṭir*) at every moment. Then you will feel a shame in your heart that comes directly from God. For if you are ashamed before God, then He will prevent your heart from experiencing any thought or impulse that is contrary to the revelation (*sharʿ*) or keep you from carrying out an action that is not pleasing to the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*). Indeed we once had a master who would record his actions (during the day) in a notebook, and then when night came he would set them out before him and take an account of his animal self according to what was noted there. And I added to my master’s practice by recording my inner thoughts and impulses as well.” (qtd. in Morris, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Book of the quintessence concerning what is indispensable for the spiritual seeker*” 29.).

39 Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī’s epistle* 42.

40 Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, imān*, 1 no. 172.

41 Qtd. in Wright, Zachary V., *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the eighteenth-century Muslim world*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020, 120.

42 Wright, *Realizing Islam* 67.

ronment and exploitation and extermination of traditional peoples and ways of life are far more dangerous and worthy of our attention.

But what could *ḥayā'* possibly have to do with these global catastrophes? Shaykh Abdal-Hakim Murad provides a clue in the 66th contention of his 14th collection of aphorisms, "The monoculture annihilates difference for fear that the Other might show it what it truly is."⁴³ If *ḥayā'* is the humble, reticent awareness of the being the object of another's moral gaze, then the present homogenizing, hegemonic world-system is completely without *ḥayā'*, and must consume and destroy all other ways of life and perspectives on itself, lest it suffer the shame of being seen for what it truly is.⁴⁴ The Quran repeatedly makes this point when criticizing the shameless behavior of those who amass and consume wealth and oppress others, such as in Sura al-Balad, "Does he suppose that none will ever have power over him? He says, 'I have squandered vast wealth!' Does he suppose that no one sees him?" (Q 90:5–7), in Sura al- 'Alaq, "Does he not know that God sees?" (Q 96:14), and in Sura al-Ādiyāt, "truly man is ungrateful to his Lord, and truly he is a witness to that, and truly he is violent in his love for good things. Does he not know that when what lies within graves is turned inside out and what lies within breasts is made known, truly on that Day their Lord shall be aware of them?" (Q 100:6–11). While there is not space here to go into all of the relevant historical and philosophical details, I will attempt to outline how the elimination of *ḥayā'*, this restraining awareness of the Divine gaze, has led to the unprecedented levels and kinds of violence, oppression, and consumption of wealth that have characterized the modern era.⁴⁵ Even a figure such as Samuel Huntington wrote in his otherwise regrettable *The clash of civilizations*, "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion ... but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do."⁴⁶

43 <http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/contentions14.htm> (last accessed: 20 July 2024).

44 The 64th contention is a corollary to this point: "The Monoculture is opaque to itself."

45 In spite of the vapid "Pollyanna" accounts of neoliberal apologists like Steven Pinker, Bill Gates, Thomas Friedman, more serious research reveals what most poor people on the African continent know intimately, that the past few decades have impoverished most people in the so-called developing world, not only spiritually, but also materially. For example, see Hickel, Jason et al., "Imperialist appropriation in the world economy: Drain from the global south through unequal exchange, 1990–2015," in *Global Environmental Change* 73 (2022), 102467. Or the more accessible summarizes of these and similar findings: <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/07/5-myths-about-global-poverty>; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/jan/14/aid-in-reverse-how-poor-countries-develop-rich-countries>.

46 Huntington, Samuel, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, 51.

As argued by figures as diverse as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Sylvia Wynter, W.E.B. DuBois and Gilbert Durand, the philosophical and spiritual roots of these crises lie in the transformations that took place between the late medieval and early modern period (~1300–1700) in the area that would come to be known as Western Europe. Spiritually and epistemologically, these shifts resulted in the collapsing of the faculty of *intellectus/nous* (a “spiritual” faculty that allowed for the direct perception of God, archetypes, metaphysical truths, and realities) into the lower faculty of “reason” (*ratio/dianoia*), leaving reason and the senses as the only valid sources of knowledge of the world. As a result, the mystical traditions of Western Christianity were excluded from mainstream intellectual life, and, with a few exceptions, gradually dried up. Furthermore, the cosmos legible to philosophy and science shrunk, as the angelic/archetypal and Divine realms previously perceived by the *intellectus* fell out of mainstream philosophy and scholarship, leaving humans themselves on top of the “Great Chain of Being,” an ancient schema of organizing and ranking everything on the cosmos based on its likeness to the transcendent One or God, which formerly topped the chain.⁴⁷

As God was no longer directly perceived by the *intellectus*, but abstracted from sensory data and the rational faculty, His role in Western intellectual thought became more and more vague and distant, culminating in the 19th-century view of the divine as a creation of the mind of man—a god made in man’s own image. Moreover, reason replaced *intellectus* (which, in Christian sources was often identified with the Holy Spirit) as the *imago Dei*, the Divine trace that marked mankind as being made in God’s image, and rationality and physical appearance, rather than saintly conformity to the Divine, became the criterion of humanity and the determining factor in rank on this revised great chain of being. Thus the transcendent, universal, Divine ideal was replaced by an immanent, particular, human ideal: rational, European (what later become “white”) man, who became the “measure of all things.”⁴⁸ As a result, new racial hierarchies of human beings emerged, based on their per-

47 See Ogunnaike, Oludamini, “From heathen to sub-human: A genealogy of the influence of the decline of religion on the rise of modern racism,” in *Open Theology* 2.1 (2016) and Lovejoy, Arthur O., *The great chain of being: The history of an idea*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

48 In the 19th century, Hegel explicitly enunciated this doctrine, declaring Western Europe “the land of the elevation of the particular to the universal,” (Hegel, G.W.F. *Lectures on the philosophy of world history*, qtd. in Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, *Race and the enlightenment: A reader*, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997, 122) and 18th-century English dissident philosopher James Beattie wrote, “That every practice and sentiment is barbarous which is not according to the usages of Modern Europe seems to be a fundamental maxim with many of our-

ceived differences in rationality and appearance from the new ideal of modern, European man, replacing the more spiritual hierarchies of angels, saints, believers, and heathens that characterized medieval European thought. As DuBois observed, "The medieval European world ... knew the black man chiefly as a legend or occasional curiosity, but still as a fellow man The modern world in contrast, knows the Negro chiefly as a bond slave in the West Indies and America."⁴⁹

Furthermore, with no way to "look up," exploration and exploitation of the "lower rungs" of the great chain of being for human purposes became the order of the day, largely replacing the contemplation of higher spiritual realities in themselves and in nature *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. As Thomas Sprat wrote in his 1667 *History of the Royal Society*:

And this is the highest pitch of human reason: to follow all the links of this chain till all their secrets are open to our mind and their works advanced or imitated by our hands. This is truly to command the world; to rank all the varieties and degrees of things so orderly upon one another; that standing on the top of them, we may perfectly behold all that are below, and make them all serviceable to the quiet and peace and plenty of Man's life.⁵⁰

When one closes the door on heaven, a new earth and a hundred more hells open. It is important to note here that "Man" does not really refer to all people that we would today consider human beings, but only those rational, European men who sat atop the great chain of being, now transformed into a kind of food chain. As Immanuel Kant wrote,

One can take the classification of organic and living beings further. Not only does the vegetable kingdom exist for the sake of the animal kingdom (and its increase and diversification) **but humans, as rational beings, exist for the sake of others of a different species (race). The latter stand at a higher level of humanity, either simultaneously as, for instance, the Americans and Europeans, or sequentially.**⁵¹

critics and philosophers" (Beattie, James, *An essay on the nature and immutability of truth, in opposition to sophistry and skepticism*, qtd. in Eze, *Race and the enlightenment* 36).

49 DuBois, W.E. Burghardt, *The Negro*, New York: Holt and Company, 1915, 12.

50 Qtd. in Lovejoy, *The great chain of being* 232.

51 Qtd. in Elden, Stuart, *Reading Kant's geography*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2011, 1; emphasis

That is, just as plants exist for the sake of animals, and animals for the sake of humans, Kant taught that human beings of “lower races and rationality” exist for the sake of the “higher races” of higher rationality. As Nietzsche’s madman declared a century after Kant and two centuries after Sprat, the result of this exiling of God results in nothing less than a deification of (European) man:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? ... What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? **Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?**⁵²

Or in Iqbal’s reformulation, “Its Adam entrapped in the net like a fish, He has killed God and worships man.”⁵³ Or perhaps even more comprehensively, as Rowan Williams summarizes the epilogue of Iain McGilchrist’s magnum opus, *The matter with things*:

We either acknowledge God or we invent a God for ourselves. If we invent a God for ourselves, we are bound to invent that God out of ourselves, out of our own psychic resources, and so sacralize our own ambitions and anxieties, projecting on to the universe our passion for analysis of and control over every aspect of what surrounds us. This is the idolatry that is literally killing us as a species.⁵⁴

Like DuBois before him, Seyyed Hossein Nasr characterizes this humanist project as a Promethean revolt against heaven, in contrast to the traditional “pontifical” conception of humanity as that which connects heaven and earth. This new Promethean conception of humanity had a profound effect on the understanding of human identity and difference, as human identity no longer came primarily from relationships to the transcendent Sacred, mediated

mine. For more on Kant’s views on race see the work of Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi and Huaping Lu-Adler, *Kant, race and racism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

52 Nietzsche, Friedrich W., *The gay science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1974, 182.

53 Iqbal, Muḥammad, *Gulshan-i rāz-i jadīd*, trans. Bashir Ahmad Dar, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1964, 63.

54 Williams, Rowan, “A brain of two minds: On Iain McGilchrist’s ‘*The matter with things*,’” in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 8 January 2023.

through spiritual/family traditions and sacred lands, but from being defined over and against other people and beings, mediated by the forces of nation-state and the invisible hand of the market.⁵⁵ Such an immanent ideal has to overrepresent itself as universal and thus define itself over and against other immanent forms, whereas a transcendent ideal can admit equal participation by different forms. The colors of the rainbow are all equally light, but not equally red; the points on the surface of a sphere are all equidistant from the sphere's center, but not from its "North Pole."⁵⁶

This dynamic of the overrepresentation of a particular as a universal and the subsequent denigration and elimination of other particulars formed the philosophical foundation and justification of many modern genocidal projects around the world from the attempted ethnic cleansing of the Americas, the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, to the atrocities of King Leopold's Congo, to the Armenian genocide, to the Holocaust, the Japanese Empire's massacres, the long Nakba, the Hanification campaign in Xinjiang, and the Russian Empire's Circassian genocide, and Stalin's brutal pogroms,⁵⁷ amongst others. In his 1920 essay, "The Souls of White Folk," DuBois coined the term "the religion of whiteness"⁵⁸ to describe this overrepresentation of a particular kind of humanity as a pseudo-divine universal and its associated "sacred games" and violent rites of colonial capitalism⁵⁹ that forcefully subordinated the natural

55 See Anderson, Benedict R., *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991 and Wynter, Sylvia, "Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation. An argument," in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003), 257–337.

56 This is the metaphysical principle underlying the remarkable diversity and celebration of ambiguity and plurality of the non-modern Islamic world, and the homogenizing and flattening tendencies of modernity. See Bauer, Thomas, *A culture of ambiguity: An alternative history of Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. In the sphere of religion, one could say that God is not a Muslim, Christian, or Hindu, but when these revealed traditions are taken as absolute objects of worship in place of the transcendent One, similarly distorted dynamics of identity result.

57 Naimark, Norman, *Stalin's genocides*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

58 DuBois, W.E. Burghardt, "The souls of white folk," in *Darkwater: The twentieth century completion of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"*, Washington, D.C.: Austin Jenkins Co., 1920, 29–52.

59 Similarly, Walter Benjamin writes in his short essay, "Capitalism as Religion": "Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction. It is the expansion of despair, until despair becomes a religious state of the world in the hope that this will lead to salvation. God's transcendence is at an end. But he is not dead; he has been incorporated into human existence. This passage of the planet "Human" through the house of despair in the absolute loneliness of his trajectory is the ethos that Nietzsche defined. This man is the superman, the first to re-

world and racialized peoples to the ever-expanding appetites of these newly divinized dominant populations.⁶⁰

These passages, sadly still relevant after more than a century of struggle, are worth quoting at length here:

The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed. The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction. The Middle Age regarded skin color with mild curiosity Here is a civilization that has boasted much. Neither Roman nor Arab, Greek nor Egyptian, Persian nor Mongol ever took himself and his own perfectness with such disconcerting seriousness as the modern white man. We whose shame, humiliation, and deep insult his aggrandizement so often involved were never deceived. We looked at him clearly, with world-old eyes, and saw simply a human thing, weak and pitiable and cruel, even as we are and were.

“But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?”

Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! Now what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time Everything considered, the title to the universe claimed by White Folk is faulty. It ought, at least, to look plausible. How easy, then, by emphasis and omission to make children believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man's soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was a white man's thought; that every great deed the world ever did was a white man's deed; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man's dream. In fine, that if from the world were dropped everything that could not fairly be attributed to White Folk, the

cognize the religion of capitalism and begin to bring it to fulfillment.” (Benjamin, Walter, *Selected writings: Volume 1*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 1996, 290).

60 W.E.B. DuBois wrote, “In her foreign mission work the extraordinary self-deception of white religion is epitomized: solemnly the white world sends five million dollars worth of missionary propaganda to Africa each year and in the same twelve months adds twenty-five million dollars worth of the vilest gin manufactured.” DuBois, “The souls of white folk” 36.

world would, if anything, be even greater, truer, better than now. And if all this be a lie, is it not a lie in a great cause?⁶¹

These racial ideologies justified white supremacy, which philosopher Charles Mills called “the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today,”⁶² and the corresponding economic, military, political, social, intellectual, and cultural dominance of “white” populations over non-white populations. Whiteness here names not skin color, but rather a set of power relations, a positioning atop the chain of being over other kinds of human beings, and an attribution of this superiority to an essential bio-cultural nature.⁶³ In this ideological context, purportedly “universal” notions of human dignity and morality (what some now call “development”) tend to be profoundly deformed by the implicit and unacknowledged exclusion of large swaths of humanity (the poor, the “non-white,” the “underdeveloped”) from dignity and humanity. Indeed, their very exploitation is what makes such “development” possible. As James Baldwin noted, “you can’t swear to the freedoms of mankind and at the same time put me in chains ... America’s sense of reality is dictated by what Americans are trying to avoid ... I can’t believe what you say, because I can see what you do.”⁶⁴ But as Baldwin poignantly explains elsewhere, this degradation of dignity cuts both ways, degrading those who fail to recognize others’ humanity:

What slavery and white supremacy did to White Southerners was worse than what it did to African-Americans in the South [T]his cowardice, this necessity of justifying a totally false identity and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history, has placed everyone now living into the hands of the most ignorant and powerful people the world has ever seen. And how did they get that way? By deciding that they were white.

61 DuBois, “The souls of white folk” 29, 31.

62 Mills, Charles, *The racial contract*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022, 1.

63 As Charles Mills explains, “Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations.” (Mills, *The racial contract* 127); Or in the words of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X) upon his return from pilgrimage to Mecca, “in Asia or the Arab world or in Africa, where the Muslims are, if you find one who says he’s white, all he’s doing is using an adjective to describe something that’s incidental about him, one of his incidental characteristics; so there’s nothing else to it, he’s just white. But when you get the white man over here in America and he says he’s white, he means something else. You can listen to the sound of his voice—when he says he’s white, he means he’s a boss.” (El-Shabazz, el-Hajj Malik, “(1965) Malcolm X, ‘Speech at Ford Auditorium,’” 26 July 2010).

64 A Closer Look Inc., “Never aired: Profile on James Baldwin ABC News 20/20, 1979,” 2021.

By opting for safety instead of life. By persuading themselves that a black child's life meant nothing compared with a white child's life (...). And in this debasement and definition of black people, they debased and defined themselves.⁶⁵

While some might be tempted to think of this as an issue of the past, one need only consider the difference in the global response to tragedies and deaths of different kinds of people: it takes the deaths of hundreds or even thousands of poor Africans or Asians to elicit the same global outcry produced by the deaths of a dozen Europeans, Americans, or Australians. As Baldwin notes, this dynamic was exemplified in the modern institutions of European colonization and chattel slavery whose "thing-ification" and "commodification" of people, even in the accounts of the era, was widely acknowledged as the source of massive accumulation of wealth and resources that led to the Industrial Revolution and modern capitalism.⁶⁶ As Frantz Fanon observed, "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World, the riches which are choking it are those plundered from the underdeveloped peoples."⁶⁷

But as Aimé Césaire warned in his 1950 "Discourse on Colonialism," (echoing Hannah Arendt and many Asian and African authors) the chickens of colonial violence, dehumanization, and exploitation always come home to roost. The commodification of enslaved Africans into units of production forced onto plantations in the Caribbean and Americas led directly to the commodification of poor people into units of production forced into factories and camps across Europe. Césaire explains that Europeans:

Tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples What he cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa Whether one likes

65 Baldwin, James, "On being white ... and other lies," in Randall Kenan (ed.), *The cross of redemption: Uncollected writings*, New York: Vintage, 2011, 168–169.

66 See French, Howard, *Born in blackness: Africa, Africans, and the making of the modern world, 1471 to the second world war*, New York: Liveright, 2021.

67 Fanon, Frantz, *The wretched of the earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press, 2007, 58.

it or not, at the end of the blind alley that is Europe, I mean the Europe of Adenauer, Schuman, Bidault, and a few others, there is Hitler. At the end of capitalism, which is eager to outlive its day, there is Hitler. At the end of formal humanism and philosophic renunciation, there is Hitler What am I driving at? At this idea: no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization that is morally diseased, that irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one repudiation to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment.⁶⁸

Supporting Césaire's claim, James Whitman's *Hitler's American model* carefully outlines how Nazi lawyers were inspired by and studied the US's elaborate Jim Crow-era legal codes based on white supremacy as models for the notorious Nuremberg Laws and other racial policies.⁶⁹ From the US, Hitler and the Nazis learned that it was possible to conquer a continent, efficiently exterminating and subordinating "inferior races" through modern state bureaucracies. Many Nazis saw themselves as simply following the American project to its logical conclusion and expected the US to support its efforts in Europe. Another Anglo/American export, the racially-stratified *kafala* system of migrant labor in the Gulf and other Middle Eastern countries has its origins in the Jim Crow system of strict racial hierarchy in ARAMCO labor camps in Saudi Arabia in the 1930s–1960s and the introduction of the racially-stratified "coolie" (South and East Asian) indentured labor by the British throughout the empire to replace recently-abolished slave labor.⁷⁰

But to return to Césaire's larger point, the 1904–1908 German Herero and Nama genocide in present-day Namibia set the precedent for the Nazi concentration camps in Europe a generation later, and although the brutality of colonial rule in King Leopold's Congo Free State is likely responsible for over 10 million deaths (roughly half the population of the area at the time), even

68 Césaire, Aimé, *Discourse on colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001, 36, 37, 39.

69 Whitman, James, *Hitler's American model: The United States and the making of Nazi race law*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. For an accessible summary see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/11/what-america-taught-the-nazis/540630/> (last accessed: 20 July 2024).

70 See Vitalis, Robert, *America's kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi oil frontier*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006 and Balachandran, Gopalan, "Making coolies, (un)making workers: 'Globalizing' labour in the late-19th and early-20th centuries," in *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24.3 (2011), 266–296.

today, the public knowledge of these atrocities in Africa is but a shadow of that of their counterparts in Europe, and we have still not heeded the lesson of any of these catastrophes: that our current way of life, reliant upon the denigration and exploitation of people and nature is, in Césaire's words, "indefensible,"⁷¹ and will ultimately destroy us and many of the other species with whom we share this planet.

To take but one example, the Dutch East India Company (v.o.c.—the biggest company in human history, worth more than Amazon, Apple, and Exxon-Mobil combined), made its fortune by wiping out and enslaving the people on and surrounding the Banda islands (in present-day Indonesia) to corner the market on nutmeg production.⁷² In *The nutmeg's curse*, Amitav Ghosh argues that the v.o.c.'s rapacious brutality and approach to nature and other people simply as resources to be used for profit, rather than as living beings full of agency and meaning, set the tone for our current economies of extraction, ultimately leading to our contemporary climate crisis. As Olufemi Taiwo explains in his review of Ghosh's book:

In a world created by corporations such as the v.o.c. and colonial sponsors such as the imperial Dutch, everything, including the planet, is considered a resource to be exchanged or exploited, and progress and "rationality" are measured in impersonal dollars and cents. Profit and security are reserved for those at the top of the world's hierarchies, and are achieved by shifting the risks and the burdens toward those at the bottom. Some people get a storm-surge barrier—a specialty of certain Dutch multinationals—and exquisitely climate-controlled interiors; others watch their villages be swallowed by the sea.⁷³

71 Even a figure such as Samuel Huntington wrote in his otherwise quite regrettable *The clash of civilizations*, "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion ... but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do." (Huntington, *The clash* 51).

72 Historians estimate that over 90% of the native population of 15,000 people were killed, enslaved, or deported. The Company set up plantations populated by enslaved people from the surrounding islands, India, and China in order to maintain nutmeg and mace production, but these enslaved people were worked to death so regularly that the company had to import hundreds of new enslaved people every year. And the invisible hand of the market rewarded the v.o.c. for these cost-efficient practices by making it the largest and most profitable company of its day.

73 Taiwo, Olufemi O., "Our planet is heating up: Why are climate politics still frozen?," in *The New Yorker*, 25 October 2021. This shameless exploitation of people and the environment

While Ghosh's book was published in 2021, Seyyed Hossein Nasr made a similar argument in his 1966 Rockefeller lectures, later published as *Man and nature: The spiritual crisis in modern man*. At a time when most were unaware of the ecological crisis, Nasr demonstrated its origins in spiritual and philosophical shifts of the late medieval and early modern periods (closely related to those described above), culminating in a Cartesian science that completely separated the "subjective" spirit/mind from "objective" matter, rendering the world of nature an inanimate "thing," whose qualitative attributes were reduced to mere quantities. Thus "de-natured," the natural world lost its real symbolic and sacred quality and became mere raw material for human consumption and use.⁷⁴ Nasr explains

In fact, it might be said that the main reason why modern science never arose in China or Islam is precisely because of the presence of metaphysical doctrine and a traditional religious structure which refused to make a profane thing of nature. The most basic reason is that neither in Islam, nor India nor the Far East was the substance and stuff of nature so depleted of a sacramental and spiritual character, nor was the intellectual dimension of these traditions so enfeebled as to enable a purely secular science of nature and a secular philosophy to develop outside the matrix of the traditional intellectual orthodoxy. Islam, which resembles Christianity in so many ways, is a perfect example of this truth, and the fact that modern science did not develop in its bosom is not the sign of decadence as some have claimed but of the refusal of Islam to consider any form of knowledge as purely secular and divorced from what it considers as the ultimate goal of human existence.⁷⁵

is tantamount to a kind of human sacrifice, in which the environment, lives, and safety of some are sacrificed for the comfort, prosperity, and enjoyment of others. While the Quran and *ḥadīth* condemn those who kill their children out of fear of poverty (Q 6:151, 17:31, 81:8), our global economies are currently burying children by the thousands in climate change-caused "natural" disasters, man-made famines, physically, and spiritually-polluted environments, and obscene levels of wealth inequality far worse than anything witnessed in feudal Europe or the medieval Islamic world, all out of fear of slowing down economic growth.

74 See Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Religion and the order of nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 for a detailed account of these spiritual, philosophical, and scientific transformations.

75 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Man and nature: The spiritual crisis in modern man*, Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1990, 97.

So whereas a medieval European Christian could see a symbol of the cross and Christ, the *axis mundi*, in a tree, or a traditional Muslim could experience the tree as a living *tajallī*, a theophanic sign (*ayāt*) of God, which hymns His praises in its own way (Q 17:44), modernized people of most faiths see a potential chair or firewood, a worker of photosynthesis, or giver of shade, and “the something more” they sense in the tree is relegated to the realm of poetry and fantasy. As the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware⁷⁶

Or in the words of William Blake, “The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others, a mere thing that stands in the way. Some see Nature all ridicule and deformation ... some scarce see Nature at all As a man is, so he sees.”⁷⁷ Thus, Nasr presciently concludes:

The ecological crisis is only an externalization of an inner malaise and cannot be solved without a spiritual rebirth of Western man It is still our hope that as the crisis created by man's forgetfulness of who he really is grows and that as the idols of his own making crumble one by one before his eyes, he will begin a true reform of himself, which always means a spiritual rebirth and through this rebirth attain a new harmony with the world of nature around him. Otherwise, it is hopeless to expect to live in harmony with that grand theophany which is virgin nature, while remaining oblivious and indifferent to the Source of that theophany both beyond nature and at the center of man's being.⁷⁸

In his recent *States of the Earth*, Mohamed Amer Meziane has similarly argued that

⁷⁶ Browning, Elizabeth Barret, *Aurora leigh: A poem in nine books*, New York: Thomas Crowell & Co., 1883, 265.

⁷⁷ Blake, William and Frederick Tatham, *The letters of William Blake: Together with a life*, ed. Archibald George Blomefield Russell, London: Methuen, 1906, 62.

⁷⁸ Nasr, *Man and nature* 9. See Meziane, Mohamed Amer, *The states of the earth: An ecological and racial history of secularization*, trans. Jonathan Adjemian, Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2024 for a complementary account of these dynamics of secularization, race, empire, and climate.

in trying to effect a transfer of sacredness from the heavens to the earth, secularization made the latter (and its administration) the only possible site for empires to be legitimated, thus opening an era of predation on nature [and “subhuman” people], of resource extraction and the unlimited exploitation of the subsoil in search of fossil energy.⁷⁹

Real human dignity is not possible in such a degraded and degrading context of desacralization. If only profit, power, and certain human lives are recognized as sacred, then to return to Sa‘dī’s poem, we do not deserve the name of “human.” As Fanon wrote, “When I search for Man in the technique and the style of [modern] Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders.”⁸⁰ Without *ḥayā’*, you have to look down and trample upon others in order to feel tall, with *ḥayā’*, your dignity comes directly from feeling small before the Divine Life you perceive in everyone and everything around you.

3 Conclusion

Although we did not have space to trace out the full intellectual and historical trajectory of the loss of *ḥayā’* (the awareness of the Divine, human, and non-human moral gaze), the shameful outcomes of these processes of desacralization (the loss of *īmān*) that characterize modernity should be clear: this attempted banishment of any truly transcendent principle or Divine gaze has resulted in an unprecedented shamelessness and divinization of the caprices of the wealthy and privileged. In a reversal of the *ḥadīth*, “If you feel no *ḥayā’*, then do as you wish,”⁸¹ in doing whatever we wish to whom or whatever we wish, modern, Promethean humanity has lost all sense of *ḥayā’*. This inability to perceive and value Divine Life in any but a small group of people has made a mockery of any talk of human equality or dignity. Paradoxically, in seeking to divinize itself, modernized humanity has debased itself: becoming a slave of its own desires and the brutal systems that cater to and incite them. The Quran admonishes us, “Have you considered one who takes his caprice as his god, God having led him astray knowingly, and sealed his hearing and his heart and placed a cover upon his sight? Who, then, will guide him after God?” (Q 45:23).

79 Mezziane, *The states of the earth* 11.

80 Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* 312.

81 Al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d., *al-adab*, 78, no. 147.

As political theologian Marika Rose writes, describing these deformations of the great chain of being,

Disenchantment [and secularization] is not so much about the disappearance of magic and mystery so much as their transformation. It is about the violent destruction of old social and metaphysical bonds which tied people to one another and to the world around them in order to bind them to new masters who were appropriating for themselves both legal and sovereign power—to nation states and imperial powers and ideals.⁸²

These new ideals transform or deform the old “metaphysical bonds” of religion (which in St. Augustine’s poetic etymology, comes from *re-ligare*, to re-bind or reconnect).⁸³ Hence the heretical abominations of genocidal manifest destiny, Sunday church lynchings, the prosperity gospel, and the longstanding marriage of white nationalism, American exceptionalism, climate change denialism, and Christianity in the context of the United States. As Eugene McCarragher argues in his *Enchantments of mammon*, “Under capitalism, money occupies the ontological throne from which God has been evicted.”⁸⁴

Unfortunately, many Muslim societies have suffered a similar fate, “following their caprices away from the truth” (Q 5:48) down the lizard holes of modernity, vying more with Euro-American models in piling up wealth, exploiting the vulnerable, and degrading the environment than in “good deeds” (Q 5:48). And to paraphrase Lady Macbeth, without serious repentance, “all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten these greedy hands!” By contrast, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ declared, “He is not a believer whose stomach is filled while his neighbor is hungry”⁸⁵ and “seek out the vulnerable for me, for you are only

82 Rose, Marika, “Decolonizing disenchantment,” in *Contending Modernities*, 1 September 2020.

83 As Walter Benjamin noted, “Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West ..., until it reached the point where Christianity’s history is essentially that of its parasite—that is to say, of capitalism.” Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” 291. Despite the many leading Christian intellectuals from Simone Weil to MLK Jr. to David Bentley Hart who have strongly opposed the depredations of predatory capitalism, the fact is that whereas the Church once regulated the market, market forces have long exceeded the Church’s control and even determine many aspects of the way of life and worldviews of even the most devout believers. Usury, once outlawed by the Church, is now a virtually unavoidable part of life for almost all Western Christians.

84 McCarragher, Eugene, *The enchantments of mammon: How capitalism became the religion of modernity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019, 11.

85 Al-Bukhārī, *al-Adab al-mufrad, al-jār*, 6, no. 112.

given provision and divine support due to your care for the vulnerable,"⁸⁶ and his companion, Bilāl, recounted that he ﷺ would spend all of his money every single day, and even borrow money, in order to clothe and feed those around him.⁸⁷ Before such an example, most of us can only be ashamed.

For most of us spiritually burdened with wealth, instead of "walking humbly upon the earth" (Q 25:63), our large collective ecological footprints and the unsustainable environmental and human costs of "everyday" luxuries like iPhones and cars have us "selling the signs of God," (Q 9:9) the precious gift of the wondrous diversity and harmony of our natural world, and the various human and non-human languages and cultures therein (Q 30:22), "for a paltry price" (Q 9:9) of material comforts. We cause "corruption on the earth," (Q 2:11) and the "land and sea" (Q 30:41), and call it "righteousness" (Q 2:11). This tragic and conjoined loss of *īmān* (faith) and *ḥayā'* is also summarized in Sura Yā' Sīn: "The word has indeed come due for most of them, for they have no faith. Truly We have put shackles upon their necks, and they are up to their chins, so that they are stiff-necked. And We placed a barrier before them and a barrier behind them and veiled them; so they see not" (Q 36:7–9). As explained above, the loss of faith (*īmān*), of the perception or even belief in that which is unseen by the senses and reason (*al-ghayb*) resulted in the stiff-necked loss of humility and shame (*ḥayā'*), veiling the eye of the heart that can perceive the signs of God and recognize the living moral gaze in all creation, both human and non-human. For "truly it is not the eyes that go blind, but it is hearts within breasts that go blind" (Q 22:46). When the mirror of *ḥayā'* is removed, we cannot even see ourselves, let alone others. The corruption of the best is the worst, and anyone questioning our role as *khalīfa* (God's vicegerent) need only consider our track record of killing off other species and our destabilizing effects on the planet's balance and harmony. The only things that could perhaps compete with us when we're not living up to our dignity are the meteors and volcanoes that wiped out the dinosaurs. As Rūmī wrote,

The crown of *We have honoured* [the children of Adam] is on your head;
the necklace of *We have given you* [Kawthar] hangs on your breast.

86 Al-Tirmidhī, Abū 'Īsā Muḥammad b. 'Īsā, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d., *al-jihād*, 23, no. 1702.

87 Al-Sijistānī, *Sunan, al-kharāj*, no. 3500. Al-Ghazālī said, "The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, was the most generous of people. He would not pass the night if he had a gold or silver coin with him. If he had any surplus and he could find no one to give it to and nighttime suddenly arrived, he would not retire to his house until he donated it to whoever needed it." Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, ii, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1982, 2:360.

Man is the substance, and the celestial sphere is his accident;
 all things are the branch or the step of a ladder: he is the goal.
 O you whose slaves are reason and intelligence
 how can you sell yourself so cheaply?⁸⁸

In contrast to this stiff-necked and blind callousness that has sold our dignity so cheaply, Ibn 'Arabī articulates a radically different way of life, characterized by a *ḥayā'* that stems from the awareness of Divine life of the Alive (*al-Ḥayy*) pervading all things:

Even though the rational thinkers and the common people say that something in the cosmos is neither alive nor an animal, in our view God gave every such thing, when He created it, the innate disposition to recognize and know Him. Each is alive and speaks rationally in glorifying its Lord. The faithful perceive this through their faith, and the folk of unveiling perceive it in its actual reality Someone may come to know that there is no existent thing that is not alive and speaking. In other words, there is nothing that is not a rational/speaking animal, whether it is called inanimate, plant, or dead. This is because there is nothing, whether or not it stands by itself, that does not glorify its Lord in praise, and this attribute belongs only to something that is described as alive.⁸⁹

The Shaykh al-Akbar concludes that whoever witnesses the reality of the life of all things will thus be full of shame at all times, whether around other people or in seclusion, for it is impossible to be alone. Even if you could escape other things by floating in empty space, you would have shame before your bodily members, since you know that they witness whatever you do and will testify before God on the Day of Judgement as to how you used them. Connecting this intense level of *ḥayā'* before all living things (which is all things, including one's own body parts) with the profound realization of one's own humility and abasement before God, and therefore awareness of God, Ibn 'Arabī writes of one who has realized this that "there is no one among God's servants more

88 Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Mathnawī-yi Ma'nawī*, Tehran: Chāpkhāna-yi Dānishgāh, 2013, Book 5, 3573–3574.

89 The beginning of this passage reads, "The name Alive is an essential name of the Real—glory be to Him! Therefore, nothing can emerge from Him but living things. So, all the cosmos is alive, for indeed the nonexistence of life, or the existence of something in the cosmos that is not alive, has no divine support, but every contingent thing must have a support. So, what you consider to be inanimate is in fact alive" (qtd. in Chittick, William C., "The wisdom of animals," in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 46.1 (2009), 32).

felicitous than he, and no one with more knowledge of God's mysteries through unveiling."⁹⁰ Thus the fullness of human flourishing and dignity for Ibn 'Arabī lies in the humble and *ḥayā'*-ful recognition of Divine Life (*al-ḥayāt*) all around oneself.

This kind of spiritual renewal, the methods of which are eloquently described in the writings of the Sufi and other esoteric traditions (including many works by Prof. Nasr) and embodied in its exemplars, must be the foundation for any attempt to restore true dignity to humanity. Large-scale socio-political and economic reforms are certainly necessary, but not sufficient to deal with the tremendous consequences of desacralization, since they address only the symptoms, but not the metaphysical and spiritual roots of our current crises. The desacralization of nature was necessary for the emergence of our current world system, and without a radical change in what we hold sacred, what we are willing to sacrifice for, we will continue to merely rearrange the deck chairs on our sinking Titanic. To those who think such spiritual renewal on a collective level is impractical, I would point out the fact that our modern systems of learning and labor are currently initiating us en masse into moral turpitude and spiritual torpor. I believe this fact will become increasingly clear with time, as the consequences of climate change and colonial inequalities become more and more apparent, revealing the necessity of turning back from the madness of the rejection of *ḥayā'*. As Sura al-Rūm says, "Corruption has appeared on the land and sea because of what people's hands have earned, that He may let them taste some of what they have done, that haply they might return" (Q 30:41). "Indeed the false is ever vanishing" (Q 17:81), so Nature and ultimately the Truth that animates it will have the last word, the question is whether or not we can decouple ourselves from our cruel falsehoods or will fade away with them.

Only a revival of *ḥayā'* in its most profound sense can lead to the revival and preservation of and return to a sacred and truly dignified mode of living, as expressed beautifully in the following poem quoted in al-Qushayrī's *Risāla*:

[It is] as if one watchman stands guard over my thoughts,
While another watches over my sight and my tongue.
Since I saw you, whenever my eyes see
something that displeases you, I say [to myself]:
"They (the watchmen) must have spotted me."
Not a single word addressed to someone other than you
has come out of my mouth without me saying to myself:

90 Chittick, "The wisdom of animals"36.

“They must have overheard me.”
 And not a single thought about anyone other than you has occurred to
 me
 Without them restraining me from it.
 The speeches of sincere friends have wearied me,
 And I have withheld from them my sight and my tongue.
 It is not renunciation that turns me away from them,
 Rather, I see only you wherever I turn.⁹¹
And wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God (Q 2:115).

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91 Knysh and Eissa (ed. and trans.), *Al-Qushayrī’s epistle* 104.

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