

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Soul – Mirror of the Invisible World

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I asked a child who was carrying a lighted candle, "Where does this light come from?" The child blew out the candle and asked me, "Tell me where it has gone and I will tell you where it came from".

Shaykh Sinai, teacher of Mevlana Rumi

What makes us human? Is it our physical body? The same body which with all of its water content, iron, phosphorus and mineral content is worth less than five dollars in the open market? Is it the absence of a tail from our backs or the size of our skulls? Some "scientists" would have us believe that this is so. Yet, these same "scientists" have no explanation for the beauty that we see in the world, the love we experience, the sense of justice that motivates us. Just because the "scientists" cannot explain love and hate, are we convinced that there is no such thing as love and hate? The answer is a resounding no.

What makes us human is our attributes. These are the attributes of beauty and truth, harmony and rhythm, speech and intelligence, love and hate, justice and injustice, our longing for Divine Grace and the peace that comes with it. It is in the search for these attributes that we have to search for our common humanity.

And where are these attributes located? Are they located in our skin? In our eyes? In the cells of our brain? No, the skin, the eyes and the cells of our brain die when the body perishes, but justice and injustice, love and hate, beauty and truth live on. The attributes we are searching for are not attributes of the physical body. They are attributes of the *Nafs*. The *Nafs* is a Qur'anic term whose approximate translation is the soul or the Self. It connotes the essence the "I".

To deny the *Nafs* is to deny the attributes which make us human. It is to take away our essential humanity and reduce us to the level of the beast. Can we deny that we love and hate? Can we deny that we fight for justice and resist injustice? Can we deny that we smell the rose and enjoy poetry?

Certain attributes of the soul are self-evident. It is not physical, in the sense that we cannot describe it through geometry, or take its picture with a Japanese camera. The fact that we cannot capture it in a camera does not negate its existence. Can we take a picture of love?

Attributes are qualities that are not necessarily physical. *The soul itself is hidden from the physical world but it makes its presence felt through its attributes.* The science of the soul deals with an understanding and description of its attributes.

In this book we have used the Qur'an as the source for an understanding of the soul. The Qur'an is the Book of Signs that makes things clear. It is a book that leads men and women from the depths of darkness to fountains of light. It invites men and women to observe, to reflect, to think, to exercise judgment and it asserts that such observation, reflection and thinking will confirm revelation, not negate it.

The *Nafs(soul)* is the mirror of the invisible world and the medium for cognition and knowledge. It is tragic that this cognitive self, the *Nafs*, is absent from the sciences as they are taught. In *Eranos Jharbuch*, Karl Jung wrote:

"All science is a function of the soul, in which all knowledge is rooted The soul is the greatest of all miracles. It is the conditio sine qua non of the world as an object It is extremely astonishing that the Western world, apart from very rare exceptions, seems to have so little appreciation of this being so. The flood of external objects of cognizance has made the subject of all cognizance withdraw to the background, often to apparent non-existence." (*Eranos Jahrbuch*, 1946, p 398)

In what follows, we will present some attributes of the soul as they are revealed in the Qur'an. An exposition of these attributes will help us understand our own innate humanness.

Attributes of the Soul

The soul is universal. All men and women, irrespective of their race, color, nationality or the historical times when they lived, are endowed with it.

*"O Humankind! Be conscious of your Lord
Who created you from a Single Nafs,
Created of like nature your spouses.
And from them twain,
Scattered like seeds,
Countless men and women.
Be conscious of God, through Whom
You derive your mutual rights,
And honor the wombs that bore you,
For God is always close to you."
Qur'an (4:1)*

Certain truths are self-evident. Yet, it is astonishing how humankind forgets these self-evident truths and either demands proofs for them, or denies them. One such truth is that all men and women are created alike, are of like nature and are brothers and sisters unto one another. This does not mean that all humans look alike, or that they are equal. It means that they share the same attributes, namely they love, appreciate beauty, struggle for justice, possess a sense of balance and proportion and have an equal inclination for the Divine. They are united by their common humanity.

There have been long periods in history when these self-evident truths were denied. The Romans, for instance, believed they were destined to rule the world and that it was their right to enslave those who opposed them. The Nazis preached the philosophy of racial superiority. The term "white man's burden"

was used in the nineteenth century to justify European domination over the continents of Asia and Africa. Similarly, in the fifteenth century, books were written in North Africa to “prove the superiority of the black man”. Ibn Fadlan’s description (circa 1490 CE) of the Nordic tradesman on the Volga River is a case in point.

Even a cursory survey of history would show that such beliefs are contrary to observation. All races and nationalities have produced men and women who have achieved greatness, as well as some who were notorious. All races and nationalities have their day in the sun, enjoy a refined culture and a high level of prosperity, only to lose it at other times. Blossoms do spring forth from the dust and today’s fertilizer provides energy for the crimson rose that blooms tomorrow.

What does it mean to say that the human *Nafs* (*Soul*) is universal? It means that all men and women, regardless of their race, color, language and the historical context of their times, are endowed with a *Nafs*, and the *Nafs* of all humans has similar attributes. We offer below some examples to illustrate this observation.

Example 1: In the ruins of Palenque in South-Eastern Mexico, a series of arches adorn the ancient buildings. The arches are high and triangular in shape. Some of these arches are decorated and some are not, but the basic triangular arch type construction is used again and again to carry the load of the roof and to give an imposing, yet pleasing, appearance to the buildings. These buildings were erected by the Mayans between the seventh and ninth centuries in the classic period of their civilization.

On the other side of the earth, in the deserts of Central Asia, there survive a number of *madrassas* (schools) and *caravansarais* (rest houses for travelers) built by the Seljuk Turks. The arches on these buildings are high and triangular in shape. Like the arches in the ruins of Palenque, those in the school buildings of Central Asia are sometimes decorated and sometimes not. But they always impart an imposing, yet pleasing, appearance to the buildings.

Here are two civilizations flourishing four centuries apart, in worlds which had no known contact with each other. Yet, the great engineers of the Mayans and of the Seljuk Turks built, shaped and erected similar arches to carry the loads in their buildings. Is this similarity accidental, or is it a sign of universality of man’s *Nafs*? The *Nafs* is the source of human knowledge and inventiveness. Doesn’t this example show a similarity in the attributes of men and women whether they were Mayan or Seljuk, living four centuries apart in worlds not known to each other?

Example 2: The Mayan civilization developed in the jungles of Guatemala and South Eastern Mexico. Great were the achievements of this civilization. The Mayans built monumental structures, tombs and observatories. One of their greatest achievements was the invention of the zero. The Mayan mind was fascinated by the mysteries of time. The cyclic character of natural phenomenon must have posed a riddle to their sensitive intellect. Life and death, the change of seasons, the periodic rotation of the stars, all these must have presented them with a mystery and a challenge. The Mayan mind accommodated this mystery by resolving the rhythm of nature into its basic structural components. Death must be a negation of life, so they thought, and night a negation of day. But if an entity passes from positive to negative, there is of necessity a moment of nothingness during this passage. This moment of nothingness denotes the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. They designated this moment by the mathematical zero.

On the other side of the globe, in ancient India, inquisitive minds were fascinated with the cyclic phenomenon of nature. The cycle of life and death challenged them as much as it did the Mayans of America. If life passes through death, they reasoned, it must experience a moment of nothingness. They

called this moment, *su-na-ya* in Sanskrit, meaning a period of rest. The word *su-na-ya* became *ca-pha-ra* when it traveled to the Muslim Middle East in the ninth century. From there, it traveled to Europe in the twelfth century and became cipher or zero. The ancient people of India evolved the concept of zero just as did the Mayans in a different continent, a different climate, at a different time.

Why is it that different people living in different continents completely unknown to each other come up with the same inventions? Why is it that they receive the same enlightenment? Whether it is in mathematics, science or the arts, history is replete with examples where people of different color, creed and origin have answered identical questions in identical ways. The voice of enlightenment speaks the same language whether it speaks in Japanese, Javanese, Mayan or English. This universal language is independent of climate, culture, time and place. What is the secret of this? Why should there be a commonality to the innermost experience of mankind? Isn't this evidence that the *Nafs* of men and women, irrespective of their origin, time and place, has similar attributes?

Example 3: Many are the examples from the history of science where different investigators in different parts of the world have arrived at identical solutions to the same problems. Marconi and Papov are both credited with the invention of the radio. The one was Italian, the other a Russian. The universality of the inventive process sometimes shows itself as the rediscovery of an idea long lost. For instance, the techniques of making "Damascus steel" which were perfected by the Arabs in the ninth century were lost for almost a thousand years and were rediscovered in the United States in the 1950s with the study of "super-plasticity" of metals.

The yearning of humankind has been the same whether we examine the third century BC or the twenty-first century AD. Whether one studies the lyrics of the Greeks, the sonnets of Shakespeare, or the ballads of the hill people, one finds the same longing for love, friendship and the inner turmoil of the soul. The attributes of humankind have not changed over the centuries. It is only the environment and the conveniences of life that have changed.

Example 4: The most striking example of the similarity in the attributes of the *Nafs* is to be found in the innermost insights of mankind into the eternal Truth. It is in the area of illumination, of infusion of knowledge, that we find the most striking evidence for the universality and similarity of the attributes of the *Nafs*. The commonality in the message of the Prophets is there for all to see. Is it a coincidence that Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammed, living in different ages, climates, cultures, speaking different languages, declared the same Truth? Doesn't this commonality show that the *Nafs* of humankind transcends time, language, climate and culture and the Source for Truth is one?

*"The illusions of this world (deceive you),
The Hereafter- that is better and ever lasting,
Indeed! This is the Message of the earliest Books,
The Books of Abraham and Moses."
Qur'an (87:16-18)*

Let us briefly examine the message of these Prophets. Abraham was born in Ur, Mesopotamia, in a culture given to the worship of the Moon, the Sun and forces of nature. As a young man, he heard the call to Divine Truth. He spent days reflecting on the condition of man. He asked himself: "Who am I? Who is my Lord?" He saw the twinkle of a distant star. "There is my Lord", he thought. But the star set. And Abraham knew that which set was not worthy of his worship. Then, he saw the moon, shining in its alluring reflection. And he thought, "This is my God". But the lure of moonlight faded before the brilliance of dawn. And Abraham knew that which was eclipsed was not worthy of his worship. Then, the sun came up in its resplendent glory, illuminating the world, and Abraham was convinced that it

was his God. But the sun too set and Abraham knew he had seen but another star. His eyes roamed the skies searching for that One Reality. Then, in a moment of illumination, he was rewarded with the experience that God was beyond all relationships, that this One Reality never set, never eclipsed, was not the subject of the laws of material existence, but indeed was the Creator of all relationships.

Moses was born in Egypt. He was brought up in the palace of the Pharaoh, under the very nose of an oppressor. The call of universal justice was infused into the consciousness of Moses. He was impelled to challenge and confront the Pharaoh who had construed justice to be his province and had confused it with privileges for a few and slavery for many. The forces of truth and falsehood met and it was falsehood that was shown up. The Pharaoh was infuriated. He could not tolerate this insolent challenge to his authority. Arrogance compelled him to pursue Moses across the sea, there to drown in the towering waves of the ocean.

While he was wandering in the Sinai, Moses came face to face with the Law. Thus, a thousand years after Abraham, the Supreme Law was infused into the consciousness of Moses, as it was into the consciousness of Abraham.

Joseph, a handsome young man, was blessed with the gift of vision. He could see what was hidden from ordinary men. His consciousness, sensitive, receptive, could read dreams as if it was reading an open book. This gift of prophecy brought him the envy of his brothers who sought to get rid of him by dumping him in a well. As he lay in the darkness of that well, a caravan of traders passed by, picked him up and sold him to a nobleman in Egypt. There, his charms caught the attention of the nobleman's wife and she tried to seduce him. But the eyes of Joseph had seen the beauty of a far more compelling vision than the beauty of a woman. Joseph was unmoved. His *Nafs* would not surrender. The drama involving a struggle between the passions of a woman, the jealousy of brothers, and the Divine passion of Joseph's soul, was played out step by step, until earthly passion and jealousy lost out and the beauty of the Supreme Being dawned on all participants.

Jesus was born at a historical time, when moral corruption was rampant. The temple of God had become a house of commerce. Man had forgotten the Law brought by Moses and had transgressed all bounds. Into this corrupt world came Jesus. His *Nafs* knew the Law and the Gospel. It was open to the Source from which Abraham, Moses and Joseph had received illumination. The same Message was written into his Person and it shone so brightly that it illuminated the whole world.

Muhammed, born into a distinguished family in Mecca, saw the destitute condition of his people. Man had forgotten who he was and had depraved himself to bow down before stones. Muhammed felt for the fallen condition of man, for the women who were exploited, for the needy whose cry went unheard. Often, he retired to the cave of Hira, there to contemplate the condition of man. Many were the months he spent in solitude and prayer until one day, in the embrace of Angel Gabriel, his consciousness reverberated to the call:

*“Recite! In the name of your Lord, Who created,
Created man out of a mere fertilized egg,
Proclaim! For your Lord is most bountiful,
He, Who taught by the Pen,
Taught man that which he knew not.”*
Qur'an (96:1-5)

Each of these men, born in different places, at different times, in completely different surroundings, transcended their specific backgrounds and became vehicles for the Supreme Law. They all drank from the same cup and spoke the same language. There was obviously no contact between these great souls. None of them attended a formal school. Indeed, Muhammed was an unlettered man. Moses grew up in a palace subject to the indoctrination of the Pharaoh. Abraham saw his father worship idols. Yet, these sons of Adam, living at different times, heard the same Message. No letters were transmitted, no information was exchanged, or books mailed, from one to the other.

The lives of the Prophets demonstrate that genealogy is not important in the realization of the Truth. It does not matter who begot whom in proving that prophethood belongs to a certain lineage. Prophethood is a gift from God. He bestows it upon whom He pleases.

The infusion of identical knowledge in men of different origin at different times in history confirms that the Source of this wisdom is one. And it also confirms that the *Nafs* of man has similar attributes. The *Nafs* and the similarity of its attributes bind mankind into a common brotherhood before God. The elements of love and hate, passion and reason, forgiveness and revenge, pride and prejudice, obedience and rebellion, construction and destruction, right and wrong, are to be found in all men and women whatever be their color, origin, race and chronological age. Each of us is a temple of joy and sorrow, laughter and tears. Each of us is *human*.

The attributes of the *Nafs* are uniquely human. The animals, birds, cells, atoms, neutrons and protons do not have these attributes. The *Nafs* distinguishes humankind from the rest of creation.

The *Nafs* is immutable. No two humans have the same soul.

The soul is not limited by the physical world and has no physical dimensions. We cannot measure the soul in meters and kilometers and we cannot divide it up and package it in containers.

The *Nafs* exists and is knowable through its properties and its attributes. Yet it is hidden from the physical world. And what are the attributes that make it knowable? Some of these attributes are:

- The *Nafs* is the seat of cognition and knowledge.
- It is the seat of feelings.
- It has a sense of right and wrong.
- It has a sense of justice,
- It has a sense of beauty, order and proportion.
- It is endowed with the faculties of reason, speech and intelligence.

These attributes are undeniable. Every man and woman is endowed with these attributes. Every man and woman is endowed with a *Nafs*.

No two persons have the same *Nafs*. If they did, they would see, hear, feel and think in an identical manner. This is contrary to observation. Every person knows he or she is different from every other person. Every human being is similar yet different.

The soul of every human is unique. The similarity of our attributes does not take away from our uniqueness. All human beings are endowed with the faculty of speech but no two human beings think and speak in an identical manner. All men and women love and hate but the love or hatred of each human being differs in degree, intensity, time and place.

To say that the *Nafs* is immutable is to assert that all humans are individuals. Every human being, man and woman, is an individual. Every man and woman is resplendent in his/her own right, different but similar, a witness before God.

The uniqueness of each *Nafs* confirms its individual responsibility. Every soul reaps the consequences of its actions. *"No soul shall bear the burden of another"* (Qur'an 2: 286). Every man and woman is endowed with the trust of free will and is to exercise this trust in justice and truth. For this exercise it faces Divine Judgment.

The *Nafs* is endowed with the faculty of *Bayan* (Speech and Intelligence)

*(God) Most Gracious
Bestowed knowledge of the Qur'an
Created Humankind
Endowed it with the faculty of Bayan".
Qur'an (55:1-4)*

Like the first rays of the sun on a beautiful morning dispelling the darkness of the night, the Qur'an dispels the ignorance of man and makes manifest his exalted position in the cosmos. It is as if a polished mirror is brought before his soul and man is able to see and recognize his true self through his own reflection.

The Qur'an makes reference to the creation of humankind and to the faculty of *bayan*. The word *bayan* is the faculty of language and communication. Language is not merely the ability to understand or speak a specific language such as English, Arabic, Urdu, Mandarin, or Keswahili. It is that universal, human ability to transmit and receive ideas, to interpret, analyze, titillate, rearrange, condense, transform, integrate and build that magnificent tree, the tree of knowledge. This ability is independent of the surface structure, grammar, or syntax of the language.

Let us consider a simple sentence, "I love you". In this sentence, "I" and "you" are coupled by the verb "love". The verb is the rhythm, the motor that vibrates the subject and object together. Now consider the sentence, "You are loved by me". Although this is an objective statement, the faculty of *bayan* transforms the meaning of this new sentence to be identical to the first. The position of the subject and object does not influence the nature of coupling between "I" and "you". In both cases, the same motor or rhythm connects you and me. The surface structure of the language has changed. The deep structure of thought has not. There is intuitive equivalence between the two sentences.

In language, ideas are connected by strings and moved, juxtaposed and vibrated by verbs. They are then spoken as sounds, transmitted through the air as compression waves, received by the auditory faculty, recognized by the cognitive faculty and transformed and interpreted in the mind of the listener. A play on the surface structure of language does not influence the perception of the deep structure because of the universal transformational faculty in humans which interprets different surface structure of language according to the deeper, basic structure of the ideas they represent. Example: Many are ways in which "I" can be coupled with "you". It may be an interrogative statement "Do I love you?" It may be an interrogative, indirect statement: "Are you loved by me?" The surface structure of these sentences is different, but the deeper structure is the same and the listener immediately recognizes this.

The faculty of *bayan* is not limited to the auditory faculty. People who are deaf use sign language. Sailors on the high seas used flags to communicate with each other until the advent of radio and wireless. The faculty of *bayan* is not limited by the ability to read. Some of the most eloquent speakers are illiterate. It is

not lost due to a loss of sight. Blind people can read with the help of Braille. It is not confined to the use of an alphabet. A no-smoking sign is recognized as such without the use of an alphabet. Mathematicians use their own notations to communicate abstract thoughts. Armies have used various signals since times immemorial. Body language is used to communicate friendship and love, anger and hatred. Sometimes, a great deal is said by saying nothing. A noble deed speaks volumes without saying a word.

There are almost half a million languages spoken in the world, some with a vocabulary of hundreds of thousands of words. Between them, human languages are a compendium of almost a billion words, each word expressing a thought, an idea, the transformation of an idea or the extension of an idea. There are written, well developed languages such as English, Mandarin and Farsi and there are languages that do not have a written alphabet such as those spoken by the people of Papua, New Guinea. Amongst all languages the most powerful is the symbolic language used in revelation. A language that speaks about the condition of man must necessarily transcend time and space. It should address itself to men and women at different times and space. It should address itself to men and women of all nations, at all times. It should make sense to the scholar from Harvard as it does to the hill people of Assam. It should address itself to those who lived in the tenth century as well as those who will live in the twenty-fifth century. Divine language must transcend the cultural and historical bias inherent in human language. That is why the Qur'an speaks to man in *Ayats*, namely Symbols or Signs.

And what is an *Ayat*? It is a Word where the Word is bigger than itself. It is self-sustained eloquence. It is wisdom caught in the Word. It is sound that makes all creation vibrate. It is divine music.

An *Ayat* is like a lamp. It illuminates. It guides. It leads. It elevates. As such it is not a sentence or a paragraph. It is the self-luminescent Word. It is Light.

An *Ayat* is a Sign. It is a Sign to eternal truth. It beckons the human soul to transcend the myriad distractions of this earthly existence and to aspire to the eternal truths that it has forgotten. It invites humans to keep their horizons high and their visions clear even as they struggle through the obstacles that hinder their vision.

The recital of an *Ayat* awakens a beautiful world which exists but of which man knows not. It is as if a blind man suddenly regains his vision. As his eyes admit the first rays of the sun, he discerns in the distance the bare silhouette of a tree, the haze of the sky, the movement of a hand. As more light is admitted, the beauty and grandeur of all that surrounds him becomes manifest. He sees the wonderful structure of the firmament, experiences the world of color and form, and observes the fauna of creation. With every sight he thirsts for more. He strives to catch a glimpse of things that are far away and exerts himself to see what is near. In slow measure, it dawns on him that no matter how far he sees, there is so much more beyond it. And, no matter how close he looks, there are vistas smaller than his sight can resolve.

Like the eye, an *Ayat* is a window. It is a window for those who see. It is a window which lets in Divine Light, the Light that guides the human soul and elevates man to his noble destiny. The dilation of this window is infinite, its extent undetermined. And for this reason, what it shows is at once of this world and beyond it.

The ability to receive and transform symbols into thoughts and ideas and to express them in language is an innate, universal human ability. It is not a function of the cultural or technological development of a society. The professor of grammar from Princeton and the bushman from Papua both possess this ability.

The Qur'anic term *bayan* is not limited to language and communication. Birds and animals, bees and insects, also communicate. Man not only communicates, he integrates ideas and builds upon them. If you tell a man he needs one gallon of gasoline to drive a hundred kilometers, he will immediately know that he needs two gallons to drive two hundred kilometers. If you tell an engineer what the gravity of the earth is and familiarize him with Orbital Mechanics he can tell you how fast you have to take off in order to escape the gravity of the earth and go to the moon. Man is endowed with that unique ability to combine, develop, question, transform, extrapolate, shake, vibrate, excite and generate ideas. Like the explosion of a star, ideas burst forth, illuminating the consciousness of man, awakening him to the possibility of that which is unseen. Or, like an ancient tree, they branch out into a thousand branches, each branch shooting a thousand leaves, each leaf a universe unto itself. *This* is the faculty of *bayan*. This is the ability that all humans share whether they are black or white, yellow or brown, whether they live in Mongolia or Madagascar, whether they speak English, French, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu or Zulu.

The faculty of *bayan* is speech, intelligence and the intellect. Apes and monkeys, zebras and elephants, swans and *minah* birds do not have this faculty. Apes have not produced a Rumi or a Shakespeare, an Aristotle, or an Ibn-Khaldun. Elephants do not shoot rockets at the moon. The faculty of *bayan* is the gate that separates the world of humans from the kingdom of the beast.

The *Nafs* is endowed with a sense of beauty, order and proportion. Great art and architecture reflect this sense of beauty and harmony.

*“By the Nafs
And the sense of order and proportion bestowed upon it”.*
Qur'an (91:7)

Amidst the apparent disorder of the world there is harmony, beauty, order and proportion. The search for this beauty has beckoned man from the earliest times. Humankind has struggled to grasp the essential harmony underlying the cosmos and to express it in the language of mathematics, art and geometry. From the cave man to the space scientist one finds this innate, universal human desire to capture the order and proportion in creation and to make it accessible to the senses.

Mankind is able to grasp the order and proportion in the created world because it is a reflection of the sense of order and proportion bestowed upon the *Nafs*.

As an example, let us consider the universal human longing for symmetry. Men and women appreciate symmetry because many of their primary experiences have symmetry built into them. Examples are inhaling and exhaling of breath, the heartbeat, the rise and fall of blood pressure, the contrast between sleep and being awake, life and death. Symmetry is also manifest in nature. Examples are night and day, the change of seasons, the rise and fall of the oceans, heat and cold, light and darkness. There is an inherent correspondence between the symmetry manifest in the created world and the symmetry bestowed upon the *Nafs*. Human existence beats to a symmetrical rhythm. Therefore, men and women have an instinctive longing for symmetry. It is expressed in the universal language of music, art, geometry and mathematics. Men and women instinctively respond to rhythm because it is an expression of symmetry. Whether it is the rhythm of the Nigerian drum, the note of a lute, or the composition of a *sarod*, it is an expression of the same universal longing.

Other examples of symmetry are available from everyday life. Babies hear their mother's heart beat when they are in the womb. A child falls asleep on his father's chest because of the resonance of his breathing. These are universal experiences whether one is a prince or a pauper, a socialite from New York or a bushman from Australia. It is this longing for symmetry that bestows upon the Taj Mahal its

universal appeal. A peasant as well as a professor of geometry relates to the Taj in the same instinctive manner. And it is the same longing that we experience in the Great Mosque of Cordoba when we look at the carpet of endless columns laid out as far as the eye can see. A geometrically laid out garden or a beautiful building is an invitation to the soul. All men and women relate to its beauty instinctively, immediately.

The longing for symmetry and the ability to express it in art, music and architecture is a uniquely human ability. It is a characteristic of the *Nafs*.

On the other hand, a longing for ambiguity is also a uniquely human characteristic. Men and women perceive ambiguity in things because their knowledge of the cosmos is imperfect. Ambiguity is an expression of the imperfection of knowledge. It presents men and women with a challenge to exercise their imagination and to reach out for visions that are beyond the immediate reach of their senses. Asymmetry is one form of ambiguity. An example is the human sense of time. Our sense of time is asymmetrical. We know the past but we do not know the future. This lack of knowledge challenges our imagination. We strive to understand time even when we do not understand it. Another example is the smile of Mona Lisa. The asymmetry in that painting is one aspect of its greatness. It invites the intellect to a plane higher than the visible.

These observations help us understand another attribute of the *Nafs*, namely the instinct. What is instinct? It is knowledge that was bestowed upon the soul or which it acquired through primordial experience but which it has forgotten. Just as a diamond gets covered with dust with the passage of time, the *Nafs* gets covered with the dust of time and it forgets what it knows. When it comes face to face with what it already knows this clutter is removed and it *instinctively* relates to what it sees.

The purpose of education is to remove the clutter from the soul so that it can see what it already knows. All knowledge is known to the soul. It was bestowed as a gift from the Creator. This is not metaphysics. It is science and art, geometry and mathematics, economics and technology. It is "research" and "discovery." To research is to engage in a strenuous exercise to polish the soul, to get away from pre-conceived notions, to ask, to experiment, to reason, to extrapolate, to exercise judgment and to remove the veil of ignorance that hides the truth from the soul.

Artists and architects in the classic Islamic period (750 – 1252 AD), understood the order and proportion bestowed upon the *Nafs* as a reflection of the underlying unity that pervades all creation. They took it upon themselves as a challenge to create a geometrical art form that captures this essential harmony and expresses it within the framework of their creed, namely, *Tawhid* (Oneness).

Tawhid, as expressed in *la ilaha il Allah* (there is none worthy of worship except God), is both a negation and an affirmation. It can also be translated as "There is no reality but the Reality". The negation confirms the finiteness of the created world. In this world, we observe that every living thing is born, grows in time, dies and is reabsorbed into primal matter. In geometry, the unfolding of the vast expanse of the universe from a single source can be represented by the movement of a point outward into space to create complex geometrical patterns. Similarly, the passing away of things and their re-absorption into primal matter, can be represented by the collapse of geometrical patterns into a single point. The negation in *Tawhid* asserts that nothing in the finite domain is worthy of worship. The affirmative part of *Tawhid* refers to Unity and Source. God, and God Alone, is the First Principle. He alone is the Source of all beauty, order and proportion. He alone is worthy of worship. Of the nature of God, one knows nothing. Man knows him only through His attributes, one of which is that He is the *Musawwir*, the owner of all art and the Creator of cosmic beauty.

Inspired by the doctrine of *Tawhid*, artists in the Classic Islamic period evolved an art form in which the order and proportion of the *Nafs* is reflected through geometry and rhythm. In this art form, one style of which is commonly referred to as *arabesque*, the manifest world is represented as an extension of a point, which is at once dimensionless and has dimensions. It reflected a desire to project the world of the senses into the supernal world.

This approach to art integrated the sacred and the secular and emphasized that all beauty is a reflection of the Unity of creation. In a secular culture, the natural and aesthetic arts are studied as separate and distinct from the sacred texts and knowledge is sought primarily for its practical unity. In this perspective, emphasis is on perspective, shape and form which are all purely physical properties. From the prism of a secular culture, the art of the Classic Islamic period may come across as decorative and an embellishment. Having separated the functional aspects of art from its spiritual content, a secular mind cannot grasp that great art (and architecture) is at once spiritual and secular. It has physical, intellectual, spiritual and psychic content. It leads the eye from the manifest world to the boundless supernal world of the soul and it expresses a basic and essential Unity. The Taj Mahal is magnificent not merely because of its shape and form but because it articulates eternal love. A visit to the Great Mosque of Cordoba elevates the soul not merely because of its architecture but because its endless columns are a reminder of the infinite compassion of the Divine and because the radiating double arches invite the *Nafs* to ascend to a higher plateau. The attempt to capture the supernal in the physical reaches its heights in sacred calligraphy, in manuscripts of the Qur'an, where the Word is given its appropriate weight through a combination of geometry, form and dynamic rhythm.

The ability to perceive order and proportion and to express it in art and architecture, is a unique attribute of the *Nafs*. No animal possesses this attribute. Apes and monkeys cannot build a Taj Mahal even if we give them a million years.

The *Nafs* is endowed with a sense of right and wrong. The drama of good and evil is played on the stage of the *Nafs*.

*“By the firmament
And its wonderful structure,
By the Nafs,
And the sense of order and proportion given it,
And its enlightenment
As to what is right, and what is wrong.
Truly, he (she) succeeds who purifies it,
And he (she) fails who corrupts it”.*
Qur'an (91: 5-10)

What is right and what is wrong? This question has been asked by all civilizations and the answer depends on the assumptions a civilization makes about the nature of man.

Consider the ancient Greeks. They were masters of logic and rational thinking. In the ideal kingdom of the Geeks, *Nomos* (the mind) is king. In this kingdom, what is right and what is wrong is decided by the mind, through cold logic, without emotion and without feeling.

There are many issues with this rational kingdom. First, it is available only to a few. It is an elitist kingdom. Only the cultivated, refined intellect of an Aristotle can aspire to this kingdom. The vast majority of men and women are excluded from it. Once elitism sets in, it becomes acceptable for the intellectuals to dominate and exploit the less gifted.

Second, even for superior intellects this kingdom is cold, devoid of all that makes life rich and beautiful. The landscape of this kingdom is barren, without color and warmth. Such a paradise is not even worth aspiring to.

Third, the question of right and wrong cannot be determined through argumentation and reason. There is no *a-priori* reason for an act to be good or bad. What is the reason to love? Is there a reason to hate? The Greeks, despite their mastery of logic and rational thought, were bogged down in questions of before and after, subject and object, axiom and proof. Without a *criterion* the question of right and wrong leads to endless discussions of what came before and what came after. The Greeks remained mired in these endless discussions.

Modern secular thought borrowed the assumptions of logic from the Greeks. The sacred is separated from the secular. Consequently, the question of right and wrong does not even arise. As an example, consider the materialists. For this group, the question of right and wrong is not even an ethical one. Man is considered nothing more than his material self, devoid of ethical purpose. What is right is what suits the exigencies of the moment. "There is no such thing as right and wrong; only thinking makes it so", sums up this philosophy. In the materialist world, ethics is self-interest, sin is fun and profit is the criterion for social good.

Without Divine Guidance man is forever at a loss, hemmed in concentric circles of darkness, a prisoner of endless arguments about before and after, subject and object, thesis and deduction. Only the intervention of Divine Guidance breaks this circle.

In the Qur'anic vision, the *Nafs* is the cognitive body for right and wrong. Such cognition, or knowledge, is bestowed by the Creator: "*By the Nafs, and its enlightenment as to what is right and what is wrong; truly, he succeeds who purifies it, and he fails that corrupts it*", *Qur'an*. There are two principles implicit in this declaration. The first is the principle of illumination. The second is the principle of receptivity of the *Nafs*.

The first principle states that the criterion for right and wrong originates from the Creator. The second principle clarifies an attribute of the soul and states that the soul has the ability to receive this illumination.

These two principles break the endless cycle of argumentation about subject and object and disputes about before and after. A sense of right and wrong is an attribute of the soul. The soul has the innate, universal ability to recognize righteousness and eschew evil. Men and women relate to what is right in the same sense that they relate to harmony, beauty, order and proportion. The difference between a believing soul and an unbelieving one, is that whereas a believer acknowledges Divine Guidance and is thankful for it, an unbeliever receives similar Guidance but denies it.

And what is the criterion for righteousness? The Qur'an answers this question:

*"It is not righteousness that you turn your faces
towards the East or the West
But it is righteousness to believe in God,
the Judgment Day,
the Angels, the Book and the Messengers,
to spend of your substance, out of love for Him,
for your kin,
for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer*

*for those who ask
and for the ransom of the slave,
to be steadfast in prayer,
and practice regular charity,
to fulfill the contracts which you have made,
to be firm and be patient in adversity,
through periods of panic.
Such are the people of Truth,
those who are conscious of the presence of God".
Qur'an, (2:177)*

In the Qur'anic vision, it is not righteousness merely to face the East or the West. Facing the East or the West suggests not only facing a certain direction, but also accepting and blindly following a philosophy, be it of the East or of the West. A vision about the condition of man and his relationship to the cosmos must be consistent with common sense and everyday observation. It should be equally applicable to all human beings. Merely quoting ancient philosophers, whether they be philosophers of China, India, Greece or Europe does not make us right.

One is righteous when one's vision is replete with Divine presence. The presence of God preempts the presence of lesser gods from the consciousness of man. These lesser gods may be powerful people, wealth, power or speculative philosophies that debase man and deny him the nobility that is rightfully his. Men and women need an anchor. When that anchor is not the Creator other anchors move in to take its place. Thus contemporary man chases the ghost of Darwin in search of his origin. He surrounds himself with conspicuous wealth and squanders it in abundance to satisfy his hedonistic inclinations. He accepts speculative theories about his condition which tell him that he is nothing more than his materialist self. He fears powerful men and tolerates injustice upon his own self and upon others. These are examples of lesser gods who have taken hold of man's *Nafs*. The presence of God liberates men and women from such lesser gods. Submission to the Divine protects the *Nafs* from submitting to anyone else.

The cosmos is replete with signs of His presence. To quote the Qur'an,

*"Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth,
In the alteration of the night and the day,
In the sailing of ships through the oceans
for the benefit of humankind,
In the rain which God sends down from the skies,
And the life which He gives therewith
to an earth that is dead,
In the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth, In the change of the winds
And the clouds which they capture
and propel between the sky and the earth,
Here indeed are Signs for a people
who are endowed with wisdom."
Qur'an (2: 164)*

It is righteousness to believe in the Judgment Day. Judgment is a necessary consequence of responsibility. Man is the only responsible agent created upon earth. He is the trustee of his volition, keeper of his own free will. He is the architect of his own destiny and will be judged by the consequences of his deeds. He dares the heavens and subjugates the earth. No other creature is entrusted

with a free will. To deny man his free will is to deny his essential humanness. Man is responsible and ultimate Judgment before the Creator follows as a logical consequence of this responsibility. To accept the Judgment Day is to accept responsibility for one's own actions and to govern those actions with equity and justice. It is to accept one's own innate humanity. Conversely, to deny the Judgment Day is to reject one's own humanness. Without a sense of responsibility, man is but an animal.

Time is a sense bestowed upon the *Nafs*. It is but a means to understand the drama of life. Space and time are related, as we well know from our current understanding of relativity. God transcends all relations and is beyond time and space. However, His attributes pervade the universe and it is through them that man understands his relationship with the Creator. Man is finite and what is finite cannot be at the same time infinite. The ascent of man to the heavens is a simile, which can be felt but cannot be expressed because language itself is bound by space and time. The Qur'an expresses this simile thus: "The Angels ascend to Him, a moment whereof is like a thousand years of your lifetime". All similes vanish before the simile of Divine Majesty.

The Book and the Messengers teach man what he knows not. Divine Guidance is necessary to break the logjam of endless arguments, repetitive logic and elliptic understanding. Without it, knowledge has no anchor as if floating in the air without a tether. With Guidance, knowledge finds a firm foundation and the arguments of logic and the reinforcements of observation begin to make sense.

The basis for ethics is not just belief. It includes action. It is in the world of man that righteousness finds its expression. Man is the architect of his own destiny, the maker of his own fortune. In the pursuit of this endeavor, he is entrusted with a free will and is provided with guidance. Whether or not he follows this guidance, it is his own choosing. When he chooses the path of righteousness, he prospers. When he chooses otherwise, he falters and suffers.

Righteousness is not rituals nor is it wrapped up in idle philosophy. The ascent of man lies through the world of man. It is when man injects himself into the process of history, shapes and molds it with equity and justice that he finds his fulfillment and his prosperity. "Spending of your substance" refers not merely to wealth. It includes the total human substance, consisting of one's abilities, time and faculties.

The sense of right and wrong is a uniquely human attribute. All men and women are endowed with this attribute. It is not an attribute that is found among the animals.

The *Nafs* of man is subject to the two opposing pulls of right and wrong. The pull towards righteousness comes from illumination, from the guidance of the Creator. The pull towards wrong originates in sources other than the Creator. Man is endowed with all the tools necessary to win the eternal battle between right and wrong. The stage for this battle is the *Nafs* of man. The contest between good and evil is fought *within* the soul. The Qur'an declares: "We created humankind in the best of molds". *The excellence of humankind lies in the attributes of its soul*. If man errs despite these attributes, it is his own undoing and he "abases himself to be the lowest of the low".

Thus, the soul is "the mirror of the invisible world". In it, all of God's creation is reflected and it is endowed with the capacity to "know" what it "sees" and to act upon it as the anointed regent of Divine Will.

Humankind stands alone among all creation, regal in its splendor, endowed with reason and armed with a free will to rule all that is between the heaven and earth.

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