

Mysticism East and West

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During recent years there has been a great debate about the clash of civilizations, which ultimately boils down to a clash between religions, because religions form the moral and spiritual basis of all civilizations. There is no doubt that there is a great deal of diversity and even fundamental differences between various different religions. It is an undeniable fact that established religions have given rise to many conflicts throughout history, but the main question is to what extent have those conflicts been based on fundamental religious differences and to what extent have they been due to political and historical differences? True interfaith work needs to be carried out with a full awareness of our differences and disagreements as well as our commonalities and similarities. Interfaith collaboration means to trust and respect one another enough to be able to differ, to be able to exchange unbiased and constructive criticism without wishing to trivialize other faiths or diminish mutual respect.

Even a cursory glance at the main teachings of the Eastern and the so-called Semitic or Abrahamic religions would reveal some basic differences between them.¹ Eastern religions generally believe in Monism or the Oneness of Being, and maintain that man will be ultimately united with God; while Semitic religions believe in Monotheism and maintain that God is and will always remain transcendent. Therefore, although man may attain God's presence, union with the divine essence will be impossible.

At the same time, although it would be inaccurate to suggest that all religions are identical in their outward teachings and their worldview, nevertheless, in the area of mysticism we have the greatest degree of unity and similarity of views among the mystics from different religious traditions. While religious

dogma and theology that are solely based on concepts and ideas create differences and disunity, the mystical understanding of the underlying reality of all religions can provide a basis of unity between them. Each mystical tradition speaks about the 'journey in God,' of intense longing for God and devotion of the soul to God, of surrender and purification, of renunciation and abandonment, through union in Love. It has been said that all mystics recognize one another, because they come from the same spiritual country.

The late Professor Cantwell-Smith of McGill University believed that religions could be divided into two parts: 'Faith,' which is a personal matter and concerns belief in spiritual values, and the other aspect of religion which he called 'accumulated tradition.'² Another way of putting this idea is to say that one can distinguish between the 'original revelations' as far as they could be understood by going to the original sources, and the 'accumulated traditions' and various interpretations to which the original teachings have been subjected. Naturally, the 'accumulated traditions' by which most religions are known today have been responsible for most of the differences between religions and also between the contemporary forms of religions and what their founders originally revealed.

Additionally, one can make a further distinction, between the esoteric and the exoteric aspects of religions, between the mystical essence and the outward and time-bound teachings and laws. Most religious scriptures have made references to the distinctions between the literal texts and their deeper meanings, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."³ The Koran refers to *Muhkamat* and *Mutishabihat*.⁴ *Muhkamat* refers to the plain texts that could be understood by all, and *Mutishabihat* refers to the allegorical and symbolic meanings of the text that can be understood only by those who are 'firmly grounded in knowledge.' This is why religious scriptures exhort the people to read the verses with the eye of the soul. They speak about the need for awakening, for enlightenment, for proper understanding, for opening one's eyes, one's ears, and one's heart.

This shows that the true meaning of the scriptures cannot be understood by mere reading, but through contemplation, by becoming blind in order to see, by becoming deaf in order to hear, by becoming ignorant in order to receive wisdom. (HW Per. 11) In the words of St Augustine, "I believe in order to understand."⁵ A deeper understanding of the words of God is one of the functions of *Irfán* or mysticism. In the words of Rumi:

Gusham shanid qesse-ye iman-o mast shod.

Ku sahm-e chashm surat-e imanam arezust

My ears heard the story of faith and became intoxicated.

Where is the portion of my eyes, my wish is to see the face of Truth.

In Arabic, the term *'Irfán* (mysticism) comes from the root *'Arafa*, to know, to recognise, rather than to be acquainted with. It refers to seeing and feeling and knowing the Truth, rather than having heard or read about it. It denotes *gnosis* rather than knowledge. In English, the word mysticism comes from the same root as 'myth' or 'mystery.' All are derived from the Greek word *musteion*, which means to close the eye or the mouth, to close oneself to the outside world. All three words are therefore rooted in an experience of contemplation or silence. These words often have negative connotations in the West today. The word 'myth,' for example, is often used as a synonym for a lie; in popular parlance, a myth is something that is not true. Also the word 'mystery' is something that needs to be cleared up, to be sorted out. It is frequently associated with muddled thinking. Similarly, 'mysticism' is frequently associated with the superstitious, with people who lack rationality.

It is curious that even in some supposedly religious systems, such as the present regime in Iran or under the Safavids, or the Wahhabis or the Puritans in Christianity, mysticism is frowned upon. Both under the Safavids, the Wahhabis, and the Taliban the Sufis were persecuted. It should be borne in mind, therefore, that mysticism is not the same as dogmatic religion. In many ways, it is its antithesis. So when we speak of Islamic,

Jewish, Christian, Buddhist or Hindu mysticism we are not talking about Islamic, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist or Hindu theologies and codes of law, but about their spiritual concepts that have a great deal in common.

However, mysticism does not deal merely with mystery, but also with the sacred. Sacred, too, is one of a whole group of cognate words: sacrament, sacrilege, consecrate, sacrosanct, sacrifice which means to make sacred. The root of the word sacred, *sacra*, means belonging to a deity. It has the connotation of the divine. One can make a few generalisations about what follows from the terms *ʿIrfân*, mysticism and sacred.

1) Sacred presupposes the divine. You cannot speak of sunlight without the sun. Without the presupposition of a deity there cannot be any concept of sacred. The main habit of a materialistic or atheistic mind is that it denies the existence of the sacred. If there is no God, it follows logically that nothing can be sacred. We may respect certain ideas or certain places due to their utilitarian nature, but their importance lies in what we derive from them, not in what they are in themselves; while the term sacred refers to their innate or intrinsic value.

2) Just as there can be no sacred without God, there can be no wholeness without God. According to a materialistic outlook, the universe is made up of disjointed or continuous particles that follow the blind laws of physics, and there is nothing that will link them together and that will give them meaning. The world may be fantastic and mind-boggling, but ultimately it is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”⁶ Even worse, according to the post-modernist thinking, it is not even a tale told by idiot, but the hallucinations of a sick mind. Either the world is the Word of God, the revelation of God, the will of God – “Be and it was” – or if, according to Nietzsche, God is dead, by definition the world is also dead.

It is the loss of contact with the divine, with the sacred and with the mystery that constitutes the Fall from Grace. This loss makes man a lowly and a lonely wanderer in an absurd, pointless and degenerating universe. According to mysticism,

on the other hand, God exists and is the ground of being, and gives meaning, purpose and significance to man's life.

3) The third presupposition is God's immanence, His indwelling. The mystics speak of creation as the moving image of the eternity, or a reflection of the divine. God reveals himself in His creation. It does not mean that God and matter are one and the same, but that matter is not conceivable without God.

The concept of God's immanence is not limited to Hinduism and Buddhism. Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Bahá'í Faith are also full of references to God's revelation in the world. The Bible teaches that God created man in His own image.⁷ The Koran teaches that "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God."⁸ In Bahá'u'lláh's *Hidden Words* we read:

O Son of Being! Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. Get thou from it thy radiance and seek none other than Me. For I have created thee rich and have bountifully shed My favour upon thee. (HW Ar. 11)

4) God is never an object. He can be known only through Himself becoming the absolute subject of our being, an epiphany. In other words, we know God through Himself. The Sufis say that God is both the lover and the beloved. Man is thirsty for God and God is thirsty for man. Man seeks God and God seeks man. There is a union or trinity between Love, the Lover and the Beloved. In the words of Rumi:

*Parro-bal-e ma kamand-e eshq-e ust.
Mukeshanash mikeshad ta kuy-e dust*

Our wings and feathers are the lassos of His love.
They pull us by our hair to the realm of the Beloved.

As Bahá'u'lláh says, "Love Me that I may love thee."⁹ Or:

O Son of Spirit! I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty? Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself? Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me? Out of the clay of love I molded thee, how dost thou busy thyself with another? Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest

*find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.*¹⁰

5) Creation is a revelation not about God, but revelation of God itself. "The heaven and earth are full of thy glory. The heavens declare the glory of God."¹¹ If God is not present in a grain of sand he is not present in heaven either. In the words of William Blake (1757-1827), true knowledge consists of:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an Hour.¹²

The same universality that exists in the material laws also exists in spiritual realm. If this was not so there could not be any contact with the sacred either in life or in art or in religion and mysticism.

Immanence and Transcendence

Hinduism and Buddhism are often described as religions of monism. They allegedly believe that the whole universe is part and parcel of God, and they do not make any distinction between the world of the matter and the world of the spirit. But Brahma, which is the Sanskrit word for the Absolute, is the supreme divinity, who is transcendent as well as immanent, beyond all limitations and definitions. He is the principle of search as well as the object sought, the animating ideal and its fulfilment. *Mundaka Upanishad* says about Him: "He is the Lord of all, that from which all things originate, and in which they finally disappear."¹³

Brahma is the immanent ground and operative principle in all subjects and objects. At the beginning of *Kena Upanishad* we read: "What cannot be spoken with words, but that whereby words are spoken; know that alone to be Brahma, the Spirit, and not what people here adore. What cannot be thought with the mind, but that whereby mind can think; know that alone to be Brahma, the Spirit, and not what people here adore."¹⁴

Chandogya Upanishad expresses the spiritual experience of Brahma in these words: "There is a Spirit which is mind and life, light and truth and vast spaces. He contains all works and desires and all perfumes and all tastes. He enfolds the whole universe, and in silence is loving to all."¹⁵

If we ask where is Brahma, the Spirit of the Universe, the answer is given in *Kena Upanishad*: "He is seen in nature in the wonder of a flash of lightning. He comes to the soul in the wonder of a flash of vision."¹⁶ The glory and majesty of Brahma are expressed in these beautiful words of the *Bhagavadgita*: "If the light of a thousand suns suddenly arose in the sky, that splendour might be compared to the radiance of the Supreme Spirit, and Arjuna saw in that radiance the whole universe in its variety, standing in a vast unity in the body of God of Gods."¹⁷ The following passage from the *Bhagavadgita* expresses the all-inclusive nature of Brahma:

I am the creation and the dissolution of the whole universe. There is not anything greater than I, and all things hang on me, even as precious gems upon a string. I am moisture in the water, light in the sun and moon, invocation in the Vedas, sound in the firmament, human nature in mankind, sweet-smelling savour in the earth, glory in the source of light. In all things I am life; and I am zeal in the zealous; and know O Arjoon! that I am the eternal seed of all nature. I am the understanding of the wise, the glory of the proud, the strength of the strong, free from lust and anger.¹⁸

Mudaka Upanishad expresses the same doctrine in a different way:

As from a well-blazing fire, sparks
By the thousand issue forth of like form,
So from the imperishable, my friend, beings manifold
Are produced, and thither also go.¹⁹

Hinduism preaches an unbounded toleration of all other religions, because although they may differ in appearance yet in reality they are all of the same substance. A Hindu song says:

Into the bosom of the one great sea

Flows streams that come from hills on every side;
 Their names are various as their springs;
 And thus in every land do men bow down
 To one great God, though known by many names.²⁰

In the Upanishads again we read: "My names are many as declared by the great seers." Again, "Him who is the One Real, sages name variously." "This indestructible enduring reality is to be looked upon as one only."²¹

Hinduism makes allowance for the different stages of people's spiritual maturity and allows different people to approach God in the way that best suits them. *Chandogya Upanishad* teaches us that the man of action finds his God in fire, the man of feeling in heart, and the feeble-minded in the idol, but "the strong in spirit finds God everywhere."²² To the Hindus, God's true essence is completely beyond the understanding of even the wisest of men and so no matter what we call him is a creation of our mind and is ultimately of little importance. The best thing is if we can rise above the names and attributes of God and worship him in his abstract reality:

The worshippers of the Absolute are the highest in rank; second to them are the worshippers of the personal God, then come the worshippers of the incarnations like *Rama*, *Krishna*, *Buddha*; below them are those who worship ancestors, deities and sages, and lowest of all are the worshippers of the petty forces and spirits.²³

This is why when it comes to the definition of God, the Hindus prefer to answer in negative terms: *neti, neti*, no, no. Hindu thinkers bring out the sense of the otherness of the Divine by the use of the negatives: "There the eye goes not, speech goes not, nor mind, we know not, we understand not; how one would teach it?"²⁴ In essence, they say that we know all that God is not, but what He is we do not know.

At the same time, in many Hindu texts one can see a distinction between the world of being and the revelation of Brahma and his essence. If read properly, *Bhagavadgita* is indeed a kind of *Mantiq at-Tayr* or *The Conference of Birds* by Farid al-Din Attar (ca. 1142 – ca. 1220),²⁵ or *The Seven Valleys* by Bahá'u'lláh.²⁶ It talks of the stages of *Arjuna's* gradual

development from bewilderment to search, to detachment, to humility, to submission, to enlightenment and to union with the Brahma. While at the beginning of the book *Arjuna* is the lord and master and Krishna is his charioteer, at the end the roles are reversed and *Arjuna* discovers the glory of Krishna. At times we feel that the words of *Arjuna* are our own words: "Speak to me again of thy power and thy glory, for I am never tired, never, of hearing thy words of life."²⁷

At this point, the *Bhagavadgita* rises to the highest points and *Krishna* reveals: "I am the beginning, I am the middle, I am the end. I am the undying Lord of creation. Whenever there is the decay of religion and an ascendancy of irreligion I am revealed from age to age."²⁸

Buddhism and Nirvana (Nibbana)

Many Western observers have seen something negative in nirvana as a goal. This seems perverse to the Buddhists, for whom nirvana is above all supreme happiness. The main schools of Indian Buddhism agree that nirvana is not a mere negation. Rather it is unconditional *dharma*, not expressible in spatial or temporal terms; knowledge of it dissolves ignorance and ends craving.

Nirvana means total extinction. However, Nirvana is not total nothingness. It contains the concept of the Void, the *sonyata*, but also of fulfilment. By avoiding the two extremes, indulgence in sensual pleasure and self-mortification, one gains the enlightenment of the middle path which produces insight, produces knowledge, and conduces to tranquility, to higher knowledge, to Enlightenment, to Nirvana. According to Buddhist scriptures, Nirvana is ineffable and inexpressible, and we cannot employ any category to describe what the Void is. Nothing can be said of it. However, it is something. It is that thing out of which everything comes. The Buddhists call it *Suchness*, it is *Whateverness* of being. It is the underlying unity of all things. It is the great reservoir of all possible potentialities. It is the ground of being, in the same way that the ocean is the ground of the waves. All waves, whatever their shapes and forms, have the same water and formlessness as their substance, their suchness.

Often Nirvana is referred to in positive terms. Buddha describes Nirvana as:

...the far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unaging, the stable, the undisintegrating, the unmanifest, the unproliferated, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, the unailing state, the unafflicted, dispassion, purity, freedom, the unadhesive, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge...²⁹

In its negative aspect, it is our total extinction to the self and all that is not God. In its positive side, it is the union of us with the great Source. Nirvana is release because it is the awareness of the illusoriness of all phenomenal being and their union with the great Void. Life is like an ever-flowing river, never being the same. We want to cross the river to the other side, which is Nirvana. Buddhism is the boat, which will carry us to the other side. After crossing not only one leaves behind the first shore and the river, but also the boat that has transported one to this shore; so that at that point even Buddha and Buddhism do not exist any longer. One achieves one's own Buddhahood and Enlightenment.

However, it has to be borne in mind that Nirvana is not merely a negative state, but plays a role in Buddhist life that is analogous to union with God. Edward Conze points out that the Buddhists often use the same imagery as the theists:

We are told that Nirvana is permanent, stable, imperishable, immovable, ageless, deathless, unborn, and unbecome, that it is power, bliss and happiness, the secure refuge, the shelter and the place of unassailable security; that it is the real Truth and the supreme Reality; that it is the good, the supreme good, and the one and only consummation of our life, the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace.³⁰

Buddha insisted that Nirvana could not be defined or discussed as though it were any other human reality. Buddha always refused to answer questions about Nirvana or the Ultimate Reality because it was 'improper' and

'inappropriate.' We could not define nirvana because our words and concepts are tied to the world of sense and flux. Buddha taught:

There is monks, an unknown, an unbecome, an unmade, an uncompounded. If monks, there were not there this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, there would not here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded. But because there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an uncompounded, therefore, there is an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded.³¹

The reason given for the Buddha's silence regarding the nature of God or Nirvana is practical: such matters are time-wasting and distracting; they do not conduce to the aim. However, it is totally wrong to see the Buddhism as a form of atheism or Nirvana as nothingness.

Zoroaster's Teachings

The first important point which Zoroastrian sacred books preach is the existence of an Omniscient Creator called Ahura Mazda. The name Ahura Mazda is full of significance. *Ahura* (Sanskrit *Asura*) means "Lord of Life." He is the Creator and upholder of all life, and thus represents the spirit side of the universe. Mazda may be explained as made up from *maz* (Sanskrit *mah*) and the root *da* (Sanskrit *dha*), and the word may be translated as "Creator of Life and Creator of Matter." Thus this name brings out the fundamental duality of our visible universe — Spirit and Matter. It implies that the Supreme Being is the Creator and Upholder of these two great principles.

This supreme Ahura Mazda is necessarily invisible and intangible to our physical senses. He can only be "seen" through the "eye of the spirit."³² For human beings, He must necessarily remain a mere name. To understand Him, therefore, Zoroaster has pointed out a method through the *Amesha-Spenta* (usually translated as the 'Holy Immortals'). In later ages, these have been understood as almost equivalent to Arch-angels, deities

standing next to the Godhead in rank, each with a special 'department' of the universe assigned to him or her to look after. They can also be described as God's names and attributes.

Western scholars have tried to explain them as 'personified qualities of Godhead,' but that seems somewhat inadequate. To begin with, they are six in number, divided into two groups of three each. In one group all three bear names in the feminine gender and represent the Mother-side of the Supreme. In the other group the names are actually in the neuter gender, but they stand for masculine concepts and represent the Father-side of the Supreme. Thus we have among the highest divinities two clear groups, one representing the active side, the Fatherhood, and the other representing the passive side or the Motherhood of the Supreme. These two also correspond respectively to the *Ahura* and the *Mazda* side of God.

It must not be forgotten that all these six are not different Beings, nor even the 'creation' of the Supreme. They are in very truth aspects of Ahura Mazda. A better comparison would be with the 'rays' of various colours that make up the white light of the Sun. These six 'Holy Immortals' together with Ahura Mazda Himself make a *Heptad*, who are known in later literature as the "Seven *Amesha-Spenta*." But the phrase used for these seven in the *Gathas* is very significant — they are called there 'the Ahura Mazdas' (in the plural number).³³

The three 'aspects' of the Supreme on the Father side are named *Asha*, *Vohu Mana* and *Kshathra*. These names have been usually translated "Righteousness or Law," "Good Mind" and "Power or Domination." But these renderings convey a very faint idea of all that these signify in the *Gathas*.

Asha stands for the knowledge of the Law of God and for the Law itself. In many places *Asha* stand for the 'Eternal Law of God,' which is identical with Righteousness. In later theology *Asha-Vahishta* (the Highest *Asha*) becomes identified with the Sacred Fire, the physical symbol of Zoroaster's religion. The worshipper expresses this wish: "Through the highest *Asha* through the best *Asha* may we catch a glimpse of Thee, may we draw near unto Thee, may we be in perfect union with Thee."³⁴ *Asha*, in short, is the Righteousness of the Father in Heaven,

which we should seek first so that all other things 'should be added' unto us.

There are six *Amesha-Spentas*, three masculine and three feminine. The masculine ones are:

1. *Asha*, the Eternal Law of God or the Supreme Righteousness.
2. *Vohu-Mana*, 'the Loving Mind' or 'Love.' In Yasna the worshipper and the worshipped are called 'the Lover and the Beloved.'
3. *Kshathra*, After achieving Righteousness and Love one should translate them into action. He must seek the help of the third 'Aspect' of the Lord, *Kshathra*, who represents the strength of the Lord — bestowed upon those who truly serve their brothers. It is the Creative Activity of the Supreme.

Feminine *Amesha-Spentas* are:

4. *Armaiti*, usually translated piety, it is the counterpart of *Asha* on the Mother side. She is the 'Daughter of Ahura Mazda' and our ultimate refuge.³⁵
5. *Ameretat* is immortality.
6. *Hauravat* is Wholeness or Perfection.

This wonderful and poetic teaching of the Holy Immortals may be summed up thus: Every human being must understand the Eternal Law of God of Truth and Righteousness. He must realise the power of Love, and he must translate both these into acts of Loving Service. All through his striving he must hold fast to Faith and thus attain the Goal of Perfection and Immortality.

The terms used to describe Ahura Mazda are always warm and friendly. He is portrayed not as a stern judge but as loving and accessible. He is over and over celebrated in the *Gathas* in many beautiful terms. Ahura is always referred to as a "Kind Friend" or a "Loving Father."³⁶ He is consulted at the time of difficulties. He is questioned at moments of uncertainty.

Communion with Him always leads to satisfaction and assurance.

Semitic Religions

The biblical God is also both immanent and transcendent. He is the God of the farthest remoteness and yet he is the One who is with man and to whom man may cry "Hear my prayer!"³⁷ "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth."³⁸ "Seek thee the Lord while he may be found, call thee upon him while he is near."³⁹ Hence, to speak of the expansion of life may be a true word of prayer: "Out of straitness I called upon the Lord: the Lord answered me, and let me into enlargement."⁴⁰

In Hebrew scriptures He and Thou are made to follow immediately upon one another; all meditation about God soon resolves itself into invocations addressed to him, into an expression of personal intimacy and connection: "The Lord is a high tower for the oppressed, a high tower in times of trouble, and they that know thy name put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee."⁴¹

To know of this One God, in whom all things and each thing find meaning and significance, to bear witness to Him, constitutes the monotheism given to the world by the Prophets of Israel. Man experiences in himself the meaning of breathing in that air of infinitude and eternity which embraces his earthly existence. "The nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge."⁴² Thus, the Psalmist expresses his yearning: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein."⁴³ "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory."⁴⁴

"All nations are as nothing before him, they are counted to him less than nothing and vanity."⁴⁵ They are only a "drop in a bucket" or "the small dust of the balance."⁴⁶ The parts of the earth are like "a grain of sand," and a thousand years are in his sight "but as yesterday when it is passed."⁴⁷ "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork."⁴⁸ "O Lord our God, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Thou has set thy glory above the heavens."⁴⁹

God is “from everlasting to everlasting,” and yet has “been our dwelling place in all generations.”⁵⁰ “For thus says the High and Lofty One that inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy and: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”⁵¹ Anxiety and confidence unite together. There is exaltation and there is awe. As the prophet, in like mood says: “and thy heart shall tremble and be enlarged.”⁵²

The above verses would be very familiar to Muslims. Compare with these verses the following verses of the Koran: “Whithersoever you turn there is the face of God.”⁵³ “We shall show them our signs in the heavens [in the firmament] and in their own souls.”⁵⁴ So God is manifest both in the world of nature, as well as, supremely, in the soul of man. “If my servants inquire of thee concerning Me,” God charges Muḥammad, “lo, I am near.”⁵⁵ Indeed, “God is closer to man than his own jugular vein.”⁵⁶ The Islamic prayer addresses God as “He who is far and cannot be seen and is close and hears every whisper.” In the Light Verse, we read:

*God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth. His Light is like a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp encased in a glass, the glass as it were a glistening star. From a blessed tree it is lighted, the olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would well nigh shine out, even though fire touched it not. It is light upon light.*⁵⁷

This closeness to God is frequently reflected in the Koranic verses, too. The merging of the Lover and the Beloved is a recurring theme in the Koran: “Then He turned to them, that they might turn.”⁵⁸ “God was pleased with them, and they were well pleased with God,”⁵⁹ so God addresses the blessed saints in Paradise: “O thou soul in peace, return to thy Lord, pleased with Him and He pleased with you;”⁶⁰ for “He loveth them and they love Him.”⁶¹ This last verse is of great significance as supporting the Sufi doctrine of Love (*mahabba*) and as providing the ultimate authority for the idea of a trinity of Lover, Beloved and Love.

Therefore, while superficially one may be able to differentiate between the beliefs of the Eastern and the Semitic

religions regarding God and the Absolute, a deeper reading of them shows that in essence they are much closer to each other than often realised. They all believe in a supernatural force behind the creation. Although they may differ in their definitions of the Supreme Being, they all maintain that words are inadequate in defining him. They maintain that the divine essence is also manifest in the world and especially in man. They stress that the divine force is loving towards its creation, and they also believe that there is an inherent, mutual feeling of love and attraction in man towards that divine reality, and that the highest aim and end of life is closeness or union with the Beloved. Therefore, regardless of whatever name is given to that divine reality, all paths ultimately lead to the same source.

NOTES

- ¹ Many of these differences have been examined by Dr Moojan Momen in his erudite paper, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics," published in *Studies in Honor of the Late Ḥusayn M. Balyuzi: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* vol. 5, ed. Moojan Momen (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988).
- ² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Mentor Books, 1962),
- ³ *2 Corinthians* 3:6
- ⁴ *Koran*, 3: 7
- ⁵ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 43, 7, 9: PL 38, 257-258. "I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe."
- ⁶ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5
- ⁷ *Genesis*, I: 27
- ⁸ *Koran*, 2:115
- ⁹ *Ibid*, Arabic, 2
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, Arabic, 13
- ¹¹ *Pslams*, 19:1
- ¹² William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*
- ¹³ *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3:12
- ¹⁴ *Kena Upanishad*, I:1-7
- ¹⁵ *Chandogya Upanishad*, III-xiv-1
- ¹⁶ *Kena Upanishad*, IV:3
- ¹⁷ *Bhagavadgita*, XI:12
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, VII:6

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- ¹⁹ *Mudaka Upanishad*, II.i.1-5
- ²⁰ Charles E Gover, *The Folksongs of Southern India* (1995, p.165)
- ²¹ *Katha Upanishad*, chapter 5
- ²² *Chandogya Upanishad*, III-xvii-7
- ²³ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (1926, p 64)
- ²⁴ *Kena Upanishad*, I:3
- ²⁵ For a translation of this book see: Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, *The Conference of Birds* (Penguin Classics)
- ²⁶ See Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986)
- ²⁷ *Bhagavadgita*, 10:18
- ²⁸ *Bhagavadgita*, 10:20-21
- ²⁹ *Samyutta Nikaya*, SN43:14
- ³⁰ Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, Oxford U.P., 1959, p 40.
- ³¹ *Udana* 8:13; quoted and translated in Paul Steintha, *Udana* (London, 1985), p. 81.
- ³² *Yasna*: 45:8
- ³³ *Yasna*, 30:9 and 31:4
- ³⁴ *Yasna* 60:11
- ³⁵ *Yasna*, 45:4
- ³⁶ *Yasna*, 31:21
- ³⁷ *Psalms*, 4: 1
- ³⁸ *Psalms*, 145:18
- ³⁹ *Isaiah*, 55:6
- ⁴⁰ *Psalms*, 118:5
- ⁴¹ *Psalms*, 9:9
- ⁴² *Psalms*, 73:28
- ⁴³ *Psalms*, 24:1
- ⁴⁴ *Isaiah*, 6:3
- ⁴⁵ *Isaiah*, 40:17
- ⁴⁶ *Isaiah*, 40:15
- ⁴⁷ *Psalms*, 90:4
- ⁴⁸ *Psalms*, 19:1
- ⁴⁹ *Psalms*, 8:1
- ⁵⁰ *Psalm*, 90:1-2
- ⁵¹ *Isaiah*, 57:15
- ⁵² *Isaiah*, 60:5

⁵³ *Koran*, 2:109

⁵⁴ *Koran*, 41:53

⁵⁵ *Koran*, 2:186

⁵⁶ *Koran*, 50:16

⁵⁷ *Koran*, 24: 35-37

⁵⁸ *Koran*, 9:118

⁵⁹ *Koran*, 58:22

⁶⁰ *Koran*, 89:27

⁶¹ *Koran*, 5:57