

MUSLIMS/ISLAM/AL-SALAM - A CONTEMPORARY SEMANTICS FOR UNIVERSAL PEACE¹

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ABSTRACT

The signs in the self and on the horizons are of God. He reminds us of them in the Recitation, which was revealed in language. Given that He comprehends everything in His knowledge and mercy, one language is the same as all languages, and so He has warned us all of the reason and purpose for which we are in the world, of His unity, of our capacity as human beings and of return to Him. To be actively muslim is to accept our responsibility to existence as a whole and so to counter the necessarily unjustified ghettoization of awareness and knowledge into mutually exclusive ways of life based on closed systems of metaphysics, cosmology, or anthropology.

To be *muslim* (at-peace) is to be literally connected to God, *al-Salam* (absolute Peace), by *islam* (being-at-and-in-peace). We are reminded of this connection by everything on the horizons and in the self, which make up the teeming and constantly changing flow of the self-revelation of the One. Multiplicity is contingent, Unity absolute. Unity ceaselessly reveals Itself in multiplicity, in all the languages of humankind, in which Unity's prophets have discoursed, and in the return of all things to It, as revelation and affirmation of the absolutely One.

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Introduction

Neither we nor the world are at peace – we never have been and never shall. This is a necessary attribute of contingency. But neither is there even a single human being who does not seek for their reason and purpose in peace, whether in the world or in the self or both. The world, with all it comprises, and every human being, no matter their condition, are thus agents of peace, connected through being-at-peace with absolute Peace, Who comprehends the conditional and contingent but Whom nothing comprehends.² Being an agent of peace is a precondition of self-realization – our own and that of everything else. This is what makes the following question so important: How shall we realize our full humanity on the quest for absolute Peace, manifest in contingency and so in existence as a whole and in every particle of it, given the various perspectives that have unfolded in and through humanity over time and their expressions in language?

The human agent of peace, turned entirely towards absolute Peace, *al-Salam*, is *muslim*. The relationship of the individual, consciously seeking peace in God, absolute Peace, is being-at-peace (*islam*). The individual bears witness of being-at-peace and of pursuing our highest potential by loving God, absolute Peace. They offer obedience but only to the good.³

We may grow far in knowledge, but for all that remain contingent and dependent on God, the absolutely Knowing. When we do anything, we run the risk of being unjust, of deciding and acting out of ignorance. When we insist that we know without testing that knowledge against absolute Knowing, then, since our knowing is always contingent, we undermine ourselves and the world, which come to seem lacking in harmony and incomplete. We raise ourselves to the level of putative harmonisers and perfecters. This produces corruption on the external horizons that also impacts the self of the corrupter.

2 The Prophet *Muhammad*, whose name is the Praised – Peace be upon him! – said to God: “O God, You are peace and from You is peace. Blessed are You, Majestic and Noble!” (Imam Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1–4, trans. ‘Abdul Ḥamīd Ṣiddīqī, Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, no date, 1:292).

3 The Prophet said: “Obedience is required only in what is good.” (Imam al-Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1–9, trans. Muhammad Muḥsin Khān, Beirut: Dar al-Arabia, 1985, vol. 5, 441).

I

In the the present condition of the world, things and relations are recognisably not what they were, certainly formally. Let us consider seven such new things and relations. 1. Never has there been such accelerated movement of people in all directions. 2. This goes together with accelerated de-ruralisation and urbanisation. Never has a majority of humankind lived in towns, as it now does. 3. As a result, people of different historical and cultural backgrounds, languages, and racial identities now live closer to each other physically and mentally and are in closer dialogue and exchange and cooperate more closely over the building of common political frameworks than ever before. The differences between them are evident, but so is the need for unity they carry within and with themselves. 4. Facilitated by science and technology, the virtual realm has turned the world into a single stage on which we all participate together, thanks to the radical bridging of spatial and temporal distance. On the other hand, our rights to privacy and intimacy are being steadily reduced and colonised by the lords of the market and capital, government, and the data companies, especially through the proliferation and complexification of digital structures and cyber technologies. 5. Thanks to the spread of mass education, we are all in common possession of a great fund of scientific discovery and research, not least into the space-time and mass-energy profundities of matter and their cosmic horizons. This has transformed our view of the world and of our selves in wondrous ways, but sometimes also at the cost of a harmful reification that strips both the world and the self of their fundamental connection with the Real. 6. As the world and humankind have come into clearer focus, the differences between individuals and peoples have also become more evident, as has the need to recognise a common essence to our humanity and our kinship to all the rest of existence as co-created with us. 7. Never before has there been so powerful or comprehensive an oppression of nature as that for which we are responsible thanks to our own actions because of our loss of that sense of kinship.

These things and relationships in the world affect us all and all our cultural, political, and economic ties, as families, communities, and peoples. These ties range across a broad spectrum, from vicious enmity to constructive cooperation and friendship. This gives the following questions their importance: What or who maintains order across physical and metaphysical existence and all its constituent elements? How should those who have or think of the prophet

Muhammad and the admonition God sent down to him for all people as their special inheritance respond to this question? What if anything is there in that inheritance to facilitate our understanding these aspects of the present age?

There is nothing in existence, on the heavens or on the earth, that does not concern us. What we know of the horizons of the external world, so much we know of ourselves. And vice versa: to the extent we know ourselves, we know existence. But we and the world are not the principle of the self. It and we are just signs, manifestations of the Principle, Which is absolutely Transcendent and absolutely Immanent to contingency. The Principle does not depend on us at all, but we depend entirely on It. When we lose focus on this axiomatic truth, we indulge in fantasies of gradual self-transcendence in which the self becomes increasingly redundant thanks to the supposedly independent power of our activity.

In this fantasy, we find ourselves denying the centrality of the human self to the self-revelation of the absolute Principle. It is part of us to want to survive (death) and happiness. But, ultimately, we cannot evade death or unhappiness. They catch up with us no matter what or where, through killings and in the suffering others impose on us or we impose on others and on ourselves. We speak of peace and may even seek to realize ourselves and our world in peace, but there is no lack of disorder, injustice, or corruption in the world, or in our fellow human beings.

To be *muslim* (at-peace) is to be literally connected to God, *al-Salam* (absolute Peace), by *islam* (being-at-and-in-peace). We are reminded of this connection by everything on the horizons and in the self, which make up the teeming and constantly changing flow of the self-revelation of the One. Multiplicity is contingent, Unity absolute. Unity ceaselessly reveals Itself in multiplicity, in all the languages of humankind, in which Unity's prophets have discoursed, and in the return of all things to It, as revelation and affirmation of the absolutely One.

Language, as the medium of expression of conscious being, reflects everything on the external horizons and in the self. It is the reason and purpose of language to reflect unity and its susceptibility to being disordered by the contingency of human will. Order has been

established again and again in God's chosen prophets. As connection with the Absolute, prophecy is universal, albeit manifest in concrete space-time conditions.

The prophets, known and unknown, all bear the seal of the perfection they were created for, of humanity as being that gathers all of existence in most beautiful uprightness. The tradition of prophecy is a constant, so long as there are people. It cannot be erased, but can fade from our reality into oblivion, heedlessness, and denial. Compare the condition of Muslims now with what our tradition was capable of in earlier ages or with its perennial purpose and that tradition has clearly long been on the wane, vanishing from our attitudes to ourselves, the world, and God.⁴

This waning of tradition takes place within the self, but not so suddenly that all those in and for whom it still informs their growth in knowledge, faith, and gratitude vanish from the scene all at once. As God says in the Recitation: "Thus We appointed you a midmost community that you might be witnesses to the people, and that the Messenger might be a witness to you."⁵ To be a *midmost community* is to be a group of individuals connected by knowing with each other and ultimately with God the absolutely Knowing. To bear witness entails knowing without any doubt, in and through the self – bearing witness with all one's being. Who and where are these witnesses in the present age? Is knowing how they refer to themselves and how others refer to them enough to identify them?

The focus of this conference is on a challenging question, "How to strengthen the unity of Muslims?" One of relevance to us all and to existence as a whole, too. It deploys the concepts of strength, unity, and Muslims. If Muslims need to be strengthened and led to unity, that

4 See further: William C. Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2007.

5 Qur'an, 2:143. The Qur'anic translations draw on the following versions, with certain adjustments to reflect the author's preferences regarding the translation of certain terms and words, intended to make clear meaningful connections in the text of the Recitation: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, and Joseph E. B. Lumbard, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, New York: Harper One, 2015, and Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980.

implies they are currently weak and divided. These are undesirable conditions. To overcome them will require an orientation of ascent from weakness and division towards strength and unity within the Muslim sense of self. This undesirable weakness and division affect the sense-of-self both of individual Muslims and of all Muslims together as a constituent part of humankind. What are the limits to this weakness and division, on the one hand, and to strength and unity, on the other? Being strong entails the potential to become weaker or even stronger. Not so unity. The contingent partakes of duality and can be divided, but its principle, absolute Unity, is indivisible. Duality and divisibility, countless multiplicity in irrepressible flux, manifest and affirm absolute Unity.

What the horizons contain appears both as irrepressible flux and as order. Their unity is not externally imposed. Its reason and purpose lie in absolute Unity, which is both entirely transcendent and entirely immanent to contingency. Humankind and individual human beings are in relationship with absolute Unity. The questions of strength and weakness and of wholeness and particularism necessarily suggest two possibilities. The first is that coherence in human communities is only ever achieved by imposing it from outside through force – an important element of every ideological image of the Real and one that signifies alienation from It. Humanity is currently in the throes of a project to impose such ideological unity from without, at the expense of the individual sense-of-self. The alternative is that the innate coherence of both our individualism and of the expressions of collective belonging-together – family, tribe, and people – are grounded precisely in the self and so in our uncreated and uncreatable essence, which is our reason and cause. There can be no unity, whether of people or the world, that does not respect this.

The general question on how to strengthen and unite Muslims thus extends to anybody who seeks their connection with the most exalted ideal of existence through the term *muslim*. They experience the situation they want to leave for strength and unity as one of prevailing weakness and division. They seek answers everywhere, but do not find any, suggesting they lack the right protocols for their quest. What is more, few are actually conscious of being seekers or seeking or even of having any real connection with what they seek. They are named after something whose essence has become obscured by ignorance, unbelief, and ingratitude, leaving them lost on their

plane of being, until they ask themselves: Do I already possess at least some of what I'm looking for within myself? Is at least some of it independent of what is outside of me?

This is a question for all of humanity. It affects is all, individually: it always has and always will. When someone consciously *muslim* poses it, they must first ask, at the very beginning of the discussion, What does being *muslim* actually mean? It can seem that we all already know the answer, which can make talking sensibly about it difficult. Difficult, because it all seems so obvious to everyone. But really, what does being *muslim* actually mean?

This search for strength and unity can lead the seeker to lose awareness of their dependence on the Absolute. Anything found under such conditions of loss will hardly contribute to our self-realization as muslims. Worse, it hollows out the original and authentic meaning of the name. That is why wrestling with the conference topic means engaging with not just the form but the content of what we have lost and so either to rediscovering the universal theo-centric image at the heart of all prophecy or resorting instead to the idol of humanity in a world without the absolute Principle. This is expressed in the modern tendency common to both reified religion and anti-religious discourse to misrecognise *islam*, the link between the *muslim* and *as Salam*, as based on a discourse of submission and so of subordination of the self rather than on the full realization of the self in and through being-at-peace with Peace. This has issued in a reified and reifying cult of Islam, rather than on the practice of being at and in peace and so of the true worship of God offered through the universal economy of praise and glorification of God as the absolutely Praised by modelling ourselves after the perfect example, the Praised, to reach full liberation and self-realization as muslims.

II

The question of strength and unity is intrinsic to all modern ideologies, insofar as they are teleological constructs that render the past and the future of humankind contingent on the will and the physical (space-time and mass-energy) framework of their imagined goal, which is constantly increasing power over the world, in turn entailing an ever greater need for power and its effects. Logically this leads to some so-called end of history. Those – and that is everyone

– who do not reach this utopian promise are humbled on the way. In less than two centuries, this obsession for ever more and more strength and unity has taken the gravest toll of destruction, suffering, and human death in history. The phenomenon is undergirded by an image of the world and of humanity produced to support this pursuit of strength and unity and the highly developed political structures and educational, scientific, technological, biopolitical, and military systems that have followed in its wake, not to mention the mass degradation of individual human beings in the name of promises offered by the authorities these ideologies legitimate.

This vision holds many today in its thrall. Three important preconditions exist for this situation to be investigated and assessed from the perspective of a properly muslim image of the world and of humanity. First, we must insist that Islam is not an ideology. Second, we must resist any temptation to reduce it to one, as that is to make it ape something it is not and is an act against the liberation and realization of our humanity and our proper relationship with God. And third, the question of how best to strengthen and unite Muslims should be investigated within the framework of the metaphysical, cosmological, anthropological, and psychological assumptions inherent to Islam.

There are individuals identified as Muslims living amongst all the peoples of the world today. They include the very poor and the very prosperous, the oppressed and the free, the persecuted and those at risk of mass killing and attempts at genocide. Pretty much every language in actual use has adopted the name and more or less every language community uses it to identify individuals and groups. Those who identify as or are identified by others as Muslims thus live across the full range of cultural and political environments with all their different understandings of history. And many of these Muslims resort to fantasy projections as to how to overcome their existential vulnerability: fantasies about individuals, groups, and peoples and the various utopias through which they are to be raised up out of weakness and division. They blame others for their condition of weakness, while commonly remaining strangers to themselves, émigrés within a phantasy of reality instead of at home in it for real. And so, they yearn for “return” to a condition of strength and unity.

They should know, however, that if they really do want such a return on a path worth travelling, then the potential for it already

exists within them. But the truth of their can weakness and their strength, of dissolution and unification, can only be discovered to them when they are sure of where they are and how they have got there, of their circumstances and their condition and how they want to proceed, and most importantly when they are ready to speak truthfully about all this and to exercise appropriate judgement. And without the discovery of all this within and through the self, they will not be able to become knowers, connected by knowing with the absolute Knower, nor faithful, connected by faith with the absolutely Faithful. This is because the ground of contingency and so of our being knowers and faithful is the absolutely Knowing and absolutely Faithful.

The absolutely One and Indivisible shows Himself in contingency, His self-revelation in the space-time and mass-energy flux of coming into and passing out of existence (waxing and waning). But He is Absolute and does not wax or wane. Encompassed by nothing, He encompasses everything in Himself. He makes Himself known as absolute Peace through everything on the horizons and in each self. There are signs in all contingent things, on the horizons, in the heavens, on the earth, and in everything in between, as well as in every human being that ever was or ever will be, of the One and so of our reason and purpose for being Muslim, which is to say people-at-and-of-peace.

Nothing contingent can at the same time be self-sufficient and independent of the One. We know of Him purely from our own selves, just as we know that contingency is a sign through which He signifies Himself. We express this interrelatedness of contingent and Absolute in various ways through speech, the linguistic medium of thought, itself dependent on consciousness. As we become increasingly aware of this relationship of the contingent to the Absolute, the higher levels of consciousness within us turn to the lower levels of consciousness in the self, as subject to object, set us straight, raise us up, and place us on the path of return to the absolutely Conscious.

The syntagm, consciousness of consciousness, directs our attention to the fact that the sense-of-self (self-consciousness) involves two levels: that which is conscious and that of which it is conscious. That we are conscious thus necessarily entails duality, and we and our being conscious are both contingent. These levels are

asymmetrically symmetrical and constantly changing. Within the self, they manifest and affirm the absolute Is of the absolutely Conscious. This relationship can be represented as follows:

$$c_{n-1} = c_n.$$

The letter *c* signifies both the level of the conscious self that is conscious and that of which it is conscious. The index *n* reflects the continuity of consciousness and its *ad infinitum* divisibility in either direction along the axis of the self, from most beautiful uprightness to the lowest depth.

God is absolutely Conscious and absolutely Third to all consciousness within the sense-of-self. He is thus absolutely Transcendent and absolutely Immanent. We cannot determine the degree of entanglement between these two aspects of the manifestation of the absolute Self in contingency because it depends entirely on the absolutely Conscious.

This holds equally for the inception of the Praised in our sense-of-self as our ever-present potential to be higher. This too can be represented symbolically:

$$h_{n-1} = h_n.$$

Here, *h* signifies being praised. Being praised varies along the axis of Being. The pair of h_{n-1} and h_n is present on this axis, representing our potential to ascend and descend along it in relation to the absolute Is of the absolutely Praised.⁶

That spectrum has its higher and lower levels. The higher level is towards God, the absolutely Praised. Our potential to be higher is expressed in the Praised (the literal meaning of the Prophet Muhammad's name, which will be used from this point on in the text to refer to him as it expresses his role in the economy of praise that is central to the vision of our place is God's creation being put forward

6 The degrees of consciousness correspond to the degrees of self-realization. On the Qur'anic representation of this, see further: Lings, Martin, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, Rochester: InnerTraditions International, 1983, chapter "The Degrees", 326–28.

here), whom God, the absolutely Praised, sent down to recall us to the axis of Being and to witness for us that none are praised but God, the absolutely Praised. So, the Praised, as His apostle, stands above any condition of the human self, while above him is the absolutely Praised. The Praised, sent down to recall us to the absolutely Praised and so as a mercy to the worlds, is the most beautiful example of and entirely realized in his humanity.

Prevented from ascending in consciousness in line with our confession that there is no consciousness but the absolutely Conscious, the sense-of-self closes in on itself, within the narrows of contingency, overcome by the feeling of its own might in an access of self-sufficiency. This is the source of violence against others and the world. In the Recitation, God asks in admonition: “Hast thou considered the one who takes his caprice as his god?”⁷

Language reflects everything on the horizons and in the self, albeit at different levels of consciousness in speaker and listener. The more realized our humanity, the more fully and clearly we see the horizons. The particles our world is comprised of, from the littlest to the greatest, stand forth in a web of meaning with neither surplus nor lack. That is what language does, every language that ever was or shall be. The integration of the external horizons and the self is then reflected in the integration of this field of meaning and its contents.

This flow of thought and consciousness continues through and is reflected in the elementary particles of discourse – sounds and silences – a flow of countless sentences, within which individual words take on different meanings. No single word extracted from this field of meaning can make clear the reason and purpose it potentially has. The sentence is the hinterland of the word. Only within such a context can it live and offer connection with the absolute Signifier and the absolute Signified. In isolation, stripped of connection with the absolute “Be!”, the word falls quiet. It becomes something onto which to project seemingly suitable attributes in its finitude. This has happened to the concepts *muslim*, *islam*, and *al-Salam*.

Existence is contingent manifestation of the Unconditioned. A countless multitude in ceaseless motion, it nonetheless has order

7 Qur’an, 25:43.

and structure, precisely because it has the One as its principle. This does not, however, mean that the absolute One can be limited to just one contingent manifestation. When we exclude the One from our observation of the order and structure of the quantifiable world, we exclude all the higher levels of Being, so that what is left may seem measurably and observably contingent, its own self-sufficient cause. This is also true of language. When the absolutely One stops being the First and the Last and the Outer and the Inner of language, then its ability to receive the manifestation of the One and so refer to Him and connect with Him becomes obscured. For precisely this reason, the concept of the person-of-and-at-peace (the *muslim*) properly belongs to everyone and so to all of existence and to all languages. Our task is to discover it again and again, always and everywhere.

The distressing question of Muslim weakness and disunity and how it is generally engaged with reveal the extent to which we have imprisoned ourselves within an ideologized and reified understanding and interpretation of the universal relationship of the *muslim* and *al-Salam* through *islam*. This understanding or rather this systematic misunderstanding reinforces and serves Muslim self-undermining. To free ourselves from this prison requires either that we reconstitute and reestablish that relationship in its authentic form, renounce our claim to be *muslim*, or opt hypocritically to continue calling ourselves *muslim* without any real attachment to what that term properly denotes. Liberation and self-realization through a restored form of that relationship would, moreover, entail accepting existence as the stage on which we – and that means everyone and all the traditions – are called upon to disclose and reveal our active possession of precisely what today’s Muslims claim not to have, even if they believe fervently that they once did, but have since lost. It cannot be lost. It can only be lost from sight.

III

According to the well-known tradition of the Prophet Muhammad meeting the Archangel Gabriel, when the latter asked: “Tell me, Muhammad, about Islam?” – the prophet replied: “Islam means to bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s apostle, to carry out the prescribed forms of worship, to pay the

tax of purification, to fast during Ramadan, and to walk around the House, if you are able.”⁸ Evidently, bearing witness is the fundamental and crowning factor in all this. Note, bearing witness and not faith. We bear witness only to what we know in and for ourselves, without any doubt. Witness connects the bearer with that to which it is borne. We can know something without bearing witness to it. But we cannot bear reliable witness to what we do not know reliably. In the above response, witness was to something known – that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His apostle. But, how can we know in and for ourselves something that is itself a precondition of our witness?

Most people today see both these acts of witness as based on transmission, that is on our having learned their content from external sources and so of its having been passed on and of our having received it. These acts of witness are, therefore, dependent on a chain of transmission at one end of which is the individual who received that witness from God. Were that the case, our knowledge would not be absolutely certain or reliable or link us as knowing subjects with what we know and bear witness to, no matter where we find ourselves or when. No. Even as transmitted or learned knowledge, it only serves to remind us of something already known, something already present in the innermost core of the self being reminded, and so in each and every one of us, everywhere, always and forever.

In Gabriel’s question, the concept of *islam* was extracted from its proper field of meaning, from the endless multitude of sentences within which it takes on the facets of its meaning. Conceptually, *muslim* belongs to the same semantic field as *islam* and *al-Salam*.⁹ In the response, *islam* was presented as the connection of the *muslim* to *al-Salam*. Accordingly, our connection with absolute *al-Salam* lies in the contingency of being *muslim* and of *islam*. This relationship is inherent to existence, to each individual, and so to all languages, all of which are contingent.

8 Muslim, 1:1–2. See further: Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam: The Foundations of Muslim Faith and Practice*, London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996, xxv–xxvi.

9 For the semantic fields associated with the verbal root *s-l-m*, see: Elsaid M. Badawi, and Muhammad Abdel Halim, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008, 450–53.

In finite space-time and mass-energy, we do not accept that the unchanging nature of the frontier between the known and the unknown. We stubbornly try to erase it, without ever quite managing to remove it. We can accept, ignore, or deny the unknown, as beyond the frontier of the known. If we accept it, the known becomes a manifestation of the unknown, signs across the horizons of the world and in the self that connect us to the Signifier and the Signified. What lies beyond the frontier of the known is then the realm of faith. We cannot put order upon it from the perspective of our own contingency. If order is put upon it and it is made known, it is by absolute Oneness, meaning that the known can no longer be isolated from that realm of the unknown. The unknown is thus also manifest in language and so across all of Being.

When we ignore or deny that the unknown is a higher level of Being, we restrict ourselves to what seems to be known, as sufficient in and of itself, independent of anything external. For such a reduced view of the world and the self, the divisible and so contingent neither manifests nor affirms the indivisible One. But that means living with a fraud taken for principle, namely that everything in this world can be compared and measured and described in mathematical equations.¹⁰ Even where we do clearly see three – two measurable, comparable sides, left and right, *and* the Is, which is neither measurable nor comparable but without which there can be no duality in the first place – we ignore, deny, and either cannot or will not see that the Is is not merely the third of three. The Is is absolutely Third to every duality. All the properties of the absolute Is are reflected in existence and so in human language. Each language has levels of meaning to correspond to the levels of our ascent in consciousness. There is no movable boundary between the level of consciousness that is

10 We cannot speak of science, in any real sense, without mathematics. But mathematics is not itself formal logic or science. Nor can it be separated from them. It is important to remember the premise that God created us and what we do and that we realize ourselves in service to God through our own selves and what we do. Nothing in existence is worthy of our service, in and of itself. Mathematics, like any other product of our consciousness, thinking, or action, can be a connection or link to God or a way of denying or breaking that connection. See further Hempel, Carl G., "On the Nature of Mathematical Truth," *The American Mathematical Monthly*, 52/10 (1945): 543–56, and Cheng, Eugenia, *Is Maths Real? How Simple Questions Lead Us to Mathematics' Deepest Truths*, New York: Basic Books, 2023.

conscious and the level it is conscious of. Nor can there be.

Let us repeat that as persons-of/at/in-peace (*muslim*) we gather all of existence within ourselves and are connected to absolute Peace (*al-Salam*) by being-at-peace (*islam*). Our ability to cross the border between the known and the unknown and to connect with absolute Peace through them discloses to us that the horizons and the self are both forms of the manifestation of God. The person-of-peace looks to the self for life and happiness within the realm of contingency. But death and unhappiness, belonging to contingency, travel always with us, while life and happiness in any absolute sense are in God and of Him. The person-of-peace sees clearly that the signs on the horizons and in the self praise God because they have nothing they did receive from the absolutely Praised absolute Is. The world and human beings are thus indebted to the absolutely Praised and themselves praised only contingently. Which is why their praise of the absolutely Praised is a connection with Him and a returning of their debt to Him.

Turning to our own selves and to the world, we discover our debt, that we are praised, and our alienation. This is because we comprehend contingency, from full consciousness of God's nearness to ultimate unconsciousness of it, with all of our being. No matter how we try to realize ourselves in relation to the absolutely Praised, no matter how high we ascend within the self, glorifying and discovering within ourselves the Praised as our connection with the absolutely Praised, we always fall short of that higher potential that is always within us. The absolutely Praised reveals Himself to us in that ever-present potential within contingent being to be higher and better than it currently is. The Praised is perfect, our shared connection to God, the essence of our humanity, our universal seal. He was sent to existence and to us, as the reason and the purpose of everything that exists. This is something we know directly, within ourselves, and so can bear witness to it.

No matter how conscious and enlightened we may be, still we feel a constant need to transcend ourselves and become even more aware and enlightened. This links us consistently to our higher potential, the Praised, whom God sent as mercy and grace and to be our maternal principle. As our higher possibility, he is a continuous downward emanation of absolute Light into contingent manifestation. Only in and with him can we know ourselves in all our own potential

perfection, as our reason and purpose for being in the world. But we neither enter the world nor leave it of our own will. We are strangers here and sojourners. We are expected to become aware of ourselves and so come to know the Absolute as the homeland whence we came and to which we shall return. In this, the Praised is our guide, the perfect example of fully realized humanity, and so our connection with God the Praised.

God remains absolutely close to the world and so to us as human beings, always and everywhere. That He is Praised cannot be excised from any element or aspect of His creation. The heart of His closeness to everything that makes Him known is the Praised, the perfect individual, who affirms in and of himself that none are praised but the absolutely Praised. So neither he, the Praised, who was sent to remind us of and recall us to the absolutely Praised, nor the absolutely Praised can be lose their purchase within the core of our humanity and so the core of all that exists. The individual chosen to be sent to us as the Praised mediates for us with God, the absolutely Praised, on the ladder by which each of us can ascend internally from multiplicity to the One and contingency to the Absolute.

Accordingly, we have always known that there is no god but God. That knowledge does not depend on anything outside of us. We are contingent and subject to self-forgetfulness and alienation from the absolute Principle of contingency. We can fall into alienation from what is known and imagine other gods than God. This is equally true of the other tenet, that Muhammad is God's apostle. This we know in and of ourselves, independently of anything passed on to us. We are, however, reminded of both indisputable truths that we know in and of ourselves by the signs on the horizons and in the self.

This is why neither act of witness depends on anything outside the self. It is also why they can be expressed in every language. Everything we feel, think, say, or do bears the more or less clear seal of this knowledge lodged at the core of our being. Once we become conscious of this, we come to understand everything on the horizons and in the self in terms of it. There is no crack or lack in creation or its contents.

As all things in existence can be separated both from each other and from the whole, it is abundantly clear that duality is not and

cannot be its own beginning or principle. God is the Principle of all things. He depends on nothing, but everything contingent depends on Him. We know nothing as it really is. When we confess this, it offers us a reliable basis for deriving everything else. We know fully, in and of ourselves, independently of anything outside us, that none are praised but God, the Praised. Everything contingent announces Him, indebted to Him in an economy of praise. All of existence is thus linked to God, the Praised, through praise, as He reminds us in the Recitation: “The seven heavens, and the earth, and whosoever is in them glorify Him. And there is no thing, save that it hymns His praise, though you do not understand their praise. Truly He is Clement, Forgiving.”¹¹

That the standard view and the behaviour associated with it, namely the confession that there is no god but God and that the Praised is His apostle, can stand entirely outside the individual self and most knowledge is shown to be inaccurate and incorrect from our argument above. Both tenets are independent of age, place, language, or tradition. We possess them always in the depths of our self and our being. The prophetic call to remember them, present in every self and throughout existence, does not entail their rebirth ab ovo each time they are invoked.

IV

Existence gathers and is focused within the individual human being. When the self brings awareness to being through knowledge of all the names, the result is a complete manifestation of unconditioned God in His creation. His names are most beautiful. He reveals himself through them as Beautiful. He loves Himself in this revelation. The realized individual loves God, as manifest in the beauty of the Praised whom He sent down to the self of each individual to indwell as our most beautiful potential. So, our love of God is inseparable from our love and adherence to that ever-present potential within us all to be more and higher. Ascending towards it, following the Praised sent to us, we free ourselves of the weaknesses that issue in sin. In the Recitation, God says to His prophet, the Praised, that he is to announce

11 Qur'an, 17:44.

to all people: "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins. And God is Forgiving, Merciful."¹²

God loves the Praised, sent down to be the fulcrum of our humanity and so of existence. The Praised loves God. Everything in existence discloses God, as Praised, to the Praised. This is why, to the person of faith, the Praised is a mercy unto the worlds and the most beautiful example, more precious than any condition of his own self, because the Apostle is the ever-present potential to be even better and higher on our path of self-realization and of return to God. On this path of ascent, the known is contingent and inseparable from the unknown. The known is, however, useless unless it brings about a straightening up and an ascent within the self.

We know in and of our own selves that there is no god but God and that the Praised is His apostle. We know nothing more reliably. But it is only when we make our own selves bear witness to this, of our own will, so that this witness connects us with absolutely Knowing and Witnessing God, that we open up to self-liberation and self-realization as recipients and observers of what exists. In and through this, all the worlds, in all their difference, and all people, in all their irreproducible originality, stand within unity, as a community through which the One reveals Himself. Precisely that which determines and defines the person-of-peace, the confession that there is no god but God and that the Praised is His apostle, is the heart of unity and of taking responsibility for what has been received.

The signs on the horizons and within the self can seem as though independent of the absolute Signifier and absolute Signified. That would render the Truth they announce contingent. Then, existence would be self-contained, something whose persistence would be independent of any observer. This cannot be the case. We are the reason and purpose for existence, but God is the absolute reason and the absolute purpose of all. Contingency cannot be without the Absolute. To deny this, we must first exclude ourselves from what we are observing. So long as we remain included, no deterministic image can hold of a world with laws but no absolute Legislator. Instead, existence must be reduced to the merely comparable and measurable. But then there will be no transcending of the frontier between known

12 Ibidem, 3:31.

and unknown. Which is to say, we will have excluded faith, the connection between the faithful and Faithful God, from the territory of the known.

But we do not accept such confinement within the limits of the known and that alone. We are constantly engaged in trying to overcome them. In fact, as knowing subjects, we are involved in constant processes of change, especially regarding what we comprehend as known. Our connections with the external horizons and the self receive new impressions through the senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch. There are names woven into webs of meaning for everything within reach of our senses. In fact, there is nothing within the boundaries of the known that is not incorporated within that network of language, meaning, and symbol. The knower, however, cannot magic away the boundary between the known and the unknown in this way. Each of the names in the shifting webs of meaning has its connections with the unknown and so with the absolute Is as well. Even these connections do not mean that the known and the unknown are commensurate, however.

As we become aware of two of His attributes, being absolute Peace and being absolutely Praised, thanks to knowing that there is no god but God, we discover our highest potential within the self in our perfectibility as human beings, a perfectibility manifest in the first of the people of peace, the Praised, sent down as the most beautiful example, more precious to us than any condition of our own selves. This is the essence of the potential deposited as treasure within the self, which we know independently of our historical, geographical, or cultural background, as part of the now, of the fully Real.

So, God, in His mercy, has sent us His heralds to remind us, through their speech and presence, of what is already within us, of being-at-peace and of being praised, as something already realized in the person of the first of the people of peace, who is the maternal Praised. That we can be conscious of existence as a whole, both of the horizons and of our own inner world, and see in them the self-presentation of the One means that we are always somewhere on the axis between most beautiful uprightness, the reason and purpose for which we and all things were created, and the lowest depth, towards which we descend when we reject what we know in and of ourselves. That most beautiful uprightness is the person of the Praised, our

most sublime potential, that cannot be extinguished by any state or condition of the self in all its diversity. And through the Holy Spirit/ the Spirit of Truth, God has sent down to the heart of the Praised, His apostle, the seal and maternal principle of all His heralds, the essence of humanity, His Word, through which He has made the nature of the Praised, our most beautiful example and a mercy to the worlds, his perfected humanity the telos and end of all existence.

The Word thus sent down is God's speech in human language and in everything on the horizons and within the self. It is His reminder to us of our reason and purpose. When it first appeared, it was, like any other word, in a specific language, but it was sent down to all people and so may be translated into all languages. In it, God says: "And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variety of your tongues and hues."¹³ This variety of languages, which divides us into linguistic communities, cannot in itself present an obstacle to our being reminded of the reason and purpose for which we are in the world. Each of us stands before God's Face, created in the same authenticity and capable of the same full self-actualization in what we have and are. Given God's absolute justice, there could hardly be *a priori* advantage offered to some select group based purely on linguistic, racial, or geographic difference or of the age into which they were born.

So, all languages and all ways of using them belong equally to the person-of-peace (*muslim*), in the universal meaning of that term. Even if, as individuals, we cannot understand them all, they all already contain everything, including all the signs on the horizons and in the self. As we become conscious of this, we rise up towards most beautiful uprightness, the reason and purpose for which we have been created. In the Recitation, God announced: "Every people has its Messenger; then, when their Messenger comes, justly the issue is decided between them, and they are not wronged."¹⁴ Consequently, the existence of different languages cannot put any of us at a disadvantage in realizing the reason and purpose for which we were created. This is made clear in the Recitation: "We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue

13 Ibidem, 30:22.

14 Ibidem, 10:47.

of his people, that he might make all clear unto them.”¹⁵

These citations from the Recitation make it clear that God has sent as many heralds as there have been, are, or will be linguistic communities. God told those he sent one and the same essence in different forms, which they then received and passed on to people. In the Recitation God says: “And We sent never a Messenger before thee except that We revealed to him, saying, ‘There is no god but I, so serve Me.’”¹⁶ In this verse, *before* may be understood as meaning both before and after. As a prophet, the Praised is the capstone of existence, first in intention and last in execution. The other heralds swore their oath to him as their paladin, and he affirmed them as having been announced and gone out into the world.

It can seem to us that we do not know who was the herald sent to the linguistic community to which we belong. Those sent to, received, and followed in the thousands of such communities were often originally of other peoples and spoke in other languages. But all languages can receive the news and the messages by which God recalls us to the reason and purpose for which we were created. No one is a stranger in his or her own tongue. When we become alienated from our own language, the self is darkened. Our true homeland lies in language, as God addresses us in His speech through it. None of us is thus without the merciful and just potential to rise to our ever higher, ever better, and ever more beautiful self. But we can mistake ourselves for lords of our own being and of all within the reach of our will and our power. This mistaken seeming then alienates us from the Real and distracts us from what is known, from what we know in and through our own selves.

We did not create even a single particle of our own being. Or speech. We may consider ourselves to be entirely within our own power and authority - sovereign. However obvious it is that the absolutely Is speaks through everything on the horizons and everything in us, we nonetheless consistently forget, ignore, and deny it. But the heralds are those amongst us to whom the absolute Is allocates the task of making clear, in speech and in language, the necessary presence and

15 *Ibidem*, 14:4.

16 *Ibidem*, 21:25.

ineradicable authority of the One. Their examples in our heritage disclose the ineradicable presence of God in consciousness, thought, and speech and in all they express. It bears repeating that God made us and everything we can feel, think, or do. He sent the Praised as His prophet, a mercy to the worlds, and so a mercy in all languages.

God is absolutely Conscious and everything He has created, no matter how great or small, reflects this. All the signs on the horizons are accordingly conscious in their relations with God, the absolute Signifier and the absolute Signified, conscious of themselves and of being participants in His creation. Each individual human being also has immediate knowledge in his or her self of being conscious and can fall into the trap of supposing that consciousness an exclusively human property. When we separate ourselves off from existence as a whole, which is itself conscious and has its claim on us, the result of our alienation in violence against the external horizons, as we transform ourselves from God's vicar over the world into its supposedly independent lord. This results in an illusion of power and strength in that violence, when in fact all we have done is to oppress the world, the other beings that make it up, and our own selves and so to reduce ourselves to our lowest rather than our highest potential.

V

Humanity has one essence. God, the Inceptor, incepted it into humankind to make of us the purpose of His creation. This was His sublime plan to introduce us into Being.¹⁷ The prophets draw our attention to that marrow of humanity, its maternity and its final, sealing nature, and they realize it themselves in and through their oath to God. That oath is mentioned in the Recitation, the discourse God sent down to His prophet, the Praised, that he might bear witness to it and pass it on all:

And when God made the covenant of the prophets: "By that which I have given you of a Book and Wisdom, should a messenger then come to you confirming that which is

17 The name of the Inceptor (*al-Fāṭir*) and the concept of inception (*fiṭra*) belong, in the Qur'anic revelation, to the semantic cluster centred on the verbal root *f-ṭ-r*. See: Badawi, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, 716–17.

with you, you shall surely believe in him and you shall help him.” He said: “Do you agree and take on My burden on these conditions?” They said: “We agree.” He said: “Bear witness, for I am with you among those who bear witness.”¹⁸

God thus offered a covenant or contractual relationship to the prophets and to each of us as an individual. For this we have free will. Otherwise, a contract or agreement would be senseless. Consequently, we can forget, ignore, or deny this contractual relationship, which, however, we know deep within ourselves, in our having been incepted into Being through God’s love, the love of the Inceptor. God comprehends everything in His knowing. Accordingly, He has full knowledge of and judges our attitude towards the stake of that original contract. This is the meaning of trust or faith as the form of our relationship as faithful subjects and God, the Faithful. Without trust, neither the offer nor the acceptance of a contractual relationship would make sense.

The apostle is the single and self-same essence of humanity. Each individual treasures knowledge of that essence always and forever, and so does every language. Each of us knows it and bears witness to it in the irreproducibility of their individual being. When it manifests itself to us within history, in a given language, region, or way of life, it gathers within itself that force of exemplarity under which our relationship to God and so to His creation is to be assessed. But contingent existence is not commensurate with the absolutely Steadfast.

Existence, which extends across the ungraspable expanses of space, time, mass, and energy, and humanity, in which it is both contained and focused, are at peace and in service to God, the absolute Lord and Peace. God’s absolute Lordship is expressed and affirmed in this service. God’s absolutely being Peace is expressed and affirmed in being-at-peace. This is how contingency is related to the Absolute. The contingent is not self-sufficient. It is not possible without the Absolute. Everything it has, it has received from Him, and it owes everything to Him. God says in the Recitation: “Unto God belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth, and unto God are all matters returned.”¹⁹

18 Qur’an, 3:81.

19 Ibidem, 3:109.

That all human hearts are as one between the two fingers of the all-Merciful²⁰ and that everything comes from Him and returns to Him are clear expressions of the inextricability of the contingent from the Absolute, of duality from the One. For, contingency, overall and within each individual thing, no matter how great or small, partakes of duality and is fully entangled through dependence on the One. This entanglement, in which every particle is “aware” of all others and shows itself, in that connectedness, to be dependent both upon the observer and on the time and place of observation, is a confirmation of the interrelationship of everything on the external horizons with the individual self of the observer and so the interrelationship of our being aware with the absolutely Conscious and Aware.

What we have, we have received from the One. In our awareness of this, existence is rendered aware, between its extremes, its beginning and end in both time and space, signs of the absolute Beginning and the absolute End, which cannot be distinguished or comprehended or encompassed by anything conditional. In the Recitation, God says of this interrelationship of everything that exists, which is to say of everything contingent and of every duality, with the One: “Glory be to Him, Who created all the pairs of what the earth produces, and of themselves, and what they know not.”²¹

Everything creation has received from God recalls Him but is not to be equated with Him. Compared to God, everything is nothing. But compared to His creation, God is God. He says in the Recitation: “There is none in the heavens and on the earth, but that it comes unto the Merciful as a servant.”²² Given the contingency of our free will, it is clear that all our striving and doing can have no impact on God’s approach. Whether we wish it or not, contingency comes to consciousness in and through free will as the manifestation of God, the absolutely Conscious. Everything in existence and existence as a whole make manifest and confirm God, absolute Peace. All of which is in turn focused and affirmed within us and our awareness. In the Recitation, God says of this: “Do they seek other than God’s debt, while whosoever is in the heavens and on the earth is in Peace with

20 See: Muslim, 4:1397.

21 Qur’an, 36:36.

22 Ibidem, 19:93.

Him, willingly or unwillingly, and unto Him they will be returned?"²³

God's address to everyone is to each of us individually and in all languages. The heart, the core of humanity in the fullest meaning of that term, is the presence of the One both in and out of time, in and out of space, and is in each one of us and in us all together, while nonetheless remaining "one between the two fingers of the all-Merciful". In its creaturehood, it corresponds to duality under the absolute rule of the One. In its uncreated nature, it is the same as Him, the One. This claim may seem questionable. Every manifestation of the individual heart is dual, but its essence is Oneness or Unity, which is God and of God. This is also the case with Peace.

The single heart of all human beings between the two fingers of the all-Merciful, the One, is a clear reminder on the dual aspect of creation in its full and absolute dependence on the Creator. He cannot be divided, but whatsoever has been created can. Even the most minute particle of the self-showing of the One in space-time and mass-energy, manifest in the irrepressible flux of both the external horizons and each and every self, of the constant processes of coming into and going out of existence, remains divisible. No matter how we imagine or measure it, every particle or, more precisely, every quantum is, in its particle-wave duality, connected with all other particles, throughout existence. When it comes to consciousness within one observer connected with others, it is as a sign of the absolute Is without Which there is no existence at all. This entanglement of the duality of contingent manifestation is the One, the third to every pair but never the third of three.

Judgement is the showing or demonstration of truth. Only in and through judgement is full justification possible. Each time we judge, we do so out of knowledge, as what connects us as knowing subjects with what we know. The only knowledge that can possibly be absolute is that there is no god but God and that the Praised is His apostle, though even here the knowing and witnessing subject remains contingent and so only contingently knowing and witnessing. Only God, Who comprehends all with His knowing, can judge entirely justly. And He shall:

23 Ibidem, 3:83. The Arabic original uses the verb *aslama*, which is derived from the same root, *s-l-m*, as *muslim*, *islam* and *salam*.

And, now you have come unto Us alone, just as We created you the first time, and you have left behind that which We had bestowed upon you. We see not with you your intercessors – those whom you claimed were partners. Now the bond between you has been severed, and that which you once claimed has forsaken you.²⁴

Creation is deposited as a treasure within us. In the Recitation, God says: “And He taught Adam the names, all of them.”²⁵ Those names are God’s. They express the inexhaustible attributes of His oneness through their difference. All of the obstacles in our path of ascent from one level of consciousness to another are removed in our consciousness or awareness of God, as the Possessor of the most beautiful names. The higher the level of consciousness, the clearer the names and their integration into fields of meaning. There is not and cannot be a level of being at which God’s names are not present. They are God’s and what connects the contingent with Him.

Nothing mediates our relationship with God, alone with the Alone. In the Recitation God tells us: “And be conscious of God. God teaches you, and God has knowledge of everything.”²⁶ And then: “Know, then, that there is no god but God.”²⁷ In and through our consciousness of this we grow in knowledge. Our character depends on our awareness of God, Who has told us: “O mankind! Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another. Surely the most noble of you before God are the most conscious of you. Truly God is Knowing, Aware.”²⁸

This is God addressing us, together and individually. He is with us wheresoever we are,²⁹ facing us with His Face no matter where we turn.³⁰ Each of us is aware of this, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on where we are on the spectrum from most beautiful

24 Ibidem, 6:94.

25 Ibidem, 2:31.

26 Ibidem, 2:282.

27 Ibidem, 47:19.

28 Ibidem, 49:13.

29 See: Qur’an, 57:4.

30 Ibidem, 2:115.

uprightness, in which we were created, to the lowest depth, as He says in the Recitation: “Truly We created man in the most beautiful uprightness, then We cast him to the lowest of the low, save those who believe and perform righteous deeds.”³¹ Being *most noble before God* is the same as having been created *in most beautiful uprightness* and *most conscious*. It corresponds to *the most beautiful example of the Prophet*. All of us can potentially attain this, because it is our innate reason and purpose. Ascending towards it depends on being faithful, on having faith and so being connected to God, the Faithful, through faith, and doing good deeds.

VI

The most conscious are the most noble before God and in Him.³² And being most noble, we realize the manifestation of that name of God both in our own selves and in everything else in existence. He commanded us: “Recite! Thy Lord is most noble.”³³ When we reach awareness through being faithful, God calls on us to persist in this: “O you who believe! Be conscious of God!”³⁴ Our own consciousness of being conscious manifests itself as an opening up of the path of ascent. As already mentioned, the awareness through which we render ourselves and the world aware is of ceaseless ascent. Once we have become aware of our awareness, there is always a higher consciousness above.

It is only in confessing that there is no awareness but God as absolute Awareness that we can cross the boundary of our confinement within space, time, mass, and energy. The same is true of all the names deposited as treasure in the self. They are all of God and are how He is manifest as absolutely Conscious at the various levels of being conscious. Any question of our self-realization by becoming

31 Qur’an, 95:4–6.

32 The epithets “most noble” and “most conscious” originally belong to the semantic fields associated with the root *k-r-m* (See: Badawi, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage*, 803–804) and *w-q-y* (Ibidem, 1042–43).

33 Qur’an, 96:3.

34 Ibidem, 59:18.

conscious and most noble is fully met only when we recognise within ourselves the incompetence of contingency without the absolutely Unconditioned. The following is declared in the Recitation regarding how the names in contingency relate to and are connected with God:

He is God, other than Whom there is no god, the Sovereign, the Holy, Peace, the Faithful, the Protector, the Mighty, the Compeller, the Proud. Glory be to Him above the partners they ascribe. He is God, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner; unto Him belong the Most Beautiful Names. Whatsoever is in the heavens and the earth glorifies Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise.³⁵

These names, uttered in God's discourse in human language, are proper to God. We are contingent and these names are in us contingently and as intimations of the Absolute in contingency. When we work on realizing them in ourselves without due recognition that they belong to God's purpose and design, then we have taken one or several little gods for God. Then our language and our volition are cut off from the self-evident truth that there is no god but God and that *whatsoever is in the heavens and earth glorifies Him*.

The free will given to us as the condition of our contractual relationship with God can appear sufficient in itself. This is a constant threat of associating one or several others with God. When we do that, we undermine the foundations for self-liberation and self-actualisation in most beautiful uprightness, which is the why and what we were created for. This leads to becoming confined on a level of Being so as to wander there or fall even lower, in contrast to prayer, through which the continuity of ascending is maintained: "Guide us upon the upright path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray."³⁶ This signifies the relationship of the measurable to the Immeasurable, of the known to the Unknown, and so of language, which must correspond to Being at all Its levels.

Existence is a stage on which we actualise or realize ourselves. As we grow in knowledge – and God in the Recitation instructs the Praised,

35 Ibidem, 59:23–24.

36 Ibidem, 1:6–7.

as a prophet, to pray: “My Lord! Increase me in knowledge!”³⁷ – this can be in relation to God or to anything in existence. If knowledge, which connects the knowing subject to the known, does not bring us closer to God, it does not contribute to our self-actualisation, but subordinates it to contingency as sufficient in itself and as its own reason and purpose. The praised says “If a day comes upon me in which I do not increase in a knowledge that draws me nearer to God, may God not bless me that day.”³⁸

From the above statement of the Praised, it follows that we can grow in knowledge, which should be our connection as knowing subjects with absolutely knowing God, while still forgetting and denying the fundamental purpose of knowledge, self-liberation and self-realization in relation to God and return from the manifold to Him, the One. Through His knowledge, God encompasses everything,³⁹ but we cannot. When we take the contingency of existence as enough in itself, then space-time and mass-energy relationships become the limitless transformation of cause into consequence and consequence into cause, so that the necessity of the absolute Third is denied or at any rate passed over in silence in all of duality. This means the necessity of the absolute Cause and the absolute Consequence, present throughout duality, is ignored in such pictures of existence. The fluid manifold is impossible without the absolute One, Who holds it in order.

When we take the signs on the horizons and in the observing self for enough in themselves and several from God, Who is Truth, we confine ourselves to contingency. Only the measurable world exists, with its countless multitude of phenomena to be subjected to our will and power. We take gods for God in the world and in the self. If we remain aware of the necessity that there be no, that there can be no god but God, we nonetheless associate our imaginings and acts to Him. The prophet, the Praised, prayed: “O God, I take refuge in Thee

37 Ibidem, 20:114.

38 In: Abu'l-Qāsim Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al-Lakhamī al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Muʿjam al-awsaṭ*, eds. Abū Muʿādh ʿAwd Allāh and Abu'l-Faḍl al-Ḥusaynī, Cairo: Dār al-Haramayn, 1415/1995, 6636; cited in: Nasr et al, *op. cit.*, 804–805.

39 See: Qur'an, 20:98.

from knowledge that is of no use!”⁴⁰ He was referring to knowledge that does not link the knowing subject with God and so undermines our return and ascent to Him. Consciously or not, we deny His signs on the horizons and in the self and as a result the immeasurable Spirit by which we are made both the focus and the sum of creation, as the recipient of the stake of the wager of confidence and so of free will.

Seeing the world in the causal terms of space-time and mass-energy phenomena always involves limits and boundaries, everywhere. It may seem that everything can be reduced to comparison and measurement. What cannot is ignored or denied. The knowing subject adopts as a goal, within this picture, only what is known and so what is within the boundaries of the contingent. The search is on for maximum power and maximum strength within these limited perspectives. Such power and strength can be compared and measured, but there is nothing that absolutely transcends or absolutely sub-tends them. Cut off from God, maximised power and strength become the most exalted goal through which humanity attempts to transcend its own ontological weakness. In the Recitation, God says: “O mankind! You are needful of God and He is the Self-Sufficient, the Praised.”⁴¹ That we are needful reflects our absolute and consequent lack of self-sufficiency (our self-insufficiency). In the Recitation this is put in the following way: “God is the Rich, and you are the poor.”⁴²

In our needfulness, our self-insufficiency, and our poverty we reflect that God is self-Sufficient, Rich, and Praised. Everything we do or can have, we have received from the Unconditioned. This is why awareness of the interdependency between our authentic weakness and our potential to be strong can be realized in knowing that there is no god but God and that the Praised is His apostle. In the Recitation, weakness and strength are marked out as relating existence and so humankind to God: “God is He Who created you from weakness, then ordained strength after weakness, then ordained weakness and old age after strength. He creates whatsoever He will, and He is the Knowing, the Powerful.”⁴³

40 Muslim, 4:1425.

41 Qur’an, 35:15.

42 Ibidem, 47:38.

43 Ibidem, 30:54.

God's strength and power are immeasurable, in contrast to strength and power in the contingent world, limited by space-time and mass-energy relations that are subject to measurement. In the Recitation, He says of Himself: "Truly thy Lord, He is the Strong, the Mighty."⁴⁴ This is why being strong and mighty/powerful is negligible in relation to Him. That He is Unconditioned means that nothing determines or defines Him. That He is His Own means His being absolutely free.

So, everything within contingency is simply a sign of Him, in which His presence is also unconditioned. Such signs do not confine us in relation to Him. It may seem to us that what we have and might have belongs to us, but this is mere seeming, in which the relationship between the contingent and the Unconditioned has been obscured. In the Recitation, we are reminded of the danger that seeming represents: "Do you worship that which you carve, while God created you and that which you make?"⁴⁵

That expression is God's own discourse sent down to the heart of His prophet, the Praised, and then delivered to people. Its meaning is relevant to all of existence, every place, every time. And that meaning is comprehensive: the world and humanity and everything that happens or may happen in them have their meaning and purpose in God. Consciousness and thinking and silence and speaking and language and inscription and doing and not doing, every voluntary and involuntary motion, all are of God in the full sense of the term.

As individuals, we are all placed within concrete socio-economic environments. When we prioritise the unity of our socio-political structures above all other aspects of their role as enabling frameworks for human flourishing, it can issue in obsession with a fantasy of society as an organic unity, as a body or system that tends to erase the primacy of our individual subjectivity as the medium of the human mode of being. One common consequence of this is that we offload our debt to God, an essentially individual responsibility, onto society or onto the political and economic order, or some other projection of supra-individual agency. Harmonious and healthy communities are,

44 *Ibidem*, 11:66.

45 *Ibidem*, 37:95–96.

however, only possible if based upon the free cooperation of liberated and realized individuals under God for whom the Praised is present as their perfect example.

Individual freedom does not come from participation in society or subordination to a social order – regardless of whether that social order considers itself liberal or repressive or is so considered by those subject to it. Individual freedom comes from our relationship with God, which is what gives us both the strength and the responsibility to judge our relationship with society and transcend our dependency on it. Interpretations of the relationship between the individual and society based upon the ideology of progress invert this incontestable truth in the service of this-worldly lords, instead of the only true Lord, and so obscure and cover over the reality that all responsibility is ultimately that of the individual before God.

VII

Trust, the relationship of the faithful with God, the Creditor or Endebtor, includes free will whereby God, the absolutely Free, renders Himself manifest within contingent creation. Nothing in this, however, stands outside the limits of His will. If we are to realize the contractual obligation that we have accepted with God, we must disclose ourselves as obedient in good and good alone. By confessing that there is no god but God we also confess that there is no good but Him and that our most exalted potential lies in obedience (hearkening) to God, the Good. In the Recitation, He says to us: “O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you differ among yourselves concerning any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you believe in God and the Last Day. That is better, and fairer in outcome.”⁴⁶

There will inevitably be divergence between people, as each of us was created from scratch and therefore is irreducible to anyone or anything else. It is precisely in this difference that God’s sameness is set forth and affirmed. Whence it follows that we as human beings,

46 Ibidem, 4:59.

in the actualisation of our capacities through being-at-peace and faithful, are obligated to discussion, and God and His apostle shall judge over us at all levels of existence in this regard. We are all co-responsible for this – together and individually. In this way, we realize our return from contingency, and so from confinement within the world of measurement, to the Unconditioned.

That which primarily belongs to us, above all, is our relationship to and our intention regarding what we do and what we do not. Lose the clear understanding that there is no god but God and that all the signs on the horizons and within the self signify Him, whether intentionally or through obliviousness, and you have openly or covertly accepted one or more gods for God. So, growth is prevented, growth in being a knowing subject connected through knowledge to God, the absolutely Knowing, and so growth in the reconciliation of difference. If so, we cannot ascend to God by means of the most beautiful example within the self.

Once knowledge stops being what relates the knowing subject with God, the absolutely Knowing, His presence in all things comes to be excluded. So, within the conditional consciousness of the observing subject, the manifold levels of Being are collapsed and the very lowest, the measurable world to which multiplicity and quantity correspond, is taken for the only actual and sufficient one.

When this happens, we obscure the higher levels of consciousness from which the question comes down to us: “Does God not suffice His servant? Yet they would frighten thee with those apart from Him; and whomsoever God leads astray, no guide has he.”⁴⁷ Given our acceptance of a contractual relationship with God, and so of free will, we can always regard the world we have been given, within the horizons and within the self, as something we accept on the basis of oblivion or denial of the reality that nothing in it is exclusive of God’s presence and authority. It may seem otherwise. When it does, this is an appearance that separates us from our purposeful and purposive potential to return from and with the manifold to the absolute One.

We fulfil our sublime potential in terms of being most noble through being most conscious. Our being conscious lies on a scale that

47 *Ibidem*, 39:36.

reaches down to the lowest level of being and up towards being most conscious and so in most beautiful uprightness. Each of these levels involves conscious relationship with God, the Possessor of the most beautiful names, albeit at varying degrees of realization, depending on our progress on the upright path. At no point, however lowly, are we outside either His presence or His will. We cannot think or speak or do anything outside of His will.

It is only when we become conscious of this, that our consciousness, feelings, thoughts, and utterances, what we read and what we do, become imbued with a fullness of purpose and of reason, albeit never an absolute fullness. Otherwise, it may seem to us that our thinking and speaking and acting are entirely our own, under our own authority, and independent of anything beyond our strength and power. Which simply cannot be the case. Ultimately, everything is of God and from God. He reminds us of this out of mercy to our obliviousness: “God it is Who created the heavens and the earth, and sent down water from the sky, then brought forth fruits thereby for your provision. He has made the ships subservient unto you, so that they sail upon the sea by His Command, and has made the rivers subservient unto you.”⁴⁸ Similarly in the Recitation: “Your Lord is He Who makes the ships sail upon the sea, that you might seek of His Bounty. Verily, He is Merciful unto you.”⁴⁹

In this statement of how we are the purpose and reason of all creation, the dependency of creation on God is stressed. Existence as a whole is given to us to be the stage on which we affirm our conscious awareness through standing, praying, and prostrating ourselves. Everything we think, say, or do, is only useful to the extent that it connects us with God. Whenever we ascribe any of this to ourselves, denying God as the absolute Reason and absolute Purpose of everything, we forfeit our position as His vicegerent in the world and as the shepherd of creation. We become rebels against God and His Lordship and consequently against ourselves as well.

We cut ourselves off from awareness of being the recipient of God’s most beautiful names and of discovering ourselves in relation to the most beautiful example, that ever present higher possibility, the

48 Ibidem, 14:32.

49 Ibidem, 17:66.

reason and purpose of creation. But it is only through consciousness of already having the most beautiful example within us that we can realize ourselves in being in the most beautiful way, beauty connected with God, the Possessor of the most beautiful names. When asked by the Archangel Gabriel “Tell me now about doing what is beautiful?”, the Praised responded: “Doing what is beautiful means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.”⁵⁰

Relating as poor, dependent, recipient, and servile to our Rich, Independent, Giving Master, we are a manifestation of the absolutely Real, but an always contingent one. What God has given us within the horizons of the world and within our own selves is never anything more than an image of the Real, an interpretation of It, and consequently cannot ever be equated with It. The horizons and the self and the prophet, and the Recitation announced to him can be accessed in contingency, in interpretation, but there is no such thing as an interpretation independent of the circumstances in which we, as individual recipients and interpreters of God’s self-expression, find ourselves. Which is why our connection with Him is through the interpretation of His self-expression.

Every new interpretation involves the overcoming of a previous one, but not so as to cut the connection with what went before or to close off from what comes after.⁵¹ No interpretation can be imposed upon the Real. It is in an unceasing process of making known in some other way, but never one that is without the presence of God, the Possessor of the most beautiful names. The beauty of the most beautiful example, the ever-presence of the connection with God, the Possessor of the most beautiful names, does not and has not faded in any of these expressions.

50 Muslim, 1:2.

51 While science, in the sense of relating to the quantifiable world, is not infrequently construed as a form of knowledge independent of (unrelated to) an observing self or absolute Uncontingent, it nonetheless changes its interpretations in accordance with prevailing (temporal) conditions and proving/testing of the known with regard to the presentation of the Real. See, e.g. Thomas Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. In his presentation of the changing paradigms of knowledge/science, he accepts independence of the developing horizontal dynamic vis-à-vis the presence of the absolute One.

VIII

We can feel specifically bound by one or other of these inherited interpretations. But it only seems so. What we inherit as our tradition can involve new and previously unknown elements, but this does not detract from the fact that the signs on the horizons and in the self and *a fortiori* in any language – including those constructed to support the supposed independence of epistemological fields – all designate God, Who in turn sees and hears all things. We have no access to anything from the past or any of the inherited interpretations of the revealed books or from any imagined future except in and through our own present, which is fully real and inseparable from the absolute Real. Whenever we turn to observe the horizons in the external world or within the self, we find ourselves facing God. There cannot be any contingent phenomenon that does not reveal and affirm Him. Only He is absolutely Real.

To realize oneself by being *muslim* (at peace), *mumim* (faithful) and *muhsin* (a doer of what is beautiful) is to accept that being known is a degree of growth in knowledge and that, given awareness of God, it reinforces the sense of dependence on the absolutely Rich and absolutely Independent, the absolutely One, and so the Cause and Purpose of the manifold as the manifestation of It. When this is forgotten or denied, we search in vain for unity amongst people, because there is none and cannot be any without the absolute One and His self-revelation through creation and through the Praised, as His prophet and the perfect epitome of existence.

The signs in the self and on the horizons are of God. He reminds us of them in the Recitation, which was revealed in language. Given that He comprehends everything in His knowledge and mercy, one language is the same as all languages, and so He has warned us all of the reason and purpose for which we are in the world, of His unity, of our capacity as human beings and of return to Him. To be actively *muslim* is to accept our responsibility to existence as a whole and so to counter the necessarily unjustified ghettoization of awareness and knowledge into mutually exclusive ways of life based on closed systems of metaphysics, cosmology, or anthropology.

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