

MAN OF LIGHT OR SUPERMAN? A PROBLEM OF ISLAMIC MYSTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

What is man? “The feather of an angel was brought and tied to a donkey’s tail that the donkey perhaps might turn into an angel”.

Thus writes the greatest of all Persian-writing mystical poets of Islam, Maulânâ Jalâladdîn Rûmî (1207-1273) in his conversations, *Fîhi mâ fîhi*, when pointing to the mystery of man’s existence: man is able to attain a rank superior to that of the angels (who have no free will and are eternally good) provided he develops his God-given faculties of reason and love; but he can sink lower than a beast if he neglects his spiritual powers and falls a prey to sensual pleasures and crimes owing to the misuse of his rational faculties.

The picture which Rûmî draws with his usual powerful poeti-

cal imagery seems on the whole a fine translation of the classical Islamic tradition as it acknowledges both greatness and vulnerability of man who was endowed with the Divine trust despite the Creator's knowledge that he was "very ignorant and tyrannical" (*Sûra* 33/72).

European scholars have often wondered what "man" in the Islamic tradition may really mean, and have not rarely criticized the two apparently contradictory expressions of the human existence which the Islamic concept seemed to offer and which look like wide-apart poles: there is the *'abd*, the "servant" or rather "slave, bondsman", as he is constantly addressed and called in the Koran, a servant whose first and foremost duty is absolute obedience to the One and Unique Lord, whose rule he has acknowledged from pre-eternity (cf. *Sûra* 7/171); and there is the *insân kâmil*, the "perfect Man", a concept developed in later Sufism, especially in the school of Ibn 'Arabî. There, man is imagined as growing spiritually through a long process of "unveilings" and will finally recognize his role as the microcosmic mirror of the Divine Names and Attributes, living, as it were, in an atmosphere beyond good and evil.

Where, in this picture, is room for what the Western tradition considers the truly "human" man? Does one really find, in Islamic thought, a "humanistic" approach to the world, and to life?

It seems to me that a global verdict against the "un-humanistic" Islamic attitude toward man can be corrected. Not only theologians and mystics of sorts but also—and even more—Muslim modernist thinkers have tried to define man's role in this world, notably Iqbâl (1877-1938), the poet-philosopher of Muslim India.

The problem of man's role was discussed throughout the centuries, the theologians and lawyer divines attempting to define all the duties that were incumbent upon him (and, likewise, on women; "man" is used here generally for both genders). They debated these duties not only in terms of personal status law but even more in political philosophy, discussing the role of the leader of the community, and asking to what extent a tyrannical leader could be tolerated. "Mirrors for Princes" were composed to shed light on these questions, and in modern times the problem of man's political and social role, and his part in the formation and maintenance of the State has been and is being discussed widely.

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However, we shall concentrate here mainly upon the definition of man's role as interpreted by the mystics, the Sufis, as they grew in the Muslim society from the early eighth century. Deeply steeped in the words of the Koran, intensely active in the fulfillment of the ritual duties and supererogative works, they developed a highly refined psychology, and developed their doctrines about the "stages" and "stations", which were thought to culminate in Love or in Knowledge—a Knowledge of non-intellectual content, "gnosis" in the classical sense of the word. Into these first Sufi currents slowly elements from the pre-Islamic areas of thought, from Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, Zoroastrism, Manicheism, Christianity were incorporated as far as they could be accommodated in the structure of mystical thought and experience—the center of Sufi teaching being a complete interiorization of the central dogma of Islam as expressed in the profession of faith: *lâ ilâha illâ- 'Llâh* - "there is no deity save God". For the Sufis, that came to mean that there is no real agent but God, Creator, Sustainer, and Judge, and then: that there is no existing being save Him: only He has the right to say "I". Before this One and Unique Divine Being, His small and insignificant creature has no will of his own; he is the "slave" who knows that he is standing before the Lord; who at the same time feels that his sinfulness makes him unworthy to stand in the Divine Presence and yet knows that God's infinite grace is able to take him out of lowly position and can forgive him if He pleases. Other Sufis emphasized the love relationship between the Lord and His slave—as the Egyptian Sufi Dhû'n-Nûn (d. 859) said in a famous prayer: "O God, I call Thee in the crowds as slaves call Thee, and I call Thee in the seclusion as lovers call Thee." Love, and hoped-for spiritual union, annihilation of the weak human being in the Presence of the ineffable Divine—these were the topics discussed, and experienced by the Sufis, some of whom had to pay with their lives for their daring utterances. They poured out their ecstatic experience in poetry, or tried to speak of it in complicated systems, and according to their position their description of man varies—poor and destitute, needy of the Lord's grace, but, at the same time, blessed by God, and capable to experience things which no other creature can experience. This twofold view seems to be typical for many of them, but it has also to be em-

phasized that one of the most important duties of the Sufi leader, the *shaykh* or *pîr*, was to teach his disciple how to overcome his weaknesses and approach the world of the spiritual by undergoing a long, and often painful process. This spiritual training has continued throughout the centuries to this day.

Let us return to the basis of every concept developed in Muslim thought, that is the Koran, to see to what extent the problem of “man” is discussed in the sacred text.

The Koranic data reveal that man is not contaminated by original sin and therefore is not in need of that kind of redemption which is at the core of Christianity. Man, as the tradition says, is born on a *fiṭra*, a natural attitude, and only then the parents make the child follow their own religion, Christianity, Judaism, or whatever it may be. But at the very beginning, it is unpolluted by any sin or mistake. To be sure, “man was created weak”, as the Koran states at various instances (thus *Sûra* 4/28), and enumerates a whole series of negative qualities: man is “given to argument” (*Sûra* 18/54; 36/77), “unjust and ignorant” (*Sûra* 33/72), as it is said with the insensive form *Jahûl zalûm*, which also occurs in man’s description as *’ajûl* (*Sûra* 17/11), “given to undue hurry”. And a clever pun in a word ascribed to the Prophet claims: *innamâ summiya’l-insan min an-nisyân* “Verily man [*insân*] was called [by this name] because of forgetfulness [*nisyân*]”—that is, *insân* and *nisyân* stem—or so it seems—from the same root. For all too frequently does man forget to thank God for His graces (although, as we shall see later, forgetfulness also is part of life and is at times even required for the continuation of this world. However, God always reminds His servants: “Do you think We have created you for a joke?” (*Sûra* 23/115), and admonishes him constantly to obey the orders of his Lord.

But, and this seems to complicate the issue, there is a strong emphasis on predestination, most crudely expressed in the oft-quoted *ḥadîth* (word ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad): *assa’id sa’id fî baṭni ummihi...* “The lucky one is lucky already in his mother’s womb (i.e., he, that is predestined for Paradise), and the wretched one [who is destined for Hell] is wretched already in his mother’s womb.” Another *ḥadîth* claims *qad jaffa’l-qalam*, “The Pen [which writes the destiny] has dried up”, that is, nothing can be changed.

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Yet, such remarks are counterbalanced by the strong emphasis the Koran lays on human responsibility, most clearly expressed in *Sûra* 99; “And who has done one atom of good, shall see it...”

It seems to me that the predestinarian view can be explained and interpreted best by recurring to Tor Andrea’s remarkable insight that predestinarianism—*not* fatalism!—is the most perfect expression of absolute religious faith, of *tawakkul*, as the Sufis would call it; for it means the acknowledgment that all human action and desire is subordinated to the will of the One who is All-Wise and All-Powerful.

This, however, implies the idea that there is nothing “secular” in the Universe—for if this world, as the traditions claims, is “the seedbed for the world to come”, it gains some religious character by virtue of being the material ground in which and through which spiritual values can be realized—for this reason, Muslims generally avoid an over-emphasis on ascetic practices and mortification of the body as the body, too, serves to perform the acts of obedience ordered by God. The feeling that there is nothing truly secular in the world is at the basis of all religious thought in Islam and permeates its literature even on the ‘profane’ level. Was not everything created to praise the Creator, as the Koran attests repeatedly? Does not every leaf, every stone bear the mark of His creating Will and Power, or, in later mystical interpretation, gains its existence only by the ray of Divine Light that makes it appear out of Not-being? Therefore even a seemingly “worldly” act has to be performed in the knowledge that God is “present and watching” (*hâdir nâzir*) and that whatever is done is done in His immediate presence. This conviction underlies the famous tripartition of Islam into *islâm*, *îmâm* “faith” and *ihsân*, lit. “doing good”, or “doing things beautifully”, which is explained as “acting as if you see God for though you do not see Him, He sees you”. It is this feeling of the constant presence of God which has been expressed most beautifully in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s introduction to Enno Littman’s German translation of the *Arabian Nights*, those stories in which the interweaving of “religious” and “profane” events sometimes surprises the Western reader.

The feeling of God’s constant presence in His universe goes together with the conviction that He orders every human act, enables man to perform it, accepts it as man’s gift and, most impor-

tantly, knows what is best for His creatures in any given moment. That does not mean that man should remain completely passive: he has to work for his spiritual development because this too is part of God's command, and, as the great religious thinkers of the Middle Ages said: "If Fate casts the arrows of affliction I protect myself with the shield of prayer", for it is not forbidden to use a shield in times of danger.

Divine actions, however, do not work on something insensible but on a being endowed with understanding, able to grasp the meaning of God's command and action (even though he more often than not will not be able to understand them immediately). "When you beat a carpet, you do not call that 'punishing', but if you beat a beloved child you call it punishment", says Rûmî in *Fîhi mâ fîhi*. For the carpet has no understanding, and cannot respond. No Divine action and human reaction, however, would be meaningful if God had not "breathed from His breath" (*Sûra* 15/29) into the form of Adam whom He created from clay. For only thanks to this Divine breath (the Sufis might also call it "spark") man is able to recognize Divine actions: only the likes can recognize likes. This idea is elaborated in the tradition stating that "He created Adam in His form" *khalaga Adam'alâ sur-âtihi*. In the Koran, this very special role of man is attested by the words that He made him *khalifa*, "viceregent" (*Sûra* 2/28). Originally, this seems to have meant "the viceregent of the angels" (and that is why, according to the Koranic text, the angels protested against this order), but it is frequently interpreted as God's viceregent on earth. It is this unique role of man in the history of creation which both the Sufis and many modernists have highlighted.

Does not the Koran say: "We have honoured the children of Adam"? (*Sûra* 17/72). Rûmî, who was particularly fond of this Koranic statement explains it with a parable known from both the Old Testament and the Koran, i.e., the story that Joseph hid his precious goblet in the wheat bag which he gave to his brother Benjamin: the bag is not sought for its external form but rather because the king's goblet is hidden in it. Thus, it is not man's physical form and his worldly accoutrements that constitute his true human character but rather the *amâna*, the "entrusted good" of which the Koran speaks (*Sûra* 33/72). This *amâna* has been

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interpreted differently according to the attitude of the interpreter; it may be the gift of intellect, of discernment, or love, of individuality, or simply as the spiritual self, the Divine breath or spark by which humans are singled out and elevated far beyond heaven and earth, mountains and oceans. Would someone use a precious, jewel-encrusted dagger as a peg to hang an old gourd on, or a priceless Indian sword to cut stinking meat? Thus asks Rûmî when he tries to impress his listeners with the necessity of recognizing their essential spiritual part and not wasting their lives in futile, material activities. He also tells the story of the silly prince who, after being trained in the secret sciences, can still not realize that “a round hollow yellow thing”, which the king holds in his fist, is a ring and not a millstone: once the outward signs are taken away and the object is reduced to its *khudî*, its innermost character, only the gold remains while form and appearance are no longer important.

If man is created “in God’s image” or carries some Divine spark in him one can understand him only when one knows God—or *vice versa*: the frequently quoted adage “Who knows himself knows his Lord” comes to mind.

Islam, in its pristine form, has emphasized the personal God, the Creator, Sustainer, and Judge although He, the One who is surrounded by His ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names and whose Throne encompasses everything, can never be apprehended in His wholeness. What one may comprehend or at least try to, is the *deus revelatus*, not the *deus absconditus* who is beyond imagination and contrary to whatever one may think. Yet, He, “the hidden treasure who wanted to be known” (and, as some Sufis say, “wanted to be loved”) appears to man under His two complementary aspects of *jamâl*, “Beauty, Kindness”, and *jalâl*, “Majesty, Wrath”, as a “personal” God, to whom one can turn in prayer—even though the Arabic term *shakhs*, “person” cannot be applied to Him as it would mean a limitation. The Unique and ever active God creates every moment anew (cf. *Sûra* 55/29), and it is He who always takes the initiative. As He addressed the not-yet-created human beings in pre-eternity with His words *alastu bi-rabbikum*—“Am I not your Lord?”, to which they responded by acknowledging His Lordship (*Sûra* 7/171), He also “taught Adam the names” (*Sûra* 2/29), thus granting him power over the

creatures (for to know someone's name means to be able to exert power over him). It is He who makes prayer grow out of the human heart, inspiring man to call Him (cf. *Sûra* 40/62, "Call Me, and I shall answer"). Otherwise, "how could a rose grow out of a dustbin?" as Rûmî asks. Whatever He does is reflected in man who as it were is an astrolabe for the Divine acts—but what is the use of an astrolabe in the hands of a cobbler or a butcher? Only those endowed with insight are able to recognize the Divine actions everywhere... These are the ones whose spiritual qualities are stronger than their lowly, beastly qualities. Once one understands the working of Divine decrees and human response to them one will appreciate the simple statement of one of the great spiritual masters, Abû'l'Abbâs al-Mursî (d. 1288), the second leader of the Shâdhiliyya order:

The believer has only four "states", there is no fifth one:
 He is under the sway of Divine grace, or of Divine trial;
 He is either obedient or disobedient.
 When you are in the state of grace, God expects you to offer thanks;
 When you are tried, He expects patience.
 When you are obedient, God requests you to acknowledge His graces,
 When you are disobedient, he requests you to ask for forgiveness.

To understand the spiritual way man has to go one has to keep in mind that he consists of three parts: the—tripartite—*nafs*, "soul", the spirit, *rûh*, and the intellect, *'aql*. His development depends first and foremost upon the education of the "soul", which, in its lowest stage, is the *nafs ammâra*, "the soul that incites to evil" (*Sûra* 12/53). It should be trained until it reaches the stage of *nafs lawwâma*, "the blaming soul" (*Sûra* 75/2). Finally, one may reach the station of the "soul at peace", *nafs mutma'inna* (*Sûra* 89/27), which can return "pacified, pacifying" to the Lord. This spiritual growth is achieved by the "greater Holy War", the constant struggle against the lower faculties, by lovingly sacrificing all the impure aspects of the soul in spiritual death, according to the saying *mûtû qabla an tamûtû*, "die before ye die!" and by spiritual resurrection on higher and higher levels, that is, by acquiring the noble Divine Attributes, following the advice "Qualify yourselves with the qualities of God!" *takhallaqu bi-akhlâq Allâh*. This development, and this upward

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movement of the spiritual faculties is regulated, in the first place, by the divinely inspired law, *shari'a*, the large highway for everyone, from which the narrow path for the elite, the *tarîqa*, branches off. By following the instructions of a wise master and guide on this path, man's soul can slowly be transformed, as through alchemy, from base copper into pure spiritual gold. (The two traditional images for man's purification, alchemy and "Pilgrim's Progress", which are common to all religious traditions, appear in Sufi parlance together usually; they culminate in the third, and most important, means of transformation, that is Love.)

This transformation of the soul, its ascent and its experience of ever new spiritual "unveilings" has been described in some mystical traditions (such as the Kubrâwiyya, interpreted in a masterly way by Fritz Meier and Henry Corbin) by a growing awareness of light, expressed in colored photisms. The soul's release from the clutches of the powers of darkness, personified in Satan, is explained in a remarkable way by a word of the Prophet. Asked what his *shaytan*, the lower soul, was doing, he answered *Aslama shaytâni*, "My Satan has become a Muslim" or "has completely surrendered to me"; for the lower faculties are not to be killed but rather transformed to serve positive purposes—just as a restive horse, after years of hard training, will finally be able to bring its owner swiftly into the presence of the Beloved, or as a thief, after repenting, will become the most successful police officer as he knows all the tricks of the trade.

Muhammad Iqbâl, the most eloquent advocate of this active development of human individuality, has described man's role in a poetical myth in his *Payâm-i Mashriq, The Message of the East* (Lahore 1923): Satan who, according to the Koran, refused to prostrate himself before the newly created Adam, seduces this weak creature; Adam, expelled from Paradise (where he would not have any possibility of development as there is constant peace and happiness), becomes, in his exile, a real human being who is called to struggle constantly against Satan and his hosts until he may finally become, if not the Perfect Man in the technical sense, a perfected human being, increasing in spiritual power the closer he draws to God. Then, in the end, he will be able to overcome Satan who now falls down before him, performing the prostration which he had refused to the immature Adam—for Satan,

in Islamic thought is man's enemy, not God's, as he is, like everything else, one of God's creatures. Iqbâl's modern myth, one of the centerpieces of his poeto-philosophical work, is inspired by Sufism as it is by Goethe's *Faust*.

Man's spiritual development can also be expressed in other images. One of the favorite images is that of the "polishing of the mirror", the heart being a steel mirror which should be polished until it is pure and shiny enough to reflect the beauty of the Hidden Treasure, of the Divine Beloved who is often symbolized under the image of Yûsuf, Joseph, the paragon of beauty. For could one think of any other present for Joseph but a mirror in which He can admire His own beauty and is, then, closer to the lover than the lover himself? Furthermore, by being a mirror for the Divine Beauty one can also become a mirror for one's neighbour (according to the tradition: *al-mu'min mir'ât al-mu'min*. "The believer is the believer's mirror," a position that enables man to perceive the faults of the others as a reflection of his own faults, which he then can correct in himself.

Both the Greater Holy War and the "polishing of the mirror" are achieved by prayer, in particular by incessant *thikr*, "remembrance of God", which eventually permeates man's whole being and enables him to be with God even in the midst of crowds (*khalwat dar anjuman*, as the Naqshbandis call it), and makes him one of those "men whom neither goods nor trade divert from God" (*Sûra* 24/37). *Thikr*, the repetition of the profession of faith, or of the name *Allah*, or of any of the ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names according to the seeker's station, should be man's constant occupation, and its different branches, its *loci* in the human body have been dealt with in detail by the Sufi masters. *Thikr* burns the veils that are between man and God, and sets free spiritual energies. The purification of the heart by uninterrupted *thikr* has been symbolized in a delightful poem by the great Sindhi mystical poet Shah 'Abd ul-Laṭîf (d. 1752), who, as many folk poets in the Indian subcontinent do, uses the imagery of women in his mystical songs: just as the yarn becomes finer and finer by the act of spinning thus the heart becomes subtler and purer by constant *thikr* so that the soul (represented as a woman, as the word *nafs* is grammatically feminine in Arabic) can "spin her trousseaux" for the Day of Judgment when her actions will be

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weighed and scrutinized; then, God will buy her goods for a high price (cf. *Sura* 9/112), that is, will grant her Paradise, while the lazy, pleasure-seeking girl will find herself naked and disgraced before the Divine Judge.

Another way to express the growing proximity between man and God which is achieved through *thikr* has been chosen by a Panjabi mystical singer, Sulṭān Bâhû (d. 1692), who compares the Divine Presence in his heart to a jasmine bush which, watered by the water of negation and affirmation, i.e. the negative and positive part of the profession of faith, grows constantly until its fragrance fills man's whole being.

Spiritual struggle for purification should be everyone's concern. But some Sufis, particularly Rûmî, might look at the world also in a different way. For if everyone would constantly be thinking exclusively of God and of the world to come, who would do the work of this world? God wanted both this world and the next to continue and therefore granted many people the bliss of forgetfulness; that is how procreation, trade, and economy go on. Only those who have woken up from the "sleep of the heedlessness" because, as Persian poets say, "they have seen India in their dream" and, like the captive elephant, have remembered their primordial home and torn the fetters of the material world—only those may be able to live a life of increasing spirituality and luminosity and finally reach the Divine Presence, attaining their home for which they have been longing, as the reedflute sings of its longing for the reedbed, as the waterwheel's shrieking sound tells of its yearning for the forest. The rest of mankind, alas, will remember God only in times of distress.

This insight into the necessity of some "forgetfulness", however does not exclude a somewhat unkind attitude toward the masses who are, as many otherwise quite loving and kind Sufis have repeated with the Koranic expression *Ka'l-an'âm*, "like animals, nay even more astray" (*Sura* 7/178). "I am fed up with animals and beasts and ghosts—the true 'man' is my wish!" Thus says Rûmî in a famous line which Iqbal took as the motto for his *Jâvid-nâma*, the "Book of Eternity" (Lahore 1932). The true man—that was the ideal of the Sufis, and they knew that he was difficult to find. The true man, *mard* in Persian, *er* in Turkish, is the one who takes upon himself every kind of pain and hardship in ord-

er to reach the goal—just as the pilgrim on his way to the sanctuary has to undergo the hardship of the journey: desert nights, blazing storms, thorns, encounters with robbers, and much more. The emphasis on man's painful struggle on the heavenward path was particularly facilitated by the rhyme *mard/dard* "pain", and it is this combination which abounds in Persian mystical poetry from the days of Sanâ'î (d. 1131) and 'Aṭṭâr (d. 1220). To be sure—and it is necessary to point this out—the true "man" can also be a woman in quest of God; examples of this use can be found without difficulty in Persian and Sindhi poetry, and this position is likewise attested in Ibn 'Arabî's works. This true "man" grows in the garden of humanity like a rare rose after millions of small, worthless flowers, grass, and weeds have perished.

It is as such a uniquely beautiful flower that the Prophet Muhammad stands before the believers—he, who is the absolute model for every Muslim, the niche through which the Divine Light shines (as *Sûra* 24/35 was interpreted a little more than a century after his death); he is the immaculate vessel through which the revelation was granted to humanity; sent as "Mercy for the worlds" (*Sûra* 21/107), he appears also as the intercessor for his community at Doomsday, and in later Sufi speculation he was elevated to an almost logos-like position; the first entity ever created by God. The seeker who has risen through the stages of all the pre-Muhammadan prophets to reach finally union with the *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*, the "archetypal Muhammad" can, like him, be seen as the locus where the totality of the Divine Names manifests itself, thus radiating light into the darkness of this world and guiding mankind through the veils that separate them from the highest principle.

With such speculations as were primarily elaborated by Ibn 'Arabî and his school and became almost ubiquitous in post-thirteenth century Sufism, Muslim mystical anthropology has taken a turn into a direction that is quite different from the interpretation of man as God's slave (although the saying "slave remains slave, Lord remains Lord" was always emphasized) and which seems a far cry from the earlier, voluntaristic mystical currents in Sufism, which culminated in Love, not in gnosis. One can well understand that Muslim orthodoxy did not appreciate this interpretation at all because by arrogating such a lofty posi-

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tion the Perfect Man—and many Sufi masters claimed to have reached this stage!—is seen as standing beyond the revealed law and, being beyond good and evil, is no longer accountable for his actions. No longer does Moses, the stern law-giver prophet, serve as model but rather *Khidr*, the mysterious guide mentioned in *Sûra* 18 as performing actions which even the great prophet, let alone common people, cannot understand; for his actions emerge from a communion with God that is superior to the understanding of normal human beings.

A look into later Sufi literature in all Islamic languages reveals how deeply these ideas had infiltrated mystical circles and percolated into folk literature as well—hence the tendency of Western critics, especially in the nineteenth century, to see in Sufism something un-Islamic, a wildly pantheistic current, or a libertine expression of only vaguely Islamicized people whose knowledge of the *shari'a*, the law, and its implications seemed to be nil.

The more “orthodox” circles too regarded these developments with mistrust, if not with outright hatred. Especially in the period of growing Western influence on the Islamic societies in the nineteenth century, a new interpretation of the role of man in the fabric of Islam was deemed necessary. Thinkers like Muhammad 'Abduh in Egypt, poets like Hâli in India reminded the Muslims of their duties, and it is not surprising that the Prophet once more was represented not so much as the mystical leader, the light from God's light, and the intercessor at Doomsday but rather rediscovered in his social and political role, as can be seen in the great number of biographies issued from the late nineteenth century to our day. This implied also a new interpretation of man's role, and it is in the work of Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) where one finds a fascinating attempt to define one's position in the world and vis-à-vis his Creator. In order to draw a sharp line between his own image of man and that of the Sufis in Ibn 'Arabi's succession he calls his ideal man not the *insân kâmil* but rather speaks of *mard-i momin*, “the true believer”, and his use of the term *mard* “man”, connects him with the early Persian mystics, notably with Rûmî. It suffices to read Iqbal's poetical description of the Prophet in his *Jâvîdnâma* to see how he goes back to earlier Sufi interpretations: Muhammad is described in this hymn

as *'abduhu*, “God’s slave”, a term used twice in the Koran (*Sûra* 17/1 and *Sûra* 53/10) in descriptions of the highest visionary experiences: “God’s servant” is the loftiest rank humans can aspire to reach.

In his first Persian *mathnawî*, *Asrâr-i khudî* “Secrets of the Self”, published in Lahore in 1915, Iqbal had underlined the importance of *khudî*, man’s individuality, which should be developed. Until then, the term *khudî* had been used largely to denote the “selfish” qualities of man which should be obliterated so that man can finally lose himself in the Divine Ocean like a tiny raindrop. For Iqbâl, on the other hand, man’s individuality and its development seemed central, and in daring verse he taught the growth of a human being that is able to create his own destiny. In his Persian poems, *Payâm-i Mashriq* (an answer to Goethe’s *West-Ostlicher Divan*) he writes a fictive dialogue between God and man, man proudly telling the Lord that although He has created deserts, stones and iron, man has transformed them into gardens and meadows, mirrors and lamps. For only thanks to his activity as God’s co-worker this world becomes a liveable place. For this and similar poetical expressions of his trust in man’s creative power, Iqbal has been accused of hypertrophism, but he gives nothing but a poetical rendering of the Koranic promise to mankind, *Sakhkhara lakum...*, “He has subjugated to you...” (*Sûra* 14/37). In this context it is worth mentioning that at some point even the Egyptian modernist journal *Al-Manâr* dwelt upon the Divine gift that was granted to man: the gift to create ever afresh and produce new values. Was not man entrusted with ameliorating the earth, given to him as a fief, so that he can return it to its proper Owner in a better shape, and was called not to ruin it.

Iqbâl’s emphasis on human activity and the development of what he calls *khudî* has been interpreted time and again as a result of his admiration for Nietzsche. But while Nietzsche’s Superman appears only after “God has died”, Iqbâl’s *mard-i momin*, all his rebellious features notwithstanding, becomes the stronger the closer he draws to God. In the loving dialogue between maturing man and his Lord the spiritual exchange can become so intimate that God grants man the fate he wants—or, if one looks at a late Urdu poem, by Iqbâl: in intense prayer one’s will changes

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so that man and God are so to speak on the same wavelength and can interact in what has been called *jabr mahmūd*, “praiseworthy coercion” (or “predestination”). There is nothing of the Nietzschean Superman in Iqbāl’s faithful Muslim; there is much more of the Faustian seeker, and also of the tradition of voluntaristic early Sufism, expressed in ever so many verses by Rûmî. In fact, it is not difficult to interpret Iqbāl’s *khudî* in the light of Rûmî’s teachings in *Fîhi mâ fîhi*, where as mentioned earlier, the term appears as the spiritual aspect of man, as the *amâna* which was offered to heaven and earth but taken only by man. It is this trust of individuality and individuation, this possibility to develop almost infinitely, which only mankind can bear, all their weakness and cruelty notwithstanding. Neither angels, who have no free will and are bound to be good, nor subhuman beings, who are equally lacking the will to choose between good and evil, can be entrusted with this *khudî*, with the spark that is in quest of the source of all light, and grows beyond the earthly level to become increasingly stronger and more luminous.

Iqbāl’s interpretation of man’s situation seems to express best the seemingly contradictory ideas found in various branches of Islamic thought. Rûmî and, following him, Iqbāl have highlighted the necessity of man’s working with the given facts of this world and, at the same time, developing his spiritual essence, his “jewel” to such an extent that a loving, creative dialogue between man and God becomes possible, rather, is required so that man can return from this spiritual dialogue in prayer into the world to act there according to his experience in the Divine Presence—just as the Prophet returned from his meditations in the cave of Hira, into the world to preach what had been revealed to him.

For man is called to grow in a never ending process of dialectic movement of *khalwa* and *jilwa*, lonesome retreat into God’s Presence and manifestation in the world of what he has experienced there; in the change of *qabd* and *bast*, “constriction” and “elation”, the movement of breathing, the systole and diastole of the heartbeat, between “dying to himself” and “qualifying himself with Divine attributes”. This development continues into the eternity of eternities (for even “heaven is no holiday”, as Iqbāl writes in his Lectures).

Iqbāl used an ingenious blend of Sufis ideas and Goethean con-

cepts to describe his ideal man whose striving never ends; Rûmî has expressed the same idea with the old image of moth and candle, coined in the Islamic world by the martyr-mystic al-Ḥallâj (executed 922). He sums up the relation between man, the never resting seeker and lover, and God, the object of all quest, in an unforgettable sentence:

“That is why man who can live without God and never strives [to find Him] is not at all a real human being; but if he could comprehend God, then that would not be God. Therefore real man is he who never ceases striving and, without rest, incessantly circles around the light of God’s Majesty and Beauty”.

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