

Editorial: What is Normal?

by M. Ali Lakhani

Although the Logos is universal,
most people act as though they had a private understanding.

Heraclitus, Fragments

Man, by virtue of his own central position in the cosmos, is able to exceed his specific norm; he is also able to betray it and sink lower—*corruptio optimi pessima*.

Titus Burckhardt

To Blake, or to the Christian world, the measure of the human norm is not the average man. It is Jesus Christ, who is the perfect man, the unfallen man, the image of man as created by God in the first chapter of *Genesis*.

Kathleen Raine

In traditional thought, the “normal” is that which accords with one’s primordial nature. The Divine Norm is the model of perfection imprinted by God in man as his primordial nature, and the “normal” is that which tends or corresponds to the Divine Norm. One of the primary definitions of “normal” is therefore that which is “natural”. The unnatural—even if it is commonplace—is not normal. But according to the maxim “*duo sunt in homine*”, man has two natures—a primordial nature with which he is endowed before his formal creation, and a “fallen” or created nature corrupted by the privative effects of creation. Traditional thought emphasizes the primacy of the primordial nature and its central role in the human quest to ascend from Earth to Heaven. In Islam, for example, the primordial nature is termed “*fitra*”—that is, the paradigm or norm according to which God created man. The quintessence of this norm is its receptivity to the “*ruh*” or uncreated Spirit (the Spiritus vel

Intellectus of Scholastic terminology, which Eckhart calls “uncreated and uncreatable”, whose locus is the Heart or spiritual Center of man), which God breathes into man at the time of his pre-formal creation in Heaven. It is when man is born formally on Earth as a creature and takes his first breath (in Arabic, “*nafas*”) that he acquires his created nature (in Arabic, “*nafs*”), which, unlike the translucent and pristine *rub*, is, as it were, a cloud-like substance that envelops the uncreated Spirit. This cloud-like substance can be more or less subtle or dense, luminous or opaque, in each human being, its plasticity and luminosity varying according to the degree to which it is transparent to the spiritual Light of the Supernal Sun. Therefore, one encounters different levels of *nafs*: *al-ammara*, *al-lawwama* and *al-mutma’inna*, the former two corresponding to the dense and opaque nature of “fallen” man—“fallen” in view of the fact that the subtle and tender qualities of the spiritual nature (which make the soul pliable—yielding and “obedient” to the Spirit) become hardened, and the pristine perception of the spiritual vision becomes obscured, by the congealing and opaque influences of creation (the psychic clouds of the cosmic dust of creation, designated in traditional metaphysics as the Cosmic Veil—in Arabic, *bijab*, and in Sanskrit, *maya*)—in contrast to *al-nafs al-mutma’inna* which is the soul of the saint, united with its Source (as “light upon light”) and utterly transparent to its own transcendent Spirit. This transcendent and pristine perception of nature is the ontological self-knowledge of the visionary Intellect—the Heart’s knowledge of itself, akin to the eye’s awareness of itself through the very act of seeing—and corresponds to the unitary and integrated Edenic knowledge signified by the Tree of Life, as distinct from the fragmentary and divisive knowledge signified by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in the Biblical account in *Genesis*.

By virtue of its archetypal quality, the “normal” can also be understood as that which is universal—though not everything that appears universal is necessarily normal. This is because the universal must correspond to the primordial nature of Adamic man in order to be truly universal. The truly universal is that which extends the Presence of the Heart radially—like Light, which is the universal symbol of “the True, the Good and the Beautiful” or of Wisdom, Compassion, and Harmony—beyond the limitations of its own Center (which are its veiled and egoic selfhood),

so that (to paraphrase St. Bonaventura) “the center is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere”. This veil-rending, expanded and unitary realization of the Presence of Oneness—which “sees” everything in the light of its spiritual reality—is universal in the most profoundly “real” sense: it converts merely sensory seeing to spiritual feeling, cognition to re-cognition, perception to “tasting”, self-driven passion to compassion, and opacity to translucence—or, as Henry Corbin has succinctly stated, it transmutes the idol into the icon. To be completely “normal” is therefore to aspire to the Divine Norm, to be fully spiritually awake—to look beyond the outer forms of things in order to experience their inner reality as a participatory Presence, compassionately, right down to their metaphysically transparent core. It is to possess a sense of the sacred—to perceive in all things “the fragrance of the Divine”. It may be objected that such fully-awakened and open Hearts are rare, and that it is therefore a misnomer to reserve the word “normal” to describe such extraordinary souls, and that for the masses the “normal” is merely the ordinary. This is, in a conventional sense, true, but tradition reminds us that the criterion for any true norm must be rooted in Heaven (in transcendence) and not merely on Earth. That is why all normal aspirations incline Heavenward, possessing both height and depth and, through these, both breadth and symmetry—while merely mundane aspirations, if they do not aspire higher, eventually die into the ashes of their own flame.

Now, the normal cannot be merely subjective (the transcendent perspective of the Divine Subject corresponds to the Object of the Divine Norm), because it must be “typical”, that is, adequate to an objective archetype. This archetype is the Divine Norm, or Logos, which corresponds to the spiritual nature of man, and mirrors the Absolute Perfection of God. It is in view of man’s theomorphic nature that one can conceive of the Human as Divine Logos or as the Universal Man (*al-insan al-kamil*, in Islam)—as typifying the Divine. However, this view of normalcy differs from the common understanding, which, having lost the criterion of an objective archetype of transcendent Perfection mirrored immanently in the *fitra*, compensates for this loss by reducing objectivity to an approximation denoted by the consensual aggregation of subjectivities, conflating the typical and the commonplace—in other words, gauging normalcy by external and quantitative criteria instead of on the basis of inner and qualitative factors. This conflation, however,

has a metaphysical basis. Since the divine spark within man is a fragment of the Absolute, it therefore partakes in its attribute of Infinitude. The spiritual nature is therefore universal, and this universality engenders in man an innate sense of a norm that is universal. In the case of the spiritually awakened man, the norm is identified with the universality of the divine archetype—to which the receptive soul becomes attached, thereby rooting itself in transcendence and verticality. But in the case of the spiritually dormant soul, the vestigial influence of the intellect—operating as reason or instinct—projects the quest for normalcy outwards and horizontally, seeking it in the average, in the universality of consensus, in the apparent objectivity of “community standards”. In the truly profane, however, the norm is inverted and identified with the purely subjective ego as the criterion of all objectivity, oblivious to the distinction between mere subjectivity and spiritual vision.

In traditional societies, where there is a general attunement to the transcendent, consensus is often regarded as a reliable criterion of objectivity and value (“in the multitude of counselors there is safety”, *Proverbs*, 11:14). Consensual reliance (*ijma'* in Muslim jurisprudence) derives not only from such attunement but also from the inherent pluralistic inclusiveness implied by the unitary vision of tradition. However, in deracinated modernist societies, where traditional principles have eroded—and along with them, the sense of the sacred, there is a danger in relying too readily on consensus as a criterion of objectivity and value. Knowledge that is cut off from its metaphysical roots—from a metaphysically hierarchic order—relies on consensus as the criterion of objectivity and value, and undermines true intellectual authority. It mistakes the average for the genuine norm. In the words of 'Ali ibn abi Talib, “The triumph of mediocre men brings down the elite”. In the common understanding, the “normal” has lost its traditional linkage to a criterion that is transcendently interior and is reduced instead to the commonplace, to the merely external recognition that a view or practice has gained general acceptance over time and become customary, thereby causing most people to acknowledge it as “normal”. The problem with such a merely external criterion of normalcy is that any consensus or apparent consensus of norms may be manufactured, as postmodern historians such as Michel Foucault have demonstrated, or may have been influenced by external factors—cultural influences or

changing fashions, and critics are therefore rightfully skeptical of the motives underlying the identification and the labeling of norms. But in all this, one should not lose sight of the fact that the real impetus behind the quest for normalcy lies in the metaphysical certitude that Truth is objective and therefore universal, and not in any intrinsic value associated with consensus itself.

While postmodernist skeptics of the processes of normativity have made a valuable contribution in pointing out the motives behind normatization, their skepticism can lead to error—especially if taken to the point of denying all normativity. Their criticisms, when pressed too far, open the descent into relativism, and thence into the abyss of a nihilistic denial of all norms. It is a false logic that would deny the very basis of order in denying the basis of disorder. In metaphysical terms, while it is true that “there is nothing like unto Him”, it is one thing to apophatically affirm the ineffability of the transcendent reality of the Divine Nature (i.e., to say that one cannot describe Perfection because its transcendent quality beggars all description)—all religions do this—but it is quite another, on this same basis, to deny the reality of the Divine Nature as the Divine Norm (i.e. to argue that Perfection cannot be a “norm” because any norm would imply a limitation and therefore an imperfection). If— for instance, as all traditional religions affirm—it is in the nature of God to be intrinsically Good, then it can be objected by skeptics of normativity that to attribute to God a norm (here, of Goodness) is to limit the Divine Nature. This is to profoundly misconstrue reality: it is to fail to realize that, while the contingent order may change, the Universal order is not subject to change. This is because freedom has not just physical but also metaphysical limits: necessity is inherent within freedom, and its boundaries—which define our very being—reside within our innermost natures, which thereby constitute our “norm”. In this, we resemble God, the source of our being. For, while God is absolutely free, He would not choose to exercise His freedom so as to deny His Divine Nature—thereby, paradoxically, one might say that God, while absolutely free, is not—by His Divine Nature—free to be other than Himself: that would be to abrogate the very nature of His Divinity—and, in this sense and to that extent, the Divine Nature is normative. To state this differently, it is normative to aspire to transcendence because, even if the transcendent is beyond our grasp, it is not beyond our aspiration,

on the basis that man was not made for other than God, and therefore the spiritual nature of man is adequate to the Divine. Mankind can intuit the Divine, and—though limited as creature—is intrinsically free, but with a freedom whose very nature aspires to perfection, even as God in Heaven is Perfect. This natural aspiration has become veiled by the polarization of its perception into dualities through the very act of creation. And it is precisely by an exercise of our freedom to avert our wandering eyes from the periphery and to focus instead on the Center, to forgo the beguilements of the flesh for the rewards of the spirit, that we merit the grace to inherit the kingdom of Heaven. It is by reorienting ourselves towards the Divine—by turning our gaze inward, from the restless periphery of the clamorous world and of our insatiable appetites to the still and quenching Center of the Heart (a turning that is called *metanoia* or “repentance”)—that we can begin to regain the unitary vision of Heaven and thereby perceive everywhere and in all things the sacred Countenance of the Divine. Such aspiration and orientation are the quintessence of what traditional teaching defines as “normal”, and the locus of such aspiration and orientation is the transcendent Heart.

Modernism, in its denial of the transcendent, is predisposed to deny any normativity based on transcendence—and therefore based on the criterion of the Heart. The consequences of this denial are serious and profound. The “new normal”—more accurately, the “abnormal”, because it is no longer rooted in immutable, timeless, and transcendent principles embodied within our innermost self—is now subject to the vagaries of time. Though these changing norms are being continually redefined according to the governing influences and contingencies of the times, some disturbing trends can nevertheless be discerned. These include three interlacing trends that are central to the modernist ethos and underlie all modernist definitions of normativity. The first of these is materialism, that is, the reduction of reality to the merely sensible order—of the immeasurable to the measurable, of quality to quantity. The effects of the materialist ethos (the “Reign of Quantity”, as René Guénon famously termed it) are pervasive: they range from the monetization of values to the consumerist conflation of wants and needs, from the profanation of the soul to the degradation of the natural environment. The second trend is secularism, that is, the desacrilization of the public sphere. The effects of the secularist ethos can be seen in the privatization of values

and its paradoxical counterpart, the erosion of conscience—reflecting the reduction of morality to mere pragmatism and utilitarianism, instead of rooting it in the soil of piety and virtue. Secularization also brings in its wake a more horizontalized worldview, an individualistic rebellion against authority, and a greater respect for egalitarian rights than for hierarchic duties. Finally, secularization marginalizes formal religion, undermining the legitimate role of the forms of worship, and thereby paradoxically de-spiritualizing religion. This contributes to the rise of religious fundamentalism and of pseudo-religions, characterized by their syncretisms and their insidious reduction of the spirit to the psyche. The third trend is scientism, that is, the scientific ethos that confines its study to the world of matter but arrogantly claims that its methodology applies to understanding reality as a whole. In its denial of supra-rational intellection, the ethos of scientism reduces all epistemology to empirical rationalism. The effects of this ethos can be seen in the sundering of knowing from being, in the evolutionary and materialistic myth of progress, and in the loss of wonder and the erosion of genuine creativity that accompanies the technification of society. In all this, it can be observed that modernism is that which separates man from the core of his being—from his true Center.

The crisis of modernism is thus a crisis of disconnection, of disorder. Abnormality, in the traditional view, is the loss of one's Center (hence the notion of the "eccentric" who is abnormal precisely because he is "ex-centric"—removed from the Center), and therefore of order itself. Because order and harmony emerge only from the Center, the loss of centrality or transcendence also generates a crisis of aesthetics—of chaos, disharmony, and vulgarity—and of its inward aspect, virtue. Virtue is an aspect of piety or holiness. To be "holy" is, in a metaphysical and etymological sense, to be "hale" (healthy or, significantly, "hearty") and "whole". It is to possess the primordial conscience of one's innate nature, which is our own self-regulator and criterion of sanity. Hence, Frithjof Schuon notes: "That which really judges us is our own norm that we carry within ourselves and which is at once an image of the whole Cosmos and of the divine Spirit shining at its center." This is the essence of being normal. The loss of transcendence is therefore a loss of integrity and is invariably accompanied by an outer and inner disintegration of cosmic order. The degenerative effects of modernism are a reflection

of this disintegration, and have given rise to what has been termed “the malaise of modernity”. This malaise is at root a spiritual disorder. While it may be true that “human kind cannot bear very much reality”, it is also true that no human being can remain sane without the sense of a center. In the case of de-spiritualized or “fallen” man, where the awareness of the Heart, the true Center, has been lost—where “the falcon cannot hear the falconer”—there develops a compensatory sense of a center that, in traditional teachings, is associated with the egoic self. This false awareness of the center is a pathological subjectivity that no amount of conventional psychoanalysis can cure—because it seeks the cure merely in the psyche, and does not perceive that the problem lies in the psyche’s inability to transcend itself. By absolutizing itself as the locus and the limit of the known, the egoic perception reduces reality to its merely psycho-physical aspects, thereby veiling itself from the Infinite. But, as Titus Burckhardt has noted, “The soul, like any other compartment of reality, can only be truly known by that which exceeds it.” The pathology of “fallen” man lies therefore in his reductive tendencies, in his inability to extend his imagination beyond the limitations of the Cosmic Veil. It is only through an act of faith—of genuine spiritual vision—that the usurping influences of the deluded ego can be overcome.

In an age-old and universal motif, the mythic Hero’s task is to slay the Usurper so that the throne might be restored to the rightful King. Through this task—which represents the defining *métier* of man—order and sanity are restored within the cosmos. But first, the usurping ego must yield to what Nikitas Stithatos (the disciple and biographer of St. Symeon) describes as “our endemic divine and spiritual consciousness”—the intuitive and intellective self-awareness of the Divine Heart—the human portal into transcendence, the Kingdom of Heaven, which is, as Stithatos reminds us, ‘within us’ (see *Luke*, XXVII:21). It is the Divine Spirit that is the rightful King and our true Norm. Thus it is said, “Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord” (*Luke*, XIX, 38). Unless the usurping tyrant of the ego is overthrown, no peace can reign in the Kingdom of the Heart. It is the restoration of spiritual order that is the condition for the restoration of cosmic order, for all things within the circle of creation are held in existence by their immutable Center: “Like pearls on a thread, the entire universe is strung in Me” (*Bhagavad Gita*, VII,7). Severed from this spiritual order, “the center

cannot hold”. This is the pathology of the abnormal and the insane. Thus, Kathleen Raine has noted: “There is a norm, there is a human perfection, from which we are all deviants in one way or another, and the nearer a human being approaches to that Divine Humanity, as Blake said, the more one could call him sane, even though the average would call him mad insofar as he departed from the average.”

To be truly human is, in the end, to transcend oneself. It is to rise beyond the mundane perception of one’s humanity and to ascend to the norm of the Divine Humanity—the archetype that exists in the realm of the spiritual imagination, the realm of faith that is open to the eyes of the spirit. For it is only by faith—by the inner eye of the Intellect that discerns the Light of the Supernal Sun and longs to be consumed within its Presence—that the illusion of the Cosmic Veil can be overcome. To be “normal” in this sense is to be spiritually sane, to have awakened from the Cosmic Dream, to see—in the words of Ibn ‘Arabi—that “the whole of existence is imagination within imagination, while true Being is God alone.”