

# Editorial: Interiority and the Alchemical Beauty of Forms

*By M. Ali Lakhani*

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.  
(*Genesis*, 1:2)

Who is more manifest than God?  
For this very purpose has he made all things,  
that through them you may see Him.  
This is God's goodness that He manifests through all things.  
(Hermes)

It is ironic, and somewhat of a paradox, that the modern world can be so attracted to surfaces and yet so dismissive of forms. One can see how this paradoxical combination of attachment and disdain exists in the context of religion where, on the one hand, there is the fundamentalist tendency to judge faith by conformity to outward forms, and, on the other, a tendency to regard formal rituals as, if not meaningless, merely incidental to faith because they are accorded no prescriptive authority. All of this is part of a larger modernist phenomenon of reductionism and relativism that one finds, for example, in the materialistic attraction to the opaque world of 'surfaces', and in the individualistic rejection of traditions which are viewed as formal curbs on personal freedoms.

The explanation for this paradox lies in the lack of interiority that characterizes the modernist ethos, in its spiritual myopia. We are drawn to forms in proportion to our tendency to reduce them to their material aspects and, at the same time, we are minded to resist forms in proportion to our tendency to view them as constraints upon our individual liberty. In either case, they are subordinated to the spiritual Principle of which they are expressions. At root, this severing of the world and

the self from their spiritual foundations can be traced back in Western philosophy to the Cartesian bifurcation between the ‘*res cogitans*’ and the ‘*res extensa*’, and the consequent discontinuity between the inner and outer dimensions of reality, in the categorical disjunction this division creates within the traditional unity of microcosm and the macrocosm. When the world is no more than a reified (material) object for the gratification of a deified (egoic) subject, one will tend to attach too great an importance to ‘appearances’. At the same time, one will tend to promote notions of unbridled freedoms and unlimited ‘progress’ over those of formal responsibilities and natural limitations that are conducive to order and equilibrium. This paradoxical combination of formalism and licentiousness, of fundamentalism and individualism, based as it is on a materialistic outlook, and lacking spiritual underpinnings, is inimical to outer and inner harmony, and is in fact a characteristic of our times.

From a traditional point of view, it is important to remember that forms are veils that both conceal and reveal substance. Metaphysical substance is Absolute, and therefore it both embraces and transcends forms, which are contingent, prefigured and projected expressions of it. “Forms are a revelation of essence”, says Meister Eckhart, pointing to an underlying hierarchy in which the physical world reveals an archetypal world in which all forms are prefigured and from which they emerge, while that archetypal world is itself a manifestation of a transcendent dimension which is Beyond-Being. All forms are thus seminally identical, possessing the same substantial reality, termed the ‘Spirit’, while existing formally as distinctively finite and temporal expressions of that Spirit, which is Infinite and is Eternal.

Put differently, forms are intrinsically substantial, yet they are not reducible outwardly to their intrinsic reality. They are aspects of the theophany by which God ‘descends’ into existence, and is therefore ‘within’ it while remaining nevertheless ‘above’ it. This is pre-eminently the case with regard to Man, who is both the outward form of ‘body’ and ‘psyche’, and the inward substance of ‘Spirit’ and ‘Intellect’. For us to ‘ascend’ to God, we must discover God in our own interiority and thereby in the theophany through an act of God’s grace. The world and the self are the mirror of spirituality, and their forms therefore bespeak the presence of the spiritual substance they embody, but they cannot

be reduced to their merely external aspects, nor, as we shall see, can they be dismissed as incidental to spiritual growth.

The forms of existence are a theophany and they have the potential to open the soul alchemically to the substance of God. According to the Hadith of the Hidden Treasure ["I was a Hidden Treasure and, out of my (overflowing) Love to be known, I created the world in order to be known"], the motive force of creation was Love—not desire, for this would be to attribute indigence to God, but the ineffable “love that transcends understanding” (*Ephesians*, 3:19). Love is “an overflowing fountain, ... a free efflux from the almighty Source of love” (John Smith the Platonist). To know the substance of the Spirit is therefore to experience it in our hearts as Love; hence, the Hadith, “Heaven and earth cannot contain me, but the heart of my faithful believer contains me”. Creatures are formed from the Spirit of Love, and each unique creature is allotted a limited measure of those qualities that derive from their archetypal font in the Treasury of God. “There is not a thing but whose treasures are with Us, and We do not send it down except in a limited measure.” (*Surah al-Hijr*, The Stones, 15:21) All creatures are therefore “signs” (*ayat*) of God, and their theophanic veils or forms, resplendent with divine qualities from His Treasury (which Muslims celebrate in “The Most Beautiful Names”), are therefore so many openings to the divine Light of Love.

Pre-eminent among “The Beautiful Names” or divine qualities is the name of *Rabman*, the Lovingly Merciful. The name *Rabman* is derived from the etymological root *r-h-m*, signifying the “nurturing womb” of a mother, and it therefore denotes that the matrix of creation is Love. This notion of the “nurturing womb” signifies the ontological oneness of the Spirit, and this is consistent with the metaphysical principle of oneness of being (*tawhid*) implicit in the Qur’anic revelation that humanity was created “from a single Soul” (*Surat an-Nisa*, The Women, 4:1). It also signifies that the nature of God is Love, and therefore that the intrinsic nature of all archetypally manifested forms is Love. It is noteworthy that *Rabman* is the only name among The Most Beautiful Names that is stated in the scripture to be on par with the name *Allah*. “Invoke God (*Allah*), or invoke the Lovingly Merciful (*Rabman*); (it is one and the same) whichever of these you call upon, for to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names.” (*Surat al-Isra*’, The Night Journey, 17:110)

Because forms are so many aspects of the Spirit of Love, it will be evident that they can possess a sacramental nature, and it is partly for this reason that the prescribed forms of the rituals and sacraments in a religion gain their importance. When, for example, in the Christian context, Jesus says “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (*John* 14:6), he is speaking as the Spirit of Love. None can gain entry into the sanctum of God except through the Spirit of Love, which is the divine substance. And when Christians partake in the sacraments of the Eucharist, its forms (the bread that “is my body” and the wine that “is my blood”), when internalized by the soul, are the alchemical means of its spiritual transformation, of the soul’s reabsorption into the Spirit of Love. So too, in practices such as fasting, charity and pilgrimage, there is a sacramental relationship involved in the soul’s internalization of the outer ritual forms, emphasizing spiritual qualities designed to conform the wayward and wilful soul to the Spirit of Love. By participating in the rituals and sacraments, we are conformed to our primordial nature.

All existence is the descent of spirit into form, and all transcendence is the corresponding ascent of form into spirit by the transformational realization of its spiritual substance. So long as we exist, we live within the matrix of forms, yet the core of this matrix is the Spirit of Love. It is through our sacramental awareness of this transcendent dimension that we can grasp the intrinsic value of forms and their complementary role in our harmony. The world is much more than the quanta of atomized matter. In its substance, it is that which, in the innermost unity of our being, we experience as Love. Each creature—snowflake or seashell, flower or star—uniquely hymns the Spirit of Love by whose grace it has come into being. The diversity of creation contains the beauty that uniquely, each in its own way, expresses Love. As Gerard Manley Hopkins states in his sonnet, *As kingfishers catch fire,*

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

...

Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.

But though we may know that the world of forms is a ‘sacred web’ of Love, it is yet difficult to practice loving in a world as implosive as ours. Ours is a world where, in W.B.Yeats’ words in *The Second Coming*, “things fall apart”, a time when “the centre cannot hold”. In such a world and time, when we are drawn away from the sanctuary and substance of our inner Spirit toward the infernal and illusory world of surfaces, it takes a tremendous discipline to curb our voracious individual appetites, and yet it is precisely through such discipline, by submitting to the limits of our primordial nature, that we can hope to conform ourselves to the pattern of the ordered universe. Thus it is said that “The beginning of Wisdom is the sincere desire of discipline.” (*Book of Wisdom*, 6:18), and Robert Herrick writes,

Men must have bounds how farre to walke; for we  
Are made farre worse, by lawless liberty.

It is for this reason that religious forms of practice become indispensable providential aids to help us to withstand the alluring abyss of the world. An integral aspect of spiritual growth is the formal discipline of method. All too often, especially nowadays when there is such little spirit of learning, forms and disciplines are discarded in favor of reductive essences, with the result that knowledge is not internalized and is therefore inoperative. One is reminded of the dilemma of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, who, while subscribing to the wisdom of loving his neighbor, is unable to deal with the practical reality of that knowledge. “One can love one’s neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it’s almost impossible”, says Ivan Karamazov in an utterly modernist utterance, foreshadowing the preferences of those who, like the not-so-futurist society depicted in the movie *Her*, prefer the anonymity of virtual social media than the rigors of personal real interactions.

Spiritual growth is not conceptual but experiential, undertaken in the crucible of life. And it is rigorous, requiring one to submit to formal disciplines that cannot be arbitrarily dispensed with as inessential. In the words of Swami Sivananda, “You cannot jump all at once to the summit of the spiritual ladder. You will have to place your feet with caution on each rung.”

The ascetic forms of practice constitute the means of our self-emp-

tying and of our submission to our primordial nature, while the virtues and sacraments constitute the means of our 'putting on the qualities of God'. But none of these practices can be sustained without the grace of faith and the polish of prayer which protect the fragile soul within the sanctum of the Spirit from the tumult of the profane world. It is the Inner Eye of faith which illumines the sacredness of forms, and it is the pure Heart's prayer that enlivens them with love. Faith and prayer: these are the prerequisites of interiority—of light and love. It is by the interiority of their presence within us that we can witness the light of their outer beauty in the theophany, while being sustained inwardly with them in love.