

# Editorial: On Sovereignty and Stewardship

By M. Ali Lakhani

Kings are the theatre for the manifestation of the Divine Kingship.

Jalaluddin Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 6:3174

He has made you *Caliphs* (Vicegerants) of the earth...

(*Holy Quran, Sura Fatir*; 35:39)

**T**he recent passing of Queen Elizabeth II prompted many reflections not only about her life and reign but also about the role of a monarch and the nature of sovereignty, particularly in modern times.

From the perspective of traditional metaphysics, the archetype of sovereignty derives from the ultimate Sovereign, the One from Whom all being and existence emerge. Creation proceeds from the Divine Principle and abides in the Divine Matrix of the cosmic Womb. This Matrix is the Quranic *rahma*, associated with the radiating beneficence (*rahman*) and reintegrating mercy (*rahim*) of God.

The *inner* reflection of the Divine Principle is the Spirit, and of the Divine Matrix, is the 'Heart' wherein the Spirit, as Heavenly Sovereign, resides. The Heart (Fr. 'coeur') therefore is the 'core' of Man, the 'niche' of the Divine Lamp in the Holy Quran's Light Verse (*Sura an-Nur*, 24:35). As the Pontifex, or bridge between Heaven and Earth, Man is *Imago Dei*, whose archetype of the 'Perfect Man' is the primordial Adam, the vicegerent of God, the authoritative *Logos* or 'Word' of God.

The *outer* reflection of the Divine Principle is the Monarch, whose symbolic role, as Earthly Sovereign, is to radiate the Divine Qualities of the Heavenly Sovereign. At the same time, each Man is a monarch in his or her own right, insofar as they model themselves on the Adamic archetype by conforming to the Spirit and, as stewards of creation, reflecting the integrating and cardinal qualities associated with God.

The Monarch therefore traditionally assumes a symbolic and sacramental role of manifesting the Divine Kingship, possessing thereby the ‘Divine Right’ to govern over the Commons. This right is not acquired simply by birth or lineage, but is confirmed through the assumption of the fiduciary responsibilities to be undertaken by the Monarch as Earthly Sovereign. This understanding forms the ritual basis of the Coronation ceremony. Robert Herrick writes of this process of confirmation and crowning as follows:

Men are not born Kings, but are men renown’d;  
Chose first, confirm’d next, & at last are crown’d.

The Coronation ceremony, which the world first witnessed on television in 1953 in the case of the Queen, and which it expects to witness again in 2023 in the case of the new King, therefore contains symbolic ‘rites’ which expressly link the Monarch’s authority or ‘right’ to govern to the ultimate Sovereignty of God (it is useful to recall that the terms ‘right’ and ‘rite’ are etymological cognates, stemming from the Sanskrit root, ‘*rt*’, denoting order and equilibrium).

In the Queen’s Coronation ceremony, after she had offered a private prayer to God, she offered a solemn vow to use her royal powers to uphold God’s Law of justice and mercy. She was then ritually anointed with a traditional chrism of sesame and olive oils flavoured with ambergris, civet, musk, orange blossoms, roses, jasmine, cinnamon, and benjamin. The anointment has a religious significance: the embalmed Monarch stands, in Christian terms, as the symbolic embodiment of the ‘Christ’, the ‘Anointed One’, emphasizing her role as the moral agent of God. Being thus symbolically conformed to the Divine Will, the sovereign’s Divine Right to rule is established. The indelible nature of this regal consecration (because of its symbolic foundation in God) is remarked upon by Shakespeare in his play, *Richard II* (III: ii: 54-55):

Not all the water in the rough rude sea  
Can wash the balm off an anointed king.

Sanctified thus in the sight of Heaven, the Queen was then invested with the regalia of her office: the Orb set under the Cross, signifying her worldly dominion under God, the Royal Ring, signifying her seal of faith, the Royal Sceptre, ensign of her regal power and justice, and the Royal Rod with the Dove, signifying her rule of mercy.

One recalls Portia's lines from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (IV: i: 179ff) about the transcendent and cardinal quality of mercy:

...it becomes  
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this scepterèd sway.  
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;  
It is an attribute to God Himself...

The crowned Monarch stands as the vicegerent of God, or, as Shakespeare puts it, the 'deputy elected by the Lord' (*Richard II*, *ibid.*), whose moral authority rests on serving the Divine Will through its Law of justice and mercy. This is the Natural Law, equating, in Platonic terms, to the 'transcendentals' of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, and in Judeo-Christian terms, to the two Supreme Commandments. The Monarch's role, as steward of the Divine Law, is to uphold the norms of human dignity and moral rectitude, and this is the premise of the Monarch's 'right' to govern. In serving the people, as a Shepherd serves his flock, the true Monarch serves God. One recalls here the Queen's pledge to serve her subjects, made as a Princess on the occasion of her 21st birthday, and her devout fulfillment of that vow: 'I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong. ... God help me to make good my vow, and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it.'

The Monarch's duty to serve the subjects is founded on reciprocal duties of care. The Commons pay homage to the Regnum in expectation of being duly cared for by the ruler, trusting that the Monarch will

exercise that power with both justice and mercy according to the principles of Natural Law. The term 'Natural Law' is to be understood here as the alignment of the self with the Spirit, with the primordial 'nature' or *fitra*, as this is termed in the Holy Quran (*Sura Rum*, 30:30, in fact asserts that one's conformance to the *fitra* – or to the sovereign Spirit – is the true purpose of religion). In turn, the Regnum serves the Commons by acting in the common good, based on the principle of *noblesse oblige*, so that the Monarch holds the reins of power as a public trust. While there may be rulers who breach that trust, an abuse of the office does not invalidate its true purpose. As the traditional metaphysician Ananda K. Coomaraswamy remarked in one of his letters, kings are not 'divinely sanctioned to do what they like' but the Monarch is to be 'a mediator of the Natural Law and by all means subject to it himself.' The principle of government thereby calls for the Regnum's temporal authority to submit to the spiritual authority of the Divine Sovereign, represented by the ecclesiastic guardianship of the Sacerdotum, the Keeper of the King's Conscience – the Monarch is guardian of the faith.

An example of this reciprocity of responsibilities is explained by Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph and first Shia Imam, in a letter to his governor of Egypt, Malik al-Ashtar. The Imam instructs Malik that the governor's authority over the people derives from his obeisance to the Caliph who appointed him, just as the Caliph's authority in turn rests on his obeisance to God. He writes:

Malik, you must never forget that if you are a ruler over them (the people), then the Caliph is the ruler over you, and God is the supreme Lord over the Caliph.

All power and authority ultimately derive from God, and all order is therefore rooted in conformance to the Divine Principle, whose earthly symbols are, outwardly, the sovereign Monarch, and, inwardly, the sovereign Heart consecrated to God. It is by virtue of society's acceptance of the reciprocal roles of the governor and the governed that their disparate elements can be held together within the sanctuary of the integrating Spirit. This conformance accords with the Heavenly model of order and purpose described in the Lord's Prayer: 'on Earth as it is in Heaven.' Commenting on the integrating function of sovereign authority, St. Paul in one of his Epistles (*Colossians*, 1:16-17) remarks:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

When this integrating order, founded in the hierarchical framework of sovereignty and stewardship, is disturbed, the result is, as Shakespeare memorably remarked, discord. In the words of Ulysses (in *Troilus and Cressida*, I: iii: 88ff):

The Heavens themselves, the planets, and this Earth  
Observe degree, priority, and place...  
Take but degree away—untune that string,  
And hark what discord follows...

In the traditional understanding, authority is linked to ‘degree, priority and place,’ spanning the lowest of creatures and culminating in the *ens perfectissimum*, or God. This hierarchy is reflected in the structure of the Great Chain of Being, in which Man holds the rank of sovereign steward, having ‘dominion’ over other creatures on Earth (*Genesis*, 1:26). This same idea is represented in the Quranic understanding of Adam as the first vicegerent of God (*al-Baqarah*, 2:30).

The macrocosmic hierarchy of human sovereignty over earth and its creatures is symbolized by both Adam and the Monarch, who are stewards over their subjects. The microcosmic counterpart of this hierarchy is the uncreated Spirit whose sovereignty is over the created soul and body. And the metacosmic counterpart is reflected in the sovereignty of the Divine Principle (the Essence which is Beyond-Being) over the *Logos* (the Relative-Absolute Being of the personal God) and Existence (creation).

These integrating principles are important in the context of today’s disintegrating world. One of the manifestations of the dominant modernist ethos is its rejection of traditional hierarchies, reflected in part in its opposition to monarchy, which is seen not ‘sub specie aeternitatis’ but in temporal terms as an anachronism. The modernist attitude towards hierarchies derives from an epistemological error, namely, its failure to retrace values to metaphysical norms. In Islam, spiritual hermeneutics, or *ta’wil*, involves the retracing of meaning through levels of being to their

Origin (or *awwal*, from which the term *ta'wil* derives). This retracing, from the outer to the inner, from the periphery to the centre, from form to essence, is premised on the intellectual hierarchy of reality emanating from the Divine Principle. Normative meaning cannot therefore be reduced to a single plane nor relativized to a single perspective; rather, it radiates from the Font of the Divine Principle as an ever-renewing theophany. Meaning, then, is the retracing of phenomena to their integrating Source. Writing about this, the philosopher, Henry Corbin, states:

*Ta'wil* is tracing a thing back to its source, to its archetype... Taking it back, we make it pass from level to level of being and in doing so bring out the structure of its essence...

The modernist rejection of hierarchy is in effect a rejection of order, which itself rests on the Sovereignty of the Spirit. Order cannot be simplistically reduced to its outer forms, whether in terms of rigid societal structures or imposed behaviours; nor can it be relativized as the pursuit of subjective preferences. Order requires a principled balancing of the particular and the universal, of freedom and responsibility, of individual and common interests, through the internalization of values rooted in the Spirit, in a shared human dignity of connectedness and caring expressed in the fiduciary concept of stewardship.

The modernist's rejection of hierarchies is a symptom of the rejection of the microcosmic order and the governance of the Spirit. In short, it is the rejection of the Sacred. Remarking on the reevaluation of values brought on by changes that were pitting modern values against traditional norms, the Queen remarked as follows in her first televised Christmas Message of 1957:

... many people feel lost and unable to decide what to hold on to and what to discard. How to take advantage of the new life without losing the best of the old. But it is not the new inventions which are the difficulty. The trouble is caused by unthinking people who carelessly throw away ageless ideals as if they were old and outworn machinery.

They would have religion thrown aside, morality in personal and public life made meaningless, honesty counted as foolishness and self-interest set up in place of self-restraint.

The 'ageless ideals' of the Spirit, of which the Queen spoke – tradition, religion, morality, honesty and concern for others – are vital to restoring harmony and a healing order. The great challenges of our time – the existential challenges of climate change, disease, famine and wars that are imperiling our planet and our humanity – call for us to pull together at the risk of pulling apart if we do not. And to do this, it is vital for us to rediscover the source of those ageless ideals, rooted in the Sacred, in the Sovereign Spirit and its ethical mandate of stewardship.

To choose 'self-interest' over 'self-restraint', and to allow the cacophony of subjective opinions and trends, especially influenced by social media, to cast aside the integrating norms of the Spirit, cannot heal us in these difficult times. Populism promotes mediocrity which, in the end, usurps the sovereign goodness which is the basis of order. According to a Hadith of Imam 'Ali, 'The triumph of mediocre man brings down the elite.' And a Hermetic maxim states that 'When the people rule over the sovereign, the times are upside down.' This is because the authority of the sovereign proceeds, as we have argued, from the true Sovereign, and its Natural Law of justice, mercy and the common good.

As Monarch, the Queen exemplified these ageless ideals in her service. The Earthly Sovereign embodied the ideal of a transcending integrity and dignity. This is reflected in the project of the Commonwealth as not only a community of sovereign nations but as a humanistic enterprise dedicated to the causes of our common humanity. She stated:

Today we need a special kind of courage, not the kind needed in battle but a kind which makes us stand up for everything that we know is right, everything that is true and honest. We need the kind of courage that can withstand the subtle corruption of the cynics so that we can show the world that we are not afraid of the future.

It has always been easy to hate and destroy. To build and to cherish is much more difficult.

... In the old days the monarch led his soldiers on the battlefield and his leadership at all times was close and personal.

Today things are very different. I cannot lead you into battle, I do not give you laws or administer justice but I can do something else, I can give you my heart and my devotion to these old islands and to all the peoples of our brotherhood of nations.

Though the Queen has passed on, the integrating ideals she spoke of are not only relevant, but are even more pressing in these times of disintegration. They are indeed championed by her successor, King Charles III, who, in his Messages at both Sacred Web Conferences, has spoken of the vital importance of recovering the Sacred in the modern world and of living according to the 'grammar of Harmony.' We are indeed fortunate to have in His Majesty the King a true Sovereign and Steward, and we pray that his reign will reflect those integrating values for the benefit of humanity.