

Editorial: Living in a Post-Real World

By M. Ali Lakhani

...we know the world only as we know shadows (or reflections); and we are ignorant of the Divine Being insofar as we are ignorant of the person who projects this shadow.

Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi

The Murcian sage, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, taught that the world is God's shadow, and he reminded us—as did Plato in his Allegory of the Cave—that there is no shadow without Light. It was the late poet-metaphysician, Kathleen Raine, who lamented that ours is a “post-real world” of “chattering shadows of shadows”, and she too pointed us to a redemptive world beyond the grip of illusion—a resplendent presence abiding in the imaginal realm of Light.

For many who live in these dimly lit times of darkening vision and dulled senses, where the spirit of the age is increasingly pitted against the Spirit itself, the prospects may appear bleak. There are several factors that account for these conditions, chief among them the abstraction of reality through virtuality, and its objectification through materialism.

A culture of virtuality, in all its various forms—from the cyber world to celluloid, from hyper-reality to social media—speeds and distorts time while compressing and dispersing space, thereby breeding both distraction and the loss of what Wendell Berry terms “particular love”. This insidious culture of abstracted reality, combined with the materialistic ethos that objectifies and reduces the world to its purely external elements, is supplanting the culture of Logos—of the word

and presence of God—and is obscuring His Signs “in the innermost self and on the horizons” (*Qur’an*, 41:53), thereby placing man increasingly in the grip of the shadow.

Man is becoming beguiled by the outer world, becoming enshrouded in it, growing oblivious to the Light that sustains it. Consequently, the bonds that connect humanity are fraying, engendering in their stead inauthentic parodies of community, communication and connection: fragmented virtual ‘communities’, the vertiginous froth of digitized ‘communications’, and *in absentia* screen ‘connections’—all of which objectify the ‘Other’ while dispensing with the presence or depth that enriches human relationships. The imaginary is spilling over into reality, clouding it, and eclipsing the heavenly “Imagination” that perceives the Face of God.

Deluded and seemingly empowered by his own technological prowess, man now dares to believe that everything is potentially within his grasp. Science, once associated with humility, a gateway for man to reverence the sacred, to wonder at the miracles of God, and to better serve one’s fellow creatures, is becoming a hubristic enterprise, a genie that man commands, presumptuously to expose the secrets of the universe and discover the ‘mind of God’, and to satisfy his own voracious appetites—all in the name of limitless ‘progress’. Through arrogance and insensitivity, man has cut himself off from the divine order, from the integral source and true object of his knowledge, and thereby from the sacred dimension that is his innermost being and his real connection to the world.

Paradoxically, but not surprisingly, man’s sense of empowerment in the face of the modern world is accompanied by his growing sense of powerlessness. He is powerless before Time, which sucks him into its vortex, into the abyss of the Nihil, paralyzing him with frantic meaninglessness or numbing boredom; and, before Space, which physically crowds him into a shrinking world while isolating him by self-focusing inwardness and fear-driven hostility towards the ‘Other’, and which psychically assaults him with the flutter of fleeting sensations and mental pabulum while disconnecting him from his core, thereby dispersing him spiritually, and atomizing him within a soulless universe. In his zeal to be free of the very Light that sustains him and the world, man imprisons himself in the darkness he imagines to be real.

Lacking a divine compass, man loses his sense of order, of purpose, of connection, of community. Dehumanized man lives increasingly in a denatured world. In Yeats' famous prophecy, we now find that "the centre cannot hold" and "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". In a cynical world that deconstructs everything, there is no longer any firm ground on which to stand. Decentered man, lacking any normative measure, falls prey to the 'norms' of fickle fashion or to unanchored subjectivity. Reality, truth, objectivity, virtue, beauty—all these are casualties to what René Guénon has termed 'the Reign of Quantity'. Lacking the faith that "one word of truth shall outweigh the world" (Solzhenitsyn), man is no longer at ease with the traditional norms of Truth, Goodness and Beauty. In our 'post-fact' world that cavalierly transmutes facts to fictions and factions, Truth is reduced to 'spin', Goodness to sentimentalism, and Beauty to solipsistic gushings. In the new world disorder, where hierarchy is conflated with elitism, freedom with license, equality with uniformity, principles with rights, privileges with entitlements, and judgment with judgmentalism, it is homogenizing political correctness and tribalizing factionalism which now hold sway.

But for all this, as Gerard Manley Hopkins observes, there remains "the dearest freshness deep down things". Through the shadows of our confused times, our discerning intellect can intuit the grace of a sustaining Light, a living presence behind the veil. It is this Light that refutes obscuring materialism, the reductive world view of the opaque sensibility which affirms the merely measurable and quantifiable while denying that which, though visible to its Inner Eye, is beyond the grasp of its outward senses. The deeper, luminous, intelligence perceives the sacredness that binds all creatures to their common Origin and End, and thereby to each other. By grounding itself in the substance of the transcendent Spirit, the higher intellect repudiates the purely subjective foundations of knowledge, replacing them with a sense of the sacred, a reverence for life and human dignity, a respect for diversity and community, and the noble aspiration to strive in the common cause of bettering the quality of life for all in a spirit of inclusiveness, openness, and caring goodwill.

The post-real world *is* indeed an illusion, but like existence itself, it cannot elude the divine embrace. Therefore it remains within the remit of hope. Its phenomena, clouded though they may appear, are

also translucent, pointing us to a luminous higher order. Its qualities—attributes of the Divine Treasury, distributed in limited measure and combinations within the unique forms of the theophany—derive from archetypes that originate in the “Hidden Treasure” that is Beyond Being. The awareness of our existential illusion, of the “insubstantial pageant” of this tenebrous world, and also of the underlying Reality that informs it—whose mercy resides, as a seed, within each particle of it—is a central message of all wisdom traditions, and is essential to the spiritual recovery and restitution of man.

To forsake this perennial message is to engage oneself in the illusoriness of the contingent world. Whatever the trajectory of our times (bearing in mind that the contingent world is subject to the laws of entropy), man has a responsibility to discern the eternal order of nature, and to conform to it. This begins with awareness. The awareness of what is real introduces into our lives a dimension of wholeness, connectedness, sacredness and balance that dispels the anomie and malaise of modern life. By grounding himself in faith, man has the right to hope. By finding a purpose beyond himself, man can hope to find meaning in life itself. By living in ways that respect universal values transcending his own particular limitations, man gives value to life—including his own.

To return to Ibn ‘Arabi’s message, one must look beyond the shadow to the Light—affirming its symbolism of wisdom and love and grace of presence, by living our lives in ways committed to truth and justice, to harmony and equity, to fellowship and generosity, and by remembering, in Jalaluddin Rumi’s celebrated lines, that “Both light and shadow are the dance of Love”.