

Editorial: The Ocean and the Volcano

By M. Ali Lakbani

...the whole visible cosmos is resting upon an invisible volcano, though also—at a deeper ontological level—upon a formless ocean of bliss.

(Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*)

No one on earth has any other way left but—upward.

(Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Harvard Commencement Address*)

The terms ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ in the first epigraph remind us that reality is multi-layered and that certain aspects of it are hidden from our ordinary sight. This has implications both for what is capable of being known and the science of knowing. Sacred and profane sciences can have very different conceptions of reality, exposing a divide between, on the one hand, the traditional view that acknowledges the ‘invisible’ dimension of transcendence as an act of faith, and, on the other, the modernist view that confines reality to whatever is ‘visible’ to its limited epistemology.

Faith is not mere credulity, as some may presume, but a profound intelligence, one that discerns not only the limits of reason and the boundaries of the material world, but also its own ontological substance, intuiting the intimate presence of mystery, and the operative reality of providence and grace. The soul knows its own abiding substance in the same way as the eyes perceive their own reality: by the experiential light of seeing—in the soul’s case, not by ‘the eyes of the flesh’ but by ‘the eyes of the spirit’.

Arriving upon the stage of this world, the soul is blinded by 'all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life' (1 John, 2:16). In the thrall of the world's theatre, the soul is prone to forget the deeper reality of its heavenly origin and of the greater law that sustains all things. The scriptures unanimously remind us of a reality that transcends the spectacle of the outer world and of its beguilements that captivate the soul's lower appetites. They point us in the direction of a primordial spiritual memory that discloses an inner sanctum in us that is eternal and divine, and that can be apprehended only through the grace of vision. It is up to the soul, through faith, to access this memory. The Sufi poet, Sa'di of Shiraz writes,

'Pluck the cotton wool of heedlessness from the ear of awareness,
So that the wisdom of dead men may reach your ear.'

The 'dead' are those who have died to their lower selves. The great task of the soul is to look beyond this fleshly veil—not merely of the outer world but ultimately of the egoic self—to apprehend the deeper ground of one's being, the 'formless ocean of bliss' that is our substance.

Modern science, particularly physics, also quests for the elusive substance of the cosmos, but, in denying the universe a metaphysical foundation, it cannot possibly account for its ultimate ground—for its substance, for life, or for consciousness, all of which originate in a transcendent dimension that modern science would deny. When science presumes (with its 'hermeneutics of condescension', to quote the American philosopher, Marilynne Robinson) to reduce this world to the boundaries of its epistemic methodologies, it exposes the materialistic biases that would restrict reality to its purely quantitative and mechanistic aspects. Such 'science' is no longer worthy of the name but becomes ideology—what some have termed 'scientific fundamentalism', 'para-science' or 'scientism'. There is of course a perfectly legitimate scope for modern science. It lies within the realms of the mutable and the measurable—domains that are conducive to its materialistic conceptions and methodologies—and the recognition that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in its limited philosophy. For example its notions of 'space' and 'matter' are only—in the language of traditional metaphysics—representative of

‘materia secunda’ or quantitative matter, and not of ‘materia prima’ or the metaphysical substance by which Essence, or the informing Spirit, is qualitatively expressed into the world of forms. These ‘scientific’ notions of space and matter—acceptable at their own limited level—do not extend to the immutable and the immeasurable, the realms of Essence and Substance—domains that lie beyond its limited epistemology.

Frithjof Schuon reminds us that ‘this world, so seemingly solid, is as tenuous as a spider’s web’. The reason for its fragility is that its material reality is contingent on the metaphysical dimension from which it originates, and in which it subsists; in itself, material reality is insubstantial and will inevitably dissolve and leave ‘not a rack behind’ (Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*). Absolute reality is ultimately irreducible to the categories of the terrestrial or of profane science. According to axioms of sacred science, its origin and substance are transcendent and are not ultimately reducible to boundaries capable of measurement. Therefore, in accordance with the precept that ‘the greater must reveal itself to the lesser’, metaphysical epistemology mandates that ‘every explanation must proceed from above downward and not from below upward’ (René Guénon, in his seminal study, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*).

It is for this reason that traditional conceptions of reality begin with the axiomatic acceptance of, or faith in, a transcendent reality that is Absolute, a metaphysical Origin from which the multiple levels of planimetric reality descend and emanate, and whose essence is intrinsically and symbolically imprinted in the substance of all manifestation—providing the basis of its sacredness. The revealed cosmos is thereby a universe of intelligible signs, visible in each creature—for example (as ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, has eloquently observed in his sermons) in the designs and structures of an ant’s feet, or of the limbs of a locust, or of a bat’s wing, or of the feathers of a peacock—so that every element of manifest reality uniquely discloses and glorifies the orderliness, diversity, and resplendent architecture of theophany. So the Qur’an repeatedly urges Man to marvel at the signs of creation to gain a spiritual perspective of the natural world and one’s place in it, and also of one’s purpose in life. Similar refrains are found in many other sacred texts, for instance, the Psalms, which state ‘The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.’ (Psalm 19:1)

The marvelous designs and intricate structures of creation point to a divine order. This cosmos of changing forms, which is in flux and in a continual state of 'becoming', emerges out of the stable foundation of formless Being, within which all things are contained and to which they are related by 'a monologue of relativity' (Schuon). Man, as microcosm, reflects this cosmic composition and origin, being made of corporeal matter (body), animic fluid (psyche), and an eternal soul which the Scholastics refer to as 'Anima' (Spirit). Of these elements, it is the Spirit alone—the 'immortal diamond' of Gerard Manley Hopkins—that transcends the insubstantiality of 'becoming' by participating in the substance of Being. Man's quest for God is the soul's quest for escape from existential impermanence, and for return to, and rest within, the blissful ocean of the Spirit.

Inasmuch as the soul, at a lower level, identifies with only the psychophysical self, with only the materially corporeal or psychic worlds, it attaches itself to restless impermanence and becomes thereby self-enclosed and disoriented, potentially—that is, but for the operation of salvific grace—closing itself off from the Spirit. In truth, while Man may turn his back on God or avert his eyes from the Spirit, God, ever-merciful and loving, is eager—as in the case of the Father in the Biblical parable of the prodigal son—to receive the genuinely repentant or awakened soul. Thus, in a certain sense, the Spirit pines for the Spirit—that is, for the soul's homecoming—in the paradoxically joyful threnody of God.

The unanimous traditions teach the soul to discern the impermanence of creation and to distinguish it from the immutable ground of its own being, so that it can depend solely on the eternal Spirit and the providential grace that sustains the world, instead of being attached to the evanescent elements of life and the solidifying world. The seamless illusion of continuous 'becoming' and of the 'seemingly solid' world masks a reality—a volcanic reality—of the discontinuity of existence. As the world degrades—becoming opaque and calcifying through the centrifugal influences of time—so it becomes increasingly unstable.

Schuon, reminding us of the fragility of existence, remarks that the world 'can collapse *ab intra*, that matter can flow back "toward the inward" through transmutation, and that the whole of space can shrink like a balloon suddenly emptied of air'. This expresses an intuition of metaphysical laws that transcend, for example, the physical laws of

entropy. Natural laws are in the end contingent on supernatural foundations. Tradition teaches that creation and life are ultimately miraculous in their origin, that the substance and structure of the manifest world are metaphysically sustained, and that, in a reversal of the processes of creation, each life, each creature, and the visible cosmos itself, can be transmuted into the Divine Substance in a return from fragility to stability, from impermanence to permanence, affirming the Qur'anic promise, 'We belong to God and to Him we shall return.' (Q 2:156)

While this apocalyptic vision of the macrocosm and the microcosm is, from a mundane perspective, deeply unsettling, it is, from a spiritual vantage, profoundly reassuring. Schuon reminds us that each soul has the capacity to transcend oblivion by reintegrating itself into the everlasting Spirit. He states, 'Human nature consists precisely in being able to escape in our innermost core and "unchanging Center" from the breaking apart of a macrocosm that has become too solid, and becoming reintegrated in the Immutable, whence we came.' This observation about the integrative capacity of human nature is implicitly both a call for the soul's spiritual reintegration and a cautionary reminder of its need to guard against the 'solidifying' tendencies of the egoic self by reorienting its intelligence toward the Spirit through prayer, and by taming its lustful appetites from the dependencies of the reified world through detachment and virtue.

We live in an age when the siren call of the world is more compelling than our sense of the Real. Lamenting the spiritual exhaustion and the moral poverty of the modern world—particularly of the West—the Russian émigré, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, reminded his audience at the Harvard Commencement Address on June 8, 1978, about the spiritual purpose of man, stating,

'If humanism were right in declaring that man is born only to be happy, he would not be born to die. Since his body is doomed to die, his task on earth evidently must be of a more spiritual nature. It cannot be unrestrained enjoyment of everyday life. It cannot be the search for the best ways to obtain material goods and then cheerfully get the most of them. It has to be the fulfillment of a permanent, earnest duty so that one's life journey may become an experience of moral growth, so that one may leave life a better human being than one started it. ... Only voluntary, inspired self-restraint can raise man above the world stream of materialism.'

Modern man, Solzhenitsyn added, bore the burden of reassessing the fundamental definitions of human life and human society:

‘Is it true that man is above everything? Is there no Superior Spirit above him? Is it right that man’s life and society’s activities have to be determined by material expansion in the first place? Is it permissible to promote such expansion to the detriment of our spiritual integrity?’

These basic questions lie at the heart of man’s search for meaning. Though for each creature, there is the inevitable end of its particular existence—the promise of a personal volcanic eruption that will leave in its wake only oblivion, the traceless geography of the lone and level sands that stretch far away, as they did in for King Ozymandias (in Shelley’s poem)—yet, for the aspiring soul that seeks sincerely to merge with the Spirit, there is also the promise of oceanic bliss, the transcendent realization of the paradox that just as the drop was always in the ocean, so too the entire ocean was always in the drop. For man was made to transcend his material limitations—through faith, virtue and prayer, and through the surrender of the soul to the beautiful and compassionate Oneness of the Spirit. The only way for man to overcome personal oblivion and ‘the world stream of materialism’ is through self-transcendence—by seeking, not the material abundance or outward semblance of heaven that is Utopia, but the spiritual felicity of the true Heaven that is the reconstituted soul of the ‘kingdom within’.