

## Mercy and Charity

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### The Throne of Mercy

My mercy encompasses all things. (Qur'an, 7.156)

When the seas of Mercy begin to surge, even stones drink the Water of Life.  
(Jalāl al-Din Rūmī)<sup>1</sup>

According to Islamic tradition, the first word written by the Pen (*al-Qalam*) upon the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawh al-Mahfūz*) was “Mercy” (*Rahmān*).<sup>2</sup> Adrian Snodgrass remarks that the Pen and the Guarded Tablet are the Islamic equivalents of Essence and Substance (*Purusa* and *Prakṛti* in the Hindu tradition), the polar complementaries by whose union phenomena come to be manifested.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Ralph Austin observes that, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, the term “mercy” did not simply denote ‘an attitude or feeling of compassion, as usually understood, but rather the very principle of creation by which all created things exist and by which all the latent possibilities within the “divine mind” are released into actuality, as objects of the divine perception and witness’.<sup>4</sup> Mercy, as Ibn al-‘Arabi says, is ‘the Throne that encompasses all things, while the Merciful is its occupant, by whose reality Mercy permeates the Cosmos’<sup>5</sup>. ‘Let us, then, come boldly unto the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace when we are in need of help’ (*Hebrews* 4:16). The distinction between the Mercy and the Merciful may be likened to that between Immanence and Transcendence, which at the principal level is what the Hindu tradition describes as a “distinction without difference” (*bhedābheda*). In a

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<sup>1</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V, 2282 (Nicholson (tr.), cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.611).

<sup>2</sup> Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, 1990, pp.410-11.

<sup>3</sup> Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, 1990, p.411, n.2.

<sup>4</sup> Austin, Introduction to Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *The Bezels of Wisdom (Fusūs al-hikam)*, 1980, p.29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.278).

difficult passage, Ibn al-‘Arabi expands on this distinction while at the same time confirming the essential identity of Mercy and the Merciful:

Mercy is, in reality, an attribution of the Merciful that necessitates control, being indeed that which is merciful.<sup>6</sup> He Who causes it to exist in the recipient of Mercy does not bring it into existence to have mercy on the recipient by it, but only to have mercy by it on that which resides within it. God is not a locus for phenomena, nor yet a locus for the bringing of mercy into existence. He is the Merciful, and the merciful is only such by the residing of mercy within it. Thus is it confirmed that He is the very Mercy Itself.<sup>7</sup>

‘Have you not considered the Throne,’ asks Ibn al-Arabi, ‘how it rests on the water and derives from it?’<sup>8</sup> ‘The Throne’ remarks Snodgrass, ‘is “the place of the Divine Presence,” the most secret and hidden (*bātin*), it is also the most outward (*zāhir*). It is simultaneously the centre and the circumference of the cosmos; it is surrounding and surrounded, containing and contained; it stands at the centre of the Waters and is also the Waters themselves, as designating the totality of creatures, spiritual, subtle and gross; it stands at the fulcrum of the Waters but includes the Waters within itself.’<sup>9</sup>

Ibn al-Arabi also says, ‘He whom the Mercy remembers, it has mercy upon.’<sup>10</sup> That is, He whom the Merciful remembers is brought forth into creation in Mercy. ‘And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that were with him in the ark: and God made a wind to pass over the earth and the waters assuaged’ (Gen.8:1). This “wind” is the Spirit (*al-Rūh; Ruah*) that moves upon the Waters in *Genesis*. Thus, Jalāl al-Din Rūmī asks, ‘Did not the sea make friends with Noah and Moses?’<sup>11</sup> Which is to say, did not the Mercy “remember” and, as such, bring into existence Noah and Moses; and so doing did not the Mercy “become” the vessels, Noah and Moses, who resided in

<sup>6</sup> The Merciful is the Active Participant or agent of mercy, distinct here from the mercy itself. Its activity is a “non-acting activity” (*wei wu wei*). The Merciful is uncreated whereas the Mercy is the very power of creation, which it embraces.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.225).

<sup>8</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.213).

<sup>9</sup> Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, 1990, p.411.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.225).

<sup>11</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I, 2137 (Gupta (tr.), *Vol.1*, 1997, p.194).

the union of “friendship” within the Waters of Mercy; and, in turn, was not the nature of Mercy expressed in the lives and forms of Noah and Moses, for, as Abu’l-Qāsim al-Junayd says, ‘The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it.’<sup>12</sup>

Mercy is most commonly symbolised by “water” or “breath.” These are the “receptacles” of the divine Essence (the Merciful). As Ibn al-‘Arabi says, ‘From the water of Mary or from the breath of Gabriel, / In the form of a mortal fashioned of clay, / The Spirit came into existence in an essence / Purged of Nature’s taint’<sup>13</sup>. The container and the contained identify.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Snodgrass recognises the Throne as ‘the Spirit (*al-Rūh*), the same spirit of God (*Ruahh Elohim*) that in *Genesis* “moved on the face of the Waters,” the Waters being the totality of cosmic potentialities, the Ocean of primordial Substance.’<sup>15</sup>

In Kabbalah, the most common meaning of water is “mercy” or “blessing.”<sup>16</sup> According to *sefirotic* symbolism, the *sefirot* are portrayed as “vessels” (*kelim*) or “pools” (*braichah*)<sup>17</sup> into which the “river” of Mercy flows from the fountain of the Godhead, through the fifty gates of *Binah* (Understanding; the “Upper Mother”; the “Great Sea”).<sup>18</sup> As each vessel fills it overflows causing a continuous stream to water the “garden” of the created world, *Malkhut* (Kingdom; the “Lower Mother”). Isaac Luria developed his doctrine of “The Breaking of the Vessels” (*Shevirath Ha-Kelim*) based on this symbolism.<sup>19</sup> For Luria the “vessels” or “shells” (*kelipot*) express the sense of limitation associated with the judgment of the *sefirot Din*. As Frithjof Schuon observes,

<sup>12</sup> Al-Junayd, cited in Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 1921, p.159.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.174).

<sup>14</sup> See my essay, ‘The Container and the Contained’, *Vincit Omnia Veritas* 2.2, 2006, 176-187.

<sup>15</sup> Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity Vol.2*, 1990, p.411.

<sup>16</sup> This is particularly evident with the symbolism of “rain.” Rain is the symbol of the celestial influences which the earth receives. See “rain” in Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 1996, p.782; see also Guénon, ‘Light and Rain’, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Ch.62.

<sup>17</sup> According to Rabbi Gikatilla the word “blessing” (*brachah*) comes from the word “pool” (*braichah*), see *Sha’are Orah*, 1994, p.16.

<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Gikatilla, *Sha’are Orah*, 1994, p.245. On *Binah* and *Malkhut* as the “Upper Mother” and the “Lower Mother” see *Zohar* I, 247b; III,7b-8a; on *Binah* as the “Great Sea” see *Zohar* I, 85b-86a.

<sup>19</sup> See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, pp.266-68; see n.68 where he refers to Tishby’s analysis of this doctrine.

‘To say manifestation is to say limitation.’<sup>20</sup> ‘If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy, sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can the world last? Behold, I will create it with both attributes; would that it might endure!’<sup>21</sup> These “shells” of judgment untempered by compassion correspond to the Kings of Edom.<sup>22</sup> The *Shevirah*, as Scholem says, ‘is compared to the “break-through” [Meister Eckhart’s *durchbrechen*] of birth ... In this manner, the mystical “death of the primordial kings” is transformed into the far more plausible symbol of a mystical “birth”’.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, for Ibn al-‘Arabi and al-Jīlī the term “mercy” (*rahmah*), which derives from the Arabic root RHM, evokes the word *rahima*, which means, womb.<sup>24</sup>

Although the *sefirah Din* first imposes judgment and limitation, the first vessel, as such, is the *sefirah Hesed*, which symbolises pure Mercy and here identifies with *Binah*. In Hebrew, the word *Hesed* (*cheched*) also means “favour,” and this suggests an interesting and pertinent connection: ‘Rejoice, you who enjoy God’s *favour*! The Lord is with you’ (Lk.1:28). The Blessed Virgin is the receptacle-the womb (*rahima*)-of God’s out flowing Mercy. She is the Mother of Mercy (*Madonna della Misericordia*). She sits enthroned beside God the Son.<sup>25</sup> The enthroned Virgin is prefigured in the Hebrew Scriptures by Bathsheba, who was placed upon a throne by her son.<sup>26</sup> The throne of the Virgin is the Sun, which is also her “robe” (Rev.12.1). The rays of the Sun are the

<sup>20</sup> Schuon, *In The Face Of The Absolute*, 1989, p.35.

<sup>21</sup> *Genesis Rabba*, 12.15.

<sup>22</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.266. For the Edomite Kings see *Zohar* III, 128a, 135a, b, 142a, b, 292a, a; see Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, 1991, p.332-3; Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, 1971, pp.107-10.

<sup>23</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.267.

<sup>24</sup> See Al-Jīlī, *al-insān*, 1983, ‘Of the Compassionate Beatitude (*ar-rahmāniyah*)’.

<sup>25</sup> The Virgin is typically shown enthroned in Renaissance art. See “Coronation of St. Mary the Virgin” in Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, 1983, p.67-8.

<sup>26</sup> “Mary the Virgin, St.” in Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*, 1983, pp.170-171. *Bath-Sheba* ‘(“daughter of an oath”’. This name derives from two words. The first is *bath* (“a daughter”) as the feminine form of *bēn* (“a son”), which derives from the primitive root, *bānāh* (“to build”). The second is *sheba*, which is taken as “oath.” This is the feminine form of *shib’āh* (“seven,” as the sacred *full* one). It derives from the primitive root, *shāba* ‘ (“to be complete”). It is taken as “oath” in the sense of “to seven oneself,” i.e. to swear by repeating the declaration seven time. The name Bathsheba expresses the feminine nature of the complete building of cosmic existence through the “seven,” which correspond to the seven cosmological *sefirah*. From one perspective, these are the “throne” upon which the triunity *Keter-Hokhmah-Binah* rests; from another perspective these are the “throne” on which the Virgin *Malkhut* is enthroned.

flowing forth of God's Mercy. The *Ka'bah*, the terrestrial Throne, is likewise "robed" by the black curtain of the *kiswa*, which here expresses the "rays" of the "Black Sun,"<sup>27</sup> shining with the "Light Inaccessible." This is the Black Virgin, 'I am black, but beautiful.'

The Virgin sits upon the Throne and is the Throne. She is likewise the Church (ship) and the Ark, where the Ark is synonymous with the "Heart." Yet according to a distinction developed by Ibn al-'Arabi, the Heart is greater than the Throne. This returns us to the distinction between that which "contains" and that which "receives," for Mercy, like the womb (*rahima*), receives, even though this is, in the final analysis, the receiving of the ever-flowing Infinite from Itself to Itself by Itself. The Heart, however, contains in the manner of Its absoluteness. The distinction might be likened to the exclusive Absolute (the Centre) and the inclusive Infinite (the Circumference). Ibn al-'Arabi: 'Know that the heart, by which I mean the Heart of the gnostic, derives from the Divine Mercy, while being more embracing than it, since the Heart encompasses the Reality, exalted be He, and the Mercy does not. ... The Reality is the subject and not the object of the mercy, so that the latter has no determining power with respect to the Reality.'<sup>28</sup> According to Austin, 'The reason for the greater capacity of the Heart is that, whereas the Mercy symbolises the whole manifestation and its resolution into unity, the Heart symbolises the whole experience of Oneness of being, as including not only the creative process and its resolution, but also that inalienable and unalterable aspect of the Reality which knows nothing of cosmic becoming.'<sup>29</sup>

Divine Mercy is the eternally flowing forth of the Infinitude of God from God to God. It is this that gives birth to Existence and returns creation back to God. This birth and return (Meister Eckhart's *durchbrechen* and *reditus*) is expressed by the Divine Names: *ar-Rahmān* (The Compassionate, He whose Mercy envelops all things) and *ar-Rahīm*

<sup>27</sup> The symbolism of the "Black Sun" has also been described as a "nocturnal day." Clement of Alexandria believes it was the "universal essence" that Plato referred to, in the seventh book of the *Republic*, as a "nocturnal day" (*Republic* 521c). Clement says that this expresses 'a conversion and turning about of the soul from a day whose light is darkness to the true day—that ascension to reality of our parable which we will affirm to be true philosophy' (*Stromata*, 5.105.2; 133.5).

<sup>28</sup> Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.147).

<sup>29</sup> Austin, Introductory Note to Ch.12 of Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.145).

(The Merciful, He who saves by His grace).<sup>30</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi also describes these as “the mercy of unobligating giving” and “the mercy of binding obligation.”<sup>31</sup> The divine Mercy is God’s gift of Himself to creation. Man—“made in the image”—responds to this gift by firstly, giving himself to God (inverse analogy) and secondly, giving himself to mankind (direct analogy). These then are summed up in the Two Great commandments that Jesus gave: ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. The second resembles: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole of the law, and the Prophets too’ (Mt.22:37-40; Lk10:25-28; Jn.13:34-34a).<sup>32</sup> The mercy of loving one’s neighbour is expressed in the virtue of charity.



### **The blessing of charity**

The quality of mercy is not strain’d, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath: it is twice bless’d; it blessed him that gives and him that takes. (Shakespeare)<sup>33</sup>

Charity is to recognise the eternal Word in creatures. (Titus Burckhardt)<sup>34</sup>

The *sefirah Hesed* (Mercy) corresponds to the patriarch Abraham, who is the personification of charity, as shown by his entertainment of the three strangers at the Oak of Mamre: ‘Yahweh appeared to him at the Oak of Mamre while he was sitting by the entrance of the tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up, and there he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them, and bowed to the ground. “My lord,” he said, “if I find favour with you, please do not pass your servant by. Let me have a little water brought, and you can wash you feet and have a rest under the tree. Let me fetch a little bread and you can

<sup>30</sup> See Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.190).

<sup>31</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.189).

<sup>32</sup> On the “Supreme Commandment” see Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, pp.151-157.

<sup>33</sup> *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.184.

<sup>34</sup> Burckhardt, *Études Traditionnelles*, 1953, p.174, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.596.

refresh yourselves before going further, now that you have come in your servant's direction." They replied, "Do as you say." (Gen.8:1-8).<sup>35</sup> 'Remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it' (Heb.13:2).<sup>36</sup>

According to Judaic tradition, Abraham once questioned his teacher, Shem-Melchizedek,<sup>37</sup> on the virtue that merited the saving of his father, Noah, and his brothers on the Ark. Shem-Melchizedek replied that their merit consisted in having practiced "charity" in feeding the needy.<sup>38</sup> 'Charity' says a Jewish tradition, 'doth deliver from death—not merely from unnatural death but from death itself'<sup>39</sup> The Talmud distinguishes two categories of charity, which correspond, at the appropriate level of analogy, to the two types of Mercy. The lesser charity is almsgiving (*Tzedakah*). Abraham Cohen notes that the proper meaning of this word is "righteousness":

...assisting the poor is not an act of grace on the part of the donor, but a duty. By giving alms he is merely practicing righteousness, i.e. performing a deed of justice. All man's possessions are but a loan from the Creator of the Universe, to Whom belong the earth and the fullness thereof, and by his charity he merely secures a more equitable distribution of God's gifts to mankind.<sup>40</sup>

'For all things come of Thee, and of thine own have we given Thee' (1Ch.29:14). One recalls here that Noah was precisely saved for being the "righteous" man in his generation (Gen.7:1).

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<sup>35</sup> Abraham is the head of the Semitic patriarchy and corresponds in the Greek tradition to Zeus, who is not only the head of the Greek pantheon but also the "protector of wayfarers".

<sup>36</sup> Again, Lot when he meets the angles who come to Sodom (Gen.19:1-4).

<sup>37</sup> The tradition that sees Melchizedek as Abraham's teacher presumably follows the tradition whereby Metatron (Yahoel) is seen as Abraham's spiritual teacher, see Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1995, p.69. For the original tradition see *The Apocalypse of Abraham* where Iaoel (Yahoel) reveals the secrets of heaven to Abraham (15.4).

<sup>38</sup> *Midrash Tanchuma, Genesis*, 8, 16, cited in Rappoport, *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, 1995, p.275. The textual context is Melchizedek's "feeding/blessing" of Abram with bread and wine (Gen.14:18).

<sup>39</sup> *Sabbath* 156b, cited in Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.221.

<sup>40</sup> Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1995, p.219.

The second, and superior, category is called *Gemiluth Chasadim* (“the bestowal of loving acts”; benevolence). ‘The Pentateuch begins with an act of benevolence and concludes with an act of benevolence. At the beginning it is said, “And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife coats of skin, and clothed them” (Gen.3:21); and at the end it is said, “And he buried him (Moses) in the valley” (Deut.34:6)’<sup>41</sup>. This meta-cosmic Charity corresponds to *ar-Rahmān* (The Compassionate).

Of the acts that constitute benevolence one is given special attention: the “entertainment of wayfarers,” of which virtue Abraham is the embodiment and epitome. In the Scriptures we are told that Abraham planted a tamarisk (*’êshel*) in Beersheba (Gen.21:33).<sup>42</sup> According to *Genesis Rabba*, *’êshel* means ‘a lodging-place where Abraham used to receive passers-by, and when they had eaten and drunk, he would say, “Stay the night and bless God”’<sup>43</sup>. The term *’êshel* is accordingly explained as made up of the initial of the three words: *achilah* “eating,” *shethiyah* “drinking,” and *linah* “lodging overnight.”<sup>44</sup> The tamarisk is the “lodging-place,” the receptacle, Ark that sustains through the “dark night of the Flood”; and it sustains precisely by the act of charity with which it is, in a sense, identical.<sup>45</sup>

The deepest truth of charity is the truth of unity. Love of God is realisation of the unity of God. ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord. You must love the Lord our God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength’ (Dt.6:4-5). Love of one’s neighbour is realisation of God in them. As Titus Burckhardt says, ‘Charity is to recognise the eternal Word in creatures.’ Love of God is realisation of the exclusivity of the Absolute; love of one’s neighbour is recognition of the inclusiveness of the Infinite. To love God is to know that the Absolute alone is real; to love one’s neighbour is to know that the Relative is granted contingent reality by the fact that nothing can be other

<sup>41</sup> *Sotah* 14a, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 1995, p.225.

<sup>42</sup> *B’êShaba’* (“well of an oath”) is also “well of seven”; that is, the seven “wells” or vessels of the cosmological *sefirot*.

<sup>43</sup> *Genesis Rabba*, 54.6, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 1995, p.225.

<sup>44</sup> Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 1995, p.225, n.1.

<sup>45</sup> The relationship of the tamarisk to the “receptacle” or Ark is most evident in the story of the murder of Osiris. It is interesting to note that the bones of Saul and his sons were also buried beneath a tamarisk tree in Jabesh (I Sam. 33:13).

than God. ‘Love of one’s neighbour’ says Schuon, ‘receives all its meaning through the love of God’<sup>46</sup>. Schuon again: ‘To love God ... is to realise in ourselves that which, by virtue of the analogical correspondences, is conformable to the divine Presence.’<sup>47</sup> To love God is to realise ourselves as receptacles of the Divine Mercy, and, in the final analysis, to realise ourselves in God and as God. Ibn al-‘Arabi: ‘There is no created being/ But is endowed with speech./ Nor is there aught created, seen by the eye,/ But is essentially the Reality./ Indeed, He is hidden therein, Its forms being merely containers.’<sup>48</sup> As Meister Eckhart says, ‘We love God with his own love; awareness of it deifies us.’<sup>49</sup>

The unity of God is the heart of the revelation of Abraham, who turned from the idol worship of his father, Terah, to the worship of the one true God. Several Judaic traditions tell of how Abraham deduced the unity of God by a sort of apophatic reasoning. According to one story, when he revolted against idolatry, his father took him before King Nimrod that he might punish him for his iconoclasm.

“If,” said Nimrod, “thou will not worship the God of thy father, then at least worship fire.” Abraham replied: “We should rather worship water which extinguishes fire.” Nimrod then said: “Then worship water.” Abraham retorted: “If so, we should worship the cloud which carries the water!” Nimrod said: “Then worship the cloud.” Abraham retorted: “If so, we should worship the wind which disperses the cloud!” Nimrod said: “Then worship the wind.” Abraham retorted: “Rather should we worship the human being who carries the wind!”<sup>50</sup>

According to another account, after his birth Abraham had been hidden in a cave for three years.<sup>51</sup>

When he left the cave, his heart kept reflecting upon the creation of the Universe, and he determined to worship all the luminaries until he discovered which one of them was God. He

<sup>46</sup> Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981, p.153.

<sup>47</sup> Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.93.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusus* (1980, p.130).

<sup>49</sup> Meister Eckhart, from Pfeiffer (ed.), *Meister Eckhart Vol.1*, 1924, p.147, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.614.

<sup>50</sup> *Genesis Rabba*, 38.13, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 1995, p.1-2 & Rappoport, *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, 1995, p.xxix. See Rappoport, *Ancient Israel Vol.1*, 1995, pp.238-245 for various other accounts of Abraham’s iconoclasm.

<sup>51</sup> Compare Moses hidden for three months (Ex.2:1-2).

saw the moon whose light illumined the darkness of night from one end of the world to the other and noticed the vast retinue of stars. “This is God,” he exclaimed, and worshipped it throughout the night. In the morning when he beheld the dawn of the sun before which the moon darkened and its power waned, he exclaimed: “The light of the moon must be derived from the light of the sun, and the Universe only exists through the sun’s rays.” So he worshipped the sun throughout the day. In the evening, the sun sank below the stars and the planets. He thereupon exclaimed: “Surely these all have a master and God!”<sup>52</sup>

Abraham’s iconoclasm is directly related to his virtue of charity. As the Mishnah says, ‘Whoever shuts his eye against charity is as though he worshipped idols’<sup>53</sup>. For Meister Eckhart, the account of Abraham’s charity to the three strangers hints at Abraham’s appreciation of unity. Meister Eckhart cites *Genesis* 18:2 as: ‘He saw three and adored one.’<sup>54</sup>

‘Charity’ says Schuon, ‘starts from the truth that my neighbour is not other than myself, since he is endowed with an ego; that in the sight of God he is neither more nor less “I” than myself; that which is given to “another” is given to “myself”; that my neighbour is also made in the image of God; that he carries within him the potentiality of the Divine presence and that this potentiality must be revered in him’<sup>55</sup>. This truth is central to the Noachic covenant: ‘He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God was man created’ (Gen.9:6). To shed the blood of another is to shed one’s own blood, for humankind is a single being in the image of the one God.<sup>56</sup> ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me’ (Mt.25:40).

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<sup>52</sup> *Midrash Hagadol*, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 1995, p.2. This tradition can also be found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 7.1-12 (Charlesworth (ed.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Vol.1*, 1983, p.692) and Qur’an 6:75-79.

<sup>53</sup> *Baba Bathra* 10a, cited in Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 1995, p.223.

<sup>54</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Comm. Jn.* 37 (Colledge & McGinn, 1981, p.135).

<sup>55</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.24. See also ‘The Supreme Commandment’, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 1981; ‘Complexity of the Concept of Charity’, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995.

<sup>56</sup> Discussing Meister Eckhart’s idea of the “image,” Richard Woods remarks, ‘we are created both *Imago Dei* and *ad imaginem Dei*, the second as creatures distinct from but wholly dependent upon God for our existence, and the first as identical with the Word of God and thus with but indistinct from God in the

The virtue of charity, which merited the salvation of Noah and his sons on the Ark, is the knowledge of the unity of Being. Charity, understood thus, is Supreme Identity. It presupposes union with God: the union of the *gnosis* of Noah's "drunkenness." As St. Cyprian of Carthage says, 'the chalice of the Lord inebriates us as Noah drinking wine in *Genesis* was also inebriated ... the inebriation of the chalice ... is not such as the inebriation coming from worldly wine ... actually, the chalice of the Lord so inebriates that it actually makes sober, that it raises minds to spiritual wisdom, that from this taste of the world each one comes to the knowledge of God'<sup>57</sup>.

Julian of Norwich saw charity as a divine light, which she understood after three manners. 'The first,' she says, 'is Charity unmade; the second is Charity made; the third is Charity given. Charity unmade is God; Charity made is our soul in God; Charity given is virtue. And that is a precious gift of working in which we love God, for Himself; and others, in God; and that which God loveth, for God.'<sup>58</sup> These three modes of divine Charity correspond to the divine Mercy, which is unmade in the Heart, but which flows forth upon the Throne and is made as a gift of grace. For Richard of St. Victor the Ark of the Covenant signifies nothing less than Grace.<sup>59</sup>

According to Schuon, 'the extrinsic charity of God consists *a priori* in His "putting Himself in the place" of nothing, that is of unreality or of impossibility, and He does so in creating the world, which is none other than nothingness to which God has lent a particle of His being.'<sup>60</sup> This particle of being is His divine gift of Love. Thus the Persian Sufi, Abū Yazīd Tayfūr al-Bastāmī, says, 'A single atom of the love of God in a heart is worth more than a hundred thousand paradises.'<sup>61</sup> To realise the nothingness of creation is to rend the illusion of the Relative and see only the Absolute. To see the Absolute is to see

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depths of the divine nature itself ' ('Eckhart's Imageless Image: Art, Spirituality, and the Apophatic Way': *Eckhart Review* No.12, 2003, p.11).

<sup>57</sup> St. Cyprian from Hamman (ed.), *The Mass: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts*, 1967, cited in Urban, 'Oblatio Rationabilis: Sacrifice in East and West', *Sophia*, 2002, p.183.

<sup>58</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.598.

<sup>59</sup> Richard of St. Victor, *Benjamin Major (The Mystical Ark)*, 1979, p.152.

<sup>60</sup> Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, 1995, p.97.

<sup>61</sup> Bāyazīd al-Bistāmī, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.617.

the Relative in the Absolute, to see God in creation. Ibn al-‘Arabi: ‘He who is universal is particular, and He Who is particular is universal. There is but one Essence, the light of the Essence being also darkness.’<sup>62</sup> In the words of the Buddhist saint, Milarepa: ‘If you realise the Voidness, Compassion will arise within your hearts; if ye lose all differentiation between yourselves and others, fit to serve others ye will be; and when in serving others ye shall win success, then shall ye meet with me; and finding me, ye shall attain to Buddhahood.’<sup>63</sup>

If God’s extrinsic Charity, which is the same as His Mercy, is His “putting Himself in the place of nothing,” then His intrinsic Charity is the realisation, made in the “Heart of the Gnostic,” that “nothing” is not and that there is only God, the Merciful.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Fusūs* (1980, p.150). Again: ‘All becoming is an imagination / And in truth also a reality / Who truly comprehends this / Has attained the mysteries of the Way’ (p.197).

<sup>63</sup> Milarepa, cited in Perry, *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.601.