

CULT/URE

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Sarah Chandonnet, Michael Bradley
Editors

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

C*ult/ure* was created by Harvard Divinity School students in 2006 as a forum to bring together the academic and social arenas of *cult* and *culture*. In its fourth inception, we hope for *Cult/ure* to continue this conversation with full force, incorporating the voices of new scholars at HDS. However, the process of carrying forward this important conversation is one that requires many voices. The writer chooses to openly share his work with his peer community, and that same community responds with tireless rounds of editing and pages of feedback. The integral parts of *Cult/ure* are the conversations that peers have with one another in the process of submission and review as well as the dialogues that transcend time and space among scholars over hundreds of years.

This year, working within the tradition of its legacy, *Cult/ure* looks to take this conversation into the present. All six of the essays featured in this edition seek to pull the discussion of cult, culture, and religion into the twenty-first century by exploring these themes in light of our contemporary socio-political world.

In "Nietzsche as Conversation Partner for Glaude and West," Klaus Yoder shines a light on two strands of African American pragmatic thought, represented by Eddie Glaude and Cornel West, through their respective engagements with and appropriation of Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Yoder, while Glaude employs Nietzsche in order to take a critical stance toward the historiographies of black theology, he does not continue on to his interlocutor's constructive possibilities. West, on the other hand, finds a fruitful conversational partner in Nietzsche by combining him with Marxian social analysis in order to expose contemporary nihilism and create new values within it.

Joshua A. Eaton asks the question, What would a Buddhist ruler look like? In "He Ruled in Righteousness," Eaton attempts to answer this question by examining two texts, Jatakas' *Ten Kingly Virtues* and Nagarjuna's *Precious*

Garland of Advice for the King, in order to find a normative ethic for Buddhist governance. Although Jataka and Nagarjuna stand in two different traditions, the personal virtues and their ties to righteous government of Jataka correlate well with the framework for specific policies that we find in Nagarjuna. In this elucidation of a specifically Buddhist understanding of ideal governance, Eaton offers a way for Buddhists to be actively engaged in the political realm and true to the teachings within their tradition at the same time.

How can Muslim women create a place for their authentic voices without adopting a patriarchal paradigm to do so? In “The Construction of Female Religious Authority,” Matthew Hotham looks to answer this question by examining the way two women, Zaynab and Amina, have impacted the female Muslim communities of Southern Lebanon and Turkey, respectively. While Zaynab acts as a role model for community action and organization for Shi’a women in Lebanon, Hotham discusses what may be lost in this achievement. Turning to the Amina that Turkish women find in Suleyman Chelebi’s *Mevlid-i Sherif*, Hotham shows how mourning may give women the sole authority over the liminal space between life and death.

In “Ethics on the Borders,” Rebecca Benefiel Bijur places the *bhakti* poet Kabir at the intersections of East and West, Hindu and Muslim, interiority and relationality, past and present. Bijur argues that Kabir’s poetry expresses an internal spirituality that is critical toward formalized religiosity that has resonances with traditionally Western understandings of religious ethics. At the same time, the narrative form of his poetry and its ability to invite a community of listeners to participate in its performance suggests an understanding of the relational, embodied, and dynamic self that is Eastern in spirit. For Bijur, Kabir’s ability to stand in the border place between protest and devotion, individuality and community, makes him an important resource for worship services characterized by religious pluralism.

In deciding issues of basic justice, democracies must contend with the diverse and conflicting views of its citizens. Bharat Ranganathan champions John Rawls’ approach to such pluralism: members within a liberal democracy must commit to the ideal of public reason, rather than to private notions of the good, when debating in the public sphere. In

“Religious Persons and the Background Culture of Democracy,” Ranganathan entertains the criticisms of religious voices who promote New Traditionalism and willingly alienate themselves from the reason-giving procedures of liberalism, and finds them wanting. While religious persons may legally refuse to abide by the ideal of public reason, the democratic values of toleration and reciprocity suggest that liberals should continually engage with them.

In “The Mirrored Veil,” Zachary Ugolnik brings us on a journey to the face of God in with an intriguing comparison between the 15th century Islamic text *Mirâj-Nâmeh* and former Eastern Christian basilica – Hagia Sophia. Ugolnik follows Mohammad’s ascent in the text, on the one hand, and the painted icons within the building, on the other, and argues that they both lead to the mirrored veil of God’s face. In studying their images, Ugolnik finds that both traditions hide the face of God through the use of light: in the *Mirâj-Nâmeh* we ascend to a presence rather than a figure, and through the use of stylized representations, the icons conceal even as they reveal. The end of contemplation is not to see the face of the divine, but to be seen by it, a conclusion all the more significant today.

While our authors focus on a range of religious traditions – including Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism – and confront in different ways the socio-political ramifications of interpretation and study of other writers and artists, they hold in common the desire to bring to the fore a contemporary understanding of the overlap between religion, philosophical thought, and the world. The authors combine rigorous academic research and passion with the need for dialogue, both throughout tradition, and within contemporary scholarship. These pages are testament to the integrity of their ventures, and the success of their contribution of new voices to the conversation.

NIETZSCHE AS CONVERSATION PARTNER FOR GLAUDE AND WEST

Klaus Yoder

As African American intellectuals engaged with the American Pragmatic tradition, Cornel West and Eddie Glaude draw on an overlapping body of philosophical, theoretical, and literary sources to challenge the contemporary political culture and reassess the way African Americans should approach this culture. Yet several factors divide their approaches, especially their treatment of religion in moral and political struggles toward better forms of democracy. One method for explicating the major contrasts of their views is to examine their relationships to the major philosophical interlocutors present in their works as a way of honing in on the critical details of their commitments. Glaude and West share in grappling with the insights of Friedrich Nietzsche, though they utilize Nietzsche's work in varying ways due to the demands of their projects. Both rely on Nietzsche as a force for critiquing problematic intellectual trends within their own communities, though with differing outcomes in mind. I will argue that the similarities and differences in their interlocution

with Nietzsche's corpus provide stimulating insight into two major currents of thought within contemporary Pragmatism. This essay will also argue that Glaude's pragmatic engagement with Nietzsche is too instrumentalizing for a deep interrogation with his Deweyan commitments, while West's approach is more dialogical in reintroducing Nietzsche's challenges to contemporary problems that are of deep concern for West's prophetic pragmatism. This essay will unfold under these three major topics of inquiry, Nietzsche as a force of critique for "Historical Pragmatics," Nietzsche as conversation partner for theorists of social reform, and the limits of Nietzsche's applicability for West and Glaude's work.

Nietzsche, Dewey and History for Life

I begin this discussion with Eddie Glaude's *In a Shade of Blue* because his use of Nietzsche's historical analysis is significant for his reevaluation of African American religious experience, as well as important for clearing a space for a "post-soul politics." Glaude's engagement with Nietzsche comes in the third chapter of this book in which he attempts to mount a critique against the way late 20th century black theology embraces a "cultural metaphysics."¹ What Glaude means by this is the problem of black reification in the liberation theologies of religious thinkers such as James Cone, a reification that denies the specificity of different experiences within black communities. Glaude's concerns are twofold: first, this kind of theology's engagement with "God talk" runs the risk of merely instrumentalizing theology for political agendas; second, the politics of struggle that are crucial to these theologies are wrapped up in an awareness of "History" that "orients us retrospectively instead of prospectively. We end up, despite our best intentions, ignoring the sheer joy of black life and unwittingly reducing our capacity to reflect and act in light of the hardships of our actual lives."² Furthermore, Glaude asserts that this retrospective orientation dismantles the ability to construct meaningful aspects of individual and communal identity.

Glaude's project for this chapter, entitled "The Problem of History in Black Theology," is to save black theology from a debilitating usage of history in the formation of cultural and political identity. Glaude turns to Nietzsche and Dewey as two thinkers who address the uses of history for life more constructively. However, Glaude restricts himself to "the early Nietzsche" and ignores the deeper connections between history and life in Nietzsche's broader work. Glaude also allies Nietzsche with Dewey without performing a rigorous comparison of their ideas on "life" and "history" and therefore he is unable to make

the most out of this brief partnership. For the remainder of this section, I will attempt to draw out some important connections between their views and comment on how they impact the message of *In a Shade of Blue*.

In the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche conceptualizes life in a particular way, focusing on the potent urgency of the exercise of power and cruelty, a drive that impregnates the best of geniuses so that their drive to cruelty becomes the creative discipline of the artist who is rarely, if ever, satisfied with the greatness of her work and is independent of the nihilism of the human herd.³ In the text that Glaude takes as his entry into Nietzsche's philosophy, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Nietzsche writes about human life as an encounter with the problems and possibilities of the historical horizon. He writes of "the plastic power of man," or the human's ability to grow past the scars of history, whether personal or social: "the power distinctively to grow out of itself, transforming and assimilating everything past and alien, to heal wounds, replace what is lost and reshape broken forms out of itself."⁴ History as humans conceive of it, whether retrospective or prospective, is central in providing a context for life: "and this is a general law: every living thing can become healthy, strong and fruitful only within a horizon."⁵ Thus black activists, if they are to express their organic potential, must be able to both distance themselves from the problems of history, as well as to utilize history in the service of life via a construction of history's borders.⁶

Glaude utilizes Nietzsche's early writings on history in this chapter to present his own account of *useful* methods of incorporating historical concerns into the theological and political liberation projects of African Americans. He summarizes the three forms, or genres of history that Nietzsche offers: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical.⁷ Then Glaude presents Nietzsche's insight that each form can be used for the service and disservice of life.⁸ The point is that human actors, such as black theologians and nostalgic activists, can destroy their own potential when they become mired in history; history must rather serve a purpose for life. And this is the stage where Glaude wants to attempt a harmonization of Nietzsche's historical analysis with Dewey's pragmatics. He has worked throughout the chapter to set up the parallel between their views; it seems that he favors Nietzsche's awareness of the power and peril of historical consciousness, while privileging Dewey's notions of responsibility to the future in the organic environment of social challenges. But the important question is: are Dewey and Nietzsche truly commensurable in their pragmatic analysis of "history for life" given their varying analyses of "life" itself?

In Dewey's thinking, life can never be spoken of without also speaking about the *experience of life*. Glaude's quotation from "Need for a Recovery of

Philosophy” draws toward this way of thinking about the organic quality of human life: “experience is primarily a process of undergoing; a process of standing something, of suffering and passion, of affection, in the literal sense of these words...experience, in other words, is a matter of simultaneous doings and sufferings.”⁹ The life of the intelligent being is experiencing suffering and learning from *histories of suffering* to improve the conditions for the future.

Dewey writes about life as that condition in which one seeks the best possible consequences of the experienced situation insofar as one is able to control the conditions of these consequences; this requires both a deep reflection into the dynamics of experience in the past as well as sense of speculative stewardship for future consequences: “the movement of the agent-patient to meet the future is partial and passionate; yet detached and impartial study of the past is the only alternative to luck in assuring success to passion.”¹⁰ Dewey’s focus upon life-experience as that of suffering/doing is tied up in the conditions of the environment; the “higher the form of life,” the more complicated and passionate need be its engagement with future consequences in a given environment.¹¹ The more engaged human beings become with the problems of their environment, the more necessary it becomes for critical forms of discipline to govern investigations into crucial problematics. Something like self-mastery of one’s passions seems to be in order here, but for the sake of social life.

Both of Glaude’s interlocutors focus on the entropy of life, the human’s suffering condition in a world that cannot be subdued by the *a priori*. Both thinkers value history as a means for furthering the cause of life as a concrete project of the passionate will. But Dewey’s conception of the meaning of life rests in utilizing experience to control the conditions of well-being for the future.¹² The deliberate pursuit of well-being through the analysis of practical problems (Deweyan intelligence) may be applied to one’s physical, social, economic, or political environments. It does not seem, however, to be reducible to any of these features, though Dewey does take his cues from the lessons of Darwinian biology. Nietzsche is also reacting to biological tropes in his work, but even more to the psychological dynamics of human qua animal. Historical analysis and life-experience are put into the service of the individual’s personal “deepening,” into the heroic control of one’s own suffering for the sake of fulfilling a self-imposed promise of creative, powerful life.¹³

This split in their conceptions of the value of life reveals the contrast in their ideas of using the historical for the sake of future life. For Glaude, Nietzsche’s reshaping of history into art¹⁴ is helpful for a demonstration of a healthy distance from one’s history, but this is not sufficient for Glaude’s project precisely because such a rendering does not have a broader social scope or impact.

Dewey's social awareness remains a dominant force in this book because the sufferings of Blues People demand a response to *collective suffering* as a problem, a response that Glaude's reading of Nietzsche is unable to provide. But the collective experience of suffering is not something that can be written on with any depth without attending to the radically particularized experiences of suffering; the best possible future for the social group cannot be achieved without the recreation of the self. Yet social and existential recreation need not be mutually exclusive. James Baldwin provides this insight in his criticism of America's stagnant white supremacy, an insight that complicates the divide between self-mastery and social-intelligence. He writes of the joylessness and insecurity in the individuals of the nation (blacks and whites) that make critical social reevaluations so difficult: "the person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality — for this touchstone can be only oneself. Such a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes."¹⁵ Baldwin believes that breaking down such delusions is nearly impossible,¹⁶ yet he also writes in the letter to his nephew at the start of *Fire Next Time* on the resources and conditions for summoning forth a more ethical America. Reconstituting norms is never simply one person's choice, but a communal reckoning that often arises in familial experience.¹⁷

Baldwin refers to the reconstruction of norms with the loaded word "integration" in order to reconstitute the meanings of this term, and employs this concept to describe the nexus of existential and social amelioration: "if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are: then cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."¹⁸ I believe that Baldwin penetrates past the surface of the conflict between Nietzsche and Dewey in writing of the relationship between the creative reevaluation of *individual values* and the sense of pragmatic social thought. He foreshadows Cornel West's approach by pointing to religion as the site of contestation for existential and social norm reconstruction: "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it time we got rid of him."¹⁹

Glaude moves away from this engagement too quickly and misses a chance to deepen his argument. Both Dewey and Nietzsche are dedicated to the sense of passion and creativity that is the germ of human achievement. And reading them together sheds light on some of the biggest challenges for democratic life. In addition to utilizing "the early Nietzsche," Glaude's position would be better served if he would enter into dialogue with the Nietzsche of *On the Genealogy of Morals* as a way of examining the exercises of power and norm-creations that go unchallenged in his "post-soul politics." Conversely, Dewey's social pragmat-

ics could provide a much needed challenge to Nietzsche's own arguments about the centrality of the heroic individual, since one of the strengths of Dewey's work is the way that he foregrounds the environmental situation of the individual: "all of the actions of an individual bear the stamp of his community as assuredly as does the language he speaks."²⁰ These are important resources for Glaude's project because of the dialectical balance between individuals and communities in his work, between the way problems are experienced by individuals, yet shared across diverse communities. This is a significant tension that needs to be attended to if post-soul politics is to become relevant for inviting individual and communal experience as harmonized sources for reconstructing democracy.

Nietzsche's Impact on West's Prophetic "New Gospel"

Cornel West draws on Nietzsche as a critiquing force of both the "neo-pragmatists" as well as Marxist social commentators. In his article "Nietzsche's Prefiguration of Postmodern American Philosophy," West draws the lines that connect post-modern thinkers such as Rorty, Quine, Sellars, and Goodman to the Nietzschean genealogical legacy and then asserts that these thinkers are emblematic of what Nietzsche foretold as the nihilistic trajectory of Western thought: nihilism "is marked by philosophical positions of antirealism, conventionalism, relativism and antifoundationalism."²¹ The critique that West puts forward against these post-modern trends of thought is that they are not symmetrically consistent with the implications of Nietzsche's project. He refers to a passage from the introduction to *The Will to Power* where Nietzsche explains that "we" must experience nihilism before being capable of crafting new values: "yet...postmodern American philosophers have failed to project a new worldview, a countermovement, a new gospel of the future."²²

At the heart of West's critique is the notion that such developments in contemporary philosophy are not engaged with making new beginning in valuation, nor are they capable of doing more than "mirroring a culture (or civilization) permeated by the scientific ethos, regulated by racist, patriarchal, capitalist norms and pervaded by the debris of decay."²³ Whereas in Glaude's arguments, Nietzsche is utilized to critique black theological understandings of the historical situation, West uses Nietzsche to demonstrate the nihilistic leanings of contemporary philosophy, especially within the context of the history of neo-pragmatism. Despite this, West seems thoroughly grounded in a kind of pragmatic complaint when he launches this critique: the problem with the major figures of American postmodern philosophy is that they are

not *doing anything* to change the norms of Western culture. According to this argument, the full implications of Nietzsche's insights are not being leveraged for the sake of a form of social criticism that seems, at least in this article, to be akin to Dewey's deep reconstruction of norms.

Yet Dewey does not go far enough for West in examining the structural problems, specifically in regards to race, that perpetuate the nihilistic bent of American (and Western) society. West thus turns to the Marxist tradition for more accommodating conversation partners. In his essay "Race and Social Theory" West observes that "Marxist theory as a methodological orientation remains indispensable – although ultimately inadequate – in grasping the distinctive features of African American oppression."²⁴ Marxist theory has two valuable starting points that offer penetrating analyses of racist oppression: "the principle of historical specificity" and "the principle of the materiality of structured social practices over time and space."²⁵ These concepts provide a framework for understanding the specific contexts of social situations, as well as practical and material engagements. West sees these two ideas as crucial for observing the economic factors of widespread social injustice, but he also disagrees with reducing the analysis of injustice to the domain of economic struggle. In order to get beyond the limitations of Marxist theory, West proposes a "genealogical materialist analysis" for reevaluating the relationships between historical consciousness and power dynamics: "what I find seductive and persuasive about Nietzsche is his deep historical consciousness, a consciousness so deep that he must reject prevailing ideas of history in the name of genealogy."²⁶ It is the capacity for the creative reconstruction of history as a way of confronting the social evils of racism that draws West to Nietzsche's "implicit pragmatism."²⁷ West understands the productive consequences of this radical synthesis to be that he is able to give an account of the genealogy of racist practice, to gain leverage on the localized impact of racialized power relations in everyday life and to give deeper accounts of class exploitation's relationship to racism in a broader social analysis.²⁸ Genealogical materialism is West's methodological entry point to the new creation of new norms, and through it he attempts to hold up the creative end of the engagement with Nietzsche, whereas most postmodern American philosophers, at best, are only able to reiterate his critiques.

There are important qualifications for the way that West engages with Nietzsche. He appropriates Nietzsche's *methodological* approach of genealogy as an analysis of implicit norm-constructing power structures. West is also engaged with the more normative proposal for the making of new values, but his engagement is complicated by a range of commitments. For Nietzsche, the

creation of new values is always tied up with self-mastery; these are promises to the self for the sake of the self's fuller expression of life.²⁹ Part of the creation of new values rests in being able to make meaning out of one's suffering and to direct that suffering toward the ends of self-mastery. This formulation disposes of any particular altruistic impulses for the sake of a life that can only be lived by the self. Such an approach may provide the tools for understanding power structures, but it does not work toward the creation of new values at the communal level. As an intellectual engaged with the experience of living with, and struggling against white supremacy, West experiences the solidarity of *shared experiences with other African Americans*, and must thus turn to alternative sources for implementing his political project.

Marxist theory is able to push back against Nietzsche's radical individualism, and strikingly enough, it assists West in working within his Christian faith in order to confront injustice and build solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the world. The deployment of genealogical materialism allows West to utilize his own specific circumstances as the organic center of his philosophical and political work.³⁰ Gramsci is critical of this move because of his notion of hybrid combinations of social practice, social practices that must be read as interrelated and organic – thus religion can be a site of resistance against oppression.³¹ But religion is more than just the means to an end for West: it is constitutive of his vocation as an "organic intellectual," and thus the practice of Christianity remains essential to the remaking of value at the individual, local, and global levels. Christianity's narratives of vitality and tragedy provide West with the necessary existential meeting-point for many different communities of oppressed peoples who share in these Christian narratives.³² Religions such as Christianity are invaluable because of the dynamic connections they foster between people in exploring the existential bedrock of traditional meanings, as well as in the ways they provoke social change: "secular traditions are indispensable, yet they have had neither the time nor the maturity to bequeath to us potent cultural forms of ultimacy, intimacy and sociality compared to the older and richer religious traditions."³³ Although West seems to be privileging religion to an unfair extent in this passage, I believe he is still taking seriously Nietzsche's pronouncement on forging radically "new gospels" in the face of American nihilism. This is because the organic intellectual is not simply a cipher for tradition, *but an individual expresser of tradition who makes it anew in the midst of life's struggles*. The challenge implicit to West's vocation is to craft new values in the Nietzschean spirit while revitalizing those specific communities that foster life.³⁴

West's synthesis of Nietzschean pragmatics and Marxist/Gramscian social theory provides him with potent conceptual tools for working within the Christian tradition. Nietzsche's input pushes West to interpret his own religious identity as a value-shaping practice and to be an engaged critic of Christianity itself, ever-conscious of potential life-denying norm-construction inside and outside the church. It provokes him to speak truth to power, in any context,³⁵ through the formulation of "a new gospel."³⁶ Gramsci's insights illuminate the vital specificity of the church as a site of communal practice and bolsters West's aims of facilitating solidarity between oppressed peoples by challenging hegemonic borders. Such a stance is courageous in that it invites diverse and critical interlocutors into a productive conversation without sacrificing its own commitments, or eliding the problematic features of its conversation partners.

Final Comparison: New Possibilities for Deepening the Dialogue

The differences in the ways Eddie Glaude and Cornel West enter into dialogue with the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche is telling in regards to their respective political and philosophical projects. Glaude's main interest in this dialogue is challenging counterproductive elements of the historiographies of black theology and radical black power movements. In this respect, he uses Nietzsche's genealogy as a wrecking ball, but does not move far toward internalizing the productive aspects of the Nietzschean approach.

Perhaps post-soul politics, in the form of Tavis Smiley's *Covenant With Black America*, has gained something from a Nietzschean kind of perspectivalism in its assemblage of diverse voices from across black communities.³⁷ These different perspectives bring light to the internal tensions and various interests and values within those communities. However, the romance of this project comes at the intersection of individuals' capacities and the mobilization of democratic politics, not at the ultra-localized emphasis on self-mastery. It seems that Glaude would benefit by returning to the sharp social analysis of James Baldwin in order to open up productive pathways between Dewey and Nietzsche and to give a solid account of the nexus of existential and social norm reconstruction. This would be an invigorating way to keep post-soul politics *honest* to the aims³⁸ Glaude has presented with so much force and style.

I believe that, at present, West gains more from having Nietzsche as an interlocutor. This is because, in the practice of organic thought, West does not instrumentalize his sources. Rather, he invites them to be present in new discussions. Nietzsche is crucial for West's prophetic social criticism because he helps bear witness to the hidden movements of power that characterize racial

and class oppression at the psychological, interpersonal, communal and global levels. Struggling with Nietzsche gives West a way to deepen the critiques offered by Marxist commentators, as well as to analyze the hegemonics and life-struggles implicit to his own chosen communities. Prophetic Christianity may keep Cornel West sane but he does not take it for granted. Organic intellectuals remain attuned to the problematic features of their environments and practices. West's reasons for adhering to this form of Christianity "are good in that they flow from rational deliberation which perennially scrutinizes my particular tradition in relation to specific problems of dogmatic thought, existential anguish and societal oppression."³⁹ West's ability to stay in dynamic conversation with the voices of Nietzsche, Gramsci, Marx, and all of the others, deepens the power of his critiques and the creativity of his "new gospel."

It is possible that Glaude does have the creative resources within his chosen intellectual tradition for taking up Nietzsche's challenge. While I may disagree with John Dewey's full-spirited optimism about the potency of deep reconstruction, I think that the strenuous attitude toward piercing reevaluation offered by Dewey, and especially Baldwin, could inspire Glaude to reexamine the tensions within his own project.⁴⁰ Such a venture could exhibit the highest virtues of the diverse forms of intellectual courage set forth by John Dewey and Friedrich Nietzsche.

NOTES

- 1 Glaude Jr., Eddie S. *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 79.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Essay 1, Section 12 (p.44, Kaufman's translation).
- 4 Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980, 10.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Glaude, 83: "Many proponents of Black Power have found themselves looking to the past in search of greatness, or venerating all that is old to the detriment of the new or attempting, a posteriori, to invent a past for themselves—one they would prefer to the past from which they actually are descended."
- 7 See Glaude, 81 and *On the Advantage*, pp. 17-22.

- 8 Glaude, 81.
- 9 John Dewey, "Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," 10:45, quoted by Glaude on p.85
- 10 "Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," *Creative Intelligence* (Holt, 1917), *Google Books*, 2007. http://books.google.com/books?id=y1kEXXLQ7V8C&dq=Creative+Intelligence&source=gbs_summary_s&cad=0 . (1 May 2008), 14.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 12 Dewey, "Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," 21.
- 13 Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, pp. 161-62.
- 14 Glaude, pp. 82, 87.
- 15 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993, 43.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 The first section of this volume, "My Dungeon Shook," is a letter to Baldwin's nephew in which shards of hope shine through Baldwin's customary ambivalence about the fate of America.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp.45-47. My thanks to Professor David Lamberth for his critique of this section of my argument.
- 20 John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (Holt, 1922), *Google Books*, 2007. http://books.google.com/books?id=Ws0RAAAAYAAJ&dq=human+nature+and+conduct&psp=1&source=gbs_summary_s&cad=0 . (1 May 2008), 317. This point resonates with Wittgenstein's rejection of the idea of private language.
- 21 West, *The Cornel West Reader*, New York: Basic Civitas, 1999, pp. 208-09.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, 210.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 256.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 256-7.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 261.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 262.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 263.
- 29 Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 3, pp. 161-62.
- 30 This is reminiscent of Dewey's point about the individual and community from *Human Nature and Conduct*.

- 31 Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Madison: Wisconsin, 1989, 232.
- 32 Cornel West, *Keeping Faith*, 134.
- 33 Ibid., 132.
- 34 My thanks to Professor David Lamberth for his feedback on the notion of remaking religious communities.
- 35 I make this remark because of West's suspicion about the professionalization of American intellectuals, as well as his interest in the organic intellectual. Thus certain social, or professional borders become less reified in structuring appropriate behavior.
- 36 Ibid., 134.
- 37 Ibid., 154
- 38 Ibid., 156. Dewey's notion of "keeping thought alive" does seem to have a strong connection to Nietzsche's ideas of intellectual pregnancy here.
- 39 Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*. New York: Routledge, 1993, 134.
- 40 I am working concurrently on another paper that brings Glaude's work into conversation with the theory of agonism espoused by Chantal Mouffe in *The Democratic Paradox* in order to address some of these tensions. Democratic politics is, for Mouffe, a constant reevaluation of who belongs to the *demos* and how power is being exercised within the political community and structures. I suggest that Glaude can learn from this theory, and that Glaude's work, specifically in *Exodus!*, provides much needed concrete examples that add depth to Mouffe's position.

“HE RULED IN RIGHTEOUSNESS”

Normative Political Ethics in the Jataka and the *Precious Garland of Advice for the King*

Joshua A. Eaton

Recent protests led by Buddhist monastics in Burma and Tibet have drawn global attention to so-called “Buddhist liberation movements.”¹ What, however, might such Buddhist liberations seek to establish? What is an essentially Buddhist form of government? For engaged Buddhists, answering these questions will be a necessary first step in moving in a positive and constructive – as opposed to merely reactive – direction. This essay will attempt to offer some suggestions by arguing that the Pali Jatakas’ Ten Kingly Virtues (*dasa raja dhamma*²) and Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland of Advice for the King* (*Rajaparikatha Ratnamala*) contain a consistent normative ethic for governance.

The Jatakas and the Ten Kingly Virtues

The Jatakas are a set of 550³ stories of Buddha Shakyamuni's previous lives as a *bodhisatta*, or one who foregoes the realizations of a *arahant* (disciple) in order to become a fully enlightened *samma sambuddha* (buddha) in a future life. These 550 stories are divided into 22 *nipatas* (books) called, collectively, the *Jataka Pali*. The *Jataka Pali* is part of the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, one of several *nikayas* that make up the *Sutta Pitaka* (Basket of Scriptures). The *Sutta Pitaka*, *Vinaya Pittaka* (Basket of Rules), and *Abhidamma Pittaka* (Basket of *Abhidamma*) in turn form the *Tipitaka* (Three Baskets) of the Pali Buddhist canon.⁴ In short, the Jatakas show Buddha Shakyamuni's 550-life trajectory toward *nibbana* (enlightenment).

Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen claim that the Jatakas' use of animal protagonists "provides a way of discussing generic moral virtues...without any misleading references to specific social locations [i.e., caste, gender, class, etc.]."⁵ Again, the focus for Hallisey and Hansen is on generic, individual moral virtues; however, their argument also suggests some particularity. In the Jatakas animals "prefigure"⁶ generic moral virtues by placing them outside of particular human contexts. So it makes sense that virtues espoused to human kings might be meant not as "generic moral virtues," but rather as advice specifically for human kings.

The Ten Kingly Virtues, which come from the Pali Jatakas, are just such advice. They are mentioned by name in at least eighteen of the 550 *jatakas*, and are enumerated twice: in the *Nandiyamiga Jataka* (Jataka 384) and in the *Mahahamsa Jataka* (Jataka 543). In both instances, the Ten Kingly Virtues are being exalted by the *bodhisatta* – as an animal king – to a human king. They are:

alms, morals, charity, justice and penitence,
Peace, mildness, mercy, meekness, patience,⁷

or, alternately,

almsgiving, justice, penitence, meek spirit, temper mild,
Peace, mercy, patience, charity, with morals undefiled.⁸

From here on I will use the following Pali terms and English equivalents, which are clearer:

1. *dana* (alms-giving)
2. *sila* (morality)
3. *paricaga* (liberality)

4. *akkodha* (non-anger)
5. *avihinsa* (non-hurtfulness)
6. *khanti* (forbearance)
7. *ajjava* (straightness)
8. *maddava* (gentleness)
9. *tapo* (self-restriction)
10. *avirodhana* (non-opposition)⁹

The vast majority of the times the Ten Kingly Virtues are mentioned in the Jatakas, it is simply in the phrase "he ruled in righteousness, not shaking the tenfold code of the king."¹⁰ There is a direct causal relationship here between the righteousness of a king's leadership and how closely he follows the ten virtues. This is why the *Hamsa Jataka* (Jataka 502), an alternate version of the *Mahamsa Jataka*, relates that the *bodhisatta* "established him [King Samyama] in the virtues of kings [my emphasis]."¹¹ Similarly, in the *Nandiyamiga Jataka* the *bodhisatta* tells king Brahmadata of Benares, "Great king, it is good for a king to rule a kingdom by forsaking the ways of wrongdoing, not offending against the ten kingly virtues and acting with just righteousness."¹² In sum, the Ten Kingly Virtues are both specific to, and normative for, kings.

Are the kingly virtues consistent throughout the Jatakas, however? There are two other lists given in the Jatakas that have been suggested as the kingly virtues. The first is an alternate list for the Ten Kingly Virtues identified by David Pierce in "The Middle Way of the Jataka Tales."¹³ It comes from the *Sama Jataka* (Jataka 540):¹⁴

Towards thy parents first of all fulfill thy duty, warrior king;
Duty fulfilled in this life here to heave hereafter thee shall bring.

Towards thy children and thy wife, fulfil [sic] thy duty, warrior king;
Duty fulfilled in this life here to heaven hereafter thee shall bring.

Duty to friends and ministers, thy soldiers with their different arms,
To townships and to villages, thy realm with all its subject swarms,

To ascetics, Brahman holy men, duty to birds and beasts, O king;
Duty fulfilled in this life here to heave hereafter thee shall bring.

Duty fulfilled brings happiness—yea, Indra, Brahma, all their host,
By following duty won their bliss: duty pursue at any cost.¹⁵

We could enumerate these ten virtues as fulfilling one's duty to the following ten types of people:

1. parents
2. children
3. wife
4. friends and ministers
5. soldiers
6. townships and villages
7. realm with its subjects
8. ascetics
9. *brahmin* (holy men)
10. birds and beasts

There are, however, three problems with Pierce's attribution.

First, and perhaps most obviously, the number *ten* is completely arbitrary here. Why, not list "friends and ministers," "townships and villages," and "birds and beasts" separately, resulting in a list of thirteen items? On the other hand, why not list "wife and children" together, resulting in a nine-itemed list? Arriving at ten items is simply a matter of convenient type-setting.

Second, the question at hand is, "What are the Ten Kingly Virtues?" Answering with a list of people to whom one is suppose to act virtuously simply does not answer the question. In other words, this list is completely incoherent without also making reference to some other list of duties or virtues which one ought to fulfill to these people. This would make sense because, as said above, the Jatakas are often self-referencing.

Take, for example, the *Hamsa*, *Cullahamsa* (Jataka 533), and *Mahahamsa Jatakas*. All give the story of the goose King Dhatarattha and his captain Sumukha – the Buddha and Ananda, respectively, in previous lives – and the human king Samyama and his queen Khema. The *Hamsa* has a scant story and almost no frame story (*pacuppannavatthu*), but it mentions the Ten Kingly Virtues. Only the *Cullahamsa* gives the full frame story, but it does not even mention the Ten Kingly Virtues. The *Mahahamsa* – which comes immediately after the *Cullahamsa* in the *Asiti Nipata* of the *Jataka Pali* – enumerates the Ten Kingly Virtues and gives the fullest story; but, it references the *Cullahamsa* for its frame story.¹⁶ The point here is that these stories are best read together, as are their lists.

Third, no other source that I am aware of identifies Pierce's list as the Ten Kingly Virtues. Both *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* and Robert Childers' *A Dictionary of the Pali Language* identify the list given earlier from the *Mahahamsa* and *Nandiyamiga Jatakas*,¹⁷ and both Ven. Walpola Rahula and Ven. Maha Chanya Khongchinda agree.¹⁸ Thus, it seems safe to conclude that Pierce's list is not the Ten Kingly Virtues referred to elsewhere in the Jatakas.

A second alternate list of three kingly virtues is given by *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, citing section 112 of the *Tesakuna Jataka* (Jataka 521): "giving up *musavada*, *kodha*, and *adhamma-hasa*."¹⁹ Elsewhere, it defined these terms as "lying," "anger," and "sin" or "unrighteousness."²⁰ So, these three kingly virtues are the abandonment of lying, anger, and unrighteousness – all qualities subsumed by the Ten Kingly Virtues.

Giving up *musavada* is, in other words, honesty – also the definition Rahula gives for the Seventh Kingly Virtue (*ajjava*, "straightness").²¹ It is a close synonym of Cowell's translation, "justice." Likewise, giving up *kodha* is just the negative form of the Fourth Kingly Virtue (*akkodha*, "non-anger"). Finally, the Ten Kingly Virtues as a whole are portrayed in the Jatakas as leading to righteous rule – the antithesis of *adhamma-hasa*.

To review, their context makes it clear that the Jataka's Ten Kingly Virtues represent specific, normative advice for kings on how to rule righteously. While alternate lists have been given – specifically Pierce's "ten" objects of duty and the Pali Text Society's three kingly virtues – it is also clear that the list given by Rahula and others is, indeed, the Ten Kingly Virtues. These virtues are normative, specific, and consistent within the Jatakas; but, how might they hold up against other Buddhist conceptions of kingship?

The Precious Garland of Advice for the King and the Ten Kingly Virtues

According to tradition, Ven. Nagarjuna was born about four hundred years after Buddha Shakyamuni's death (*parinibbana*) to a priestly caste family (*brahmin*) in Vidarbha, India. He would go on to found the Madhyamaka school of emptiness (*shunyata*) through his magnum opus, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*).²² He wrote the *Precious Garland of Advice for the King* to King Satavahana.²³ It is, as Christina Scherrer-Schaub calls it, "an excellent *vade-mecum* of a mahayanist 'celestial and terrestrial' program for those centuries."²⁴ She goes on to say that "the underlying ideological presupposition and the particular setting of rules make this *Ethics* entirely Buddhist and, moreover, mahayanist."²⁵

Rephrasing our question, how does Nagarjuna's "Mahayanist" *vade mecum* hold up to the Jatakas' "Shravakayanist" *vade mecum* – especially on the terrestrial end of things? The specific policy proposals made by Nagarjuna all correlate with at least one of the Ten Kingly Virtues. These policy proposals are located between chapter three, verse 231 and chapter four, verse 341 of *The Precious Garland*, to which I will now turn my attention.

***Dana*: Alms-Giving**

Here, a distinction needs to be made between the First and Third Kingly Virtues, *dana* and *paricaga*. While both can mean “generosity” or “charity,” *dana* usually refers to generosity with respect to the Buddhist teachings (*Dhamma*). *Paricaga*, on the other hand, can mean “charity,” “giving (to the poor),” or “liberality.”²⁶

Nagarjuna emphasizes this virtue above all others, with 33 of these 110 verses directly addressing it. These can be divided into two broad categories: ones in which Nagarjuna asks Satavahana to support Buddhist teachings, teachers, practitioners, and institutions; and, ones in which he asks the king to share the teachings with others in some way. Under the first category, Nagarjuna proposes that the king

1. construct and decorate Buddha images, reliquaries, and temples (23127, 232, 233, 310, 313, 317)
2. provide temples with riches, food, necessities, attendants, etc. (231, 318-319, 322, 326)
3. sustain the *Dharma* and the *Sangha* (233)
4. revere reliquaries with riches (234)
5. rely on, provide for, and give gifts to *Dharma* teachers (235, 267, 339)
6. not revere heretics, as this would lead others away from the *Dharma* (237)
7. make donations of the scriptures (*sutras*) and commentaries (*shastras*), plus pens and ink to copy them with (238)
8. feed and quench monks before he feeds and quenches himself (244)
9. give wealth away to generate merit and be well-liked (258, 341)
10. provide facilities for studying *Dharma* to those who do not have them (262)
11. offer lamps and instruments at reliquaries, etc. (292-293)
12. offer gems to the Buddha (299)
13. support Buddhists who do not seek your support, and those living under other kinds (321)

Under the second, he suggests

1. causing others to free themselves from their faults through power and wealth (270, 312)
2. revering the *Dharma*, listening to it, and then giving it to others (265, 296)

So, it is clear that Nagarjuna's primary concerns are the king's generation of merit through offering precious substances to reliquaries and statues, and the teachings' physical support and sustenance.

Sila: Morality

Early in the *Precious Garland*, Nagarjuna lays out the basic tenets of lay Buddhist morality for his king to follow:

Not killing, no longer stealing,
 Forsaking the wives of others,
 Refraining completely from false,
 Divisive, harsh and senseless speech,

Forsaking covetousness, harmful
 Intent and the views of Nihilists—
 These are the ten white paths of
 Action, their opposites are black.

Not drinking intoxicants, a good livelihood,
 Non-harming, considerate giving, honoring
 The honorable, and love—
 Practice in brief is that (8-10).

Nagarjuna begins pushing morality, then, almost from the very beginning.

Still, it is telling that morality is not lost in the fray when he starts getting down to the hard-nosed policy. In fact, morality comes in fourth beneath alms-giving, generosity, and non-harm. In particular, Nagarjuna gives his king the following advice on governmental ethics:

1. develop a distaste for idle chatter (267)
2. get rid of your faults (270)
3. always speak the truth, regardless of the consequences (274)
4. practice "disciplined action," as it has been explained to you (275)
5. analyze everything before taking action (276)
6. good ethics result in a positive rebirth (287)
7. do not talk about other's physical or mental defects (294)
8. appoint temple attendants who keep their vows (319)
9. appoint pure ministers, administrators, and advisors (323, 325, 329)
10. do no sentence prisoners for life, or you will lose the lay (*upa-saka*) precepts²⁸ (334)
11. behave in a way that accords with the practices (338)
12. only govern virtuously (343)

The final injunction – to only commit virtuous acts on behalf of his kingdom, never unvirtuous ones – is particularly telling, and suggests that for Nagarjuna, morality is not simply a matter of one’s private behavior.

Paricaga: Liberality

Next to alms-giving, Nagarjuna spends the most time – and certainly lavishes the most detail – on liberality. His suggestions almost remind one of the exorbitant generosity of Prince Vessantara in the *Vessantara Jataka* (Jataka 550). Still, as Nagarjuna says,

Practice does not mean to
Mortify the body,
For one has not ceased to injure
Others and is not helping them (11).

The tone here is obviously one of moderation and sensible altruism, despite Nagarjuna’s enthusiasm. He advises that the king implement these policies:

1. sustain teachers and give schools estates (239)
2. set up barbers and doctors (240)
3. provide hostels, amusement centers, dikes, ponds, rest houses, wells, beds, food, grass, wood, shoes, umbrellas, water filters, tweezers, fans, needles and thread, medicines, wool, chairs, food, pots and pans, axes, water, roads, youths for teachers, etc. (241-242, 245-248, 295)
4. give beggars food and drink, clothes, ornaments, perfumes, garlands, enjoyments, and pleasures (244, 261, 271)
5. care for and nourish the sick, the protectorless, the suffering, the lowly, the persecuted, the stricken, disaster victims, the conquered, the poor, and the feeble (243, 251, 295)
6. offer food and drink to ants, dogs, birds, hungry ghosts, etc. (249-250)
7. provide farmers with “seed and sustenance” (252)
8. eliminate high tolls and taxes (252-253)
9. be available to others, even momentarily (257)
10. generate merit by giving away wealth (258)
11. give the needy well-adorned, beautiful girls (259-260)29
12. increase resources through not being stingy (290, 307-308)
13. give food, medicine, and protection from fear (291)
14. give food and drink to the blind, sick, lowly, protectorless, wretched, and crippled (159)
15. appoint generous generals (324)

16. give prisoners barbers, baths, food, drink, medicine and clothing (335)
17. be well-liked through giving (340-341)

Especially interesting is the injunction to lower tolls and taxes in verses 252-253. Not only does it clearly differentiate Nagarjuna's *liberality* from *liberalism*,³⁰ but, it also carries echoes of self-restraint (*tapo*) and non-opposition to the people's will (*avirodhana*), both important factors in the Ten Kingly Virtues. Nagarjuna makes it clear that the reason for such a move ought to be to "free them [the poor] from the suffering [that follows when/The tax collector] is waiting at the door (253)." And in light of all of the social programs that Nagarjuna proposes, any decrease in taxes and tolls can only come from one source – a resultant decrease in the royal purse.

Akkodha: Non-Anger

Nagarjuna talks only briefly about the Fourth Kingly Virtue, non-anger; however, his brief discussion is incredibly powerful. It leaves little doubt that non-anger plays an important part in his conception of a virtuous king. In fact, he lists "forsaking...harmful intent" in his opening verses on essential lay Buddhist morality, quoted above. Going further still, he makes these specific suggestions to his king:

1. praise your enemies (268)
2. do no slander others (269)
3. do not be angry when others harm you (271)
4. appoint patient, non-combative temple attendants (319)
5. do not enforce punishments out of anger, but only out of compassion (336)

While all but the last two suggestions are individual virtues seemingly unrelated to public policy, recent concerns over the temper of presidential candidates should serve to prove the relevancy of a leader's anger management to matters of governance. There are also many verses in the *Precious Garland* that espouse non-anger along with non-hurtfulness and/or patience, which I have not listed here in order to avoid repetition.

Avihimsa: Non-Hurtfulness

The Fifth Kingly Virtue is non-hurtfulness, or "non-harming," as Nagarjuna calls it above. Here, Nagarjuna has the following seven proposals:

1. do not give if the giving is unhelpful, or if it is harmful (263-264)
2. do not harm others through what you say (269)
3. when others harm you, do not act in a manner that just creates more suffering (271)
4. appoint non-harmful temple attendants (319, 322)
5. free prisoners as quickly as possible (333-334)
6. only punish criminals to reform them (336)
7. do not torture or kill “angry murderers,” but instead exile them for their own and others’ protection (337)

Notable are verses 263-264, which again moderate Nagarjuna’s lavish charity with the acknowledgment that some giving might actually be harmful, as opposed to beneficial. The language that he uses here is striking, in light of his sumptuous descriptions of what the king ought to give away to the least well off in his kingdom:

Even give poison
 To those whom it will help,
 But do not give the best food
 To those whom it will not help (263).

Even with respect to perfections such as generosity, then, non-hurtfulness still holds a central place for Nagarjuna. Still, some might question whether or not his council to appoint generals in verse 324 contradicts non-hurtfulness. What do generals do, after all, except hurt others for a living?

One potential solution is realism on Nagarjuna’s part. He probably had few illusions about getting the king to totally disband his army; but, he could at least get him to appoint generals who “practice the doctrine.” After all, what is practice? As he states in verse ten, it is “a good livelihood” and “non-harm.” Similarly, in the *Mahabamsa Jataka* the *bodhisatta* asks the king, “Hast thou true men ... ready to die, if need be, for thy good cause and name?”³¹ There can be little doubt that this is referring to some sort of defensive violence; but, at least it is being enacted by “true men” unlikely to take advantage of their position.

***Khanti*: Forbearance**

With forbearance or patience, Nagarjuna again gives his royal audience seven pieces of council:

1. consider others harming you as the result of your own past negative actions (*karma*) (271)
2. do not burden others with your sufferings, but handle them on your own (272)
3. do not be depressed, even if you become destitute (273)
4. do not rush to action without first examining things thoroughly (276)
5. appoint patient temple attendants (319)
6. be patient and forbearing with criminals and murderers (330-336)
7. provide "the shade of patience" to your subjects (340)

Included here are verses concerning both forbearance with others (those who harm you, criminals and murderers, royal subjects, temple visitors) and forbearing unfortunate circumstances (suffering, depression, harm from others, destitution). Also included is what we might now consider not forbearance, but *patience* – no being overly anxious to rush to action, but taking measured and calculated steps. So, Nagarjuna includes forbearance in all of its aspects.

***Ajjava*: Straightness**

The Seventh Kingly Virtue is, perhaps, the most illusive. *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* defines it as "straightness," "straight," or "upright."³² Similarly, Childers defines it as "rectitude."³³ Still, neither of those proves very helpful. Cowell *et al.* translate it as "justice," while Rahula gives the clearest translation, "honesty."³⁴ What to do, then? Taking all of the definitions as a whole gives a general sense of "honesty," "justice," "conscientiousness," "honor," or "moral rectitude," all of which are synonyms for *uprightness*.³⁵ Without delving into the ideas of justice that are seemingly inherent in the above verses about caring for the poor and oppressed, there are just five verses that have this general connotation. In them, Nagarjuna's councils to the king are to

1. set prices fairly (254)
2. always speak the truth at any cost (274, 281)
3. appoint truthful temple attendants (319)
4. appoint steadfast generals (324)
5. appoint unbiased administrators (325)

Again, when contemplating how few verses directly address this virtue, it is important to consider its broad quality and implicit presence in many of the other verses – especially those concerning morality and liberality. In a sense, all of *The Precious Garland of Advice for the King* – and all of the Ten Kingly

Virtues—are about how to live and govern in an upright, honest, just, and conscientious way.

Maddava: Gentleness

The Eighth Kingly Virtue is another rather illusive term, defined as “mildness,” “softness,” or “gentleness.”³⁶ Rahula defines it as “kindness,” while Cowell *et al.* translate it as “meek spirit.”³⁷ With these definitions in mind, then, nine counsels spread out over eleven verses seem to extol this virtue:

1. respect and revere the *Dharma*, its teachers, and *bodhisattvas* (237, 265)
2. develop a love for thinking about how to help others (256)
3. do not praise yourself (268)
4. do not slander others (269, 281)
5. do not be proud of wealth (273)
6. appoint kind temple attendants (319)
7. appoint ministers who are “affectionate,” “friendly,” and of “excellent disposition” (323)
8. appoint “affectionate” generals and administrators (324-325)
9. appoint agreeable advisors (329)

Verse 257 – already listed under liberality – is another rather poetic exemplar of mildness:

If only for a moment make yourself
Available for the use of others
Just as earth, water, fire, wind, medicine
And forests [are available for all].

All of these verses convey a sense of humility and amiability, both toward the *Dharma* and toward the royal subjects. This humility does, however, have exceptions for Nagarjuna:

Create centers of the doctrine, abodes
Of the Three Jewels and fame
And glory which lowly kings
Have not even conceived of in their minds.

O King, it is best not to create
Centers of the doctrine which do not stir
The hairs of neighboring kings because
Of ill repute after death (310-311).

Perhaps this was just a bit of skillful means (*upaya*) to spur on his glory-hungry royal audience; or, perhaps he believed that modesty deserved to be abandoned for the *Dharma*'s sake. He does, after all, say just two verses earlier that the king ought to be "delighting in exalted deeds (309)." The Jataka are also ambiguous on this point. In the *Mahabamsa Jataka*, King Samyama worships the *bodhisatta* and Ananda (in the form of golden geese) with a fine golden throne, a white umbrella, golden bowls of parched grain and honey, sweetened water, flower garlands, and other elaborate oblations.³⁸

Tapo: Self-Restriction

In Chapter Two ("An Interwoven Explanation of Definite Goodness and High Status") of *The Precious Garland of Advice for the King*, Nagarjuna spends 23 verses (148-170) telling his king, in graphic detail, just how filthy the royal body – and all of those female bodies it is always chasing after – are. Here is a typical example:

He who lies on the filthy mass
Covered by skin moistened with
Those fluids, merely lies
On top of a woman's bladder (157).

Perhaps this is why Nagarjuna only chose to give him eight bits of advice concerning self-restriction in the section on royal policy—most of which focus on state finances:

1. do not partake of food or drink before sharing it (244, 250)
2. eliminate high tolls and taxes (252-253)
3. refrain from idle speech (266)
4. do not rush to action (276)
5. wealth and possessions cannot follow you at the time of death (313-316)
6. appoint temple attendants who are without greed (322)
7. appoint generals who are without attachment and use your wealth properly (324)
8. use the kingdom's resources in a sustainable way (281, 344-345)

Again, while some are personal (i.e, refraining from idle speech), most deal very directly with matters of state.

Avirodhana: Non-Opposition

Lastly, the Tenth Kingly Virtue is non-opposition: “absence of obstruction, gentleness.”³⁹ It is illustrated perhaps most poignantly by an episode from the *Mahabamsa Jaka*.

King Samyama of Benares created a Utopian lake in order to lure the wise, golden-colored Dhatarattha geese down from their home on Mount Cittakuta in the Himalayas, so that he might capture some of them and fulfill his queen Khema’s wishes. When the *paka* geese told the Dhatarattha geese about this paradise-like lake, they all wished to go there; however, their king – the *bodhisatta*, of course – knew that it must be some sort of trap, and so refused. When they asked again, however, the *bodhisatta* thought, “My kin folk must be vexed by reason of me: we will go there.”⁴⁰ In the end, though the goose-king *bodhisatta* was vindicated.

For his part, Nagarjuna spends less time on non-opposition than on any other kingly virtue. Still, he does offer some guidance on the issue:

1. always follow your ministers’ beneficial council (255)
2. avoid “divisive speech” (281)
3. appoint non-combative temple attendants (319)
4. appoint agreeable counselors (329)
5. provide the “flourishing flowers of respect” to your subjects (340)

As previously stated, there are other verses that imply non-opposition, as well – especially verses 252-253, which counsel the royal reader to lower tolls and taxes. While this is certainly Nagarjuna’s most neglected kingly virtue, it is still present in his *Precious Garland*.

It is also noteworthy that Nagarjuna spends six verses (301-306) explaining, gently, why King Saravahana ought to practice non-opposition toward him and his council, three of which are as follows:

The Blessed One said that students are to be told
The truth, gentle, meaningful and salutary,
At the proper time and from compassion.
That is why I you are being told all this.

O steadfast one, if true words
Are spoken without anger,
One should take them as fit to be
Heard, like water fit for bathing.

Realize that I am telling you
What is useful here and later.

Act on it so as to help
Yourself and also others (304-306).

Nagarjuna's concrete policy advice to King Satavahana is found in Chapter Three, verses 231-300 and Chapter Four, verses 301-241 of his *Precious Garland of Advice for the King*. He gives the most attention to the virtues of liberality, alms-giving, non-hurtfulness, morality, and patience; however, mildness, self-restraint, uprightness, non-anger, and non-opposition are also present, in that order. None of the Ten Kingly Virtues are sufficiently absent from the *Precious Garland* as to claim that Nagarjuna ignores them altogether, and there are seemingly no direct contradictions. It is safe to say, then, that Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* and the Ten Kingly Virtues correlate.

Toward a Normative Political Ethic

Though one belongs to the Sanskrit Mahayana tradition and the other to the Pali Theravada tradition, the Jataka's Ten Kingly Virtues and Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland of Advice for the King* both express a consistent normative ethic for governance. Despite some confusion, the Jatakas are clear that certain virtues are directly tied not only to personal righteousness, but to righteous governance. Those virtues also carry over to Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, providing a framework within which can be placed his specific policy proposals.

This is important because it shines further light on the burning question of how Buddhists can respond to current affairs in a way that is both truly engaged and true to elements of their tradition. It also suggests that, while his "celestial" program might be "Mahayanist," as Scherrer-Schaub puts it, Nagarjuna's "terrestrial" program is in line with that laid out in the Pali tradition. This bodes well for nuancing our understanding of a division that has, perhaps, been made far too much of.

Finally, it suggests a couple of new and interesting avenues of investigation. While the Ten Kingly Virtues are an important concept, they are set within a much larger context. To the best of my knowledge, there has not yet been a study of ideas about governance in the Jatakas *as a whole* – something that, though ambitious, would be an incredibly valuable contribution. There has been much written on the connection between both Asoka and the Ten Kingly Virtues and Asoka and the *Precious Garland*, but nothing on the three together. In closing, it seems fitting to quote a few last verses from Nagarjuna:

May all sentient beings have all the stainless
Powers, freedom from all conditions of non-leisure,

Freedom of action
And good livelihood.

May all embodied beings
Have jewels in their hands and may
All the limitless necessities of life remain
Unconsumed as long as there is cyclic existence (469-470).

NOTES

- 1 Preface to *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), x.
- 2 All foreign-language terms are Pali or Sanskrit, with English pluralization, unless otherwise noted.
- 3 Other sources list only 547 *jatakas*.
- 4 Introduction to *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births, v. 1*, ed. and trans. E.B. Cowell et al. (Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1978), vii; *Guide to the Tipitaka: An Introduction to the Buddhist Canon* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1993), 111.
- 5 Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 313. <http://ezp1.harvard.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9704041501&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (Accessed May 8, 2008).
- 6 *Ibid.*, 308. Prefiguration is "the effect of narratives in enlarging an agent's moral horizons."
- 7 Cowell, *The Jataka v.3*, 174. This quote is from the *Nandiyamiga Jataka* (Jataka 385), section 274.
- 8 *Ibid.*, v. 5, 200. This quote is from the *Mahahamsa Jataka* (Jataka 534), section 378.
- 9 *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1998), s.v. "Raja-dhamma."
- 10 *Ibid.*, "Dasa raja dhamme akopetva dhammena rajjan karesi."
- 11 Cowell, *The Jataka v. 4*, 267.
- 12 Cowell, *The Jataka v. 3*, 173.
- 13 David C. Pierce, "The Middle Way of the Jataka Tales," *The Journal of American Folklore* 82, no. 325 (July – September, 1969): 248, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/538711> (Accessed April 5, 2008).

- 14 Similar lists are given in the *Rohanta Miga Jataka* (Jataka 501) and *Tesakuna Jataka* (Jataka 521).
- 15 Cowell, *The Jataka* v. 6, 52. This quote is from section 94.
- 16 *Ibid.*, v. 4, 264-267; v. 5, 173-202.
- 17 *Pali Text Society*, s.v. "Raja-dhamma;" Robert Cæsar Childers, *A Dictionary of the Pali Language* (Rangoon: Buddha Sasana Council Press, 1974), s.v. "Rajadhammo." I have used Childers here because Cowell cites it often.
- 18 Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Bedford: Gordon Fraser, 1959), 85; Phra Maha Chanya, *Buddha's Socio-Political Ideas* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1993), 93. Ven. Chanya specifically cites Cowell here.
- 19 *Pali Text Society*, s.v. "Raja-dhamma."
- 20 *Pali Text Society*, s.vv. "Musavada," "Kodha," "Dhamma."
- 21 Rahula, *Buddha Taught*, 85.
- 22 Andy Karr, *Contemplating Reality: A Practitioner's Guide to the View in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2007), 208-209; Nagarjuna and bskal bzang rgya mtso, Introduction to *The Precious Garland and the Song of the Four Mindfulnesses*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins and Lati Rinpoche (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 15.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, "Immortality Extolled With Reason: Philosophy and Politics in Nagarjuna," in *Pramanakirtih—Papers Dedicated to Ernest Steinkellner on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Birgit Kellner et al. (Wien: Universitat Wien, 2007), 761.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 762.
- 26 *Pali Text Society*, s.vv. "Dana," "Paricaga."
- 27 All verse numbers refer to those in Nagarjuna, *Precious Garland*, 51-68. Verses 231-300 occur in chapter three ("The Collections for Enlightenment"), 51-61. Verses 301-341 occur in chapter four ("Royal Policy"), 62-68.
- 28 The Five Lay Precepts are to abstain from killing, taking what is not freely given, committing sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants.
- 29 I found these two verses – particularly verse 260 – totally perplexing. Unfortunately, I did not have access to any commentaries or to the Tibetan manuscript.
- 30 In his analysis of the *Precious Garland*, Robert Thurman suggests that one of its four primary themes is "compassionate socialism." Unfortunately, Thurman glosses over these two verses and their implications for what he calls Nagarjuna's "welfare state." See Robert Thurman, "Guidelines for Buddhist Social Activism Based on Nagarjuna's *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsels*," *Eastern Buddhist* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 37-38, <http://ezp1.harvard.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&>

db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000932791&site=ehost-live&scope=site (Accessed May 8, 2008).

- 31 Cowell, *The Jataka* v. 5, 200.
- 32 Pali Text Society, s.v. "Raja-dhamma," "Ajjava."
- 33 Childers, *Pali Language*, s.v. "Ajjavam."
- 34 Cowell, *The Jataka* v.3, 174; v. 5, 200; Rahula, *Buddha Taught*, 85.
- 35 Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed., s.v. "Upright."
- 36 Pali Text Society, s.v. "Maddava."
- 37 Cowell, *The Jataka* v.3, 174; v. 5, 200; Rahula, *Buddha Taught*, 85.
- 38 Cowell, *The Jataka*, 199. These passages are in section 376-377.
- 39 Pali Text Society, s.v. "Rajja-dhamma," "Avirodhana." Rahula takes (perhaps unfounded) liberties here, translating the term as "non-opposition to the people." See Rahula, *Buddha Taught*, 85.
- 40 Cowell, *The Jataka* v. 5, 189. This quote is from section 358.

ETHICS ON THE BORDERS: MORAL FORMATION IN THE SONGS OF KABIR

Rebecca Benefil Bijur

Religious Ethics from East to West

We find to the far East an Indian conception of the socially-embedded self, offering an ethics of particularity defined by varnashrama dharma, the moral duties of caste and life stage required in a classical Hindu context. In the distant West lies the American conception of the autonomous self. As described by oft-quoted Declaration of Independence, this being is “endowed by his Creator with certain unalienable rights,” and exhibits a “universal,” if suspiciously Protestant, emphasis on an interior sense of morality and what it means to be human.

Anyone attempting to locate this thinker or that text on such a topographical map will not be surprised to discover that the space between West and East is wide indeed, and growing more crowded by the moment. A closer look reveals how competing claims lie closer to, or further from, an ethic of universality or particularity. Here, the songs of Kabir and other singer-saints of the

bhakti tradition in India are roots jutting up from the path through the territory of religious ethics, tripping up would-be explorers with their language of social protest, individual longing, and poetic contradiction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, once tripped up by Kabir's poetry, where scholars and devotees fall on the map of religious ethics seems to have as much to do with their own context as that of the Indian singer-saint. In the course of its serial adoption and adaptation by various kinds of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and even Unitarian Universalists, the poetry of Kabir moved east and was folded more completely into Hinduism, and moved west and became familiar to Western audiences seeking the God within. Puzzling, poignant, and memorable for both form and content, the songs of Kabir have not ceased to challenge scholars and delight devotees in both directions. In this exploration of Kabir's contributions to religious ethics, I will discuss how the songs attributed to him emerge from, and respond to, classical Hindu ethics;¹ how he conceives of what it means to be human and the proper ends of human life; how his choice of narrative form grounds his ideas; and finally, what he offers to what I will call "borderland ethics" between individuality and particularity, as it shapes pluralistic worshipping communities today, such as those who gather weekly for the Harvard Divinity School Noon Service.

Kabir's Grounding in Hindu Ethics

Kabir would have been hard-pressed to fit his ethnic and religious affiliations onto a standardized form, as such forms do not usually permit the response "My parents are Muslim, but my grandparents were Hindu" or "Socially Hindu, Bearing a Muslim name, and Politically Anti-Religious." His mysterious upbringing in North India in the fifteenth century has afforded both Hindus and Muslims several opportunities to claim him as their own. Kabir was almost certainly born to a low-caste Muslim family, a designation that itself connotes the religious pluralism created by the Turkish-Muslim invasion of Hindu North India, near the holy Hindu city of Benares.² Yet because his knowledge of Islam, as revealed in his songs, seems scant compared to his grasp of the complexities of Hindu religious philosophy and practice, scholars suggest that his family had recently converted,³ and still held on to most of the Hindu social and religious practices available to low-caste *shudras* of their time. Additionally, *bhakti* scholar William Dwyer notes that Kabir's ability "to indulge in such vitriolic criticism of Islamic practices ... and still identify himself with traditional Hindu society, argues strongly for a less clear-cut dichotomy between communities and beliefs than we know today."⁴ I suspect Dwyer would add

that such dichotomies are most clear at an institutional level, and often less clear from individual to individual, both in Kabir's time and our own.

A number of the songs attributed to Kabir reveal his grounding in Hindu ethics, or rather, his passionate protest of a classical, Brahmanical understanding of *varnashrama dharma*, untouchability and caste, and how to obtain liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Again and again, he voices his doubt at the efficacy of the formalized rituals and religious teachings of both Hindus and Muslims, asking why God did not create Muslims circumcised, if that was what God wanted, or why God cannot hear a whispered call to prayer just as well as one shouted from the rooftops.⁵ He is especially frustrated at the lack of connection between spoken prayers and what they pray for, singing "The pandits' pedantries are lies," for

If saying Ram gave liberation
saying candy made your mouth sweet
saying fire burned your feet
saying water quenched your thirst
saying food banished hunger
the whole world would be free.⁶

Because the whole world is not free, the teaching of the Hindu pandits must be false, and there must be some other teaching, some other way, to break free of the soul's enslavement to *maya*, illusion. In another direct attack on classical Hindu rules of purity, Kabir challenges the pandit to "look in your heart for knowledge" to justify untouchability, then goes on to point out how all humanity is dependent on the "touch" of creation.⁷ In Kabir's line of reasoning, the only one who can avoid the fact that "we eat by touching, we / wash by touching, from a touch / the world was born," is "he who has no taint of Maya."⁸ High-caste Hindus delude themselves in thinking that by avoiding so-called "untouchables" they can move closer to liberation from *maya*, illusion, than anyone else. Rather, as Kabir scholar Linda Hess points out in her analysis of this poem, Brahmins are touched by pollution (and creation), just like the rest of us.⁹

Not content to simply protest false teachings and rituals, and speak out against the pandits, Kabir balances his blunt critiques with invitations for his listeners to discover the real truth by trusting their own experiences, and seeking God (Ram) within. Instead of living their lives according to the rules of *varnashrama dharma*, the moral duties of caste and life stage, Kabir "sang of the one and only *dharm, bhakti*; and that everything else is impious," according to the ancient author Nabhadada, who mentioned Kabir in his *Bhaktamal* in

1592.¹⁰ In one song, Kabir likens the pandits and their followers to a speaking parrot, who can say “God,” “but doesn’t know God’s glory” for “if you don’t see, if you don’t touch, what’s the use of a name?”¹¹ Here Kabir vents his frustration at any conception of religious practice that ignores personal experience of the world, in favor of established religious and social norms. He also begins to build his case for *bhakti*, the way of personal devotion, as the only alternative to the empty rule-following of both Hindu and Muslim holy men.

In another song, Kabir challenges the pandit to answer a series of rapid-fire questions about Hindu philosophy, then asserts that “I’m not confused about sing and purity/ heaven and hell,” that he doesn’t actually care what answer the learned pandit will give.¹² Instead, he tells his listeners, “Kabir says, seekers, listen: Wherever you are/ is the entry point.”¹³ For those coming to Kabir from the West, his focus on interior religious experience is resonant with Protestant conceptions of Luther’s priesthood of all believers, and the idea that the individual needs no mediator to come into contact with her Creator. Within the context of Kabir’s Hinduism, however, such a departure from an ethics of human particularity proved as radical as it was popular, especially for arguing that liberation was possible for low caste communities otherwise ignored by Brahmanical Hinduism.

Although Kabir has been named in modern times as the father of Hindu-Muslim unity and syncretism, his attempts to protest the hypocrisy of both traditions are more obviously represented in the *Bijak*. He is particularly frustrated with violence as it erupts between proponents of the two religions in the name of their faith, and with their willingness to kill some animals, but not others. Both of these concerns are a part of Kabir’s larger critique of religious hypocrisy, as in the name of seeking truth, humanity is lead down false paths toward division and distraction. He sings,

Vedas, Korans, all those books,
those Mullas and those Brahmins—
so many names, so many names,
but the pots are all one clay.
Kabir says, nobody can find Ram,
both sides [Hindu and Muslim] are lost in schisms,
One slaughters goats, one slaughters cows,
they squander their birth in isms.¹⁴

Rather than understand ourselves as “one clay,” people insist on patrolling the meaningless borders between religious identities and judging one another as inhuman for as slight a matter as which sort of animal it is acceptable to kill.

Elsewhere, Kabir reminds his listeners that not only are we all made of the same stuff, but we all must face death. Here, too, the futility of religious differences is emphasized as Hindus uselessly call for cremation, and Muslims insist on the importance of finding a good religious teacher, all the while fighting religious wars that only send more and more of them to death.¹⁵ Removed from the fray, “the swan discerns,”¹⁶ suggesting that those outside these teachings are more likely to discover truth than those within. Kabir scholar Vinay Dharwadker notes that the image of the swan as a symbol of “the soul ... on a journey beyond the human and natural realms” is found not only in Kabir’s songs, but also in older Indian and Persian poetry.¹⁷ Interestingly, the discerning swan is herself not immune to Kabir’s entreaties, as he addresses questions directly to this image out of Indian myth, wondering if the swan/soul really can break free, and if so, where she travels once she is freed.¹⁸ Unlike Muslims and Hindus, the swan has the ability to rise above petty disagreements, and fly after what is really important.

Though it is tempting to describe Kabir as India’s Luther, sparking a generation of religious reforms and counter-reforms by rejecting so much of Hindu and Muslim practice, *bhakti* scholar Eleanor Zelliott cautions against drawing too close a comparison between these figures. Having herself suggested the parallel between the two, she then writes of Kabir, “he was no Luther in establishing an inclusive organized challenge to the established religion, but he was a protestant.”¹⁹ Like other *bhakti* leaders, most of Kabir’s followers still identified themselves as Hindus, although his songs also came to a place of prominence in the scriptures of the Sikhs.

Zelliott also points out that although *bhakti* movements throughout history often challenged Hindu society, they also did much to ensure the survival of Hinduism in the face of Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam, by bringing religion to the common people and supporting the creation of religious literature in vernacular languages.²⁰ Kabir is no exception to these trends. Despite the harsh words he reserves for Hindu teachers and teachings, his “movement has been accommodated in various ways into Hinduism” and is no longer understood as outside the tradition.²¹ Although he spoke out against Hindu teachings and practices, in his lifetime and after his death Kabir did not achieve total liberation from his Hindu context.

Kabir says, This is What it Means to be Human

Although it is tempting to move Kabir further and further west on our religious ethics map, given his protests against Hinduism and his focus on interi-

ority, he can also be seen as heir to the latest additions to the *Vedas*, Hinduism's sacred scriptures, located firmly in the East. While the majority of the *Vedas* link *dharma* to sacrificial ritual (*yajna*), emphasizing the necessity of performative, observable, exoteric action to maintaining social and cosmic order, the later *Vedas* attempt to decrease the importance of ritual and promote *jnana*, seeing the world as it really is, as the real goal of moral duty.²² Such a quest to understand the underlying realities of the world is incorporated into *varnashrama dharma* as the duty of forest-dwellers, and it is not expected of students or householders. Although his status as a low-caste Muslim prevented Kabir from participating in the four life-stages available to Brahmin males, he similarly made the search for truth his life goal. To be human, for Kabir, was to have the capacity to discover truth within one's own self.

This search was not dependent on caste, life stage, guru, or education, but possible by virtue of being alive. As interpreted by Robert Bly, Kabir sings,

I laugh when I hear that the fish in the water is thirsty;
 You don't grasp the fact that what is most alive of all is inside your
 own house;
 and so you walk from one holy city to the next with a confused look
 Kabir will tell you the truth: go wherever you like, to Calcutta or
 Tibet;
 if you can't find where your soul is hidden,
 for you the world will never be real!²³

To borrow the vocabulary of Buddhism, the liberation we thirst for or crave is the water all around us. Even though we have everything we need to discover "what is most alive of all," we insist on undertaking spiritual journeys to find enlightenment, looking in all the wrong places. In a similar vein, Bly's Kabir writes, "If you want the truth, I'll tell you the truth:/ Listen to the secret sound, the real sound, which is inside you."²⁴ Throughout his poems, Kabir emphasizes the importance of discovering one's own voice, and trusting one's own experiences, especially when they contradict established Hindu or Muslim teachings.

Obviously a lover of language himself, Kabir was even willing to dismiss here the words of the *Vedas* and the Qur'an for obscuring more truths than they revealed. As interpreted by Bly, he writes,

The Sacred Books of the East are nothing but words
 I looked through their covers one day sideways.
 What Kabir talks of is only what he has lived through.
 If you have not lived through something, it is not true.²⁵

It is possible that his distrust arises not from the words as they were spoken (although he is dismissive of the prayers prayed aloud by Hindus and Muslims in other songs), but especially as they were written. Hess points out that Kabir was an oral poet, whose works were later collected and written down by his followers, and that he sings,

I don't touch ink or paper
this hand never grasped a pen.
The greatness of four ages
Kabir tells with his mouth alone.²⁶

Here, Kabir refuses to write down his wisdom, but speaks it clearly and without mediation in his songs and poems. Kabir's distrust of some words is also made more complicated by his use of the term *sabda*, the Word, "to refer to the enlightenment experience or the means of reaching it."²⁷ Although the religious books of Hindus and Muslims contain many words, they do not have the right words to bring us to union with the Divine, according to Kabir.

Throughout his songs, Kabir balances his focus on interiority with an understanding of the importance of relationship. This is illustrated most clearly in his use of vocative "you" forms of address. Linda Hess, a Kabir scholar and translator, points out that where other *bhakti* poets speak to God, Kabir speaks directly to us, his listeners, through a series of intimate (and occasionally abusive) addresses, such as "Hey Saint, Brother, Brahmin, Yogi, Hermit, Babu, Mother, Muslim, Creature, Friend, Fool!"²⁸ Hess remarks on the way such direct address evokes a response from the listener, who is energized and browbeaten into considering how to answer Kabir's challenging questions, or argue with his conclusions.²⁹ Even as Kabir's poems confirm an interior, nearly unspeakable experience of God open only to the individual, they also assume and evoke a relational universe among his listeners, especially those who would seek the truth.

Kabir says, These are the Ends of Human Existence

Kabir is not confident in our ability to find enlightenment, even if we take his words to heart and seek the truth within our own selves. Frequently, he ends his songs by pointing out how few hearers will understand him, singing, "My speech is of the East / no one understands me," "... rare listeners / hear the song right," "A spiritual person is rare in this world," and "there are very few who find the path."³⁰ Despite the difficulties inherent in the task, however, Kabir asserts that the true purpose of human existence is to follow the path of *bhakti* back to

God, to a place where “the ego simply disappears the moment you touch him.”³¹ More urgently, Kabir describes the dissolution of religious identity possible when one heeds his words: “Kabir says, plunge into Ram! / There: No Hindu. No Turk.”³² At that moment of dissolution, the things we thought were important will cease to be so, which explains Kabir’s impatience with the world as it is now. As Dharwadker points out, the “Kabir tradition” holds “human beings as especially responsible for inflicting fake religions, false values, social and economic injustices, and acts of violence upon the world,” thus “add[ing] a profusion of man-made illusions to the illusions that already populate the domain of Maya.”³³ At the same time, because humans, not God, are the creators of our own illusory universe, we also have agency in dismantling illusion.³⁴ Again and again, Kabir’s songs urge the listener to stop avoiding the truth and take action, as he sings, “wake up, wake up! ... You have slept for millions of years./ Why not wake up this morning?”³⁵ The tools to end our enslavement to *maya* are not in our hands but are our hands, or, perhaps more accurately, our mouths.

The Ethics of Song

One of the challenges in considering the religious ethics of Kabir is addressing the difference it makes to receive his words and ideas via the eyes, scanning his verse on the page, rather than through the ears and mouth. In his essay on the connection between music, faith, and morality, John Stratton Hawley explores what is lost when *bhakti*, the life of devotion, is experienced separate from *bhajan*, the devotional song, both of which share etymological roots with “to share” and “the one who shares out,” or God.³⁶ Hawley is especially eloquent in his analysis of the impact of song on memory, and how what we sing, more than what we hear or read, physically becomes part of who we are, “a partner, defender, and shaper of the ethical life.”³⁷ In practice, a characterization of Kabir’s songs as poems of individual protest and interiority would need to be enlarged were it offered the hearing of a standing-room-only crowd at a Kabir songfest, especially if the audience started singing along.

Certainly, such a scene runs counter to the romantic image of the lone transcendentalist captured in Bly’s reworking of his poems. As Hawley describes how “the distinction between performer and audience is diffused almost to the point of non-existence, as everyone sings along,”³⁸ it seems almost possible that Kabir’s singing could reflect and reinforce the process of dissolution into the Divine he advocates in his songs. In such a moment, “it is natural ... that the considerations of boundary, location and propriety ... fall into the background,” in fine *bhakti* tradition, as the audience joins their voices to the song,

responding or taking over from the singer.³⁹ Or, as Kabir might say: There: No Hindu. No Turk.

As a musician, I appreciate Hawley's attempt to inject the experience of song into his consideration of *bhakti* ethics. His point about the way songs, more than speech, can get "stuck" in our heads is one reason Kabir's words survived into the present day, and are still popularly sung in India and elsewhere. Hess, too, notices the way Kabir's songs live on in memory after the first reading or hearing, as she points out how the cadence of certain lines can be heard as an aural assault on the inside of the listener's skull.⁴⁰ Once these songs are bouncing along in our brains, however, it is less clear how the medium has affected the message. Hawley is inclined to romanticize the power of music to shape human action, as he asserts that "music demands one recognize a level of truth that is often absent in ordinary speech" and that "musical reflection can realign faith even when the moral dimension of religious life has gone astray."⁴¹ Such assertions provoke the question of whether singing can rescue us from all sorts of moral failings, just by virtue of being sung.

To be fair, Hawley offers these conclusions within the context of the songs of Sur Das, not Kabir. But his elevation of *bhakti* singing as unavoidably important to moral formation, because it is *singing*, seems to be an overstatement when so much of what comes to reside in memory is a result of sheer repetition, not the soul-stickiness of insight or truth. As ethical teachings, Top 100 pop hits and sitcom theme songs are less than helpful, but they rattle around in my skull, nonetheless. Thus, while some songs, perhaps Kabir's, offer deep truths that are harder to come by in other kinds of expression, it is not only because they are sung, but because of what Kabir says in these songs. Both the medium and the message are important.

At the same time, when Hawley speaks about the participatory dimension implied in the performance of religious songs, I find his ideas about the importance of Kabir's narrative form reshaping my sense of Kabir's ethical universe. Rather than emphasizing cosmic union possible in song or through song, as if it were a meditative practice similar to chant or mantras, Hawley describes the ways in which devotional singing brings about a participatory community of "people who respond to a single sense of what is true or real," unable to keep silent in the presence of this spirit-moving music.⁴² He contrasts this with traditional understandings of Hindu *dharma* in which community gatherings consist of "people who serve different yet complementary functions,"⁴³ kept separate from one another by the particularity of their caste and life stage, even when gathered in the same place. In such a participatory gathering, Kabir's use

of the vocative is an even more powerful invitation to his listeners to respond to his words, immediately, without waiting for further mediation or direction.

Although audience members do not have the chance to re-write the songs, they can co-narrate them along with the singer. In singing, they may take on the voice of Kabir, or the foolish Hindu or Muslim teacher; they may be male or female, questioning or certain. They may even be all of these different identities at the same time, much as Kabir took on more than one identity or role in his own life. In each case, because of this narrative form, Kabir's songs more strongly imply an understanding of what it means to be human that is embodied, relational, and dynamic. This sets up a contrast to the content of some of his songs, which seem to champion interiority over all else. Bly's Kabir sings,

Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains,
and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!
All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars.
The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels.
And the music from the strings no one touches, and the source of all
water.
If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:
Friend, listen, the God whom I love is inside.⁴⁴

But if everything is inside, why sing aloud? Why invite a friend to listen? Why share this truth at all? The answer lies in the tension Kabir holds between individuality and particularity; East and West; interiority and relationality; singing and speech.

Borderland Ethics in Kabir

At the edges of the map of religious ethics, modern scholars are building on the contributions of liberal, Christian feminists and others to expand the horizons of the field. Rather than focusing on notions of the autonomous self, these scholars offer the idea of a communally constructed person, who takes on new identities in different contexts and shifts roles throughout her life.⁴⁵ To understand this ethical being, we must hear her narrate her story, and engage in a kind of inter-subjectivity in which the listener also contributes to the creation of the person telling the story.⁴⁶ This evolving conception of what it means to be human is not too distant from Hawley's description of religious formation made possible by participation in *bhakti* singing.

As the words of Kabir and other devotional poets are sung and exchanged between singer and listeners, they create a space where both singer and listener contribute to one another's identity and formation. The listener responds to

Kabir's direct address with questions of her own, and together seeks truths that are less available in other forms. She tries out the sound of his convictions, wondering if they will fit her mind and heart today. She protests religious contradictions and vents her anger at lies, hypocrisy, purity rules, caste. As she starts an interior conversation about truth and liberation, she also participates in an exterior conversation, contained by the community as it sings. Hess draws our attention to the moments where Kabir "hovers over boundary lines, or imagined boundary lines – especially those that have to do with our sense of identity."⁴⁷ In this space, not only formation, but perhaps transformation is possible, as singer and listener, or God and devotee, suddenly switch roles. To illustrate this sudden shift, Hess quotes one of the contradictory couplets with which Kabir ends one of his songs, "... if you understand now, / you're guru, I'm disciple."⁴⁸ In Kabir's understanding of the human condition, each one of us has the ability to be both teacher and disciple, if we could only let go of the separation between these roles and allow ourselves to move more freely across these false boundaries.

Then again, in this particular song, Kabir systematically denies every level of separation, from the line separating creator/creation, and Hari or Brahman, to that dividing cause/effect and mother/father.⁴⁹ This approach makes sense for a singer-saint of a strong *advaita* (non-duality) tradition, but only makes it more perplexing for Kabir to end his exploration of non-dualism with a reiteration of the separation between you, guru, and I, disciple. Perhaps ultimate non-dualism remains forever beyond our grasp, as does the meaning of this contradictory song, or maybe Kabir intends to suggest that dynamic movement between identities, our ability to shift in a moment, now, from one side to another, is the route to understanding the human condition. This space of shifting identity and movement, on the borderlands between East and West, is one of Kabir's more complex contributions to the field of religious ethics, particularly as it unfolds in pluralistic worshipping communities today.

Kabir as a Guest at the Harvard Divinity School Noon Service

Perhaps Kabir's poetry has proved remarkably adaptable to different religious traditions in part because it makes protest a religious act, a feat Jon Levenson ascribes to the sung poetry of the Psalms in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Alongside Kabir's poetry of protest, however, are also his songs of devotional love, which have been less a focus of this discussion but perhaps more formative to religious traditions such as Sikhism. While *bhakti* is usually translated as devotion, it also carries a sense of intense emotion and mutual, devoted love

exchanged by humans and God, as it is experienced by devotees.⁵⁰ This element of love as a fundamental spiritual practice was emphasized in the readings, music, and shared meal offered by the Sikh community at a recent Harvard Divinity School Noon service. Although Kabir's songs were not a part of this particular service, his words were first collected alongside those of the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, in the scriptures of the *Guru Granth* around 1603,⁵¹ and are considered part of the foundational teachings of the faith.

As I experienced this service, there could be no confusion between Kabir's directive to look within for spiritual union and the need for individuals to participate and respond to other individuals embarking on a similar quest. For this reason, I think Kabir offers a great deal to pluralistic religious communities, where people of faith are seeking Divine union, or meaningful ethical teachings, without a need to argue for one truth over another. I am not surprised to find Kabir's poetry in the Unitarian Universalist hymnal, nor shaping views of religious co-existence among the Sikh community, nor at work in any *bhakti* setting on the borders of Hinduism where "participation and ... mutual indwelling between the devotees and God" is at work.⁵²

Similarly, in his role as a singer from the borderlands between Hindu and Muslim identity, Kabir offers a sense of what it means to be human that assumes that individuals can inhabit multiple identities at the same time, and still be whole, or at least be just as broken and questing as the rest of us. In some ways, Kabir offers language for those seeking a highest common denominator among a variety of religious traditions, because he balances interiority and relationality through a "borderlands ethic" of participation among spiritual seekers. Kabir might be surprised to find himself suddenly deemed just as pluralistic as he is Hindu, Muslim, *bhakti*, syncretic, and/or anti-religious, but he would certainly be made welcome at the Harvard Divinity School Noon Service, and he might find some of the devotional songs sung in such a community quite catchy, and oddly familiar.

NOTES

- 1 For the purposes of this discussion, I have chosen not to limit my use of writings attributed to Kabir to a single source, translator, or textual tradition. Other scholars have discussed the interpretive variations among the Rajasthani, Bihari, and Sikh collections of Kabir's songs and the complexities posed by the lack of a single, authoritative collection in Hindi or English. See especially Linda Hess's Introduction to her translation of the Bihari collection of Kabir's work, *The Bijak of Kabir*, pp. 6-7. To add to this confusion, I will cite Kabir's words in the context

where I found them, rather than by their numbers in any given collection. Other scholars have noted the flaws in Tagore's translations, which did much to popularize Kabir to a Western audience, and upon which Robert Bly based his most recent English reworkings of Tagore's translations, also used for this discussion.

- 2 Charlotte Vaudeville, "Kabir," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005, 5052. Accessed online 9 May 2008.
- 3 Vaudeville, 5052.
- 4 William J. Dwyer. *Bhakti in Kabir*. Patna, India: Associated Book Agency, 1981, 10.
- 5 Kabir, *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983, 69; and Robert Bly, *Kabir: Ecstatic Poems*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004, 58.
- 6 *The Bijak of Kabir*, 54.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 9 Linda Hess, "Introduction," in *The Bijak of Kabir*, trans. Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983, 18.
- 10 Dwyer 2.
- 11 *The Bijak of Kabir*, 54.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 17 Vinay Dharwadker, "Introduction: Kabir, His Poetry and His World," in *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs*, trans. Vinay Dharwadker, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2003, ix.
- 18 *The Bijak of Kabir*, 52.
- 19 Eleanor Zelliot, "The Medieval Bhakti Movement in History: An Essay on the Literature in English," in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith, Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1976, 158.
- 20 Zelliot ,143.
- 21 Zelliot ,158.

- 22 Anne Monius. Class lecture. 6 February 2008.
- 23 Bly, 4.
- 24 Bly, 6.
- 25 Bly, 44.
- 26 Quoted by Hess, 3.
- 27 Hess, 3.
- 28 Hess, 9.
- 29 Hess, 10.
- 30 Quoted by Hess 26, Bly 14, 57.
- 31 Bly, 16.
- 32 *The Bijak of Kabir*, 67.
- 33 Dharwadker, 84.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 35 Bly, 13.
- 36 Charles Hawley, "The Music in Faith and Morality," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 52, no. 2, Jun 1984, 244.
- 37 Hawley, 247, 251.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 257.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 258.
- 40 Hess, 12.
- 41 Hawley, 258, 250.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 257.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 257.
- 44 Bly, 63.
- 45 Anne Monius. Class lecture. 9 April 2008.
- 46 Anne Monius. Class lecture. 9 April 2008.
- 47 Hess, 23.
- 48 Quoted by Hess, 23.
- 49 *The Bijak of Kabir*, 56.

50 John B. Carmen, "Bhakti," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005, 856. Accessed online 9 May 2008.

51 Hess, 6.

52 Carmen, 865.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE ROLD OF ZAYNAB AND AMINA IN RITUAL MOURNING

Matthew Hotham

In spite of the wide range of female figures of authority in early Islam, few have become role models women can look to in order to organize and mobilize themselves to advocate for expanded rights within the male-dominated religious discourse. A unique exception to this rule appears to be Zaynab as imagined by Shi'a women in Southern Lebanon, depicted in Lara Deeb's *An Enchanted Modern*. For Deeb's interlocutors, Zaynab has become a figure of female authority whose model inspires them to actively participate in shaping public life within their communities. Before she could become such a figure, however, Zaynab had to be reclaimed from Traditionalist accounts which emphasized her overwhelming grief and exorbitant mourning. According to Deeb, it is this very transformation which facilitated the entry of women into public religious life and encouraged women to become community leaders and activists.

By examining another female figure, the Prophet's mother Amina as depicted in Suleyman Chelebi's *Mevlid-i Sherif*, this paper seeks to better understand what it is about the figure of Zaynab that enabled such a community transformation. Like Zaynab, Amina is a figure tied to community mourning rituals through the recitation of elements of her biography by men in mixed-gender public settings and by women in private all-female gatherings. In spite of the frequent contact Turkish women have with Amina's story, however, she has not developed into a role-model the way Zaynab has in the Lebanese context. This paper will explore the figure of Amina and her role in Turkish society in contrast with the transformation of Zaynab occurring in Shi'a communities in Lebanon. Focusing on notions of passive and active prophesy, as bifurcated through the complimentary Arabic terms *nabiy* and *rasul*, we will see that Amina's nature as passive receiver of divine insight is contrasted with Zaynab's active role as community leader.

Furthermore, we will examine the role of female mourning in Islamic discourse and question whether or not Zaynab's model is wholly beneficial for women or if in underplaying her role as a mourner, contemporary women are conceding authority to male religious discourse in exchange for access to the public sphere. In light of this question, we will return to the figures of Amina and Zaynab in mourning to see if their models might provide insights into ways women may reframe mourning as a liminal space between life and death in which women have unprecedented authority in reshaping both religious discourse on the connections between this life and the afterlife, and community structure as it reconstitutes itself to fill the chasm left by the absence of the deceased.

Suleyman Chelebi's *Mevlidi Sherif*

Suleyman Chelebi was born sometime in the early second-half of the Fourteenth Century CE in Bursa to a family well-connected to the Imperial court through religious and administrative posts.¹ His father, Ahmet Pasha held several important administrative titles during his career, including, according to one source, the position of Grand Vizier under Murat I.² Suleyman Chelebi himself was a member of the Halvati Sufi order and later became *imam* of the Great Mosque in Bursa.³ According to the story, Suleyman Chelebi was present at a theological debate where a popular preacher argued that Jesus and Muhammad were "equal in degree."⁴ Upset over the implication, he immediately composed a verse discounting the crucifixion and was encouraged to

continue with a longer work in this vein. This original verse does not appear in the currently known versions of Suleyman Chelebi's *Vesilet un-Necat* (The Means of Salvation), more commonly known as the *Mevlid-i Sherif* (The Noble Birth), but it nevertheless is rumored to be the inspiration for the longer work completed in 812/1409.⁵

A more likely explanation for the poem's composition is that it was commissioned by the Sultan "that there might be a Turkish poem in praise of the Prophet similar to the Arabic poems of this nature."⁶ Since Suleyman Chelebi "is the earliest strictly Ottoman poet" we currently know, meaning he is the first native-born poet writing in Turkish rather than Persian or Arabic, it is not surprising that he might be asked to create a Turkish language rival to popular Arabic poetry.⁷ Though similar poems were written after Suleyman Chelebi's, none gained the same popularity as his, and in 996/1589 his poem was enshrined by Sultan Murad III who included it as a part of the inaugural, annual state celebration of the Prophet's birthday.⁸

Extant versions of the poem itself vary in length from less than 300 verses to as many as 1000, depending on the manuscript from which one works.⁹ It is composed of nine sections covering topics which are relatively standard among poems in the *mevlid* form¹⁰, including invocations, lists of Prophetic miracles, songs of praise, and two narrative sections detailing the events surrounding the Prophet's birth and his night journey.¹¹ This paper will deal primarily with the sections of the poem describing prophetic succession and the Prophet's birth, the relevant parts of which number 12 verses and 36 verses in length respectively in the available English translation.

For a poem written in the Fourteenth century, Suleyman Chelebi's *Mevlid* is a surprisingly anti-patriarchal text. The common account of Muhammad's birth begins with his father, 'Abd Allah. Muhammad's grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib, arranged a double marriage for both himself and his son to the daughter and niece (respectively) of the chief of the Bani Zuhrah, Wahayb.¹² On their way to the wedding, 'Abd Allah was reportedly stopped by a woman who noticed a certain light shining from his forehead. She immediately proposed to him, but he declined out of respect for his father's arrangements. The next day, after marrying Amina and consummating the marriage the previous evening, 'Abd Allah ran into the same woman at the well. This time she had nothing to say to him, and when he asked about her changed attitude, she replied "When you passed me there was a white blaze between your eyes and when I invited you you refused me and went in to Amina, and she has taken it away."¹³ Suleyman Chelebi's poem is notable for excluding an account of this incident and casting 'Abd Allah only in terms of his relationship to Amina

(Amine in MacCallum's translation): "Now Amine...Had been with child by Abdullah, the faithful."¹⁴

This oversight is especially relevant in light of the section which precedes the birth scene: a discourse on prophetic succession. Suleyman Chelebi's presentation adopts "the mystical idea that all previous prophets were nothing but partial aspects of the light of Muhammad."¹⁵ According to Schimmel, this notion "became common in the mystical trends under the influence of Ibn 'Arabi" and was expounded in the poetry of Jami and Rumi.¹⁶ In the *Mevlidi Sherif* this concept of prophetic succession is rendered: "On his [Adam's] brow first God set the Light of Prophets./Saying: This Light belongs to my Belovèd."¹⁷ In other poems this light passes down through the prophets, with Moses and Jesus especially noted, before finally coming to rest on 'Abd Allah's forehead before he passes the light into Amina's womb.¹⁸

Suleyman Chelebi's rendering of prophetic succession is unusual for several reasons. First, as noted above, the story of the light on 'Abd Allah's forehead is not mentioned, in fact Muhammad's paternity is barely mentioned at all. Second, the poem attests that following Adam's death "to Eve's brow next the light migrated."¹⁹ In the traditional account of the Prophet's birth, the light of prophecy passes from 'Abd Allah's forehead directly into Amina's womb, as if women can only be the carriers of future prophets but never touched by the light of prophecy itself. Suleyman Chelebi's version of prophetic succession directly inserts a woman, Eve, into this line of prophets. Eve receives the light *after* Adam's death, so she is not merely a carrier of the light when pregnant with Seth, who is the next person to which the light passes. After Seth, the *Mevlidi Sherif* mentions only Abraham and Ishmael before noting that the list of prophets is too long and moving into the birth scene. It is noteworthy that Eve is not mentioned for the sake of comprehensiveness, but rather is specifically included in a list of only five other prophets prior to Muhammad.

Other commentators have noted the similarities between Suleyman Chelebi's *Mevlid* and prior Arabic poems of the same genre,²⁰ but unnoticed are the similarities between the birth scene in the *Mevlid* and the description of the birth of Jesus found in the Qur'an itself. The apocryphal story of the poem's provenance becomes more plausible when one views these passages side-by-side and sees the ways in which Suleyman Chelebi takes key events from *Surah* 19 and elevates them in his description of Muhammad's birth. Considering the esteem with which Maryam is regarded, this parallel structure not only signals the elevation of Muhammad over Jesus, but perhaps also of Amina over Maryam.

The similarities (and telling departures in the *Mevlid*) begin with both women receiving visions preceding their sons' births. In the case of Maryam, the angel Gabriel appears in the form of a young man to announce that she shall give birth to "a boy most pure."²¹ When Maryam protests that she has not been touched by a man, Gabriel responds that it is an easy matter for God to create a child in her womb without the assistance of a man. In *Surah* 21 verse 91 however, Maryam's conception is tied in both phrasing and word usage to the notion of prophecy.²² Michael Sells points out that this sexual metaphor of prophecy descending upon and entering into something is echoed in *Surah* 97 verses 1-5, where here it is the night which becomes impregnated with "the spirit" (*ruh*).²³ For Sells, this linkage between Maryam's conception of Jesus and the night receiving the spirit in *Surah* 97 shows a powerful role for the feminine in Islamic notions of prophecy. Similarly, Schimmel notes the use of pregnancy as a metaphor for spiritual development in Sufi writings, where the human is construed as a pregnant woman who carries mystery within them waiting to give birth through suffering.²⁴ In both of these instances, however, as in the story of 'Abd Allah passing the light of prophecy into Amina, the feminine role is always a passive one—as receivers and bearers of prophecy or mystery for a brief time. Suleyman Chelebi's poem, as we shall see, repeatedly undercuts this notion of woman's role in prophecy and subverts such patriarchal readings of prophetic succession.

In line with other accounts of Muhammad's birth, Suleyman Chelebi's Amina has a vision in which three angels raise banner on the two horizons and atop the *Kaaba*.²⁵ Whereas Maryam receives one angelic visitor hailing the coming of her son, Amina first sees three angels who are quickly followed by "rank on rank the heavenly host descend[ing]"²⁶ on her home, indicative of the triumphalist project of the poem. During the labor pains, both women cry out in thirst and are directed to water. Continuing in the triumphalist vein, whereas Maryam is given water flowing between her legs,²⁷ Amina is presented with a white glass filled with water colder than snow.²⁸ Similarly, Jesus' first words are in defense of his mother's chastity²⁹, whereas Muhammad's are for his people.³⁰

More interesting than the number of angelic visitors, purity and coolness of the water presented to the parched mothers, or first words of the respective prophets, however, are Amina's non-angelic guests. In other accounts of Muhammad's birth, these are simply three *houris* who assist her in the birthing process, but in Suleyman Chelebi's rendition, two of the female visitors are Maryam herself and "Asiye [Asiya], fair consort / Of Egypt's King" and Moses' surrogate mother.³¹ Left out of the line of prophetic succession in the previ-

ous section of the poem, ostensibly these two women are here to attest to the superiority of Amina's son in comparison to their own. The selection of these two particular women, however, not only serves to elevate Muhammad's status in relation to Jesus and Moses, but also negates the importance of paternity to prophethood. Taking the passing treatment of 'Abd Allah one step farther, the poet presents Amina communing with the mother of a prophet whose sole father is God³² and the foster mother, rather than birth mother, of a prophet of obscure parentage. By tying these three women together, the poem constructs motherhood (especially through the inclusion of Asiya) as something more complex, more than strictly biological, and thus more active than it is traditionally depicted when used as a metaphor for women's role in prophetic succession.

The Poem's Use in Popular Culture

Suleyman Chelebi's poem was incorporated into state celebrations of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*) when they were first introduced to the Ottoman Empire in 996/1588.³³ The festivals included torchlight processions and street fairs, but central to them was recitation of the poem,³⁴ which initially occurred at the Sultan Ahmed Mosque because of its accommodating size and the proximity of the Hippodrome for parades and other festivities³⁵ until later being moved to other Imperial mosques.³⁶ Beginning in 1910, the festivals were instituted as a national festival, both under the Ottoman Empire and continuing on into the Republic.³⁷ State sponsored *Mawlid*s were not the only occasion on which the poem was recited, however. In many regions they are recited as part of religious rites of passage such as circumcision or to fulfill a vow,³⁸ and in Turkey Suleyman Chelebi's poem is used more widely still, trotted out and broadcast on television for every major Islamic holiday,³⁹ and recited on the anniversary of the deaths of several national heroes and leaders, as well as to commemorate important historical events in Turkey's history. Most significantly for the purposes of this paper, the poem is included in funeral ceremonies, as well as at commemorations held after the death of a family member.⁴⁰

In the Turkish town of Egridir, where Nancy and Richard Tapper conducted field work to study *mevlid* performance in the 1970s and 80s, *mevlid*s are recited by men exclusively in all contexts except those associated with death—where women may host private ceremonies held “immediately after a funeral, and then on any or all of the following occasions: the 7th, the 40th, the 52nd days after death and annually on the anniversary.”⁴¹ Unlike the male *mevlid*s which are broadcast on television and recited in local mosques and community

centers to predominantly male audiences, female recitations of the poem occur exclusively in private homes before entirely female listeners.⁴² Beyond the differences in occasion, venue and audience for male and female *mevlid* recitations, the content and emphasis of the recitations varies as well. Male performances tend to be “short and formal, allow little display of emotion, and offer little scope for cantors or sponsors to manage or vary the impact of any particular service.”⁴³ Furthermore, in form and expression male recitals emphasize all elements of the poem equally, but when men are asked to identify the poem’s most significant passage, they tend to point to “the night journey to heaven [as] the most important part of the narrative biography, in spite of the fact that this is treated briefly and with no particular emphasis in their performances.”⁴⁴

Female performances offer a striking contrast to male recitations in “style, length, structure, complexity and emotionality.”⁴⁵ Unlike men, who never have an opportunity to hear a female performance even as children⁴⁶, women benefit from frequent exposure to male performances. Thus, differences between male and female recitations cannot be attributed to divergent development but can be viewed as a conscious choice on the part of female reciters and hosts to depart from male recitation practices. The most noticeable difference is of course in length of the recitation. Whereas male recitations tend to excerpt about 64 couplets from the poem, with twenty couplets devoted to the Prophet’s birth, twenty-seven to the heavenly journey and the remaining seventeen divided between invocation and introduction, female recitations stretch to include as many as 217 couplets. Of these 217 couplets, female performances include fifty-five lines describing the Prophet’s birth and Prophetic succession, fifty-eight lines centered around the heavenly journey, and include large numbers of verses on the Prophet’s miracles and on petitions to God, both of which are excluded from male recitations.⁴⁷

Beyond the length, female cantors frequently make modifications to the invocation emphasizing the “intercessory role of the pure believer”⁴⁸ and converting a couplet that in male recitations reads “If from Hell’s flame you hope to find salvation, / With grief and love repeat the Salutation”⁴⁹ into “If you seek to find sublime place, / Lovingly repeat the Salutation,”⁵⁰ establishing a positive, proactive, salvific purpose for the recitation. Emphasis of content also differs in female performances. Whereas male recitations tend to remain flat throughout the poem, with no section gaining performative emphasis over the others, “the second section of the women’s recitals, focusing on the Birth of the Prophet, is performatively the most elaborate part of their *mevluds*.”⁵¹ In spite of this performative emphasis placed upon the birth scene, women do not single it out as the most important part of the ceremony, as men tend to do with the

heavenly journey. Rather, “women consider the *mevlud* service in its entirety to be an important act of piety, and they refuse to treat any one aspect of the service as more meritorious than others.”⁵² Finally where male performances are noteworthy for their emotional restraint, lack of physical contact, and impersonality, female recitations often feature open weeping and are “intense religious experiences which focus on birth and motherhood, emphasize relations of equality among women and create and reinforce relations of support among them.”⁵³

Traditional and Authenticated Majalis in Southern Lebanon

A parallel experience of female solidarity enacted through ritualized mourning can be found in Lara Deeb’s account of *majalis* in southern Lebanon. Like the Turkish *mevlid* gatherings, Shi’a women in Lebanon often host performative recitations of the story of the Karbala massacre in private residences or *husayniyya* to exclusively female audiences (though sometimes children are present in traditional *majalis*). Traditional *majalis* are highly emotional experiences, where the cantor herself often breaks down in tears at some point during the performance, and sees her primary goal as moving listeners “to cry as much as possible for the martyrs and captives.”⁵⁴ Like *mevlid* performances in Turkey, *majalis* performances center around the hope for personal salvation, tied to a belief in the salvific effect of tears shed for Husayn and on a hope for his intercession on behalf of the mourner on the day of judgment.⁵⁵ In traditional gatherings Zaynab becomes a role model for mourning women. She is depicted as “buried in grief, pulling at her hair and shedding copious tears over the dead and dying.”⁵⁶ In both Turkey and Lebanon, women overcome the trauma of death through rituals which “create and confirm the promise of individual salvation...offered to all Muslims.”⁵⁷ In Turkey, they do this by “exalting child-birth and using an ideal of motherhood to establish an intimate link between the *mevlud* participants and the Prophet Muhammad.”⁵⁸ In Lebanese Shi’a communities, women are united with one another and with Zaynab through their shared grief, which also reflects a shared loss of loved ones to conflict. In both occasions praise and remembrance of an intercessory figure brings hope of spiritual benefits for the recently deceased and the ceremonial participant herself in the afterlife.

By contrast, what Deeb dubs “authenticated” *majalis* have gained popularity in recent years, especially among the younger generation. Authenticated performances differ from traditional ones in that they emphasize the important benefits of learning “religious, social, and political lessons” from the Karbala story, in

order to link the meaning of Karbala to the present.⁵⁹ Emotion is downplayed in authenticated *majalis*—weeping is no longer an end-in-itself with salvific benefits, but a means to better understand the suffering of Husayn. Associating one's own losses with Karbala is also discouraged, downplaying the notion of a community united through shared grief, and instead emphasizing the role of women as students sharing in the lessons of Karbala and hoping to apply them to their present lives.⁶⁰ Along with this transformation of the emphasis in the *majalis*, concepts of Zaynab also shift in authenticated discourse. She is no longer the mourner *par excellence* but rather the one “who carries the history of Ashura forward to future generations of Shi'i Muslims.”⁶¹ As bearer of the Karbala story, Zaynab becomes both a figure of defiance, in her refusal to be silenced by the authorities who massacred her entire family, and a model of leadership, in her role as interim head of the Shi'a community. Thus the focus in authenticated *majalis* moves from communal grief to individual learning, from personal salvation to communal improvement and advancement.

For Deeb and her interlocutors, this shift in Zaynab's role from mourner to revolutionary is an important step in the transformation and expansion of female public piety among the Shi'a of Southern Lebanon. It offers women an important role model for political action in the face of oppression—their role as pious Shi'a women need not be to merely give their sons and husbands as martyrs, but they may work as community leaders and organizers and voices of witness while the men fight. While Deeb notes some negative aspects of the public piety enabled through the role-model of authenticated Zaynab (such as the fact that public expressions of piety become not just permitted, but even expected, and that women are usually expected to find time for community involvement on top of their household duties and full-time jobs), authentication is generally cast as a positive development that gives women greater control over their religious discourse and community development.

Mourning as Revolution: Early Islamic Discourse on Female Mourning

What Deeb fails to acknowledge, however, is that the dialectic between traditional and authenticated *majalis* is revisiting a fourteen-hundred year-old debate over the role of women in mourning rituals in Islam. In pre-Islamic Arabia, women were expected to perform elaborate wailing rituals on the death of a relative, especially a husband, father or son, and were joined by widows, unmarried women, and neighbors of the deceased.⁶² The wailing rituals formed a community of mourners who were expected to turn out in one another's times of grief, but who were also often augmented by professional wailers hired by

the family of the deceased. This wailing was not born solely out of grief, but also out of anxiety, particularly when the deceased was the financial provider and physical protector of the bereaved. Thus wailing was also an appeal to the men of the community not to dispose the vulnerable woman of her property and integrity, a wailing shared in by women who had been similarly dispossessed when their own husbands, sons and fathers had died.⁶³

Wailing was discouraged by the Prophet Muhammad according to one *hadith*, because it was a sign that one doubted God's will.⁶⁴ Beyond this theological reason, wailing was seen as a threat to male stoicism, as it was harder to remain stiff-lipped in the face of loss when surrounded by weeping female relatives.⁶⁵ It also seems that pre-Islamic female wailing practices were threatening to a burgeoning male religious elite seeking to institute their own new, more tempered ceremonies. According to Halevi, such men feared "that wailing women...would upstage the poised and contemplative Muslim men who had already submitted to God's judgment and now yearned to enact an orderly and predictable funerary rite."⁶⁶ Death represents a significant breach in the social order, one which those who control the society will often seek to downplay or quickly traverse. It is also a moment that community members can exploit to enact social change. As the social fabric is torn by the vacuum left by each death, funeral rites offer a unique opportunity for those outside of the circles of authority to re-knit this fabric in ways that alter the social structure. If in southern Lebanon "authenticated Zaynab" is a revolutionary figure, Halevi shows us that "grieving Zaynab" can also be a powerful source for revolutionary change.

Behind much of the rhetoric surrounding female wailing, which primarily issued from Kufa, particularly after the martyrdom of Husayn, seems to be a struggle for authority between proto-Sunni and proto-Shi'a groups. The burgeoning Sunni authorities were concerned that vocal wailing over those who had been killed in the conflict between the two groups would incite a widespread rebellion.⁶⁷ In order to tamp down on this possibility, Halevi argues that they fabricated and continued to circulate discredited *hadith* that claimed vocal wailing caused the deceased torment in the grave, and argued that women should be banned from graveyards and funerals entirely.⁶⁸ As a result of this historical conflict, Sunni attitudes toward female wailing have remained restrictive, while Shi'i sources, though they discourage excessive wailing, generally condone female participation in mourning rituals, and approve of grief expressed for Husayn.

It seems that both the revolutionary threat of wailing and the danger it poses to male religious authority come in to play in the creation of authen-

ticated *Ashura* rituals in Southern Lebanon. When shifting to authenticated *majalis*, women in Southern Lebanon are not only creating a model for public piety in their revision of Zaynab's model, but are also adopting a form of religious expression that is sanctioned by the male religious authorities. By this I do not mean to reinforce previous religious stereotypes about male (intellectual, textual) versus female (emotional, oral) religiosity. At the same time as women were reforming emotion out of their private *majalis* in exchange for greater roles in public life, men too were encouraged to leave behind the less restrained elements of *Ashura* commemoration, such as exuberant self-flagellation and forehead cutting, and instead asked to channel their expressions of piety toward more rational acts, such as donating blood to local blood banks.⁶⁹ Deeb casts this as a response to Western modernity—both because it seeks to adopt the rationality and practicality of Western modernity, and because it derives from an awareness of and desire to tailor one's actions to the Western gaze. While this may be part of the reason for the shift away from exuberantly emotive religious expression, authentication also bears some of the hallmarks of Sunni pietism found in early Islam.

In these examples, views toward wailing seem related to a religious movement's position within the broader community in relation to other sects or religions, and the status of the consolidation of power among male religious elites within the movement itself. As Shi'a in southern Lebanon have increased their economic status and political authority, mourning rituals that once were beneficial in the threat they posed to non-Shi'a sources of political and religious authority, now threaten to disrupt the newly established authority and traditions of the ascendant local Shi'a community and male *ulema*. Thus, while Deeb sees the positive benefits an authenticated understanding of Zaynab has given to the women of Southern Lebanon, she does not recognize that authenticated Zaynab is a figure who works within the modes of male religiosity. This could either bring a new and expanded definition of what it means to be female and religious, or it could be a signal that women have conceded that male models of religious expression are normative, with which their own practices must be brought into line.

Why Zaynab and Not Amina?

In spite of the fact that female *mevlid* recitations in Turkey, like the Lebanese *majalis*, create a space for "feminine support, solidarity and equality"⁷⁰ they do not result in any other forms of social mobilization or to calls for women's active participation in public *mevlid* recitations. Tapper points out two possible rea-

sions for this: first she notes that *mevlid* recitations which unite women as mothers and Muslims are countered by “Reception Days” where a select few women from the community host revolving open houses. In contrast to the solidarity created at *mevlids*, Reception Days emphasize class differences between members of the upper-middle class and the rest of the town, and within this select group of women, the events highlight status differences between the women based upon their husband’s occupation, wealth, or government rank. Thus the community of women formed during *mevlids* is fragmented into competing families whose position is tied to a male head-of-household during Reception Day ceremonies.⁷¹

Beyond this, Tapper notes that religious public expression is heavily controlled in the secular Turkish Republic, and private religious gatherings are expressly forbidden. As such, women’s *mevlid* ceremonies are technically illegal, though few in government would imagine breaking up a gathering where their mothers and wives express their love of Muhammad.⁷² This, however, could quickly change if the *mevlid* became a venue for social mobilization.

Fear of repression, however, can not be the only thing preventing women from expanding the unity found within the *mevlid* performance to the public sphere. It is important not to discount the value of the privacy of their religious rituals in a society where public expressions of religiosity are heavily monitored. In Turkey, where men “become both guardians and enactors of the state-established orthodoxy...women, particularly in their *mevlud* services, preserve a domain of religious enthusiasm.”⁷³ Though they do not have freedom of public expression, “women’s *mevluds* may be an important vehicle for religious sentiments that cannot be expressed more publicly by men.”⁷⁴ Thus the very privacy of women’s ceremonies is what provides them with the freedom to maintain traditions under assault in the public sphere, and augments their value not only in the eyes of women, but also for pious men.

At the heart of this division between public/private and male/female is the notion of *nabi* versus *rasul*. *Nabi*, meaning roughly prophet, is a term which has had a sliding meaning in Islamic history. In pre-Islamic Arabia it seems to have denoted any being with “the gift of penetrating the mysteries of God” including “djinnns who used to listen at the gates of Heaven” and thus would be more accurately rendered as *seer* or *diviner* in English.⁷⁵ The Qur’an, perhaps in response to accusations that Muhammad himself was nothing more than a seer or fortune-teller, marks angels as the source of divine messages, as opposed to the demonic inspiration of seers and soothsayers.⁷⁶ Thus in the loosest sense, *nabi* can be used to describe one who has received a message from God through an angel. *Nabi* is the passive, receptive element of prophecy depicted through

images of sexual penetration or pregnancy as Sells point out.⁷⁷ The list of *nabi* in Islam is long, and using the above definition, we may expand it to include Maryam and Amina, both of whom received visions and messages from angels hailing the coming of their sons.

The definition of *rasul* is more restrictive, meaning either messenger or apostle. From the Arabic root r-s-l, its verbal forms carry the connotations of one who is sent forth, one who corresponds, and also one who sets something free, one who sheds (as in tears), one who utters, etc. In the sense of apostle, it differs from *nabi* in that a *rasul* is leader of an *ummah* whereas a *nabi* is merely called to reveal insights given to him or her by God, but not necessarily to lead a community. According to this definition, there have only been nine *rasuls*, including Muhammad.⁷⁸ Taken to mean messenger, however, the contrast between *rasul* and *nabi* no longer focuses on the size or nature of a prophet's community, but rather on what the prophet is called to do with the divine message. *Rasul* emphasizes the active aspect of prophecy: the calling out, sending forth or delivering of a message, whereas *nabi* places the emphasis on reception. Using these as working definitions, it is easy to see how many figures in Islamic history have received insights from God without necessarily being asked to share these insights with the broader community. The differences between Zaynab and other female figures of authority within Islamic history also seems to revolve around this dynamic between *rasul* and *nabi*, the tension between those who incubate revelation and those who disseminate it.

Zaynab is a paradoxical figure because she calls women to revolutionary dissent, yet in the communities Deeb studied in Southern Lebanon, through authenticating discourse, women following Zaynab's model become the "guardians and enactors" of a new orthodoxy, by adapting an inherently male discourse. This paradox occurs because of Zaynab's dual role, as both scourge of the emerging Sunni consent, and leader of a beleaguered Shi'i community. Zaynab is revolutionary in her role as advocate for a religious minority speaking out against an oppressive majority. Within the Shi'a community, however, she becomes interim leader who upholds communal cohesion between the death of one male authority and the establishment of his successor.⁷⁹ Thus authenticated Zaynab is both a revolutionary and a conservative role model at the same time. When invoked to mobilize women against an external enemy, such as Lebanese Christians or Sunnis, or occupying Israeli forces, her power derives from her role as *rasul*, one called upon to spread the message. Within the Shi'a community itself, however, she becomes the consummate *nabi*, in the mode of Amina and Maryam, who bears the light of prophecy (the tradition

itself) in times of turmoil until authority can be reinvested in a momentarily absent male authority.

Conclusion

So what is it about the figure of Zaynab that motivates women to public piety and opens up space in the public sphere for their presence? How is she different from other strong female figures from the Prophet's family, such as Fatimah, Khadijah, A'isha, or Amina in the Turkish context? As we have seen, Zaynab is a unique figure because she is both called to spread the story of Karbala and also to maintain the Shi'i community in the absence of a male heir apparent. The only comparable female member of the Prophet's family who can be pointed to in her capacity as a community leader is A'isha, but as numerous sources have pointed out, her failure at the Battle of the Camel, and Ali's subsequent comments about the role of women in public life, have had extremely detrimental effects on the status of women as leaders.⁸⁰ In Sunni Islamic sources, she is instead commemorated primarily as a transmitter of *hadith*—emphasizing her role as *nabi*, as one who kept the words and deeds of the Prophet safe until they could be transmitted to the proper male authorities.

Similar attempts to mobilize women to revolutionary action through use of other female figures, in particular Fatima in the Iranian context, have also met with poor results. In his *Fatima is Fatima* Ali Shariati attempted to create a moving biography of the Prophet's daughter, showing her struggle in the face of Ali's marginalization following her father's death. While one can hardly read the text without feeling moved by her struggle and upset by the injustice heaped up her and her family⁸¹, as a model for political mobilization Fatima's quiet endurance and early, grief-related demise (in Shariati's account)⁸² call women not to enact political change, but rather to wait until their husbands declare that the time is right to throw off oppression, even if that time does not come during their own lives. Here we see the passivity of the *nabi* without the subsequent leadership and vocality of the *rasul*.

Are there ways in which women can be vocal within the tradition itself, not just in the face of external authority, without adopting male discourse? I would argue that wailing provides just such a space. The trauma of death creates a rupture that threatens male religious authority and emotional stoicism. Carefully orchestrated funerary rites are enacted to ensure not simply the transition of the deceased into the afterlife, but also the cohesion of community following the loss of a member. To prevent the potential rupture in the social order that wailing threatens, women are often banned from participating in funerary ritu-

als. In the case of Turkey, however, the opposite is true. Rather than keeping women segregated from death, “women are *given* death while the social order is reaffirmed elsewhere”⁸³ In this case women are not kept separate from death, but are grouped with death and both women and death are separated from the rest of society where they are left to stitch together life and death by affirming the possibility for individual salvation. Tapper and Tapper argue that it is this focus on individual salvation rather than communal regeneration which undermines the power of female mourning. Contrary to what one might assume, in *mevlid* performances, death is not overcome by appealing to the recuperative powers of new birth in the face of loss. Instead, power over the lifecycle is specifically taken *away* from women in the *mevlud*'s construction of Muhammad's birth. The anti-patriarchal nature of the passing treatment of Muhammad's paternity also serves to exalt motherhood to the spiritual realm by treating the Prophet's birth as almost parthenogenic.⁸⁴ Similarly, Mary and Asiya's appearance, while undercutting the primacy of men in the line of prophetic succession, also denies “any connexion between human sexuality and salvation.”⁸⁵

In order to move beyond the dialectic of female griever who loses all command of her senses in the face of death and must be kept separate from the community, and woman as passive bearer of trauma who seeks to uphold the social order until a suitable male authority or ritual structure can bridge the chasm caused by death, a new discourse must be found. In the former model, overwhelming grief is overcome by the hope for individual salvation, an action which can unite women in their shared faith but simultaneously places the focus of mourning in the afterlife, overlooking very real concerns of community cohesion and continuity following death. In the latter model women are granted a role in reconstituting community life following a death in exchange for handing control over the modes this reconstitution will utilize to established male authorities. In both cases the privilege of defining the connection between life and death is handed to men: in the former the chasm is bridged by salvation through the intercession of a male figure, and in the latter, community cohesion is reconstituted through appeals to orderly male ritual and pre-existing social structures.

What these two modes fail to acknowledge, however, is that women have sufficient capacity to “assert central beliefs in the continuity between temporal life and a life hereafter.”⁸⁶ These beliefs could center upon the biological continuity of the birth/death cycle, in which women play the pre-eminent role, or upon the transformative and revolutionary power of grief itself, not merely as pressed into service of a male agenda. The Amina of Suleyman Chelebi's *Mevlid* thus provides a potential figure women may turn to in order to assert the

continuity of the birth/death cycle, since her role as mother is recited repeatedly in the face of death and because the role of fatherhood in such a cycle is significantly downplayed. Similarly, the value of Zaynab as a figure of mourning, which Deeb's interlocutors disdain in favor of an authenticated version of Zaynab, must be re-evaluated. It is precisely Zaynab's extreme grief, her sense of nothing-left-to-lose that gave her the courage to speak out against Yazid and become the model of vocal female leadership that women so admire. It is also the fragmentation of male authority following the massacre at Karbala that opened a space for Zaynab to control the way the early Shi'a community presented itself and the story of one of its most seminal events to other communities and future generations. Thus Zaynab's grief should not be elided as a momentary loss of self control, or as a moment of communal chaos which must be bridged, but rather as a productive and transformative moment of liminality in which women have a unique opportunity to define the ways in which tragedy is explained and control the way the community reconstitutes itself following the rupture of death.

NOTES

- 1 Kathleen Burrill, "Suleyman Celebi, Dede," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Edited by P. Bearman et al, Brill, 2008, <http://brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-7172> (10 January 2008) and Louis Mitler, *Ottoman Turkish Writers: Bibliographical Dictionary of Significant Figures in pre-Republican Turkish Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 139. Burrill sets his birth date as 1351 with a question mark, whereas Mitler lists it as circa 1370, other sources do not bother to venture a guess.
- 2 Mitler, 139.
- 3 Suleyman Chelebi, *The Mevlidi Sherif*, trans. F. Lyman MacCallum (London: John Murray, 1957), 5.
- 4 E.J.W. Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry*, (Cambridge, England: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1984), 233.
- 5 Chelebi, 7.
- 6 Chelebi, 6.
- 7 Gibb, 232.

- 8 Chelebi, 7.
- 9 Burrill.
- 10 A. Salmi, "Mawlidiyya," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al. Brill, 2008.
<http://brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-5060> (10 January 2008)
- 11 Chelebi, 8.
- 12 Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, (London: Islamic Texts Society, 1983), 17-18.
- 13 Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *The life of Muhammad : a translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, A. Guillaume, trans. (New York : Oxford University Press, 2001), 69.
- 14 Chelebi, 20.
- 15 Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 63.
- 16 Schimmel, *And Muhammad*, 63.
- 17 Chelebi, 19.
- 18 Schimmel, *And Muhammad*, 64.
- 19 Chelebi, 19.
- 20 Burrill.
- 21 Qur'an 19:19.
- 22 Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999), 189.
- 23 Sells, 190.
- 24 Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*, trans. Susan H. Ray (New York: Continuum, 1997), 95-96.
- 25 Chelebi, 21.
- 26 Chelebi, 21.
- 27 Qur'an 19:25.
- 28 Chelebi, 22.
- 29 Qur'an 19:30-33
- 30 Chelebi, 26.

31 Chelebi, 21.

32 In the Islamic context, this means that Jesus was created directly by God without the need for a human male to cause conception. God's unique role in Jesus' fathership is explained as yet another act of God's infinite creative powers, and does not invite questions about the uniqueness and importance of Jesus' sonship in relation to God, as it does in the Christian context.

33 H. Fuchs and J. Knappert, "Mawlid (a.) or Mawlud" *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al. Brill, 2008. <http://brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-0716>, 10 January 2008

34 Fuchs and Knappert.

35 Chelebi, 9.

36 Gibb, 237.

37 Fuchs and Knappert.

38 Fuchs and Knappert.

39 Nancy and Richard Tapper, "The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam," In *Man*, New Series, 22, no. 1 (Mar., 1987): 77.

40 Neget Cagatay, "The Tradition of Mawlid Recitations in Islam Particularly in Turkey," In *Studia Islamica*, no. 28 (1968): 127-128.

41 Tapper and Tapper, 77.

42 Tapper and Tapper, 77.

43 Tapper and Tapper, 77.

44 Tapper and Tapper, 82.

45 Tapper and Tapper, 82.

46 Nancy Tapper, "Gender and Religion in a Turkish Town: A Comparison of Two Types of Formal Women's Gatherings," In *Women's Religious Experience: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by Pat Holden (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 75. These gatherings are taken so seriously by the participants that even small children are prevented from attending.

47 Tapper and Tapper, 79.

48 Tapper and Tapper, 80.

49 Tapper and Tapper, 74.

50 Tapper and Tapper, 80.

51 Tapper and Tapper, 80.

52 Tapper and Tapper, 82.

- 53 Tapper and Tapper, 82.
- 54 Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 142.
- 55 Deeb, 142.
- 56 Deeb, 148.
- 57 Tapper and Tapper, 84.
- 58 Tapper and Tapper, 84.
- 59 Deeb, 143.
- 60 Deeb, 143.
- 61 Deeb, 149.
- 62 Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 118.
- 63 Halevi, 118-119.
- 64 Halevi, 119.
- 65 Halevi, 123. Similar notions of the female voice as a threat to male integrity are found in Greek culture, as noted by Halevi (115) and Anne Carson in her essay "The Gender of Sound" in *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995). Carson notes that female wailing was viewed by men as chaotic and threatened to bring disorder to the community, in spite of the fact that, as in the Arabian context, female wailing was a structured and organized practice with its own set of customs, components and expectations.
- 66 Halevi, 142.
- 67 Halevi, 133. Wailing and commemoration rituals have indeed been a source of political uprisings, most recently in the case of the Iranian Revolution. In the Iranian context, mourning rituals for those killed by the Shah created an ever escalating cycle of public demonstrations every forty days. At these rituals, mourners would be once again killed by the Shah's forces as they sought to repress the public demonstrations. Forty days later there would be another public protest/mourning ritual for those who had been killed at the previous one, and the cycle would continue (Milani, 179-235).
- 68 Halevi, 125.
- 69 Deeb, 135.
- 70 Tapper, "Gender and Religion in a Turkish Town," 76.
- 71 Tapper, "Gender and Religion in a Turkish Town," 76.
- 72 Tapper and Tapper, 83.

- 73 Tapper and Tapper, 83.
- 74 Tapper and Tapper, 83.
- 75 T. Fahd, "Nubuwwa," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al. Brill, 2008. <http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-5964>, 12 January 2008.
- 76 Fahd, 2.
- 77 Sells, 190.
- 78 A.J. Wensinck, "Rasūl," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al. Brill, 2008. <http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0911> 08 January 2008
- 79 Deeb, 148.
- 80 Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 221, and Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1991), 5-7.
- 81 And certainly it was Shariati's intention to inspire associations between Fatima's situation and Iranian's own oppression under the Shah by linking Abu Bakr and Omar's transgressions against Ali and Fatima to the Shah's transgressions against the Iranian Shi'i.
- 82 Ali Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar, (Tehran, Iran: The Shariati Foundation, 1981), 220-224.
- 83 M. Bloch, "Death, Women and Power," in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, eds. M. Bloch and J. Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 226 as cited in Tapper and Tapper, 87.
- 84 Tapper and Tapper, 87.
- 85 Tapper and Tapper, 87.
- 86 Tapper and Tapper, 88.

RELIGIOUS PERSONS AND THE BACKGROUND CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Bharat Ranganathan

For without citizens' allegiance to public reason and their honoring the duty of civility, divisions and hostilities between doctrines are bound in time to assert themselves, should they not already exist. Harmony and concord among doctrines and people's affirming public reason are unhappily not a permanent condition of social life. Rather, harmony and concord depend on the vitality of the public political culture and on citizens' being devoted to and realizing the ideal of public reason. Citizens could easily fall into bitterness and resentment, once they no longer see the point of affirming an ideal of public reason and come to ignore it. —John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*

1.

John Rawls's political philosophy has been subject to myriad criticisms. My aim in this essay is to defend Rawls's arguments on the idea of public reason and the background culture of democracy. In response to religious voices critical of liberal democracy, I argue that democratic society grants them the freedom to hold their substantive moral convictions and the platform to voice their views. But, by the same token, liberal democracy makes certain epistemic demands on religious (and other) citizens. These demands include democratic tolerance, which requires citizens to legitimate their views to one another and

is antithetical to institutionalizing a single view of the good. Liberal democracy must ultimately protect its citizens' freedoms and tolerate their diverse views.

This essay unfolds as follows. I first explore Rawls's comments on public reason and what he refers to as the "background culture" of democratic society. Then, drawing from T.M. Scanlon, Jeffrey Stout, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, I consider the exchange of reasons that occurs in and the tolerant nature of this background culture. I believe Rawls's framework is flexible in some instances and rigid in others. On the flexible side, social interaction allows citizens to draw from their comprehensive moral schemes to reason with one another. Scanlon refers to these exchanges as the "informal politics of social life."¹ On the rigid side, one cannot coerce his or her neighbors with these (informal) reasons. I also consider religious persons who are critical of Rawls's view.² Detractors considered here, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas, view the pluralism endemic to liberal democratic societies as problematic. Liberals, on the other hand, view it as one of the hallmarks of democratic society. Finally, building on these considerations, I respond to these critics.

2.

Rawls has two tasks in *Political Liberalism*. The first deals with the possibility of a well-ordered society. The second task, which is relevant to the discussion here, considers the conditions of legitimacy. On these tasks, Rawls asks, "how is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?"³ In this section, I focus principally on Rawls's views on public reason and the background culture of civil society.

Rawls defines public reason as:

characteristic of a democratic people: it is the reason of its citizens, of those sharing the status of equal citizenship. The subject of their reason is the good of the public: what the political conception of justice requires of a society's basic structure of institutions, and of the purposes and ends they are to serve. Public reason, then, is public in three ways: as reasons of the citizens as such, it is the reason of the public; its subject is the good of the public and matters of fundamental justice; and its nature and content is public, being given by the ideals and principles expressed by society's conception of political justice, and conducted open to view on that basis... As an ideal conception of citizenship for a constitutional democratic regime, it presents how things might be, taking people as a just and well-ordered society would encourage them to be. It describes what is possible and can be, yet may never be, though no less fundamental for that.⁴

Public reason also lends itself to Rawls's goal of developing a freestanding conception of justice. And, Rawls adds, public reason applies only to questions "involving what we may call 'constitutional essentials' and questions of basic justice."⁵ In other words, it applies to what Rawls conceives of as necessary for a fair and just democratic society. Reasoning in this way, citizens can reflect and deliberate on political questions drawing resources from their respective comprehensive moral schemes. Rawls is quick to note, however, that the language of public reason must stand when citizens "engage in political advocacy in the public forum" and when "citizens are to vote in elections when constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are at stake."⁶

Rawls then links public reason and democratic citizenship. The ideal of citizenship, on Rawls's view, imposes, "a moral, not a legal, duty—the duty of civility—to be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason. This duty also involves a willingness to listen to others and a fairmindedness in deciding when accommodations to their view should be made."⁷ The salient feature of this comment is Rawls's emphasis on the language one may use and its link to toleration. Our society is chock full of different comprehensive moral schemes. On a democratic view, we regard one another, *qua* citizen, as free and equal. Respecting the fact that we are free and equal, Rawls wants us to reason with each other in a way that is mindful of the fact that we have different views of the good. When we affirm and support the political conception of justice, acknowledging that our own comprehensive moral views are concordant with its aims, we form an overlapping consensus.⁸ When this happens, Rawls believes, the paradox of public reason disappears. However, as I explore later, certain sorts of people do not agree with Rawls's conjectures.

Non-public reasons refer to what Rawls calls the background culture of civil society. He defines this culture as: the culture of daily life, of its many associations, for instance, churches and universities, learned and scientific societies, and clubs and teams, to mention a few. These reasons for Rawls are social and "certainly not private."⁹ This view becomes more important when we consider Rawls's proviso below. Moreover, "[w]e impose any such doctrine on ourselves," Rawls argues, "I mean that, as free and equal citizens, whether we affirm these views is regarded within our political competence specified by basic constitutional rights and liberties."¹⁰ These views, he believes, are ours to hold or abandon. We use them to reflect on personal deliberations and contemplate on political matters. One further note, linking nonpublic and public reason. Rawls argues:

The point of the ideal of public reason is that citizens are to conduct their fundamental discussions within the framework of what each regards as a political conception of justice based on values that the others can reasonably be accepted to endorse and is, in good faith, prepared to defend that conception so understood.¹¹

And:

It is inevitable and often desirable that citizens have different views as to the most appropriate political conception; for the public political culture is bound to different fundamental ideas that can be developed in different ways. An orderly contest between them over time is a reliable way to find which one, if any, is most reasonable.

This view seems reasonable enough. Rawls's first claim reinforces the view that we need a framework and a language with which we can legitimate our views to one another. Moreover, it reflects the desired civility of the background culture. And the second claim is very much concordant with the democratic enterprise itself. It points to our public and social interaction with one another over time. I return to this point in the next section when I consider the exchange of reasons.

Let me now turn to religion and public reason. To support both their comprehensive moral scheme and a reasonable constitutional democratic regime, Rawls thinks it is insufficient that religious persons view government as a mere *modus vivendi*. On his view, a *modus vivendi* serves, "merely to quiet divisiveness and encourage social stability. However, in this case we do not have stability for the right reasons, that is, as secured by a firm allegiance to a democratic society's political (moral) ideals and values...democracy is accepted conditionally and not for the right reasons."¹² What one must instead do, Rawls insists, is "give up forever the hoping of changing the constitution so as to establish our religion's hegemony, or of qualifying our obligations so as to ensure its influence and success. To retain such hopes and aims would be inconsistent with the idea of equal liberties and for all free and equal citizens."¹³ This is indeed an important point. For certain prominent religious voices, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas, Christianity provides an account of the entirety of reality. Secular liberal modes of reasoning, especially that espoused by Rawls, are antithetical to the Christian view. On Christianity and democratic government, Hauerwas provocatively states:

Growth in the Christian life may well involve encouraging a greater conflict between the self and wider society than is generally approved.

Thus, Christians train or should train their children to resist the authority of the state, not in the name of “rights” as individuals, but because “justice” of the state is to be judged against God’s justice. Such training is “risky,” as it separates the young of the Christian community from powerful support necessary to being “a self.” To be trained to resist the state, therefore, requires nothing more than an alternative society in which the self can find a home.¹⁴

For liberal-minded persons these sorts of claims are indeed difficult to swallow. It is obvious that Hauerwas’s comments are antagonistic towards liberalism; he views liberalism as undermining (his reading of) Christianity. I reserve response to this sort of view until a later section.

Rawls’s view, following from his suggestion that religious persons abandon a hegemonic project, advocates tolerance of others. A reasonable constitutional democracy, he argues, is the “way to fairly ensure the liberty of its adherents consistent with the equal liberties of other reasonable free and equal citizens.”¹⁵ Moreover, a democracy of this sort is the only way to regulate the rivalry between differing comprehensive moral doctrines. This is especially important when doctrines or the people who espouse them are unreasonable.

This does not suggest, however, that religious argument has absolutely no place in public conversation. Rawls’s *proviso* states, “that reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support.”¹⁶ The speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., mentioned by Rawls himself, demonstrate the important need for the proviso. It also grants greater latitude to religious persons to address pressing problems in the near term. In other words, here and now religious persons may lack the particular language—the language of public reason—to address a problem. However, given that they, as citizens, see it as a problem, they may invoke reasons from their comprehensive schemes to address it. It is reasonable to think that if a claim is made, that some other person, not sharing the same comprehensive doctrine, might provide a public reason.¹⁷ Thus Rawls comments, “[t]his meets the duty of civility, since in due course the proviso is satisfied.”¹⁸ And, second, we now have an issue that these two groups see an urgent need to talk about informally, that is, in the background or informal setting of social life.

3.

Unsurprisingly, not all Christians share Hauerwas's convictions. Responding to the views espoused by Hauerwas and the like, Nicholas Wolterstorff comments, "[p]resumably the destruction of liberal democracy is the effect these writers desire, since they speak of it as a great evil. I, by contrast, regard it as a great good—a gift of God's providential grace to humanity."¹⁹ Here I consider Wolterstorff, Stout, and Scanlon on the exchange of reasons and the nature of toleration required by our democratic framework. What I aim to show is that interaction among and toleration between citizens moves us beyond a mere *modus vivendi* towards the sort of reciprocity and cooperation valued by Rawlsian liberalism.

As mentioned above, under conditions of freedom, disagreements multiply rather than disappear. These disagreements, however, suggest that citizens are granted the freedom to pursue their own view of the good. Pursuit of these goods are not, as some critics suggest, selfish moves. Rather, these pursuits more often than not give meaning to people's lives. Religion is one such pursuit. On the religious voice and democracy, Wolterstorff comments:

[Religious citizens] will soon find that if they want to be persuasive, they cannot just say "Here I stand," but will have to fetch around for arguments that persons of different fundamental convictions from theirs find cogent...Not all who heard King's "I Have a Dream" speech shared his religion; those who did not, made allowances. They were then moved and inspired along with everyone else.²⁰

Wolterstorff provides a position concordant with Rawls's proviso. More importantly, he illustrates again that religious persons can broadcast their views in the social and public spheres. He then moves to toleration. Once we acknowledge that as result of our pluralism there is an array of different views, we have another sort of democratic responsibility. That is, we need to get into each other's minds, to see what makes each of us think the way we do, and see if we cannot reason with another. Stout is instructive on this point. Democracy, on Stout's view, is a discursive practice. He argues, "[b]y exchanging reasons and requests for reasons with one another, participants in the practice hold one another responsible for their commitments and actions."²¹ Thus, when we recognize one another as free and equal, we also need to acknowledge the sorts of claims other people make and the views they hold. A democracy does not say you must affirm X and leave Y; rather, we support a system that lets us affirm our own view of the good. "A liberal democracy survives," Wolterstorff adds, "as long as those who lose the vote think it's better to lose the vote than destroy the

system. Its survival does not depend on making anybody shape up to anything other than the formal requirements of the system itself."²²

One of democracy's goals, Stout holds, is to bring as many people as possible into these sorts of practices, e.g., public and social conversation, informal politicking and voting, "without regard to social status, wealth, or power." Stout's approach is to build networks with one another. On his view, while each group's morality differs—presumably because of the good we each pursue—"anybody's morality resembles everybody else's in some respects."²³ Stout argues elsewhere, over against MacIntyre, that differing moral views are not incommensurable. Rather, we lack the linguistic tools to acknowledge that our views more often than not overlap. And, through conversation, we increasingly find that we have a lot in common with other, different sorts of people.²⁴ This sort of attitude is important for democracy. Specifically, it shows conviction in the belief that we can reason with one another. And, in instances when we cannot, two things may follow. On the one hand, as mentioned above, it may well be that we simply lack the linguistic tools. Public reason and informal politics, however, try to remedy this problem. The timeline over which we may have to reason with each other remains indeterminate. On the other hand, another's intolerance of contrasting views may be quite severe. Consequently, while we may be able to get into their heads, to see what makes them hold a certain view, they are unable or unwilling to get into our minds. When this occurs, our toleration of others must hold firm.

Here, Scanlon is helpful. On his view, tolerance requires "us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disapprove of them. Tolerance thus involves an attitude that is intermediate between wholehearted acceptance and unrestrained opposition."²⁵ I have mentioned above the social interaction that occurs between citizens. In this domain, Scanlon believes, tolerance requires democratic practice. A tolerant person, he contends, would reason as follows: "Even though we disagree, they are as fully members of society as I am. They are as entitled as I am to the protections of the law, as entitled as I am to live as they choose to live. In addition (and this is the hard part) neither their way of living nor mine is uniquely *the* way of our society."²⁶ In other words, we recognize each other as free and equal, and we have also formulated our own view of the good. This is indeed the sticking point between Hauerwasians and Rawlsians. For Hauerwasians, there is only one way—to be obedient to the Christian life and Christ's example. And, as mentioned above, his view is to be distrustful and resistant to the state. What this suggests, on my reading, is that Hauerwasians are against a liberal system that promotes individualism and pluralism. For the liberal voices explored here, however, this

is impermissible. But it does not follow that we should, or are required to, force Hauerwas to change his views. Forcing someone, of course, violates his or her autonomy—even if they do not hold the same conception of autonomy as we do. Indeed, religious ethicists have long tried to try reason with him. These efforts have been fruitless. Scanlon comments that rejecting tolerance “involves a form of alienation from one’s fellow citizens.”²⁷ But Hauerwas is fine with this separation. He believes Christians ought to be a pilgrim people. He therefore says, “We are at home in no nation. Our true home is in the church itself, where we find those who, like us, have been formed by a savior who was necessarily always on the move.”²⁸ In the next section, I respond to these anti-liberal views.

4.

For those unfamiliar with Hauerwas, it is worth noting, perhaps unsurprisingly, that he takes his cues from Alasdair MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelianism. On Hauerwas’s reading of MacIntyre, the moral fabric of our contemporary society is incommensurably torn by liberal individualism. Hauerwas believes people are all selfishly pursuing their own individual good; community and cooperation are not part of the picture.²⁹ What Christians need to be, Hauerwas maintains, are a people committed to Christ’s moral example. Only by acknowledging the narrative of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection does one acquire the tools necessary for *the* proper life. His ethical vision is a community founded around this example. Indeed, as mentioned above, to be faithful to this community means placing nothing else before diligent obedience to Christ. Consequently, democratic authority must never take precedence over the Christian faith.

How do we respond to the Hauerwases of the world?³⁰ And, how do we respect them in a democratic way? There are a few possible routes to take here. Burton Dreben, for instance, provocatively suggests, “[i]f one cannot see the benefits of living in a liberal constitutional democracy, if one does not see the virtue of that ideal, then I do not know how to convince him... You do not try to reason with him.”³¹ As mentioned above, people indeed have tried reasoning with the New Traditionalists. These attempts have failed. Hauerwas continues to argue along the same lines, gaining polemical force. Nevertheless, ceasing dialogue with them is not the best solution. On a charitable reading of their views, the New Traditionalists share many of the same convictions liberal democrats do. Indeed, acknowledging this, as Stout suggests above, gives us grounds for interaction. They might not want to engage with us, but their

commitments to nonviolence and friendship, for example, show that they are not villainous persons.

This forces us into a somewhat awkward position. On the one hand, the New Traditionalists are fine with alienating themselves from the broader society. But many of their moral commitments are not alien to the rest of us. In fact, on a charitable reading, many of their views are quite admirable. I might go so far as to say one might be able to learn a bit from them. And here, again, is an important point relating to tolerance and informal politics. That is, insofar as one is willing to see what the New Traditionalists have to say, one can solicit their views and get resources to think about one's own commitments. On the other hand, they neither desire nor do they sustain any commitments to our liberal democracy. Nor do they believe that non-Christian ethics overlap with their views. And, if they are going to educate their children to be resistant to the state, then there is a problem. The concern, then, is what form this resistance will take. As radical pacifists, it safe to assume their attack of liberal democracy will be limited to rhetoric—there will be no resorts to violence.

Commenting on the freedom of political speech, Rawls states, “there is no such thing as the crime of seditious libel; there are no prior restraints on freedom of the press, except for special cases; and the advocacy of revolutionary and subversive doctrines is fully protected.”³² This view again reflects Rawls's sustained commitment to basic liberties for all citizens, among which free speech is one. The New Traditionalists' rhetoric at the very least must be classified as adversarial to if not subversive of the liberal democratic regime. Nevertheless, Rawls is quick to affirm their freedom of speech and thought. Indeed protecting seditious libel is a necessary condition for free speech. Once the freedom to this sort of speech is secured, the other essential fixed points are easier to establish and maintain. Moreover, free speech is an important alternate to violence for a group to air its grievances about a system. Freedom of speech requires that we allow all voices to broadcast themselves. These grievances, of course, have reasons. That is, their views emerge from their respective comprehensive doctrines. By supplying these reasons to the public and social forums, the rest of us have a chance to wrap our minds around their complaints. Like the other liberal democrats explored here, I do not believe the New Traditionalists' objections obtain. Nor do I believe they will gain widespread public support. But by bringing their views out into the open, we have a platform to engage one another. Doing so both respects them as citizens of our society and expresses democratic toleration of their views. Repressing their voices, however, would suppress their reasons and violate their right to free speech and thought.

At the same time, liberal democrats must stand pat. As Rawls and Stout both hold, democracy is a tradition in its own right and its roots are deeply embedded. On this point, Rawls contends:

...the basic institutions of a moderately well-governed democratic society are not so fragile or unstable as to be brought down by subversive advocacy alone. Indeed, a wise political leadership in such a society takes this advocacy as a warning that fundamental changes may be necessary; and what changes are required is known from the more comprehensive political view used to explain and justify the advocacy of resistance and revolution.³³

In a society that is stable for the right reasons, the dissident views of a minority are not sufficient to topple or damage our commitments to the just political framework. The second part of Rawls's view, however, leads down two routes. On the first route, Wolterstorff, for instance, may critique the latitude granted by the proviso. But while he critiques it he still maintains his support of the political conception. His view is critical rather than subversive. He wants change Christian attitudes *within* the system while affirming the just provisions upheld by liberal democracy. The New Traditionalists take the second route, breeding resistance against Christian affiliation with democracy. Here, again, we run into problems. Specifically, the New Traditionalists will not abandon their project of the Christian view as *the good* that is antithetical to democratic norms. And, in response to this grievance, we simply cannot make fundamental changes to our political framework to satisfy their complaints. This remains a sticking point.

There are two routes to interacting with these radical critics. The former is Dreben's view. People have (time and again) tried reasoning with them but to no avail. And now, if they cannot see the benefits of liberal democracy, then, there is nothing more we can say to them. Despite their scholarly work, and the acolytes they develop, they are just unreasonable people. One might even say, on this view, that reasoning with them at all just gives them greater polemical force. If we are sure our institutions will stand strong against their attacks then we will leave well enough alone. They remain alien to us and we alien towards them. Democracy and (the New Traditionalist reading of) Christianity remain polar opposites. What this does though fails our own commitments to democratic tolerance and participation.

Toleration, at minimum, means letting (unreasonable) persons hold the views that they want and allowing them to pursue their unique good. That being said, I acknowledge that is difficult to entertain, let alone take seriously,

many of the views espoused by the New Traditionalists. Tolerance requires us to take these views a bit more seriously. The recommendation made by Wolterstorff is especially important here. That is, toleration requires us to get inside of their heads. It means thinking along their lines and empathizing with their viewpoint. We absolutely need to let them air their views in the public and social spheres. This act is afforded by a basic liberty. The move, then, is to engage them. Engagement here leads to participation in the democratic process. More importantly, I am suggesting we make moves against alienating other members of our society. Their views may not suffice for public reason, but this does not suggest that they have nothing to contribute to our informal conversations. Indeed, if we are able to talk to each other at this level, if only in a tertiary manner, then we may slowly show to the New Traditionalists that their views are not that far separated from our own. The background culture is the staging ground and sustaining force of our political institutions. Defenders of democratic liberalism need to bring as many people as possible into this fold, to tolerate and participate, and preserve justice for all of us.

NOTES

* Thanks to Cory Kates for comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Thanks also to the members of the Critical Theory Reading Group for many pertinent discussions.

- 1 Scanlon, T.M. *The Difficulty of Tolerance – Essays in Political Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003a, 190; Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy & Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, 225-245; Williams Bernard. *In the Beginning was the Deed*, 3rd Edition. Princeton: Princeton University, 2007, 40-51; and Wolterstorff, Nicholas. "An Engagement with Rorty." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1, 2003, 129-139. It goes without saying that Scanlon, Stout, and Wolterstorff each have different views about the democratic enterprise that depart in many important ways from Rawls's conception. But all are defenders of many of the ideals espoused by liberal democracy. Especially in regards to Stout and Wolterstorff, I have purposely been selective in my retrieval. (Scanlon's contractualist formula, it seems to me, takes many cues from Rawls's arguments.) The quarrels I see occurring between them and Rawls have to do with the way we conceive of liberal democracy. In these quarrels, they are not seeking a way to abandon liberal democracy altogether. Rather, they are trying to clear out "elbow room" for the sorts of views that may be expressed in formal and informal politics.

- 2 Please note, throughout this essay I focus on religious persons, referring to people who hold reason ably comprehensive or comprehensive moral doctrines. As Rawls notes, a “comprehensive moral doctrine” also applies to nonreligious doctrines. However, since I later consider objections from Christians, I use the term “religious persons.”
- 3 Rawls, 3.
- 4 Rawls, 213.
- 5 There are two kinds of constitutional essentials: (a) fundamental principles that specify the general structure of government and the political process: the powers of legislature, executive, and judiciary; the scope of majority rule; and (b) equal basic rights and liberties of citizenship that legislative majorities are to respect: such as the right to vote and to participate in politics, liberty of conscience, freedom of thought and of association, as well as the protections of the rule of law, (227). On basic justice, Rawls comments, “[p]olitical discussions of the reasons for and against fair opportunity and the difference principle, though they are not constitutional essentials, fall under the questions of basic justice and so are to be decided by the political values of public reason,” (229).
- 6 Rawls, 215.
- 7 Rawls, 217; Cf. Scanlon “Rawls on Justification.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, edited by Samuel Freeman. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003.
- 8 See Rawls 1996, Lecture IV. It is also worth noting that when we have an overlapping consensus, our well-ordered society is also stable.
- 9 Rawls, 220.
- 10 Rawls, 220-222; Cf. Bedi, Sonu.. “What is so Special About Religion? The Dilemma of Religious Exemption.” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15.2, 2007, 235-249.
- 11 Rawls, 226-227. See also, Rawls 1996, 240-241. Cf. Scanlon’s contractualist formula: “The parties whose agreement is in question are assumed not merely to be seeking some kind of rational advantage but also to be moved by the aim of finding principles that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject. The idea of a shared willingness to modify our private demands in order to find a basis of justification that others also have reason to accept is a central element of the social contract tradition going back to Rousseau,” Scanlon, T.M. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 5.
- 12 Rawls, 459-460.
- 13 Rawls, 460.
- 14 Hauerwas, Stanley. *The Hauerwas Reader*, edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003a, 252.
- 15 Rawls, 460.
- 16 Rawls, 462.

- 17 Consider the following scenario. A Christian values the divine command forbidding killing another person. For a Christian, this is a religious claim reflecting the inherent worth of persons bestowed by God. A Christian might invoke this injunction in reference to capital punishment, demonstrating his or her moral view towards the practice. Another person, e.g., a Kantian philosopher, might then add that capital punishment violates an agent's autonomy; that it fails to treat an agent as an end. He too draws from his own comprehensive moral scheme to posit a reason against the continuance of capital punishment. As I read this example, two things consequently follow. First, drawing from their respective comprehensive moral doctrines, two groups have registered their arguments against a certain act; they have forwarded their arguments into the public sphere. But the Rawlsian proviso again makes epistemic demands on these citizens. Therefore, what must follow next is public justification. They together might seek a language by which their view can be legitimated to others. They thus fulfill their commitments to public reason, do not back away from their view on a particular act, and seek to do so on democratic grounds. Cf. Stout 2004, 10-11.
- 18 Rawls, 465.
- 19 Wolterstorff, Nicholas.. "Jeffrey Stout on Democracy and its Contemporary Christian Critics." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.4, 2005, 633-647.
- 20 Wolterstorff, 135. On my reading, there are still problems with Wolterstorff's account. Let me briefly mention why. I grant that his view overlaps in some ways with Rawls's on the duties of civility. But I'm less convinced that he properly stresses the epistemic demands made by *liberal democracy* on citizens' decision-making. Therefore, citizens may make ad hoc allowances, e.g., in cases like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech, but without being stressed to meet certain procedural demands, viz., the ideal of public reason, it's not demanded that citizens account for others' interests in the way Rawls's framework requires them to. See Note 1 above.
- 21 Stout, 209.
- 22 Wolterstorff, 137.
- 23 Stout, 228.
- 24 See Stout *Ethics After Babel – The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.; MacIntyre, Alasdair.. *After Virtue*, 2nd Edition. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.
- 25 Scanlon, T.M. *The Difficulty of Tolerance – Essays in Political Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 187.
- 26 Scanlon, 192.
- 27 Scanlon, 194.
- 28 Hauerwas. *The Peaceable Kingdom – A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, 102.
- 29 Consider Rawls's position on cooperation that contradicts Hauerwas's view. On cooperation, Rawls writes, "Fair terms of cooperation specify an idea of reciprocity:

all who are engaged in cooperation and who do their part as the rules and procedure require, are to benefit in an appropriate way as assessed by a suitable benchmark of comparison,” and, “reciprocity is a relationship between citizens of a well-ordered society expressed by its public conception of justice,” (16-17). See also Rawls 1996 § 3. “The Idea of Society as a Fair System of Cooperation.” For a defense of Rawls’s conception of individuals against communitarian critiques, see Pogge, Thomas W. *Realizing Rawls*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, 86-106.

- 30 Stout refers to MacIntyre, John Milbank, and Hauerwas as the “New Traditionalists.” I also employ this term from now on.
- 31 Dreben, Burton. “On Rawls and Political Liberalism.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, edited by Samuel Freeman. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003.
- 32 Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*, Revised Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 315.
- 33 Rawls 347-348. Elsewhere, Rawls forcefully adds, “...to restrict or suppress free political speech, including subversive advocacy, always implies at least a partial suspension of democracy. A constitutional doctrine that gives priority to free political speech and other basic liberties must hold that to impose such a suspension requires the existence of a constitutional crisis in which free political institutions cannot effectively operate or take the required measures to preserve themselves.” Moreover, “the free public use of our reason in questions of political and social justice would seem to be absolute,” (354, 355).

THE MIRRORED VEIL

Seeking the Face of God through the Figurative Art of Hagia Sophia and the *Mirâj-Nâme*h (1436) Manuscript

Zachary Ugolnik

Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his face continually.
(ps. 105:4)

Thou hast said, 'Seek ye my face.'
My heart says to thee, "Thy face, Lord, do I seek."
(ps. 27:8)

As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness;
when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form. 1
(ps. 17:15)

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding [or reflecting] the glory of the Lord,
are being transformed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another;
for this comes from the Lord who is Spirit.²
(2 Cor. 3:18)

Call not upon another God: there is no god but He.
All things perish, except His face; His is the judgment and to Him you shall return.³
(Qur'an 28:88)

"To God belongs the east and the west;
wherever you turn,
there is the Face of God.⁴
(Qur'an 2:115)

The face is the portrait of our identity. It greets us as we visualize our being. But to our own eyes it is unseen. Only through mirrors in the refraction of light are we allowed glimpses. Through these same lines of vision we seek the Face of God. The transfigured face of Jesus is perhaps such a reflection, a human face as the incarnate face of God. For others all creation, which includes ourselves, is his portrait: “wherever you turn there is the Face of God” (Qur’an 2:115)⁵. Yet it seems even for those found worthy to gaze beyond temporal creation, as “All things perish, except His face” (Qur’an 28:88), God’s likeness is veiled by a luminous void. A “veil made of light,”⁶ illuminated from beyond, which “goes back infinitely from the visible to the invisible by the grace of the visible itself.”⁷ This same infinitude shines through the face of Christ. These visions blind through sight, conceal through reflection, enlighten through mystery, and yet still call us to continue our journey to the light eternal.

This paper will compare the figurative art represented in the Islamic Turkish *Mirâj-Nâme* manuscript (book of mystical ascent) of the 15th century to the figurative art depicted on the walls and ceilings of the Eastern Christian Hagia Sophia of Constantinople after iconoclasm. This inquiry is based on the assumption that the conception of ‘seeking God’s Face’ informs both programs. Andrew Rippin claims the word, *wajh*, face, and its plural *wujūh*, appear in the Qur’an 72 times.⁸ By his count, the conception of “seeking the face of God” or “desiring the face of God” is expressed seven times.⁹ Samuel E. Balantine in his study *The Hidden God* contends that the references in the psalms to “seeking God’s face,” are very much linked to the lament expressed over the face of God as hidden.¹⁰

Through embarking on what at first may seem an esoteric comparison, that is, a book and a building, I hope to provide insight into how both Eastern Christianity and Islam represent this hidden face. Much in the same way I hope to “read” the program of mosaic icons beginning from the lower walls culminating in the face depicted at the dome, I hope to traverse the manuscript as a landscape, chronicling Mohammed’s journey from earth to his prostration amidst eternal light. I will argue it is through the manipulation of light that both programs veil and mirror the face of God.

The legend of Mohammed’s *Mirâj* and his vision of God is based on first verse of surah twenty-seven of the Qur’an: “Glory to Him Who carried his Servant by night from the Sacred Mosque at Mecca to the Remote Temple in Jerusalem whose precincts we blessed...”¹¹ The narrative included in the *Mirâj-Nâme* manuscript was translated from its Arabic original into Eastern Turkish by the poet Mir Haydar of Herat, the capital of Khursan (present day Afghanistan)¹² Based on the colophon at the end of manuscript, the text is

thought to have been written in 1436 in Herat, during the rule of Shâh Rukh, for whom it was commissioned.¹³ The calligrapher Mâlik Bakhshî signed his work and scored the text in Uighur, a Mongol script,¹⁴ with Arabic gracing the borders of the page, while the painters of the illustrations (thought to be done by several artists) are left nameless.¹⁵ Michael Barry suggests that it was Shâh Rukh's claim to the legacies of both lines of khan and caliph that allowed for Mohammed's ascent to be depicted in the medium of pictures in such a culturally inclusive manner.¹⁶ The spiked nimbuses and swirly clouds of the illustrations suggest Chinese Buddhist influence. The manuscript includes fifty-eight paintings. The first forty-three depict his ascent to paradise, while the remaining portray his decent into hell.¹⁷ This paper will concern itself with the former.

Point of Departure: Mohammed with Prophets (Plate Five) and Deesis Icon

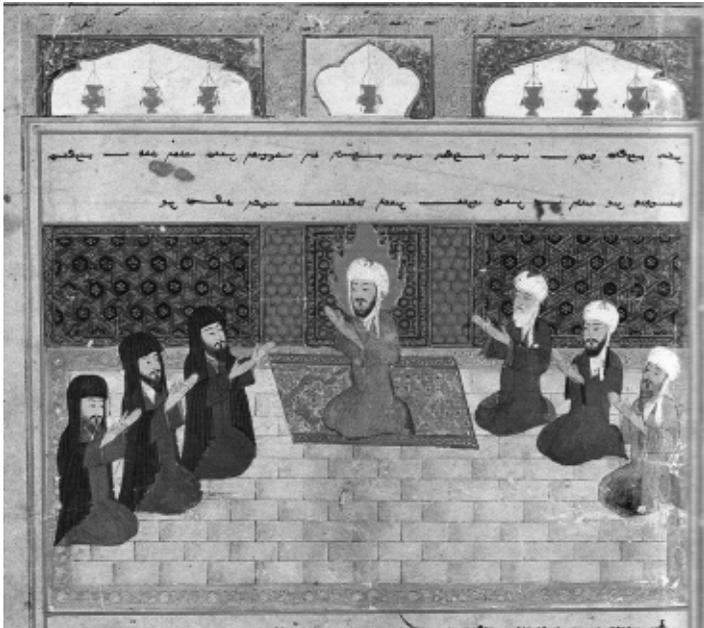


Fig. 1. Plate five, *Mirâj-Nâme* manuscript¹⁸



Fig. 2 Deesis icon, Hagia Sophia

Angel Gabriel appears to Mohammad on the first page (plate 1). Accompanied by other heavenly hosts, Mohammad rides the back of Buraq, a winged horse with a female human head to the sacred mosque in Jerusalem (plate 2). It is here that his ascent to heaven begins. He first enters the mosque and is greeted by the prophets that succeeded him (plate 4). In the next illumination (plate 5), when Mohammed is seated at prayer in the middle of the page with a succession of three prophets flanking him on both sides, their three quarter profiles facing him, we see a remarkable similarity to the deesis icon in Hagia Sophia (see illustrations 1 and 2). This mosaic, then, will begin our corresponding ascent of the cathedral.

Robin Cormack dates this famous mosaic to around 1261, after Hagia Sophia was restored following Frankish rule (1204-1261).¹⁹ It is located in the southern gallery in the middle bay of the cathedral. This common iconographic scene portrays Jesus between the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. The leaning of the John and Mary's heads in profile, turned inward, the supplicating gesture of John the Baptist's hands, as well as their slightly lower positioning in relation to the central figure, form angular lines of vision which lead to the centerpiece of the image: the face of Jesus. It is only this face we see in full frontal view. His head surrounded by a circular halo, which bears the mark of a cross, his visage superimposed in the center joint. This marker is only used in the halos of the messiah, perhaps as a mode of distinguishing him from the other figures which so resemble him (see fig. 3).

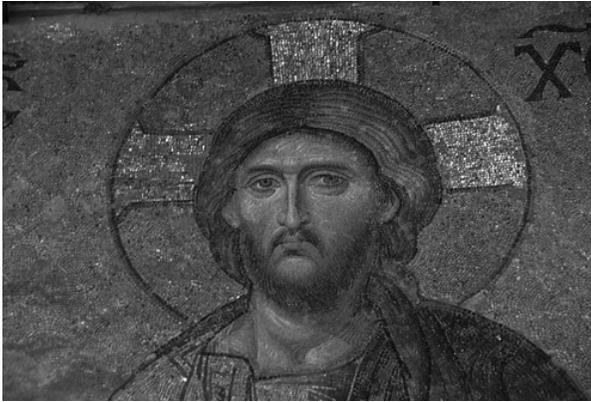


Fig. 3 Deesis icon, Hagia Sophia

This cross also acts as something of a bull's eye, drawing our gaze into the face. His eyes look back. Jean-Luc Marion writes: "the icon shows us a face that gazes at our gazes in order to summon them to its depth."²⁰

We find this same triangular line of vision in plate five, drawn by the three prophets on either side of Mohammed, culminating in his portrait. Much like the draping robes and long noses in the deesis, in the illumination "the hieratic attitude of the figures is accentuated by elongation of the body."²¹ This "lengthening" propels the movement of the eye. However, while the right hand of Jesus is depicted in a gesture of blessing, the hands of Mohammed, like the prophets around him are gestured upward in prayer. Though the prophets are turned toward Mohammed, their heads slightly angled back, Mohammed, depicted in frontal view, his eyes glancing up, is turned toward God. The flames of his fiery nimbus burn beyond the border of the page; seated upright, his hands call us to continue our upward journey. Jesus returns our gaze with a blessing; Mohammed redirects it with a prayer.

Jesus is God incarnate, but Mohammed, as the "seal of the prophets," acts as the supreme intermediary. Barry in his description of Islamic art after the triumph of iconoclasm in Byzantium, suggests: "This notion of God made visibly manifest in man—although mostly as a mirrored reflection, not as an incarnation, very much survived in Islam."²² Much in same way that Jesus as the God incarnate is mirrored on both sides by those who preceded him (John the Baptist and Mary), Mohammed, as a pure reflection of God's light, is mirrored by the prophets who came before him. In plate five this light is depicted symbolically as lamps above each of the prophets, hanging from the upper reaches of the page. In the preceding painting, however, in their initial greeting, each

prophet maintains a fiery nimbus, their heads facing Mohammed like wicks of lit candles side by side, the outer flames of each burning as one flame (see illustration 4).

The mystic Ibn 'Arabî (1165-1240), who wrote extensively on the *mi'raj* account and demonstrated significant influence on Eastern Islamic art and thought through many of his disciples in Seljuk Anatolia, understood God as clothed in primordial darkness but his "aspects or symbols are thus made visible, by God's will, as if in a series of mirrors."²³ Mohammed, as he looks to the line of prophets seems to be gazing into such a 'series of mirrors.' This row of similar looking figures, all from different eras though all emanating the same light which radiates from him, reflect his stare (see fig. 4). Historical time is conflated in the space of the journey. Barry describes the thought of Ibn 'Arabî:

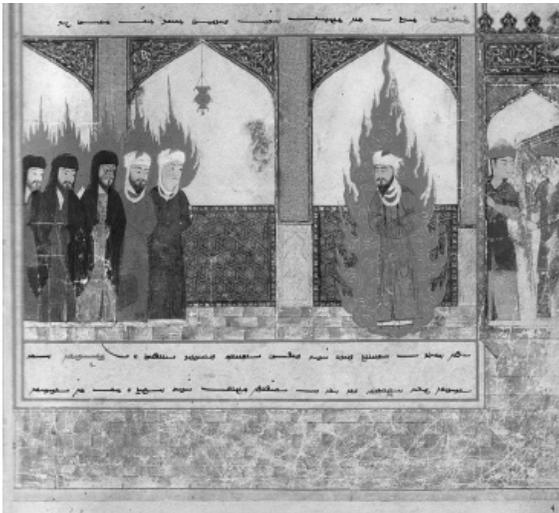


Fig. 4. Plate 4, *Mirāj-Nāmeḥ* manuscript

"God's various aspects also appear, as abstract concepts as it were, in a sort of mirrored reflection, in the meditation of a succession of holy persons. Moreover, these aspects of God are also made manifest as a very visible shining radiance upon the countenances of these same holy persons chosen by God."²⁴

The intensity of the prophet's nimbuses in plate four are contrasted by the presence of Mohammed on the opposite side of the page, the seal of all prophets, his entire body enveloped by a larger flame. In the *deesis* icon, we find this same disparity, as Jesus' golden robe and frontal face are contrasted by the

somber blues and browns of John and Mary. In their solemn joy, they too wear the halo of light.

This vision of emanating light from the face as a manifestation of God's grace, or *tajalli*, the divine "manifestation" or "epiphany,"²⁵ is shared in the mystic schools of both traditions.²⁶ In the manuscript, nimbuses depict this radiance, while in Byzantine iconography it takes the form of a circular aureole. In both cases, its color is gold. Though this style of the flaming nimbus appears before the year 1000 in the Chinese Turkistan most likely inherited from Mazdaism,²⁷ "the importance given to gold in the coloration" throughout the manuscript and including the nimbus is suggested by Séguy to be one of the most visible Byzantine influences upon Herat art.²⁸

Perhaps the gold nimbuses and gold halos depicted "behind" the faces are to be perceived as in fact shining through them. In the case of the deesis icon we find the same brilliant gold mosaic of the background used as the color of Jesus' inner robe and the gospel he holds. His hair and even facial features are highlighted by this same glow. In the arm of the cross around his face, the gold mosaics were inserted at angle into the plaster to better reflect the light.²⁹ The background becomes the foreground, as the light of gold seems to infuse him from beyond. Though our focus is maintained, his facial dimensions yield to the ominous gold which envelops him. This technique of presenting light shone from within is characteristic of Byzantium iconography, which is particularity impressive when achieved through this medium of mosaics: pieces of glass which are in themselves mirrors.

When viewing Mohammed, who is always portrayed in the manuscript above a golden nimbus, the luster of the bright gold around him jumps from the page and is contrasted by the flat surface of his white turban and flesh toned skin. Even in these "unorthodox" paintings which depict him unveiled, his face becomes a blurred outline or "negative space" as the eye is drawn to the dominating gold around him. The light of gold transcends the figure of the face, whether depicted through it or around it. We are in fact seeing a likeness imbued with light, looking through form into formlessness. Through the blinding of gold, both representations reveal as they conceal.

Mirror of Multiplicity

When staring into mirrored mirrors, perhaps in the changing area in a department store for instance, one feels the perspective of infinitude. One can peer only so far into multiplicity. Just as Mohammed in his ascent looks to the line of prophets, we in our ascent of Hagia Sophia encounter such a 'succession of

holy persons.' Pavel Florensky, the twentieth century Russian Orthodox martyr, theologian, and art historian, perhaps can provide insight into the nature of ascent in an Orthodox Cathedral. Florensky writes: "the temple is Jacob's ladder, leading from the visible into the invisible."³⁰ He continues: "this separation can only occur through the visible witnesses of the invisible world, those living symbols of the co-inheritance of this world and the other-i.e. through the holy people."³¹ Much a like a 'series of mirrors,' as our eye and soul ascends, as we survey the crowds of faithful around us, we are greeted by a crowd of holy images.

This is represented not only on the typical Byzantium iconostases but also on the programs of the walls and apses: the higher one reaches, the more sanctified the soul. This schematic is based on "the hierarchical principle [which] meant that the more important a figure was, the higher up it was placed."³² Though it is difficult to reconstruct what exactly was portrayed on the walls of Hagia Sophia due to the various natural disasters and the white washing of its surfaces, Cyril Mango, based on typical schematics of Byzantium churches, historical accounts, and visual evidence, describes the following program: bishops and imperials portraits occupied the lower galleries; lay saints stood upon the lower reaches of the walls in the nave; the Church fathers were placed in the lower section of apse; the apostles, evangelists, and prophets were depicted on intrados of the higher arches and between the windows of the dome; the Virgin Mary with child reigned in the second place of honor in the apse of half dome (a mosaic still partly preserved today), perhaps flanked by Archangel Gabriel and Michael; and finally in the apex of the dome, surrounded by his heavenly court of angels, a portrait of Christ.³³ These figures that greet our eyes and spirits as we ascend are "they [who] are the living soul of humanity by and through which mankind enters into the highest realm."³⁴ We are mirrored not only as individuals but as mankind.

With find this same mirror effect in Mohammed's journey, though represented through the prophets that preceded him. Throughout his ascension he comes across the following holy persons: the prophet Adam (plate 8), prophets John and Zachariah (plate 13), Jacob and Joseph (plate 16), the prophet David and Solomon (plate 17), the prophet Moses (plate 23), the prophets Noah and Idris (plate 24), and the last prophet he sees before bows down to the eternal: Abraham (plate 26). It is here that we see in our climb to God, we often find ourselves mirrored in multiplicity. (This same sense is evoked when Mohammed encounters a seventy headed angel [see illustration 5].) In both artistic programs, without even reaching the final "face," we find revelation in recognizing the face of others.



Fig. 5. Plate Eighteen, *Mirâj-Nâmeh* manuscript

Beauty and Beasts

These multiple prophets, however, are understood as witnesses of one unified revelation. Each prophet demonstrates a unique creative light yet is part of the one “single and eternal *Nûr Muhammadi* (‘light of Muhammad’).³⁵ In this sense, as Nasr points out: “Islamic art is the result of the manifestation of Unity upon the plane of multiplicity.”³⁶ This same theology in Christendom finds its representation in the plurality of saints and its final realization in the Trinity. In Mohammed’s night journey to heaven, however, he encounters not only holy people but also creatures of a mythological nature. While riding Buraq, a human-headed winged-horse, he encounters a giant white cock (plate 9); a half-fire, half-snow angel (plate 10); an angel with seventy heads³⁷ (plate 18: see fig. 5); and an angel with the four heads of a man, a bull, a lion, and an eagle (plate 30: see fig. 6).³⁸ Barry provides insight into the epistemology of Herat art:



Fig. 6, Plate thirty, *Mirâj-Nâmeh* manuscript

Herat's writers, carvers, and painters truly wished to see cosmic reality as a superimposition of multiple layers, with interrelated levels of significance: as so many degrees in a complex chain of emanated Being that linked all visual manifestations, in earth and heaven, unto the ultimate Godhead beyond.³⁹

Fire and ice, angels and beasts, horses and humans, these 'visual manifestations of heaven and earth' collide to create images that form a 'complex chain' that reflect the beauty and majesty of God. These paradoxical attributes of the "Divine, which alone is the coincidence of opposites," (according to many Sufis) find their representation in this melding of contrasts and variety of creatures.⁴⁰ In plate thirty, we find this 'superimposition of multiple layers' in the four heads of the angel, which like a hand of cards, seem to enfold from one on top of one another.

Interestingly, the Fossati brothers, during their visit to Hagia Sophia in mid-nineteenth century, in a water color rendition (see fig. 7) recorded this same tetramorph in the pantocrator vault in the South gallery (an image which is not visible today).⁴¹ These four creatures, also understood as symbols of the four evangelists, are referenced in prophet Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1:10 and 10: 12) and in the book of revelation, where four beasts guard the throne of God (Rev 4:6-8).



Fig. 7, Fossati water color, Album p.22, 19th century, Hagia Sophia⁴²

I find the majesty, wrath, and severity of God more privileged in the manuscript's illuminations. At the end of the ascent only Mohammed can endure the presence of the eternal. This divine majesty, though, finds its representation in the expansiveness of Hagia Sophia—the nave walls are 103 feet apart⁴³—as well as in the bearing of Jesus (based on the deesis depiction and the mosaic above the imperial doors). In the Byzantium depictions of the Christ, he soothes us with a soft blessing yet chides us for our sins, a foretaste of the final judgment.

The Veiled Throne

God judges from his throne. This image of imperial majesty is present in both programs, though in the manuscript it appears only in text. Before Mohammed reaches the apogee of his ascent, “beyond the seven heavens, in infinite space, Mahomet now sees seventy thousand veils made of light,”⁴⁴ (see fig.). In plate thirty-six, various veils of different colors teaming with angles break up the page while Mohammed, on the left, takes the hand of an angel as he is lead beyond one such barrier. This is perhaps a reference to the hadith:

God hides himself behind seventy-thousand veils of light and darkness. If he took away the veils, the penetrating light of his Face would at once destroy the sight of any creature who dares to look at it.⁴⁵



Fig. 8, Plate thirty-six, *Mirâj-Nâmeh* manuscript

This “veiling” may not be an explicit motif in the program of Hagia Sophia, but when understood three dimensionally, such a segmentation of space certainly exists.

Florensky understood the structure of church as “defined by ‘membranes’: narthex, vestibule, the temple itself, sanctuary, altar-table, antemension, chalice, the Holy Mysteries, Christ, the Father.”⁴⁶ Just as the iconostasis separates the sanctuary from the Eucharist on a horizontal plane, so too, the program on the ceiling and walls act as a peripheral “icon screen,” veiling the earth from the outer heavens, pieced by the light of windows. On this vertical plane, representations become progressively more inaccessible. It is important to note that particularly in the case of Hagia Sophia, with its two narthexes and galleries on either side of the nave, the central view arrives in stages, leading to final dramatic vision below the dome (see fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Hagia Sophia

For this reason, Mango argues that due to the structure of Hagia Sophia, it does not lend itself to one unified decorative scheme: “the figural mosaics of Hagia Sophia tend to be seen as individual tableaux, not as constituent parts of a unified ensemble.”⁴⁷ These images, then, as one passes through the enclaves of the cathedral are viewed much in the same way one turns the pages of a book: individually, yet part of the same narrative. Mango attributes this to not only the massive interior which separates the walls on either side but also the “double shell” type of the church, where the “outer periphery, i.e., the aisles and galleries” are “not fully visible from the nave.”⁴⁸ The climax of Hagia Sophia is the highest dome, yet its apex is only visible within the reaches of its perimeter.

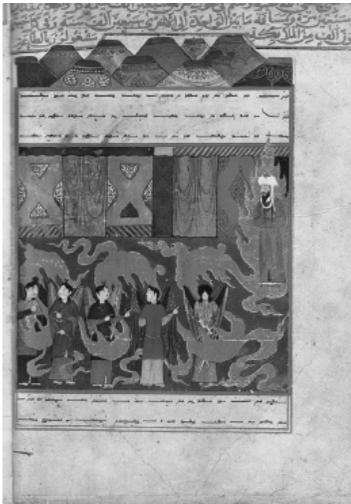


Fig. 10, Plate 37, *Mirâj-Nâmeh* manuscript



Fig. 11, Hagia Sophia⁴⁹

We find this same circular layout in plate thirty-seven where Mohammed, after bowing to the eternal, encounters several hundred thousand tents, depicted in the upper section (see illustration 12). “These tents surrounding the heavenly throne suggest nomadic encampments in the desert, at the center of which the tent reserved for God became a sanctuary, then a temple, the midpoint of the world.”⁵⁰ The Hagia Sophia demonstrates a layout very similar to this *axis mundi* type as a central dome is surrounded on all sides by lower structures. This main dome “bulges gracefully into the longitudinally disposed pendentives, which in turn expand into three domed exedras”⁵¹ (see illustration 13).

For this reason it is often described as being built “from the top down.”⁵² This sense is accentuated by the successive arches and descending open spaces. From this perspective, each concurring dome and separation from the cathedral’s highest point seem to lower themselves from the sky. The outlines of arches and the dips of the pendentives resemble something like curtains drawn around the majesty of God. The folded wings of the seraphim that still remain today seem to be fanning the enclosure, inviting yet warning away our gaze. Even the brilliant rays that drape from the windows of the dome act as ‘veils made of light,’ guarding the throne of God.

Conclusion: Liminal Light

Mohammed reaches this throne in illumination thirty-eight, as he bows to the eternal, the divine depicted as a cloud of light and fire, its flames transcending the frame (see fig. 12). At the end of this ascent, then, we do not find a face, but rather, a void of light. Nasr explains:

This refusal to identify, even symbolically, any concrete form with the Divinity stems, of course, as much from the Islamic insistence upon the Divine Unity as does the absence of an icon which would symbolize the God-Man or the incarnation found in other traditions.⁵³

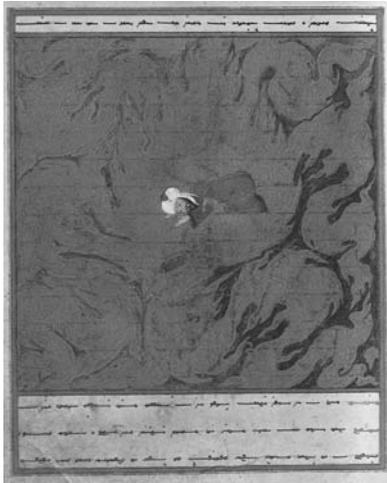


Fig. 12, Plate thirty-eight, *Mirâj-Nâmeh* manuscript

It is not a void of nothingness but of presence and force, suggested by the outlines of fiery luminous clouds drawn on a darker shade of gold. This blazing

vision depicted in plate thirty-eight is the same cloud that pervades much of the manuscript. We can perhaps find this paralleled by the resemblance of Christ's face to the face of other holy figures. This suggests Divine unity and the omnipresence of God in all things: "To God belongs the east and the west: wherever you turn, there is the Face of God," (Qur'an 2:115).⁵⁴ Yet in this final plate, absent Mohammed in prostration, it is only this "presence" that remains. Perhaps a reference to the understanding of the Qur'anic passage: "All things perish, except His Face," (Qur'an 28:88).⁵⁵

In this understanding, "face" is not represented as figure but as presence. Hamid Dabashi very elegantly writes: "The Islamic Hermeneutics is categorically predicated on a constitutional mistrust of the Face-value, of the sur-Face meaning, and the reversal trust in the promises of the Hidden, in the Unseen, in that which is to be dis-covered, un-veiled."⁵⁶ Even in the summit of our ascent, passed the seventy thousand veils, we seem to continue to encounter the hidden. In one account of the Legend, Mohammed "saw a man who had disappeared into the light of the Throne."⁵⁷

The Byzantines after iconoclasm achieved this paradox of representing the divine through Christ as an illuminated mirror of incarnation as well as a veil of his father. We find this face at the end of our ascent (see fig. 13). Though originally the dome was occupied by a cross mosaic, Cyril Mango suggests we can "confidently assume a representation of Christ was placed here in the second half of the ninth century."⁵⁸ "The Deity, either as the central element of Ascension or an independent figure of Christ, naturally occupied the apex of the dome."⁵⁹ He believes this apex (36 feet in diameter), "may have been either a full-length figure seated on a rainbow (as in Ascension) or a bust of the type usually called Pantokrator."⁶⁰ He seems to adopt the thesis that after the partial dome collapse in 1346, despite contrasting accounts of unknown credibility, a Pantokrator type (which is described, though with inaccurate proportions by Nicephorus Gregoras in 1355⁶¹) remained there until it was later obscured and covered by 1672.⁶²

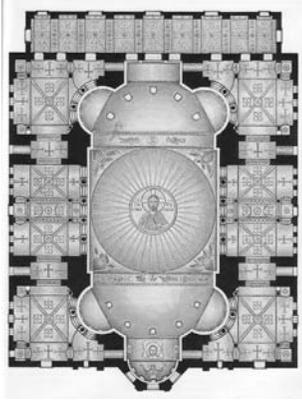


Fig. 13, Artist's rendering, Hagia Sophia post-iconoclasm⁶³

It is interesting to compare the typical face depicted in Byzantine icons of the Pantocrator to the scriptural references to Christ after his resurrection. Christ resurrected visage, like his face in the transfiguration, demonstrates aspects of light and mystery.⁶⁴ His likeness, even in the transfiguration icon, is never actually explicitly depicted with light emanating from his skin. This is only suggested through the mandorlas and halos behind him.⁶⁵ Such a face cannot be drawn, it can only be seen through his image, through the veil of his painted face. This iconic veiling through the stylization of the portrait is particularly apparent in the icons of modern saints. They are portraits we can compare to actual photographs in their lifetime.

Icons evoke veils. When Clavijo visited Hagia Sophia in the beginning of the 15th century he wrote of his impression:

These images, as I said before are not drawn, or painted with any color, or inlaid; but the stone itself gave birth to this picture, with its veins, which may be clearly seen. The said images appear as if they were in the clouds of heaven, as if there was a thin veil before them.⁶⁶

This 'veil' association perhaps can be linked to the legend that the likeness of Christ was believed by many to derive from the Holy face of Edessa or the mandylion: a cloth. In the legend which was most widely accepted by the eighth century in Byzantium, King Agbar sends Ananias to paint a portrait of Christ.⁶⁷ According to the version included in the tenth century text *Narratio de Edessena*, Ananias could not accomplish his task due the brilliance of the divine visage, thus, "The Savior washed his face from water, wiped off the

moisture that was left on the towel that was given him, and in some divine and inexpressible manner his own likeness impressed on it.”⁶⁸ This mandylion has been associated by scholars to the veil in front of the holy of holies, the curtain of the iconostases that obscures the sanctuary, as well as the liturgical cloth, *aer*, held before the Eucharist in Divine Liturgy. Seeing the face of Mohammed veiled, then, does not seem such a foreign image. Gerstel suggests that often in Byzantium churches, the painted mandylion was placed below the Pantocrator, which “contributed to the dome’s dogmatic message” of incarnation,⁶⁹ as well as a reminder that the painted portrait of Christ is only a reflection of his divine face: an icon.

Through our comparison of the iconography of Hagia Sophia and the manuscript illuminations of the *Mi’râj-Nâme* we have gained insight into how each program, and perhaps each tradition, through the representation of light, both mirrors and veils the face of God. Both echo this face through the face of others along the journey, depicting his unity, beauty, and majesty through heavenly creatures and the blinding light of gold. The Byzantines veiled the face of God through the representation of the stylized image of Christ, while the Muslims of Herat veiled the face of God through never actually representing it: a veil of light always remains.

After the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, and converted the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, it is believed they covered up the face of Christ. Mango suggests “The face of Pantocrator in the main dome was obscured before 1630—perhaps before 1580-1592—but the figure itself may have still been visible in 1652; it had disappeared, however, by 1672.”⁷⁰ Though this is a different historical and intellectual setting from Heart dynasty in 1436, it is interesting to note how the Ottomans dealt with the space of Hagia Sophia: they covered many of the images of icons and placed calligraphy in their stead. The textual triumphs the visual. Perhaps for this reason: “In the absence of the face of invisible, the Qur’an begins in the Name.”⁷¹

In the heavenly climb of the manuscript’s illuminations, the only image that remains at the summit, amidst formless light, is Mohammed in prostration. We thus return to the manuscript, to the text, to the call to prayer. We prostrate in midst of such a vision. It is interesting that immediately after Mohammed received his vision, with Moses as an advisor, he disputes the number of times the faithful must pray. Only after his own vision does he guide us to our own.

Muslims prostrate in the direction of Mecca, bowing before space as a veil and mirror of Allah. Eastern Orthodox Christians prostrate before icons, bowing before the face, as a veil and mirror of God. At the end of our ascent, we both submit our vision in place of prayer. We see in order to be seen. Even the

organ of the eye is itself a mirror. But even with eyes closed and heads bowed, even if we do not see the face of the divine, we feel the presence of his light.

When entering Hagia Sophia, the mosaic above the imperial doors depicts Christ holding a gospel on which is written: “I am the light on earth, peace be upon you.” Beyond this threshold, the dome of Hagia Sophia, in the place of where the face of Christ perhaps was once depicted, is now occupied by the calligraphic inscription of Surah 24:35 (see fig. 14):

“In the name of the God, the merciful and the compassionate. Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth; His light is like a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp in glass and the glass like a brilliant star, lit from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West.”⁷²

Like the light that reaches us, we ascend to God from ‘neither of the East nor of the West.’ Only light is mirrored, both created and uncreated—timeless— still and infinite, it reveals form but is formless, its presence seen but essence unseen. Only light can maintain the invisible through the visible, like rays of a sun, or the eyes of a beloved. Only light can transcend a veil.

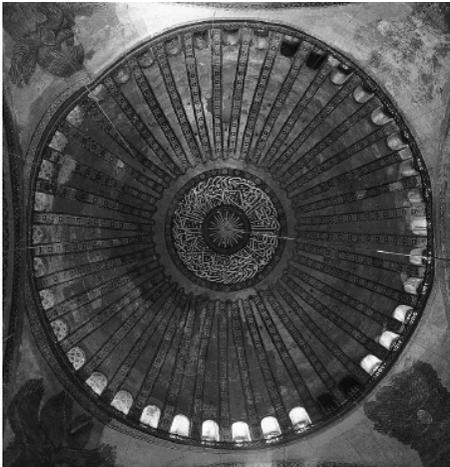


Fig. 14, Hagia Sophia

NOTES

- 1 Translations cited from Ford, David. *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, Vol. [1] Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 198.
- 2 Ibid., 24.
- 3 Translation cited from Haleem, Muhammad Abdel. "The Face, Divine and Human, in the Qur'an," *Islamic Quarterly* 34, no. 3, 1990, 169.
- 4 Ibid., 167.
- 5 Ibid., 167.
- 6 Séguy, Marie Rose and Bibliothèque nationale, *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet : Mirâj Nâmeh : Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Manuscrit Supplément Turc 190)* New York: G. Braziller, 1977, as quoted from commentaries on plate thirty-six.
- 7 Marion, Jean-Luc. *God without being : Hors-Texte* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 19.
- 8 Rippin, Andrew. "Desiring the Face of God": *The Qur'Ānic Symbolism of Personal Responsibility*. London: Curzon Pr, 2000, 118.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ford, 1999, 199.
- 11 Translation from Séguy, 1977, 9.
- 12 Ibid., 7.
- 13 Ibid., 8.
- 14 Ibid., 92.
- 15 It is interesting to point out this manuscript was purchased on January 14, 1673, by Antonine Gallard (1646-1715) in the city of Constantinople. Séguy, 1977, 7.
- 16 Barry, Mike. *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bibzād of Herat (1465-1535)*, English language ed. Paris: Flammarion, 2004, 92.
- 17 A number of scholars entertain the possibility of this legend of Mohammed's night journey influencing the Italian poet Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
- 18 All manuscript illuminations cited from Séguy, 1977.
- 19 Cormack, Robin. *Icons*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007, 144.
- 20 Marion, 1991, 19.
- 21 Séguy, 25.
- 22 Barry, 2004, 240.

- 23 Ibid., 223.
- 24 Ibid., 223.
- 25 Ibid., 223.
- 26 Florensky claims, through quoting hagiographic literature, that the face of the holy persons was transfigured and emitted a visible light in their lifetime. The face of the ascetic “becomes an artistic portrait of itself, an ideal portrait, fashioned out of the living material by the loftiest of arts, the ‘art of arts.’” Each of us, then, in our mystical ascent strive towards emulation of the icon of Jesus, to realize our true nature as made in the image of God. Florensky as quoted in V. V. Bychkov, *The Aesthetic Face of being : Art in the Theology of Pavel Florensky*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993, 33.
- 27 Séguy, 1977, 26.
- 28 Ibid., 22.
- 29 Teteriantnikov, Natalia B. *Mosaics of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul: The Fossati Restoration and the Work of the Byzantine Influence* (Washington D.C: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), 53.
- 30 Florensky, P.A. *Iconostasis*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996, 59.
- 31 Ibid., 61.
- 32 Mango in Heinz Kähler and Cyril A. Mango, *Hagia Sophia : Heinz Kähler ; with a Chapter on the Mosaics by Cyril Mango ; Translated by Ellyn Childs*. New York ; Washington: F.A. Praeger, 1967, 48.
- 33 Ibid, 50. This schematic is based on Cyril Mango’s description of the mosaics in the ninth century after iconoclasm, we can then assume the basic program was maintained up until the fourteenth century: “The mosaic decoration carried out in St. Sophia in the late ninth century and early tenth century was not basically altered thereafter.” Cyril A. Mango, *Materials for the Study of the Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul*, Vol. 8. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1962, 98.
- 34 Florensky, 1996, 61.
- 35 Barry, 2004, 223.
- 36 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, *Islamic Art & Spirituality* (New Delhi; New York: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts; Oxford University Press, 1990), 7.
- 37 The seventy headed angel is the angel of prayer, using its seventy faces to face and praise the Lord.
- 38 It is interesting to note that this last creature, the four headed Cherub, perhaps occupied the South gallery of the Hagia Sophia, based on the water color illustration done by the Fossati brothers in the mid-nineteenth century (see illustrations 7). The four heads taking on the symbolism of the four gospels. Based the Fossati illustration, however, the three heads resemble something of a crown upon the larger feminine face of

- the angel, while in the manuscript the angel's face is the same size as that of the animals. Mango, 1962, f. 26 and 27.
- 39 Barry, 2004, 95.
- 40 Chittick, William C. *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 10.
- 41 Mango, 1962, pg. 34.
- 42 Mango, 1962, f. 27.
- 43 Mango, 1967, 99.
- 44 Séguy, 1977, quoted from commentaries on plate thirty-six.
- 45 As quoted in William Henry Shannon, *Seeking the Face of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 14.
- 46 Florensky, 1996, 59.
- 47 Mango, 1967, 50.
- 48 Ibid., 50.
- 49 Image cited from *Hagia Sophia* edited Fatih Cimok (Istanbul: A Turizm Yayinlari Ltd. 1995), 22.
- 50 Séguy, 1977, quoted from commentaries on plate thirty-seven.
- 51 Laurence J. James, "Byzantine Aesthetics, Light and Two Structures," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 29, no. 3. 1985, 210.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Nasr, 1990, 187.
- 54 Translation from Haleem, 1990, 167.
- 55 Ibid., 169.
- 56 Dabashi, Hamid. "In the Absence of the Face," *Social Research* 67, no. 1 (Spring, 2000), 134.
- 57 Sayyid Muhammed ibn 'Alawī al-Mālikī, *The Prophet's Night Journey & Heavenly Ascent; Translated and notes by Gabriel F. Haddard*, 4th ed. United Kingdom: Aqsa Publications, 2006, 30.
- 58 Mango, 1962, 87.
- 59 Mango, 1967, 48.
- 60 Ibid., 48.
- 61 Mango, 1962, 87.

- 62 Ibid. It is then plausible the face of Christ occupied the dome when the *Mirāj-Nāmeḥ* manuscript was created.
- 63 Cimok, 45.
- 64 Ford suggests in the Gospel narratives there is a “strong sense of disturbance of ordinary reconcilability.” He provides the following examples: “In Luke: “their eyes were kept from recognizing him’ (22:16), and ‘they were started and thought they saw a spirit’”(24:37). In Matthew, ‘when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted’”(28:17). In John, Mary did not know it was Jesus,(20:14) and ‘Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus’”(21:4). Ford suggests the “indetermination of this face is intrinsically connected to both the mystery of God and relationship to every other face.” Ford, 1999, 172. Iconography of the face strives to depict this mystery.
- 65 Cormack suggests the “new emphasis on the intense and mystical moment when the face of Christ shines with light” depicted though glowing mandolas in the transfiguration iconography of the fourteenth century can be linked to the growing spiritual movement of Hesychasm in the same period. Cormack, 2007, 61.
- 66 Markam, C. R. ed. and trans., *Narrative of the Embassy of Ruy Ganzalez de Clavijo to the Court of Timour at Samarcard* (London, 1859), 38. As quoted in James Trilling, “The Image Not Made by Hands and the Byzantine Way of Seeing” in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation : Papers from a Colloquium Held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome, and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996*, Vol. 6 (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1998), 127.
- 67 Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, 71.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Gerstel, Sharon E. J. *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary*, Vol. 56. Seattle, Wash.: Published by College Art Association in association with University of Washington Press, 1999, 213. 68. There is no evidence to suggest such a mandylion existed in Hagia Sophia. I merely point to this presence in Byzantine churches in general.
- 70 Mango, 1962, 99.
- 71 Dabashi, 2000, 128.
- 72 Mango, 1962, 91.

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