

## UNSEEN AND VISIBLE

**Hamid Parsania**

The concordance between anthropology, ontology, and epistemology yields a coherent view of the cosmos. In the religious outlook centred around *tawhīd* all that exists in the physical and metaphysical domains finds a natural place in a vertical hierarchy of existence. This provides for multiple states of being along the path of descent and ascent.

**Keywords:** Hierarchies of existence; physical and metaphysical domains; *tawhīd* as “unitive form”; stages of descent; stages of ascent; forms of being and motion.

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### Realms of Knowledge

Man is not separate from the world, nor is the world apart from man. Man subsists in the very substance of the world and the world manifests itself in and through man, expounding itself through his speech.

This bond and unity between man and the universe implies that the awareness and knowledge of the two are not separate and distinct from each other. He who in some fashion apprehends the world—synthetically and in harmony with man—comes to know man to the degree of his awareness of the world. From these preliminaries, the bond and concord between anthropology and ontology becomes evident. Since ontology and anthropology are but two fields of knowledge, a bond exists between them and between this connecting principle of knowledge and man’s modality of cognition. This means that the ontological and anthropological perspectives of every man arise from the limits and scope of his understanding and knowledge. Likewise, his level of knowledge is proportionate to his awareness of man and the world.

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Because every soul arrives at a harmonious understanding of man and the world according to the level of its awareness, and conversely, its apprehension is also in line with its understanding of man and existence, it can be concluded that there is a concordance (*tawāzun*) between epistemology, anthropology and ontology. Thus, the person that is afflicted with doubt and scepticism in the realm of knowledge and awareness becomes a nihilist vis-à-vis his ontological perspective, and a humanist in his dealings with the phenomena of man.

The person given to sensory knowledge and awareness, on the other hand, thinking that the senses and experimentation are the exclusive means of attaining knowledge, finds himself left with a world that is entirely material. In this case, it is only natural that his anthropological perspective should gain validity and recognition only after it, like other material phenomena, is made empirical. The person who depends on the “researches of his mind” and with a rationalistic outlook regards rational processes as the only means of attaining knowledge, attempts—like Descartes—to prove the existence of man himself by way of rational thought, and denies—like Hegel—ontological reality and existence to all that does not measure up to the standards of rational thought.

Those who live in a world of myths are predisposed to speak, in their knowledge of being, of masters of species (*arbāb al-anwāʿ*) and a multitude of gods and goddesses. Their picture of man is likewise mythical. In a mythical understanding, the senses and reason do not play a major role and, in their stead, it is human desires, accompanied by imagination and fantasy, which receive emphasis. In this type of knowing, it is possible to perceive certain forms and visions of the intermediate and imaginal world, though these are only the preliminary stages in the hierarchy of intuitive and spiritual understanding.

Intuitive knowledge<sup>1</sup> and spiritual understanding, when not limited to provisional glimpses of the imaginal world, and after having acquired a supra-rational and intellectual dimension, call for a different type of ontological and anthropological perspective than what has so far been covered. From this perspective, man—in his body, soul and spirit—and the world—in its entirety—become the signs and words of God Almighty.

The highest kind of intuitive knowledge is Divine Revelation. Revealed knowledge, unlike its mythical counterpart, is not anti-rational. Moreover, it neither ignores nor rejects outright sensory and experiential

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1. Or, knowledge by witnessing—*maʿrifat al-shuhūdī*. Tr.

forms of knowledge. What it does do, however, is reveal the imperfections and ineffectuality of rationalism and empiricism, insofar as they deny levels of knowledge beyond their own, or attempt to reduce transcendental knowledge to the level of their own dialectic. As such, Revelation attempts to break asunder the bonds and shackles, and extend the arbitrary boundaries that have been put on the lower sciences of humanity. The end result of this revealed knowledge is a unitive or “*tawḥīdī*” ontology and anthropology. In a *tawḥīdī* ontology, existents are nothing but the words or signs of God; and in a *tawḥīdī* anthropology, man is nothing less—existentially and essentially—than the Word of God (*Logos*). As the Word, man is in dialogue with the signs of God and is really His interlocutor; and finally, due to his comprehension and knowledge of the reality of all things and the Divine Names, he is named the “vicegerent of God”—the *khalīfat Allah*.

Based on the above typology of knowledge and what has been said regarding the multiple forms of awareness in understanding man and the universe, five corresponding perspectives on epistemology, ontology, and anthropology can be put forward.

The following table shows these types and levels:

Type	Epistemology	Ontology	Anthropology
Contemporary Philosophical	Relativity of Perception/ Truth, Skepticism	Nihilism	Culture-making Animal, <i>homo faber (cultura)</i>
Scientific, Positivistic	Empiricism, Sensationalism	Materialism	Tool-making Animal, <i>homo faber (instrumentum)</i>
Classical Philosophical	Rationalism	Idealism and Rational Order	Rational Animal, <i>homo sapiens</i>
Mythological	Imaginal and Isthmian Apparitions	Lords of Species and Pantheism	Mythical Creature, <i>homo mythicus</i>
Religious - Islamic	Revelation and Intellect	Monotheism ( <i>Tawḥīd</i> )	Divine Vicegerent, <i>logos</i> , and Interlocutor

The interdependence of the various levels of knowledge, in the three realms mentioned above, is hardly a matter of doubt or dispute. But beyond the mere existence of a logical coherence between epistemology, ontology and anthropology, there remains the potentially controversial matter of the existence of a hierarchy between them and the relative positions

that they occupy in that hierarchy.<sup>2</sup>

Some hold epistemology to be prior to anthropology and ontology. They believe that, with a change in man's basis of knowledge and the resulting change in his exposition of epistemological issues, his outlook on ontology and anthropology also changes.

Others are of the opinion that the awareness of existence and knowledge, or its methodology, lie in the domain of the awareness and knowledge that a person has of the human soul. That is, they put anthropology before the other two fields of knowledge.

A third group gives priority to ontology. They believe that man's awareness of being has direct bearing upon his knowledge of his soul and knowledge itself.

All three of these opinions, in spite of the arguments and proofs put forward in their favour, are united in their admission of the logical interdependence of the three fields of knowledge.

### Religious and Worldly Perspectives

Islam's perspective on man and the world is not mundane or materialistic. In the mundane outlook, physical nature and the life of this world hereunder constitute all of reality. Islam's outlook on the world is religious, and in a religious outlook the physical world is but a part of reality—the other part being beyond the physical realm, or, precisely, metaphysical. The physical and metaphysical domains are variously referred to in religious terminology as “earth” (the world hereunder) and “heaven” (the hereafter); “visible” (*shahādah*) and “unseen” (*ghayb*); the corporeal world or “kingdom” (*mulk*) and the spiritual world or “dominion” (*malakūt*). In the ontology of religion, the physical is not disconnected and divorced from the metaphysical; nor are the two situated on one level—in a “horizontal” relation, so to speak. They are rather, part of a single hierarchy, which integrally connects them in a “vertical” manner; such that the physical world falls under the dominion of the metaphysical, and the spiritual (*malakūt*) dominates the corporeal (*mulk*). Hence, the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical is essentially of a different order than the relationship between physical objects themselves.

The metaphysical comprehends<sup>3</sup> the physical in such a way that the

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2. Wahl, Jean, *Traite de Metaphysique* (Paris: Payot, 1953), ch. 8.

3. The word “comprehend”, or its derivatives, will be used to designate the translation of *iḥāṭah*, so as to allude to the greater scope of this Arabic word than its usual English translation of “encompass”. Tr.

latter comes to be known as lower and outward, or manifest, while the former is higher and inward, or immanifest. The relation between the manifest and the immanifest is not of the order of two things on the horizontal plane. It is, rather, a transcendental relation, which when compared to normal worldly relationships, appears mysterious and quite incredible.

The metaphysical realm is the inward, unseen and higher level of the physical realm itself, and due to the type of relationship that it has with physical objects, it “colours” them, giving them the appropriate quality. It is for this very same reason that the religious perspective does not see the natural physical world as a homogenous and uniform multiplicity. Rather, each and every part of the physical world—in line with the type of relation it has with the metaphysical and unseen realm—assumes a metaphysical aspect. The relation between the physical and metaphysical is similar to the one between the words of a script and their meanings. From the physical point of view, words are nothing but sounds and things that are inter-related only horizontally. But every word that is uttered or written conveys a particular message due to the relation and connection that it has with its meaning. In this way, every word—with a view to its meaning—acquires particularities that it would not otherwise have had without its semantic (*maʿnawī*) relation. Needless to say, the relation between words and meanings is an arbitrary one, in that it is established by cultural context and the exercise of human freewill. The connection between the physical and metaphysical worlds on the other hand, is real, pertaining to the order of existence.

Words and expressions, set in various cultures, are accompanied by differing meanings and messages. These meanings, in those very same settings, have real and tangible effects—both individual and social. Some words cause pleasure and elation, while others result in anger and distemper.

From the religious perspective, every part of the natural world, depending on the type of relation and connection it has with the metaphysical—and hence its own inner or unseen aspect—is subject to particularities and categorizations of its own and peculiar to itself.

The metaphysical realm, being the unseen world, is the source of holiness and the different values or qualities. Parts of the physical world in accordance with the relation they have with the unseen world are infused with certain values and qualities. This is why some things are “naturally” considered holy and pure, while others are seen to be base and profane.

In the secular and mundane appraisal of things, transcendental

qualities (or values) and the qualifications that physical things acquire in respect to them are all imaginary—existing only in the thought and fantasy of men. From this outlook, the real source of transcendental matters are nothing but the physical dimensions of human existence along with certain tendencies that can be traced to matter. From the religious perspective, however, the above qualifications have roots in a supra-natural transcendental reality. This transcendental reality is not a concoction of the mind. On the contrary, the very mind and cognition of man, in its self-conscious journey towards this reality, apprehends and discovers it.

Belief in the existence of metaphysical dimensions of reality is a common feature of all non-materialist ontologies. Some anthropologists though, have claimed this to be particular to the religious worldview.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Tawhīdī Exposition***

If religion is taken to be a set of beliefs and rituals, apart from those that a purely materialistic and worldly outlook offers, then the belief in spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of being can very well serve as the boundary between the religious and secular spheres. If this scheme is adopted, then Islam falls simply and clearly into the religious category. This, however, belies the very special type of belief in the unseen that Islam holds. From the Islamic perspective, the unseen world is in a hypostatic unity with the seen and has a “unitive form” than can only be described as *tawhīdī*. What this means is that, in the final analysis, the world is one single unseen realm that transcends all the other states of being, and is more hidden than all the planes of creation. Everything that exists in the various levels of the world—the natural world in particular—derives and descends from the unseen and will once again return to it.

Islam holds that *tawhīd* is the true religion, and sees both materialistic and polytheistic outlooks to be in error and void of truth. It calls God’s prophets the messengers of the true religion. The Qur’ān says *It is He who has sent His Apostle with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it prevail over all religions, though the polytheists should be averse.*<sup>5</sup>

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4. Hamilton, Malcolm, *The Sociology of Religion: Theology & Comparative Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2001), 21; Tyler, Edward B., *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 4th ed. (London: John Murray, 1903), 424.

5. *at-Tawbah*: 33. Translations of Qur’ānic verses have been mostly adapted from the recent translation by Sayyid ‘Alī Qūlī Qarā’ī titled *The Qur’ān with an English Paraphrase*. Tr.

In the Islamic outlook, all of the prophets—from Adam to the last of them, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus (may Peace be upon them all)—were called to *tawhīd*. All believed in the One God and were subservient to Him only. The differences between them lie in the divine laws that they brought—laws that God revealed for the guidance of men in different times and ages. Every prophet verified the prophet that came before him and foretold the coming of the messenger after him. The Qurʾān affirms this in the following verse: *And when Jesus son of Mary said, 'O Children of Israel! Indeed I am the apostle of God to you, to confirm what is before me of the Torah, and to give the good news of an apostle who will come after me, whose name is Aḥmad'...*<sup>6</sup>

The Qurʾān, while emphasizing *tawhīd*, refers to those who believe in multiple gods to be in dire error, and sees those who speak only of the material world to have gone astray. Likewise, the Qurʾān calls the worship of God and subjugation to His commands the *ḍīm* or “path” of all existents (from the ontological perspective) and the message or “calling” of all the prophets (from the theological and religious point of view). In this respect, God has neither differentiated amongst any of His prophets, nor has He condoned the following of anything other than the prophetic religions. He has said *Do they, then, seek a religion other than God's, while to Him submits whoever there is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they will be brought back? Say, 'We have faith in God, and in what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus were given, and the prophets, from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit.'* Should anyone follow a religion other than Islam, it shall never be accepted from him, and he will be among the losers in the Hereafter.<sup>7</sup>

### The Stages of Descent

In the Qurʾānic view, all existents have descended from God, and all of them return to Him. In some verses there is mention of the manifestation and descent of the world from the divine realm. In others, the return of things to Him is spoken of. A third group of verses mention both these movements, in both a general and specific way. The verse *Indeed we belong to God, and to Him do we indeed return...*<sup>8</sup> mentions in general the origin and destination of the movement of human beings. The following verse, on the other hand, outlines the descent of all things, including man: *There is*

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6. *aṣ-Ṣaff*: 6.

7. *Alī 'Imrān*: 83-85.

8. *al-Baqarah*: 156.

*not a thing but that its treasures are with Us, and We do not send it down except in a known measure.*<sup>9</sup> The use of the word “thing” in this verse is such that it includes all the objects of the natural world and everything that can be conceived.

The verse quoted above begins with the negation of an indefinite clause. The exception that follows amounts to the inclusion of all things except those mentioned in the remainder of the verse—namely, God Himself and the “treasures” that are with Him. Hence, it can be concluded that everything that is in this natural and physical world has descended from the said stores or treasures.<sup>10</sup>

This verse not only expounds the idea of derivation or descent itself, but also points out some of its stages. In other words, the concept that everything has treasure houses points to the fact that there is not only one store or treasure for a given thing, but rather, that there are a number of them, and that their descent is not from just one place. At every stage of descent, a treasure house or repository is envisioned, from which a thing—in given and specified measures—is brought forth. Further deliberation upon this verse reveals other particularities of the stages of descent: Firstly, the natural world is the last and bottom stage of descent and everything that exists on this level must have descended from prior and preceding stages. Secondly, the particularities of the existents in the natural world, for the human being who happens to be in it, are apparent and known—categories such as time, space, motion, dimensionality, etc. Thirdly, the descent of things starts from the Divinity and its first actual stage is from the treasure house that is closest to Him. It can be added that the particularity of this first stage or level, from which the descent takes place, is that it is unlimited and undetermined. This is because the verse states that the Divine descension and sending down is by certain measures and determinations. So, the predetermined existents, at their outset, are not only free of all of the faults and imperfections of the natural order, but are also beyond all types of measures and delimitations. The latter occur only after the process of descent towards the natural world begins.

The above quoted verse accords with the explanation that “determining” (*taqdīr*) is a stage that lies between the level of the treasure houses (*khazā'in*) and the natural world. In line with such an interpretation of this verse, three overall stages of descent can be spoken of when discussing the

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9. *al-Ḥijr*: 21.

10. al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Muḥammad Ḥusayn, *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Mu'assasatu'l-ilmī li'l-maṭbū'āt, 1998), Vol. 12, 143.



descent of existents into nature.

First is the stage of the treasures (*khazā'in*). The definitive feature of this level is that the things in it lack a particular measure or limit and exist in a non-delimited fashion. Second is the stage of the determining (*taqdīr*). This level, though free of temporal and spatial limits and their corollaries, such as gradual change and movement, is nonetheless given to certain measures and amounts. The realistic phenomena of the dream-state correspond to this level of being. This is so because, though they have specific measures and a degree of dimensionality, they are neither limited by time nor by the other limitations of the natural realm—being free from the vicissitudes of the latter. Third is the stage of the natural and physical world. In addition to dimension and quantity, the things in the natural world are subject to other limitations specific to this realm.

### The Stages of Ascent

Just as the verse quoted above alludes to the stages of descent, there are other verses that mention the stages of ascent of things in general, and the ascent of man—from nature to God—in particular. ...[A]nd beyond them is an isthmus, to the day they are raised.<sup>11</sup> The verse specifies three general levels in the stages of ascent from the level of man to the Divine: First, there is the stage of the natural world (*ṭabī'at*), in which the addressees of the verse are situated. Second exists the stage of the intermediary world or isthmus (*barzakh*), which is the stage that (temporarily) supersedes man and continues until the next, third stage. Third is the stage of the day of Resurrection (*yawm al-ba'ṭh*), which is the final stage and the one in which men are summoned into God's presence.

In the mentioned verse, the second stage forms the middle-ground between this world and the Resurrection and is called the intermediary world or isthmus precisely because of its mediating function.

Muslim thinkers, in deliberating upon the above-mentioned verses of the Qur'ān as well as on certain related traditions, and by availing themselves of both the methods of mysticism and discursive philosophy, have put forward arguments and proofs for the stages of descent and ascent of the world and man. The Peripatetic philosophers have, in their turn, set up proofs for the two stages of ascent and descent. They call the world that is free of measures and amounts the “world of intellects”, and the one that is dependent on it the “world of nature”. They have, however, been unable to prove the existence of the middle ground between

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11. *al-Mu'minūn*: 100.

the natural and intellectual orders. The mystics or *ʿurafā*, on the other hand, have reported in their visions a world similar to that found in traditions; a world where things have measures and quantities but are not material.<sup>12</sup> In both Transcendental Philosophy<sup>13</sup> (*ḥikmat al-mutaʿāliyah*) and the Illuminationist school<sup>14</sup> (*maktab al-ishrāqī*), the existence of this middle world has been proven.<sup>15</sup>

### The Stages of the World

The discussions above point to the existence of three general stages in the world. Man and the world pass through these three stages in their arc of descent from the highest level—from which the arc of ascent begins—to the lowest, and they continue to traverse the three stages of the arc of ascent, back to their origin.

The three stages in these two arcs of ascent and descent—depending upon the perspective in question—are known by various names. The first stage, in its being the source and store of all things descended from it, is known as the treasure house (*khazāʾin*); in its role as the corrector of the faults and imperfections of the lower levels, is known as the *jabarūt*. *Jabarūt* literally means omnipotence and power. This first level is also known as the Guarded Tablet (*lawḥ mahfūz*) because of both its constant and unchanging nature and the fact that the reality of all things is kept safe and guarded in it. This stage or world is known by other names also, such as the world of decree (*qaḍā*), the world of intellects (*ʿuqūl*), the world of ideas (*muthūl*), and the world of immaterial essences. Seen from the arc of ascent, it is also called the Greater Resurrection (*qiyāmat al-kubrā*).

The second stage, which mediates between the other two stages, is by the same token, called the isthmus (*barzakh*) and because it has some measures and quantities (despite its immaterial nature), it is called the world of measure or decree (*qadr*). Due to its sovereignty over the natural and corporeal world and kingdom it is called dominion (*malakūt*). Other names include: the imaginal world (*mithāl*), contiguous imagination (*khiyāl al-muttaṣil*), non-contiguous imagination (*khiyāl al-munfaṣil*), the Tablet of

12. Qayṣarī, Sharaf al-Dīn Dāwūd, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Tehran: Dar al-Funun, 1299/1881-82), 30.

13. Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Ḥikmat al-Mutaʿāliyah*, Vol. 7 (Beirut: Dār Ihyāʾ Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1981), 257.

14. Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī, *Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (Tehran: Intisharat Muʾasiseh Mutaliʿat Islāmī Danishgah Tehran, 1379/2000), 352.

15. Āshtiyānī, S.J., *Sharḥ Muqadameh Qayṣarī* (Mashhad: Bastan, 1385/1965-66), 483.

Negation and Affirmation (*lawḥ al-maḥẓ wa al-ithbāt*), and finally the Lesser Resurrection (*qiyāmat al-ṣuḡhrā*). These names pertain to the whole or parts of the second stage where it is seen from different perspectives.

The third stage is the natural world (*‘ālam al-ṭabī‘at*), and is also known as the material (*mādī*), kingdom (*mulk*) or corporeal, visible (*shahādah*), and lower world (*dunyā*).

Every level or stage is termed “visible” relative to the levels above it and “unseen” in reference to the ones below. In this way, the natural world is absolutely visible and the Divine Essence, which transcends all levels and comprehends them, is the absolute and utterly unseen or inner. The worlds situated anywhere between these two extremes—even the first stage or world of the treasures—are according to their various aspects known as either visible or unseen.

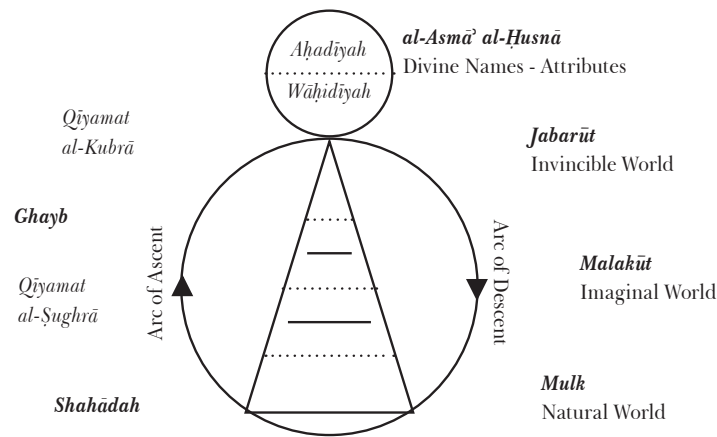


Diagram 1 – The Multiple States of Being in their Arcs of Ascent and Descent

The coming and going of things to and from this world in two arcs of descent and ascent—along with the names that are given to the stages of this movement—can be seen to be a cyclic movement. If these multiple states and levels of being were to be represented in a diagram of a pyramid, then the apex would be the Absolute Being; the first stage down would be the treasure house (also called *jabarūt*, divine decree, guarded tablet, the world of intellects, the world of ideas). The next stage would be the isthmus (also called dominion, measure, imaginal world). The last and bottom stage would be the natural world. In this hierarchal representation of being, all thing and realities—both simple and composite—are

seen to descend from God. Things such as iron are said in the Qurʾān to be “sent down” (...and We sent down iron<sup>16</sup>), as well as the Qurʾān itself: *Indeed We sent it down on the Night of Ordainment*.<sup>17</sup>

### Seven Heavens

Every higher level surrounds, envelops, and comprehends the levels lower than it. Subsequently, every lower level falls under the dominion of the level above it. Every dominion—with respect to that which it encompasses and dominates—can be referred to as a “heaven” or “sky”. Correspondingly, every dominated realm—in comparison to its dominion—can be called an “earth”. In the same way that light and water descend from the sky to the earth of this lower and natural world, Divine Grace and Mercy is showered down from the spiritual skies and heavens to the realms below and the kingdom hereunder. Hence, the affairs of the earth are made and managed in heaven: *He regulates the affair from the heaven to the earth...*<sup>18</sup>

More precisely, it is possible to divide the tri-level stages above into further sub-stages, and in so doing, arrive at a number of heavens and earths that fall into a precise vertical hierarchy. In this hierarchy, every heaven surrounds and comprehends the earth below it, while the divine heaven transcends them all. The Qurʾān says *and from beyond them, God is encompassing*.<sup>19</sup>

The existence of levels as well as their division into three general stages, can be discursively proven. The sub-levels and the conditions that apply in them, on the other hand, are only made apparent to those on the mystical path by way of direct witnessing. The Prophet, God’s blessing be upon him and his progeny, in his Nocturnal Ascension (*miʿrāj*), passed through the seven heavens, and the Qurʾān also speaks of seven heavens and seven earths: *It is God who has created seven heavens, and of the earth [a number] similar to them. The command gradually descends through them, that you may know that God has power over all things, and that God comprehends all things in knowledge*.<sup>20</sup>

In a tradition from Imām ʿAlī ibn Mūsā al-Riḍā (765-818) he described sevenfold heavens and earths—one above the other.<sup>21</sup> Now, even if the number seven here is not a hyperbole signifying “multipleness”, it is cer-

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16. *al-Ḥadīd*: 25.

17. *al-Qadr*: 1.

18. *as-Sajdah*: 5.

19. *al-Burūj*: 20.

20. *aṭ-Ṭalāq*: 12.

21. Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *op. cit.*, Vol. 19, 337.

tainly not taken from Ptolemaic astronomy, since in the latter the heavens were seen to be crystalline spheres whose number was nine, and not seven. Moreover, Ptolemaic astronomy—regardless of its factuality or error—always concerns itself with the material world of bodies, while the heavens spoken of in the Qurʾān pertain to all the levels and states of being, physical as well as metaphysical.

Muslim philosophers have conclusively proven the three general stages of the world<sup>22</sup> and have held that further specification is only possible by referring to the opinions of the mystics and visionaries, or alternatively, by way of conjecture and guessing.

Now, if each of the above mentioned three-fold stages were to be divided into two levels and their origin—the Divine Names and Attributes, which form the Divine Heaven—is also divided into the two states of *Aḥadiyyah* and *Wāḥidiyyah* (as the mystics have reported), then we find that there are in total eight levels or states. The highest of these levels—the Unitive Essence—transcends all things, and the lowest is the (bottom part) of the natural order.

Hence, the highest level is exclusively heaven, and is not an earth of any level whatsoever. Likewise, the lowest level is exclusively earth, and is not a heaven relative to any other level. Of the remaining six levels, each is a “heaven” with respect to the levels below it and is an “earth” in respect of those above it. In this way, seven heavens and seven earths can distinctly be spoken of. These seven heavens are spiritual heavens, not material or worldly skies. It can be said that they are the heavens of the world hereunder—that is to say the natural world and all that it contains is “under” and encompassed by them. Now of course in this natural world itself, there exists a heaven (or sky) and an earth pertaining to it. The heaven that pertains to this world, and is contained in it, is the very same sky that is seen by the naked eye, and the same one that is decorated by the stars. The Qurʾān says of this sky, *Indeed We have adorned the lowest heaven with the finery of the stars.*<sup>23</sup>

The spiritual heavens that are, on the other hand, otherworldly, comprehend and encompass this material world, while not being characterized by the natural and corporeal order. It is for this reason that the means of arriving at these heavens and returning from them is not a worldly or materialistic means or method.

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22. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāī, *Nihāyat al-Ḥikmah* (Qum: Muʾasiseh al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1360/1980), 275.

23. *aṣ-Ṣaffāt*: 6.

The spiritual heavens are such that the disbelievers and the arrogant cannot approach them. The Qurʾān speaks of those for whom the gates of heaven are shut and never opened: *Indeed, those who deny Our signs and are disdainful of them—the gates of the heaven will not be opened for them...*<sup>24</sup>

Now, because the management of the earth is by way of the heavens, and the earthly bounties are sent from above, the opening of the gates of heaven and the descent of heavenly grace is tantamount to the opening up and multiplication of these earthly bounties. Hence, God gives the glad tidings to the believers in this way: *If the people of the towns had been faithful and Godwary, We would have opened to them blessings from the heaven and the earth...*<sup>25</sup>

### Two Motions

Man and the other existents of the natural world undergo an additional type of displacement and change other than their mere physical movements. This type of change does not take place in the natural and physical world, but rather is the very result of entry into, and departure from, this world.

The descent of all things from the divine stores and treasures above to the natural world here below—and likewise, the fall of man from paradise to this earth—is not a downward movement that has as its origin a physical place and that passes through physical space to terminate at just another point in this very same physical and natural order. This is because the origin of this descent is metaphysical and its destination is physical. The intervening distance is such that it is bordered by the spiritual heavens on one end, and by the natural world on the other. For this reason, in measuring this motion, space, and time—which compose the necessary conditions of all motion and phenomena in the natural physical order—are of no consequence. The space and time of this world are themselves phenomena that appear only after the descent and at the end of the line, so to speak. By the same token, the ascent towards the Divine is neither physical in character, nor can it be compared to any upward motions in the natural world.

The difference between ascent and descent in the physical world is arbitrary and depends on the point of reference used. For instance, if a moving object has the centre of the earth as its point of reference, any motion towards this point is called “descent” and away from it “ascent”. As an example, someone who has made the earth his point of reference

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24. *al-Aʿrāf*: 40.

25. *al-Aʿrāf*: 96.

will label any motion towards the moon as an “ascent”. But if the point of reference is changed, and, say, the moon is now chosen to be the point, then any motion towards the moon becomes a “descent” and away from it an “ascent”. It is precisely because all corporeal entities in the physical world are “horizontally” coexistent and collateral that there is not a real and absolute measure to discern ascent and descent. Ascending and descending motions relative to the natural world itself, though, do have a real difference and point of reference, the latter being independent of any particular case. Hence, a thing that is in descent is all the while losing and giving up its transcendent and spiritual dimensions, and one in ascent is entering higher worlds of meaning.

In a descent into the natural world, the distance covered is neither natural nor worldly. An ascent from the natural world also does not involve a physical or worldly type of distance. In other words, the journey that man makes in the arcs of ascent and descent is not in space-time. It is rather, a journey *into* space and time, and an escape *from* them. In short, a journey from and to space and time is quite different from a journey within space and time.

The way, path, and means of a journey of ascent in the physical world is different from the way, path, and means of a journey from the confines of the physical world. God’s throne is beyond the heavens and, hence, when Imām ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib (600-661) was asked about its distance from the place where he stood, he said, “From the place of my feet to my Lord’s throne, is that a person sincerely says ‘There is no god but God.’”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, if ascent into the physical sky is by material and natural means, an ascent into the spiritual heavens takes place by virtue of faith, knowledge, and sincerity.

*Translated from the original Farsi by Shuja Ali Mirza*

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26. Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār* (Beirut: Mu’asisat al-Wafā’, 1404/1986), Vol. 10, 122.