

Acceptance as a Door of Mercy: *Ridā* in Islamic Spirituality

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“Allah tasketh not a soul beyond its scope. (*Lā yukallifu Allāh nafsān illā wus‘ahā*) For it (is only) that which it hath earned, and against it (only) that which it hath deserved. Our Lord! Condemn us not if we forget, or miss the mark! Our Lord! Lay not on us such a burden as thou didst lay on those before us! Our Lord! Impose not on us that which we have not the strength to bear! Pardon us, absolve us and have mercy on us, Thou, our Protector, and give us victory over the disbelieving folk.” (2:286, trans. Pickthall)

The Qur’ān teaches its readers that God does not impose upon the soul what is beyond its “capacity” or its “breadth” or “scope” (*wus‘ahā*). This is *prima facie* an enigmatic statement when considering how human beings have often been unable, throughout history, to sustain the blows of fate in keeping with a sense of faith. The hardships of existence have made many, especially in the modern world, feel overburdened with the weight of life and its trials, or overwhelmed by the power of inner and outer adversities, to the point of calling into question the very reality of God. Whereas many traditional religious paths tended to consider those hardships as either intrinsic concomitances of cosmic existence, or testing grounds for higher realms, contemporary mankind, since the advent of modernity, has rather taken the position that they constitute a primary stumbling block in any theodicy. Voltaire’s “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster”, in which the French philosopher takes the 1755 Lisbon earthquake as a major objection to the justice and goodness of the Supreme Being is, in this respect, a most eloquent case in point.

The term *wus‘ahā*, which could literally be translated by “her width” derives from the same Arabic root as that of the Divine Name *al-Wāsi‘*, the Abundant, the One Whose Capacity is Without Limits, the All-Encompassing. Several verses from the Qur’ān include derivations from this same root, among which “My Mercy encompasses (*wasi‘at*) all things” (7:156) and “He encompasses (*wasi‘a*) everything in His knowledge” (20:98). As mentioned by Ghazālī¹ in his commentary of the Divine Names, we might see that, although the name *al-Wāsi‘* remains the prerogative of God, mankind is not unable

¹In his commentary on the ninety-nine Names of God, al-Ghazālī makes the point that *al-Wāsi‘* is the Infinite that knows no bounds: “If one were to contemplate His beneficence and blessings, (one would know that) there is no limit to His object-of-power.” Even though the Name *al-Wāsi‘* can only be attributed to God in truth, it can be said of man, according to Ghazālī, that “if his knowledge is extensive, then he is a *wāsi‘* in proportion to the capacity of his knowledge; and if his character has expanded to the point that the fear of poverty, the irritation of those about him who are envious, the victory of greed and other attributes of this nature do not harass him, then he is a *wāsi‘* (in both knowledge and character), even though all of that has its limitation.” *Ninety-nine Names of God in Islam, A translation of the major portion of Al-Ghazālī’s al-Maqsad al-Asnā*, Robert Charles Stade (Daystar Press, Ibadan, Nigeria: 1970) p. 88.

to deserve the predicate of *wāsiʿ* inasmuch as it has the ability to open itself to the Divine vastness. Along the same lines, another verse from the Qurʾān connects God's consideration of the *wusʿa* of man with the Book of Destiny—*kitāb*, in asserting that no human will be wronged by it (23:62). Here again, the proportionality between human capacity and Divine decree is clearly asserted, and cuts short any attempt at “accusing” God of injustice, as it were. Considering this Quranic emphasis on the just proportion between Divine existention and human scope, it may come as a surprise that the Qurʾān adds the prayer “Our Lord do not bring upon us what we do not have the power to bear.” Does not the need for such a prayer contradict the very principle that has been asserted above? This imploration becomes quite intelligible, however, when considering the gap between the metaphysical and spiritual principle enunciated by the Qurʾān and the moral maturity or self-understanding of the soul. In other words, although the soul knows, theoretically, that God cannot overburden it, practically it must pray to Him that He would not do so. This invocation opens the channels of grace and inner relief by contact with the source of All-Powerfulness. Prayer is, in that sense, less a request than a means of realization through the request. It amounts to coming to realize concretely that one has indeed the capacity to bear with what He has sent upon one, a capacity that is, it must be noted, ultimately none but His, since it coincides with His Wisdom and Foreknowledge. In other words, it is through what God imposes upon it that the soul comes to know its real capacity in God and only in God, by contrast with what it imagined its own *wusʿa* to be for lack of self-knowledge. Thus, the rigor of destiny is a way through which one's limited awareness of God and oneself in God, as it were, is deepened and expanded. The Qurʾān, by taking the form of a prayer, teaches human beings a way to realize how much more they are when they turn to God, and “die” to themselves in Him, than in their ordinary and self-reliant ego. This realization does not come without suffering, however, because it draws the soul—sometimes abruptly and violently, away from its usual, natural self-satisfaction in order to open it up to a wider and deeper region of satisfaction that it was a priori reticent to embrace. In the Quranic view of reality, this process is as rigorous as death, but its full and sincere acceptance is a central door to Mercy.

Few would deny that today's world is rife with tensions and conflicts, and therefore in dire need of acceptance and mercy. No doubt, conflicts have rarely, if ever, been absent from human history, but the last decades have impressed upon most observers a sense of moral urgency in the face of violent ethnic and ideological clashes and acute forms of polarization that are not without evoking the climate of dissolution associated by René Guénon with what he conceived as the final stages of a process of civilizational entropy.² It is not difficult to read in this explosive dissolution the sure sign that what may have remained of a sense of unity and harmony has been broken, and that some measure of ontological reconciliation has to be brought back to the fore if mankind is to heal and flourish. One of the theses of this essay is that religion could be defined as a potential response to this tragic predicament in so far as it is fully understood as a program and a practice of acceptance of reality and other human beings through

²Cf. *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Sophia Perennis: 2004) was first published in 1927, and *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (Sophia Perennis: 2004) in 1945.

surrender to the Divine. In fact, there is no axial religion³ that does not start from the premise that “something is rotten in the Kingdom of Denmark,” to make use of Hamlet’s suggestive expression: mankind has lost its connection with the Principle of its being and disharmony has ensued. This state of affairs, that religion aims at remedying, may be deemed to result from a sense of radical “otherness”, of separation between I and God, I and others, I and nature, symbolized, in the Bible, by the loss of the blissful proximity and unity of terrestrial paradise. In this essay, we propose to show that the concept of *riḍā*, or acceptance, particularly as it has been conceptualized and practiced in Islam and Sufism, can be considered as both the means and the end of our recognition of God and other human beings in so far as it amounts to a profound acceptance of “other-than-ourselves” and “other-than-our-will.” As Frederick Mathewson Denny put it in his *Introduction to Islam*: “All true religion is ‘surrender’ to God and, thus, Islam in the generic sense.”⁴ Within the religious fold of Islam, Sufism is moreover particularly keen on emphasizing the central role of *riḍā* as a central ethico-spiritual means of verification, assimilation and realization of the metaphysical principles of the creed.⁵

The Quranic ideas of Divine *riḍā* and *riḍwān* provide both the transcendent model and the infinite foundation of this concept of acceptance: “Allah promiseth to the believers, men and women, Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide—blessed dwellings in Gardens of Eden. And—greater (far)!—acceptance from Allah (*riḍwān*). That is the supreme triumph (*fawz*).” (9:72) The principle that God “accepts” mankind is foundational in Islam, and it is moreover the pre-requisite for any understanding of the meaning of *riḍā* as a human virtue. The Divine *riḍā* is, in Islam, a divine “yes” that opens a space of free-will within which humans may choose between “yes” and “no.”

For better or for worse our world is particularly prone to make use of the word “no” as a means of affirmation of its progressive and anti-essentialist Weltanschauung. Indeed, today’s world could be characterized as a “no” to the limitations that are felt to prevent human self-realization. From genetic engineering to interstellar exploration the prospect of modern mankind is to push back the limits of the concept of nature and traditional definitions of humanness. This is why modern mankind tends to be distrustful of the concepts of “reality” and “essence,” or the idea of things “as they are.” Such concepts are deemed to foster passivity, arbitrariness and even oppression. Feminism,⁶ anti-racism and

³One may refer here to the categories used by John Hick in his *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven and London: 1989). Axial religions, of which Karl Jaspers saw the emergence between the 8th to the 3rd centuries BC, emerged when “significant human individuals appeared through whose insights (...) human awareness was immensely enlarged and developed, and a movement began from archaic religion to the religions of salvation or liberation.” Hick, p. 29.

⁴Pearson Prentice, 2006, p. 58.

⁵“It can be said that the Sufis were the ones to have developed the assertion that the knowledge of the religion cannot be separated from its spiritual-ethical practice. Their methodology is characterised by practical application (*istiḥmāl*) of the verses of the Quran and the Sunnah. Although other Muslim scholars in other disciplines have touched upon this matter, it was the Sufis who developed a deeper understanding of the various practical ethical and spiritual dimensions of attributes such as repentance (*tawbah*), piety (*wara'*), trust (*tawakkul*) and contentment (*riḍā*).” *Ethical Personalism*, Cheikh Mbacke Gueye (Ed.), Ontos Verlag, 2011, p. 73.

⁶“To varying degrees the essentialist hold of biological, psychological and social (to name but three) universals and structures on the construction of identity has been loosened under the influence of poststructuralist critiques and reformulations.” (*The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, J. K. Gibson-Graham, First University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 24).

other types of progressive discourses are particularly bent on questioning essentialism, which they associate with conservative or reactionary socio-political stands or premises. Thus, for example, in the context of anti-racist discourse, we read that “while anti-essentialism is a reflexive tendency, an attempt to question taken-for-granted categories and experiences, essentialism leads away from reflexivity; it is a tendency that tries to close down political debate and sustain existing notions and labels.”⁷

It could even be said, going a step further, that both modernity and the post-modern condition that has emerged in its wake can be considered as denials that there is a way “things are.” Whether they rejoice in it or not, few people would deny that modernity has been primarily defined as a rejection of tradition conceived as a “static” concept of reality, while striving to substitute for it a “dynamic” one based on becoming and progress. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church itself, heretofore a jealous guardian of a traditional and dogmatic delimitation of the human predicament, came to highlight and applaud, in the Preface of its *Pastoral Constitution* of the Council Vatican II that “the human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one.”⁸ This statement alludes to the fact that the entrance into modernity, with the advent of the European Renaissance, entailed a substitution of “becoming” for “being.” The 18th-century Enlightenment was in many ways an intensification of this move, and as such paved the way for profound and irreversible political and cultural changes. History replaced truth, or rather has become synonymous with it. Hegelian dialectics and the Marxist materialistic narrative were the two main figures of this promotion of history to the rank of highest criterion of truth and reality, while Darwinian evolutionism provided a scientific hypothesis that has functioned, by and large, as the ideological and imaginary foundation of the modern paradigm. Such founding ideas as individual freedom, democratic empowerment, the pursuit of happiness and ownership over one’s life and destiny have shaped a new concept of humanity that is radically at odds with holistic and pre-modern models.⁹ There is no stable and definitive concept of reality which would hamper human development and imprison mankind under arbitrary or authoritarian principles of *status quo*. Post-modern trends have gone a step further in this demolition of “being” by rejecting any definiteness or permanence of meaning. The meaning of things is always postponed, in the making, and there is therefore nothing we can consider as meaningful of the real or the true. Modernity, and all the more so post-modernity, say “no” to “being” in the name of “becoming” understood not as “something that happens to being” but rather as an utter dismissal of being.¹⁰ In other words, being is never present nor given since it is fundamentally negated by “fissure” and “delay.” Not only have we no way to know what is anymore, but in fact nothing is in any definite sense of word.

Islam, for its part, has been defined by the Prophet as consisting in ways of acting, the

⁷Alastair Bonnett, *Anti-Racism*, Routledge, New York, 2000, p. 142.

⁸*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, article 5.

⁹For an enlightening analysis of this contrast see, for example, Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

¹⁰Thus, Christoph Cox has characterized Derrida’s *différance* as “the operation of differing which at one and the same time both fissures and retards presence.” *Nietzsche Naturalism and Interpretation* (University of California Press: 1999), p. 203.

first of which being a witnessing of Being, the confession of faith, *ash-shahādah*. In the famous *ḥadīth* of Gabriel¹¹ the very first element in the definition of Islam is the *shahādah*. Nothing summarizes Islam more aptly and succinctly than the first *shahādah*, “no god but God,” since it encapsulates the central doctrine of Unity, or “unification”, *tawḥīd*. Now this unification is neither a negation of the possibility of change nor the repudiation of diversity and becoming as such. In this sense, Islam does not say “no” to becoming as such, but to the erection of becoming into being. In the four words of the first *shahādah*, *lā ilāha ill’Allāh*—no divinity except/if not the Divinity, we recognize a negation which is either compounded and radicalized or turned into a conditional affirmation. In the first case, which is the most immediately obvious, the *ilāha* that stands for any god, any divinity, or any being or idea claiming divine or worshipable status, is negated by the *istīḥnā*, the exclusive exception of Allāh. There is no true being except God. In addition, another layer of meaning appears as soon as we understand *illā* as a literal *in-lā*, or “if not.” “No real being if not Divine Being” sounds now like a conditional affirmation of creatures on the basis of Divine Being. In other words we derive from the *shahādah* both that there is no reality but God and that there is no real being without God. God is the only true Being, *al-Ḥaqq*, without which, or without whom, no being would be endowed with any reality, nor any meaning. Islam does not separate the meaning of the relative as such from that of the Absolute as such. What it denies is *bāṭil*, vanity, insubstantiality, inexistence, nothingness; what it affirms is the Unconditional Being that is the *conditio sine qua non* of all beings. Islam affirms God, the Absolute, and recognizes everything else within the context of this affirmation. This is another way of saying that God “accepts” creatures to the extent that they are not separated nor isolated from Divine Being, Meaning and Consciousness. Islam is a “yes” underlying a “no” or it is a “no” culminating into a “yes.” In this essay we would like to meditate on the notion and practice of *riḍā* as one of the most meaningful and representative of Islamic virtues, and as the epitome of the “yes” that Islamic spirituality, as well as—*mutatis mutandis*—Christian spirituality and religious spirituality in general, can and must foster as a constructive, charitable and merciful response and alternative to the modern and post-modern “no.”

¹¹“While we were one day sitting with the Messenger of God, there appeared before us a man dressed in extremely white clothes and with very black hair. No traces of journeying were visible on him, and none of us knew him. He sat down close by the Prophet (...) and said, ‘O Muhammad! Inform me about Islam.’ Said the Messenger of God, ‘Islam is that you should testify that there is no deity save God and that Muhammad is His Messenger, that you should perform *ṣalāh* (ritual prayer), pay the *zakāh*, fast during Ramadan, and perform Hajj (pilgrimage) to the House (the Ka’bah at Makkah), if you can find a way to it (or find the means for making the journey to it).’ Said he (the man), ‘You have spoken truly.’

“We were astonished at his thus questioning him and telling him that he was right, but he went on to say, ‘Inform me about *īmān* (faith).’ He (the Messenger of God) answered, ‘It is that you believe in Allah and His angels and His Books and His Messengers and in the Last Day, and in fate (*qadr*), both in its good and in its evil aspects.’ He said, ‘You have spoken truly.’

“Then he (the man) said, ‘Inform me about *īhsān*.’ He (the Messenger of Allah) answered, ‘It is that you should worship God as though you could see Him, for though you cannot see Him yet He sees you.’ He said, ‘Inform me about the Hour.’ He (the Messenger of God) said, ‘About that the one questioned knows no more than the questioner.’ So he said, ‘Well, inform me about the signs thereof (i.e. of its coming).’ Said he, ‘They are that the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress, that you will see the barefooted ones, the naked, the destitute, the herdsmen of the sheep (competing with each other) in raising lofty buildings.’ Thereupon the man went off.

“I waited a while, and then he (the Messenger of God) said, ‘O ‘Umar, do you know who that questioner was?’ I replied, ‘God and His Messenger know better.’ He said, ‘That was Jibril. He came to teach you your religion.’” [Muslim]

Before we approach the specifically Islamic denotations and connotations of the term it is meaningful to note that the concept of *riḍā* is most often translated into English as “acceptance” or “satisfaction.” It must be stressed that these two translations already point to different spiritual degrees. To accept does not necessarily mean satisfaction, even while satisfaction seems to imply acceptance. One may all too easily accept something out of passivity, indifference or conformity. Indeed, it is to be feared, in this connection, that the most usual understanding of the contemporary concept of “tolerance” does not go beyond this relatively superficial way of “accepting.” This appears in the way one may tolerate an evil without for that reason attaching any positive value to this form of acceptance. There is, however, in the Latin etymology of the verb “to accept,” *accipere*, a sense of receiving that points to more positive associations, particularly by suggesting a certain inner receptivity that is akin to the ability to welcome. Such a meaning takes us closer to the positive denotations of *riḍā* as an ability to receive within oneself and to embrace. Still, the concept of acceptance does not tell us explicitly about the spiritual and moral foundations of this ability to accept, to receive and to welcome. Such foundations appear in a clearer light when one considers the translation of *riḍā* by satisfaction. The Latin prefix *satis* is in reality an adverb that means “enough.” Satisfaction comes with a sense of fullness, a sense of plenitude that does not require anything more, and is perfectly contented in itself, or in the enjoyment of its object. Thus, satisfaction in God is, on an immediate level, a response to the human tendency toward insatiability. It is therefore related to a sense of being “fed” by God. In the Qur’ān this is epitomized by Maryam’s being satisfied by, and nurtured with, the divine nourishment, *al-Rizq*: “Whenever Zachariah went into the sanctuary where she was, he found that she had food. He said: O Mary! Whence cometh unto thee this (food)? She answered: It is from Allāh. Allah giveth without stint to whom He will.” (3:37) In Christianity alike, the utter acceptance of the Word by Mary, akin to spiritual obedience (*tā’ah*), has been equated with the perfection of the human soul. “Let it be done, according to your Word” (Luke 1:38) says Mary when receiving the visitation of the Angel. The Immaculate Conception is the supernatural pinnacle, and in a way the transcendent “archetype,” of this perfect receptivity to, acceptance of, and satiety with God’s Word. From a human point of view, spiritual satisfaction is none other than the ultimate object of all quests. All humans aim at a perfect plenitude of being and happiness, whether they do so in a misguided manner or not. They seek a sense of fulfillment that would be the meaningful culmination of human life, one that is “*bi-ghayri ḥisāb*,” or “without measure, or account.” (Qur’ān, 3:37) Hence the question put, in different ways, by religious traditions of the world: what may bring this fullness of satisfaction to human beings, and free them from their constricting, wretched sense of incompleteness? The answers certainly vary in forms and ways, but the common grounds of meaning are, at least, two: nothing on this level of terrestrial reality can give access to full satisfaction, and it is only in transcendence—whether we understand by this word another plane of reality or a different level of perception of the same reality, as Maryam’s total *tabtīl*,¹² or utter dedication to prayer, that *satis*, the “enough” that is a synonym of plenitude, can be reached and experienced.

When coming to the meaning of the Arabic word *riḍā* in the Islamic tradition, three

¹²“So remember the name of thy Lord and devote thyself with a complete devotion (*tabtīlan*).” (Qur’ān, 73:8)

points must be stressed as starting themes of meditation. First, *riḍā* can be given positive or negative denotations and connotations depending on whether it is understood as *riḍā* with God or *riḍā* with oneself, *riḍā an-naḥs*. Secondly, *riḍā* pertains both to mankind and to God, there is a human *riḍā* and a divine *riḍā*; and thirdly, as we will see, *riḍā* is the highest finality of the human vocation, and also in a certain sense the highest fulfillment of the Divine Nature. The two latter points are, in fact, intimately connected, as we hope will become evident in what follows. The first point, although perhaps obvious to many, is not without importance as it denotes a basic distinction between a human attitude of self-contentment that shuns any sense of transcendence, and one that finds its abode in nothing but a reality higher than itself. The Algerian Sufi Shaykh Aḥmad al-‘Alawī told his agnostic friend Dr. Carret, “To be one of us and to see the Truth, you lack the desire to raise your Spirit above yourself. And that is irremediable.”¹³ *Riḍā an-naḥs* is, in that sense, incompatible with the kind of self-transcendence that gives access to the Spirit, it is a satisfaction with too little, a psychological or moral comfort that shies away from self-transcendence out of an ill-inspired sense of egotistical preservation. It is the self-satisfaction chastised by the Qur’ān when it refers to him who “sees himself as independent,” (*an ra’ahu astaghna*) (96:8). But the *riḍā* under discussion is not self-satisfaction, it is a *riḍā* founded on God-consciousness, the spiritual virtue of *riḍā*. What strikes one about this positive *riḍā*—and it is our second point, is that, among all virtues recorded and commented upon in spiritual manuals, it is probably the one that reveals the highest degree of reciprocity between God and mankind, the term *riḍā* being attributable to the human as well as to the Divine, albeit with a different inflection of meaning in each case. “God is satisfied with them, and they are satisfied with Him” (5:119): this verse applies to the highest reward in the Hereafter, as in the current passage, but also by extension to the highest experience in this world, as will appear more clearly in what follows. Commenting upon this Quranic verse, the 11th century Sufi Hujwīrī, in his classical treatise *Kashf al-Mahjūb*—the *Unveiling of the Hidden*, highlights the two meanings of *riḍā* as “the satisfaction of God with man” and the “satisfaction of man with God.”¹⁴ By contrast with other virtues that tend to be either positive modes of participation in the Divine or complementary ways of relating to it, the concept of *riḍā* applies to both the human and the Divine while doing so in quite distinct ways. Whereas, for example, the virtue of generosity may be conceived as a participation in divine generosity, or to put it in more Islamic terms, as an exchange of qualities, *tabaddul al-ṣifāt*, in the sense that the human soul becomes clothed with the Divine Quality—mankind being endowed, if only provisionally, with the Divine Attributes of generosity, human *riḍā*, by contrast, is not ultimately identifiable with God’s *riḍā*. On the other hand, while the poverty of the human being, *faqr*, is like the receptive complement of the richness of God, the Rich, *al-Ghanī*,¹⁵ mankind’s *riḍā* cannot be truly considered the negative complement of God’s *riḍā*, since they are both positive and not lacking, as it were. There are virtues that result primarily from similarity and analogy, or immanence, like generosity, and others mainly from difference and abstraction, or transcendence, like humility, but *riḍā* appears to be connected to both dimensions. It is in some ways like a

¹³Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth-Century* (Islamic Texts Society: 1993), p. 28.

¹⁴‘Alī bin ‘Uthmān Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, (Zaki: Lahore, 2002), p. 177.

¹⁵“Allāh is the Rich, and ye are the poor.” (47:40)

threshold, or an “isthmus”—a *barzakh*, between transcendence and immanence, a point of junction, as it were, between the salty and the sweet seas referred to in the Quranic surah of the Cave. Paradoxically, the spiritual texture of *riḍā* is made of proximity in distance, and identity in difference and separation. Humans are separated from God but they somehow unite with Him by accepting the distance that this relationship entails. As we will see, in *riḍā* the human meets with the Divine in a sort of reciprocal fulfillment. This is no doubt why the 8th century Sufi ‘Abd al-Wāḥid ibn Zayd could say that “satisfaction is the greatest door of God and Paradise on earth.”¹⁶

In the classical tradition of Sufism, or *taṣawwuf*, *riḍā* is most directly connected to the human response to destiny as manifestation of the Divine Will. As most virtues, it can be actualized on different degrees ranging from the elementary moral quality of the ordinary believers (*‘awāmm*) to a spiritual extinction in God’s Will which is the virtue of the “elite of the elite” (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*). Thus, the 18th century Moroccan Shaykh Ibn ‘Ajība defined *riḍā*¹⁷ as the virtue that allows one to encounter vicissitudes with a “smiling face” or with joy (*surūr*) in the heart. It is quite clear that such a virtue, at least on such an elevated level of manifestation, amounts to a direct, immediate and spontaneous sense of the Divine Presence in everything. The immediate and reflex-like nature of *riḍā* appears in contradistinction with *tawakkul* (reliance on God) and *taslīm* (tranquillity) since it manifests “at the very time of the descent of the divine decree,” *al-riḍā yakun ‘inda al-nazūl*, whereas *tawakkul* and *taslīm* tend to be more prospective and open-ended. This character of immediate assent also differentiates *riḍā* from mere patience, *ṣabr*, as illustrated by the hierarchy of virtues inherent to ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab’s advice: “All goodness lies in satisfaction. Be satisfied, if you can; if not, then endure patiently.”¹⁸ Hujwīrī gives further metaphysical depth and expansion to the description of the virtue of *riḍā* by specifying that “human satisfaction is equanimity toward Fate, whether it withholds or bestows, and spiritual steadfastness (*istiqāma*) in regarding events, whether they be the manifestation of Divine Beauty (*jamāl*) or of Divine Majesty (*jalāl*), so that it is all one to a man whether he is consumed in the fire of wrath or illuminated by the light of mercy, because both wrath and mercy are evidences of God, and whatever proceeds from God is good in His eyes.”¹⁹ The Persian Sufi adds that the spiritual function of *riḍā* is to purge the heart from “thoughts relating to other than God and free it from the bonds of tribulation.” Thus, these two passages indicate that *riḍā* is central to the process of *tawḥīd*, that is “unification” in both senses of a recognition of Unity within multiplicity—and even in divergences and oppositions, and a centering of all human faculties upon God’s oneness. Acceptance leads one to understand that everything is “unified” in God’s Will, that everything comes from Him and is, essentially, Himself, as it helps one unify one’s faculties in surrendering to His Will. In other words, *riḍā* makes *tawḥīd* a concrete, existential reality, for to write that rigor and mercy are “all one” to the spiritual traveler means that he or she recognizes them from the point of view of their originating in the One, indeed of being dimensions or aspects of the One. To the extent that destiny, especially in its rigorous blows, is among all human experiences that which tends to lead

¹⁶*Al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism*, Abū’l Qāsim al-Qushayrī, translated by Alexander Knysh (Garnet Publishing, 2007), p. 207.

¹⁷*L’Ascension du regard vers les réalités du Soufisme, Kitāb Mi‘rāj al-Taṣawwuf* (AlBouraq, Paris: 2010), p. 84.

¹⁸Qushayrī, p. 209.

¹⁹Hujwīrī, p. 177.

humans to fall into multiplicity and disintegration, it makes sense that any encounter with the hard edges of existence may also be a major challenge to transcend oneself through divine grace. This self-transcendence in and by *riḍā* is not to be misunderstood, however, as any sort of de-humanization or “disensitized” indifference. In point of fact, when quoting Abū ‘Alī al-Daqqāq, Qushayrī makes it quite plain that *riḍā* does not amount to an absence of suffering from the rigor of the decrees but rather a concrete awareness that these decrees and their effects on the body and the soul flow from God, and must therefore be accepted as expressions of His Reality: “satisfaction is not that you remain immune to affliction; it is that you do not oppose (divine) judgment and decree.”²⁰ As for the spontaneity of *riḍā*, it introduces us to the idea of the immediacy of grace—since no mediated human efforts would seem to be strong enough to produce it—while being at the same time connected to the notion of *waqt*, or destiny as it manifests itself in the particular moment of time that weighs upon us. Some Sufis, for this very reason, claim that the *adab*, or spiritual adequateness or courtesy, of the *waqt* of the rigour of destiny is *riḍā*. In this sense, *riḍā* is a welcoming of the *waqt*.²¹ Inasmuch as it is independent of the mere sequence of human efforts, the association of *riḍā* and *waqt* brings the power of grace to the fore. In actuality, the classical argument as to whether *riḍā* is to be considered a state or a station directly stem from these considerations.

Traditionally, the station (*maqām*) tends indeed to be defined by Sufi writers in terms of human effort and acquisition, as well as in the form of stages and a sense of permanence, whereas the state (*ḥāl*), by contrast, lies on the side of grace, uniqueness and temporariness. In his *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, Hujwīrī specifies, for example, that “‘station’ belongs to the category of acts, ‘state’ to the category of gifts.”²² It is precisely on the basis of this distinction that classical Sufism gave rise to a debate as to the nature of *riḍā*. On one side of the debate, the 9th century Baghdadi Shaykh Muḥāsibī defended the principle that *riḍā* is a *ḥāl*, and not a *maqām*. This is because, according to Fuḍayl quoted by Hujwīrī, “he who is satisfied does not desire any higher stage.”²³ Moreover Muḥāsibī calls satisfaction the quiescence (*sukūn*) and tranquility of the heart at God’s decrees, and these are “not qualities acquired by Man, but are Divine gifts.”²⁴ In this view, when left to his own natural abilities the human soul is quite unable to acquiesce to the decrees of rigor. By contrast with the school of Baghdad, the Sufis of Khurasan tended to consider *riḍā* as a station, in fact as the summit and perfection of the station of trust in God. It is remarkable that two of the most important classical commentators and classifiers of the 11th century, Hujwīrī and Qushayrī, proposed a more balanced interpretation that provides a manner of synthesis between Baghdadi and Khurasanian views. For Hujwīrī: “satisfaction is the end of the ‘stations’ and the beginning of the ‘states’.”²⁵ Its beginning rests with effort and acquisition, its end with divine bestowing. This is also the point of view adopted by Qushayrī in his *Risālah* when he states that “at the beginning of the Path, the servant acquires satisfaction, so it is a station, while in the end it becomes

²⁰Qushayrī, p. 207.

²¹Al-Nurī said: “He who does not observe the rules of proper behavior in his mystical moment (*waqt*), his moment will turn into spite (*maqt*).”p. 296.

²²Hujwīrī, p. 181.

²³Hujwīrī, p. 179.

²⁴Hujwīrī, p. 180.

²⁵Hujwīrī, p. 182.

a state, and, therefore, can no longer be acquired.”²⁶ So once again, *riḍā* reveals both a human and a divine side: *riḍā* is like a *barzakh*, an isthmus between two incommensurable domains. This intermediary status of *riḍā* is, moreover, illustrated by the reflections of the 11th century Persian Sufi Abdullah Al-Anṣārī, in his *Abodes of the Travelers toward the Real (Manāzil al-sā’irīn ilā al-ḥaqq)*, where he defines *riḍā* as “pausing willingly where God has us stop, without asking for a position ahead or behind, without any attempt at obtaining more, and no desire to change one’s state.”²⁷ At this juncture *riḍā* could be compared to an effort toward no effort, a progress toward no progress, and as such an intermediary zone between the proceeding through stations and the bestowing of a state. The perfection of *riḍā* would imply the recognition that the traveler is ultimately not the real agent, nor the real cause of his or her own traveling. This purifies the path from that which, in his effort, would still be mixed with an individualistic desire of progress or a subtle spiritual ambition. In this context of surrender and abandonment, *riḍā* evokes, more generally, the overall spirit and climate, or *barakah*, of Islam, the practice of which the contemporary philosopher Frithjof Schuon has suggestively referred to as a paradox of “repose in effort”:²⁸ This repose is abandonment to God’s Will, whatever might be the degree and depth of its source and actualization. It is in reference to those stages of spiritual realization that Anṣārī, in the typical fashion of classical Sufi manuals, distinguishes three levels of *riḍā*. The first, elementary, stage is that of believers who zealously reject any object of worship other than God. On this level, *riḍā* preserves the theocentric nature of mankind and society, thereby preventing them from letting worldliness and terrestrial gods or “associates” alter the purity of worship, or *ikhlaṣ*. It might be proposed that our world could find in this dimension of *riḍā* a way to address the excesses, hybristic ambitions and delusory vanities of contemporary mankind, whether it remains outwardly religious or not. To the extent that one has identified with these centrifugal tendencies one has succumbed to a radical forgetfulness of the *shahādah*, for the Islamic tradition teaches, in a *ḥadīth*, that were the entire universe of manifestation placed on one side of a scale and the *shahādah* on the other, the testimony of faith would infinitely outweigh “heavens” and “earths.”²⁹ Further, Anṣārī defines the second stage of *riḍā* (that of *al-khāss*) as one in which “one is satisfied with God in all that He has decreed.” Significantly, one of the three criteria of the realization of this stage of *riḍā* is the “cessation of all quarreling with fellow humans.”³⁰ In other words, this level of *riḍā*, which is the most widely recognized and most often mentioned in Sufi treatises, entails the abandonment of any individual pretensions to change the heart of others through debates, criticism or, a fortiori, forceful and violent behavior. Here again, the lessons for today are most relevant in sight of occurrences of presumptuous and aggressive religious self-righteousness. Finally, the third level of *riḍā* (that of *khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*) is the “satisfaction with the very satisfaction of God.” This stage is none other than the

²⁶ Qushayrī, p. 206.

²⁷ In *Chemin de Dieu—Trois traités spirituels*, trans. Serge de Laugier de Beurecueil, (Paris, Sindbad: 1997), p. 181.

²⁸ “The practice of *Islām*, at whatever level, is to repose in effort.” *Understanding Islam* (World Wisdom: 2011), p. 52.

²⁹ “If the seven Heavens and those who dwell in them other than Me and the seven Earths are put into one pan (of the scale) and *Lā-ilāha-ill-Allāh* is put into the other; *Lā-ilāha-ill-Allāh* would be heavier.” [Ibn Hibban and Hakim]

³⁰ Anṣārī, p. 181.

practical expression of the recognition of God's exclusive being, which is the essence of the Sufi doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, expressed among others by Ghazālī in his *Mishkāt al-anwār –The Niche of Lights: «Laysa fi-l'wujūd illa'llāh»*, “There is none in existence save God.”³¹ This very subtle, and easily misinterpreted doctrine, amounts to the realization of the inexistence of any ultimate and essential “distinctions”. It is the recognition of, and the identification with, the Light through the whole range of its radiation and obfuscations. In that ultimate sense, *riḍā* amounts to a concrete realization of *tawḥīd*, the exclusive and inclusive “unification” of everything in God.

The metaphysics of *riḍā*, or the metaphysics implied by its realization, is indeed one of inclusion through exclusion. *Tawḥīd* has found, in some schools of Sufism, a most consistent expression in the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that draws from the Unicity of the Real the exclusiveness of its Reality, while opening thereby onto a deeper inclusiveness. In keeping with this inspiration, we read in the following lines by Sachiko Murata a suggestive synthesis of Sufi views of the Unicity of Reality: “There is none but the Real. Everything else is unreal, evanescent, non existence. However the divine beauty, mercy, and good pleasure (*riḍā*) look at the other and affirm it. God is similar to all things and present in them.”³² This means, in other words, that God accepts our “otherness,” our being different from Him through his *riḍā*, and excludes our “otherness” or separation through His wrath to the extent that we are not “satisfied” with Him. Therefore, satisfaction is, on the part of God, both a dimension of His essential and intrinsic Mercy and, secondarily, a function of His response to our recognition of this Mercy. By accepting “us” God gives us “being” in Him, and our “satisfied” response to this gift “fulfills”, if one may say so, His satisfaction. As Murata puts it, commenting on Ibn ‘Arabī, “at every instant wrath destroys the others, and at every instant mercy recreates them,” and since mercy prevails over wrath, or is more real, continuity prevails over discontinuity, and immanence over transcendence. Without the divine *riḍā* there would be no existence, and no mankind. Thus *riḍā* is not only, nor primarily, a response to our abiding by God's Will, it is indeed the very precondition of our being. This divine acceptance is acceptance of “other than Itself” or “other than God” on the part of the Divine Self; it is none other than the acceptance of multiplicity on the part of Divine Unity.

The Qur'ān is quite explicit about the divinely willed nature of terrestrial and human diversity: “O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another.” (49:13) The Divine Unity manifests itself through its affirmation of multiplicity, differences, alternations and complementarities. This diversity is affirmed because it increases, as it were, the self-knowledge of God through the theophanic multiplicity of the vehicles of knowledge; and this also reveals important implications in the realm of human interactions and relationships. Diversity can be a way toward Unity inasmuch as it invites us to seek and realize its ultimate message. Thus, in the domain of the relationships among religious communities, the Qur'ān suggests a commonality of faith and a striving for the Truth

³¹“The gnostics, after having ascended to the heaven of reality, agree that they see nothing in existence save the One, the Real.” *Mishkāt al-Anwār—The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman (Brigham Young University Press: 1998), pp. 16–17.

³²*The Tao of Islam* (State University of New York Press: 1992), p. 94.

within the context of differences: “For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.” (5:48) The diversity of mankind is therefore not only founded in God’s desire to see human beings know each other, but also in His invitation to them to perfect themselves through differences. Differences, far from being inherently conflicting, mean increased knowledge and a greater attentiveness to the Divine Will, hence a recognition of Unity within, and by means of, diversity. If one were to wonder why the Divine would in any way favor this reciprocal knowledge, and this God-knowledge through emulation, it might be enough to say that Sufis have meditated upon this fact as a reflection of the limitlessness of God’s Essence in the and through Divine Self-disclosures, *tajalliyāt*. In the words of the oft-quoted ḥadīth that is so central to the Sufi understanding of the world of creation, God as “Hidden Treasure” wanted to be known and this knowledge,³³ inasmuch as it is an exteriorization of Himself, could not occur but through the manifestation of his infinity in an analytic and differentiated mode, which is like the reverse side of His Unity. Secondly this multiplicity is not only one of being, but also one of knowledge: this means that multiplicity has to be perceived in and through the polarity of subject and object. The myriad of modes and manifestations of knowledge presupposes the polarity between subject and object. Thirdly, the knowing subjects themselves, and human beings first among them, can and must take each other as objects of knowledge. This makes up a world in which an infinite number of mirrors reflect each other, while reflecting the Divine Face. If one were to ask what acceptance and contentment have to do with this projection, multiplication and polarization that proceeds from God’s Essence and return to it, an answer would lie in mankind’s ability—but also sometimes failure, to be “accepting” of the world and human beings in their difference from self, not only as a more or less reluctant or conventional tolerance, but as a recognition of the Divine transcendence in them. In knowing others human beings know both God and themselves. They recognize in the other the face of God and at the same time what they are themselves, albeit in a different mode.

Finally, the question must be raised of the ultimate meaning of a divine “acceptance” and a divine “satisfaction” since, with regard to satisfaction, God is necessarily satisfied in the sense of being perfect, while with respect to acceptance, His infinite mercy is by definition intrinsically accepting. What can it mean for God to be “accepting” of man, and to be “satisfied” with humans? On an immediate and literal level we can easily understand that acceptance and satisfaction on the part of God must be responses to good thoughts, good behavior and good actions on the part of human beings. This is the conventional, anthropomorphic, religious concept of the good: God is satisfied with humans when they do His Will. But does it mean that something could be added to God that would be absent without us “satisfying” Him? Not so, claims the tradition, for the Perfect God of monotheism does not lack anything. The anthropomorphism of the expression of “satisfaction” may therefore veil us from the highest metaphysical meaning of divine satisfaction. The “satisfaction” of God is the fulfillment of his Will toward us, and this Will is expressed in the aforementioned ḥadīth “I was a Hidden Treasure and I wanted

³³Murata, p. 61.

to be known so I created the world.” The “satisfaction” of God consists in being known, that is in being known by other than Himself, creation being none other than a way for God to be known as an object, or as the supreme Object, since He already knows himself essentially as a Subject. Given that mankind was taught all the names of creation,³⁴ it can know God in all its wealth of manifestation, and it can also know Him as the principle of manifestation. In other words mankind can know God both as the Outer, the Manifest, *al-Zāhir*, and as the Inner, the Hidden, *al-Bāṭin*. However, the way mankind knows the Inner is different from the way it knows the Outer. The Hidden can only be known subjectively, as the mysterious root or essence of our being, an essence that transcends our limited individuality *qua* individuality while being “nearer to him (man) than his jugular vein.” (50:16) This intimate, essential, subjective Unity is no more beautifully expressed than in the question put by the 13th century Andalusian Sufi Shushtarī: “*man anā, ya anā, illa anā?* (who am I, oh I, if not I)?”³⁵ As for *al-Zāhir*, He can be known through the myriad of qualities that humans experience on a daily basis, and which are nothing but the distant reflections of His Names and Attributes. For Sufis, when a human being reaches the pinnacle of this two-fold knowledge of God and recognizes Unity in Multiplicity and Multiplicity in Unity, he fulfills the very purpose of creation in the most active and perfect way. This is the highest degree of satisfaction in God because it has fulfilled the plenitude of God’s being and the fullness of man’s being. This satisfaction is higher than the garden because it touches upon the very Essence of God, His Infinity and His Perfection. In the Divine *riḍwān* the perfection of the human vocation meets with the perfection of the Divine Essence. Herein human beings are totally encompassed by the Divine Satisfaction in a way that may be thought to absorb their limitations into the Divine Limitlessness. This makes it plain why the Divine Satisfaction is also Divine Acceptance: it is a kind of welcoming of human beings into the fold of the Divine, as it were, thereby greatly exceeding any other possible reward:

Allah promiseth to the believers, men and women, Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide—blessed dwellings in Gardens of Eden. And—greater (far)!—acceptance from Allah. That is the supreme triumph. (9:72)

As we have already mentioned, the Qur’ān asserts that the spiritual destiny of the human soul consists in “returning to (her) your Lord, satisfied and accepted.” (89:27-28.) According to Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajībah, the “divine satisfaction” or *riḍwān* is the desire (*shawq*) of the elite (*khāṣṣ*), which transcends the desire for the garden, *al-jannah*.³⁶ This is the ultimate finality and meaning of humankind, and therein the whole cycle of existence formed by the “arch of descent” (*qaws al-nuzūl*) and the “arch of ascent” (*qaws al-su’ūd*) comes to completion. This is the final abode of the “pacified soul” (*an-nafs al-muṭma’innah*), who is both *rāḍiyah* and *marḍiyyah*. In this fulfillment, the active and passive aspects of satisfaction and acceptance converge, highlighting the highest

³⁴“And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform Me of the names of these, if ye are truthful.” (2:31)

³⁵Quoted in Martin Lings, *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology*, The Islamic Texts Society, 2004, p. 89.

³⁶Although there is an even higher desire, that of *ḥaḍrah ‘ayānahu*, “the glorious vision of the Lord”. Cf. *Kitāb Mi’rāj al-Taṣawwuf ilā Ḥaqā’iq al-Taṣawwuf—L’Ascension du regard vers les réalités du Soufisme*, trans. Jean-Louis Michon, Paris: Alboutraq, p. 104.

coincidence between the Divine creative intent and the human perfection: “God is satisfied with them, and they are satisfied with Him” (5:119) Likewise, in his Meccan Illuminations, Ibn ‘Arabī beautifully suggests the supereminence of Divine *riḍā* in his account of the vision of God’s Face when, having been made witnesses of the Divine Face through the lifting of the Veil, the elect are asked by God “Is there anything else for you (that you still desire) after this?” To which they reply: “O our Lord, what thing could yet remain...?” before hearing the final Divine response: “But there is something more for you... My everlasting Contentment (*riḍā’i*) with you all (...)”³⁷

As we have come to understand it through our examination of its levels and modes of reality through Sufi sources, *riḍā* is contentment in God and with God, and therefore contentment with one’s destiny as willed by God. *Ridā* is acceptance of the Divine Other and, consequently, acceptance of what is other, different and foreign to us, or that which is independent from, and even contrary to, our individual will. The most fruitful lesson of Sufi wisdom is, in this respect, that it is by accepting otherness that we become “ourselves” in God. Acceptance is a knowledge of self and God, of God in oneself and the self in God, a door to His Mercy through the recognition of the transcendence of His purposes. It is also, thereby, an acceptance of others, and even more so, a love of others for being God’s witnesses in our life: “Love God and your neighbor as yourself.” In its highest reaches and in any conducive context, *riḍā* may equally translate into an acceptance of other faiths on the basis of one’s own,³⁸ not out of relativism, indifference, cynicism or tepidness. *Ridā* is the grace of the recognition that alterity is none other than identity, and the fulfilling satisfaction therein. Thus, metaphysically, *riḍā* is a coincidence of opposites, the height of *tawḥīd*; morally, it means humility and forgiveness; religiously, it amounts not merely to a facile tolerance but to a knowledge of Unity in diversity and diversity in Unity, a recognition that Reality transcends all limited point of views, in keeping with the Islamic epistemological coda “and God knows best”, *wa Allāhu a‘lam*.

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³⁷James Morris insightfully specifies that even though such terms as *riḍā* and *riḍwān* are “often translated as divine “satisfaction” or “contentment”, (...) obviously such approximate English expressions are utterly inadequate in this context.” (*The Reflective Heart. Discovering Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Meccan Illuminations*, note 123, p. 347)

³⁸“One understands the other by substituting oneself mentally for the other, by entering in the ‘composition of the place’ of the other, by reflecting in oneself the mental structure, the system of thought, of the other.” Our translation of Louis Massignon, “Un nouveau sacré”, *Ecrits Mémoires*, I, Robert Laffont, Paris, 2009, 349.