

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Oneness of Truth, Oneness of Reality

Averroes argued that truth is one but there are two ways of accessing this truth: one is revelation, the other is reason. Although the sophistication of his argument as the basis for a multi-religious society is certainly original, and influenced European thought, together with the rise of humanism a century later, the basis of his idea was already present already in another Andalusian philosopher. Ibn Tufail, who was the mentor of Averroes, wrote an allegorical account of the congruence of reason and revelation in his philosophical novel *Hay ibn Yaqdhan*. According to this novel, a child who was raised alone on an island by an antelope could by the time of his maturity figure out creation, God's existence and the place of human beings in the world, all by reason. His first encounter with a visitor from another place happened when he was thirty. Through this meeting, he discovered that religion displays the same truths as those he deduced by his own efforts.

Both ideas were taken up by the mystics. Ibn Arabi accepted Averroes' unity of truth, but he was not sure that reason alone could lead to the complete truth. He thought that reason is limited to the sub-lunar world, much like Kant's restriction of knowledge to the realm of possible experience.

Ibn Tufail had died by the time of Ibn Arabi, but the latter met Averroes when he was a young man on his first steps of his mystical quest. He must have been very impressed by his thought, although he recorded the opposite in his major work *The Meccan Openings*. Ibn Arabi argued that revelation is superior to philosophy. In a way it is the same truth, as he told Averroes in their brief meeting, but in another way, or at a higher level, it is not. He was trying to answer Averroes' question about whether he found the same truth in his mystical experience as the philosophers do.

He said: 'Yes, then 'No'.

Averroes talked about truth in an epistemological way, but Ibn Arabi talks about it in an ontological and existential way. Ontologically, he does this by taking the whole of Being as a unity, and existentially, as the aim of long experience or a journey. It is not the way we intellectually realise that the truth is one, but how we ground it in our very being and make it the guiding light in an upward journey, or ascension, in a hierarchy of an experiential road.

Ibn Arabi, according to the most reliable interpretations, subscribes to the theory of the Unity of Being. God reveals himself through nature and humanity. Human Beings themselves picture God in different forms, but the way to realise God in one's being is through experience and the purity of heart and by being on a steep rise, or ascension, where wayfarers go through many stations, adopt different partial points of views until they reach the highest level where they adopt all the previously discovered truths, through the different stations, and then get beyond them all to the station of no-station. They are no longer limited by any partial view, or in Hegel's language, they come to have an absolute knowledge.

Averroes states his case in clear philosophical language but Ibn Arabi, as a mystic, uses lots of imagery, poetry and some stories. But the underlying structure is philosophical. However, the point here is not a comparison between mysticism and philosophy, but the mystical and philosophical ground of tolerance of different beliefs and creeds – a unity that is recorded beautifully in one of his poems.

The Editor

The Dialectic of Nature and Spirit

Friedrich Hölderlin and his Novel *Hyperion*



Holderlin

In *Hyperion* Friedrich Hölderlin explores many of the themes that exercised his philosophical friends and contemporaries, particularly Hegel and Schelling. His obsession with overcoming alienation and separation and his exploration of the different ways that this might be done show him as someone straddling the twin spheres of philosophy and art.

DAVID SOLOMON

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The life and work of the poet and novelist Friedrich Hölderlin are witness to his identity both as an artist and a philosopher. Hölderlin (born 1770) was a friend of Hegel and Schelling and all three attended the same *Stift* (Lutheran religious seminary) in Tübingen. Each in their youth intended to become a Protestant minister, and each veered away from the path of orthodox Christianity towards a more heterodox spirituality: F. W. J. Schelling and G. W. F. Hegel tended towards philosophy and Hölderlin towards artistic creation. But at this stage of philosophy in the period following Kant and his transcendental ‘Copernican revolution’ there was no clear distinction between German Idealism and the burgeoning Romantic Movement. Hölderlin in particular was a part of the circle known as the Jena Romantics, which also included [August Wilhelm](#) and [Friedrich von Schlegel](#), as well as [Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg](#) (Novalis),

J. G. Fichte and Schelling himself. Hölderlin attended Fichte’s lectures at the University of Jena, and the latter was succeeded by Schelling at the same university after he was forced to resign. The group was tightly knit; the intellectual and creative influences were mutual and complex.

Being and Judgment

In 1793, Hölderlin had written a letter titled *Being, Judgment and Possibility*. In it he took issue with Fichte and Schelling, who had attempted in their systems to ground our entire knowledge of the world in the self-consciousness of the I (expressed in the formula $I = I$). For Hölderlin, in order for there to be self-consciousness, there must have already been a split in being between the I as subject and the I as object. To grasp being as such, as a whole and prior to this split, required what he called Intellectual Intuition.



Friedrich Hölderlin and Susette Gontard

‘Where subject and object are absolutely, not only partly, united, namely so united that no division can be executed without damaging the essence of that which is to be separated, there and nowhere else one can speak of a being as such, as is the case with intellectual intuition.’

An original act of knowing expressed as $I = I$ was an act of judgment that already implied a chasm in Being. Hölderlin makes this split explicit by punning on the word ‘judgement’ (German *Urteil* which he divides into two parts *Ur* and *Teil* to render the meaning ‘original split’). Hölderlin’s emphasis on Intellectual Intuition over Judgment, indicates the centrality of his sense of the original unity of being and his desire to grasp it through an imaginative or spiritual act, to heal a tragic rift between subject and object, between the individual and creation.

These obsessions are explored imaginatively in his poetic novel *Hyperion* the first part of which came out in 1797, followed by the second part in 1799.

The main character Hyperion is named after the mythical being who is the father of the sun god Helios. Hyperion mythically was one of the 12 Titans, offspring of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Sky).

These divine beings were therefore more primeval than the Olympian gods. The events of *Hyperion* the novel take place in a time closer to Hölderlin’s own. The eponymous hero is represented as a young Greek man from the island of Tinos in the Aegean. In the course of the novel he moves around area of the Aegean, Asia Minor and Greece to Smyrna, Kalaureia off the Peloponnesian coast, to the Peloponnese itself, to Athens, Corinth and Salamis. He takes part in the Orlov revolt of 1770 against the Ottoman Empire and in the naval battle of Chesma which took place between the Russian and Turkish navies. *Hyperion* is an epistolary novel consisting of a series of letters most of which are addressed by the hero to a German friend Bellarmin. This format allows a disjunction between the time that the letters are written and the events written about. Almost all the letters in the novel are written between 1771 and 1772 after Hyperion has lived through a series of momentous and often traumatic encounters and meetings. At the time of writing he is reflecting on the events and the changes of mood and perspective that accompanies them. The epistolary form of the novel allows Hyperion the character to review the recent events of his life and his relationships. Its stance is retrospective and the story as whole can be considered a Bildungsroman – a novel of education and development.



The Tower in Zimmermann's house where Holderlin spent the last half of his life

The character Hyperion, like Hölderlin, is torn between wildly different moods: exaltation and despair about himself and humanity, a feeling sometimes of oneness with nature and sometimes of oppression by his sense of separation from it. He finds consolation at times in nature itself, at other times in the prospect of a renewal of humanity and the return of the beauty and harmony of the ancient Greek, and in particular Athenian, civilisation. At times he feels a bond and a source of hope in humanity, at others a desire for hermit-like self-sufficiency.

‘I often stand at this height, my Bellarmin! but a moment of reflection hurls me down. I reflect and find myself as I was before, alone, with all the pains of mortality; and the asylum of my heart, the world’s eternal unity, is gone; nature closes her arms and I stand like a stranger before her and do not comprehend her.

O! had I never gone to your schools. Knowledge, which I pursued down into the shaft, and from which in my youthful folly I expected confirmation of my pure joy, has corrupted everything for me.’

(Hyperion, First Volume, First Book 1.2: Hyperion To Bellarmin)

Apart from his German correspondent Bellarmin, three other characters are significant in Hyperion’s travels. The first is an older friend known as Adamas. Adamas introduces Hyperion to the beauties of ancient Greece and preaches the philosophy of self-sufficiency:

‘What is loss, when a man thus finds himself in his own world? In us is all. Why should a man worry when a hair falls from his head? Why does he struggle so for servitude, when he could be a god?’

(Hyperion First Volume First Book 1.4: Hyperion To Bellarmin)

... and then in recalling Adamas, Hyperion says:

‘My innermost being still mourns and rejoices over every word that Adamas spoke to me then, and I do not comprehend my destitution, when I often feel as he must have felt then. What is loss, when a man thus finds himself in his own world? In us is all. Why should a man worry when a hair falls from his head? Why does he struggle so for servitude, when he could be a god? You will be lonely, my dear boy! Adamas also said to me then, you will be like the



Stamp commemoration



Isaac von Sinclair

crane left behind by its brothers in a harsh season while they seek spring in a distant land.'

(*Hyperion, First Volume, First Book 1.4: Hyperion To Bellarmin*)

Later on, Hyperion encounters another friend and mentor Alabanda. Alabanda is a proponent of a life of action and encourages Hyperion to take part in the Greek revolt against the Turks. He is based on a friend of Hölderlin's Isaac von Sinclair, a champion of the French Revolution, who attended, as did Hölderlin, lectures by Fichte. Fichte was a champion of the philosophy of life based on acting on the world, of transforming it, instead of our accepting its fate, its inevitability. In 1794 he delivered *Some Lectures concerning the Scholar's Vocation*. Hölderlin attended these and parts of his novel echo Fichte's rhetoric:

'You are in the process of learning by means of philosophical inquiry how men should be, though you have not yet entered into any intimate, close, and indissoluble relationship with men. You will enter into such relationships, and you will find that men are quite different from what is prescribed by your ethical theory. The

nobler and better you are, the more painful this future experience is going to be. Do not allow yourself to be overcome by this pain; instead, overcome it through deeds. This pain has a purpose. It is part of the plan for improving the human race. It is womanish to stand there and complain [klagen] about human corruption without lifting a finger to diminish it. It is unkind to censure men and to mock them bitterly without telling them how they can improve. Act! Act! [Handeln! Handeln!] That is what we are here for. Should we complain that others are not as perfect as we are, as long as we ourselves are only more perfect than they are? Isn't our greater perfection precisely this calling we have received to work for the improvement of others. Let us rejoice over the prospect of the immense field that is ours to cultivate! Let us rejoice because we feel our own strength and because our task is endless!' (Fichte: *Scholar's Vocation. Fifth Lecture.*)

Under the influence of Alabanda Hyperion sees hope in a renewal of humanity what he calls 'the springtime of peoples', of harmony and brotherhood of humanity. This is not political in the narrow sense.

‘The coarse husk around the kernel of life and nothing more - that is the state. It is the wall around the garden of human fruits and flowers.’

(Hyperion, First Volume, First Book 1.7: Hyperion To Bellarmin)

It will be more like a spiritual renewal,

‘The state cannot command you to come. But may it not disturb you, and then you will come with your all powerful ecstasies, you will envelop us in golden clouds and bear us upward above mortality, and we will marvel and ask if it is still we, we destitute creatures who asked the stars if a spring bloomed for us up there - do you ask me when this will be? It will be when the darling of time, the youngest, most beautiful daughter of time, the new church, will emerge out of these besmirched, antiquated forms, when the awakened feeling of the divine will bring man his divinity [44] again, and restore beautiful youth to his breast..’

(Hyperion, First Volume, First Book 1.7: Hyperion To Bellarmin)

The third and most significant relationship of the novel is Hyperion’s love Diotima, who is based on Susette Gontard, the wife of Hölderlin’s one-time employer. The original Diotima was a prophetess and philosopher who appears as a mentor to Socrates in Plato’s Symposium.

Diotima likewise plays the part of a mentor to Hyperion in this novel. She resembles an earth goddess; Hölderlin presents her as united to nature, the time they spend together being an idyll where both are embedded in nature. But Diotima encourages him to go out into the world and fulfil his calling. His time ‘in nature’ cannot be permanent. She mourns, and ultimately dies, when he goes off to fight against the Turks, but accepts that Hyperion has to go out to seek his destiny.

Here Hölderlin reveals an ambiguity about nature. Nature is a recourse, the source of life. It is an idyll, a comfort, a lost paradise, and a primal unity. It has become over-ripe, almost rotten. But

because it is lost it cannot be totally recovered as it was. Humans have to recover the sense of nature, through spirit, through the attainment of the ideal.

‘The peoples once set out from the harmony of childhood; the harmony of spirits will be the beginning of a new world history. Men began from the happiness of plants and grew up, and grew until they ripened; from then on, they unceasingly fermented, inwardly and outwardly, until now the human race, infinitely dissolved, lies there like a chaos, so that dizziness seizes all who still feel and see; but beauty flees from the life of men upward into spirit; the ideal becomes what nature was, and if below the tree is dried-up and weathered, a fresh crown has still sprung from it and grows green in the sunshine as the trunk did once in the days of youth; the ideal is what nature was. By this, by this ideal, this rejuvenated divinity, the few recognize one another and are one, for there is one spirit in them, and from them, from them begins the second age of the world - I have said enough to make clear what I think.’

(Hyperion, First Volume, Second Book 1.26: Hyperion To Bellarmin)

What stands out as one of the most important themes of the novel is the dialectic between Nature (evoking Recourse, succour, original unity, the source of beauty inspiring Art and Religion) and Spirit (evoking Action, renewal, rejuvenation, the second age of the world). At the end of the novel Hyperion has recounted all the events leading up to the time he is in when he writes to Bellarmin. He has caught up with himself. There is a sense of the completion of a circle. But there is also an anticipation that he is now about to fulfil the urging of Diotima, who has now literally returned to the earth, to find and fulfil his vocation. The last words of the last letter to Bellarmin are: ‘So I thought. More soon.’

In the history of his life, Hölderlin did not write another novel but went on to become a lyrical poet. We can perhaps see the novel as a story of how he came to be what he in fact became.

Ideology: A Paradigm or Political Legitimacy

DAVID CLOUGH

Charles Taylor

Is it an ideology that integrates or anchors the social imaginary or just political legitimacy? The arguments pitch between gluing together unified paradigms of the social and the power relations of legitimate authority. Perhaps since bio-politics was conceived, we now have the internet corporations as well as the state.

Following on or in parallel to Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus (or ISA) which was a springboard for Badiou and Ranciere, Foucault and then Agamben, bio-politics is when state technology power fully subsumes and regulates our private life, but Foucault actually developed the idea more in the emerging context of the neo-liberal enabling state.

But is liberalism or neo-liberalism itself an ideology or is it as Lyotard or Kuhn might have it just a paradigm? There is a rather loose relation between such terms when discussion culture in terms of what seems to dominate our own social imaginary. Zigmunt Baumann and Ricoeur both talk about Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* but the position of ideology beyond false consciousness as it extends through Weber and Durkheim through our social sciences is then developed by Habermas. Ricoeur does see three functions for ideology, but are they distinct types? For Habermas it legitimates, for the once important Clifford Gertz it was about cultural integration through some kind of symbolic, and in the original *German Ideology* it is the suspicious inversions of false consciousness (deception).

Weber saw legitimation in three terms too: rational, traditional and charismatic. Ricoeur wants to know how these are related to ideology. Looking back to Durkheim and Peter L Berger there were plausibility structure aspects. But what sediments or cements something plausible into something which if not strictly certain now seems to have conviction? Here Ricoeur suggests that ideology is what fills the 'credibility gap' in Weber's structure. One might ask here how Hegel or Taylor are different here and whether it relates to Marx's surplus of value? It seems that ideology does reinforces the legitimacy of something in a governing position in a more political sense than a paradigm does.

What about ideology now in our present politics. Can a pluralistic domain of fragmented politics really be as ideologically straightforward as it has been assumed since the 1970s? Can jumbled bits of ideological thinking still persist in apparently confusing situations? I still argue that ideology has not disappeared from the scene in such circumstances and may even think that after the period of heavy critique that Western thinking went through in the last three decades, ideology might simply be reappearing as another repressed reality. But the challenge is then to admit that things are actually pretty complicated. Whatever glues factions like nationalists today together or so-called populist movements often seems to lack a straight-forward propositional structure. But it is difficult not to think that ideology must still be hidden in there somewhere.

Egyptian Love Life

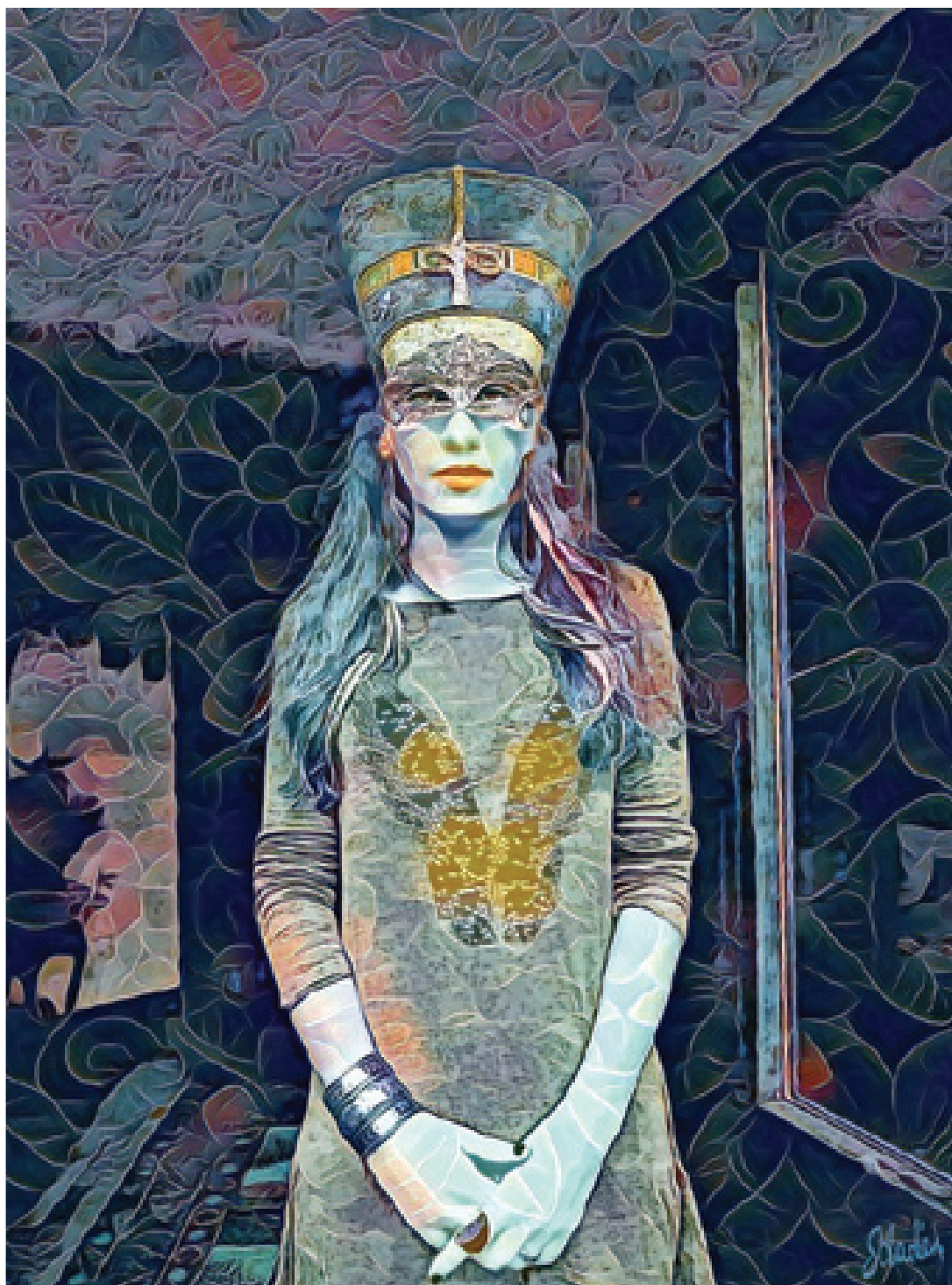
Take me for a ride past the patchy shades, spells
from the Book of the Dead, or the words I misspell
masking their meaning.

*All life is hidden, you said.
You find it in red wine, sweet grapes and also
in the bitterness of wild plums.*

Look for me at the Ashmolean,
your Nefertiti, filled with lapis lazuli life
stacked in the locked cabinet next
to the turquoise and onyx rings,
the jade and jasper scarabs,
for you hold the key to all my faience.

Do not believe my words
or trust in what pours from my alabaster jar.
Listen instead to the water music
that falls through footbridges, black hulls
and weeping willow trees, while we are afloat.

Remember, the singing is not for us,
my own Akhenaten.
We take what is given, the pure melody,
as long as my sunset lips engulf yours.



Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

Crossing Boundaries: St George and Al-Khidr

The first part of this article dealt with the figure of Al Khidr. In this concluding part, the main character is St George. The article as a whole does show the common religious heritage and mythology in the Middle East and across the world.

ADRIAN RANCE-MCGREGOR*

Part 2

Today one finds the cult of Al-Khidr in shrines or sanctuaries in many parts of Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Israel and Egypt, although now it is to a great extent found only in the countryside, as the veneration of Islamic saints in popular religion is disapproved of by more formal religious authorities. In recent years the decline of the cult of Islamic saints in cities in the Middle East has been attributed to increasing sophistication under the influence of Western culture and to the domination of Wahhābi-inspired purist Islam that opposes popular religious practice, particularly the veneration of saints.

In the Palestinian territories, St George, known as Mar Jirjis, still plays a prominent role in the religious, social, and even political life under military occupation. Throughout Palestine several hundred churches are dedicated to St George and the mounted saint with the dragon is often placed above the doors of new houses and offices. Lance D Laird carried out an ethnographic religious study on the cult of St George and Al-Khidr in Palestine and asked people why St George was to be seen everywhere. The answer was: 'He protects us.'

person or saint.

St George speaks to the Palestinian people living under military occupation. He is thought of as a Palestinian saint; he is a warrior and he is a protector. During his prolonged martyrdom St George was dismembered, just as Palestinians see their land as having been dismembered, and he comes back to life. Laird reports the sermon preached by the Arab archimandrite Atallah Hanna in the church of Al-Khidr on the feast day of St George, in which he urged the congregation to 'remember our resurrection' and to be 'free from the fear of death, even under harsh circumstances'. The themes of St George being Palestinian, having miraculous powers, suffering for the faith and heroic martyrdom, mean a lot for both Christian and Muslim believers in the occupied territories.

In Lebanon the cult of St George and his association with Al-Khidr is widespread. A recent survey identified 276 churches dedicated to St George, 27 monasteries, 26 schools, 2 hospitals, 2 mosques and numerous local shrines, not to mention the famous hostel of St George in Beirut.

The people of Beirut believe that the fight between St George and the dragon took place near to the river outside the walls of the ancient city where the dragon came out of the sea, intent on destroying the city. Near the mouth of the river tradition identifies a grotto with seven coves as the den of the dragon; nearby there is a spring of water in which the saint washed his hands (and which now has miraculous curative powers) and the tree to which he tied his horse. Nearby is a Maronite Christian church which eventually became a mosque of Al-Khidr,

Muslims and Christians together still take part in an annual pilgrimage to the shrine of St George at the village of Al-Khadr in the shadow of the nearby eight-metre-high concrete barrier that has been built to separate Israel from the Palestinian territories. In their devotion to St George and Al-Khadr, Palestinian Christians and Muslims share a common understanding of the blessing, or *baraka*, that comes from sacred places or objects which one can visit and touch, or by taking part in a ritual such as baptism or by making a vow to a sacred



**St George and the River of Immortality.
12th century. St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.**

which was visited by the Anglican bishop, Richard Pococke (1704-1765):

I set forward on my journey from Bayreut on the first of June, and went to the east along the side of the bay: after having travelled about a league, we came to the place where, they say, saint George killed the dragon which was about to devour the king of Bayreut's daughter. There is a mosque on the spot which was formerly a Greek church; near it is a well, and they say that the dragon usually came out of the hole, which is now the mouth of it. The medieval writers say that this place was called Cappadocia. In this mosque I saw an extraordinary ceremony performed on one of the Turks that was with me; who sitting down on the ground, the religious person, who had the care of the mosque, took a piece of a small marble pillar, in which, they say, there is an extraordinary virtue against all sorts of pains, and rolled it on the back of the Turk for a considerable time.

Part of the medieval church with an eleventh century inscription can be seen in the modern structures of the mosque; the well is still to be seen, and the 'seven-mouthed grotto', which in fact is a sepulchral cave with square recesses cut into the wall for sarcophagi, is well kept but sealed off with an iron grill.

Devotion to St George is widespread in Lebanon and it is common to find expressions such as 'God is great, but not like St George'. Legends are numerous: in one area it is said that St George takes with him the 'keys of winter' at the beginning of spring, and in other areas St George is known to ride the sea on his horse on the 23rd of April, striking the sea with his sword so that the water rises into the air to become rain to water the crops. St George and Al-Khidr transcend confessional boundaries and are a point of identity for all Lebanese. Generally, the feast day of St George is celebrated on the 23rd of April, but in the town of Baalbeck it is celebrated on the 3rd of May under the name of *Mar Georgious al-Khadr*. How did

this convergence of religious devotions happen? In many areas of Palestine, the coming together of Al-Khidr and St George seems to reflect the honour given to sanctuaries and sacred places, and the blessing or *baraka* that the presence of God bring to these places. For instance, there is a cave on the Mount of Olives that is honoured by Muslims as the shrine of er-Râb'ah; it is revered by the Christians as the place where Pelagia atoned for her sins and for the Jews it is the shrine of the prophetess Huldah.

The honouring of sacred sites is found before the introduction of Islam and even before the Christian period. The possibility that these popular religious practices might have their origin in pagan pre-Christian and pre-Islam cults has led to the suggestion that the rural religious practices in which the convergence of St George, Al-Khidr and Elijah are to be found contain a folk memory of an early rural religious system which, to reflect its agrarian origins, has been called a 'georgic' religious system and which, it is suggested, had its origins in the worship of Baal or Zeus. These 'georgic' figures, including St George, have the attributes of fertility and the growing of crops, power over natural events such as floods and storms or military power over enemies, life and death and immortality. However, it is in the nature of historical research that one can do no more than speculate on possible links between Al-Khidr-St George and pagan antecedents preserved in religious folk memory.

Al-Khidr's immortality gives him a particular significance in what has been described as the shifting shape of 'sacred geography' that arises whenever two cultures clash through war, conquest and colonisation. During the expansion of Islam into Syria it must have been acceptable for Muslims to think of Al-Khidr as already being attached to significant places which existed before the Islamic conquest of the land, and for him to remain significant in the new mixed ethno-religious landscape that was being created. Early sites associated with Al-Khidr are known on the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, and Al-Khidr is found in Damascus at the Great Mosque which was built between 705 and 715 on the site of an earlier cathedral dedicated to John the Baptist



Dom of Al-Khidr, Jerusalem

and which itself was built on the site of a pagan sanctuary which contained a temple to Jupiter. The special relic of the head of John the Baptist was retained and venerated within the mosque. The presumption is that the presence of the pre-existing and immortal Al-Khidr affirmed that God's authority was at the site in its prior pagan and Christian manifestations. The presence of Al-Khidr at a holy site meant that it must have always been holy and so it was natural to link him with biblical and Christian saints also associated with the site. This takes on a particular importance when the main religions are competing for influence as happened in the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries as a result of the incursions by Western crusaders.

One can imagine that during periods of social and religious upheaval, as Christians and Muslims took control of different areas of the Middle East, the promotion of a Christian saint at a holy site alongside an Islamic saint would help make the religion of the dominant side less threatening to believers on the subjugated side. In keeping with the violence of the times Al-Khidr became known



**Prophet Elijah/ Al-Khidr Rescuing Nur ad-Dahr,
(from the Hamzanama, 16th Century, Persia.)**

for his strength and martial prowess, including his skill on horseback. Byzantine warrior saints such as St Theodore started appearing on horseback slaying a dragon. St George became so popular that the first Turkish Islamic dynasty in this region, the Danijmendids, issued bilingual coins with images of a dragon-slaying figure meant to represent St. George.

The merging of Muslim and Christian saints in the changing religious landscape of the Middle East is to be found in some icons of St George at St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai. The monastery, which has its origins in the monasticism of the third century CE, is unique as a Christian centre in a Muslim country in that it has never been sacked or damaged and so has become an extraordinary repository of Christian art and heritage. Of all the surviving Byzantine icons in the world, half of them are in St Catherine's Monastery. The survival of the monastery over 1,700 years is sometimes attributed to a document in its possession known as the 'Donation of Mohammed', which, it was claimed, was given to the monks by the Prophet having been written by Ali and attested by twenty witnesses in Medina and which confirmed the sanctity of the monastery and urged all Muslims to protect it.

St George has always had a prominent place among the icons of the monastery and above the original

entrance was a chapel dedicated to St George which visiting Bedouin tribesmen would have known and would have associated with Al-Khidr. Icons of St George at Sinai include several that feature the 'coffee boy' riding on the horse behind St George, which in Ethiopia is connected with the twelfth century miracle of St George recorded in the Encomium of Theodotus and which is also connected with the story of the youth of Mytelene. To a Muslim, the servant figure carrying a jug could be taken to be a representation of Al-Khidr who in Surah 18 of the Qur'an is referred to as 'a servant of our servants', and who in the icons could be carrying water from the spring of immortality. In some of the coffee boy icons the horse of St George is in a stream of water where there are swimming fish: again Al-Khidr's discovery of the river of immortality is connected with the discovery of the same river by Alexander's cook who noticed the salted fish coming back to life and swimming away. The convergence of St George and Al-Khidr, both in icons and in the dedication of a chapel to St George at the entrance to the monastery, can best be understood in the context of the community's management of the special relationship it had, and still has, with its Bedouin neighbours.

• A long version of this article will appear in a forthcoming book on St. George. References were removed for a lack of space.

Descartes in Doubt

Notes on the Wednesday Meetings Held on 5th of December 2018

RAHIM HASSAN

The topic of this meeting was the changing fortunes of Descartes thought. Descartes started with his famous doubting experiment and ended with solid facts of the self, God, the world, certainty and truth. But recent post-Nietzschean philosophy ended up doubting all Descartes' certainties. The question whether we can recover Descartes' position and defend him against recent philosophy.

The case of Descartes was put forward by David Burrige who wrote in the last issue of *The Wednesday* that one of the things that irritates him is how easily people dumb down Descartes where in fact he was a philosopher who opened the door to greater thinking.

I do agree with David's point. Yet, Deleuze and Guattari argued in *What is Philosophy?* that Descartes wanted 'to account for what was or was not comprehensible, what was or was not rational,

what was lost or saved.' (P.63) But the new philosopher 'wants the lost, the incomprehensible, and the absurd to be restored to him.' (Ibid.)

Does this put the Cartesian project in doubt? Does it call for a re-assessment of his thought? Or is there a way of recovering his ideas and showing the oppositions to be wrong in some or all of their claims? I suppose that this debate runs parallel to the Habermas question of whether Modernity has finished or is an unfinished project. It is also connected to the claim of the end of Grand Narratives.

David Clough

David Clough added: How do we understand the Germanic reading of Descartes, a French Philosopher? Yes, we call fall back into debating postmodernist matters. It is easy for me to point to Ricoeur in the early Freud book talking about a shattered cogito, or later in *Oneself as Another*, positioning his narrative view of self and ethics somehow between Descartes and Nietzsche. Peter



Guattari & Deleuze

Strawson said we cannot shed responsibility, but his son Galen denies a diachronic self like this.

Rahim reading Deleuze's *What Is Philosophy?* sees a plane of immanence as the impersonal field between subjects and conceptual persona as the mind of the philosopher but this rather normalises Plato, Søren Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. He agrees that it is harder to find these implied personas in the more technical logically based procedural analytic philosophy, but I can see the fictional, almost Leo Straussian aspects.

In my postmodernist reading of these personae, they are literary creations and Deleuze and Guattari are using literary philosophers, novelists and painters. But they are not generally the ones that appeal to me (Beckett, Bacon, Lewis Carol, Jackson Pollock ...) but Deleuze did write the book on Proust. Deleuze and Guattari argued in *What is Philosophy?* that Descartes wanted 'to account for what was or was not comprehensible, what was or was not rational, what was lost or saved.' (P.63) So, Descartes anticipates the clarity of analytic philosophy in some ways but why does Deleuze say that absurdity and irrationality are what new philosophers need? There is also the question of internalism-externalism in Deleuze's writings. Externalising pain and suffering may be a good thing pragmatically but my still internalised view invokes a kind of recognition between the inner pain and the text, not its evacuation from the subject. Breton's light bulb and Surrealism connects to Freud, but anti-Oedipus kind of psychiatry is anti-Freud. The theatre of the absurd fits with *Alice in the Wonderland*. Artaud may fit with Bacon (the painter). Benjamin and Proust have eruptive epiphanies like lightning strikes. Is Deleuze like this or more rational?

Rahim also mentioned the plane of immanence, but how is the plane populated with concepts? and how do concepts avoid being another kind of representation which Deleuze declares ruined elsewhere? I also want to know how Rahim interprets the Deleuze and Guattari reading, and maybe how it connects back to last week and Nietzsche and naturalism?

Rahim Hassan

Finally, Rahim Hassan rounded off the debate by saying: Here are my quick answers to David's points. Concepts come together with the plane of immanence and so does the philosophical persona. At least this is my understanding of it at the moment. The connection with Nietzsche and Naturalism is also easy to understand, since Deleuze and Guattari object to transcendence in the old metaphysics. Perhaps this opens a new debate.

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Wishes all its readers a very *Merry Christmas* and a *Happy New Year*

‘therefore
all·seasons
shall·be
sweet
to
thee’

Words from ‘Frost at Midnight’, S.T. Coleridge, 1798

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