

*Jesus and Hallaj***'First-person Theology'/'Second-person Theology'**

I write as a Christian priest. But God forbid, I pray, that the missionaries of my religion should ever be so successful as to render *the entire world* uniformly Christian! For, there is surely major benefit in the persistent diversity of religions. Theologically speaking, a providential purpose – not least because of how this diversity makes possible, to people of Faith, a certain sort of critical self-knowledge that is otherwise impossible.

As I have said, when I was much younger I went to live for a couple of years in a little town in Upper Egypt, working there as a schoolteacher. The initial 'culture shock' was considerable. I remember walking around for weeks as if in a dream. And, looking back on the experience – which was incidentally a very happy one – I can see that it was, to me, a sort of revelation, as it compelled me to reflect, both critically and appreciatively, on my own British identity. I was brought to see how deeply British, in fact, I am; and how very *odd* that made me, to people who did not at all share the natural instincts proper to my sort of Britishness. Sensing something of how, by virtue of this Britishness, I appeared to those amongst whom I found myself living, I was led quite radically to question my own upbringing and moral education – and all to the good, I think!

Well, that was a matter of thinking about my Britishness. But the same general principle surely also applies to my Christian Faith. Such understanding as I have of it very largely, I think, comes from the questions raised by my encounters with people belonging to other religious traditions.

And there is moreover a tremendous potential for theological insight inherent in the grand historic collision between different forms of religious tradition. The extraordinary sheer energy of early Christian theology, after all, is very largely due to the fundamental difference between

the two religious traditions which were colliding there: the tradition enshrined in the Hebrew scriptures and the tradition of Greek philosophy. Again, the working-through of this collision, as between two tectonic plates heaving up a mountain range, is what I have called 'first-person theology'.¹ I call it this inasmuch as when the early Christians thought of the First Person of the Holy Trinity, 'God the Father' as such, a key element in their thinking was the thought that the God addressed by Jesus as 'Father' was 'Father' not only to the Jews but also to the Greeks, having been revealed, in preliminary fashion, through both of these pre-Christian traditions alike. By 'first-person theology' in general, then, I mean any sort of Christian thinking insofar as it is directly responding to the challenge of other religious cultures. On the one hand, at its best, it is everything that follows from the elementary recognition of what all authentic religious traditions, as such, have in common – their basic character as so many different strategies for the promotion of truth-as-openness. But, on the other hand, it is also ideally a celebration of their beauty-in-diversity – for that which, in the most vivid way, differentiates religious traditions is just what constitutes their various types of beauty: the rich concreteness of the imagery they deploy. And the more varieties of such beauty, the better!

Or, to put it in Hegelian terms, 'first-person theology' is theology enjoying the most immediate relationship to the culminating truth of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the wisdom of 'Absolute Knowing'. Thus: what is it that 'Absolute Knowing' knows? It is by no means to be misconceived as the purported attainment, somehow, of ultimate metaphysical truth-as-correctness; it appears, on the contrary, as the culmination to a systematic survey of the workings of 'Spirit'. In other words: the impulse to that very different thing, truth-as-openness. 'Spirit' is the impulse to perfect truth-as-openness, on every level of human thought. And 'Absolute Knowing' knows – absolutely, finally – what this means. In other words, it knows how to recognise the trans-metaphysical impulse to truth-as-openness in all of its innumerable, utterly diverse manifestations; very much including every different species of authentic religion. It is a knack, a skill: crucially, indeed, the ability to tell authentic religion apart from sacred ideology – no matter how orthodox, sophisticated and sincere sacred ideology may be. It is, precisely, the ultimate gift of discernment in tackling the endless, ubiquitous ambiguities of religion. What 'Absolute Knowing' knows is, first and foremost, the proper sacredness of truth-as-openness: that it is truth-as-openness, and not any form of (purported or real) truth-as-correctness, which is, in the

end, truly sacred. And so it sees through the necessary, necessarily self-negating, plurality of religious traditions, to the one thing that is highest.

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But now let us turn to the area of overlap between *first*-person theology and *second*-person theology. First-person theology places the Christian gospel into the context of religion in general. Second-person theology, by contrast, focuses more specifically on its original distinctiveness as a singularly militant form of *anti-political* religion.

Still, the Christian gospel is not the only form of anti-political religion. Jesus proclaims the advent of the βασιλεία του Θεου, God's reign, or what I am calling 'holy anarchy'; the narrative of his being crucified, yet raised, is the most vivid dramatisation of holy anarchy's ultimate vindication; and the dogma of the Incarnation, in principle, is meant to infuse the whole thinking of the Church with the spirit of holy anarchy, overthrowing the sacred-ideological self-projections of the Unatoned State of Mind. But that spirit may very well come to expression in other ways, also, within the non-Christian matrices of anti-political religion: especially, Islam and Rabbinic Judaism. Insofar as Christian theology is infected with sacred ideology, and therefore preoccupied with the supposedly exclusive truth-as-correctness of the gospel, it can never acknowledge this. However, theology armed with at least something of the purely anti-ideological wisdom which Hegel calls 'Absolute Knowing' knows the all-importance of perfect truth-as-openness *in itself*; to be welcomed, absolutely, *in whatever cultural form it takes*. And hence it is always ready to recognise the actual presence of Christ's truth wherever it appears – even if it be in the most complete 'anonymity', right outside Christendom. In fact, the capacity for such recognition of Christ incognito is really, I think, a pretty basic test of authentic theology, as opposed to sacred ideology.

Let us take a particular Islamic example to illustrate the point here.

The Martyrdom of al-Hallaj

Classically, perhaps the most dramatic eruption of holy anarchy in Islamic history is that which came to pass in the extraordinary life and death of Abū 'Abdallāh al-Husayn ibn Mansūr ibn Mahammā al-Baydāwī al-Baghdādī al-Hallāj.

Born c.244 in the Islamic calendar – that is to say, 858 CE – Hallaj was spectacularly martyred in late March 309/922. 'Abū', father of, "Abdallāh",

he had three sons and at least one daughter. The memoir of his youngest son, Hamd, is one of the main accounts of Hallaj's eventual martyrdom. 'Al-Husayn' was the name his father gave him. 'Ibn', son of, 'Mansūr ibn', son of, 'Mahammā': Hallaj's grandfather's name indicates that he had been a Zoroastrian; Hallaj's father had converted to Islam. 'Al-Baydāwi': Hallaj was born in the district of Bayda, between Shiraz and Isfahan, in south-western Iran. His ancestors were Iranian, yet it seems that he himself spoke only Arabic. 'Al-Baghdādī': resident of Baghdad. He actually lived quite a peripatetic life, travelling all around the Islamic world of those days and beyond, as a missionary, into present-day India and China, with extended periods in Tustar, Basra, Mecca, Bayda and Ahwaz, as well as Baghdad. 'Al-Hallāj', the carder: his father had been a cotton-wool carder, and he also on occasion practised the same craft. For his disciples, he became 'the carder of hearts'.

Hallaj died in Baghdad at the age of 64, finally executed after almost nine years' imprisonment, during which time his fate had been the subject of constant political intrigue at the highest levels of government. His followers, watching him die, were certainly mindful of the possible comparison with the death of Jesus. As in the case of Roman crucifixion, in this case the authorities were determined to use the occasion for maximum deterrent effect, intimidating prospective dissenters. The prisoner was led through the streets to the public square, on the west bank of the Tigris, outside the police headquarters. There, in front of a vast crowd, he was first flogged with 500 lashes. Then the executioners cut off his hands and feet and hoisted him up onto a gibbet, for display. They left him hanging there, still alive – and, it is reported, conversing ecstatically with the bystanders – overnight, under heavy guard. Elsewhere in the city, rioters protested, setting fire to shops. But in the morning, after the vizir had arrived to read the death sentence, the guards took their victim down from the gibbet. Then they cut off his head. They soaked his trunk with oil, burnt it, and took the ashes to throw them, from the top of a minaret, into the river. His head was at first hung on the prison wall; then they carried it away on a great, gruesome propaganda tour, out around the provinces.

What was supposed to have been Hallaj's crime? At his initial trial, when he was first arrested, he had been accused, in general terms, of 'public preaching that usurps the sovereign authority of God'. The prosecutors' case at his second trial, the one that resulted in the death sentence, was more specific: then, he was charged with criminally denying the universal obligation to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca. This was because he taught that if one were, for genuine reasons of poverty or

sickness, unable to make the journey, it would be enough to make a replica of the holy Ka'ba in one's own courtyard and perform the various pilgrimage rituals at home. There was nothing altogether new in this teaching – indeed, back in the 830s the then Caliph had actually built a replica Ka'ba at Samarra, in Iraq, for his Turkish mercenaries. And the fact was that Hallaj himself had made the full pilgrimage three times, with great devotion; his dedication to promoting it could scarcely be questioned. But his enemies nevertheless chose to view his teaching in this regard as evidence of an outrageously excessive claim to authority, overruling the law proclaimed by the Prophet.

Hallaj has always been associated, above all, with the simple 'ecstatic utterance': '*ana* [I am] *'l-haqq* [the divine Truth, the ultimate Reality]'. It does not seem that this particular saying featured at all in either of the two trials, and the narrative traditions that attribute it to him are, in fact, quite legendary in character. However, that does not necessarily mean the attribution in itself is false.

Ana'l-haqq: one might also translate this as 'My true "I" is the site of God's unveiling'. It is what, in *John* 14: 6, Jesus says (or rather, it is what the evangelist hears the risen Jesus saying to the Church, and then projects back into the context of Jesus's original preaching.) 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.' On the one hand, it is simply an affirmation of the 'that of God' that lies more or less hidden at the core of every human soul; but then, on the other hand, Hallaj is intent on thrusting himself forward as a special representative, a demonstrator of what this latent indwelling of God within human souls might imply, when brought to light. And in order to do so he embarks on a path that he in fact very clearly sees will lead him, like Jesus, to the most violent of deaths. *Al-haqq*: the 'Truth' in question here is, surely, none other than the truth of holy anarchy.

The Sufi tradition of holy-anarchic 'ecstatic utterances', *shathiyāt*, was already well established before Hallaj entered into it. In northern Iran, Abū Yazīd al-Bistamī (died c.875) was the great pioneer of such teaching. 'Once', Bistami is for instance reported to have said,

[God] took me up, placed me before him, and said to me: O Abu Yazid, my creation would love to seek you.

I said: 'Adorn me with your unity, clothe me with your subjectivity, and take me up to your oneness, until when creation sees me they say "We have seen you" and you will be *that*, and I will not be there'.²

This is a classic formulation for the ideal, the highest of all ideals, that the early Sufis termed *fanā' wa baqā*, 'annihilation-and-abiding'. When I have

finally been 'adorned', 'clothed' and 'taken up' by God, Bistami declares, 'I will not be there': my ordinary, everyday, conventional ego will have been altogether *annihilated*. And what then *abides* in the vacated place is God alone: 'You will be *that*.' The concealing cover having been removed, the latent indwelling of God within the soul is laid open. Famously, or notoriously, anticipating this, Bistami also cries out '*Subhani*', 'Hallelujah to me!' '*Subhan*' is a term only ever properly applied to the praise of God, but the 'me' here is the 'me' that abides in my annihilation. Hallaj's cry of '*ana'l-haqq*' says just the same.

In another formulation of annihilation-and-abiding, a famous little couplet attributed to Hallaj runs as follows:

Heartfelt insight revealed my Love to me,
And when Love asked, 'Who *are* you?' I said, 'You!'³

Bistami compared himself to a bird that flies and never ceases, into, through and beyond 'nothing'. So too Hallaj was remembered as saying,

I never cease swimming in the seas of love, rising with the wave, then dropping; now the wave upholds me, then I sink beneath it; love sweeps me away, where there is no longer any shore. . .⁴

But such intensity of religious passion is immediately liable to appear disturbing – a reproach, perhaps a threat, to the complacent devotees of ordinary, conventional religion. And that was how Hallaj himself understood the necessity for his own way of the cross.

'Hallelujah to me!' cries Bistami. Still, he remains a devout Muslim: there was never any question of his followers acclaiming him God incarnate, the way Christians acclaim Jesus. That is to say, no one ever sought to institute any form of public liturgy in which God would be approached through the mediation of Bistami. And neither did Hallaj's followers, in his case. '*Ana'l-haqq*' is not intended as the basis for a second Christianity; nevertheless, one can well see why the notion of annihilation-and-abiding that comes to expression here should have seemed so alarming to insecure earthly rulers of tyrannical bent. For what is it, in this ideal of 'annihilation-and-abiding', that is 'annihilated'? Again, surely, it is nothing other than whatever, in the given self of the true lover of God, had hitherto remained bound up with the *libido dominandi*, or submissive to the *libido dominandi* of others; trapped within the self-projections of the Unatoned State of Mind. And when the *libido dominandi* of Unatonement is 'annihilated', there 'abides' only that which most decisively confronts it, to overrule whatever forms of human authority are built up by it. The

tyrant, encountering the true lover of God, is confronted by the overruling authority of the Most High, devastatingly unveiled.

Was it truly holy anarchy that Hallaj stood for, or was it mere sacralised licence? He had many admirers, supporters and allies from a range of different groups, aristocratic and plebeian, Sunni and Shi'a. But notable amongst his Sunni friends, for example, were many of the turbulently puritanical Hanbalites. We do not know exactly how he felt about their policies in detail. However, at any rate it is clear that *they* did not see him as an advocate of sacralised licence – puritans as they were, they would scarcely have approved of him if they did! The Hanbalites warmed to Hallaj, far rather, as a passionate advocate of social justice, against obvious tyranny.

As a young man in Basra, Hallaj had been a disciple of the Sufi teacher 'Amr Makki, who was himself a follower of that key figure in early Sufi history, Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd of Baghdad. Junayd was another great poet of 'annihilation-and-abiding' but, in contrast to Bistami and Hallaj, he tempered this with a strong insistence, also, on the need for 'sobriety'. By 'sobriety' Junayd meant a well-disciplined practice of reticence. Hallaj, even more than Bistami before him, was a flamboyant showman. Junayd was wary of showmanship, as such. In 877 Hallaj quarrelled with 'Amr Makki, who disapproved of his marriage. He travelled to see Junayd, in the hope that Junayd would mediate in this dispute, and legend has it that Junayd already on this occasion – very early in Hallaj's career – was impelled to warn him against impatience. Hallaj, however, was unwilling to submit, and eight years later he broke with the mainstream Sufi world, symbolically ceasing, for a time, to wear the Sufi uniform of woollen robes. It seems he was rejecting what he saw as the unnecessary (anti-) political timidity of Junayd, and of those who thought like Junayd.

Hallaj was a roving missionary, renowned as a miracle worker. He travelled, preaching and teaching, through large areas of the 'Abbāsid Empire – Arabia, Palestine, modern Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – and also out beyond the limits of the then Muslim world, into Gujarat, Kashmir and Xinjiang, the land of the Manichean Uighurs. As for his miracles: the evidence for these is somewhat problematic due to the polemical nature of the sources, some of which are very hostile, determined to portray him as a mere charlatan. But many of them do sound like conjuring tricks, and it seems not unlikely that he may sometimes have used such tricks as a publicity device for drawing together a crowd, to whom he would then preach his message of God's love – might not this, perhaps, be a justifiable tactic, in a world with so few other

non-coercive means of making an impression? At all events, his methods worked. He succeeded in making himself a very prominent public figure: one around whom all kinds of people critical of the established political order might well rally.

And it was a world seething with discontent. A sudden hike in the price of bread had triggered major riots in Baghdad in 921, just a year prior to Hallaj's execution; the Hanbalites had played a leading role in these. The government was forever short of money and dependent on the work of freelance tax collectors, often ruthless. Various groups, especially Shi'a ones, cultivated vivid messianic hopes for a new regime of justice – and some appear, at times, to have looked to Hallaj himself as a potential messiah, the promised *Mahdi*. When, as a young man, he had settled in Basra, he was moving to a region aflame with civil war, and his eventual in-laws had close connections to the leaders of the Zanj insurgency there. This was a Shi'a social revolutionary movement, seeking to mobilise the poor in general, and in particular the numerous immigrants from East Africa – the poorest of the poor, some of them slaves, employed as diggers in the natron mines. It was not finally put down until 884, eight years after Hallaj's marriage. One can scarcely doubt that his association with the world of the Zanj in this period was an important influence on the future development of his thought – even if not one that it was politic for him to emphasise. Meanwhile, the millenarian Shi'ites of the Qarmathian movement continued to agitate. Even though Hallaj himself was a Sunni, he repeatedly came under suspicion as a possible 'agent of the Qarmathians'. From their stronghold in Bahrain the Qarmathians occasionally raided the convoys of pilgrims crossing the desert to Mecca. They did not believe in the pilgrimage, and when Hallaj's accusers, at his final trial, picked upon his controversial views on this topic as their chief point of attack, this was no doubt in order to link him with the Qarmathians. On his second pilgrimage to Mecca in 895 he had indeed travelled by way of Bahrain, and is said to have arrived in company with some 400 'disciples' dressed in patchwork coats, signifying voluntary poverty. One can see why the Vizir Hamid, who in the end succeeded in having him put to death, should have feared Hallaj's influence: Hamid was a notoriously cynical, self-aggrandising politician. He seems to have become obsessed with the need to destroy Hallaj, and he had numerous allies amongst the religious leaders of both the Sunni and Shi'a communities. Nevertheless, it took a while, because Hallaj also had powerful protectors at Court – above all, two Greek converts to Islam: the Court Chamberlain, Nasr and the Queen Mother, Shaghab.

During the years of Hallaj's imprisonment, the fickle young Caliph, Muqtadir, constantly wavered between the two parties.

In the period immediately before his arrest, on the other hand, Hallaj himself appears quite deliberately to have sought out a death – as he is said to have expressed it – ‘in the confession of the Cross’. He presented himself before the people of Baghdad as one who had become a victim of God, for his love of God was impelling him to a wild abandon. ‘I saw Hallaj’, one witness for example is recorded as saying,

in the Suq al-Qati'a (a market in Baghdad), full of sorrow, and crying out: ‘O people! Save me from God’ (three times)! Then he recited the following: ‘For He has robbed me from myself and He does not return me to myself! I cannot witness to Him the respect due to His presence, for I am afraid of His forsaking [me]’. Then: ‘He will leave me deserted, forsaken, outlawed! And woe to the one who feels deserted after the [revelation of God's] presence and abandoned after the [enjoyment of] Union [with Him]!’ The people wept for him.⁵

Driven by the sheer intensity of his passion for God's justice, he was impelled to confront the pervasive injustice of complacent, manipulative and manipulated herd morality, to the very utmost extent. Such a confrontation could only prove intolerable to those confronted – so much so that they would in the end, he suggested, be bound to kill him. On another occasion, it is said, he went into the Mansur Mosque and gathered a great crowd around him, a crowd of both friends and enemies.

He said, ‘You must understand that God has made the spilling of my blood lawful for you. Therefore kill me!’ But the crowd wept. Abd al-Wadudi ibn Sa'id ibn 'Abd al-Ghani al-Zahid, one of the great figures amongst the Sufis, was seen advancing towards him. And he replied: ‘O Shaykh, how could we kill a man who prays, fasts and recites the Qur'an?’ But Hallaj said to him, ‘O shaykh, what prevents you from shedding my blood has nothing to do with prayer. Or with fasting. Or with reciting the Qur'an. Kill me then, and you will be rewarded for it, and I will gain peace by it, for you will have fought for your faith, and I, I will have died a martyr.’⁶

Thus, he was determined to die a death like that of Jesus, the death of a dissident scapegoat. In other words: a death serving to highlight the essential wrong of the universal human impulse to scapegoat; that core impulse of sacralised injustice, in general. He sought a death which would, in a great moment of truth, dramatise, just as the death of Jesus did, the mortal conflict between conventional herd morality and holy anarchy, at its ultimate extreme.

This was some time before his arrest. But, again, right at the end, he did not go quietly to death. Another witness says:

I was there the day of Hallaj's execution: he was led out of the prison, bound and chained, but he was smiling, and I said to him: 'O master, how does it happen that you are in this state?' [He said] 'From the coquettishness of His beauty; it so entices the elect to union'.

And he recited:

The One who invited me, so as not to seem to wrong me,
Bade me drink from the cup He drank from: like the Host who serves
a guest.
Then, when the cup was passed around, He called for the leather [execution]
mat, and the blade.
Such is the fate of one who drinks Wine under the [zodiacal] sign of the
Lion in summer.⁷

Others describe him weeping tears of laughter and strutting in his chains, as if performing a sort of war dance. Then, it is said, as he was hoisted onto the gibbet, he cried out:

O my God, here I am now in the dwelling place of my desires, and my gaze is surprised by your marvels. My God, I see You show Your love specifically to those who wrong You. How therefore does it happen that You do not show Your love to the one to whom injustice is done in You?⁸

There is an extravagant mixture here – of public anguish, exasperation, exultation and defiance – quite strikingly different from what one finds in the story of Jesus, who appears, by contrast, so very much more serene.

And yet, what was the real underlying purpose of these strange antics? In the final analysis, what was it that Hallaj stood for? It was surely very close to what Jesus stood for.

Hallaj's Writing

There is also another difference between Hallaj and Jesus: Hallaj was a writer.

After his death the authorities, naturally, attempted to suppress his writings. But at any rate one text has survived, a substantial core of which appears to be authentically his. Whether he is the actual author of any of the poetry attributed to him is doubtful; however, we do have a little collection of prose texts, edited by a disciple, entitled the *Tawasin*.

The title is the plural form of a meaningless word. In its singular form it consists of the two Arabic letters *ta* and *sin*. In the same mysterious way

that some of the suras of the Qur'an begin with a series of isolated letters, these two form part of the superscription to section six: 'The TaSin of Before-Time and Ambiguity.' And it is this that is really the most remarkable section of the book, for here Hallaj is exploring the symbolic potential of the Qur'anic story about the fall of Iblis; that is, Satan. And his interpretation is certainly very bold.⁹

The original story of the fall of Iblis appears in two places in the Qur'an, Sura 2: 30–34 and Sura 38: 71–78. It is set 'before time', in the sense of preceding human history; and, at any rate as retold by Hallaj, it represents Iblis as a profoundly 'ambiguous' moral figure. Hence the peculiar title of the Hallajian text. Thus, Iblis falls from grace because he disobeys God's express command to bow down before the newly created Adam, precisely – in the sense of kneeling and touching his head to the ground – as Muslims kneel and touch their heads to the ground in ritual prayer to God alone. But *why* does he disobey? Is it simply a matter of pride, because he is more nobly made – of fire, whereas Adam is made of clay? That is the conventional, exoteric interpretation (Sura 38: 76). Or is it because of his genuine devotion to the uniqueness of God, who alone, in his view, is truly worthy of such honour? For Hallaj, the point is that it is for *both* of these reasons, at once.

'The TaSin of Before-Time and Ambiguity' is a brief text. There are three original parts to it, with a later passage – about Hallaj but not by him – interpolated into the middle of the third. The first part begins with a basic contrast between Iblis and Mohammad, represented as the ideal model of true obedience. It continues with fragments of conversation between Iblis and God, before whom Iblis seeks to justify himself. The second part consists of a conversation between Iblis and Moses, in which, again, Iblis presents his case – only even more forcefully. And then in the third part – as it were, to register an ever-mounting excitement – the style shifts into a heavy rhyming prose: fragments of Iblis's prayers to God alternate with various hints regarding his symbolic significance, but in places the manuscripts disagree, and the meaning here is quite uncertain.

Iblis, as Hallaj presents him, defends his disobedience to God, essentially, as an expression of his supreme love for God, which was such that he could never bear to bow down in homage to any other:

He was told: 'Bow down!' He said, '[I will bow down to] no other!' He was asked, 'Even if you receive my curse?' He said, 'It does not matter. I have no way to an other-than-you. I am an abject lover'. (Paragraph 9)

Is this pride? If so, he protests, then it is a pride entirely grounded in his true love for God: 'A moment with you', he says to God, 'would be

enough to justify my pride and lording-it-over. So how much more am I justified when I have passed the ages with you' (para. 11). How, though, can he justify disobedience? He continues to see himself as justified because he refuses to accept that God ever really meant the command: 'That was a test', he says to Moses, 'not a command' (Paragraph 14). Moses asks Iblis, 'Do you remember [God] now?' (Paragraph 15). In his reply, Iblis speaks like a Sufi godfriend, become ecstatically translucent to God: 'Remembrance does not remember', he says. That is to say, his is a 'remembrance' which decisively transcends the ordinary meaning of the word; it is a 'remembrance' in which 'I am the remembered and he is the remembered. His remembrance is my remembrance, my remembrance, his.' For he remains united with God, at least in the sense of still being absolutely *sincere* in his love for God, his will perfectly merged with his perception of God's real will – behind what he sees as the 'test'. Indeed, his readiness to endure condemnation and punishment, he argues, is precisely a token of this sincerity: 'Formerly I served him out of concern for my own lot; now I serve out of concern for his'. No one, Iblis argues, could show greater love for God than his. Truly: 'My proclamation is the proclamation of those who are sincere, and in love I am triumphant' (Paragraph 17).

So how are we to understand this?

The later-written passage, interpolated into the text, suggests one possible interpretation. It speaks of a competition between Hallaj himself, Iblis, and the Pharaoh who opposed Moses: a competition 'in the domain of valour'. 'My friends and teachers are Iblis and Pharaoh', Hallaj is represented as saying (Paragraph 24). For all three are symbols of holding fast to what one believes, even under the most terrible pressure. Even Pharaoh is admirable in this regard – and all the more, Iblis!

But is Iblis right when he claims that the apparent divine command to bow down before Adam was not really meant as a command, but only as a test? If so, the story would surely become a symbolic validation for all manner of bigotry: religion upholding its orthodoxy, over and above God's command to honour the sheer humanity of others even if they are outside the circle of that orthodoxy. For that is what the anomalous command to bow down before Adam, in the first instance, surely represents. Note that Hallaj still speaks of Iblis as a symbol of real vice:

Things are known through opposites. A fine garment is woven on a coarse, black backing. Similarly, the angel displays the virtues and says to the virtuous: 'Perform them and you will be requited', while Iblis shows the vices and says: 'Perform them and you will be requited' – symbolically. Whoever does not know vice will not know virtue. (Paragraph 19)

Elsewhere – it is true – the authorial voice does also appear to endorse Iblis' claim to sincerity (Paragraphs 34–35). Hallaj's Iblis truly is a most ambiguous figure. The later Persian 'Hallajian' tradition tends to emphasise his heroic sincerity; the Turkish 'Hallajian' tradition tends, rather, to hold fast to his being condemned. But, in the end, what Iblis surely represents is just this combination: the most perfect, impassioned sincerity – in the service of a basic moral error.

And the error in question, it seems to me, is none other than what I would call the corruption of religion into sacred ideology; the error that Jesus also identifies in the piety of misguided scribes and Pharisees. For again, what, more exactly, does the not yet fallen Adam represent which might make sense of the command that Iblis should bow before him? He represents humanity before the development of society. Or, in other words: humanity altogether outside all relationships of domination, as, in mythic terms, the original condition of Adam precedes the development of such relations. Pre-eminently, therefore, he represents the humanity that resurfaces in the Sufi dialectic of 'annihilation-and-abiding' – for, again, what is 'annihilated' is just the self that is caught up in relationships of manipulative exploitation, whether as the manipulating one or as the manipulated one. And what that then leaves 'abiding' is, precisely, the original Adamic self; the idea of a self entirely prior to any diremption into Unatonement. Adam, thus, represents the ideal 'godfriend', humanity perfectly translucent to God. In bowing down to Adam the angels were, after all, only bowing down to God, as God is immanent within the soul of the godfriend.

But Iblis fails to see this. He fails to see it, because his mythic pride is of a piece with that of all those mortals who are ensnared by the *libido dominandi* of Unatonement. In short: he represents the *libido dominandi*, here in its very noblest expression, as vindicated by sacred ideology at its most sublimely and fervently sincere. Like the ideal Sufi in his exalted sincerity, he nevertheless entirely repudiates the essential open-mindedness of the true Sufi. He therefore stands for everything in Hallaj's more noble-minded religious opponents for which Hallaj, loving his enemies, continues to have real respect. And, as such (I think), he becomes the ultimate symbolic embodiment of the truth that sincerity, even at its most perfect, is not yet full Honesty. For Iblis is perfectly, intensely sincere. And yet – in the sense that true Honesty (with a capital 'H') is nothing other than perfect truth-as-openness towards others – he is still dishonest. His refusal to bow before Adam is a refusal to accept the truth of holy anarchy. But, because he represents that

refusal at its most genuinely devout, here we have the theological challenge of holy anarchy represented at its very sharpest.

The Testimony of Louis Massignon

As it happens, Hallaj has been rather well served by modern scholarship. This is, above all, due to the heroic labours of the great Roman Catholic scholar Louis Massignon – who began his study of Hallaj in 1907, when he was twenty-four, and stuck at it, off and on, until he died in 1962.

Massignon's magnum opus, *La passion d'al-Hallaj*, remained a work in progress, never definitively complete. And a good deal of his other writing also consists of offshoots from the same basic project. He, more than anyone else, is the man who pioneered the western academic study not only of Hallaj, but of Sufi thought in general. But, at the same time, Massignon was also much more than just an academic Orientalist. He was an energetic public intellectual, and, moreover, he was a visionary original religious thinker in his own right.

During the First World War he enlisted as an officer in the French Army; as an academic scholar of Arabic literature, he was posted to the Middle East. At the war's end he was there in the official party, representing France, when Lawrence of Arabia made his solemn triumphal entry into Jerusalem; he then served as a member of the Sykes-Picot Commission, set up to determine the boundaries of the various successor states to the Ottoman Empire. Notwithstanding this context, however, as a scholar his was an Orientalism essentially grounded in religious openness. Later on, during the 1930s, he set up a pioneering trans-confessional prayer fellowship, including both Christians and Muslims, called the 'Badaliya'. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War he was again despatched, as a cultural envoy of the new France, to the Middle East; he went on to India, not least to meet Gandhi, for whom he had a great admiration. From 1954 onwards, he became caught up into the great struggle over Algeria. The Badaliya merged with the Parisian 'Amis de Gandhi' as a non-violent campaigning community, in solidarity with those campaigning to uphold the fullest possible equality of political rights within a trans-continental France for all citizens, including the Algerian Arabs. Most dramatically, in 1961, when the Paris police shot some Algerian suspects and threw their dead bodies into the Seine, it was Massignon and his friends who sought to recover the corpses for proper Muslim burial. And when they were prevented, in an impassioned article on the front page of *Le Monde*, he invoked the

memory of Antigone. Many of his academic colleagues considered the fervour of his political engagement to be crazy.

But Massignon believed in fervour – not only with regard to politics, but also in religion. ‘True sanctity’, he remarks, ‘is necessarily excessive, eccentric, abnormal, and shocking’.¹⁰ Certainly, Hallaj’s personality was of that order. And, for Massignon, Hallaj was not only an object of research; speaking of Hallaj, he once said: ‘I do not pretend that the study of his life has yielded me the secret of his heart. But, rather, it is he who has fathomed mine, and fathoms it still.’¹¹ *La passion d’al-Hallaj* is a work of obsessive homage.

Why Hallaj? There is a latent theological argument underlying Massignon’s work, constantly more or less hinted at, given in fragments, but never quite spelled out. Massignon was, by all accounts, a spellbinding extempore lecturer. But his literary style is that of a scholarly miniaturist, who was also a hoarder. His writing constitutes a truly daunting pile of meticulously detailed information; not all of it yet, indeed, quite properly checked; all rather jumbled together. And then the text is strewn with sudden splashes of lyrical colour, charged with intense passion. It has a quite haunting quality. He was, to the end of his life, a loyal Catholic, a Franciscan tertiary, but he also became more and more alienated from the actual reality of ordinary church life in what he called ‘the rich, developed, arrogant West’. Although he was a married man, in 1950 he was ordained a priest, by special papal permission, into the Arabic-speaking Melchite rite, which permits married priests. Of the church and yet always an outsider, he would begin each day at home in Paris by celebrating mass, usually alone, in a foreign language, Arabic. And in honouring Hallaj, he was, not least, honouring a patron of religious outsiders. Clearly, he saw Hallaj as a pioneer of authentic Christ-likeness within the world of Islam. To be Christ-like is, necessarily, to be an outsider to the Earthly City, as shaped by the Unatonement, just as Hallaj was an outsider to the dominant culture of his age. But then, to the Christian, it also means being an outsider in relation to the church, inasmuch as the church itself has, so very largely, developed as an institution of the Earthly City. Indeed, the risen Christ appears as a stranger. At first, the disciples fail to recognise him (*Luke* 24: 15–16; *John* 20: 14; 21: 4; and cf. *Matthew* 28: 17): poetically, this represents his perennial strangeness, in his true self as a prophet of holy anarchy, to the church. And to recognise authentic Christ-likeness in a non-Christian is, precisely, to be brought face to face, once again, with that same primal strangeness.

One may well have misgivings about Massignon's project. I am not sure about Edward Said's essentially secularist critique, mind you:¹² fully acknowledging Massignon's unique brilliance as a scholar, Said nevertheless mistrusts what he calls the 'inhumanity' of his religious outlook. He criticises Massignon for according Hallaj a 'disproportionate importance': Massignon's veneration of Hallaj is, in Said's view, 'disproportionate' in that it represents an ultimate lack of real sympathy with ordinary modern Muslims, as such. Massignon, even when protesting against injustices suffered by contemporary Palestinians and Algerians, still remains, for Said's taste, all too aloof in his scholarly religiousness.¹³ More especially, Said accuses Massignon of a residual, only peculiarly refined, form of Christian cultural imperialism. Indeed, he puts it in the most brutal fashion: in Massignon's thinking, he remarks, 'Mohammed was thrown out, but al-Hallaj was made prominent because he took himself to be a Christ-figure'.¹⁴

Is this fair? Surely not! It is wrong not only in the obvious sense that truly to honour Hallaj is, at the same time, to honour Mohammed, just as Hallaj himself honoured Mohammed. But also – what exactly is Said suggesting here? The implication seems to be that Massignon's approach to Islam as a Christian theologian, looking for points of contact with Christian Faith, somehow, in itself, indicates a fundamental lack of respect for ordinary Muslims. It seems that Said thinks it would have been more respectful of Massignon, as a student of Islam, to have completely bracketed his own Christian Faith, and approached the matter in quite 'neutral' – in other words, secularist – terms. But would this, in fact, have been a more respectful procedure? As a Christian, I must say, I do not find secularist discussions of Christian Faith to be intrinsically more respectful than Muslim ones. On the contrary, it must surely be the rule that – all other things being equal – no matter what its variations in cultural expression, Faith is always better understood by Faith than it is by Faith-less secularity. What Massignon certainly *does* 'throw out', as Hallaj also does, is Islam corrupted into an instrument of the *libido dominandi*. This, though, is by no means what he thinks Mohammed stands for. And neither is there any indication that he considers Islam any more liable, by nature, to such corruption than Christianity. Clearly, his 'rendering prominent' of Hallaj does represent a certain critique of conventional Islam, as the absolute intransigence of Hallaj's testimony to holy anarchy contrasts with all the manifold ambiguities of the larger religious culture to which he belonged. And yet this critique of conventional Islam is equally a critique of conventional Christianity. Massignon is by no means criticising

conventional Islam for being insufficiently like conventional Christianity; rather, he is criticising the conventionality of conventional Abrahamic religion in general – Muslim, Christian or Jewish – for the way it tends to subdue the proper critical thrust of divine revelation, and reduce it to the level of mere herd religion.

On the other hand, it is true that Massignon does have a number of quite questionable prejudices. (He was a quirky man!) Examples are his hostility to later Sufi thinkers such as Ibn ‘Arabi; to Shi’a Islam, in general; or to all things British, as such. One might also, indeed, wonder about the absoluteness of his anti-Zionism.

And, still more fundamentally, Jeffrey Kripal, I think, represents an altogether more troubling take on his general project.¹⁵ Thus, Kripal focuses on the undeniable element of sublated homoerotic *masochism* in Massignon’s spirituality. He considers the way Massignon celebrates Hallaj not only as a witness to what I am calling ‘holy anarchy’, but also as a symbol of extravagant self-immolation. And he raises the question of how far the self-immolation in question here differs, in the end, from mere pathological self-destruction? Indeed, in this respect Massignon’s work is disturbing in much the same way that Simone Weil’s, for instance, so spectacularly also is. The one major difference has to do with the particular role played by Massignon’s homosexuality. He was always quite open about being gay, but his conversion to Christian Faith was, for him, very much bound up with a strict renunciation of that particular aspect of his earlier life.

This conversion actually took place in the most bizarre circumstances, over a period of three months, April–June 1908. Two years earlier, on board a ship travelling to Cairo for a year’s study of the Arabic language, Massignon had met a young aristocratic Spanish dandy, Luis de Cuadra, who had recently converted to Islam – or more exactly, to Islam ‘in the manner of Omar Khayyam’. The two men became lovers, and it was in fact de Cuadra who first drew Massignon’s attention to the writings of al-Hallaj. But, after a brief ‘season in hell’, exploring with de Cuadra the various forbidden delights of decadent Cairo, Massignon had clearly become troubled by the relationship. From Cairo, he had moved to Baghdad, and then set off on an archaeological mission in the south of the country. Whilst there it seems he fell ill with malaria; then he quarrelled with one of his servants who had been spreading rumours about his ‘effeminate manners’. That servant left, taking the expedition’s money with him, and when Massignon tried to enlist the help of the local authorities, he was accused of being a French spy. 1908 was the year of

the Young Turk Revolution, a period of great political turbulence in the Ottoman Empire. On the steamer back to Baghdad, the only outsider in a crowd of Iraqis, he found the other passengers staring at him 'brutally' – as he later recalled, 'less for being suspect of espionage than for loose morals'. An officer, on the other hand, reiterated that he was a spy, and threatened his life. Massignon fled to the captain's cabin, pleading for protection. He was shivering with fever and with terror, and he started to behave erratically: he waved a revolver around; pointed it first at the captain, then at his own head; swallowed several lit cigarettes; then lapsed into a complete delirium. The boat stopped at Ctesiphon, and he disembarked. Standing there in the ruins of the Taq, the Palace of Khosrau (as he himself told the tale), he experienced a sense of being upheld by the prayers of four intercessors. One was his mother. Another was the Belgian novelist J-K. Huysmans, whom he had known well, and admired. The third was the famous hermit of the Sahara, Charles de Foucauld, with whom he had earlier entered into correspondence;¹⁶ and the fourth was Hallaj. In his delirium, he heard the doves, overhead, call '*haqq, haqq*' ('truth, truth'). He tried to make a get-away, but the Iraqis caught him. The next day, back on the steamer, he again became agitated and made a suicide attempt, stabbing himself in the chest with a knife, although to little effect. They bound him hand and foot. Afterwards, lying bound on the floor, he was granted a vision of God. As he lyrically remembered it:

The Stranger who visited me, one evening in May before the Taq, cauterizing my despair that He lanced, came like the phosphorescence of a fish rising from the bottom of the deepest sea; my inner mirror revealed Him to me, behind the mask of my own features. . .

This, in retrospect, appeared to him to have been a decisive moment. For, from that time forward:

The Stranger who took me as I was, on the day of His wrath, inert in His hand like the gecko of the sands, little by little overturned all my acquired reflexes, my precautions, and my deference to public opinion. . .¹⁷

Just then, however, it was still anguish. Held by God – feeling his fragility 'like a gecko of the sands' – for two days he did not open his eyes, but lay gazing, intently, inwards. On arrival in Baghdad, they took him to a hospital, where at first he fell into a prolonged sleep, calling on de Cuadra in his dreams: 'Luis, Luis, Luis. . .' Over a period of several weeks, he began to recover. Eventually he was discharged, and boarded a train to Beirut. On arrival, he made his way to the Church of St. Joseph,

where – somewhat to the dismay of the parish folk – he prostrated himself, cruciform, face down on the floor, deep in prayer, refusing to answer anyone other than a priest he had met on the train. They brought the priest, who, having heard his confession, absolved him. And then – then, at last, the crisis was over.

This flamboyant nervous breakdown had three major consequences. First, emerging from a period of theological agnosticism, Massignon rejoined the Roman Catholic Church. Second, he broke off his sexual relationship with Luis de Cuadra. (In 1914 he married a cousin. But he also continued faithfully to write to de Cuadra every week until the latter's death by suicide in 1921, whilst in jail.) Third, it was from that moment on that he dedicated himself, with real intensity, to the study of Hallaj. 'True sanctity is necessarily excessive, eccentric, abnormal, and shocking.' Massignon yearned to suffer – like Christ, like Hallaj – 'on behalf of' those for whom he prayed. He yearned to suffer 'on behalf of' de Cuadra; 'on behalf of' homosexual people in general; 'on behalf of' his Muslim friends. The Christian–Muslim prayer community he set up in the 1930s, the Badaliya, was founded on the basis of that ideal. And Kripal also highlights the various traces of Massignon's own struggle to suppress and sublimate his homosexuality in the text of *La passion d'al-Hallaj*. He discusses Massignon's evident fascination with the usage, in the Hallajian and other Sufi traditions, of homoerotic imagery to evoke the love of the 'godfriend' for God, whilst also noting Massignon's marked anxiety, nevertheless, to insist on the absolute sexual 'purity' of these traditions.

In accordance with the moral consensus of his Church, Massignon considered homosexuality to be a disease, and the practice of gay sex to be intrinsically sinful. He admired Hallaj as a great representative Outsider, and his monumental research project dedicated to Hallaj is clearly inspired by his own sense of being an Outsider, as well – not least by virtue of the sheer intensity of his own anguished wrestling with this supposed 'disease'. Kripal expresses the natural reaction of any liberal-minded reader today:

What do we do with a palpable sanctity that was psychologically derived from what many of us now take to be a serious moral mistake?¹⁸

I agree it is a poignant question!

And yet – with that one, admittedly, quite major critical proviso – it still does also seem to me that Massignon has rendered Christian theology, in principle, a very great service. For the juxtaposition he suggests between Jesus and Hallaj serves in such a very direct way to clarify what is truly

essential to the gospel; thus, whatever else Hallaj may also have represented, the fact surely still remains that he went to his death – like Jesus – above all as a witness to holy anarchy. His death, like that of Jesus, served in the most vivid fashion to dramatise the conflict between the Earthly and the Heavenly City. And, moreover, it seems that this was just what he, like the Jesus of the Gospels, intended. Hallaj's story has never quite been used, in the way the Jesus story has, to try and put the truth of holy anarchy explicitly right at the heart of an all-encompassing liturgical tradition. But, by the same token, it has also never suffered anything equivalent to the systematic distortion of the Jesus story by the self-serving sacred ideology of the Church. And, in that sense, to meditate upon the parallels between the two is to catch an echo of the gospel *more primitive*, one might perhaps say, than any that one could ever hope to catch in ordinary Christian tradition, considered on its own.

This, I guess, is what Massignon intuitively recognised. He sensed that here we therefore have a sort of *secondary gospel revelation* – in other words, a decisive re-emergence of just those aspects of gospel truth which the sacred ideology of the Church, as a phenomenon of the Earthly City, is most immediately bound to suppress. With good reason, he hoped that the juxtaposition might help us disentangle those aspects.

You may still want to ask, which, then, is the better of these two strategies for the transmission of holy anarchy: the Christian or the Sufi? But that question actually seems to me quite pointless. The two ways are not in competition; they are complementary. Both are potential vehicles for the highest truth of anti-political religion. And all that matters is that, in both cases, we see how.

Other Verdicts on Hallaj

In Upper Egypt, nearly forty years ago, I remember the summer heat was such that I put my bed out onto the roof. Above me: a mosquito net and the stars. A faint buzz of late-night voices came from the café below, and the clatter of dominoes. Frogs would start croaking.

And then – evening after evening – there would also come the distant sound of flutes and of chanting, the music of a Sufi *dhikr*, somewhere: a ceremony of remembrance. One also saw them on Fridays in the dusty space in front of the main mosque, gathered in little groups, chanting their mantras, and swaying, swaying, swaying almost until they dropped. Their clothes were shabby, their faces incandescent. Who were these people? The Egyptian colleagues and students whom I asked, the English-speakers,

were generally quite scathing. These were ignorant and superstitious types, they said, the duped devotees of reactionary shaykhs. Yet, it was of course in just these sorts of circles that the memory of Hallaj, more or less transmuted into legend, was originally preserved and transmitted. Massignon has compiled a meticulous record of all the various folkloric traditions, across the Islamic world, through which this was done.

One may I think well sympathise with Junayd's misgivings about Hallaj the showman: Junayd, Hallaj's older contemporary, was no less extravagant a poet of 'annihilation-and-abiding' than Hallaj, but at the same time was so much more wary of the pitfalls into which the showman impulse, in general, might lead people. Indeed, Hallaj's signature cry of '*ana'l-haqq*' ('I am' the divine Truth) clearly means something quite different when, for instance, it is adopted as the slogan of a ruthless political ruler, as it was by Shah Isma'il of Iran (1487–1524), the Sufi poet who became an emperor. Isma'il used his Shi'a Sufi brotherhood very much as an agency of government, savagely repressing all Sunni rival groups. However, in his poetry, he also appropriates the Hallajian cry. In a sense, I think one might well argue that it was precisely in order to try and pre-empt the misappropriation of Sufi rhetoric by authoritarian ideologists like Isma'il that Hallaj opted for the sort of death he died. Hallaj died as he did so as to make plain the proper logic of his doctrine: its quite implacable, embattled opposition to the *libido dominandi* in any form. I write here, myself, as a Christian theologian very much in the catholic tradition. And that tradition is in fact largely built on a systematic mistrust of showmen. But, at any rate, Hallaj may surely be considered a most scrupulous showman; a showman of the most costly personal integrity.

Three and a half centuries after Hallaj's death, the great poet Jelaluddin Rumi (1207–73) certainly sought to honour him. 'People imagine', Rumi remarked,

that [*ana'l-haqq*] is a presumptuous claim, whereas it is really more of a presumptuous claim to say '*ana'l-'abd*, I am the slave [of God]', and '*ana'l-haqq*' is in fact an expression of the very utmost humility. Thus, one who says, '*ana'l-'abd*' affirms two existences, his own and God's, whereas one who says '*ana'l-haqq*' has made himself non-existent. He has given himself up, and says 'I am nothing, God is all; there is no true being but God's.' There can indeed be no greater self-abasement than this.¹⁹

Other strands of Muslim tradition, on the other hand, have been much more hostile to the provocation of Hallaj. In particular, the immensely influential Ibn Taymiyya (1268–1328) played a crucial role in this regard. Ibn Taymiyya is

the great medieval authority most often cited by *salafi* Muslims today: notable for his fierce condemnation of various Sufi practices, such as pilgrimage to the tombs of famous 'godfriends', and prayer invoking them as heavenly mediators. He did much to weaken the taboo forbidding Muslim-on-Muslim warfare – which had been such an important aspect of Islam's original missionary appeal – when he urged maximum military resistance to the ostensibly Muslim Mongols, on the grounds that their adherence to Islam was only superficial and therefore did not count. This has become a key theological precedent for terrorist attacks by Muslim radicals on Muslim governments, and Muslim populations, today. And Ibn Taymiyya also issued a series of *fatwas* concerning the issues raised by the case of Hallaj. He was himself a Hanbalite legal scholar, in Damascus; however, he took a very different view from the Hanbalites of Hallaj's own day. (Perhaps this was why he raised the matter: because there were still members of his own school who thought of Hallaj as a hero?) Ibn Taymiyya's verdict is indeed quite unequivocal: Hallaj, he decreed, was nothing but a wicked blasphemer.

As for the Christian equivalents of Ibn Taymiyya and his followers: no doubt they will also recoil in horror from Massignon's advocacy of Christian-theological engagement with the Hallajian tradition. But how depressing it is when Christians and Muslims refuse, as a matter of principle, to learn from one another, and regard each other merely as enemies! Anti-political religious traditions are quite properly called to a certain sort of militant intolerance: they are called to be absolutely intolerant of the workings of the *libido dominandi*, as such. The *libido dominandi*, however, is endlessly lithe and cunning – so it deflects that intolerance onto other targets, twists it, and turns it into its opposite, a fundamental intolerance of God experimenting. In other words: a fundamental intolerance of God being God.

And how melancholy are the great monuments to this intolerance! I think for instance of the once great Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Since 1935 it has been a museum. Any place of prayer converted into a museum will tend to feel desolate. I remember visiting the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan in St Petersburg back in the 1980s, when St Petersburg was still Leningrad and the Cathedral was still functioning as a 'Museum of Atheism', full of state-sponsored propaganda against religion in general. And I remember feeling, then, that there could scarcely be a more vivid physical argument *against* militant irreligion than that dismal, dead place. The current state of Hagia Sophia is not quite so bad; yet to me it still feels like a place of defeat: a building defeated by the violence of its history. No doubt it was inevitable that when the Ottomans conquered

Constantinople in 1453 it should have been converted into a mosque. But I can also sympathise with the secularist authorities in 1935, insofar as they felt embarrassed by the testament to religious violence that this signified. Moreover, the place is also a monument to the violence of Christian against Christian: sacked by Roman Catholic troops in 1204, for some fifty-seven years after that it served as the Cathedral of the Latin conquerors. When the Emperor Justinian, who first commissioned the building, viewed it, back on the occasion of its completion in 537, such was its richly decorated magnificence that, it is said, he cried out: 'Solomon, I've outdone you!' But what is now left of it stands, essentially, as a grim, stony, ironic rebuke to any such imperial hubris.

Or I think of Cordoba Cathedral, that quite ghastly baroque structure encased in the glorious ruins of the old mosque, the Mezquita, left behind from the days of Muslim rule. The great mosque of Cordoba was originally built in four main phases: the first beginning in the year 786 CE; the second in 832; the third in 962; and the fourth in 987. During this period the city had for a while become the greatest city in the whole of Europe and the Middle East; more populous, wealthier and more sophisticated even than Baghdad or Byzantium. Its rulers had begun to style themselves 'Caliph', thereby setting themselves up as rivals to the Caliphs of Baghdad and Cairo for the universal leadership of the Islamic world. And, as was therefore only natural, they were determined that their central mosque should be a wonder to behold, and a major pilgrimage centre. For several centuries Muslim Cordoba flourished. Gradually, however, decline set in. At length, in 1236 it fell. The Christian army of King Ferdinand III of Castile seized the city, and the mosque became a cathedral. At first, the new rulers – conscious that they had come into possession of an exceptionally beautiful building – made only the most minimal adjustments to it. For three further centuries it was preserved almost intact. But then came the reign of Charles V. This was a time when, on the other side of Europe, Islam was on the advance again: the Ottoman Turks, having finally subdued the Balkans, were now threatening Hungary and Vienna. As Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V was also sovereign overlord of the frontline states both in central Europe and southern Italy, and in 1523 he authorised what was, in effect, a great symbolic assertion of Christian power over and against Islam in Cordoba: a spectacular new chancel and choir, to be erected right in the middle of the Islamic remains, in order, as it were, finally to subdue them. The members of the Cathedral Chapter were divided over the advisability of this, and, to their credit, the City Council protested vociferously. They knew themselves to be the

custodians of a supreme treasure, which was hardly likely to be improved; at one point they even threatened the death penalty for any builder, mason, carpenter or labourer who took part in the preparatory demolition work. But they were defeated. After the initial work was done, Charles himself admitted that it had, perhaps, been a mistake: addressing the chapter, he remarked, 'You have built what you or others might have built anywhere, but have destroyed something that was unique in the world.' In fact, though, it is worse than that. Not all the damage was done at once: the great dark gleaming mahogany choir stalls – such a prodigious display of technical skill deployed to produce, truly, the most hideous overall effect! – were erected in the eighteenth century. But the whole thing, surely, is a violation. Enough of the mosque, the Mezquita, is left for us to see what it must once have been. It was an oasis grove in stone, with its elegant pillars and characteristic horseshoe arches, in red and white stripes as stonework alternates with brick. Or one might describe it as a vast tent, expansive rather than overwhelming: gently lit; still; yet full of ambient energy, an intricate play of patterns. Adorned with elaborate carving, yet with nothing in it too insistently clamouring for attention, it was a thoroughly humane and restful building. Its architecture was not, primarily, an act of self-aggrandisement by the great rulers who commissioned it; rather, it was an ideal setting for friendship, camaraderie, the sharing of thoughtful reflection.

However, the cathedral in its midst is like a great smack in the face. Thus, here are juxtaposed the relics of two regimes. On the one hand, an Islamic regime in whose domains the Christian and Jewish communities were, for most of the time, fairly free to flourish as they pleased alongside their Muslim neighbours; on the other, a Christian regime which had entirely banned the practice of Judaism and Islam, which had expelled all Jews and Muslims who would not convert and which was patron to a very energetic Inquisition, enforcing that ban with fire. The liberality of the Islamic regime was by no means perfect, but the contrast is nevertheless clear. And what we Christians have added to the Mezquita is, indeed, pure bully-architecture. It is heavy, frenzied, pompous, boastful stuff, without relief. All around the building, side-chapels have been installed: barred, bolted and padlocked. Somehow, in this context, they resemble so many jail cells, inside which the holy figures writhe, each trapped in his or her own dingy nightmare. Even the enormous cherubs on the choir ceiling look like supercilious thugs. What do I love when I love my God? I love just what those thug-cherubs in Cordoba Cathedral seem most deeply to fear and loathe.²⁰

Providential Triangulation

So now let us consider the whole phenomenon of Islam from a Christian-theological point of view. Shall we regard it simply as a rival religious tradition, at best to be tolerated and treated with indulgent courtesy? No! The case of Hallaj, I think, actually helps open up an altogether more positive sense of possible providential complementarity here.

Both Christianity and Islam are forms of anti-political religion invested with the very boldest evangelistic ambition. Thus, at best, both represent strategies for creating a truly global conversation-community, ideally infused with the spirit of holy anarchy. But there is, I would argue, intrinsically a huge providential advantage in the co-existence of at least two quite different such divine experiments. That there are two of them, rather just one alone, provides a most instructively triangulated take on the ideal; for, as a result, it becomes so much easier, in each case, to distinguish the *substantial* truth involved – that is, the real testimony to holy anarchy as such – from what merely belongs to the *formal* means employed. The formal means employed in Christianity – divine revelation primarily by Incarnation – are, indeed, at every level quite different from those employed in Islam – divine revelation primarily by Sacred Book. Yet, so far as I can see, the substantial truth to be revealed is the same. It surely is the same God positively at work in both traditions at their best: the God of holy anarchy. And to recognise that sameness-in-difference is, at once, to separate out the real truth-potential of both traditions, which tends to draw them together in friendship, from the sacred-ideological corruption of both, which on the contrary tends to split them apart as rivals. The shared underlying truth of holy anarchy stands out altogether more clearly than it otherwise would from its various sacred-ideological accretions, both Christian and Islamic, by virtue of the contrast.

Suppose one's basic concern is with the cultivation of a global conversation-community, ideally infused with the spirit of 'holy anarchy': then it is clear that whilst, for this purpose, Christianity does have certain immediate advantages over Islam, Islam also has advantages over Christianity. Not that these advantages are readily commensurable – and, moreover, neither tradition by any means excludes the vices, or the virtues, of the other.

Thus, it has to be said that Islam – because of the quite different way it originally spread, without anything like the early Church's protracted exposure to persecution – was, from the outset, much less liable than Christianity was to the sort of vindictive impulses so evident in the *Book of Revelation*, for instance, or in Tertullian, as he fantasises about the joy of

the redeemed, looking down from heaven and contemplating the torments of their erstwhile persecutors condemned to hell. Also in relation to the Jews: there are, it is true, elements of proto-antisemitism in early Islamic tradition, but really nothing like the sort of deformation to be found in popular Christian theology, insofar as Christians have sought to invert the moral challenge of the gospel by finding scapegoats for the crucifixion of God incarnate. Nor was there ever the same risk in traditional Islam, as there was in medieval or early modern Christendom, of aggressive clericalism and heresy-hunting; the *umma* found ways to promote large-scale unity without any exact equivalent to the pastoral disciplines of the Christian Church. And yet, of course, consider 'salafi' neo-fascism today! The most fanatically anti-Christian forms of Islam are, precisely, reproducing apace all the old 'Christian' vices of the past.

Meanwhile, on the other hand, the great strength of Christianity – from the point of view I am proposing – consists in the absolute centrality it accords to a set of narratives with the very richest, inextinguishable capacity to express the imperatives of holy anarchy. But, once again – look at Hallaj, for instance, also! After all, the moral differences between Christianity and Islam are, in general, surely much less significant than the differences *within each tradition* between the upholders of truth-as-openness and their opponents; and infinitely less important, also, than the proper imperatives of solidarity between the upholders of truth-as-openness across the confessional divide.

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