

# The *Zaqqūm* Tree

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O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitteing and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness darkeneth thee not; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee. (*Psalm* 139:1-12)

In common with the descriptions of Paradise from many traditions, trees feature prominently in descriptions of the Islamic Paradise, both in the *Qur'ān*<sup>1</sup> and *aḥādīth*.<sup>2</sup> The inhabitants will enjoy their “spreading shade” and eat of their “fruits in plenty.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to the nameless trees populating Paradise the *Qur'ān* mentions some specific trees; the tree related to the Fall of man,<sup>4</sup> the date palm of Sayyidatna Maryam

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Reclining therein upon couches, they will find there neither (heat of) a sun, nor bitter cold. The shade thereof is closed upon them and the clustered fruits thereof bow down’ (*Qur'ān* 56:13-14). Translations from the *Qur'ān* are from Pickthall unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> For many of the descriptions in *aḥādīth* see the present author’s unpublished doctoral thesis, ‘The Dome of the Rock: Recognition of a Symbol,’ Chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, *Qur'ān* 56:28-34; 76:14.

<sup>4</sup> *Qur'ān* 20:120-121. The Tree of Knowledge of good and evil is mentioned also in the second *Sūrah*, ‘The Cow,’ which tells of Adam and his wife in the Garden. God cautions Adam saying, ‘...and come not nigh this tree for then would ye be transgressors’ (*Qur'ān* 2:35). This translation from Abū Bakr Sirāj ad Dīn, *The Book of Certainty: The Sufi Doctrine of Faith*, Cambridge: Vision and Gnosis, 1992, p.67.

(the Virgin Mary),<sup>5</sup> the olive tree that is neither of East or West,<sup>6</sup> the *Sidrat al-Muntahā*,<sup>7</sup> and a tree called *Zaqqūm* that grows in Hell.<sup>8</sup> Previously the relationship between these trees has been explored<sup>9</sup> suggesting that each of these trees represent different hierarchical orders, different aspects, of the symbolism of the World Tree, the cosmic and supracosmic Tree of Life, which stretches along the length of the *Axis Mundi* passing through and connecting all of the created order—all worlds and beings—at the centre.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most troublesome aspect of the previous statement is the relationship of correspondence between the Tree of Life and the accursed tree, the *Zaqqūm* Tree. This tree that grows at the centre of Hell is described in graphic detail in the *Qur'ān*. Just as the fruits of the trees in Paradise will delight and nourish those who enter the garden, those who enter

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<sup>5</sup> See *Qur'ān* 19:23-26.

<sup>6</sup> See *Qur'ān* 24:35.

<sup>7</sup> The *Sidrat al-Muntahā*, which is translated as “the Lote-tree of the uttermost boundary,” is mentioned only once in the *Qur'ān*, in the Star Sūrah referring to the vision of the Prophet during his Ascension. See *Qur'ān* 53:13-18.

<sup>8</sup> Another tree, the *Shajarat-al Ṭūbā* is not mentioned in the *Qur'ān* but is prominent in *aḥādīth* and in the writings of later mystics. The *Shajarat-al Ṭūbā* was described by Ibn al-'Arabī in his *Futūḥāt al Makkiya* as growing down from the roof of Heaven and penetrating all of the spheres of Heaven. Miguel Asín-Palacios describes the tree in Ibn al-'Arabī's “plan of Paradise” as ‘a mighty tree depending from the heaven of the Primum mobile, or roof of the abode of glory, whose foliage spreads throughout the seven celestial spheres and each branch of which penetrates one of the countless individual mansions of bliss. This tree he calls the Tree of happiness or bliss (*ṭūbā*)’ (M. Asín-Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, tr. H. Sunderland, London, 1926, p.152).

<sup>9</sup> See again the present author's unpublished doctoral thesis, Chapter 6, ‘The Tree.’

<sup>10</sup> It is described in its inverted aspect in the Upanishads, ‘Its root is above, its branches below—This eternal fig-tree (*aśvattha*)! That indeed is Pure. That is Brahma. On it all the worlds do rest, and no one soever goes beyond it’ (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 6.1, in R. Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads*, London, 1931, p.358). This is elaborated in the *Bhagavadgītā*, ‘Men tell of the changeless Fig-tree, with roots that upward rise and branches that descend; its leaves are [Vedic] hymns; he who knows it knows the Vedas. Upwards and downwards its branches spread, swollen by the *Gunas*; their shoots are the objects of sense; and downward do the roots extend; and their effect is work in the world of men. Its form is not here [in the world “below”] understood, nor its end, nor its beginning, nor yet its ground’ (*Bhagavadgītā*, Bk.15, 1-4, W. D. P. Hill, *The Bhagavadgītā: An English Translation and Commentary*, Madras, 1953, p. 185f.) See also in this context A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, ed. R. Lipsey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.397, n.49, where he recalls that, ‘This pillar is omnipresent and passes through the centre of every being.’

the fire will ‘eat of a tree called *Zaqqūm*,’<sup>11</sup> ‘the food of the sinner, Like molten brass, it seetheth in their bellies,’<sup>12</sup> ‘it is a tree that springeth in the heart of hell, Its crop is as it were the heads of devils. And lo! They verily must eat thereof and fill their bellies therewith.’<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, while the symbolism of *Shajarat-al Ṭūbā* (Tree of Bliss) and of the *Sidrat al-Muntahā* (Lote-tree of the Uttermost Boundary) has been unfolded by the Islamic mystics, and images of the blessed Tree are used throughout Islamic art and architecture, little is said about the infernal Tree and its image is rare in Islamic art. It appears to be distinct and opposed to the Tree of Life, to represent the Satanic forces of darkness and evil as opposed to the divine forces, thus it is difficult to reconcile with the other trees of the *Qur’ān*.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between the *Zaqqūm* Tree and the Tree of Life. It is proposed that their apparent opposition is the result of misperception, disorientation or lack of recognition. The *Zaqqūm* Tree as described in the *Qur’ān* embodies “evil” and, although the trees can be seen to occupy two poles, if they are recognised as part of a continuum the *Zaqqūm* Tree is potentially a Tree of Life; they are essentially one. Dionysius the Areopagite entreats us to ‘run counter to mass prejudice and ... to make the holy journey to the heart of sacred symbols’<sup>15</sup> and perhaps his words are more important to heed in the midst of the “darkness” of modern life. It is in the hold of such “darkness” where the potential for a “return to light” can be seen to offer great hope and it is humbly wished that through touching on some

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<sup>11</sup> *Qur’ān* 56:52.

<sup>12</sup> *Qur’ān* 44:44-45.

<sup>13</sup> *Qur’ān* 37:63. Eating of the fruit of this tree is always followed by a drink from a boiling spring. See *Qur’ān* 56:54, 44:48, 37:67 and 88:05.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted in this context, as has been pointed out by Marco Pallis in his illuminating chapter, ‘Is there a problem of evil?’ in his book, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, 1980, p. 31-51, that ‘the idea of “a problem” of evil originated in Christianity and is largely confined to that field.’ My thanks go to Timothy Scott for directing my attention to this book.

<sup>15</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Complete Works*, tr. C. Luibheid, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987, p.284. The entire quote from Letter 9 reads: ‘We have therefore to run counter to mass prejudice and we must make the holy journey to the heart of the sacred symbols. And we must certainly not disdain them, for they are the descendants and bear the mark of the divine stamps.’

of the aspects of the symbolism of the Quranic “Tree of darkness” this hope can be rekindled.<sup>16</sup>

In exploring the symbolism of the Tree, as George Lechler has explained, ‘we have to deal with an idea—more than 5000 years old—common to all Indo-European branches.’<sup>17</sup> The universal recognition of the tree as a symbol has been well documented in ritual, mythology, cosmology, and sacred art from Ancient Mexico to Africa to Japan.<sup>18</sup> The tree growing upwards towards the heavens, reaching towards the light of the sun, presented an obvious symbol of heavenly aspiration. With its branches outstretched, one above the other, extending from the central trunk, each branch depending on the roots for its initial growth and sustenance, it could be seen as a reflection of the “degrees” of cosmic manifestation, of the hierarchy of the created order. The seed of the tree that contains the tree itself *in potentia*, can be understood as an image of multiplicity contained in Unity and Unity revealed through multiplicity.<sup>19</sup> The tree is associated with the *Axis Mundi* and was often

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<sup>16</sup> In the modern world the word symbolism requires definition. Throughout this paper the word symbol will be used in the sense that it is spoken of by Al Ghazālī in *Mishkāt al-Anwar* with the regard to the correspondence of the cosmic with the supracosmic: ‘Were there no relation between the two worlds, no interconnection at all, then all upward progress would be inconceivable from one to the other. Therefore the divine mercy gave to the World Visible a correspondence with the World of the Realm Supernal, and for this reason there is not a single thing in this world of sense that is not a symbol of something in a yonder one’ (Al Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwar* [*The Niche for Lights*], tr. W. H. T. Gairdner, Lahore, 1924, p.71). Dr. Martin Lings, in his book *Symbol and Archetype*, has perhaps given the most clear and concise definition of a symbol as, ‘a reflection or shadow of a higher reality’ (*Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991, p.1).

<sup>17</sup> Lechler, ‘The Tree of Life in Indo-European and Islamic Cultures’, *Ars Islamica* Vol.4, 1937, p.381. He explains that the Tree of Life had a central position in the religious life of the past and ‘it is equally established in all branches of Indo-European culture. Its origins lie farther back than Neolithic culture’ (p.372).

<sup>18</sup> See M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. R. Sheed, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, p.265f; N. R. Reat, ‘The Tree Symbol in Islam’, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1975, p.167; Lechler, ‘The Tree of Life in Indo-European and Islamic Cultures’, p.372.

<sup>19</sup> Recall that the Greek word for the universal substance is *hylé*, meaning literally “wood.” ‘In certain Asiatic traditions, notably in Hindu and Tibetan symbolism, wood is regarded as a “tangible” equivalent of the *materia prima*, the universal plastic substance’ (T. Burckhardt, *Sacred art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods*, tr. Lord Northbourne, London: Perennial Books, 1967, p.56).

used to represent this in ritual.<sup>20</sup> Trees were used to mark the *omphalos*, to represent the “place” of the manifestation of the Divine in this world and a “point” of access to the “worlds above.”<sup>21</sup>

Early references to the Tree, from the earliest surviving references placing the Tree at the centre of the Sumerian Paradise, through to those in later Rabbinical literature, describe it as embracing all the possibilities of manifestation.<sup>22</sup> Another reference describes a jewelled house in Paradise where all the ‘pleasant things of heaven and earth are stored,’ again representing the Infinite Qualities of the Divine, all of the possibilities of manifestation. In the midst of this Paradise is a Tree of Life, whose height is said to be a ‘journey of five hundred days,’ to express the incommensurable distance between the “worlds” it unites. In its shade Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are seated with Moses and Aaron who teach the Law, and a crowned David and Solomon. The tradition continues, ‘And from the Tree of Life rise and descend the souls of the righteous in Paradise, like a man mounting or descending a ladder’,<sup>23</sup> connecting this Tree with the *Axis Mundi*. Yet, how are all of these trees, the celestial trees in Paradise, the Tree as *Axis Mundi*, the Tree that represents the repository for all of the Divine Qualities as they

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<sup>20</sup> Mircea Eliade describes an Altaic ritual where a spot in a meadow is chosen and a new yurt erected, ‘setting inside it a young birch stripped of its lower branches and with nine steps (*tapy*) [representing the stations of ascension or degrees of knowledge] notched into its trunk. The higher foliage of the birch, with a flag at the top, protrudes though the opening at the top of the yurt...’ (*Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, tr. W. R. Trask, New York: Pantheon Books, 1964, pp.190-91). Professor Keith Critchlow writes of the first act in the establishment of a Hindu temple as it is described in ancient manuscripts, ‘the erection of the central upright pillar recalling the world tree echoing the Hindu symbolism of the *śushumha* which is described as a “ray joining every being to the spiritual sun”’ (*Time Stands Still: New Light on Megalithic Science*, London: Gordon Fraser, 1979, p.29f.) In Mesopotamia ritual temples were built to represent on earth the heavenly dwelling place of the deity. These were often surrounded by a grove of trees, not only offering shade in a hot climate but reminiscent of the sacred tree. In rituals, a sacral King was crowned with wreaths of blossoms and anointed with the oil of the sacred tree, he carried a rod or sceptre of its branches. See G. Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion*, King and Saviour IV, Uppsala, 1951, and L. Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-branched Lampstand*, London, 1971, p.35. Note also that these rituals are paralleled in the Hebrew tradition.

<sup>21</sup> Thus it was often used in connection with other symbols of the *omphalos*.

<sup>22</sup> Many of these references are collected in the present author’s unpublished doctoral thesis.

<sup>23</sup> From the Midrash Kohen. This translation used by Z. Amiesenowa, ‘The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography’, *Journal of the Warburg Institute* Vol.2, 1938-1939, p.336.

will be manifested in the cosmos, related to the accursed *Zaqqūm* Tree that grows in the centre of hell?

The *Zaqqūm* can be seen as an inevitable result of the desire of the Hidden Treasure to be known<sup>24</sup> based on the Pythagorean principle that ‘when from the Cause there emanates one there emanates from it not one.’<sup>25</sup> To understand this, consideration must return to the first stirrings of becoming, the separation of the primal unity, or as it is spoken of in the Abrahamic Traditions, the ‘separation of heaven and earth.’<sup>26</sup> This “separation” which results in a duality represents the beginning of cosmogonic manifestation, an ontological level wherein the primal Unity is refracted into so many reflections of the Divine Qualities or possibilities of manifestation. Thus a movement “away” from Unity has been made, a movement “away” from the Absolute and

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<sup>24</sup> This is in reference to the *ḥadīth qudsi* wherein the Divinity speaks on the tongue of the Prophet Mohammad, ‘I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known and so I created the world.’

<sup>25</sup> See H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, tr. W. R. Trask, New York: Pantheon Books, 1960, p.68. This is, perhaps, Corbin’s concise way of expressing what Plato discusses in the *Timaeus* when he speaks of the World Soul as being comprised of sameness, otherness and essence.

<sup>26</sup> See *Qur’ān* 21:30 where the heavens represent supraformal or Spiritual manifestation and they are divided from the earth representing formal or subtle celestial and corporeal manifestation. See also *Genesis* 1:4 where light and darkness represent the division between formal and supraformal manifestation. The darkness here is the primordial Darkness which Dionysius describes as ‘impervious to all illumination and hidden from all knowledge,’ and of which St. Thomas says it is called “Darkness” ‘on account of its surpassing brightness’ (see A. K. Coomaraswamy, ‘Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology’, *Journal of American Oriental Studies* Vol.55, 1935, p.384. See also Coomaraswamy, ‘The Darker Side of Dawn’, *Smithsonian Collections* Vol.94, no.1, 1935, p.8, where he quotes from the Upanishads that it is only ‘when the parents that cohabit in the dark are separated do they pass over the babe.’ This “separation” can also be recognised in the many creation myths which tell of the large chthonic or theriomorphic beast—the ‘deity in the darkness, unmanifested, in his ground, not proceeding, or as it is technically expressed *ab intra*’ (‘The Darker Side of Dawn’, p.2)—is “separated” head from body and the head used to create the heavens and body used to create the earth. See Coomaraswamy, ‘Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology’, p.400 and Eliade, *The Two in the One*, tr. J. M. Cohen, London, 1965, p. 90 for further references. See also the *Prose Edda* where the body of Ymir is divided and they “made the world from him,” his skull becomes the sky and his flesh the earth (S. Sturlson, *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturlson*, tr. J. Y. Berkeley, 1964, p.35). As Coomaraswamy writes, ‘The creative act involves a maiming, division, or transformation...’ (‘The Darker Side of Dawn’, p.2). For the Tantricist it is the ‘separation of the two contrary principles incarnate in Shiva and Shakti. All relative existence implies a state of duality’ (Eliade, *The Two in the One*, p. 117).

into the realm of relativity. To return to the symbol of the Tree, this is the realm of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. At this level the Tree can be recognised as a “Tree of Knowledge” in the sense that it is through reflection or manifestation of the Divine Qualities in the universe that man is able to know the Divine. But it is also the “veil,” the illusion of multiplicity that separates all manifestation from its Source; it is the realm of relativity, of *Maya*, the realm “under the Sun.”<sup>27</sup> It is this phenomenon of apparent separation, this illusion that, if not recognised for the illusion that it is, can be described as “evil.”<sup>28</sup> As the words of the early Sufi Al Niffarī (d. 971AD.) explain it is this ‘experience of otherness,’ man’s inability to recognise his participation in the Spirit, that is the actual ‘evil.’ He writes that, ‘the fire is otherness’.<sup>29</sup> This loss of knowledge or “veiling” is represented in the

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<sup>27</sup> This perception of the tree as barrier or veil is implied in St. Ephraem’s writings describing the architectural expression of the symbolism of the tree. He describes the Tree of Knowledge as a ‘boundary’ equating it with the sanctuary or veil within the basilica, and the Tree of Life as the Holy of Holies. ‘In the very midst He planted the Tree of Knowledge, endowing it with awe, hedging it with dread, so that it might straightway serve as a boundary to the inner region of Paradise .... In the midst of Paradise, God had planted the Tree of Knowledge, to separate off, above and below, sanctuary from Holy of Holies’ (*Hymns of Paradise* 3:3, 14, tr. S. P. Brock, New York, 1990, p. 91). Note also Hymn 15:2, which recognised in a reversal of orientation that the “barrier” is also the “door”: ‘The tree that is called the Tree of Knowledge symbolises the gate of Paradise; it is through the gate of knowledge that one is able to enter in; it is the likeness of its glorious Creator, in whose hidden abode through the gate of knowledge all who are perceptive may approach His hiddenness’ (p.182). Recall also in this context the strait-gate of the Gospels, the Quranic *barzakh*, the *rāqia* of *Genesis* 1:6, 8 and that the *two* Cherubim are set as guardians of the gate (*Genesis* 4:24).

<sup>28</sup> Coomaraswamy collects some of the textual references that describe the ‘act of creation and procession as an extroversion’ that leads to a reversal of the order or a disorientation (‘The Darker Side of Dawn’, p.14, n.8). Frithjof Schuon writes, ‘Nothing can be opposed to God absolutely since nothing existent escapes from Divine Possibility; apparent opposition is consequently only symbolic but it is nonetheless real on the plane of its relativity...’ (*Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, tr. W. Stoddart, Ghent, NY: Perennial Books, 1981, p.80, n.85).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Experience of other than Me does not dwell beside Me ... Banish from thee all experience of otherness, and of what is derived from otherness ... Thy experience of otherness is derived from otherness and the fire is otherness, and it has a lookout over the hearts: it sees in them otherness, when it looks out over the hearts, and so sees what is of itself, and unites with it; but when it sees not what is of itself, it unites not with it’ (*Mawāqif* 17:1-2, 6) and ‘He unveiled for me His gnoses of uniqueness, and Fire died down’ (*Mawāqif* 16:3) and in the *Kitāb Mukhātabāt*: ‘Name is a veil over essence ... Unveiling is the Paradise of Paradises: veiling is the Hell of Hells’ (27:7, 10). Al Niffarī

Abrahamic Traditions by the exile or Fall of Adam.<sup>30</sup> The relation of the Tree to Adam's exile is well known. A perceived separation is the inevitable result of the misplaced recognition of the Tree of Life as a Tree of Knowledge of good and evil.<sup>31</sup> When Adam turned away from the centre, when he choose to experience the one *and* the other, when he mistakenly took the relative to be real, he turned towards "otherness," he set foot on a path of forgetfulness, he lost consciousness of his participation in the Divine. But, although this symbolic revelation of Adam's plight elicits, and rightly so, man's greatest sense of loss, its exegesis can also lead to the recognition that the relative, by its very nature, by its existence, *must* contain "otherness," must contain "distance," must even contain "evil."<sup>32</sup>

It may be helpful at this point to turn to the oral tradition of Juddaism as recorded in the Kabbalistic texts where the initial refraction of Unity (the reflection of the *Sephiroth* or the Aspects of the Divine in the cosmos) is seen as arising from a primary "contraction" (*tsim-tsum*) wherein God in the midst of His Infinity must deny himself in order for Unity to unfold into the reflections, more or less perfect, that make up the created order—the relative.<sup>33</sup> If there was nothing aside from His Infinity there could be no cosmos for there would be no limits and endless infinitude would be the result. It is the Absolute aspect of His Perfect Unity that allows for the "denial" that makes possible the

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(*The Mawāqif and the Mukhātābāt of Muḥammad Ibn 'Abdi al Jabbār al Niffarī*, tr. A. J. Arberry, London, 1935, p.52 & 158); also *ibid.* p.114 and *Kitāb al Mawāqif*, 67:65-70.

<sup>30</sup> See *Genesis* 2-3, *Qur'ān* 20:123, also *Qur'ān* 95:4-5.

<sup>31</sup> As Frithjof Schuon writes, 'Positively speaking the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is All-Possibility as Divine Freedom; negatively, or in a limiting sense, it is that same possibility when, unfolding into Existence and thus, one might say, in a downward direction, it necessarily moves far away from the Divine Source' (*Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, tr. J. P. Hobson, London, 1976, p. 190).

<sup>32</sup> As Pallis writes, 'if one pauses to look really closely into the premises of creation, one must surely wake up to the truth that a paradise—any paradise—to be a paradise *must contain the serpent*' (*A Buddhist Spectrum*, p.38). This is what allows Coomaraswamy to write, 'For anyone who holds that "God made the world," the question, Why did He permit the existence in it of any evil, or that of the Evil One in whom all evil is personified, is altogether meaningless; one might as well enquire why He did not make a world without dimensions or one without temporal succession' (*Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, ed. R. Lipsey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.23).

<sup>33</sup> See L. Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, tr. N. P., Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004, p.101.

creation of the cosmos.<sup>34</sup> Thus, as Leo Schaya writes, ‘Satan was born from this “contraction” or illusory negation of God.’<sup>35</sup> This relative reality, the emanation of the Divine Qualities as so many reflections, would not be possible without the determination of the cosmic limits. These limits are finally achieved through the aspect known in the Abrahamic Traditions as the “Rigour” or “Justice” or “Majesty” of the Divine.<sup>36</sup> This aspect, which in manifestation masquerades as a negation, appears as an opposition of the relative to the real, of the world to God. It is sometimes equated with the “anger” or “wrath” of God. Instead it is an aspect of His Truth, for its role is to affirm His Truth, that He alone is Reality, to negate all negation of Him. Thus this limit to the unfolding of Infinity, the limit to the cosmogonic expansion, which marks the final boundary of the cosmogonic trajectory, negates the negation and thus is the death of the created and “hell.”<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, and here we return to the verses from *Psalms* 139 that are quoted at the beginning of this paper, there is nothing that exists that is not to some extent touched by the Spirit.<sup>38</sup> There is nothing in the created order that is anything but a reflection of the Divine Order and thus all of manifestation is waiting to be recognised as

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<sup>34</sup> Schuon writes, ‘To say Absolute is to say radiation, and thus relativity, and to say relativity is to say movement away from the Absolute, and thus the possibility of evil’ (*Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p.83, n.89).

<sup>35</sup> Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p.101. He explains, ‘the cosmic possibilities, issuing from the divine grace affirm themselves; but by being attached to existential happiness, they forget the pure and divine affirmation, the cause and very sense of their existence. Their affirmation of themselves degenerates into a negation of their transcendental essence and divine grace is obliged to assume the aspect of rigor in order to deny this negation of God.’ This in the language of the symbol of the Tree is the eating of the fruit for the sake of the fruit while forsaking its Source.

<sup>36</sup> Coomaraswamy writes, ‘In general theology these contrasted aspects of the deity are those respectively of Mercy and Justice; in Islamic metaphysics for example, Heaven is the reflection of his absolute Love, Hell of his absolute Majesty’ (‘Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology’, p.407).

<sup>37</sup> ‘He is the creator of the relative, as required by His infinity; of that relative the thing we call evil is a necessary function, being in fact a measure of the world’s apparent separation from its principle, God—an illusory separation...’ (Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, p.43).

<sup>38</sup> Pallis writes, ‘a hell, to be a hell must contain a trace of the Tree of Life concealed in it somewhere; it cannot be a place of absolute evil or absolute imperfection or absolute anything. It is in the realm of the relative’ (*A Buddhist Spectrum*, p.39). ‘The world whatever it may contain of things permanent or transitory, is never detached from God; it is always the same celestial substance fallen into a void and hardened in the cold of separation...’ (Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, tr. P. N. Townsend, London, 1970, p. 37).

such.<sup>39</sup> Every illusory projection that makes up the “worlds below,” regardless of how remote or broken contains at its core and is essentially something of the perfect model that it reflects. Although “hell” represents the outermost extremity of the Divine Order reflected in the cosmos, its manifestation would be impossible if it were not the reflection, however dim and dismembered of Unity. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes of the relationship of analogy between Heaven and hell saying, ‘The degrees of Heaven are as many in number as the degrees of hell; for each degree in the one has its counterpart in the other ... Thus were a stone to fall from any one degree in Paradise, it would of surety fall in a straight line in the corresponding degree in Hell.’<sup>40</sup> These analogies, these traces of the Spirit within the created order, however dim, await the recognition of man through his capacity to remember and to recognise his participation in the Spirit. This is possible, for through His aspect of Rigour, God creates the worlds by “separating” them from Himself but the final act of this separating power is to separate all the worlds, beings and things from their illusion of separation and to cause them to return to Unity. Although ‘The word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the

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<sup>39</sup> Coomaraswamy in his study of the Yaksas writes of this choice or recognition that, ‘In the Vedic tradition “Yaksa” is a designation of the Supreme Identity of Mitra (Indraagni, king-and-priest) and Varuna, *apara* and *para* Brahman and either of these aspects considered apart. Agni is a preferred name, “his is the likeness both of Life and Death” (*Rg Veda* 10.121.2). As the Sun he is the Friend (Mitra), but as the Devourer, Death (Yama, Varuna, Vṛtra, Ahi, Atri); one or the other accordingly as men “approach him, making him their Friend” (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 3:4) or look upon him as Enemy’ (*Yaksas: Essays in the Water Cosmology*, ed. P. Schroeder, Oxford, 1993, p.25).

<sup>40</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt al Makkīyah* 4 Vol., Qustantiniyah, 1876 (1293), Vol.2, p.898. In the same way the fountains of Paradise are reflected in the boiling springs of Hell. Also, in a *ḥadīth* which Al Ghazālī discusses, the mention of *sijjīn* in *Qur’ān* 83:7-8 is said to be referring to ‘a rock underneath the seventh earth [the “lowest” of the chaotic “earths” of the phases of clarification of matter which preceded the primordial earth],’ underneath which is found ‘a book of evil.’ Al Ghazālī calls this ‘a rock in Hell to which the spirits of the wicked are brought’ (*The Marvels of the Heart*, in Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al Dīn, *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, Book 21, tr. W. J. Skellie as *The Religious Psychology of Al Ghazālī*, Ann Arbor, 1977, p. 138). As Schaya writes, ‘hell is identical with “chaos,” nevertheless a kind of hierarchy of states or degrees can be distinguished here; this hierarchy is the last reflection of the cosmic order, projected into the primordial disorder of nature. There the formative radiation of the spirit barely touches created being, but nothing could possibly exist without having been conceived and “touched” by that Spirit and without possessing an eternal Archetype’ (*The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p. 100).

dividing asunder of soul and spirit',<sup>41</sup> 'the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.'<sup>42</sup> For fallen man, who chose the knowledge of the one and the other over knowledge of the One the first step towards a return to Unity is the recognition of the opposites as held within God.

In his paper on *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*, Mircea Eliade collected many traditional myths whose exegesis could lead to recognition of the union of the opposites.<sup>43</sup> Many are also to be found in the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy in his studies *The Angel and the Titan* and *The Darker Side of Dawn*. Eliade associated these early myths with the far later writings of Nicolas of Cusa concerning the *coincidentia oppositorum*. The contemplative, reflecting on these myths can be led to the realisation that, as Heraclitus wrote, 'God is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger.'<sup>44</sup> All of these traditional teachings, and it is certain that they would be paralleled by many to be found in the oral teachings of traditional peoples throughout the world, lead to the realisation that wherever there is opposition it is reducible to complementarism, that opposition although counterfeiting as reality, is bound to be resolved at a higher level and to disappear within the Real. Any pair of contrasts, which are divided in the created order, are recognised as united once consideration is raised to the level of the Absolute, as the principle of Unity demands. In reality, in the realm of the Eternal, *ab intra*, the opposites are united. It is only from the viewpoint of the limited and multiple, the temporal and spatial, *ab extra*, that they are divided.<sup>45</sup> From without the Tree is a Tree of

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<sup>41</sup> St. Paul's *Epistle to the Hebrews* 4:12.

<sup>42</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 12:17.

<sup>43</sup> Eliade, *The Two in the One*, p.80ff. The word exegesis is used in its etymological sense of "a guiding out" which could be accomplished through a traditional teaching or through contemplation. In addition, as Eliade writes, 'The whole man is always engaged when he listens to myths and legends, consciously or not, their message is always deciphered and absorbed in the end' (ibid. p.83). The importance of myth, degraded by many scholars and largely ignored or sentimentalised in the modern world, cannot be underestimated.

<sup>44</sup> G. S. Kirk & J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge, 1957, p.191.

<sup>45</sup> As Coomaraswamy writes, 'the Devas and Asuras, Angels and Titans, powers of Light and powers of Darkness in *Rg Veda*, although distinct and opposite in operation, are in essence consubstantial, their distinction being a matter not of essence but of orientation, revolution, or transformation' ('Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology', p.373) and 'There can be no question that the Powers of Light and the Powers of Darkness are the same and only Power. Devas and Asuras are alike Prajapati's or Tvastr's children: the Serpents are the Suns. It is entirely a question of "orientation"'

duality, the knowledge is of good *and* evil, regarded from the centre there is only one Tree. The distinctions are relative and not essential. These contrasted orientations can be seen as the inevitable result of the One Brahman, *apara* and *para*, described in the Upanishads as mortal and immortal, in a likeness and not in any likeness.<sup>46</sup> But men are warned that they ‘may mark the one and fail to mark the other.’<sup>47</sup>

Remembering that the Tree has been described in relation to the Vedic teachings as either ‘a Single Tree to which contrasted elements of the Deity are ... differently related, or as two different Trees, respectively cosmic and supracosmic, manifested and unmanifested, but indwelt throughout by the single Brahman-Yaksa,’<sup>48</sup> there is perhaps in the Tree a symbol to lead man to “mark the other.” The *Zaqqūm* Tree in its relation to the Tree of Life, like the myths telling of the relationship of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, can act to awaken within the contemplative mind knowledge of the relationship between “good” and “evil.” The *Zaqqūm* can be seen in the context of the first phase of the spiritual journey wherein the traveller must “descend into hell” to undertake a reversal of *corruptio optimi pessima*, the inevitable result of the trajectory of the descent of spirit into matter and of the severing of soul from Spirit. Through consciousness of the worst, and knowledge of the Divine, the worst can again become best, the *metanoia* or conversion can be achieved.<sup>49</sup> The possibility of the recognition suggested by the symbolism of the *Zaqqūm* Tree can be seen also in the

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(‘The Darker Side of Dawn’, p.2). Dionysius writes in *The Divine Names* 725C, ‘So therefore the tribe of demons is evil not because of what is in its nature, but on account of what it is not ... I would claim that the angelic gifts bestowed on them have never been changed inherently, that in fact they are brilliantly complete, even if the demons themselves, through a failure of their powers to perceive the good, are not able to look upon them’ (*The Complete Works*, p.91). Recall also in this context the *ḥadīth*, ‘My *shaytān* has become Muslim.’

<sup>46</sup> For this see the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* as cited by Coomaraswamy, ‘Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology’, p.408 and ‘The Darker Side of Dawn’, p.12, n.4.

<sup>47</sup> *Rg Veda* I.164.38. This translation used by Coomaraswamy, ‘Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology’, p.411, n.43. See also Coomaraswamy, ‘The Darker Side of Dawn’, p.5.

<sup>48</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, p.379.

<sup>49</sup> To quote from the *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas*: ‘When you make the two one, and when you make the inside as the outside, and the outside as the inside, and the upper as the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male is not male and the female not female ... then shall you enter [the Kingdom]’ (log.22 tr. B. Blatz in W. Schneemelcher ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* Vol.1, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991, p.120).

representations of the Vedic deities where, besides a gracious form, each has a “terrible form” (*krodha murti*), the fierce, menacing and frightening aspect. It can also be recognised in the descriptions of the sacred ash, *Yggdrasil*, of the *Prose Edda*, which tell of the presence of Nithhögg (the Striker that destroys), who gnaws at the root of the Tree from below and is surrounded by ‘so many serpents that no tongue can count them.’<sup>50</sup> Perhaps this knowledge can lead to the recognition of what Ananda Coomaraswamy describes as “the older teaching,” that “good” and “evil” like all of the opposites, are only “real” “under the sun” and “within the worlds,”<sup>51</sup> they are features of the cosmos, but in the ‘Supreme Identity are coincident without opposition or composition.’<sup>52</sup> For fallen man who has “tasted” of the multiple, who has chosen knowledge of the one and the other over knowledge of the One, the Tree of Life takes on the *appearance* of a tree of opposites or contraries. For him the Tree is broken and separated into innumerable “levels” that appear as separate from one another but, if recognised as such, are really the connection between man and all of the levels “above,” eventually reuniting heaven and earth, soul and spirit, shattering man’s illusions of separateness and allowing reintegration, a remembrance of the Self. In Sufism it is said, ‘knowledge of the Truth entails the grasping of “the union of opposites” (*jam‘ad-diddayn*),’<sup>53</sup> the recollecting and reassembling of the scattered pieces of man’s spiritual

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<sup>50</sup> Sturlson, *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturlson*, p.45. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the relationship to Christ’s crucifixion on the Cross set between the crosses of the “good” and “bad” thieves could be explored as well as to the representations in European art of the two heads of Janus, and to the *Kala-mukha* (Death mouth), the Aztec Garuda with the man’s head in his open mouth, and the Makara crocodile with open jaws that holds itself “against the current,” and also to the two angels who sit on the right and the left of the Mercy Seat in the Judaic Temple.

<sup>51</sup> This is why it is said in *Galatians* 5:18, ‘If ye be led of the Spirit, you are not under the Law.’

<sup>52</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology’, p.409, n.42. Eliade writes of the ‘fundamental Indian doctrine that good and evil have no meaning or function except in a world of appearances, in profane and unenlightened existence. From the transcendental viewpoint good and evil are on the contrary illusory and relative, as are all other pairs of opposites: hot cold, etc.’ (*The Two in the One*, p.96). Lings writes, ‘every single thing in existence, therefore every pole of duality, is bound to have in itself two complementary aspects’ (*Symbol and Archetype*, p.24) and that, ‘The notion of a pair implies complementarity, which is a condition and an anticipation of union’ (p.19).

<sup>53</sup> Lings, *Symbol and Archetype*, p.44.

possibilities, leaving behind the knowledge of duality, of good and evil, in the quest for the knowledge of Life, of Unity. The Judaic oral tradition describes a tree of two faces, a “Tree of Life and Death.” It relates that when night falls, the Tree of Death appears, but as dawn breaks the Tree of Life is in the ascension and the Tree of Death falls away and people come to life again. It is said that this happens in order to ‘see if there were any man of understanding that did seek after God.’<sup>54</sup> It is a Tree of Life to the man “awakened” and a Tree of Death to the man still concerned with the world, and thus “dead.”<sup>55</sup> In order to recognise the Tree as the Tree of Life a man must perform a re-orientation, he must “turn his back” on this world, he must awaken himself from his “death in this life” and experience the “death” of those worldly qualities within himself so that he may replace them with the spiritual qualities, which are his birthright.<sup>56</sup> It could be said that he must recognise and nurture the Tree that grows at the centre for it is also the Tree that grows within his own heart.<sup>57</sup>

Although the One is the source of being, He is also non-being, He is both life and death, outwardly seemingly opposed and yet inwardly impartible. In order for the spiritual seeker to reach his goal, to become

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<sup>54</sup> This is quoted in Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, p.391.

<sup>55</sup> This brings to mind the depiction in a Mithraic cave vault of a tree that meets at the top of the vault, its left side in full leaf and its right completely barren. The sun and moon are depicted in its branches. This tree is described in J. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, Leiden, 1968, p.35.

<sup>56</sup> Abu Sa'id asks, ‘What is evil? And what is the worst evil?’ and answers, ‘Evil is “thou,” and the worst evil “thou” if thou knowest it not’ (cited in R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, Cambridge, 1921, p.53). ‘If any man come to me and hate not his own life, also, he cannot be my disciple’ (*Luke* 14:26). ‘Heaven and Hell are the divided images of Love and Wrath *in divinis* where the Light and the Darkness are undivided, and the Lamb and the Lion lie down together. In the beginning, as all traditions testify, heaven and earth were one and together; essence and nature are one in God, and it remains for every man to put them together again within himself’ (Coomaraswamy, *Metaphysics*, p.32).

<sup>57</sup> It is in this sense that Lings writes of *corruptio optimi pessima* in the context of human vice and virtue (evil and good) as ‘a bridge across the gulf that appears to separate them’; a bridge that can be crossed ‘both by way of corruption, and also from the other side by way of redemption’ (*Symbol and Archetype*, p.103). It is an example of the reversal of the inversion, for it is possible that ‘The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner’ (*Psalms* 118:22), or that ‘The serpents are Suns (and) He who follows the same course shall shine with the Suns’ glory’ (*Pañcavimśa Brahmana* 25:15:4 as quoted by Coomaraswamy, ‘Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology’, p.404).

a Comprehensor, he must through his will, through grace and through knowledge be able to recognise in the relativity of the created order the compliments or opposites, as manifestations of the real at their given level but not as the real in themselves. None of the created order can be called real in its own right but it can reveal Reality, it can be recognised as a symbol. The Comprehensor must be willing to see his own position as subjective, and thus subject to the illusions of multiplicity and separation. But through his efforts to transcend the opposites, through his knowledge of God, through recognising the Divine as revealed in the created order, he is able to move beyond his immediate and personal situation. The *Zaqqūm* Tree grows even in the centre of “hell.” It is there, even in the midst of the darkness to be recognised as the lowermost extension of the inverted Tree of Life. And even here hope is offered for the possibility of a return to the Garden, for ‘the way of the Tree of Life’ eventually and inevitably leads to the Source. *Zaqqūm* symbolises the greatest separation, but even at this greatest “distance” there is still a symbol of the possibility of reintegration. The very trajectory of creation pre-supposes a return.<sup>58</sup> It is the light of the knowledge that can transcend duality and opposition that can turn the Tree of darkness into a Tree of Life. Recognition of this symbol offers the opportunity for the reorientation, the turning process, a return from the state of mind symbolised by hell, a result of forgetting the ‘way of the Tree of Life,’ of the inability to recognise the unity of reality.<sup>59</sup> To

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<sup>58</sup> As discussed earlier, in order for creation to proceed, for the Hidden Treasure to be known, God must become “world” on some level. Thus cosmic manifestation, what appears as a “negation” of God is really an affirmation of Reality. Man, in his attachment to the world, to his existence, forgets this affirmation and his Divine origins. But, as Schaya writes, “The dark reversal of the divine order implies the possibility of a return from chaos, of “inversion of the inversion”...” (*The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p.101). As Rūmī, following Rābī’ah, writes in *Divan*, Ode XIII: ‘There is no crime worse than thy ex-istence.’ The etymology of the word existence is *ex+alio+sistens*, “to stand forth, to stand apart.” There is always the possibility for reintegration.

<sup>59</sup> As Coomaraswamy explains, ‘It is only from our temporally human point of view that “good and evil” are opposed to one another, but “to God all things are good and fair and just” (*Heracleitus*, Fr.61)... to Him in all conflicts, both sides are right (*Rg Veda* II.7.15) ... *there*, [beyond the clashing rocks, the *barzakh*] as Meister Eckhart says in full agreement with Chuang Tzu, the *Upaniṣads*, and Buddhism, neither vice nor virtue have ever entered in” Coomaraswamy, “Symplegades” in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Winter, 1973, p.38, n.3; he continues on p.49, n.1, ‘The distinction of Heaven from Hell is not of places but in those who enter; the Fire, as Jacob Boehme is fond of

“enter the Fire” is a lack of recognition, but to “enter the Garden” is to have followed the “path” of Mercy and to realise that the Trees are in essence One Tree, to realise that, ‘As is the tree, just such is the Lord of Trees, so indeed is man.’<sup>60</sup> For, ‘When the Holy One grants the sinner grace and strength to accomplish his return to righteousness...the man himself (who as a sinner had been “dead”) is truly and perfectly alive, being joined to the Tree of Life.’<sup>61</sup>

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saying, is one and the same Fire, but of Love to those who are lovers and of Wrath to those who hate ... differing only according to our point of view.’

<sup>60</sup> *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 3:9:8, cited in Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, p.394.

<sup>61</sup> *Zohar, Mishpatim*, III, 303-324, per Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, p.383.