

The Sacred, The Holy, Ya Quddus

I want to reflect today on the meaning of what is sacred and holy to us. In our contemporary era we think of much of what was holy in the past, the symbols and concepts of Sacredness, with skepticism and cynicism. And there are many good reasons for this attitude. We have seen the 'sacred' used in ideological battles as a weapon to criticize and attack, and also for advertising and promotion of a particular point of view. We have seen behind the public personas of many people or causes who presented themselves as holy, and we have seen their hatred and greed. And so we collectively cry out: Who can we trust? Anyone can put his or her smiling face on Facebook.

The collective mythological symbols that have held communities in the past are now shattered. We live in a time of broken symbols, as Joseph Campbell painstakingly illustrated. And those communities that do think they are unbroken often sound rigid, dogmatic, or brittle. So we have to inquire into this question personally; to ask ourselves: what do I feel is sacred? What do I know to be holy? What can I rely on? The Scriptures chosen for this Universal Worship service each express something about this question.

In the Hindu scriptural text from the *Devi Mahatmyam*, the gods gather to sing a song, a hymn of praise to the Great Goddess Devi, who has defeated the Great Demon, Mahisasura. This story of a cosmic battle between the gods and demons, between good and evil, is told many times, in many different Hindu Scriptures. It is the battle of existence, an ever-changing process of light and dark, birth and death. In this instance, Devi has defeated the demon that the gods could not defeat; so they sing and praise Her. They say, "To that Ambika who is worthy of worship..."

So we can stop here and think about their statement. The One who fights for them, who stands up for them is the One that they praise as worthy of worship? So I can ask myself:

What or whom do I feel is worthy of worship? What do I respect and admire? As Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan puts the question: what is your ideal? This is a very real and sometimes disturbing question for people to consider. Is there anything or anyone in my experience that I don't feel cynical or skeptical about? Is there anyone or anything that has not disappointed or disillusioned me? And I don't mean the cynicism that occurs when my needs or desires aren't immediately met. I mean the deep disillusionment that happens when you see the self-centered blindness of someone you had respected.

As the hymn continues, the gods offer prayers for protection for the universe from the Goddess who is worthy of worship. Only One like this can protect. Without an ideal that is alive, that we really believe in, we are unprotected in this existence of constant change, of maya or samsara. And so I ask myself, where do I really find protection?

In the Zoroastrian text, God, who is called Ahura Mazda, is described as the "Greatest One of All," the "Lord of Wisdom" who is known through Truth. It is through God's Wisdom that we are guided to Eternal Light. Here we find more characteristics of one who is "worthy of worship." Not just protecting us in times of conflict. Greatness, majesty, wisdom, truth, and light are these characteristics. And then the one who prays asks that this Divine One "reveal Thy purpose for my soul." It is only when we are communicating with One whom we find worthy, that we can discover the Divine purpose for our lives: the purpose for which my soul came into existence.

This is not an easy thing to find. It is not easy to really reflect and go deep into one's understanding and feeling to find that which is "worthy of worship." The Jewish prophet Isaiah recognizes how unworthy, unclean, he is when he has a vision of "the King, the Lord of Hosts." The angels sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole world is full of His glory." This is a powerful expression of Divine grandeur

and majesty, the way the Holy fills the world with glory. It is an inspiring and terrifying experience for a human being to have. And we are told that when Isaiah, who was to become a prophet, saw this, he deeply felt how small, finite, and unclean he was. When he recognized and expressed this, then the angel took a burning coal from the altar of God and touched his lips with it, burning away all iniquity and sin, all cynicism and skepticism. In response, then, to God's question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" the prophet Isaiah said, "Here am I, send me." He had met the one who was, for him, "worthy of worship." He had found the purpose for his soul. And the limitations of his vision were burned away from his lips.

In the Christian scripture, in the gospel of Luke, we find a conversation between the devil and Jesus while he is meditating in the desert. The devil's temptation is that he will give Jesus authority and glory, and all that Jesus has to do is to worship the devil. And Jesus answers, "It is written: 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.'" From the perspective of this symbolic story, the devil can offer authority and glory to a person, in exchange for being seen as "worthy of worship." And Jesus is shown as one who can discern the difference between this power and the true nature of God, the only one who is "worthy of worship." Again we are shown how difficult it is to follow this question deeply into our minds and hearts. There are "devils", promises of authority, seductions of grandeur. We might experience them as a sense of personal grandiosity, an entitlement to do whatever we want to get what we think we deserve. A powerful need to be recognized and acknowledged by other people, in order to feel secure. Inner voices about one's own grandeur have to be recognized, named, and rejected. We tend to describe these inner "devils" in psychological language in our contemporary era; so we might think of these inner voices as only mental. But they are very powerful and can unconsciously shape our attitudes, feelings, and behavior.

Then, it is said in the Gospel of John, "God is Spirit and those who worship God must worship in Spirit and in Truth." This ability to perceive and know in a mature way, to know "in Spirit and in Truth" is necessary if we are to come into contact with the "One" as the Koran says, who cannot be described, who is "not begotten and does not beget." Or as the Buddhist text says, "there is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed." No language can fully contain that which is not born, originated, created, or formed. Our language can only be, as the Zen poet said, like a finger pointing to the moon. Our language is not the moon.

And yet, if we are to discover that which is truly "worthy of worship" and encounter That in a way which reveals the purpose of my soul in this life, we have to engage language and go deeper; entering into the realm of the heart through feeling, intuition, and imagination. Inayat Khan says, "One often wonders what the word 'holy' means. Sometimes people understand it as meaning spiritual, pious, pure, religious; but none of these words can fully explain its meaning. Holy is the next degree beyond pious. God-realization is pious, self-realization is holy... Holiness is the spark of divinity in a human being, and no soul should be regarded as being deprived of this spark of divinity. This spark is light itself...and it is in a human being that it has an opportunity to blaze into a flame." (The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan, vol. 8, *Holiness*)

Inayat Khan gives a picture of the mystical meaning of our journey into the heart. We are orienting our consciousness toward that spark of light, which can be named as the 'soul' and which is itself Divine Light. A light that just is, within every human being. The devil's temptation often implies that "my soul" has a special "spark" that no one else's soul does; and therefore I am specially entitled to authority and grandeur. Jesus rejected this claim. And Isaiah would not have been a prophet if, upon seeing the Lord of Hosts, he had seated himself next to the throne. So there is spiritual and psychological-emotional work to be done on this

journey, before one can discern what is “worthy of worship” and who (within yourself) is a true worshipper. Inayat Khan says, “But it manifests only when the heart is open, and when out of that divine spark there rises a tongue of flame which illuminates the path of a human being in life’s journey towards the spiritual goal.” (*Holiness*)

Inayat Khan writes of how he traveled through India for nine years, seeking for holy souls. He says, “The love of spiritual realization which was born in my heart has kept me in the pursuit of these sacred beings all through life. He or she who seeks, finds; and so I found the souls I sought after.” (*Holiness*) There is such optimism in these words. There is such faith in them: that all who seek will find. We can be comforted and encouraged by this deep faith and experience, as we search in our own lives for that which is “worthy of worship.” In the mystical journey, the Sacred is not found necessarily in orthodoxy, in shrines or temples, in theological treatises (though it could be). The Sacred, the Holy, is not contained by my judgments of another person’s goodness. So we have to keep going deeper. Murshid says, “Holiness is a continually rising fountain of light, a phenomenon in itself; it is illumination and it is illuminating. Light has no other proof than itself. Holiness needs no claim, no pleading, no publicity. It is its own claim, it pleads for itself, light itself is its publicity.” (*Holiness*) As we attune our hearts to our ideal, as we perceive in more subtle ways, the continually rising fountain of Light is visible everywhere. And we may find ourselves always in the presence on the “One who is worthy of worship.”