

**Strength in Faith**  
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At this time, our world seems to be in crisis. The public media give us constant reports on violence and tragedy in many parts of the world. And the various social media amplify and instigate information and misinformation, in ways that society has not experienced before. There is an atmosphere of crisis and fear. Not everywhere, of course, but this emotional atmosphere is felt by many people. In this context, it is relevant to reflect on what we think about our engagement in activities in social and political world. What do I want to do, as a Sufi? What inspiration can we find in the teachings of Hazrat Inayat Khan?

Inayat Khan gave a talk in 1922, now included in the *Social Gathekas*, entitled *Sufism not Pacifism*. In this talk he emphasizes that Sufism does not teach a set of rules to follow, and does not bind one to any beliefs or dogmas. He also says, "Sufism does not mean goodness, kindness or piety; Sufism means wisdom. All things in life are materials for wisdom to work with, and wisdom cannot be restricted to any principle." Sufism is not identified with pacifism, nor is Sufism against it. In each situation in life, a Sufi needs to understand and assess the attitude and motivation of his or her own actions, as well as that of other people. Every situation is an opportunity to exercise wisdom.

Then Inayat Khan speaks about his perception of the European world in 1922; and it seems like his description could have been written today. He says:

The condition of the world today is such that humanity has become abnormal in these days. People are not only frightened at badness, but also at goodness; people do not only dread war, but also peace. People are not only tired of enmity, but also of friendship. People do not suspect their adversary today, but even their brothers and sisters. It seems as if the mind of the world were not only tired, but ill. It seems as if humanity has had a nervous breakdown. Men and women, individually or collectively, do not know their life's purpose or goal.

(Edited for gender inclusive language, and punctuation.)

We also live now in a time that seems abnormal. European/ North American and Islamic cultures are fighting a battle that takes the imagery of an Apocalyptic vision, of the Eschaton, the last days. This is a belief about a final battle on the world's stage between good and evil, or God and the Devil, which will destroy the earth, reward the righteous, and punish the evil-doers. This belief has existed since the time of the prophet Zoroaster, about 1200 BCE. As we read in the Zoroastrian scripture, "The first created were the Spirits two, as twin co-workers..." One spirit is truth, goodness, associated with Ahura Mazda. The other spirit is the lie, evil, associated with Ahriman. Each human being must choose, in his or her actions on earth, whether they serve Truth or the Lie. These human choices will determine who wins this cosmic struggle: Ahura Mazda or Ahriman.

These ideas are very familiar in all the Abrahamic religions. During the Babylonian Exile, the Jews became familiar with the Zoroastrian religion of their liberator, Cyrus the Great. They absorbed the ideas about the Apocalypse, the Eschaton, the battle that would reward the righteous, punish evil, and destroy life. Of course, the early Christians also absorbed these ideas, and associated them with the Second Coming of the Son of God. And then the Muslims absorbed Apocalyptic images from both the Jews and the Christians. Throughout the political and economic wars of the last two thousand years, the idea of life as a great battle between good and evil has fueled the rhetoric of war. These are powerful emotional ideas, which can give people a strong sense of identity and of their important place in history. It can give their life a sense of purpose.

Of course, western industrial society often rejects the language of religion. Religion is considered by the secularists to be irrational. It must be kept out of public institutions and policies. In the United States, there cannot be prayer in schools or the singing of Christmas carols in the "Winter Celebration." And yet religion erupts in its most fundamentalist, dogmatic forms, leading people to kill doctors and nurses at medical clinics in the name of the "Pro-life Movement."

Western secular collective consciousness has made religion the social scapegoat for violence. It is said that religion causes war with its emotional attitudes, and must be banned from policy making in the public sphere. In this characterization, the public sphere is thought to be governed by universalist principles of reason and pragmatism. This definition of religion as solely emotional and irrational is inaccurate, as it ignores both the philosophical analysis of existence and the moral ethical codes that have shaped social life. And, practically speaking, we have not gotten rid of these archetypal Apocalyptic images by banning them. The images simply emerge in secular form. We fear an Apocalyptic destruction of the earth by nuclear bombs. Or we fear that technology's evil will destroy the earth through Climate Change. The politics of fear are active in the western industrialized world. Why should we be surprised to see them also in the Islamic world?

While reading an editorial by Dr. Jocelyn Cesari, I came across a quotation from an ebook called "The Management of Savagery: the Most Critical Stage Through Which the Ummah Will Pass" by Abu Bakr Naji (2004). This name is thought to be a pseudo-name for Mohammad Hasan Khalil a-Hakim who is purported to have been the head of media and propaganda for al-Qaeda in Iran. The book provided a strategy that al-Qaeda and other jihadists could follow. The 'tyrants' referred to in this text are western secularists. He writes,

The tyrants plan and plot together for the continued humiliation and pillage of the Ummah ( Islamic community), the suppression of the jihad, and the buying off of the youth and the Islamic movement. Therefore, we must drag everyone into the battle in order to give life to those who deserve to live and destroy those who deserve to be destroyed...Thus, we must burn the earth under the feet of the tyrants so that it will not be suitable for them to live in..."

He then describes 'wave operations' which are actions that never end and maintain high levels of fear. He says he will capture the minds of youth to turn their energy into lethal weapons against the "armies of Evil." The goal of this strategy is to create fear in civilian populations. But this is not only a political narrative. This is a religious narrative. It is a powerful religious narrative of resistance against the secular values of

European and North American society. This narrative will not be changed by focusing solely on economic and political policies, though they are important.

We need to articulate a religious narrative to respond to the religious narrative of Apocalypse. We need a clear expression of religious alternatives to violent conflict. The longing for peace and forgiveness, the practice of conflict resolution, the consciousness of communication and reconciliation. Cesari says that we need to create a global network of religious groups and individuals from all denominations and traditions who will work locally for peace and social justice. There are people everywhere who are desperate for a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. People who want to feel that they belong – to a family, to a community, to a religion. The black and white narrative of Apocalypse tells people what is evil and how to fight against the evil in order to be good. It is a simple and seductive narrative – kill the bad guy. Hate language is being used by every side in this battle.

If this is the only narrative that is available on the Internet and in social media, then some people will think that this is all that religion teaches. But there is another religious narrative, a better narrative than hatred. As we see in the Buddhist text, the *Dhammapada*, “There is only one eternal law: Hate never destroys hate; only love destroys hate.” How can hate and fear be overcome? What attitudes and understanding about life will help us move through hate and fear? Because to succumb to fear is to allow the narrative of Apocalypse to win.

Hazrat Inayat Khan says, in the *Gayan*, “Life is an opportunity, and it is a great pity if one realizes this when it is too late.” What does it feel like: to look at this situation in the world as an opportunity? He also often points out that life is a struggle. This is the nature of life; it is not a problem, a temporary condition that will change, and then life will be without conflict. The struggle does not end because a person is “good” or fighting for the righteous cause. This is part of the seduction of Apocalyptic thinking. We try to solve the problem of evil by projecting it on to someone or some religion or some ethnic group or some gender; and then we try to get rid of them. But when one looks at life from a spiritual perspective, one sees that the deeper struggle is within the personality, not outside it.

Inayat Khan says, "Right and wrong depend upon attitude and situation, not upon action." As we look within, it becomes apparent that we have different attitudes or motivations which compel us to perceive and take action. Sometimes our needs and desires are in conflict with each other. The spiritual work of sadhana is to sit with and become aware of all one's attitudes and motivations, conscious and unconscious. Then when a person makes a decision and acts, there is more consciousness, and one is more likely to be able to see the effects of one's actions. Are my actions promoting hatred and fear? Do my actions promote harmony and balance?

Inayat Khan says, "All situations of life are tests to bring out the real and the false." And we are born on this earth to experience life, to experience the situations life brings to us. Nothing that exists is excluded from connection with God, the One Being. As the *Bhagavad Gita* states, "There never was a time when I (Krishna) did not exist, nor you (Arjuna), nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be....That which is non-existent can never come into being, and that which is can never cease to be." This is an inclusive picture of life and existence, seen from a highly elevated state of consciousness. When this transcendent perspective is seen, we realize that there is no enemy that can ever be excluded from existence. So we stop fighting the Apocalyptic battle of exclusion. We realize that every living being wants to exist, wants to experience happiness. Seeing the Divine light in every soul, we can imagine what the experience of the "other" person is and can begin to wonder how "I" might help. The Christian text from First Corinthians describes the body as made up of many parts which are distinct from each other, like the eye and the hand. What would happen if the eye said to the hand, "I reject you, I don't need you"? The eye does need the hand; they are both part of one body. Similarly, we are all members of a larger community of people, living together on this earth. "So it happens that if one member suffers, all the other members suffer with it." (I Corinthians 12:26) We need to sympathize with all the parts of this community, because we are connected to each other.

A religious narrative based in spiritual transformation overcomes the Apocalyptic narrative because it is inclusive, not dualistic. Realizing the oneness of existence, whether this is called God, Jehovah, Allah,

Brahman, or Nirvana, seeing through the differences of name and form in the changing existential world, we can understand that all situations in life are part of the precious opportunity that we have. If only for an instant. What a pity it is if we realize this too late. We can, now, participate in the struggle of life, seeing us all as part of the “one body”, seeking to know how we can help each other; purifying our own attitudes from the delusion that some are “other” and must be destroyed. This is a narrative that will uproot our fear. It is a narrative that gives us an important purpose in a meaningful life. This is a narrative that can help us reach out to create a global network of people who work locally to include the displaced and rejected ones. With this kind of Strength in Faith we may take the next steps in building a more peaceful world, within and without.

, in building a world in which we sympathize with and care for each other.