

La pensée d'Ostad Elahi

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[English version, pp. 1-16.]

2.2. LA PENSÉE D'OSTAD ELAHI par James Morris

Aperçu de l'enseignement d'Ostad Elahi

Permettez-moi, en guise d'introduction, de rappeler quelques faits qui nous aideront à replacer la pensée et l'enseignement d'Ostad Elahi dans son contexte.

On peut distinguer trois grandes périodes dans la vie d'Ostad Elahi. Pendant vingt-cinq années, il a d'abord mené une vie d'ascète, planifiée, rigoureuse, sous la direction spirituelle éclairée de son père ; une vie imprégnée de la tradition mystique qui alliait la contemplation aux études religieuses classiques (en persan, en arabe et en kurde). Dix ans après la disparition de son père en 1920, il quitta sa retraite et ce mode de vie traditionnel et contemplatif pour s'engager dans la vie active, comme magistrat puis comme juge. Ce changement radical tenait à la nécessité pour lui d'élargir le champ de ses expériences et de mettre à l'épreuve de la vie sociale et professionnelle les principes éthiques et religieux qu'il avait acquis au cours de ses années d'ascèse. Ce n'est qu'à partir de 1957, date de son départ à la retraite, qu'Ostad Elahi a publié ses ouvrages et a commencé à transmettre véritablement son enseignement spirituel. Au cours de ces années, il rencontrait chez lui, à Téhéran, des gens de tous horizons, de toutes religions et de toutes nationalités. C'est l'enseignement oral qu'il a dispensé dans ce cadre que je vais aborder au cours de cette conférence.

Mais au préalable, il faut dire quelques mots de l'œuvre écrite d'Ostad Elahi. Ses écrits reprennent ses enseignements, dans le vocabulaire propre à la théologie et à la philosophie classiques, en mêlant les traditions arabe, persane et kurde, familières aux érudits de l'époque. Parmi ses ouvrages publiés, *Bohân ol-Haqq* (*Théorème de Vérité*), apporte une rectification pratique et théologique aux enseignements symboliques des « Fervents de Vérité », ordre mystique traditionnel de la région Kurde dans laquelle Ostad Elahi est né. On peut citer également *Ma'refat ol-Ruh* (*Connaissance de l'âme*) qui est une étude philosophique et théologique de l'âme ; et enfin *Hâshie bar Haqq ol-Haqâyeq*, qui est un commentaire sur la poésie mystique de son père. Si l'on prend connaissance des enseignements oraux d'Ostad Elahi, qui seront au centre de mon propos, on se rend compte que chacun de ses écrits ne fait que développer les mêmes thèmes et les mêmes principes spirituels, mais sur un mode plus érudit.

L'enseignement oral d'Ostad Elahi, plus informel que son œuvre écrite, est issu de discussions ou d'explications données aux personnes qui venaient chercher auprès de lui la réponse à leurs questions. Ces propos ont été fidèlement notés et retranscrits par ses proches. A ce jour, deux recueils de paroles ont été publiés en persan¹⁶ et toutes les citations que je ferai aujourd'hui en sont extraites. L'oralité et le caractère informel de cet enseignement ne signifie nullement qu'il soit un aspect « mineur » ou une version superficielle de son œuvre écrite. En fait, comme l'auront constaté ceux d'entre vous qui connaissent un peu les traditions mystiques pré-modernes, l'expression la plus ouverte, la plus directe et la moins symbolique des enseignements spirituels est souvent celle qui est réservée au cercle des proches.

Dans le cadre de cette introduction, il me paraît utile de mettre en lumière l'importance de l'aspect pratique de cet enseignement. D'après Ostad Elahi, on ne peut trouver la vérité qu'à travers une pratique spirituelle et on ne peut s'en tenir uniquement à une « théorie » ou à un système donné de croyances ou d'idées.

Cela ne signifie pas que la réflexion et la compréhension ne sont pas essentielles à la tâche de la formation spirituelle, mais plutôt qu'elles doivent prendre racine dans la pratique et l'expérience réelles. Comme il le fait remarquer :

Un savant [spirituel] qui met sa foi en pratique peut être comparé à un homme qui parcourt un trajet [la voie spirituelle] en avion ; le pratiquant¹⁷ sans connaissance est comme l'homme qui voudrait parcourir le même trajet à dos d'âne. Mais il est pire d'être savant sans pratique que pratiquant sans connaissance.

La perspective de mon propos étant à présent définie, je voudrais faire quelques remarques personnelles sur la manière dont la pensée d'Ostad Elahi me semble répondre aux grands défis auxquels sont actuellement confrontées les religions.

Ostad Elahi est né dans un milieu provincial traditionnel, qu'il évoque dans ses souvenirs d'enfance. A cette époque, les hommes s'éloignaient rarement de leur village et leur vie religieuse était presque entièrement régie par des coutumes locales. Les représentants religieux transmettaient des modèles de croyance et de comportement qui n'évoluaient que très lentement à travers les siècles. Seuls quelques mystiques et leurs disciples se consacraient à la spiritualité, en se retirant délibérément du monde. Mais les profondes mutations de ce siècle (dans les domaines de la technologie, des communications et de la vie économique et sociale) ont peu à peu bouleversé et fait disparaître ce cadre millénaire de vie et de pratique religieuse. L'humanité est entrée dans l'ère du « village planétaire ». Les croyances et les

¹⁶ *Asar ol-Haqq* vol. I, parole 229. - *Asar ol-Haqq* vol. I, parole 2073.

¹⁷ Ici, il s'agit de celui qui pratique les principes authentiques et communs à toutes les religions et non pas un rituel quelconque.

pratiques religieuses ne peuvent plus aujourd'hui demeurer isolées dans un particularisme aveugle, ni être purement et simplement rejetées comme des formes archaïques. Dans ces conditions, il est plus urgent que jamais de commencer à penser notre nature spirituelle et notre finalité communes, mais de façon adaptée à l'époque contemporaine.

Tout le temps qu'a vécu Ostad Elahi, et même encore aujourd'hui, des hommes de toutes religions et de toutes cultures ont essayé de répondre à cette situation nouvelle, et ce de deux façons. Certains ont tenté de rejeter toutes les traditions religieuses antérieures et de bâtir un monde nouveau, sur une morale « simplement » humaine, dépourvue de référence spirituelle. D'autres ont tenté de fuir ces nouveaux défis, en recréant artificiellement des communautés religieuses fermées sur elles-mêmes et en s'accrochant aux certitudes rassurantes (mais illusoires) des traditions religieuses pré-modernes. Pour mesurer la gravité des conséquences de ces deux options, il suffit de considérer l'actualité de chaque jour.

Face à ces mêmes bouleversements planétaires, Ostad Elahi propose une voie tierce, à partir d'une réflexion fondée sur une compréhension profonde de notre héritage religieux et de la situation inédite du monde moderne. Elle met en lumière et respecte l'essence spirituelle commune des religions, mais aussi la fonction pratique et éthique qu'elles peuvent remplir dans les différents domaines abordés par ce symposium.

En réponse aux questions pratiques et personnelles qui lui étaient posées, Ostad Elahi a développé progressivement ce que nous pourrions appeler une « vision globale du patrimoine spirituel de l'humanité ». Pour expliquer cette vision globale, il commençait toujours par distinguer d'une part l'essence et le but spirituels communs à toutes les religions révélées, et d'autre part leur dimension exotérique, coutumière, qui concerne seulement notre vie sociale et matérielle. Il disait par exemple :

Les principes divins véridiques sont les mêmes dans toutes les religions, qui ne diffèrent entre elles que dans leurs aspects relatifs à des questions d'ordre matériel. Les préceptes concernant la purification de l'âme et la perfection éthique sont identiques dans toutes les religions.

Je reviendrai sur l'attention que portait Ostad Elahi à cette dimension spirituelle commune, fondamentale. C'est sur cette dimension que repose l'unité et l'universalité de toute sa démarche. Mais il faut prendre le temps d'en relever quelques implications pratiques, mais non moins essentielles, en ce qui concerne la vie en société.

La première implication, et la plus évidente, est celle de la nécessité de la tolérance et de la compréhension mutuelle dans tous les domaines. Sans cette tolérance, sans une multiplicité de voies et de perspectives religieuses, personne ne serait libre de suivre son propre

chemin spirituel, et même de pouvoir en apprécier pleinement l'authenticité. A ce sujet, il dit à plusieurs reprises que toutes les religions sont respectables et qu'il ne faut en rejeter aucune.

La seconde implication frappante - compte tenu des coutumes sociales et religieuses propres à son milieu culturel - apparaît dans son affirmation répétée de l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes : « La femme est en tout point l'égale de l'homme,... et de nombreuses femmes sont spirituellement plus élevées que certains prophètes. » Il ne s'agit pas là d'une clause de rhétorique, mais d'un principe spirituel de grande portée qu'il applique pleinement, comme en témoignent nombre de ses paroles.

Souvent, dans l'enseignement d'Ostad Elahi, un principe énoncé sous une forme concrète, dans un but pratique, nous ramène, si nous l'appliquons, à une réalité spirituelle plus profonde. Par exemple, cette insistance sur la nécessité éthique de la tolérance religieuse et de l'égalité entre hommes et femmes, correspond au but spirituel profond de l'amour et de la compassion universelles, but qui a été énoncé dans toutes les traditions religieuses. Ainsi, à la question « Qu'est-ce que le mysticisme (ou la connaissance spirituelle réelle) ? » Ostad Elahi répond :

Qui que tu voies, si tu le considères comme un mystique, alors tu as compris le sens de la mystique. Lorsque tu considéreras tous les prophètes et les saints comme authentiques et que tu ne feras plus aucune différence entre les religions, alors tu auras atteint l'étape de la connaissance spirituelle.

ou même plus simplement :

Ce que tu aimes pour toi-même, il faut l'aimer pour les autres, et ce que tu n'aimes pas pour toi-même, ne le souhaite pas pour les autres : c'est le principe essentiel de la religion.

Une troisième implication fondamentale découle implicitement de ce dernier point (amour et respect universel de toutes les créatures) : Ostad Elahi insiste sur la nécessité éthique et spirituelle de participer à la vie sociale et de s'impliquer pleinement dans la communauté humaine. Je reviendrai sur les motivations profondes de ce principe par la suite, car il concerne directement la possibilité même d'une pratique du spirituel. Ce principe de la vie en société, Ostad Elahi l'avait d'ailleurs déjà exprimé dans ses actes, en quittant sa retraite mystique pour embrasser une exigeante carrière de magistrat.

La quatrième implication, enfin, est la responsabilité individuelle, totale et inaliénable qui est la nôtre dans tous les domaines de notre vie.

Ce dernier point apportera peut-être un élément de réponse à une interrogation qui revient souvent chez ceux qui ont pris conscience de la portée extraordinaire de la pensée d'Ostad Elahi. Pourquoi n'a-t-il pas cherché à s'attirer des adeptes qui auraient répandu ses idées,

comme l'ont fait d'autres figures spirituelles ? Il existe plusieurs réponses à cette question, mais on peut penser d'abord à cette idée, sans cesse réaffirmée par Ostad Elahi, que chaque être humain a le devoir de partir lui-même en quête de la vérité, et que nul ne peut se décharger de cette responsabilité ou la déléguer à autrui.

Si l'on voulait résumer en quelques mots le propos d'Ostad Elahi, on pourrait dire qu'il concerne avant tout « l'âme et sa quête de Vérité » : en réponse aux questions de ses interlocuteurs, les sujets qu'il développe, qu'il s'agisse de questions métaphysiques, théologiques, ou ayant plus directement trait à la pratique spirituelle, gravitent autour de cette idée centrale de la quête. Et cette quête, comme il le répète souvent, se ramène à quelques questions essentielles :

Pour tout homme, la Vérité consiste à savoir qui il est, d'où il vient, ce qu'il doit faire et où il doit aller... Lorsque cette quête est devenue le guide de sa conduite, qu'il l'a mise en pratique et qu'il a trouvé les réponses, alors il accède à la Vérité.

L'essence de la connaissance spirituelle est que l'homme comprenne pourquoi il est venu à l'existence, quels sont ses devoirs en tant qu'existant et quel est son but ultime.

Notre but doit être d'agir conformément aux principes divins pour arriver à la perfection.

Ostad Elahi nous rappelle sans cesse que notre condition humaine, bien qu'elle comporte ses propres défis et responsabilités spirituelles, fait nécessairement partie d'un processus de perfectionnement bien plus vaste et qui concerne l'ensemble de la création.

Le perfectionnement qui va du minéral au végétal, du végétal à l'animal et de l'animal à l'homme est prédéterminé. Les minéraux, les végétaux et les animaux n'ont pas la faculté de raisonner et leur évolution se fait de façon naturelle et automatique. Le perfectionnement de l'homme obéit, lui, à des règles différentes, car il possède une âme angélique. Il est donc doué de raison et de libre arbitre et c'est par ses propres efforts qu'il peut parvenir à la perfection.

Pour Ostad Elahi l'âme humaine incarnée ou « soi », est la combinaison unique et le point de rencontre de deux dimensions tout à fait différentes ; il y a d'abord « l'âme angélique » individuelle, ou l'esprit immortel, qui porte en elle « l'expir Divin » et reste en permanence en relation avec Dieu ; ensuite, il y a l'âme charnelle, mortelle, animal-humain (*basharique*, de l'arabe *bashar*, animal humain) qui est la combinaison unique et individuelle d'âmes animales, végétales et minérales antérieures agrégées à un corps par le principe même du perfectionnement. Pour Ostad Elahi, la rencontre et la combinaison de ces deux dimensions de notre âme et de notre moi animal dans un corps n'est pas une sorte de piège ou de prison desquels il faudrait chercher à s'évader. Bien au contraire, c'est justement cette combinaison complexe qui crée cette situation terrestre unique par laquelle

l'âme angélique devient progressivement apte à apprendre et à se développer jusqu'à son plein épanouissement spirituel.

Ostad Elahi insiste constamment sur le fait que le chemin qui mène à l'accomplissement réel de notre nature spirituelle commence nécessairement par la recherche et le développement d'une véritable conscience de notre âme, c'est-à-dire de notre Soi. Ou en d'autres termes :

L'être véritable, c'est l'âme, et le corps est l'instrument de l'être véritable. Celui qui arrive à la perfection entre dans l'océan de l'unicité. Mais chaque parcelle conserve son identité.

Il est impossible d'entreprendre un voyage sans en connaître un tant soit peu le but. Pour Ostad Elahi, le but du cheminement spirituel, c'est donc la perfection. La parole suivante résume très bien la relation intime entre ce but spirituel et les multiples engagements pratiques et concrets qu'implique le cheminement spirituel :

Plus l'homme parvient à s'éloigner des désirs et des passions de son âme charnelle et à se rapprocher des étapes et des sentiments d'un être humain au plein sens du terme, plus il devient parfait. [...] « L'homme parfait » est celui qui agit envers les autres comme il aime qu'on agisse envers lui, et il s'oppose à ce qu'on fasse aux autres ce qu'il n'aime pas pour lui-même. Cela est facile à dire, mais très difficile à mettre en pratique. [...] Il doit se surveiller vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre et être son propre juge.

Il y a encore bien d'autres paroles, encore plus concises, dans lesquelles Ostad Elahi traduit cet état spirituel en termes de manifestations éthiques concrètes.

Un être humain digne de ce nom est celui qui se réjouit du bonheur des autres et compatit sincèrement à leur malheur.

La clef de voûte de la vie en ce monde est le respect du droit d'autrui.

Le voyageur (sur la voie spirituelle) doit préserver l'équilibre entre les quatre éléments suivants : l'âme, le corps, la famille et la société.

Travailler dans ce but est une tâche difficile qui peut susciter une lassitude passagère. De ce fait, il est utile, avant d'aborder les prescriptions pratiques essentielles que définit Ostad Elahi, de garder en mémoire ce qu'il dit à propos de l'importance de la foi, de la certitude spirituelle et de la maîtrise de soi.

Tout le monde passe par des hauts et des bas. L'homme doit essayer d'acquiescer la maîtrise de soi. Lorsqu'on est maître de ses états intérieurs, tout devient facile. L'homme ne doit pas subir le destin mais au contraire le prendre en main ; et face à Dieu et à Sa providence, être si confiant et si détaché de toute chose que les décrets du destin lui paraissent insignifiants. L'homme ne doit pas laisser les désagréments le dominer.

Certains des enseignements pratiques spirituels les plus fondamentaux et communs à toutes les religions sont rappelés dans la parole suivante :

Les principes des religions sont érigés et fondés sur quelques piliers inébranlables : la maîtrise de soi, la charité, la prière, l'intention pure et la sincérité envers Dieu.

Après avoir décrit le rôle de la maîtrise de soi et de la charité, il poursuit :

La condition de la prière est de porter son attention sur la Source divine, et non pas seulement de répéter des phrases.

L'intention pure et la sincérité envers Dieu signifient en termes simples que ce que l'on aime comme bienfait pour soi, on l'aime pour toute la création, et que ce que l'on n'aime pas pour soi on ne le veuille pas pour les autres.

Lorsque les principes ci-dessus sont vraiment observés, on est purifié, on est sorti de l'animalité et on devient un être humain véritable. Lorsque l'homme devient vraiment humain, son inclination naturelle lui dicte d'agir toujours en bien.

Bien entendu, énoncer ces principes est une chose, les mettre en pratique - chacun le sait - en est une autre ! Avant de citer d'autres paroles d'Ostad Elahi, qui illustrent ce cheminement qui mène de la connaissance de soi à la connaissance de Dieu, il faut expliquer ce qui peut sembler être une contradiction entre cette conception métaphysique du « soi réel », qui aurait l'air d'impliquer une démarche « contemplative », et son enseignement pratique, éthique et religieux, qui comme on l'a vu, rompt avec l'idéal de la vie contemplative, retirée du monde. Pourquoi donc Ostad Elahi insiste-t-il tant sur le fait qu'une vie sociale active, responsable, engagée dans ce monde est indispensable au processus de connaissance de soi ? C'est que nous ne pouvons parvenir à nous connaître nous-mêmes - et à polir le miroir de notre cœur - qu'au travers des conflits et des défis d'une vie active dans ce monde qui nous renvoient notre propre reflet.

Une vie engagée dans la société est donc l'école la plus efficace et la plus fructueuse pour découvrir la nature véritable de l'âme et la purifier. Dans l'une de ses anecdotes autobiographiques, il raconte ainsi : « Une nuit, un état de ferveur spirituelle s'empara de moi, et je décidai de m'isoler pour me recueillir et de passer la nuit en prière et en contemplation ». Puis il décrit en termes humoristiques comment, dérangé par le bruit que font ses voisins, il doit monter sur la terrasse de sa maison, puis comment une suite d'événements l'obligent à descendre dans la rue, et à prendre le chemin d'un mausolée éloigné, sans parvenir jamais à trouver un lieu isolé propre au recueillement. Finalement, il explique :

Bref, ce soir-là, l'état de ferveur disparut et quoique je fisse, je ne pus me consacrer à la contemplation. « O Seigneur, dis-je, Tu m'éprouves encore. Eh bien ! c'est à Toi de décider. Qu'il en soit selon Ta volonté ». A ce moment-là une « voix » se fit entendre : « C'est à l'intérieur de votre cœur que vous devez

rechercher l'isolement. Aucun lieu n'est jamais vide, seul le cœur est vide et isolé ». Je compris que l'on voulait m'empêcher de m'isoler car depuis quelque temps je restais un peu dans mon coin, alors que je devais, du fait de ma profession, participer aux manifestations sociales et répondre aux invitations. Vivre à l'écart de la société n'est pas juste. Il faut vivre dans la société tout en se préservant. Celui qui choisit l'isolement, en évitant les tentations et les épreuves qui découlent de la vie en société, et qui se dit vertueux se trompe. Ce qui compte, c'est d'être vertueux tout en vivant dans la société et en participant à la vie sociale.

On peut mesurer l'importance que revêt la vie active dans ce monde pour la connaissance de soi et de Dieu, si l'on considère que les principes qui sous-tendent ces conseils pratiques, et qui sont toujours rappelés à ceux qui avancent sur la Voie, sont les piliers mêmes du perfectionnement. Ces principes fondamentaux se ramènent à trois points essentiels. Premièrement, dire bien, voir bien et vouloir bien. Deuxièmement, lutter sans cesse contre les attaques cachées ou visibles de notre soi animal. Troisièmement, porter constamment notre attention vers Dieu. En fait, il s'agit là des aspects inséparables d'un même « travail » spirituel sur la voie du perfectionnement. Travailler sur l'un de ces trois points met nécessairement en relief le rôle des deux autres.

Le premier de ces principes, sur lequel Ostad Elahi revient en permanence, consiste à parvenir graduellement à dire bien et vouloir bien - et finalement à voir le bien en chaque chose.

Celui qui se dit *viator* (dans la Voie spirituelle) doit faire siens ces trois principes :

- « Dire bien » : c'est-à-dire ne pas médire, ne pas calomnier, ne pas jurer ou injurier, etc.

- « Voir bien » : ne voir rien ni personne en mal, mais au contraire voir toute chose en bien.

- « Vouloir et penser bien » : ce que l'on veut pour soi, le vouloir pour tous; ne pas éprouver de haine, de jalousie et de rancune, ne pas penser à la vengeance, etc.

Ce principe fondamental, si souvent rappelé par les prophètes et les saints est simple en apparence ; mais dès que nous le mettons un tant soit peu en pratique, nous nous trouvons confrontés au deuxième grand thème de l'enseignement spirituel d'Ostad Elahi, le difficile combat entre notre âme angélique ou « esprit » et l'âme charnelle, le « soi animal » ou « soi impérieux » avec ses masques et ses ruses innombrables.

Cette lutte inévitable pour dominer cette dimension de nous-mêmes qui s'oppose « naturellement » à notre nature plus haute et divine est un thème central dans toutes les traditions religieuses. Mais la manière dont Ostad Elahi traite ce sujet apporte des clarifications importantes qui constituent les points saillants de son enseignement spirituel.

Ostad Elahi insiste sur la nécessité de toujours renforcer ce qu'il y a de plus haut en nous, l'âme angélique, ou l'esprit, plutôt que d'affaiblir la force de notre soi charnel. En d'autres termes, l'ascèse véritable n'est pas dans l'affaiblissement du corps mais dans le développement conjoint et équilibré de toutes les dimensions de notre être.

Plus l'âme angélique est forte, plus elle arrive à dominer le soi impérieux. La méthode pour fortifier son âme est d'en reconnaître la dignité et d'aimer la qualité de son âme. En conséquence, on acquiert les qualités spirituelles nobles, c'est-à-dire que tout ce qui est indigne de son âme, on le prend en aversion.

Enfin, le troisième aspect essentiel de l'enseignement spirituel pratique d'Ostad Elahi est « l'attention à Dieu »¹⁸. Bien entendu, cet aspect est présent à chaque étape de notre vie spirituelle, comme il nous le rappelle constamment. Pour commencer, dans chaque religion :

Toutes les prières, les invocations, les dévotions, et le reste... se résument à cet état d'attention continuelle à Dieu et à essayer [de savoir] quoi faire pour qu'il y ait contentement de Dieu.

Pour ce qui est des dévotions [qui diffèrent selon les religions], et notamment les prières, ce n'est pas le rituel selon lequel on les accomplit qui compte ; ce qui importe, c'est d'avoir l'attention à Dieu, dans quelque langue ou de quelque manière qu'on L'invoque.

Ce qui est fondamental, au cours du cheminement spirituel, et cela au sein même de la vie sociale, c'est donc de garder notre attention tournée vers Dieu. C'est ce que résume bien cette autre parole : « Pour obtenir la liaison avec la source divine, l'homme doit en toute circonstance porter son attention vers Dieu, de sorte que spontanément il agisse bien et évite de commettre le mal ».

Si « l'attention à Dieu » occupe déjà une place fondamentale dans les étapes les plus élémentaires de la vie religieuse, elle est encore plus essentielle à mesure que l'âme progresse dans le cheminement de la connaissance de soi et de Dieu.

En conclusion, j'espère avoir fait saisir, à travers cette esquisse de l'enseignement spirituel d'Ostad Elahi, la signification que revêt une théorie du spirituel lorsqu'elle est associée à une éthique et à une pratique rigoureuses, ainsi que l'universalité et le caractère original de sa démarche et de sa pédagogie spirituelle.

Comme il le disait lui-même dans les dernières années de sa vie : « Je n'ai laissé aucune question sous silence, il est seulement nécessaire de comprendre et d'avoir l'aspiration de l'âme. »

¹⁸ Avoir « l'attention à Dieu » : se Le représenter toujours à l'esprit, tel l'amoureux qui, quoi qu'il soit en train de faire, a toujours sa bien-aimée présente à l'esprit. Celui qui a l'attention sent Dieu présent et agissant en tout.

Et si cet aperçu de ses enseignements rappelle certaines écritures saintes ou certaines prescriptions des grandes religions, cela n'a rien de surprenant, puisque l'un des points sur lequel Ostad Elahi revient fréquemment est que les principes fondamentaux de la réalité spirituelle sont en fait identiques et universels, rappelés invariablement par tous les prophètes et les saints, mais sous des formes adaptées à leurs contemporains.

Pourtant, ces formulations traditionnelles d'une même Vérité peuvent être rendues obscures par les déformations et les interprétations erronées liées à la transmission, ou encore par l'emploi d'un langage inhabituel ou symbolique.

A mesure qu'une plus grande partie des écrits d'Ostad Elahi sera traduite et publiée, il sera possible de constater qu'il sait orienter directement vers la Vérité, sans recours à une symbolique hermétique ou à des allusions problématiques; il fait ressortir de manière explicite ce qui reste obscur ou tout à fait absent dans les traditions antérieures; il recentre notre attention sur la « quintessence » universelle des religions révélées, dans ce qu'elles ont en commun d'essentiel et de vrai ; il maintient enfin toujours l'ouverture de la théorie et des principes sur une pratique qui les prolonge en leur donnant corps, en leur donnant directement un sens pour tous.

N'oublions pas, pour finir, qu'il existe d'autres méthodes puissantes de communication spirituelle comme la musique, dont Ostad Elahi était aussi un maître, et desquelles nous n'avons pas parlé au cours de cette conférence. Peut-être l'effet particulier de sa musique pourra-t-il nous aider, de manière plus profonde que mon propos, à pénétrer une de ses ultimes paroles : « J'ai parlé à chacun dans la mesure de sa compréhension, mais je n'ai encore jamais dit à personne ce qu'il y a dans mon cœur. »

The Different Aspects of Ostad Elahi's Spiritual Teaching

Since the teaching of Ostad Elahi--like that of all great spiritual teachers--is so inseparable from his own life, we must begin by recalling a few basic facts to help situate the context of his teaching and the personal experiences he often used to express his ideas. To begin with, the outward course of Ostad Elahi's biography clearly falls into three distinct periods. For the first twenty-five years of his life, he led an ascetic, secluded life of rigorous spiritual discipline under his father's careful guidance, a life completely devoted to the forms of contemplation and the classical religious studies (in Persian, Arabic and Kurdish) developed over centuries of mystical tradition in that area. After his father's death in 1920, however, Ostad Elahi left his traditional contemplative life for a much more active career as a magistrate and judge, a radical change that was necessary to broaden his experience and test his ethical and religious principles in the crucible of all the challenges of social and professional life. As he himself later described it,

"God made me enter the public administration and government work despite my own aversion for that. He made me a judge by force and gave me difficult judicial assignments. But afterwards I discovered that in each of these posts were concealed thousands of nuggets of wisdom, such that even a multitude of philosophers and sages gathered together couldn't have designed such plans..." [A, ch. 24??]

Thus it was only after his retirement from public service in 1957 (until his passing in 1974), that Ostad Elahi actually published his written works and began his more visible activity as a spiritual teacher, meeting frequently at his home in Tehran with students from all walks of life and from the most diverse religious and national backgrounds. Our focus in today's lecture is on his personal, *oral spiritual teaching* developed in that setting, since it is most universal and widely accessible in its form of expression. But before beginning that discussion, we must at least mention a few of his major written works, which developed many of the same spiritual insights and teachings in the complex idiom of classical theological and philosophic learning, combining Arabic, Persian and Kurdish traditions familiar to the learned public of that time. Those extensive, multilingual writings--each of which would require several volumes of translation in a Western language--include Ma'rifat al-Ruh ("Inner Knowledge of the Spirit"), a philosophic and theological discussion of cosmology and spiritual psychology; a long commentary on his father's spiritual epic, the Hâshiye bar Haqq al-Haqâyeq; and Burhân al-Haqq ("Demonstration of the Truth"), a practical and theological rectification of the symbolic teachings of the "Ahl-e Haqq," a traditional mystical order from Ostad Elahi's native Kurdish region. Once one is

familiar with the broader, more universal expression of Ostad Elahi's thought in the oral teachings we shall discuss today, it becomes clear that each of those writings is basically a thorough explanation of those same spiritual principles for traditional learned audiences.

Ostad Elahi's more informal and personal, oral teachings, which were set forth in discussions and explanations for people of all ages and backgrounds who came to him for guidance during the later years of his life, were carefully recorded and transcribed by a number of his close students. To date, two massive Persian collections of those sayings--together the equivalent of a dozen or more volumes in translation--have been published, and all the passages quoted in today's lecture are drawn from those two published works. The fact that these were originally oral teachings does not at all mean that they are somehow "minor" or unsystematic, in comparison with the above-mentioned writings. In fact, as those of you familiar with other Eastern and pre-modern esoteric traditions well know, the open, less symbolic expression of many of the most central spiritual teachings have often been reserved for an intimate circle of trusted disciples. And in any event, many of Ostad Elahi's own remarks make it quite clear that he was very aware of the lasting importance of his spoken words, and that he definitely intended for them to be recorded and transmitted to wider circles in the future.

Before describing some of the key systematic principles of Ostad Elahi's spiritual teaching, though, it is helpful to highlight some of the essential characteristics of the very *form* and *expression* of that teaching. Not only does this help convey some of the distinctive "flavor" and humanity of Ostad's personality, but these particular sayings also contain important practical lessons for our own work of spiritual *learning* and communication.

First of all, Ostad Elahi's teaching is typically based directly on his own lifelong personal experience and "testing" of his principles, often expressed in openly autobiographical anecdotes and stories. As he once put it,

[R5-12] *When I tell you all these things my purpose is not just to recount stories, but to pass on spiritual wisdom. I'm not able to advise anyone about something until I've put it into practice for myself. I don't mention anything that I haven't explored completely. I have not imitated anyone: my ideas are the result of my own discoveries and my own personal experiences. I have summarized the very essence of the foundation of all the true religions in these few words that I've left for those traveling the path of God. Throughout my life, whenever I didn't know something I've never been ashamed to say so. And I've always tried to speak truthfully and precisely.*

Or expressed as a more general principle: *“Every word that comes from lived experience and personal observation has an immediate spiritual influence.”* [A, 570]

Secondly, if the form of Ostad Elahi’s teaching is often apparently “simple” (such as recounting a dream or an outwardly “mundane” personal experience), that reflects his constant stress on the fact that the process of spiritual teaching and learning, for each of us, necessarily takes place through our reflection on the deeper meaning and challenges of spiritual “lessons” grounded in *everyday life*.

[R5-11] *“It is in everyday life that I’ve learned the most lessons about the underlying order of the universe. This world becomes a place for spiritual edification once we discover how to draw those lessons from it—even from the flight of a mosquito.”*

And *“The person who in their everyday life draws conclusions on the basis of little things will always succeed in life; while on the contrary, someone who tries to draw particular conclusions from generalities will not succeed in life.”*

In fact, the deeper reality evoked in such outwardly simple stories and sayings is often inexhaustible, and that reality will continue to be understood and realized in new ways at all the levels of spiritual practice and realization:

“The revelations of the spiritual world are like a fruit that one opens and discovers within it ten seeds; then within each of those seeds are ten seeds, and within each one of those ten more, and so on to infinity.” [A-657]

Finally, the implication of this focus on the spiritual lessons to be found in all aspects of life is that the “truth” intended for each person can only be found and realized through our own spiritual *practice* (included a process of reflection integrally grounded in practice)—not through the elaboration of a special “theory” or system of ideas or beliefs:

[A660] *“Everything that has marked a person’s heart and faith has a spiritual effect, however they may speak about it. Forget about fancy words, faith is what matters—I mean, what has an effect is that in which we have faith and which we put into practice. When we ourselves have put something into practice and speak about that, our words have an effect. But if we don’t practice it, then there’s no use in talking about it and developing proofs and arguments—none of that will have any effect. Because when we practice something, we don’t even need to talk about it: our actions and behavior will have an effect all by themselves.”*

This is not to say that reflection and understanding are not also essential to the task of spiritual learning, but that they must be firmly grounded in practice and real experience. Then, as he points out:

[R1-11] *“The person who has (spiritual) knowledge and puts their faith into practice is like someone who completes their journey [i.e., the spiritual path] by airplane. The person who practices religion without understanding is like someone who makes the same journey very slowly, as though traveling by donkey. But someone who has such knowledge and fails to put it into practice is even worse off than the person who is practicing it without any knowledge.”*

All this is only an application of the deeper metaphysical principle, however apparently simple, that *“The Truth [or “God”/Haqq] has no need of proofs and arguments; It is Its own proof.”* That is a helpful caution to keep in mind as we turn to some of the key systematic features of Ostad Elahi’s teaching.

Perhaps nothing more readily sums up Ostad Elahi’s teaching than to say it is about “the soul’s quest for Truth”: all the metaphysical, theological, and practical spiritual themes that he develops in response to his interlocutors’ questions revolve around this central idea. And that quest, as he so often reiterates, comes down to three equally essential questions:

[R1- 2] *“Truth, for every human being, consists in knowing who we are, [i.e., 1.] where we have come from, [2.] what we must do, and [3.] where we should be going.... When that search has become the guiding principle for our actions, when we have put it into practice and discovered the answers: then we have reached the truth.”*

And [R1-3] *“The essence of real spiritual knowledge is when you understand why you have come into existence, what are your duties in that existence, and what is your ultimate goal.... Our goal should be to act in accordance with the divine principles in order to reach perfection.....*

While the answers to all three of these basic metaphysical questions can be developed to infinity--and do in fact receive detailed and systematic treatment in each of Ostad Elahi’s writings as well as his oral teachings--it is characteristic of the *practical* focus of his spiritual teaching that what is most essential and immediate, once we have acquired a basic awareness of where we have come from and where we are ultimately going, is the focus on what we should be doing here and now, in this world and this life:

[A665] *“If a person understands, through their faith and inner certainty, these three principles: that there is one God, that the soul lives on, and that there is another accounting and record [of our life] than what we can see in this world--then that is sufficient for them.”*

In the remainder of this lecture, then, we will have to assume the wider metaphysical, theological and eschatological framework of Ostad Elahi’s thought, which is systematically developed at length in both his written and oral teachings, and focus in here on certain key features of his understanding of our spiritual situation and our essential practical duties. We shall begin by outlining--as concisely as possible--his understanding of the nature of the human soul or “self”, in both its spiritual and animal dimensions, and of the “Path” of gradual perfection that naturally leads from inner knowledge of the soul to the unfolding of true knowledge of God and eventually to the highest stages of spiritual Perfection. Then we shall turn to--and conclude with--key aspects of his *practical* teaching concerning the actual *work* of perfection, the actual duties and actions that together can move us through this path of realization.

Ostad Elahi constantly reminds us that our human situation, while it carries unique spiritual responsibilities and challenges, is necessarily part of a much larger, truly universal process of perfection:

[R3-5] *“The process of perfection that passes from the mineral to the vegetal state, from the vegetal to the animal, and from the animal to the human state is a natural and predetermined movement. The minerals, plants and animals don’t have the power of reason, and their development takes place...in a way that is natural and automatic. But the process of perfection in human beings takes place according to a different set of rules, since we have an angelic soul. Each human being is endowed with reason, and it is through our own efforts that we can eventually reach perfection...”*

For Ostad Elahi, therefore, the embodied human soul, or “self,” is the unique combination and meeting-point of two very different dimensions: first, of the individual “angelic soul,” or immortal spirit, which is derived from the divine “Breath” and always remains directly connected to God--even if we are not aware of that inner connection; and secondly, of a specific, mortal carnal, human-animal (“basharic”) soul, which is a uniquely individual combination of earlier animal, vegetal and mineral souls connected to this particular body. (For the sake of brevity, we may refer to this mortal, basharic soul by the handy Perso-Arabic expression, “the *nafs*.”) For Ostad Elahi, the connection and combination of these two dimensions of our soul and self is not some sort of “trap” or “prison” to be escaped. Instead, as we shall

see, it is their complex combination that creates the unique earthly situation through which the angelic soul or spirit is gradually able to *learn* and develop to its full spiritual potential. As he summarizes it,

[A811 (&806)] “...*The mineral, vegetal, animal and basharic souls are all material [and therefore mortal]; only the angelic soul or spirit can be included among the incorporeal [and immortal] beings. When a person dies, it is the angelic soul that carries away with it the lasting impressions of those four [material] souls.*”

For this reason, Ostad Elahi always insists that the way back to a true realization of our own spiritual nature and relation to God--and ultimately to all the spiritual worlds and realms of Perfection--necessarily begins through seeking and developing a true awareness of our soul and self. Or in other words,

[A789] “*The angelic soul (or ‘spirit’) is the true being, and the body is only the instrument of that being, not the true being itself. Whoever reaches the final stage of Perfection enters the ocean of the Unicity of Being--but each particle (of that Being) conserves its own individuality.*”

Of course, saying this is one thing, and actually *doing* it--as we all know--is quite another! So before going on to quote more of Ostad Elahi’s teaching concerning this unfolding path through self-knowledge to knowledge of God and awareness of the duties that eventually lead to Perfection, it is essential to explain what might at first look like a strange paradox between this metaphysical outlook and his practical ethical and religious teaching. Why, as we shall see, does Ostad Elahi go on to insist that an active, responsible social life of involvement in this world is so absolutely essential to our process of self knowledge? The key lies in this short and simple saying:

[R2-13] “*Everyone sees the external world through the prism of their own heart. What we see is the image of what is in our heart reflected in the world outside us.*”

In other words, we can only come to know our selves--and to polish the mirror of our hearts--through the conflicts and challenges of our life in the world with others. Or as he puts it in another equally succinct saying:

[A735] “*As long as we have not polished our own heart like a mirror, we cannot see God. For God isn’t separate from us, and turning this way or that won’t help [to find Him]. Thus the knowledge of our duty becomes our knowledge of God.*”

At this point, we can simply quote a long saying that summarizes in more detail--but still in abstract outline form--the successive stages in this unfolding process of spiritual awareness:

[R2-3] Reaching the spiritual stage of "knowing one's self" is an essential precondition for beginning the stage of "coming to know God".... In other words, the "knowledge of God" we're referring to here means coming to know God within our self, and these two stages both lead up to the stage of the soul's journey toward spiritual Perfection.

...The fundamental condition for reaching this knowledge of our self is to become a true, fully human being--which means to want for others what we want for ourself. Putting that principle into practice leads such a person to the point where all the essential qualities of true humanity automatically emanate from them.

...as we delve within our self, we can see all the traces and impressions within us that bear witness to our Creator. Then eventually, in that state of union and ecstasy, we are able to contemplate God's reflection and manifestation within our own being.... And the key of knowledge of God reveals everything that is necessary to us along the spiritual path and shows us how it is useful. From then on we are truly "on track" and know what we need to understand. Once we understand that the source of our knowledge of our self and our knowledge of God is one and the same, then we have begun the stage of the journey toward spiritual perfection.

Translating this road-map into the actual journey, of course, is something else. And the decisive practical importance in that journeying of right action and attentiveness toward God is well summed up in another memorable saying:

*[R2-2] Once we succeed in delving within our self, everything is unveiled and revealed to us. It may happen that a person is walking along normally, when suddenly they enter into a state of spiritual contemplation. Their heart is connected with the Source, and as a result of that connection they understand everything they need to understand... In order to find that connection, we must always have our attention focused on God, to such an extent that we spontaneously do what is good and avoid doing anything evil. **Really putting these two principles into practice is the key to all those spiritual discoveries and intuitions that will gradually come to guide us later on.***

We can hardly begin to undertake any journey without some notion of our goal. The following saying of Ostad Elahi beautifully summarizes the inner relations between that spiritual goal and the ongoing concrete, practical facets of our ethical and religious existence that actually constitute “our” intentional, active contribution to this spiritual journey:

[A885] *“The more a person manages to overcome the desires and passions of their carnal-animal self (their **nafs**), and the closer they come to the stages and sentiments of true humanity and our full human dignity, the more ‘perfect’ they become.... In order for a person to become a fully human being, there are many conditions they must fulfill. It’s easy to state these in theory, but the conditions themselves are extremely difficult. The ‘perfect human being’ is the person who treats everyone else the same way they would like to be treated, and who also defends others against whatever that person would not like for himself. That’s easy to say, but very difficult to put into practice. Yet the more you actually apply it in your life, the closer you come to real human being. You have to watch and control yourself at every instant, day and night, and become your own judge.”*

There are a number of other, even more concise sayings in which Ostad Elahi summarizes that spiritual goal in equally visible and practical--and equally difficult--terms. Here are a few of them:

[R4-6] *A true human being is someone who is pleased at the happiness of others and who has sincere compassion for their suffering.*

[R4-7] *The key to life in this world is respecting the rights of others.*

[R4-20] *The voyager on the spiritual Path must **always** preserve the proper equilibrium in each of these four areas: the balance of the angelic soul, the body, family, and society.*

Working toward this goal, however one describes it, is so difficult that dejection and disappointment, even despair, are constant dangers. Thus, before turning to some of Ostad Elahi’s key practical prescriptions for those traveling this Path, it may be helpful to keep in mind what he says about the constant importance of faith, spiritual self-confidence, and self-mastery:

[R4-9] *Everyone’s life has its ups and downs. We must try to acquire self-mastery. When a person has become master of their inner states, everything becomes easy. We mustn’t “endure” our destiny, but rather we must take it in hand: in light of our relation*

to God and His providential caring, we should be so confident and so detached from everything that the decrees of destiny seem insignificant. We shouldn't let upsets and disturbances dominate us: the more we are able to resist being controlled by them, the better we will master the situations we do encounter.

[A595] *In order to strengthen one's self-confidence, the best way is not to focus on your failures, and to continue to pursue your goal as though you hadn't undergone a defeat or failure. The secret of the success of all great human beings comes from that attitude.*

Now throughout human history, one of the most essential, indispensable guides to this process of spiritual perfection, in all of its dimensions, has of course been that complex reality we call "Religion." Not surprisingly, much of Ostad Elahi's practical teaching--like that of every great spiritual guide and teacher--was constantly focused on clarifying the proper relations between the different dimensions and functions of religions, especially as they contribute to the realization of our ultimate spiritual end.

Perhaps the best way to approach this subject, once again, is to begin by evoking the goal, the reality of being and truth as witnessed by the fully human being. That condition is beautifully summarized in Ostad Elahi's response to the naive question: "What is the meaning of mysticism (or of true spiritual understanding, 'irfân)?:

[R1-4] *"When you realize that every person you happen to see is a mystic, then you will have understood the meaning of this. When you've come to see all of the prophets and saints as true, and you no longer distinguish between the different religions, then you will have reached the stage of true spiritual understanding."*

Or even more simply: *"The religion of the Truth is One...and all the religions (and prophets) have said it: that you should love and do for others what you wish for yourself.... That is the ultimate principle of religion."* [A612]

In his more theoretical discussions of this question, especially when people would seek to compare or criticize different historical religions or particular schools and approaches, Ostad Elahi always began by distinguishing between the unifying, perennial spiritual core and goal shared by all the revealed religions, and the diverse "exoteric" social, ritual and legal dimensions comprised within each of those traditions. For example,

[A722] *"...The basis of esotericism [of the common spiritual aim and related prescriptions] is the same for all the religions, and they only differ concerning the*

unavoidable matters connected with social life. But what is the true prescription for purification of the soul and ethical perfection is identical in all the (true) religions.”

Of course the practical elaboration and clarification of these distinctions is not always an easy matter, and much of Ostad Elahi’s work of practical spiritual guidance was devoted to helping students with that unavoidable task. But his most general practical conclusion is well summarized in the following advice:

[A718] *“...The condition of (true) religious life for every human being is, first, to respect all (the true) religions, without rejecting others (than your own); and secondly, whatever the religion you choose, to put it into practice, not just (believing its) words. Because what God is concerned with is our heart and our deeds....”*

In his own practical teaching and guidance, Ostad Elahi always sought to bring his students back to the *spiritual* essentials, to making the inner connection between their religious practice and its ultimate spiritual aim in the purification and perfection of the soul. Some of the most central common practical spiritual teachings shared by all the religions are aptly summarized in the following saying:

[A611] *“The principles of the (true) religions are all based on certain unshakable foundations, including abstinence or inner self-restraint; charity; prayer and invocation; and purity of intention and sincerity toward God....*

[After describing the role of self-restraint and true charity, he goes on to explain that] With prayer and invocations, the essential condition is to focus one’s attention on the divine Source, not simply to repeat certain phrases or other ritual prescriptions. And true invocations are when we truly remember God and our true selves, so as to avoid heedlessness.... Purity of intention and sincerity toward God, in practical terms, means that we should want for all creatures those benefits we want for ourself, and that we should not wish for others what we don’t want for ourself.

When a person truly practices those four basic principles, then they will be purified and move from their animal state to that of a true, fully human being.... In a word, when a person actually becomes truly ‘human,’ their natural inclination always prompts them to act for what is good and right.”

One of the most characteristic features of Ostad Elahi’s own teaching is his constant insistence on the practical spiritual importance of an active, engaged social life in the world as the most fruitful and productive “school” for discovering and purifying the inner realities of the soul. As we have already

seen, this insistence is surely not unrelated to the dramatic contrast, in his own life, between his youthful existence in contemplative spiritual retreat, and the more complex challenges of his later family life and career. The ongoing temptations of a more peaceful “retreat” from this world--and the spiritual pitfalls that necessarily involves--are well illustrated in one of Ostad Elahi’s most memorable autobiographical anecdotes, where he tells how “*One night a state of spiritual enthusiasm came over me, and I decided to spend the night alone in prayer and contemplation.*” Then he goes on to describe in humorous terms how noisy neighbors and other distractions forced him up to his roof, out into the streets of Shiraz, and eventually to a remote shrine, without ever finding the quiet he was seeking. Finally, he explains:

[R4-1/A18xx] *In short, that special spiritual state of mine disappeared that night, and no matter what I tried I wasn't really able to meditate. "O Lord," I said, "so You're still testing me? Well then, it's up to You. Thy will be done!" At just that moment a "voice" responded: "You must seek that spiritual solitude within your own heart. No place is ever unoccupied; only your heart is free and alone." Then I understood that they wanted to keep me from secluding myself too much, because recently I'd been a little too withdrawn... It's not proper to live in seclusion from society. Instead you must live in society while still staying true to your self. Those who choose to isolate themselves in order to avoid the temptations and tests that necessarily come from participating in society, while saying that they are being virtuous, are mistaken. What really counts is to stay in the world and participate in social life while still remaining virtuous and moral.*

The deeper reasons why active life in this world is so conducive to attaining greater knowledge of our true self--and ultimately of God and our deeper spiritual duties--become quite clear when we consider the basic principles underlying Ostad Elahi’s constantly repeated *practical* advice to those setting out on this Path. Those basic principles of right action, from the point of view of attaining those spiritual goals described above, come down to three essential points: first, seeing, saying and wanting what is good, or purifying our moral intentions; second, constantly struggling against the hidden and visible constraints of our carnal, animal self (the “nafs”); and third, constantly focusing our attention on God. In fact, although we must outline each of these points in linear succession, they are each inseparable aspects of the *same* ongoing spiritual “work” or “combat” along the path of perfection, and working on any one of these elements inevitably brings into relief the integral role of the other two as well.

In particular, the way each of these three essential aspects of conscious spiritual work leads concretely to greater self-knowledge and increasingly higher levels of spiritual awareness and clarity is well summarized in the following saying:

[A620] *“...The [spiritual] cause of whatever happens to us is within ourselves and not outside our self. Therefore we must always search for that cause within our self. Because the further we delve within ourselves, the clearer things become. [For example,] If someone commits a transgression and then things happen to them, that is the (spiritual) consequence of their transgression, since there is no action that does not have a corresponding reaction.... So if we take as our religious watchword and precepts what has been taught by the great religious figures, and if we put that into practice with real faith, that will guide us along the right path....”*

It should not be necessary to explain here how each of these basic practical spiritual principles is expressed in the central teachings of each great religious tradition.

The first of these principles, to which Ostad Elahi constantly returns, is that of gradually coming to say and want what is good--and ultimately even to see everything as good.

[R4-12] *Those who consider themselves voyagers on the spiritual Path should adopt these three principles:*

- *“To say what is good”: this means not to gossip or put down others, not to swear and curse, and so on.*
- *“To see what is good”: this means not seeing anything or anyone as evil in themselves, but rather to see the good in every thing....*
- *“To want and think what is good”: this means that whatever we want for ourselves, we should also want it for everyone; and it means not to feel hatred, jealousy and bitterness, not to think of getting vengeance, and so on.*

Again, it is crucially important to keep in mind that the perception of what is truly “good” here must be taken in a profoundly spiritual sense--ultimately inseparable from the task of attention to God to which we will come in a moment. The “good” in each of these domains cannot be effortlessly taken from some external source (be it social, cultural, familial, etc.), but can ultimately only be discerned and discovered through the long process of spiritual work itself, as the following saying makes clear:

[R4-13] *“To see what is good, think what is good, and say what is good all have an effect whose benefit can be felt by the person who actually practices those principles. That person’s heart becomes illuminated, so that they are able to see with full clarity, rather than through the fog of bitterness and resentment.”*

This basic principle, so often reiterated by every prophet, saint and true spiritual guide, may sound simple in itself, but even the slightest attempt to put it into practice immediately brings us face to face with the next central theme of Ostad Elahi’s spiritual teaching, the long and difficult combat between our angelic soul or spirit and the carnal-animal self, the “*nafs*,” with its endless masks and ruses.

While the unavoidable struggle to master that dimension of our self which naturally opposes our higher, divine nature is a central theme in every religious tradition--as in every tradition of spiritual practice--Ostad Elahi’s treatment of this subject involves certain important clarifications and distinctive emphases which stand out in all his spiritual teaching.

To begin with, Ostad Elahi constantly stresses the importance--whether in our own spiritual work, or in our spiritual education of our children and others--of ultimately strengthening the mastery of our higher self, the angelic soul or spirit, rather than simply weakening or undermining (much less “destroying”) the forces of the carnal self:

[A867] *“The stronger the angelic soul becomes, the more it will be able to dominate the nafs. The method to strengthen our soul is to recognize its real dignity and worth, and to come to love the soul. As a result of that you will acquire the higher, noble qualities, and will come to feel an immediate aversion for everything that is unworthy of the soul...”*

To be even more explicit, Ostad Elahi emphasizes that this process of coming to know our real soul and spirit--which is constantly revealed to us and “highlighted,” as it were, by the oppositions and ruses of the carnal self--involves coming to know intimately and recognize the presence and workings of each of the three dimensions or manifestations of our angelic soul: [A824] *“The ‘inspiring soul,’ which gives us spiritual inspiration; the ‘blaming soul,’ or conscience which reproaches us for each wrong action; and the ‘reassuring soul,’ which gives faith and certitude and reassurance to the true worshipper of God...”*

Thus for Ostad Elahi the opposing process of learning to recognize and master the carnal self does not involve heroic efforts of mindless asceticism so much as a much more demanding, highly reflective and never-ending process of increasing awareness, self-discovery and self-mastery:

[A837] *“The way to combat the carnal-animal self is as follows: whatever the nafs wants with great desire and passion, we must not give it, because in that state the nafs has no respect for religion, reason, or honor. The only thing it wants is to satisfy its desires! But when the nafs wants something that is in accordance with the rules of religion and the judgment of right reason, then one should respect it and give it that.”*

[One obvious example of this latter case, for example, would be properly respecting and taking care of the divine gift of one’s body.]

One important and recurrent aspect of this constant spiritual struggle is the providential way in which it is precisely our persistent failures and weaknesses that keep each human being--or at least those of us who have not reached any sort of perfection!--constantly in a state of humility and search for divine grace and guidance:

[A836] *“Each person, in relation to God, should always be in a state of humility, submission and inner surrender to God. That is to say, we should always despair of relying on our own actions, while we should always have hope in God’s Grace. The higher a person rises, the greater and weightier their responsibilities become....”*

The practical result of this incessant inner struggle--which is most obvious when the combat is most intense and even apparently hopeless--is to weaken the carnal self’s greatest weapons of pride and egotism, while simultaneously working to strengthen the soul’s awareness of its faith and the presence and reality of the spiritual master:

[A843] *“The best weapon in the struggle against the carnal self (nafs) is faith. As God says to Satan: ‘You have access to all, except for those true servants who have the light of faith in Me in their hearts; you will not find a way to them!’”*

And Ostad Elahi’s concluding advice on this point: [A842] *“In the struggle against the nafs, always call upon your master or guide.”*

The third essential aspect of Ostad Elahi’s practical spiritual teaching is so absolutely fundamental--since it is at once both the Goal and the primordial foundation and presupposition of all spiritual work--that even mentioning it sounds like a truism. That most essential point of all is *“attention--and intention--toward God.”* And of course it is present at the core of every stage of our religious and spiritual life, as Ostad Elahi constantly reminds us. To begin with, in every religion,

[A659] *“All prayers, invocations and all the rest--(the aim of) all of these can be summed up as maintaining that state of continual attention on God, and trying to learn what we must do in order to please God.”*

For [A701] *“the very principle of prayer is purpose and intention. Whatever the religion or form of worship, to have your attention on God, to whatever degree, is accepted--whatever the words may be.”*

But if attention toward God is already central at even the most elementary and external forms of religious life, how much more essential and active it must become as the soul moves, through this spiritual work, along the path of self-knowledge leading to ever deeper and more operative direct awareness of God. The absolute importance of attention at these higher stages of the path is beautifully summarized in a passage which also draws together virtually all the points of Ostad Elahi's teaching we have covered today:

[A884] *“Following the path of spiritual perfection necessarily requires a connection (with God), and that spiritual rank cannot be acquired through artificial methods.... Eventually each person must experience for themselves a state of illumination; then through that illumination they will grasp the manifestation of the Truth.*

That (higher spiritual) world is not concerned with the body, but with the angelic soul. So we must orient our soul toward that world, and once we have done that, the divine Source Itself will arrange the rest....

It is sufficient for us to realize that we must have this Attention (toward the Source), and then the rest will take care of itself. But the essential thing is this initial Attention. ...Whoever wishes to reach Perfection will have to pass this way. Once a person has fulfilled all the (divine) orders, the right ways will naturally open for them, and those ways will bring this Attention.For the Truth is a single Point; there are not two.”

In conclusion, I hope that all of you, whatever your own background and confession, have recognized much that was already familiar in the spiritual teachings of Ostad Elahi outlined here today. If that is so, I hope that you will credit that sense of familiarity not to this very partial selection from his wider teachings, but to the those basic qualities of *directness, simplicity, and explicit universality* which are indeed essential characteristics of his way of teaching. As he himself put it in one of the sayings that dates from the last years of his life:

[A2073] *"I have not passed over any subject in silence: all that is needed is a grasp of the question and the aspiration (to understand). And that aspiration comes from the angelic soul.*

And if this brief summary of his teachings has frequently reminded you of scriptures and other spiritual teachings from any number of other religious traditions, that also should not be surprising, since one of Ostad Elahi's most constantly reiterated points is that the basic principles of religious and spiritual reality are indeed the same and universal, constantly repeated by all the great spiritual teachers and mystics in ways adapted to their own time and audiences. Yet those classical formulations of the same Truth, as we all know, can often become obscured by the inevitable processes of transmission, interpretation, and the use of unfamiliar, or even intentionally symbolic language and other forms of expression.

So as more of Ostad Elahi's teaching and writings become accessible in other languages, you should be able to verify for yourselves how far he was successful in his constant aims of pointing more directly to that one Truth, without problematic symbols and allusions; of bringing out explicitly and universally what was often opaque or missing in earlier traditions; and in re-focusing our attention on the universal "quintessence" of the revealed religions, on the common ground of what is and remains essential and true.

And once we have done all that, we must remember in closing that there are other powerful ways of spiritual teaching and communication, where Ostad Elahi was also a master, which we have not even spoken of in this lecture today. Perhaps the special magic of his unique *music* might help, in deeper ways beyond these words, to open up another of his final and most enigmatic sayings:

[R5-13/end of A,ch.24] *"I have spoken with each person to the extent they could understand. But I have still not told anyone all there is in my heart."*