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Blessed Are the Strangers! Muslim and Secular Views on Being a Stranger in the World

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ
بَدَأَ الْإِسْلَامُ غَرِيبًا وَسَيَعُودُ كَمَا بَدَأَ غَرِيبًا فَطُوبَى لِلْغُرَبَاءِ.

*Islam began as a stranger and it will become a stranger again as it once began. Blessed are therefore the strangers.*¹

This is a well-known Hadith, one of the sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed. It is as astonishing as it is mysterious, and the attempts of orthodox religious scholars to deprive it of its heterodox power have rarely been convincing.²

Seen from a modern perspective, it strikes that the Prophet perceived strangers as something positive and that strangeness had been considered by him as a distinction and not as a state of deficiency. One of the reasons for this could be found in early Muslim history: The first Muslims were persecuted in Mecca for their faith and emigrated to Medina in the year 622, called Hijrah in Arabic. This date marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar and one of the most decisive events of early Muslim history. Being a foreigner or stranger therefore characterises the beginnings of Islam.

But being a stranger also is the situation of Islam at the end of all times, the prophet says. Its alienness would then be the beginning and the end, the alpha and omega (ἄλφα καὶ ὠμέγα) or the 'Alif and the Yā' of the religion founded by Mohammed on the Arabian Peninsula. But there is a small catch. We cannot say with sufficient certainty whether this Hadith is genuine and really goes back to the Prophet. Muslim believers might object here, because the saying features in a canonical Hadith collection that is accepted as authentic. As a non-Muslim the question of the authenticity of these prophetic traditions nevertheless arises to me.

¹ Muslim 1918, Bd. 1, S. 128.

² The common positions on this question are summarized by Franz Rosenthal in „The Stranger in Medieval Islam“ in: Arabica XLIV, Leiden 1997 („Rosenthal 1997“).

To understand the problem of authenticity, one has to know that the Hadiths¹ (or *ahādīth*, as the plural reads in Arabic, often translated as 'prophetic traditions') were systematically collected and written down only after the death of the Prophet (he died in the year 632), many of them only in the 8th century. Until then the transmission of the prophetic traditions was oral. Of some Hadiths who made it into the six large canonical collections, Western research² believes to know that they are unlikely to go back to the Prophet, for example if they contain information of which the prophet could not yet know anything.

As for our Hadith about the strangeness of Islam, it is noticeable that the word *gharīb* ("strange" or "stranger") does not appear in the Koran. If being a stranger is really as central to Islam as it is claimed, this is surprising. The Arabic root of the word consists of the consonants *gh – r – b*. This root does in fact appear in the Koran but, as I will show later, only in the sense of 'sunset' or 'place of sunset'.³ The basic meaning of the root is 'going away', 'disappearing', or 'leaving'. The meaning 'strange' or 'stranger' might have its roots in an expression about the difficulty to understand something, i.e. of obscurity in terms of language.⁴ As for the translation, the according verbal noun *ghurbah* covers a semantic field which is expressed in English by stranger/strange/strangeness; foreign/foreigner/foreignness (a meaning for which modern Arabic uses another the term which can be dated back to the Koran: *adjnabi*)⁵; exile, and possibly also alien, alienness⁶. And we would stretch its meaning only slightly if we understood the word as coming to mean 'estrangement' or 'alienation'.⁷

But the origins of the word as well as questions of authenticity do not concern us here. For our purpose it is only important that this Hadith has become canonical and is recognised as genuine among the faithful.

In another Hadith it says:

كُنْ فِي الدُّنْيَا كَأَنَّكَ غَرِيبٌ أَوْ عَابِرُ سَبِيلٍ

¹ The word Hadith can also be used as a collective term denoting the corpus or a group of Hadiths. I use the uncommon English plural Hadiths to make clear that I talk about several single Hadiths, not a corpus.

² Cf. Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, Halle 1890; Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979; Juynboll G.H.A: *Muslim Tradition*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1983.

³ cf. *Encyclopedia of the Quran*, Vol. 5, p. 131 (entry "Strangers and Foreigners"). Ed Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Brill, Leiden 2001.

⁴ Cf. Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, Librairie du Liban, Beirut 1968, p. 2295.

⁵ cf. *Encyclopedia of the Quran*, Vol. 5, p. 131 (entry "Strangers and Foreigners"). Ed Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Leiden (Brill) 2001. Rosenthal 1997, S. xx

⁶ Alienness is the term preferred by Hans Jonas in his book "The Gnostic Religion" (cf. note 11)

⁷ The common Arabic translation for the Marxist term 'alienation' is *Insilâb*. For Rosenthal, though, alienation is one of the possible meanings of *ghurbah*. Cf. Rosenthal 1997, p. 40.

*Be in this world as if you were a stranger or a passer-by on a path.*¹

This is one of the most famous statements handed down by the Prophet and features in one of the most widespread Hadith-collections, the so-called "Forty Hadiths", which was compiled in the 13th century by the religious scholar al-Nawawī (1233-1277) and which is still very popular today. Since the wording is similar to the latter Hadith, the question of authenticity also arises here. But let us look at it from the point of view of content.

This simple rule of life has widely ramified cultural-historical roots. Its starting point is the assumption, which can be traced back to much older religious and philosophical currents, that man's real home is not here in this world, but in the hereafter, with God. In this world man is only in exile. This belief is still somehow present in the other two monotheistic religions, albeit with a certain shift of emphasis. Its origins can be traced back to the the Book of Genesis. The state of being a stranger or foreigner, we can conclude with reference to the first Hadith quoted here, is thus not only at the beginning of Islam but at the beginning of all three great world religions and is inscribed in them in the narrative of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise.

Thus it says in verse 19 of the 119th Psalm: "I am a guest on earth". Such statements about man's being a guest in this world can be found in various passages of the Old Testament.

In the New Testament something similar is expressed in the Letter to the Philippians (3, 20), in which it says: "But our homeland is in heaven". This idea becomes even clearer in Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews. There it says (11, 13): "These all [...] confessed that they were strangers and without citizenship on earth. But now they are seeking a better [fatherland], which is a heavenly one."

Albeit the idea of man's being a stranger or exile does not belong to the main narratives of Christianity it has never been forgotten. Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) wrote in 1666 in a Christian hymn in German: "I am a guest on earth and have no position here". And still in the 20th century the Catholic German poet Georg Thurmair (1909-1984) wrote a church song in which it says: "We are only guests on earth and wander without rest and many difficulties to our eternal homeland."

However, the most important influence on Islam concerning the conception of *ghurbah* was probably not Christianity nor Judaism but the Gnosis. Gnosis is the collective term for various religious currents that had a great influence in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC to the early Middle

¹ Al-Buḥārī, Abū ' Abdallāh Muḥammad (1999): *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī*. Riad, S. 1114. And: *Das Buch der Vierzig Hadithe*. Ed. by Marco Schöller, Verlag der Weltreligionen, Frankfurt 2007. p. 245 (Number 40).

Ages. While Gnosis as such no longer exists today, Gnostic thought has entered all monotheistic religions; today it can be detected in numerous religious and non-religious political ideologies¹ as well as in esoteric and New-Age belief systems.

In short, Gnostic faith consists of the assumption that man was thrown from the otherworldly realm of light into the darkness of this world. Thus, he is a stranger here and should return. "The recollection of his own alienness, the recognition of his place of exile for what it is, is the first step back; the awakened homesickness is the beginning of the return"² writes the Gnosis researcher Hans Jonas. And he adds: "All this belongs to the 'suffering' side of alienness. Yet with relation to its origin it is at the same time a mark of excellence, a source of power and of a secret life"³. According to Jonas, "the concept of the alien life is one of the great impressive word-symbols which we encounter in gnostic speech, and it is new in the history of human speech in general."⁴

Early Christianity, we learn from Hans Jonas, developed its own theology in the confrontation with Gnosis. Something similar could be said of Islam, which, however, does not play any role in Jonas' considerations (he simply did not know much about it, I guess). However, the concept of the stranger that underlies the Hadiths quoted above is hardly conceivable without Gnosis, as Jonas describes it. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that the idea of man's being a stranger on earth and the words *gharīb* and *ghurbah* are not yet found in the Koran, while a hundred or one hundred and fifty years later it appears in the prophets' sayings. For unlike the Arabian Peninsula, where Mohammed preached, the Eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia - today's Iraq - were a centre of Gnosis. It was precisely there that many Hadiths were collected (if not created) and compiled into the canonical collections.

Around the year 780 there was a great wave of persecution against the Gnostics, called *zindīq* (plural *zanādiqah*) by the Muslims, which actually means heretic or free spirit. In that epoch, the Gnostics were considered as threatening to infiltrate Muslims' beliefs with their own. "In late antiquity, Gnosticism had been able", writes German Islamicist Heinz Halm, "to penetrate and transform pagan, Jewish, Christian and Iranian traditions with its own understanding of the world; the Islamic belief was also exposed to temptations of this kind."⁵ The Hadiths quoted are, to my mind, a result of these Gnostic temptations. Although it is true

¹ As has been shown by Eric Voegelin in: Die politischen Religionen. Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 2007.

² Jonas, Hans: The Gnostic Religion, Beacon Press, Boston, 2001. p. 50.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Jonas 2001, p. 49

⁵ Heinz Halm Die Islamische Gnosis, Artemis Verlag, Zürich 1982, p. 10.

that the Gnostics were expelled from Baghdad in the prophetic traditions we still find their footprints.¹

Given this genealogy, which consists of biblical and gnostic ideas, I doubt that other influences played an important role in shaping Muslim (not to mention the prophet's) understanding of *ghurbah*. Pre-Islamic and nomadic experiences, as recorded and conceived in pre-Islamic poetry, were certainly favourable to the adoption of the Gnostic understanding of *ghurbah* by the early Muslims who still had a vivid memory of these experiences. However, judging from pre-Islamic poetry, the nomadic experience of alienation was not grounded in the idea of a better hereafter but in what was called *qadr*, which is destiny as embodied in the disastrous outcome of time, i.e. the transitoriness of life. The longing of the Bedouin poet was not towards the hereafter but towards the past, and even this past was not a mythical or paradisaical past but the past of his own lifetime, the memories of what he once lived and saw. His longing was for the world as it is or as he had once known it.

The incorporation of Gnostic beliefs at the time of the early Abbaside califate shows us how supple Islam was in its early days. It succeeded in integrating many non-Islamic ideas and thus becoming also acceptable for people who were inclined to Gnostic world views. Already in 1909 the Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher spoke of a "characteristic appetite for appropriation"² of Islam and emphasised that the Hadith was one of the most popular vehicles for this appropriation.

Another vehicle was Sufism, i.e. Islamic mysticism, as we will see soon. Sufism, according to Goldziher, had made "neo-Platonic and Gnostic thoughts applicable in Islam"³. If this is true, then it is not Judaism and Christianity, but Islam which is the actual heir and successor of Gnosis—in both good and evil, one is inclined to say.

The alienness emphasized in the 'Gnostic' Hadiths incites man to strive from this world towards God and the hereafter, just as the stranger and exile longs for his homeland and his family. The fact that man is at odds with the world or can feel in it like an alien, reveals to him that in truth he belongs somewhere else, namely to God and the hereafter.

Conversely, this world, the here and now, is described as a place or state of deficiency, which cannot be man's home. The aforementioned Hadith "Be in this world as if you were a

¹ For a discussion of the Zindq see also Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, 1990, vol. 1., De Gruyter, Berlin, 1990. p. 416ff

² Goldziher, Ignaz: Neuplatonische und gnostische Elemente im Hadith. In: *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 22, 1909, p. 317.

³ Goldziher, Ignaz: Neuplatonische und gnostische Elemente im Hadith. In: *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 22, 1909, p. 317.

stranger, or one who passes by on a path” implies that man is urged to be a stranger even when he is not and feels well in this world. It follows that whoever is too satisfied, whoever feels too much at home in the world has almost given up his or her faith and does not follow the example of the prophet, i.e. has forsaken the *imitatio mohammedi*.

If the stranger knows the world too well, Jonas writes, “he forgets that he is a stranger and gets lost in a different sense by succumbing to the lure of the alien world and becoming estranged from his own origin.”¹ We can find the same idea in a Sufi saying which says: “A stranger is he who is far from home, while he dwells there.” Or: “A stranger is not he who is far from his homeland, but he who has few siblings and people like himself”.² When the mystic al-Shiblī (861-945) was asked what familiarity with God was, he is said to have answered: „Your feeling of alienness towards yourself, your soul and the whole creation.” With these Sufi sayings, which scholar Richard Gramlich has compiled, we come quite close to a state of mind and soul which feels alienation even in the most familiar environment.

But in spite of all this in Islam as in Gnosis being a stranger is marked by a considerable ambiguity. For sure, it is and remains a state of deficiency — to feel alien is certainly not something which should be wished for. However, negativity is not the one and only result of this kind of alienation. Rather, being or feeling like a stranger is appreciated since it leads to something. For example, it reveals to us that we are not at home in life on this earth and that we are, therefore, not supposed to feel at home. This reminds us of God and brings us closer to Him, even if only by yearning for Him.

For man as an individual, alienness may be negative, bad, problematic — and the secular Muslim tradition also saw it that way³. According to the teachings inspired by the Gnosis and its Muslim followers, however, alienness plays an indispensable role in the imaginary construction of the cosmos and of man’s relationship with the creator. *Ghurbah* is part of the divine plan of salvation, as Islam, understood in Gnostic terms, defines it.

Alienness, one could perhaps say, is in Islam what suffering is in Christianity. Certainly, suffering is not desirable; but at the same time it is some kind of memory of God and it paves the way towards him, not least because it is the way that Jesus chose: to take on suffering. Seen from a higher perspective, being a stranger — just like suffering in Christianity — is therefore not a bad thing and can even be recommended by the Prophet, just as the strong Christian

¹ Jonas 2001, p. 49.

² For both quotations: Gramlich, Richard. *Weltverzicht. Grundlagen und Weisen islamischer Askese*. Harrasowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 1997, p. 133f.

³ Rosenthal 1997: p. 42.

believers have literally sought and provoked suffering, for instance through self-mortification or martyrdom. If in Christianity “the mere experience of suffering [...] can [become] a place of new encounter with God, which transforms man and liberates and saves him”¹, then the same can be said for the experience of alienness in Islam: It can become a place of encounter with God. It liberates man and saves him.

Just like suffering, feeling like a stranger is a universal experience, not only in religious but also in existential terms. Every person has an idea of what it means. Everybody has felt strange at some point, somewhere, while travelling or even at home. Every child once felt homesick. Alienation can be regarded as the particular experience and mood of modernity as such. We do not have to be a refugee to know what alienness is. As a refugee and exile one only gets to know it much more drastically.

One could, therefore, extend the realm of *ghurbah* — strangehood, alienness or alienation (understood as the dark side of modernity and progress) —, into everyday experience. Then it is a metaphor for all sorts of frustrations, exclusions, disabilities, annoyances, quarrels – in other words, for the sum of what we experience as problematic when we are in the world. These experiences remind us that we are only human beings, not gods, that we can become sick, that will die, that there are many things that seem incomprehensible, alienating, frightening to us, even if in many respects we succeed in establishing ourselves in the world, above all materially. The fact that we rarely, perhaps only in moments of ecstasy, merge with the outer world, that our being in the world and feeling like an integral part of it is not self-evident and guaranteed, reminds us of *ghurbah*, which we can therefore call a basic human experience.

While Orthodox Islam up to today's Salafism has often dealt with very secular (or in-worldly) questions, questions of concrete action and practical morals, and could do little with the concept of *ghurbah*, it was, as we have already seen, Islamic mysticism and Muslim philosophers and poets who popularised this idea and turned it into a key concept of their world view. In Urdu and some other south Asian languages the word *gharīb* has therefore come to mean poor, like the word *darwīsh* in Farsi and *faqīr* (the English fakir) in Arabic.

One of the most remarkable examples of how Sufi Islam interprets the here and now as exile is a parable by Shihabuddin Suhrawardi, called *maqtūl* (‘the killed one’) because he was executed in 1191 at the age of thirty-six in Aleppo by order of Saladin. He had pushed his mystical speculations too far and was suspected of being a *zindīq*. If we read his text we are not surprised by this suspicion: the Gnostic elements in it are unmistakable.

¹ Lexikon des Dialogs. Grundbegriffe aus Christentum und Islam. Ed. by Richard Heinzmann, Herder Verlag, Freiburg 2016, p. 284.

The parable is entitled “*Qissat al-ghurbat al-gharbīyah*” — “Story of Western Alienation” or “Western exile”. The title contains a pun. While the word *gharīb* means “stranger”, as I have already mentioned, the word *gharbī*, derived from the same root, means ‘western’ and *gharb* means ‘west’, i.e. the place of sunset, which is the meaning of this word root in the Koran. The Arabic title of Suhrawardi’s parable thus combines the two meanings of the root gh – r – b, ‘West’ and ‘exile’, or ‘strange’. As we will see, the parable is the illustration of this play on words.

The narrator tells how he and his brother went out far west on a hunting trip and ended up in the Tunisian city of Kairouan where the inhabitants captured them and threw them into a well. A castle is enthroned above the well, and the prisoners are allowed to climb the towers of the castle at night. There, the hoopoe, considered a messenger bird in Islam, brings them a message from their father, who asks them to remember him and return to him in the East. “‘Ahlik ‘ahlak” says the demand in Arabic, again one of the numerous onomatopoeic puns in this text, and it means: “Let your people go to ruin”.

What is meant by this drastic expression is that the narrator should turn away from everything that binds him to the world.¹

After overcoming numerous obstacles, reminiscent of apocalyptic scenes from the Bible, the narrator arrives at his father’s place in the kingdom of light. There he receives good and bad news. The bad news is that he has to return to the prison well in the West because he has not yet sufficiently freed himself from what binds him to the world. The good news consists in the promise that one day he will succeed and that he will be able to enter the kingdom of light again at any time.

In this story, too, alienness, or exile appears as a fundamental human condition. What is new, however, is that according to Suhrawardi it seems possible to break out of this existential alienness or alienation, even if only for a short time, for example in sleep, in dreams, or in mystical ecstasy. The narrator, we remember, is allowed to climb up from his prison to the towers of the castle at night, where he receives his father’s messages, i.e. from the afterlife.

This is at least a foretaste of home, a foreboding of a state of non-alienation. The two spheres, home and exile, East and West, this world and the hereafter, are separate but they know from each other and there is some kind of communication between them. If the

¹ Corbin, Henry: *En Islam iranien*. Vol. 2: *Sohrawardi et les Platoniciens de Perse*. Paris 1971, p. 258ff; cf also: Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical treatises*. Ed. Wheeler M. Thackston. Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa (CA) 1999.

separation of the spheres were complete we would feel no alienness because then we would not even know about the existence of the other sphere. Exactly that which makes the separation evident — *ghurbah* —, points the way towards transgressing and ending it.

The Sufis and other believers have tried to follow this path. Their means were manifold: an ascetic, pious life, wanderings faithful to the Prophet's saying – “be like a passer-by on the way” – , certain ascetic body techniques or ecstatic exercises, and finally music and poetry. For them, *ghurbah* acts like an additional sense that enables them to receive messages from the unknow or from the hereafter. It is a form of being chosen, elected: by perceiving themselves as strangers, they fulfill for all the other, more ‘normal’ people the function of the messenger birds. Depending on how they do this and how they perceive themselves, we call them prophets, seers, mystics, poets, thinkers, or just madmen, schizophrenics, psychos. By confronting us with our existential alienation they open up the possibility for us to overcome it or at least to hope for an overcoming. They provide patterns of interpretation, metaphors or sometimes mystical practices (such as the dance of the Mevlevi dervishes who are inspired by the Sufi poet Jellaluddin Rumi) that help us to overcome this separation and alienation.

For the Muslim Sufi poets the overcoming of the distance to God takes place above all through love. In contrast to Christianity, this does not only mean charity but also erotic, even physical love and attraction. Where love succeeds and leads to ecstasy and fusion it becomes a symbol for overcoming separation, loneliness and the feeling of being a stranger. This explains why the Sufi poets are also great love poets.

In the Islamic tradition, ecstasy in physical love is seen as a foretaste of the paradisiacal afterlife. Islam has had to take a lot of ridicule for its sexualised idea of the afterlife. I think wrongly. Sexual intercourse in paradise is in principle quite the same as that on earth — only a little more enduring. Thus, a central element of the paradisiacal delights of the hereafter can already be experienced in our world, in the here and now: It is the overcoming of our fundamental alienness in the ecstatically experienced sexuality. The belief in a world beyond paradoxically leads to an appreciation of this world and of carnal existence.

The idea of the world as exile and of man being a stranger in this world has also appealed to contemporary Arab writers. Although most of them are not religious, due to the political situation in their homeland many of these authors actually have lived in exile. And since the exile (*ghurbah*) according to Suhrawardi's narrative lies, of all places, in the west (*gharb*) there are numerous points of reference to the Sufi legends for those Muslim authors who really live

there.¹ They describe their existential plight with just as impressive metaphors as their medieval ancestors:

2 نُسَافِرُ كَالنَّاسِ، لَكِنَّا لَا نَعُودُ إِلَى أَيِّ شَيْءٍ .-

*We travel like other people, but we return to nowhere.*³

writes Mahmud Darwish (1941-2008), the most famous poetic voice of the Palestinians. His poem closes with the lines:

لَنَا بِلَادٌ مِنْ كَلَامٍ. نَكَلِّمُ نَكَلِّمُ لِنَعْرِفَ حَدًّا لِهَذَا السَّقَرِ!-

We have a country of words.

*Speak speak so that we may know the end of this travel.*⁴

Today's Arab poets have learnt to see their real exile in terms of a metaphor and a symbol for existence as such. They have learnt how to gain comfort from the universalisation of the idea of exile even without explicit reference to an afterlife. If in truth — this truth being religious or existentialist — all people are in exile then the real exile no longer appears to be a disadvantage, a stigma or a reason for discrimination but opens up the possibility of solidarity and what we might call some kind of brotherhood of strangers. In a poem with the significant title “Al-Hudhud” (“The Hoopoe”) Mahmud Darwish takes this thought even further. There he says:

5. أُسْرَى مَا نَحْبُ وَمَا نَرِيدُ وَمَا نَكُونُ ... لَكِنَّ فِينَا هُذُودًا

We are prisoners of what we love and what we are;

But inside of us, there is a hoopoe.

The referent of „what we love and what we are” corresponds to the earthly entanglements in the text by Suhrawardi. We can equate it with our present ideas of home and identity. When Darwish writes “But inside of us, there is a hoopoe” this hoopoe reminds us that we are

¹ Tunesian author Abdelwahhab Meddeb elaborated on this fact in the afterword to his French translation of Suhrawardi's parable: Abdelwahhab Meddeb, *L'exile occidental*, Albin Michel, Paris 2005.

² in: Al-Udhari, Abdullah: Mahmud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, Adonis: Victims of a Map. Translated by Abdullah al-Udhari. Saqi Books, London 1984, p. 30f.

³ in: Al-Udhari, Abdullah: Mahmud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, Adonis: Victims of a Map. Translated by Abdullah al-Udhari. Saqi Books, London 1984, p. 30f.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Darwīš, Maḥmūd: *Dīwān*, Dār al-‘audah, Beirut 1994, vol. 2, S. 451.

strangers in this world, that we have other, higher affiliations, aspirations and desires which are devoid of conceptions of home and identity. The hoopoe warns us that the search, be it metaphysical or concrete, for a homeland is our destiny, that we are by no means at home at home, that we are possibly only trapped in what we love, and that there is something in us that drives us out, be it into the big, wide and foreign world or into higher spheres: “But inside of us, there is a hoopoe”.

This understanding results in a new perspective. What was alien before now appears exciting and tempting. Hoopoe and prophet, hoopoe and poet are tempters, whisperers, missionaries of the strange world and they challenge us like the prophet: *Kun gharīban*, “become a stranger”. Or to put it blatantly in decidedly modern terms: “alienate yourself”.

Thus, we have returned to the hadiths about alienness quoted in the beginning of our essay, and yet we have covered a long journey. We no longer need to believe in the afterlife in order to appreciate alienness and strangehood. The hoopoe does not come from the hereafter but is inside of us. We can free ourselves from the constricting ideas of belonging, of home and of identity which are the modern names for the earthly entanglements the Sufis wanted to get rid of. Religion can be a help in this process. But it is by no means necessary.

This we learn also from Syrian poet Adonis, born in 1930, who gave expression to a radical version of earthly exile without any hereafter. For him too, concepts such as homeland and identity have lost their meaning. If everything is strange and exile looms everywhere since there is no afterlife and God is dead (as Adonis writes frankly in other verses), then the most sensible thing to do is to confess exactly that and to completely abolish the concept of (a) home here on earth. This is what Adonis says in his poem “Earth Without Return” (“□Ar□ bi-lā ma‘ ād”):

*Even if you came home, Ulysses.
Even if the (four) dimensions became too narrow for you (...)
you will remain the story of a departure
You will remain on an earth without a promise.
You will remain on an earth without return -
Even if you came home, Ulysses.¹*

حتى ولو رجعت يا أوديس
حتى ولو ضاقت بك الأبعاد (...).

¹ Adonis: Die Gesänge Mihyârs des Damaszeners. Ed. by Stefan Weidner. Ammann Verlag, Zürich 1998 p. 39 (my translation).

تظل في أرض بلا ميعاد،
تظل في أرض بلا مَعَاد،
حتى ولو رجعت يا أوديس

If in a mainstream trend of Islam — as well as in secularised modernity and existentialism — the whole of this world is regarded as alien, then there is no homecoming in this world and no need to go back anywhere. In order not to succumb to the illusion of a concrete homeland, the Sufis have even made it their task to roam the world and to follow the Prophet's commandment, “be like a stranger”. “The Sufis travel in the East and in the West, so that the strangerhood is firmly rooted in them,” it says in a medieval Sufi handbook that Richard Gramlich has studied¹: “That is why they leave their wives and children and go out to God's lands”.

For this attitude, of course, one does not have to be a Sufi or a believer at all. We find the idea of existential alienness everywhere in modernity, for example in „Wittgenstein's Nephew“, who is the protagonist of the novel of the same name by Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989): “Basically I am one of those people who cannot bear to be anywhere and are happy only between places.”² The narrator believes that it is a pathological fatality which must “soon lead inevitably to total madness” until he realizes that it is precisely this fatality that saves him from it. The difference between the faithful Middle Ages and the unbelieving modern age is not the factual feeling of alienness and dissatisfaction with being fixed in one place but the fact that modern man considers sick and crazy what the medieval might consider pious and right. We conclude from this that medieval men might have coped better with experiences of alienation and being a stranger than we do today.

A wandering Sufi who “basically couldn't stand a place in the world” was also Ibn Arabi, born in Andalusia in 1165. He moved along the entire southern Mediterranean to the East. Around the year 1200 Ibn Arabi arrived in Mecca and made the pilgrimage. In memory of this pilgrimage and of an erotic experience there he wrote a cycle of mystical love poems entitled “The Interpreter of Desires”. The following verses, among others, can be found in this volume:

*He saw lightning in the east - and he longed for the east, but if it had flashed in the west
he would have longed for the west*

¹ Gramlich 1997, p. 133f (my translation).

² Bernhard, Thomas: Wittgensteins Neffe. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt 1987, p. 144. English translation quoted from: Thomas Bernhard. Wittgenstein's Nephew Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. (Kindle-Version, Kindle-Positions 1050-1052).

*My desire is for the lightning and its gleam, not for the places and the earth.*¹

Here, too, the idea is rejected that the homeland exists in a concrete place. The true home is the lightning, which symbolizes the ecstatic moment. As such it is settled in the transient and thus in this world; but already in this world eternity flashes up, conveys a breath of paradise.

Seven hundred and fifty years later we find a similar idea in a short poem by the French poet René Char (1907-1988). Char writes:

*Si nous habitons un éclair
il est le cœur de l'éternel*

*If we inhabit a lightning,
it is the heart of eternity.*²

Eternity flashes in the shortest moment – at least when we are able to comprehend it (i.e. transience) as a kind of home and to “inhabit” it by resigning ourselves to this transience, which is at the same time the transience and absurdity of life itself.

René Char was a close friend of Albert Camus (1913-1960)³, the Franco-Algerian existentialist and Nobel Prize winner of literature, who placed the absurdity of existence and the strangeness of man at the centre of his work. In his book “The Myth Of Sisyphus” he treats suicide as a philosophical question: “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”⁴

The importance of this question for philosophy arises in the face of the presumed absurdity of existence. Existence is absurd because the world is inexplicable and man feels alien in it. Camus writes: “A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.”⁵

¹ Muhyi'ddín Ibn al-'Arabi: The Tarjumán al-ashwáq. London. Ed. Reynold A. Nicholson, p. 74-75. London, Royal Asiatic Society 1911. (Poem XIV)

² Char, René: Einen Blitz bewohnen. Gedichte. Hrsg. von Horst Wernicke. Frankfurt 1995 (my translation).

³ Cf. Camus' essay on Char in: Camus, Albert: Essais, Gallimard (Pleiade), Paris 1965, p. 1164.

⁴ The myth of Sisyphus, and other essays / Albert Camus; translated from the French by Justin O'Brien, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1955, p. 11.

⁵ Camus 1955, p. 13

The oldest and strangest religious ideas, we may conclude, are much closer to us today than we would have expected in the beginning of our essay. With the idea of the world as a place of alienation and exile, inspiring ideological perspectives emerge even if we do not want to believe in God or in an afterlife. If we want to believe in it, this does not change the perspective: Being in the world still seems strange or absurd to a considerable extent. In any case, however, this alienation or absurdity is not merely negative but shows us how we can deal with it creatively and perhaps overcome it momentarily.

The concept of *ghurbah*, of man being a stranger on earth, thus provides a way to bridge the seemingly insurmountable gap between believers and non-believers, between religious and non-religious people because both can share this concept and refer to it.

In this context it is noteworthy that also some terrorist groups like al-Qaeda¹ have taken up this concept and referred to themselves as „strangers“. The appeal of this concept to those who consider themselves outsiders is obvious and, being promoted by the prophet himself, seems to fit well into the ‚true‘ Muslim tradition extremist groups claim to adhere to. However, there is a considerable historical irony in the fact that precisely those thinkers (or activist, as we would call them today) who, in Muslim history, became associated with this concept were often regarded as heretics and persecuted because they were deviating from the orthodox Islam of their time - sometimes the same orthodox Islam extremist groups now claim to fight for in a way and with means which in turn lead to their self-marginalization and persecution. The concept of man as a stranger, it seems, appears today stranger than ever to a mainstream Islam which is either westernized or serves to create the obedient subjects who best conform with the kings, emirs, mullahs, and dictators who rule in large parts of the muslim lands today, and with their exclusively secular interests.

But the idea of strangeness or alienness as a human condition is a counterweight to material self interest. It allows us to regard the real strangers — i.e. in everyday language the immigrants, refugees, foreigners — as our own folk, since we share with them the same destiny, namely of being all strangers in the world. It would seem logical, therefore, to understand this concept as an expression human equality instead of misusing it for warfare and terrorism. The idea that we are all strangers in the world should be regarded an strong argument for a new solidarity, or even for some kind of fraternity of strangers.

In addition to all this, alienness and absurdity have become a means of and way to ecstasy also in modernity. Estrangement is one of the most important means of art, both modern and

¹ The al-Qaeda magazine *Sadā al-Malāʾim* had an article about “Ghurabā” in its volume 6, published in November of 2008, p.32 (I have to thank Flagg Miller for this hint at our conference in Cape Town in February 2019)

mystical. For what seems strange also appears new, surprising, inspiring, opening up new horizons and inciting our spirit of discovery.

The concept or teaching of the fundamental alienness of man in the world, as outlandish as it might have seemed in the beginning of this essay, can therefore be considered as a useful means to deal with this *conditio humana* in a meaningful and productive way. Feeling like a stranger or alienation could thus be interpreted and integrated into life as a positive force which enables us to transcend our existential isolation towards a communication with everything that is different, foreign and new.¹ From this perspective, even a non-believer is entitled to agree with the prophetic Hadith, be it authentic or not, which says: *Fa tūbā li-l-ghurabā'*: Blessed are the strangers!

¹ For further consideration from a psychoanalytical point of view we might discuss Julia Kristeva's essay: *Étrangers à nous-même*. Gallimard, Paris 1988.

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