

FROM SUPERMAN TO SUPERIOR MAN

Anthropology of Perfection in Traditional Cosmology

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Introductory Remarks

Man since his appearance on the plane of existence, has experienced constant struggles within; a fundamental attraction between Evolution and Involution, Exoteric and Esoteric. And in his efforts to reach perfection realized convincing signs from both directions: ‘the path of pursuit’ (*Pravritti Marga*) on the one hand and ‘the path of return’ (*Nivritti Marga*) on the other. The twofold elemental attractions in the course of time evolved into two distinct cosmologies, each with many branches, fruits and names. From exoteric realities that are transient in nature, developed certain ideologies we generally refer to them as ‘Religion(s) of Time’ and from esoteric realities emerged ‘Religion(s) of Eternity’. Both categories actually aim at realization of perfection and, in doing so, ‘self-realization’ proves to be essential.

Followers of the *religions of time*¹ realize the time-bound nature of all beings. For them, therefore, an idealized man, or the Superman, must either be a born-superior-entity, or altogether beyond the realm of possibility. In this worldview all realities take place in time-space dimension, which is regarded as the only existing dimension, and as a result, value of the actions will be determined by the tangible outcomes they produce.

¹ By ‘followers of religions of time’ we do not necessarily mean atheists. It is an individual’s worldview that goes beyond his/her religious orientation. Association to a ‘religion’ does not make an individual ‘spiritual’ and, on the other hand, not announcing oneself as follower of an established faith isn’t necessarily indicative of one’s secular/materialistic mindset.

For followers of the *religions of eternity*, on the other hand, the existence transcends the time-space limitations and continues in a timeless realm beyond limitations of matter. From this perspective man can evolve into an exalted entity, a hero, saint, prophet – a Superior Man. For such an individual, according to an Islamic tradition (*hadith*), *it is not the face value of actions that matter; instead “The value of all actions is determined by the nature of their intentions.”*² They are “free beings” the virtue of whose deeds, in Coomaraswamy’s words, ‘lies in the complete coordination of their being – “body, soul and spirit, the inner and outer man, at one.”’³ A host of names for this ideal occur in Indian literature: “he is the *Arhat* (adept), *Buddha* (enlightened), *Jina* (conqueror), *Tirthakara* (finder of the ford), the *Bodhisattva* (incarnation of the bestowing virtue), and above all *Jivan-mukta* (freed in this life), whose actions are no longer good or bad, but proceed from his freed nature.”⁴

The Qur’anic term for such a being is *‘khalīfat Allah fī al-‘Ard* (God’s vicegerent on earth): “... WE have made you [Our] vicegerent on earth: judge, then, between men with justice, and do not follow vain desire...” (Qur’an 38:26). He is, in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu teachings, the *Chakravartin* (*the universal ruler*) *who rules ethically and benevolently over the entire world and “through whom the wheel (of Dharma) is moving”*. (See Figure 1)

Ibn Arabi calls this superior entity The True Man (*al-Insān al-Haqīqī*), The Exalted Man (*al-Insān al-‘Arfa*), or The First Man (*al-Insān al-‘Awwal*). He also uses the following: Deputy of Truth on Earth (*Nā’ib al-Haqq fī al-‘Ard*), Teacher of the Angels in the Heavens (*Mu’allam al-Malak fī al-Samā’*). And he is said to have been the first person who coined the term ‘The Perfect Man’ (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*)

It is thus obvious that this paper’s focus is multi-dimensional in view but very unique in its addressing all within the scope of a superman/superior man, hence it is solely a study of man and his various selves. It is an attempt at studying the anthropology of perfection in perennial philosophy, addressing issues such as the nature of ‘self’ and the states of self-realization, selflessness and selfishness, the categories of man, the process of exaltation, attributes, rights and obligations of a superior man in traditional worldview.

² إنما الاعمال بالنيات

³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, 2nd edition (1982), New Delhi, p. 146.

⁴ Ibid, p. 156



Figure 1: Chakravatin, stone, 1st century BCE/CE.

In Buddhism and Jainism the term *chakravartin* applies to temporal as well as spiritual kingship and leadership. The same term in Hinduism denotes a powerful ruler, whose dominion extended to the entire earth. In this image the universal ruler is depicted in a colossal size (representing his greatness and supremacy) with the wheel of Dharma (Dharma-chakra) under his right arm

Tradition and its Preservation

The word ‘tradition’ derives its meaning from the Latin noun *traditio*, and the related words *tradere* or *traderer*, which literally meaning to transmit, to hand over, deliver, or to give for safekeeping. A belief or practice in any field of culture may be called a tradition when:

- 1- It is received from hands, lips or examples rather than being discovered or invented. People follow it without thinking about ‘who’ invented it

and ‘when’? In other words tradition appears timeless. This is reflected in traditional dresses, patterns and motifs on textiles, folktales, etc., where one cannot trace the name of the inventor or the time it was first introduced. The essences of such works are continuity. **(Figure 2 a,b,c)**

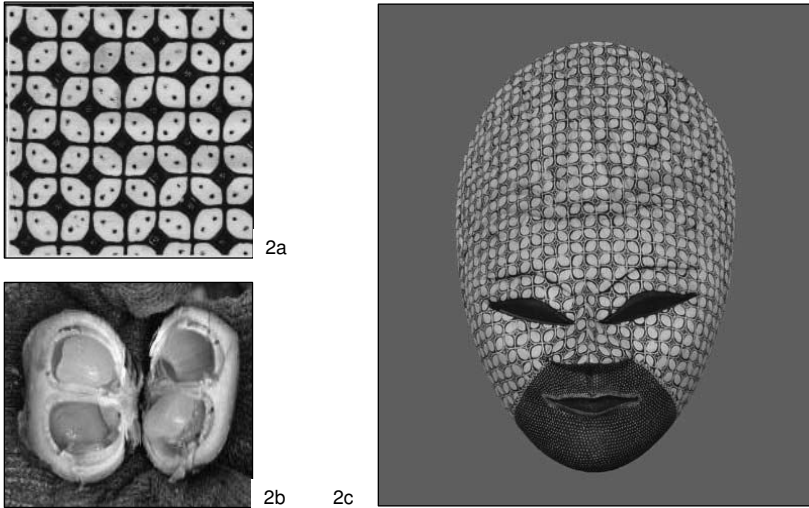


Figure 2 (a,b,c): The kawung motif (2a) is based on repeated squares, rectangles, ovals and stars; it reflects the Javanese belief in a structured universe. The Kawung is one of the oldest designs, and was reserved for the royal family. It represents a cross-section of the aren-palm fruit (2b). It is also believed that the cross-shape formed in between the four ovals refers to the universal energy source.

In figure 2c the kawang motif is adopted to decorate a traditional mask. Both the pattern and the mask are among old and familiar forms in Indonesia. People have been using them in their clothing and furniture for generations; scholars and old masters write about them and interpret the motif, yet nobody actually knows who designed the kawung first, and when! The motif is not a stranger to other communities either, for numerous patterns used in many societies have close affinity to it. It is a pattern that seems to have been around at all times!

- 2- It is received with the express command and conscious intention of future transmission without ‘substantial change’. Changes happen any

way. It is in the nature of this world to evolve, but this evolvment should happen gradually and with a ‘natural’ pace. Substantial and drastic changes are harmful to the rhythm of natural evolvment of life and, therefore, resisted by tradition. It is through the slow and steady growth that traditions can maintain their existence and continuity— just like the natural growth of a living being. It is said that for a practice, belief or object to be considered traditional at least two transmissions over three generations are required.⁵ Traditions are often altered to suit the needs of the day, and the changes can become accepted as a part of the ancient tradition.⁶ Traditional changes are usually so slow that its adherents are usually unaware of the change; it is perpetually seen as unchanged.

The concept of tradition includes a number of interrelated ideas; the unifying one is that it refers to beliefs, objects or customs performed or believed in the past, originating in it, transmitted through time by being taught by one generation to the next, and are performed or believed in the present.⁷

Sacred traditions purport to embody a fixed truth in an unchangeable pattern of evolvment, from an authoritative source. The Qur’an has emphasized on the unalterable nature of the Divine Tradition (*sunnat-Allah*).⁸ Traditions – unlike rumor & fashion, which are not necessarily reliable, and invite for speculation and elaboration – are regarded as a reliable source of knowledge.

The concepts of tradition and traditional values are frequently used in political and religious discourses to establish the legitimacy of a particular set of values. For example, the term ‘*traditionalist Catholic*’ refers to those who wanted the practices of the church to be as they were before the Second

⁵ Shils, Edward (1981). *Tradition*, University of Chicago Press, p.15

⁶ S. Langlois, Traditions: Social, in: Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes, Editor(s)-in-Chief, *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Pergamon, Oxford, 2001, Pages 15829-15833.

⁷ For definitions of tradition see: Tradition”, by Paul Valliere in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade) Vol. 15, pp.1-16; Thomas A. Green (1997) *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, pp. 800; Also Shils, Edward (1981), *Tradition*, University of Chicago Press, p. 12.

⁸ “This is Our way with those messengers We sent before you, and you will not find any change in Our way.”(17:77); “It is Allah’s way which has gone before, and you will never find any alteration of Allah’s way” (3:137)

Vatican Council of 1962–65.⁹ In the like manner, the Sunni Muslims are referred to as ‘*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā‘ah*’ (أهل السنة والجماعة), which literally means “people of the tradition [of the Prophet] and the community”, emphasize on their attachment to religious and cultural tradition.

Traditional societies have been characterized as valuing filial piety, harmony, interdependence, group welfare and stability. This is an outcome a certain worldview that contrasts the *modern* perception of life. Traditional mindset values selflessness, modesty and self-sacrifice for a ‘communal goal’, which in the case of sacred traditions will also be rewarded in the hereafter.

Why Preserve Tradition? Traditions provide a link between the origin and destiny of things. “Sometimes sacred traditions tell of a golden age of the past. They preserve glimmers of the glorious age and establish beliefs, practices, and institutions to cope with the present ... (and) anticipate the attainment of a glorious future”¹⁰. Often they address both past and future and, as a result, provide a sense of orientation and a meaningful identity to the peoples who live by them. Preservation of tradition would mean safeguarding of values, protecting virtues and maintaining a meaningful and harmonious connection between individuals and the world around them. Traditions survive through teaching, communication, artifacts, icons, monuments, symbolic objects, sites, designs, gestures, postures, customs and institutions.

Heroes, saints, sages, prophets and spiritual leaders are leading figures who are themselves embodiments of a tradition as well as its protector. They are also regarded as role models of individual and societal perfection by traditional communities. Deeply rooted in traditional knowledge, they are the ones who can provide guidelines and solutions that would be applicable to practices and applications of contemporary issues of any given time and environment. A superior man, through his presence, guarantees the preservation of not only the tangible manifestations of tradition, but also its intangible spirit. The intangible spirit in a sacred tradition is the sacredness itself – a quality that transcends the material domain of religion

⁹ Marty, Martin E., R. Scott Appleby (1994), *Fundamentalisms Observed*, University of Chicago Press. p. 92

¹⁰ “Tradition”, by Paul Valliere in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Micea Eliade) Vol. 15, p.1

and associates itself with the Divine.¹¹ A number of factors, including industrialization and globalization, can aggravate the loss of traditional lifestyle and values.¹² These can eventually lead to the disappearance of the living world and the absence of the model – the superior man.

Perennial Wisdom and World Religions

Perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis*) or ‘eternal philosophy’ has tight connections with the notion of tradition, specifically sacred traditions. It is not a ‘philosophy’ in the modern sense of the word; it is rather an extraction of the universal wisdom, which Plato characterized as something not describable and only knowable through intuition. In Perennialism, philosophy works in harmony with religion; together they should lead to the knowledge of God – the Truth that flows from a single source but finds a multitude of manifestations. It is an ancient concept that is based upon the idea of transcendence, a state of being that exists independent and beyond the physical existence and sense experience. The core idea of this philosophy is that Divine Truth is one, timeless, and universal, and that there is a single divine foundation of all religious knowledge, referred to as the Universal Truth. There is “one principle of all things, of which there has always been one and the same knowledge among all peoples”.¹³ This truth is lost over time and is only preserved in the *prisci theologal*, or venerable and ancient theology (another name for *philosophia perennis*) which embodied it and could be found in all ages.¹⁴

¹¹ have discussed the concepts of sacred, religious and non-religious in a number of my writings. See for example Zekrgoo, Amir H. “Trans-cultural Nature of Islamic Art”, in *Islam Hadbari: Bridging Tradition and Modernity* (ed. Mohd. Ajmal bin Abul Razak Al-Aidrus), International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur 2009, pp. 270-314; also Zekrgoo, Amir H. and Barkeshli, Mandana “Collection Management of Islamic Heritage in Accordance with the Worldview and Shari’ah of Islam”, in *Conservation of Living Heritage*, ICCROM Conservation Studies 3 (editors: Herb Stovel, Nicholas Stanley-Price, Robert Killick), Rome 2005, pp. 94-101

¹² For an elaboration of the factors see McIntosh, Tracey (2005). “Maori Identities: Fixed, Fluid, Forced”, in James H. Liu, *New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations*. Wellington, N.Z.: Victoria University Press. p. 40

¹³ Charles Schmitt, *Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz*, Journal of the History of Ideas. Vol. 27, No. 1, (1966) p.517

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

The idea of a perennial philosophy has great antiquity and can be found in many of the world's religions and philosophies. St Augustine's statement that "*The very thing that is now called the Christian religion was not wanting among the ancients from the beginning of the human race, until Christ came in the flesh, after which the true religion, which had already existed, began to be called "Christian",*"¹⁵ has in it an assertion of the perennial philosophy.¹⁶ Al-Farabi (872 – 950 CE), the 10th century Islamic philosopher advocated the idea of philosophy and religion being two avenues to the same truth. He described his notion of an esoteric philosophy which referenced the eternal truth or wisdom which lies at the heart of all traditions as a "science of reality" based on the method of "certain demonstration" (*al-burhan al-yaqini*) – a combination of intellectual intuition and logical conclusions of certainty (*istinbat*). He said that it was therefore a superior kind of knowledge to the exoteric domain of religions (*millah*) since that relied on a method of persuasion (*al-iqna*), not demonstration. This view is found with the *philosophia perennis* of Leibniz and later in the 20th century, Schuon.¹⁷ Al-Farabi developed a theory to explain the diversity of religions. He posited that religions differed from one another because the same spiritual and intellectual truths can have different "imaginative representations". He further stated that there was a unity of all revealed traditions at the philosophical level, since all nations and peoples must have a philosophical account of reality that is one and the same.¹⁸

In Hinduism *Sanatana Dharma*¹⁹ (immutable eternal law) is among the best known traditions to propose a similar idea of a common truth residing within all religions. Advocates of Sanatana Dharma believe that it refers to the common truth that resides in the core of all religions, rather than simply their own faith.²⁰ The unity of all religions was a central impulse

¹⁵ St Augustine *Retractationes*, 1.13.3, in Gustave Bardy (ed.) *Bibliothèque Augustinienne*, Vol. 12 (1950), Paris; Cross, Stephen *Coomaraswamy, St. Augustine, and the Perennial Philosophy*, Harry Oldmeadow *Crossing Religious Frontiers: Studies in Comparative Religion* (2010) p.73 World Wisdom

¹⁶ Cross, Stephen *Coomaraswamy, St. Augustine, and the Perennial Philosophy*, in Harry Oldmeadow *Crossing Religious Frontiers: Studies in Comparative Religion* (2010) p.73 World Wisdom

¹⁷ Osman Bakar, (1998) *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* p.81

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 83

¹⁹ The word 'Dharma' corresponds the right way of living that is led by divine law. 'Sanatana' means eternal or immutable,

²⁰ The belief, found in the Rig Veda, in one god combined with the belief in the existence of several gods. See Smart, Ninian (1998) *The World's Religions*, p.56, Cambridge University Press,

among Hindu reformers in the 19th century, who in turn influenced many 20th century perennial philosophy-type thinkers, such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda who were influenced by the Hindu school of Advaita Vedanta, which emphasizes unity over diversity.

The Point of Departure: In the Perennial Philosophy the point of departure is the highest form of reality, which is one, formless and undivided. This single Truth echoes through all times & places, and in various religions that are but different languages expressing that one Truth. The Perennialists may have their own religious devotion but, when writing of the divine truth, they only search to express the Truth on its own terms, not on the terms of one or another of its earthly expressions. The very concept – that may sound complicated and confusing to the modern mind – has found expression in simple, yet profound, folk tales. Rumi narrates a very old Persian story in his *Mathnawi* about four men – a Persian, an Arab, a Turk and a Greek – who engage in serious fight on how to spend their shared money!²¹ They were all craving for ‘grapes’, yet each one was calling the fruit using their local tongue: The Persian insisted on *angur*, the Arab on *inab*, the Turk on *uzum* and the Greek on *istáfil*. The root of their animosity, according to Rumi, was their ignorance of esoteric knowledge, for “If a revered master of esoteric knowledge had been there, a man who knew the essence of a hundred languages, peace would have been restored among them”.²²

*Pass on from the ‘name’; look into the ‘attributes’,
Let the attributes lead you to the ‘essence’
The disagreement of mankind is caused by names
Peace unveils when they advance to the ‘essence’²³*

Perennial philosophy, metaphorically speaking, may be likened to the ‘white light’ that is colorless, yet contains the spectrum of seven colors. The number ‘seven’ symbolizes multiplicity while white represents singularity and simplicity. Rumi uses the light-color metaphor to stress upon the transcendental unity of existence, forgetfulness about which would bring about calamity:

²¹ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Book II, 3669-3673

²² Ibid, Book II, 3669-3674 (my own translation)

²³ Ibid, Book II, 3674 (my own translation)

هست بی رنگی اصول رنگها
صلح ها باشد اصول جنگها
چونکه بی رنگی اسیر رنگ شد
موسی با موسی در جنگ شد

*Colorlessness is the base of all colors
Peace is often the reason for bloody wars²⁴
When colorlessness is enslaved in cage of colorful bars
Prophets of the single God engage in pointless wars.²⁵*

Anthropology of Perfection

Man, since his appearance on the plane of existence, experienced a constant struggle within; a fundamental attraction between Evolution & Involution, Exoteric & Esoteric. And in his efforts to reach perfection realized convincing signs from both directions:

1. **The Path of Pursuit**, which in Sanskrit and in Indian religious tradition is known as *Pravritti Marga*. It is an external movement, advancement in the worldly domain, which includes materializing one's talents, perusing professional achievements and performing social responsibilities. This path deals with the exoteric dimension of life; it also includes the manifested aspect of religions: rituals, customs, etc. A rightful and successful journey would require realization of perfection at its initial stage, and self-assertion as means for accomplishing the goal. Self-assertion itself needs self-realization to place the traveler on a solid ground. The followers of the 'path of pursuit' belong to the 'Religion of Time'.
2. **The Path of Return** or *Nivritti Marga*: This is the inward movement (involution); it is the path for those whose constant focus is on the Source where they've originally come from and shall eventually return to. In other words *nivritti marga* is the 'spiritual path'. This path deals with the

²⁴ Ibid, Book VI, 60 (my own translation)

²⁵ Ibid, Book I, 2466 (my own translation)

esoteric dimension of life: regardless of whether a person is religious or not, he may have a natural attraction towards mystical aspects of his being and of the universe. Only those who have attained self-realization are qualified to travel on this path; the ultimate goal is the realization of the Self – that Universal entity from Whom all being emanates. The followers of the ‘path of return’ belong to the ‘Religion of Eternity’.

Diagrams 1 and 2 display a comparison of the state of perfection and the components of the two-fold path – Religion of Time and Religion of Eternity – and the state of transient self and Divine Self in each, also the key role of self-realization in the process of realization of perfection.

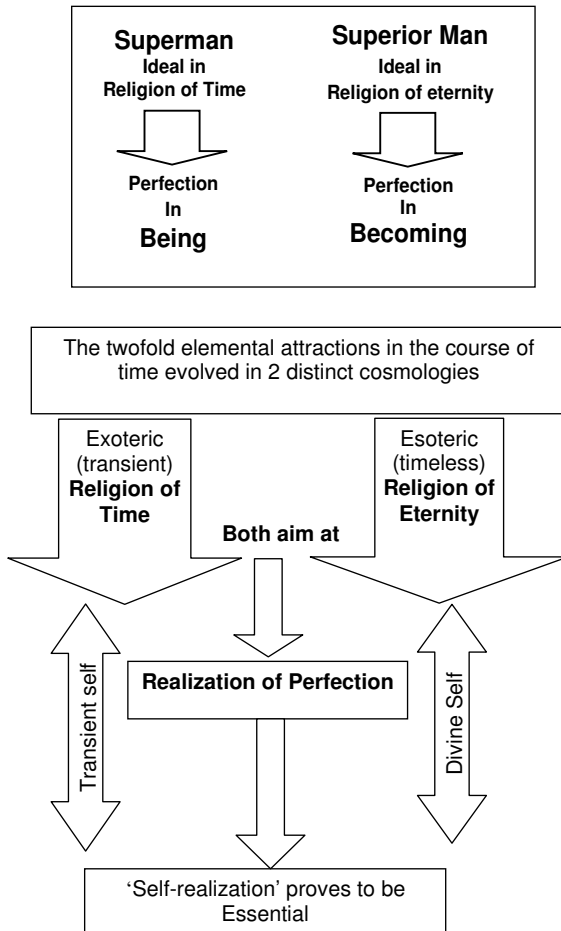


Diagram 2

The Islamic version of the two-fold path and their complementary role in the full cycle of life is reflected in the Qur'anic expression *انا لله وانا اليه راجعون* (2:156) "Verily unto God do we belong (from God we originate) and verily unto God we shall return." Here the expression *انا لله* refers to the path of pursuit; the way forward in the world of matter that is bound within the time-space limitations. On the other hand *انا اليه راجعون* refers to the path of return to the source. The verse introduces a doctrine of harmony between the two. The perfection, according to this worldview, finds manifestation in the unity, or rather a golden balance, of the two. This golden balance is reflected using identical expressions "Middle Path" both in Islamic and Buddhist traditions. The Qur'anic/Arabic expression *ummataṭan wasaṭan* (أُمَّةٌ وَسْطًا) and the Buddhist/Sanskrit term *madhyamā-pratipad* both refer to 'The Middle Way' or *Middle Path* – a balanced combination of *Pravritti Marga* and *Nivritti Marga*; a path between the extremes of austerities and sensual indulgence. Buddha spoke about the *Middle Path* in the very first teaching that he delivered after his enlightenment, in which he referred to it as "the path to liberation"²⁶, while the Qur'an addresses the followers of the faith as "a community of the Middle Path" (Qur'an 2:143)

From Superman to Superior Man

Followers of the *religion of time* realize the time-bound nature of all beings.²⁷ For them, therefore, an idealized man, or the Superman, whose powers are supernatural must either be a born-superior entity, or altogether beyond the realm of possibility. In this worldview all realities take place in time-space dimension, which is regarded as the 'only dimension', and as a result, value of the actions will be determined by the tangible outcomes they produce.

The comic hero 'Superman', who found vast audience and was promoted in the movie industry, is a manifestation of such perfection in the in the domain of matter, yet beyond limitations of matter! Once, I was surfing the net about the origins of the super-heroes, just to satisfy my

²⁶ For an elaborate account see Bodhi, Bhikku (trans.) (2000). *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications

²⁷ I would like to stress, once again, that by the expression 'followers of religions of time' we do not mean atheists. This is a worldview beyond religious orientations of individuals, since being associated to a 'religion' does not necessarily bring along a worldview of a certain nature.

interest about the young generation's mindset and their values of perfection. It was worth the time! I came across an interesting discussion among the young fans of the super heroes, and their preferences of a certain hero. The discussion was about the reasons that a certain hero (Superman) was found superior/stronger than another (The Incredible Hulk). The following answer, which is founded on sound arguments, was selected as "Best Answer – Chosen by Voters":

"Superman is stronger because earth is not his home, but he has powers here. His powers allow him to manipulate the known laws of physics (flying, heat vision, ice vision, ect.). The Hulk is just a man who mutated due to Gamma Ray exposure. So Superman is stronger."

According to the modern idealization of perfection, which has found manifestation in science-fiction characters and the heroes of high-action movies, a superior man is:

- Born-superior
- Bestowed with super human abilities
- Imbued with a strong moral compass.
- Embodiment of goodness
- Fights all that is evil & resolves human problems
- Able to Produce immediate & tangible results

The modern fantasy of supremacy has found expression in the global arena too. Relying on monetary and military might some superpower fantasize about being embodiments of goodness and masters of the universe. They glorify themselves and force their wishes upon 'others' – whom they regard as 'evil' – hoping to produce tangible results. Unfortunately, however, as earth is their home and the laws of nature apply to them too, their solutions prove not to be so effective!

For followers of the *religions of eternity*, on the other hand, the realm of existence transcends the time-space limitations and continues in a timeless and limitless domain. Realization of one's inner self, differentiating between duties and rights, and guided by divine light, the traditional man hopes to 'evolve' into an exalted entity: a hero, saint, prophet, Superior Man i.e. a superman-in-becoming – a free being in the process of becoming. Such an individual is, in the word of Nietzsche, a free being "beyond good and evil", who is not measured by what and how much he produces, but rather, "on the nature of

his intentions”. This ideal man is not from another world, nor is he a super human. He knows that man is the microcosm and has all the qualities of the universe in him; therefore through self-realization he can reach the exalted state of realizing the Ultimate Self. A prophetic *hadith* stresses on self realization to the extent of equaling it to the realization of God,²⁸ while Nietzsche’s emphasis on the human self finds manifestation in his famous statement “where you see ideal I see what is human, all too human”.²⁹ This humble, yet superior, entity lives with natural “coordination of (his) being – body, soul and spirit, the inner and outer man, at one”.³⁰ Among the distinguishing features of this superior being is his inner vision, for “He who lacks the inner vision”, as stated by Ghazali in his *Alchemy of Happiness*, “cannot perceive the inner form, and he cannot derive pleasure from it, love it and incline toward it.”³¹ Realization of the self at esoteric and exoteric levels brings about self-esteem that is an essential component of growth. Individuals & nations without self-esteem are already defeated in the global race!

Self-esteem versus Extremism

It is important to differentiate between self-esteem and selfishness. Selfishness or egocentrism is the incomplete differentiation of the self and the world. An egocentric person is usually full of himself, unable to empathize with others. An enlightened individual with self esteem, unlike an arrogant egocentric, acts modestly with wisdom and insight³² and follows the middle path. An egocentric person is an extremist by nature. Extremism in national level manifests in “nationalism” – a concept originated in Europe in the 18th century. Nationalism is an idealization of a nation through ‘uncritical acceptance & belief in superiority of a group by descent, race or culture’ that in extreme manifestations can lead to fascism. The “New World Order”

²⁸ من عرف نفسه فقد عرف ربه

²⁹ *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* - The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche (Vol. 17) 1974

³⁰ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, 2nd edition (1982), New Delhi, p. 146.

³¹ See *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization* (1981) Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg (ed.), The University of Malaya Press, p. 28

³² “... Give, then, glad tidings to those of My servants who listen closely to all that is said, and follow the best of it; for it is they whom God has graced with His guidance, and it is they who are truly endowed with insight.” (Qur’an 39: 18-19)

that is spearheaded by the west through the idea of “Globalization” is but an epidemic growth of the same disease at global scale. Contrary to the propagated secular notion that blames “religion” (الدين) for creating conflict and bloodshed, social and political scientists have suggested nationalism as the most significant force in history that has caused the most destructive wars of the globe, i.e. the two World Wars.³³ The solution is establishment of a brotherhood of mankind – not a global supremacy of the economy and military giants. You cannot force peace. With no inner peace there will not be an outer peace. The harmony between the inner and the outer self is essential in attaining physical, social and spiritual liberation. This fraternity must welcome human capability in its entirety; it cannot be led by the West or the East, for “the chosen people of the future cannot be any nation or race, but an aristocracy of the earth uniting the virility of European [Western] youth to the serenity of Asiatic [Eastern] age”.³⁴ It is based on truth, honesty, good intentions and sincere actions; it requires an esoteric affinity or a kinship of hearts, using Rumi’s expression:

*Sharing a tongue shows kinship and connection
A man among strangers is a prisoner in chain
Indians and Turks may connect through a shared tongue
While two Turks may be strangers in vain
Thus, the language of hearts is of a different nature
Unity of hearts is indeed better than unity of tongues³⁵*

Who is the Superior Man?

The superior man is called by various names, but the attributes remain as universally venerated qualities. In various sayings, Confucius, his disciples,

³³ Nations are often artificial and vague entities, “their boundaries drawn in the blood of past wars”. In fact “there is no country on earth which is not home to more than one different but usually coexisting culture. Cultural heritage is not the same thing as national identity”. See Grayling, A.C. (2001) *The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, pp. 78–79

³⁴ Coomaraswamy provides an elaborate account of the of the salvation of mankind that would only materialize, according to him, when East and West both contribute to this auspicious union. See ‘intellectual Fraternity’ and “Cosmopolitan View of Nietzsche” in his *Dance of Shiva*, pp. 151-163

³⁵ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Book 1, 1205-1207 (my own translation)

and Mencius present the attributes of the superior man, whom the sage adjures his disciples to admire without ceasing, to emulate without turning, and to imitate without let or hindrance. Characters that follow transcend the boundaries of a single ideology or teachings of a particular faith and introduce universal qualities of perfection.³⁶ At times the statements introduce a certain attribute of a superior individual; at other times a comparison is made between the attitude/attribute of a superior and an ordinary man.

Purpose: The superior man learns in order to attain to the utmost of his principles.

Self-sufficiency: What the superior man seeks is in himself; what the ordinary man seeks is in others.³⁷

Earnestness & Sincerity: The superior man in everything puts forth his utmost endeavors.³⁸ He is sincere in his thoughts.³⁹ It is his absolute sincerity which distinguishes him as a superior being.⁴⁰

Self Assessment: His intentions and action are pure. He is therefore watchful over himself when alone.⁴¹

Love of truth: The object of the superior man is truth.⁴² He is anxious lest he should not get truth; he is not anxious lest poverty come upon him.⁴³ A superior man is catholic and not partisan, while the ordinary man is partisan and not catholic.⁴⁴ "The world does not set his mind either for anything or against anything; what is right, he will follow".⁴⁵

Integrity: For the superior man righteousness is most essential. He thinks of virtue, while the ordinary man thinks of comfort."⁴⁶ The superior man's mind is conversant with righteousness, while the mind of the ordinary man is conversant with gain.⁴⁷

³⁶ The following phrases/sentences are extracted from the *The Ethics of Confucius*. See Miles Menander Dawson (1915)'s *The Ethics of Confucius*, available at sacred-texts.com

³⁷ Analects, bk. xv, c. xx, in *ibid*.

³⁸ Great Learning, ii., 4., in *ibid.*, p. 3

³⁹ Great Learning, vi., 4., *ibid.*, p. 3

⁴⁰ Doctrine of the Mean, c. xiii., 4. *Ibid*.

⁴¹ Great Learning, vi., 2. *Ibid*.

⁴² Analects, bk. xv, c. xxxi. *ibid*.

⁴³ Analects, bk. xv, c. xxxi. *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ Analects, bk. ii., c. xiv.

⁴⁵ Analects, bk. iv., c. x.

⁴⁶ Analects, bk. iv., c. xi. *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁴⁷ Analects, bk. iv., c. xxi.

Prudence and Serenity: The superior man is slow in his words and earnest in his conduct.⁴⁸ He is content and composed; the ordinary man, on the other hand, is always full of distress.⁴⁹ “The superior man may indeed have to endure want; but the ordinary man, when he is in want, gives way to unbridled license.”⁵⁰

Fearlessness: “The superior man has neither anxiety nor fear.”⁵¹ “When internal examination discovers nothing wrong, what is there to be anxious about, what is there to fear?”⁵² “They sought to act virtuously and they did so; and what was there for them to repine about?”⁵³

Ease and dignity: Unlike the ordinary man who displays pride without dignified ease, the superior man has dignified ease without pride.⁵⁴ He is dignified and does not quarrel.⁵⁵

Firmness: The superior man refuses to surrender his will;⁵⁶ he is correctly firm and not merely firm.⁵⁷ “Looked at from a distance, he appears stern; when approached, he is mild; when he is heard to speak, his language is firm and decided.”⁵⁸

Moderate: “The superior man is affable but not adulatory; the ordinary man is adulatory but not affable.”⁵⁹

Growth: “The progress of the superior man is upward; the progress of the ordinary man is downward.”⁶⁰ “The superior man is distressed by his want of ability; he is not distressed by men’s not knowing him.”⁶¹

Openness: “The faults of the superior man are like the sun and moon. He has his faults and all men see them. He changes again and all men low, look up to him.”⁶²

⁴⁸ Analects, bk. iv., c. xxiv.

⁴⁹ Analects, bk. vii., c. xxxvi.

⁵⁰ Analects, bk. xv., c. i., v. 3.

⁵¹ Analects, bk. xii., c. iv., V. i.

⁵² Analects, bk. xi., c. iv., v. 3.

⁵³ Analects, bk. vii., c. xiv., V. 2.

⁵⁴ Analects, bk. xiii., c. xxvi.

⁵⁵ Analects, bk. xv., c. xxi.

⁵⁶ Analects, bk. xviii., c. viii., v. 2. Ibid., p. 5

⁵⁷ Analects, bk. xv., c. xxxvi.

⁵⁸ Analects, bk. xix., c. ix.

⁵⁹ Analects, bk. xiii., c. xxiii.

⁶⁰ Analects, bk. xiv., c. xxiv.

⁶¹ Analects, bk. xv., c. xviii.

⁶² Analects, bk. xix., c. xxi.

Benevolence and Broadmindedness: “The superior man seeks to develop the admirable qualities of men and does not seek to develop their evil qualities. The ordinary man does the opposite of this.”⁶³ “The superior man honors talent and virtue and bears with all. He praises the good and pities the incompetent.”⁶⁴ He does not promote a man on account of his words, nor does he put aside good words on account of the man.”⁶⁵

Reserve power: “That wherein the superior man cannot be equaled is simply this: his work which other men cannot see.”⁶⁶

The Golden Rule: *The superior man lives by a golden rule:* “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do unto others.”⁶⁷
Such are attributes of a superior man.

Where is the Superior Man?

The superior man, as we have seen, is an embodiment of perfection in this world. He is from the same world that we live in, with the difference that – unlike the ordinary man – he is a steady climber of the heights of goodness, rightness, and all great qualities find his soil of being a perfect place for sprouting and growing. He represents eternal values of perfection and therefore – like a temple – he is the meeting place of heaven and earth. The location of the superior man is where the *axis-mundi* of the universe stands. He manifests at once as the resident of *Mount Meru*⁶⁸ and *Yggdrasil* (**Figure 3**), the enlightened one under the tree of life (**Figure 4**), and the ultimate traveler of *Mi’raj*. (**Figure 5**)

⁶³ Analects, bk. xii., c. xvi. Ibid., p. 6

⁶⁴ Analects, bk. xix., c. iii.

⁶⁵ Analects, bk. xv., c. xxii.

⁶⁶ Doctrine of the Mean, c. xxxiii., v. 2.

⁶⁷ Doctrine of the Mean, c. xiii., v. 3.

⁶⁸ Mount Meru is a sacred mountain in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain cosmology. It is considered to be the center of all the physical, metaphysical and spiritual universes.

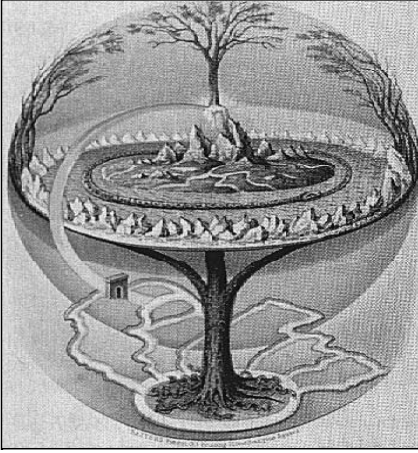


Figure 3: Yggdrasil is an immense tree in Norse cosmology that is considered very holy. It is the connection of the heavens and the earth, and it is said that gods go to Yggdrasil daily to hold their courts. In this 1847 depiction of the Yggdrasil tree and the mountain are both marking the universal axis. The earth represented as a disc, dividing the sphere into two halves, while both the roots and branches are extended beyond.



Figure 4: A brass statue depicting the Buddha meditating under the tree of enlightenment. The bodhi tree is central in Buddhist cosmology. It represents eternal wisdom. The enlightenment of Gautama Buddha under this Banyan tree symbolizes his connection to the universal source – the core of knowledge, balance and harmony.



Figure 5: Painting of Mi'raj; page from a manuscript of Khamsa, by Nizami

Artist: Sultan Muhammad, painted during 1539-43 in Tabriz, Iran

In this painting, Prophet Muhammad, who is an exemplary manifestation of the “Perfect Man” (al-Insān al-Kāmil), is depicted with his face covered, riding Burāq (his mythological steed) on his miraculous night journey to the highest heavens where he met the previous prophets and his Creator. The meeting with the previous prophets (superior men who led nations before him) and finally God, indicates that the Ultimate Truth runs through all the superior men of the history connecting and uniting them, the same way a least visible – but absolutely essential – thread connects, unites and gives meaning to the numerous beads that form a rosary.

The ontological location of the superior man, then, has to be at the center of the universe. This concept of centrality is reflected beautifully in the sacred diagrams known as mandala. A mandala is a primordial symbol, a cosmogram (diagram of the universe) representing the inner structure and evolution of the universe. It is used in sacred rites and as an instrument of meditation. The mandala serves as a collection point for universal forces. The perfect symmetry of mandala and its concentric layers symbolizes the ‘cosmic balance’ and the layers of reality.⁶⁹ At the centre sits a bodhisattva, a perfect entity that has reached the level of liberation, yet keeps his connection in this world to lead others to salvation. (See Figure 6)



Figure 6: Bodhisattva Manjushri (on the left) is the oldest and most significant bodhisattva in Mahāyāna literature in Buddhism. Manjushri is depicted as a male bodhisattva wielding a flaming sword in his right hand, representing the realization of transcendent wisdom which cuts down ignorance and duality. In his left hand he holds a lotus representing his attainment of ultimate realization from the blossoming of wisdom.

The image on the right is a mandala by the same name (Bodhisattva Manjushri Mandala). The bodhisattva is depicted at the very centre to the cosmogram, representing a balanced world that evolves and spreads around the transcendent wisdom.

⁶⁹ For symbolism of Mandala see Zekrgoo, Amir H. (2008) “Esoteric Buddhism and Islamic Mysticism: An Interdisciplinary Overview of the Sacred Arts and Mystical Literature” in *Esoteric Buddhist Studies: Identity in Diversity*, Koyasan University, Japan, p. 388

The troubles that are caused in the world are often a result of life moving out of its natural course. Loss of balance means a shift of the axis off the center – its rightful place. **Figure 7** displays a painting I created in the year 2000. The composition follows a mandalaic structure – with concentric rectangles each representing an epoch. It also shows how the world is shifting away from its natural course.



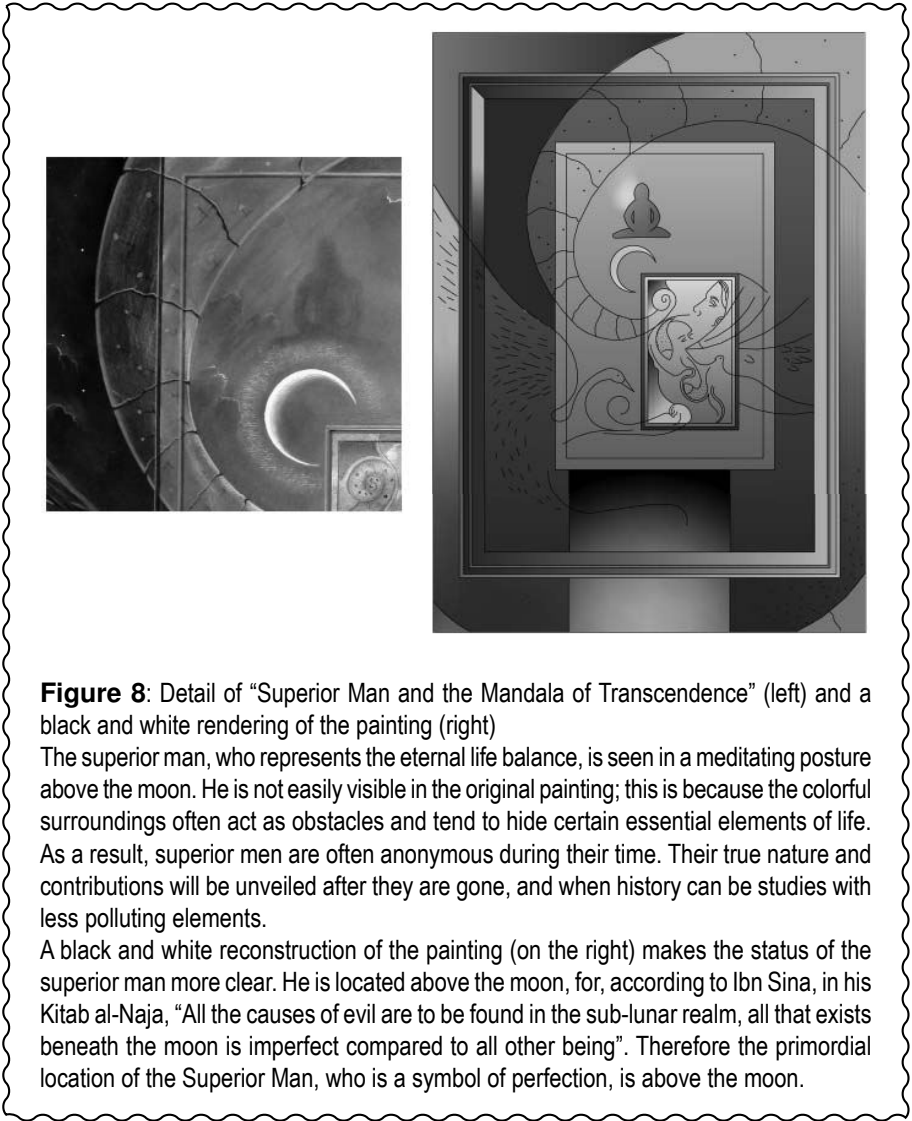
Figure 7: Superior Man and the Mandala of Transcendence

Mix media on layers of paper

Artist: Amir H. Zekrgoo

The above painting is a mandala with concentric rectangles, each representing an epoch. The area on the lower center – marked between two parallel lines in the dark-blue era (where my signature is seen), which extends to the lower edge of the painting – symbolizes the universal axis. The universal law of balance requires that each epoch be aligned with the central axis so that the world would evolve harmoniously in accordance with its essence. But it appears that a slow shift is taking place: the light-blue area is slightly shifted to the right and, as a result, the crescent – which marks the central axis – seems off centre! The smallest rectangle that represents the modern age and is marked with overwhelming activity is moving further away from the axis, putting itself in odds with the universal rhythm and harmony.

Figure 8 shows a black and white rendering of the same painting. It presents the harmonious structure of the universe, the status of the epochs and Superior Man's cosmic status.



The Hidden Knight

Although the superior men are often hidden from the eyes of the ordinary, the world, according to the teachings of many divine religions, will be saved by their hands. This savior, known in Southeast Asian religious/ Islamic context as *Satria Pininggit* (The Hidden Knight), has been victorious in fighting his ego (*nafs al-Ammara*), and has attained the transcendental qualities of perfection. A selfless individual who has been successful in establishing himself on a right path, this Superior Man has not been exposed to any significant downfall, even though he has been attacked by lots life temptations and ill desires. This is the meaning of *Satria Pininggit* is derived from “Pinngit” (to hide), hence pin(ing)git means something which manifests itself in something else. Hence, *Satria pininggit* is a superior man who is hidden from the eyes of the ordinary men. The immergence of this savior, according to the old prophecies, will happen when the world is filled with injustice, and *Satria Pininggit* will bring back justice to human-being. Another name for this superior being is ‘*Ratu Adil*’. The literal meaning of *Ratu* ‘queen’; it is an Indonesian equivalent meaning of a king (*Raja*), the highest stage and dominance in governing a region. *Ratu* here signifies a king in the kingdom of quality and perfection. *Adil*, from the Arabic ‘*adl*’ means ‘Justice’, and *Ratu* in the kingdom of quality and perfection is necessarily an *Adil*. Thus *Satria Pininggit* in this transformation is what is meant by a superman in the present context.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussions – from traditional cosmology to perennial philosophy, and from superman to superior man – it is obvious that the use of these various terms does not result in a miscellany of ideas such as it occurs in many New Age theories. In perennialists’ writings we have come to realize that this is not an attempt to mix traditions together, but is instead an attempt to utilize existing terminology when it is appropriate. The paper has focused at studying the anthropology of perfection in perennial philosophy. It has addressed issues such as the nature of ‘self and the states of self-realization’, ‘selflessness and selfishness’, ‘the categories of man’, ‘the process of exaltation’, ‘attributes’, ‘qualities’, ‘rights and obligations of the superior man in traditional worldview.

In various places of the paper we have resorted to artworks belonging to various traditions and different times to communicate the ideas and worldviews. They show how essential the role of artists and the art they produce is in keeping alive the reverence for perfection and continuity of tradition through their inspired imagination.

The superior qualities are not necessarily those of rulers and conquerors. They are rather to be found in mythical heroes, prophets of God and sages of various traditions; those who, in Ghazali's words, "possess inner vision". Such individuals hold attributes of perfection; their bodies die, yet their characters live beyond time and space inspiring generations after generations. After all, to be a superior being means starting a never-ending journey of becoming!❖