

MICHAEL SELLS **The Generous Qur'an**



# **The Generous Qur'an**

Ten Selected Suras

Michael Sells



### **THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP**

...is composed of seekers, mainly, but not exclusively members of the Religious Society of Friends. QUF seeks to promote open dialogue on its issues of interest. It writes in its statement of purpose:

While being convinced of the validity of our own religious paths, we not only accept but rejoice that others find validity in their spiritual traditions, whatever they may be. Each of us must find his or her own path, and each of us can benefit for the search of others.

In the selection of both its speakers and manuscripts, QUF tries to implement those ideas.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In this pamphlet we offer to Friends ten short chapters, or “suras,” from the Qur'an, translated with accompanying commentary by Michael Sells. The selections are from 36 suras included in Sells' book, *Approaching The Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, published by White Cloud Press (Ashland, Oregon, 1999). We hope that readers who are touched by the beauty of the verses and intrigued by the explanations will go on to read further in the book itself – and not only to read, but to listen, for the book as published is accompanied by a compact disk (CD) on which six of the shorter suras are recited in Arabic. As one listens, one may follow them in the text, which gives a full transliteration and a word-for-word English gloss.

As Sells explains in his introduction to the book, the Qur'an is for speakers of Arabic primarily an auditory experience. Its poetry and its power, often resting in associations of sound as well as meaning, are almost incapable of translation. For this reason among others, the Qur'an has been little understood or appreciated in the West. It tends to remain an enigma, even for seekers like universalist Friends, who are generally open to the spiritual truths of other religions and cultures.

In this rendering, which has been honed by years of use in the classroom, Sells seeks to bring readers an appreciation for the subtle feeling and spiritual resonance of these brief “Early Revelations” given to the prophet Mohammed. They are, as he points out, only a small part of the Qur'an, but, perhaps, the part most often taught and

committed to memory by followers of Islam. The words are regarded by those followers as a direct transmission from God via the Prophet.

From time to time QUF publications have carried discussions of traditions other than Christianity, but Islam has been neglected. Historically this seems strange, for Islam, along with Judaism and the varied beliefs of American Indians, was one of the first non-Christian bodies of thought that 17<sup>th</sup>-century Friends encountered. Early Friends, including George Fox, approached Islam without hostility and with a conviction that its followers were potentially open to the inward light. Yet they made little effort to study or understand the truths that might be found in the Qur'an.

Several years ago at an FGC gathering the absence of material on Islam was brought to the attention of members of the QUF steering committee along with a request that we try to fill the gap. Now, thanks to Michael Sells, we are able to take a step in that direction. When we asked what led him to Quakerism and Islamic studies, he replied as follows, writing in the third person:

Michael Sells encountered Quaker meeting for worship for the first time while he was a graduate student at the University of Chicago. His roommate suggested he attend the 57th Street Meeting. He was immediately struck by the diversity of voices in the meeting. Compelling messages from a variety of religious and nonreligious perspectives sounded and were heard in the depth of the surrounding silence. He remembers hearing messages bristling with Old Testament prophecy, Christian-centered reflections, psychological self-reflections, personal concerns expressed in a manner more open than he had heard in public, Buddhist-centered messages, and messages of political engagement.

The most famous Qur'anic passage of *tawhīd* (affirmation of divine unity) is among the shortest Suras of the Qur'an. In this passage, Allah is affirmed as one, not begetting, not begotten, and as *samad*, an enigmatic term in classical Arabic. *Samad* in pre-Islamic poetry meant a person whom one approached for refuge. Qur'anic commentators have stressed the notion of perdurance and indestructibility. Indeed, there is a feminine form of the word *samada* that means a large rock. In the translations above I have given three versions, each attempting to bring out one aspect of the complex set of meanings this word signifies.

Significantly, this short Sura is called by the alternative name of sincerity (*ikhlas*). In Islamic theology the notion of sincerity or authenticity is necessarily connected with the affirmation of unity. As mentioned earlier, in Islamic theology and mysticism, the affirmation of unity has several facets. It affirms that the deity has no partners or equals. In the moral sense, it has been interpreted as having no other aims, goals, or thoughts beyond the one reality or one deity. In other words, any other object that becomes an end in itself, a goal, is a form of false deity. In the theological sense, it can refer to the interior unity of the deity. To give the deity separate activities (seeing, hearing, knowing, willing) raises issues about the unity of God. If those attributes are eternal, then there are an eternal number of differing powers. If they are not eternal, then God can change, a notion that many Islamic philosophers, influenced by Aristotelian ideas about the impassivity of deity, found inconceivable. Finally, in many mystical theologies, unity involves not knowing or seeing anything but the one deity and – in the view of some mystical philosophers – arrival at a point where one's own existence passes away into the infinite reaches of that one God.

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**SINCERITY / UNITY**

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Version 1

Say he is God, one  
God forever  
Not begetting, unbegotten,  
and having as an equal none

Version 2

Say he is God, one  
God the refuge  
Not begetting, unbegotten,  
and having as an equal none

Version 3

Say he is God, one  
God the rock  
Not begetting, unbegotten,  
and having as an equal none

He recalls that this was the first time he had encountered such a diversity of perspectives not only being accepted, but actually being embraced within a religious context. He ultimately found in the Quaker Universalist Fellowship a larger framework for the cultivation of such a diversity.

At the time he was encountering Quakerism for the first time, Michael Sells was working to finish his graduate studies toward a Ph.D. in comparative literature. During the next two years he completed a dissertation on comparative mystical language in Greek, Islamic, and Christian mysticism. At the same time his interest in Arabic and the Islamic world was growing. He has since made Arabic and the Islamic civilization a central part of his research.

Of all traditions, Islam is the one that encounters the fiercest prejudice in the United States at this time. Recently Sells returned from a three-week stay in Damascus. He recalls the deep hospitality, respect, and warmth with which he was accepted by people from every stratum of society. After returning home, he began seeing again the image of the Arab and the Muslim on the news media and in newspapers. At times he found himself wondering if the image seen in the U.S. had anything to do with the culture and life in a city like Damascus. Having lived for five years in North Africa and the Middle East, he had developed the conviction that Muslims have the exact same proportion of peaceful and violent personalities, successful and failed marriages, tenderness or neglect of parents toward children or children toward parents, and honest or deceitful

discourses as do communities in the United States.

After 16 years of teaching the religions of the world at Haverford College, Michael Sells is more convinced than ever of the infinite depth of wisdom within each religious tradition, from Islam to Hinduism, from the Igbo of Nigeria to the Ojibwe of Minnesota. He has also encountered and written about the way religious symbols can be manipulated to motivate and justify horrendous violence, as was the case in Bosnia. Because the Muslims have been dehumanized through stereotyping in Western media, Sells has focused his teaching, research, and writing on those aspects of Islamic culture that are “lost in translation.” The rich worlds of nuance, humor, gentleness, wit, dissent, meditation, and love poetry, all of which are central to Middle Eastern and other Islamic societies, are commonly stripped from the image of Islam as it is presented, sometimes by outsiders, sometimes by those claiming to be its leaders in the West. The result of such loss is a mono-dimensional and wooden image of the people and the culture. In *Approaching the Qur'an*, Michael Sells attempts to bring across the combination of intimacy and majesty that is central to the Qur'an and which tends to be lost in many translations.

We are grateful to Michael Sells for these comments as well as for his generous permission in letting us reprint selections from his book.

*Rhoda R. Gilman*

*Those Who Reject The Faith* contains a series of hymnic repetitions. In arguing against religious intolerance, Muslim scholars frequently point to this Sura as a primary source. The Sura suggests that people worship different things and that the prophet should resign himself to that fact. It does not enjoin any kind of force to compel people to adopt the worship and faith of Islam. The forms of worship mentioned here in a general sense can be taken as differing religions or, ethically, in the sense of whatever one deems of ultimate value (the truth, *al-haqq*).

The final verse simply states that there is a *din* for you and a *din* for me. *Din* can mean “religion,” “way,” or “reckoning.” In first two cases, the implication seems to be that diversity of beliefs and values is acknowledged without any call for compulsion or conflict. If *din* is taken as final reckoning, the implication is more specific. There is no need for compulsion in values or beliefs now; each person will receive a just and final reckoning at the proper time.

THOSE WHO REJECT THE FAITH

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Say: You who reject the faith  
I do not worship what you worship  
and you do not worship what I worship  
I am not a worshipper of what you worship  
You are not a worshipper of what I worship  
A reckoning for you and a reckoning for me

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A calligraphic style of the Basmala (In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring) in a bold, black, stylized script.A calligraphic style of the Basmala (In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring) in a bold, black, stylized script, featuring more pronounced curves and flourishes.A calligraphic style of the Basmala (In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring) in a bold, black, stylized script, with a more fluid and cursive appearance.

Three calligraphy styles presenting the phrase  
*bi smi Allah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*  
(In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring),  
which precedes each sura of the Qur'an.

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**THE OPENING**

In the name of God  
the Compassionate the Caring  
Praise be to God  
lord sustainer of the worlds  
the Compassionate the Caring  
master of the day of reckoning  
5 To you we turn to worship  
and to you we turn in time of need  
Guide us along the road straight  
the road of those to whom you are giving  
not those with anger upon them  
not those who have lost the way

*The Small Kindness* relates a series of activities in a way that grounds much of Islamic moral theology. The first act is rejecting or calling a lie the *din*, a word that can mean either the religion or the day of reckoning. Just as the word often translated as “believe” is more passive than the Qur’anic conception of holding fast to the belief or keeping the faith, so the concept of calling the reckoning (or religion) a lie is more active than standard English translations such as “unbelief.” Those who reject the reckoning – which, in early Meccan revelations, is the foundation of religion – are those who abuse the orphan, who are indifferent to those suffering in their midst, and who are neglectful in performing the prayer. This neglectfulness has been interpreted in two ways by Qur’anic commentators: either as neglecting the proper timing and posture in performing the physical movements or as performing them mechanically while thinking about other things, without following through on the implications of the prayer for other aspects of life and behavior. The second interpretation is supported by the fact that the verse on prayer is followed by two verses on self-display and neglecting the small kindness.

Display, particularly of one’s own acts of worship or piety, betrays a lack of true generosity. Self-display ends as a form of self-delusion, as a person ignores what the Qur’an announces will be ultimate in the evaluation of each life at the moment of reckoning: a genuine act of kindness, however small it might seem. There is a moral circle of causality implied in the Qur’anic passages on this issue. The refusal to acknowledge the moment of reckoning results in blindness to the small act of kindness. On the other hand, the true weight of that small act will be revealed on the day of reckoning to those who have carried it out and to those who have neglected it alike.



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## THE SMALL KINDNESS

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Do you see him who calls the reckoning a lie?  
 He is the one who casts the orphan away  
 who fails to urge the feeding of one in need  
 Cursed are those who perform the prayer  
 5 unmindfully  
 who make of themselves a big show  
 but hold back the small kindness

Because of its eloquent statement of devotion and the manner in which it pervades religious life, *The Opening* has been called the Islamic equivalent of the Lord's Prayer in Christianity. The word translated "opening," *fātiha*, means the opening in the sense of the opening of a chapter or a story. Unlike the other early hymnic Suras, *The Opening* occurs not at the end of the Qur'anic written text, but at the very beginning. It is the most recited of all Qur'anic Suras, not only in prayers and liturgy, but also in everyday life. After business transactions, for example, *The Opening* is recited by both parties as a mark of good faith and a solemn affirmation of the responsibilities affirmed by each partner.

*The Opening* is the only Sura in which the phrase "In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring" does not occur before the Sura, but is actually considered part of the Sura itself. Just as that phrase is woven into the pattern of simple activities as a form of reminder so "Praise be to God" (*al-hamdu li llāh*) has become part of everyday speech. It is used after any good news or any praise, and as a response to the greeting "How are you?"

The two qualifications of God are "lord of the worlds" (the creator deity) and "master of the day of reckoning" (the deity who brings finality to all acts and all lives). The response for those hearing or reciting *The Opening* is to turn toward God in worship and for refuge.

The "the road straight" frequently is translated as "the straight path." The term rendered here as road, *sirāt*, would have connoted something grand to the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. There are many words in Arabic for paths; the Arabs of Muhammad's time traveled through the desert on barely discernible paths. By contrast, the word *sirāt* means a paved road, such as the roads of the Romans which the Arabian travelers might come across in their journeys.

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THE STAR

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the star as it falls  
Your companion has not lost his way nor is he  
deluded  
He does not speak out of desire  
This is a revelation  
5 taught him by one of great power  
and strength that stretched out over  
while on the highest horizon –  
then drew near and came down  
two bows' lengths or nearer  
10 He revealed to his servant what he revealed  
The heart did not lie in what it saw  
Will you then dispute with him his vision?

He saw it descending another time  
at the lote tree of the furthest limit  
15 There was the garden of sanctuary  
when something came down over the  
lote tree, enfolding  
His gaze did not turn aside nor go too far  
He had seen the signs of his lord, great signs

*The Epoch* offers a condensed version of the ethos of the early Meccan revelations. There is no doctrine of original sin in Islam, no doctrine of an innate sinfulness that makes every human inherently unworthy of salvation without the saving grace of the deity. Instead, the Qur'an affirms that humankind is in a state of forgetfulness, confusion, and loss, and in need of reminder.

This Sura affirms that each human being is at a loss, except those who engage in four activities. The first activity is holding or keeping the faith (*imān*). This word is often translated as "belief," but *imān* includes not only intellectual assent to certain propositions but also engagement in just actions. These actions include 1) defending belief in the face of persecution or ridicule; 2) sharing wealth; 3) protecting those who are disinherited or in need; and 4) performing the ritual prayer, *salāt* – the second activity explicitly mentioned in this Sura. The word *imān* also has connotations of being secure or protected. In other words, to keep the faith through an active witness that exposes one to persecution and danger, is, ironically, to gain refuge.

The last two items tie two primary virtues, the seeking of truth (*haqq*) and patience (*sabr*), to the social nature of such activity, the mutual counseling and encouraging of friend to friend toward such ends.

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## THE EPOCH

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the age, the epoch  
 The human is always at a loss  
 Except those who keep the faith  
     who work justice  
     who counsel one another to truth  
     and counsel one another to patience

The first eighteen verses of The Star are considered among the earliest revelations of the Qur'an and are the most explicit reference to Muhammad's prophetic vision. The Sura begins (1-12) with the divine voice swearing by the falling star that "your companion" has not gone mad or lost his way. "Your companion" is interpreted as Muhammad. His vision is also called a revelation (*wahy*) and is explicitly said to be rooted not in desire (*hawä*), which the Qur'an associates with the inspiration of the poets (Sura 26). The object of vision is never actually described. Instead, the text evokes the process of vision by tracing a movement along the highest horizon and then a descent and drawing near to the distance of "two bows' lengths." The passage ends with an affirmation of the validity of the vision: The heart of the prophet "did not lie in what he saw." This affirmation becomes a proof text for the claim among many mystics and philosophers that the locus of spiritual vision and mystical knowledge is the heart.

In a second passage (13-18), the divine voice, referring to Muhammad again in the third person, describes another vision ("He saw it descending another time"). Here, "the lote tree of the furthest limit" is placed in or near the enigmatic "garden of sanctuary." We are told almost nothing about the tree, except that something came upon it in an enveloping manner. Of key importance is the "gaze" of the prophet, which does not "turn aside" or "go too far." This one verse became the paradigm for Islamic reflection on the proper state in contemplation. As in many evocative passages in the Qur'an, what is left unsaid is as important as what is said. Here, the power of the vision is evoked through a depiction of the gaze of the viewer, but the vision itself is never described in detail or given fixed form in a way that limits thought or imagination.

When the Qur'an states "He saw it descending another time," the antecedent of the pronoun (*hu*, it/him) is unstated, and thus the referent of the "it" is not determinable from the passage. The identity of the referent became a matter of controversy, with the debate centering upon whether or not the deity can be seen in this world. Those for whom the vision of God can only occur in the afterlife tend to interpret the it/he as referring to the messenger-angel Gabriel.

Muhammad was orphaned as a young boy and came under the protection of his grandfather. When his grandfather died, his uncle became his guardian. In a tribal society based on family and clan protection, the loss of his father and grandfather left Muhammad vulnerable to enemies in Mecca, particularly when he began reciting the Qur'anic messages that threatened the interests and beliefs of more powerful men.

In this short Sura, the Qur'anic emphasis on helping the orphaned and the disinherited is directly tied into a reminder (to Muhammad and to the listener in the more general sense) of the sufferings Muhammad experienced in his youth. Many commentators believe that this Sura was a consolation to Muhammad for the opposition and persecution he suffered as a prophet in the early Meccan years.

### THE MORNING HOURS

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the morning hours  
By the night when it is still  
Your lord has not abandoned you  
and does not hate you

5 What is after will be better  
than what came before  
To you the lord will be giving  
You will be content

Did he not find you orphaned  
and give you shelter  
Find you lost  
and guide you  
Find you in hunger  
and provide for you

10 As for the orphan -  
do not oppress him  
And one who asks -  
do not turn him away  
And the grace of your lord -  
proclaim



The bismillah invocation  
in the form of an ostrich

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**THE MOST HIGH**

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Holy be the name of your lord most high  
 Who created then gave form  
 Who determined then gave guidance  
 Who made the meadow pasture grow  
 5 then turned it to a darkened flood-swept remnant

We will make you recite. You will not forget  
 except what the will of God allows  
 He knows what is declared  
 and what lies hidden  
 He will ease you to the life of ease  
 So remind them if reminder will succeed  
 10 Those who know awe will be brought to remember  
 He who is hard in wrong will turn away  
 He will be put to the fire  
 neither dying in it nor living  
 He who makes himself pure will flourish  
 15 who remembers the name of his lord and  
 performs the prayer

But no. They prefer the lower life  
 Better is the life ultimate, the life that endures  
 As is set down in the scrolls of the ancients  
 the scrolls of Ibrahīm and Músa

The Sun begins with one of the most extended oaths of the Qur'an. The sun is portrayed surrounded by a court, in the most lyrical Qur'anic tone. The word for sun (*shams*) is grammatically feminine in Arabic and takes the grammatically feminine pronoun *hā*. By making *hā* the key rhyme word throughout the first part of the Sura, the Qur'anic voice creates a partial personification. In other words, a "gender figure" is produced. The "her" is never fully personified as a woman, but is always on the verge of such a personification.

The second part of the Sura evokes the civilization of Thamūd. For the people of Arabia, there were few symbols more potent than the tribe of Thamūd and the ruins of their great city that may have been part of the Nabataean culture whose capital was Petra, the "red rose city as old as time."

In both early Islamic poetry and the Qur'an, the destruction of Thamūd became a parable for the passing of civilizations. The poets attributed the passing of the civilization to the incessant work of fate/time (*dahr*), which wears down all things and thwarts human aspirations. The Qur'an attributed the destruction of Thamūd to the refusal of its people to heed the words of their prophet, a refusal that led to the destruction of other peoples before and after Thamūd as well.

In disobeying their prophet, Sālih, the people of Thamūd slaughtered God's camel mare. Nothing was more taboo in ancient Arabia than the unjustified killing of a camel mare. The central ritual of pre-Islamic poetry was the camel sacrifice and distribution of the meat throughout the tribe. The improper slaying of a camel mare was a sacrilege or abomination of such enormity that it led to tribal wars that lasted generations.

By slaughtering God's camel mare, the people of Thamūd committed what was by both ancient tribal standards and Qur'anic standards an abomination. The depictions of the destruction of Thamūd are also eerily similar to depictions of the events of the day of reckoning and may serve as a parable for them as well.

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THE SUN

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the sun and her brightening  
 By the moon when it follows her  
 By the day when it displays her  
 By the night when it veils her  
 5 By the sky and what constructed her  
 By the earth and what shaped her  
 By the soul and what formed her  
 and revealed her debased  
 and revealed her faithful  
 Whoever honors her flourishes  
 10 Whoever defiles her fails

The people of Thamud called truth a lie  
 in their inhumanity  
 when they sent out their worst

The messenger of God said  
 God's camel mare  
 give her water!

They called him liar  
 and hamstrung her for the slaughter  
 15 Then their lord rumbled down upon them  
 for their crime and wiped them away  
 with no fear of what came after

*The Most High* centers on a repeated theme of the early Meccan Suras: the Qur'anic text and its messenger as a "reminder." The divine voice proclaims that Muhammad can only remind but not compel his listeners to heed the reminder. God is depicted here as the one who knows what is in the open and what is hidden. This notion of the deity will be developed throughout the Qur'an by the use of divine names such as the all-seeing (*al-basir*), the all-hearing (*as-sami'*), the one who knows inside and out (*al-khabir*), and the all-knowing (*al-'alim*). The human being hides things from others and from himself. The being that knows these hidden, most intimate details, that knows ourselves better than we know ourselves, is the Qur'anic God, Allah.

Those who cannot be brought to remember their essential role and responsibility as human beings are said to prefer the lower life (*al-hayät ad-dunyä*). The word for "lower" here is also the word, when used as a noun, for "world," a meaning that has led some translators to render the phrase "the life of the world." Although there may be a play on the two senses of *dunyä* here, grammatically the term cannot mean "life of the world" and I have adhered to the more immediate meaning of the term. The other problem with terms like "life of the world" or "worldly" is that the Qur'an generally does not view the world in negative terms, seeing it instead as the gift of an infinitely generous creator that, however transitory it may be, is to be cherished rather than despised.

The final verse suggests that the central message of *The Most High* is the same one that was revealed to Abraham (Ibrähim) and Moses (Müsä).

## THE GROUND

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

I swear by this ground  
 – you have come to dwell on this ground –  
 by the begetter and by the begotten,  
 we created the human being in hardship  
 5 Does he think there is no power over him  
 He says: look at the goods I devoured  
 Does he think no one sees him

Did we not endow him with eyes  
 lips and tongue  
 10 and guide him to the two high plains

And yet he did not climb the steep pass  
 What can tell you of the steep pass?

To free a slave  
 To feed the destitute on a day of hunger  
 15 a kinsman orphan  
 or a stranger out of luck in need

Be of those who keep the faith  
 who counsel one another to patience  
 who counsel to compassion  
 They are of the right

As for those who cast our signs away  
 they are of the left  
 20 Over them a vault of fire

The oath at the beginning of *The Ground* evokes as a sign the ground, area, or region (presumably the district around Mecca, held as a sacred territory). In verse 2 it speaks directly to the prophet and indirectly to other Meccans, in stating, “you have come to dwell on this ground.” The Arab term rendered here as ground, *balad*, can mean both town and countryside and there is a difference of opinion concerning the exact area designated by the term – whether it means the town of Mecca or the territory or land on which Mecca sits. I have chosen an English term, ground, that can be as open in usage as the original Arabic. After invoking as signs this special ground and the “the begetter and the begotten,” the Sura turns to one of the fundamental messages of the early Meccan period: condemnation of indifference and callousness toward the orphaned and the poor.

The condemnation of indifference to the suffering of others is brought back to the sign of the land in a graphic manner. The emancipation of a slave or caring for the disinherited is portrayed as the climbing of a high pass, the steep, narrow, treacherous ledge that rises up along the face of desert mountains.

The Sura ends with a divine command to people to counsel one another to patience and compassion, and with a warning to those who deny the signs. The word for sign (*āya*) means both a physical sign (such as the land) and also a verse of the Qur'an. The verses of the Qur'an are both a remembrance of signs that are present throughout the world and themselves signs, which, like the signs of nature, point to a deeper reality forgotten or neglected in everyday human consciousness and endeavor.