

Radix

McGill's multi-faith newsletter

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A Project of McGill Chaplaincy Service

Transcendence

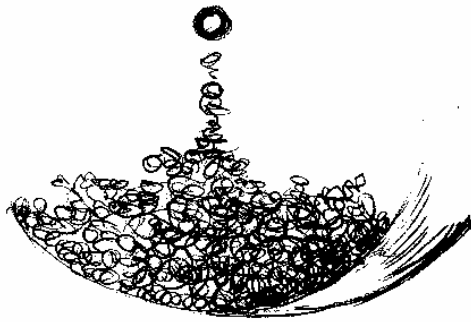
The Experience of God

Transcendence. Experiencing the divine. Tasting that sweet essence of God. For the Sikh, God has no form. God has no shape, age, race, or gender. God was never born, and will never cease to be. God is. That's it. The Sikh definition of God, found in the beginning of the Sikh scripture (the Aad Guru Granth Sahib) and the main Sikh prayer (the Mool Mantra), is not so much a definition as an anti-definition. God is told to be timeless. The face of God? Guru Nanak says the face of God is immortality. The enemy of God? God has no enemy, and god holds no enmity. So what is this God then?

One word: everything.

For a Sikh, GOD is EVERYTHING—the entire universe, and beyond. Guru Nanak was the founder of Sikhism and the first of ten Sikh Gurus. The Gurus were the Sikhs spiritual, social and political leaders. They were God-realized human beings, ten people who so fully realized God, that they almost became the divine. For a Sikh, the route to God is through the Guru. After the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, the Guruship was passed on to the Sikh scripture, which became the spiritual guidance of the Sikhs, and to the Sikh nation, the Guru Khalsa

Panth. For the Sikh, people as a whole are the Guru. And this twelfth Guru has power over the social and political world. Guru Nanak writes that God is in all, in all the species, in all the planets, in all the stars, in all the galaxies. God is everything. Yet, God is one. That one manifest God is the one and the same, everywhere.



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A Significant Act

The idea of transcendence often brings to mind something other-worldly, or beyond our normal sensory range. It is a concept that has developed in many spiritual traditions. Dictionaries remind us of where the word comes from: the prefix *trans-* from the Latin verb "to cross", or simply meaning "across", and *-scend*, from the Latin verb "to rise or climb", also the root of the English *ascend*. So, when we put the two together, we get something like "to climb across". This makes me think that transcendence is perhaps more earthly than we normally suppose. I, as a human being, am capable of transcendence in many ways. In order to climb across to a different place or reality, however, I must first be located somewhere—perhaps on the right or wrong side of the fence, or sitting on it.

Most importantly, I think, people are able to transcend the limitations of self, of being only one, small, isolated person. The results of our actions, for better or worse, transcend our own perception of them.

“...transcendence is perhaps more earthly than we normally suppose”

Beyond Food and Evil

It is now nearing the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadhan, a time when Muslims are fasting from dawn until sunset. Many people understand that such a fast involves not eating and drinking during the day, but staying away from any sinful or unjust acts is also a part of fulfilling this duty. Because Ramadhan is understood to be a time of solidifying one's faith and strengthening one's worship of God, abstaining from some things that are normally a part of everyday life and being even more vigilant about not straying from the straight path are both essential. In effect, Ramadhan is also a time to transcend routines such as eating, in order to gain an appreciation for, and perhaps even more perspective on, this and the many other blessings God has granted us in our lives.

way for believers to show their devotion to God by sacrificing an essential need. Though many Muslims also fast voluntarily at different times of the year, we believe that this month is special because God has been even more Merciful and Beneficent to us. For example, Muslims believe that during Ramadhan the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was completed. Also during this time, the gates of Hell are closed and the devils are chained up, while the gates of Heaven are opened, and each good deed is rewarded ten to seven hundred times its worth. Clearly, this is an opportunity to move beyond everyday concerns and to focus on deeds and endeavours that are pleasing to God.

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Jesus speaks of this type of transcendence in action. In speaking of his "kingdom" (Matthew 25: 31-46) he separates humanity into two categories: those who have cared for others and those who have not. Jesus sets himself, and his power, in solidarity with those who often go unnoticed or are treated as insignificant: children, homeless, elderly, women, people marginalized because of their race or lifestyle... I could go on at length. Jesus (or Matthew) clearly lays out a crystallized picture of good and bad. The good takes action, feeding those who are hungry, giving water or drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, providing clothing for the cold and naked, or visiting those who are sick or in prison. Evil is simply shown as the neglect of these actions.

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As is the case in many religions, fasting is a

Journey of a Book Lover

Jews are often called *The People of the Book*, and surely it is true. There is just something so Jewish about books.

Today this love for books is in no way confined to the Bible or Jewish books. Yet once it was the lot of each Jew, well okay, mostly the men, to engage the law and lore of their ancestors so that they too might claim their portion in the God of Jacob. They believed, like I and so many others continue to believe, that through delving into Jewish texts the very soul of God becomes available, turning study into a transcendental experience. The ancient Rabbis taught that even when one sits alone and studies, the Divine Presence is with him.

A few times a year, Jews are exhorted to do an all-nighter. The night of *Shavuot* sometime in May / June, is the king of all-nighter nights. *Shavuot* was originally an agricultural festival and some still remember it that way. For most it is a celebration of the greatest gift that God gave us: the Torah on Sinai.

“...even when one sits alone and studies, the Divine Presence is with him.”

On *Shavuot* night Jews stay up and study their collective inheritance. I remember one *Shavuot* night in Jerusalem where I was living and studying. Some people there tried to cover a little of each facet of the Torah, but for me it was important to sit and just learn. The topic didn't matter – what mattered was that I learned.

Then before dawn I joined others on the long walk to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount. Over there I was to relive, in my way and my time, the revelation of Sinai. Only this time it had moved a few mountains and was taking place in Jerusalem. Delirious on sleep deprivation, together with a head flexed by night-study, I felt close to that famed opening of the Ten Commandments, *I am the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt*. Standing at that wall and living the prophecy of return made the past more credible – until it finally collapsed into the present. Torah study is what allowed me then, and allows me today, to turn yesterday into tomorrow.

—Asher Oser

Asher is currently working on an MA in Jewish studies



ramadhan, cont'd from pg 1

To rise above the usual dedication we put into worship and other religious observances is to let ourselves get a taste of a more spiritually oriented routine, some of which will hopefully remain after Ramadhan has passed. Yet, God knows his creation and realizes that only He is truly transcendent and free of all material and physical needs. So He puts limits on what we are asked to sacrifice. Muslims are forbidden from fasting for more than sunrise to sunset in a day, or from praying continuously throughout the day and night; in addition, anyone who is ill or weak is not required to fast. Our bodies have rights over us, and fulfilling these needs with moderation also has its rewards. And so, for Muslims, transcending our everyday needs and routines through sacrifice is limited by

God's command to sustain ourselves spiritually, emotionally and physically.

One of the great joys in this month for many Muslims is the way in which it brings believers together. It is customary to eat with other people, and to find that people volunteering to cook meals for large gatherings at the end of each day's fast. In the last few years, even though Ramadhan has been within the busy final weeks of the semester, many students at McGill have gathered to break their fast in the Muslim Students' Association office, with food donated by the local community. There is no mistaking the feelings of gratefulness to God for this and His many other blessings as we sit down to a meal prepared and delivered in the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood. Finally, the greatest reminder that Ramadhan

brings about in the Muslim is that we are fragile beings who are not here on Earth for very long. Though during the day we go about our daily tasks, the few grumbles of our stomachs are a reminder that whether during Ramadhan or any other time of the year, we should first be grateful servants of God. Hence, the Muslim who fasts accepts that though there is short-term benefit and happiness in fasting, the true reward of it comes from God. To hope and strive for this greater reward is to transcend the temporary reality of existence here on Earth and to live with the hope of success in the hereafter.

—Amina Mohammed

Amina is in U3 education, and is currently teaching math to grade 7 and 9 students

Comments? Questions? Suggestions?

One of our goals at the Radix is to promote understanding and awareness and provide a place to ask questions. We want to hear from you!

If you have specific questions for any of our writers, or general questions or comments about anything related to the Radix, please write to us at

radix@yours.com

a significant act, cont'd from pg 1

It doesn't take much extra energy to figure out who's being slighted in a group situation and then make a conscious effort to include that person.

Jesus first identifies himself as that marginalized person who received, or did not receive, some sort of merciful or generous action. The “good” people ask him, “When did we see you in any of these conditions and care for you?” Likewise, the “bad” people ask him “When did we see you like this and *not* care for you?” Jesus replies that insofar as people have cared, or not, for the most insignificant person, they have cared, or not, for him.

This statement points to the transcendence that I want to talk about. Every small action that I take is inevitably in relation to someone else, and to all of humanity, even the whole earth and universe, and, yes, to God. Realizing this brings home a sense of responsibility, which is at first terrifying, but in reality is full of power.

Our hands are not tied. Period. We are free to act as the spirit moves us—to give of ourselves to those around us who are in need, despite

facing opposition in the form of perceived lack of time or energy, limited finances, ridicule, workplace discrimination, religious or political persecution... Again, I could go on at length. All it takes is one small decision. In that moment we see ourselves as simultaneously insignificant and of utmost significance. The whole world focuses to a single, clear point, and we know that we are in the presence of something bigger than we can possibly understand.

Climb across the fences, or tear them down. Don't just sit on them.

—Loren R Carle *Loren is in the first year of his licentiate in organ*



The View from Down Here



Call for Submissions:

The **Radix** is looking for submissions by McGill students for future issues.

Upcoming themes include:

Body—Print date: January 25

Spiritual Teachers—

Print date: Feb 25

Art and Music

Symbols, Places of Worship

(dates subject to change)

If you have an idea for an article, book review, poem or artwork, contact the Radix editor at

“Hey Tali, wanna write this article for me?”
“An article?” My friend Tali raised her eyebrows. “Man, I don’t even have enough time to do my own schoolwork. An article about what?” “Transcendence.” I replied.

Tali paused for a moment. She then looked me straight in the eye and grinned, “You wanna transcend the world...go smoke a joint!”

Together, we burst out laughing. “That’s just great Tali” I said sarcastically, “I can see it now: *The Jewish Perspective on Transcendence—Go Smoke a Joint!*” I moved on in my search for a potential writer for the Radix.

With the deadline fast approaching, and still not even a hint of an article in sight, I was becoming more and more frustrated and almost decided to give up. And then, on Shabbos*, it came to me, like a bolt of lightning: Tali was absolutely right!

There are a countless number of ways to “transcend” the constraints of our physical world. Some people spend literally decades in caves in deep meditative practices. Others use art, music, poetry or even exercise to try to achieve this lofty ideal. But truly, if transcendence is to be thought of as an end in itself, it seems to me that there is a far quicker and simpler way to arrive there...

I realized why I was having such a difficult time trying to write an article about the Jewish perspective on *Transcendence*. Judaism places little emphasis on transcendence per se, at least as a goal in and of itself. If the whole point had been just to shed ourselves of our perceived individual identities and become One with the All, then why the need to have us descend into this “illusion” of a world in the first place? Indeed, if ALL is truly ONE and ONE is truly ALL, then what difference does it make in the grand scheme of things whether or not

bother trying to lead any sort of “moral” life at all? If all actions, creations and essentially EVERYTHING is really the same anyhow, how can anyone dare even *suggest* a preferred method as to how a person is to conduct her/his life?

A man by the name of Rabbi Shniur Zalman of Liadi (otherwise known as the *Alter Rebbe*, or the Old Rabbi - the first *Rebbe* in the Chabad Lubavitch dynasty) addresses these questions and other related ones in his work, *Shaar HaYichud Ve’HaEmunah (The Gate of Unity and Faith)*. His answer: the world, while truly having no intrinsically independent existence apart from its Creator, *does* exist, as do all of its inhabitants. There are two basic forces underlying all of our reality—revelation and concealment. Revelation is the hidden life force within all of creation; the power of concealment is what allows each creature to enjoy its own independent existence without being nullified in its source. Both are G-dly, and in essence, they are really one and the same.

So if G-d put us here, it must be for a reason. And in so doing, He must have left us with some sort of instruction manual as to what our purpose here is. Our guide in Judaism is the Torah: the blueprint of our universe and G-d’s will made manifest in words. Torah teaches us that we exist for the single purpose of making a dwelling place for G-d in the physical world, through performing certain acts that he commands us to do—acts that allow G-d’s Oneness to be manifest *down here*. A much more difficult, yet purposeful task than smoking a joint—or something else of that nature.

—Sarede Switzer

Sarede is in U2 Psychology at McGill

* Shabbos is the Jewish day of rest, celebrated on Saturday



we “tap into” this reality or not? In fact, why

experience of God, cont’d from pg 1

How can such a God be experienced? A God so beyond human comprehension? While embracing the sciences fully, Sikhism is clear that no amount of rational thought or research can yield a definition of God. God is beyond the constraints of the human mind. To humanize God is to put limitations on God—it is to put God in human terms, and thus, God ceases to be something beyond our scope. God has become mundane and human, not grand and transcendent.

The answer to how a God beyond definition can be experienced is simple: through love.

God is love, and to experience love is to experience God. This is what the Sikh Gurus preach. How is our love for God shown? Two key ways: meditation and service. Meditation on God is integral, as is music. Singing the poetry of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib is at the heart of Sikhism. Music is seen as the key to instilling love of God in the human heart, and that divine music (*kirtan*), when coupled with meditation, is the key to experiencing the transcendent. But it is not enough. In fact, it’s only half of the picture—the other half is just as integral. Service



manity (and for all species in fact) is integral for a religious life. Without service, there is no spirituality. Sikhism does not advocate a break in religious and social spheres; instead, a Sikh is taught to incorporate religion into her everyday life. That is essential. A Sikh must be a productive and positive member of society, and to be such a member, selfless service is integral.

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This service takes two routes: providing for people’s basic human needs, and fighting for people’s basic political rights. Both are needed. People need freedom of choice, freedom of thought, freedom of religion and freedom of speech, but those rights are useless if they do not have food, shelter or health care. Both are necessary.

A Sikh’s life has two purposes: to become one with the Divine God that is in and around us all, and to leave this world a better place than when we found it.

—Santbir Singh

Santbir is a U1 Sociology student



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