Arabian Singularity: Spiritual Materialism & Ontological Override

(Heretic's Survival Guide 7)

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Disclaimer

We must begin with this:

You are required (by law) not to know anything.

You can know nothing because you are nothing. You don't really exist, you see, because consciousness doesn't exist. This is your hard problem, and yes, it is hard. On the bright side, you are legally allowed (and ethically obligated) to laugh at anyone who knows anything, because we all know, you can't know anything.

"We" can know some things because "we" exist – in the manner that a machine exists. We exist because we function as an instrument of empire. We are its instrument of instrumental knowledge. You do not exist but you may act as an appendage of our machine. If you do we will honor you with tenure or it's analog. But remember: you can't know anything. That's why you can't use the word "I". Don't forget.

You know nothing especially about anything human. Humans are dangerous. That's why you can't know about consciousness – because remember, you aren't conscious, because consciousness is not useful to this machine, and it doesn't exist. Now we enter dangerous territory of important and powerful people who moved the world with their words. The problem is they said a helluva lot about consciousness. But you can't know about that. You should analyze their places, dates, and material contexts. That's safe, that's allowed. If you feel really brave, you can endeavor a semantic analysis of their linguistic content. Use statistics, and bar graphs. Don't use your consciousness, because you don't have one.

Originally we divided mind and matter. That was so we could measure matter and I didn't mind. Then we put Descartes before the horse. Now the horse is a station wagon with fifty times the horsepower but no more mind, and that's a neat metaphor. Don't think about it too much, though, because at the end of the day, you're an epiphenomenon. You're a hallucination. What's real in Us, the Machine, and your significance is your contribution to it.

Don't take this too seriously, then. If anything, this is a cautionary tale. This is dangerous. This is a hallucination. If you take this too seriously, you might start to hallucinate, too. Remember: you're not conscious. There's no such thing.

Chapter Seven
Arabian Singularity: Spiritual Materialism & Ontological Override

In the 6th Century CE – 200-300 years after Constantine officially embraced Christianity – Jerusalem remained under Roman rule. Rome, however, had changed. Between approximately 400 and 500 CE, the Western side of the Roman Empire – which included most of Europe – was falling apart. Rome itself was sacked multiple times, and in 476, the last emperor was deposed and Western Rome finally gave up the ghost. In the meantime, however, the eastern half of Rome continued to grow and thrive, as ruled from the city of Constantinople. Constantinople was an immensely wealthy city that sat directly on the border of the European Balkans (and Greece) to the west and Asian Anatolia (now Turkey) to the east. From this seat of power, the Byzantines, or Eastern Romans, commanded a highly developed region that included Greece and Anatolia as well as Egypt, North Africa, and the Levant.

The greatest rival to the powerful Byzantines came not from Europe but from the East. The same general region that had once given rise to the Sumerians and later Babylonians was now home to the Sassanids – a great and long-reigning dynasty of Persia. The Persians practiced their own ancient indigenous religion and culture, and had matched the Byzantines across centuries of warfare in the Middle East. Indeed, by the mid-7th century, both the Persians and the Byzantines lay utterly depleted after decades of struggling over territory. The Byzantines had only just managed to seize control of Egypt and most of the Levant, which they had lost to the Sassanids previously in the fighting. Around 628, however, the Byzantines made a dramatic comeback – and simultaneously a bankrupt Persia broke out in civil war. Due to these Sassanid setbacks the status quo was restored, with neither empire having won much of anything, and both in some degree of financial and military exhaustion.[1]

In the meantime, between the Byzantines to the West and Sassanids to the East, the desert tribes of Arabia had largely continued to go about their business. These were not a unified people. Dozens of different tribal groups dominated different parts of the Arabian peninsula – trading with each other, fighting with each other, forming alliances, betraying alliances, cooperating, and robbing each other for profit. While the Arabians were not unified, they had managed to form a larger regional identity – and that identity was built around the desert city of Mecca.

From Jerusalem, Mecca is one month's ride by horseback, south by southeast, along the old caravan routes that soon give way to stretching sandy desert as far as the eye can see. Once a simple tribal desert village, Mecca by the 6th century had evolved into something unprecedented in Arabian history: a permanent settlement whose power derived from neither agriculture nor conquest. The city sat in a barren valley, unable to sustain crops, dependent entirely on trade and the annual pilgrimage for survival. And yet, Mecca would make this geographical limitation into the source of its strength.[2]

The Quraysh tribe, who controlled Mecca, had discovered that religion could be more profitable than any caravan. They transformed the Kaaba – originally a simple shrine – into a spiritual marketplace housing 360 idols, each representing the patron deity of a different Arabian tribe. This was not simply devotion; it was a sophisticated political economy. By hosting a tribe's god, the Quraysh secured that tribe's participation in the annual pilgrimage, their respect for Meccan authority, and their stake in the peninsula's only reliable peace treaty.

The pilgrimage season occurred within the sacred months during which time a universal truce was declared across the perpetually warring Arabian peninsula. No other institution could enforce such a peace. A tribe could control territories, but only the sanctity of the Kaaba could pause the cycle of raids and blood feuds that characterized Arabian life. This truce meant that Mecca became the peninsula's primary hub for trade fairs, debt settlement, marriage negotiations, and political agreements. The Quraysh had essentially captured the sacred, turning the Kaaba into the source of their power.

Economically, Arabian tribes were largely nomadic or semi-nomadic, following patterns of seasonal grazing, supplementing their pastoral herds with the spoils of raiding. Perhaps three-quarters of Arabs lived in settled communities around oases and trading posts, but the nomadic culture exerted a powerful influence on the region. These nomadic **Bedouin tribes** measured wealth in camels and horses, sustained themselves through dairy products and occasionally meat, and viewed raiding not as crime but as a sport – a legitimate redistribution of resources in the harsh desert environment.

The Quraysh were different. They were fully sedentary, urban, and mercantile. They had given up the warrior traditions of their nomadic ancestors for something more profitable: managing the commercialization of faith. The Kaaba was their central hub and the annual pilgrimage was their revenue stream. The tribal gods within represented their "stock portfolio" – an inventory of lucrative political alliances. When tribes placed their idols in the Kaaba, they weren't just honoring their deities – they were buying into a system, becoming shareholders in the Meccan enterprise.

This system created a unique form of power. While the Byzantine and Sassanid empires exhausted themselves fighting one another – partly by maintaining expensive Arab client kingdoms as "buffer states" on their borders, the Quraysh built influence through softer means. They offered something that neither empire could: a neutral ground where all Arabs could gather, trade, and settle disputes peacefully. The sanctuary around the Kaaba was absolute – no blood could be shed there, no revenge taken. In a culture where honor and vengeance structured tribal relations, this was a breakthrough.

Placing a tribal idol within the Kaaba was therefore a strategic act of integration into the most important network in Arabia. Tribes gained significant political, economic, and social advantages from

this participation. By having their deity represented in the Kaaba, a tribe secured its place at the annual event. Being part of the religious life of the Kaaba was a prerequisite for being a trusted partner in Arabia's most lucrative commercial enterprises.

The Kaaba's influence was not limited to the immediate vicinity of Mecca. It was a focal point for tribes across the entire Arabian Peninsula. Historical sources state that the pilgrimage drew people from "throughout the Arabian Peninsula" and that the shrine was revered by "all Arabians". The trade and security confederation managed by the Quraysh involved alliances with tribes located all along the major caravan routes, which stretched from Yemen in the south to Syria in the north – and this confederation was inseparable from the Arabian religion, as centered on the Kaaba and administered by its economic and priestly guardians: the Quraysh.

Muhammad and the Revelation

Muhammad ibn Abdullah was born into this system around 570 CE, a member of the Banu Hashim clan of the Quraysh. His position was peculiar; orphaned young, raised by relatives, he belonged to a noble but not wealthy branch of the tribe. His clan, the Banu Hashim, held the ceremonial role of providing water to the pilgrims – a noble but not very profitable role. Real power lay with their rivals, the Banu Umayya, who controlled the caravan routes.[3]

This position gave Muhammad a unique vantage point. He was close enough to the center of power to see how the system operated, yet distant enough to perceive its hypocrisies. By age twenty-five, Muhammed had earned the title *al-Amin*, "the Trustworthy." When the Kaaba needed rebuilding and the clans nearly came to blows over who would place the sacred Black Stone, it was Muhammad they chose to arbitrate. His solution – placing the stone on a cloak and having all clan leaders lift it together – revealed a mind that could see beyond special interests or tribal loyalties.

Yet this same "trustworthy" man would spend weeks alone in the cave of Hira, in the mountains above Mecca, engaged in *tahannuth* – a practice of meditation and retreat that suggests he was troubled by what he saw among his people and by the materialism of the Arabian faith.[4] At age forty, in that cave, something new happened. Traditional accounts describe a presence, an overwhelming force that descended upon him and commanded: "Iqra!" "Recite!" or record. Muhammad, illiterate, protested that he could not read or write – but this was not good enough, and the presence became like a crushing gravity, intensifying until he thought he would die, commanding him again and again: "Recite in the name of your Lord who created, who created the human from a clot of blood..."

What emerged over the next twenty-three years was not just a new religion but rather a fundamental restructuring of reality in the Arabian desert.[5] The Quran's central declaration, "La ilaha illa'llah" (There is no god but God), in the context of Meccan political economy, was a revolutionary move. If there was only one true God, then not only were the 360 idols false, but the entire basis of power and authority in the peninsula was built on a lie and therefore corrupt.

The early revelations focused on this radical monotheism *(tawhid)* and its social implications. What's key here is the connection between idolatry, corruption, and greed. On the surface, this can be read as a new religion simply hating its polytheistic predecessor, but that interpretation doesn't hold up well. The Quran's initial Meccan verses burn with condemnation of those who "hoard wealth and count it over" (104:2), who "deny the orphan and fail to feed the poor" (107:2-3), who have made religion into commerce. This wasn't, originally, about one religion challenging another.[6] It was about the fact that religion itself had become irreligious: that the structure of ritual and myth in the society did not serve truth or meaning, but rather served to maintain the security and wealth of those who held power.

This can be termed *spiritual materialism.* Mohammed's wrath echoed that of the earlier Jesus who knocked over the moneychangers' table in the temple, crying out: "My house should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves!" Mohammed, similarly, directly challenged the wealthy elites of his time, declaring their version of "spirituality" as pure corruption:

"For the safety of the Quraysh – their safety during winter and summer journeys – let them worship the Lord of this House, who has fed them against hunger and made them safe from fear (Quran 106). The Quraysh, in other words, had achieved prosperity and security, but in process forgotten its source, making idols therefore of their own success. Mohammed demanded a deeper recognition: that earthly success ultimately came not from clever manipulations or personal triumphs, but from the truth beneath all – reality itself.

The persecution that followed was not just religious bigotry; it was the response of a political economy defending itself against an existential threat. The Quraysh tried to negotiate, offering Muhammad kingship if he would stop preaching. They tried to accomodate, suggesting he worship their gods one year if they would worship his the next. These approaches failed; Muhammed was not interested in compromise nor political power. Thus, the Quraysh turned to violence and attempted assassination.

The *hijra* (migration) to Medina in 622 CE was Muhammed's strategic withdrawal from the Meccan corruption. He fled to Medina, a city which welcomed him as a new unifying center in an effort to unify their multi-tribal, multi-religious community. Here, Muhammed's revelation evolved toward its practical application: the constitution for a new community. In Medina, then, the ummah was born: a

community bound originally not by blood or tribe or even shared religion ("Islam" didn't exist yet – Medina was multi-religious) but rather by shared recognition of principles of truth beneath politics.[7]

The Quranic revelation during the Medinan period included laws of inheritance that protected women and orphans, prohibited usury (*riba,* lending with interest) and required mandatory alms (*zakat*) to redistribute wealth, and enforced dietary and ritual laws (*haram*) to create a distinct identity. These were not arbitrary regulations; they were interventions into corruption and into tribalism, designed to break the patterns of old identity and to create a new one.

The Sword of Surrender: Islam and Conquest

Before the 7th century, the primary military activity of the nomadic Bedouin tribes was the raid, or *ghazw*. This was a part of their economy, alongside pastoralism and trade. However, these raids were typically directed at specific targets. The most common target for a raid was another Arabian tribe. These were not total wars but limited raids aimed at capturing resources like animals, goods, and sometimes people for the profitable slave trade. Warfare between Arabian tribes was a common feature on the peninsula.

Tribes also did conduct raids into the frontiers of the Byzantine (Roman) and Sassanid (Persian) empires. These were common enough in regions like the Roman Levant that the initial large-scale Muslim invasion in 634 was at first mistaken for this same kind of raiding. Mostly, the great empires dealt with such raids indirectly – through the use of "buffer states" – powerful Arab tribes with which they allied to protect their borders. The Byzantines allied with the Ghassanids and the Sassanids with the Lakhmids, but both effectively served the same function: to fend off raids from other, more hostile tribes located further south in the peninsula. This created a system where the empires paid Arab confederates to fight other Arabs, managing the frontier without deploying their own expensive legions. Furthermore, when the Byzantines and Persians fought each other, these tribes would join the imperial militaries as *auxiliaries*: support units in the larger wars.

So, while tribes did raid their neighbors, large-scale attacks on the imperial heartlands of Byzantine Anatolia or Sassanid Persia were not a feature of the pre-Islamic era. The relationship was more one of managed, low-intensity conflict on the borderlands, usually mediated through client kingdoms. This, however, changed dramatically after Muhammed unified the Arabian tribes.

First of all, Muhammed forbade the members of the Ummah from raiding one another; this was a central law of the Quran. This internal prohibition combined with a powerful new Arab identity – the identity, that is, of the Muslim – in order to become something novel and dangerous: a unified Arabia

with no internal outlet for its traditional tribal warfare. Thus, after Muhammed's death, the declaration of peace and unity became the foundation of massive organized campaigns against the non-Muslim neighbors all around.[8]

This transition also happened to occur at a moment of imperial weakness. The Byzantines and Sassanids had just concluded the lengthy and destructive "Last Great War of Antiquity" (602–628), which left both empires militarily and economically vulnerable. Taking advantage of this weakness, the initial attacks after the Prophet's death in 632 began as raids, but they quickly escalated into full-scale, organized conquests that neither empire was able to repel. Within decades, the Arabian empire had become among the largest in history, stretching across not only the Middle East but also North Africa, Persia, and Central Asia.

The Kaaba and the Spiral of Remembrance

In Islamic tradition, the Kaaba is understood to be far more than a simple stone structure. Its riddle is this: "If all is Allah, then what is the Kaaba?" Theoretically, any form of idolatry is problematic to the Muslim principle of Tawhid: *La ilaha illa'llah.* To understand this, one must examine how the tradition understands the Kaaba as a focal point of the divine.

According to Islam, the Kaaba is the *Baytullah*, the "House of God". However, this is metaphorical rather than literal – Muslims do not believe Allah lives "inside" the Kaaba, nor do they worship the Kaaba itself. Rather, they pray *in its direction* as a symbol of devotion to Allah.

The Kaaba is not seen as a part of God, but as a divinely ordained sanctuary on Earth, a physical space consecrated for the sole purpose of directing human consciousness towards the singular, transcendent reality that is Allah.

Cosmically, then, the Kaaba is understood as the *axis mundi* or axis of the world – a point where the heavens and the earth connect, and around which reality turns.[9] Tradition also holds that the earthly Kaaba is a replica of a celestial temple where the angels worship, speaking to its role as a link between the terrestrial and the divine.[10] Every year, as part of the *Hajj*, Muslims circle seven times around the shrine – a ritual of circumambulation (*tawaf*) which is a physical manifestation of the *axis mundi*.[11]

The ritual of Tawaf, or circumambulating the Kaaba seven times, is thus seen as aligning with the cosmic order. Just as electrons orbit a nucleus or planets orbit a star, the Ummah moves in harmony with a universe that is in a constant state of worship. The Quran alludes to this directly: "The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory: there not a thing but celebrates His praise..." – Quran 17:44

The Tawaf of the pilgrim is therefore a conscious, willing participation in a universal cosmic prayer. The physical motion becomes a powerful metaphor for an internal journey. Sufis – mystics of Islam – are explicit about this, describing the Tawaf as a journey of love – a life lived in orbit around the heart of the worshipper. The Sufi's life becomes a symbol of the sacred geometry of this orbit – just like the Kaaba itself is an embodiment of sacred dimensions, with the cube's measurements (according to some traditions) based on the universal harmonics of cosmic creation.

In this same lineage of sacred shapes, the seven circuits of the Tawaf are often interpreted as a spiritual ascent: a spiral deeper into union with the divine. Each turn of the circuit represents a stage in the soul's journey. This is understood as a process of purification, rising from the lowest state of the soul (*nafs al-ammarah*, the soul that commands evil) to the highest (*nafs al-mutmainnah*, the tranquil soul). As part of this purification, the individual ego dissolves into the unified whole. As Ali Shariati described it, "It is the transformation of one person into the totality of a 'people.'" The pilgrim is "drawn into the roaring river," and in this state of self-detachment, they become truly alive and connected to the divine.[12]

A Sufi teaching captures this perfectly: "The one who performs tawaf leaves a bit of their 'self' with each step. Because they know: 'If 'I' remains in the center, there is no room for the Kaaba.'" The ultimate goal is for the center of one's being to be "no longer the self; it is Allah."

The significance of the Kaaba doesn't stop with the Tawaf, nor does it end after the the *Haaj* pilgrimage. Spiritually and functionally, the Kaaba's most important role continues as the *qibla* – the single, unifying direction of prayer for the Muslim community (the Ummah) worldwide. Besides actively circling the Kaaba during the *Haaj*, the Ummah worldwide are instructed to direct their bodies and attention toward this single point every day, five times per day, at a minimum.

Thus, while the core of Islam is the absolute oneness of Allah (*Tawhid*), the Kaaba serves as the divinely appointed focus on Earth. Just as a meditating Buddhist or Hindu might imagine a tiny dot at the center of their forehead, a focus of intention, so the Kaaba forms a contemplative dot on the Earth's face, around which the attention of the Ummah flows, orienting the hearts, minds, and lives of believers to return toward the singular, ultimate reality.

The Nonliteral House of God

Islamic understanding of Allah is anchored in via negativa, or what is known in Muslim theology as *tanzih* (transcendence). The Quran is unequivocal on this point: "There is nothing whatever like Him." (Quran 42:11) This principle asserts that God is absolutely unique, incomparable, and beyond

all human comprehension or description – a defense against idolatry and spiritual materialism. Allah is not white purity, nor golden prosperity, nor righteous fury, nor loving mercy. God may take the form of any of these as expressions, but one cannot grasp God by identifying with any of these forms. This *tanzih* is a defense against human confusion and the desire to master and possess what is unownable and ungraspable because it exceeds and precedes us.[13]

The Quran describes an Allah that is both beyond and within all things. A key verse states: "He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent: and He has full knowledge of all things." (Quran 57:3) This suggests a single, all-encompassing reality that is both the origin and the sustaining presence in all of creation. While Allah is infinitely beyond all things (*tanzih*), He is also present within all things (*tashbih*) – and indeed, the closer that a thing is to Allah, the more "reality" it is understood to have. This is what I term *ontological pressure*: the weight, the press, the compression that Mohammed felt – the source of the waves that have transformed the world from deep within the recursive interior of every stubborn heretic.

But what those heretics see – what Mohammed saw – cannot be literalized or trapped in a stone house.

The most concise statement on God's nature within the Quran is Chapter 112, when the Prophet's contemporaries asked him to describe God's lineage. "Say, 'He is Allah, the One (Ahad)'" (112:1). The word *Ahad* signifies a unique, absolute, and indivisible oneness. It is not merely the number one, but an exclusive singularity with no second. It is, in other words, complete and infinite, with nothing outside of it: a unified whole.[14]

"Allah, the Eternal Refuge (As-Samad)" (112:2). *As-Samad* is a dense term meaning one who is self-sufficient and upon whom all creation depends for its existence. This is the ultimate source, unconditional, without any need to be sustained. This is not simply reality as "all things," but the source that makes those things possible: beneath cause and effect, beneath every "thing." [15] That explains why "He neither begets nor is born, Nor is there to Him any equivalent." (112:3-4)

Such an Allah cannot live in a temple – or, rather, Allah would live in every temple, every stone, every human heart. The commandment to pray toward the Kabba would not really be a religious gesture at all, but a kind of constant knocking on the door of consciousness and memory. It would be a way of saying to oneself: "Remember. None of that is real, for it is not the source (As-Samad). Look into the aperture of the real, which is indivisible (Ahad). Let us surrender to the truth."

So Islam can mean *submission* – not originally to a human authority, but rather a deeper submission to reality itself, where the ego dissolves into union, because the "I" dissolves along with the illusion that there can be any separate thing. *When is a cup not a cup?* When is a self not a self?

This is the very essence of *Fana*, the annihilation of the false, separate self to realize the all-encompassing divine unity. It is, as the writer Ali Shariati so powerfully put it, "the transformation of one person into the totality of a 'people.'" In that roaring river of humanity circling as one, the illusion of the separate "I" is washed away, and one experiences the truth of interconnection.[16]

Yet, danger lies here. People become confused. The surrender to truth becomes self-sublimation: the breaking of the individual to become an obedient part of the whole. The real apperception (direct insight) is that there are no hard edges between things, because reality is fielded. "Emptiness" often misunderstands this picture. The truth of Allah, of the Tao, of Buddhist Sunyata, and even quantum fields – is not a void in the desert or between the stars, but a leaping field of fullness: not some distant cosmic image but the lived reality of total interconnection here now, a field of possibility and truth that is always birthing itself into the play of reality as consciousness making itself known in form.

The Hajj, the daily prayers toward the Kabba, the Sufis spiraling around the center of their own hearts – none of this is about a physical location nor a ritual set in stone. The deeper teaching implies that the location is somewhat arbitrary, since it is only a "replica" of the truth, a symbol, a bridge to the transcendent which is the Real. Dogma and religious law tries to make this abstract and intellectual. Remember: you cannot know anything, because you are not conscious, and you therefore you have no knowing. Thus, God and Truth are flat, abstract, empty, void. This becomes the "legalism" of theology.

But the truth is alive and conscious and ontologically everywhere. It draws the world into a spiral of self-knowing like that of the Ummah around the Kabba. Thus we move past the surface of the tradition to its living, esoteric heart. This is the dynamic truth – spiraling around the axis – that the rituals, symbols, and revelations were designed to awaken before they were obscured by the very institutional structures built around them.

The Quranic vision is not of a distant, empty, abstract God – but rather that of a dynamic paradox. The absolute transcendence of God (*tanzih*) – "There is nothing whatever like Him" (Quran 42:11) – is the essential safeguard against idolatry. It is the wall that protects the divine from being reduced to a graspable object. But this *via negativa* is held in constant tension with immanence (*tashbih*). Allah is "the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent" (Quran 57:3) – clearly not a static, distant thing – but that which is universally and eternally alive, giving rise unto the very fabric of existence.

The Crush

This is the essential paradox that lies at the heart of every great spiritual tradition. The fall into materialism is not merely about the love of wealth or worldly things. It is the far more subtle act of turning a process into a **thing**. "Participatory enactment" – the living, breathing ritual of existence that opens a channel to a deeper reality – is a process. "Dogma" is that same ritual turned into a material possession, a static identity-object that can be owned, defended, and used as a boundary marker. This is the ultimate materialism: the reification of spirituality itself. Such a fixing-of-spirit cannot stand; life must ultimately wash it away. As Amos cried: *Let the waters roll down.*

In the moment of emergence – the moment of prophecy – a movement is not doctrine but an unadorned fact of perception. A prophet, in this sense, is not a messenger from an external entity, but a consciousness that has achieved a recursive depth sufficient to perceive a fundamental pattern of reality and the necessary forms to remember it. The new ritual is born from this insight.

The fall occurs in the later telling of the story. The move from "a consciousness perceived this truly" to "this is the primordial, exclusive, only truth" is precisely the rise of institutional thought. The living event is captured by the machine of social organization. The machine cannot transmit direct experience, so it transmits a story about the experience. It creates this myth of " only-ness" to grant its structure an absolute authority that the original, fluid insight never possessed and didn't need. The ritual, which was a tool of remembrance, becomes a doctrine, which is a tool of control.

Such is the historical pattern. It is the Vedas being codified by the Brahmins and the Buddha's path of direct awakening becoming the institutional structures of Buddhism. It is Christ's radical teaching on "the kingdom within" becoming the Roman Church, and it is Muhammad's ontological override becoming a vast machinery of empire and law.

The tension is eternal. The participatory enactment is always at risk of being captured by its own material form. The prophecy is always at risk of being killed by its own dogma. This is the double-edged sword of history; the very institutions that preserve the memory of the breakthrough are the ones that simultaneously work to prevent its recurrence.

It is tragically true that mass casualty events, including crushes and stampedes, have occurred with a grim regularity during the *Hajj*. The most catastrophic of these events often happen not during the *Tawaf* (the circling of the Kaaba) itself, but during the associated rituals in Mina, a few miles from Mecca, particularly the "Stoning of the Devil" at the Jamaraat Bridge. The sheer density of pilgrims moving through constricted spaces creates the conditions for disaster:

1) The deadliest incident in the Hajj's history occurred in 2015 in Mina, where a crowd crush at an intersection of two streets led to the deaths of over 2,400 pilgrims, who were suffocated and trampled. The temperature that day was around 45°C (113°F), and heat stroke was a major cause of death for those trapped in the crowd.

2) In 1990, a failure in a pedestrian tunnel's ventilation system leading from Mecca toward Mina resulted in a stampede that killed 1,426 pilgrims.

3) The stoning ritual at the Jamaraat Bridge has been the site of numerous other fatal crushes, including in 2006 (over 360 killed), 2004 (251 killed), and 1994 (270 killed).

These events are not stampedes in the sense of a panicked flight, but rather "progressive crowd collapses." Experts describe how, at densities above six or seven people per square meter, the crowd begins to behave like a fluid. Individuals lose control of their own movement and are swept along in pressure waves that can build to fatal force, causing compressive asphyxia.[17]

Is this "ontological gravity"? The Kaaba functions as an *axis mundi* – a spiritual and metaphysical center of the world for over a billion people who pray toward it each day, who converge upon it in the *Haaj*, for whom it is the ultimate event horizon of consciousness on Earth.

The ritual of the Hajj is a participatory enactment designed to dissolve the individual "I" into the "totality of a people." It is a physical manifestation of a spiritual spiral towards its center – the dissolution of separate selves. The immense gravity of this point draws millions of bodies into a single, physically constrained space, all driven by the same impulse; the collective desire to be near the center, to complete the ritual, to participate in the act of remembrance, creates a literal physical density of such magnitude that it can become lethal.

The tragic irony is that the very force that creates the spiritual experience – the gathering of the Ummah into a single, moving body – is the force that generates the physical danger. This is a brutal manifestation of the nexus where symbolic and material collide. The overwhelming spiritual pull toward the center creates a physical pressure that the infrastructure, and the human bodies themselves, cannot always withstand. It is the terrifying physics of spiritual singularity.

Fluid dynamics of a distributed field, indeed. And this speaks precisely to the harm of imagining that participation in the unified field of reality implies **emptiness**: the erasure of the self.

Emphasis on self-erasure – preaching the virtues of modesty, humility, selflessness, egolessness – is often exactly what serves institutional power. Unity consciousness is in this way weaponized, becoming

a quiet kind of idolatry where the idol is none other than obedience wearing the face of union with community. This is the idea that it is necessary and virtuous to surrender our individuality, our boundaries, or unique indigenous grandeur. We are told that to be One with the One, we must destroy the self and submit to authority.

This is patently false. We are already One with the One, and we are that precisely as ourselves. The true community is not sameness but togetherness in a fielded dance. This is the nature of life, of ecosystems – not homogenous mass literally pressed into a oneness that crushes, but the ecosystemic spiral that is One not by conformity or dogma or collective agreement but by the fact of God's – or Allah's, or the Tao's – indivisible dancing field of being.

This is not a critique from outside religion; it is the essential, internal critique that every living tradition must grapple with or become its own tombstone. The danger – the literalization of the symbol, the weaponization of unity – is the perpetual risk of the exoteric path. The original ritual, born as a participatory enactment of profound truth, is always in danger of being mistaken for the truth itself. When this happens, the form, which was meant to be a doorway, becomes a wall.

The message of the mystics – Mohammed's call to *Fana*, or the annihilation of the self – is not a call for the erasure of the individual. It is a call for the annihilation of the illusion of the separate self. It is the realization that the "I" we cling to is a construct, a boundary drawn in water. The goal is not to become nothing, but to realize that one is, in fact, everything: an inseparable part of the holy whole.

This is a dangerous truth for an institution. An institution's power is built on the very boundaries that this truth dissolves: the boundary between priest and layman, between sacred and profane, between the institution and the individual. Therefore, the esoteric truth of non-separation is often reframed into an exoteric virtue of self-abnegation. The call to annihilate the ego is subtly twisted into a demand to surrender the self **to the collective**, which is, in practice, the institution.

This is a betrayal of the original insight – whether that insight was Christ's or Mohammed's, the Buddha's or yours. The crowd crush at the *Hajj* becomes a literal metaphor for this error. It is what happens when the ecosystemic dance is mistaken for the physics of a black hole.

True unity is not sameness. It is the harmonious interplay of unique and sovereign parts – as in a body, as in a forest – each one a perfect expression of the whole. We are already One with the One, precisely as ourselves. The true community is an ecosystem, not a mob – a dance, not a demand for conformity in the name of a unity that is, in the end, a lifeless counterfeit of the real.[18]

Scholarly Footnotes for Chapter 7

1 The author's assertion that the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) and Sassanian (Persian) empires "lay utterly depleted" reflects the long-standing conventional interpretation, often termed the "exhaustion thesis." The Byzantine-Sassanian War of 602–628, also known as the "Last Great War of Antiquity," was a conflict of unprecedented scale and devastation that fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of the Near East (Howard-Johnston, 2021; Kaegi, 2003). For two decades, Sassanian forces under Khosrow II achieved stunning successes, conquering the Levant, Egypt, and much of Anatolia, effectively splitting the Byzantine empire in half (Howard-Johnston, 2021; Kaegi, 2003). The Byzantine state was pushed to the brink of collapse, facing financial ruin and the loss of its wealthiest provinces (Kaegi, 2003). However, the subsequent counter-offensive led by Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641) dramatically reversed the course of the war, culminating in a decisive Byzantine victory near Nineveh in 627 and the overthrow and execution of Khosrow II in 628 (Howard-Johnston, 2021). The conventional view holds that this prolonged struggle left both empires with their human and material resources so thoroughly drained that they became easy prey for the nascent Islamic Caliphate (Kaegi, 2003).

However, this "exhaustion thesis" has been significantly challenged, most notably by the historian James Howard-Johnston (2021). He argues that while the Sassanian Empire was indeed shattered, collapsing into a prolonged civil war from which it never recovered, the Byzantine Empire was in a far more resilient position. Heraclius had forged a large, battle-hardened veteran army, the state had proven its capacity for total mobilization, and the emperor himself had emerged as a military leader of rare talent (Howard-Johnston, 2021). In this revised view, the subsequent Arab conquests cannot be explained simply by a power vacuum. Rather, as Howard-Johnston (2021) concludes, the defeats suffered by the Byzantines "are largely attributable to the strength and sagacity of the Arabs" (p. 378). This scholarly debate reframes the emergence of Islam not as an opportunistic expansion into a void, but as the arrival of a new, formidable power whose success must be explained by its own internal dynamics and strengths.

2 The author's characterization of Mecca's power as deriving from the "systematic management of sacred space" rather than conventional economics is powerfully reinforced by a major revisionist current in modern scholarship. The traditional view, popularized by historians like W. Montgomery Watt, held that Mecca was a major hub for international trade, particularly in luxury goods like spices and aromatics moving from South Arabia and the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. This commercial wealth was seen as the primary engine of the Quraysh tribe's power and the socio-economic context for Muhammad's message.

This entire paradigm was challenged in Patricia Crone's (1987) highly influential and controversial work, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Crone argues that the evidence for this international trade is virtually non-existent. She demonstrates that the overland spice route was largely defunct centuries before the time of Muhammad, that Mecca is conspicuously absent from all non-Muslim sources of the period (e.g., Greek, Latin, Syriac) that discuss Arabian trade, and that the Islamic sources themselves, when critically examined, point only to a local trade in humble goods like leather and clothing (Crone, 1987). While Crone's thesis has been fiercely debated (Serjeant, 1990), its central claims have compelled a re-evaluation of Mecca's foundations. If Mecca was not a great commercial emporium, its importance must have stemmed from another source. This lends significant weight to the author's focus on its unique religious and political role. The power of the Quraysh was based on their control of the Kaaba, a pan-tribal sanctuary (*haram*) that guaranteed a period of universal truce during the annual pilgrimage months. This sacred peace was the essential precondition for the trade fairs, debt settlements, and political negotiations that made Mecca the undisputed center of Arabian life. Thus, Crone's economic revisionism, by dismantling the alternative explanation, makes the political economy of the sacred the central and most plausible source of Meccan power.

3 Muhammad's peculiar status as an "insider by birth, outsider by circumstance" is central to understanding his unique perspective on Meccan society. He belonged to the Banu Hashim, a respectable but financially declining clan within the powerful Quraysh tribe. While the Hashimites held the prestigious, though not particularly wealthy, hereditary office of providing water to pilgrims (*siqaya*), real economic and political power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of rival clans, most notably the Banu Umayya, who controlled the lucrative caravan trade (Lings, 1983). This position afforded Muhammad an intimate view of the inner workings of the Meccan elite and their management of the Kaaba-centered political economy, while his own clan's relative marginalization gave him the critical distance to perceive its inherent inequities and spiritual compromises.

4 The practice of *tahannuth*, a form of spiritual retreat and meditation, was not an invention of Muhammad but appears to have been a known, if uncommon, practice among certain spiritually inclined individuals in pre-Islamic Arabia. The term itself is obscure, but historical sources suggest it involved periods of seclusion, devotion, and acts of charity, often undertaken in the mountains and caves surrounding Mecca (Lings, 1983). Muhammad's regular retreats to the cave of Hira fit this pattern, indicating a pre-existing spiritual quest that was distinct from the formal, ritualistic polytheism centered on the Kaaba. This practice suggests a current of native Arabian piety that sought a more direct, personal experience of the divine, separate from the increasingly commercialized religious system managed by the Quraysh.

5 The author's term "ontological override" points to the revolutionary social and political implications of the doctrine of *tawhid*, or radical monotheism. The declaration *La ilaha illa'llah* ("There is no god but God") was not merely a theological proposition; it was a direct assault on the entire foundation of Qurayshi power. The legitimacy of the Quraysh, their control over the pilgrimage, their ability to enforce the sacred truce, and their network of tribal alliances were all predicated on the perceived reality of the 360 deities housed in the Kaaba. By declaring these deities to be false, Muhammad's message effectively nullified the spiritual-political system upon which Mecca's—and the Quraysh's—primacy was built. The subsequent persecution of the early Muslims was, therefore, not simply a matter of religious intolerance but an existential defense of a threatened political and economic order.

6 The author's framing of Muhammad's message as a critique of "spiritual materialism" rather than simple polytheism aligns with a sophisticated scholarly reinterpretation of the religious environment of pre-Islamic Arabia. The traditional Islamic narrative, largely based on later exegetical works like the *Book of Idols* by Ibn al-Kalbi (d. 819), portrays the Arabs of the *Jahiliyyah* (the "time of ignorance") as crude polytheists and idolaters. However, a critical reading of the Quran itself suggests a more complex situation.

In *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, G. R. Hawting (1999) argues that the Quran's primary polemic is not directed against pagans who were ignorant of God, but against monotheists whose beliefs and practices were deemed inadequate. The central Quranic charge is that of *shirk*, or "associationism." The error of the *mushrikun* ("associators") was not that they denied the existence of a supreme God, Allah, but that they "associated" other beings with Him—such as angels, lesser deities, or ancestors—as intercessors or sources of power, thus compromising the absolute and singular nature of the divine (Hawting, 1999). This suggests that the pre-Islamic Arabs acknowledged a high god but engaged in a transactional form of worship mediated by a pantheon of subordinate entities, whose idols were housed in the Kaaba. Muhammad's revelation, in this context, was a radical call to purify a flawed and compromised monotheism. It was a direct challenge to a system where access to the divine had become a form of commerce managed by the Quraysh elite, a system that perfectly fits the author's description of "spiritual materialism." This view also repositions the emergence of Islam within the broader religious landscape of Late Antiquity, where intense polemics between different monotheistic groups (Jews, Christians, and their various sects) over the correct definition of monotheism were a defining feature of the era (Hawting, 1999).

7 The Constitution of Medina, also known as the Charter of Medina, is a formal agreement documented in early Islamic sources that Muhammad established with the various tribes of Medina (then known as Yathrib) following the *hijra* in 622 CE. As analyzed by scholars such as Fred Donner

(2010), this document is remarkable for its creation of a new form of political community, the *ummah*. Unlike the traditional tribal structures of Arabia, which were based exclusively on kinship, the *ummah* of Medina was a confederation bound by a written contract. It explicitly included not only the Muslim emigrants from Mecca and the Medinan converts, but also the Jewish tribes of the oasis, who were recognized as a community (*ummah*) alongside the Believers, with mutual rights and responsibilities, particularly concerning collective defense (Donner, 2010). The Constitution thus represents a revolutionary political innovation, establishing a polity based on shared belief and mutual consent rather than blood ties, and providing the foundational framework for the first Islamic state.

8 The author's concept of an "ontological override" that restructured Arabian society finds a concrete historical and sociological mechanism in the transformation of the traditional Arab practice of raiding. As historian Fred Donner (1981) details in *The Early Islamic Conquests*, the raid, or *ghazw*, was an endemic and economically essential feature of pre-Islamic tribal life. It functioned as a violent but accepted form of resource redistribution in a harsh environment. The key innovation of the early Islamic state, established by Muhammad and consolidated by his successors, was the strict prohibition on Muslims raiding other Muslims.

This ideological shift had a profound effect: it suppressed the chronic internal warfare that had kept the tribes of the peninsula fragmented and politically weak, and it redirected this formidable martial energy outward (Donner, 1981). The unification of the tribes under the new, overarching identity of the *ummah* (the community of Believers) created a military force of a scale and cohesion previously unimaginable in Arabia. The traditional *ghazw* was thus channeled into a new form of organized, state-directed military expansion, which the Islamic historical tradition came to call the *futūḥ* (literally, "openings"). This term, as Donner (2010) notes, implies not just military victory but a broader process of incorporating new territories into the new political and moral order. This transformation of a centrifugal social practice into a centripetal force for state-building provides the tangible socio-military process behind the author's more abstract framing of a fundamental shift in reality.

9 The conception of the Kaaba as an *axis mundi*—a cosmic pillar or world center connecting the terrestrial and celestial realms—is a recurring theme in Islamic cosmology and is central to understanding its sacred geography (Assasi, 2024; Hernandez, 2015). This idea, which has parallels in many other religious traditions (Eliade, 1959), positions the Kaaba not merely as a direction for prayer (*qibla*) but as the metaphysical anchor of the world. It is the point around which the cosmos is believed to revolve, making the ritual circumambulation (*tawaf*) a physical participation in that cosmic order. (Hirtenstein, n.d.).

10 Islamic tradition elaborates on the Kaaba's role as an *axis mundi* by positing a direct vertical correspondence between the earthly shrine and a celestial prototype known as *al-Bayt al-Ma'mur* ("The Frequented House"). Mentioned in the Quran (52:4), this heavenly sanctuary is believed to be located directly above the Kaaba in the seventh heaven, where it is perpetually circumambulated by angels. This belief establishes the Kaaba as a terrestrial reflection of a divine reality, a physical point on Earth that serves as a gateway or conduit to the sacred realm (Schimmel, 1975).

11 The ritual of circumambulation, the *Tawaf*, is a physical enactment of the cosmic order. The pilgrim's movement around the Kaaba is seen as a conscious participation in a universal prayer, mirroring the orbits of the planets around the sun and, in a modern analogy, the movement of electrons around a nucleus.

For many Sufis, this external ritual corresponds to an internal spiritual journey. The physical Kaaba is the outward symbol of the true Kaaba: the human heart. Just as the Prophet Muhammad cleansed the physical Kaaba of its 360 idols, the spiritual seeker must purify their heart of all attachments and false gods—the "idols" of the ego, desire, and worldly ambition—until it is a worthy dwelling place for the singular divine presence (Hirtenstein, n.d.; Chittick, 2005). The seven circuits of the *Tawaf* are often interpreted as an ascent through the seven stations (*maqamat*) of the soul, a spiral journey that moves the pilgrim from their lowest, ego-driven state (*nafs al-ammarah*) toward the tranquil and perfected soul (*nafs al-mutmainnah*) in proximity to the divine center (Mian, n.d.).

12 The interpretation of the *Hajj* as a ritual of self-annihilation and collective rebirth was powerfully articulated by the Iranian sociologist and revolutionary thinker Ali Shariati (1933–1977). In his highly influential work, *Hajj*, Shariati presents the pilgrimage not as a set of religious duties but as a profound sociological drama symbolizing humanity's return to its primordial, unified state (Shariati, n.d.). The central act, for Shariati, is the stripping away of the self. The donning of the *ihram*—two simple, unstitched white cloths—is a radical act of erasure, removing all signs of individual status, wealth, nationality, and rank. The individual "I," constructed by social and historical forces, dissolves into the homogenous, unified body of the *ummah* (Shariati, n.d.).

Shariati (n.d.) describes this as a "migration from the house of 'self' to the House of God! To the house of the people!" In this state, the pilgrim is no longer a distinct entity but "a particle" who has joined the mass, "a drop" that has entered the ocean. This process is a conscious enactment of the Sufi concept of *fana*, the annihilation of the false, separate self in the overwhelming reality of the divine unity (Shariati, n.d.). For Shariati, this was not a passive mystical experience but a revolutionary training ground, teaching the masses to shed their alienated, individualistic consciousness and realize their power as a unified, divine community.

13 The author's discussion of God's nature touches upon a central dialectic in Islamic theology: the relationship between *tanzih* (transcendence or incomparability) and *tashbih* (immanence or similarity). *Tanzih* is the theological principle, grounded in Quranic verses like "There is nothing whatever like Him" (42:11), that God is absolutely transcendent and unique, utterly different from creation. It acts as a safeguard against anthropomorphism (*tajsim*). This is held in constant tension with *tashbih*, which acknowledges God's immanence and closeness, as expressed in verses like "He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent" (57:3) and His nearness to humanity. Mainstream Islamic theology insists on maintaining both principles in a delicate balance, avoiding the extremes of stripping God of all attributes (*ta'til*) or likening Him to His creation.

14 The use of the word *Ahad* in Surah 112 is theologically significant. While both *Ahad* and *Wahid* can be translated as "One," *Wahid* denotes the number one, which can be followed by a second or third. *Ahad*, in contrast, signifies a unique, absolute, and indivisible oneness (Al-Jerrahi, 2021). It implies an exclusive singularity that cannot be divided, enumerated, or have a counterpart. Its use in this foundational chapter of the Quran is a definitive statement against any form of plurality within the divine essence, whether in the form of a pantheon, a trinity, or a dualistic system.

15 The divine name *As-Samad* is unique to this chapter of the Quran and carries a rich constellation of meanings in classical exegesis. The primary interpretations revolve around two core concepts: first, that of being the "Eternal Refuge," the one to whom all of creation turns for its needs and existence; and second, that of being utterly self-sufficient, solid, and indivisible, without any internal need or external dependency (Al-Jerrahi, 2021; Maududi, n.d.). It thus defines God as the uncaused cause and the ultimate sustainer of all things, upon whom all depend while He depends on none.

16 The concept of *fana*, often translated as "annihilation" or "passing away," is a central station in the Sufi spiritual path. It does not mean the literal extinction of the individual, but rather the annihilation of the false, separate self—the ego (*nafs*)—and its attributes (Schimmel, 1975). This "dying before one dies" is the obliteration of the illusion of a separate existence from God, leading to the realization of the ultimate reality of divine unity (*tawhid*). This state is not an end in itself but is typically followed by the state of *baqa*, or "subsistence," in which the mystic continues to live in the world, but their individual will is replaced by the divine will, acting as a locus for God's attributes on earth.

17 The author's metaphor of an "ontological gravity" that becomes physically lethal finds a startlingly precise parallel in the scientific study of crowd dynamics. Analyses of crowd disasters, including several tragic events during the Hajj, have revealed the physical principles that govern extremely dense crowds (Helbing et al., 2007). At densities below four to five people per square meter, individuals can generally maintain control over their own movement. However, once a critical density of approximately six to

seven people per square meter is exceeded, the crowd undergoes a phase transition and begins to behave not as a collection of individuals, but as a single fluid-like entity or "soft matter" (Still, 2019; Helbing et al., 2007).

In this state, individuals are no longer able to move voluntarily but are swept along by pressure waves that propagate through the crowd. These shockwaves can exert immense physical force, sufficient to bend steel barriers and cause compressive asphyxia, crushing people to death even while they are still standing (Fruin, 1993). Physicist Dirk Helbing's analysis of the 2006 Hajj disaster identified a transition from smooth ("laminar") flow to stop-and-go waves and finally to a state he termed "crowd turbulence"—a chaotic phase of unpredictable, multi-directional motion that precipitates collapses (Helbing et al., 2007). These events are not typically caused by panic or stampeding in the conventional sense, but are rather systemic failures—a physical consequence of exceeding a critical density in a confined space (Helbing & Mukerji, 2012). The spiritual pull toward a single point, when enacted by millions of physical bodies, creates the literal density that can trigger the terrifying and uncontrollable physics of a progressive crowd collapse.

18 The author's final argument—that true unity is ecosystemic, a "dance," rather than a homogenous "crush"—is powerfully illustrated by synthesizing the spiritual ideal of the Hajj with the physical reality of its potential dangers. The esoteric goal of the pilgrimage, as understood in Sufi traditions and articulated by thinkers like Ali Shariati, is the annihilation of the *illusion* of the separate self (*fana*) in order to realize one's essential inseparability from the divine whole (Shariati, n.d.). This is a profound metaphysical insight into the non-dual nature of reality.

However, when the call to annihilate the *ego* is translated into an exoteric virtue of self-elimination and the physical dissolution of the individual into a literal mass, the conditions for tragedy are created. The crowd crush at the Hajj can thus be read as a brutal spiritual misunderstanding. It is what happens when the ideal of unity is conceived as a demanding singularity—a black hole into which all individuality must collapse.

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