Wicked Beauty:

A *Ḥāshiya* on Secular Desire

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> Have you seen he who has taken his own desire (*hawāhu*) as his god?
> — Qur'an, 45:23

> Indeed, in the heart there is a scattering that nothing can gather but turning to God; and in it is a loneliness that nothing can remove but intimacy with God; and in it is sadness that nothing can soothe but the joy of knowing Him and sincerity in dealing with Him; and in it is anxiety that nothing can calm but focusing one's entire being on Him and fleeing to Him…
> — Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Fawā'id*

> It is disgraceful for a philosopher to say: the good and the beautiful are one; if he adds 'also the true', one ought to beat him. Truth is ugly. We possess art lest we perish of the truth.
> — Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power (1901)*

The Orphaning of Desire

Beneath the epidemic of modern despair and mental health crisis lies something deeper: the unmistakable portent of a civilization adrift. That these afflictions not only persist but proliferate in an age saturated with therapeutic discourse and psychological services raises a haunting question: could it be that the fault lies not simply with the theories or profession of therapy but with modern "official knowledge" and how it understands the human being?[1] Has scientific knowledge become the handmaiden of the very system that produces the sickness? While this conclusion might seem too sweeping, it is hard to deny that when it comes to the maladies of human desire—desire which lies at the heart of the modern quest—modern psychological explanations and solutions disappoint the philosophically curious and remain utterly closed to the theologically alive. Classical Muslim literature on the "diseases of the heart" is profound and pertinent. Yet, as a long-time student and translator of these texts, I increasingly sense the difficulty modern readers face in penetrating them—there is a need for a new generation of

1. The phrase 'official knowledge,' coined by Roman Catholic author and *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat in his 2025 book *Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious*, refers to the discourse produced and policed by hegemonic Western secular institutions—a concept he elaborates in the following article, https://english.aawsat.com/opinion/5073127-world-ready-religious-comeback. *The Economist* sums up the thesis in a review entitled, "Why You Should Believe in God. Or Allah. (But not Baal)."

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ḥāshiyas: commentaries that engage our present condition, with its large-scale, long-distance, and abstract institutions; its revolutionizing technologies of the self; its mind-shattering distractions; and its proliferating powers. The official models of modern self-understanding tend to flatten human experience into bio-chemical impulses or evolutionary relics: desire becomes a surge of dopamine, addiction a malfunction in neural circuitry, and love an echo of our hunter-gatherer instincts. At best, these accounts describe mechanisms; at worst, they indulge speculative fictions about prehistoric brains with little evidence and even less insight.

What they fail to grasp is not the hardware of desire but its meaning. They fail to explain why desire matters: why we are drawn to what undoes us, why modern luxury makes us feel impoverished, why we lust after what leaves us less content and tranquil, why transgression seems so attractive, why what we seem to desire most at times is pain and thrill? And yet, how some of us are capable of resisting what we crave, clinging to what causes pain and discomfort, acting selflessly and altruistically.

More than a failure of treatment, we are witnessing a failure of vision. At the heart of this crisis is the neglect of the enduring human quest for divine truth, a yearning deeply rooted in our nature. Despite the influence of modern anti-religious movements and secular elites, it remains resilient.[2] Secularism, far from being a neutral or inevitable outcome of modernity, is a deliberate political and cultural project—advanced by intellectuals, policymakers, and media institutions—often at odds with the lived religiosity of ordinary people across the globe.[3] This reveals a deep gulf between humanity's innate orientation toward the divine and the "iron cage" of modern, elite-driven language, frameworks, and institutions that seek to contain or redefine it.

This conflict is no longer between tradition and progress or East and West, but between elite-imposed paradigms and the lived experience of most people worldwide. While many today critique elite power structures in economics (e.g., neoliberalism) and politics (e.g., liberal interventionism), fewer recognize how secularism operates similarly in psychology, philosophy, and theology. We readily identify, for instance, the hypocrisy of Western liberal states decrying human rights abuses while enabling the genocide in Gaza—yet fail to see how certain progressive movements (e.g., commodified LGBT activism, therapeutic self-help culture, and reductive "wokeness") reflect elite-driven distortions of deeper human yearnings for justice, belonging, and transcendence.

2. Cross-cultural anthropological research, cognitive science of religion, and classical philosophical thought all converge on one conclusion: the human inclination toward belief in the divine or transcendent is not incidental but deeply embedded in our cognitive and moral nature. Secular experts have long been forced to acknowledge this reality: *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) by Peter Berger argues that religion arises naturally as humans construct meaning in a chaotic world; Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained* (2001) shows how cognitive structures predispose humans to religious belief; Scott Atran's *In Gods We Trust* (2002) attempts to provide evolutionary evidence for the natural emergence of religious thought; Harvey Whitehouse's *Modes of Religiosity* (2004) explains how religious practices align with innate cognitive and emotional mechanisms; and Justin Barrett's *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* (2012) presents empirical findings that children are naturally inclined toward belief in God—a disposition he terms "theistic receptivity."

3. For example, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (2003); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994); Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World* (1999); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007); Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith* (2015), to name a few, each argues that historical studies and global data show secularism to be an elite project and religion's persistence despite it. This elite secularism is true of the existing legal institutions in the West and, by extrapolation, worldwide: Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (2007), which traces how Western legal systems (e.g., U.S. Supreme Court rulings on education, abortion) marginalized religious authority; Winnifred F. Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2005), which shows how U.S. courts define "religion" in narrow, Protestant-centric ways, privileging elite secular norms.

Too often, we unconsciously adopt the psychologized, secularized jargon sanctioned by secular-capitalist elites—from Hollywood's pseudo-spirituality to the Oprah-fied "gospel of self-actualization." These frameworks promise liberation but often co-opt and corrupt the very existential and communal longings they claim to address. Psychology has been deformed by a culture that isolates the individual, severs the soul from transcendence, ignores the fundamental reality of sin, and reduces healing to chemical adjustment or cognitive reframing.[4] In doing so, it often pathologizes suffering that might instead be cries of spiritual disorientation, existential alienation, or moral injury. Worse still, the tools of psychological insight have been weaponized by marketing industries and digital platforms—repurposed not to heal, but to hook. The science of behavior has become the science of manipulation. Far from diagnosing the illness of late modernity, psychology is often enlisted to reinforce it—to optimize productivity, enhance consumption, and numb discontent just enough to prevent rebellion.

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Secular modernity, this essay argues, has ruptured the moral grammar of the soul. Once severed from the divine horizon, desire—previously a terrain of discipline, a space of moral drama, and even a means of ascent toward God—has become a false god. Desire is no longer judged; it is the judge. Modern moral consciousness, accordingly, is marked by a curious and persistent admiration for transgression. The adulterer, the rebel, the outlaw, the sexual libertine—figures long condemned by the moral traditions of the world—have become the protagonists of modern literature, film, and popular philosophy. It is not merely that we tolerate them. We admire them, desire to be like them, or see in their transgressions a kind of salvific authenticity. But this cultural turn demands reflection. What has changed in our metaphysical and moral landscape such that betrayal, rebellion, and even lawlessness might appear beautiful, even redemptive?

4. Consider the following "working definition for Psychotherapy" by the American Psychological Association: "Psychotherapy is the informed and intentional application of clinical methods and interpersonal stances derived from established psychological principles for the purpose of assisting people to modify their behaviors, cognitions, emotions, and/or other *personal characteristics in directions that the participants deem desirable*" (emphasis added). See American Psychological Association, "Recognition of Psychotherapy Effectiveness," accessed August 22, 2025, https://www.apa.org/about/policy/resolution-psychotherapy.

The consequences of such a turn are not negligible, neither in this world, nor for eternal life. For all its promises of liberation and progress, modernity has unleashed a quiet apocalypse across the most intimate and collective dimensions of human life. Inwardly, it has hollowed the soul, rendering desire unmoored and insatiable—now mass-manufactured and commodified in forms like pornography and consumerism. Socially, it has frayed the bonds of kinship, community, and meaning, leaving behind isolated individuals tethered to algorithmic pleasures. Politically, it has given rise to regimes of surveillance, inequality, and war, culminating in genocides that unfold in real-time before a global audience dulled by spectacle. The human condition has been disenchanted, desire deified, and the world transformed into a stage where every sacred thing is consumed, repackaged, and destroyed.

What we urgently need are surgical and introspective critiques of modernity—not broad-brush, reductive condemnations, which are all too common.

Before embarking on an analysis of desire in the modern world, a few points of caution and self-reflection are in order.

First, while critiques of modernity often emphasize its costs, we must also acknowledge its staggering achievements—scientific breakthroughs, material abundance, and unprecedented control over nature. These are the fruits of desire unbound: restless, seeking, insatiable. Yet, we cannot shake the feeling that it is precisely this triumph that reveals our disorientation. By unshackling desire, we may have lost sight of limits, ends, and the soul's hunger for meaning. Modernity's victories dazzle, but they also consume. For Muslims, they evoke unease, in part because we were seldom their beneficiaries and often their victims. The machinery of progress was built in part from our lands and histories—leaving us with consequences, not confidence. Still, like all trials (*ibtilāʾ*), those that came with modernity can serve as a divine wake-up call. That Muslims have arrived late to modernity may itself be a mercy: while its technologies and scientific advances cannot be wholly rejected, those who choose God now have the chance to enter this era more deliberately, with clarity and faith—less dazzled, more discerning. Did the Prophet ﷺ not say that all affairs of a believer are good—if he endures hardship with patience and meets felicity with gratitude?[5]

5. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2999.

Second, what we urgently need are surgical and introspective critiques of modernity—not broad-brush, reductive condemnations, which are all too common. Currents foreign to Islam—Arab tribalism, Persian courtly customs, Hellenistic philosophy, Mongol political tradition, to name a few—have long coursed through the Islamic tradition, at times enriching it, at others distorting it, and often doing both at once. To assume that the West is wholly alien to Islam, or that Islam stands between a halcyonic past in opposition to a dystopian present, is simplistic. It is often noted that modern Western thought draws from two principal wells: Abrahamic revelation and Athenian reason. Anyone familiar with the Islamic *falsafa*, *akhlāq*, and *kalām* traditions will recognize their deep indebtedness to both these traditions. Modernity, then, is not a wholly external imposition; it is interwoven with intellectual currents historically shared by both Islamic and Western civilizations. Without reckoning with this shared inheritance, critiques risk becoming superficial. Truthful engagement requires that we neither romanticize the past nor hastily reject the modern. Our critique, therefore, must be focused, not totalizing. Similarly, we should move beyond the crude dichotomy between modernity and postmodernity, if only because many of postmodernity's core contentions were already latent within modernity's own discourses.

No amount of political or cultural resistance can exempt us from confronting the deeper shift at modernity's core: the redefinition—and near deification—of desire.

Third, Muslims have not been merely passive recipients of the colonial onslaught. From anti-colonial resistance to intellectual responses and reform, we have often contested and reshaped modern trajectories. As a result, and sometimes against its grain, modernization has often strengthened Islamic identity and Ummatic solidarity.[6]

Still, no amount of political or cultural resistance can exempt us from confronting the deeper shift at modernity's core: the redefinition—and near deification—of desire. This shift contrasts sharply with the Islamic grammar of desire anchored in an inexorably moral worldview whose telos is a Living and Sustaining God. Desire is not a stand-alone individual human yearning that must be liberated, enhanced, actualized, and represented, but is only meaningful in reference to the moral architecture of existence; it is either in accordance with what is true, good, and hence truly beautiful, or otherwise.

6. An accessible summary of various studies can be found here, "What Explains the Global Islamic Revival? The Prestige-Piety Feedback Loop," https://www.ggd.world/p/what-explains-the-global-islamic For ummatic globalization, see Sadek Hamid, "Islam Beyond Borders: Building Ummatic Solidarity in the 21st Century," https://ummatics.org/islam-beyond-borders-building-ummatic-solidarity-in-the-21st-century/.

Take, for instance, *hawā* and *shahwa*—two chief Qur'anic terms for desire. They are neither to be worshipped nor denied or extinguished, but trained and channeled.

Originally, *hawā* means *to fall*, but classically refers to carnal desire, caprice, or passion—especially when it leads one away from truth, reason, or divine guidance.[7] The Qur'an mentions this term in at least three distinct but interrelated senses. First, *hawā* is an inclination of the soul to injustice, especially in matters of leadership and law. Addressing Prophet Dāwūd, God commands: *So judge between people with truth and do not follow hawā, lest it lead you astray from the path of Allah* (Q. 38:26). A similar directive is addressed to the believers: *So do not follow* hawā, *lest you swerve from justice* (Q. 4:135). Second, *hawā* is identified with the soul's inclination toward evil, resisting which is the definition of moral success: *As for the one who feared standing before his Lord and restrained the soul from* hawā, *Paradise will be his home* (Q. 79:40). Finally, *hawā* is presented as personal opinion or impulse, in contrast to divinely revealed truth. Speaking of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the Almighty says: *Nor does he speak from* hawā (Q. 53:3)—his speech is not directed by his self (*nafs*), but revelation.

A term for bodily or sensual desire, *shahwa* (pl. *shahawāt*) appears with two principal connotations.[8] First, it is presented as a natural human attraction to worldly pleasures such as women, wealth, children, and food, which are framed as tests: *"Beautified for people is the love of* shahawāt*—of women and sons, hoarded treasures of gold and silver…"* (Q. 3:14). Second, unnatural desire, which is sharply condemned when pursued, as with the people of Lot: *Indeed, you approach men with desire* (shahwa)*, instead of women…* (Q. 7:81; see also Q. 27:55). Elsewhere, it describes those who abandon prayer and follow *shahawāt*, thereby incurring divine wrath (Q. 19:59; cf. Q. 4:27). A hadith underscores this moral topology by stating: *Paradise is surrounded by hardships* (makārih)*, and Hellfire is surrounded by temptations* (shahawāt).[9]

Shahwa, therefore, is a natural instinct or appetite, which may be lawful or ruinous depending on its orientation and regulation, whereas *hawā* is the internalization of desire as judgment, idea, or principle that elevates the self's whims over divine truth. It is epistemically and morally corrupting. Ruin sets in when either *hawā* or *shahwa* is enthroned as criterion—when desire ceases to be governed by revelation and becomes the standard of truth or value itself. An adage attributed to the Prophet ﷺ, albeit with weak authority, suggests that even *hawā* is to be transformed, "One has no faith until his *hawā* becomes harmonious with what I have brought."[10]

7. Ibn Manẓūr, Lisān al-ʿarab, 15 vols. (Dār Ṣādir, 1993), 15:371, https://shamela.ws/book/1687/7980#p1.

8. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 14:445, https://shamela.ws/book/1687/7569.

9. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2822.

10. The *isnād* of this report is generally deemed weak, but the meaning is confirmed in the Qur'anic verse 4:65: "But no, by your Lord, they will not believe until they make you, [O Muhammad], judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit with full submission."

Desire is natural, even necessary; its discipline and redirection are the point. It is both a test and a sign.

The Qur'an explicitly rejects *rahbāniyya* (monasticism)—a way of life marked by excessive self-denial and mortification of natural human desires—as an innovation not prescribed by God (Q. 57:27). The Prophet Muhammad likewise forbade such forms of piety, affirming a path that embraces the world while remaining anchored in devotion. When a group of men sought to surpass his example and imitate Christian monasticism by depriving themselves of food, sleep, and marriage, he said, "By Allah, I fear Allah more than you do and am more mindful of Him, but I fast and break my fast, I pray and I sleep, and I marry women, and whoever turns away from my Sunnah is not of me."[11] Paradise is described as being filled with pleasures of the soul as well as the body, and hellfire is similarly a torture in both domains. Thus, the experience of natural desires serves not only to motivate action but also to prompt moral discipline and orient the soul toward eternal life. It is as if God created these desires to awaken urgency in our pursuit of the divine.

In contrast, Christian theological polemics—particularly those rooted in late antiquity, when Christianity became deeply intertwined with Greek philosophical dualism—strongly affirmed this separation.[12] This worldview found its clearest expression in the rise of monastic asceticism and the writings of figures like Origen (who allegorized bodily resurrection) and Augustine (who, drawing on Neoplatonism, depicted salvation as an escape from the "prison" of the flesh). This also had a sustained influence on many Islamic ascetic traditions.[13] The challenge, then, is not merely to critique modernity but to disentangle Islamic thought from borrowed epistemic structures, modern or premodern, that may distort its own relational ontology—one in which the body, soul, and world are interdependent realms of divine *āyāt* (signs), not warring opposites.

Nietzsche: The Death of Meaning

If Christianity spiritualized the body, modernity has evacuated the spirit. Few voices captured this reversal with more force than the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900).

With rare clarity, Nietzsche recognized the civilizational stakes of his era's accelerating loss of belief in God. European modernity brought about a seismic shift in moral and aesthetic sensibility. As secularism

11. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5063; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* no. 1401.

12. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press), 1988.

13. Bradley B. Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life in Early Islam* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

moved from the fringes of philosophical speculation to a widespread social condition in the nineteenth century, a new ethos took hold—one that unleashed dazzling creativity alongside a deep moral nihilism.[14] In this new order, what had long been condemned as evil was not only accepted, but celebrated as beautiful. Transgression was reimagined as freedom—an exhilarating release from the constraints once imposed by religion, tradition, and what came to be dismissed as superstition.

But what happens when the truth of God is hidden—not just from a few, but from most? Truth ceases to be beautiful, comforting, or coherent; it seems harsh, cruel, and corrosive. The philosopher who dares to clothe truth in the garments of goodness and beauty, Nietzsche protested, is not merely naïve but contemptible. This marks a shift in the nature of art—not as a refracted glimpse of a luminous truth veiled by sin or confusion, but as a refuge from truth itself. Consider how the Anṣārī Companion Ḥassān ibn Thābit links the Prophet's inner truth to his outwardly beauty in these couplets of exceeding beauty:[15]

وَأَحْسَنُ مِنْكَ لَمْ تَرَ قَطُّ عَيْنِي
وَأَجْمَلُ مِنْكَ لَمْ تَلِدِ النِّسَاءُ
خُلِقْتَ مُبَرَّءًا مِنْ كُلِّ عَيْبٍ
كَأَنَّكَ قَدْ خُلِقْتَ كَمَا تَشَاءُ

My eyes have never seen anyone
more beautiful than you,
And no woman has ever given
birth to anyone more handsome.
You were created free of all flaw,
As though you were created
just as you wished.

Yet, in a world where divine meaning has vanished, truth in its nakedness becomes unbearable, and art becomes a necessary illusion to shield us from its bleakness.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche asks whether truth is desirable at all. Later, in *Will to Power,* he writes with unnerving clarity: "Man does not seek knowledge, only the certainty of his pleasure. He calls this certainty 'truth'." The believer might nod, but with a crucial redirection: Man does not seek knowledge, only the certainty of His pleasure. And that certainty—rooted in submission, not self-satisfaction—is all the knowledge that truly matters. The Almighty has ninety-nine names, among them, al-Ḥaqq, the Truth—not as a proposition, but as the living Reality that grounds all meaning and moral order. Truth, in this sense, is not what flatters our instincts but what unmasks them before God.

14. The term secularism, fittingly, was first introduced in its current meanings during the mid-nineteenth century by English freethinkers to avoid the inconvenient charge of atheism. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 23, 206-07.

15. Ḥassān ibn Thābit, *Dīwān Ḥassān ibn Thābit,* ed. Muḥammad al-ʿInānī (Maṭbaʿa al-Saʿāda, 1331/1912), 19.

Nietzsche, like many moderns, began the path of negation—*lā ilāh*, there is no god. He saw through the idols of his time. But he stopped there. Revelation is what completes the journey: *illā Allāh*—except Allah, the One who is the Truth behind every truth.

Both the Enlightenment's product and its nemesis, Nietzsche was caught in a philosophical bind born of his rejection of a transcendent grounding for truth. A century before the modern academic philosopher would come to justify his vocation in economic or pragmatic terms, Nietzsche had already declared that the philosopher is no longer a seeker of truth, but a physician for the nation—concerned not with what is true, but with what is life-enhancing.[16] Having sidelined God, the Enlightenment, he saw, had failed to restore an account of truth and beauty. Illusion was all that could sustain life now. Precisely because Nietzsche was the arch-atheist, he was also the most clear-eyed about what is lost when men fool themselves into thinking that they can live without God. In *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Gay Science), Nietzsche's madman presciently asks what the loss of belief in God that was to overtake Europe entailed:

> How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? … Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing? … God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.[17]

This Nietzschean blasphemy, violently offensive to a believer's ear, must be expressed in order to fully awaken our emotions to the intellectual consequences of secular modernity. This blasphemy was not a theological claim—it was a cultural diagnosis. What also perished with it is the metaphysical ground of value, the unified source of truth, beauty, and goodness. What remained was a fractured world, where meaning must be forged, not found. In such a thought-world, deprived of the divine anchor, the beautiful may arise from the morally reprehensible, and the good may appear in forms devoid of aesthetic pleasure.

Nietzsche saw the abyss—and dared to stare into it. In the absence of God, he knew that desire must be transfigured into will to power, the only force left to give shape to a disenchanted world. Yet perhaps he also grasped that without a higher aim, desire curdles inward. It festers. It sickens the soul. Nietzsche's power lies not in his atheism, but in his refusal to flinch. He understood the stakes. As the madman in *The Gay Science* cries, "What were we doing when we unchained this earth from

16. Frederick Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, "Preface to the Second Edition" added in 1887, Section 2, trans. Kaufmann, (Vintage, 1974), 35.

17. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

its sun?" This was no gleeful liberation but an existential scream. And yet Nietzsche could not believe; his Übermensch could not will himself to faith. His own life bore the weight of this tragedy: a brilliant mind descending into madness, ending in a long, silent death. As life became incomprehensible, it also became unbearable. His madness becomes the mirror in which modern man glimpses his own disorientation.

Untethered from a telos, desire in our age has become self-legitimating: "I desire, therefore I am." The Enlightenment's dream of a rational subject awakens to an order that both cages desire in technocratic regulation or unleashes it in hyper-consumerism. The result is neither freedom nor flourishing, but anxiety, exhaustion, and endless dissatisfaction.

But here lies the paradox. Culminating in today's consumerist capitalism and liberal democracy—flanked by a spectrum of rival ideologies—modernity has crafted an account of human desire that is both devastatingly effective and profoundly flawed. Rooted in secularity, it rarely embraces atheism without Nietzschean honesty; doing so would render its moral consequences too unbearable. In contrast, more radical modern ideologies—Marxism, scientistic utopianism—reject God and tradition outright, only to clash with human nature and collapse beneath the weight of their own idealism. Where these radical projects faltered through their open defiance of transcendence, the mainstream of modernity is more cunning: it co-opts God-talk for its own ends, even claiming to ennoble religion by stripping it of its worldly entanglements. Western Christianity has been especially vulnerable to this quiet domestication—but increasingly, some forms of Islam too tread the same path.

Nietzsche's disciple Michel Foucault famously argued that modern regimes of power did not suppress sexuality, as the repressive hypothesis suggests, but rather incited it through dense discourses of surveillance, normalization, and classification. The rise of biopower, he argues, brought sexuality under the purview of institutions—medicine, psychiatry, education, and criminal justice—which managed desire not through prohibition alone, but through strategic incitement, confession, and categorization. This history is thoroughly godless: there is no appeal to transcendence, no divine command, no teleology. Foucault's analysis operates within a radically secular epistemology that displaces the divine gaze with institutional panopticism and social regulation. It does not—and cannot—account for moral systems that conceive of desire as both natural and sacred, regulated not by state or science but by divine command. The terms of analysis shift dramatically when we hear God's messenger ﷺ declare: "In your sexual act is charity."[18]

18. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1006.

Unlike the Christian ascetic legacy that Foucault critiques—which spiritualized the body through renunciation and abnormalized sexual desire—Islamic law (*sharīʿa*) affirms sexuality within lawful bounds as part of the *fiṭra*, the innate human disposition. The self is not subject to institutional surveillance but to the divine gaze: "Does he not know that God sees?" (Q. 96:14). This theocentric moral anthropology suggests a balance between body and spirit, law and desire, that cannot be reduced to the genealogies of power that dominate today's postmodernist narrative.

From colonial conquest to consumer capitalism, from ecological devastation to sexual malaise, from the normalization of sexual perversion to the epidemics of depression and pornography—all can be traced back to the idolatry of desire, enthroned in the absence of divine orientation.

And yet, paradoxically, belief in God persists—indeed, in some places and respects, religiosity has become more visible than in previous centuries. Perhaps, then, the modern age is best understood not as a godless epoch, but as an era in which one particular culture—the secular West—has achieved an unprecedented global hegemony, reshaping knowledge, culture, and institutions in its image, and obscuring other ways of being, knowing, and desiring.

Freud: Savagery of Desire

Sigmund Freud (d. 1939), the secular-atheist Austrian Jew, remains one of the most formidable diagnosticians of modern desire, portraying Western civilization as founded on repression. Civilization, he taught, emerges only by repressing instinct and disciplining desire. But repression breeds discontent. We are sick because we are civilized. While the Enlightenment imagined reason as desire's master, Freud exposed it as a fragile outpost besieged by unruly drives. Rationality is not sovereign but sabotaged from within. In this, Freud offers a sobering counter-Enlightenment: the modern self is neither fully rational nor free, but tormented by what it cannot name. American sociologist Philip Rieff most aptly characterized Freud's view:

> Freud's map of the mind is a cityscape in which reason occupies a beleaguered house, surrounded by the turbulent forces of passion. The Enlightenment had imagined reason as a secure ruler; Freud reveals it as a nervous occupant, barricaded against the mob.[19]

19. Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1979), 36. Also, Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (Penguin Books, 2002 [1930 orig.]), 56.

Freud's tripartite model of the psyche—id, ego, and superego—revolutionized modern understandings of the self. Beneath the conscious ego lies the id, a seething reservoir of instinctual drives, while the superego—shaped by social norms—polices and restrains it. Human behavior, Freud argued, is shaped less by reason than by this inner conflict. In his vision, virtue is repression, and desire—dark, unruly, unspeakable—is the truest self. And more often than not, it is the winner.

This reminds us of the language of Muslim sages like al-Ghazālī: the heart is the king, and the mind, its vizier, and desire (*hawā*) its mortal enemy. Reason, in other words, seeks justifications and means for what the heart wishes to accomplish.[20] But the similarity has its limits. The Islamic view of the soul is inextricably moral and oriented toward the divine as it distinguishes between *al-nafs al-ammāra* (the soul that commands evil), *al-nafs al-lawwāma* (the reproaching soul), and *al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna* (the tranquil soul)—the three possible states of the human self, presenting a moral journey rooted in divine origin. The tranquil soul (*al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna*) wishes to return to the Truth Almighty, its original source. And unlike Freud's id, which stems from base instincts oriented toward survival and gratification, Islam locates evil not in the essence of the self but in *waswās*—the whispered provocations of Satan. These are external intrusions, not innate impulses. Virtue, by contrast, originates from within. For God breathed His spirit into the human being, endowing the soul with the capacity for goodness and transcendence (Q. 15:29). The animal self is not evil; it simply obeys its instinct, one that is eminently corruptible and educable. True evil arises only when the human being consciously turns away from God. Though created "in the best of forms" (*aḥsan taqwīm*), man—when he rejects faith—is cast to "the lowest of the low" (*asfal sāfilīn*) (Q. 95:4–5). His fall is not one of nature, but of will. In Islam, then, righteousness is not a social imposition or a psychological construct like the superego—it is the soul's original nature (*fiṭra*). Evil desire is not the authentic self, but its trial.

What Freud and his intellectual heirs understood as the irrational substrate of the human soul was grasped in Islamic tradition with far greater nuance and depth. What lies beyond reason, in the Islamic tradition, may be sub-rational—such as animal instincts vulnerable to Iblīs's whisperings—or supra-rational, namely the soul's capacity to perceive truths beyond calculative reason, through the heart (*qalb*) and spiritual intuition. Unlike Freud's tripartite self, which pits instinct, reason, and societal repression against one another, Islam sees each component of the self as possessing a divinely oriented role, to be refined and harmonized under divine guidance and through divine light.

20. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, Kitāb Riyāḍat al-Nafs: "The heart is the sovereign, the limbs its loyal soldiery. Reason is the faithful minister, ever counseling the ruler toward his welfare, while passion is the adversary, ceaselessly plotting the sovereign's ruin."

Freud and his ilk produced powerful psychological insights, but unmoored from the divine truth, these revelations about human nature were doomed to be exploited for dark powers rather than true enlightenment. In Freud›s case, this becomes tragically obvious. Through his nephew Edward Bernays—widely regarded as the father of modern public relations—Freud's theories were weaponized in service of the emerging capitalist order. Bernays pioneered modern advertising by tapping into the subconscious, manipulating primal desires for sex, status, and security, thereby launching an unprecedented assault on the modern self.[21] This marked a perversion of knowledge—substituting the soul's liberation with its systematic seduction and enslavement. This was not a betrayal of Enlightenment ideals, nor merely a corruption of Freud's critique, but rather their logical conclusion: once God was dislodged, morality orphaned, and the powers of unreason within the self laid bare, it was inevitable that desire would become the new lever of control in the service of the powerful. In an age of emerging psychological insight and technological power, the capitalist and political elite naturally moved to harness those very desires—not to elevate the human being, but to maximize profit and manipulate the public.

21. Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (Horace Liveright, 1928); Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (Basic Books, 1996), esp. chapters 2–4. See also Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (Crown Publishers, 1998), for a comprehensive biography and analysis of Bernays' influence on modern consumer culture.

Weber: Modernity as Polytheism

The attempts to understand the new, disenchanted world took a more sociological and historical form in Max Weber, who in his famous 1917 lecture, "Science as a Vocation," reproduced Nietzsche's challenge: "Since Nietzsche, we realize that something can be beautiful, not only in spite of the aspect in which it is not good, but rather in that very aspect." If Nietzsche was the intoxicated mystic of secular modernity and Freud the analyst of its psychosis, Weber was its disenchanted jurist. The first heralded postmodern philosophy and literature, the second birthed the psychological constructs that pervade modern consciousness, the third laid the foundations of social science and the ethos of the modern university. Together, these three stand as seminal diagnosticians of the modern condition, whose ideas continue to shape not only philosophy but also the institutions of modern life—social sciences, psychoanalysis, and the wider world of arts and letters.

Weber described modernity as disenchantment—the triumph of technocratic rationality over sacred value. In its vulgar form, modernity champions a myth of linear history—an unyielding march toward progress, emancipation, and enlightenment. In its more self-aware and sophisticated iterations, however, this trajectory culminates not

in redemption but in a secularized fall: the death of man's innocence and the crucifixion of the deity, yet without any promise of salvation. This tragic arc is best captured in Max Weber's influential vision of disenchantment, which continues to serve as a central pillar of the Western social scientific and humanistic imagination.

With the loss of a unified cosmos rooted in the authority of an omnipotent and omniscient God, the modern world no longer possesses a shared moral foundation. Instead, what emerges is a "polytheism" of values—a radical fragmentation in which no single ethical vision can lay claim to universal authority.

Modernity, as diagnosed by Max Weber, is marked by two tragic and, in his view, irreversible transformations. The first is the process of rationalization, which consists of two intertwined developments: intellectualization—the reduction of reality to that which can be calculated, predicted, and explained—and impersonalization—the subordination of life to abstract rules, bureaucratic systems, and institutional machinery. Together, these create a world increasingly governed by vast, impersonal organizations, such as the modern state, the military, and the corporate economy, all organized around efficiency and control. The result is what Weber famously called the "iron cage" of modern life: a world in which individuals are trapped within rationalized structures that strip life of mystery, spontaneity, and deeper meaning.

But Weber saw a second movement unfolding alongside this rationalization—partly inspired by Nietzsche, seemingly its opposite, yet ultimately its consequence. With the loss of a unified cosmos rooted in the authority of an omnipotent and omniscient God, the modern world no longer possesses a shared moral foundation. Instead, what emerges is a "polytheism" of values—a radical fragmentation in which no single ethical vision can lay claim to universal authority. While the world is disenchanted by rationalization, it is simultaneously re-enchanted in a fractured and chaotic form. Weber's prescient language captures the heart of what would later be called the postmodern condition: "His vision of polytheistic reenchantment,"

writes one historian, "is rather that of an incommensurable value-fragmentation into a plurality of alternative metanarratives, each of which claims to answer the same metaphysical questions that religion and science strove to cope with in their own ways."[22]

Thus, the modern world is doubly haunted: by the loss of a coherent, sacred order and by the return of conflicting and unmoored values—"gods and demons," in Weber's chilling words, who "strive to gain power over our lives and again … resume their eternal struggle with one another." The collapse of theological unity has not led to a serene secular harmony, but to a battlefield of rival absolutes—each asserting itself, yet none able to claim the final word.

Indeed, the historical record reveals that the secular age did not, in fact, usher in a reign of pure rationalism. Quite the opposite. As the structures of monotheistic religion were dismantled in Europe, what often rushed in to fill the vacuum was not reason, but magic, mysticism, and the occult. Recent scholarship has meticulously documented how the very thinkers and elites who championed the Enlightenment ideal of "disenchantment" were themselves deeply immersed in esotericism, spiritism, and alchemy. Many of its leading figures—including Newton, Goethe, and even Freud—remained entangled with theological, magical, and esoteric traditions. Even Max Weber was entangled in these undercurrents.[23] The world, then, was never truly disenchanted, and the paradox endures today. A growing body of contemporary scholarship notes a sharp rise in astrology, witchcraft, and New Age practices in the United States—trends that correlate with the demographic surge of the "nones," those claiming no formal religious affiliation. Secularization, this shows, does not eliminate religion but fractures and privatizes it, giving rise to a spiritual marketplace animated by diffuse, polytheistic desires and severed from the unifying truth of monotheism.[24]

The false gods have returned—but now in the form of algorithmic idols, consumer fetishes, and the occult market.

There were many, of course, who cheered on this moment of anthropocentric confidence. Yet, even at its peak, this glee was confined to the European elite at the height of colonial and technological ascendancy, who had mistaken material domination for moral and metaphysical authority. This illusion was eventually shattered—not least by the unprecedented carnage of two world wars in the following century.

22. https://plato.stanford.edu/archIves/fall2016/entries/weber/index.html

23. The notion that secularization would inevitably lead to a disenchanted, rational world has come under serious scholarly revision. Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, in his influential study *The Myth of Disenchantment*, argues that the standard narrative of the Enlightenment and modernity as eras of rising rationalism and the retreat of magic is itself a myth. Drawing on detailed intellectual histories, he shows that many canonical figures of modern thought—Descartes, Newton, Goethe, Freud, even Weber—remained entangled in occult, mystical, or esoteric traditions, even as they laid the groundwork for secular modernity. Josephson-Storm suggests that what modernity produced was not disenchantment but a transformation in the discourse about magic and belief, wherein elites came to see belief in enchantment as irrational, even as they themselves often continued to be drawn to it. See Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), esp. chapters 1 and 8.

24. Contemporary sociological trends testify to this dynamic. While the number of Americans identifying as religious "nones" (those who profess no religious affiliation) has grown significantly over the last two decades, this shift has not led to a widespread embrace of atheism or materialist rationalism. Instead, what has emerged is a surge of interest in astrology, pagan rituals, tarot, crystals, and New Age mysticism—particularly among younger, more progressive demographics. See, Ross Douthat, "The Return of Paganism," *New York Times*, Dec 12, 2018 (Accessed 25 Aug 2025); Liel Leibovit, "The Return of Paganism," *Commentary*, May 2023, https://www.commentary.org/articles/liel-leibovitz/paganism-afflicts-america/ (Accessed 25 Aug 2025).

With the accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of the modern elite, rather than peace and prosperity for all, existential angst, spiritual dislocations, and inhumane inequality multiplied.[25] Instead of peace and enlightenment, the twentieth century witnessed quite possibly the bloodiest period in human history.[26] Ironically, modern medical discoveries prolonged life only to make that many more people available for mass killing.

The vacuum left by monotheistic religion has not been filled by rational clarity but by a bricolage of mythic fragments, unexamined desires, and new cults of selfhood. The false gods have returned—but now in the form of algorithmic idols, consumer fetishes, and the occult market.[27] What began as the Enlightenment's dream of reason has culminated in a haunted labyrinth of competing truths, unmet longings, and existential angst.

Art: The Index of Desire

Having outlined the modern malaise through its leading thinkers, we now turn to its lived experience. If modernity's promise of emancipation culminated instead in civilizational collapse, psychological fragmentation, and moral incoherence, it did not do so silently. Its crisis found voice—indeed, many voices—in art. Art became the index of desire: at once its mirror and its altar. It is thus fitting that thinkers like Nietzsche, Freud, and Weber, each in his own way, turned to art not merely as a cultural artifact, but as both the crucible and the crystal ball of the modern condition. For if religious devotion once offered a transcendent grammar for desire, and communal norms once disciplined it within an ordered cosmos, in the secular age, art became its final register. When religion was dethroned and virtue disenchanted, it was in poetry, painting, music—and above all, literature—that the modern soul continued its search for meaning. It is here that the trajectory of desire, gradually shedding its Christian roots and metaphysical constraints, comes most clearly into view.

Through art, the modern self externalizes its passions, anxieties, and longings. Schopenhauer saw art as the embodiment of the "Will," the blind and striving force behind all existence. Freud interpreted it as a sublimated form of unconscious desires, transformed into socially acceptable symbolic forms. Nietzsche viewed art as a Dionysian eruption—an ecstatic release of suffering, chaos, and primal yearning. In this view, art functions as the language of desire, its transformation into aesthetically compelling form.

25. On the disillusionment of European elites post-WWI, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (Pantheon, 1994). Hobsbawm details how the confidence of 19th-century secularism gave way to catastrophe and moral crisis after the world wars.

26. Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* provides a sobering account of how the century became morally distinct—not merely in death toll but in the systematic scale and ideological intensity of state violence (Yale University Press, 1999). Glover underscores the 20th century's uniqueness in terms of ideologically motivated mass murder, such as the Holocaust, Stalinist purges, genocide in Rwanda, and Cambodian atrocities—linking them to advances in bureaucratic techniques and technological capacity for mass destruction. Note that even what appear to be cases of ethnic violence, such as in Rwanda, were the result of modern colonial ideologies. Belgian colonial rule entrenched the idea that Tutsis were a superior "Hamite" race—more intelligent and closer to Europeans—while Hutus were portrayed as inferior.

27. One social scientist contends that algorithmic systems on social media platforms are profoundly destructive: they amplify moral outrage, undermine adolescent mental health, fragment democratic societies, and prioritize engagement over truth, wisdom, or human flourishing. See Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024), esp. chap. 5. For more on this, see https://jonathanhaidt.com/anxious-generation/.

Moderns came to see inner beauty not in virtue—acquired through effort, sacrifice, and wisdom in obedience to the divine—but in authenticity: being one's "true self," as if desire were the last remaining mystery, inexplicable, yet sacred and thus worthy of reverence. There was no shortage of moral discourse; quite the contrary—philosophy and art obsessed over it precisely because its foundations were collapsing. Art searched for traces of meaning amid the ruins. Belief did not vanish overnight, but as horizons expanded with unprecedented speed, the old, creaking, and often hypocritical devotions—fragmented into warring sects—could no longer keep pace with the power and knowledge unleashed by science, capitalist accumulation, and colonial conquest. In the absence of a morally resonant belief in God, virtue came to be seen not as nobility but as cowardice masquerading as piety: a refusal to confront reality, a timid compromise. To live virtuously, on this view, was not to live at all.

Weber illustrates this rupture by invoking Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), a foundational text in modernist poetry. Published in 1857 and swiftly condemned by French authorities for offenses against public morality, Baudelaire's work openly engaged themes of eroticism, blasphemy, and moral decay. Six of its poems were banned until 1949. Yet the collection became a touchstone for Symbolist and Decadent poets and later profoundly influenced literary development. Baudelaire's idea of the poet as both visionary and cursed shaped the very soul of modernist and existential literature. What Baudelaire showed—and Nietzsche and Weber would later theorize—is that darkness, perversity, and even moral violation can be a source of aesthetic intensity. Not only could beauty now coexist with evil, but that very evil—its strangeness, its depth, its forbidden allure—intensified its beauty.

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By contrast, in premodern and classical theories, art was often not the outlet for desire but its refinement—its cultivation, edification, and disciplining according to the highest ideal. Rather than giving free rein to emotion, art was meant to shape it. Plato, in the *Republic*, famously distrusted art because of its mimetic nature and its power to stir the irrational soul; yet even he acknowledged the possibility of noble poetry and music that could educate and orient the soul toward virtue. Aristotle, more sympathetic, argued in the *Poetics* that tragedy produces *catharsis*—a purgation of pity and fear that provides emotional release while also morally and intellectually educating the audience. In Islamic and Christian traditions, too, art was primarily didactic. Poetry, storytelling, and even visual forms (where permitted) were evaluated not for their originality or emotive depth alone, but for their capacity to cultivate *ḥikma* (wisdom) and *adab* (ethical refinement).

Decadent art existed aplenty, as in the opulent centuries of the Abbasid empire, but it recognized its place in the world of submission to God rather than glorifying nihilism. Take, for instance, Abū Nuwās, the infamous 2nd-3rd (8th–9th) century libertine poet, widely remembered as the literary emblem of decadence—celebrated and condemned for his unflinching praise of wine, eroticism, and irreverence toward religious norms. Yet his poetry does not simply revel in immorality, but often reflects on it with irony, conflict, and remorse. One study examines a poem in which Abū Nuwās transitions from indulgence to repentance, revealing a deeper moral awareness beneath the surface of transgression.[28] Others have traced a shift in his later work toward asceticism and spiritual reflection, suggesting an evolving poetic conscience grappling with the very norms he once defied.[29] Desire, in other words, could be expressive and even profligate, but it could not become its own judge—its own highest standard. That inversion could be stabilized only in the absence of the divine reference.

The Qur'an's mistrust of poets was not a rejection of poetic form but precisely due to their being unmoored from truth and virtue and their valorization of desire: *They wander in every valley, and say what they do not do* (Q. 26:225–226). This highlights the poets' inconsistency and indulgence in rhetorical flourish detached from ethical commitment. Yet it is clear that the Qur'an does not categorically condemn poetry itself. The Prophet ﷺ employed Ḥassān ibn Thābit to compose poetry in defense of Islam and praised verses that affirmed truth, such as those of the poet Labīd, who declared, *"Lo, everything apart from Allah is perishing."*[30] What the Qur'an censures, then, is not the art of poetry but the privileging of desire over truth and virtue.

28. James Montgomery, "Revelry and Remorse: A Poem of Abū Nuwās," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 25.2 (1994), https://www.jstor.org/stable/4183332.

29. Nizar Abdullah Al-Nuweiri and Al-Taj Ibrahim Dafallah, "The Ascetic Themes in the Poetry of Abu Nuwas: An Analytical Study," *Mesopotamian Journal of Arabic Language Studies* (2022): 37–49, https://doi.org/10.58496/MJALS/2022/004.

30. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6147.

The convergence of diversion and refinement is vividly illustrated in the Islamic literary tradition, where even the most impassioned love stories—such as *Layla and Majnun*—are often read allegorically, as metaphors for the soul's longing for the Divine. Erotic desire is not celebrated for its own sake but transfigured into a higher yearning, transcending the pursuit of romantic self-fulfillment and becoming a vehicle for spiritual ascent. To be sure, human desire and the seduction of sin were never absent from the Muslim experience; from folk culture to royal courts, expressions of decadence found their place. Yet the custodians of high culture—the *ʿulamāʾ* and other intellectuals—upheld truth above desire, shaping a civilizational ethos in which longing was not denied, but made sublime.

This broader difference in the purpose of art is reflected in how storytelling itself was structured. Islamicate storytelling was often teleological: it presumed a moral universe in which events, however tragic, ultimately served a meaningful end. Justice may be delayed, but it was not denied. The goal of storytelling was often explicitly didactic—it aimed to instruct and edify, not just entertain. Texts like *Kalīla wa dimna* or *the Shahnameh* exemplify this. Furthermore, stories were embedded in collective rituals; they served to reinforce a shared cultural or religious worldview and transmit it across generations.

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The modern novel marks a decisive break from its premodern antecedents. It privileges psychological realism, turning inward to portray complex, conflicted individuals whose motivations resist easy moral judgment. The worlds these characters inhabit are often disenchanted—justice is uncertain, and meaning is no longer assumed. The narrative centers on the private interiority of the self, frequently in tension with society, tradition, or God. In the wake of Romanticism, the novel increasingly embraces aesthetic autonomy: art is pursued for its own sake, detached from explicit moral or theological ends. Tolstoy, for instance, begins with a strong ethical vision, yet by Anna Karenina, he renders a world where desire, emotional tumult, and spiritual disorientation unfold without clear resolution. The greatest artistic achievements—such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*—become labyrinths of

memory and longing, where the journey of desire becomes the point, and ethical conclusions, if they exist at all, remain elusive. Art, in this context, not only mirrors the modern self but actively participates in its formation—simultaneously reflecting and reshaping the contours of human experience. Despite the psychological richness and formal innovation of modern literature—and allowing for notable exceptions—the overarching trajectory is difficult to ignore: a deepening nihilism, a steady erosion of metaphysical coherence, and a gradual shift from mourning this loss to celebrating it.

The erotic impulse and its seductive power are not absent from Islamic history. Yet whenever that fire flared—whether in the verses of Layla and Majnūn or in the folklore of Yūsuf and Zulaykha—the tradition set mirrors around it, not to extinguish the flame but to reflect it toward a higher light. Reciters who lingered on the sensual beauty of Sūrat Yūsuf were reminded by scholars to temper their rapture with Sūrat al-Nūr, where chastity, restraint, and moral clarity frame desire within a divine architecture. In this way, Islam did not deny passion—it disciplined it, insisting that longing find its meaning in the worship of al-Ḥaqq, rather than in self-gratification.

Art and Pornography: The Trouble with a Man-made Distinction

The phenomenon of pornography—an epidemic of the digital age—may hold the clearest key to understanding desire in late modernity.

The allure of the liminal and the transgressive, as noted, is not unique to secular modernity. But what distinguishes our time—and makes pornography possible and emblematic—is the erosion of the moral and metaphysical architecture once provided by religion, however fractured or inconsistent. Late modernity, severed from transcendence, finds itself increasingly unable to distinguish art from pornography—a collapse that cultural critics such as Roger Scruton, Camille Paglia, and Theodor Adorno have traced in their analyses of commodified aesthetics and erotic flattening.

Moreover, it is a telling mark of the structure of our world that modernity's most nihilistic invention—capitalism's most satanic production, pornography—became a global phenomenon virtually overnight. No civilization today seems to possess a serious defense against it. Confucian, Hindu, and African traditional cultures—each of which once cultivated rigorous ethical boundaries around

sexuality and public decorum—have gradually capitulated, eroded by consumerism, legal redefinition, and the omnipresence of globalized media. In contrast, the Islamic world may represent the last global moral culture where public consensus still resists the normalization of pornography, even if access and consumption are sadly present. This resistance is not grounded in the absence of sexual vice, but in a religious and communal ethic that continues to frame such behaviors as morally problematic.[31]

What has been lost is not merely a code of conduct, but a vision of the sacred. Pornography desecrates the very foundation of human relations. Resistance does persist: among pious Muslims, in Orthodox Christian revivals across Eastern Europe, and among leftist critics who decry the porn industry as an extension of capitalist exploitation. But such resistance is often fragmented, reactive, or easily co-opted.

To understand the feeble moral reasoning that led us here, let us begin with patient zero. British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton, in *Beauty* (2009), famously argued that true art—even when depicting the nude—maintains a posture of reverence: "In aesthetic experience, the body is transfigured by the soul; in pornography, the soul is discarded for the body." Scruton emphasizes that pornography "invites consumption" rather than contemplation, and thus cannot belong to the sphere of high art. American philosopher Camille Paglia, a dissident feminist, while defending the place of eroticism in art, similarly drew a sharp line in *Sexual Personae* (1990), claiming that pornography reduces erotic complexity to "mechanical friction," lacking the psychological depth and symbolic richness that elevate the sexual in true art. Allan Bloom, in his well-known *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), lamented how the modern collapse of cultural standards left students unable to distinguish between the "nobility of Eros" celebrated in high art and the "banality of pornography," which caters solely to base appetite.

All three thinkers—Scruton, Paglia, and Bloom—thus appear confident that a meaningful, moral, and aesthetic boundary can be preserved between art and pornography, even if the surrounding culture increasingly flaunts it. This confidence, however, is ill-conceived and ill-fated. Contemporary Catholic intellectual Mary Eberstadt suggests in *Primal Screams* (2019) that the cumulative breakdown of traditional moral and familial structures has so thoroughly reshaped the modern sensibility that even what once were clear distinctions have become blurred: "The line between high and low culture, between art and pornography, between heroism and

31. In Islamic law, pornography is unequivocally forbidden, and socially it carries a deep sense of shame and reprobation. Its widespread consumption among youth in the Middle East reflects social dysfunction and collapse rather than cultural acceptance; unlike in the West or elsewhere, it has not been normalized. Its rejection remains anchored in the broader Islamic moral universe, where resistance to such practices is integral to the collective understanding of a dignified life. For further discussion, see *"Porn in the Middle East – The Elephant in the Room."* *Raseef22*, August 22, 2016, https://raseef22.net/article/1066747-porn-middle-east-elephant-room.

exhibitionism, grows ever harder to discern." Against the effort to uphold a sharp boundary between art and pornography, several influential cultural critics have argued that such distinctions are historically contingent and ideologically motivated, rather than essential. John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), contends that the traditional European nude was already pornographic in its function, serving not aesthetic reverence but voyeuristic pleasure: "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." For Berger, what elites have celebrated as "art" is merely a more socially prestigious form of objectification, differing from pornography only in its coded manners of display. Critics who dismiss moral concerns, like Thomas Laqueur, offer a complementary historical argument. In *Solitary Sex* (2003), Laqueur suggests that moral panics over sexuality, obscenity, and masturbation were not timeless truths but products of specific bourgeois cultures seeking to regulate private life: "What was once natural became pathological; what was once a private act became a public anxiety." In this view, the shifting boundary between art and pornography does not reflect a timeless moral distinction but rather the changing needs of social governance. Walter Kendrick deepens this argument in *The Secret Museum* (1987), tracing the very category of "pornography" to nineteenth-century Europe, when moral entrepreneurs sought to differentiate respectable "high culture" from vulgar "low" productions. As Kendrick puts it, "Pornography" as a category separate from art "was invented so that it could be suppressed," suggesting that the art/pornography division functions primarily as a mechanism for class-based exclusion and cultural gatekeeping.

The contrast between these two camps perfectly captures the modern-postmodern divide over the nature of culture and morality. For the modernists, the distinction between art and pornography is grounded in the possibility of elevating human experience through aesthetic form and moral imagination; without such elevation, civilization itself risks collapse into mere appetite. By contrast, for postmodernists, the very notion of elevation is suspect, revealing hidden structures of power, exclusion, and social control. What one side views as a defense of dignity, the other sees as a rhetorical strategy for legitimizing cultural hierarchies. At stake in this debate is not simply the status of erotic representation but the possibility—or impossibility—of a shared moral and aesthetic order in modernity.

Without the authority of divine command—an authority capable of binding reason, will, and desire into a coherent moral whole—the distinction between art and pornography, like all moral distinctions, becomes a fragile construct, ever vulnerable to erasure by the shifting tides of power, fashion, and appetite.

As long as taste, dignity, and civilization are grounded merely in human judgment, without reference to divine command, every aesthetic or moral boundary becomes provisional and subject to contestation by rival elites. As Alasdair MacIntyre famously argues in *After Virtue* (1981), modern moral discourse has fragmented into "emotivism," where competing moral claims are little more than expressions of subjective preference, presented as rational arguments. In this context, Scruton and Bloom are not defenders of an ancient order but mourners of its passing, trapped within the relativism they cannot escape. Worse, they are hypocrites, as their vision of Western supremacy is built upon a bloody history not only of colonialism and genocide but also of the systematic annihilation of ways of life far richer, more integrated, and spiritually profound than their own modernized, diluted, and selective religiosity.

Yet even MacIntyre's proposed recovery of Aristotelian virtue ethics reveals the depth of the problem: in a world without consensus on the prescriptions of natural law, appeals to telos and human flourishing cannot compel allegiance across divided moral communities. As MacIntyre himself concedes, we are living through "a new dark ages" where rational agreement on first principles has become unattainable. Without the authority of divine command—an authority capable of binding reason, will, and desire into a coherent moral whole—the distinction between art and pornography, like all moral distinctions, becomes a fragile construct, ever vulnerable to erasure by the shifting tides of power, fashion, and appetite.

Desire Meets the Almighty

Against the post-Enlightenment West's steady devolution into relativism and emotivism, Islam alone offers a vision of vibrant moral order that is neither arbitrary nor subject to the shifting tastes of elites. Due to space limitations, we cannot fully explore how every major world civilization—whether China, India, or Russia—has been profoundly reshaped by secular Western ideologies, both culturally and philosophically, even as these regions witness reactionary political and cultural movements. Islam and its moral order, imbricated in Muslim communities and societies worldwide, remains the last enduring framework.

Yet this moral sovereignty comes with all the challenges of advocating for an ideal in the face of a triumphant global order. Despite military defeats and the co-optation of our elites and institutions, Muslim intellectual, social, familial, and personal lives have remained embattled frontiers of jihad against pharaonic desire. The struggle continues not merely on political or economic terrain, but in the deeper moral and spiritual fabric of everyday life. A God-centered, worshipful existence; the prohibition of alcohol; the regulation of sexuality; and the cultivation of modesty—these are not cultural quirks or relics of premodern social engineering. They are obligations rooted in the metaphysical reality of divine command, reminders that even in moments of defeat, the believer's soul remains a battlefield—and that ultimate authority belongs to God alone. In Islamic epistemology, moral knowledge is not invented through cultural consensus nor subject to renegotiation through historical accident; it is discovered through revelation (*waḥy*) and reason (*ʿaql*) properly situated within the covenantal relationship between humanity and God. Thus, where Western debates over art and pornography oscillate endlessly between competing elites, Islamic law maintains a principled, coherent distinction between permissible (*ḥalāl*) and prohibited (*ḥarām*) forms of representation and behavior. It is this anchoring in transcendence that preserves the possibility of genuine moral clarity—a clarity that the heirs of the Enlightenment, for all their eloquence and nostalgia, can no longer secure. It is not that the barbarians are not at the gate, threatening our trust in divine knowledge, but rather that we—by both belief and experience—know of a refuge amid the storm. Our grasp on it is not guaranteed, yet its existence, and the presence of believing Muslims who still seek and hold to it, is beyond doubt.

In Islam, human desire is a divine secret—at once a peril and a possibility. It can become the site of our fall or the secret of our ascension. The Qur'an warns: "Have you seen the one who takes his own desire (*hawā*) as his god?" (Q. 45:23), exposing the idolatry of self. Yet it also proclaims: "Those who believe are stronger in their love for Allah" (Q. 2:165), reminding us that desire, when disciplined and rightly directed, becomes the very force that lifts the soul toward God.

Here, Islam is not merely offering a list of rules, but staging a metaphysical drama. The soul (*nafs*) is torn between competing loves. And love is not neutral. What we desire *shapes what we become*. As Ibn al-Qayyim writes in *al-Fawāʾid*, "The one who loves something besides God is punished by that very love. It turns against him." But he also says, concerning the journey to Allah: "Desire is the mount of the traveler. Without it, the seeker would not move." This duality is crucial. The same fire that scorches also warms; the same yearning that leads to ruin may, if purified, open the gates of paradise.

The Islamic poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal keenly grasped the challenge faced by modern Muslims and gave voice to the spirit of many revivalists across the Ummah. In response to Nietzsche's idea of the will to power, Iqbal did not reject the concept outright for Muslims. Instead, he redirected it—arguing that the Muslim must harness the will to power in the service of God and His creation. In doing so, he drew on eclectic Sufi imagery, particularly from his poetic master Rumi, and looked to the Prophet ﷺ as the ultimate exemplar. Iqbal's call was not for self-effacement but for the elevation of the self (*khudī*)—not in rebellion against God, but in devotion to Him. As he famously wrote:

Raise your selfhood so high
that before every destiny
God Himself will ask you:
Tell me, what is your desire?

خُدی کو کر بلند اتنا کہ ہر تقدیر سے پہلے
خدا بندے سے خود پوچھے، بتا تیری رضا کیا ہے

Iqbal deploys this shocking and brazen language to rouse the Indian *Musalman*—the Urdu word for Muslim—out of spiritual stupor. To grasp the depth of this crisis, consider a chilling historical irony: in the Nazi death camps, German guards used the word *Musalman* to describe Jewish prisoners in the final stages of physical and spiritual collapse—those so emaciated, so broken, they had surrendered utterly to death. The term came to signify a state of lifeless submission. It is precisely this docility—of a people with belief but no will, no defiance, no fire—that Iqbal sought to awaken us from: not a people without God, but a people without desire for God.

What this reveals is that desire, in Islam, is not simply to be extinguished or idolized. It is to be *disciplined*, *refined*, and *oriented toward God*. Not suppressed, but trained—like a wild horse that must be broken so its strength can be harnessed in God's path. Desire is not the enemy. It is the arena. And God is not merely a judge from without, but the Beloved toward whom the heart leans, the One whom all other loves must be measured against. "And those who believe are stronger in love for God" (Q. 2:165).

In *Madārij al-sālikīn*, in the section on the *maqām* (spiritual station) of *riḍā* (contentment with God's decree), Ibn al-Qayyim offers a profound meditation on why God created Iblīs—the Devil. Rather than apologetic, his answer is spiritually and theologically daring. He writes that the existence of Iblīs, and by extension, the reality of sin and temptation, is not a flaw in the divine order but a necessary element of the unfolding of divine wisdom. Were it not for Iblīs, there would be no *jihād* of the soul, no struggle against temptation, no turning back in repentance (*tawba*), no taste of forgiveness, and no true knowledge of the names and attributes of God, such as *al-Ghaffār* (the Forgiving), *al-Tawwāb* (the Relenting), and *al-Ḥalīm* (the Forbearing).

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Ibn al-Qayyim suggests that the very drama of the human condition—our fall, our yearning, our ascent—is only possible through the testing ground created by evil. Sin, paradoxically, becomes the site of deeper knowledge (*maʿrifa*), sincerity, and dependence on God. He writes:

> Had it not been for Iblīs and the soul's inclinations, many of the divine names would have remained veiled from the servant. How could the servant know the meaning of *al-ʿAfūw*, the Pardoning, unless he sinned and was then pardoned? How could he taste the sweetness of *al-Raḥīm*, the Merciful, unless he had felt the sting of guilt and received mercy?[32]

This theme echoes across the Islamic tradition. The Qur'anic story of Adam and Iblīs (Q. 2:30–39, 7:11–25, among others) is itself a profound

32. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Ranks of the Divine Seekers: A Parallel English–Arabic Text*, 2 vols, trans. Ovamir Anjum (Brill, 2020), 2:162-65, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004413412.

narrative on divine wisdom and the purpose of moral fallibility. Adam is not presented as a failed creature, but as the first example of *insān*—the forgetful yet redeemable human. His lapse, the beginning of moral consciousness. Iblīs falls because of arrogance (*takabbur*); Adam stumbles because of desire, but he also repents and is forgiven. Thus begins the human story: not in perfection, but in error, learning, and return.

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Al-Ghazālī, too, in his *Iḥyāʾ* and *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, reflects on the role of divine names that require a world of sin and suffering to be truly known. Without the veil, there is no unveiling. Without misguidance, there is no *hudā*. Without the experience of distance, the sweetness of nearness cannot be known. As he writes: "The perfection of the divine order lies not in the elimination of evil, but in the harmonization of opposites… through which the beauty of God's names is manifest."

Of course, none of these voices celebrate evil in itself. Rather, they insist that God's wisdom is not undone by the existence of evil; it is displayed through it. Desire, misstep, and fall are not merely obstacles but stages in a deeper journey. The Islamic tradition does not erase the moral distinctions between good and evil, but it insists that even evil must serve a higher purpose within God's plan.

And so, yes—desire is dangerous. But it is also revelatory. It uncovers who we are, what we long for, and how far we are willing to go for what we love. In that revelation lies the possibility of *taḥawwul*—transformation. The very arc of the human story is incomprehensible without the possibility of sin and the mercy that follows. As the Qur'an reveals, the Adamic story on earth begins not with divine wrath for an original sin, but a divine lesson in forgiveness for a misplaced desire (Q. 20:122).

Conclusion

Desire cannot thrive without the concept of sin to guard it. In a world with no sense of guilt before the Almighty, virtue itself disintegrates. And with the collapse of virtue, desire ceases to be stabilizing, elevating, or even genuinely pleasurable—it becomes fragmented, compulsive, and nihilistic. In this context, pornography offers a disturbingly accurate window into the crisis of desire in late modernity—not just as the most extreme commodification of longing, but as a mirror reflecting the spiritual desolation at the heart of our age. It doesn't merely degrade—it reveals a civilization that no longer knows what to do with the human soul.

In the new *jāhiliyya*, idolatry is no longer golden calves and stone statues; it is worship of self, capital, and libido.

What Max Weber observed with confusion and wonder—modernity's fractured, disenchanted worldview—Sayyid Qutb later diagnosed with clarity through the Qur'an: modernity is a form of epistemic polytheism, or in Qur'anic terms, *jāhiliyya*—a willful ignorance of truth itself. This is not simply a decline in religiosity, but an engineered rebellion against the soul's deepest nature: its longing for God. In the new *jāhiliyya*, idolatry is no longer golden calves and stone statues; it is worship of self, capital, and libido.

Yet, if modernity is so hollow, why does it win? The answer lies in the paradox of truth and power, and in an honest reckoning with human desire. Modernity does not triumph because it is true—it triumphs because it acts. Its success lies not in a true understanding of the human being, but in the ability of its ideas to mobilize will, devotion, discipline, and institutional form. By contrast, the believing Muslim holds a luminous truth, but often lacks the will to live it. The truth of Islam is not merely intellectual; it is existential—demanding embodiment in a self, *khudī*, ennobled through service to God.

American political scientist Samuel Huntington once remarked: "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion (to which few members of other civilizations were converted) but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do."[33] This, however, is only a half truth. Their institutions of memory and knowledge having been

33. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World* (Simon and Schuster, 1996), 51.

destroyed, non-Westerners too often forget—confusing worldly defeat with spiritual inferiority, and thus surrendering inward dignity and divine purpose along with their land. It is not the absence of truth but the atrophy of will—the mistaking of passive belief for active submission—that has rendered us ineffective. The Qur'an reminds us that the love of the believers for God must surpass all worldly loves (Q. 2:165); only such love, when embodied in action, can transform the world.

But this world is not the final measure. It is a trial. What matters is not possession of truth, but striving in its path. The Prophet ﷺ called this *jihād*, and it begins in the heart. Those who strive most fiercely will shape the world—whether their cause is true or false. And so we must stop waiting for truth to defend itself. We must defend it—by embodying it, desiring it more than the world desires its gods, and living it until the world begins to remember its soul. Our task is not merely to call to truth, but to show that it is still possible to live it. As the Qur'an says, "Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" (Q. 13:11). Desire is not the enemy—it is the battleground. And we will either be destroyed by it, or saved through it.