

# Oriental Dialectic and its Roots in Faith

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WHEN comparing the literatures of West and East one often has the impression that the critical faculty of Orientals and that of Westerners are situated on different planes; Westerners cannot help feeling shocked by certain peculiarities and inconsequences in the dialectic of Orientals, for example, the fact of supporting a good thesis by weak arguments, or of ignoring strong arguments or of exploiting them insufficiently, not to mention a tendency to exaggerate which is often met with, at least in certain sectors. One might be tempted to conclude that spiritual zeal and a critical sense are mutually exclusive, but it is quite obvious that this cannot be so in principle, since two positive qualities are involved; one is nevertheless forced to admit that to a large extent it is so in practice, by reason of the unequal distribution of natural gifts in a humanity far removed from primordial perfection. In brief, the difficulty consists in combining spiritual subjectivity, which has in view what is efficacious for the saving of souls, with outward objectivity, which is concerned with the exactness of phenomena; we say outward and not metaphysical objectivity, since the latter is included in the subjectivity just mentioned and even conditions it; otherwise this subjectivity would not be spiritual. That this incompatibility—always relative—concerns collectivities and not necessarily individuals is obvious; but being present in the collective mentalities, it spills over into the traditional language and affects even the most gifted of individuals.

Be that as it may, when the Westerner comes up against certain extravagances of language in some Moslem texts—for it is the Near East that is more particularly in question here—it is obviously not wrong of him to notice the existence of these imperfections be they real or apparent; but he is seriously deceiving himself if he imagines that *homo occidentalis* is endowed with a critical sense that is operative on all levels, or in other words that the critical sense—or causal requirement—which characterizes the ancient Greeks in particular and Europeans in general is valid in every realm and thus represents an overall superiority. Admittedly, the critical sense that prevents us from accepting an incoherence, even if it be only verbal, is a mode of discernment; but it is not discernment *per se*, namely discernment which operates on the decisive planes of the human condition and which puts the latter in accord with its sufficient reason. The Westerner possesses a sense of exactness and of measure on the level of facts and their expression—apart from any question of ignorance or prejudice—but he makes it impossible for himself to derive profit from this gift at the level of his ultimate interests; the most striking proof of this is the disintegration of Western civilization in general and of modern thought in particular.

The implicit and symbolistic nature of Eastern dialectic coincides in a certain way with sacred dialectic as such; as for hyperbolism, which is used so frequently, it may be a legitimate rhetorical means of spiritual suggestion, but at the emotional level it results from a temptation of the exiled soul when faced with the supernatural and its marvelous and immeasurable aspects. Pious exaggeration believes it may violate the principle of measure—which requires that a thing

be expressed in conformity with the means of expression—because the essences to be expressed escape the narrownesses of the terrestrial world and of language; but the expression is strictly speaking at fault as soon as it attributes the illimitation of essences to sensible forms, all the more so when it does this in a quantitative and unthinking manner. Perfect symbolism adopts an intermediate attitude: like the miracle, it projects the marvelous into the formal order; but the miracle is not beyond measure, and likewise perfect symbolism manifests, along with the marvelous, the measure that is proper to the formal order; it thus avoids gratuitousness, improbability, or, in a word, absurdity, from all of which a certain type of religious emotionalism seems to have difficulty in escaping.

At the level of sacred dialectic the Gospel provides us with examples of hyperbolic symbolism: when Christ affirms that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven, or that it is enough to have faith no greater than a grain of mustard seed in order to move a mountain, he is expressing himself in a typically Semitic manner: what one has to understand is, on the one hand, that it is impossible for the soul to enter Glory directly as long as it remains attached to perishable things—for it is attachment and not possession that creates the vice of richness, on the other hand, that faith, to the extent that it is sincere, comprises in itself a supernatural and therefore humanly un-measurable power. Formal exaggeration has here the function of suggesting on the one hand—as far as richness is concerned—a *conditio sine qua non* of salvation, and on the other hand—as regards faith—a quality of effective participation in absoluteness. Analogous remarks could be made with regard to the injunctions to turn the other cheek and to refrain from passing judgment, and other expressions of this kind which are all examples of an isolating dialectic in which a particular relationship is implicit.

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According to some devotees of Vishnuism, the Name of Rama is greater than Rama himself, for the reason, it would seem, that "it is only by the power of this Name that the Lord is accessible". On the one hand, it would be vain to deny or smother under a heap of euphemisms the flagrant contradiction contained in this proposition; on the other hand, one cannot in all conscience blind oneself to the obvious fact that the function of this formulation is to isolate a particular element of the spiritual reality—the Name of Rama—and then to underline its preeminence exclusively in regard to its efficacy in the saving of souls. It is as if one dared to assert that the sacred host is greater than Christ because in fact it is the host that confers grace in an immediate and almost material manner; an extraordinarily ill-sounding and paradoxical ellipse to say the least, and one that can scarcely be justified by the wish to single out for special adoration the sensible manifestation of the saving Hypostasis. In fact, Western mentality is refractory to such contortions, and this scruple, considered in itself, is unquestionably a quality which one would like to see given its full value through an equivalent spiritual realism.<sup>1</sup>

The traditions of India, Assyria and Egypt provide us with examples of what has been called henotheism, namely, the cult of various divinities, each of which, when it is worshipped, is considered as the Supreme God.<sup>2</sup> To regard the Name of Rama practically as the major divinity amounts, analogically speaking, to replacing the worship of the transcendent God by that of the efficient God, in the measure in which such a distinction can be meaningful; such a "tour de force", however can only be explained by the emotional subjectivism of the *bhaktas*. If the Name of Rama possesses any efficacy, this can only be because it "is Rama", an elliptical formula which is as daring as it is possible to be within the framework of what is logically permissible;

the greatest homage that one can render to this Name is obviously to recognize, not that it is more than the Named, but that it can be identified with the Named.

If henotheism is a phenomenon proper to certain ancient religions—though in Hinduism it is still alive—the henotheist mentality in a broad sense is characteristic of the whole of the East, to one degree or another; we may recognize it every time a single aspect is isolated from the whole with a particular relationship in view, then presented as a superlative in the context of this same relationship. The superlativism of Arab dialectic—which consists in emphasizing a quality or a defect by means of a logically unacceptable hyperbole while keeping silent about the particular relationship which makes the superlative intelligible—is not unconnected with the importance which in the Arab and Islamic mentality is attached to the image of the sword and to the experience of instantaneity: in saying which begin "The best of things is..." or "the worst of men is..." or "he will have the greatest reward (or the greatest punishment), who...", the thought is comparable to a sword-stroke; it is an act rather than a vision.

According to Islam, all the Prophets are equal in their dignity of prophecy and their character of impeccability; nevertheless some excel others in some particular grace; Mohammed is their synthesis, and being thus the first in his celestial reality, he is the last in time, according to the principle of inverse reflection. That is to say an apparently very contingent aspect of the phenomenon of Mohammed is interpreted as manifesting a unique and supereminent quality; now this is completely in the line of henotheist logic, for it is thus that Vishnu, Shiva or other Divinities become alternatively or separately the Supreme God, always in virtue of a given quality extended to the Absolute. This extension obviously presupposes that the quality in question is really prefigured in a certain manner in God, or that it indicates the supereminence in question by direct or inverse analogy; the degree of this supereminence may be directly Divine as in the case of the Hindu gods, or more relative as in that of the Arab Prophet. The fact that the latter was the last founder of a world religion—and it is sufficiently remarkable from the criteriological point of view that he foresaw this, given that in his time Islam was humanly speaking nothing—is precisely an objective sign which in the case of a phenomenon of this order of grandeur permits a henotheistic type of interpretation which though not valid for every cosmic sector is valid for that of Islam.<sup>3</sup>

In an analogous manner, if a given God or Goddess of Brahmanism may appear as the Supreme Divinity, that is because he—or she—rules a cosmic sector which extends from the devotee, through the particular Heaven of the God or the Goddess, right up to Paramātmā, and which also includes—on the earthly side—the whole form of worship offered to the particular Divinity.

And just as the posteriority of the Arab Prophet may or must be interpreted, in the cosmic sector of Islam, as marking the principal anteriority of the Mohammedan Logos, so the human femininity of the Blessed Virgin, and thus her subordination, can indicate a real celestial superiority in a particular connection: femininity appears here—in view of the spiritual and cosmic supereminence of the personage—as the inverted reflection of pure essentiality, which amounts to saying that the Virgin, in her "transcendent body" (*dharmakaya*), is the virginal Mother of all Prophets; she is thus identified with Divine Femininity, or with the Wisdom "which was at the beginning"<sup>4</sup>

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When Junayd opines—with a logic which we think has been sufficiently characterized—that

a moment's forgetfulness of God compromises a thousand years of obedience, one sees immediately, by the very excessiveness of the image, that it is from the sincerity of faith that he deduces the obligation always to remember God: to believe that God is one, to believe it sincerely and consequently totally, is not to forget it for even a moment, it is to plunge one's whole existence into this conviction. To lose sight of Unity is to place oneself outside unitary faith, and thus outside Islam; whence the obliteration of the rites accomplished previously, be it for a thousand years. This totalitarianism or this ostracism recalls that of St. Symeon the New Theologian, *mutatis mutandis*, who maintained that baptism only remains valid in the presence of a spiritual perfection that is renewed every instant: just as for Symeon sanctity proves the efficacy of baptism, so for Junayd the perpetual mindfulness of God proves the sincerity of faith in God;<sup>5</sup> the oneness of God demands the totality of faith, its ubiquity and its perpetuity. In the face of the reality of the Essence, thinks Junayd, all the rest must, if not disappear, at least diminish to the point of never excluding the consciousness of the One.

The two following examples bear witness to the same state of mind: a certain believer asks God for various favors, not because he wishes to obtain them, but "to obey the divine command" expressed by the Qoran; as if God, in commanding or permitting personal prayer did not have in view the ends of this prayer, and as if God could appreciate an obedience that disdained the sufficient reason of the act commanded or permitted! In this case moreover, "command" is a rather grand word; in reality God does not command us to have needs or to make requests of him, but he invites us out of mercy to ask him for what we lack; we can pray for our daily bread or for a cure as we can pray for inward graces, but there is no question of praying for the sake of praying because God ordered for the sake of ordering. The second example is the following: another believer, contrarily to the foregoing, starts off from the idea that everything is predestined and abstains from formulating any prayers—in spite of the "Divine command" this time!—because "everything that must happen will happen anyway"; as if God gave himself the trouble to command or permit superfluous attitudes, and as if prayer too were not predestined! To be sure, man is a "servant" ('abd), and servitude (*'ubūdiyyah*) comprises obedience; but it is not just a matter of "art for art's sake"; it exists only in virtue of its contents, especially since man is "made in the image of God"; to forget this is to empty the very notion of man of all its substance.

What the first of the two believers quoted undoubtedly had in view is the virtue of obedience: he wishes to show that this virtue—or this "mystical taste" (*dhawq*)—has priority over all logical motivations and all secondary ends; envisaged thus, obedience obviously is of greater importance than the obtaining of some desire. The worldly man (*dunyāwī*), his name is disobedience: thus it is necessary to operate an initial inversion or conversion (*tawbah*), and then repeat it at every moment. The spiritual man is then the perfect servant, to the point of "disappearance" (*fanā'*); things have value only through obedience.

So also in the case of the second example quoted: it signifies that one must not set out any personal wish in opposition to the Divine decrees. Logically such an intention is absurd and unrealizable, but spiritually it means that the soul seeks to maintain itself in a so to speak ontological attitude; only the Divine Will is real, and one must hold oneself at the disposal of this sole reality; an impracticable attitude, strictly speaking, but one which, considered as an intention or a tendency, may have its value. Nevertheless there is in such a case a danger of individualism in reverse, giving rise to an insoluble sentimentalism and a moral automatism which, while seeking to be the vehicle for a metaphysical consciousness, are in reality incompatible therewith;

the Christian cult of humility offers numerous examples of the contradiction posed by an annihilation of self which in fact is an emotional inflation of the ego. In Islamic terms, one might say that individualism, even if indirect, is a sin of "association" (*shirk*) (of something else with God), and is a sin of hypocrisy (*nifāq*), from the moment one claims to admit that "there is no divinity apart from the sole Divinity" and to annihilate oneself for this very reason, when in fact one merely indulges oneself in a noisy drama of annihilation.

But let us return to the perfect obedience, or fideism, which displays no wish to understand beyond a certain intuition considered to be sufficient: according to this way of seeing and feeling, the attitude of intellectual observation (which as such is neutral and apparently "non-committed") is pervaded by a compromising odor of outwardness and profanity, or even of impiety; the critical spirit then appears as something that is more or less sacrilegious, and which seems for this very reason to harm peace of heart and serenity of soul; in short, it will be said that one must content oneself with the taste of Truth, which has no need of the proofs required by doubt. Moreover, from the point of view of fideism, one should not seek to verify "from without"—by a profane mental intervention—what is certain "from within"; one must not open the door to the temptation of doubt and to the vicious circle of a philosophical restlessness without issue and in the last analysis destructive; thought will never appease thought. There is in this sentiment an incontestable truth—although in fact it favors an emotionalism devoid of the sense of proportion—for discursive thought comprises a grave danger owing to the fact that its own nature provides it with no motive for stopping; ratiocination is without end, its movement is spiroidal and cannot exhaustively attain to the Real.

Mental movement is only appeased in faith, which rejects it, or in gnosis, which integrates it and realizes its positive content; in both cases, mental movement may be produced or may not be produced, and if it is produced—which it obviously is—it will in any case only have a purely descriptive and provisional function, delimited either by dogma or gnosis. The points of reference furnished by the traditional doctrines have nothing to do with any sort of philosophical "research" without serenity and without end and unaware of the very *raison d'être* of intelligence.

That fideism opens the door to sentimentality is undeniable, but that does not prejudice spiritual effort, and that is what counts here; moreover, man is free to choose his way in conformity with his nature and the role that sentiment plays in it. And there is a further point of importance: when a sentiment is such that it neither contradicts nor limits truth in any way—the reference here being to spiritually sufficient truth—it is entirely legitimate; it then represents, not a natural fact that is simply to be tolerated, but a passive mode of intuition or participation. If it were not so, the symbolism of love would not be conceivable, nor would the use of music or poetry.<sup>6</sup>

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The Christian cult of humility to which reference has been made above, implies an infelicitous equation between intelligence and pride;<sup>7</sup> it tends to reduce spirituality to alternatives that are too narrow when compared with the possibilities of human nature, and thus to exclude certain types of sanctity and even to favor substitutes in reverse for these unfulfilled vocations. This cult of humility like the Moslem cult of obedience or sincerity is moreover not unconnected with the absence of the notion of *Māyā*: in fact, the prejudice of practically reducing spirituality to the conviction of being the most vile of men presupposes a sort of absolutization of human reality from which one cannot escape—in the absence of intellectual alchemy—save by a

psychological crushing.<sup>8</sup> This amounts to saying, firstly that man is not capable of objectivity, and secondly that the soul in no wise possesses the aspect of objective phenomenon in relation to the intelligence; if it be objected that humility is precisely the fact of being objective in regard to oneself, we would reply that it is so in principle, but it is not so in the conventional ascetic cult of humility which imposes on the soul—on every soul—the conviction of being, not relatively bad, but of being bad fundamentally and to a greater degree than any other soul. The fact that this formulation is capable of a plausible meaning in the shape of a notion-symbol (and in this sense every sin is in a certain manner sin as such) does not alter the fact that in passional mysticism humility gives rise to a moral automatism without intelligence and is generally applied with a sentimental prejudice devoid of every nuance of objectivity.

Within the framework of a real contemplativity, one that is refractory to the world and to ambitions—and from which as a consequence this world withdraws—the question of knowing whether we are good or bad pertains to Maya; it is fundamentally insoluble and thus a matter of indifference. Although we cannot help seeing evil in ourselves and indeed must even force ourselves to do so—without, however, involving our soul to the point of falling into an individualism without issue—the only thing that counts definitively is the element of absolutivity which determines our spiritual life. And it is the very insistence on the positive elements of spirituality that regulates what is morally problematical; unable as we are to solve the insoluble question of our own value, it is God who solves it for us, so to speak, through the elements of absolutivity to which we give pride of place.

To see in this doctrine an invitation to abandon effort is to lose sight of the fact, on the one hand, that the struggle for virtue is not an end in itself, and that there must therefore be a spiritual connection in which virtue takes precedence over struggle, and on the other hand that it would be senseless to struggle towards a goal which virtue itself would forbid us to attain. All these considerations converge on the crucial problem of the encounter, in part inevitable and in part contradictory, between religious individualism and universal Reality.

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There is an element which—in fact if not by right—is opposed to the critical sense and this is what might be termed "inspirationism": it consists in the pious abstention from making mental interventions of a corrective or doubting nature when faced, not with inspiration in the highest sense of the term, but with the wave of flowing inspiration which is necessarily produced when a person writes on a spiritual subject with sufficient authority. The idea that it is God who dictates to us what we must write by virtue of our vocation, may result in a degree of negligence or carelessness as to the form and even value of the arguments, as well as to a corresponding insensibility to these things; the extreme opposite would be a meticulous logic without inspiration, whereby things were treated from the outside without sufficient knowledge, and without a "mandate from Heaven", and this is the case of philosophy in the current sense of the word. Inspirationism, with all its dialectical risks, is a two-edged sword—in principle if not always in fact—but it is understandable in the case of Semites of nomadic type who, with their prophetic mentality, are always suspended on the Divine Word descending from Heaven.

Quite apart from any question of Western incomprehension, we are of the view that most of those things in Oriental texts which seem arbitrary, absurd and "unreadable", must be ascribed to inspirationism, positively or negatively according to the case; and when the cause is positive, this is because there really is inspiration. Semitic revelationism and Aryan intellectionism: from them

derive respectively inspirationism and objective dialectic, then imperturbable fideism and critical sense, and finally, at the extreme limit (which is already excessive and abusive), the blind automatism either of religious moralism or of a philosophical logic that is devoid of all normally human intuition and which for this reason is much more aberrant than the said moralism. This asymmetry between two opposed but in a certain sense complementary abuses, is explained by the fact that there is inequality between their positive sources, namely Revelation and Intellection, or objective and formal religion and immanent and supra-formal religion; the latter being the quintessence of the former, its enfeeblement in human consciousness will result in counterfeit and *perversion—corruptio optimi pessima—*, whereas the most unintelligent fideism does not cut itself off in principle either from truth or from grace. This makes comprehensible the condemnation of the philosophical point of view by the fideists, even when they are wrong in detail; they reject truths which are inaccessible to them in fact, but in doing so they condemn a tendency.

In saying this, we are aware of the fact that many arguments could be turned against us to invalidate our thesis, which can only be an approximation; but it is a necessary approximation, without which important phenomena, troubling at first sight, would remain unexplained; they would even seem inexplicable, unless they are either explained in the most erroneous manner (as has happened in fact), or unless on the contrary they are dissimulated beneath euphemisms that are detestable in themselves and in the long run more compromising than useful.

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It must be recognized that Moslem hagiography is one of the fields that causes most difficulties for the Western reader; only too often the impression is given that the pure and simple facts, in their exact and measurable outward aspect, are of little importance to the authors; only moral and mystical intentions seem to count; history seems to be reduced to a sort of didactic ideography that must be as incisive as possible.<sup>9</sup> The great virtues dominate everything: sincerity, poverty, generosity, confidence; the saints are there to demonstrate these virtues, not to be humanly credible; and God is all-powerful. It is the content of the facts, their moral and spiritual *raison d'être*, their efficacy against hypocrisy which are important; the facts in themselves are mere signs, like the letters of the alphabet.

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<sup>1</sup> It should not, however, be forgotten that Christianity itself is Oriental. The cult of the "Heart of Jesus" is an example if not of the subordination of essence to form, at least of the projection of adoration on to one single aspect of the Hypostasis. In the expression "Mother of God"—the intention of which was to strike a blow against Arianism—the ellipse is of the most daring kind, since it seems to subordinate the Absolute to the relative, and it is scarcely less extra-ordinary than the Vishnuite hyperbole exalting the Name of Râma.

<sup>2</sup> The term quoted is from Max Müller. The expression "kathenotheism", proposed by the same author seeks to bring out the successive nature of such worship.

<sup>3</sup> Account must be taken here of a circumstance which despite its importance can only be mentioned in passing: this is that every Revealer inwardly perceives his identity with the total Logos, but he does not necessarily perceive—unless the perspective which he incarnates should necessitate it—this same degree of identity on the part of other Revealers; he will therefore see in them particular functions of the total Logos and so of himself, since he knows that he is concretely identified with the latter. Hence, for example, the notion of the "mandate of Mohammed" which is taken to include all Messages from on high.

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<sup>4</sup> A Sufi—possibly Ibn ‘Arabi—has written that the Divine Name "She" (*Hiya*), not in use but nevertheless possible, is greater than the name "He" (*Huwa*). This refers to the Indetermination or Infinitude, both virginal and maternal, of the Self or "Essence" (*Dhāt*).

<sup>5</sup> In an analogous fashion a Moslem author has maintained that fasting is only valid on condition of its being accompanied by all sorts of inward abstinences, an opinion which is unacceptable from the point of view of the Law.

<sup>6</sup> It is sometimes alleged that Oriental music, Hindu music in particular, is not sentimental but intellectual, which is ridiculous; music is sentimental by definition—which is no reproach, and still less an insult—but within this framework it acts as a vehicle for spiritual modalities which as such pass beyond the level of psychic phenomena.

<sup>7</sup> Originally directed against the "wisdom of the flesh", this equation could have been salutary, but through its sentimental exploitation it has tended instead to favor the rationalist reaction.

<sup>8</sup> According to Olier, humility is "to wish to be not only known but also treated as vile, abject and contemptible... The truly humble soul does not believe that anyone can despise it because it sees itself as being beneath words... it suffers with affliction the least things which are done for it and which appear to suggest that it is held in some esteem". (*Introduction à la vie et aux vertus chrétiennes*, chap. V). Here the awareness of our ontological nothingness and of our personal limitations is transposed into the language of sentimental individualism, a contradictory attitude which yields nothing to the most excessive obedientialism, and which reduces mysticism to an infantile level and impoverishes it just as ‘Asharism ruins theology. Let us recall here that ‘Asharism has a tendency to reduce the Divine nature to Omnipotence alone, while losing sight of the fact that while God certainly can do all he wishes, he nevertheless does not wish to do all that he can.

<sup>9</sup> Such is in no wise the case of the Life of the Saints written by Ibn ‘Arabi (*Risālat al-quds*). Other collections are more unequal, the tradition being mixed with popular echoes.