

Al-Faqr¹

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THE contingent being may be defined as one that is not self-sufficient, not containing in himself the point of his existence; it follows that such a being is nothing by himself and he owns nothing of what goes to make him up. Such is the case of the human being in so far as he is individual, just as it is the case of all manifested² beings, in whatever state they may be for, however great the difference may be between the degrees of Universal Existence, it is always as nothing in relation to the Principle. These beings, human or others, are therefore, in all that they are, in a state of complete dependence with regard to the Principle “apart from which there is nothing, absolutely nothing that exists”;³ it is the consciousness of this dependence which makes what several traditions call “spiritual poverty”. At the same time, for the being who has acquired this consciousness, it has, as its immediate consequence, detachment with regard to all manifested things, for the being knows from then on that these things, like himself, are nothing, and that they have no importance whatsoever compared with the absolute Reality. This detachment implies essentially and above all, in the case of the human being, indifference with regard to the fruits of action as is taught particularly in the Bhagavad-Gita, and which enables the being to escape from the unending chain of consequence which follows this action; it is “action without desire” (*nishkâma karma*), while “action with desire” (*sakama karma*), is action carried out in view of its fruits.

¹ The French original was published in *Le Voile d'Isis*, 1930.

² That is, the beings of the different states of Manifestation or Existence or, in other words, of what is represented by “the waters” as a whole, including both the “upper waters” or superhuman states, and the “lower waters” or human and sub-human states.

³ 'Abd Allâh al-Balyani, *Risalat al-Ahadiyyah*.

By this means the being transcends multiplicity; he escapes, according to the expressions used by the Taoist doctrine, from the vicissitudes of the “current of forms”, from the alternation of the states of “life” and of “death”, of “condensation” and “dissipation”,⁴ passing from the circumference of the “cosmic wheel” to its centre and which is itself termed “the emptiness” (the unmanifested) which unites the spokes and makes them into a wheel.⁵ “He who has attained to the greatest possible emptiness”, also said Lao-Tseu, “will be firmly fixed in repose . . . Returning to one's root (that is, to the Principle, which is both primary origin and final end of all the beings, Alpha and Omega) means entering into the state of repose”.⁶ “Peace in emptiness”, said Lao-Tseu, “is an indefinable state; it is neither taken nor given; one comes to be established in it”⁷. This “peace in emptiness” is the “great peace” (*as-sakinah*) of Islamic esoterism,⁸ which is at the same time the “divine presence” at the centre of the being, implied by his union with the Principle, which cannot actually be brought about except in this very centre.

“All the beings manifest themselves to him who remains in the unmanifested. Being united with the Principle, he is therefore in harmony with all the beings. Being united with the Principle, he knows everything through the general higher causes, and therefore no longer uses his different senses for the sake of particular and detailed knowledge. The true cause of things is invisible and cannot be grasped defined or determined. It can be attained in deep contemplation by him who is re-established in the state of perfect simplicity, and by no one else”.⁹ “Simplicity” meaning the unification of all the being's powers, is a feature of the return to the “primordial state”; and here is seen the whole difference that separates the transcendent knowledge of the sage from ordinary and “profane” knowledge. This “simplicity” is also what is called elsewhere the state of

⁴ Aristotle, in the same sense, said “generation” and “corruption”.

⁵ *Tao-Te-King*, XI.

⁶ *Tao-Te-King*, XVI.

⁷ Lie-Tseu. ch. 1.

⁸ See *The Symbolism of the Cross*, ch. VIII.

⁹ Lie-Tseu. ch. IV.

“childhood” (in Sanskrit *balya*), to be understood of course in the spiritual sense, and this “childhood” is considered in the Hindu doctrine as an indispensable condition for attaining to true knowledge.

This recalls the corresponding words in the Gospels; “Whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein”¹⁰, “Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes.”¹¹ “Simplicity” and “smallness” are here equivalents, in reality, of the “poverty” which is so often mentioned also in the Gospels, and which is generally very much misunderstood: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”.¹² This “poverty” (in Arabic *al faqr*) leads, according to Islamic esoterism, to *al fana*, that is, to the extinction of the “ego”,¹³ and, by this “extinction” the “divine station” is reached (*al-mâqam al-ilâhî*), which is the central point where all the distinctions inherent in the more outward points of view are surpassed and where all the oppositions have disappeared and are resolved in a perfect equilibrium. “In the primordial state, these oppositions did not exist. They all spring from the diversification of the beings (inherent in manifestation and, like it, contingent), and from their contacts caused by the Universal giration (that is by the rotation of the “cosmic wheel” around its axis). They cease then and there to affect the being that has reduced its distinct ego and its particular movement to almost nothing.”¹⁴ This reduction of the “distinct ego”, which finally disappears by being reabsorbed into a single point, is the same thing as *al-Fana*, and also as the “emptiness” mentioned above; moreover, it is clear, according to the symbolism of the wheel, that the “movement” of a being becomes more reduced the nearer this being is to the centre. “This being no longer comes into conflict with any being because he is established in the infinite, effaced in the

¹⁰ St. Luke, XVIII. 17

¹¹ St. Matthew, XI. 25; St. Luke, X. 21.

¹² St. Matthew, V. 2.

¹³ This “extinction” is not without analogy, even as to the literal meaning of the term which is used for it, with the Nirvana of the Hindu doctrine; beyond *al fana'* there is *fana' al fand'* the extinction of the extinction, which corresponds similarly to *Parinirvâna*.

¹⁴ Choang-Tseu, ch. XIX.

indefinite.¹⁵ He has arrived and remains at the starting-point of the transformations, which is a neutral point where there are no conflicts. By concentrating his nature, by feeding his vital spirit, by gathering together all his powers, he is united to the principle of all the births. His nature being whole (synthetically fulfilled in the principial unity), his vital spirit being intact, no being can harm him".¹⁶

The "simplicity" referred to above corresponds to the unity "without dimensions" of the primordial point, which marks the end of the movement back to the origin. "The man who is absolutely simple sways by his simplicity all beings, so effectively that nothing sets itself against him in the six regions of space, nothing is hostile to him, and fire and water do not injure him"¹⁷ In fact, he remains at the centre, which the six directions have issued from by radiation, and where, in the movement that takes them back, they come to be neutralized two by two, so that, in this single point, their threefold opposition ceases entirely, and nothing that results from them or that is situated in them can reach the being who dwells in immutable unity. Through his not setting himself against anything, nothing can set itself against him, for opposition is necessarily a reciprocal relation, which calls for the presence of two terms, and which is therefore incompatible with principial unity; and hostility which is only a result or an outward manifestation of opposition, cannot exist in connection with a being that is outside and beyond all opposition. Fire and water, which are the type of opposites in the "elemental world", cannot injure him, for, in actual truth, they no longer even exist for him as opposites, having returned, by balancing and neutralizing each other through the reunion of their qualities, which, though apparently opposed to one another, are really complementary, into the indifferentiation of primordial ether.

This central point, through which there is, for the human being, communication with the higher or "celestial" states, is also the "narrow gate" of the Gospel symbolism and

¹⁵ The first of these two expressions refers to the "personality" and the second to the "individuality".

¹⁶ *Ibid.* The last phrase refers again to the conditions of the "primordial state"; This is what the Judaeo-Christian tradition describes as the immortality of man before the "fall", which immortality is recovered by those who, having returned to the "Centre of the World", eat of the "Tree of Life".

¹⁷ Lie-Tseu, ch. II.

from what has gone before it will be easily understood who are the “rich” who cannot pass beyond it; they are the beings who are attached to multiplicity, and who are therefore incapable of rising from distinctive knowledge to unified knowledge. This attachment, in fact, is the exact opposite of the detachment mentioned above, just as wealth is the opposite of poverty, and it involves the being in the indefinite series of the cycles of manifestation.¹⁸ The attachment to multiplicity is also, in a certain sense, the Biblical “temptation”, which, by making the being taste the fruit of the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”, moves him away from the original central unity and stops him from reaching the “Tree of Life”; and it is just by that, in fact, that the being is subjected to the alternation of the cyclic changes, that is, to birth and death. The seemingly endless path of multiplicity is depicted exactly by the coils of the serpent winding round the tree that symbolises the “Axis of the World”; it is the path of “those who are led astray (*ad-dâllin*), of those who are in “error” in the etymological sense of this word, as opposed to the “straight path” (*as-sirât al-mustaqim*), in vertical ascension along the axis itself, the path that is spoken of in the first Surat of the Quran.¹⁹

“Poverty”, “simplicity” and “childhood”, are no more than one same thing, and the process of being stripped which all these words express²⁰ culminates in an “extinction” which is, in reality, the fullness of the being, just as “inaction” (*wou-wei*) is the fullness of activity, because it is from it that all the particular activities are derived; “The Principle is always inactive, and yet everything is done by it”.²¹

The being who has reached in this way the central point, has realized, by this very means, the human state in its entirety; he is the “true man” (*chenn-jen*) of Taoism, and when, starting from this point to rise to the higher states, he has achieved the perfect

¹⁸ It is the Buddhist Samsara, the indefinite rotation of the “wheel of life” which the being must be freed from in order to attain to Nirvana.

¹⁹ This “straight path” is identical with the *Te* or “Rectitude” of Lao-Tseu, which is the direction to be followed by a being in order that his existence may be in accordance with the “way” (*Tao*), or, in other words, in conformity with the Principle.

²⁰ It is the “being stripped of metals” in the Masonic symbolism.

²¹ *Tao-Te-King*, XXXVII.'

fulfilment of his possibilities, he will have become the “Divine Man” (*sheun-jen*) who is the “Universal Man” (*al-insân al-kâmil*) of Islamic esoterism. So it can be said that it is those who are the “rich” from the standpoint of manifestation who are really the “poor” with regard to the Principle, and inversely; that is what the following Gospel sentence expresses very clearly, “The last shall be first and first shall be last”²²; and we are compelled to see in this respect, once again, the perfect agreement of all the traditional doctrines, which are no more than the diverse expressions of the one Truth.

²² St. Matthew, XX, 16.