

# Paradoxical Aspects of Sufism (later re-titled “The Exo-Esoteric Symbiosis”)

by

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*Editor’s Note: The essay “Paradoxical Aspects of Sufism,” which appeared in Studies in 1978, later appeared with a few modifications as a chapter of Frithjof Schuon’s book Sufism: Veil and Quintessence. The piece was re-titled “The Exo-Esoteric Symbiosis” for that book. The version below is as it appeared in the most recent edition of the book (World Wisdom, 2006) in a new translation.*

When speaking of spirituality one calls to mind *ipso facto* the sources of knowledge, which in this case are revelation, inspiration, intellection, and—secondarily—reflection; it is necessary to know exactly what is meant by these terms.

Inspiration, like revelation, is a divine dictation, with the difference that in the case of revelation the Spirit dictates a lawgiving and obligatory Message of overriding force whereas in inspiration the Message, whatever its value, has no dogmatic import, but plays an illustrative role within the framework of the fundamental Message.

Reflection, like intellection, is an activity of the intelligence, with the difference that in the case of intellection this activity springs from the immanent divine spark that is the Intellect whereas in reflection the activity starts from the reason, which is capable only of logic and not intellectual intuition. The *conditio sine qua non* of reflection is that a man reasons from facts that are at once necessary and sufficient and does so with a view to a conclusion,<sup>1</sup> this conclusion being the reason for the existence of the mental operation.

From the point of view of knowledge properly so called, reasoning is like the groping of a blind man, with the difference that—by removing obstacles—it may bring about flashes of insight; it is blind and groping because of its indirect and discursive nature, but not necessarily so in its function, for it may be no more than the description—or verbalization—of a vision one

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<sup>1</sup> It is precisely the absence of such facts that makes modern science aberrant from the speculative point of view and hypertrophied from the practical point of view; likewise for philosophy: criticism, existentialism, and evolutionism have their respective points of departure in the absence of a datum that in itself is as self-evident as it is essential.

possesses *a priori*, and in this case it is not the mind that is groping, but the language. If we compare reasoning to groping it is in the sense that it is not a vision, and not in order to deny its capacity for adequation and exploration; it is a means of knowledge, but this means is mediate and fragmentary like the sense of touch, which enables a blind man to find his way and even to feel the heat of the sun, but not to see.<sup>2</sup>

As for intellection, on the one hand it necessarily expresses itself by means of reason, and on the other hand it can make use of reason as a support for actualization. These two factors enable theologians to reduce intellection to reasoning; that is, they deny it—while nonetheless seeing in rationality an element that is more or less problematic, if not contrary to faith—without seeking or being able to account for the fact that faith is itself an indirect and in a way anticipated mode of intellection.

If on the one hand reasoning can provoke—but not produce—intellection and if on the other hand intellection is necessarily expressed by reasoning, a third combination is also possible, but it is abnormal and improper: namely, the temptation to support a real intellection by aberrant reasoning either because the intellection does not operate in all domains on account of some blind spot in the mind or character or because religious emotionalism leads thought toward opportunistic solutions, faith being inclined to assume, even if only subconsciously, that “the end justifies the means”.

In any case it is impossible to deny that Sufis sometimes write “philosophically”—rather than from “inspiration”—especially since the philosopher, far from being by definition a rationalist, is simply a man who reflects on the meaning and causes of phenomena or on the combinations of things, which after all is entirely normal for a creature endowed with intelligence but not omniscience. On the other hand Sufis reason “theologically” insofar as they seek—to the detriment of their esoterism—to combine an anthropomorphist, moralistic, and sentimental monotheism with metaphysics and *gnosis*; but this particularity plays no role from the point of view of speculative rationality, for in this regard there is no strict line of demarcation between philosophy and theology.

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Another mode of knowledge, if one may put it this way, is the interpretation of sacred Scriptures; one knows that in a Semitic context scriptural interpretation, with its play of associations of ideas springing from words or images, often takes the place of thinking. Hermeneutics pertains to inspiration as a prerogative of sanctity, but without being able to dispense with the concurrence of reasoning or *a fortiori* intellection, which it is sometimes difficult to separate in practice from inspiration; in any case inspired interpretation is distinguished by the fact that the reference

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<sup>2</sup> It is said that angels do not possess reason since they have a vision of causes and consequences, which obviously does not signify an infirmity.

points of spiritual or mental activity are passages or words from Scripture and not in the first place ideas or intuitions. The fact that the boundary between the supernatural and the natural is not always precise explains the diversity and inequality of Sufic, Shiite, and Rabbinical speculations; one has the impression with many of these speculations that it is not a question of liberating oneself from cosmic *Māyā*, but on the contrary of entrenching oneself more deeply in it, of plunging into a religious mythology with piety and ingenuity but without the desire to escape from it. Thus the notion of esoterism is rather precarious in the Semitic monotheistic world, although it is precisely in this world that it is the most necessary;<sup>3</sup> indeed all too often it conveys either an exoterism that is simultaneously severe and refined or else an esoterism that is both fragmentary and vulgarized, hence exoterized. “If thou wouldst reach the kernel, thou must break the shell”: this maxim, which is as dangerous as it is true, runs the risk of remaining a dead letter in an esoterism conventionally entrenched in dogmatic theology and denominational “mythology”. We shall no doubt be told that exoterism is the necessary starting point for the corresponding esoterism, which is true insofar as it is a question of a symbolism that is pure, hence open to the universal, and not of an exclusivist particularism;<sup>4</sup> obviously one must take into account the need for circumspection, which in a religious context may distort the dialectic of sapience, and this argument can carry much weight.

Sufism seems to derive its originality, both positive and problematical, from the fact that it mixes—metaphorically speaking—the spirit of the Psalms with that of the *Upanishads*, as if David had chanted the *Brahmasūtra* or Badarayana had implored the God of Israel. Needless to say this often gives rise to a harmonious, profound, and powerful combination, in Ibn Ata Allah for example; as for the drawbacks of this amalgam—which in fact is not an amalgam since it is spontaneous—one must always take the eschatological idealism into account, an idealism that can greatly compensate for pious inconsistencies even as the ardor of faith can compensate for many human imperfections.

Christ said two things that are equally plausible but at first sight seem contradictory: on the one hand he prescribed obedience to the scribes and Pharisees, since they “sit in Moses’ seat”, and on the other he described many of their commandments as “human”; what this means is that tradition includes—or may include—elements which, without departing from “orthodoxy”, are unnecessary luxuries, to say the least, and which are sometimes harmful to the moral or spiritual essentiality of the divine Message. These distorting and alienating elements—“human” without being “heterodox”—also exist *de facto* in esoterism, always by virtue of a “human margin” that Heaven concedes to our freedom; it is not of course a question here of elements that enter

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<sup>3</sup> In the Hindu context, Shankarian *Vedānta* is not properly speaking an esoterism since the Ramanujan perspective, which corresponds to exoterism, does not act as a cover for it, but leads an independent existence.

<sup>4</sup> For all the more reason religious fanaticism cannot be a starting point for *gnosis*, a truth that Omar Khayyam expressed in his own way.

directly into the elaboration of sanctity, but of those luxuriant speculations that produce vertigo rather than light.

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Like the Semites, the Aryans constitute above all a linguistic group, which implies that they also constitute, though more vaguely, a psychological group and even a racial group, at least originally; on the other hand this homogeneity is quite relative since the Aryans form but a fragment in a much vaster collectivity, namely, the white race.<sup>5</sup> Psychologically, there are “introverted” and contemplative Aryans, the Hindus, and “extroverted” and enterprising Aryans, the Europeans— “East and West”, with the obvious reservation that the characteristics of the one are also to be found in the other. In the case of Semites, who on the whole are more contemplative than Europeans and less contemplative than Hindus, there are also two principal groups, Jews and Arabs: the soul of the first is richer but more turned in on itself whereas that of the second is poorer but more expansive, more gifted from the point of view of radiance and universality.<sup>6</sup>

For the Semite, everything begins with Revelation and therefore with faith and submission; man is *a priori* a believer and consequently a servant: intelligence itself takes on the color of obedience. For the Aryan by contrast—and we are not thinking of the Semiticized Aryan<sup>7</sup>—it is intellection that has the first word even if it springs forth as the result of a Revelation; Revelation is not a commandment that seems to create intelligence *ex nihilo* while at the same time enslaving it, but appears instead as the objectification of the one Intellect, which is at once transcendent and immanent. Intellectual certainty has priority here over a submissive faith; the *Veda* does not give orders to the intelligence, but awakens it and reminds it of what it is.

*Grosso modo* Aryans—except in cases of intellectual obscuration where they have retained only their mythology and ritualism—are above all metaphysicians and therefore logicians whereas Semites, unless they have become idolaters and magicians, are *a priori* mystics and

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<sup>5</sup> This race also includes the Hamites and Dravidians, but these groups have far less historical and spiritual importance than the Aryans and Semites, at least in a direct sense.

<sup>6</sup> In this comparison we are thinking of orthodox Jews—those who have remained Orientals even in the West—and not of the totally Europeanized Jews, who combine certain Semitic characteristics with Western extroversion. Moreover, Judaism had a certain radiation in the Roman period, but after that it was only indirectly and through Christianity and Islam that the essential monotheistic Message spread, of which Judaism, after Abraham and with Moses, was the first crystallization.

<sup>7</sup> It would be a mistake to argue that al-Ghazzali was a Persian and therefore an Aryan, for the Persians were Arabized by Islam whether they were Shiite or Sunni; and it goes without saying that a Hellenized Arab is more “Aryan” than an Arabized Persian, schematically speaking. An Iranian or Indian can be Arabized *a priori* and Hellenized *a posteriori*, and as a result an Aryanized Semite can be superimposed on a Semiticized Aryan within the same person.

moralists, each of the two mentalities or capacities repeating itself within the framework of the other in keeping with the Taoist diagram of the *yin-yang*. Or again, Aryans are objectivists, for good or ill, while Semites are subjectivists; deviated objectivism gives rise to rationalism and scientism whereas excessive subjectivism engenders all the illogicalities and pious absurdities of which a sentimental, zealous, and conventional fideism is capable. It is the difference between intellectualism and voluntarism; the first tends to reduce the volitive element to the intelligence or to integrate it therein, and the second on the contrary tends to subordinate the intellectual element to the will; this may be said while still taking into account the fluctuations necessarily contained in the concrete reality of things. It is sometimes necessary to express oneself in a schematic fashion for the sake of clarity if one is to express oneself at all.

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The Arabs of old were both skeptical and superstitious; if they were rationalists, it was because of worldliness and not because of a shadow of intellectuality; they did not think of putting their rationality, however acute, into the service of a truth that was in practice distant and unverifiable and that seemed in addition to go against their interests; on the contrary they put it into the service of effectiveness, on the plane of magical idolatry as well as on that of commercial enterprises. In order to pull them out of their indifferentism it was necessary to cause a chord to vibrate in them other than this completely “horizontal” sagacity; to make them accept a “vertical” truth it was necessary to impose on them a simple and enthralling faith while discrediting a rationality compromised by its pagan character; the man who is converted must “burn what he has worshipped”.

The lasting result of this change is that the pious Muslim is mistrustful of the need for explanations in matters of faith; rationality appears to him as a pagan memory and an invitation to doubt and insubordination, hence unbelief; even so fideism developed its own rationality—dogmatic theology (*kalām*) and the science of the divine Law (*fiqh*)—though al-Ghazzali nonetheless thinks that on the Day of Resurrection the Imams of primitive Islam will be opposed to the doctors of the Law, the former having sought only to “please God”; he believes that learned theology is there only to prevent innovations (*bid‘a*) and that true knowledge of God is at the antipodes of *kalām*. All this enables us to explain the paradox of an esoterism founded less on an intellectuality conscious of its nature and rights than on a voluntaristic, individualistic, and sentimental fideism that prolongs exoterism, radicalizing or refining it in a certain way, but only insufficiently perceiving its relativity. Nonetheless we have here the two essential aspects of plenary esoterism: on the one hand a penetration of the symbols of exoterism and on the other hand an affirmation on the contrary of the independence—and pre-excellence—of essence in relation to forms or substance in relation to accidents, that is, the formulations precisely of the

common religion.<sup>8</sup> With regard to this “non-conformist” aspect of esoterism, we would say by way of illustration that the abrogations of Koranic verses and the matrimonial exceptions in the life of the Prophet are there to indicate respectively the relativity of the formal Revelation and that of social morality, which amounts to saying that these abrogations and exceptions pertain to the esoteric perspective, leaving aside their immediate and practical significance.<sup>9</sup>

As for the affinity—in some respects paradoxical and yet fundamental—between Islam and *gnosis*, it is necessary to understand that Islam has the greatest respect for intelligence, this being consistent with the Koran and the *Sunnah* and contrary to what takes place in Christianity—contrary also to the wishes of certain Muslim fideists; but here it is a question of intelligence in itself (*‘aql*)—which includes the Intellect as well as the reason, or conversely—and not the Intellect alone, which the believer may accept or not depending on his degree of understanding. Intelligence for the Muslim is the faculty that allows us to distinguish between what pleases God and leads to salvation and what displeases God and leads to perdition, or between good and evil, true and false, the real and the illusory, whether in the most elementary or the very highest sense.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Abu Hurairah: “I kept precious in my memory two stores of knowledge I received from the Messenger of God; I passed on one of them, but if I passed on the other you would cut my throat.” One finds a completely analogous passage in the Gospel of Saint Thomas. As the Taoists say, “Only error is transmitted, not the truth.”

<sup>9</sup> This is not unconnected with the mysterious passage that relates the meeting between Moses and al-Khidr, the latter representing—like Melchizedek—supraformal, universal, and primordial spirituality (*Sūrah* “The Cave” [18]:66-83). Let us note that the verses abrogated have in general a more universal meaning than the verses replacing them and that the additional wives—the Koran allowing only four—indicate what might be called the “Krishnaite” aspect of the Prophet.

<sup>10</sup> Traditions advanced by Ghazzali: “The fool does more harm by his ignorance than the wicked man by his wickedness. Furthermore, men reach a higher degree of nearness (*qurb*) to God only in proportion to their intelligence (*‘aql* = “intellect”).” “Because for everything there is a support and the support of the believer is his intelligence, his way of worshipping (serving) God (*‘ubudiyah* = “servitude”) is proportioned to his intelligence.” Ghazzali distinguishes four meanings in the word *‘aql*: abstract intelligence, which distinguishes man from the animals; the instinct for what is possible and impossible; empirical knowledge; discernment of causes and foresight as to consequences. “Whoever dies knowing that there is no god but God enters Paradise”; commenting on this *hadīth* in his *Futūhāt al-Makkiyah*—in a section on the modes of *Tawhīd*—Ibn Arabi remarks that the Prophet said, “Whoever knows” (*ya ‘lam*), not “whoever believes” (*yu ‘min*) or “whoever says” (*yaqūl*); and he adds that Iblis was not unaware that there is no god but God, but that he nullified this knowledge by his sin of “association” (*shirk*). The primacy of “knowledge” is yet a further indication among many others of the fundamentally “gnostic” character of Islam.

Innumerable detours and endless discourses result from the fact that Sufi metaphysics is linked with the anti-metaphysical and moralizing creationism of the monotheistic theologies and from the fact, this being so, that it is unable to handle in a sufficiently consequential way the principle of relativity; radicalism in regard to the essential goes hand in hand with inconsequentiality in regard to detail. No doubt the precautions of theology, which are metaphysically unnecessary, give rise to fruitful perplexities, to the sort of wounds that generate mystical intuitions, but this has nothing to do with pure and total truth, to which nonetheless all the Sufis lay claim.

What is it in fact that interests the esoterist, the gnostic, the metaphysician? It is truth in itself and an intelligence proportioned to it: an intelligence that is theomorphic, hence holy, by the very fact that it is proportioned to the highest truths—holy through its trans-personal root, the “uncreated” and immanent Intellect. And what is it that interests the mystical fideist? It is the sublimizing affirmation of a driving idea in and through faith, a faith that has a nearly absolute value because of its dogmatic content on the one hand and its volitive, imaginative, and sentimental intensity on the other. There is only one step from this to believing oneself “inspired” because one abstains from thinking; the fideist is by definition an inspirationist.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly this tension in faith does not exclude intellection properly so called, but in this case intellection is not the “prime mover” of speculations; it appears as a gift or concomitance of faith, which is not false since the Holy Spirit is manifested through the Intellect as well as through inspirations falling from Heaven. The drawback is that one attributes the suggestions of pious sentimentality to the Holy Spirit or inspiration, suggestions that are not necessarily aberrant but may be so.<sup>12</sup>

Jews and Arabs have in common an overactive imagination even when it is poor, which quite paradoxically is not a contradiction. Many Islamic or more particularly Sufic speculations—without forgetting the Shiite sector—fully rival those rabbinical speculations that are most subject to caution; it is thus appropriate to take both *cum grano salis* and not with the illusion that everything laying claim to tradition and containing a modicum of sacred science is necessarily infallible.<sup>13</sup> No doubt playing with complex and exuberant associations of ideas—

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<sup>11</sup> A positive inspiration—the only kind we are considering here—can come from God or from an angel, which in practice amounts more or less to the same, but it can also come from the subconscious without therefore being false; in this case, however, one is mistaken in attributing it without reservation to a heavenly source, although in the last analysis every true intuition can be traced back metaphysically to the one Truth.

<sup>12</sup> From the first centuries of Islam preacher-storytellers (*qāss, qussās*) sought to arouse the imagination of their audience with more or less extravagant stories in order to stimulate piety, fear, hope—a double-edged sword if ever there was one, for the result was an inextricable mixture of the true and the fictitious and, in the final analysis, a sort of infantilization of pious literature.

<sup>13</sup> A typical problem: can one see God with one’s bodily eyes in certain cases? Were Moses on Sinai and Muhammad during the Night Journey able to see God? Nonetheless, “sight cannot reach Him (*Allāh*)”,

suggestive by their content as well as their excessiveness—can procure for the Arab or the Arabized soul a satisfaction that is at least stimulating; but there is little likelihood it will have the same effect on other mentalities.<sup>14</sup>

“There is no right superior to that of Truth,” proclaims a princely maxim from India; monotheists who stem from the desert—for whom everything begins with faith—would say instead that there is no right superior to that of God or piety. It is perhaps not too hazardous to say that the Aryan spirit, in keeping with the realism—sacred or profane—that is proper to it, tends *a priori* to unveil the truth whereas the Semitic spirit, whose realism is more moral than intellectual, tends toward the veiling of the divine Majesty and those of its secrets that are too dazzling or intoxicating, as is shown precisely by the innumerable enigmas of the monotheistic Scriptures, in contrast with the *Upanishads*, and as is indicated by the allusive and elliptical nature of the corresponding exegesis.

In any case it is only too obvious that the great question that arises for man is not to know whether he is Semitic or Aryan, Oriental or Western, but to know whether he loves God, whether he is spiritual, contemplative, pneumatic; this recalling of the “one thing needful” compensates on the human plane for what may be unfathomable or troubling in the comparison of spiritual modes.

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The Arab soul is poor, but heroic and generous; its poverty as well as its ardor qualify it to serve as a vehicle for a faith that is centered on the essential—whether it is a question of doctrine or worship—and that is all the more passionate because it is simple. But this poverty as a psychological fact calls forth compensatory features, which are as it were “quantitative” by reason of their very poverty, whence a tendency toward exaggeration and prolixity, and indeed boastfulness—whence also on another level a tendency toward contrasting simplification, isolating over-accentuation, and too-hasty ostracism; all these features are discernible even in the spiritual literature of the Arabs and those who are Arabized. Paradoxically, the tendency toward simplification or simplistic alternatives finds a sort of compensation in allusive and elliptical secretiveness, whence also complication and concealment, detours and veilings.

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according to the Koran; and why does one speak of an “eye of the heart” (*‘ayn al-qalb*)? For the purpose of the physical eye is precisely to perceive material things as such, and thus it is not suited to a vision of the immaterial in itself or *a fortiori* to a vision of the Archetypes, let alone the Essence. To say that the eye has seen God is to say either that God has made Himself form, light, space or that the eye has ceased to be eye.

<sup>14</sup> Thus the Arab notion of “eloquence” (*balāghah*), which is not unconnected with a deployment of images and speculations that is at once ardent, ingenious, and verbose, can give rise to quite diverse evaluations.

No doubt the Arab soul has its richness—the contrary would be inconceivable—but it is a poor richness or a poverty enriched by the glistening of nomadic virtues and enhanced by a desert-like acuity of intelligence. Faced with the evidence, however, one is forced to admit that the exuberance attached to this temperament creates a certain problem from the point of view of sapiential esoterism and with regard to its integrity and expression; the thirst for the marvelous is one thing, and metaphysical serenity another.

If there is a poor richness, there is also and no less paradoxically a rich poverty, and it is this that predisposed the Arabs to Islam and with it to a mysticism of holy poverty: the saint in Islam is the “poor one”, the *faqīr*, and the spiritual virtue above all others, which moreover coincides with sincerity (*sidq*), is “poverty”, *faqr*. Without this spirit of poverty Islam would not have been capable of preserving the Biblical world over an entire sector of the globe or excluding from its universe that literary and artistic, and profoundly worldly, “culture” of which the West is so proud and from which it runs the risk of dying, if indeed it has not already done so. Those who accuse Islam of “sterility” do not understand that one of Islam’s greatest claims to glory is that it was able to impress a certain character of the desert on a whole civilization, a character of holy poverty as well as holy childhood.<sup>15</sup>

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Revelation imposes itself upon Aryans and Semites alike; on the other hand one is right to speak of an Aryan “intellectionism” and a Semitic “inspirationism”, even though both intellection and inspiration necessarily belong to all human groups; the entire difference lies in the emphasis. Intellection is sacred because it is derived from the Intellect, which pertains to the Holy Spirit; the same is true for inspiration, with the difference that it is derived from a particular grace and not, like intellection, from a permanent and “naturally supernatural” capacity.

We do not believe we are over-stylizing things in taking the view that the Aryan tends to be a philosopher<sup>16</sup> whereas the Semite is above all a moralist; in order to be convinced of this one may compare the *Upanishads*, the *Yoga-Vasishtha*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* with the Bible, or Hindu doctrines with Talmudic speculations.<sup>17</sup> The innermost motive of Muslim mysticism is

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<sup>15</sup> A character preserved—or made visible—especially in the Maghreb; we are not speaking of the caliphs of Damascus and Baghdad or the Turkish sultans.

<sup>16</sup> One might object that the Celtic and Germanic peoples do not answer to this description at least *a priori*; this would be to forget that the Aryan spirit includes two dimensions, one mythological and the other intellectual, and that the groups we have just referred to put all the emphasis on the mythological and heroic side, not to mention the more than probable existence of an esoteric and oral wisdom among the Germans as well as the Celts.

<sup>17</sup> We remarked in one of our first books—and others have since repeated it—that the encounter of Hinduism and Islam on the soil of India has something profoundly symbolic and providential about it, given that Hinduism is the most ancient integral tradition and Islam on the contrary is the youngest

fundamentally more moral than intellectual—in spite of the intellective character of the *Shahādah*—in the sense that Arab or Muslim, or Semitic, sensibility always remains more or less volitive, hence subjectivist, as we noted above; knowledge itself, if it is not considered a gratuitous gift from Heaven, appears almost as a merit of the will, at least *de facto* and in the general context if not in regard to the deepest intention. To affirm Unity is good while being true as well; and the first reason for accepting that God is One seems to be that He has ordered us to believe it. The highest good is therefore to affirm Unity in the most radical and most sublime manner possible; this subtly and subconsciously moral instinct seems here to be the stimulus for metaphysical speculation. Thus many concepts resulting from this tendency are not to be taken literally: they are “ideals”, that is, schematic formulations intended to inspire an impetus to ward Unity; it is the operative intensity of faith that counts here more than intellectual coherence. It is quite easy to object that “esoterism” is beyond even elementary logic, that the “profane” understand nothing of these mysteries, and so on—a gratuitous “esoterism”, which does not prevent us from sometimes preferring the ‘*ulamā*’ “of the outward” (*zāhir*) to the scholars “of the inward” (*bātin*) or the Hellenizing philosophers to Ghazzali, although we do not fail to recognize the subjective merits of pious extravagances.

It is important to note in this context that the all-embracing accentuation of the divine Unity in Islam determines and colors the whole perspective, as does the all-embracing accentuation of Christ in Christianity. But whereas in Christianity this conceptual and passional accentuation gives rise first to Trinitarian absolutism and then to the moral and ascetical cult of the cross, in Islam the accentuation of Unity gives rise to the negation of secondary causes and even of the homogeneity of things, hence to an occasionalism that in a certain way dismantles the world *ad majorem Dei gloriam*; in both cases we are altogether removed from the serene contemplation of the nature of things. Thus there is nothing surprising in the fact that thought, which in Christianity always tends toward the “fact” since Christ is a historical phenomenon, readily displays in Islam an occasionalist, hence discontinuous, coloration, and this partly explains certain paradoxical features of Muslim mysticism, beginning with an inspirationism that cares little for coherence.

And this leads to the following parenthesis: whereas the Bible is a book that is directly historical and indirectly doctrinal, the Koran is a book that is directly doctrinal and indirectly historical; this means that in the Koran, which seeks only to proclaim the Unity, Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Mercy of God and correlatively the existential, moral, and spiritual servitude of man, historical facts are only points of reference and have scarcely any interest in themselves.

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religion; it is the junction of the primordial with the terminal. But there is more than a symbol here: this encounter means in fact that each of these traditions, even though they are as different as possible, has something to learn from the other, not of course from the point of view of dogmas and practices, but from that of tendencies and attitudes; Islam offers its geometric simplicity, its clarity, and also its compassion, whereas Hinduism brings its influence to bear by its profound serenity and its multiform and inexhaustible universality.

This explains why the Prophets are quoted without any chronological order and why historical occurrences are sometimes related so elliptically as to be unintelligible without commentaries; it is only the relationship Lord-servant that is important here, the rest being but illustration or symbolism. A comparison between the Old Testament and the Koran has no meaning apart from these considerations; as for the New Testament, it combines the two styles—it is eminently historical while being explicitly doctrinal—but it is distinctive as compared with the Koran in that it displays different levels of inspiration, which is likewise the case with the Old Testament. The Muslim reproach that the Scriptures have been “falsified” no doubt refers to these differences in an indirect and symbolic manner and with an ostracism that is not at all exceptional in the realm of exoteric oppositions.

As is indicated by the Testimony of Faith, the *Shahādah*, Islam is the religion of Divinity as such—not of divine Manifestation as is Christianity—and therefore of the conformity of the human “form” to the divine “Essence”, as is indicated in turn by the second *Shahādah*, that of the Prophet. In relation to the self-evidence of the divine Principle, all other evident and certain things and all the miracles in the world are but little, whence the profound and almost explosive conviction of the Muslim and whence his passionate faith, a faith that is at the same time necessarily serene through its very object, this complementarity indicating in addition the possibility of a certain choice, depending on the level of the doctrine or the soul.

The conviction Islam possesses of being at once the religion-quintessence and the religion-synthesis, that is, the religion that offers everything constituting the essence of every possible religion, is certainly not unfounded: for in the first place Islam affirms—to the point of being nearly reducible to this affirmation—that there is but one sole Absolute, which is both Unique and Total; second, that the universal Law—*Dharma*, as the Hindus would say—is the conformity of contingent beings to the Absolute, and this is what is expressed by the term *Islām*: “Abandonment”, “Submission”, or “Resignation”; third, that the essence of salvation is the recognition or awareness of the Absolute and nothing else; fourth, that the link between the Absolute and the contingent or between God and the world is that God periodically sends Messengers to remind men of the two fundamental truths, that of the Absolute and that of Conformity to the Absolute: *Allāh* and *Islām*—all this being necessarily prefigured in the personal nature of the Prophet in keeping with the congeniality and complementarity between the sacred content and the providential container. This concise summary we consider to be of decisive importance.

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From the doctrinal point of view Sufis seek—whether consciously or not—to combine two tendencies, Platonism and Asharism.<sup>18</sup> For Platonism—as for all true metaphysics—the true, the

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<sup>18</sup> Indeed the same phenomenon has arisen within Christianity, the Asharite tendency being here replaced by Protestant fideism; the combination and opposition with regard to Platonism go hand in hand.

beautiful, and the good are such because they manifest qualities proper to the Principle, or to the Essence if one prefers, and because God, though supremely free, cannot be free in opposition to His nature, which He obviously cannot change except on pain of absurdity; Asharism proclaims on the contrary that the true, the beautiful, and the good are such because God wills it so without our being able to know why and that the opposite could be the case if by chance God so willed. In this system, which is voluntaristic inasmuch as it is viscerally moralistic and therefore individualistic, God and man are defined as will: God is “absolutely free” will, capable of determining things no matter how and without any other motive than His will, as if will had its sufficient reason in itself and as if freedom could logically and ontologically include the absurd; correlatively, man is defined as will predestined for obedience and apparently free in its choices “if God wills”. On this battlefield Sufism obviously approaches pure *gnosis* to the extent it is Platonic—which does not mean that sound doctrine necessarily comes to it from Plato or Plotinus—and it departs from it to the extent it capitulates to Asharism. According to “ontological monism” (*wahdat al-wujūd*), everything that exists is “good” because it is “willed by God”; the notion of evil is in our minds because “God willed it”; evil is what we do not love or what *a priori* God does not love. We are not told why God does not love certain things even though all things are good “in themselves”; we must take note of the fact that He does not love them, and this constitutes all our “knowledge”. Here the most vertiginous metaphysics is combined with the most summary Asharism.

Be that as it may, the “Platonic” thesis is expressed in the Koran not only by the formula “in the Name of God, the Clement, the Merciful”, but also by all other formulas setting forth the aspects or qualities of God and thus affirming the immutable and at the same time intelligible character of the divine nature; if Ashari does not draw from this the fundamental consequences one would expect, it is because of his immanent moralism, which doubtless coincides with a psychological and social opportunism.

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“God doeth what He will,” says the Koran, and it is the only thing Ashari seems to remember, at least in a consequential fashion; he forgets that other Koranic formulations implicitly proclaim that “God doeth what He is”, which occurs for example when God carries out justice because He is the Just (*al-Hakīm*) or when He produces beauty because, according to a *hadīth*, He is beautiful (*jamīl*) and loves beauty, or again when He forgives because He is always by His very nature “He who forgiveth” (*al-Ghafūr*). God cannot possess the freedom of not being what He is and therefore of not manifesting it, for all the emphasis is in reality on divine Being and not divine Will. God is not “Will” *a priori*; He is Perfection, hence all possible perfections; He is free in the play of possibilities, but not with regard to their essences, which pertain to divine Possibility as such; the imperatives of Possibility take precedence over this play just as Being takes precedence over things.

According to Asharite reasoning God is free to “do what He will” because there is no one above Him; the good is not the good because of an intrinsic quality directly reflecting a given aspect of the divine Perfection, but for the sole reason that God willed it thus; here the error consists on the one hand in confusing Omnipotence or All-Possibility with the arbitrary and on the other hand in forgetting that the foundation of the good is not a decree from God but the intrinsic goodness of the divine Nature. If two and two make four, this is true because God is Truth, not because He is Omnipotence or gratuitousness.

Be that as it may, Islam either had to teach like Mazdeism that there are two “divinities”, one for good and one for evil—an idea that emphasizes contingency and not Absoluteness, except for the final Victory—or it had to proclaim that “God doeth what He will”, which instead of being interpreted “in an ascending direction”, in the sense of All-Possibility and its various consequences, “horizontal” as well as “vertical”, has all too often been interpreted “in a descending direction”, as an arbitrariness that obviously excludes divine Perfection. Whoever accentuates the side of contingency, manifestation, world must veil the Absolute, which is what was done in Mazdean dualism and in a less abrupt fashion in Christian Trinitarianism; whoever on the contrary accentuates the Absolute—still at the level of a religious voluntarism—cannot help “veiling” in a certain manner the side of contingency by reducing its workings in too unilateral a way to the Transcendent Cause, as is shown precisely in Islam by a certain “atomizing” and occasionalist unintelligibility of the world. This dilemma arises for a dogmatic formulation but not for pure metaphysics, which benefits from a suppleness or mobility dogmatism cannot achieve; thus the role of esoterism is to surmount dogmatist disequilibriums and not prolong or refine them.

Ibn Arabi, in spite of his unevenness and contradictions—the contradictions owing above all to his at least partial solidarity with ordinary theology and the discontinuous, isolating, and over-accentuating quality of its thought—had the great merit of expressing the mystery of radiating and inclusive Unity in a fully Asharite environment, hence of placing the emphasis on the implicitly divine character of cosmic Manifestation, which brings us back to pure and integral metaphysics; it is in this and not in his more or less expeditious argumentation or in his “mythological” imagination or mystical excesses that the whole significance of his work resides. Along with this merit goes that of having positioned Platonic love of the Beautiful at the summit of the universal hierarchy, of having discerned it in God Himself, and of having replaced—but without abolishing—the God-Will of Ashari with God-Beauty, with God-Love.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mention must also be made of the fundamental doctrine of “Universal Man” (*al-Insān al-kāmil*), which is the *Logos* that prefigures the created universe; it is reflected—or realized existentially—in the microcosm as well as the macrocosm, and it is especially manifested in the Prophets and Sages; the Prophets are summed up in the person of the founder of Islam. This theory derives its justification and inspiration from the theomorphism of man.

For us this equation means that the Absolute by definition comprises Infinitude, in which precisely are rooted and from which are therefore derived all beauty and love, so much so that it is the beauty and love perceived in the world that enable us to have a presentiment of what the radiant nature of God truly is and even to actualize it within ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

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The distinction between the necessary and the possible, which concerns all domains of the universe, also applies especially to the domain of thought and activity and in particular to that of mystical inspiration. Thus alongside inspirations pertaining to the necessary or certain it is inevitable that there should be others relating only to the possible and uncertain, while still others are illusory without being harmful; religious enthusiasm, coupled with a thirst for information about heavenly things and a quasi-conventional overestimation of religious mythology as such, cannot but give rise to a margin of dreams, not to say illusions. Christian theology rightly teaches that such mirages are not opposed to sanctity as long as they are simply human and not diabolical;<sup>21</sup> it is appropriate to remember this when confronted with pious fantasies on the margin of the love of God and heroic virtue.<sup>22</sup>

Hence there is a Sufism that is necessary and another that is possible, just as there is a necessary Being and possible existences; the first of these Sufisms is founded on the esoteric evidences resulting from the immutable elements of Islam, whereas the second is connected to personal inspirations, philosophical-mystical speculations, religious mythology, hagiography, zeal, and morality.

It can be seen from numerous Sufi treatises that Muslims like to present metaphysical truths—to the extent possible—as a function of subjective experience, whereas Hindus for example present these truths in pure objectivity as if the subject did not exist, which seems paradoxical when one considers the transcendent subjectivism of the *Vedānta*; it is true that

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<sup>20</sup> It can be said that Love, together with Beauty, Goodness, and Beatitude, is a mystery or “dimension” of the Essence, but not that the Essence is nothing other than Love; being Absolute, the Essence is ineffable, and it manifests its nature precisely by Spirit and Power. It is *Sat*, *Chit*, *Ānanda*; in Arabic, *Wujūd*, “Reality” (or *Qudrah*, “Power”), *Shuhūd*, “Perception” (or *Hikmah*, “Wisdom”), *Hayāt*, “Life” (or *Rahmah*, “Generous, Merciful Goodness”).

<sup>21</sup> There is a rather large number of mystics whom the Church has canonized, but without ratifying all their experiences and opinions. More or less innocent inspirationist illusions are possible among particularly imaginative devotees, who are not thereby false mystics and who may even be saints and possibly legitimate philosophers, depending on the case.

<sup>22</sup> Rumi attributes the following discourse to God: “What matter words to me? I have need of an ardent heart; let hearts become inflamed with love, and occupy thyself neither with thoughts nor their expression.” This is said in order to excuse human weakness, but not to discredit wisdom; it is at the same time a reference to the mystical unanimity of the religions.

Muslims do the same in their Neoplatonic treatises—which are always fundamentally Koranic or Muhammadan—but the most general expression of Sufism unquestionably has the subjectivist character we have indicated, which means that the stages leading toward transcendent Reality are presented less as objective and immutable “envelopes of the Self” than as “moral” stations—in the widest and deepest sense one can give to this adjective. The “states” (*ahwāl*) and “stations” (*maqāmāt*) of Sufism are in principle innumerable, and their description is governed by the author’s path, which does not alter the fact that on the one hand these experiences clearly possess a perfectly objective character as points of reference, it being otherwise pointless to speak of them, or that on the other hand—and this must again be stressed—Islam possesses a metaphysical and cosmological doctrine expressed in objective terms, founded on the Koran and the *Sunnah*, and possibly influenced in its conceptualization by the categories of Hellenistic esoterism.

But in Islam spirituality properly so called always retains its solidarity with the “objective subjectivism” of faith—hence with the sincerity of faith and with the inward virtues determined by unitary Truth—of which the Koran and the *Sunnah* are the paradigms; the originality of Sufism is that it presents itself as a metaphysics of the human virtues that are inherent in faith—or, let us say, in consciousness of the Absolute—and that in the final analysis are rendered supernatural by this very inherence.

The distinction between the “possible” and the “necessary” in Sufism leads us to formulate or recall the following precision: esoterism is without a homeland, and it establishes itself wherever it can. Historical Sufism is *grosso modo* a sector of the exoterism in which esoterism has found refuge; esoterism is not like the branch of a tree but like mistletoe, descended from Heaven and placed on the branch; and this association justifies one in saying in a general way that Sufism is esoterism. Thus we do not say that this equation is wrong, but that it is approximate and sufficient for ordinary language; and this is all the more true in that the esoteric tendency in any case contains degrees.

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The presence of the element “intoxication” (*sukr*) at the heart of Islam—but then we find ourselves in compensatory esoterism and *bhakti*—is all the more paradoxical in that Islam is indirectly aware of the disequilibrating element contained *de facto* within Christianity, for better or worse: in fact the Renaissance, betrayal though it was, would never have taken hold had it not benefited from a reaction against an idealism of the hereafter—itsself contemptuous of an accursed here-below—which weighed upon souls and bodies in an unrealistic and disproportionate fashion. To an accursed “natural”, anathematized by an isolated and apparently hostile “supernatural”, Islam means to oppose a sanctified and thereby supernaturalized “natural”, which it could not realize except at the price of some excesses, in keeping with the ineluctable principle of the “human margin”. Islam senses in Christianity a sort of “wine”, and

the prohibition of intoxicating beverages is in a sense parallel to the rejection of the penitential idealism that characterizes Christianity; intrinsically speaking, this prohibition runs parallel to the affirmation of equilibrium or stability, hence to the integration of the virtualities of disequilibrium.<sup>23</sup>

Still on the subject of “wine” or “intoxication”, it is appropriate to note that one of the most authentic expressions of Muslim esoterism is the dance of the dervishes, which has as its basis not the elaborations of theology, but either the Names *Allāh* or *Huwa* (“He”) or the *Shahādah*—symbol of all faith and metaphysics—combined with the mystery of the Heart and therefore the mystery of Union. The theme of this dance, like that of the *Dhikr* in general and in the final analysis even of all sacred art, is the return of the accidents to the Substance: in other words art in general and dance in particular express the Substance that has become accident; and it is from this origin that the beauty, profundity, and power of accident-symbols come. Art expresses this relationship in a movement that is at once descending and ascending, for on the one hand it reveals the Archetype in the form and on the other hand it brings the form or the soul back to the Archetype.<sup>24</sup>

The return of the accidental to the Substance, of the formal to the Essence,<sup>25</sup> amounts to the reintegration of plurality into Unity; now Unity, which in the geometrical order is equivalent to the point, includes in reality and as if by compensation a mystery of dilation, precisely as the Absolute by definition includes Infinitude; perfect concentration coincides with an “expansion of the breast” (*inshirāh*), whence the name *dhikr al-sadr* (“invocation by the breast”) that is sometimes given to the dance of the dervishes.

This dance pertains, like sexual life, to a magic that is at once vital, existential, and sacramental; it symbolically transfers the finite into the Infinite or the “I” into the Self in a manner that is virtual and yet at the same time effective on its psychological plane. Other dances have the function of evoking a cosmic genius—that of love, for example, or that of war; the

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<sup>23</sup> During the “Night Journey” (*Laylat al-Mi‘rāj*) the Archangel Gabriel allowed the Prophet to choose between three beverages: water, wine, and milk; the Prophet chose milk, which here symbolizes equilibrium or the happy medium. Even the Koranic style can be explained by this rejection of both water and wine, that is, of a logician-like transparency that is felt to be too “easy” and irreverent and a mystical musicality that is too enthralling and thus too dangerous—an observation that is valid at least for the general style of the Koran, which is both dry and sibylline, though at the same time endowed with a virile rhythm.

<sup>24</sup> What constitutes the falseness of extra-traditional art is that it wishes to express the accidentality of accidents, thereby losing its entire reason for being—except for the completely negative reason of accidentalizing souls and minds, hence of making them outward and worldly.

<sup>25</sup> The difference between the two expressions is that there is continuity in the case of Substance—even though conditional—whereas there is discontinuity in the case of Essence, hence a “leap into the void”; this is the whole difference between concentric circles and the cross.

sacred dance for its part does not tend toward such and such an essence, but toward the Essence as such. It tends this way in principle and under the veil of less absolute but always interiorizing intentions: virtually bringing form back to Essence, it prefigures the mystery of union, the mystical miracle that causes the drop to become again the sea.<sup>26</sup>

Christians readily reproach this type of practice for its “easiness” and “artificial” character, but this is because Westerners rarely have a sense of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena and because they insist as a matter of preference on penitential means; this is the point of view of the moral alternative, not that of contemplative participation in the Archetype by means of the symbol or in the Essence by means of the form. Nevertheless there have always been popular dances in Europe in spite of the ill humor of the religious authorities, and it is probable they were not always profane—those of the month of May for instance—which means that sacred intentions in varying degrees, inherited from Nordic or Mediterranean antiquity, may have found refuge in them.<sup>27</sup>

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Since it is in the nature of esoterism to recognize the essence—by definition one—in every form, whether religious or sapiential, and thus to be tolerant as far as possible in practice, one may be surprised to find among Sufis not only denominational narrowness but also intolerance; this is a mere lack of information in many cases, and yet a lack of spiritual imagination in others and an inconsistency with regard to the principle of essentiality and universality. Even when this is not the case, it is necessary to greet declarations of universality with caution, for it can happen that they also embrace idolaters, so that one does not know whether the “tolerance” has in view particular formal religions or simply a sort of underlying and unconscious natural religion that refers to the Divinity because everything does; in the second case the attestation of universality is meant to testify to the loftiness of spirit of the Sufi and not to the validity of other religions. Moreover such declarations are sometimes followed by passages establishing the supremacy of Islam, passages that cannot be explained simply in terms of circumspection, for if one must fear the *‘ulamā’* to so great an extent it would be better not to speak of universality at all—unless what we have here is a kind of dividing of the mind as with the “double truth” of the Christian

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<sup>26</sup> Rumi: “In the rhythms of music a secret is hidden: if I were to divulge it, it would overwhelm the world.” Like Chaitanya, Rumi had “chosen the way of dance and music” among the “roads that lead to God”.

<sup>27</sup> In Judaism the dance of Miriam and that of David left a concrete memory, whence the persistence down to our own day of a dance that is either liturgical or properly mystical: a dance of triumph after the crossing of the “Red Sea” of the passions and a dance of joy before the divine Presence, the *Shekhinah*, actualized first by the “Ark of the Covenant”, then by the Holy of Holies in the Temple, and later in the diaspora by the *Sepher Torah*.

Middle Ages, in which case it is difficult to know where to place the accent or to what degree the line of demarcation is transparent.

The question that arises here *a priori* is the following, and it is both banal and enigmatic: why are religions and theologies not tolerant of other religions and theologies?<sup>28</sup> This intolerance is often regarded as a needless and regrettable luxury, and it is so regarded by ignorant esoterists as well as profane idealists; in reality, however, it is the only possible means of protection against errors, for if it is assumed that a religion could proclaim that salvation can also come from somewhere else, how could this religion still reject false masters who present themselves in the name of a personal revelation? If a religion is intolerant, it will no doubt exclude many foreign values, but since it offers everything man needs to reach his final end, the harm is in practice quite relative; if it is tolerant, however, it opens the door to the lethal poison of pseudo-spiritualisms without the values of the foreign religions offering the slightest help. What this means is that intolerance is merely an extreme simplification of the self-protection necessary for every spiritual form, hence a kind of preventive war against all possible counterfeits and corruptions; now it is infinitely more important for a religion to keep intact its truths and spiritual means, which are certain and in practice sufficient, than to open itself to foreign values at the risk of losing its own.

As for esoterism, it is necessarily open in principle to all intrinsically orthodox forms, but it compensates for this openness and the dangers it may include with criteria that are all the more rigorous, which are proper to itself and which in fact are beyond the reach of exoterism; exoterism has no need of them precisely since its nature permits it to simplify the question *a priori*. Intrinsic truth obviously has priority over the problem of its possible forms; metaphysics, combined with human experience, obliges us nonetheless to accept the diversity of the forms of the one Truth.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Not necessarily with regard to a given philosophy since philosophies are hardly ever presented with religious requirements; if they are, they are either denominational theories or particularly harmful human inventions.

<sup>29</sup> In principle—although the hypothesis is excluded for more than one reason—Christ could have said that Hinduism is a form of truth, but he could not have enumerated all the Hindu heresies that existed in his time or all the heresies still to come, and so on for all the religions. It sufficed for him to say that he himself is the truth, which is absolutely certain and which in practice is sufficient for a given human cosmos or given predestined men. In his *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, Ibn Arabi sings: “My heart has become receptive to every form . . . a temple for idols, a kaaba for a Muslim pilgrim, the tablets of the *Torah* and the book of the Koran. I adhere to the religion of love.” All religious forms, Ibn Arabi comments, are united in the love of God, and yet: “No religion is more excellent than the one founded on the love—and need—of God. . . . This religion of love is the prerogative of Muslims; for the station of the most perfect love has been imparted exclusively to the Prophet Muhammad and not the other Prophets; for God accepted him as his well-beloved friend.” The extenuating circumstance for this abrupt and unintelligible denominationalism is the fact that for each religion the Prophet who founded it is the sole personification

Among the statements made by Ibn Arabi about the universality of truth and thus about the “religion of the heart”, the most explicit—and the one most directly in conformity with the esoteric perspective—is doubtless the following, which comes from the *Fusūs al-Hikam*: “The believer . . . praises only the Divinity contained within his belief (such as it is contained therein), and it is to this he is attached; he cannot perform any act that does not revert to him (its author), and likewise he cannot praise anything without thereby (in effect) praising himself. For to praise the work is without doubt only to praise its author; beauty, like the lack of beauty, reverts to the author (of the work). The Divinity in whom one believes is (so to speak) fashioned by him who conceives (*nādhir*), and it is therefore (in this respect) his work; the praise addressed to what he believes is praise addressed (indirectly and with regard to conceptualization) to himself. And this is why he (the believer insofar as he limits God) condemns every belief except his own: if he were just, he would not do this; but he does it because, fixed on a particular object of worship (*al-ma'būd al-khāss*), he is beyond all doubt in ignorance; and this is why his belief in God implies the negation of everything that is other than it. If he knew what Junayd said—that the color of the water is the color of the vessel—he would allow every believer (whose belief is other than his own) to believe what he (the other believer) believes; he would know God in every form and in every object of belief. But he (the man limited by his belief) follows his opinions without having (total) knowledge, and this is why God said (through a *hadīth qudsī*): I conform to the opinion my servant forms of Me (*anā 'inda zanni 'abdī bī*). That is, I appear to him only in the form of his belief; if he will, let him expand (*atlaqa*) (his conception of Me), and if he will, let him constrict it (*qayyada*). The Divinity in which one believes assumes the limits (of the belief), and this is the Divinity which (according to a *hadīth qudsī*) the heart of the slave contains, the absolute Divinity not being contained in anything since it is the essence of things as well as its own essence.” It is important to understand here that the image of the “believer who praises himself” must be applied above all, according to the logic of things, to a given religious point of view and therefore to a given believing collectivity and further that the fact of thus praising “oneself” does not rule out the possibility—obviously since one cannot do otherwise—that at the same time and above all one praises God: not some specific conception of God but, by means of it, the Divinity in itself.

It follows from these considerations that God is the same for all the religions only in the divine “stratosphere”, not in the human “atmosphere”; in this “atmosphere” each religion has its own God for all practical purposes, and there are as many Gods as there are religions. In this sense it could be said that esoterism alone is absolutely monotheistic, it alone recognizing only

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of the total, not the partial, *Logos*; nonetheless one might expect an esoterist not to enclose himself in this concept-symbol but, since he has opted for the essence, to take into account the relativity of forms, even those that are dear to him, and to do so in an objective and concrete, and not merely metaphorical, manner—or else to remain silent, for pity’s sake. One is obliged, however, to take note of the *de facto* existence of two esoterisms, one partially formalistic and the other perfectly consistent, all the more so as facts cannot always be at the level of principles.

one religion under diverse forms. For if it is true that the form “is” in a certain manner the essence, the essence on the contrary is in no way the form; the drop is water, but water is not the drop.

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The fact that man tends to conceive in his own image what he worships is also proven by various levels of piety within the same religious collectivity, but here more than ever we must be careful not to attribute to God the limitations of men. Admittedly, God accepts the distinctive piety of the pedantic or excessively servile soul, but not as if He were an accomplice or a despot; otherwise He would not respond to intelligence or nobility, which pierce the fog of a limited mentality.<sup>30</sup> God can assuredly love littleness insofar as it is weak, simple, trusting, and touching; He cannot love in it any possible aspects of pettiness or opacity. Moreover—and confusions are frequent on this plane—God hates arrogance but not a well-inspired pride, hypocrisy but not a dignity that is natural and inherent in the sense of the sacred, profane and impertinent curiosity but not the need for explanation that is a part of understanding. God demands humility but not necessarily modesty, sincerity but not cynicism even if it is well intentioned,<sup>31</sup> obedience but not servility to the extent it takes away from man what God has granted him. And above all: God is supremely free without His freedom giving rise to arbitrariness; He is Necessary Being without His necessity implying the least constraint. “God doeth what He will”: this Koranic expression means above all that God is what He is.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*Often when I have prayed I have asked for what I thought was good, and persisted in my petition, stupidly importuning the will of God, and not leaving it to Him to arrange things as He knows best for me. But when I have obtained what I asked for, I have been very sorry that I did not ask for the will of God to be done; because the thing turned out not to be as I had thought..*

Evagrius the Solitary.

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<sup>30</sup> Every mentality as such includes limits, but it is of particular, not general and existential, limitations that we are speaking here.

<sup>31</sup> As in the case of the *malāmātiyah*, who through sincerism “show the bad and hide the good”.