

The Ambiguity of Exoterism

by

Frithjof Schuon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1983).

© World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

The essay below also appeared in the book In the Face of the Absolute (World Wisdom, 1989, 1994). The version below is from a new translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon.

Cathedrals often, and perhaps even always, comprise intentional irregularities signifying that God alone is perfect and capable of perfection; that human works, like man himself, are necessarily imperfect. And this applies to the entire universe, hence to all that is not God; “Why callest thou me good?” said Christ. It is not surprising, therefore, that this principle also includes the domain of the sacred — we have just mentioned cathedrals — and above all religions themselves; thus humility as well as the sense of reality demand that we not be scandalized disproportionately by the dissonances we may encounter in celestial ambiances on earth; that we not be shocked, for example, by particular “providential excesses.” The natural shadows, in a particular earthly beauty, do not prevent us from seeing that it is still beauty; to see it with gratitude and to sense that the earthly reflection transmits a flawless archetype. Since he who judges is himself not exempt from imperfection and must be aware of it, by what right and with what logic would he require that other cosmic phenomena be exempt from it? “God alone is good.”

*

*

*

The term “exoterism” designates three different orders: firstly, a system of symbols and means; secondly, a way; and thirdly, a mentality. The first category embraces dogmas and rites, then legal, moral and other prescriptions, and liturgy in the widest sense; the second embraces the general religious practices, those which are incumbent upon all; and the third category comprises the psychism corresponding to a particular religious climate, thus all the manifestations of sentimentality and imagination determined by a particular religion, a particular piety and particular social conventions.

In other words, it is important to distinguish the following aspects in exoterism: the formal system, which offers symbols and means; the exoteric way, which is based exclusively upon this

system; the exoteric mentality, which is formalistic, voluntaristic and individualistic, and which adds all kinds of restrictive sentimentalities to the simple forms. These are three altogether different meanings of the term “exoterism”: according to the first, the religious Law is necessary and venerable, and it becomes a constitutive element of esoterism; according to the second meaning, the Law is different from esoterism without necessarily excluding certain elements of the latter; according to the third meaning, there is an antinomy between the “outward” and the “inward,” or between the “letter” and the “spirit.”

It is of the highest importance not to confuse these three levels; in particular, not to lose sight of the fact that the first — Dogma and Law — is available to esoterism as regards both interpretation and practice. In order to determine whether a spiritual support is exoteric or esoteric, we need to ask not only what doctrinal and legal forms are involved, but also “who” accepts and practices them, and thus “how” they are accepted and practiced. In Dogma and Law, only those aspects are exoteric that are restrictive if taken literally, but not the aspects of pure symbolism and thus of universality.

When, on the contrary, there is an exclusively literal interpretation of the ideas and symbols on the one hand, and a voluntaristic and sentimental practice of the rites and prescriptions on the other — and this individualism corresponds to an anthropomorphic conception of the Divinity — then the way itself pertains to exoterism; the “believer” accomplishes what the Divine Person has ordained, and abstains from what He has forbidden; he does so in view of salvation and without necessarily concerning himself directly with the nature of things as regards human attitudes and divine intentions.

What we have just said shows that the exoteric way cannot be entirely disassociated from the exoterist mentality; nevertheless, extremes — notably pedantry and fanaticism — are independent of religious practice as such; religious practice can inspire human temperaments and comportments, but quite obviously, it is not inseparably linked to them by definition. Dogmatic and legal exoterism is of divine institution; the exoterist mentality has a right to exist so long as piety wards off abuses, but it has nothing supernatural about it; its rights coincide more or less with those of human nature.

Dogmatic exoterism, as we have mentioned more than once, exhibits providential limitations determined by its mission and thus by its reason for being; to begin with, it excludes the idea of universal relativity — of *Māyā* — and therefore is unaware of the diverse and at times antinomic aspects of things, as well as of the points of view which take them into account; this amounts to saying that it identifies itself with a particular point of view determined by a particular aspect. By excluding the notion of *Māyā*, exoterism situates itself entirely within *Māyā*, the summit of which is the personal God who creates and legislates; *Paramātmā*, the supreme Self — Boehme’s *Ungrund* — could not produce a world or found a religion. But religion could not be closed to the total truth, for God is one, and where the Divine Person is, there also is the Divine

Essence;¹ the latter is accessible through esoterism, precisely, by full right and despite a certain inevitable opposition on the part of the exoteric framework.

One has to realize that outward religion is not disinterested; it wants to save souls, no more no less, and at the cost of the truths that do not serve its holy strategy. Sapience, by contrast, wants only the truth, and the truth necessarily coincides with our final interests because it coincides with the Sovereign Good.

* * *

In Hinduism, as in other archaic traditions — to the extent that they have kept a sufficient vitality — the relationship between exoterism and esoterism presents itself in another way than the Semitic religions: what is merely of social relevance, or what is taken literally, is exoteric; whereas the esoteric is not what of itself pertains to pure metaphysics — *Advaita Vedānta* is not technically an “esoterism” — but what for some reason or other — social reasons above all — must be kept secret.

Hinduism — like the religions of ancient Europe — is not exclusively interested in the salvation of souls; it is true that it tries to prevent men from falling into hell, but it abandons them to transmigration, which in monotheistic language amounts to the same thing. Among the ancient Europeans — Greeks, Romans, Celts, Germans — only the initiates go to Paradise, and possibly also the heroes, who then are assimilated to the initiates; the others remain in the darkness, in some underworld Hades, which in practice combines the state of the perishable psychic elements with the great unknown that is transmigration through non-human and extra-terrestrial states. Thus the reproach of “paganism” on the part of the Semitic religions is not altogether unjustified, except of course as regards initiates, Platonists and Vedantists.

But it is not enough to acknowledge the difference — or even the divergences — between religious perspectives and their exo-esoteric structures; we need essentially to know their causes, which a priori result from the refraction of the Divine Light in the cosmic darkness. The “descent” (*tanzīl*) of the Koran signifies that the ordaining Will of the Personal God — the Principle which, upon contact with *Māyā*, becomes personalized, and thus limits itself by virtue of the universal radiation required by the very nature of the Sovereign Good — enters into a collective soul determined by particular racial and ethnic factors; it enters therein with “temporal” as well as “spatial” purposes, that is to say that it has in view eschatological destinies as well as immediate social situations; succession and the afterlife as well as simultaneity and the earthly city. In descending into a collective soul, the Divine Word becomes refracted into the

1. When it is said that the personal God is situated in *Māyā*, which runs the risk of sounding offensive, one must be careful to make it clear that this God is the Supreme Principle “entering” into universal Relativity, hence still “Supreme” despite the “entering,” which enables one to affirm that God the Creator and Legislator is at one and the same time *Ātmā* and *Māyā*, or *Ātmā* in *Māyā*, but never simply *Māyā*.

possibilities of this soul: it becomes Judaized, Arabized, Hinduized or Mongolized, according to case; and in making itself human it cannot maintain, in every respect or modality, its original majesty and beauty; the human requires the little and the ambiguous and cannot live without it; but greatness, transcendence and harmony without admixture subsist always in the supernatural substance of the revealed Word. Christ is “true man and true God”; the same is true for every Revelation; it is this that must never be forgotten when one encounters elements that at first sight seem too human — to the point of seeming unlikely — in the variform stream of the divine Messages.

To understand, at least morally, certain apparent contradictions in the Scriptures, the following principal situation must be borne in mind: Divine All-Possibility, ontologically “prior” to the Divine Personification, pours into creation what is ontologically possible; it is a manifestation of Infinitude, and necessarily involves contrasting and amoral aspects because in a certain manner it includes the impossible, owing to the limitlessness of Possibility itself; whereas the Divine Personification, which hypostatically reflects the essential Goodness of the Essence, coordinates the chaos of possibilities and “desires” the good, whence precisely the half-divine, half-human phenomenon that is Revelation.²

The ambiguity of exoterism is largely a consequence of the complexity of the Divine Order; we say “Divine Order” to indicate that we have in mind here not the Principle in itself, but in respect to its “extension” within universal Relativity.³ Now exoterism, which must restrict itself to being a minimal doctrine, so to speak — whatever the mode of its emphasis — could not render an account of this Divine Order, both transcendent and relative,⁴ without allowing enigmas and pitfalls to remain, or rather, without creating them.

* * *

A typical feature of the monotheistic exoterisms is their dogmatization of theological speculations; it is the fixed prejudice that not only wishes to “dot all the i’s,” but to do so at the

2. This precisely is the Muslim point of distinction between the ontological “Will” of God and His moral “Desire”; the weak point in the theory is that it attributes two hypostatic degrees to one and the same anthropomorphic subjectivity, as we have noted more than once. According to Ibn ‘Arabi, God confines Himself to “bringing into existence” that which “wants to exist”; He is not “personally” responsible for the possibilities as such.

3. See the chapter “Dimensions, Modes, and Degrees of the Divine Order” in our book *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*.

4. Purely transcendent at its summit, relative in its reverberation in accordance with *Māyā* and yet transcendent in this aspect as well, at least in relation to the world. The mystery of mysteries — pointed out in the West by Eckhart — is that there is in our Intellect a “divine point” which rejoins pure Transcendence, of which otherwise we would have no notion; and moreover it is this point which explains the possibility of the “central” phenomenon that is man.

level of “faith,” and hence of dogmatic constraint — this being the role of the councils and of promulgations *ex cathedra* — whereas it would suffice in many a case to let the scriptural enunciations stand as they are, in a holy indetermination that excludes no aspect of truth and does not crystallize one aspect to the detriment of the others. In fact, the evil here lies less in the existence of speculations and precisions — for men cannot be prevented from thinking — than in their dogmatic fixation; one threatens with hell not only those who doubt God and immortality, but also those who dare doubt some exorbitant theological conclusion; and this threat is all the less plausible in that one postulates the incomprehensibility of God and always holds in reserve this begging of the question that is “mystery.” The more one adds precisions *ex cathedra*, the more one increases the chances of scission and the risks of persecution, which would not be the case if one remained content with a level of “admissible” or “probable opinions” in varying degrees.⁵ There is no point in objecting that pure metaphysicians do as much, for it is not the action of explaining or specifying which is at issue here, but the formalistic and therefore restrictive character of the specification, and above all the constraining dogmatization that is added to it, and that in no way forms part of the intentions and functions of pure and disinterested knowledge.⁶

Given its mission, exoterism has to take into account the weaknesses of men, and thus also, be it said without euphemism, their stupidity; like it or not, it must itself take on something of these shortcomings, or at least it must allow them some room, on pain of not being able to survive in human surroundings. Thus one must not be too surprised, nor above all scandalized, at the paradoxical phenomenon of pious stupidity; certainly, this phenomenon is far from being harmless, for it sometimes affects the canonical domain, but it cannot but exist since religion addresses itself to everyone and everyone must be able to recognize himself in it, if one may so express matters. A climate of religious belief appeals to emotivity, and emotivity is obviously opposed to perfect objectivity, at least when it goes beyond its rightful limits; when it does so, excessive emotivity damages the power of reflection or even — with all due reservations — intelligence itself, while plainly favoring a fundamental sentimentalism, extending from an initial

5. One example of ostracism by exoterists is the case of the Pope Honorius I, accused of “heresy” in a disproportionate manner, to say the least; for the idea that Christ has only one will, the Divine — this is the Monothelite thesis — takes nothing away from the glory of Christ, quite the contrary, since it is based upon the axiom that there is nothing in the nature of Christ that could be opposed to the Divine Will. All in all, it is a simplistic and “implausible” theological opinion — since the human will certainly exists in the soul of Jesus — but the opinion is not subversive for all that; it is an ellipsis, and it would have sufficed to take note of the intention, or to put it in parentheses.

6. Those American Indians who retain a traditional outlook point out, against disputatious confessionalism, that one can always argue about concepts, but not about the immutable symbols of virgin nature; and that books are perishable, whereas the symbols of the Great Spirit abide; what matters is to understand them. When one goes to the root of things, one sees that the argument is far from simplistic, and it even coincides with the Koranic doctrine of the divine “signs” (*ayāt*) in the world.

biased attitude to harmless prejudices.⁷ However: remove emotivity from religion and you kill it; moreover, a stream has need of banks in order to flow, and thus it is that exoterism, or the religious form, has need of limitations in order to be a living influence; “grasp all, lose all,” as a proverb has it.

The exoterist mentality is largely the result of associations of ideas inspired by religious imagery: for example, in Islam, the sun does not enjoy an unmixed prestige, because of the danger of becoming a rival with God and because of the sun-worship which existed in the Near East, and this is attested to by certain symbolisms very unflattering to the sun. Aside from this imagery, and prior to it, the Koran speaks of the sun, moon and stars as slaves upon whom God has imposed forced labor (*sakhara*) in the service of men, and it moreover enjoins men not to bow down to the heavenly bodies; thus it is considered advisable, whenever one looks upon the sun or the moon, to say that “God is greater” (*Allāhu akbar*). Analogous remarks apply to fire: whereas for the Indo-Iranian, or simply Aryan traditions, fire is sacred like the sun — *Agni* and *Surya* being theophanies — in the monotheism of the Semites it takes on a baleful coloration because of its association with hell.⁸ Christianity, which is not based upon jealous zeal for Unity, does not have such worries in relation to the sun, as is proved by the “Canticle to the Sun” of St. Francis of Assisi; for the Christian, it is all too evident that the sun is not God or that it is not Christ; thus he can love the sun in all innocence and without the least complex of guilt. A question that arises here incidentally is the following: would a Westerner who has serious motives for following the Sufic path be obliged to adopt the Muslim attitude towards the royal orb? — we chose this example among others — that is, should he feel obliged to experience an imaginative and sentimental reaction that he does not have and cannot have? Clearly not, and all the more so since essential Sufism would not require it; for the confessional mentality is one thing, and spiritual realization, another.

But let us return to the Arabs: by a curious derogation from the sensibility we have described above, the expressions “Sun of Princes” (*Shams al-Umarā*’), “Sun of the Learned”

7. Very typical of the sentimental, and paradoxically individualistic humilitarianism, is this Hesychast’s opinion: to remember God constantly is not a great thing; on the contrary, what is great, is to believe oneself lower than all other creatures. A surprising ignorance of the sacramental quality of the Name of God is here combined with a strange lack of appreciation for the qualities and merits of holy perseverance, and with a no less strange abdication of intelligence in the name of virtue. “He that raiseth up himself shall be brought low”: which could not mean that humility is incompatible with that prerogative of man which is discernment, hence objectivity; besides, one may well wonder whether “to make oneself low in order to be raised up” is really humility. Such inconsistencies, it is true, are not the prerogative of any religion.

8. This is far from Heraclitus, for whom fire — or rather its divine prototype — is at the origin of everything.

(*Shams al-'Ulamā'*), “Sun of (spiritual) Guidance” (*Shams al-Hudā*), and others are honorific titles; “Sun of Religion” (*Shams ad-Dīn*) is a man’s name, and “Like unto the Sun” (*Shamsī* or *Shamsiyyah*) and “Sun of Daytime” (*Shams an-Nahār*) are women’s names — all of which express the unanimous sentiment of primordial man, or of man as such, and thus of esoterism. Moreover, when the Koran declares that “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth” (*Sūra* “Light”), it is impossible, by the very nature of things, for the sun to be completely excluded from this hierarchy, even though no Muslim could acknowledge this, except perhaps in esoteric surroundings. Besides, all these considerations on the solar orb also apply, to one degree or other and in an appropriate manner, to the moon and even to the stars: “Full Moon of the Religion” (*Badr ad-Dīn*) and “Star of the Religion” (*Najm ad-Dīn*) are masculine names; “Like the Full Moon” (*Badrī* or *Badriyyah*), “Star” (*Najmah*) and other images of the kind are feminine names.

In the Koran, the sun is described three times as a “lamp” (*sirāj*), and this word is also applied to the Prophet, whence his name *Sirāj*, which — we have been told — establishes a scriptural and liturgical connection between Muhammad and the sun.⁹ This “rehabilitation” of the sun, and above all its indirect glorification by proper names and other metaphors, seems to indicate that the sensibility of Muslims is not greatly affected by the pejorative symbolism in question nor by the sacred ostracism of the theologians;¹⁰ all of which has to be granted with some reservations, for the “evidence,” namely certain classical formulations, cannot be brushed aside entirely. A further remark while we are on the subject: in Muslim imagery, rain is the most favored, as can be easily understood in a desert country; the Koran misses no opportunity to mention it with praise, and the Prophet loved to bare his head in the rain because of the blessing it brings.

In passing, and before going further, we would like to say a few words concerning the integration of a foreign element into a particular traditional formalism; this problem places us between syncretism, which is intrinsically heterodox, and esoterism, which in certain cases can admit such coincidences. This is because, in principle, esoterism is “open to all forms,” as Ibn ‘Arabi expressed himself in speaking of his heart; but in fact, such exceptions depend upon certain subjective as well as objective conditions; therefore we must ask, not only what has been done, but also by whom and for what reason.

9. It should be noted, however, that the image of the lamp is less offensive to Muslim sentiment than that of the sun, for no one is tempted to worship a handmade object, even if it is a symbol of light. When praying in a mosque, the believer necessarily bows down in the direction of the lamp in the *mihrab*; he would not do so in the direction of the sun.

10. The same is true for the question of secondary causes: the average Muslim does not doubt that fire has the attribute of burning, despite Hanbalite or Asharite hairsplitting.

In esoterism there are two principles which may be actualized sporadically and at different levels, but always in a partial and contained manner: the first is that fundamentally, there is only one religion with various forms, for humanity is one and the spirit is one; the second principle is that man bears everything within himself, potentially at least, by reason of the immanence of the one Truth.

* * *

The only plausible explanation for the theological excesses of an ‘Ashari — aside from religious zeal — is the principle of “functional” truth — not “informative” truth — of which we have spoken above; what is “true” is not necessarily what gives an adequate account of a reality, but what serves a particular psychological purpose in view of salvation and in relation to a particular mentality. From this standpoint, heresy is not objective error, it is subjective inopportuneness: it is better to reach Paradise with a limb missing than to be thrown into hell with all of one’s limbs; this principle, purely moral and mystical in the intention of Christ, becomes intellectual or doctrinal in the domain of certain theological speculations. If ‘Ashari maintains that fire does not burn by its own nature, that it burns only because God decides to bring about the burning, this is because the faithful have to be convinced that “God is without associate,” despite the evidence that He surrounds Himself with Angels and Prophets;¹¹ and if this same doctrine goes so far as to affirm that evil comes from God, otherwise it could not occur, or that God can impose obligations that man is incapable of accomplishing, or that God can make a creature suffer — or even punish it — for no reason and without compensation, or that, being free from all obligation, He can do “what He wills” with man, and that consequently it would not be unjust for Him to send the good to hell and the bad to Paradise¹² — if the Asharite doctrine upholds such enormities, this is, at bottom, in order to wage preventive warfare against certain vicious predispositions of man, rightly or wrongly, and in the context of a particular mentality — doubtless heroic, but prone to heedlessness and insubordination.¹³

11. Despite the idea that every single drop of rain is sent down by an angel, and other inconsequentialities of the kind.

12. Quite as absurd is Asharite atomism, which stems from a defective conception of causality: from the inability to see — or refusal to understand — that far from being excluded by metaphysical causes, physical causes on the contrary manifest or reflect them and are relatively real precisely by virtue of the absolute reality of their prototypes *in divinis*.

13. All these excesses are contradicted by the Hanafite theologian Maturidi, who considers that man’s freedom is relatively real and not imaginary, and that God “desires” (*rida*, “being pleased”) only good actions; that when He demands something of the creature, God confers upon it *ipso facto* the capacity to do it; that injustice is incompatible with the Divine Nature, and not that injustice is justice when the doer is God. Let us add that prior to Maturidi, the Mutazilites had the merit of teaching unambiguously that God is obliged to be just to men; an obligation freely assumed and resulting on the one hand from the

Different opinions may be held as to the legitimacy or efficacy of such stratagems, but what matters here is not their quality, but their purpose, thus the principle of “functional truth,” which is indirect and conditional and not direct, informative and categorical.¹⁴ The “laissez-faire” of the Holy Spirit in theological matters — if one may so express it — can be explained, in short, by the necessity of having to take into account the limited capacities of the majority and consequently of having to renounce the intellectual element to a greater or lesser extent, and to emphasize all the more the moral and emotional element as well as eschatological interests. Muhammad knew what he was saying when he asserted that “disagreements (*ikhtilāf*) between the doctors of the Law are a Mercy”: differences of opinion are all the more useful in that it is impossible to satisfy the needs of a collectivity of believers by presenting a homogeneous metaphysical doctrine; something more is needed, even in religion, for “it takes all kinds to make a world.”

There is no room for polytheism or idolatry in Islam; and yet they are to be found in it, insofar as they have a positive and thus legitimate meaning: “Muslim polytheism” is represented by the ninety-nine Names of God, and “Muslim idolatry,” by the Kaaba and the Black Stone, the Kaaba being prolonged by the prayer niche in mosques. One could object that these are not images; no doubt, but nonetheless they are material objects, situated in space; a tree is not an image either, and yet if one were to pray towards a particular tree intentionally, while disregarding the canonical direction — the *qiblah* — Islam would term it an idol. Logically, and strictly speaking, Muslims ought to pray with their eyes closed — which they do not — and without regard to a ritual direction; abstraction would then be complete; but in fact, they pray before one visible thing — the *mihrab* — and in the direction of another thing — the Kaaba. Thus it can be seen that the purism of a religion is necessarily relative when it is a question of things that are justified in themselves and, moreover, opportune.

Iranian and Indian Muslims,¹⁵ and even certain Arabs, are not afraid to practice painting, whereas the Sunna forbids it; it is true that there are differences of opinion as to whether the indictment of images refers simply to statues, which “cast a shadow”; but the predominant attitude of the ulamas is plainly hostile towards figurative art, and admits no exceptions. Here again, one has to take into consideration the motive of the Law, namely the tendency of the

Divine Perfection itself, and on the other from the intelligent and responsible nature bestowed by God upon the human creature. It could be said, paradoxically: if the Divine Nature allows God to claim all rights in all circumstances, He would not have created man; a formulation worthy of Zeno of Elea, yet nevertheless without being devoid of meaning.

14. Despite the warrant given by Ghazali to the extreme opinions we have quoted above, Sunnite theology has hardly retained them; the great majority of Sunnites, despite being Asharites, side in practice with the ideas of Maturidi which can be described as “reasonable.”

15. We mean the Iranians in the proper sense of the term, and not the Persians alone.

Semites towards idolatry; the Aryans do not have this tendency, which means that they are not idolaters when they worship images; the Hindus — apart from cases of popular deviation — are at bottom no more idolaters than the Christians, who certainly are not. Logically, Christians should be as iconoclastic as Jews since they base themselves on the Bible, but in this case as in others, it is the instinct for the “nature of things” which has prevailed and which has even given rise to certain modes of spirituality; the sacramental icon conveys graces and works miracles.

Let us add that music and above all dancing fall into the same category of traditional ambiguities; disapproved in Islam, they are nonetheless practiced in Sufism, always by reason of the profound justification conferred upon them by that universal criterion which is the nature of things. Inopportuneness is neither error nor wickedness, and there can always be cases wherein opportuneness changes sides, not only because men differ, but also — and above all — because man is one.

An example of excessive formalism — and of a conventionalism which is definitely superstitious — is provided by certain garments of Muslim women: in Islamic India there are certain ways of veiling women that have something truly sinister about them — they are like walking prisons or phantoms — which to say the least is contrary to nature, and which demonstrates to what extent the exoteric spirit can be pedantic, blind and desiccated; by contrast, the veil of Moroccan women is morally and aesthetically plausible, being so to speak “one point of view among others.” In the Maghrib, Berber women go unveiled — this should be recalled here — and the same is true for many Muslims of the black and yellow races, not to mention other examples difficult to categorize; which shows that this convention of dress is in no way essential from the point of view of the Law.¹⁶

In all climates of formalistic super-saturation, the instinct for the “nature of things” or for the archetypal and primordial norm sporadically regains the upper hand; while this is not technically an expression of esoterism, it is nonetheless linked with its spirit, with the disinterested and universal vision of good and evil, useful and useless, beautiful and ugly, and also, it must be said, serious and ridiculous, or human and monstrous, as the case may be.¹⁷ And it is normally one of the functions of esoterism, not to play the *mufti* or the *pandit*, but as far as possible to bring visible forms as well as moral behaviors back to the serenity of a Paradise lost, but still accessible in the depth of our hearts.

* * *

16. The prescription to “veil one’s charms” allows of various interpretations, including the most paradoxical, since modesty is sometimes concentrated on the face alone.

17. As for the gratuitous hyperbolism of certain kinds of religious language, it is important not to confuse it with symbolism in the proper sense of the term, which in any case is not a matter of style. Let us note in this connection that for the Westerner it is difficult to conceive that exaggeration pure and simple can form part of eloquence; and yet, had it but occurred to someone; it is as with Columbus’ egg.

From the standpoint of pure or total truth, the unavoidable drawback of the Semitic or monotheistic religions is that they reduce man to a privative or negative aspect of the average man, to a “minimal aspect,” so to speak: Christianity defines man as a “sinner” who must do penance, whereas Islam defines him as a “slave” who must simply obey and whose intelligence exists merely to register orders; it is true that this is not all of the religion, and also that it is not unjustified at a certain level or given a certain end in view, but in any case, this reduction suffices to create misunderstandings and uneasiness on a higher level, and above all, to open the door to the abuses of sentimentalism. Moreover, if it lies within human possibility to present the most stupid ideas in the most intelligent manner — which is the case of modern philosophers — the converse must be possible too, namely that the most intelligent ideas be presented in the most stupid manner, as happens precisely in religions.

As for the general question of the balance between faith and intellection, or between their respective rights, it cannot be solved juridically, for it depends upon personal imponderables; the imbalance between the two points of view or domains is consequently a kind of natural calamity, but man is what he is.

And yet, it is in the nature of things that there be means of regulating this balance, by taking into account the factors of harmony in the world and in our spirit. We have in mind here the complementarity between the sense of the true and the sense of the beautiful; the sense of the evident and the sense of the sacred; now the second intuitive capacity contributes towards regulating the demands of the first. The wise man sometimes abstains from asking questions, not because he despairs of his intelligence, but because his sense of beauty imposes upon him a limit — not of darkness, but of light; moreover, there is no sacred science without some modes of holy ignorance. Otherwise, the Absolute would enter *tale quale* into the relative, and the Infinite into the finite; Necessary Being would cause contingency to burst and there no longer would be either relativity or, consequently, existence and existing wisdom.¹⁸ To speak of manifestation is to speak of limitation.

* * *

When two religions have to exist side by side, as in India, or in Palestine at the time of the Crusades, two things happen: on the one hand a stiffening on the part of the formal religion, and on the other a greater flexibility and a certain interpenetration in the domain of spirituality; it is

18. The Koran expresses this as follows: “(O man), follow not that whereof thou hast no knowledge. Lo! the hearing and the sight and the heart — of each of these reckoning will be asked. . . . They will ask thee concerning the Spirit [the universal Spirit, *Rūh*]. Say: The Spirit is by command of my Lord [by radiation or hypostatic prolongation], and of knowledge [of divine mysteries] ye have been vouchsafed but little. And if We [God] willed We could withdraw that which We Have revealed unto thee. . . .” (*Sūra* “The Children of Israel,” 36, 85 and 86)

true that religions exist side by side everywhere, but what we have in mind here are those cases where there is virulent antagonism, unmitigated by habit and indifference. A crucial truth emerges from such confrontations and reciprocities: when a man has grasped the validity of a religion other than his own — which comprehension results from concrete experience as much as from intellectual intuition — God cannot but take into account the widening of this man's spiritual perspective and the awareness he will have of the relativity of forms as such; God, therefore, will absolutely not demand of him what he asks of believers who are totally enclosed in the formal system of their religion, yet at the same time He will make new demands. Knowledge is not a gift that entails no obligations, for all knowledge has its price; the “minus” on the side of formal religion will have to be compensated by a “plus” on the side of non-formal religion, which coincides with the *sophia perennis*.

Esoterism, with its three dimensions of metaphysical discernment, mystical concentration and moral conformity, contains in the final analysis the only things that Heaven demands in an absolute fashion, all other demands being relative and therefore more or less conditional. The proof of this is that a man who would have no more than a few moments left to live could do nothing more than: firstly, look towards God with his intelligence; secondly, call upon God with his will; thirdly, love God with all his soul, and in loving Him realize every possible virtue. One may be surprised at this coincidence between what is most elementarily human and what pertains quintessentially to the highest wisdom, but what is most simple retraces precisely what is highest; *extremities aequalitates*, “extremes meet.”