Images of Islam

by

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Islam burst forth in the form of an epic: now a heroic history is written with the sword, and in a religious context this sword assumes a sacred function; combat becomes an ordeal. The genesis of a religion amounts to the creation of a relatively new moral and spiritual type; in Islam this type consists of an equilibrium—which is paradoxical from the Christian point of view—between contemplativeness and combativeness on the one hand and between holy poverty and hallowed sexuality on the other. The Arab—and the man Arabized by Islam—has four poles, as it were: namely, desert, sword, woman, religion. For the contemplative the four poles are interiorized: desert, sword, and woman become so many states or functions of the soul.

On the most general and *a priori* outward level, the sword represents death—the death one deals and the death one risks; its perfume is always present. Woman represents a similar reciprocity; she is the love one receives and the love one gives, and thus she incarnates all the generous virtues; she compensates for the perfume of death with that of life. The deepest meaning of the sword is that there is no nobility without a renunciation of life, and this is why the initiatic vow of the Sufis—to the extent it relates historically to the "pact of the divine Acceptance" (*Bayʿat al-Ridwān*)—includes a promise to fight to the point of death, bodily in the case of the warriors (= "martyrs", *shahīd, shuhadāʾ*) and spiritually in the case of the dervishes (= the "poor", *faqīr, fuqarāʾ*). The symbiosis between love and death within the framework of poverty and in the face of the Absolute constitutes all that is essential in Arab nobility; indeed we do not hesitate to say that here lies the very substance of the Muslim soul of the heroic epoch, a substance Sufism tends to perpetuate by sublimizing it.

To say that Islam was born in the form of an epic means that it possesses essentially a political dimension that was foreign to early Christianity and that Christianity possessed only as a profane appendage even when it became a state religion. Now politics is divisive by its very nature because of the diversity of possible solutions and individual qualifications: the Companions of the Prophet were politically divided by force of circumstances, and what was at stake was nothing less than the final and lasting victory of Islam; they lived alongside one

another like closed systems, not unlike different religious perspectives, which also exist side by side without understanding each other; each identified himself in his very being with his own particular intuitions of what was right and efficacious. The remarkable stability of Islamic institutions through all the vicissitudes of history proves that worldly ambitions were very far from the minds of the Companions and, on the contrary, that at the very heart of their dissensions was a concern for immutability and incorruptibility. In a word, each kept himself enclosed in his point of view with a holy obstinacy, if one may put it this way, the rigidity of their attitudes being the result of their sincerity.[1]

Unlike the Apostles, the Companions did not live in the shelter of a *Pax Romana*; they were founders and defenders of an empire, every question of religious perspective aside. The situation of nascent Islam was complex because of the inevitable rivalry on the one hand between the Qurayshite masters of Islam and the Bedouins, who had become heroes of the conquests, and on the other hand—among the Qurayshites themselves—between the Hashimites and Ummayyads; the first of these, which was the clan of the Prophet, represented a strictly religious point of view (*dīnī*) and the second, which was the clan of his early adversary, Abu Sufyan, tended either to a more specifically political point of view or even to one that was plainly worldly (*dunyāwī*). Moreover the core element, which was opposed by the rising tide of the victorious and newly enriched Bedouins—who were represented above all by the cities of Basra and Kufa—was not simply the tribe of the Quraysh, from which the Prophet issued, but also the group of Medinese Companions (*ansār*) of the Prophet; together they constituted precisely the spiritual aristocracy that is designated by the term "Companions" (*sahābah*); but in addition, and at the antipodes of this quite general rivalry, there was the opposition between the Alids and all other pretenders to the caliphate. All these oppositions were in the logic of things—let us remember the bloody birth of Latin Christianity at the time of Clovis and Charlemagne—and there is no need to attribute such clashes to questions of personal interest when they occurred on a plane where only the sword could decide; history itself proves the contrary and shows that parallel to the play of historical contingencies there was an unfolding of the highest moral values, not to mention the immutability of the sacred mold that is religion.

A point of view that may be worth mentioning here is the following: the range of the Arab soul extends from the most violent impulsiveness to the most generous serenity;[2] but it is not

[1] It would have been contrary to the nature of things, however—given the contingent character of its motives—for such holy rigidity to have been unconditional: before the famous "Battle of the Camel" the Companions were on the point of being reconciled, but the battle was joined through the fault of subordinates who had an interest in division.

[2] The mixture of aggressiveness and generosity that characterizes the pure Arabs reminds us of an incident we witnessed among the Bedouins: two women in dispute were pulling each other's hair and hurling invectives like furies, but suddenly they had had enough and released each other, each going her

alone in possessing these characteristics and gifts—upon which, however, it confers an original quality precisely because of its impulsiveness—and it has bequeathed these same traits to a greater or lesser extent to foreign peoples, above all to nomads and semi-nomads, through the process of Islamicization. The historical facts that illustrate this Arab-Muslim magnanimity are numerous, and we shall here recall two examples: after the capture of Jerusalem, the Caliph Umar refused to pray in the basilica the Patriarch had placed at his disposal in order to avoid its being claimed later by Muslims; and the Saracens abandoned the siege of Toledo because the queen of the city appeared on the ramparts to tell the assailants that her husband the king was absent.[3] In summary, the particular disinterestedness that is generosity necessarily confers upon strength its stamp of nobility; strength owes it to itself to be generous to the extent it is legitimate.[4]

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In every religion there are three spheres or levels: the Apostolic, the theological, and the political; the first has a certain quality of absoluteness, the other two being more or less contingent, although clearly to very different degrees. In Christianity the theological element is directly connected to the Apostolic, the political era beginning only with Constantine. In Islam, however, the political element is found in conjunction with the Apostolic, strictly theological elaboration coming only later. Now the Apostolic environment—the intimate circle of a prophet—inevitably involves oppositions when the political element comes into play, offering as it does different solutions to the problem of efficacy; but it cannot contain elements of hypocrisy or other forms of baseness in its very substance: differences of perspective, yes, but not petty and sordid conflicts of interest. The Apostolic sphere is pure, or else it is nothing;[5] and it is in this sense that Sunnism accounts for the Apostolic epoch of Islam. But the appropriateness of the traditional

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way with dignity as if nothing had occurred; we have never been able to forget the expression of detachment that suddenly adorned their faces.

[3] In this case chivalric honor also enters into play; one does not wish to go against a frail woman even if she is surrounded by warriors.

[4] The greatness of the soul of Saladin—a Kurd—is well known. In the midst of battle he presented a richly caparisoned horse to his enemy, Richard the Lion-Hearted, whose horse had just been killed; and this was one of the least of his acts of generosity.

[5] The Epistles of Saint Paul contain an echo of grave disorders in the early Church, but the people or groups concerned were converted pagans, not Apostles; they were therefore outside the Apostolic sphere just as were those Arabs who entered Islam after the taking of Mecca and who can be counted neither among the "emigrants" (*muhājirūn*) from Mecca nor the "allies" (*ansār*) of Medina.

Sunni version of events involves taking into account the quasi-avataric nature of Fatimah's posterity, which it does through its doctrine of the *sharīf*s:[6] the *sharīf*s cannot suffer damnation, any sins they may commit being forgiven them in advance, and they are entitled to respect and love, easily becoming saints—in short, being "pneumatics", gnostically speaking, even if most of the time they are so only in virtuality. None of this should be taken to mean that a "psychic" can never become a saint or that there are no "pneumatics" outside the Fatimid line; this is self-evident.[7]

From a certain point of view the significance of the battles between the Ummayyads and Alids is in practice the conflict between political efficacy and sanctity, two things few men are capable of combining. Abu Bakr and Umar succeeded in doing so, apart from certain blunders that need not concern us in this context; as far as the Caliphate of Uthman is concerned—and still more that of Ali—it is important not to underestimate the terrible difficulty of holding in balance a mass of men as passionate, ambitious, and turbulent as the ancient Arabs, who were always divided among themselves and therefore unaccustomed to unity and discipline.

The early Caliphs were fully aware of how dangerous it would be for the austere Bedouins, who had become conquerors, to adopt the decadent customs of the Sassanids and Byzantines; this is what the later Caliphs did all too readily, to the point of betraying the dignity and virtues of their race, and this is what the Shiites wished to prevent by claiming the Caliphate for the Alids alone. Moses broke the Tablets of the Law upon seeing the Golden Calf and then, so it is said, received others of a less rigorous character; this image expresses a principle of fluctuation or adaptation, the effects of which may be observed in diverse traditional climates and also, precisely, in early Islam, where the political regime that was ultimately viable did not correspond to the original ideal. Sunnis resign themselves to this fatality whereas Shiites enclose themselves in the bitter memory of a lost purity combined with that of the drama of Karbala and, on the level of the mystical life, with the noble sadness that an awareness of our earthly exile can arouse—an exile then seen in a particular aspect: that of injustice, oppression, frustration with regard to early virtue, divine right, and everything that represents them.

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[6] The descendants of the Prophet through Fatimah; the Arabic word *sharīf* (plural *shurafā'*) means "noble".

[7] The "psychic" is saved through "conversion" whereas the "pneumatic" is saved by "nature". The second of these accepts the truth—as did Ali and Abu Bakr—without the least hesitation and from the heart by virtue of an almost existential "recollection". One must bear in mind that in Pauline language the "psychic" is the earthly and fleshly man, hence practically the "hylic" man of Gnosticism.

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Be that as it may, the fundamental explanation of Shiism and its reason for being cannot be situated on the political plane alone; what must be said is that in Islam, and above all in the person of the Prophet, there are two tendencies or mysteries—this latter word indicating something rooted in the celestial order—namely, "Fear" and "Love", or "Cold" and "Heat", or "Dryness" and "Humidity", or "Water" and "Wine"; now there are grounds for saying that Ali, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husayn represented the second of these dimensions, whereas Aisha, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman personified the first, at least from the point of view of a more or less outward accentuation. Ali and his family—politically ineffectual as they were—collided with the world of "Fear", "Dryness", efficacy; and what is remarkable is that Fatimah came up against this world not only in the person of the first Caliph but even in relation to her father, the Prophet, who as we have said combined both tendencies. It goes without saying that the element Love could not have been lacking in the Abu Bakr group—the love for the Prophet among all the Companions proves this[8]—and conversely it is unthinkable that the element Fear would have been missing in Ali and his people, for in their case too it could only have been a question of accentuation, not of privation;[9] in short, what was more or less implicit in the case of the Sunnis became no doubt more explicit in that of the Shiites. One could enlarge indefinitely upon this entanglement of religious attitudes, and we would have preferred not to mention it, especially since it is a difficult and thankless task to do justice in just a few words not so much to the parties involved as to all the points of view. One related observation is essential, however: upon contact with the Sunni world—where the general atmosphere is one of resignation in God and serenity through faith—one does not *a priori* have the impression of dealing with a perspective of Love while one does have this impression in the climate of Shiism, whatever the reasons may be. It is true that resignation and serenity characterize Islam as a whole; it is equally true that in Shiism an emotional element is added, to the point of being superimposed upon these qualities, an element that has an approximate equivalent among Sunnis only in the Sufi brotherhoods.

[8] This love is still to be seen in our time from one end of the Muslim world to the other in forms that are surprising in their intensity and touching in their spontaneity. Let us draw attention here to the fact that Sunnis criticize Shiites for not loving the Prophet sufficiently in that they love Ali, Fatimah, and their descendants too much; and let us cite this by no means irrelevant *hadīth*: "Not one of you is a believer unless I am dearer to him than his sons and his father and all men together".

[9] The question of there being an alternative between Fear and Love could not arise in the case of an Ali or Abu Bakr; but within *gnosis* itself it is possible for either the "humid" or the "dry" aspect to predominate.

Be that as it may, a most important point must still be clarified: when we speak of the element "Love" in the case of the Prophet, there can clearly be no question of anything other than the love of God; when we attribute this element to the Companions, it becomes somewhat fluid with regard to its object, which may be either God or the Prophet or both, or again Ali and his family, whereas the object of "Fear" is always God. What has to be understood above all is that in Islam the love of God is not the point of departure; it is a grace God may bestow upon whoever fears Him; the point of departure is obedience to the Law and the fear—perfectly logical—of punishment. "What matters is not that you should love God, but that God should love you," a canonical collection on the Prophet declares,[10] and it continues to this effect: if you wish God to love you, you must love His Messenger by following his *Sunnah*. Love of God thus passes through love of the Messenger; among Shiites love of the Messenger passes *de facto* through love of Ali and his family, and this introduces into this mysticism—for historically plausible reasons—an element of resentment and mourning on a level where such motivations may be reconciled with a movement toward God.

The question of the spiritual style of Islam as a whole is also clarified by the following example: "If I turn in repentance toward God," says a man to Rabiah Adawiyyah, "will God turn in Mercy toward me?" "No," replied the saint, "but if He turns toward you, you will turn toward Him." It will no doubt be objected that this way of thinking—typically Muslim—implies a kind of inoperative tautology, which may even have a paralyzing effect; now it is necessary to know that the intention here is to arouse in man the consciousness of his impotence before God and to prevent him from attributing his virtuous actions to himself, hence to make him profoundly aware of the fact that the positive cause of his good actions is the divine Agent; without this concrete certitude—in the Islamic perspective—effort is compromised at its very root. This is doubtless a question of point of view, but points of view have their efficacy.

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[10] *Al-Anwār al-Muhammadiyyah* by the *faqīr* Yusuf ibn Ismail al-Nabahani. The saying quoted appears to contradict the Law of Love proclaimed by the *Torah* and Christ, but this is not so, for the difference can be reduced to a question of terminology: whereas in the Bible the love of God has a significance that is primarily volitive and operative, this same expression refers in Islam to a contemplative grace, a grace that is doubtless active and yet conditioned by a divine inspiration. "Love God and therefore obey Him," Christ seems to be saying. "Obey God until you love Him," says Islam in turn; and there is obviously a point where the two perspectives meet and intermingle.

But let us now return to the question of denominational divergences: for Shiites, and according to a perspective that is at once symbolic and schematic, hence simplifying and abstract, protagonists of the "dry" dimension—that of earthly efficacy—become personifications of the "world"; only the family of Ali represents the "spirit". No doubt this makes no difference from the point of view of pure mysticism, but on a more outward level it does render more plausible the polemics against the great figures of Sunnism, especially since Sunni doctrine renders homage not only to Ali and Fatimah but to the great "Imams", to whom precisely the Shiites refer;[11] in short, it is at the very least paradoxical and tragic that a denominational branch that aims to identify itself with esoterism would at the same time include a particularly virulent and problematical exoteric ostracism. Shiism on the whole is a mysticism of the providential and provisional defeat—ultimately changed into triumph—of the *Logos* in its earthly exile, and in this way it rejoins the mystical geometry expressed by Saint John: "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not"; thus we are far from the idea of an immediate victory, one necessitated by the divine origin of the message. The criteria are now inverted in that the minority status of Shiism is a sign of superiority from their point of view: for Sunnism, which is the perspective of the necessarily victorious divine message—a perspective that must therefore be held by the majority—to be in the minority is a sign of heresy, but for Shiites it amounts to a criterion of orthodoxy since *lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt*. This criteriology applies unquestionably to esoterism, and in this respect the two denominational points of view of Islam coincide; Sunni Sufism is necessarily a minority in the context of the common religion, and Shiism claims the same quality of "inwardness" that Sufism aims to represent. Nonetheless what Shiites seem to want to say is basically this: "Islam is esoterism"; and Sunnis seem to reply: "First allow it to exist on earth." Or again, to the Shiite assertion that esoterism is Shiism, the Sunni reply is basically that esoterism cannot be a religion and furthermore that esoterism is found where exoterism is found. The fact that Shiism in its fashion recognizes the distinction between the "outward" (*zāhir*) and the "inward" (*bātin*) does not modify its basically esoteric claim, as is proved by its theory of the imamate.[12]

But let us return to the symbolism *lux in tenebris*: if the political failure of Ali and his successors on the plane of Islam as a whole proves that the Prophet's son-in-law could not alone be the personification in every respect of spiritual and temporal authority for Islam as such, the very existence of Shiism nonetheless proves an element of victory in Ali himself and by

[11] To the Imams of the Shiites correspond the Sunni Shaykhs, who rule to the extent that they influence monarchs. Shiites like to support the legitimacy—or transcendence—of the Imams on the basis of such and such a numerical or cosmological symbolism, but Sunnis can do as much, *mutatis mutandis*: there are four Caliphs who are *rashidūn* and four founders of ritual schools (*madhhab*) just as there are four rivers of Paradise, four Archangels, four words in the *Basmalah*, four sides to the Kaaba.

[12] A fact worthy of mention is that the majority of the descendants of Ali and Fatimah are Sunnis and that there were Alid dynasties that were nevertheless not Shiite.

extension in his family. Sunnis do not deny this eminence, praying indeed for blessings upon the Prophet, "his family (*āl*), and his Companions (*sahb*)", and honoring the "*sharīf*s".[13]

Let us note parenthetically that the elements "light" and "martyrdom", which are attached to Ali and his family, allow us to interpret the affair of the Fadak Oasis in a particular sense: after the death of the Prophet the caliph Abu Bakr refused Fatimah the right of inheritance; now the Prophet had owned the oasis of Fadak, and his daughter greatly wished to keep it.[14] Clearly there could have been no malice toward anyone on Abu Bakr's part and *a fortiori* not toward Fatimah—he was ready to allow the inheritance as long as he was presented with a direct witness to the *hadīth* authorizing it—but he was providentially obliged to play a negative role, though in an altogether outward sense, in relation to Fatimah insofar as she was the personification of an otherworldly light; it was necessary for him to assume this incidental role on the material plane by virtue of his thoroughly extrinsic function as guardian of legal principles, or let us say of legal abstraction. The affair of the inheritance refused to Fatimah is an example of the dilemma or conflict between a principial abstraction and a particular concrete case lying outside its purview.

The intertwining of characters and destinies that concerns us here includes the strange case of Fatimah. Embodying the purest sanctity, according to unanimous tradition,[15] she was put aside, deprived of her rights, forgotten; on occasion she was treated with harshness—even, it seems, by the Prophet, her father. In this is contained the whole drama of a celestial soul predestined to be a martyr of terrestrial life; her abasement is like a shadow cast by her spiritual elevation, human individuals appearing in her destiny as the cosmic instruments of her painful alchemy. There is something similar in the case of the Virgin Mary, treated not without a certain coldness by the Gospels and passed over to a large extent in silence by the rest of the New Testament, to reappear afterward in all the greater splendor; a comparable example in a totally different world is that of Sita, wife of Rama, who was never happy on earth but was deified in Heaven, or again that of Maya, mother of the Buddha, who was nearly forgotten and yet later glorified in the form of Tara, "Mother of all the Buddhas"; we mention these things here to show

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[13] Many *ahādīth* accepted in Sunni collections take account of this. This proves moreover that one cannot accuse Sunni authorities of having in bad faith suppressed texts favorable to Ali and corroborative of the Shiite thesis, especially since the Caliph Umar II, who had the first written collection of *ahādīth* made, was not hostile to the Alids.

[14] Which, it must be admitted, poses a certain problem for non-Muslims in the absence of documents that would explain this attitude in relation to its hagiographic context.

[15] The written documents contain nothing, however, that would oblige us to acknowledge this sanctity; if we do acknowledge it, this is because there is no effect without a cause: the cult of Fatimah throughout Islam and throughout the centuries cannot be explained without the sanctity of the person, and the world of Fatimah is too near our own to be legendary in its essential features.

that the destinies of saints of the highest order show forth symbolisms that it would be vain to analyze solely from the point of view of individual responsibilities. As for Fatimah, this saint's attachment to her father clashed after his death with the inflexibility of the first caliph, who in refusing her certain elementary favors took into consideration only the rigidity of the principles of Islam, which in reality could have allowed for a wider interpretation in this particular case; but it was the destiny of Fatimah to be deprived of the consolations of this lower world. This example is typical of the oppositions between the Companions: the clash is not between passions but between good intentions, inspired by a totalitarian mentality ever prone to irreducible alternatives.

All things considered the drama of the Companions is that of human subjectivity: there would be no problem if there were only the good and the bad, but the great paradox is the existence of the good who differ with each other to the point of not being able to understand each other—differing not so much by nature as with regard to situation and vocation. The great epic poems, such as the Iliad or the Song of the Nibelungs, show in all their tragic grandeur this intertwining of temperaments, positions, responsibilities, duties, and destinies: combat outwardly in the current of forms, but unity inwardly in an unchanging quest for the Light that liberates.

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The moral courage of Muhammad was immense; the physical courage of Ali, unsurpassable hero on the battlefield, was no less so. Muhammad liked to speak of the general religion and to give practical counsel; Ali was the metaphysician of the community, and he would even broach the most transcendent subjects during moments of respite in combat.[16] Now men are diverse; in many cases the law of affinity as well as that of complementarity could have worked in Ali's favor, and this must have given the impression—not altogether mistakenly—that some people were less attached to the Prophet than to his son-in-law. But even if this were not the case, one can admit that the forerunners or ancestors of the Shiites, if they were not those among the Companions who most loved the Prophet, certainly were the ones who put the love of his Family in the foreground—to the detriment, say the Sunnis, of the more impersonal elements of the divine Message or a more objective evaluation of things. We could perhaps say that the "pre-Shiites" were those Companions who could not live without the presence of the Muhammadan Family and who had no other choice but to attach themselves to what remained of

[16] According to the testimony of Hasan al-Basri, Ali was "the theologian of the Community". "I am the city of Knowledge, and Ali is its gate," said the Prophet, according to a *hadīth* that was reported to us in a Sunni country; it means that Ali was concerned with explaining and commenting upon what the Prophet expressed in an elliptical manner.

it in its descendants, whereas the Sunnis were those who could not accept any substitute whatever for this presence and who therefore had no choice but to live by the memory of it and in its *Sunnah*.

One must assume there was something fascinating about Ali, something particular to him that determined a cult nearly independent of that of Muhammad; Ali appears above all as the "solar hero" and the "lion" (*asad* or *haydar*) of God; one loves him as the *gopī*s loved Krishna,[17] and his tragic death adorns him with a halo of martyrdom and cries out for a quasi-mystical and cosmic vengeance. Nonetheless—and this is an altogether different matter—the hero was not a statesman or even a strategist; he wielded the sword superlatively but not so diplomacy; he disdained diplomacy out of purity and uprightness, we are assured by his partisans, who forget that the Prophet—without being any less pure or upright than his son-in-law—was an accomplished statesman, perfectly capable of cunning when dealing with the enemy and of making concessions that seem surprising at first but are extremely efficacious, even decisive, in the final analysis. Ali lacked foresight because of a spirit of integrity and was indecisive because of detachment from earthly things; this explains why he did not gain full endorsement at the time of his election.[18] In the personality of Muhammad, by contrast, it is not the physical hero who stands out, but the leader of men, the strategist, the farsighted and invincible statesman: he who does not merely win a day's battles by the strength of his sword but who brings about a millennial world empire thanks to his genius, humanly speaking. Now Abu Bakr, Umar, and others were more responsive to this kind of power than to the heroic radiance of an Ali; for men like the first three caliphs there could be no question either of a cult or of hostility in relation to the Messenger's son-in-law.

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[17] "Love for Ali consumes all sins, as fire consumes dry wood," proclaims a Shiite *hadīth*. For the extremists Ali is even greater than the Prophet.

[18] Even among some of his partisans his prestige dropped during the war against his rival Muawiyah. The majority of Ali's army having pressed him into accepting an arbitration that in fact turned out to be disastrous, a part of the army—the Kharijites—revolted against him and separated from him; it was one of these Kharijites who later killed him at Kufa in order to avenge the defeat Ali inflicted upon them at Nahrawan. Let it be noted that a Hasan al-Basri and an Ibn Sirin, young contemporaries of Ali and great stars in the firmament of nascent Sufism, were totally Sunni: they criticized certain aspects of Ali's behavior and accepted without hesitation the caliphate of Abu Bakr and Umar and, with serious criticisms but with resignation, the caliphate of the Ummayyads, while at the same time excusing Uthman, an attitude that would be inconceivable on the part of saints of that epoch if truth and right had been the monopoly of the Imamists. This is all the more significant in that the initiatic genealogy of the Sufis connects Hasan al-Basri with Ali himself, which indicates, if not a direct initiatic link—although we do not see why this link has been brought into doubt—at least a particular and typical spiritual relationship.

The quasi-exclusion in Shiism of what we have termed the element "dryness" may fundamentally explain—though not justify—the Shiites' misinterpretation of the first three caliphs and of the Prophet's favorite wife, and this is the price paid for the exoteric coagulation of Shiism; it is indeed the way of all exoterism to become hypnotized by a single aspect of reality and interpret everything in terms of this exclusivity.[19] Let us recall in this connection the general condemnation of all forms of "paganism" by each of the three monotheistic religions or in particular the Christian underestimation of the *Torah* and the inward dimension of Judaism, or again in Islam the reduction of Christ's role to that of a forerunner. For Shiite spirituality the question of knowing who an Abu Bakr or an Aisha really was does not arise: only principles count—whether positive or negative and whatever the images in which they find expression. Be that as it may, the extent of the dissemination of the theses that are the most hostile to Sunnism and—it must be said—most passionate and most unconvincing appears to have been somewhat variable; they are to be found above all in theological works of the Safavid epoch, works that do not possess any absolute authority, however, since the application of the canonical principle of "personal conclusion" (*ijtihād*) is freer among Shiites than Sunnis and thus opens the door to far more pronounced divergences, whence by way of compensation the less obligatory character of the opinions expressed.

Regarding the origins of Shiism, the emphasis we have placed on these factors must not however cause one to lose sight of the role of political contingencies after the death of Uthman and above all after the death of Ali, when the city of Kufa aimed to remain the capital of the Empire and did not dream of effacing itself in favor of Damascus, the capital of Muawiyah. While it is true that ideas create vested interests, it is no less undeniable that vested interests can in turn create ideas or ideologies, for such interests encourage accentuations—and corresponding doctrinal elaborations—with all the prejudices and exclusions these can bring in their train; these two factors, idea and interest, are sometimes difficult to disentangle in a climate of passion that is at once mystical and political. From an entirely different point of view, it is possible that Shiism, which was *a priori* a purely Arab movement, was subjected *a posteriori* to the influence of concepts having a Babylonian and Mazdean origin: we are thinking here particularly of the metaphysics of Light and the related idea of an esoteric and quasi-superhuman Priesthood.[20]

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[19] This sort of ostracism—and the negative symbolization of proper names—is found almost everywhere, even in the Hindu world and even outside exoterism: for the partisans of Madhva, Shankara is the incarnation of a demon; his name, which means "Savior", becomes for them *Sankara*, "bastard". The partisans of Shankara do as much in return, declaring that Madhva was the bastard of ignoble parents, who set himself the mission of falsifying the *Vedānta*.

[20] We have very little inclination to acknowledge borrowings of this kind, but in the case of Shiism—above all, or at the very least, in its extreme and relatively late forms—such influences seem to us probable if not certain; they may be explained in this case by a convergence of motivations.

There are those who have wished to see the esoteric aspect of Islam in Shiism, which is false if one concludes from this that Shiism is a pure esoterism and that Sunnism may be reduced to the corresponding exoterism; but it nonetheless contains an element of truth to the extent that Shiism can be explained by an intention of "inwardness", which however it readily translates into the terms of "outward" theology;[21] thus Shiite exoterism is instilled with the flavor of a quasi-esoterism of an emotional type, whereas in Sunnism the two dimensions, the outward and the inward, remain in principle separated and in equilibrium.[22] In a certain approximate manner Shiism is the "Christianity of Islam":[23] its fundamental theme is the "divine humanity" of its great saints,[24] then the martyrdom of the uncomprehended light, and finally the sacramental presence of this light in the form of the imamate.[25]

The quintessence of Shiism is imamism: instead of being humanized in the Prophet alone, the *Logos* is also manifested in the twelve imams by being as it were refracted in them, and this begins with Ali. The pure Intellect, which is immanent in the heart of every man but actualized only in the sages and saints[26]—in varying degree and different modes—is in itself infallible, and it is a ray of the divine *Logos*; now since this *Logos* has been humanized not only in the Prophet but also in the imams, it is from them that the human Intellect stems in practice according to the

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[21] Mention must be made of a particular sector, namely Shiite Sufism, which is very close to Sunni Sufism. One comment on the subject of the etymology of the word *sūfi*: the fact that in Persian this Arabic term has often been translated as *pashminah-push*, "wearer of the woolen cloak", indicates that the Arabic word is derived from *sūf*, "wool", and not from *safā*, "purity", nor for that matter from the Greek *sophos*, "sage", as has been claimed.

[22] Both popular Sufism and Sufi Asharism appear to some extent to contradict this, but these are inevitable phenomena, for it is impossible that the two dimensions would remain anywhere totally independent from each other.

[23] Shiism is to Islam what Arianism is to Christianity, but in an opposite sense since it accentuates the human Manifestation of God whereas Arianism accentuates the Transcendence.

[24] Though not in the sense of Christian incarnationism (*hulūl*). The avataric quality of the Muhammadan Family, which is in any case relative, implies an innate and *a priori* radiant sanctity—which may not manifest itself in distant descendants, to say the least—but the absence of this quality in no way implies that the highest spirituality is impossible.

[25] To pretend that all Muslim esoterism is derived from the *shiʿah* is to play with words. The Sufi notion of the "pole" (*qutb*) results from the nature of things, and it is not the fault of Sunnis if for the Shiites the "pole" is the Alid imam and no other; it is clear that the immediate descendants of Husayn, the son of Ali, were "poles" since they combined the Sharifian nature with personal sanctity. As for the opposition of certain imams to Sufism, this concerns only some particular manifestations of Sufism; one need not be a Shiite in order to notice a "two-edged" innovation in the foundation of the brotherhoods, but this has no bearing on *Tasawwuf* as such.

[26] According to the accepted view, the first of these terms accentuates intellective perfection and the second volitive perfection.

Shiite point of view. There is no wisdom and no sanctity without the grace of the imam, even if "hidden"; to know God is to know Him through the imam since all spiritual knowledge comes from the Intellect. This is the thesis of Shiism, and it will be noted that it pushes to its limits the humanization, indeed politicization, of principial realities.[27]

The particular greatness of the imams, Fatimah eminently included, resides in the conjunction of what might be called their celestial substance with their personal sanctity, this sanctity having been effectively realized down to the twelfth Imam, who withdrew from the sight of men and is supposed to reappear as the *Mahdi* at the end of the world. But this conjunction—of which one sees another example in the ancient Brahman caste, which issued from the *Rishi*s, and yet another in the case of the first emperors of Japan, who descended from Jimmu Tenno—does not mean that sanctity cannot appear outside an avataric line of descent; the imams are to be identified with the *Logos*, but the *Logos* is not to be identified with the imams;[28] the Sunni *qutb*—the "pole"—embodies the *Logos* as does the Shiite imam, but without having to be a *sharīf*. And we shall add this: if the very existence of Shiism proves the particular greatness of the "House of the Prophet", the Sunni perspective, or the existence or actual importance of this perspective, points on the contrary to the relativity and the limits of imamism.

From the fact that Shiites have in their own way emphasized certain ideas or realities of early Islam or of Islam as such, it does not follow that these ideas or realities belong to Shiism alone nor that all who acknowledge them are indebted to Shiism or are openly or even secretly Shiites. From a more general but related point of view we would say that saints certainly have a right to think and speak as their vocation permits and within the framework of their denominational milieu, but their teachings should not make us lose sight of the fact that all Islamic sapience flows from quintessential and primordial formulations, namely, the

[27] Imamism justifies its narrowly systematic conception of the "cycle of sanctity" (*wilāyah*) by a corresponding retrospective interpretation of the "cycle of prophecy" (*nubūwah*), but in reality the liberty or discontinuity of the latter cycle is an argument in favor of the Sunni conception of the "pole" precisely because this has nothing dynastic about it. And in any case how can one attribute perfections or talents as diverse as personal sanctity, metaphysical intellectuality, and political capacity to a whole dynasty—that of the Alid imams? On this subject let us note that there are divergent opinions about the person of the imam, which is all the more surprising, to say the least, given the fact that knowledge of the imam of the period is supposed to be a condition of salvation.

[28] Just as one may accept that Jesus is God but not that God is Jesus. Let it be noted that for the Nusairis, the Ali-Ilahis, the Bektashis, and others, Ali is God veiled by a human appearance; one might ask what the motivations are for such extravagances.

*Shahādah*and certain *ayāt* and *ahādīth*[29] that make its essential intentions more explicit or specific in relation to union as well as doctrine.[30]

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No believer doubts that God may sacrifice certain possibilities of Mercy to the imperative demands of Truth, for otherwise no Justice would be possible; but it must also be acknowledged—though there is no symmetry between the two—that God may sacrifice truths that are in practice secondary to the imperatives of saving Mercy, for otherwise there would be no religious or denominational divergences. This means that in practice a secondary truth is no longer truth when it is discarded in favor of an essential truth, just as a lamp is no longer light in the presence of the sun and is even a cause of obscurity since it then casts a shadow; this also means that error as such could not come from God but is on the contrary prefigured—if it figures extrinsically in a traditional symbolism—in the very structure of the human receptacle. God never gives less than He promises and never takes away anything positive without compensating for it or giving it back on a higher level; therefore the errors—always extrinsic—of religions or denominations that are orthodox[31] in themselves necessarily coincide with spiritual truths, at least with those that are negative.[32]

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[29] Koranic verses and sayings of the Prophet.

[30] When one possesses a rigorous notion of esoterism or *gnosis*, it is impossible not to feel uneasy in observing that the sayings of the imams, which are supposed to be the only sources of esoterism, have given rise to voluminous compilations and require in turn whole volumes of commentary. One of the crucial differences between Sunnis and Shiites is that for Sunnis the apostolic quality belongs only to sayings of the Prophet—there are some thousands—whereas for the Shiites it extends right down to the last of the imams, toward the end of the ninth century, hence more than three centuries after Muhammad; it is as though one were to add all the Fathers of the Church to the New Testament. These remarks will be better understood if one considers the subjective, empirical, emotional, inspirationist, prophetising, and even political character of a certain type of esoterism, one founded above all on hermeneutics (*ta'wil*) and an eschatology that is audacious, to say the least.

[31] A denomination or religion is intrinsically orthodox when it includes a metaphysical doctrine that is at least adequate and offers both the notion and the phenomenon of sanctity.

[32] Not positive, for it is a question here of things rejected. Shiites are right in condemning Pharisaism; their associating it with the names of Companions is quite another matter. Hindu meditation on an image is one thing, and the Semitic reproach of idolatry is another.

When the Scriptures say that the sun rises, moves, and sets, they are not lying, even though from the point of view of facts the sun is motionless in relation to its planetary system; they are simply using the language of terrestrial appearances. The same is true of the human facts contained in the sacred perspectives; every formal element is subject to the relativity of "aspects" and "points of view", only the divine Intention—made of intrinsic Truth and liberating Attraction—being immutable. "Elias is come," said Christ, thinking of Saint John the Baptist, even though John had denied he was Elias; it is true that Christ was referring only to the function and not the person whereas the Forerunner was speaking of his own person and not the function; but Jesus' indirect and elliptical expression nonetheless illustrates the liberty that prophetic language may take with the facts when a principial truth is at stake.

Whatever the divergences between the Muslim denominations, the metaphysics of Unity and Union dominates the entire horizon of thought, just as much Shiite as Sunni; and in the final analysis a Muslim is orthodox to the extent that he identifies himself with the fundamental thesis of Islam and assumes all its consequences. On this basis we can say that quintessential orthodoxy is sanctity, which combines or transcends all partial truths in the purity of its experience.