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Dilemmas of Theological Speculation

With Special Reference to Moslem Scholasticism

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THEOLOGY is a mental activity which, founded on the inevitably antinomic and elliptical—but by no means contradictory or insoluble—data of the sacred Scriptures, interprets these data by means of the reason and in terms of a piety that is often more fervent than enlightened; all too often this results in theories which, while doubtless opportune and effective in a given psychological or moral connection, are nevertheless restrictive or even aberrant from the point of view of pure and simple truth, and in any case unacceptable on the plane of metaphysics.

Moslem theology provides an immediate example of this in the antagonism between "comparison" (*tashbīh*) and "abstraction" (*tanzīh*): some protagonists of the latter have gone so far as to maintain that God is unknowable in an almost absolute fashion and that, if the Koran attributes to Him certain benefic names, this tells us nothing about the divine nature, because this is "absolutely other" and God has merely "given Himself" these names in Revelation, without our being able to grasp His motive for so doing.[1] Obviously there is, between God and the world, both resemblance and incomparability; this may be expressed by saying that God does not resemble the world, but that the positive qualities of the world resemble God and are only intelligible through Him; God is in no sense a physical light, but it would be absurd to maintain that physical light does not tell us anything about the Divine Nature, otherwise it would be pointless to reveal to us that God is Light.

Ash'arite theology in particular offers more than one example of a reasoning inspired rather by an almost totalitarian zeal than by intellectual intuition. God cannot be unjust—reasons Ash`ari[2]—because injustice consists in invading someone else's domain, and there is no domain that does not belong to God; consequently, even if God were to act like the most unjust of men, he would not for that reason be unjust. There is here a strange forgetfulness of intrinsic values: God is presented, not in accordance with his Koranic image, which stresses above all his infinite Goodness *(Rahmah,* whence the names *Rahmān* and *Rahīm),* but as a sort of "moral vacuum" whose only characteristic is an unintelligible and incalculable willfulness. If this were the truth, no name signifying a quality would be applicable to God; human intelligence would be pointless, since there would be nothing to understand; it would not exist, any more than would the virtues, which by definition reflect something of God. A sort of obedient animality, completely proportioned to a blind Law, would be all that could be demanded of man.

When Ash'ari depicts the unlimitedness of Omnipotence, he strangely loses sight of what a quality is in itself, as well as what the Divine Nature is; he seems only to discern extrinsic qualities or situations—such as the fact that a monarch has to take orders from no one—and seems only to see in God situations of this kind. Nevertheless, the love of

God is incumbent on every man, which presupposes—and proves—that God is supremely lovable, and furthermore that this love is thereby in man's profoundest nature, so much so that to love God is to be entirely true to oneself; now the arbitrary and willful God of Ash'arī and Ibn Hanbal[3] is not lovable because the only motive for His actions is "what He wills" and "because He wills". Certainly, the Koran teaches that God "does what He wills"; but it does not say that this constitutes the very definition of God and the sufficient reason for worshipping and loving Him. In totalitarian obedientialism there are two flagrant nonsenses: one concerning God, whom one would have sublime by means of a blind hyperbolism of freedom, and the other concerning man, of whom one would make a nothingness by means of a no less blind abdication of commonsense. Ultimately, the error here is the subordination of Being to Power, or *God-Atmā* to *God-Māyā*, or "Essence" (*Dhāt*) to "Qualities" (*Sifāt*); now Power is a reality that is already relative—although still in a divine way—since it presupposes a level which is not God and over which it can hold sway. Power, being relative to this level, has no effect on the Divine Nature which is absolute; Power can neither limit nor extend itself, because its substance derives from the Divine Nature, and not from the will of a given Hypostasis; God cannot cause His Omnipotence either to be less than it is or to have an effect on the Divine Nature and so trespass on the Essence, which is the Absolute.

If it is impossible for God to lie, this is because lying is an imperfection; this being so, Omnipotence does not imply that God might possibly decide—as Ash'ari maintains—that lying is a perfection; if lying is not intrinsically an imperfection, there is no reason to suppose—as does Ash'ari—that God cannot lie. And if it is impossible for God to pray —to quote something Ash'ari wrongly takes as a proof of his opinion on lying—this is because prayer, as an act of subordination, implies the imperfection of separation and duality; but it equally implies the perfection of love and union, and in this connection its prototype is in God. Moreover, when Ash'ari affirms that God cannot lie, one wonders in virtue of what he affirms this; he even specifies that God, while creating lying "for others", cannot Himself lie, just as God, in ordering prayer for others, cannot pray Himself since there is no one above Him; a reasoning which is fallacious, for prayer, in its positive and essential content, necessarily has its origin in God, as we have just seen. Moreover the same holds good for lying: the purely negative side of lying is certainly foreign and opposed to the Divine Nature, but God can hide truths, as is proved on the one hand by the diversity of the revealed religions and on the other by the existence of esoterisms; this is not lying, but lying nevertheless derives, by perversion and privation, from God's capacity to veil Himself; if God veiled nothing, the whole world would be instantly consumed by his blinding Truth.

In affirming that lying is an evil because God has declared it so, and for no other reason, one completely forgets to ask the question why God declared it to be an evil; and one forgets even more to tell oneself that this "why", or this motive, is in God Himself. An evil is what is opposed to the Divine Nature, and not what God—because He is "omnipotent"—had decreed to be evil; it is the very content of the divine declaration that confirms the evident fact that lying is an evil; it is not the fact of the declaration that makes lying evil. The Ten Commandments, in teaching—or reminding—us what we must do or not do, teach us at the same time what God is and what He is not.

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For Ibn Hanbal and Ash'ari it would seem that God owes nothing to man and can owe nothing to him; the truth is that God, having created man "in His own image" and having consequently given him intelligence, owes His intelligent and theomorphic creature an intelligent and consequential attitude, because He owes this to Himself; it is because God is homogeneous and because His homogeneity penetrates creation—or because the Divine Nature is essentially good and true—that man cannot be excluded from the logic of the Divine Nature, if one may thus express oneself.[4] The reciprocity between the Creator and the creature comes from the nature of the Creator, and God cannot change His nature; "can" and "will" are here synonymous.

If we know that God rewards the good and punishes the wicked, this is because (according to Ash'ari) He has told us so; it is not because He is obliged to act in this way. The theologian, in his passionate desire to instill into turbulent souls a pious abnegation before God, loses sight of the fact that God has likewise told us that He is the Good, the Merciful, the Just, the Generous; if we must believe this—even supposing that we know it only because we have been told so—then by the same token we must necessarily conclude that God acts in accordance with goodness, mercy, justice, generosity. It is true that in certain cases we may not know how these divine Qualities must or will manifest themselves; but in the case mentioned by Ash'arī, precisely, we do know, and it is the express will of God that we should know.

God does not owe us any explanations, thinks Ash'arī, dazzled as he is by his awareness of our nothingness; but he forgets that God "wishes to owe" explanations, and that if God creates an apple-tree, it is to produce apples and not figs; God "wishes to owe" human intelligence all the clarifications for which it was made, just as He "wishes to owe" a given womb the species of creature for which it was made, and not another. And if God thus keeps His word, ontologically and humanly, it is certainly not from lack of freedom, but because He is Truth and Goodness and because ontologically His Freedom wills the good.

We may recapitulate all these considerations—at the risk of repetition—in the following way: the point of departure of theological voluntarism is the affirmation that in the world are both good and evil, and both were created by God; if these things exist in space or happen in time, it is because God "wills" them; from this proposition to voluntarism there is but one step, and Ash'ari takes this step by declaring that it would not be a bad way of acting on the part of God to punish believers and put unbelievers in paradise, our only reason for saying He will not do so being that he has told us He will not! And all this—still according to Ash'ari—because God, as supreme Sovereign, cannot be constrained by anyone; indeed He is free to do what He will and nothing can be evil on His part.

Mention has already been made of this strange opinion: lying is bad "because God has declared it bad", and "it would be good if God had declared it good"; if God Himself does not lie it is "not because lying is bad, but because it is impossible for God to lie"! The entire error in this reasoning comes from the equation of "God" and "Will", and from the fact that All-Possibility is envisaged—in keeping with exoteric anthropomorphism—as a freedom to will anything whatsoever; the error here—let it be said again—lies in

subordinating even the true and the good to the arbitrariness of an unrestricted Divine Will, and in forgetting that man is made in the image of God, his intellections thus depending, not on divine "declarations", but on the nature of things as derived from the perfection of God and revealed to the primordial understanding which is, in principle, man's normal understanding. Without a doubt nothing exists or happens without a wish on the part of God, or in other words without an ontological causation; but this Koranic doctrine would be unintelligible without the essential affirmation, placed at the top of each *surah*, that God is "the Infinitely Good, the Ever Merciful"; from this it results that evil "created" or "wished for" by God can only be a provisional element in a greater good, and that this evil is consequently integrated and dissolved in the final and decisive good; it is this—and not the notion of a gratuitous "Omnipotence"—which explains that nothing can be an evil on the part of the Sovereign Good.[5]

"If someone were to ask me", remarks Al-Ghazālī, "why God does not wish all men to be believers, I would reply; we have no right to ask questions about what God wishes or does. He is perfectly free to wish and to do whatever He pleases". Now this reply is wrong, and wide of the point; but what is strange—and significant as regards the "double thinking" of many esoterists—is that Ghazālī himself gives the correct answer later on: "In creating unbelievers and wishing them to remain in this state, in creating snakes, scorpions and pigs, in short in willing everything that is evil, God has wise motives in view which it is not necessary for us to understand". He should have said so from the start! For this answer completely contradicts the one he suggested earlier; what should have been said is that Divine Causation can have motives which, in principle or in fact, may well escape the understanding of mankind, or of a given man; to ask questions is normal for a human being, and to admit that his understanding has fundamental or accidental limits is likewise normal. To scold intelligence in the name of a Divine "whim" is convenient but fails to take into consideration the imprescriptible rights of our nature; nor, needless to say, does it solve the problems of Universal Manifestation and All-Possibility.

If we look at a scorpion—to keep to Al-Ghazālī's example—and if we consider it from the point of view of pure existence, we see a good and not an evil, to wit, precisely, existence, the Divine word "Be!" which is like a victory over nothingness; the same is true if we consider it from the point of view of its function in the economy of nature; and if we looked at everything in this way—and if we had a motive for making the effort or if it were possible for us to do so always—we could say with Ibn `Arabi and with certain Indian *bhaktas* that in the world there is only good. On condition, nevertheless, of clearly discerning the relationships that authorize us to do so and of never denying that an evil is an evil in the particularity which characterizes it! It is all very well to object that this particularity is only privative, that it is "pure inexistence", as Ibn ‘Arabī would say; the concrete reality of imperfect or malefic things will still not be abolished, for the very reason that this privation or "inexistence" exists, failing which it would be impossible to speak of an evil. But this reality, let it be said once more, is necessary and becomes a good through its function in the universal economy, quite apart from the good that is existentially immanent in all things without which no creation would be possible.

To manifest Divine Perfection is to make it different from God; without this difference, there would be no manifestation; now to be different from Pure Perfection is

to comprise imperfection, and thus also to comprise—on certain existential levels—what we call evil. The manifestation of Divine Perfection results from the infinity of this Perfection itself; this dimension, which is both expansive and restrictive, is none other than *Maya*.

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It is curious that a man like Ghazālī, who was aware of the dangers of *kalām* since he considered that this science was liable to trouble faith, should have had the inadvertence to bow before the *fait accompli* of theological opinions which had come to be established as dogmas; like Ash'ari, he piously considers that God can cause to suffer, and can punish, without the creature having deserved it and without there being any ulterior compensation, whereas it would have been neither difficult nor indeed superfluous to specify that a destiny always results from the nature of the being who undergoes it—which is independent of the question of individual sin—and that furthermore the creature is always free to turn his destiny into a cause of spiritual merits and so of salvation. Ghazālī thinks that it is blameworthy *(makrûh)* to apply oneself to a science that goes beyond our capacity, and that only Prophets and Saints—not theologians and philosophers—have the capacity and the right to scrutinize the mysteries of God; whether Ghazali was a Saint or not—and we are of the opinion that he was—it must be admitted that we sometimes prefer to his own opinions, those of the philosophers he attacks.[6] The real, and consequently adequate, intuition of a perspicacious intelligence is worth more than the hasty and inept speculation of a contemplative, even an outstanding one, and the fact that a given error may, subjectively speaking, only have a quite provisional and accidental character, obviously adds no value to it whatsoever.

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The following point calls for some consideration in this context: wisdom consists not only in knowing truths and being capable of communicating them, but also in the sage's capacity to recognize the most subtle limits—or hazards—of human nature. Since, for various reasons, this condition is not always fulfilled—and attenuating circumstances for this are not lacking—we encounter errors even on the part of traditional authorities, with all due deference to those who see such authorities in far too superhuman a light; it is a fact that the doctors of the Law and of the Spirit contradict one another even apart from any heresy, and this is from motives which are not always a simple question of point of view, unless one calls lack of intellectual intuition or a false piece of reasoning a "point of view"; moreover, the orthodox doctors do not accuse one another of "ways of seeing things", they accuse one another of errors. All the same, there is here an essential distinction: there are errors situated within the framework of comprehensive and decisive truth, and there are errors which break this framework, and herein lies the whole difference between sacred and profane thought. It is sometimes said that no doctrine is completely wrong and that there is truth in everything, which is completely false, because, while fundamental—and thus decisive—truths can neutralize any minor errors in a doctrine, minor truths are valueless within the framework of a major error; this is why one must never glorify an error for having taught us some truth or other, nor look for truth in errors on the pretext that truth is everywhere the same—for here there are important nuances—and above all one must not reject a fundamental and comprehensive

truth because of a minor error that may happen to accompany it.

Be that as it may, the human soul is capable, paradoxically and up to a certain point, of combining spiritual knowledge with a singular incapacity to express it in conformity with the requirements of the total context and according to the logic of things; there is basically no common measure between the inward man captivated by the radiations of the Infinite and the outward man living on preconceived notions and habits and moving his thought, incidentally, on a level proportionally far below his intelligence; it is of course to be desired that man should match his thought to his real knowledge without letting any purely formal doubts persist, but this is a particular grace which may not be present and which, in the case of certain Ash'ari-minded Sufis, is only partially realized.

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In the logic of the omnipotentialists, our possible ignorance of Divine motives becomes the possible absence of motives in Divine activity; this is a characteristic subjectivism which must never be lost sight of if one wishes to extract a plausible meaning from certain verbal utterances that have become more or less traditional, but not obligatory. In the same realm of ideas, the following example is perhaps worth mentioning: the opinion—repeated by Ghazalī—that God can ask of man something that man is incapable of accomplishing, is completely in keeping with the anti-metaphysical and indeed immoral omnipotentialism-obedientialism of the Ash`arites; the Koranic prayer: "Do not impose on us what we have not the strength to bear" (Surah of the Cow, 286) in no wise authorizes it, in that the same verse tells us that: "God imposes on the soul only what it can bear". The meaning of the prayer just mentioned is that God—in this case *karma,* as the Hindus and Buddhists would say—may punish a sin and the punishment goes beyond the immediate strength of the sinner; but in this case the human weakness is an aspect of the sin and manifests its importance, which amounts to saying that we may, through our own fault, be accidentally incapable of bearing what we normally could bear if we had sufficient faith. What the prayer means is: "Remove from us *a karma* which in fact would crush us", that is to say: "dissolve this knot, or alleviate its effects, since we put our trust in Thy Mercy". But it does not imply that God can ask us to perform things which objectively are incapable of realization.

We have already mentioned, in passing, the strange opinion according to which God could chastise the good and reward the bad "if He so wished": to draw this blindly totalitarian conclusion from the Koran is to forget that the Koran itself excludes it. When God says that He will punish sinners "according to their deserts"—while specifying that He will reward the good far more than they deserve—He expresses a causal connection and not an arbitrary and unintelligible decision; one absolutely fails to see why God, because He is all-powerful, should be less logical and less just than virtuous men, even without mentioning the fact that, according to the Koran, the essence of God is Generosity and Mercy. This last point has been amply developed by the Sufis, especially Ibn `Arabī who refers everything to the Divine *Rahmah.*[7]

The idea of the unlimited rights of God, which in itself constitutes a strange juridical incursion into the realm of All-Possibility, gave rise, in the climate of Sufism, to the following paradox: when man, on the order of God, asks God for a certain gift, God

rewards him for having obeyed this order, even if the request is not granted; but when man makes a request on his own initiative, it may be that it is granted but it may also be that the man concerned will be deprived of a grace in Paradise in proportion to the gift received on earth. As if God could order a petition without granting it, and as if He could grant a request and cause it to be paid for in the hereafter—He who never promises more than He gives and never gives less than He promises, and who not merely permits, but commands that one make Him requests! The Koranic phrase: "God does what He wills" means that we may be unaware of His motives and His ways, but not that He can be intrinsically arbitrary, as certain reasonings do not hesitate to insinuate, basing themselves on the contradictory and tautological idea that nothing can be arbitrary on the part of God.

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The rightness of a reasoning—that is, its adequacy and not merely its formal correctness—is dependent on the truth of the data it uses, as well as on the presence of sufficient data; this is what philosophers and theologians too often forget, whence reasonings of the following type, metaphorically speaking: "a bird is an animal, and it has wings; a cat does not have wings, therefore it is not an animal ..."[8] A fallacious reasoning of this sort, taken from the catechism of Fudali, is the following: "Let us suppose that a temporal thing resembles God, that is to say that God is such that one could attribute to Him qualities that one also observes in temporal creatures: in this case, He too would have to have a temporal origin and consequently would need to have a Creator...." This conclusion is false, because the temporal character of things has no connection with their qualities, it simply pertains to their level of manifestation. It is as if one said: There is no resemblance between the moon and its reflection in water, because if there were a resemblance, the moon would have to be liquid like water! And let no one say that this type of reasoning is the prerogative of theologians: modern science reasons no differently when it ventures into realms that are by definition beyond its scope, given its initial prejudice against everything that transcends the senses; it was with this kind of logic that were created evolutionism, psychology, textual criticism, historical interpretation, and the science of religions.

The great problem, for Ash`ari, was to replace mu'tazilite rationalism by something which, without being rationalism, replaces or canalizes the need that gives it birth. At the same time it was a question of making disputatious men feel that God owes them no explanations beyond a certain limit and that it does not behoove the creature to dispute with his Creator. Moreover the long opposition in Islam to any rationalization of the faith is well known; this is the opposition between the partisans of *naql,* the Koranic and Mohammedan tradition, and those of *'aql,* or rational interpretation. There is wisdom in the position of the partisans of tradition alone; their principle: "Without asking how and without comparison *(bilâ kaifa walâ tashbih)*", although on the one hand it is a two-edged sword, is nevertheless a protection against the excesses of a piety disguised as metaphysics, without thereby sacrificing any of the possibilities of inward illumination.[9]

The ancient partisans of tradition had moreover a positive and overriding reason for mistrusting rational speculations: this was that the Witness of Faith, the *Shahâdah,*

constitutes a sufficient metaphysical key, and many reefs would subsequently have been avoided if one had always known how to apply this fundamental formula to theological problems. Especially one would have understood—instead of only half grasping—that every human quality is prefigured in the Divine Nature and is possible only as a result of it, so much so that no manner of acting that would be base for men would be possible for God notwithstanding the blind argument of the unlimited rights of All-Possibility; and it is precisely the fact that it would be base for men which proves by analogy that it cannot play a part in the Divine Freedom, the Infinite Source of all earthly qualities. At all events, we must not allow our ignorance of God's motives to lead us into attitudes incompatible with the Divine Nature: if an act of God is apparently unjust, this is not because God has the right to be unjust or because injustice on His part would not be unjust, but because the appearance of injustice comes from the fact that we do not perceive the divine act in its entirety, rather as a child who receives a bitter medicine may not be aware that one is not doing him any harm. To say that God "does not have the right" to be unjust means that he "does not want" to have this right, and to say that an injustice would remain unjust on His part means precisely that it is incompatible with His nature ; if it were not so, God would not possess the quality of justice nor, consequently, the name "Just" (Al-'Adl), and all the Divine Names would be there for the purpose of telling us precisely nothing—quod *absit.*

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Intellectually speaking, the mental weakness of Al-Ash'ari consists in humanizing the Absolute, in speaking of Omnipotence when it is a question of All-Possibility, and in attributing to Omnipotence an individual and almost juristic character and forgetting the fundamental goodness of Being. What, in God, is an overflowing of Infinity, becomes for the Ash'arites and their like an unfathomable tyranny, at least in certain sectors of their thought: God keeps His word, they say, because he cannot lie; but they do not tell us, firstly, why God cannot lie, and secondly why, when He tells us that lying is wicked, God performs an act of authority and not simply an act of truth. This detour, by way of an authority which decrees, can obviously mean that God is the source of every quality and every measure; but in this case, the thing is badly expressed, as always happens when one forces metaphysical truths into the mould of a perspective that is narrowly human and therefore centered on will and sentiment.

Furthermore, the Ash'arite doctrine of causality throws light on an aspect of exoterism as such, for we find analogous theories—from the point of view of their formal insufficiency—in the most diverse religious climates. The function of this doctrine—or this atomism or occasionalism—is at bottom always to recall that God is present and active in all things, and to suggest to us that this low world would only be a discontinuous chaos but for the Divine Presence; regarded in this way Ash'arite atomism is a reminder of this Divine Presence, an introduction of the transcendent—of the marvelous, one might say—into everyday life. Man must feel that faith is something other than ordinary logic and that it sees things with the eye of God and not with the eye of the world. The believer, by this fact, is not himself entirely of this world, his faith is not a "natural" thought, but a "supernatural" assent; what is divinely true seems absurd to unbelievers, who follow only a down-to-earth process of thought. According to this

perspective, the unbeliever thinks in a horizontal sense; the believer thinks in a vertical and ascending sense, according to the "straight path"; and this divine transparency of earthly things—since the Divine Cause is everywhere and it alone is really present—confers on faith a sort of concrete and sacramental mystery, in short a miraculous element which makes of the believer a being marked by the supernatural. From the metaphysical point of view this is an unnecessary luxury, since the intellect has other resources than pious absurdity; but from the theological point of view it doubtless marks a victory. In a word, if unbelief in the form of atheistic scientism only admits physical causes and denies the transcendent causality which works in them, Ash'arism has replied in advance, and has done so radically, by denying physical causes; it is like a surgical operation or a preventive war. The Renaissance certainly could not have hatched out in an Ash`arite climate.

Similarly omnipotentialism (which in practice denies the human mind all capacity of understanding divine motives and refers our intelligence to revelation alone) has the function of suggesting that it is "God alone who knows", but it does this arbitrarily *ab extra* and forgets that, if it is indeed God who is always the thinker, He is also the thinker in us and in pure intellection or inspiration; for one cannot utter a truth about God "if it is not by the Holy Spirit". But Ash'arism thinks only of one thing: making the immensity of God concretely present in the world; and it is perfectly realistic in its presentiment that in the case of the average man the acceptance of higher truths passes through the will and not through the intellect and that consequently it is the will that must receive the shock; this shock, both crushing and sacramental is provided, precisely by the as it were blind omnipotentialism. Just as the negation of secondary causes has transformed the world into a discontinuous chaos of spatial and temporal monads which only the miracle of a Divine Will, renewed at each instant, can hold together, so also the negation of intellectual and moral logic regarding what concerns God transforms our intelligence into a vacuum which only revelation can fill; it is an application, plausible or otherwise, of the principle according to which one must die in order to be reborn. For Ash'ari, theology, to be concrete and efficacious, has to be "folly in the eyes of the world"; and Sunnism, sensitive to this moral and sentimental value of Ash'arite theology, has accepted it—*de facto* rather than *de jure—as* the best possible solution of the ever threatening antagonism between reason and faith.

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Moslem theology, like Christian theology, believes it has to insist on the gratuity of creation: God creates things in order to manifest His Power or His Will—always this obsession with will!—and without needing to create them, thus without any necessity; He has the right to do no matter what in His creation, this could not be an evil on His part, and so on. Here we have the so-to-speak classical confusion between necessity and constraint on the one hand, and between liberty and arbitrariness on the other: the point is overlooked that necessity can be a perfection and is by no means the opposite of liberty, and at the same time it is forgotten that arbitrariness—or "gratuitousness"—is an imperfection and thus cannot be an attribute of the Divine Nature. And if God can "owe" certain things to man—something that totalitarian voluntarism will not allow—it is not because He can be subjected to constraint, but because His truthfulness, faithfulness and goodness involve consequences whose roots are, not in human "rights", but in Divine Perfection itself: in accomplishing what He promised, God submits to His own will, and

this submission is no more contrary to divine liberty than the honest or noble action of an honorable man is contrary to human liberty. Theological voluntarism appears to forget that it is contrary to the Divine Nature to will the absurd; it will be said that the absurd willed by God is no longer absurd because God wills it, but this precisely is the height of absurdity and of sentimentalist perversion of intelligence. If God "owes" us the truth, it is because, being perfect, noble, good and truthful, He cannot but wish to be what He is and act in consequence; He does not have the "power" not to be perfect, which would mean not to be God. It is important to understand that God, from the moment that He has created the lion, "owes" it to him that zebras should look like zebras and not like something else; the apparent divine "debt" is nothing other than the immanent logic of the cosmos, or in other words, this "debt" results, not from a lack of liberty or power, but simply from the necessary homogeneity of the world. For "all things are *Atma*"; it is this homogeneity that is expressed by the Hindu myth of the "sacrifice of Purusha".

In order to express that man is mere nothingness in regard to the Absolute, one could say that he is but a dog, which would be false; but this is what, metaphorically speaking, certain theologians seem to say, viewed from the stratosphere, man disappears in fact, as he likewise disappears in the abyss of time; there are thus points of view which make evident the nothingness of man, but there is no point of view which can reduce him purely and simply to an animal; nor is there any point of view which allows one to think that the human mind is worthy of no logic on the part of its Creator; otherwise religious teachings would be in vain.

It is by reducing the nature of the Universe to the exclusive relationship "Creator and creature" and so enclosing it in an alternative without issue, that one prevents oneself from being able to recognize that creation is necessary, or rather that it has an aspect of necessity. Intellectually, however, this restrictive opinion is not inevitable: indeed we fail to see why it would be an imperfection for God to manifest Himself by necessity, while everyone admits that it is neither restrictive nor humiliating for Him to have qualities which He necessarily possesses; this we have already said, and do not hesitate to insist on it once more. Universal manifestation—creation—is nothing other than the gushing forth of a Divine Quality, and if necessity is in no wise imperfect but on the contrary signifies a perfection, this is precisely because manifestation, inasmuch as it is a divine quality, goes beyond the alternative "Creator-creature"; from this point of view, the world is "none other" than an aspect of *Atmä*. *Mäyä* is a divine aspect mysteriously projected towards a nothingness which by definition does not exist but which is always insinuated; *Mäyä is* this very insinuation, which goes out from Being to the smallest of privations and into the spatial vacuum. The duality "Creator and creature" is situated in *Mäyä*, *Atmä* alone transcends it.

To reply to the argument that creation must be "gratuitous" on pain of imputing "constraint" to God—as if gratuity did not have an aspect of infirmity and as if necessity did not have an aspect of perfection deriving from absoluity—we might express ourselves thus: God is unlimited, therefore He will express His unlimitedness; He is good, therefore He will manifest His goodness; He is powerful, therefore He will manifest His power; and this is why He creates the world.[10] Manifestation is not a constraint from outside—from a non-existent outside—but as it were a dimension of the Divine Nature, and it has as much right to be so considered as any other quality of God; and if we affirm

that God is One, we do not enquire if He is obliged to be so. Divine Necessity is free, and Divine Freedom is necessary; God is not limited by His Nature, and His Freedom cannot not be.

Like all Semitic theologians, Ash'ari conceives only the opposition between the created and the Creator, and not the participation—nonetheless necessary—of the first in the second: whence the negation, characteristic for Ash'arism, of secondary causes and natural laws. It is as if, in a textile, one could see only the warp and not the woof, a curiously fragmentary image of the cosmos, which overlooks a whole dimension of existence—that of cosmic or natural causality—and replaces it arbitrarily by God. We say "arbitrarily" because one could put God in the place of any other cosmic reality and deny the role of the Prophet on the pretext that God alone speaks, and not an intermediary. We could equally well maintain that only fruits are real, and that trees are non-existent, because God alone provides the fruits.[11]

* * *

To reply to the criticism of Averroës, Ghazali thinks it possible to defend the Ash'arite negation of secondary causes by putting in their place angels, by means of whom—or in whom—God causes physical burning; wasted effort, for if God can or must use angelic powers, or subtle substances, to bring about burning, then equally He can and must use physical substances or powers. "Must" means here, not "being forced" *ab extra*, but remaining within the logic of His own nature; for if we say that God cannot not be God, this in no wise means that He is "forced to be God", and so determined *ab extra*; *quod absit.*

If on the one hand there is opposition between Creator and creature, there is also, on the other, unity of Essence; this is what the exoteric point of view cannot grasp, incapable as it is both of admitting more than one relationship and of understanding the simultaneity of antinomic relationships. Consequently it admits only one relationship, the one most apparent and most opportune from the human point of view, and as this sole relationship is not sufficient to satisfy all the presentiments of our understanding, the gaps are filled with emotional sublimations, in which the very excessiveness of the image takes the place of profundity and mystery.

* * *

One of the characteristic features of the Semitic mind is the tendency to reduce things to simplifying and, all too readily, to moralizing alternatives; this tendency has its symbolic value and its efficacy, but it gives rise to many abuses. Theologians know, metaphorically speaking, that such and such an object is not white, and consequently conclude that it is black, as if this were the only choice; and if perfection be roundness, and they conceive of this exclusively in the form of a circle, they will declare that a sphere is not round because it is not a planimetric figure, and so on. We have here what is beyond doubt a general characteristic of the human mind inasmuch as it easily becomes the dupe of "points of view" and "aspects"—this is even necessary to one degree or another at the level of doctrinal formulation—but there is an essential difference between a limited starting-point which opens up horizons and a limiting concept which closes them in advance.

Alternativism, that is, the prejudice of seeing in every relative and therefore reconcilable opposition a fundamental and irreconcilable one that would force us spiritually and morally to a violent choice, induced the early rationalists of Islam (the Mu'tazilites) to see an incompatibility between the qualities of God and His unity; from this there resulted a tendency, either to deny the diversity of these qualities, or even to deny them altogether. There was the same alternative, for the Mu'tazilites, between Justice and Predestination, and the same incapacity for seeing that here are two faces of a single reality, or two different relationships. The inability to reconcile the pure spirituality of God—or His "non-materiality"—with the possibility of a beatific vision stems from the same intellectual limitation.

Ash'arism reacted against the rationalism of the Mu'tazilites but without being able to overcome the tendency towards alternativism or, generally speaking, towards a certain lack of the sense of relativity, which means that it did not get beyond either the impassioned logic so characteristic of exoterism or the equally characteristic anthropomorphist voluntarism with all its simplifications. This is clear from the incapacity of the Ash'arites, and before them of the Hanbalites, for reconciling relative or cosmic causality with absolute or divine causality and in their violent and stubborn option for the second at the expense of the first, on the pretext that it is "hypocrisy" (*nifaq*) to admit ordinary causality—the laws of nature, for example—because this would be to "associate" (*ashraka*) and "aid" (wait) with God, of whom He has no need and whose existence is impossible since God is One; as if earthly causality, which merely reflects divine causality, could prevent it from being what it is, and from acting simultaneously with the appearance of physical causation! Such simplifications are the penalty paid for a doctrine destined to teach us about God but containing only what the most elementary and least inspired reason can grasp; whence the paradox of a wisdom that has to force metaphysical truths into the mould of a mentality that is incapable of containing them.

* * *

There is unquestionably a certain spiritual beauty in the fact of admitting, when one sees the effect of a fire, that God alone accomplishes the marvel or miracle of burning; or in admitting, when one grasps an object, that this force of movement can only come from God who alone is powerful—in remembering, that is, in this way and on every occasion that "there is no god but God"; but one would prefer that these were spontaneous acts of awareness, limited to the particular relationship which they perceive, and not the applications of a scholasticism which violates the natural evidence of things and consequently violates common sense.

The inability to understand the notion of *Maya—which* is basically that of relativity and of the infinitely varied play of relationships between the relative and the absolute—may either be fundamental or accidental; if accidental, it may result either from the ambiance or else from a spiritual vocation which preceded the doctrinal reflexion and which determines it in the direction of an emotional mysticism or, let us say, a systematic *bhakti*. But it may also be the result of a simple difficulty of expression or of a concern for religious psychology, and in these two cases it is merely apparent; it none the less enters into the destiny of those concerned, doubtless not as an "incapacity", but as an "absence" of a complete or fully conscious understanding. One finds in fact in

theologians ideas which prove that they are capable of understanding such and such a truth which they deny, or that they understand it indirectly or virtually, or that they could accept it if it were given to them to approach it in a completely different way; in a word, the rejection of a notion may be the result of ambiance, vocation, or destiny; the accent is then not on intellectual intuition, but on fervour with a view to realization. It must not be forgotten that in the case of some individuals a particular truth might have the effect of neutralizing this fervour, while in the case of others it would stimulate it; there are spiritual jets which have need of narrowness and which instinctively refuse certain forms of expansion for that very reason. It is thus by no means exclusively a question of a more or less ample or profound truth, but also of spiritual economy, and of the balance of energies.

What we have just said allows us to specify further that there is a common link between religious exoterism and the systematic way of love, that is, of a bhaktism which is both limiting and explosive: certainties of a transcendent nature, or those which for any reason engage the whole man, act on the sensibility and provoke enthusiasm; the latter concentrates itself on a single point, neglecting or rejecting all the rest, and it is for this reason that the elephant—if one may have recourse to an Eastern metaphor—is identified by some blind men with the trunk and by others with the tusks, and so on; this simplifying concentration is all the stronger in that at the point of view in question, man is will, and truth is what is capable of determining the will in a spiritual direction. Certainly, every truth determines the will in one fashion or another, but it is the emphasis that counts here; a will integrated in the contemplation of the truth is one thing, and a notion of the truth narrowed to suit the needs of a volitive nature is another. There are souls which present a curious mixture of contemplativity and impulsivity; profound intuitions unleash violent exteriorizations which are one-sided by reason of their very violence; such souls find a compensation in a sort of "rationalism" which tends to codify both the contemplation and the impulsions.

* * *

We have shown—such at least was our intention—how only the idea of *Maya* permits the combination of the two causalities: physical causality, which is "horizontal", and metaphysical causality, which is "vertical", in the absence of this idea, one must skip the intervening stages, that is, sacrifice the dimension which causes difficulty. Herein is the meaning of the Buddhist *upaya,* the "saving means" which is itself illusory: a spiritually effective "absurdity" is a mercy, and it is its very efficacy that here stands in the place of truth; in fact, a notion which for any reason leads to the truth is virtually true, which amounts to saying that, contrariwise, truths that are too elevated may in fact concretely become errors in the consciousness of the too earthly or too passionate man. Let us note here that the idea of *upaya* essentially implies the ideas of "aspect" and "standpoint" ; it means that every formulation derives objectively from "aspect" and subjectively from "standpoint"; this is also stated by the introductory sentence of the Tao-Te-King: "The Name that can be named is not the true Name".

In order to put the Ash'arite mentality in its rightful place, we must therefore take account of the fact, paradoxical in some respects, that it largely coincides with the point of view of love, in the sense, not of *bhakti* in itself, but of its doctrinal systematization.

The protagonists of Vishnuism, whose sanctity is obviously no more in question than that of the great spokesmen of *kalam,* see fit to assert against the *Mâyâ* of Shankara that souls, like the physical world, are real—something that Shankara never denied, for the notion of *Mâyâ* does not contradict relative reality, it merely annuls it at the level of Absolute Reality; now it is precisely this spirit of alternatives, this inability to reconcile apparent antinomies on a higher plane and the incomprehension of relativity and absoluteness, which are common to Semitic exoterism and Hindu bhaktism. The great Vaishnavas—especially Madhva with his abrupt dualism *(dvaitavâda)—only* conceive of Being as Creator and not of the unqualified Essence, because their ontological "positivism" cannot reconcile two levels of reality, one of which annuls or in a certain way absorbs the other, precisely without preventing the other from remaining fully real at its own point of view. This "positivism" cannot admit a reality woven of relativities and as it were transparent and fluid because, being above all operative and emotional, it has need of solid bases—according to its way of looking at things—it has need of simple and definitive distinctions; a simplicity which, given the complexity of Reality, becomes crudity wherever it does not truly apply.

Every religious exoterism is will-centered (and so moralistic) and in its fashion depreciates intelligence; bhaktism does the same. For Ramanuja, gnosis *(jnana)* cannot be more than mere mental meditation on the divine perfections, which has obviously nothing to do with Deliverance. It is moreover significant that bhaktism feels itself obliged to reduce the divinities (the personified "divine aspects" of the Hindu pantheon) to mere creatures: its spirit of alternatives prevents it from reconciling these aspects with the one personal God of which it has need.

If we look for a prime mover in Ash'arism, it is the wish to relate everything, absolutely everything, to the Divine Cause alone: this means denying all cosmic or "horizontal" relationships in favour of "vertical" or ontological relationships only, as if the first were incompatible with the second and as if the "horizontal" relationships were not, on the contrary, the necessary images of the "vertical" relationships and invested with the same right to existence as the things to which they relate.

* * *

The Near-Easterner of earlier times is unquestionably a man of impulse: at the touch of the spur of some certainty, be it real or illusory, he will leap, superlativize and isolate; these are three characteristics that come easily to the combative temperament, for the warrior must charge: without exaggerating he would not conquer, and without isolating he would let himself be distracted. When we come across an apparently absurd theological idea—and one that is in fact absurd at the level of expression—we must strive to disentangle these three factors, leaping, isolation and exaggeration, and reach the cause of the phenomenon, namely an intellectual or mystical bedazzlement in response to some aspect of the Real. A classical example of such extravagance as the price of profundity is the following reasoning:

The man who loves God must not desire to go to Paradise since God would perhaps prefer to put him in hell. As if God did not wish Paradise for those who love Him, and as if, for this very reason, He did not wish man to have the same wish! Certainly man may abstain from every eschatological desire by reason of contemplating the Immutable, but

in this case he remains humanly neutral; he does not mix his individual sentiments with the affairs of the Absolute nor does he express his metaphysical neutrality by human absurdities; no one ever dreamt of committing suicide for the simple reason that in the eyes of the Absolute man is a nothingness.

To much the same category belongs the well-known Sufi saying: "Paradise is the prison of the sage *(`ârif)*"; the meaning is not hard to divine: no created thing could possibly constitute the bliss of those who have grasped the Untreated, or who have been grasped by it, but in reality Paradise is so constituted that it is a prison for no one; the outward form of this expression has absolutely no connection with the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the celestial states. We might note, while we are on this subject, that the sentimentalist cult of suffering in Catholicism gives rise to entirely analogous excesses[12]: a mystic has said that the angels envy earthly men for being able to suffer for the love of God—which would justify the question: whether the Christian saints regret being in heaven and unable to suffer any longer; if yes, in what does the bliss promised to the elect consist? As in analogous Islamic formulations, there are two aspects to be taken into consideration: firstly, the objective aspect of absurdity which the pure and simple truth does not allow us to pass over, and secondly the subjective aspect of "zeal for the house of the Lord", which the love of God obliges us to discern without hesitation.

Arab thought, in certain sectors at least, is above all an act; it seems that the more spiritual (and in consequence the more prone to inspirations) it is, the more it tends to erupt and to isolate; it will thus easily take on an appearance of impulsivity and discontinuity, and to understand it we have to ponder over its expressions, not necessarily on account of long-drawn-out arguments, but more probably on account of underlying intentions that are more or less isolated from one another. Moreover, the aim of the exaggeration which isolates (that is, which violates the logic of a context that in fact has been lost sight of) is to make sure on the one hand that the image will stand out clearly and on the other that the discourse will be effective; the European is rather insensitive to this dialectic, and the result is an immense gap between the two mentalities which is both regrettable and providential.[13]

At the heart of Moslem obedientialism there is the profound truth—already indicated by the term *islam* ("abandon")—that man is fundamentally happy only in obedience, from the fact that he is a fragment, or rather a "fragmentary totality", and consequently does not have his final end within him. But in order to produce its full effect, that is, in order that obedience may be compounded of certainty and appeasement, it is necessary for its motive to be intelligible, for whoever says "faith", says "confidence", and man cannot submit really and with happiness to the unintelligible and the absurd; it is precisely this that is forgotten by the theologians who tend to reduce metaphysics to a sort of system of morals, thereby running the risk of robbing their moral concern of its whole basis. But it is necessary to reserve for human nature a certain right to error within the framework of truth, and it is because of this—since man rarely has the gift of being complete in every dimension of the spirit—that "divergence amongst the doctors of the Law is a blessing".

Logical "isolationism" or "fragmentarism", to which we referred above, has the grave disadvantage of not satisfying the whole mind when it ought to be satisfied: one makes unilateral affirmations the limits of which are nevertheless known, and one proves that

one knows them by making elsewhere directly opposite affirmations. For example when Ghazali reckons that: "to listen to the voice of a bird and to look at the greenness of a landscape means a twofold privation in the next life", it is impossible to allow that he was ignorant of the root of the question, which is that everything depends on our attitude, that is, whether it be one of passionate attachment or contemplative non-attachment and indeed he suggests this crucial truth in his considerations on gnosis, which consists in seeing God everywhere and everything in God, and on equilibrium, which consists in avoiding extremes[14]; or again, if in one passage, the same author expresses himself like the most limited Ash'arite, by declaring without more ado that God is the cause of both good and evil, he explains in another passage—most judiciously this time—that God "wills the good inasmuch as it is good, but that He wills evil, not inasmuch as evil, but in view of the good that it comprises, the evil being accidental and the good essential". In spite of his all too ostentatious solidarity with Ash'arite *kalâm,* Ghazali does not forget to say that "God does not disappoint the hopes of whoever loves Him"; this should have been said alongside the brutal and troubling paradoxes of conventional omnipotentialism. Finally, Ghazalī has the merit of emphasizing, against the opinion of the most dryly obedientalist theologians, that man cannot "love by obedience, as this is rather the consequence and the fruit of love, love itself being in the first place; this is what one would like to have heard *a priori,* in keeping with the Koranic verse on the pre-excellence of Mercy.

One might perhaps find fault with this article for the same fragmentarism by pointing out passages by the authors criticized which it has not taken into account, but this has no connection with its purpose; for it is one thing to criticize authors while not knowing certain passages in their works—and they deserve such criticism precisely because of their defect of fragmentarism—and another to present weighty truths in a fragmentary manner which inevitably leads to confusion. Ash`ari defended himself by demanding that, in order to judge him, it was necessary to have read him completely; which is no excuse, for one cannot logically demand the acceptance of an absurd idea because of what one will write the next day, *Deo volente,* or because of what one has written in another volume; *hic Rhodus, hic salta.*

* * *

The great weakness of the protagonists of *kalam is to* apply anthropomorphism to what in God most completely eludes this process, namely, Beyond-Being or the supra-ontological Essence, and to confuse Beyond-Being with its ontological self-determination, namely, Being, which creates, reveals and saves. It is the confusion, in the absence of the notion of *Mâyâ,* of two totally different divine subjectivities, the first corresponding to *Paramâtma* and the second of *Ishvara* or even to *Buddhi,* according to the degree envisaged; and it is this lamentable confusion that constitutes the characteristic infirmity of Ash`arism in particular and of *kalam* in general, or even of all doctrinal exoterism, to one degree or other.

According to Ibn `Arabi, the meaning of sin is that God orders a legal or a virtuous action, but may not wish its realization, or that he wishes a forbidden action to happen, but prohibits *a priori* his servant from accomplishing *it*[15]; a typically Ash'arite

formulation, for the divine Subject is here double, the "God" who orders an act being in no wise the same Subject as the "God" who does not "wish" the realization of this act. An anthropomorphic *Paramâtma* is something monstrous, and all speculations based on it are bad metaphysics; for example, speculations such as those that seek to show that Iblis, by violating the command of God, nevertheless obeyed the "Divine Will"; once again, this anthropomorphist concept of "Divine Will", which comprises realities that are in some respects antinomial, makes an intolerable mixture of the ontological and the moral, the absolute and the human; in a word, it amounts to putting a Divine Quality in the place of God. Moreover, the error in question cannot simply be reduced to the anthropomorphist confusion of Beyond-Being and Being, it implies equally and by the same token the confusion of Pure Being with the determinative and existence-generating Qualities, which here too amounts to a mixing of two universal Subjectivities that are in fact different, always without prejudice to their essential unity.[16] This whole problem—like the corresponding problems in Christianity that result from the trinitarian dogma—shows that it is impossible to practise integral metaphysics on the basis of axioms treated apart from the key-notion of *Mäyä*.

The early Moslems necessarily had at their disposal an intrinsically sufficient doctrine, although in fact insufficient with regard to heresies that were to arise later on; witness this saying of Hasan ibn `All: "One does not obey God by compulsion, and one does not disobey Him under the sway of an irresistible force; He has not left His servant completely without initiative in His Kingdom"; witness also this perfect formulation of Kalâbâdhi: "By freewill we mean that God has created in us a free will, and this is why there is no question of compulsion in our conforming (*tafwid*) to God". This the theologians would not deny, but they abolish it all the same, in fact if not in intention, by a heavy and simplifying determinism.

The "Supreme Subject", Beyond-Being, *Alma* or *Paramatmä*, cannot "will" cosmic manifestation; being able to will only Himself, His absence of creative will must manifest itself in some fashion even within creation—the latter being willed by the creative Hypostasis of *Atma* —and this is a mysterious cause of what we call evil; the creative and conservative "will" of Being vehicles in a subtle and mysterious manner the negative "indifference" of Beyond-Being.[17] The other causes of evil are those which we have indicated on more than one occasion, namely the separation of the world with regard to Being, and also the balance-restoring function of evil, or simply of limitative reality, whatever be its mode or degree.

There are two fundamental errors in the formulations of the voluntaristic theologians and philosophers: firstly, the attribution to a single Divine Subject (in fact humanized) of cosmic effects which in reality are related to different universal Sources, inasmuch as the Divine Functions are not Substance or Being, and inasmuch as Being is not Beyond Being; secondly the use of the word "will" for causes only some of which will allow of this anthropomorphic analogy. It is true that the Koran uses symbolisms that seem to allow all the simplifications in question; but theology is supposed to be a commentary, and a commentary is there, precisely, to explain and clarify things, not to complicate them or make them intellectually unintelligible and morally unacceptable.

Even the most narrowly unitarian Moslem is obliged to admit that the Divine Quality called "Merciful" is not the same as the one called "Avenger", he must also admit that the

Qualities are not the same thing as Essence. God "wills" the virtuous action, since he commands it, while at the same time "willing" sin, since sin is committed and nothing happens without the "Will" of God; but the metaphysical cause of sin is different from that of the Divine Command. On the one hand there is for everyone a Divine Will which commands the good; on the other there is, for the world, a Divine Will connected with a certain cosmologically inevitable or necessary quantity of evil; and there is for everyone the freedom to appropriate to himself this or that Universal Will by choosing either good or evil[18]; finally, there is Divine Foreknowledge of the choice that man will make thanks to the freedom that God has bestowed on him in the shape of relative participation—but real on its own level—in absolute Freedom. And it is only through this and in this that man makes himself completely free: the choice of the good is the choice of Freedom.

There is a truth which philosophers are prone to ignore either through unawareness, or else by prejudice and on principle: a formulation does not exist to exhaust the reality it expresses, it exists in order to provide a key towards the realization of that reality; the spiritual passage from the formulation to the reality is always discontinuous—it is like a leap into the void just as there is no common measure between the most perfect geometrical figure and the reality—which cannot be grasped graphically—of total space.

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We have already referred to the fact that theology does not have and cannot have the same function or the same dignity in Islam as in Christianity. Whereas in Christianity it has majestic prototypes in the Gospel of St. John and in the Epistles, followed by venerable models in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, including Denys the Areopagite, and whereas on this foundation it gave rise to the great scholastics and, in the East, to the Palamitic doctrine, in Islam theology has no sacred prototype. Neither the Koran nor the Sunnah contain any such thing, and the first theological attempts, as we have seen, met with a categorical rejection on the part of the traditionalists, so that in fact the legitimacy of *kalam* remains open or at least is not absolutely settled; it would consequently be unjust to wish to compare the two theologies—the Christian and the Moslem—given that their respective roles are by no means equivalent except in a completely extrinsic respect. What in Islam corresponds best to Christian theology are the four orthodox ritual schools; but while one cannot be a Catholic without being a Thomist[19], at least under normal conditions, one can easily be a Malikite or other Moslem without accepting in the very least all the Ash'arite theses, except of course those which clearly coincide with the unanimously recognized sense of the tradition.

In other words: theology in Islam is rather what Aristotelianism is in Christianity; Islam however is more theological than Christianity is Aristotelian. Theology is a normal and vital element in Christianity, which it scarcely is in Islam, where it even has an appearance of innovation" (*bida'*), therefore something either blameworthy (*makrüh*), *or* illicit (*haram*). This last position is that of Hanbalism; and yet it is from Hanbalism that Ash'arism inherited its most questionable theses.

We must mention here certain merits which greatly contributed to the success of Ash'arī in the Sunnite world. Firstly, he safeguarded, against the extremists of the literal tradition (*naql*), the rights of interpretive intelligence, but without minimizing those of

Revelation, whereas before him the religion seemed to know only extremes—which does not however imply any shortcomings on the part of anti-rationalist traditionalism in so far as it might coincide with Sufism. Further, Ash`ari successfully established the right definition of the Koran: according to him it was a message that was both created and uncreated; likewise, as regards human liberty, he defined it in a way which was acceptable from the theological point of view, safeguarding both divine determination and human responsibility. All this, along with that hymn of exaltation, his omnipotentialist doctrine, will suffice to explain why Ash`ari's thought became the bulwark, not of Islam, but of Sunni exoterism; it is important to insist on this reservation, for Islam as such is to be found only in Revelation and the divine Institutions on the one hand and in the Gnosis of the Sufis on the other.

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A point that we should like to stress further in this context is the following : in questions of religion and spirituality, the reasoning of the Semites appears to be determined—not exclusively but much more readily than that of the Greeks and Hindus—by the wish to communicate an illuminating shock or a moral emotion: the reasoning may be based on a dogmatic, intellectual or mystical certitude, but the function of the logical operation is only to communicate and reinforce the evidence; compared with a dialectic bent on doing justice to the nature of things, it is not impartial; logic has ceased to be anything more than an extrinsic factor—hence the weakness of certain reasonings of the Sufis themselves. The nature of things is perceived in the fundamental idea, whether this be explicit or implicit, but it is not necessarily followed up in the "landmarks" which the reason sees fit to supply; in saying this, we are aware of entering an extremely subtle sphere in which definitions are always hazardous, but the nature of the problem leaves us no choice ; there are things one can only express imperfectly but which nevertheless cannot be passed over in silence, without leaving unsatisfied an imperious logical need.

It is perhaps fitting to distinguish between a static thought, nearer to the Aryan genius, and a dynamic thought, nearer to the Semitic genius; and in order to understand the most paradoxical of the Semitic expressions, it is necessary to understand clearly the nature of this dynamism. By "Semitic" is also meant, by extension, Aryans Semiticized by their respective religions, such as the Europeans and the Irano-Indians, although in these groups Aryan mentality can coexist with Semitic mentality, this being most unquestionably so in the case of the Christianized Westerners, in whom there is sometimes, in this connection, a veritable schism, pagan antiquity never having been completely eliminated by Christianity. Humanity being one, these two modes of thought—the static and the dynamic—may be found everywhere; but they are none the less characteristic, respectively, of the two great groups of white humanity, albeit only relatively so, inasmuch as the Semites themselves were partially Hellenized.

Aryan thought is—or seeks to be—a recording of the nature of things; Semitic thought presents itself rather as an act, a process of transmission and persuasion, it seeks to be effective and saving, and it is right in the sense that the truth is well transmitted only when it takes hold of the man who receives it. In the origin—in the "Golden Age"

—the truth pure and simple was saving by itself, and this to a certain extent is the point of view of Platonism[20]; later it was necessary to reveal the aspect most appropriate to its saving effect, it was thus necessary to clothe it in an argument efficacious for certain mentalities, and this is what the Semitic religions have done. All the same, the fundamental enunciations of the religions remain outside these categories: the Christ-given idea "God descended so that man might rise", or the Islamic idea that "there is no god but God", while being Semitic in certain of their aspects, have at the same time a universal character that is open to every possibility of the spirit.

An example of what we mean by the Semitic spirit is provided—at the level of Revelation itself—by the characteristic notions of a heaven and a hell that are both eternal: certainly, this is objective information in the sense that the elect are once and for all in the Divine Grace (since the apocatastasis abolishes nothing that is positive, while transmuting the accidental) and the damned will never return to the human state, a definitive exclusion which, like the definitive inclusion, may be expressed by means of the notion of eternity[21]. But what is important above all is the moral and spiritual effect of the dogma: man is confronted with definitive realities, and it is precisely the definitive character that reveals the cosmic and divine reality that awaits us, whatever may be its modalities in the shorter or longer term. It is this innate point of view —this precedence of effective eschatology over what is objectively exact in the immediate sense—that explains, and excuses if necessary, the excesses of a theology more concerned with saving efficacy than with intellectual exactness.[22] In dogmatic formulations, whether at the level of Revelation or at that of theology, it is always necessary to sacrifice the interest of those whose spiritual dissatisfaction offers the least inconvenience: thus, the idea of Divine Mercy attracts the naturally contemplative man towards God, but it runs the risk of leaving the passional man in his sin; doctrine will choose to avoid this risk rather than seek out the contemplative who in any event is detached from the world, by his very nature; the spirit of the contemplative sees through phenomena, and he is such that the world withdraws itself from him.

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As regards our reservations concerning Ash'arism, the basis of the problem is the question of the evil that is "willed" by God; we should like once more, for the sake of clarity, to summarize the problem in a few words. From the point of view of Divine Subjectivity, the Will that wishes evil is not the same as the one that wishes good; from the point of view of the cosmic object, God does not wish evil as evil, but as a constituent element of a good; He therefore wishes it as a good. Furthermore, evil is never such by its existential substance which, by definition, is willed by God; it is evil only by the cosmic accident of a privation of good, willed by God as an indirect element in a greater good. If we are reproached for introducing a duality into God, we admit this without hesitation—but not as a reproach just as we admit all differentiations within the Divinity, whether it be a question of hypostatic degrees or of qualities, or of energies; the very existence of polytheism confirms our point of view, quite apart from any aspect of deviation and paganization that it may come to have.[23] At all events it is important to distinguish between the Divine Will in regard to existence, and the Divine Will in regard to man, who is intelligence and will: in the first case, everything that exists or happens is willed by God; in the second, only truth and good are divinely willed.

In the face of such an ambiguous intellectual phenomenon as Ash'arism one cannot continue indefinitely weighing the *pro* and the *contra*; one must resign oneself to a conclusion which is at least approximate. We come back here to an argument which we used earlier, namely, that every opinion intended to proclaim the absoluity of the One or to serve in any way the cause of God (granted that this be within a context of traditional orthodoxy), compensates by this very fact for its possible imperfections, on condition, always, that it does not have a contrary effect in a given milieu; but even in this case, such an opinion would be morally excusable. The same is true for men: we must excuse their limits and their weaknesses not according to our love for them, but according to their love for God.

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[1] The Shaikh al- ‘Alawi remarked, on the contrary, that "the men most removed from their Lord are those who most exaggerate His unknowability", that is, His *tanzih* ("incomparability"), by reason of which nothing is like him. "What is important", the Shaikh also said, "is not to exaggerate 'incomparability'(tanzih), but to know God by means of `analogy' *(tashbih)*.... Comparison, along with the certitude of Unity, is worth more than abstraction, along with the veiling of Unity."

[2] ‘Ali al-Ash‘ari, celebrated theologian of the 10th century, founder of Moslem scholasticism *(kalâm).* It must be mentioned right away that, whereas in Christianity dogmatic theology is identical with the message of the religion itself, it is not so in Islam, where theology is in principle a thing to be wary of, and consequently always has a more or less optional character.

[3] The founder of the fourth orthodox ritual school. The Ash'arites are in certain respects the heirs of Hanbalites, most paradoxically moreover since Hanbalism is the declared adversary of all interpretative speculation (*ta'wil*); but Ash'ari took care not to oppose any orthodox theses, including those of Ibn Hanbal.

[4] It goes without saying that the word "logic" is used here in a transposed, and not a rational, sense. Logic, as a positive discipline, necessarily reflects a quality of the Divine Intelligence.

[5] It has been said, in Islam as in Christianity, that evil derives from substances which do not accept the omnipresent Goodness; it remains to be seen why these sub-stances do not accept it. The reason is that these substances, although deriving ontologically from the Divine Good, are required—in virtue of cosmic equilibrium and the rhythms it implies—to manifest separation from the Principle and thus a sort of nothingness; bad in their privative particularity, these substances are nevertheless good through their cosmic function, which is necessary in view of a total good, namely Universal Manifestation.

[6] Let us note in passing that the epithet "philosopher"—in a limitative and figurative sense—may not be applied without reservation to such minds as Fârabi and Avicenna, as *they* were largely Neoplatonists, in spite of the Aristotelian nature of their dialectical discipline. And let us note too in this connection that the role of the sage is not—according to the radical error of Westerners—and to explain things from zero and to construct a system, but firstly to "see" and secondly to "cause to see", that is, to provide a key, so that it is absurd to accuse Platonists of "constructing" a theory of knowledge on the basis of a world picture which already presupposes such a theory.

[7] Ash'ari, Ghazali and Ibn `Arabi are, in general terms, the three landmarks of Sunni Islam, leaving out of account the founders of the four orthodox ritual schools: Abu Hanifah, Malik, Shafi'i and Ibn Hanbal. Ash'ari, previously a Mu'tazilite, presented orthodoxy in a philosophical and scholastic form; Ghaza1i rendered this scholasticism more supple and profound and assured Sufism an unquestioned and henceforth unquestionable place in the general orthodoxy; Ibn `Arabi attached himself to the explicit formulation of the doctrine—essentially inherent in Koranic monism—of the non-duality of the integral Real and of the essence of Merciful Love *(Rahmah)* of this Real (this essence also being proclaimed by the Koran) and he thus demonstrated the absoluity and universality of Mohammed's message. And it is precisely this quasi-definition of Unity as *Rahmah* which the protagonists of omnipotentialism are so willing to forget.

[8] This type of reasoning is used especially to deny the validity of other religions: one attributes an absolute significance to one's own axioms without realizing that, while they assuredly are intrinsically true, they nevertheless only pertain to a "point of view" or "aspect".

[9] The early Moslems did not hesitate to declare theological speculation "illicit" *(haram). "If* men knew to what extent theology comprises evil passions, they would flee it like a lion", declared Shafi`i, and this was

also the sentiment of the three other founders of ritual schools *(madhhab).*

[10] According to St. Thomas, "every power manifests itself by its effect, for otherwise it would be vain". He likewise says that "whatever implies contradiction is not comprised in Divine All-Possibility, because that is outside the notion of the possible" *(Summa, Qu.* XXV, Art. 2. and 3. This answers the abusive speculations on the unlimitedness of what is possible to God; such speculations tend to attribute incoherence to the Divinity' for the sake of a pointless glorification.

[11] This theory of causality was dealt with in our book *The Stations of Wisdom, in the* chapter entitled *Nature and Arguments of Faith.*

[12] We do not criticize this cult which is the subjective means of a certain type of mysticism, but we reject any doctrine that presents it as the sole truth and the only means of attaining to God.

[13] To these difficulties may be added another, namely the fact that the Arabs, with their linguistic narcissism, so to speak, are sometimes more preoccupied with semantics than logic, in the sense that a verbal meaning, even indirect or conjectural, can take the place of an argument, sometimes in the very teeth of the evidence.

[14] It is to say the least that a man who admits metaphysical transparency for sexuality, forgets this transparency in the case of other phenomena no less symbolic; but it is possible that Ghazali has simply omitted to indicate a particular relationship—in keeping with the habit of Moslem writers—and that he wished to speak of the fact of "enclosing oneself " in a sensation and not of "passing through" it, given that a sensorial enjoyment constitutes either an "association" (of some-thing else with God, *shirk),* or an indirect experience of "unification" (between the soul and God, *tawhid)*; without this second possibility, there would be no sacred art, and even no calligraphy of the Koran.

[15] Ibn ‘Arabi distinguishes between an "existential commandment" *(amr takwini)* and a "circumstantial commandment" *(amr taklifi),* which necessitates the taking into consideration of an internal distinction in the Divinity, in so far as the respective objects of the two commandments are ontologically different, and therefore not capable of meeting in one and the same régime.

[16] This principle of the pluralization of the Divine Subject, or of a given hypostasis of this Subject, finds an application in the plurality of the law-giving Logos, whence the religions: when Heaven speaks to man, it personifies itself in function of the human receptacle or of a given possibility of formal expression, whence the apparent contradictions, not only from one religion to another, but sometimes also within the fold of one single religion, depending on its historical span.

[17] Jili opposed Ibn `Arabi—but with moderation—on the subject of AII-Possibility : whereas for Ibn `Arabi God created things, not by taking them out of inexistence, but by transferring them from Being-Intellect to Being-Existence, Jili maintains rightly that there is no antinomy here and that the transfer from one mode of Being to another takes place along with the *creatio ex nihilo*; in fact, if on the one hand existentiation is the projection—into the realm of contingency—of the archetypes contained in Being-Creator or Being-Prescience, Being in its turn is *Maya* in regard to the Supra-ontological Essence. Consequently Prescience too arises *ex nihilo,* only the Pure Absolute—Beyond-Being—being Reality as such and Pure All-Possibility. Being—the ontological Principle—is a "divine self-revelation" *(tajalli)* arising *ex nihilo* in regard to the Supra-ontological Essence *(Dhät).*

[18] This is what Ash'ari had the merit of teaching; he opposed the massive determinism of the *Jabriyah* with the doctrine of "appropriation" *(kasb* or *iktisâb)* of divine causations by man.

[19] Apart from the few Thomistic theses that the Church has not retained.

[20] Christian polemics against Platonism are characteristic in this respect; it is a dialogue between two different languages, one Semitic and the other Aryan. While Platonism in itself is obviously not a "wisdom according to the flesh", it can in fact be so in purely philosophic minds, in whose case the truth carries with it no obligations—apart from superficial and social ones—and it may seem so to religious minds of the Semitic kind, for which the truth must be clothed in forms that are aimed ultimately at man's will, forms that are intended not only to inform, but to capture.

[21] That is, the damned are excluded from Grace in so far as it concerns the human creature, but not from universal Grace which, outside the cosmic sector of man, may manifest itself in innumerable ways, independently of the final and apocatastatic reintegration which includes also, fundamentally transmuting them, the negative existences.

[22] In this realm of ideas one could mention the Mahâyânic wish to "save all living beings down to the last blade of grass", thus the idea that everything must "become Buddha"; this formulation, absurd as it is

humanly speaking, nevertheless contains a truth—as do all exoteric formulations—namely, the apocatastasis : the final reintegration of which Origen spoke. Likewise we might mention the ellipses of trinitarian theology, in which the one Divine Essence and the diversity of Persons give rise to a contradictory—but nevertheless symbolically revealing—accumulation, the intention clearly being to safeguard both Unity and Trinity which are both presented as real at the same level of reality, that of the Absolute.

[23] Original polytheism envisages Divinity both as *Atma* and in function of *Maya*; it is only pagan from the moment that it forgets *Atma* and attributes absoluity to diversity, and so to relativity.