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The Quintessential Esoterism of Islam

The Islamic religion is divided into three constituent parts: *Īmān*, Faith, which contains everything one must believe; *Islām*, the Law, which contains everything one must do; *Ihsān*,[1] operative Virtue, which confers upon believing and doing the qualities that make them perfect—in other words, that intensify or deepen both faith and works. *Ihsān*, in short, is the sincerity of the intelligence and the will: it is our complete adherence to the Truth and our total conformity to the Law, which means that we must on the one hand know the Truth entirely, not only in part, and on the other hand conform to it with our deepest being and not only with a partial and superficial will. Thus *Ihsān* opens onto esoterism—which is the science of the essential and total—and is even identified with it; for to be sincere is to draw from the Truth the maximal consequences from the point of view of both intelligence and will; in other words, it is to think and will with the heart, hence with our entire being, with all we are.

Ihsān is right believing and right doing, and it is at the same time their quintessence: the quintessence of right believing is metaphysical truth, *Haqīqah*, and that of right doing is the practice of invocation, *Dhikr*. *Ihsān* comprises as it were two modes, depending on its application: the speculative and the operative, namely, intellectual discernment and unitive concentration; in Sufi language this is expressed precisely by the terms *Haqīqah*[2] and *Dhikr* or by *Tawhīd*, "Unification", and *Ittihād*, "Union". For Sufis the "hypocrite" (*munāfiq*) is not merely someone who gives himself airs of piety in order to impress people, but it is the profane man in general, someone who fails to draw all the consequences implied in the Dogma and Law, hence the man who is not sincere since he is neither consequential nor whole;

[1] Literally *Ihsān* means "embellishment", "beautiful activity", "right doing", "charitable activity"; and let us recall the relationship that exists in Arabic between the notions of beauty and virtue.

[2] It is to be noted that in the word *haqīqah*, as in its quasi-synonym *haqq*, the meanings "truth" and "reality" coincide.

now Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is nothing other than sincerity (*sidq*), and the "sincere" (*siddīqūn*) are none other than Sufis.

Ihsān, since it is necessarily an exoteric notion as well, may be interpreted at different levels and in different ways. Exoterically it is the faith of the fideists and the zeal of the ritualists; in this case it is intensity and not profundity and thus has something quantitative or horizontal in it when compared with wisdom. Esoterically one can distinguish in *Ihsān* two accentuations: that of *gnosis*, which implies doctrinal intellectuality, and that of love, which requires the totality of the volitive and emotive soul, the first mode operating with intellectual means—without however neglecting the supports that may be necessitated by human weakness—and the second with moral and sentimental means. It is in the nature of things that this love can exclude every element of intellection and that it can readily if not always do so—precisely to the extent it constitutes a way—whereas *gnosis* on the contrary always contains an element of love, doubtless not violent love but one akin to Beauty and Peace.

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Ihsān includes many ramifications, but it is obviously constituted most directly by quintessential esoterism. At first sight the expression "quintessential esoterism" looks like a pleonasm; is esoterism not quintessential by definition? It is indeed so "by right" but not necessarily "in fact", as is amply proven by the unequal and often disconcerting phenomenon of average Sufism. The principal pitfall of this spirituality—let it be said once again—is the fact that it treats metaphysics according to the categories of an anthropomorphist and voluntaristic theology and of an individualistic piety that is above all servile in character. Another pitfall, which goes hand in hand with the first, is the insistence on a certain hagiographic "mythology" and other preoccupations that enclose the intelligence and sensibility within the phenomenal order; finally there is the abuse of scriptural interpretations and metaphysico-mystical speculations, which are derived from an ill-defined and poorly disciplined inspirationism or from an esoterism that is in fact insufficiently conscious of its true nature.

An example of "moralizing metaphysics" is the confusion between a divine decree addressed to creatures endowed with free will and

the ontological possibility that determines the nature of a thing; as a result of this confusion one asserts that Satan, by disobeying God—or Pharaoh, by resisting Moses—obeyed God in that by disobeying they obeyed their archetype, hence the existentiating divine "will", and that they have been—or will be—pardoned for this reason. Now the ideas of "divine will" and "obedience" are being used here improperly, because in order for an ontological possibility to be a "will" or an "order" it must emanate from the legislating *Logos* as such, and in this case it is expressly concerned with free and therefore responsible creatures; and in order for the submission of a thing or a being to constitute an "obedience", it is clearly necessary for there to be a discerning consciousness and freedom, hence the possibility of not obeying. In the absence of this fundamental *distinguo* there is merely doctrinal confusion and misuse of language, as well as heresy from the legitimate point of view of theologians.

The general impression given by Sufi literature must not cause us to forget that there were many Sufis who left no writings and were strangers to the pitfalls we have just described; their influence has remained practically anonymous or blends with that of well-known individuals. Indeed it may be that certain minds instructed in the "vertical" way—which refers to the mysterious filiation of al-Khidr—and outside the requirements of a "horizontal" tradition shaped by an underlying theology and dialectical habits, may have voluntarily abstained from formulating their thought in such an environment, without this having prevented the radiance proper to every spiritual presence.

To describe known or what one may call literary Sufism in all its *de facto* complexity and paradoxes would require a whole book, whereas to give an account of the necessary and therefore concise character of Sufism, a few pages can suffice. "The Doctrine—and the Way—of Unity is unique" (*al-Tawhīdu wāhid*): this classic formula succinctly expresses the essentiality, primordiality, and universality of Islamic esoterism as well as esoterism as such; and we might even say that all wisdom—all *Advaita Vedānta* if one prefers—is contained for Islam within the *Shahādah* alone, the twofold Testimony of faith.

Before going further and in order to situate Islam within the totality of Monotheism, we wish to draw attention to the following: from the point of view of Islam, which is the religion—analogically and principially speaking—of the primordial and universal, Mosaism

appears as a kind of "petrifaction" and Christianity by contrast as a kind of "disequilibrium". Indeed Mosaism—every question of exaggeration or stylization notwithstanding—has the vocation of being the preserving ark of both the Abrahamic and Sinaitic heritage, the "ghetto" of the One and Invisible God, who speaks and acts, but who does so only for an Israel that is impenetrable and turned in on itself and that puts all the emphasis on the Covenant and obedience; whereas the sufficient reason for Christianity, at least with regard to its specific mode, is to be the incredible and explosive exception that breaks the continuity of the horizontal and exteriorizing stream of the human by a vertical and interiorizing irruption of the Divine, the entire emphasis being placed on sacramental life and penance. Islam, which professes to be Abrahamic, hence primordial, seeks to reconcile the oppositions within itself, just as the substance absorbs the accidents but without abolishing their qualities; by referring to Abraham and thereby to Noah and Adam, Islam seeks to restore the value of the immense treasure of pure Monotheism, whence its accentuation of Unity and faith; it frees and reanimates this Monotheism, the Israelization and Christification of which had actualized specific potentialities while dimming its substantial light. All the unshakable certitude and propulsive power of Islam are explained by this and cannot be explained otherwise.

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The first Testimony of faith (*Shahādah*) contains two parts, each of which is composed of two words: *lā ilāha* and *illā ʾLlāh*, "no divinity—except the (sole) Divinity". The first part, the "negation" (*nafy*), corresponds to universal Manifestation, which is illusory in relation to the Principle, whereas the second part, the "confirmation" (*ithbāt*), corresponds to the Principle, which is Reality and which in relation to Manifestation is alone real.

Nevertheless Manifestation possesses a relative reality without which it would be pure nothingness; in a complementary way there must be within the principial order an element of relativity without which this order could not be the cause of Manifestation, hence of what is relative by definition; this is visually expressed by the Taoist symbol of the *Yin-Yang*, which is an image of compensatory reciprocity.

This means that at a level below its Essence the Principle contains a prefiguration of Manifestation, which makes Manifestation possible; and Manifestation for its part contains in its center a reflection of the Principle, without which it would be independent of the Principle, which is inconceivable, relativity having no substantiality of its own.

The prefiguration of Manifestation in the Principle—the principial *Logos*—is represented in the *Shahādah* by the word *illā* ("except" or "if not"), whereas the name *Allāh* expresses the Principle in itself; and the reflection of the Principle—the manifested *Logos*—is represented in turn by the word *ilāha* ("divinity"), whereas the word *lā* ("there is no" or "no") refers to Manifestation as such, which is illusory in relation to the Principle and therefore cannot be envisaged outside it or separately from it.

This is the metaphysical and cosmological doctrine of the first Testimony, that of God (*lā ilāha illā ʾLlāh*). The doctrine of the second Testimony, that of the Prophet (*Muhammadun Rasūlu ʾLlāh*), refers to a Unity not exclusive this time but inclusive; it expresses not distinction but identity, not discernment but union, not transcendence but immanence, not the objective and macrocosmic discontinuity of the degrees of Reality but the subjective and microcosmic continuity of the one Consciousness. The second Testimony is not static and separative like the first, but dynamic and unitive.

Strictly speaking, the second Testimony—according to its quintessential interpretation—considers the Principle only in relation to three hypostatic aspects, namely: the manifested Principle (*Muhammad*), the manifesting Principle (*Rasūl*), and the Principle in itself (*Allāh*). The entire accent is placed on the intermediate element, *Rasūl*, "Messenger"; it is this element, the *Logos*, which links the manifested Principle to the Principle in itself. The *Logos* is the "Spirit" (*Rūh*), of which it has been said that it is neither created nor uncreated or again that it is manifested in relation to the Principle and non-manifested or principial in relation to Manifestation.

The word *Rasūl*, "Messenger", indicates a "descent" of God toward the world; it also implies an "ascent" of man toward God. In the case of the Muhammadan phenomenon, the descent is that of the Koranic Revelation (*laylat al-qadr*), and the ascent is that of the Prophet during the "Night Journey" (*laylat al-miʿrāj*); in the human microcosm, the descent is inspiration, and the ascent is aspiration; the descent is divine grace whereas the ascent is human effort, the content

of which is the "remembrance of God" (*dhikru ʾLlāh*), whence the name *Dhikruʾ Llāh* given to the Prophet.[3]

The three words *dhākir*, *dhikr*, *madhkūr*—a classic ternary in Sufism—correspond exactly to the ternary *Muhammad*, *Rasūl*, *Allāh*: *Muhammad* is the invoker, *Rasūl* the invocation, *Allāh* the invoked. In the invocation, the invoker and the One invoked meet, just as *Muhammad* and *Allāh* meet in *Rasūl* or in the *Risālah*, the Message.[4]

The microcosmic aspect of *Rasūl* explains the esoteric meaning of the "Blessing upon the Prophet" (*salāt ʿalāʾn-Nabī*), which contains on the one hand the "Blessing" properly so called (*Salāt*) and on the other hand "Peace" (*Salām*), the latter referring to the stabilizing, appeasing, and "horizontal" graces and the former to the transforming, vivifying, and "vertical" graces. Now the "Prophet" is the immanent universal Intellect, and the purpose of the formula is to awaken within us the Heart-Intellect in the twofold relationship of receptivity and enlightenment—of the Peace that extinguishes and the Life that regenerates, by God and in God.

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The first Testimony of faith, which refers *a priori* to transcendence, includes secondarily and necessarily a meaning according to immanence: in this case the word *illā*, "except" or "if not", means that every positive quality, every perfection, every beauty belongs to God or even "is" God in a certain sense, whence the divine Name "the Outward" (*al-Zāhir*), which is the complementary opposite of "the Inward" (*al- Bātin*).[5]

[3] Jacob's Ladder is an image of the *Logos*, with the angels descending and ascending, God appearing at the top of the ladder and Jacob remaining below.

[4] Another ascending ternary is that of *makhāfah*, *mahabbah*, *maʿrifah*: fear, love, knowledge—modes at once simultaneous and successive; we shall return to this later.

[5] This interpretation has given rise to the accusation of pantheism, wrongly of course since God cannot be reduced to outwardness, that is, since outwardness does not exclude inwardness any more than immanence excludes transcendence.

In a similar but inverse manner, the second Testimony, which refers *a priori* to immanence, includes secondarily and necessarily a meaning according to transcendence: in this case the word *Rasūl*, "Messenger", means that Manifestation—*Muhammad*—is but the trace of the Principle, *Allāh*, hence that Manifestation is not the Principle.

These underlying meanings must accompany the primary meanings because of the principle of compensatory reciprocity to which we referred when speaking of the first Testimony and with regard to which we mentioned the well-known symbol of *Yin-Yang*. For Manifestation is not the Principle while nonetheless being the Principle by participation because of its "non-inexistence"; and Manifestation—the word says as much—is the Principle manifested, but without being able to be the Principle in itself. The unitive truth of the second Testimony cannot be absent from the first Testimony any more than the separative truth of the first can be absent from the second.

And just as the first Testimony, which has above all a macrocosmic and objective meaning, necessarily includes a microcosmic and subjective meaning,[6] so the second Testimony, which has above all a microcosmic and subjective meaning, necessarily includes a macrocosmic and objective meaning.

The two Testimonies culminate in the word *Allāh*, which being their essence contains them and thereby transcends them. In the name *Allāh* the first syllable is short, contracted, absolute, whereas the second is long, dilated, infinite; it is thus that the Supreme Name contains these two mysteries, Absoluteness and Infinitude, and thereby also the extrinsic effect of their complementarity, Manifestation, as is indicated by this *hadīth qudsī*: "I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known; hence I created the world." Since absolute Reality includes intrinsically Goodness, Beauty, Beatitude (*Rahmah*) and since it is the Sovereign Good, it includes *ipso facto* the tendency

[6] An initiatic, or if one prefers "advaitic", meaning: "There is no subject ("me") except the sole Subject (the "Self")." It should be noted that Ramana Maharshi and Ramakrishna seem to have failed to recognize in their teachings the vital importance of the ritual and liturgical framework of the way, whereas neither the great Vedantists nor the Sufis ever lost sight of it.

to communicate itself, hence to radiate; this is the Absolute's aspect of Infinity, and it is this aspect that projects Possibility, Being, whence spring forth the world, things, creatures.

The Name *Muhammad* is that of the *Logos*, which is situated between the Principle and Manifestation or between God and the world. Now the *Logos* is on the one hand prefigured in the Principle, which is expressed by the word *illā* in the first *Shahādah*, and on the other hand projects itself into Manifestation, which is expressed by the word *ilāha* in the same formula. In the Name *Muhammad* the whole accent and all the fulgurating power are situated at the center between two short syllables, one initial and one final, without which this accentuation would not be possible; it is the sonorous image of the victorious Manifestation of the One.

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According to the school of *Wujūdiyah*,[7] to say that "there is no divinity (*ilāha*) if not the (sole) Divinity (*Allāh*)" means that there is only God, that as a consequence everything is God, and that it is we creatures who see a multiple world where there is only one Reality; the question that remains is why creatures see the One in multiple mode and why God Himself, insofar as He creates, legislates, and judges, sees the multiple and not the One. The correct answer is that multiplicity is objective as well as subjective—the cause of diversifying contingency being in each of the two poles of perception—and that multiplicity or diversity is in reality a subdivision, not of the divine Principle of course, but of its manifesting projection, which is existential and universal Substance. Diversity or plurality is therefore not opposed to Unity; it is within it and not alongside it. Multiplicity as such is the outward aspect of the world; but it is necessary to look at phenomena according to their inward reality, hence as a diversified and diversifying projection of the One. The metacosmic cause of the

[7] The ontological monism of Ibn Arabi. It should be noted that even in Islam this school does not have a monopoly on unitive metaphysics despite the prestige of its founder.

phenomenon of multiplicity is All-Possibility, which coincides by definition with the Infinite, the latter being an intrinsic characteristic of the Absolute. The divine Principle, being the Sovereign Good, tends by this very fact to radiate, hence to communicate itself—to project or make explicit all the "possibilities of the Possible".

To say radiation is to say increasing distance, hence progressive weakening or darkening, which explains the privative—and finally subversive—phenomenon of what we call evil; we speak of it thus for good reason and in conformity with its nature and not because of a particular, even arbitrary, point of view. But evil must have a positive function in the economy of the universe or else it would not be possible, and this function is twofold: first of all there is contrasting manifestation, that is, the highlighting of the good by means of its opposite, for to distinguish a good from an evil is a way of understanding better the nature of the good;[8] then there is transitory collaboration, which means that it is also the role of evil to contribute to the realization of the good.[9] It is in any case absurd to assert that evil is a good because it is "willed by God" and because God can will only the good; evil always remains evil in relation to the privative or subversive character that defines it, but it is indirectly a good by virtue of the following factors: by existence, which detaches it so to speak from nothingness and causes it to participate, with everything that exists, in the divine Reality, the only one there is; by superimposed qualities or faculties, which as such always retain their positive character; and finally, as we have said, by its contrasting function with regard to the good and its indirect collaboration in the realization of the good.

[8] At first sight one might think that this highlighting is a merely circumstantial and therefore secondary factor, but this is not the case, for it is a question here of the quasi-principial opposition of phenomena—or categories of phenomena—and not of accidental confrontations. Qualitative "contrasting" is indeed a cosmic principle and not a question of encounters or comparisons.

[9] Evil in its aspect of suffering contributes to the unfolding of Mercy, which in order to be plenary must be able to save in the fullest meaning of this word; in other words divine Love in its dimension of unlimited compassion implies evil in its dimension of unfathomable misery; to this the Psalms and the Book of Job bear witness, and to this the final and quasi-absolute solution is the *Apocatastasis*, which reintegrates everything in the Sovereign Good.

To consider evil in relation to cosmogonic Causality is at the same stroke and *a priori* to consider it in relation to universal Possibility: if manifesting Radiation is necessarily prefigured in the divine Being, the privative consequences of this Radiation must be so in a certain manner as well, not as such of course but as "punitive" functions—morally speaking—pertaining essentially to Power and Rigor and thus making manifest the "negation" (*nafy*) of the *Shahādah*, namely, the exclusiveness of the Absolute. These functions are expressed by the divine Names of Wrath, such as "He who contracts, tightens, tears away" (*al-Qabid*), "He who avenges" (*al-Muntaqim*), "He who injures" (*al-Darr*), and several others;[10] these are altogether extrinsic functions, for "Verily, my Mercy (*Rahmah*) precedeth my Wrath (*Ghadab*)", as is declared by the inscription on the throne of *Allāh*: "precedeth", hence "takes precedence over" and in the final analysis "annuls". Moreover the wrathful functions are reflected in creatures in just the same way as the generous ones, whether positively by analogy or negatively by opposition; for holy anger is something other than hatred, just as noble love is something other than blind passion.

We shall add that the function of evil is to permit or introduce the manifestation of divine Anger, which means that this Anger in a certain way creates evil for the sake of its own ontologically necessary manifestation: if there is universal Radiation, there is by virtue of the same necessity both the phenomenon of evil and the manifestation of Rigor, and then the victory of the Good, hence the eminently compensatory manifestation of Mercy. We could also say very elliptically that evil is the "existence of the inexistent" or the "possibility of the impossible", this paradoxical possibility being required as it were by the limitlessness of All-Possibility, which cannot exclude even nothingness, for however null in itself, this nothingness is nonetheless "conceivable" existentially as well as intellectually.

Whoever discerns and contemplates God, first in a conceptual way and then in the Heart, will finally see Him also in creatures—in the

[10] Vedantic doctrine discerns in the substantial or feminine pole (*Prakriti*) of Being three tendencies: one ascending and luminous (*Sattva*), one expansive and fiery (*Rajas*), and one descending and obscure (*Tamas*); the last does not in itself constitute evil but prefigures it indirectly and gives rise to it on certain levels or under certain conditions.

manner permitted by their nature and not otherwise. From this comes on the one hand charity toward one's neighbor and on the other hand respect toward even inanimate objects, always to the extent required or permitted by their qualities and defects, for it is not a question of deluding oneself but of understanding the real nature of creatures and things;[11] this means that one must be just and—depending on the case—more charitable than just, and also that one must treat things in conformity with their nature and not with a profaning inadvertence. This is the most elementary manner of seeing God everywhere, and it is also a way of feeling that we are everywhere seen by God; and since there are no strict lines of demarcation in charity, we may say that it is better to be a little too charitable than not charitable enough.[12]

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Each verse of the Koran, even if it is not metaphysical or mystical in itself, includes a meaning in addition to its immediate sense that pertains to one or the other of these two domains; this certainly does not authorize setting aside an underlying meaning in favor of an arbitrary and forced interpretation, for neither zeal nor ingenuity can replace the real intentions of the Text, whether these are direct or indirect, essential or secondary. "Lead us on the straight path": this verse refers first of all to dogmatic, ritual, and moral rectitude, but it cannot but refer also and more especially to the way of *gnosis;* on the other hand, when the Koran institutes some rule or other or when it relates some incident, no higher meaning imposes itself in a necessary way, which is not to say that this is excluded *a priori*, provided that the symbolism is plausible. It goes without saying that the exegetical science (*ʿilm al-usūl*) of theologians, with its classification of explanatory categories,

[11] Love of beauty and the sense of the sacred are also situated in this context.

[12] According to the Koran God rewards merits much more than He punishes faults, and He more readily forgives a fault on account of a small merit than reduces a reward on account of a small fault—always according to the measures of God, not according to ours.

does not take account—and this is its right—of the liberties of an esoterist reading.

A point we must take into account here, even if only to mention it, is the discontinuous, allusive, and elliptical character of the Koran: it is discontinuous like its mode of revelation or "descent" (*tanzīl*) and allusive and therefore elliptical through its parabolism, which insinuates itself in secondary details that are all the more paradoxical in that their intention remains independent of context. Moreover it is a fact that the Arabs, and with them the Arabized, are fond of a separating and accentuating discontinuity, of allusion, ellipsis, tautology, and hyperbolism; all this seems to have its roots in certain characteristics of nomadic life, with its alternations, mysteries, and nostalgias.[13]

[13] With regard to allusive ellipsism, here are some examples: Solomon arrives with all his army in the "Valley of the Ants", and one of these says to the others: "O ants! Enter your dwellings lest Solomon and his armies crush you unknowingly." The meaning is first that even the best of monarchs, to the very extent he is powerful, cannot prevent injustices committed in his name and second that the small, when confronted with the great, must look to their own safety by remaining in a modest and discrete anonymity, not because of a voluntary ill will on the part of the great, but because of an inevitable situation; the subsequent prayer of Solomon expresses gratitude toward God, who gives all power, as well as the intention of being just, of "doing good". Then Solomon, having inspected his troops, notices that the hoopoe is absent, whose important function is to discover water holes, and he says: "Verily I shall punish it with a severe chastisement, or I shall slay it, unless it bring me a valid excuse"; the teaching, which slips here into the general narrative, is that it is a grave matter to fail without a serious reason in fulfilling the obligations of an office, the degrees of seriousness being expressed by the degrees of punishment. Finally, the hoopoe having recounted that it had seen the Queen of Sheba, a worshipper of the sun, Solomon says to it: "We wish to see whether thou speakest truth or whether thou liest." Why this distrust? To emphasize that a leader must verify the reports of his subordinates not because they are liars but because they may be so; but the distrust of the king is also explained by the extraordinary nature of the account, and it thereby includes an indirect homage to the splendor of the kingdom of Sheba. These are so many psychological, social, and political teachings inserted into the story of the meeting between Solomon and Queen Bilqis (*Sūrah* "The Ant" [27]:18, 21, 27). That these incidents can also have profound meanings we have no reason to doubt, but we nonetheless do not wish to abolish the distinction between interpretations that are necessary and those that are merely possible. Let us add, regarding the quotations we have presented here, that it is completely in the style of Islam to mention—explicitly or implicitly—practical details that at first sight seem obvious and thus to provide points of reference for the most

Let us now consider the Koranic "signs" in themselves. The following verses—and many others as well—have an esoteric significance that is at least certain and therefore legitimate even if it is not always direct; or more precisely, each verse has several meanings of this kind, if only because of the difference between the perspectives of love and *gnosis* or between doctrine and method.

"God is the Light of the heavens and of the earth" (*Sūrah* "Light" [24]:35), that is, the Intellect at once "celestial" and "terrestrial", which is to say principial or manifested, macrocosmic or microcosmic, the transcendent or immanent Self; "And unto God belong the East and the West, and wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God" (*Sūrah* "The Cow" [2]:115); "He is the First and the Last, and the Outward (the Apparent) and the Inward (the Hidden); and He knoweth infinitely all things" (*Sūrah* "Iron" [57]:3); "He it is who sent down profound peace (*Sakīnah* = Tranquility through the divine Presence) into the hearts of the believers (the heart being either the deep soul or the Intellect) in order to add faith unto their faith", a reference to the illumination that superimposes itself on ordinary faith (*Sūrah* "Victory" [48]:4); "Verily we are God's, and verily unto Him we shall return" (*Sūrah* "The Cow" [2]:156); "And God calleth to the house of Peace, and leadeth whom He will (whoever is qualified) upon the straight (ascending) Path" (*Sūrah* "Jonah" [10]:26); "Those who believe and whose hearts find peace through the remembrance (mention = invocation) of God. Is it not through the remembrance of God that hearts find peace?" (*Sūrah* "The Thunder" [13]:28); "Say *Allāh*, then leave them to their vain discourse" (*Sūrah* "Cattle" [6]:92); "O men, ye are the poor (*fuqarā'* from *faqīr*) in relation to God, and God is the Rich (*al-Ghanī* = the Independent), the universally Praised", every cosmic quality referring to Him and bearing witness to Him (*Sūrah* "The Angels" [35]:15); "And the hereafter (the principial night) is better for thee than the here below (the phenomenal world)" (*Sūrah* "The Morning Hours" [93]:4); "And worship God until certitude (metaphysics, *gnosis*) cometh unto thee" (*Sūrah* "*Al-Hijr*" [15]:99).

We have quoted these verses as examples without undertaking to explain the specifically esoteric implications hidden in their respec-

diverse situations of individual and collective life; the *Sunnah* is an abundant proof of this.

tive symbolisms. But it is not only the verses of the Koran that are important in Islam; there are also the sayings (*ahādīth*) of the Prophet, which obey the same laws and in which God sometimes speaks in the first person; a saying in this category, to which we referred above on account of its doctrinal importance, is the following: "I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known; hence I created the world." Or a saying in which the Prophet speaks for himself: "Spiritual virtue (*ihsān* = right doing) is that thou shouldst worship God as if thou sawest Him, for if thou seest Him not He nonetheless seeth thee."

A key formula for Sufism is the famous *hadīth* in which God speaks through the mouth of the Messenger: "My slave ceaseth not to draw nigh unto Me by devotions freely accomplished[14] until I love him; and when I love him, I am the Hearing whereby he heareth and the Sight whereby he seeth and the Hand wherewith he smiteth and the Foot whereon he walketh." Thus the absolute Subject, the Self, penetrates the contingent subject, the ego, and thus the ego is reintegrated into the Self; this is the principal theme of esoterism. The "devotions freely accomplished" culminate in the "Remembrance of God" or are directly identified with it, all the more so since the profound reason for every religious act is this remembrance, which in the final analysis is the very reason for the existence of man.

But let us return to the Koran: the quasi-"Eucharistic" element in Islam—that is, the element of "heavenly nourishment"—is chanted recitation of the Book; canonical Prayer is the obligatory minimum of this, but it contains as if by compensation a text that is considered to be the equivalent of the entire Koran, namely the *Fātihah*, the "*Sūrah* that opens". What is important in the rite of reading or reciting the revealed Book is not only a literal understanding of the text, but also—and almost independently of this understanding—an assimilation of the "magic" of the Book, whether by elocution or audition, with the intention of being penetrated by the divine Word (*Kalamu*

[14] Exoterizing Sufism, which prolongs and intensifies the *Sharī'ah*, deduces from this passage the multiplication of pious practices, whereas the Sufism that is centered on *gnosis* deduces the frequency of the quintessential rite, *Dhikr*, emphasizing its contemplative quality and not its character of meritorious act. Let us remember, however, that there is no strict line of demarcation between the two conceptions, although this line does exist by right and can always be emphasized.

'Llāh) as such and thus by forgetting the world and the ego.[15] From the twofold point of view of doctrinal content and "real Presence", ejaculatory prayer—*Dhikr*—has in principle the value and virtue of a synthesis of Koranic recitation.

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The Muhammadan sayings sometimes contain judgments that appear excessive, which prompts us to give the following explanation. Ibn Arabi has been reproached for placing the Sages above the Prophets—wrongly so, for he regarded all the Prophets as Sages too, though their quality of wisdom took precedence over that of prophecy. Indeed the Sage transmits truths as he perceives them whereas the Prophet as such transmits a divine Will, which he does not spontaneously perceive and which determines him in a moral and quasi-existential manner; the Prophet is thus passive in his receptive function whereas the Sage is active by his discernment, although in another respect the Truth is received passively, just as inversely and by way of compensation the divine Will confers upon the Prophet an active attitude. And here is the point we wish to make: when a Prophet proclaims a point of view whose limitations one can perceive without difficulty, whether from the standpoint of another religious system or from a perception of the nature of things, he does so because he incarnates in this case a particular divine Will: for example, there is a divine Will which, for a given mentality, inspires the production of sacred images just as there is another divine Will which, for another mentality, proscribes images; when the Arab Prophet, determined by this second Will, proscribes the plastic arts and anathematizes artists, he does not do so on the basis of prevailing opinion or as the result of a personal intellection, but under the effect of a divine Will that seizes him and makes of him its instrument or spokesman.

All this is said to explain the "narrowness" of certain positions taken by the founders of religion. The Prophet as Sage has access to

[15] As it happens, non-Arab Muslims, who to a large extent do not know the language of the Koran, recite or read parts of the Book in order to benefit from its *barakah*, a practice considered perfectly valid.

every truth, but there are some truths which do not actualize themselves concretely in his mind or which he places in parentheses unless an occasional cause makes him change his attitude, and this depends on Providence, not chance. The Prophet does not belie by his nature as Sage what he must personify as Prophet, except in some exceptional cases, which believers may understand or not and of which they are not meant to be judges.

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The twofold Testimony is the first and most important of the five "Pillars of the Religion" (*arkān al-Dīn*). The others have a meaning only in reference to it, and they are canonical Prayer (*Salāt*), the Fast of Ramadan (*Siyām*), Almsgiving (*Zakāt*), Pilgrimage (*Hajj*). The esoterism of these practices is not only in their obvious initiatic symbolism but in the fact that our practices are esoteric to the extent we ourselves are, first by our understanding of the Doctrine and then by our assimilation of the Method,[16] these two elements being contained in the twofold Testimony precisely. Prayer marks the submission of Manifestation to the Principle; the Fast is detachment with regard to desires, hence with regard to the ego; Almsgiving is detachment with regard to things, hence with regard to the world; finally, the Pilgrimage is the return to the Center, the Heart, the Self. A sixth Pillar is sometimes added, Holy War: this is combat against the profane soul by means of the spiritual weapon; it is therefore not the Holy War that is outward and "lesser" (*asghar*), but the Holy War that is inward and "greater" (*akbar*), according to a *hadīth*. Islamic initiation is in fact a pact with God for the sake of this "greater" Holy War; the battle is fought by means of the *Dhikr* and on the basis of *Faqr*, inward "Poverty", whence the name of *faqīr*, given the initiate.

What is distinctive about Prayer among the "Pillars of the Religion" is that it has a precise form and includes bodily positions, which as symbols necessarily have meanings specific to esoterism; but these

[16] Which essentially includes the virtues, for there is no path that is limited to an abstract and in a sense inhuman *yoga*; Sufism is precisely one of the most patent proofs of this.

meanings are simply explanatory and do not enter consciously and operatively into the accomplishment of the rite, which requires only a sincere awareness of the formulas and the pious intention of the movements. The reason for the existence of the canonical Prayer lies in the fact that man always remains an individual interlocutor before God and that he need not be anything else; when God wants us to speak to Him, He does not accept from us a metaphysical meditation. As for the meaning of the movements of the Prayer, all we need to say here is that the vertical positions express our dignity as free and theomorphic "vicar" (*khalīfah*) and that the prostrations on the contrary manifest our smallness as "servant" (*ʿabd*) and as dependant and limited creature;[17] man must be aware of the two sides of his being, made as he is of clay and spirit.

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For obvious reasons the Name *Allāh* is the quintessence of Prayer just as it is the quintessence of the Koran; containing in a certain manner the whole Koran, it thereby also contains the canonical Prayer, which is the first *sūrah* of the Koran, "that which opens" (*al-Fātihah*). In principle the supreme Name (*al-Ism al-Aʿzam*) even contains the whole religion and all the practices it requires, and it could therefore replace them;[18] but in fact these practices contribute to the equilibrium of the soul and society, or rather they condition them.

[17] The gestures of the ritual ablution (*wudū'*), without which man is not in a state of prayer, constitute various so to speak psychosomatic purifications. Man sins with the members of his body, but the root of sin is in the soul.

[18] "Remembrance (*dhikr*) is the most important rule of the religion. The law was not imposed upon us nor the rites of worship ordained except for the sake of establishing the remembrance of God (*dhikru 'Llāh*). The Prophet said: 'The circumambulation (*tawāf*) around the Holy House, the passage to and fro between (the hills of) Safa and Marwah, and the throwing of the pebbles (at three pillars symbolizing the devil) were ordained only for the sake of the Remembrance of God.' And God Himself has said (in the Koran): 'Remember God at the Holy Monument.' Thus we know that the rite that consists in stopping there was ordained for remembrance and not specifically for the sake of the monument itself, just as the halt at Muna was ordained for remembrance and not because of the valley. Furthermore He (God) has said on the

In several passages the Koran enjoins the faithful to remember God, hence to invoke Him and frequently repeat His Name. Likewise the Prophet said: "It behooves you to remember your Lord (to invoke Him)." He also said: "There is a means of polishing everything and removing rust; what polishes the heart is the invocation of *Allāh*; and there is no act that removes God's punishment as much as does this invocation." The Companions of the Prophet said: "Is the fight against infidels equal to this?" He replied: "No, not even if one fights until one's sword is broken." And he said further on another occasion: "Should I not teach you an action that is better for you than fighting against infidels?" His Companions said: "Yes, teach it to us." The Prophet said: "This action is the invocation of *Allāh*."

Dhikr, which implies spiritual combat since the soul tends naturally toward the world and the passions, coincides with *Jihād*, Holy War; Islamic initiation—as we said above—is a pact for the sake of this War, a pact with the Prophet and with God. The Prophet on returning from a battle declared: "We have returned from the lesser Holy War (performed with the sword) to the greater Holy War (performed with invocation)."

Dhikr contains the whole Law (*Sharī'ah*), and it is the reason for the existence of the whole Law;[19] this is declared by the Koranic verse: "Verily, prayer (the exoteric practice) preventeth man from committing what is shameful (degrading) and blameworthy; and certainly remembrance (invocation) of God (the esoteric practice) is greater" (*Sūrah* "The Spider" [29]:45).[20] The expression "the remembrance of

subject of the ritual prayer: 'Perform the prayer in remembrance of Me.' In a word, our performance of the rites is considered ardent or lukewarm according to the degree of our remembrance of God while performing them. Thus when the Prophet was asked which spiritual strivers would receive the greatest reward, he replied: 'Those who have remembered God most.' And when asked which fasters would receive the greatest reward, he replied: 'Those who have remembered God most.' And when the prayer and the almsgiving and the pilgrimage and the charitable donations were mentioned, he said each time: 'The richest in remembrance of God is the richest in reward'" (Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi in his treatise *Al-Qawl al-Ma'rūf*).

[19] This is the point of view of all invocatory disciplines, such as Hindu *japa-yoga* or the Amidist *nembutsu* (*buddhānusmriti*). This *yoga* is found in *jnāna* as well as in *bhakti*: "Repeat the sacred Name of the Divinity," said Shankaracharya in one of his hymns.

[20] "God and His Name are identical," as Ramakrishna said; and he was certainly not the only one or the first to say so.

God is more important" or "the greatest thing" (*Wa la-dhikruʾLlāhi akbar*) evokes and paraphrases this formula from the canonical Prayer: "God is greater" or "the greatest" (*Allāhu akbar*), and this indicates a mysterious connection between God and His Name; it also indicates a certain relativity—from the point of view of *gnosis*—of the outward rites, however indispensable in principle and in the majority of cases. In this connection we could also cite the following *hadīth*: one of the Companions said to the Prophet: "O Messenger of God, the prescriptions of Islam are too numerous for me; tell me something I can hold fast to." The Prophet replied: "Let thy tongue always be supple (in motion) with the mention (the remembrance) of God." This *hadīth*, like the verse we just quoted, expresses by allusion (*ishārah*) the principle of the inherence of the whole *Sharīʿah* in *Dhikr* alone.

"Verily in the Messenger of God ye have a fair example for whosoever hopeth in God and the Last Day, and remembereth God much" (*Sūrah* "The Clans" [33]:21). "Who hopeth in God": this is he who accepts the Testimony, the *Shahādah*, not merely with his mind but also with his heart; this is expressed by the word "hopeth". Now faith in God implies by way of consequence faith in our final ends; and to act in consequence is quintessentially to "remember God"; it is to fix the mind upon the Real instead of squandering it in the illusory, and it is to find peace in this fixation, according to the verse we have quoted above: "Verily in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest!"

"God maketh firm those who believe by the firm Word, in the life of the world and in the hereafter" (*Sūrah* "Abraham" [14]:27). The "firm Word" (*al-qawl al-thābit*) is either the *Shahādah*, the Testimony, or the *Ism*, the Name, the nature of the *Shahādah* being *a priori* intellectual or doctrinal and that of the *Ism* being existential or alchemical, though not in an exclusive manner, for each of the two divine Words participates in the other, the Testimony being in its way a divine Name and the Name being implicitly a doctrinal Testimony. By these two Words man becomes rooted in the Immutable, in this world as in the next. The "firmness" of the divine Word refers quintessentially to the Absolute, which in Islamic language is the One; thus the affirmative part of the *Shahādah*—the words *illāʾLlāh*—is called a "confirmation" (*ithbāt*), which indicates reintegration into immutable Unity.

The whole doctrine of *Dhikr* is brought out by these words: "So remember Me (*Allāh*); I will remember thee (*Fadhkurūnī adh-*

kurkum)" (*Sūrah* "The Cow" [2]:152). This is the doctrine of mystical reciprocity, such as appears in the following formulation of the early Church: "God became man that man might become God"; the Essence became form that form might become Essence. This presupposes a formal potentiality within the Essence and a mysterious immanence of the essential Reality within form; the Essence unites because it is one.

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Every way includes successive stages, which can at the same time be simultaneous modes; these are the "stations" (*maqāmāt*, singular: *maqām*) of Sufism. The fundamental stations are three: "Fear" (*Makhāfah*), "Love" (*Mahabbah*), and "Knowledge" (*Maʿrifah*); the number of the other stations, which in principle is indeterminate, is obtained by the subdivision of the three fundamental stations, whether the ternary is reflected in each of them or each is polarized into two complementary stations, each of which may in its turn contain various aspects, and so on. Moreover the "stations" are also manifested as passing "states" (*ahwāl*, singular: *hāl*), which are anticipations of the stations or which cause a given station already acquired to participate in another station still unexplored.

That each of the three fundamental modes of perfection or the way is repeated or reflected in the other two appears to us obvious and easy to imagine; we shall therefore not seek to describe these reciprocal reverberations here. On the other hand we must give an account of a subdivision that is not self-explanatory and that results from the bipolarization of each mode because of the universal law of complementarity; this complementarity is expressed fundamentally, for example, by the divine Names "the Immutable" (*al-Qayyūm*) and "the Living" (*al-Hayy*). We may thus distinguish within *Makhāfah* a static pole, Abstention or Renunciation (*Zuhd*), and a dynamic pole, Accomplishment or Effort (*Jahd*), the first pole realizing "Poverty" (*Faqr*), without which there is no valid work, and the second giving rise to "Remembrance" (*Dhikr*), which is work in the highest sense of the word and which eminently contains all works, not from the point of view of worldly necessities or opportunities, but from that of the fundamental divine requirement.

In *Mahabbah* there are likewise grounds for distinguishing between a static or passive pole and a dynamic or active pole: the first is Contentment (*Ridā*) or Gratitude (*Shukr*), and the second is Hope (*Rajā*) or Trust (*Tawakkul*). Moreover the second pole implies Generosity (*Karam*), just as Contentment for its part implies or requires Patience (*Sabr*); these virtues are necessarily relative, hence conditional, except toward God.[21]

As for *Maʿrifah*, it includes an objective pole, which refers to transcendence, and a subjective pole, which refers to immanence: on the one hand there is the "Truth" (*Haqq*) or Discernment of the One (*Tawhīd*), and on the other hand there is the "Heart" (*Qalb*) or Union with the One (*Ittihād*).

The three formulas of the Sufi rosary retrace the three fundamental degrees or planes: the "Asking of forgiveness" (*Istighfār*) corresponds to "Fear", the "Blessing on the Prophet" (*Salāt ʿalā ʾn-Nabī*) to "Love", the "Testimony of faith" (*Shahādah*) to "Knowledge". The higher planes always include the lower whereas the lower planes prefigure or anticipate the higher if only by opening onto them; for Reality is one, in the soul as in the Universe. Moreover Action reunites with Love to the extent it is disinterested, and it reunites with Knowledge to the extent it is accompanied by an awareness that God is the true Agent; and the same applies to Abstention, *Vacare Deo*, which likewise can have its source only in God in the sense that mystical emptiness prolongs the principial Void.

It is a fact that classical Sufism has a tendency to seek to obtain cognitive results by volitive means rather than seeking to obtain volitive results by cognitive means, that is, by what is intellectually self-evident;[22] the two attitudes must in reality be combined, especially since in Islam the supreme and decisive merit is acceptance of a truth and not a moral attitude. There is no question that profound virtues predispose to Knowledge and can even bring about its blossoming in

[21] We give here only the "archetypes" or "keys" of the virtues—or "stations"—which sum up their multiple derivations. The *Risālah* of Qushayri or the *Mahāsin al-Majālis* of Ibn al-Arif, and other treatises of this kind, contain enumerations and analyses of these subdivisions, which have been studied by various Arabists.

[22] As was understood by the best of the Greeks, the word "philosophy" implied for them virtue through wisdom.

cases of heroism, but it is no less true, to say the least, that when Truth is well assimilated it produces the virtues in the very measure of this assimilation or—what amounts to the same—this qualification.

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The Koran repeatedly cites the names of earlier Prophets and relates their stories; this must have a meaning for the spiritual life, as the Koran itself attests. It can happen indeed that a Sufi is attached—within the very framework of the Muhammadan Way, which is his by definition—to some pre-Islamic Prophet; in other words the Sufi places himself under the symbol, influence, affective direction of a Prophet who personifies a congenial vocation. Islam sees in Christ—Sayyidna Isa—the personification of renunciation, interiorization, contemplative and solitary sanctity, Union; and more than one Sufi has claimed this spiritual filiation.

The series of the great Semitic Prophets includes only one woman, Sayyidatna Maryam; her prophetic—but not law-giving—dignity is made clear by the way the Koran presents her and also by the fact that she is mentioned in the *Sūrah* of "The Prophets" together with other Messengers. Maryam incarnates inviolable purity, to which is joined divine fecundation;[23] she also personifies spiritual retreat and abundance of graces[24] and, in an altogether general manner and *a priori*, celestial Femininity, Purity, Beauty, Mercy. The Message of the Blessed Virgin was Jesus, not Jesus as the founder of a religion but the Child Jesus[25]—not such and such a *Rasūl* but the *Rasūl* as

[23] "And Mary, daughter of Imran, who kept her virginity intact; and We (*Allāh*) breathed into her of our Spirit (*Rūh*)" (*Sūrah* "Banning" [66]:12).

[24] According to the Koran, Mary spent her early youth in the "prayer-niche" (*mihrāb*) of the Temple and was nourished there by angels. When Zachariah asked her whence came this food, the Virgin replied: "It is from God; verily God giveth to whom He will without reckoning" (*Sūrah* "The Family of Imran" [3]:37). The image of the "prayer-niche"—or spiritual retreat (*khalwah*)—is found in the following verse: "And make mention of Mary in the Book (O Prophet), when she withdrew from her people (from the world) to a place toward the East (toward the Light); and she placed a veil between herself and them" (*Sūrah* "Mary" [19]:16, 17).

[25] "And We (*Allāh*) made the Son of Mary and his Mother a sign (*āyah*)" (*Sūrah* "The

such, who contains all possible prophetic forms in their universal and primordial indifferentiation. Thus the Virgin is considered by certain Sufis as well as Christian authors to be Wisdom-Mother or Mother of Prophecy and all the Prophets; thus Islam calls her *Siddīqah*, the "Sincere"—sincerity being none other than total conformity to the Truth—which is indicated by the identification of Mary with Wisdom or Sanctity as such.

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The Sufi readily calls himself "son of the Moment" (*ibn al-Waqt*), which means that he is situated in God's Present without concern for yesterday or tomorrow, and this Present is none other than a reflection of Unity; the One projected into time becomes the "Now" of God, which coincides with Eternity. The Sufi cannot call himself "son of the One", for this expression would evoke Christian terminology, which Islam must exclude because of its perspective; but he could call himself "son of the Center"—according to a spatial symbolism in this case—and he does so indirectly by his insistence on the mysteries of the Heart.

The whole of Sufism, it seems to us, is summed up in these four words: *Haqq*, *Qalb*, *Dhikr*, *Faqr,* "Truth", "Heart", "Remembrance", "Poverty". *Haqq* coincides with the *Shahādah*, the twofold Testimony: the metaphysical, cosmological, mystical, and eschatological Truth. *Qalb* means that this Truth must not be accepted with the mind alone but with the Heart, hence with all we are. *Dhikr*, as we know, is the permanent actualization of this Faith or *Gnosis* by means of the sacramental word; while *Faqr* is simplicity and purity of soul, which make this actualization possible by imparting the sincerity without which no act is valid.[26]

Believers" [23]:50). It will be noted that the "sign" is not Jesus alone, but he and his Mother.

[26] "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

The four most important formulas in Islam, which correspond in a sense to the four rivers of Paradise gushing forth from beneath the Throne of *Allāh*—the earthly reflection of this Throne being the Kaaba—are the first and second *Shahādah*, then the Consecration and the Praise: the *Basmalah* and the *Hamdalah*. The first *Shahādah*: "There is no divinity except the (sole) Divinity"; the second *Shahādah*: "Muhammad is the Messenger of God (of the sole Divinity)"; the *Basmalah*: "In the Name of God, the Clement, the Merciful";[27] the *Hamdalah*: "Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds."

The Quintessential Esoterism of Islam

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[27] God is clement or benevolent in Himself in the sense that Goodness, Beauty, and Love are contained in His very Essence (*Dhāt*), and He therefore manifests them necessarily in and through the world; this is expressed by the Name *Rahmān*, which is almost synonymous with the Name *Allāh*. And God is also good in relation to the world in the sense that He manifests His goodness toward creatures by according them subsistence and all possible gifts, including above all salvation; this is expressed by the Name *Rahīm*.