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ḤAQĪQA AND *SHARĪʿA* IN ISLAM*

René Guénon

Islamic Esoterism

Of all traditional doctrines, perhaps Islamic doctrine most clearly distinguishes the two complementary parts, which can be labeled exoterism and esoterism. In Arabic terminology, these are the *sharīʿa*, literally the "great way," common to all, and the *ḥaqīqa*, literally the "inward truth," reserved to an elite, not because of some arbitrary decision, but by the very nature of things, since not all men possess the aptitudes or "qualifications" required to reach knowledge of the truth. To express their respective "outward" and "inward" natures, exoterism and esoterism are often compared to the "shell" (*qishr*) and the "kernel" (*lubb*), or to the circumference and its center. The *sharīʿa* comprises everything that in Western languages would be called "religious," and especially the whole of the social and legislative side which, in Islam, is essentially integrated into the religion. It could be said that the *sharīʿa* is first and foremost a rule of action, whereas the *ḥaqīqa* is pure knowledge; but it must be well understood that it is this knowledge that gives even the *sharīʿa* its higher and deeper meaning and its true *raison d'être*, so that even though not all those participating in the religion are aware of it, the *ḥaqīqa* is nevertheless its true principle, just as the center is the principle of the circumference.

But this is not all, for esoterism comprises not only the *ḥaqīqa*, but also the specific means for reaching it, and taken as a whole, these means are called the *ṭarīqa*, the "way" or "path" leading from the *sharīʿa* to the *ḥaqīqa*. If we return to the symbol of the circumference and its center, we can say that the *ṭarīqa* is represented by the radius that runs from the former to the latter. And this leads us to the following: to

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each point on the circumference there corresponds a radius, and all the radii, which are indefinite in number, terminate in the center. It can thus be said that these radii are so many *ṭuruq* (plural of *ṭarīqa*) adapted to the beings "situated" at the different points on the circumference according to the diversity of their individual natures. This is why it is said that "the ways to God are as numerous as the souls of men" (*aṭ-ṭuruqu ila ʾLlāhi ka-nufūsi bani Adam*). Thus the "ways" are many, and differ all the more among themselves the closer they are to their starting-point on the circumference; but their end is one, as there is only one center and one truth. Strictly speaking, the initial differences are effaced along with "individuality" itself (*al-innīya*, from *ana*, "I"); in other words, when the higher states of the being have been attained, and when the attributes (*ṣifāt*) of the creature (*ʿabd*, "slave")—which are really limitations—disappear (*al-fanāʾ*, "extinction"), leaving only those of Allah (*al-baqāʾ*, "permanence"), the being becoming identified with the latter [Divine attributes] in his "personality" or "essence" (*adh-dhāt*).

Esoterism, considered thus as comprising both *ṭarīqa* and *ḥaqīqa*, namely means and end, is designated in Arabic by the general term *taṣawwuf*, which can only be translated precisely as "initiation"—a point to which we will return later. Although *taṣawwuf* can be applied to any esoteric and initiatic doctrine, regardless of the traditional form to which it belongs, Westerners have coined the [derivative] term "Sufism" to designate Islamic esoterism; but, apart from being completely conventional, this term has the unfortunate disadvantage of inevitably suggesting by its "ism" suffix, the idea of a doctrine proper to a particular school, whereas this is not the case in reality, the only schools in question being the *ṭuruq*, which basically represent different methods, without there being any possibility of a fundamental difference of doctrine, for "the doctrine of Unity is unique" (*at-tawḥīdu wāḥid*). As for the derivation of the terms *taṣawwuf* and "Sufism," they obviously come from the word *ṣūfī*, and here it must first be said that no one can ever call himself a *ṣūfī*, except from pure ignorance, for he proves thereby that he is not truly so, this quality necessarily being a secret (*sirr*) between the true *ṣūfī* and Allah; one can only call oneself a *mutaṣawwuf*, a term applied to anyone who has entered upon the initiatic "way," whatever the "degree" he may have reached; but the

ṣūfī, in the true sense of the term, is only the one who has reached the supreme degree.

Some have sought to assign the most diverse origins to the Arabic word *ṣūfī*; but this question is undoubtedly unsolvable from our present position, and we freely admit that the word has too many proposed etymologies, of equal plausibility, for only one to be true; in reality, we must rather see herein a purely symbolic name, a sort of "cipher," which, as such, requires no linguistic derivation strictly speaking; and this is not unique, for one can find comparable cases in other traditions. As for the so-called etymologies, these are basically only phonetic resemblances, which, moreover, according to the laws of a certain symbolism, effectively correspond to relationships between various ideas which have come to be grouped more or less as accessories around the word in question. But given the character of the Arabic language (a character which it shares with Hebrew), the primary and fundamental meaning of a word is to be found in the numerical values of the letters; and in fact, what is particularly remarkable is that the sum of the numerical values of the letters which form the word *ṣūfī* has the same number as *al-Ḥikmatu'l-ilahiya*, "Divine Wisdom." The true *ṣūfī* is therefore the one who possesses this Wisdom, or, in other words, he is *al-ʿārif bi'Llāh*, that is to say "he who knows through God," for God cannot be known except by Himself; and this is the supreme or "total" degree of knowledge or *ḥaqīqa*.[1]

[1] In a work on *taṣawwuf*, written in Arabic, but from a very modern perspective, a Syrian writer so ill acquainted with us as to mistake us for an "orientalist," has taken it into his head to address a rather singular reproach to us: having somehow read *as-Sūfia* in place of *Ṣūfī* (in a special issue of C*ahiers du Sud* in 1935 on "Islam and the West"), he imagined that my calculation was inexact; wishing then to make the calculation himself according to his own lights, he managed, by way of several errors in the numeric value of the letters, to arrive (this time as equivalent to *aṣ-Ṣūfī*, which is still wrong) at *al-ḥakīm al-ilahī*, without, moreover, perceiving that, one *ya* being equal to two *ha*'s, these words form exactly the same total as *al-ḥakma al-ilahiya*! We know well enough that academic teaching of the present day is ignorant of the *abjad* [the alphabet], and is only familiar with the simple grammatical order of the letters; but just the same, when someone undertakes to treat

From the preceding, we can draw several important consequences, the foremost being that "Sufism" is not something that was "added" to Islamic doctrine as an afterthought and from outside, but, on the contrary, is an essential part of it, since without it, Islamic doctrine would be manifestly incomplete, and, what is more, incomplete "from above," that is to say in regard to its very principle. The completely gratuitous supposition of a foreign origin—Greek, Persian, or Indian—is in any case formally contradicted by the fact that the means of expression of Islamic esoterism are intimately linked with the very constitution of the Arabic language; and if there are incontestable similarities with doctrines of the same order existing elsewhere, these can be explained quite naturally and without recourse to hypothetical "borrowings," for, truth being one, all traditional doctrines are necessarily identical in their essence, whatever the diversity of the forms in which they are clothed. As regards this question of origins, it is of little importance whether the word *ṣūfī* and its derivatives (*taṣawwuf*, *mutaṣawwuf*) have existed in the language from the beginning or have appeared at some later juncture, this being a great subject for discussion among historians; the thing may well have existed before the word, or under another name, or even without it having been found necessary to give it one. In any case—and this ought to settle the matter for anyone not regarding things merely from the outside—tradition expressly indicates that esoterism, as well as exoterism, proceeds directly from the very teaching of the Prophet, and, in fact, every authentic and regular *ṭarīqa* possesses a *silsila* or "chain" of initiatic transmission that ultimately goes back to him through a varying number of intermediaries. Even if, subsequently, some *ṭuruq* really did "borrow," or, better said, "adapt," certain details of their particular methods, this has a very secondary importance, and in no way affects what is essential; and here again similarities may equally well be explained by the possession of the same knowledge, especially as regards the "science of rhythm" in its

these questions, such ignorance passes beyond the acceptable limits. Be that as it may, *al-ḥakīm al-ilahī* and *al-ḥakma al-ilahiya* have basically the same meaning; but the first of these two expressions has a somewhat unusual character, while the second, as we have indicated, is, on the contrary, completely traditional.

various branches. The truth is that "Sufism" is as Arab as the Koran itself, in which it has its direct principles; but in order to find them there, the Koran must be understood and interpreted according to the *ḥaqāʾiq* (plural of *ḥaqīqa*) which constitute its deepest meaning, and not simply by the linguistic, logical, and theological procedures of the *ʿulamā aẓ-ẓāhir* (literally the "doctors of the outward") or doctors of the *sharīʿa*, whose competence extends only to the exoteric realm. It is a question here of two clearly different domains, and this is why there can never be any contradiction or any real conflict between them; it is moreover obvious that one cannot in any way oppose exoterism and esoterism, since on the contrary the second finds its foundation and point of departure in the first, and since they are really no more than the two aspects or the two faces of one and the same doctrine.

We should also point out that contrary to an opinion only too widespread among Westerners, Islamic esoterism has nothing in common with "mysticism." The reasons for this are easy to understand given everything we have explained so far. First of all, mysticism seems to be unique to Christianity, and it is only through erroneous assimilations that one can pretend to find more or less exact equivalents of it elsewhere. Some outward resemblances, in the use of certain expressions for example, are undoubtedly the cause of this error, but they can in no way justify it in light of differences that bear on everything essential. Since by very definition mysticism pertains entirely to the religious domain, it arises purely and simply from exoterism; and furthermore, the end toward which it tends is assuredly far from being of the order of pure knowledge. On the other hand, the mystic could have no method since he has a "passive" attitude and, as a result, limits himself to receiving what comes to him spontaneously as it were and with no initiative on his part. Thus there cannot be any mystical *ṭarīqa*, and such a thing is even inconceivable, for it is basically contradictory. Moreover, the mystic, always isolated by the very fact of the "passive" nature of his "realization," has neither *shaykh* nor "spiritual master" (who, of course, has absolutely nothing in common with a "spiritual director" in the religious sense), neither does he have a *silsila* or "chain" through which the "spiritual influence" would have been transmitted to him (we use this expression to render as exactly as possible the meaning of the Arabic word *baraka*), the second of these

two things being moreover an immediate consequence of the first. The regular transmission of the "spiritual influence" is what essentially characterizes "initiation," and even what properly constitutes it, and that is why we have used this word above to translate *taṣawwuf*. Islamic esoterism, like all true esoterism, moreover, is "initiatic" and cannot be anything else; and even without entering into the question of the difference of goals, which in any case results from the very difference in the two domains to which they refer, we can say that the "mystical way" and the "initiatic way" are radically incompatible by reason of their respective characters, and we might also add that in Arabic there is no word by which one can translate "mysticism" even approximately, so much does the idea expressed thereby represent something completely foreign to the Islamic tradition.*

In its essence, initiatic doctrine is purely metaphysical in the true and original meaning of this term; but in Islam, as in other traditional forms, it also includes a complex ensemble of "traditional sciences" by way of more or less direct applications to various contingent realms. These sciences are as if suspended from the metaphysical principles on which they depend and from which they derive, and draw from this attachment (and from the "transpositions" which it permits) all their real value; they are thereby an integral part of the doctrine itself, although to a secondary and subordinate degree, and not more or less artificial and superfluous accretions. There seems to be something here that is particularly difficult for Westerners to understand, doubtless because their own environment offers no point of comparison in this regard; nevertheless there were analogous Western sciences in antiquity and the Middle Ages, but these are entirely forgotten by modern men, who ignore the true nature of things and often are not even aware of their existence. Those who confuse esoterism with mysticism are especially prone to misunderstand the role and the place of these sciences, which clearly represent a knowledge as far removed as can be from the preoccupations of the mystics, so that the incorporation

* Editors' Note: This question of terminology regarding the term "mysticism," as it is often understood in the West, and its application to Sufism is treated in some depth in the selection in this volume by Titus Burckhardt (see the section "Sufism and Mysticism" in the article "Sufi Doctrine and Method").

of these sciences into "Sufism" constitutes for them an undecipherable enigma. Such is the science of numbers and of letters, of which we gave an example in the interpretation of the term *ṣūfī*, and which, in a comparable form, can be found only in the Hebrew *Kabbala*, by virtue of the close affinity of the languages which are the vehicles of expression for these two traditions, languages of which only this science can give the most profound understanding. Such are also the various "cosmological" sciences which are included in part in what is called "Hermeticism"; and in this connection we must note that alchemy is taken in a "material" sense only by the ignorant, for whom symbolism is a dead letter, those very people whom the true alchemists of the Middle Ages stigmatized as "puffers" and "charcoal burners," and who were the true precursors of modern chemistry, however unflattering such an origin may be for the latter. Likewise astrology, another cosmological science, is in reality something entirely other than the "divining art" or the "science of conjecture" which alone is what modern people see in it. Above all it has to do with the knowledge of "cyclical laws" which play an important role in all traditional doctrines. Moreover, there is a certain correspondence between all these sciences which, since they proceed from essentially the same principles, may be regarded as various representations of one and the same thing from a certain point of view. Thus, astrology, alchemy, and even the science of letters do nothing but translate the same truths into the languages proper to different orders of reality, united among themselves by the law of universal analogy, the foundation of every symbolic correspondence; and, by virtue of this same analogy, these sciences, by an appropriate transposition, find their application in the realm of the "microcosm" as well as in that of the "macrocosm," for the initiatic process reproduces in all its phases the cosmological process itself. To have a full awareness of all these correlations, it is necessary to have reached a very high degree in the initiatic hierarchy, a degree which is called that of "red sulfur" (*al-Kebrīt al-aḥmar*); and whoever possesses this degree may, by means of the science known as *sīmiyā* (a word that must not be confused with *kīmiyā*), and by operating certain mutations on letters and numbers, act on the beings and things that correspond to these in the cosmic order. *Jafr*, which according to tradition owes its origin to Sayyidnā ʿAlī himself, is an application of these same sciences to the

prevision of future events; and this application, in which the cyclical laws to which we alluded just now naturally intervene, exhibits all the rigor of an exact and mathematical science for those who can understand and interpret it (for it possesses a kind of "cryptography," which in fact is no more astonishing than algebraic notation). One could mention many other "traditional sciences," some of which might seem even stranger to those who are not used to such things; but we must content ourselves with this, and restrict ourselves to generalities, in keeping with the scope of this exposition.

Finally, we must add one last observation of capital importance for understanding the true character of initiatic doctrine: this doctrine has nothing to do with "erudition" and could never be learned by the reading of books in the manner of ordinary or "profane" knowledge. The writings of the greatest masters themselves can only serve as "supports" for meditation; one does not become a *mutaṣawwuf* simply by having read them, and in any case they remain mostly incomprehensible to those who are not "qualified." Indeed, it is necessary above all to possess certain innate dispositions or aptitudes which no amount of effort can replace; then, it is necessary to have an attachment to a regular *silsila*, for the transmission of the "spiritual influence" that is obtained by this attachment is, as we have already said, the essential condition, failing which there is no initiation, even of the most elementary degree. This transmission, which is acquired once and for all, must be the point of departure of a purely inward work for which all the outward means are no more than aids and supports, albeit necessary, given that one must take the nature of the human being such as it actually is into account; and it is by this inward work alone that a being, if capable of it, will ascend from degree to degree, to the summit of the initiatic hierarchy, to the "Supreme Identity," the absolutely permanent and unconditioned state beyond the limitations of all contingent and transitory existence, which is the state of the true *ṣūfī*.

The Shell and the Kernel (*Al-Qishr Wa Al-Lubb*)

Al-Qishr wa al-Lubb [The Shell and the Kernel], the title of one of Muḥyi ʾd-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī's numerous treatises, expresses in symbolic

form the relationship between exoterism and esoterism, likened respectively to the casing of a fruit and to its interior part, the pith or kernel.[2] The casing or shell (*al-qishr*) is the *sharīʿa*, that is, the external religious law which is addressed to all and which is made to be followed by all, as indicated moreover by the meaning of "great way" that is associated with the derivation of its name. The kernel (*al-lubb*) is the *ḥaqīqa*, that is to say truth or essential reality, which, unlike the *sharīʿa*, is not within reach of everyone but reserved for those who know how to discern it beneath outward appearances and how to attain it through the exterior forms which conceal it, protecting and disguising it at the same time.[3] In another symbolism, *sharīʿa* and *ḥaqīqa* are also designated respectively as the "[outer] body" (*al-jism*) and the "marrow" (*al-mukh*),[4] of which the relationship is exactly the same as that of shell and kernel; and one could no doubt find still other symbols equivalent to these.

Whatever the designation used, what is referred to is always the "outward" (*aẓ-ẓāhir*) and the "inward" (*al-bāṭin*), that is, the apparent and the hidden, which, moreover, are such by their very nature and not owing to any conventions or to precautions taken artificially, if not arbitrarily, by those who preserve traditional doctrine. This "outward" and this "inward" are represented by the circumference and its center, which can be looked upon as the cross-section of the fruit evoked by the previous symbol, at the same time that we are brought back to the image, common to all traditions, of the "wheel of things." Indeed, if one looks at the two terms in question according to their universal sense and without limiting them by applying them to a particular traditional form, as is most often done, one could say that the *sharīʿa*,

[2] Let us point out incidentally that this symbol of the fruit has a relationship with the "cosmic egg," and thus with the heart.

[3] One might remark that the role of exterior forms is related to the double meaning of the word "revelation," since such forms simultaneously manifest and veil the essential doctrine, the one truth, just as a word inevitably does for the thought it expresses; and what is true of a word in this regard is also true of any formal expression.

[4] One may recall here the "substantive marrow" of Rabelais, which also represents an interior and hidden meaning.

the "great way" traveled by all beings is nothing other than what the Far-Eastern traditions call the "current of forms," while the *ḥaqīqa*, the one and immutable truth, resides in the "invariable middle."[5] In order to pass from one to the other, thus from the circumference to the center, one must follow one of the radii, that is, a *ṭarīqa*, or, one might say, the "footpath," the narrow way which is followed by very few.[6] Furthermore, there are besides a multitude of *ṭuruq*, which are all radii of the circumference taken in the centripetal sense, since it is a question of leaving the multiplicity of the manifested to move toward principial unity; each *ṭarīqa*, starting from a certain point on the circumference, is particularly adapted to those beings who find themselves at that point, but whatever their point of departure, they all tend equally toward one unique point,[7] all arrive at the center and thus lead the beings who follow them to the essential simplicity of the "primordial state."

The beings who presently find themselves in multiplicity are forced to leave it in order to accomplish any realization whatsoever; but for most of them this multiplicity is at the same time the obstacle that stops them and holds them back; diverse and changing appearances prevent them from seeing true reality, so to speak, as the casing of a

[5] It is noteworthy that in the Far-Eastern tradition one finds very clear equivalents to these two terms, not as two aspects, exoteric and esoteric, of the same doctrine, but as two separate teachings, at least since the time of Confucius and Lao Tzu. In fact, one might say in all strictness that Confucianism corresponds to the *sharī'a* and Taoism to the *ḥaqīqa*.

[6] The words *sharī'a* and *ṭarīqa* both contain the idea of "progressing," and thus of movement (and one should note the symbolism of circular movement for the first term, and linear movement for the second); there is in fact change and multiplicity in both cases, the first having to adapt itself to the diversity of exterior conditions, and the second to that of individual natures; but the being who has effectively attained *ḥaqīqa*, by that very fact participates in its unity and immutability.

[7] This convergence is represented by that of the *qibla* (ritual orientation) of all places toward the *Ka'ba*, which is the "House of God" (*Baytu 'Llah*) and of which the form is a cube (the image of stability) occupying the center of a circumference that is the terrestrial (human) cross-section of universal existence.

fruit prevents one from seeing its inside; and this inside can be attained only by those capable of piercing through the casing, that is, of seeing the Principle through its manifestation, and even of seeing it alone in all things, for manifestation itself, taken all together, is no more than a totality of symbolic expressions. It is easy to apply this to exoterism and esoterism understood in their ordinary sense, that is, as aspects of a traditional doctrine; there also, the exterior forms hide profound truth from the eyes of the common man, whereas on the contrary they may be seen by the elite, for whom what seems an obstacle or a limitation to others becomes instead a support and a means of realization. One must clearly understand that this difference results directly and necessarily from the very nature of the beings, from the possibilities and aptitudes that each carries within itself, so much so that for each of them the exoteric side of the doctrine thus always plays exactly the role that it should, giving to those that cannot go further what it is possible for them to receive in their present state, and at the same time furnishing to those that can go further, "supports," which, without ever being a strict necessity, since they are contingent, can nonetheless greatly aid them to advance in the interior life, and without which the difficulties would be such that, in certain cases, they would amount to a veritable impossibility.

We should point out in this regard that for the majority of men, that is, for those who inevitably abide by exterior law, this takes on a character which is less a limitation than a guide; it is always a bond, but a bond that prevents them from going astray or from losing themselves; without this law, which obliges them to follow a well-defined path, not only would they never attain the center, but they would risk distancing themselves indefinitely from it, whereas the circular movement keeps them at a more or less constant distance.[8] In this way, those who cannot directly contemplate the light can receive at least a reflection of and a participation in it; and they remain thus bound in some way to the Principle, even though they do not and could not have an effective

[8] Let us add that this law ought to be regarded normally as an application or a human specification of the cosmic law itself, which similarly links all manifestation to the Principle, as we have explained elsewhere in reference to the significance of the "laws of Manu" in Hindu doctrine.

consciousness of it. Indeed, the circumference could not exist without the center, from which, in reality, it proceeds entirely, and even if the beings who are linked to the circumference do not see the center at all, or even the radii, each of them is nonetheless inevitably situated at the extremity of a radius of which the other extremity is the center itself. But it is here that the shell intervenes and hides whatever is found in the interior, whereas the one who has pierced this shell, by that very fact becoming conscious of the path or radius corresponding to his own position on the circumference, will be liberated from the indefinite rotation of the latter and will only have to follow the radius in order to move toward the center; this radius is the *ṭarīqa* by which, starting from the *sharī'a*, he will arrive at *ḥaqīqa*. We must make clear, moreover, that once the shell has been penetrated, one finds oneself in the domain of esoterism, this penetration, by its relationship to the shell itself, being a kind of turning about, of which the passage from the exterior to the interior consists. In one sense the designation "esoterism" belongs even more properly to *ṭarīqa*, for in reality *ḥaqīqa* is beyond the distinction of exoterism and esoterism, as this implies comparison and correlation; the center, of course, appears as the most interior part of all, but when it has been attained there can no longer be a question of exterior or interior, as every contingent distinction then disappears, resolving itself in principial unity.

That is why Allah, just as He is "the First and the Last" (*al-Awwal wa al-Ākhir*),[9] is also "the Exterior and the Interior" (*aẓ-Ẓāhir wa al-Bāṭin*),[10] for nothing of that which is could be outside of Him, and in Him alone is contained all reality, because He is Himself absolute Reality, and total Truth: *Huwa 'l-Ḥaqq*.

[9] That is, the Principle and the End, as in the symbol of the *alpha* and the *omega*.

[10] One could also translate this as the "Evident" (in relationship to manifestation) and the "Hidden" (in Himself), which correspond again to the two points of view of the *sharī'a* (the social and religious order) and *ḥaqīqa* (the purely intellectual and metaphysical order), although this latter may also be said to be beyond all points of view, as comprising them all synthetically within itself.

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