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Some Difficulties Found in Sacred Scriptures

To read the sacred Scriptures of mankind with unreserved admiration is one thing and to recognize that one is not always capable of appreciating them is something else; we may indeed know that a given text, being sacred, must be perfect both in content and in form, without being able to understand why; this is the case when our ignorance comes up against certain passages that only traditional commentary, and in some cases the original language, would make intelligible to us. To accept with veneration "every word which proceedeth out of the mouth of God" does not therefore in the least require any sort of pious hypocrisy, which is to say that our acquiescing, not just in principle but in fact, is intelligent and sincere only when based on real motives; otherwise we should be compelled to accept every incongruity resulting from errors in translation, so long as we were unaware of their inaccuracy.[1]

It is true, and even inevitable, that pious illusions of this and similar kinds do occur, even within the fold of the great orthodoxies; as an example we may take the affirmation, not infrequently heard among Muslims, that the Koran possesses not merely a perfect form, which would be plausible and even

1. The Bible would be much more comprehensible and much less vulnerable if one did not systematically ignore rabbinical exegesis, which does not mean that Christian authors have always ignored it, and one could well dispense with "scientific" and other forms of logomachy. Meister Eckhart, for instance, knew the exegesis of Maimonides, whom he called "the Rabbi" just as Aristotle was called "the Philosopher".

obvious, but also a superhuman and inimitable style; and one hears stories of men who tried to imitate the Koran but failed lamentably. That they failed is not hard to believe, but this was not because of the inimitability of the style, for the Koran is formulated in human language, and the gamut of possibilities of perfection on this level is of necessity fairly restricted; language can scarcely be more than language. That the Koran is perfect and normative from the point of grammar and syntax is incontestable—the contrary would be inconceivable for a revealed Book—but it is not unique in this; that its language is sometimes of an unsurpassable poetic quality is no less certain, but to say that it cannot be surpassed is not necessarily to say that it cannot be equaled; finally, that it contains all necessary truths, to say the least, is likewise not in itself a pure miracle. The divine quality of a revealed Book cannot be apparent in an absolute fashion from its earthly form, nor from its conceptual content alone; in reality, the divine and therefore supernatural, miraculous, and inimitable quality, which only pious prejudice could attribute abusively to words, is in fact of an altogether different order from that of the most perfect dialectic or the most brilliant poetry: it shows itself first of all in a richness of meanings—a feature that is incapable of being imitated—and also in what might be called the underlying divine substance perceptible through the formal expression and especially manifested in its results in souls,[2] and in the world, in space, and in time.[3] Only this divine substance can explain both the spiritual and the theurgic efficacy of the Koranic verses, with its consequences in the lightning-like expansion of primitive Islam in the conditions in which it took place, as well as in the stability of Muslim institutions and the extraordinary fruitfulness of Islamic doctrine and the power of the spirituality, not

2. "Charms have a certain natural force: and any one who comes under the influence of the charm, even if he does not understand it, gets something from it, according to the nature of the sounds thereof. . . . Just so is it with the giving of names in the divine Scriptures, only they are stronger than any charms" (*The Philokalia of Origen*, 12:1).
3. "And this Koran is not such as could ever be invented in despite of Allah" (10:37). "If We had caused this Koran to descend upon a mountain, thou (O Muhammad) verily hadst seen it humbled, rent asunder by the fear of Allah" (59:21).

forgetting the profound originality of architectural and ornamental art, whatever its "original materials" were; and only this non-human substance can account for the monolithic conviction that characterizes Muslim faith, whose causes could never be found in the ideas alone or in the style.[4]

It goes without saying that the style of the Koran, from a certain point of view, cannot be imitated; but this is so in the case of every masterpiece. As for the elliptical and as it were super-saturated style that the Koran owes to its celestial origin, it cannot be claimed that this is a linguistic or literary perfection. One might almost say that the sacred Scriptures wish to make us realize that their perfection is difficult of access from all points of view, and that human expressions cannot but be imperfect in certain respects. Moreover, Muslims, like the exegetes of other religions, have not failed to emphasize the providentially harsh and uncompromising character of revealed Scripture, a character at variance, not of course with the perfection of language, but with the opinion of those who would uphold the formal and as it were "massive" sublimity of the revealed Book.[5] There is indeed in the Koranic style something of a special concern not to indulge in poetry—which does not prevent certain passages from attaining the most powerful beauty of expression.

The specific character of the Koran doubtless reveals itself more directly in some passages than in others, notably in the eschatological Meccan *sûrah*s or in passages such as the Throne verse (2:255) or the Light verse (24:35), but the zealots we have in mind seek to extend this manifest divine sublimity to the whole Book, even to stipulations on civil law. Moreover, the distinction that has just been established between degrees of expressivity does not resolve the following crucial question: is there a style of language that is necessarily divine, or in other words, are there formal or literary criteria directly proving the divine provenance

4. For ideas are also to be found in the great theological treatises, just as beauty can be found equally in Sufi poems; but neither the one nor the other could have conquered—and preserved—a whole part of the world.
5. Moreover, the sublimism in question has had various effects: thus it has given rise, in a certain "specialized" psalmody of the Koran, to a curious super-saturation, an idolatry of sound that robs the reading of its spiritual as well as sonorous beauty.

of a text? The problem is basically the same as that of the superhuman beauty of the *Avatâra*, which may also be miraculous in its effects:[6] where visual beauty alone is concerned, the face and body of the heavenly Messenger cannot be either more or other than summits of human and racial beauty—admittedly summits that are extremely rare and even unique in virtue of a providential originality which is compounded of elements that altogether elude our powers of assessment—and it is only with the soul, the expression, and the attitudes that a strictly superhuman beauty first appears. Neither in the divine Messenger nor in the Message can there be any monstrousness of perfection, that is, something violating the norm.[7] If those skeptical Arabs who tried to imitate the Koran failed, it was not literary impossibility so much as the supernatural reality that made their effort vain, and the more inexorably so in that they were Muslims "by right" if not "in fact"; their sin was that of Prometheus, or Icarus, or the Titans. This is an order of things that literary criticism, either Eastern or Western, could never explain.[8]

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In order to read a sacred Book without difficulties, one must be aware, among other things, of the associations of ideas that a given word evokes in a given language, and of the metonymies

6. Tradition emphasizes this feature especially in the cases of Krishna and the Buddha; in the latter case the central role of the sacred image illustrates this truth. In Christianity the importance of icons indicates the same reality, not only for Christ, but also for the Virgin. As for Islam, the beauty of the Prophet is the subject of a dogma, and this is reflected in the general cult of the beauty of things and of the soul. The generosity of man should be able to repose in the harmony of things, which should be like a mirror of that generosity.
7. Lest we forget, the norm by definition is divine.
8. To illustrate this, let us suppose for a moment that the Koran were a part of the Bible, and that it had been written several centuries before our era. There can be no doubt that there would have been "criticisms" to the effect that the Koran had been written at different periods and thus also by different authors; that certain passages were much more recent than tradition alleged, not to speak of later interpolations by copyists—a never-failing argument in the arsenal of the destructive "exegetes" of the Scriptures.

which are common usage in it. This brings us to the following distinction: there are sacred Scriptures in which the original language is of capital importance, whence the more or less express prohibition against translating them for canonical usage—this is so in the case of the Torah, the Koran, and the Vedas, and perhaps also the Tao Te Ching; and there are others in which the whole meaning is contained in the imagery and in the direct expression of thought—such is the case of the Gospels and the Buddhist Books—and where translations into popular but noble languages are even traditionally anticipated. Reference is made to "noble" languages in order to emphasize that modern Western languages represent languages that have become more or less trivial—with respect to the sacred—as a result of several centuries of irreligious literature and democratic mentality; thus they are hardly suited to convey the Scriptures, when all the canonical, liturgical, and psychological aspects are taken into account, whereas these same languages could still do so in the Middle Ages. We speak of "traditionally anticipated translations" in order to recall that the possibility of translating Scripture is already prefigured in the "gift of tongues" and, as regards Buddhism, in the original parallelism between Pali and Sanskrit. But once it has become liturgical, the language is crystallized and does not change further, even if it undergoes modification in profane usage.[9] It is noteworthy that these two forms of Revelation, the Buddhist and the Christian, are founded on a humanization of the Divine—the impersonal Divine in the first case and the personal Divine in the second—whereas in the Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu traditions, the Revelation takes on above all and essentially the form of Scriptures; Hindu avatarism does not alter this fact,

9. As Joseph de Maistre wrote, "Any changing language is not well suited to an unchanging religion. The natural movement of things constantly attacks living languages and, aside from these great changes that alter them absolutely, there are also changes which may not seem important but which in fact are very much so. Every day the corruption of the age seizes words and spoils them for its own amusement. If the Church spoke our language, the most sacred words of the liturgy would be at the mercy of the first brazen-faced wit who had the effrontery to ridicule them or make them indecent. For every conceivable reason, the language of religion must be kept out of the domain of man" (*Du Pape*, Book 1, Ch. 20).

for the Vedas are prior to the *Avatâra*s; it is not they who reveal the *Sanâtana-Dharma*, or who create it, so to speak.

Detailed understanding of the Torah, the Koran, and the Brahmanical Books presupposes a knowledge not only of the associations of ideas evoked by the Hebrew, Arabic, or Sanskrit terms, but also of the implicit propositions furnished by the commentators, either precisely in virtue of their learning, or through inspiration; as for the symbolism that is so important in all Scriptures, including the Gospels, it is necessary to distinguish between a direct, complete, and essential symbolism and one that is indirect, partial, and accidental: when Christ raises his eyes towards Heaven in prayer, the symbolism is direct, for Heaven or "that which is above" represents by its spatial situation and also its cosmic nature the "divine dimension"; but when, in the parable of the sower, the birds that carry away the seed represent the devil, the symbolism is quite indirect and provisional, for it is only insofar as they remove the seed and fly about in all directions that birds, which in themselves symbolize the celestial states, can assume this negative meaning. Another example can also be noted here, this time of a symbolism that is both partial and direct: the Koran compares the braying of a donkey to the voice of Satan, but the donkey in itself is not involved, even though its cry can never lend itself to a positive interpretation.[10] These different levels of symbolism are frequently encountered in the Law

10. It was to a she-ass—that of Balaam—that God gave speech, and it was an ass that carried the Virgin and Child on their flight into Egypt, and also Christ on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Let us remember too that the ass bears on its back the mark of a cross. The ass symbolizes humility, in contrast with the princely pride of the horse, and indeed it incarnates, alongside its noble fellow creature, the peaceful, modest, and touching—we might almost say childlike—character of creatures without glory, but nonetheless good; as for its braying, this seems to manifest an ambition to equal the neighing of a horse, as if there were here the caricatural mark of the temptation of the small to play at being great, and thus of the sin of pride. One could accept that the ass at the manger has a lower, if not malefic meaning—in view of its braying and its reputation for stubbornness—but according to another interpretation, which is much more adequate and which is corroborated by the *Golden Legend*, the ass at the manger represents the presence of the small and the humble, those who are despised by the world but received by the Lord.

of Manu, which it is impossible to understand in detail without knowing the implicit ramifications of the various symbols.

For the unprepared reader, many passages of the Scriptures contain surprising repetitions and pleonasms, if indeed they are not altogether unintelligible or apparently absurd. Thus, for example, the Koran says of Abraham: "We have chosen him in the world here below, and in truth he is in the world beyond, amongst the just" (2:130). One may wonder what the function is of the second proposition, which in any case is obvious. In fact it is rendered necessary by the preceding words: "in this world"; if the Scripture had said simply: "We have chosen him", it would have been unnecessary to elaborate further; but since it adds "in the world here below", it is obliged to say also "and in the world beyond", so as to prevent the first phrase being interpreted in a limitative sense.[11] From the Islamic point of view, the second phrase was all the more necessary in view of the fact that Christianity placed Abraham in the "limbo of the Fathers" and because Christ described himself as being "prior" to the Patriarch.[12]

Here is another example: Jesus said, "I shall announce to you what ye will eat and what ye will store up in your houses" (Koran 3:49). This passage alludes first to the Eucharist, and secondly to the amassing of treasures in the world to come[13]—two elements of the Christ-given message; but these associations are not obvious at first sight and on mere reading. An analogous passage is the following: "Jesus, son of Mary, made this prayer: O God our Lord, send down upon us a table spread with food from Heaven, that it may be a feast for the first and the last of us, and a sign of Thy power" (5:114). The words "the first and the last of us" refer respectively to the saint and to the man of sufficient virtue, and also in a different connection to the gnostic and to the simple

11. This verse is not unconnected with the following one: "We showed Abraham the kingdom of heaven and of the earth so that he might be among those who possess certainty" (6:75). Here "heaven" means both the stars and the heavenly worlds, or, according to Ghazzali, "inward vision".
12. This Christ did in that he was an actual and concrete manifestation of the Logos, one which was central for a given world.
13. "Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:33-34).

believer; the remainder of the passage contains a divine threat against the unworthy, which recalls the analogous threat of St. Paul: "Whosoever shall eat this bread unworthily eateth damnation to himself" (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

On an entirely different plane, and in a passage concerning the pilgrimage (2:198), the Koran remarks, to the amazement of the unprepared reader, that "it is not a sin for you if you seek some favor from your Lord", which means: it is permitted to you during the pilgrimage to gain some subsistence by means of commerce; it is enough to know this, but this meaning is not clear from the words themselves. Of an analogous kind is the following difficulty: "There is no sin for those who believe and do good works, in what they have eaten, if they fear God and are believing, and do good works, and again fear God and believe, and again fear Him and excel in good" (5:93). The sum and substance of this is that in the case of true believers, no trace remains of any sin they may have committed by ignorance before the revelation of the corresponding prescription, or before their entry into Islam; and this also includes the case of the true believers—but not of the hypocrites—who died before this revelation. As for the repetitions contained in this passage, they refer according to the commentators to the divisions of time—past, present, and future—and also to the degree of application—ego, God, neighbor—of our moral duties and of the spiritual attitudes corresponding to them. But this verse also has a meaning both more literal and more general, namely that in exceptional circumstances the alimentary prescriptions are subordinated to the intrinsic principles, which is to say that the observance of the latter may, in case of need, compensate for the lack of observance of the former.

One detail in the Koran which may cause surprise is that often, without transition or logical connection, some legal stipulation or other is followed by a phrase such as: "And Allah is Mighty, Wise". The reason for this is that the Koran contains several superimposed "layers", as it were; after pronouncing on a temporal matter, the veil of contingency is torn, and the immutable foundation reappears.

But, one may ask, if the reading of the Koran is so arduous and precarious, even for men who know Arabic, how is it that Islam can peaceably win so many followers among peoples who do

not know this language, and are as far removed from the Arabs as the Negroes, the Chinese, and the Malays? The reason that Islam expands is not by the reading of the Koran, but by its human, spiritual, psychological, and social manifestation: if African Negroes embrace the Arab religion, it is because they observe the kind of life led by Muslims, see them praying, hear the call of the muezzin, observe a certain generosity common to believers, as also the serenity of the pious; it is only afterwards that they learn the minimum of Arabic necessary for the canonical prayers. The immense majority of non-Arab Muslims will never be able to read the Koran, still less appreciate its literary qualities; they live with the effects without knowing the cause. It is easy to understand the importance in Islam of the '*ulamâ* when one knows that they are the guardians and, as it were, the reservoirs, not only of the verses of the Koran—very often sibylline[14]—but also and above all of the implicit meanings derived from either the *Sunnah* or the traditional commentaries.

Certain enigmas in the Koran result from a purely metaphysical intention: "Dost thou not see how thy Lord hath spread the shade—And had He willed He could have made it motionless—then We (Allah) have made the sun to be its indicator; then We withdraw it unto Us, a gradual withdrawal" (25:45). In this passage, what is striking in the first instance is that the shade is not described as indicating the movement of the sun by its movement, but on the contrary the sun is described as indicating the shade. According to some exegetes this expresses, or confirms, the fact that God is the direct cause of every phenomenon—that there are thus no intermediate causes;[15] others relate the term "shade" (*zill*)[16] to the twilight, that is to say, brightness without sun—this

14. This characteristic belongs much more to the "parabolic" (*mutashâbihât*) than to the "confirmed" (*mukhamât*) verses (3:7), the latter constituting the "Mother of the Book" (*Umm al-Kitâb*); the former contain a multiplicity of meanings and the latter one single meaning; the "confirmed" verses may comprise gradations, but they are parallel and not divergent. The "Mother of the Book" is basically the dogmas together with the essential precepts and prohibitions.
15. On this subject see the formulation of Fudali, quoted in the present author's *Stations of Wisdom*.
16. The meaning of this word is to be distinguished from that of *zulmah*, "darkness" or "obscurity", and from that of *fai'*, "projected shadow".

is the hour that corresponds to the heavenly state,[17] free both from darkness and the burning sun. Finally, according to another interpretation of the verse,[18] the shade represents relative existence, which is an absence of Being or a void (*'adam*), the shade itself being an absence of light; and indeed relative existence[19] cannot be known except by virtue of absolute Being[20] which here corresponds to the sun.[21]

Another passage of the Koran that calls for mention here is the following: when Satan says that he will seduce men "from in front, from behind, on their right and on their left" (7:17), the commentators observe that neither above nor below is mentioned and conclude that this verse expresses in its fashion the limitation of the power of Satan; now the two inviolable dimensions are essentially "greatness" and "littleness"; that is, man is saved either because he remains "little" like a child, or because he rises above things like an eagle.[22] These two states, moreover, can and must be combined, as is indicated for example by the name of Lao-Tzu, the "Child-Elder"; in other words, one can be either "too little" or "too great"[23]—too humble or too elevated—for mortal sin and the final disgrace; the very type of the Promethean or titanic sinner is the impassioned and ambitious adult who,

17. The "companions of the right" (the saved) will be found "amongst thornless lote-trees, and clustered plantains, and spreading shade . . ." (56:27-30).
18. Mentioned, like the foregoing, in the famous compilation of *Rûh al-Bayân*.
19. This is a pleonasm, but the term is used for the sake of greater clarity.
20. Or "relatively absolute", in keeping with a very important metaphysical nuance referred to several times in the author's works.
21. It has been remarked to the author that in Sufi symbolism, the creation of shade precedes that of light, because the shade—the negative of Being, or ignorance—represents relativization, manifestation, or the first objectification of the Essence.
22. The same passage affirms that the majority of men are ungrateful, thus emphasizing that what lures man into Satan's net is lack of gratitude toward God—a statement calling for much development. It is indeed by a kind of ingratitude—or by a thousand kinds of ingratitude and culpable unawareness—that man removes himself from the Center-Origin; it is the gift of existence, or intelligence, profaned and squandered, and finally trodden underfoot.
23. The innocent littleness of children does not need wisdom, but wisdom—being a totality—is impossible without this littleness.

being neither child nor old man, has neither the humble and trusting innocence of the little, nor the detached and serene wisdom of the great. But "height" is also the adamantine Truth, just as "depth" is the unalterable nature of things. The devil has no hold on either the incorruptibility of pure knowledge or on the innocence of pure Being.

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In the sacred Texts there may be symbolical or dialectical antinomies, but not contradictions; it is always a difference of point of view or aspect that provides the key, even in cases like that of divergent Gospel narratives. For example, when according to St. Luke one of the thieves is bad and the other good, it is obviously a case of simple opposition between evil and good, unbelief and faith, vice and virtue.[24] On the other hand, when according to St Matthew and St Mark the two thieves abuse Christ, they are identifiable with the two poles of vice—one mental and one moral—found in the human soul, where Christ appears as the Intellect and on a lower level as the voice of conscience, which is a prolongation or a reflection of the pure Intellect. Moreover, if good and evil as such are to be found in the soul, there is also evil under the guise of virtues and good spoiled by vices. Let us remember also that if one of the thieves was good, he was nonetheless, as a thief, an offence to Christ, so that the narratives of Matthew and Mark coincide from a certain point of view with that of Luke. Nevertheless, it is Luke's version that takes prece-

24. Tauler compares the crucifixion of the first thief to the vain repentance of people who put all their faith in outward austerities and penances born of pride, which only bring them damnation in return for their sufferings; this is the "zeal of bitterness" of which St Benedict speaks. The second cross is that of the sinner who has really turned away from the world, who has sacrificed everything for God, and joyously accepts the sufferings deserved for his sins, with a firm hope in the love and mercy of God. The central cross is that of the perfect man who has chosen to follow Christ in all things, and who must be crucified in the flesh in order to attain the "cross of the divine nature of Christ". From the point of view of Hermetic symbolism, this image can be identified with the caduceus, wherein the central axis or the "tree of the world" comprises two cycles, one ascending and one descending, which relates it to the *janua coeli* and the *janua inferni*, and also, in Hindu terms, to the *deva-yâna* and the *pitri-yâna*.

dence, wherever this alternative exists, for Mercy has priority over Rigor, according to an Islamic formula.[25]

This style of interpretation—whose origins, as far as Christianity is concerned, are to be found in Origen, St Ambrose, St Augustine, St John Cassian, St Gregory, and others—is profoundly rooted in the nature of things, and consequently it occurs in all traditional settings; but what is important here is that many of the images contained in the sacred Scriptures would remain unintelligible without their transposition onto the metaphysical, macrocosmic or microcosmic planes.[26]

Contrary to what is generally believed today, the people of antiquity were in no way blind to the strangeness, as far as the literal sense is concerned, of certain passages in the Scriptures. Origen noted, quite justifiably, that a blow given by the right hand falls on the left cheek, and that it is thus surprising that Christ enjoins offering the left cheek after the right, not inversely;[27] or again, that the eyes look at one object together, not separately, and thus it is impossible to take literally Christ's counsel to pluck out one's right eye, if it has looked with concupiscence, quite apart from the fact that the counsel itself can scarcely be meant literally, and so on.[28] Again, Origen remarks that if there are Israelites "in spirit", there must also be Egyptians and Babylonians "in spirit", and that the Biblical passages concerning Pharaoh and

25. This is the inscription on the Throne of Allah: "Verily, My Mercy hath precedence over My Wrath."
26. There is also a diabolical pseudo-exegesis on the part of modernistic sectarians, for example the affirmation by the Ahmadis of Lahore—a heresy founded in the nineteenth century—that the "resurrection of the dead" means the present day "awakening of peoples"! This is false twice over, first because the resurrection concerns the dead and not the living and takes place at the Last Judgment, and secondly because people are not awakening, to say the least; what is awakening is something quite different. In exactly the same category are those Christian exegetes whose sole concern is to empty the Scriptures of their content, for example by "psychologizing" the angels, who in reality are perfectly objective and concrete beings, as well as being at the same time "higher states", a difference corresponding to that between the Boddhisattvic function and the corresponding nirvanic level.
27. The Gospel indicates a logical and moral hierarchy, and not a succession of physical situations.
28. Here the logical and moral meaning is as clear as can be, in spite of the physical impossibility of the image.

Nebuchadnezzar cannot all be applied to the monarchs bearing these names; consequently some of them are applicable only to the "types" that these names designate. [29]

As regards the apparent contradictions of the sacred Scriptures, a further example from the Bhagavad-Gita may be quoted: "All this universe is permeated by Me, My form [nevertheless] remaining unmanifested. All beings dwell in Me [but] I do not dwell in them. And yet these beings do not dwell in Me. Behold my divine *yoga*! Supporting all beings without dwelling in them—that is My Self (*Âtmâ*), the cause of beings" (9:4, 5). One might think that this passage contains a flagrant contradiction, but the relationships envisaged change from one sentence to the next, as Shankara explains in his commentary: "No being deprived (by hypothesis) of the Self can become an object of experience. Thus they dwell in Me, that is to say, they exist by Me, the Self. . . . I am certainly the ultimate Essence, even of ether . . . but these things—beginning with *Brahmâ* (and down to the smallest of creatures)—do not dwell in Me. . . . The *shruti* speaks of the non-attachment of the Self, seeing that It has no connection with any object: void (of the limitative condition) of attachment. It is never attached." *Âtmâ* cannot comprise in Its infinite nature any factors of attachment or of limitation.[30]

29. Analogously, but on another plane, when Christ declares that "no man cometh unto the Father but by me", it is a question not only of one particular manifestation of the Logos, but of the Logos as such, and thus of every illuminating and law-giving manifestation of the eternal Word. The intrinsic truth of the great revelations of humanity forces us to this conclusion, just as other objective facts force us to interpret—and thus limit—certain scriptural passages, for example the prohibition of killing, or the injunction to turn the other cheek, which no one takes in an unconditional or absolute sense.

30. It may be remarked in passing that in some respects the European feels closer to the mentality of Hindus than to that of Arabs. In other respects, however, he is closer to the Arabs and Islam—even if he does not admit it—than to the Hindus and Brahmanism. The former affinity is explained by the fact that Europe, apart from tiny exceptions, is Aryan, and this is not merely a matter of language, though one should remember that there is no language without a corresponding mentality. The latter affinity is explained by the fact that Europe, being Christian with Jewish and Muslim minorities, is spiritually Semitic, at least by heredity. This observation is not unconnected with the general question now being considered.

Sometimes divergences in sacred texts—and *a fortiori* between texts of different provenance—are more or less comparable to the divergence between exact astronomy and that of Ptolemy, the former founded upon the objective, but in a way "extra-human", nature of facts, and the latter upon human experience, of necessity limited but symbolically and spiritually adequate, because "natural".[31] A spiritual perspective may, in a given case, opt for one or the other of these solutions—analogically speaking—according to its internal logic and to the opportunity it gives rise to. For example, in the fundamental divergence between the Christian and Muslim theses regarding Jesus' end on earth, there is a mystery which the Gospel does not take account of explicitly, and of which each of the two viewpoints providentially conveys a somewhat extreme aspect, in keeping with the respective demands or interests of each spirituality.[32]

The greatest possible divergence in this realm is probably to be found in the opposition between the non-theism—or nirvanism—of the Buddhists and the monotheism of Semitic origin, the former being founded on the dream-like and impermanent character of the cosmos in connection with the negative or "void-like" appearance of Absolute Reality, and the latter on the reality

31. We shall note that traditional India admits both a flat and a spherical earth: for the *Purana*s, the earth is a disc supported by Vishnu as a tortoise, whereas for the *Sûrya-Siddhânta* it is a sphere suspended in the void.
32. Docetism and monophysitism have exhibited various aspects of this mystery; the term "aspects" is used because the whole question is one of great complexity, and it is even probable that it cannot be solved in earthly terms. At all events it is this mystery that explains, on the one hand, the superhuman and supernatural heroism of the martyrs integrated into the nature of Christ and, on the other hand—on a completely different plane—the profusion of divergent doctrines concerning his nature from the very beginning of Christianity. However that may be, one must not lose sight of the fact that the Koranic passage in question, which while affirming the reality of the Ascension allows the Crucifixion only the semblance of reality (4:157-8), can have—and indeed of necessity does have—a meaning that concerns a "spiritual type" and not a historical personage, and that it is sometimes difficult, and perhaps even impossible in a scriptural passage of this kind, to know where the limit between history and symbolism lies. This is so especially in those cases where the literal meaning is a matter of indifference as regards the "Divine Intention" of a given Revelation, and from the point of view at which the religion in question must place itself.

of experience of the world and on the positive and active manifestation of the creative Principle. These definitions, inadequate as they may be in some respects, illustrate in their fashion the non-contradiction—or the profound coherence—of the heavenly universal Word.[33]

Here we may stop, as our purpose was merely to show that the apparent deficiencies found within the same sacred Book are in fact syntheses or ellipses, and also to emphasize that in order to be in conformity with the truth and orthodoxy, it is not at all necessary to find sublime something that one is unable to understand and appreciate. To be respectful without hypocrisy and sincere without disrespect, it is enough to know that the Divine Word is necessarily perfect, whether at the moment we are capable of recognizing it or not. Be that as it may, since it is impossible to make the Sacred Texts the subject of a demonstration, which finally is of secondary importance, without exceeding the limits of such a demonstration—for its contents inevitably open up horizons that take us singularly far from the original intention—it is fitting to conclude with a quotation that brings the question back to its essence and at the same time serves as a justification for the present study: "Say: if the sea were ink for the writing of the Words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before those Words, even if We (Allah) were to add a further sea to augment it" (Koran 18:109).[34]

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33. As the author has remarked elsewhere, "theism" is to be found in a certain fashion within the framework of Buddhism, notably in the form of Amidism, even though it is "non-theistic", and "non-theism" is in turn to be found in the monotheistic esoterisms in the concept of the "impersonal Essence" of Divinity (*Treasures of Buddhism*, World Wisdom Books, 1993).
34. Likewise: "And if all the trees on the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven more seas to help it, were ink, the words of Allah could not be exhausted. Lo! Allah is Mighty, Wise" (31:27).