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Chapter 6

SUFI INTERPRETATION OF THE QUR'ĀN

Since Sufism represents the inner aspect of Islam its doctrine is in substance an esoteric commentary on the Qur'ān. Now the Prophet himself gave the key to all Qur'ānic exegesis in teachings he gave orally which are verified by the concordance of the chains of intermediaries.[1] Among these sayings of the Prophet some are fundamental for Sufism and they are those which the Prophet enunciated, not as a law-giver, but as a contemplative saint, sayings which were addressed to those of his companions who later became the first Sufi masters. There are also the "holy utterances" (*aḥādīth qudsīyah*) in which God speaks in the first person by the mouth of the Prophet. These latter have the same degree of inspiration as the Qur'ān, though not the same "objective" mode of revelation, and in the main they set forth truths not intended for the whole religious community but only for contemplatives. This is the basis of the Sufi interpretation of the Qur'ān.

As the Prophet stated, the Qur'ān contains in each part several meanings.[2] This is a characteristic common to all revealed texts because the process of revelation in a way repeats the process of divine manifestation, which equally implies a number of levels. The

[1] Certain "specialists" in judging the authenticity of the *aḥādīth* of the Prophet suppose that they can establish the following criteria, disregarding thirteen centuries of Muslim scholarship. They are these: (1) If some *ḥadīth* can be interpreted as favoring some particular group or school, this means it has certainly been invented. If, for instance, it is in favor of the spiritual life, then the Sufis invented it: if on the contrary it provides an argument for literalists hostile to spirituality, then the literalists fabricated it. (2) The more complete the chain of intermediaries indicated by traditionalists, the greater the chance that the particular *ḥadīth* is false because, say they, the need of proof grows in proportion to the lapse of time. Such arguments are truly diabolical for, taken as a whole, they amount to this reasoning: if you bring me no proof it is because you are wrong, but if you do bring proof it means you need it and so again you are wrong. How can these orientalists believe that countless Muslim learned men—men who feared God and hell—could have deliberately fabricated sayings of the Prophet? It would lead one to suppose bad faith to be the most natural thing in the world were it not that "specialists" have almost no feeling for psychological incompatibilities.

[2] According to a saying of the Prophet, "no verse of the Qur'ān has been revealed which has not an external aspect and an inner aspect. Every letter has its definite sense (*ḥadd*) and every definition implies a place of ascent (*maṭla'*)."

interpretation of the "inner" meanings of the Qurʾān is founded both on the symbolical nature of the things mentioned and on the multiple meanings of the words. Every language which is relatively primordial, like Arabic, Hebrew, or Sanskrit, has a synthetic character, a verbal expression still implying all the modes of an idea from the concrete up to the universal.[3]

It might be said that the ordinary exegesis of the Qurʾān takes the expressions in their immediate meanings whereas the Sufi exegesis uncovers their transposed meanings, or, again, that while exotericism understands them conventionally the Sufi interpretation conceives their direct, original, and spiritually necessary character. When, for example, the Qurʾān says that he who accepts God's guidance will be guided "for himself" (*linafsihi*) and that he who remains ignorant is so "on himself" (*ʿala nafsihi*) (see Qurʾān, 17:15 and also 4:105) the exoteric interpretation is limited to the idea of the recompense and punishment. The Sufi understands this verse of the Qurʾān in the sense of the sayings of the Prophet: "He who knows himself (*nafsahu*) knows his Lord."[4]

The latter interpretation is no less faithful to the literal meaning than is the exoteric interpretation, and indeed it brings out the whole logical strictness of the formula, though without excluding the application envisaged by the learned men "of the exterior" (*ʿUlamāʾ aẓ-ẓāhir*). In the same way, when the Qurʾān affirms that the creation of the heavens and the earth and all creatures was, for God, like the "creation of a single soul", the exoteric interpretation will at most see here the simultaneity of the whole creation where the esoteric interpretation at the same time also deduces from it the intrinsic unity of the cosmos, which is constituted as a single universal being. At times the Sufi exegesis in a sense reverses the exoteric meaning of the text. Thus, the Divine warnings of destruction and annihilation, which are "from the outside" applied to the damned, are incidentally interpreted as describing the self-examination and extinction of the soul in spiri-

[3] This polyvalence of expression has, further, its analogy in the representational art of "archaic" civilizations where the representation of an object may at the same time designate a concrete object, a general idea, and a universal principle.

[4] This interpretation is further confirmed by the context of the passage quoted from the Qurʾān. Thus, when it is said that on the day of resurrection man will receive an open book: "Read thy book; it sufficeth that thou shouldest this day make up thine own account" (17:14), the Last Judgment is presented as a knowledge of oneself with regard to which man's will is entirely passive.

tual realization. Indeed the point of view proper to the individuality as such and the point of view of transcendent, impersonal intellect may contradict one another by the very fact of their opposition, which is real though not absolute.

Finally there is the exegesis founded on the phonetic symbolism of the Qur'ān. According to this science each letter—i.e. each sound, since Arabic writing is phonetic—corresponds to a determination of primordial and undifferentiated sound, which is itself like the substance of the perpetual Divine enunciation. Modern Europeans have difficulty in conceiving that a sacred text, though clearly linked with certain historical contingencies, corresponds, even in the very form of its sounds, to realities of a supra-individual order. It will therefore be as well to give here a brief summary of the theory of the revelation of the Qur'ān.

According to the "inner meaning" of the *Sūrat al-Qadr* (97) the Qur'ān "descended" as a whole during the "night of predestination" as an undifferentiated state of Divine knowledge and was "fixed", not in the mind of the Prophet, but in his body, i.e. in the mode of consciousness identified with the body, the relatively undifferentiated nature of which is related to pure cosmic potentiality.[5] Always potentiality is "night" because it contains the possibilities of manifestation in a total way. In the same way the state of perfect receptivity—the state of the Prophet when the Qur'ān "descended"—is a "night" into which no distinctive knowledge penetrates: manifestation is here compared to day. This state is also "peace" because of the Divine Presence which comprehends in their immutable plenitude all the first realities of things—all the Divine "commands".

> In truth, We (God) have made it (the Qur'ān) to descend in the night of predestination.

[5] René Guénon wrote thus of the "night of predestination", the *lailatu'l-qadr*, in which the descent (*tanzīl*) of the Qur'ān took place: ". . . This night, according to the commentary of Muḥyī-d-Dīn ibn 'Arabī, is identified with the very body of the Prophet. What should be particularly noted here is that the 'revelation' was received, not in the mind, but in the body of the being entrusted with the mission of expressing the Principle. The Gospel also says: *Et verbum caro factum est* ('And the Word was made flesh') (*caro* and not *mens*) and this is another and a very exact expression, in the form proper to the Christian tradition, of what the *lailatu'l-qadr* represents in the Islamic tradition" (translated from "Les Deux Nuits", in *Études Traditionnelles*, April and May 1939).

> And what shall teach you what is the night of predestination (since reason cannot conceive it)?
> The night of predestination is better than a thousand months (that is, better than an indefinite duration);
> (In that night) the Angels and the Spirit (*ar-Rūḥ*) descend with the permission (or the full authority) of their Lord for every commandment (*amr*) (to regulate all things).
> It is peace, even till the coming of dawn. (Qurʾān, 97)

The state of total knowledge, which was hidden in the "night of predestination" unfathomable by thought, was later translated into words as external events actualized one or another aspect of it, and thus arises the fragmentation of the text into a great many parts and also the repetition, with ever new variations, of the same essential truths which are both simple and rationally inexhaustible. Moreover, this translation into words was made through a cosmic necessity, just as the lightning flashes from supersaturated clouds, and without any discursive elaboration, and this gives the form its direct character not only as regards the mental picture but also in the very sound of the phrases, in which the spiritual power which made them ring out still vibrates.

In order to prevent any misunderstanding, it must again be emphasized that this has no connection with certain modern speculations about an unconscious source from which a psychic impulse arises. What is here called cosmic, in the traditional meaning of that word, in no wise implies the unconscious, at any rate as regards the principle which brings about such a "descent".[6] Moreover, the traditional theory of the revelation of the Qurʾān is in essence the same as that of the revelation of the Veda in Hinduism. The Veda, like the Qurʾān, subsists from all eternity in the Divine Intellect and its "descent" is brought about by virtue of the primordiality of sound. The *rishi*s, like the prophets, received it by inspiration, visual and auditory, and transmitted it just as they had seen and heard it without any mental discrimination on their part.

[6] Revelation is "supernatural" because it is divine, but in another relationship it is also "natural". Even in the sensory domain there are events which, though they are natural, break its "normal" continuity and are like images of revelation. Lightning has already been mentioned; snow also is an image of a divine "descent" that transfigures the world and wipes out its impurities, expressing not so much inspiration as a state of sanctity.

In this connection it may be pertinent to refer to another Hindu theory concerning revelation which can also help us to understand certain characteristics of the Qur'ān. Since the revealed text has for its aim nothing but the knowledge of God, the things of this world which it cites by way of example or parable must be understood according to ordinary experience, that is according to the collective subjectivity of mankind, and not as the objects of a scientific statement.[7]

At first sight metaphysical commentary on the Qur'ān seems to be intellectually superior to the text itself for the simple reason that the language of the Qur'ān is religious in form and so linked to human emotionality and to the anthropomorphism of the imagination, whereas the commentary directly sets forth universal truths. But the exegesis suffers from the disadvantages of abstract expression while the sacred text possesses the advantage of the concrete symbol, that is, the synthetic nature in which a single succinct form includes meanings indefinite in their variety.

Sufi commentators know that the anthropomorphic and, so to say, ingenuous form of the sacred text not only answers to a practical need—that of being accessible to the whole of a human collectivity and so to every man,[8] but also corresponds at the same time to the

[7] For instance, when a sacred book like the Qur'ān mentions the motion of the stars, it does so from a geocentric point of view because this perspective is natural to man and is also directly symbolic inasmuch as man's predestined place is at the center of the cosmos.

[8] "The books revealed as a common law (*shari'ah*) use in speaking of God such expressions that the majority of men grasp their most proximate meaning, whereas the elite understand all their meanings, to wit every meaning implied by each saying according to the rules of the language used" (Muḥyi-d-Dīn ibn 'Arabī in the chapter on Noah of his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*). "The prophets use concrete language because they are addressing the collectivity and rely on the understanding of the wise who hear them. If they speak figuratively it is because of the commonalty and because they know the level of intuition of those who truly understand. . . . All that the prophets brought of sciences is clothed in forms accessible to the most ordinary intellectual capacities in order that he who does not go to the bottom of things should stop at this clothing and take it for all that is most beautiful, whereas the man of subtle understanding, the diver who fishes up the pearls of Wisdom, can indicate why this or that (Divine) Truth should be clothed with such and such a terrestrial form. . . . Since the prophets, the Divine messengers (*rusul*), and their (spiritual) heirs know that in the world and in their communities there are men possessing this intuition they rely in their demonstrations on concrete language, accessible both to the elite and to the commonalty; thus one of the elite draws from it at the same time both what the commonalty draw from it and more besides. . ." (ibid., in the chapter on Moses).

process of Divine Manifestation in the sense that the Divine Spirit loves as it were to clothe Itself in concrete forms that are simple and not discursive; herein lies an aspect of the incommensurability of God, who—as the Qurʾān puts it—"is not ashamed to take a gnat as a symbol".[9] This means that the limitation inherent in the symbol cannot lower Him Who is symbolized: on the contrary, it is precisely in virtue of His perfection—or His infinity—that He is reflected at every possible level of existence by "signs" that are always unique.

According to the Prophet all that is contained in the revealed books is to be found in the Qurʾān and all that is contained in the Qurʾān is summed up in the *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah* ("The opening one") while this is in its turn contained in the formula *bismillāhi-r-Raḥmāni-r-Raḥīm* ("In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful"). This *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah* constitutes the chief text of the ritual prayer; as for the formula, commonly called the *basmalah*, it is the formula of consecration pronounced before every sacred recitation and every ritual act. According to another tradition, generally held to go back to the Caliph ʿAlī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, the *basmalah* is in essence contained in its first letter, *ba*, and this again in its diacritical point, which thus symbolizes principial Unity.

In the conventional translation of the *basmalah* quoted above, the interpretation of the two names *ar-Raḥmān* and *ar-Raḥīm* as "the Compassionate" and "the Merciful" is only approximate as there is no real equivalent. Both names imply the idea of Mercy (*ar-Raḥmah*: *ar-Raḥmān* corresponds to the Mercy which—to use a Qurʾānic expression—"embraces all things", and expresses the plenitude of Being, Its essential bliss, and the universal nature of Its effulgence; *ar-Raḥīm* corresponds to Grace. As *Raḥmān* God manifests Himself through the appearance of the world; as *Raḥīm* He manifests Himself divinely within the world.)

[9] St. Denis the Areopagite writes in the same sense: ". . . If, therefore, in things divine, affirmation is less right and negation more true, it is expedient that we should not seek to set out, in forms analogous to them, those secrets that are wrapped in a holy obscurity for by no means does it abase but rather elevate the celestial beauties to depict them by means which are evidently inexact, since by that we avow that there is a whole world between them and material objects. . . . Further we must remember that nothing of what exists is wholly deprived of a certain beauty: for, as the Truth itself says, all things that were made are essentially good" (*Of the Celestial Hierarchy*). If a symbol and its archetype are incommensurable, there is none the less, as St. Denis explains in another passage, a strict analogy between the former and the latter.

The three Divine Names mentioned in the *basmalah* reflect one might say three "phases" or "dimensions" of the Divine Infinity. The name *Allāh* symbolizes, through its indeterminate character, the Infinite in its absolute transcendence: through His infinity God is "rich in Himself". The name *ar-Raḥmān* expresses "superabundant Infinity" by the very fact that the Infinite does not exclude any possible reality whatever, even Its own apparent limitation; It is the cause of the world; the manifestation of the world is a pure "mercy", for by it God opens Himself out to possibilities of limitation which neither add anything to His Essential Plenitude nor in any way limit it.

The name *ar-Raḥīm* expresses "Immanent Infinity": the world, which seems to limit the Infinite, in reality only limits itself; it could not exclude the Infinite, which descends mysteriously into it and, virtually, reabsorbs it into Its Plenitude. The Divine Infinity necessarily includes this triad of aspects.

The following is a translation of the *sūrat* (*al-Fātiḥah*), which "opens" the Qur'ān:

Praise to God, the Lord of the worlds,
The Compassionate, the Merciful,
The King of the day of Judgment.
It is Thee whom we adore and it is with Thee we seek refuge.
Lead us on the straight way,
The way of those on whom is Thy grace,
Not (that of) those who suffer Thy wrath, nor of those who stray.

The tripartite division is traditional. The first part, as far as the words "The King of the day of Judgment", mentions the chief aspects of the Divinity; the last part, beginning with the words: "Lead us on the straight way", enumerates the fundamental tendencies of man; the verse between these expresses the relation between God and man, which has two aspects: dependence and participation.

By praise (*al-ḥamd*) offered to God the spirit soars, mind takes wing; its starting point may be any earthly object which does not amount to a mere limitation, anything which is not merely a "fact" and nothing more; every positive quality includes a depth of inexhaustible reality; every color, for instance, is both evident and unfathomable in

its essential uniqueness, a uniqueness which reveals the Unique Being, "Lord of the worlds".

Being Itself is effaced before the Infinite and the Infinite is manifested by Being through the two "dimensions" described above, the "static" plenitude of *ar-Raḥmān* and the "dynamically" redemptive and immanent plenitude of *ar-Raḥīm*. Or again, the Bliss-and-Mercy (*ar-Raḥmah*) opens up and completes the creature, whereas Rigor (*al-Jalāl*) which is an expression of the Divine "Majesty" or Transcendence, constricts the creature and makes him powerless.

In the order of the categories of individual existence it is time which manifests the Divine Rigor. Consuming this world and all the beings in it, it recalls to them their "debt" to the Principle of their existence. The totality of time, its full cycle is "the day (for payment) of the debt" (*yawm-ad-dīn*), the words equally signifying "the day of religion", for religion is like the recognition of a debt.[10] The same expression also means "the day of judgment", which is nothing other than the final reintegration of the cycle of time into the timeless. This reintegration can be conceived on different scales according to whether we envisage the end of a man, the end of this world, or the end of the whole manifested universe—for "all things perish save His Face" as the Qurʾān says.

In the timeless the freedom which is but loaned to individual beings returns to its Divine Source; on "that day" God alone is "absolute King": the very essence of "free-will", its unconditioned basis, is thenceforth identified with the Divine Act. In God alone do freedom, action, and truth coincide,[11] and that is why some Sufis say that at the

[10] "Debt" is also one of the meanings of the Latin word *religio*.

[11] Freedom being everywhere what it is, that is, without inner constraint, it may be said that man is free to damn himself, just as he is free to throw himself, if he wishes, into an abyss; but as soon as man passes to action freedom becomes illusory in so far as it goes against truth: to cast oneself voluntarily into an abyss is to deprive oneself by the same act of freedom to act. It is the same for a man of infernal tendency: he becomes the slave of his choice, whereas the man of spiritual tendency rises towards a greater freedom. Again, since the reality of hell is made of illusion—the remoteness from God can only be illusory—hell cannot exist eternally beside Bliss, although it is unable to conceive its own end, this inability being, as it were, the counterfeit of Eternity in the states of damnation. Thus it is not without reason that Sufis have insisted on the relativity of everything created and have affirmed that after an indefinite duration the fires of hell will grow cold; all beings will finally be reabsorbed into God. Whatever modern philosophers may think, there is a contradiction between freedom and the arbitrary;

Last Judgment beings will judge themselves in God; this agrees with the Qurʾānic text which says it is man's members which accuse him.

Man is judged according to his essential tendency; this may be in conformity with the Divine attraction, or opposed to it, or it may be in a state of indecision between the two directions, and these are respectively the ways of "those on whom is Thy grace", of "those who suffer Thy wrath", and of "those who stray", who are dispersed in the indefinitude of existence and may be said to be turning round and round. In speaking of these three tendencies the Prophet drew a cross: the "straight way" is the ascending vertical; the "Divine wrath" acts in the opposite direction, and the dispersion of "those who stray" is in the horizontal direction.

These same fundamental tendencies are to be found in the whole universe; they constitute the ontological dimensions of "height" (*aṭ-ṭūl*), "depth" (*al-ʿumq*), and "breadth" (*al-ʿurḍ*). Hinduism calls these three cosmic tendencies (*guṇas*) *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, *sattva* expressing conformity to the Principle, *rajas* centrifugal dispersion, and *tamas* the fall, not only in a dynamic and cyclical sense, of course, but also in a static and existential sense.[12]

It can equally be said that for man there is only one essential tendency, that which brings him back to his own eternal Essence; all the other tendencies are merely the expression of creaturely ignorance and will moreover be cut off and judged. Asking God to lead us on the straight way is thus nothing but aspiration towards our own pre-temporal Essence. According to the Sufi exegesis the "straight way" (*aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) is the unique Essence of beings, as is indicated by this verse of the *Surat Hūd*: "There is no living creature which He (God) does not hold by its forelock;[13] verily my Lord is on a straight path" (11:56). Thus this prayer corresponds to the essential and fundamental request of every creature; it is granted by the mere fact of its utterance.

man is free to choose what is absurd, but inasmuch as he chooses it he is not free. In the creature freedom and action do not coincide.

[12] If stupidity, error, vice, ugliness, etc., are manifestations of *tamas*, the same is true, on another scale, of matter, weight, darkness, etc., but these categories are then "neutral" and so susceptible to a positive as well as a negative symbolism.

[13] This recalls the Hindu symbolism in which a being is linked to the Principle by the medium of the "solar ray" (*suṣumnā*) passing through the crown of the head.

Man's aspiration towards God includes the two aspects expressed in the verse: "It is Thee whom we adore (or serve) and it is with Thee we seek refuge (or help)." Adoration is the effacing of individual will before the Divine Will which is revealed externally by the sacred Law and inwardly by the movements of Grace. Recourse to Divine help is a participating in the Divine Reality through Grace and, more directly, through Knowledge. Ultimately the words: "It is Thee whom we adore" correspond to "extinction" (*al-fanāʾ*) and the words: "with Thee we seek refuge" to "subsistence" (*al-baqāʾ*) in Pure Being. Thus the verse just mentioned is the "isthmus" or *barzakh* between the two "oceans" of absolute Being and relative existence.[14]

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[14] Cf. the Qurʾānic verses: "(God) produced the two seas which meet; between the two is an isthmus which they do not pass" (55:19-20).