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Chapter 3

SUFISM AND PANTHEISM

All the metaphysical doctrines of the East and some of those of the West have frequently been labeled as pantheistic, but in truth pantheism is only to be found in the case of certain European philosophers and in some Orientals who were influenced by Western thought of the nineteenth century. Pantheism arose from the same mental tendency which produced, first, naturalism and then materialism. Pantheism only conceives of the relationship between the Divine Principle and things from the one point of view of substantial or existential continuity, and this is an error explicitly rejected by every traditional doctrine.

If there were such a continuity by virtue of which God and the manifested universe could be compared as a branch can be compared with the trunk from which it sprang, then this continuity, or (what amounts to the same thing) the substance common to the two terms, would either be determined by some superior principle which differentiated it or would itself be superior to the two terms which it bound together and, in a sense, included: God would then not be God. Now it might he said that God is Himself this continuity, or this Unity, but in that case it would not be conceived of as outside Him, so that He is in reality beyond compare and therefore distinct from everything manifested, but without the possibility of anything being "outside" or "beside" Him.

Now, as Muḥyi-d-Dīn ibn ʿArabī says in his "Epistle on Unity", the *Risālat al-Aḥadīyah*:

> . . . None grasps Him save He Himself. None knows Him but He Himself. . . . He knows Himself by Himself. . . . Other-than-He cannot grasp Him. His impenetrable veil is His own Oneness. Other-than-He does not cloak Him. His veil is His very existence. He is veiled by His Oneness in a manner that cannot be explained. Other-than-He does not see Him; whether prophet, envoy, or perfected saint, or angel near unto Him. His prophet is He Himself. His envoy is He. His message is He. His word is He. He has sent word of His Ipseity

> by Himself, from Himself to Himself, without intermediary or causality other than Himself. . . . Other-than-He has no existence and so cannot bring itself to naught. . . .

Now, if it happens that masters of esotericism make use of the picture of a material continuity in order to express the essential Unity of things, just as when Hindu advaitins compare things to pots of differing form but all made of clay, they are perfectly well aware of the inadequacy of such a picture. Moreover, this quite evident inadequacy excludes the danger of people reading into it anything more than a symbolic allusion. As for the allusion itself, its whole justification is based on the inverse analogy which exists between the essential unity of things—all of them "made of Knowledge"—and their "material" unity, which has nothing to do with any theory of "causality" in the cosmological sense of that word.

Again, it must be added that the contemplative never tends to enclose reality in any single one of its modes—such as substantial continuity—or in any single one of its levels—such as sensory existence or intelligible existence—to the exclusion of others. On the contrary, he recognizes innumerable levels of reality, the hierarchy of which is irreversible, so that one can affirm of the relative that it is in essence one with its principle,[1] or that it "is" its principle, although one cannot say of the principle that it is included in its product. Thus, all beings are God, if considered in their essential reality, but God is not these beings and this, not in the sense that His reality excludes them, but because in the face of His infinity their reality is nil.

The essential Unity (*al-Aḥadīyah*), in which all diversity is "drowned" or "extinguished", is in no wise contradicted by the metaphysical idea of the indefinite number of levels or degrees of existence. On the contrary, these two truths are intimately connected one with the other. This is clear as soon as the Divine Infinity (*al-Kamāl*) is envisaged "through" each of them—inasmuch as the Infinite can be "envisaged". Then—to speak figuratively—the Infinite either "comprises" or "dilates" according to whether it is envisaged in its principial determination, which is Unity, or its cosmic reflection, which is the inexhaustible and indefinite nature of existence.

[1] By the word "principle" is here to be understood the ontological cause, independent of its effects.

This enables us to understand that the Sufi doctrine of Unity (which is strictly analogous, despite the difference in terminology, to the Hindu advaitic doctrine of "Non-Duality"), has no connection with a philosophical "monism", as modern critics of such Sufi *jñānin*s as Ibn ʿArabī or ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī try to pretend. Their opinion is the more astounding since the doctrinal method of these masters consists in bringing out extreme ontological contrasts and envisaging the essential Unity not by rational reduction but by an intuitive integration of paradox.[2]

"Sufism and Pantheism"

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[2] According to the expression of Sahl at-Tustarī: "One knows God by the Union of the contrary (qualities) which relate to Him."