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The Quran and the Sunnah

The great theophany of Islam is the Quran; it presents itself as being a "discernment" (*furqān*) between truth and error.[1] In a sense the whole of the Quran—one of the names of which is indeed *Al-Furqān* ("the Discernment")—is a sort of multiple paraphrase of the fundamental discernment expressed by the *Shahādah;* its whole content is summed up in the words: "Truth hath come and error [*al-bātil*, the empty, or the inconsistent] hath vanished away; lo! error is ever bound to vanish." (Quran, 17: 81.)[2]

Before considering the message of the Quran, we wish to speak about its form and the principles determining that form. An Arab poet once claimed that he could write a book superior to the Quran, disputing its excellence even from the mere standpoint of style. Such a judgement, which is clearly contrary to the traditional thesis of Islam, is explicable in the case of a man who does not know that the excellence of a sacred book is not a priori of a literary order; many indeed are the texts conveying a spiritual meaning in which logical clarity is joined to powerful language or grace of expression without their having on this account a sacred character. That is to say, the sacred Scriptures are not such because of the subject of which they treat or the manner in which they treat it but by reason of their degree of inspiration, or what amounts to the same thing, by virtue of their divine provenance; it is this which determines the content of the book, not the converse. Like the Bible, the Quran may speak of a multitude of things other than God; for example, it speaks of the devil, of the holy war, of the laws of succession and so on without being on that account less sacred, whereas other books may treat of God and of sublime matters without being on that account the Divine Word.

For Moslem orthodoxy the Quran is not only the uncreated Word of God—uncreated though expressing itself through created elements such as words, sounds and letters—but also the model par excel-

1 In this context it is significant that in Islam God Himself is often called *Al-Haqq*, The Truth. The Sufi Al-Hallaj exclaimed: *Ana Al-Haqq*, "I am the Truth," not "I am Love."

2 Or, in another passage: ". . . We (*Allāh*) strike error with Truth that it may be crushed, and lo! error vanisheth away" (21: 18).

lence of the perfection of language. Seen from outside, however, this book appears (apart from approximately the last quarter, the form of which is highly poetic, though it is not poetry) to be a collection of sayings and stories that is more or less incoherent and sometimes incomprehensible at first approach. The reader who is not forewarned, whether he reads the text in translation or in Arabic, runs up against obscurities, repetitions, tautologies and, in most of the long suras, against a certain dryness, unless he has at least the "sensory consolation" of that beauty of sound which emerges from ritual and correctly intoned reading. But such difficulties are to be met with in one degree or another in most sacred Scriptures.[3] The seeming incoherence of these texts[4]—for instance the Song of Songs or certain passages of the Pauline Epistles—always has the same cause, namely the incommensurable disproportion between the Spirit on the one hand and the limited resources of human language on the other: it is as though the poor and coagulated language of mortal man would break under the formidable pressure of the Heavenly Word into a thousand fragments, or as if God, in order to express a thousand truths, had but a dozen words at his disposal and so was compelled to make use of allusions heavy with meaning, of ellipses, abridgements and symbolical syntheses. A sacred Scripture—and let us not forget that for Christianity Scripture includes not only the Gospels but the whole Bible with all its enigmas and seeming scandals—is a totality, a diversified image of Being, diversified and transfigured for the sake of the human recep-

3 There are two principal modes or levels of inspiration—one direct and the other indirect—represented in the case of the New Testament by the sayings of Christ and by the Apocalypse as regards the former mode, and by the stories in the Gospels and by the Epistles as regards the latter. In Judaism this difference is expressed by comparing the inspiration of Moses to a luminous mirror and that of the other prophets to a darkened mirror. Among Hindu sacred books the texts of secondary inspiration (*smriti*) are in general more easily accessible and seem more homogeneous than the Veda, which is directly inspired (*shruti*), and this shows that the immediate intelligibility and readily perceived beauty of a text are in no way criteria of inspiration or of the level of inspiration.

4 It is this "incoherent" surface of the language of the Quran—not the grammar or the syntax—with which the poet mentioned above considered he should find fault. The style of the revealed Books is always normative. Goethe characterized very well the style of sacred texts in his *Westöstlicher Diwan*: "Thy song turns like the vault of heaven; the origin and the end are ever identical."

tacle; it is a light that wishes to make itself visible to clay, or wants to take the form of that clay; or still in other words, it is a truth which since it must address itself to beings made of clay or of ignorance, has no means of expression other than the very substance of the natural error of which our soul is made.[5]

"God speaks tersely," say the Rabbis and this also explains both the bold ellipses, at first sight incomprehensible, and the superimposed levels of meaning found in the Revelations.[6] Moreover—and herein lies a crucial principle—for God the truth lies in the spiritual or social efficacy of the words or the symbol, not in the factual exactitude when this is psychologically inoperative or even harmful; God's first wish is to save, rather than inform, and His concern is with wisdom and immortality, not with outward knowledge, still less with curiosity. Christ called his body "the Temple," which may seem astonishing when one thinks that this term primarily, and to all appearances with better reason, designated a stone building; but the stone Temple was much less than Christ the receptacle of the living God—since Christ had come—and in reality the term "Temple" applied with far more reason to Christ than to the building made by the hands of men; it can even be said that the Temple, whether that of Solomon or that of Herod, was the image of the body of Christ, temporal succession not entering into the matter for God; it is thus that sacred Scriptures at times displace words and even facts in function of a higher truth which eludes men. But it is not merely intrinsic difficulties that are

5 In his *Kitab fihi mā fīh*, Jalal ad-Din Rumi wrote: "The Quran is like a young married woman: even if you try to unveil her she will not show herself to you. If you discuss the Quran you will discover nothing and no joy will come to you. That is because you have tried to pull off the veil and the Quran refuses itself to you; by employing cunning and making itself ugly in your sight and undesirable, it is saying to you: `I am not that which you love.' And it can in this manner show itself under any kind of light." See also *Discourses of Rumi* (Murray, 1961) p. 236. According to the teaching of Saint Augustine and other Fathers, and repeated by Pius XII in his encyclical *Divino Affante*: "God has purposely strewn difficulties throughout the Holy Books He has Himself inspired in order that we may be stimulated to read and study them with greater attention and in order to exercise us in humility by the salutary recognition of the limited capacity of our intelligence."

6 For instance, it is said that the *Bhagavad Gītā* can be read according to seven different threads of meaning. This principle has been mentioned several times in the author's previous works.

found in the revealed Books, there is also the matter of their distance in time and the differences in mentality in different periods, or rather the qualitative inequality of the phases of the human cycle; at the origin of a tradition—whether we are speaking of the age of the Rishis or of that of Muhammad—the language was different from what it is today, the words were not outworn and they then contained infinitely more than we can divine; many things which were evident for the reader of earlier times could be passed over in silence but need to be rendered explicit—not added to—at a later stage.[7]

A sacred text with its seeming contradictions and obscurities is in some ways like a mosaic, or even an anagram; but it suffices to consult the orthodox—thus divinely guided—commentaries in order to find out with what intention a particular affirmation was made and in what respects it is valid, or what the underlying implications are that enable one to connect elements which at first sight appear incongruous. These commentaries sprang from the oral tradition which from the beginning accompanied the Revelation, or else they sprang by inspiration from the same supernatural source; thus their role is not only to intercalate missing, though implicit, parts of the text and to specify in what relationship or in what sense a given thing should be understood, but also to explain the diverse symbolisms, often simultaneous and superimposed one on another. In short, the commentaries providentially form part of the tradition; they are as it were the sap of its continuity, even if their committal to writing or in certain cases their remanifestation after some interruption occurred only at a relatively late date in order to meet the requirements of a particular historical period. "The ink of the learned (in the Law or in the Spirit) is like the blood of the martyrs," said the Prophet, and this indicates the capital part played in every traditional cosmos by orthodox commentaries.[8]

7 We have no wish to devote space here to the deployment of unintelligence in modern "textual criticism", whether it be "psychological" or of some other kind. Suffice it to point out that in our times the devil has not only laid hold on charity, which he seeks to reduce to an atheistical and materialistic altruism, but has also taken hold of the exegesis of Holy Writ.

8 Jalal ad-Din Rumi, in the work quoted above, wrote: "God Most High does not speak to just any man; like the kings of this world He does not speak with any cobbler; He has chosen ministers and deputies. Man accedes to God by going through the intermediaries He has appointed. God Most High has made an election among his creatures

According to the Jewish tradition it is not the literal form of the holy Scriptures which has the force of law, but solely their orthodox commentaries. The Torah is a "closed" book and does not surrender itself; it is the sages who "open" it, for it is in the very nature of the Torah to require from the beginning the commentary of the Mishna. It is said that the Mishna was given out in the Tabernacle, when Joshua transmitted it to the Sanhedrin; by this the Sanhedrin was consecrated and thus instituted by God like the Torah and at the same time. And this is important: the oral commentary, which Moses had received on Sinai and transmitted to Joshua, was in part lost and had to be reconstituted by the sages on the basis of the Torah: this shows very clearly that gnosis includes both a "horizontal" and a "vertical" continuity, or rather that it accompanies the written Law in a manner that is both "horizontal" and continuous and also "vertical" and discontinuous; the secrets are passed from hand to hand, but the spark may at any time leap forth on mere contact with the revealed Text in function of a particular human receptacle and the imponderables of the Holy Spirit. It is also said that God gave the Torah during the daytime and the Mishna by night;[9] and again, that the Torah is infinite in itself whereas the Mishna is inexhaustible through its movement in time. We would add that the Torah is like the ocean which is static and inexhaustible, and the Mischna like a river which is always in motion. *Mutatis mutandis* all this applies to every Revelation and particularly to Islam.

In the case of Islam, or rather as regards its esoterism, the following argument has been made in its favor: ifthere must be authorities for the Faith (*īman*) and the Law (*islām*), there must also be authorities for the Path (*ihsān*), and these latter authorities are none other than the Sufis and their duly qualified representatives. The logical necessity for authorities in this third domain—which the theologians of "the outward" (*'ulamā azh-zhāhir*) are forced to admit, though they cannot

in order that a man may come to Him by going through him whom He has chosen." This passage, which refers to the Prophets, is also applicable to the authorized interpreters of the tradition.

9 Here the reader will recall that Nicodemus came to find Christ by night, and this implies a reference to esoterism or to gnosis.

explain it—is one of the proofs of the legitimacy of Sufism, therefore also of its doctrines and methods as well as of its organizations and masters.

These considerations concerning the sacred Books call for some sort of definition of the epithet "sacred" itself: that is sacred which in the first place is attached to the transcendent order, secondly, possesses the character of absolute certainty and, thirdly, eludes the comprehension and control of the ordinary human mind. Imagine a tree the leaves of which, having no kind of direct knowledge about the root, hold a discussion about whether or not a root exists and what its form is if it does: if a voice then came from the root telling them that the root does exist and what its form is, that message would be sacred. The sacred is the presence of the center in the periphery, of the immutable in the moving; dignity is essentially an expression of it, for in dignity too the center manifests outwardly; the heart is revealed in gestures. The sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into relativities and confers on perishable things a texture of eternity.

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In order to understand the full scope of the Quran we must take into consideration three things: its doctrinal content, which we find made explicit in the great canonical treatises of Islam such as those of Abu Hanifah and At-Tahawi; its narrative content, which depicts all the vicissitudes of the soul; and its divine magic or its mysterious and in a sense miraculous power.[10] These sources of metaphysical and eschatological doctrine, of mystical psychology and theurgic power lie hidden under a veil of breathless utterances, often clashing in shock,

10 Only this power can explain the importance of the recitation of the Quran. In his *Risālat al-Quds*, Ibn `Arabi quotes the case of Sufis who spent their whole life in reading or in ceaselessly reciting the Quran, and this would be inconceivable and even impossible to realize were there not, behind the husk of the literal text, a concrete and active spiritual presence which goes beyond the words and the mind. Moreover it is by virtue of this power of the Quran that certain verses can chase away demons and heal illnesses, given the concurrence of the requisite conditions.

of crystalline and fiery images, but also of passages majestic in rhythm, woven of every fiber of the human condition.

But the supernatural character of this Book lies not only in its doctrinal content, its psychological and mystical truth and its transmuting magic, it also appears in its most outward efficacy, in the miracle of the expansion of Islam; the effects of the Quran in space and time bear no relation to the literary impression which the written words may give to a profane reader. Like every sacred Scripture, the Quran is also a priori a "closed" book, though "open" in another respect, that of the elementary truths of salvation.

It is necessary to distinguish in the Quran between the general excellence of the Divine Word and the particular excellence of a given content which may be superimposed as, for example, when it is a question of God or of His qualities; it is like the distinction between the excellence of gold and that of some masterpiece made from gold. The masterpiece directly manifests the nobility of gold; similarly the nobility of the content of one or another sacred verse expresses the nobility of the Quranic substance, of the Divine Word, which is in itself undifferentiated; it cannot, however, add to the infinite value of that Word. This is also related to the "divine magic," the transforming and sometimes theurgic virtue of the divine discourse to which allusion has already been made.

This magic is closely linked with the actual language of the Revelation, which is Arabic, and so translations are canonically illegitimate and ritually ineffectual. A language is sacred when God has spoken in it;[11] and in order that God should speak in it, it must have certain characteristics such as are not found in any modern language; finally, it is essential to understand that after a certain cyclical period and the hardening of the terrestrial ambience which it comprises, God no

11 From this the reader might conclude that Aramaic is a sacred language since Christ spoke it, but here three reservations must be made; first, in Christianity, as in Buddhism, it is the *Avatāra* himself who is the Revelation so that, apart from their doctrine, the Scriptures have not the central and plenary function which they have in other traditions; secondly, the precise Aramaic words used by Christ have not been preserved, which corroborates what has just been said; thirdly, for Christ himself Hebrew was the sacred language. Though the Talmud affirms that "the Angels do not understand Aramaic," this language has nonetheless a particularly high liturgical value; long before Christ it was "made sacred" by Daniel and Esdras.

longer speaks, at least not as Revealer. In other words, after a certain period, whatever is put forward as new religion is inevitably false;[12] the Middle Ages mark grosso modo the final limit.[13]

Like the world, the Quran is at the same time one and multiple. The world is a multiplicity which disperses and divides; the Quran is a multiplicity which draws together and leads to Unity. The multiplicity of the holy Book—the diversity of its words, aphorisms, images and stories—fills the soul and then absorbs it and imperceptibly transposes it into the climate of serenity and immutability by a sort of "divine ruse."[14] The soul, which is accustomed to the flux of phenomena, yields to this flux without resistance; it lives in phenomena and is by them divided and dispersed—even more than that, it actually becomes what it thinks and does. The revealed Discourse has the virtue of accepting this tendency while reversing its movement thanks to the celestial nature of the content and the language, so that the fishes of the soul swim without distrust and with their habitual rhythm into the divine net.[15] To the degree that it can receive it, the mind must be infused with a consciousness of the metaphysical contrast between "substance" and "accidents"; a mind thus regenerated keeps its thoughts first of all on God and thinks all things in

12 The same can be said of initiatory orders. One can—or rather God can—create a new branch of an ancient lineage or found a congregation of people around a pre-existing initiation; if there is an imperative reason for doing so and if this type of congregation is within the practices of the tradition in question, but in no circumstance has anyone a right to found a "society" having "Self-Realization" as its aim, for the simple reason that such a realization is exclusively the province of the traditional organizations. Even if someone sought to incorporate a genuine initiation into the framework of a "society" or of some kind of "spiritualist" fellowship—thus a profane association—one can be certain that this very framework would wholly paralyze its efficacy and inevitably bring about deviations. Spiritual treasures do not accomodate themselves to just any sort of framework.

13 In fact Islam is the last world religion. As for the Sikh brotherhood, this is an esoterism analogous to that of Kabir, the special position of which is explained by the quite exceptional conditions arising from the contiguity of Hinduism and Sufism; but here too it is a case of a final possibility.

14 In the sense of the Sanskrit term *upāya*.

15 This is true of every sacred Scripture and is notably true of Bible history: the vicissitudes of Israel are those of the soul seeking its Lord. In Christianity this function of "transforming magic" appertains especially to the Psalms.

Him. In other words, through the mosaic of passages, phrases and words, God extinguishes the agitation of the mind by Himself taking on the appearance of mental agitation. The Quran is like an image of everything the human brain can think and feel, and it is by this means that God exhausts human disquiet, infusing into the believer silence, serenity and peace.

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In Islam, as also in Judaism, the Revelation relates essentially to the symbolism of the book: the whole universe is a book whose letters are the cosmic elements—the *dharmas* as Buddhists would say—which, by their innumerable combinations and under the influence of the divine Ideas, produce worlds, beings and things. The words and sentences of the book are the manifestations of the creative possibilities, the words in respect of the content, the sentenses in respect of the container; the sentence is, in effect, like a space —or a duration —comprising a predestined series of compossibles and constituting what may be called a "divine plan." This symbolism of the book is distinguished from that of speech by its static character; speech is situated in duration and implies repetition, whereas books contain affirmations in a mode of simultaneity; in a book there is a certain leveling out, all the letters being similar, and this is moreover highly characteristic of the Islamic perspective. But this perspective, like that of the Torah, also includes the symbolism of speech, which is then identified with the origin; God speaks and His Speech is crystallized in the form of a Book. Clearly this crystallization has its prototype in God, and indeed it can be affirmed that the "Speech" and the "Book" are two sides of pure Being, which is the Principle that both creates and reveals; however, it is said that the Quran is the Word of God, not that the Word proceeds from the Quran or from the Book.

First of all the "Word" is Being as the eternal Act of Beyond-Being, of the Divine Essence;[16] but, taken as the sum of the possibilities of manifestation, Being is the "Book." Then, on the level of Being itself,

16 The *Gottheit* or *Urgrund* of Meister Eckhart's doctrine

the Word, or according to another image the Pen,[17] is the creative Act, while the Book is the creative Substance;[18] here there is a connection with *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata* in the highest sense attributable to these concepts. Finally, on the plane of Existence—or, it could be said, of Manifestation—the Word is the "Divine Spirit", the central and universal Intellect which brings about and perpetuates the miracle of creation, as it were "by delegation"; in this case the Book is the sum of the "crystallized" possibilities, the world of innumerable creatures. The "Word" is then the aspect of "dynamic" simplicity or of simple "act," while the "Book" is the aspect of "static" complexity or differentiated "being."

Or again: it can be said that God created the world like a Book and His Revelation came down into the world in the form of a Book; but man has to hear the Divine Word in Creation and by that Word ascend towards God; God became Book for man and man has to become Word for God; man is a "book" through his microcosmic multiplicity and his state of existential coagulation, whereas God, when envisaged in this context, is pure Word through His metacosmic Unity and His pure principial activity.

In Christianity the place of the "Book" is taken by the "Body" with its two complements of "flesh" and "blood" or "bread" and "wine"; *in divinis* the "Body" is, first, the primary autodetermination of Divinity, and thus the first "crystallization" of the Infinite; next it is Universal Substance, the true "mystical Body" of Christ; and finally it is the world of creatures, the "crystallized" manifestation of this Body.

We have seen that God-as-Being is the Book par excellence, and that, on the plane of Being, the pole Substance is the first reflection of this Book; the Word, which is its dynamic complement, then becomes the Pen, the vertical axis of creation. In contradistinction, man too has an aspect of Word represented by his name; God created man in naming him; the soul is a Word of the Creator when envisaged from the aspect of its simplicity or its unity.

17 See also the chapter "*An-Nūr*" in the author's book *Dimensions of Islam*.

18 According to Hindu doctrine this is the Divine *Prakriti*.

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The most obvious content of the Quran consists not of doctrinal expositions, but of historical and symbolical narratives and eschatological imagery; the pure doctrine emerges from these two sorts of pictures in which it is enshrined. Setting aside the majesty of the Arabic text and its quasi- magical resonances, a reader could well become wearied of the content did he not know that it concerns ourselves in a quite concrete and direct way, since the "disbelievers" (the *kāfirūn*), and "associaters" of false divinities with God (the *mushrikūn*) and the hypocrites (the *munāfiqūn*) are within ourselves; likewise that the Prophets represent our intellect and our consciousness, that all the tales in the Quran are enacted almost daily in our souls, that Mecca is our heart and that the tithe, the fast, the pilgrimage and the holy war are so many contemplative attitudes.

Running parallel with this interpretation there is another which concerns the phenomena of the world around us. The Quran is the world, both outside and within us, and always connected to God in the two respects of origin and end; but this world, or these two worlds, show fissures harbingers of death or destruction or, to be more precise, transformation, and this is what the apocalyptic and eschatological suras teach us; everything that concerns the world also concerns us, and conversely. These suras transmit to us a multiple and striking image of the fragility both of our earthly condition and of matter, then of the destined reabsorption of space and of the elements into the invisible substance of the causal "protocosm"; this is the collapse of the visible world into the immaterial—a collapse, to paraphrase Saint Augustine, "inwards" or "upwards"; it is also the confronting of creatures, torn away from the earth, with the dazzling reality of the Infinite.

By its "surfaces" the Quran presents a cosmology which treats of phenomena and their final end, and by its "pinnacles," a metaphysic of the Real and the unreal.

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Not surprisingly, the imagery of the Quran is inspired above all by conflict; Islam was born in an atmosphere of conflict and the soul in search of God must fight. Islam did not invent strife; the world is a constant disequilibrium, for to live means to struggle. But this struggle is only one aspect of the world and it vanishes with the level to which it belongs; hence the whole of the Quran is suffused with a tone of powerful serenity. In psychological terms it could be said that the combative aspect of the Moslem is counterbalanced by his fatalism; in the spiritual life the "holy war" of the spirit against the seducing soul (*an-nafs al-ammārah*) is transcended and transfigured by peace in God, by consciousness of the Absolute; it is as if in the last analysis it were no longer we who are fighting, and this brings us back to the symbiosis of "combat and knowledge" in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and also to certain aspects of the knightly arts in Zen. The practice of Islam, at whatever level, is to repose in effort; Islam is the way of equilibrium and of light which comes to rest upon that equilibrium.

Equilibrium is the link between disequilibrium and union, just as union is the link between equilibrium and unity, which is the "vertical" dimension. Disequilibrium and equilibrium, lack of rhythm and rhythm, separation and union, division and unity: such are the great themes of the Quran and of Islam. Everything in being and in becoming is envisaged in terms of Unity and its gradations, or the mystery of its negation.

For the Christian, what is necessary for coming to God is "unreservedly to renounce oneself," as Saint John of the Cross put it; thus the Christian is astonished to hear from the Moslem that the key to salvation is to believe that God is One; what he cannot know straightaway is that everything depends on the quality—on the "sincerity" (*ikhlās*)—of this belief; what saves is the purity or the totality of the belief, and that totality clearly implies the loss of self, whatever the form in which this is expressed.

As for the negation of the Christian Trinity in the Quran—and this negation is extrinsic and conditional—we must take account of certain shades of meaning. The Trinity can be envisaged according to a "vertical" perspective or according to either of two "horizontal" perspectives, one of them being supreme and the other not. The "vertical" perspective—Beyond-Being, Being and Existence—envisages the hypostases as "descending" from Unity or from the Absolute, or from the Essence it could be said, which means that it envisages the

degrees of Reality; the supreme "horizontal" perspective corresponds to the Vedantic triad *Sat* (supraontological Reality), *Chit* (absolute Consciousness) and *Ānanda* (infinite Beatitude), which means that it envisages the Trinity inasmuch as It is hidden in Unity;[19] the non-supreme "horizontal" perspective on the contrary situates Unity as an essence hidden within the Trinity, which is then ontological and represents the three fundamental aspects or modes of Pure Being, whence the triad: Being-Wisdom-Will (Father-Son-Spirit). Now the concept of a Trinity seen as a deployment (*tajallī*) of Unity or of the Absolute is in no way opposed to the unitary doctrine of Islam; what is opposed to it is solely the attribution of absoluteness to the Trinity alone, or even to the ontological Trinity alone, as it is envisaged exoterically. This last point of view does not, strictly speaking, attain to the Absolute and this is as much as to say that it attributes an absolute character to what is relative and ignores *Māyā* and the degrees of reality or of illusion; it does not conceive of the metaphysical—but not pantheistic[20]—identity between manifestation and the Principle; still less, therefore, does it conceive of the consequence this identity implies from the point of view of the intellect and the knowledge which delivers.

Here comment is called for on the subject of the "disbelievers", the *kāfirūn*, namely those who according to the Quran do not belong, as do Jews and Christians, to the category of "people of the Book" (*ahl al-Kitāb*). If the religion of these "disbelievers" is false, or if disbelievers are such because their religion is false, why have Sufis declared that God can be present, not only in churches and synagogues, but also in the temples of idolaters? It is because in the "classical" and "traditional" cases of paganism the loss of the full truth and of efficacy for salvation essentially results from a profound modification in the mentality of the worshipers and not from the possible falsity of the symbols; in all the religions which surrounded each of the three Semitic forms of monotheism, as also in those forms of "fetishism"[21] still alive today, a

19 The Absolute is not the Absolute inasmuch as it contains aspects, but inasmuch as It transcends them; inasmuch as It is Trinity It is therefore not Absolute.

20 Not pantheistic since it is in no sense "material," nor even "substantial" in the cosmological sense of that term.

21 This word is here used only as a conventional sign to designate decadent traditions, and there is no intention of pronouncing on the value of any particular African or

mentality once contemplative and hence in possession of a sense of the metaphysical transparency of forms had ended by becoming passional, worldly[22] and strictly speaking superstitious.[23] The symbol through which the reality symbolized was originally clearly perceived—a reality of which it is rigorously speaking an aspect—became in fact an opaque and uncomprehended image, thus an idol, and this decadence of the general mentality could not fail in its turn to react on the tradition itself, enfeebling it and falsifying it in various ways; most of the ancient paganisms were characterized by an ecstasy of power and sensuality. There is, assuredly, a personal paganism to be met with even within those religions which are objectively living, just as conversely truth and piety may be actualized in a religion which is objectively decadent, in which case however the integrity of its symbolism is to be presumed. But it would be completely mistaken to believe that any of the great world religions alive today could in its turn become pagan; they have not the time to become so, and their sufficient reason is in a sense that they should endure till the end of the world. That is why they are formally guaranteed by their founders, which is not the case with the great paganisms that have disappeared; these had no human founders and their perennial subsistence was conditional. The primordial perspectives are "spatial" and not "temporal"; Hinduism alone of all the great traditions of the primordial type has had the possibility of being renewed through the ages thanks to its *Avatāras*.[24] In any case

Melanesian tradition.

22 According to the Quran, the *kāfir* is in effect characterized by his "worldliness," that is, by his preference for the good things of this world and his inadvertance (*ghaflah*) as regards those lying beyond this world.

23 According to the Gospels, the pagans imagine they will be answered "for their much speaking." At root, "superstition" consists in the illusion of taking the means for the end or of worshiping forms for their own sake and not for their transcendent content.

24 Moreover nothing prevents the possibility of other branches of the primordial tradition—of "hyperborean" or "Atlantean" affiliation—from having also survived on the fringes of history, though this could not be so in the case of the great traditions of urbanized peoples. Apart from this, when speaking of paganism—and we are adopting this conventional term without regard either to its etymology or its unpleasant associations, which chiefly arise from abuses—there is doubtless always need to make a reservation as regards a sapiential esoterism inaccessible to the majority and in fact incapable of acting upon that majority.

our intention here is not to enter into details but simply to make it clear why, from the point of view of some Sufi, it is not Apollo who is false but the way of regarding him.[25]

But to return to the "people of the Book." If the Quran contains elements of polemic concerning Christianity and, for stronger reasons, concerning Judaism, it is because Islam came after these religions, and this means that it was obliged—and there is always a point of view which allows of its doing so—to put itself forward as an improvement on what came before it. In other words the Quran enunciates a perspective which makes it possible to go beyond certain formal aspects of the two more ancient monotheisms. Something analogous can be seen, not only in the position of Christianity in relation to Judaism—where the point is self-evident by reason of the messianic idea and the fact that the former is like a "bhaktic" esoterism of the latter—but also in the attitude of Buddhism towards Brahmanism; here too the later appearance in time coincides with a perspective that is symbolically, though not intrinsically, superior. The tradition that is apparently being superseded clearly has no need to take account of this fact, since each perspective is a universe unto itself—thus a center and a standard—and since in its own way it contains all valid points of view. By the logic of things the later tradition is "condemned" to the symbolical attitude of superiority,[26] on pain of non-existence one might almost say. But there is also a positive symbolism of anteriority and in this respect the new tradition, which is from its own point of view the final one, must incarnate "what came before," or "what has always existed"; its novelty—or glory—is consequently its absolute "anteriority."

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25 Thus also how he was represented, as is proven by "classical" art.

26 This attitude is necessarily legitimate from a certain angle and at a certain level and is explained, in the field of Monotheism, by the fact that the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions correspond respectively to the paths of "action," "love" and "knowledge" to the extent that they can, as exoterisms, do so and without prejudice to their most profound content.

Pure intellect is the "immanent Quran"; the uncreated Quran—the Logos—is the Divine Intellect, which crystallizes in the form of the earthly Quran and answers "objectively" to that other immanent and "subjective" revelation which is the human intellect.[27] In Christian terms it could be said that Christ is like the "objectification" of the intellect and the intellect is like the "subjective" and permanent revelation of Christ. Thus there are two poles for the manifestation of Divine Wisdom and they are: firstly, the Revelation "above us" and secondly the intellect "within us"; the Revelation provides the symbols while the intellect deciphers them and "recollects" their content, thereby again becoming "conscious" of its own substance. Revelation is a deployment and intellect a concentration; the descent coincides with the ascent.

But there is another *haqīqah* [truth] on which we should wish to touch at this point, and it is this: in the sensory order the Divine Presence has two symbols or vehicles—or two natural "manifestations"—of primary importance: the heart within us, which is our center, and the air around us, which we breathe. Air is the manifestation of ether, the weaver of forms, and it is at the same time the vehicle of light, which also makes manifest the element ether.[28] When we breathe, the air penetrates us, and symbolically it is as though it introduced into us the creative ether together with light; we breathe in the Universal Presence of God. There is also a connection between light and coolness, for the sensation of both is liberating; what is light outwardly is coolness inwardly. We inhale luminous, cool air and our respiration is a prayer, as is the beating of our heart; the luminosity relates to the Intellect and the freshness to pure Being.[29] The world is a fabric woven of threads of ether; into it we and all other creatures are woven. All sensory things come forth from ether, which contains

27 It is "subjective" because empirically it is within us. The term "subjective," as applied to the intellect, is as improper as the epithet "human"; in both cases, the terms are used simply in order to define the way of approach.

28 The Greeks left the element ether unmentioned, no doubt because they conceived it as being hidden in the air, which is also invisible. In Hebrew the word *avir* designates both air and ether: the word *aor* has the same root and means "light."

29 In Islam it is taught that at the end of time light will become separated from heat, and heat will be hell whereas light will be Paradise; the light of heaven is cool and the heat of hell dark.

all; everything is ether crystallized. The world is an immense carpet; we possess the whole world in each breath because we breathe the ether from which all things are made,[30] and we "are" ether. Just as the world is an immeasurable carpet in which everything is repeated within the rhythm of continual change, or again, in which everything remains similar within the framework of the law of differentiation, so too the Quran—and with it the whole of Islam—is a carpet or fabric, in which the center is everywhere repeated in an infinitely varied way and in which the diversity is but a development of the unity. The universal "ether," of which the physical element is only a distant and grosser reflection, is none other than the divine Word which is everywhere "being" and "consciousness" and everywhere "creative" and "liberating" or "revealing" and "illuminating".

The nature which surrounds us—sun, moon, stars, day and night, the seasons, the waters, mountains, forests and flowers—is a kind of primoridal Revelation; now these three things—nature, light and breath—are profoundly linked with one another. Breathing should be linked with the remembrance of God; we should breathe with reverence, with the heart so to speak. It is said that the Spirit of God—the Divine Breath—was "over the waters" and that it was by breathing into it that God created the soul, as it is also said that man, who is "born of the Spirit," is like the wind; "thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth."

It is significant that Islam is defined in the Quran as an "expansion (*inshirah*) of the breast," that it is said, for example, that God "hath expanded our breast for Islam"; the connection between the Islamic perspective and the initiatory meaning of breathing and also of the heart is a key of the first importance for understanding the Sufic arcanum. It is true that by the very force of things the same path also opens out onto universal gnosis.

The "remembrance of God" is like breathing deeply in the solitude of high mountains: here the morning air, filled with the purity of the eternal snows, dilates the breast; it becomes space and heaven enters our heart.

30 This is a symbolic manner of speech, for ether being perfect plenitude is motionless and could not move.

But this image includes yet a more differenciated symbolism, that of the "universal breath": here expiration relates to cosmic manifestation or the creative phase and inspiration to reintegration, to the phase of salvation or the return to God.

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One reason why Westerners have difficulty in appreciating the Quran and have even many times questioned whether this book contains the premises of a spiritual life[31] lies in the fact that they look in a text for a meaning that is fully expressed and immediately intelligible, whereas Semites, and Eastern peoples in general, are lovers of verbal symbolism and read "in depth." The revealed phrase is for them an array of symbols from which more and more flashes of light shoot forth the further the reader penetrates into the spiritual geometry of the words: the words are reference points for a doctrine that is inexhaustible; the implicit meaning is everything, and the obscurities of the literal meaning are so many veils marking the majesty of the content.[32] But, even without taking into consideration the sibylline structure of many sacred sentences, we can say that the Oriental draws much from a few words: when, for example, the Quran recalls that "the world beyond is better for you than this lower world" or that "earthly life is but a play" or affirms: "In your wives and your children ye have an enemy" or: "Say: *Allāh*! then leave them to their vain talk"—or finally when it promises Paradise to "him who has feared the station of his Lord and refused desire to his soul"—when the Quran speaks thus, there emerges for the Moslem[33] a whole ascetic and mystical doctrine, as penetrating and as complete as any other form of spirituality worthy of the name.

31 Louis Massignon answers this question in the affirmative.

32 This is the way the Bible was read in the Middle Ages—following the footsteps of Antiquity. The denial of the hermeneutical interpretation, which was the bulwark of traditional and integral intellectuality, inevitably led in the end to the "criticism"—and destruction—of the sacred Texts; for instance there is nothing left of the Song of Songs once only the literal meaning is accepted.

33 Note that we say "for the Moslem," not "for every Moslem."

Man alone has the gift of speech, for he alone among all the creatures of this earth is "made in the image of God" in a direct and total manner. And since it is by virtue of this likeness—provided it is actualized by appropriate means—that man is saved, thus by virtue of the objective intelligence[34] associated with free will and truthful speech, whether articulated or not, it is easy to understand the capital part played in the life of the Moslem by those sublime words which are the verses of the Quran; they are not merely sentences which transmit thoughts, but are in a way beings, powers or talismans. The soul of the Moslem is as it were woven of sacred formulas; in these he works, in these he rests, in these he lives and in these he dies.

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34 It was the objectivity of human intelligence which enabled Adam to "name" all things and all creatures; in other words it is this objectivity which enables man to know objects, plants and animals, whereas they do not know him. But the highest content of this intelligence is the Absolute; to be able to compass the greater is to be able to compass the lesser, and it is because man can know God that he knows the world. After its own fashion human intelligence is a proof of God.