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Chapter 13

The Vocation of Man According to the Koran

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Introduction

Today we often hear questions such as "Where do we come from?" or "What, if any, is the meaning of life?" Questioning of this kind is typical of Western Man, by which I mean people of modern Western societies, because Medieval Man, the Christians of the Middle Ages, did not ask themselves such things—any more than do contemporary believers, whether they be Christians, Jews, Muslims or, to go farther afield, Hindus, Buddhists or even animists.

All religions have, in fact, answered these fundamental questions in a peremptory way. Their responses have differed so greatly, some people would argue, that they have given rise to wars of religion. Moreover, under these conditions, how can we know what the truth is, or who is right?

This dilemma has not held any ambiguity for me for a very long time, ever since I grasped and tasted, beyond any difference in form and ritual, that which the present-day philosopher Frithjof Schuon has so justly called "the transcendent unity of religions."[1] In this paper, however, without taking a position on the subject, I will content myself with presenting, as clearly, accurately and objectively as possible, the point of view of Islam on the meaning of our destiny.

The following exposition will be based on facts drawn from the Koran and sometimes completed by quotations—*hadîth*—from the prophet Muhammad. This is to say that it will never reflect person-

1. Title of a work by Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions,* Gallimard, Paris, 1946, Collection "Tradition". It was subsequently republished several times, both in the original French and in English translation.

al opinions, but rather the doctrine of Islamic scholars and legal experts, as well as the belief of the ordinary faithful, both of which are founded on adherence to two certainties: that the Koran is the Book of God, and that Muhammad is the Messenger who was chosen to spread the Book's truth.

The Koran

It was in the year 610 of the Christian Era (the Era of the Hegira would not begin until twelve years later), that Muhammad at age forty—the age of prophecy—received the first revelations of the Book of God, *Kitâb Allâh,* which is the most excellent reading and recitation: *al-Qur'ân.*

Here, then, is the account of this important event that was the first descent of the Koran, a narration that was compiled from the earliest and most authentic sources by the British scholar Martin Lings, whose biography of Muhammad I had the privilege of translating into French, and which was published at the beginning of 1986.

It must be remembered that Muhammad, predisposed since childhood to an intense contemplative life, often withdrew to solitary places to pray and call upon the one true God (contrary to the great majority of Arabs of the time, who had little by little deviated from the cult of Abraham toward idolatry). One of his favorite places of meditation was the cave of Hirâ, situated on the side of a mountain that juts out over Mecca. Here, then, is the account:

> Ramadan was the month that was traditionally set aside as a time of retreat, and it was one night at the end of the month, during his fortieth year, when Muhammad was alone in the cave, that an Angel came to him in the form of a man. "Read!" the Angel commanded him; to which he replied, "I cannot read!" Whereupon, as he himself related, "The Angel seized me and grasped me tightly in his arms until I was unable to endure it any longer. Then he loosed his embrace and told me 'Read!' 'I cannot read,' I answered again, and he grasped me once more until I could endure it no longer; thereupon he let go of me and said a third time, 'Read!' and I repeated my answer, 'I cannot read!' Once again he clasped me as before and then freed me and said:
>
> 'Read: In the name of thy Lord who createth,
> Createth man from a clot.
> Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous,

> Who teacheth by the pen,
> Teacheth man that which he knew not'."
> (XCVI, 1-5)[2]

> The Angel left immediately, and Muhammad recited the same words after he had gone. "It was as if these words had been written on my heart," he would later say; but he was afraid that what had taken place meant that he had to go back to the valley. When he was half-way down the slope he heard a voice above him that said, "Oh Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God, and I am Gabriel." Lifting his eyes to the sky, he recognized his visitor, whose angelic nature at that moment manifested itself with unmistakable clarity, filling the horizon. The Angel again said, "Oh Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God, and I am Gabriel." The Prophet watched the Angel without moving; then he turned away, but in whichever direction he looked, whether to the north, south, east or west, the Angel was there, blocking the horizon. Finally the Angel disappeared, and the Prophet descended the mountain and returned home.[3]

And it was thus that, little by little, over a period of twenty-two years—twelve of which were spent in Mecca and ten in Medina—from the year 1 of the Hegira (622 AD.) until the death of the Prophet (632 A.D.), the entire Book was revealed to Muhammad through Gabriel as intermediary, and was retained in the memory of men, transcribed at first on bones and skins in order later to be transmitted practically *ne varietur* in its original language, Arabic, across more than thirteen centuries.

The Creation

> Read: In the name of thy Lord who createth,
> Createth man from a clot. (XCVI, 1-2)

These two verses, which were the first ones revealed in the Koran, set the tone of the Sacred Book. They immediately evoke the

2. All Koranic quotations are from *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation,* trans. Marmaduke Pickthall, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1948, 2nd edn.
3. M. Lings, *Le Prophète Muhammad,* Seuil, Paris, 1986, pp. 57-58. Originally published as *Muhammad, His Life Based on the Earliest Sources,* Islamic Texts Society Allen & Unwin, London, 1983.

directing will of the Lord, creator of the world and man, who descends bringing a new message to his human creation.

But how is creation itself to be explained? Does it have a reason for being or a finality? These questions are answered in the Koran and in the prophetic tradition.

One verse of the Koran is particularly explicit. It says:

> I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship me. (LI, 56)

Hadîth are quotations from the Prophet that consist mostly of simple statements, words of advice, or narratives directly related by Muhammad. However, the *hadîth qudsî* are veritable inspirations in which God Himself speaks through the tongue of his Prophet. One of the *hadîth qudsî,* which is very often quoted, particularly in mystical treatises, says:

> I was a hidden treasure, I wanted to be known and I created the creatures.

The will to be worshiped, to be known: these two "desires" of God are at the center of our research at present, at the center of an interaction between God and man, and man and God, that explains and justifies our presence on earth, and, as we shall see, sheds light on many aspects of the human condition that at first seem obscure.

Let us return, then, to the previously cited verse on the creation, which says that God created jinn and men only that they might worship him. The last verb, "to worship", is formed from the triliteral root *'a-b-d,* as are the derivations *'ibâda* ("worship") and especially *'abd* ("servant"), and *'âbid* ("slave"); all are key words and are among the most frequently found in the Koran. Who, moreover, does not know the word *'abd,* which figures among such compound first names as Abdallah, Abdelkarim, Abdelkader, and so on. Abdallah is the most common of these names; it means "the worshiper", "the servant" or even "the slave of God"; all of these meanings are equally valid. In the other compounds such as Abdelkader, Abdelkarim, etc. the name Allâh, that of the unqualified Divinity Himself, is replaced by one of His more than one hundred other names, which are those of His attributes, such as Severity or Forgiveness, Beauty or Majesty, attributes that deserve to be glorified and venerated by all creatures. It must be emphasized that the first name Abdallah, which is so widespread, is not only that of the Prophet Muhammad

himself, but is also that of each prophet. In the Koran, for example, the young Jesus, when speaking to the men who surround Mary, cries out, "Lo! I am the slave of Allâh *('abd-Allâh)*. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet" (XIX, 30).

Abdallah is, in fact, the true name of each human being. Thus the preacher who addresses the faithful from high up in his pulpit, before prayers every Friday, begins his sermon with the words, "Oh servants of God! (*Yâ 'ibâd-Allâh)" ('ibâd* is the plural of *'abd*).

What then is meant or implied by the condition of being the servant of God, of having the status of servitude? There are two modes of servitude to be considered. On the one hand, there is a passive means, a state of existential worship that is submitted to, a total and absolute constraint that is exerted on all creatures; in this sense, the rocks themselves, the trees, and the animals are the servants and slaves of God. On the other hand, there is also an active means of servitude: it is conscious adoration, worship that is voluntarily offered by the being that recognizes its place in the universe and renders thanks to the Supreme Artisan. Only man is capable of this active mode of worship, and he is obligated to it by the very nature of his unique and privileged position.

Another notion that is very close to that of *'abd* is when a man is described as being *faqîr,* or "poor". This Koranic idea is expressed, *inter alia,* in the verse that declares "Allâh is the Rich, and ye are the Poor" (XLVII, 38). Like the condition of servitude, the state of poverty, i.e. of extreme dependence on the Dispenser of all good, can either be passively submitted to or actively recognized and accepted, in which case man returns what he has to God and strips himself of all pretension to self-sufficiency. This attitude, according to the teachings of the Koran, is the supreme act of worship, which makes a man a true believer (*mu'min*) and a true Muslim (*muslim*): "They are the (true) believers whose hearts feel fear when Allâh is mentioned, and when the revelations of Allâh are recited unto them they increase their faith, and who trust in their Lord" (VIII, 2).

Why is only man called to this conscious and active form of worship? One answer is that it is because he is the culmination, the completion of the creative work, because it is to him that the principle of *noblesse oblige* applies in its full right. "Surely we have created man of the best stature," says a verse of the Koran (XCV, 4), and another adds: "Allâh it is Who . . . fashioned you and perfected your

shapes" (XL, 64). Finally, in the words of the Prophet, man has been created "in the image of God" *('alâ sûrati-Allâh)*. Let us now turn our attention to this form that is so beautiful that it resembles the Divine.

Externally, man is endowed with five senses that give him the ability to:

see the blessings of God, His signs, and His reflection "on the horizons" (according to a Koranic expression, XLI, 53);

hear the song of creation, for "All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Him" (LIX, 24 *et passim*);

smell the scent of flowers, symbol of the invisible presence of the Creator within his work;

taste the fruits of His generosity: the dates, pomegranates, figs and grapes that, even after the Fall, have retained the taste of Paradise;

touch, so that he may know her whom God has given him as a companion.

Man is also endowed with inner faculties, which permit him to enter into contact not only with visible things and beings, but also with the Invisible, with the hidden face of things. They are the memory, the imagination, the will, the reasoning mind and, above all, the spirit *(rûh),* which God has breathed into him. Spirit is also intellect *('aql),* direct and intuitive intelligence that is able to grasp the deeper nature of things and beings without passing through the reasoning process.

Finally, man is endowed with the faculty of speech, which makes him fundamentally different from all other beings in the animal kingdom.

The exceptional nature of man, which is destined to be the very mirror of the Divine, also explains the marked anthropocentrism of the Koranic message:

> He it is who created for you all that is on the earth. (II, 29)
>
> He it is who hath appointed for you the night that ye should rest therein and the day giving sight. (X, 68)
>
> And after that [after the creation of the vault of heaven, *samk*] He spread the earth And produced therefrom the water thereof and the pasture thereof, And He made fast the hills, A provision for you and for your cattle. (LXXIX, 30-33)

Plants—grapevines, vegetables, olive and palm trees, gardens and various fruits—have been put on earth so that man can take his sustenance and create remedies from them (II, 2).

God has made subject to man:

- the animals, so that he may drink their milk, ride them, use them for transporting his goods, make his clothes from them, eat them for his nourishment, and admire them in the morning when they go out to their pasture, or in the evening, when they come back from it (XVI, 6);
- the stars, that he may use their paths to find direction at night and to measure time (VI, 97);
- the earth, that it may be a stable dwelling-place *(qarâr)* (XL, 64) and a restful bed *(firâch)* for him (II, 22);
- the sea, "that ye eat fresh meat from thence, and bring forth from thence ornaments which ye wear" (XVI, 14);
- ships, so that man may voyage on the sea (XIV, 32).

Man the Caliph

Placed at the center of creation, man has been designated by God to be his lieutenant, his "caliph *(khalîfa)* on earth," in the terms of the Koran (II, 30). The office is a distinguished one, to the point of giving man a status superior to that of the angels, whose bodies are pure light and whose sole mission is to glorify the Lord by revolving around the divine throne. In order that he might exercise his earthly magistracy, God taught man the names of all things, names which man then passed on to the angels; afterwards He ordered the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam.

Was this primordial man going to remain faithful to the mission that had been entrusted to him? Alas, no: "Everyone that is thereon [on earth] will pass away" (LV, 26). And since perfection only belongs to God, even an image of God can become tarnished.

It must be admitted that a certain risk of estrangement existed between the creature and its Originator, due to the fact that man had been made of water, clay, semen and blood, and that spirit had been breathed into coarse matter. From that moment on, a composite form existed, its hybrid nature (not yet beast and angel, as

Pascal would say, but at least earth and angel) containing the potentiality for both destabilization and corruption.

This is why the Koran contains warnings such as: "Man is made of haste" (XXI, 37); or again, that he has been created as "weak" (IV, 28), "anxious" (LXX, 19), "in affliction" (XC, 4), and "ever thankless (*kâfura*)" (XVII, 67).

There are, therefore, imperfections in the painting, and in spite of his deiform nature, man has degenerated. This is what is known as the Fall in biblical terms, and it is an event that is related in several passages of the Koran; for example:

> And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to place a viceroy in the earth, they said: Wilt Thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee? He said: Surely I know that which ye know not.
>
> And he taught Adam all the names then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform me of the names of these, if ye are truthful.
>
> They said: Be glorified! We have no knowledge saving that which Thou has taught us. Lo! Thou, only thou, art the Knower, the Wise.
>
> He said: O Adam! Inform them of their names, and when he had informed them of their names, He said: Did I not tell you that I know the secret of the heavens and the earth? And I know that which ye disclose and which ye hide.
>
> And when We said unto the angels: Prostrate yourselves before Adam, they fell prostrate, all save Iblîs. He demurred through pride, and so became a disbeliever.
>
> And We said: O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and eat ye freely (of the fruits) thereof where ye will; but come not nigh this tree lest ye become wrongdoers.
>
> But Satan caused them to deflect therefrom and expelled them from the (happy) state in which they were; and We said: Fall down, one of you a foe unto the other! There shall be for you on earth a habitation and provision for a time.
>
> Then Adam received from his Lord words (of revelation), and He relented toward him. Lo! He is the Relenting, the Merciful.
>
> We said: Go down, all of you, from hence; but verily there cometh unto you from Me a guidance; and whoso followeth My

> guidance, there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. (II, 30-38)

It will be noticed in this passage that Eve is not shown as having induced Adam into temptation; Satan, however, caused both of them to "deflect". The same thing occurs in another chapter of the Koran, in which the same event is related in a slightly different way and, in particular, the nature of the temptation is made more explicit:

> And verily We made a covenant of old with Adam, but he forgot, and We found no constancy in him.
>
> And when We said unto the angels: Fall prostrate before Adam, they fell prostrate (all) save Iblîs; he refused.
>
> Therefore We said: O Adam! This is an enemy unto thee and thy wife, so let him not drive you both out of the Garden so that thou come to toil.
>
> It is (vouchsafed) unto thee that thou hungerest not therein nor art naked.
>
> And that thou thirsteth not therein nor art exposed to the sun's heat.
>
> But the devil whispered to him, saying: O Adam! Shall I show thee the tree of immortality and power that wasteth not away?
>
> Then they twain ate thereof, so that their shame became apparent unto them, and they began to hide by heaping on themselves some of the leaves of the Garden. And Adam disobeyed his Lord, so went astray.
>
> Then his Lord chose him, and relented toward him, and guided him. (XX, 115-122)

What is particularly important in this account is the existence of a pact *('ahd)* that God had made with Adam and that the latter had forgotten.

Such a pact was in fact concluded with all men even before they came into existence. It was the "primordial" pact or Covenant that was made in pre-eternity when all souls were, as the Koran says, "within the loins of Adam." At that time God had asked them: "Am I not your Lord?" They said: "Yea, verily. We testify" (VII, 172).

In the primordial state, that is to say in conditions of existence like those in the Garden of Eden, man stayed faithful to his pact and worshiped without fault, overwhelmed with and grateful for the

blessings of his Lord, whom he praised unceasingly. Various traditions call this time the Golden Age.

However, Adam's sin broke apart this primary state, and from that point on he was to be exposed to the constant seduction of evil: in other words, of his own soul, which whispers to him to devote himself to the illusory and ephemeral goods of the world as if they were destined to endure, and which wants him to give up what he already has in order to obtain uncertain benefits.

But God, who created man to be his regent on earth, pardoned and "came back to" Adam and gave him "a guidance," capable of abolishing fear and sadness for those who would follow it, for him to use among the greater hardships of his new earthly existence. From that time on, as humankind increased in number, spread over the earth's surface and split up into different races and tribes, God would send guides and messengers—angels, prophets, and saints—through whom he would renew His original pact with man. In the words of the Koran, "And when We exacted a covenant from the Prophets, and from thee (O Muhammad) and from Noah and Abraham and Moses and Jesus son of Mary. We took from them a solemn covenant (*mithâgan ghaliza*)" (XXXIII, 7).

In many passages the Koran reminds us that in the course of human history there is not a single nation that has not received its alliance and its messenger. With the coming of the latest of these messages—the Koran—the earlier religions, especially those of the "people of the Book" (Jews and Christians) were confirmed as being expressions of the one Truth, while at the same time a new union was proposed to mankind: Islam.

What makes a Man a *Muslim?*

He must believe in one God, who is all-powerful and is the creator of everything. This is the monotheistic credo, the doctrine of divine unity, the *tawhîd*. He must also believe in the truth of the Koranic message brought by Muhammad. These two articles of Muslim faith are summed up in the formula with which one bears witness to God *(shahâda):* "There is no God but Allâh, and Muhammad is his Messenger."

Said with sincerity, the above formula re-establishes union with the divine and restores to fallen man his primordial status. It is the

equivalent of baptism for the Christian. Thus, spoken at the moment of death, it erases previous sins and opens the doors of Paradise. Being at the same time an adherence of the spirit to the dogma of divine unity and a recognition of the authenticity of Muhammad's mission, the *shahâda* implies a commitment to abide by the law proclaimed in the Koran. It is therefore considered to be the first pillar of Islam. The four other pillars are canonical prayer, said five times each day; the fast of Ramadân that requires each believer to go without food from sunrise to sunset for one month every year; the law of alms-giving, by which each well-to-do Muslim must give a sum to the public treasury in order to take care of the needy; and lastly, the pilgrimage which each Muslim must make to Mecca at least once in his life if he can afford it. These are the individual obligations that make up the fundamentals of the religion and that each Muslim must practice if he wishes to be right with the Lord. Beyond that, there is the set of rules of behavior and social conventions that makes up the code of personal morality and social ethics: measures governing marriage, inheritance, commercial transactions, the penal code, etc. Indeed, Islam, like Judaism and Christianity before it, although in a different form, bases itself strongly on community life in order to assure the individual salvation of the faithful.

The Muslim community, according to the Koran, was founded by God: "We have appointed you a middle nation" (Il, 143). This community has brought harmony to the hearts of its members: "And hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of Allâh, and do not separate. And remember Allâh's favor unto you: how ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that ye became as brothers by His grace . . ." (III, 103). "Ye are the best community that hath been raised up for mankind. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in Allâh" (III, 110).

Islam distrusts the recluse; it considers him to be overly exposed to the temptations of the devil and too weak to defend himself. While it is true that the Koran lauds the Christian anchorites, the monks of the desert, for their piety, it does not put forward their way of life as an example. "No monasticism in Islam (*Lâ rahbâniyyata fî al-Islâm*)," advised Muhammad. Indeed, marriage and the founding of the family are the norm, to the point that the Prophet also states that "marriage is half of *dîn* (religion)."

Let us return, however, to the community, the *umma,* and to its merits, not the least of which is to have received, in the words of a Koranic verse cited above, the gift of the "middle nation" (II, 143). It forms an organic whole of interdependent elements. In a *hadîth* that is often cited—without much of a lasting effect, unfortunately, judging by the dissensions within the Muslim world today—the Prophet said that, "The believer is to another believer as are the parts of a building that give each other mutual support." He also stated: "You will see Muslims in their kindness, their affections, and their reciprocal feelings, form a body which, when one of its members suffers, sees all the other parts share its sleeplessness and fever in emulation." Finally, Muhammad gave assurance that "My community will never agree together on an error": a statement that was to have considerable repercussions in the formation of law through the principle of the consensus of the believers *(ijmâ')*. This solidarity, in Muslim law, was expressed by a statute of collective obligation called the duty of sufficiency *(fard kifâya),* which frees the individual believer from a compulsory prescription whenever a sufficient number of the faithful join together to fulfill it. This obligation applies, for example, to prayers for the dead, holy war *(jihâd),* and to the carrying out of duties that require a detailed knowledge of religious science.

It goes without saying that man, through his conduct, commits only himself, and that it is he alone who will appear before the Supreme Judge to answer for his actions. However, his ties with the social body are so strong that, in order to find his salvation, he depends in large measure upon those around him and upon whether or not his surroundings provide conditions that are favorable for the fulfillment of the Revealed Law. As the Koran says: "Lo! man is in a state of loss, save those who believe and do good works, and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to endurance" (CIII, 2-3). These verses underline the importance of mutual encouragement for the fundamental virtues. The goal that is assigned to the community, to the Islamic Holy City, is to achieve the most complete harmony possible between, on the one hand, the search for individual salvation and, on the other, the functioning of the social body that is the guardian of the Divine Message, of institutional wisdom, and of the example of the just.

It is a question then, as has recently written Professor S.H. Nasr, author of numerous works on Islamic spirituality and science, of an "egalitarian theocracy" or, to use another expression, of a "normocracy" (the latter term emphasizes the sovereign domination of the Revealed Law).[4]

Let us examine the principal functions incumbent upon the community of believers.

First of all, there is the *executive power.* In the image of the community that Muhammad founded in Medina and that was ordered to "obey Allâh and His messenger" (VIII, 1), for "Whoso obeyeth the messenger obeyeth Allâh" (IV, 80), the supreme head of the Muslim nation is the caliph, or "commander of the believers," who is the successor to the Prophet and who unites all the duties associated with spiritual authority and temporal power.

The main concern of the Umayyad Caliphate, quite soon after the death of the Prophet, was to strengthen its political power, and the later Abbasid Caliphs transformed the caliphate into a royal autocracy. Thus a split arose between political and administrative duties on the one hand, and juridical and religious ones on the other; this split has become more accentuated with the division of the Muslim world into a multitude of autonomous entities. It was not, however, until the formation of nation-states along the Western model and the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 that the break between the executive and the religious functions became complete in most of *dâr al-islâm,* the Muslim world.

It seems understandably surprising that today, in what is called the Muslim world, so many peoples are subjected to governments that are quite obviously not impelled by any concerns of a religious nature.

Without entering here into a discussion that would necessitate large numbers of examples, it could nevertheless be stated that if there exists a certain passivity or resignation towards the lack of government interest in religion, it is because the Muslim conscience is thoroughly impregnated with the idea, expressed in the Koran, that "Allâh's is the whole command" (XIII, 31). God therefore can carry

4. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam,* Allen & Unwin, London, 1966, Chapter IV. Published in France as *Islam–perspectives et réalités,* Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 1975.

out his government as and through whomever he wishes. He commands the faithful to "Obey Allâh, and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority" (IV, 59), so that they must recognize constituted authority, at least as long as those in power do not overtly contravene the precepts of the Revealed Law.

The second function of the Holy City of Islam is to provide justice. The idea of justice is fundamental to Islam, for the Islamic world itself, *dâr al-islâm,* is also called the world of justice, *dâr al-'adl,* since the Law that prevails over it is that of God, the Just (*al 'adl*). All the obligations and prohibitions stipulated in the *sharî'a,* the body of Koranic law, as well as the virtues that are for the believer the corollary and consequence of his submission to the Will and Wisdom of the Divine Legislator, have the same end result: "Give the right to each who has the right," or, more explicitly, "Respect the rights of God and the rights of men."

Thus, all the functions of the Holy City are organized around contractual relations. The first of these relations is the original pact through which God suggested that man be his lieutenant on earth and to which man subscribed by his acceptance. Next, there is for those in authority the duty of protection, and its inverse, that of obedience for those who are ruled over. Finally, there are the contracts that regulate the acts of social life and private law by which men pledge themselves to each other without ever losing sight of the sovereign prerogatives of Him who, before any human intervention, had already fixed the order of all things.

The affinity between the above conception and the Platonic vision of a just society is immediately evident. Moreover, when Farabi, in the tenth century AD., described an ideal of the city of virtue *(madina fâdila),* it was both as a Muslim and as a disciple of Platonism that he specified the ends and the means: "To make men enjoy as much as possible, during this life and on this earth, the happiness and delights of the life to come by making use of community institutions based on justice and solidarity."

On the level of the Holy City, the exercise of judicial power is left to the judge, the *qâdî,* who receives his office from the caliph or head of the executive branch of government. Enthroned in the mosque where he will often be called to preach the Friday sermon, his domain is that of the law, the *sharî'a,* and includes all the Koranic prohibitions, which he ensures are applied to specific cases.

He pronounces marriages and divorces, attends to the execution of wills, cares for the upbringing of orphans and the handicapped, and, in particular, decides the disputes that are submitted to him and, in the case of a public or private transgression, applies the penalties provided for by the Koran.

The *teaching of religion* must also, of course, occupy an important position in the Community.

Government legal officials are of necessity chosen from among the *ulemâ',* or Doctors of Law, and the important role that is assigned to them explains why the formation of the *ulemâ'* was established as one of the Community's "duties of sufficiency". Indeed, there is no higher distinction for the Muslim than that which is conferred by learning *(al-'ilm),* that is, knowledge of the Revealed Law. "He to whom God wishes well," said the Prophet, "is made learned in matters of religion." He also stated that, "One single Doctor of Law has more strength against Satan than a thousand men who devote themselves to worship." This does not mean that the learned man can dispense with worship, but that religious practices, when combined with the intelligent knowledge of their significance, acquire an almost invincible power against temptation, error, and excesses of passion.

The duty of calling the believers to their religion and of preaching good conduct does not belong solely to the learned judges or imams of the Community. The upholding of high moral standards and the encouragement to do good are duties that are incumbent upon each citizen. "And there may spring from you a nation who invite to goodness, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency," declares the Koran (III, 104). Thus, each Muslim is expected (within the conditions defined by jurisprudence, and which, except for circumstances beyond one's control, exclude the shedding of blood) to criticize and denounce public or private acts which are contrary to the "limits" *(hudûd)* set by God. If it is within his power, he is also expected to reform the transgressors, so that order may be reestablished in the Community, which suffers as does a body when one of its members becomes diseased, and the wholeness of which is an almost indispensable condition for the salvation of its constituents.

Not even a detailed enumeration of the precepts and rules of religious law would be able to exhaust the contents of Muslim life.

Transformations and syntheses take place inside of the institutional framework within which the believers live; they constitute a veritable spiritual alchemy that, although entirely inspired by the Koranic message, nevertheless transcends its normative aspects.

The Mystical Path

The Revealed Message has two dimensions or faces: one is external and superficial; the other is internal and profound. The first is the Law of which we have just spoken: it is imposed upon all responsible men, must be accepted in terms of reason, and governs their faculties of sensation and action. Followed to the letter, it institutes and assures a sacred order that aims to restore created beings to their original status, and to make them able to attain the promised happiness of the Hereafter. The second dimension is that of the truth (*haqîqa*): it is concerned with the essential realities hidden behind appearances and is only perceived by "the eye of the heart" that is open to contemplation. It is a kind of advance vision that God grants to those close to Him in this world. Access to this interior vision, of opening the eye of the heart to the penetration of the divine light, is by the mystical way (*tarîqa*), which is like a tree that rises toward the sky while its roots thrust down into the common way, the *sharî'a.*

I spoke at length several years ago of the mystical way and of the practices that are associated with it. I will not, therefore, repeat myself, but will simply bring to mind again its essential element: the *dhikr,* the remembrance or recollection of God.

The word *dhikr* can be interpreted on various levels because it in fact refers to every act and every thought that brings one closer to God. Thus the whole Koran is *dhikr-Allâh,* or "remembrance of God," and its verses are *ayat,* "signs", that recall the existence of the Creator. *Dhikr-Allâh* is also one of the over 200 names of the Prophet Muhammad, which are used in the litanies and praises that the faithful address to him. "Remind them, for thou art but a remembrancer," Muhammad is told in the Koran (LXXXVIII, 21), and in fact for all believers, the imitation of the customs of the Prophet *(sunna)* is the means of remembering God.

The *dhikr,* in the language of the Muslim mystics known as the Sufis, refers in particular to the mention of the Divine Name, or of

one of the ninety-nine ritual Names of the Divinity, such as the Beneficent, the Merciful, the Generous, etc. Its repetition, under conditions and in forms that can vary from one school of mystics to another, is always and everywhere the supreme sacrament. Many verses of the Koran recommend the practice of the *dhikr.* Here are several of them:

> Cry unto Allâh, or cry unto the Beneficent *(al-Rahmân),* unto whichsoever ye cry (it is the same). His are the most beautiful names. (XVII, 110)
>
> Therefore remember Me, I will remember you. (II, 152)
>
> O ye who believe! Remember Allâh with much remembrance. And glorify Him early and late. He it is who blesseth you, and His angels (bless you), that He may bring you forth from darkness unto light. (XXXIII, 41-43)
>
> (This lamp is found) in houses which Allâh hath allowed to be exalted and that His name shall be remembered therein. Therein do offer praise to Him at morn and evening men whom neither merchandise nor sale beguileth from remembrance of Allâh and constancy in prayer and paying their due. (XXIV, 36-37)
>
> Verily in the messenger of Allâh ye have a good example for him who looketh unto Allâh and the Last Day, and remembereth Allâh much. (XXXIII, 21)

The spiritual advice given by Muhammad to his disciples is in the same vein:

> Men never gather to call upon Allâh without being surrounded by angels and covered with Divine Favor, without peace *(sakina)* descending upon them and Allâh remembering them.
>
> There is but one means of polishing all things, that removes rust; and that which polishes the heart is the invocation of God.
>
> "Shall I point out to you the best of your acts? The purest in intent toward your King, that which raises you the highest in degree, the accomplishment of which is more beneficial than distributing gold and silver (as alms)? Or than meeting your enemy and hitting him on the back of the neck, or being hit upon the back of the neck?" His companions said, "Tell us what it is." The Prophet replied, "It is the invocation of God Most High."

Among the most commonly used formulas for the *dhikr,* there is the repetition of the first part of the testimony of faith: *La ilâha il-Allâh.* The special effectiveness of this formula comes from its evo-

cation of two phases of spiritual realization: a first phase of negation of all "divinity", that is, of all secondary "reality", of that which does not have sufficient reason in itself; and a second phase that is the affirmation of the sole reality of the Absolute Being. In other words, it represents phases of the obliteration of the created being and of the return to the Creator; or the annihilation of separative consciousness, followed by reunification in God.

However, the highest invocation is that of the name *Allâh,* the name of the Unqualified Divinity, "the Supreme Name," "the Unique Name," "the Name of Majesty." Within its two syllables and four letters, the symbolism of which has been often commented on, this name concentrates all of the redemptive effectiveness of the divine word. "God is present in His Name," say the Sufis. Indeed, through the conjunction of this Presence and serious concentration on the part of he who invokes Him, the worshiper finds himself practically obliterated, reabsorbed into the Invoked, the *dhikr* becoming that of God alone, in which the invocation, the invoked, and the invoker are one with the One that has no second.

Doubtlessly this state of perfect concentration is not attained automatically by practicing the *dhikr.* The initiate needs a master to instruct and educate him; he must learn to know himself, For, according to one of the sayings of Muhammad, "Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord." In short, the initiate must travel over a difficult itinerary, the steps of which have often been described by mystics of diverse traditions, sometimes in symbolic form, sometimes with great psychological realism. In Islam in particular, there exists a tradition of examining the conscience which was specifically illustrated by a Sufi who lived in Baghdad in the third century of the Hegira (ninth century AD.), and who was given, while he was living, the title *Muhâsibî,* that is, "Master of Introspection."

In order to describe the way of the Sufis, I will make use of a teaching that, in its written form, dates back to another great master, a contemporary of Muhâsibî, and who, like him, lived in Baghdad, where he was buried. His name was Junayd, "the Master of the Circle (*shaykh al-tâ'ifa*)," a name that he received because the first mystical fraternities, the *turûq* (plural of *tarîqa,* "the way"), were formed around him. Moreover, this particular teaching has been handed down without interruption ever since that time, and I per-

sonally found it in a treatise written at the beginning of the last century by the Moroccan Sufi Ahmed Ibn'Ajiba, who died in 1809.

The mystical journey, Junayd explains, consists of three stages. The first is the realization of the *unity of actions (tawhîd al-ad'al),* which is the understanding that none of our actions belongs to us, but that God is actually the only Agent. This is what God, speaking through the Prophet, expressed in the famous *hadîth qudsî* that says:

> My servant never ceases to approach me through pious devotions until I become the mouth through which he speaks, the eye through which he sees, the ear through which he hears, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks.

The second stage is that of the *unity of qualities (tawhîd al-sifât).* This unity, for the human being, lies in the realization that his own attributes, powers, gifts and abilities come from the Lord of the Worlds, are only reflections of divine qualities, and do not in any way belong to him. "The most beautiful names are of God; call Him by them!" the Koran often advises; and the recitation of the Divine Names is one of the means used to attain this second stage of the mystical way, in which the *faqîr il-Allâh,* the "poor man within God," having renounced granting himself some merit or qualification, sees his own deficiencies replaced by the riches of the Most Generous.

The last level of the way is the *unity of the Essence (tawhîd adh-dhât).* At this point, the human subject completely dissolves into the Infinite Being; the drop enters the ocean. Subject and object become one, and even if he remains among his fellows, without any apparent change, the person who has extinguished himself within the Divine Essence, who is one with it, is no longer the same. Having achieved the way of return through its final stage, the subject from that time on enters the category of the "intimates of God" *(awlîya' Allâh),* those saints of whom the Koran repeatedly says that "they will not know either fear, nor affliction" (X, 62ff.).

Such is, finally, the vocation of man, for, again according to the Koran, "Lo! we are Allâh's, and lo! unto Him we are returning" (II, 156).

The Vocation of Man According to the Koran by Jean-Louis Michon

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