Images of Islam

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Islam burst forth in the form of an epic: now, a heroic history is written with the sword, and in a religious context the sword assumes a sacred function; combat becomes an ordeal. The genesis of a religion amounts to the creation of a relatively new moral and spiritual type; in Islam, this type consists in the equilibrium — paradoxical from the Christian point of view — between contemplativeness and combativeness, and then between holy poverty and hallowed sexuality. The Arab — and the man Arabized by Islam — has, so to speak, four poles, namely the desert, the sword, woman and religion. For the contemplative, the four poles become inward: the desert, the sword and woman become so many states or functions of the soul.

On the most general and, *a priori*, outward level, the sword represents death, the death one deals and the death one risks; its perfume is always present. Woman represents an analogous reciprocity; she is the love one receives and the love one gives, and thus she incarnates all the generous virtues; she compensates for the perfume of death with that of life. The deepest meaning of the sword is that there is no nobility without a renunciation of life, and this is why the initiatory vow of the Sufis — insofar as it relates historically to the "Pact of the Divine Acceptance" (*Bay`at ar-Ridwan*) — includes the promise to fight to the point of death, bodily in the case of the warrior-martyrs (*shahada shuhada'*) and spiritual in the case of the dervishes, the "poor" (*faqir*). The symbiosis of love and death within the framework of poverty and in the face of the Absolute, constitutes all that is essential in Arab nobility, so much so that we do not hesitate to say that here lies the very substance of the Moslem soul of the heroic epoch, a substance that Sufism tends to perpetuate by sublimizing it.

To say that Islam was born of an epic, means that it possesses essentially a political dimension which was foreign to primitive Christianity and which Christianity, even when it became a state religion, possessed only as a profane appendage. Now political activity is by its very nature

divisive because of the diversity of possible solutions and the diversity of individual qualifications. The Companions of the Prophet were politically divided by the force of circumstances, and at stake was nothing less than the final and lasting victory of Islam; they lived alongside one another like closed systems, not unlike different religious perspectives, which also exist side by side without understanding each other. Each identified himself, in his very being, with his own particular intuitions of what was right and what was efficacious. The remarkable stability of Islamic institutions through all the vicissitudes of history proves that worldly ambitions were very far from the minds of the Companions and, on the contrary, that at the very heart of their dissensions was a concern for immutability and for incorruptibility. In a word, each kept himself enclosed in his point of view, with a holy obstinacy, if one may put it in this way, the rigidity of their attitudes being the result of their sincerity.¹

Unlike the Apostles, the Companions were not situated in the shelter of a *pax romana*; they were founders and defenders of an empire, all question of religious perspective aside. The situation of nascent Islam was complex, owing to the inevitable rivalry, on the one hand between the Qurayshite masters of Islam and the Bedouins become heroes of the conquests, and on the other hand, within the Qurayshites themselves, between the Hashimites and the Ummayyads, the former—the clan of the Prophet—representing a strictly religious point of view (*dina*), and the latter—the clan of his early adversary Abu Sufyan—tending either to a more specifically political point of view, or even to one that was plainly worldly (*dunyawa*). The core-element which opposed the rising tide of the victorious and enriched Bedouins—represented above all by the cities of Basra and Kufa—was, moreover, not simply the tribe of Quraysh from which the Prophet issued, but also the group of Medinese Companions (*ansar*) of the Prophet; together they constituted precisely the spiritual aristocracy designated by the term "Companions" (*sahb*). In addition, and at the antipodes of this quite general rivalry, there was the opposition between the Alids and all other pretenders to the caliphate. All these oppositions were in the logic of things—let us remember the bloody birth of Latin Christianity during the time of Clovis and Charlemagne!—and there is no need to attribute

¹ However it would have been contrary to the nature of things for such holy rigidity to have been unconditional, given the contingent character of its motives: before the famous "Battle of the Camel", the Companions were on the point of being reconciled, but the battle was joined through the fault of subordinates who had an interest in division.

the clashes — when they occurred on a plane whereon only the sword could decide — to questions of personal interest; history itself proves the contrary, and shows that parallel to the play of historical contingencies there was an unfolding of the highest moral values, not to mention the immutability of the sacred mold which is religion.

A point of view which is perhaps worth mentioning here is the following: the gamut of the Arab soul extends from the most violent impulsiveness to the most generous serenity;² but on the one hand this soul is not alone in possessing these characteristics and gifts — upon which, however, it confers an original quality precisely on account of the element of impulsiveness — and on the other hand, it has bequeathed these same traits to a greater or lesser extent to foreign peoples — above all to nomads and semi-nomads — through Islamization. There are numerous historical facts illustrating Arabo-Moslem magnanimity, and we shall here recall two examples: the Caliph Omar, after the capture of Jerusalem, renounced praying in the basilica which the patriarch had placed at his disposal, in order to avoid its being claimed later by the Moslems. The Saracens renounced the conquest of Toledo because the queen of this city appeared on the ramparts to tell the assailants that her husband the king was absent.³ In summary, the particular disinterestedness that is generosity necessarily confers its stamp of nobility upon strength; strength owes it to itself to be generous to the extent that it is legitimate.⁴

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In every religion there are three spheres or three levels: the Apostolic, the theological and the political. The first has a certain quality of absoluteness, the other two are more or less contingent

² This mixture of agressiveness and generosity that characterizes the pure Arabs reminds us of an incident that we witnessed amongst the Bedouins: two women in dispute were pulling each other's hair and hurling invectives like furies, but suddenly they had had enough and released each other, each going her way with dignity as if nothing had occurred; we have never been able to forget the expression of detachment that suddenly adorned their faces.

³ In this case, chivalric honor also enters into play; one does not wish to go against a frail woman, even if she is surrounded by warriors.

⁴ The greatness of Saladin's soul — a Kurd — is well known. In the midst of battle he presented a richly caparisoned horse to his enemy Richard-the-Lion-Hearted, whose horse had just been killed; and this was one of the least of his acts of generosity.

although, clearly, at very different degrees. In Christianity the theological element is directly connected to the Apostolic, the political era beginning only with Constantine. In Islam, on the contrary, the political element is found in conjunction with the Apostolic; theological elaboration properly speaking comes later. Moreover the Apostolic sphere — the intimate circle of a prophet — inevitably comprises opposite points of view when the political element comes into play, offering as it does different solutions to the problem of efficacy; but it cannot comprise in its very substance elements of hypocrisy or other forms of baseness; differences of perspective, yes, but not petty and sordid conflicts of interest. The Apostolic sphere is pure or it is nothing, and it is in this sense that Sunnism judges the Apostolic epoch of Islam. But to be adequate, the traditional Sunni version of events must take account of the as it were avataric nature of Fatimah's posterity, which it does through its doctrine of the *sharifs*: they cannot suffer damnation, any sins they may commit are forgiven them in advance; they are entitled to respect and love; they easily become saints; in short, they are "pneumatics", in gnostic terms, even if most of the time they are so only in virtuality. None of this should be taken to mean that a "psychic" can never become a saint or that there are no "pneumatics" outside the Fatimid line, obviously.

From a certain point of view the significance of the battles between Ummayyads and Alids is in practice the conflict between political efficacy and sanctity, two things that few men are capable of combining. Abu Bakr and Omar succeeded in doing so, apart from certain blunders which need not concern us in this context; so far as the Caliphate of Othman is concerned and still more that of Ali, it is important not to underestimate the terrible difficulty of holding in balance a mass of men as passionate, ambitious and turbulent as the ancient Arabs, always divided amongst themselves and in consequence unaccustomed to unity and discipline.

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⁵ The Epistles of St. Paul contain an echo of grave disorders within the primitive Church, but the people or groups concerned were converted pagans, not Apostles; they were therefore outside the Apostolic sphere, just as were those Arabs who entered Islam after the taking of Mecca, and who can be counted neither among the "emigrants" (*muhajiran*) from Mecca nor the "allies" (*ansar*) of Medina.

⁶ The descendants of the Prophet through Fatimah.

⁷ The "psychic" is saved through "conversion", whereas the "pneumatic" is saved by "nature". The second of these accepts the truth — as did Ali and Abu Bakr — without the least hesitation and from the heart, by virtue of an almost existential "reminiscence". One must bear in mind that in Pauline language, the "psychic" is the earthly and fleshly man, hence practically the "hylic" man of Gnosticism.

The early Caliphs were fully aware of the danger that existed, for the austere Bedouins who had become conquerors, of adopting the decadent customs of the Sassanids and the Byzantines; this is what the later Caliphs did all too readily, to the extent of betraying the dignity and virtue of their race, and this is what the Shiites wished to prevent by claiming the Caliphate for the Alids alone. Moses, upon seeing the Golden Calf, broke the Tablets of the Law and then, so it is said, received others of a less rigorous character. This expresses a principle of fluctuation or of adaptation, the effects of which may be observed in diverse traditional climates and also, precisely, in primitive Islam, where the political regime which was ultimately viable did not correspond to the original ideal. The Sunnis resign themselves to this fatality, whereas the Shiites enclose themselves in the bitter memory of a lost purity combined with that of the drama of Karbalaand, on the level of the mystical life, with the noble sadness aroused by the awareness of our earthly exile — an exile which is then seen above all in its aspect of injustice, of oppression, of frustration with regard to early virtue, and to divine right and its representatives.

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In any case, the basic explanation and reason for the existence of Shiism cannot be situated on the political plane alone; what must be said is that in Islam and, above all, in the person of the Prophet, there are two tendencies or two mysteries—this last word being used here to indicate that which is rooted in the celestial order — namely "Fear" and "Love", or "Cold" and "Heat", or "Dryness" and "Humidity", or "Water" and "Wine". Now there are grounds for saying that Ali, Fatimah, Hasan and Husayn represented the second of these two dimensions, whereas Aisha, Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman personified the first, at least from the point of view of outward accentuation. Ali and his family — politically ineffectual — came up against the world of "Fear", "Dryness", efficacy; and what is remarkable is that Fatimah came up against this not only in the person of the first Caliph, but even in relation to her father, the Prophet, who combined, as we have said, both tendencies. It goes without saying that the element of Love could not be lacking in Abu

Bakr's group — the love for the Prophet among all the Companions proves this — and, inversely, it is unthinkable that the element of Fear should have been missing in Ali and his people, for in their case as well it can only be a question of accentuation, not of privation. Briefly, what was more or less implicit in the case of the Sunnis became no doubt more explicit in that of the Shiites. One could enlarge indefinitely with regard to this entanglement of religious attitudes, and we would have preferred not to have to mention it, all the more so since it is a difficult and thankless task to do justice in few words not to all those concerned but rather, to all the points of view. There is one observation which in any case imposes itself in this context and this is that upon contact with the Sunni world — in which the general atmosphere is one of resignation in God and serenity through faith — one does not *a priori* have the impression of having to do with a perspective of Love, whereas one does have this impression in the climate of Shiism, whatever may be the reasons. It is true that resignation and serenity characterize Islam as a whole; it is equally true that in Shiism there is added to it — to the point of superimposition — an emotional element, a kind of equivalent to which is found, among Sunnis, only in Sufi brotherhoods.

However this may be, there is a most important point that must still be clarified: when we speak of the element "Love" in the case of the Prophet, there can clearly be no question of anything other than the love of God; when we attribute this element to the Companions, it becomes somewhat fluid as regards its object, which may be either God or the Prophet, or both at the same time, or again Ali and his family, whereas the object of "Fear" is always God. What has to be understood above all is that in Islam the love of God is not the point of departure; it is a grace which God may bestow upon whomever fears Him. The point of departure is obedience to the Law and in consequence the perfectly logical fear of punishment. "What matters is not that you should love God, but that God should love you", quotes a canonical collection on the Prophet, ¹⁰ and it continues to this effect: if

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⁸ This love is still to be seen in our time from one end of the Moslem world to the other in forms which are surprising in their intensity and touching in their spontaneity. Let us draw attention here to the fact that the Sunnis reproach the Shiites for not loving the Prophet sufficiently, in that they love Ali, Fatimah and their descendants too much. Nor is the following *hadith* irrelevant: "Not one of you is a believer until I am dearer to him than his sons and his father and all men together".

⁹ The question of a choice between Fear and Love could not arise in the case of an Ali or an Abu Bakr; but there is, within gnosis itself, a possibility of the predominance of either the "humid" or the "dry" aspect.

¹⁰ Al-Anwar al-Muhammadiyyah by the faqir Yusuf ibn Ismail an-Nabahani. The saying quoted appears to contradict

you wish God to love you, you must love His Messenger through following his Sunna. The love of God thus passes through the love of the Messenger; among the Shiites the love of the Messenger passes *de facto* through the love of Ali and his family, which introduces into this mysticism — for historically plausible reasons — an element of resentment and of mourning, at a level whereon such motivations may be reconciled with a movement towards God.

The question of the spiritual style of Islam is also clarified by the following example: "If I turn in repentance towards God", says a man to Rabiah Adawiyah, "will God turn in Mercy towards me?" "No", replied the saint, "but if He turns towards you, you will turn towards Him". It will no doubt be objected that this way of thinking — which is typically Moslem — implies a kind of inoperative tautology which may even have a paralyzing effect; now it is necessary to know that the intention here is to arouse in man the consciousness of his impotence before God and to prevent him from attributing his virtuous actions to himself, and thus to make him profoundly aware of the fact that the positive cause of his good actions is the divine Agent; without this concrete certitude — in the Islamic perspective — effort is compromised at its very root. A matter of point of view, certainly, but points of view have their efficacy.

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But let us now return to the question of confessional divergences. For the Shiites, and according to a perspective tending both to the symbolic and the schematic and therefore to simplification and to the abstract, the protagonists of the "dry" dimension, or the dimension of earthly efficacy, become the personifications of the "world"; only the family of Ali represents the "spirit". No doubt this is indifferent from the point of view of pure mysticism, but on a more outward level, it does make more plausible the polemics against the great figures of Sunnism, inasmuch as Sunni doctrine renders homage not only to Ali and Fatimah, but also to the great

the Law of Love proclaimed by the Torah and by Christ, but this is not so, for the difference can be reduced to a question of terminology: whereas in the Bible the love of God has a significance that is primarily concerned with will and actions, this same expression refers in Islam rather to a contemplative grace, active — certainly — but conditioned by a divine inspiration. "Love God and, as a consequence of this, obey Him", is what Christ seems to be saying. "Obey God until you love Him", says Islam in its turn; and there is obviously a point at which the two perspectives meet and intermingle.

"Imams" to whom, precisely, the Shiites refer. ¹¹ In short it is paradoxical and tragic, to say the least, that a denominational branch which intends to be identified with esoterism should at the same time comprise a particularly virulent and problematical exoteric ostracism. Shiism is on the whole a mysticism based upon the providential and provisional defeat — ultimately changed into triumph — of the Logos in its earthly exile, and in this way it rejoins the mystical geometry enunciated by St. John: "And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not"; thus we are far from the idea of immediate and necessary victory as demanded by the divine origin of the message. The criteria are now inverted in that the minority situation of Shiism is, from their point of view, a sign of superiority: thus while for Sunnism, which is the perspective of the necessarily victorious divine message and consequently is in the majority, to be in the minority is rather a sign of heresy, whereas for the Shiites it is like a criterion of orthodoxy, since lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt. This criteriology applies unquestionably to esoterism and, in this respect, the two denominational points of view of Islam coincide; Sunni Sufism is necessarily a minority in the context of the common religion, and it is known that Shiism claims the same quality of "inwardness" which Sufism aims at representing. All the same, the Shiites seem to want to say, in substance: "Islam is esoterism"; "first allow it to exist on earth", the Sunnites seem to reply. Or again, to the Shiite affirmation that esoterism is Shiism, the Sunnites in practice reply that esoterism cannot be a religion and, further, that esoterism is found where exoterism is found. The fact that Shiism in its fashion recognizes the distinction between the "outward" (zahir) and the "inward" (batin) does not modify its basically esoteric claim, as is proved by its theory of the Imamate. 12

But let us return to the symbolism *lux in tenebris*: if the political failure of Ali and his successors as regards Islam as a whole proves that the Prophet's son-in-law could not alone be the personification, in every respect, of spiritual and temporal authority for Islam as such, the very

¹¹ To the Imams of the Shiites correspond the Sunni Shaykhs who rule to the extent that they influence monarchs. The Shiites like to support the legitimacy— or the transcendence— of the Imams on the basis of such and such a numerical or cosmological symbolism, but the Sunnis can do as much, *mutatis mutandis*: there are four Caliphs who are *rashidum* and four founders of ritual schools (*madhhab*), just as there are four rivers of Paradise, four Archangels, four words in the *Basmalah*, four sides to the Kaaba.

¹² A fact worthy of mention is that the majority of the descendants of Ali and Fatimah are Sunnis and that there are Alid dynasties that are not Shiite.

existence of Shiism proves nonetheless an undeniable element of victory in Ali himself and, by extension, in his family. The Sunnis do not deny this eminence, since they pray for blessings upon the Prophet, "his family (*al*) and his Companions (*sahb*)" and since they honor the "sharifs". ¹³

Let us note, parenthetically, that the elements of "light" and of "martyrdom" attached to Ali and to his family allow us to interpret the affair of the Fadak Oasis in a particular sense: after the death of the Prophet, the caliph Abu Bakr refused Fatimah the right of inheritance; the Prophet had owned the oasis of Fadak, and his daughter greatly wished to keep it. 14 Clearly there could not have been any malice on Abu Bakr's part towards anyone and *a fortiori* not towards Fatimah — he was ready to allow the inheritance on condition that he was provided with a direct witness to the *hadith* authorizing it — but he was providentially obliged to play a negative role, in an altogether exterior sense, in relation to the personification of otherworldly light that Fatimah was; he had to assume this role contingently on the material level and by virtue of his quite extrinsic function as guardian of the legal principles or, let us say, of legal abstraction. The affair of the inheritance refused to Fatimah is an example of the dilemma or conflict between a principial abstraction and a particular concrete case which lies outside its purview.

In the intertwining of characters and destinies which concern us here, there is the strange case of Fatimah.¹⁵ Embodying the purest sanctity, according to unanimous tradition, she was put aside, frustrated, forgotten. On occasion she was treated with harshness even, it seems, by the Prophet, her father. In this is contained the whole drama of a celestial soul predestined to be the martyr of terrestrial life. Her abasement is, as it were, the shadow cast by her spiritual elevation, human individuals appearing in her destiny as the cosmic instruments of her painful alchemy. There is something of this likewise in the case of the Virgin Mary, treated not without a certain coldness by

¹³ Many *ahadith* accepted in the Sunni collections take account of this. This proves moreover that one cannot accuse the Sunni authorities of having suppressed in bad faith texts favorable to Ali and corroborative of the Shiite thesis; especially since the Caliph Omar II, who had the first written collection of *ahadith* made, was not hostile to the Alids.

¹⁴ Which, it has to be admitted, poses a certain problem for non-Moslems, in the absence of documents that would explain this attitude in relation to its hagiographic context.

¹⁵ However, the written documents contain nothing that would oblige us to acknowledge this sanctity; if we acknowledge it, it is because there is no effect without a cause: because the cult of Fatimah throughout Islam and throughout the centuries cannot be explained without the sanctity of the personage; and because the world of Fatimah is too near our own in order to be legendary in its essential features.

the Gospels, passed over to a large extent in silence by most of the New Testament, to reappear afterwards in all the greater splendor. A comparable example, in a totally different world, is that of Sita, the wife of Rama, never happy on earth but made divine in Heaven; or again, that of Maya, the mother of the Buddha, almost forgotten yet later glorified under the form of Tara, "Mother of all the Buddhas". We mention these things here to show that the destinies of saints of the highest order manifest symbolic elements which it would be vain to analyze solely from the point of view of individual responsibilities. As regards Fatimah, the attachment of this saint to her father clashed, after his death, with the inflexibility of the first caliph who, in refusingher certain elementary favors, had in view only the rigidity of the principles of Islam, which in reality could have allowed of a wider interpretation in this particular case; but it was the destiny of Fatimah to be deprived of the consolations of this lower world. This example is typical of the oppositions between the Companions: it is not their passions that clash, but their good intentions, inspired by a totalitarian mentality always ready to deal in terms of irreducible alternatives.

The drama of the Companions is, all in all, that of human subjectivity: there would be no problem if there were only the good and the bad, but the great paradox is the existence of the good who differ to the point of not being able to understand each other, differing not so much by nature as in terms of situation and vocation. The great epic poems, such as the Iliad or the Song of the Nibelungs, show in all their tragic grandeur this intertwining of temperaments, positions, responsibilities, duties and destinies: combat outwardly, in the current of forms, but unity within, in the unchanging quest for the Light which liberates.

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The moral courage of Muhammad was immense; the physical courage of Ali, unsurpassable hero on the battlefield, was no less so. Muhammad liked to speak of religion in general and to give practical counsel; Ali was the metaphysician of the community, and he would even broach the most transcendent subjects during moments of respite in combat.¹⁶ Now men are diverse; in many cases,

¹⁶ According to the testimony of Hasan al-Basri, Ali was "the theologian of the Community". "I am the city of Knowledge, and Ali is its gate", said the Prophet, according to a *hadith* told to us in a Sunnite country, and which

the law of affinity as well as that of complementarity could work in favor of Ali, which must have given the impression — not altogether mistakenly — that some people were less attached to the Prophet than to his son- in-law. But even if such were not the case, it can be admitted that if the forerunners or ancestors of the Shiites were not those who most loved the Prophet, they were certainly those who put the love of his Family in the foreground — to the detriment, say the Sunnites, of the more impersonal elements of the Divine Message, or to the detriment of a more objective evaluation of things. We could perhaps say that the "pre-Shiites" were those Companions who could not live without the presence of the Muhammadan Family and who had no other choice but to attach themselves to what remained of it in its descendants; whereas the Sunnites were those who could not accept any substitute whatever for this presence and who, in consequence, had no other choice but to live by the memory of it and in its Sunna.

One has to assume that there was in Ali a fascinating element particular to him and which determined a cult almost independent of that of Muhammad; Ali appears above all as the "solar hero", he is the "lion" (asad or haydar) of God; one loves him as the gopis loved Krishna, ¹⁷ and his tragic death adorns him with a halo of martyrdom and cries out for a quasi-mystical and cosmic vengeance. However — and this is an altogether different matter — the hero was not a statesman nor even a strategist; he wielded the sword superlatively, but not diplomacy; he disdained diplomacy out of purity and uprightness, his partisans assure us, forgetting that the Prophet, without being less pure or less upright than his son-in-law, was an accomplished statesman, perfectly capable of wiliness with the enemy and of making concessions that are at first sight surprising but extremely efficacious and indeed decisive in the final analysis. Ali lacked foresight out of a spirit of integrity, and was indecisive out of detachment from earthly things; it is this that explains why he did not rally all of his supporters from the time of his election.¹⁸ In the personality of Muhammad by contrast,

means that Ali was concerned with explaining and commenting upon what the Prophet enunciated in an elliptical manner.

¹⁷ "Love for Ali consumes all sins, as fire consumes dry wood", proclaims a Shiite *hadith*. For the extremists, Ali is even greater than the Prophet.

¹⁸ Even among some of his partisans, his prestige dropped during the war against his rival Muawiyah. The majority of the army of Ali having pressed him into accepting an arbitration which in fact turned out to be disastrous, a part of the army — the Kharijites — revolted against Ali and separated from him; it was one of these Kharijites who later

it is not the physical hero who stands out, but the leader of men, the strategist, the far-sighted and invincible statesman: he who not merely wins a day's battles by the strength of his sword, but who brings about a millennial world empire thanks to his genius, humanly speaking. Now Abu Bakr, Omar and others were more responsive to this kind of power than to the heroic radiance of an Ali; for men like the first three caliphs, there could be no question either of a cult or of hostility in relation to the Messenger's son-in-law.

The near-exclusion in Shiism of what we have termed the element of "dryness" may be the fundamental explanation — but not the justification — of the Shiites' misinterpretation of the first three caliphs and of the Prophet's favorite wife, and this is the price paid for the exoteric coagulation of Shiism; it is indeed the way of all exoterism to become hypnotized by a single aspect of reality and to interpret everything in terms of this exclusivity. Let us recall in this connection the total condemnation of all forms of "paganism" by each of the three monotheistic religions, or, in particular, the Christian underestimation of the Torah and of the inward dimension of Judaism or again, in Islam, the reduction of Christ's role to that of a forerunner. For Shiite spirituality the question of knowing who an Abu Bakr or an Aisha really was does not arise: only principles — whether positive or negative — count, whatever may be the images in which they find expression. Moreover, the extent of the dissemination of those theses which are hostile to Sunnism and — it must be said — most passionate and most unconvincing, appears to be somewhat variable; they are to be found above all in the Safavid epoch in theological works which, however, do not possess any absolute authority, given that the application of the canonical principle of "personal judgment" (ijtihad) is freer among

killed him at Kufa, in order to avenge the defeat that Ali inflicted upon them at Nahrawan. Let it be noted that a Hasan al-Basri and an Ibn Sirin, young contemporaries of Ali and great stars in the firmament of nascent Sufism, were totally Sunnite: they blamed certain aspects of Ali's behavior and accepted without hesitation the caliphate of Abu Bakr and Omar, and — with serious criticisms, but with resignation — the caliphate of the Ummayyads, while, moreover, excusing Othman — an attitude that would be inconceivable on the part of saints of that epoch if truth and right had been the monopoly of the Imamists. All this is the more significant in that the initiatory genealogy of the Sufis connects Hasan al-Basri with Ali himself, which indicates, if not a direct initiatic link — although we do not see why this link has been brought into doubt — at least a particular and typical spiritual relationship.

¹⁹ This kind of ostracism — and negative symbolization of proper names — is found almost everywhere, even in the Hindu world and even outside exoterism: for the partisans of Madhava, Shankara is the incarnation of a demon; his name, which means "Savior", becomes for them *Sankara*, "bastard". The partisans of Shankara do as much in the opposite sense, declaring that Madhava was the bastard of ignoble parents who set himself the mission of falsifying the *Vedanta*.

the Shiites than among the Sunnis and thus opens the door to far more pronounced divergences, whence, by way of compensation, the less authoritative character of the opinions expressed.

Our insistence upon these factors must not however cause one to lose sight, as regards the origins of Shiism, of the role of political contingencies after the death of Othman, and above all, after the death of Ali, after which the city of Kufa intended to remain the capital of the Empire, and did not dream of effacing itself in favor of Damascus, the capital of Muawiyyah. If it is true that ideas create vested interests, it is no less undeniable that vested interests can in their turn create ideas or theologies, in the sense that such interests encourage accentuations — and corresponding doctrinal elaborations — with all the prejudices and all the exclusions which these can bring in their train. These two factors, idea and interest, are sometimes difficult to disentangle in a climate of passions that are at once mystical and political. From an entirely different point of view, it is possible that Shiism, which was *a priori* a purely Arab movement, was subjected *a posteriori* to the influence of concepts of Babylonian and Mazdean origin: we are thinking here particularly of the metaphysics of Light and of the related idea of an esoteric and quasi-superhuman Priesthood.²⁰

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There are those who have wished to see in Shiism the esoteric aspect of Islam, which is false if one understands from this that Shiism is a pure esoterism and that Sunnism may be reduced to the corresponding exoterism; but it nonetheless comprises an element of truth in the sense that Shiism can be explained by an intention of "inwardness", which however it readily translates into terms of "outward" theology;²¹ thus Shiite exoterism is penetrated with the flavor of quasi-esoterism of an emotional type, whereas in Sunnism the two dimensions, the outward and the inward, remain in

²⁰ We have very little inclination to acknowledge borrowings of this kind, but in the case of Shiism, above all — or at the very least — in its extreme and relativelylate forms, such influences seem to us probable if not certain; they may be explained in this case by a convergence of motivations.

²¹ Mention must be made here of a particular sector, that is to say Shiite Sufism, which is very close to Sunni Sufism. One comment on the subject of the etymology of the word *sufi*: the fact that in Persian this Arabic term has often been translated as *pashminah-push*, "wearer of the woolen cloak", indicates that the Arabic word derives from *suf*, "wool", and not from *safa*, "purity" nor, for that matter, from the Greek *sophos*, "sage" as has been claimed.

principle separated and in equilibrium.²² In a certain manner, and only approximately, Shiism is the "Christianity of Islam":²³ its fundamental theme is the "divine humanity" of its great saints,²⁴ then the martyrdom of the uncomprehended light, and finally the sacramental presence of this light in the form of the Imamate.²⁵

The quintessence of Shiism is Imamism: the Logos, instead of being humanized in the Prophet alone, is also manifested — by being as it were refracted — in the twelve Imams, beginning with Ali. Pure Intellect, immanent in every man's heart but actualized only in the sages and the saints, ²⁶ in varying degree and in different modes, it is in itself infallible and is a ray of the divine Logos. Now since this Logos has been humanized not only in the Prophet but also in the Imams, human Intellect stems in practice from the Imams according to the Shiite point of view. There is no wisdom and no sanctity without the grace of the Imam, even if "hidden"; to know God is to know Him through the Imam, since all spiritual knowledge comes from the Intellect. This is the thesis of Shiism, and it will be noted that it pushes to its limits the humanization, indeed the politicization, of principial realities.²⁷

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²² Popular Sufism on the one hand and Sufi Asharism on the other appear to some extent to contradict this, but these are inevitable phenomena, it being impossible that the two dimensions should anywhere remain totally independent the one from the other.

²³ Shiism is to Islam what Arianism is to Christianity, but in an inverted sense, since it accentuates the human Manifestation of God, whereas Arianism accentuates the Transcendence.

²⁴ But not in the sense of Christian incarnationism, (*hulul*). The avataric quality — which is moreover relative — of the Muhammadan Family implies an innate and *a priori* radiant sanctity, which may not manifest itself in distant descendants — to say the least — but the absence of this quality in no way implies the impossibility of the highest spirituality.

²⁵ To claim that all Moslem esoterism derives from the *shi'ah* is to play with words. The Sufi notion of the "Pole" arises from the nature of things, and it is not the Sunnites' fault if, for the Shiites, the "Pole" is the Alid Imam and no other; that the immediate descendants of Husayn, Ali's son, were "Poles", is clear, since they combined the Sharifian nature with personal sanctity. As for the opposition of certain Imams to Sufism, this concerns only some particular manifestations of the latter. One does not need to be a Shiite in order to see in the foundation of the brotherhoods a "two-edged" innovation, but this has no bearing on *Tasawwuf* as such.

²⁶ According to the accepted view, the first of these terms accentuates intellective perfection and the second volitive perfection.

²⁷ Imamism justifies its narrowly systematic conception of the "cycle of sanctity" (*wilayah*) by a corresponding retrospective interpretation of the "cycle of prophecy" (*nubuwah*), but in reality the liberty or discontinuity of the latter cycle is an argument in favor of the Sunnite conception of the "Pole", precisely because this has nothing dynastic about it. Moreover, how can one attribute to a whole dynasty — that of the Alid Imams — perfections or talents as diverse as personal sanctity, metaphysical intellectuality, and political capacity? On this subject, let us note the divergent opinions about the person of the Imam, which are all the more surprising, to say the least, given the fact that knowledge

The particular greatness of the Imams, Fatimah eminently included, resides in the conjunction of their as it were celestial substance with their personal sanctity, this sanctity having been effectively realized down to the twelfth Imam, who withdrew from the sight of men and is supposed to reappear as the *Mahdi* at the end of the world. But this conjunction — of which one sees another example in the early Brahman caste, descended from the *Rishis*, and yet another in the case of the first emperors of Japan, descended from Jimmu Tenno — could not be taken to mean that sanctity cannot appear outside the avataric line of descent; the Imams are to be identified with the Logos, but the Logos is not to be identified with the Imams.²⁸ And we will add that, if the very existence of Shiism proves the particular greatness of the "House of the Prophet", the Sunni perspective — or the existence or actual importance of this perspective — points on the contrary to the relativity and the limitations of Imamism.

From the fact that the Shiites have in their own way emphasized certain ideas or realities of primitive Islam or of Islam as such, it does not follow that these ideas or realities are the exclusive property of Shiism, and that all who acknowledge them are indebted to Shiism or are even openly or secretly Shiites. From a more general but related point of view, we would say that the saints certainly have the right to think and to speak in terms of their vocation and in the framework of their confessional milieu, but their teachings should not make us lose sight of the fact that all Islamic sapience flows from quintessential and primordial formulations, namely the *Shahadah*, and certain *ayat* and *ahadith*²⁹ which make more explicit or specific its essential intentions, in the context of union just as much as in that of doctrine.³⁰

of the Imam of the period is supposed to be a condition of salvation.

²⁸ Just as one may acknowledge that Jesus is God, but not that God is Jesus. Let it be noted that for the Nusairis, the Ali-Ilahis, the Bektashis and others, Ali is God veiled under a human appearance; one might ask what the motivations are for such extravagances.

²⁹ Koranic verses and sayings of the Prophet.

³⁰ When one possesses a rigorous notion of esoterism or of gnosis, it is impossible not to feel uneasy in observing that the sayings of the Imams, which are supposed to be the only sources of esoterism, have given rise to voluminous compilations and require in their turn whole volumes of commentary. One of the crucial divergences between Sunnis and Shiites is that for the Sunnis the Apostolic quality belongs only to the sayings of the Prophet — there are some thousands — whereas for the Shiites it extends right down to the last of the Imams, towards the end of the IX century, that is, more than three centuries after Muhammad; it is as though one were to add all the Fathers of the Church to the New Testament. These remarks will be better understood if one takes account of the subjective, empirical, emotional, inspirationist, prophesizing and even political character of a certain type of esoterism, founded primarily upon

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No believer denies that God may sacrifice certain possibilities of Mercy to the imperative demands of the Truth, otherwise no Justice would be possible; but it must equally be admitted — although there is no symmetry between the two — that God may sacrifice truths that are in practice secondary to the imperatives of saving Mercy, otherwise there would be no religions or confessional divergences. What this amounts to is that in practice a secondary truth is no longer truth when it is eliminated on behalf of an essential truth, exactly as a lamp is no longer a light in the presence of the sun and is even a cause of obscurity since it then casts a shadow; this also means that error as such could not be from God, but is on the contrary prefigured — if it figures extrinsically in a traditional symbolism — in the very structure of the human receptacle. God never gives less than He promises, He never takes away anything positive without compensating for it or without giving it back on a higher level; in consequence the errors — always extrinsic — of religions or confessions that are in themselves orthodox³¹ necessarily coincide with spiritual truths, at least with negative ones.³²

When the Scriptures say that the sun rises, moves across the sky and sets, they are not lying, even though from the factual point of view the sun is motionless in relation to its planetary system; they are simply using the language of terrestrial appearances. The same is true of the human facts comprised in the sacred perspectives: every formal element is subject to the relativity of "aspects" and "points of view"; only the divine Intention made of intrinsic Truth and liberating Attraction, is immutable. "Elias is come", said Christ, thinking of St. John the Baptist, although the latter had denied that he was Elias; it is true that Christ had in mind only the function and not the person, whereas the Precursor was speaking of his own person and not of the function; but Jesus' indirect and elliptical expression illustrates nonetheless the liberty that prophetic language may take with the

hermeneutics (ta'wil) and an eschatology which is, to say the least, audacious.

³¹ A denomination or a religion is intrinsically orthodox when it comprises a metaphysical doctrine that is at least adequate, and which offers both the notion and the phenomenon of sanctity.

³² Not positive, since it is a question here of rejects. The Shiites are right in condemning Pharisaism; their associating it with the names of Companions is quite another matter. Hindu meditation upon an image is one thing, the Semitic reproach of idolatry another.

facts when a principial truth is in operation.

Whatever may be the divergences between the Moslem denominations, the metaphysics of Unity and of Union dominates the entire horizon of thought, Shiite as well as Sunni; when all is said and done, the Moslem is orthodox to the extent that he identifies himself with the fundamental thesis of Islam and takes upon himself all its consequences. On this basis we will say that quintessential orthodoxy is sanctity, which in the purity of its experience combines or transcends all partial truths.