

Insights into the Muhammadan Phenomenon

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Like Christianity, Islam teaches that Jesus had no human father, that he is the “Word of God”, that he was born of a Virgin, and that he and this Virgin-Mother have the unique privilege of not having been “touched by the devil” at the moment of their birth, which is an indication of the Immaculate Conception; now as it is impossible, even from the Muslim point of view, that all of these incomparable privileges carry only a secondary meaning, or should have occurred only “in passing” without leaving any decisive traces, Christians will ask how it is that Muslims can without contradiction reconcile these sublime facts with faith in a later Prophet. To understand this –all metaphysical arguments notwithstanding- one needs to take into account the following: integral Monotheism comprises two distinct lineages, one Israelite and the other Ishmaelite; now whereas in the Israelite lineage Abraham is renewed and replaced, as it were, by Moses –in the Sinaitic Revelation being like a second beginning of Monotheism- for the sons of Ishmael Abraham continues to remain the primordial and unique Revealer. The Sinaitic miracle called for the Messianic or Christic miracle: it is Christ who, from a certain point of view, closes the Mosaic lineage and completes the Bible, gloriously and irrevocably so. But this cycle, proceeding from Moses to Jesus, or from the Sinai to Ascension, does not in fact encompass all of Monotheism: the Ishmaelite lineage, which is still Abrahamic, was situated outside of this cycle and remained in certain fashion open; it called in its turn for a glorious completion, the character of which would not be Sinaitic and Christian, but Abrahamic and Muhammadan and, in a certain sense, “of desert” and “nomadic”.

Abraham came before Moses; hence Muhammad had to appear after Jesus; the “miraculous cycle” extending from Sinai to Christ finds itself as if encompassed – in temporal terms- by another parallel cycle of a distinctly different character, one marked more by the one monotheistic Truth, with all the absoluteness and saving power inherent

in its nature, and deeply attracted to primordial simplicity and “Platonic” transcendence; Islam and Abrahamism are fundamentally the religions of ahistoric nomads, burned by an ever-present and eternal Divine Sun. Man is nothing before this Sun; that the Caliph Omar should conquer of the ancient world or that the Prophet should milk his goat amounts practically to the same thing; in other words, there is no “human greatness” in the profane and titanic sense; there is thus no humanism to incite man in the pursuit of vain glories; the one lasting grandeur allowed is sanctity, and this belongs to God.

Islam has perpetuated up until our times the Biblical world which Christianity, once it had been Europeanized, could no longer represent; without Islam, Catholicism would have soon invaded all the Middle East and this would have involved the destruction of Orthodoxy and other Eastern Churches, and the Romanization –thus the Europeanization- of our world up to the borders of India; the Biblical world would have been dead. One can say that Islam had the providential role of arresting time –thus of excluding Europe- in the Biblical part of the globe and stabilizing, while universalizing, the world of Abraham, which was also that of Jesus; Judaism having emigrated and been dispersed, and Christianity having been Romanized, Hellenized, and Germanized, God “repented” –to borrow from Genesis- of this unilateral development, and out of the desert, the ambiance or background of original Monotheism, He brought forth Islam. One encounters here a play of equilibrium and compensations that the different exoterisms are not capable of situating, and it would be absurd to require them to.¹

¹ After reading these lines, Titus Burckhardt communicated to us the following thoughts concerning the Abraham-Muhammad cycle: “ It is significant that the Arabic language is the most archaic of all of the living Semitic languages: its phonetics preserve, with the exception of one, all the sounds indicated in the most ancient Semitic alphabets, and its morphology can be found in the famous code of Hammurabi which is more or less contemporaneous with Abraham.” –“Indeed, Mecca, along with the Kaaba built by Abraham and Ishmael, is the forgotten sacred city –forgotten both by Judaism which disregards Ishmael’s prophetic role, and by Christianity, which inherited the same point of view. The sanctuary of Mecca, which is to the Prophet what the Temple of Jerusalem is to Christ –in a certain sense, at least- is like the “stone rejected by the builders” which becomes the cornerstone. This forgetting of the Ishmaelite sanctuary, as well as the line of succession constituted by Abraham-Ishmael-Muhammad -the Arab Prophet being of Ishmaelite descent- this double factor shows us how the divine economy of things likes to combine the geometric with the unforeseen. One can assign no importance whatsoever here to the opinion of those who see in the Abrahamic origins of the Kaaba a retrospective Muslim myth and who, in so doing, completely lose sight of the fact that Arabs of old possessed a genealogical memory that was both extraordinary and meticulous, as is in fact the case with nomads or semi-nomads. “

It is said in Islam, not only that the Muslim religion is the completion of the preceding religions and that, owing to this, Muhammad is the “Seal of Prophecy” (*Khatam an-nubuwwah*), but also that earlier prophetic missions –those of Abraham, Moses and Jesus- were carried out under a “Muhammadan mandate”; now this means not only that in Islam Muhammad is identified with the Logos as such –no religion does less with its founder- but also that earlier Prophets exercise a type of function within the framework of Islam itself, a function of example and, sometimes, of esoteric inspiration.

In order to show in what way the Muslim religion considers itself to be the completion and synthesis of earlier monotheisms, we must first of all recall that its constitutive elements are *al-imam*, *al-islam* and *il-ihsan*, terms that can be rendered, not literally but nonetheless adequately, as “Faith”, “Law”, and “Way”. “Faith” corresponds to the first of the three monotheisms, that of Abraham; “Law” to the second, that of Moses; and the “Way” to the third, that of Jesus and Mary. In Abrahamism, the elements “Law” and “Way” are as it were absorbed by the element “Faith”; in Mosaism, it is the element “Law” that predominates and that, as a result, absorbs the elements “Faith” and “Way”; and in Christianity, it is the element “Way” that absorbs the two other elements, Islam, for its part, intends to contain these three elements side by side, thus in perfect equilibrium, whence precisely its doctrine of the three elements *imam*, *islam* and *ihsan*.

Al-imam, “Faith”, comprises basically the two Testimonies, that of the Unity of God and that of the prophetic quality of Muhammad; *al-islam*, the “Law”, comprises the five ritual obligations: the two Testimonies just mentioned, canonical Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving, Pilgrimage. As for *al-ihsan*, the “Way”, its central or quintessential support is the “Remembrance of God” (*dhikru’Llâh*), the modalities of which pertain finally to the “science of the inward” (*ilm al-batin*); this means that one cannot define the content of the “Way” in exoteric terms. *Al-ihsan* is the domain of the Sufis, not of the “doctors of the outward” (*‘ulama az-zahir*).

Of necessity, all the Prophets possesses all the virtues; however, according to a way of seeing things specific to Islam, one can, without implying any refutation of the foregoing, attribute to Abraham the virtues belonging to Faith, to Moses those of the Law, and to Jesus those of the Way; and if Islam, on the basis of this schematism, sees in

Muhammad the synthesis of all these qualities, it does so in the same way as in the case of the synthesis of *imam-islam-ihsan* and with the intent of emphasizing the distinct manifestation of these qualities. One can even say that a specific virtue, and indeed every virtue, belongs by attribution to such and such a Prophet under a given aspect: thus when a given quality is attributed to Jesus, it is considered in relationship to *ihsan*, the Way, and not, it goes without saying, in a any exclusive manner. In other words, each fundamental virtue can be considered on the basis of either Faith or certitude, of either the Law or obedience, either the Way or love, or sanctity; the fact that virtues refer more particularly to one or the other of these three elements does not invalidate this principle.

That the Arab Prophet can be considered as the “best of the created beings” and as the Logos without any qualification, a being in whom other “Messengers” must in some fashion be incorporated, is a way of seeing things that is admissible in virtue of the fact that there is a cosmic sector extending from earth up to the loftiest of the celestial spheres, or up to the “Divine Throne” where Muhammad alone may truly be identified with the Logos; and this is so in virtue of a particular Divine Will, the same that decreed the advent of Islam, and thus also the existence of the cosmic sector under consideration here: every *Avatara* is “the Logos” in the cosmic sector allocated to him.² Thus to see in a given Founder of religion the sole personification of the Word is a question, not only of perspective, but also of objective reality for those who find themselves enclosed in the corresponding spiritual sector; and this is independent from the question of knowing whether the Prophet concerned possesses –or should possess in the function of the nature of his mission or the structure of his message- the same avataric breadth as another Founder of religion; for what matters to God is not the personality of the spokesman alone; it is the totality of his personality and mission taken together. This totality, whatever the forms involved, is always fully the Word of God; it thus constitutes an element of absoluteness and infinitude, of integral and saving Truth.

What we have just said may serve as an illustration of the principle that God alone is unique, a metaphysical principle that Buddhism, for instance, expresses through the

² It is to the “projection” or “establishment” of this sector that, that, for Islam, the “Night Journey” (*Laylat al-Mi'raj*, “Night of the Ascension”) of the Prophet corresponds.

doctrine of the countless Buddhas. If we have insisted here on this matter of the cosmic sectors, it is because those who grant the validity of all intrinsically orthodox religions generally limit themselves to emphasizing the oneness of Truth, which is not by itself sufficient in that exoteric claims are left unexplained, or are even considered to be errors pure and simple; such an assumption is inadmissible given the essential and salvific content of the great Revelations.

The religions can be likened to so many sectors of the “universal circumference”, the center being the Divine Principle or the nirvanic Reality. God is unique; the personification of the Logos could never be so, except for a given sector.

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What appears in Islam as an irritating disproportion, when seen from the outside, is the contrast between the obviously human style of the Prophet and the claim of his pre-eminence in the hierarchy of religious messengers or simply of creatures. The totalitarianism specific to each religion obliges Islam to identify Muhammad alone with the total Logos, the other Prophets being able, in this case, to represent only particular functions of this same Logos; but since the Prophet of Islam does not have the right to be avatarically superhuman, for Islam intends in its own way to avoid the pitfalls of anthropolatry and titanism, no spokesman of Heaven is allowed to be so; on the one hand, Muhammad can be only a “man”, and this condemns him in the Islamic perspective to present himself in the mold of the smallness and complexity characteristic of the human species, while on the other hand, he must be situated at its summit, for the evident reasons just indicated above.³ What in Islam compensates for the necessary smallness of the spokesman –since to be a creature is to be small- is the sublimation of the Prophet by virtue of his inward identification with the total Logos; whence the occurrence of a kind

³ Carried away by his zeal to refute the doctrine of incarnation, Ghazzali did not hesitate to affirm that the transformation of a staff into a snake by Moses was a miracle greater than the raising of the bodies by Christ. A manifest error, because to throw one’s staff by divine order and then to flee before the snake is not to produce a miracle; the marvel is great of course, but Moses had nothing to do with it.

of void between the human smallness and the metaphysical greatness, a void which, in the avataric perspectives, is filled by the Man-God, who is at once divine man and human God.

This simplicity, or this voluntary smallness of the Prophet, is in fact an unmistakable proof of his sincerity; an impostor coming after Christ would not have failed in declaring himself “Son of God” in his turn: The sincerity is here all the more striking since the Prophet admitted the virginal birth of Christ, which was hardly in his interest to do, either humanly or logically; at no time did the Prophet endeavor to appear as a superman⁴. Be that as it may, Muhammad was unquestionably an ascetic; it is well known that he had several wives, though incomparably fewer than David and Solomon who possessed hundreds; but, apart from that situation, which was sacramental from his point of view, he never ate to satiety, spent his nights in prayer, and gave away as alms all that he did not strictly need. As for his political comportment, it is worth recalling that the outward morality of Islam is identical to that of the Old Testament: it is *a priori* practical and not ascetical or mystical; thus it is first of all social. Intrinsic morality, that of the virtues, takes precedence over social morality while belonging to another sector which, though being no doubt parallel, is nonetheless independent; it acts towards the outward in the same manner that substance determines accidents *ab intra* and not *ab extra*; it is meant to inhere in all of our actions.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to insert the following comments. Westerners feel compelled to reproach Muhammad for certain direct and indirect acts of cruelty, and in doing so they start either from the prejudice that the victims were necessarily innocent or from the error that there can be no culprits deserving of such a harsh treatment; one would retort, from the Muslim side, that the treatment in question was an adequate reaction to a moral and physical culpability, which is irrefutable if one assumes the fact of effective guilt; it is in any case impossible to prove that it was not so, and the tendency some historians have of attributing the basest motives in spite of psychological information proving the contrary, does nothing to help clarify matters nor

⁴ When in intimate surroundings and on the margin of his mission, the Prophet had a somewhat playful simplicity which recalls Krishna and, closer to us and at a more modest level, the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna.

to solve the problem in itself. It is incontrovertible that the satirical poet Kab was treacherously assassinated, but Judith did not act differently towards Holofernes, nor as a matter of fact Jahel with Sisera, in the times of the prophetess Deborah; in all three cases one finds an amoral relationship of cause and effect based on the deceitful nature of treachery, whether political or spiritual or both at the same time. If it is true that in some cases the means debase the end, it is equally true that in other cases the end sanctifies the means; all told, everything is here a question of circumstance and proportions.⁵

This said, let us return to our main subject. “Ye have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example”, the Koran says, and not for nothing. The virtue one can observe among pious Muslims including the heroic modalities that these give rise to among the Sufis, are attributed by the *Sunnah* to the Prophet: now it is inconceivable that these virtues could have been practiced throughout the centuries all the way to our day without the founder of Islam having personified them in the highest degree; likewise it is inconceivable that the virtues would have been borrowed from elsewhere – one would have wonder from where- since their conditioning and style are specifically Islamic. For Muslims, the moral and spiritual worth of the Prophet is not an abstraction nor a conjectural matter; it is a living reality, and this is precisely what proves, retrospectively, its authenticity; to deny this amounts to claiming that there can be effects without a cause. The Muhammadan character of the virtues explains, moreover, the more or less impersonal bearing of saints: there are no other virtues than those of Muhammad; thus they can only be repeated by those who imitate his example; it is through them that the Prophet lives on in his community.

That a Muslim sees nothing outside of this particular phenomenon of greatness is the ransom of the subjectivism specific to any religious mentality; and it is almost a

⁵ There remains one more very particular point to clarify, namely that the case of Kab presents an aspect of magic analogous to that occurring in the case of Shimei: the latter had implicitly cursed David –and thereby the Prophet-King’s posterity; David accepted the outrage as a chastisement from God; and later, having become powerful again, he likewise accepted Shimei’s excuses and swore to spare his life. Before dying, however, he enjoined Solomon to slay the insulter –his oath having engaged none but David himself- in order to avert from Solomon the curse which Shimei had uttered and which was still effective: its magic could be extinguished only by being turned back to its author. The rest of the Biblical story obliges us to add that Solomon combined the apparently contradictory wishes of his father in a kind of ordeal subject to divine judgment in which the ultimate verdict rested upon the particular behavior of the incriminated; in this manner, Shimei assumed the responsibility of his fate while making the verdict of God plain to see.

tautology to add that, in spite of all the painful and irritating misunderstandings concerning other possible modes of greatness, the Muslim compensates –or has to compensate- for his “lack of imagination” by an attitude that enables him to realize inwardly and qualitatively what he ignores outwardly. One finds here the whole system of the “love of the Prophet”, or the love of the Logos as a terrestrial Divine Manifestation: man must love the human Logos so as to be loved by God. To love the Prophet is, in practical terms, to become integrated in the mold of the *Sunnah*; it is thus to take on before God the primordial human norm (*fitrah*), the sole one approved by Him.

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The *Avatara* is Divine Man and human God; *grosso modo*, Islam opts for the first of these aspects and Christianity for the second. “Divine Man” means here: perfect man, primordial and normative –undeformed image of the Creator; but image nevertheless, not Divinity. “Human God” means: Divine Spirit animating a human form, to the point of absorbing the soul so as to make one substance of both the soul and the Spirit.

We have seen that one of the stumbling blocks for a Westerner in the approach of Islam is the question of the sanctity of the Prophet; the difficulty resides mainly in the fact that the Christian perspective addresses this question from another angle than does Islam. The difference at issue here could perhaps best illustrated with the following images: there is a type of sanctity that pertains *a priori* to formal perfection, at least as regards its usual manifestation: the saint is perfect as the sphere is the most perfect of forms, or as regular geometric figures are perfect when compared with asymmetrical or even chaotic and thus arbitrary figures. There is, however, another mode in which sanctity manifests itself that corresponds, not to the perfection of the form, but to the nobility of the substance; just as we could say that the sphere or the cube are perfect forms, whatever be their substance, in the same way we could say that gold and diamond are noble substances, whatever be their form.

In the case of a Christ or a Buddha, it may be said that their sanctity is proven outwardly by the perfection of their form; whosoever fails to realize a perfect form, as they possess, is not a saint. On the hand, in the case of a Krishna, an Abraham, or a Muhammad, it may be said that everything they did was precious or infused with holiness, not owing to the form, but owing to the substance; it is the substance which makes the act legitimate and ennobles it, and which makes of it a positive sign and an element of benediction.

Whereas the Christian will say: he who possesses a celestial nature will prove it by his way of acting, the Muslim will say rather: the actions of one who has a celestial nature cannot but possess a celestial quality. Certainly, sanctity as substance excludes intrinsically imperfect acts, but it does not exclude acts that are ambiguous in their appearance; and sanctity as form is impossible without sanctity in substance; but a near perfect form without sanctity –hence hypocrisy- is something quite possible, though its prestige could not be more tenuous. If Krishna plays with the milkmaids, he still remains Krishna, and his play conveys something of the liberating Infinite; conversely, no matter how meticulously the Pharisees condemned by Christ may try to conform to the formal law, this is not enough to make of them saints; quite the contrary.

In Christianity, the majority of saints are monks or nuns, if not hermits, but there are also kings and warriors; in Islam, the majority of saints –those at the origin- are warriors or at least men of action; however, starting at a certain epoch, the majority of the Sufis kept apart from the world except, if the case arose, when preaching. With regard to the Prophet himself, one has the impression –keeping in mind the characteristic perspective of Islam- that God introduced into his life some seemingly fortuitous elements in order to show that the Messenger is but a man and that the fate of man is the contingent and the unforeseeable, in order to prevent the Messenger from being deified after his sojourn on earth. It is precisely this aspect of things that induces Islam to insist on sanctity as substance and not to see beyond a “doing” that is engaged in the accidents or vicissitudes of the world- and lacking in itself the value of a decisive criterion- a “being” that is independent of this activity; this “being” or this holiness is revealed, for those who are its witnesses, through its tendencies and through the spiritual perfume it

projects onto its manifestations.⁶ On the one hand, the Muslim deduces from the absolute Truth of the Message the total holiness of the Messenger, while the Christian proceeds the other way round; on the other hand, the Muslim bases himself on the accounts of those who, having known the Prophet, bear witness to his incomparability.

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It is now indispensable to say something about the metaphysical basis of prophecy. Man cannot know, in any degree, the “Self” without the assistance – and “blessing”- of the “Divine Person”; likewise, he cannot approach the Divine Person without the assistance and the blessing of “God made manifest”, that is to say, the divine reflection in the cosmic substance: “No man cometh unto the Father but by Me,” said Christ, and a *hadith* tells us “no man shall meet Allah who halt not first met the Prophet.”

There are indeed three great theophanies, or three hypostases, which in descending order are: firstly, Beyond-Being or the Self, Absolute Reality, *Atma*; secondly, Being or the Lord, who creates, reveals and judges; and thirdly, the manifested Divine Spirit, which Itself possesses three modes: the Universal or Archangelic Intellect, the Man-Logos, who reveals in a human language, and the Intellect in ourselves, which is “neither created or uncreated”, and which confers upon the human species its central, axial, and “pontifical” rank, one which is virtually divine with regard to other creatures.

In a perspective as rigorously unitarian and transcendentalist –not immanentist- as Islam, it is the mystery of the “God made manifest” that accounts for the immense importance of the “prayers on the Prophet”, a practice that would remain unintelligible were it not for the in some sense “Divine” character of the Messenger: traditional

⁶ The famous “tea ceremony” in Japanese Buddhism is an example that has become liturgical of this interiorizing manifestation – or of this “manifestation of the Void”- of what even ordinary actions of men penetrated of God can be. The “tea ceremony” is great, not because of a moral sublimity, but by virtue of a “being” or a gnosis made manifest in an otherwise unimportant activity, thus highlighting the contrast between the profundity of “being” and the humbleness of the action. An example, of a different order, is provided in the life of Abd Al-Qadir al-Jilani: the saint relates a little story about cats, and the whole audience begins to weep from spiritual emotion, after having listened with boredom to the brilliant sermon of a great theologian.

accounts of the person of the Prophet enable us to become aware of both the incontestably human and, equally superhuman nature of the manifested Logos.

To understand this doctrine more clearly –a doctrine which, from the Muslim point of view, is esoteric –the following image could be proposed: when the sun is reflected in a lake, one can distinguish first of all the sun, secondly the ray, and thirdly the reflection itself; now one could discuss without end the question of knowing whether a creature who saw the reflection alone –the sun being hidden from sight by some obstacle- saw only the water, or whether, on the contrary, it really saw something of the sun itself. What is incontestable is that without the sun, the water would not even be visible –and it would in any case carry no reflection; therefore it cannot be denied that he who sees the reflected image of the sun sees thereby “in a certain fashion” the sun itself, as this Muhammadan saying enunciates: “ He who hath seen me hath seen the Truth (God).”

Certainly, avatarism is altogether foreign to Islam; nonetheless, Islam cannot but attribute a unique virtue to the prophetic quality of its Revealer, since the sufficient reason for every manifestation of the Logos is to reveal Itself as the sole manifestation, or as the most ample, or as the first or the last, or as that of the essence of the Logos, and so on. No Divine Name is another Name, and yet each one is God; and each becomes central the moment It reveals Itself or the moment It is invoked, for it is God who reveals Himself in It, and it is God whom one invokes in It; and this applies also *mutatis mutandis* –to speak now in Buddhist terms- to the *Adi-Buddha* who, through diversely projected in time and in space, both heavenly and earthly⁷, remains always the same Logos.

When discussing the great theophanies –Beyond Being, Being and the Divine Center of Existence, or the Self, Lord, and Logos-Intellect- mention was also made, while relating it to the Logos, of the human Intellect, which is neither “created nor uncreated”: this allows one to distinguish, if so desired, a fourth theophany, that of the Logos

⁷ The Paradises are beyond extension and duration in the physical or terrestrial meaning of the terms; nonetheless, they comprise strictly analogous conditions for the simple reason that each cosmos requires, on the one hand, a condition of stability, and simultaneity while requiring, on the other hand, a condition of change and succession. There is no cosmos without expansion and without rhythm.

reflected in the microcosm; this is the same Divine Logos, but manifesting Itself “inwardly” instead of “outwardly”. If “no man cometh unto the Father but by Me”, this truth or this principle applies also to the pure Intellect within us: in the sapiential order –and it is only in this order than one can speak of Intellect and of intellectuality without adjoining implacable restrictions –what matters is to submit all the powers of the soul to the pure Spirit, which is identified, though in a formless and ontological manner, with the fundamental dogma of Revelation and thereby with the *Sophia Perennis*.⁸

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Islam readily insists on the Prophet’s poverty, which sometimes appears as the quintessence of the virtues insofar as it is freely consented to and piously practiced. It can be said without exaggeration that one of the fundamental traits of Islam is its cult of poverty, a cult that extends from the *Sunnah* all the way to art: the splendor of the mosques is a richness imprinted with poverty; their glittering quality is neutralized by a calm monotony, even in Persian and Turkish art where the richness is more marked than in the art of the Arabs.⁹ The Koran is the paradigm of this equilibrium: to recite the Koran is to drink holy poverty; the element of drunken rapture is not missing, but it is a sober rapture comparable to the poetry of the desert.¹⁰ The dryness of the Koranic style –with

⁸ When the Ancients considered that wisdom and felicity consisted in submitting to “reason”, both human and cosmic, they were referring whether directly or indirectly, consciously, or unconsciously, to the One Intellect. The proof of this lies precisely in the fact that they linked reason to universal Nature; the error occurred when many of them reduced in practice this Nature to human reason, after having first reduced God to Nature. This double reduction is the very definition of Greco-Roman paganism, or of Greco-Roman spirit insofar as it was pagan and not Platonic; one could add that it is only the Man-Logos or Revelation that gives full value to or “resuscitates” reason, just as it is the notion of the absolute Real alone and of its transcendence that gives meaning to Nature.

⁹ That Muslim art has an Arab character and a powerful originality of its own is denied by some on the pretext that it is composed of elements borrowed from other styles; this however, in the very relative measure in which it can be conceded, is wholly beside the point. For one thing, Muslim art –even Persian Turkish or Indian- is deeply Arab in virtue of the Islam which determines it; for another this art is perfectly original and could not fail to be so owing to the fact that, whatever its models may be, it springs from an intrinsic orthodoxy and thus from a celestial inspiration.

¹⁰ According to an Islamic tradition, Adam at first refused to enter into a body made of clay and only resolved to do so once swayed by a celestial music; now this music is reproduced in the Koran under the form of the *surah* “*Ya Sin*”.

the exception of a few *surahs* and of some passages- has often been remarked upon, whereas the virile power of this style has often been overlooked; to speak of God in Arabic, is to speak of Him with force. The truth is that the general dryness of the Koranic style prevents the engendering of a titanic and dangerously creative individualism; it creates a human style that is rooted in pious poverty and in holy childlikeness.

The Arab soul is made of poverty; it is from this background that the qualities of ardor, courage, tenacity, and generosity stand out. Everything is derived from poverty, deploys itself in it, and is resorbed in it; the originality of Arab eloquence, be it chivalrous or moralizing, is that it is poor; its prolixity is that of the desert.

There is in Islamic pauperism a universal message, found no less in Gospels, but with less obsessive monotony; it is a matter of reminding man that norm of well-being is not a maximum but a minimum of comfort and that the cardinal virtues are, in this respect, contentment and gratitude. But this message would not amount to much were it is not the expression of a truth which encompasses our whole being, and which the Gospels express in these terms: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.” The Koranic basis for spiritual poverty according to Islam is the following verse: “O mankind! Ye are the poor in your relation to Allah. And Allah is the rich! He is the Absolute, the Owner of Praise.” The “poor” are those who know that they have nothing by their own means and that they need everything from someone else; the “Rich” is He who suffices unto Himself and who lives from His own substance.¹¹ *Islam*, inasmuch as it is “resignation” to the Divine Will, is poverty; but poverty is not an end in itself: its whole purpose for being rests in its positive complement, which means that perfect poverty opens onto richness, a richness that we carry within ourselves since the Transcendent is also the Immanent. To die for Transcendence is to be born in Immanence.

¹¹ *Surah* of “the Angels”, 15. The “Rich” is literally the “Independent” (*Ghani*), who is in need of nothing and of no one since He is the source of everything and since He contains everything within Himself; and it is for this reason that He is also the “Praised” (*Hamid*).