



Al-Faqr

René Guénon

The contingent being may be defined as one not having in itself its own sufficient reason; consequently, such a being is nothing in itself, and nothing of what it is belongs properly to it. Such is the case of the human being insofar as he is individual, as well as of all manifested beings in whatsoever state they may be, for any difference among the degrees of universal Existence is always as nothing in relation to the Principle. These beings, human or otherwise, are therefore, in all that they are, in a state of complete dependence with regard to the Principle, “outside of which there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that exists”; it is in the consciousness of this dependence that what several traditions call “spiritual poverty” properly consists. At the same time, for the being that has acquired it, this consciousness immediately results in detachment with respect to all manifested things, for thence forward the being knows that these things too are nothing, and that their importance is strictly nothing with respect to absolute Reality. In the case of the human being, this detachment implies essentially and above all indifference to the fruits of action, as the *Bhagavad-Gita* notably teaches, an indifference by which the being escapes the unending chain of the consequences of this action; it is 'action without desire' (*nishkama karma*), whereas 'action with desire' (*sakama karma*) is action with a view to its fruits.

By this means the being escapes multiplicity; according to the Taoist expression, it escapes from the vicissitudes of the “current of forms”, from the alternation of the states of “life” and “death”, of “condensation” and “dissipation”, passing from the circumference of the “cosmic wheel” to its center, which is itself termed “the void [the non-manifested] that unites the spokes and makes of them a wheel.” “He who has arrived at the limit of the void,” said Lao Tzu also, “will be fixed firmly in repose.... To return to its root [that is, to the Principle, which is both first origin and final end of all beings] means entering into the state of repose.” “Peace in the void,” says Lieh Tzu, “is an indefinable state; one neither receives it nor bestows it; one succeeds in establishing oneself in it.” This “peace in the void” is the “great peace” (*as-sakinah*) of Islamic esoterism, which is at the same time the “divine presence” at the center of the being, implied by union with the Principle, which can only be effected in that very center.

Al-Faqr

To the one who dwells in the non-manifested, all beings manifest themselves United to the Principle, it is in harmony, through it, with all beings. United to the Principle, it knows all through superior general reasons, and consequently no longer uses its various senses to know in particular and in detail. The true reason of things is invisible, imperceptible, indefinable, indeterminable. Alone, the spirit re-established in its state of perfect simplicity can attain in it deep contemplation.

“Simplicity”, an expression of the unification of all the powers of the being, characterizes the return to the “primordial state”; and we see here the whole difference separating the transcendent knowledge of the sage from ordinary and “profane” knowledge. This “simplicity” is also designated elsewhere as the state of “childhood” (in Sanskrit, *balya*), naturally understood in the spiritual sense, and is considered in Hindu doctrine as a precondition for the acquisition of knowledge par excellence. This brings to mind similar words found in the Gospels: “Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it,” and, “Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes.” “Simplicity” and “littleness” are here basically equivalents of the “poverty” that is so often mentioned also in the Gospels, and that is generally very much misunderstood: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” According to Islamic esotericism, this “poverty” (in Arabic, *al-faqr*) leads to *al-fana'*, that is, to the “extinction” of the “ego”; and by this “extinction” one attains the “divine station” (*al-maqamul-ilahi*), which is the central point where all distinctions inherent in outward points of view are surpassed, where all oppositions have disappeared and are resolved in a perfect equilibrium.

In the primordial state these oppositions did not exist. They arise from the diversification of beings [inherent in manifestation and, like it, contingent], and from their contacts caused by the universal gyration [that is, by the rotation of the “cosmic wheel” around its axis]. They cease to affect the being directly it has reduced its distinct self and its particular movement to almost nothing.

This reduction of the “distinct self,” which finally disappears by being resorbed into one unique point, is the same as *al-fanâ'* and also as the “void” mentioned above; moreover, according to the symbolism of the wheel, it is evident that the “movement” of a being is all the more diminished as the being nears the center.

This being no longer enters into conflict with any being, because it is established in the infinite, effaced in the indefinite. It has reached and remains at the starting-point of transformations, a neutral point where there are no conflicts. By concentration of its nature, by alimentation of its vital spirit, by a gathering together of all its powers, it has joined itself to the principle of all genesis. Its nature being whole [synthetically totalized in principial unity], its vital spirit being intact, no being can harm it.

The “simplicity” in question above corresponds to the unity “without dimensions” of the primordial point, where the movement of return toward the origin ends. “The man who is absolutely simple sways all beings by his simplicity, so effectively that nothing opposes him in the six regions of space, nothing is hostile to him, and fire and water do not injure him.” Indeed, he remains at the center from which the six directions have issued by radiation, and where, two by two, they come to be neutralized in the movement of return,

so that at this unique point their threefold opposition ceases entirely and nothing of what results therefrom or there localizes itself can reach the being that dwells in immutable unity. As the latter opposes nothing, neither can anything oppose it, for opposition is necessarily a reciprocal relation which calls for the presence of two terms and which, consequently, is incompatible with principial unity; and hostility, which is only a result or an exterior manifestation of opposition, cannot exist with regard to a being outside and beyond all opposition. Fire and water, which are the type of opposites in the “elementary world”, cannot injure it, for in truth they no longer even exist for it as contraries, having returned into the indifferentiation of the primordial ether by balancing and neutralizing each other through the reunion of their qualities which, though apparently opposed, are really complementary.

This central point, by which communication with the superior or “celestial” states is established for the human being, is also the “narrow gate” of the Gospel symbolism, and from everything we have said it will easily be understood who are the “rich” that cannot pass through it: they are beings attached to multiplicity and therefore incapable of rising from distinctive knowledge to unified knowledge. Indeed, this attachment is the exact opposite of the detachment treated above, just as wealth is the opposite of poverty, and it enchains the being to the indefinite series of the cycles of manifestation. Attachment to multiplicity is also, in a certain sense, the Biblical “temptation”, which, by causing the being to taste of the fruit of the “Tree of Knowledge of good and evil”, that is, of the dualistic and distinctive knowledge of contingent things, moves him away from the primordial central unity and prevents him from attaining the fruits of the “Tree of Life”; and in fact it is in just this way that the being is subject to the alternation of cyclical changes, that is, to birth and death. The indefinitude of the course of multiplicity is represented precisely by the turns of the serpent coiling itself around the tree which symbolizes the “World Axis”; it is the path of “those who are led astray” (*ad-dallîn*), of those who “err” in the etymological sense of this word, as opposed to the “straight path” (*as-sirâtul-mustaqîm*), ascending vertically along the axis itself, which is spoken of in the opening *surat* of the Koran.

“Poverty”, “simplicity”, and “childhood”, these are but one and the same thing, and the stripping away expressed by these words leads to an “extinction” which, in reality, is the plenitude of the being, just as “non-action” (*wu-wei*) is the plenitude of activity since it is from this that all particular activities are derived. “The Principle is always non-acting, and yet everything is done through it.” The being that has thus arrived at the central point has by this very fact realized the integrality of the human state; it is the “true man” (*chen jen*) of Taoism, and when, departing this point to rise to higher states, it will have accomplished the perfect totalization of its possibilities, it will have become the “divine man” (*shen jen*), who is the “Universal Man” (*al-Insân al-Kâmil*) of Islamic esotericism. Thus it can be said that it is the “rich” who, from the standpoint of manifestation, are really the “poor” with respect to the Principle, and inversely; this is what the Gospel expresses very clearly by the words: “The last will be first, and the first last”; and in this regard we note once again the perfect agreement of all the traditional doctrines, which are only diverse expressions of the one Truth.