



The science of hand-reading in Sufism

René Guénon

We have often had occasion to point out how foreign the concept of “traditional sciences” has become to Westerners in modern times, and how difficult it is for them to understand its true nature. Yet another example of this incomprehension recently came to our attention in a study devoted to Muhyi’ d-Dîn ibn al-‘Arabî, in which the author expressed surprise at finding, side by side with the latter’s purely spiritual doctrine, numerous considerations on astrology, the science of letters and numbers, symbolic geometry, and many other things of the same order which he seemed to regard as having no link with the doctrine itself. There was a double misapprehension, moreover, for the properly spiritual part of the teaching of Muhyi’ d-Dîn was itself presented as “mystical”, whereas it is essentially metaphysical and initiatic; and if something “mystical” were at issue, it could have no effective connection with sciences of any sort whatsoever. On the contrary, whenever it is a question of spiritual or metaphysical doctrine, these traditional sciences – the value of which the same author totally failed to recognize, in accordance with the usual modern preconceptions – follow normally from it as applications, just as consequences derive from a principle, and thus, far from representing somewhat adventitious or heterogeneous elements, they form an integral part of *tasawwuf*, that is to say the totality of the initiatic sciences.

Of these traditional sciences, most are completely unknown to Westerners today, and of others they know only more or less unconnected bits and pieces, often so degenerated as to have become nothing more than practical “recipes” or simple “divinatory arts” clearly devoid of any doctrinal value. As an example of just how far from reality it is to envisage them in such a way, we shall here offer some instruction on the science of hand-reading (*‘ilm al-kaff*) in Islamic esotericism, which in any case constitutes only one of the many branches of what might be called, for want of any better term, “physiognomy,” although this word does not do justice to the full scope of the Arabic term (*‘ilm al-firâsah*) denoting this group of sciences.

The science of hand-reading, strange as this may seem to those who have no notion of such things, is, in its Islamic form, directly related to the science of the divine names: the arrangement of the principal lines of the left hand trace out the number 81, and those of the right 18, giving a total of 99, which is the number of the names attributed to Allâh (*sifatiyyah*). As for the name Allâh itself, it is formed by the fingers in the following way:

The science of hand-reading in Sufism

the little finger corresponds to the *alif*, the ring finger to the first *lam*, the middle and index fingers to the second *lam*, which is double, and the thumb to the *ha* (as regularly drawn in its “open” form); and here lies the principal reason for the widespread use of the hand as a symbol in all Islamic countries (a secondary reason being connected with the number 5, whence the name *khums*, which is sometimes given to this symbolic hand). From this we may understand the meaning of the verse in the book of Job: “He seals (*khâtim*) up the hand of every man, that all men may know his work”; and it may be added that this is not unrelated to the essential role of the hand in the rites of benediction and consecration.

The correspondence between the different parts of the hand and the planets (*kawâkib*), on the other hand, is generally known, and even Western chiromancy has retained it, though in such a way as to see in it no more than conventional designations, whereas in reality this correspondence establishes an effective link between the sciences of hand-reading and astrology. Moreover, one of the chief prophets presides over each of the planetary heavens as its “pole” (*al-qutb*); and the qualities and sciences linked more especially to each of these prophets also have a relationship with the corresponding astral influence. The list of the seven celestial *aqtab* [plural of *qutb*] is as follows: Adam, the heaven of the moon (*al-Qamar*); Jesus, the heaven of Mercury (*al-Utârid*); Joseph, the heaven of Venus (*az-Zohrah*); Idris [Enoch], the heaven of the sun (*as-Shams*); David, the heaven of Mars (*al-Mirrîkh*); Moses, the heaven of Jupiter (*al-Barjîs*); and Abraham, the heaven of Saturn (*al-Kaywân*).

To Adam corresponds the cultivation of the earth (cf. Gen. 2:15): “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it”; to Jesus corresponds knowledge of a purely spiritual order; to Joseph, beauty and the arts; to Idris, the “intermediary sciences,” that is, those of a cosmological and psychic order; to David, government; to Moses, with whom his brother Harun [Aaron] is inseparably associated, religious matters under the double aspect of legislation and worship; and to Abraham, faith (this correspondence with the seventh heaven must be compared with what we recently noted in connection with Dante, as to its placement on the highest of the seven rungs of the initiatic ladder).

Furthermore, the other prophets, both known (that is, mentioned by name in the Koran – twenty-five in number) and unknown (all the others, the number of the prophets being 124,000 according to tradition) are also distributed around the principal prophets throughout the seven planetary spheres.

The ninety-nine names which express the divine qualities are also distributed according to this septenary: 15 for the heaven of the sun, by reason of its central position, and 14 for each the other six heavens ($15 + 6 \times 14 = 99$). An examination of the signs found on the part of the hand corresponding to each planet indicates in what proportion ($s/14$ or $s/15$) the subject possesses the qualities related to each; this proportion itself corresponds to a same number (s) of divine names among those belonging to the planetary heaven in question; and these names themselves can then be determined by means of a very long and complicated calculation.

The science of hand-reading in Sufism

It may be added that the region of the wrist, beyond the hand properly speaking, is the place corresponding to the two highest heavens, those of the fixed stars and the empyrean, which, together with the seven planetary heavens, complete the number 9.

Moreover, the twelve zodiacal signs (*burûj*) are located in different parts of the hand, and are linked, moreover, to the planets, of which they are the respective “houses” (one apiece for the sun and moon and two for each of the other planets), and also to the sixteen figures of geomancy (*‘ilm ar-raml*), for all the traditional sciences are closely linked together.

An examination of the left hand indicates the “nature” (*at-tabiyah*) of the subject, that is, the collection of tendencies, dispositions, or aptitudes that in some way constitute his innate characteristics. The right hand exhibits the acquired characteristics (*al-iktisâb*), and since these latter change continually, the reading must be repeated every four months if a thorough study is to be made. This period of four months constitutes in effect a complete cycle, in the sense that it brings us back once more to a zodiacal sign corresponding to the same element as that of the starting-point, the order of the correspondence with the elements being, as one knows, fire (*nâr*), earth (*turâb*), air (*hawâ*), and water (*mâ’*). It is therefore an error to suppose, as some have, that the period in question should be only three months, for this period only corresponds to one season, that is, one part of the annual cycle, and is not itself a complete cycle.

These few indications, brief as they are, will serve to show how a traditional, regularly constituted science is attached to principles of a doctrinal order and is entirely subject to them; and at the same time they will serve to illustrate the truth we have so often affirmed, that such a science is strictly bound to a definite traditional form so that it would be quite unusable outside the civilization for which it was intended. Here, for example, the considerations relating to the divine names and the prophets, which are precisely those upon which all the rest is based, would be inapplicable outside the Islamic world, just as, to take another example, onomantic calculus, whether used in isolation or as an element in the casting of a horoscope in certain astrological methods, could only be valid for Arabic names, the letters of which have fixed numerical values. In this order of contingent applications there is always a question of adaptation which makes it impossible to transfer these sciences just as they are, from one traditional form to another; and no doubt this is also one of the principal reasons why they tend to be so incomprehensible to those who, like modern Westerners, have no equivalent in their own civilization.