



Islamic Esoterism

René Guénon

OF ALL TRADITIONAL DOCTRINES, perhaps Islamic doctrine most clearly distinguishes the two complementary parts, which can be labeled exoterism and esoterism. In Arabic terminology, these are the *sharī'ah*, literally the 'great way', common to all, and the *haqīqah*, literally the 'inward truth', reserved to an elite, not because of some arbitrary decision, but by the very nature of things, since not all men possess the aptitudes or 'qualifications' required to reach knowledge of the truth. To express their respective 'outward' and 'inward' natures, exoterism and esoterism are often compared to the 'shell' (*qishr*) and the 'kernel' (*lubb*), or to the circumference and its center. The *sharī'ah* comprises everything that in Western languages would be called 'religious', and especially the whole of the social and legislative side which, in Islam, is essentially integrated into the religion. It could be said that the *sharī'ah* is first and foremost a rule of action, whereas the *haqīqah* is pure knowledge; but it must be well understood that it is this knowledge that gives even the *sharī'ah* its higher and deeper meaning and its true *raison d'être*, so that even though not all those participating in the religion are aware of it, the *haqīqah* is nevertheless its true principle, just as the center is the principle of the circumference.

But this is not all, for esoterism comprises not only the *haqīqah*, but also the specific means for reaching it, and taken as a whole, these means are called the *tarīqah*, the 'way' or 'path' leading from the *sharī'ah* to the *haqīqah*. If we return to the symbol of the circumference and its center, we can say that the *tarīqah* is represented by the radius that runs from the former to the latter. And this leads us to the following: to each point on the circumference there corresponds a radius, and all the radii, which are indefinite in number, terminate in the center. It can thus be said that these radii are so many *turuq* (plural of *tarīqah*) adapted to the beings 'situated' at the different points on the circumference according to the diversity of their individual natures. This is why it is said that 'the ways to God are as numerous as the souls of men' (*at-turuqu ila 'Llāhi ka-nufūsi bani Adam*). Thus the 'ways' are many, and differ all the more among themselves the closer they are to their starting-point on the circumference; but their end is one, as there is only one center and one truth. Strictly speaking, the initial differences are effaced along with 'individuality' itself (*al-innīya*, from *ana*, 'I'); in other words, when the higher states of the being have been attained, and when the attributes (*sifāt*) of the creature (*'abd*, 'slave') — which are really limitations — disappear (*al-fanā* 'extinction'), leaving only those of Allah (*al-baqā*, 'permanence'), the being becoming identified with the latter [Divine attributes] in his 'personality' or 'essence' (*adh-dhāt*).

Islamic Esoterism

Esoterism, considered thus as comprising both *tarīqah* and *haqīqah*, namely means and end, is designated in Arabic by the general term *tasawwuf*, which can only be translated precisely as 'initiation' — a point to which we will return later. Although *tasawwuf* can be applied to any esoteric and initiatic doctrine, regardless of the traditional form to which it belongs, Westerners have coined the [derivative] term 'Sufism' to designate Islamic esoterism; but, apart from being completely conventional, this term has the unfortunate disadvantage of inevitably suggesting by its 'ism' suffix, the idea of a doctrine proper to a particular school, whereas this is not the case in reality, the only schools in question being the *turuq*, which basically represent different methods, without there being any possibility of a fundamental difference of doctrine, for 'the doctrine of Unity is unique' (*at-tawhīdu wāhid*). As for the derivation of the terms *tasawwuf* and 'Sufism', they obviously come from the word *sūfī*, and here it must first be said that no one can ever call himself a *sūfī*, except from pure ignorance, for he proves thereby that he is not truly so, this quality necessarily being a secret (*sirr*) between the true *sūfī* and Allah; one can only call oneself a *mutasawwuf*, a term applied to anyone who has entered upon the initiatic 'way', whatever the 'degree' he may have reached; but the *sūfī*, in the true sense of the term, is only the one who has reached the supreme degree.

Some have sought to assign the most diverse origins to the Arabic word *sūfī*; but this question is undoubtedly unsolvable from our present position, and we freely admit that the word has too many proposed etymologies, of equal plausibility, for only one to be true; in reality, we must rather see herein a purely symbolic name, a sort of 'cipher', which, as such, requires no linguistic derivation strictly speaking; and this is not unique, for one can find comparable cases in other traditions. As for the so-called etymologies, these are basically only phonetic resemblances, which, moreover, according to the laws of a certain symbolism, effectively correspond to relationships between various ideas which have come to be grouped more or less as accessories around the word in question. But given the character of the Arabic language (a character which it shares with Hebrew), the primary and fundamental meaning of a word is to be found in the numerical values of the letters; and in fact, what is particularly remarkable is that the sum of the numerical values of the letters which form the word *sūfī* has the same number as *al-Hik-matu'l-ilahiya*, 'Divine Wisdom'. The true *sūfī* is therefore the one who possesses this Wisdom, or, in other words, he is *al-'ārīf bi' Llah*, that is to say 'he who knows through God', for God cannot be known except by Himself; and this is the supreme or 'total' degree of knowledge or *haqīqah*.¹

¹ In a work on *tasawwuf*, written in Arabic, but from a very modern perspective, a Syrian writer so ill acquainted with us as to mistake us for an 'orientalist,' has taken it into his head to address a rather singular reproach to us: having somehow read *al-Sūfiyah* in place of *Sūfī* (in a special issue of *Cahiers du Sud* in 1935 on 'Islam and the West'), he imagined that my calculation was inexact; wishing then to make the calculation himself according to his own lights, he managed, by way of several errors in the numeric value of the letters, to arrive (this time as equivalent to *al-Sūfī*, which is still wrong) at *al-hakīm al-ilahī*, without, moreover, perceiving that, one *ya* being equal to two *ha*'s, these words form exactly the same total as *al-hak-mah al-ilahiya*! We know well enough that academic teaching of the present day is ignorant of the *abjad* [the alphabet], and is only familiar with the simple grammatical order of the letters; but just the same, when someone undertakes to treat these questions, such ignorance passes beyond the acceptable limits. Be that as it may, *al-hakīm al-ilahī* and *al-hakmah al-ilahiya* have basically the same meaning; but the first of these two expressions has a somewhat unusual character, while the second, as we have indicated, is, on the contrary, completely traditional.

Islamic Esoterism

From the preceding, we can draw several important consequences, the foremost being that 'Sufism' is not something that was 'added' to Islamic doctrine as an afterthought and from outside, but, on the contrary, is an essential part of it, since without it, Islamic doctrine would be manifestly incomplete, and, what is more, incomplete 'from above', that is to say in regard to its very principle. The completely gratuitous supposition of a foreign origin—Greek, Persian, or Indian—is in any case formally contradicted by the fact that the means of expression of Islamic esoterism are intimately linked with the very constitution of the Arabic language; and if there are incontestable similarities with doctrines of the same order existing elsewhere, these can be explained quite naturally and without recourse to hypothetical 'borrowings', for, truth being one, all traditional doctrines are necessarily identical in their essence, whatever the diversity of the forms in which they are clothed. As regards this question of origins, it is of little importance whether the word *sūfī* and its derivatives (*tasawwuf*, *mutasawwuf*) have existed in the language from the beginning or have appeared at some later juncture, this being a great subject for discussion among historians; the thing may well have existed before the word, or under another name, or even without it having been found necessary to give it one. In any case — and this ought to settle the matter for anyone not regarding things merely from the outside — tradition expressly indicates that esoterism, as well as exoterism, proceeds directly from the very teaching of the Prophet, and, in fact, every authentic and regular *ṭarīqah* possesses a *silsilah* or 'chain' of initiatic transmission that ultimately goes back to him through a varying number of intermediaries. Even if, subsequently, some *ṭuruq* really did 'borrow', or, better said, 'adapt', certain details of their particular methods, this has a very secondary importance, and in no way affects what is essential; and here again similarities may equally well be explained by the possession of the same knowledge, especially as regards the 'science of rhythm' in its various branches. The truth is that 'Sufism' is as Arab as the Koran itself, in which it has its direct principles; but in order to find them there, the Koran must be understood and interpreted according to the *ḥaqā'iq* (plural of *ḥaqīqah*) which constitute its deepest meaning, and not simply by the linguistic, logical, and theological procedures of the *'ulamā az-zāhir* (literally the 'doctors of the outward') or doctors of the *sharī'ah*, whose competence extends only to the exoteric realm. It is a question here of two clearly different domains, and this is why there can never be any contradiction or any real conflict between them; it is moreover obvious that one cannot in any way oppose exoterism and esoterism, since on the contrary the second finds its foundation and point of departure in the first, and since they are really no more than the two aspects or the two faces of one and the same doctrine.

We should also point out that contrary to an opinion only too widespread among Westerners, Islamic esoterism has nothing in common with 'mysticism'. The reasons for this are easy to understand given everything we have explained so far. First of all, mysticism seems to be unique to Christianity, and it is only through erroneous assimilations that one can pretend to find more or less exact equivalents of it elsewhere. Some outward resemblances, in the use of certain expressions for example, are undoubtedly the cause of this error, but they can in no way justify it in light of differences that bear on everything essential. Since by very definition mysticism pertains entirely to the religious domain, it arises purely and simply from exoterism; and furthermore, the end toward which it tends is assuredly far from being of the order of pure knowledge. On the other hand, the mystic could have no method since he has a 'passive' attitude and, as a

Islamic Esoterism

result, limits himself to receiving what comes to him spontaneously as it were and with no initiative on his part. Thus there cannot be any mystical *tarīqah*, and such a thing is even inconceivable, for it is basically contradictory. Moreover, the mystic, always isolated by the very fact of the 'passive' nature of his 'realization', has neither *shaykh* nor 'spiritual master' (who, of course, has absolutely nothing in common with a 'spiritual director' in the religious sense), neither does he have a *silsilah* or 'chain' through which the 'spiritual influence' would have been transmitted to him (we use this expression to render as exactly as possible the meaning of the Arabic word *baraqah*), the second of these two things being moreover an immediate consequence of the first. The regular transmission of the 'spiritual influence' is what essentially characterizes 'initiation', and even what properly constitutes it, and that is why we have used this word above to translate *tasawwuf*. Islamic esoterism, like all true esoterism, moreover, is 'initiatric' and cannot be anything else; and even without entering into the question of the difference of goals, which in any case results from the very difference in the two domains to which they refer, we can say that the 'mystical way' and the 'initiatric way' are radically incompatible by reason of their respective characters, and we might also add that in Arabic there is no word by which one can translate 'mysticism' even approximately, so much does the idea expressed thereby represent something completely foreign to the Islamic tradition.

In its essence, initiatic doctrine is purely metaphysical in the true and original meaning of this term; but in Islam, as in other traditional forms, it also includes a complex ensemble of 'traditional sciences' by way of more or less direct applications to various contingent realms. These sciences are as if suspended from the metaphysical principles on which they depend and from which they derive, and draw from this attachment (and from the 'transpositions' which it permits) all their real value; they are thereby an integral part of the doctrine itself, although to a secondary and subordinate degree, and not more or less artificial and superfluous accretions. There seems to be something here that is particularly difficult for Westerners to understand, doubtless because their own environment offers no point of comparison in this regard; nevertheless there were analogous Western sciences in antiquity and the Middle Ages, but these are entirely forgotten by modern men, who ignore the true nature of things and often are not even aware of their existence. Those who confuse esoterism with mysticism are especially prone to misunderstand the role and the place of these sciences, which clearly represent a knowledge as far removed as can be from the preoccupations of the mystics, so that the incorporation of these sciences into 'Sufism' constitutes for them an undecipherable enigma. Such is the science of numbers and of letters, of which we gave an example in the interpretation of the term *sūfī*, and which, in a comparable form, can be found only in the Hebrew *Kabbalah*, by virtue of the close affinity of the languages which are the vehicles of expression for these two traditions, languages of which only this science can give the most profound understanding. Such are also the various 'cosmological' sciences which are included in part in what is called 'Hermeticism'; and in this connection we must note that alchemy is taken in a 'material' sense only by the ignorant, for whom symbolism is a dead letter, those very people whom the true alchemists of the Middle Ages stigmatized as 'puffers' and 'charcoal burners', and who were the true precursors of modern chemistry, however unflattering such an origin may be for the latter. Likewise astrology, another cosmological science, is in reality something entirely other than the 'divining art' or the 'science of conjecture' which alone is what modern people see in it. Above all it has to do with the knowledge of 'cyclical laws'

Islamic Esoterism

which play an important role in all traditional doctrines. Moreover, there is a certain correspondence between all these sciences which, since they proceed from essentially the same principles, may be regarded as various representations of one and the same thing from a certain point of view. Thus, astrology, alchemy, and even the science of letters do nothing but translate the same truths into the languages proper to different orders of reality, united among themselves by the law of universal analogy, the foundation of every symbolic correspondence; and, by virtue of this same analogy, these sciences, by an appropriate transposition, find their application in the realm of the 'microcosm' as well as in that of the 'macrocosm', for the initiatic process reproduces in all its phases the cosmological process itself. To have a full awareness of all these correlations, it is necessary to have reached a very high degree in the initiatic hierarchy, a degree which is called that of 'red sulphur' (*al-Kebrīt al-ahmar*); and whoever possesses this degree may, by means of the science known as *sīmiyā* (a word that must not be confused with *kīmiyā*), and by operating certain mutations on letters and numbers, act on the beings and things that correspond to these in the cosmic order. *Jafr*, which according to tradition owes its origin to Seyidna 'Ali himself, is an application of these same sciences to the prevision of future events; and this application, in which the cyclical laws to which we alluded just now naturally intervene, exhibits all the rigor of an exact and mathematical science for those who can understand and interpret it (for it possesses a kind of 'cryptography', which in fact is no more astonishing than algebraic notation). One could mention many other 'traditional sciences', some of which might seem even stranger to those who are not used to such things; but we must content ourselves with this, and restrict ourselves to generalities, in keeping with the scope of this exposition.

Finally, we must add one last observation of capital importance for understanding the true character of initiatic doctrine: this doctrine has nothing to do with 'erudition' and could never be learned by the reading of books in the manner of ordinary or 'profane' knowledge. The writings of the greatest masters themselves can only serve as 'supports' for meditation; one does not become a *mutasawwuf* simply by having read them, and in any case they remain mostly incomprehensible to those who are not 'qualified'. Indeed, it is necessary above all to possess certain innate dispositions or aptitudes which no amount of effort can replace; then, it is necessary to have an attachment to a regular *silsilah*, for the transmission of the 'spiritual influence' that is obtained by this attachment is, as we have already said, the essential condition, failing which there is no initiation, even of the most elementary degree. This transmission, which is acquired once and for all, must be the point of departure of a purely inward work for which all the outward means are no more than aids and supports, albeit necessary, given that one must take the nature of the human being such as it actually is into account; and it is by this inward work alone that a being, if capable of it, will ascend from degree to degree, to the summit of the initiatic hierarchy, to the 'Supreme Identity', the absolutely permanent and unconditioned state beyond the limitations of all contingent and transitory existence, which is the state of the true *sūfī*.