



## The Shell and the Kernel (*Al Qishr wa al-Lubb*)

René Guénon

*Al-Qishr wa al-Lubb* [The Shell and the Kernel], the title of one of Muhyi 'd-Dîn ibn al-'Arabî's numerous treatises, expresses in symbolic form the relationship between exoterism and esoterism, likened respectively to the casing of a fruit and to its interior part, the pith or kernel.<sup>1</sup> The casing or shell (*al-qishr*) is the *sharî'ah*, that is, the external religious law which is addressed to all and which is made to be followed by all, as indicated moreover by the meaning of "great way" that is associated with the derivation of its name. The kernel (*al-lubb*) is the *haqîqah*, that is to say truth or essential reality, which, unlike the *sharî'ah*, is not within reach of everyone but reserved for those who know how to discern it beneath outward appearances and how to attain it through the exterior forms which conceal it, protecting and disguising it at the same time.<sup>2</sup> In another symbolism, *sharî'ah* and *haqîqah* are also designated respectively as the "[outer] body" (*al-jism*) and the "marrow" (*al-mukh*),<sup>3</sup> of which the relationship is exactly the same as that of shell and kernel; and one could no doubt find still other symbols equivalent to these.

Whatever the designation used, what is referred to is always the "outward" (*al-zâhir*) and the "inward" (*al-bâtin*), that is, the apparent and the hidden, which, moreover, are such by their very nature and not owing to any conventions or to precautions taken artificially,

<sup>1</sup> Let us point out incidentally that this symbol of the fruit has a relationship with the "cosmic egg," and thus with the heart.

<sup>2</sup> One might remark that the role of exterior forms is related to the double meaning of the word "revelation," since such forms simultaneously manifest and veil the essential doctrine, the one truth, just as a word inevitably does for the thought it expresses; and what is true of a word in this regard is also true of any formal expression.

<sup>3</sup> One may recall here the "substantive marrow" of Rabelais, which also represents an interior and hidden meaning.

## The Shell and the Kernel (Al Qishr wa al-Lubb)

if not arbitrarily, by those who preserve traditional doctrine. This “outward” and this “inward” are represented by the circumference and its center, which can be looked upon as the cross-section of the fruit evoked by the previous symbol, at the same time that we are brought back to the image, common to all traditions, of the “wheel of things.” Indeed, if one looks at the two terms in question according to their universal sense and without limiting them by applying them to a particular traditional form, as is most often done, one could say that the *sharī’ah*, the “great way” traveled by all beings is nothing other than what the Far-Eastern traditions call the “current of forms,” while the *haqīqah*, the one and immutable truth, resides in the “invariable middle.”<sup>1</sup> In order to pass from one to the other, thus from the circumference to the center, one must follow one of the radii, that is, a *tarīqah*, or, one might say, the “footpath,” the narrow way which is followed by very few.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there are besides a multitude of *turuq*, which are all radii of the circumference taken in the centripetal sense, since it is a question of leaving the multiplicity of the manifested to move toward principal unity; each *tartqah*, starting from a certain point on the circumference, is particularly adapted to those beings who find themselves at that point, but whatever their point of departure, they all tend equally toward one unique point,<sup>3</sup> all arrive at the center and thus lead the beings who follow them to the essential simplicity of the “primordial state.”

The beings who presently find themselves in multiplicity are forced to leave it in order to accomplish any realization whatsoever; but for most of them this multiplicity is at the same time the obstacle that stops them and holds them back; diverse and changing appearances prevent them from seeing true reality, so to speak, as the casing of a fruit prevents one from seeing its inside; and this inside can be attained only by those capable of piercing through the casing, that is, of seeing the Principle through its manifestation, and even of seeing it alone in all things, for manifestation itself, taken all together, is no more than a totality of symbolic expressions. It is easy to apply this to exoterism and esoterism understood in their ordinary sense, that is, as aspects of a traditional doctrine; there also, the exterior forms hide profound truth from the eyes of the common man, whereas on the contrary they may be seen by the elite, for whom what seems an obstacle or a limitation to others becomes instead a support and a means of realization. One must clearly understand that this difference results directly and necessarily from the very nature of the beings, from the possibilities and aptitudes that each carries within itself, so much so that for each of them the exoteric side of the doctrine thus always plays exactly the role that it should, giving to those that cannot go further what it is possible for them to

---

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that in the Far-Eastern tradition one finds very dear equivalents to these two terms, not as two aspects, exoteric and esoteric, of the same doctrine, but as two separate teachings, at least since the time of Confucius and Lao Tzu. In fact, one might say in all strictness that Confucianism corresponds to the *sharī’ah* and Taoism to the *haqīqah*.

<sup>2</sup> The words *sharī’ah* and *tarīqah* both contain the idea of “progressing,” and thus of movement (and one should note the symbolism of circular movement for the first term, and linear movement for the second); there is in fact change and multiplicity in both cases, the first having to adapt itself to the diversity of exterior conditions, and the second to that of individual natures; but the being who has effectively attained *haqīqah*, by that very fact participates in its unity and immutability.

<sup>3</sup> This convergence is represented by that of the *qiblah* (ritual orientation) of all places toward the *Ka’bah*, which is the ‘House of God’ (*Bayt Allah*) and of which the form is a cube (the image of stability) occupying the center of a circumference that is the terrestrial (human) cross-section of universal existence.

## The Shell and the Kernel (Al Qishr wa al-Lubb)

receive in their present state, and at the same time furnishing to those that can go further, “supports,” which, without ever being a strict necessity, since they are contingent, can nonetheless greatly aid them to advance in the interior life, and without which the difficulties would be such that, in certain cases, they would amount to a veritable impossibility.

We should point out in this regard that for the majority of men, that is, for those who inevitably abide by exterior law, this takes on a character which is less a limitation than a guide; it is always a bond, but a bond that prevents them from going astray or from losing themselves; without this law, which obliges them to follow a well-defined path, not only would they never attain the center, but they would risk distancing themselves indefinitely from it, whereas the circular movement keeps them at a more or less constant distance.<sup>1</sup> In this way, those who cannot directly contemplate the light can receive at least a reflection of and a participation in it; and they remain thus bound in some way to the Principle, even though they do not and could not have an effective consciousness of it. Indeed, the circumference could not exist without the center, from which, in reality, it proceeds entirely, and even if the beings who are linked to the circumference do not see the center at all, or even the radii, each of them is nonetheless inevitably situated at the extremity of a radius of which the other extremity is the center itself. But it is here that the shell intervenes and hides whatever is found in the interior, whereas the one who has pierced this shell, by that very fact becoming conscious of the path or radius corresponding to his own position on the circumference, will be liberated from the indefinite rotation of the latter and will only have to follow the radius in order to move toward the center; this radius is the *tariqah* by which, starting from the *sharî'ah*, he will arrive at *haqîqah*. We must make clear, moreover, that once the shell has been penetrated, one finds oneself in the domain of esoterism, this penetration, by its relationship to the shell itself, being a kind of turning about, of which the passage from the exterior to the interior consists. In one sense the designation “esoterism” belongs even more properly to *tariqah*, for in reality *haqîqah* is beyond the distinction of exoterism and esoterism, as this implies comparison and correlation; the center, of course, appears as the most interior part of all, but when it has been attained there can no longer be a question of exterior or interior, as every contingent distinction then disappears, resolving itself in principial unity.

That is why Allâh, just as He is “the First and the Last” (*al-Awwal wa al-Akhar*)<sup>2</sup> is also “the Exterior and the Interior” (*al-Zâhir wa al-Bâtin*),<sup>3</sup> for nothing of that which is could be outside of Him, and in Him alone is contained all reality, because He is Himself absolute Reality, and total Truth: *Huwa 'l-Haqq*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Let us add that this law ought to be regarded normally as an application or a human specification of the cosmic law itself, which similarly links all manifestation to the Principle, as we have explained elsewhere in reference to the significance of the “laws of Manu” in Hindu doctrine.

<sup>2</sup> That is, the Principle and the End, as in the symbol of the *alpha* and the *omega*.

<sup>3</sup> One could also translate this as the “Evident” (in relationship to manifestation) and the “Hidden” (in Himself), which correspond again to the two points of view of the *sharî'ah* (the social and religious order) and *haqîqah* (the purely intellectual and metaphysical order), although this latter may also be said to be beyond all points of view, as comprising them all synthetically within itself.