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THE UNITY OF MAN
IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

"Man never tires of demanding happiness; but as soon as unhappiness touches him, he is lost, without hope..."

"Satisfied by our benefits, man turns away and becomes isolated; but as soon as unhappiness arrives, his prayers are unending."

Koran 41, 49 and 51

"The sign of an infidel (*kâfir*) is that he is lost in the horizons; the sign of a believer (*mûmin*) is that the horizons are lost in him."

Muhammed Iqbel

In a sense it is easier to talk about human unity in the biological sciences than from the perspective of the human and social sciences, especially as these have developed over the last thirty years. If paleontology, biology and neurology make it possible to emphasize physical constants evident for the entire human race, to the contrary it seems impossible to find similar unity in the social systems and the cultural values that define the radical identity of

Translated by R. Scott Walker

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a group, a community or a nation. Apartheid, racism, intolerance and prejudices everywhere express differences that most frequently derive from social imagination but that function no less strongly as determining forces for human cultural production and historical conduct.

Microbiology even shows, through analysis of genetic codes, that no human being is exactly like any other. We know the heated ideological debates that have been provoked everywhere by this irrefutable fact of human chromosomal make-up. There is also ethology that insists, rightly so, on the animal violence inherent in the physical-chemical nature of man.

The major religions have often foreseen the empirical data for which modern science provides a systematic formulation that can be used in applied sciences such as medicine, psychology, sociology, anthropology and so on. The solutions proposed by religions (with the help of transcendental themes, ritual behavior, strict relationships to the sacred, to the pure and impure, to good and evil, to being and non-being) tend to transfigure the weaknesses that are part of the human condition, and the negative forces that inhabit it, into an irrepressible Desire for Unity, Perfection, Justice, Truth, Harmony, eternal Happiness: in short into a Vocation that becomes an active Desire to imitate God, to be like God, to draw near to God (*ta'alluh, taqarrub, walâya*) in Islamic terminology, influenced, as we shall see, by neo-Platonism and Koranic Revelation.

The topic of human unity has given rise to a great deal of literature on Islamic thinking; mystics, moralists, theologians, philosophers and gnostics have continuously testified through their writings, but also by their behavior, to a unified and unifying vision of man entirely taken over by the idea of Perfection (the perfect man, man created in the image of God). We will attempt to explore this literature rapidly without ever losing sight of the necessity of situating it historically, scientifically and philosophically. A discussion of the question of human unity in Islamic thought cannot consist simply in describing the doctrines and positions of various authors or schools. As much as is possible it is necessary to introduce a critical relationship in order to elucidate the concept, justifying or weakening, when required, the quest this implies, the action it has inspired and that it continues to inspire

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under conditions that are nevertheless quite different from those that favored the appearance and expansion of the very idea of Unity contrasting with that of multiplicity.

We will begin, as we must, with Koranic statements about man, not in order to follow the orthodox practice that derives everything from the Koran, but in order to better differentiate the systems of thought developed over the centuries in historically changing circumstances. We shall see that concepts developed in the Islamic environment do not necessarily fit into the broad perspectives left open by the Koran.

I. MAN ACCORDING TO THE KORAN

It is not enough simply to bring together all the verses dealing explicitly with man in order to reconstitute the Koranic viewpoint on this subject. Not only would there be too many verses, but these would be removed from their contact with other verses that stand in semantic, dialectical and rhetorical contrast to them. This observation is true for the entire Koranic discourse, which forms a textual unity, and it makes any attempt at cutting the text up into smaller units of reading awkward. Reading with faith, with a total integration of the text, as memorized and made current daily in ritual ceremonies, makes up for what is lost by picking out a given verse or even a fragment of a verse in order to relate it to an existential situation proper to the individual or the community.

It can be stated at once that man as presented by the Koran is constantly the inseparable partner of God (Creator-creature dialectic), a biological and psychological being composed of a body and a soul (however, without the insistence on dualism characteristic of philosophical, gnostic or Manichean currents), an active member of social groups who competes for the stakes of power. A complex and dynamic image, always anchored in psychological, sociological and cultural realism, at the same time inscribed in a religious horizon where disorderly multiplicity should be changed into unity conceived both as a transfiguration, a going beyond and a harmonious reconciliation of the divisive forces ever at work in man.

Man is weak, versatile, hypocritical, rebellious, sensitive to

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Satan's temptations and the seductions of this world. Even the prophets, even Muhammed himself can succumb to the appeals of Satan. But man is not marked by an original sin; he needs to be pardoned for his faults—as Adam and Eve were—but he does not need Redemption. His primordial nature (*fitra*) is good. He can, with God's help, free himself from his ignorance and blindness, from his deafness in order to recognize (*'aqala*) the true knowledge that Revelation gives him.

In this sense man is a being privileged by God, even when compared to the angels, to jinns, to the heavens and the earth. This privilege is cited in two verses so frequently quoted that they form the most solid pillars of the unity of man as a religious, moral and political subject. It is worthwhile to recall these texts.

"Certainly We had an agreement with Adam before; and then he forgot and We did not find him to be decided. And when We said to the Angels, "Bow down before Adam," they all bowed down except Iblis who refused. We said, "Oh Adam, this is an enemy for you and your wife. May he not cause you both to leave the garden so you would be unhappy. It has been given to you not to be hungry, or cold... or thirsty there, and not to suffer from the hot sun."

(XX, 115-119)

"And when your Lord said to the Angels, "I will place a vicar (*Khalifa*) on earth," they said, "Will you place someone who will sow corruption and spill blood, while we sing Your Grace and proclaim Your Holiness?"—God said, "I know what you do not."

(II, 30)

We note that this discourse has a mythical structure. Generations of commentators, nevertheless, have read it as an ordinary story, referring to beings, and even times, that can be situated and identified as in any historiographical discourse. What was addressed to a free, open and dynamic imagination is transferred to an analytical, deductive and logical form of reason that establishes, for example, that original sin does not exist in Islam and that there exists only the obligation for man to obey God in exchange for the moral and spiritual privilege granted to Adam after the pardon.

Philologists, on the other hand, have sought to discover biblical sources, Jewish and Christian, for the passage from the Koran,

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emptying the latter of its own intentions, denying in particular its repeated appearance (there are three versions in the Koran of the same fundamental narrative, at chronologically well-denoted intervals in Revelation: before, during and at the end of the Hegira) as a new beginning for a code that is at once mythical, symbolic, linguistic (as a usage of the Arab language) and, finally, cultural.

To come back to this new beginning of the code in its initial appearance does not signify that one is able here to declare the *true* meaning that believers can adopt in all security. What is sought is to reintroduce into religious imagination and all cultural practices—in the broad sense, including rituals, ceremonies, institutions and systems of thinking—that depend on it, a creative dynamic centered on man as open Destiny. The figures of the Angel, of Iblis-Satan, of Adam and Eve in relation to the transcendent Voice that gives them so much ontological substance, existential consistency and tragic intensity in their dialectical opposition, can function indefinitely as sources of spiritual energy, as bases for artistic creation, poles for the crystallization of dreams, of hopes, visions, values, behavior, the works through which man realizes himself as such. And because the Bible had already introduced these same figures with the same dialectical opposites and the same intention of ontological fixation, we can say that human unity is rooted in a religious imagination that goes beyond the strict Koranic formulation. Thus are we referred to a more radical unity—that of the myths and symbols that have nourished and produced the entire history of man in the realm of what can be called societies of the Book, that is those subject to the phenomenon of Revelation, handed down in the Holy Scriptures.

We note that Iblis-Satan, as a dialectical force always opposed to God or to the desire for the absolute in man, has resisted better than the Angel to secular developments of reason and culture. Literatures have always integrated Evil, Satan, the Devil as the constantly taut springs of human existence. In this sense these figures are inseparable from the unity of man being affirmed through the struggles, dramas, revolutions, violence and upheavals that make up the tragic tissue of our history.

From this perspective we see how much theological systems, in Islam as in Christianity, that insist only on the fact that man is created in the image of God in order to be his "vicar" on earth,

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distance themselves from the creative intensity of the tragic dialectic inscribed in the relationships between the Angel, Iblis-Satan, Adam and Eve as these are affirmed even in the Koran, although a relatively "late"—chronologically speaking—version in comparison to the biblical narrative. Another distancing of the same type—with other stakes perhaps—was to be created between the Platonic view of the unity of man rooted in open and creative myths and the Aristotelian *logos* that was to nourish the logocentrism of classical metaphysics in Islam as well as in Christianity, with its technocentristic avatars in the modern West.

Legal thinking, which was to produce canon law and *Shari'a* from the sacred texts, not only distanced itself from the paradigmatic Figures without whom Revelation loses all its force of *incitement* for man; it cut off its discourse and its practices from these figures, which are, it is true, reintroduced by the religious subject through his ritual activities and his discourse on eschatological hope. It would be interesting to verify to what degree the rabbinic practice of the Talmud was able to maintain a greater proximity between the Law that commands and the Figures that cause thoughtful reflection.

The psychological, social, political and even biological and physiological realism with which the Koran speaks of man preserves, in the manner proper to oral cultures, all the possibilities of meaning opened up by the major mythic narratives. The verses, groups of verses and narrative units function as so many statements of truth, linked more to precise moments in the existence of the prophet and his small initial community than to the overall context of Koranic discourse, read as a vast textual unit by the Community once the official closed corpus (*Mushaf*) was formed.[1] This purely linguistic information, together with the political necessities that weighed down on the formation of the *Mushaf*, was to have consequences for the unity of Islam, both in terms of the doctrinal views derived from the Koran as well as the historical practice of the State laying claim to a legal code likewise "deduced" from the Book, read both as a unit and as a specialized collection of so-called legislative verses.

[1] For this concept see M. Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran*, Maisonneuve-Larose, 2nd ed. , 1988.

II. The Mystic Way

It is perhaps in the mystic experience that the unity of man as religious subject has been best affirmed. The Koranic origins of this experience have been brought to light especially by L. Massignon and L. Gardet. But we must not forget that the Koranic lexicon, pregnant with religious values, has experienced vast semantic expansion thanks to the creative imagination of each personality engaged in existential confrontation and cultural incitement, as varied as the tribes, languages, cultures and collective destinies included in the Islamic sphere after the foundation of the imperial State (661).

The mystic way brought the spiritual experimentation of inner unity and its corresponding expression (technical vocabulary of Muslim mysticism) to a level of achievement that made it possible, on the one hand, to reproduce the experiment in confraternities (*ṭuruq*) and, on the other, to develop manuals for the use of aspirants-disciples (*murîd*).

A word that is filled with expansive dynamism helps evoke the quest, the experimental itinerary, the psycho-linguistic course of the mystic. This word is *'ishq*, the essential Desire that urges man to realize unity (*waḥ*da) internally and, thereby, to achieve the unifying connection with God (*ittiḥâd-ittiṣâl*). The famous ecstatic cry of Ḥallâj: "*Anâ-l-Ḥaqq*": I am the Real-True = God-Truth, proclaims the total irreversible immersion of the self of the person in the living, infinite Person of God; the in-habitation of God in man, transcending the unity of man realized in spiritual discipline, *incorporating* methodically, patiently, painfully God who, for his part, has provoked the Desire for loving fusion by making himself present and accessible.

We will see that *'ishq* enflamed not only the hearts of mystics irresistibly attracted by the living Person of God; poets, theologians, philosophers and desert bedouins have felt this inner fire that not only forms the most intimate being but pushes it to link up with the beloved being in order to attain the perfection of unity. It was the great mystic-poet-visionary Ibn 'Arabî (died 638/1240) who provided the most majestic and the most exemplary expression for what is called the Unicity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujd*).

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Here is an example of this expression that at the same time was lived and felt during his spiritual journey (*sulûk*):

"I will respond, my dear friend and very close companion, to the question you asked me about the modalities of the journey to the Master of Omnipotence, the arrival in His Presence and the return—from Him and by Him—to His Creatures without there being any separation, however. For in existence there is nothing other than Allah, His attributes and His acts. Everything is Him, through Him, proceeds from Him, returns to Him; and if He were to hide Himself from the universe, even if only for a second, the universe would cease at once to exist, for it only subsists through His protection and His care. Appearing in His light is so blinding that eyes can not perceive Him (Kor. 6, 103), so it is best to say that His appearance is an occultation."[2]

Before reaching this degree of contemplation and mental appropriation of the Being who transfers His Transcendence, His Light and His Unity to the Friend-Lover (*walî*), the believer begins by obedience and recognition of the good deeds of God by respecting the canonical obligations incumbent on all creatures (profession of faith, prayer, gifts of material goods, fasting, pilgrimage); the spiritual deepening of each of these obligations progressively transforms internal dissipation into an exacting unit, open to the absolute unicity of Being.

It might be objected that such a spiritual itinerary has been followed only by a few strong persons. Thus it would not be representative either of an ordinary Islamic ethos or of most Muslim faithful. It is true that not all mystics have consigned their experiences to such ample and masterful works as those of Hallâj, Muhâsibî, Ibn 'Arabî, Djalâl al-dîn al-Rûmî, etc. But it is a historical fact that Islam, as a form of individual asceticism, a thankful and often loving submission to the living God present in every heart and in the history of man, has, down to our own times, experienced a continuity that is all the more remarkable in that the State, economic life, intellectual activity, profane and scientific learning have suffered, to the contrary, profound discontinuities since the 5th/11th century. We shall see how the mystic orders

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[2] Quoted and translated (into French) by M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des Saints*, Gallimard 1986, pp. 184-185.

described under the name of marabout confraternities took up the political relay from a failing central State in many societies. Because of this permanently present religious requirement for the internal unity of the person, projected into and reinforced by the postulated unity of the *Umma*—Community, itself articulated by the constituent and transcendent unity of God, it is possible to speak of the spiritual ethos of Islam that transcends the historical vicissitudes and dramatic discontinuities marking the life of the Community since the 5th/11th century.

Let us return to the ecstatic cry of Hallâj and, more generally, to the mystics who gave free rein to their religious sensitivity and to their creative imagination. The reactions of the jurist-theologians and of the Caliphal State to this form of religious life and thinking illustrates the tensions between two sectors—the religious and the political—that aim, with differing means, at actualizing human unity. Normally these tensions are described from a juridical, institutional and occasionally social point of view. Considered under the theme of human unity, the question leads to recognizing the primary psychological and even psychic role of religious expression, taking in the sacred word of God, rituals, song, bodily disciplines and the various arts placed at the service of this expression. Even when this expression is highly secularized, as in Western Christianity (different in this respect from Eastern Christianity), it retains its initial function and purpose since the politician who takes it over cultivates in the same manner a messianic hope, the promise of a future filled with justice, reconciliation and recognition of man by man. This is why we rightly speak of secular religions. (I am thinking particularly of the Christian roots of socialist ideology, which substitutes an earthly promise for the eschatological promise expressed in the symbolic language of revealed religions).

In the realm of Islamic thinking, the tensions between the religious and the political—considered in their anthropological dimensions—are expressed in such well-known opposite pairs as esoteric meaning and obvious meaning (*bâṭin/ẓâhir*), delightful initiatory knowledge and argumentative knowledge (*'irfân/'ilm*), spiritual leadership and temporal leadership with religious responsibility (*imâma/khilâfa*), the principle-source-foundation and derived legal qualifications (*asl/far'*), the truly real and the conjectural

(*ḥaqq/ẓann*) and so on.[3] All these opposing concepts in fact go beyond the Islamic framework of their origin and development; they refer to the original and still open concepts of *Mythos* and *Logos*, of symbol, metaphor and sign, on the one hand, and of concept, meaning (either proper or denotative), and signal on the other. Contemporary anthropology, linguistics and semiotics have moved into the intellectual realm and the realm of scientific investigation of the parameters of knowledge, closed off and misrepresented for centuries in and by the dogmatic spirit proper to theological systematization. What had been thought, analyzed and experienced as insurmountable opposites with regard to access to absolute Truth, source and guarantee of human unity, has been transferred to an open questioning of the theoretical conditions for any reading or adequate reception of a message (and, for traditional believers, primarily the revealed Message).

It is appropriate to insist on the psychological, political and philosophical scope of this transfer of original questions to an intellectual realm freed from the *a priori* statements and definitions of theology, mystical as well as dogmatic. The mystic way of human unity has regained favor, in fact, in the present context of technology that excludes, ignores, crushes or disqualifies the symbolic universe of traditional religions. The return to the religious is manifested more as a recourse, a refuge against dislocating forces, than as the result of an intellectual and scientific re-examination of the questions *at the origin* of the production and the metaphors for meaning by a reason that renounces all sovereignty in order to bring out new parameters for rationality. It is thought possible to regain human unity by a direct return to tradition, without accepting the necessity today for detours over other traditions and modernity. This attitude has been especially strong and expansive in militant Islamic movements over the last ten years. It has even led to unexpected conversions among Westerners.

The re-evaluation of the mystic way leads to the transgression of conceptual boundaries inherited from dualistic thinking based on the well known dichotomies between faith and reason, revealed

[3] M. 'Abid Al-Jabiri has just given a traditional description of these opposites in *Bunyat al-'aql al-'arabiyy*, Casablanca 1986.

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truth and rational truth, religious law and human norms, earthly life and eternal life, good and evil, true and false, and so on. Mystic discourse gets bogged down in categories as much as dogmatic theological discourse. We will see how ethical discourse and political discourse are themselves dependent on this dualism constitutive of all traditional anthropology.

The recurrence in contemporary theological discourse of dichotomies proper to dualist thinking and the ideological constructions that result from it or prolong it attest to their deep roots in the mentalities and cultures that produce such thinking. In Islam, the absence of any philosophical criticism of classical theologies and metaphysics leaves the field open to developments that nourish the imaginary quest for human unity: the unity of the religious subject united with God, the unity of the community (*Umma*) willed and guided by God, the unity of the testimony (*shahâda*) confessing One God and his manifestation through Revelation, the unity of true religion (*Dîn al-ḥaqq*) that makes it possible to realize the unity desired. Imagination thus constituted played a decisive role in the historical development of contemporary Islamic societies. Yearning for the unity ever promised but ever delayed, broken or even lost because of the "enemies" of Islam throughout the ages nourishes great popular uprisings now more than ever.

III. THE ETHICAL WAY

The mystic insists on the inner conversion of the person and his spiritual continuation through search for intimacy with God. Even though it engages the individual conscience in the same manner, ethics in an Islamic environment introduces the social and political dimensions of human unity.

I have shown the richness and diversity of ethical literature in the classical period of Islamic thinking, and its poverty, or even disappearance, since the ideologies of struggle against imperialism and colonialism invaded the discourse of today's societies.[4] I will not go back over the presentation of the various currents of ethical

[4] See M. Arkoun, *L'Islam, morale et politique*, Unesco-Desclée de Brouwer, 1986. See also my translation of the *Traité d'éthique* by Miskawayh, Damascus, 1969.

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reflection and teaching. From the viewpoint of the topic of unity that is our concern here, I will only recall the fundamental contribution of ethical philosophy, the most accessible and most successful expression of which was given by Miskawayh (d. 420/1030) in his *Tahdhîb al-Akhlāq.*

In the wake of the Neo-Platonic philosophy of the One, philosophers in the Islamic environment insisted on the role of wisdom (*ḥikma*) as intellectual discipline for cutting through multiplicity (*kathra*), overcoming it and reaching unity (*al-waḥda*). Here is how Miskawayh defined this journey of the wise man moved, like the mystic, by the irrepressible force of the Desire (*'ishq*) that urges a realization in the microcosm (man) of the cosmic unity of the macrocosm:

"If you know the universal predicables of beings, then in a certain manner you also know the particular predicables, for the particulars do not extend beyond the universals. If you achieve similar perfection, complete it by a systematic action, scientifically classifying your faculties and your habits in conformity with what you have just learned. If you finally achieve this rank, you become, you by yourself, a world, and you have the right to be called a microcosm since the forms of all beings are united in your essence, and you yourself are them in a certain manner. Then, if by your acts, you introduce an order in these forms, according to your capability, acting with regard to them as the representative of your Lord, Creator of All, committing no errors with regard to them and in no way departing from the wise order introduced by Him in the first place: then you become an entire world. But the complete being is he who has a permanent existence, he who subsists eternally. From then on nothing of the subsisting grace will escape you, for made of this perfection, you are ready to receive the flow emanating from the Lord for eternity. And at this point you have drawn so near to Him that a veil could no more separate you. This is the highest rank and extreme happiness.[5]

The reader familiar with both Plotinian vocabulary and Koranic language will easily be able to measure the harmonization of these two philosophical and religious sources realized by the ethical view in the line of thought illustrated by Miskawayh and his followers.

[5] *Traité d'éthique, op. cit.* pp. 66-67. For a commentary on this passage see my *Humanisme arabe au IVe-Xe siècle*, 2nd ed., Vrin, 1982.

"The Lord Creator of all," the absence of a veil between the wise person and the One in the final stage of the journey, the acquisition of the role of "representative of your Lord," "subsisting grace" all refer to key Koranic notions. But the conquest of these spiritual states is no longer achieved by mystic asceticism; it mobilizes knowledge constructed and controlled by reason and that the Middle Ages practiced under the names of *quadrivium* and *trivium*. The equilibrium between the three faculties of the soul—rational, appetitive and irascible—is the first step taken thanks to education of reason and to a strict spiritual medicine that includes hygiene of the body and of the mind. The leader of the city must necessarily be a wise man who has acquired the balance that controls the constant interaction of these three faculties; in this way unity will also be introduced into the social body. This unity has the name of Justice:

> "Justice is the most perfect virtue and the one most assimilable to unity because it is exactly in the middle between extremes, a disposition that makes it possible to return to the middle any excess and any defect. I mean by this that to unity belongs the most sublime nobility and the ultimate degree. Any multiplicity that is not organized by an idea conferring unity upon it has neither foundation nor stability. It is excess and defect, multiplicity and paucity that disorganize things, as soon as there is not that proportionality among them that, in a certain manner, preserves a balance among them. For this balance helps them rediscover the shade and the idea of unity; it is this balance that confers nobility on them and delivers them from the vice of multiplicity, from inequality, from disproportion, which are neither defined nor discerned by equality, the 'vicar' of unity for all multiplicities."[6]

Justice (*'adl*) is metaphysically linked to the pure One (*al-wâhid al-mahd*) and to perfect Existence, whereas injustice (*zulm*) is non-being (*al-'adam*), that is, everything that is not existence: plurality (*kathra*). It is through Justice so defined that one achieves the stage of *Unity of the All* and of contemplative happiness:

[6] *Traité d'éthique, op. cit.* pp. 175-176.

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"The circle of existence is the circle that, when realizing its unity, makes unity of multiplicity. It establishes, in a veritable and demonstrative manner, the Unicity, Wisdom, Power and Generosity of its Author—may His name be blessed, may His glory be exalted, may the recollections devoted to Him be sanctified!"[7]

The symbolism of the circle and the sphere was often used by medieval thinkers to connote the unity sought, as is seen, with faith, passion and intellectual energy. It is in the desire for unity and unification that moral conduct and the practice of virtues draw both justification and will-power. Over and beyond the morality that obliges all, the desire for unity can impel one toward an activity reserved for an elite: alchemy, which is the achievement of unity by an experimental way. The alchemists spoke of the science of Balance (*mîzân*), a symbolic designation for the Justice-Unity sought through the practice of alchemy. The fact that the scientific status of alchemy has frequently been discussed, beginning in the Middle Ages, in no way diminishes the psychological, speculative and intellectual importance of this activity that so marked the medieval mental sphere. In fact alchemy is a very complex phenomenon that combines several aspects of the culture, beliefs and sensitivity proper to the Middle Ages. We note it here in order to point out a remarkable convergence, stressed by Ibn 'Arabî when he spoke of a "science at once natural, spiritual and divine" (*Futûhât* II, 357). The alchemist's attempt to purify matter was inseparable from the moral and religious asceticism to purify the soul. Symbols, myths and metaphors were used to express the development of the laboratory experiment, referring to the spiritual itinerary that leads to perfection.

Scientific curiosity, the passion for piercing the mysteries of nature, moral perfection, the desire to resemble God (*ta'alluh*), intellectual pleasure, the ascending and descending flow leading the Intellect from unity to multiplicity and from multiplicity to unity are all characteristic features of the wise man, in whom converge the mystic impulse, the intellectual and scientific exigency of the philosopher, the moral rightness of the believer, the contemplation of the learned man filled with the Beautiful, the Right and the Good.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

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IV. THE POLITICAL WAY

By treating the political way only in the fourth position, we do not intend to suggest a descending order of importance in relation to the ways already discussed. It should not be forgotten that, according to the symbolism of the circle or the sphere, all levels of reality are articulated with one another so that we cannot mention one of them without touching on all the others closely. In studying the vocabulary of mysticism or of ethics, we very quickly discover a unity of vision clearly projected in the language. I have shown that in beginning with any ethical, political, psychological, metaphysical or physical concept whatsoever, we can cover the entire field of vision taking in the microcosm and the macrocosm, physics, anthropology, cosmology, eschatology, or God and all the created worlds.[8]

As with ethics, politics is a discipline in which converge the Greek concepts of Plato and Aristotle and the ideal representations of the Muslim Guide of the City (the Imâm) as they have been crystallized, particularly in the Shi'ite tradition. Fârâbî (died 339/950) and the *Ikhwân al-Safâ* (4th/10th century) combined Greek ideas of the philosopher governor and Shi'ite concepts of the Imâm, successor and charismatic continuer of the Prophet Muhammad. We should also mention another work that had a decisive influence on the entire Muslim ethical-political imagination since the 1st/7th century; this is the *Nahj al-balâgha* attributed to the Imâm 'Alî and compiled in the 4th/10th century by Al-Sharîf al-Ridha (died 406/1015). The Imâm-Governor brought justice to reign—in the sense defined earlier—and established an affectionate relationship between himself and his subjects. Here is how Miskawayh summed up these functions:

> "The head of the Community (Imâm) assumes the responsibility for preserving this religious tradition and all the prescriptions of the Law so that they are not detached from their institutional bases...
> "The Ancients named king only the one who watched over religion and ensured the observance of the dignities, commandments and prohibitions prescribed by it. Whoever turned away from this task

[8] See M. Arkoun, *Essais sur la pensée islamique*, 3rd ed., Paris 1984, pp. 319-351.

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was called a tyrant and declared unworthy of the name of king. This is because religion is a divine institution that leads men, with their free will, to supreme Happiness. The king is the guardian of this divine institution, the guarantor of the rules dictated to men...
"The relationship of the king toward his subjects should be a paternal one, while the relationship of the subjects to the king should be filial, and the relationship of the subjects among themselves should be fraternal in order to preserve the exact prerogatives of the dignities. In other words, the king's solicitude for his subjects and his manner of dealing with them are the very same as those used by a father with his children... He acts as vicar for the Legislator—to Him be blessing and Salvation—and even for the Author of the Law, using compassion and clemency, looking for salutary works for his subjects, delivering them from evil, causing order to reign among them, in short everything that brings about good and inhibits evil. Then the subjects will love him like children love a good father..."[9]

The author, it can be noted, speaks indifferently of Imâm or king (*malik*) because he is drawing at once on the Iranian tradition of the Sassanid kings, the Greek view of the philosopher-governor and the Islamic concept of the Imâm. This is not a matter of confusion but the standard expression of ethical-political imagination that has never ceased claiming the incarnation of its ideals in a Leader-Vicar of the Prophet (the Legislator) and even of God (the Author of the Law). The Community imbued with these ideals realizes in this way, at the level of the collective imagination, what historical reality has always refuted.

The most remarkable aspect of this situation is the continuity, even down to our own times, of the imagination attracted toward the ideal of political unity, translating the Communion of all into the same ethical-religious values, despite the recurrence of despotic powers quite distant from the hopes projected on the symbolic Figure of the Imâm. It is true that in the course of its history, the *Umma* has experienced periods in which the Mahdi—Guide Promoter of cosmological Justice—inspired exceptional dynamism in collective expectations. I am thinking of the Fatimid Mahdi, 'Ubayd Allah in the Maghreb, of Mahdi Ibn Tumert, founder of the Berber dynasty Almohade in Morocco, of recent Mahdis in the

[9] *Traité, op. cit..* pp. 219-220 and 225-226.

Sudan and in Senegal. In the same series I would willingly include Nasser, called *Za'īm*, lay leader, and yet promoted to the rank of charismatic guide by the masses and even by the elite, always obsessed by the Figure of the leader incarnating the Unity of the Community. This unity, with Nasser, was restricted to the historical and cultural dimensions of the Arab Nation whose vocation is to transcend the individual countries that began in the 1950's to emerge as separate nationalities, sometimes even opposed to one another. Nasser won an immense amount of prestige by concentrating in the Arab Nation all the eschatological dynamism and all the messianic yearning that the common imagination of the Muslim Community (*Umma*) had created over the centuries.

The failures of Nasser's unitary ideology (collapse of the union with Syria, defeat in Yemen, the Six-Day War), rivalries within the *Ba'th* party, the other unitary party striving toward the creation of the Arab Nation, the inability of the League of Arab States to overcome inter-Arab oppositions and conflicts did not completely eliminate the tenacious desire for Unity among the Arab and Muslim collective consciousnesses. Nor have national disen-chantments that have gained ground since the 1970's been able to discourage the search for alternatives aiming at and using the same ideal of unity. Two leaders, one a layman and the other religious—Kaddafi and Khomeini—have taken up, with different styles, the ancient call to Unity to regenerate the Arab Nation (Kaddafi) or the Community-*Umma* (Khomeini).

Here too we recognize the daily rebuttals that economic, social, political and cultural reality inflict on unitary ideology, which many leaders in Islamic countries use as a motive for legitimacy or as a means for diverting attention away from growing difficulties. And it is a fact that the theme of unity continues to be a mobilizing one, especially when it stirs up religious emotions. Purely secular social, economic and cultural policies, along the lines of Western models, provoke resistance to and refusal of policies imposed by "imperialism," in the name of an Islamic model betrayed even though superior because it is "divine." This is the predominant view of Islamist movements, especially since the triumph of the Iranian revolution in 1979. In this sense it is not exaggerated to say that there is an "Islamic" style of historical

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production of societies by agents who have internalized, or even incorporated in the form of individual and collective habits, the need for unity and the ritual conduct laying claim to it (more than its concrete realization).

The movements of traditionalization, often described by political scientists and sociologists with the names of Islamic radicalism or fundamentalism, in fact manifest the difficulties of passing from a very ancient religious ideal to empirical practices that proclaim the approaching collapse of all those hierarchical instances in which the dynamising ethos of unity was realized. The heart itself ceases being the unified and unifying center since the human subject, cut off from God, is scattered among specialized activities, rigorously separating emotional life, lyric subjectivity and the dream for Unity proper to traditional culture from the technical performances required by modern economics, science and politics. The historians of Western societies have only recently become interested in the conditions of this same evolution that led the West to the religious stage comparable to that of Islam, to the secular situation in which some go as far as to proclaim the death of man as sovereign subject, after the death of God, with whom Unity and human sovereignty was articulated. In Islam, the passage to secularism is effected in a climate of violence, of domination of the center (the West) over the peripheries (Third World), of permanent upheaval, of cultural void, of economic backwardness and, especially, of political oppression. This results in an exacerbated collective desire for traditionalization, that is for resistance to the forces of dispersal, a return to the system of securities handed down by tradition. Tradition retains a power of assembly and unification; this is why new regimes, in need of legitimacy, favor traditionalist demands that seemingly go in the direction of unity but which, in fact, augment the semantic disorders concerning the relationships between tradition and modernity and, consequently, the forces of dispersal, diversion and alienation, the effects of which can be observed everywhere in the Muslim world.

What significance should be given under these new circumstances to the renewed growth of religious life, even in mystic forms and even in Western societies? Is this an intensification of human Unity that integrates both the teachings of tradition and

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the achievements of modern knowledge of the levels and the means for realization available to the person in search of unity? Or should we rather speak of a drifting away of the ideal, cut off both from its ontological base and the spiritual values in which the Koranic discourse had rooted it, as well as from the cultural, political and economic alternatives offered by modernity?

The study of human unity is very important because it makes it possible to pose radical questions about the roles and the effects of traditional religions that must face the more and more difficult challenges of modernity. In the case of Islam, we can note a two-fold rhythm in the unity demanded, experienced and made explicit in various languages by Muslims, up to the brutal eruption of modernity that was created apart from them. There is a break with the classical forms of unity such as were formulated and incarnated by thinkers, the great witnesses to religious life, the institutions, the arts. All this belongs to a very distant history, little studied in our times, to the point that only the names of the authors or of works are mentioned without reference to the historical conditions of their appearance and their action. Even more serious is the break with the modernity produced in the West since the 16th century and incessantly enriched and renewed, while Islamic thinking became bogged down in scholastic repetition of a few "truths" transmitted by "orthodox" schools with no relation to the rich discussions and research of the classical period. In this way a continuity of the ideal of Unity was maintained, but at the cost of a gradual renunciation of historical initiatives rendered difficult, it is true, by colonial domination. When the initiative was regained, after 1945, it was in order to reconquer political sovereignty and to give priority to a combat ideology. On the intellectual and cultural level, the spread of the slogans of militant movements considerably limits the effort to integrate unity into a considerably enlarged and enriched history in the West.

Much remains to be done in the thinking, culture and historical action in Muslim countries in order to fill in the gaping holes created by these breaks. Without this labor of updating the critical instruments of thinking and knowledge, Islamic thought will continue to drift off into an imagined unity, remaining outside the history that creates a new man. Nothing can define the place and the role of unity in the thinking and action of modern man. The

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sacred, transcendence, holiness, moral perfection, mystical love, revelation, prophecy, religious law, eternal life, the soul, God: the entire lexicon that nourished the awareness of unity has either disappeared from current usage or has been re-used in a precarious manner in the context of militant discourses. The necessary work of reappropriation or critical evaluation, under the hypothesis of an irreversible escape beyond the religious, has not yet been undertaken, and perhaps is not even conceivable in present Islamic thinking, completely absorbed by its ideological combats. This is far from Western thinking that foresaw the exit of the religious as an inevitable historical phase.[10] As long as Islam in turn does not take this question into consideration, the cry for human unity will mobilize the collective ideal for actions that are spectacular and historic but that are doomed to be dangerous evasions of reason.

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[10] See Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, Gallimard 1985.