



At-Tawhîd

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THE doctrine of Unity, that is, the affirmation that the Principle of all existence is essentially One, is a fundamental point common to all orthodox traditions, and we could even say that it is on this point that their basic identity appears most clearly, conveying itself in its very expression. Indeed, wherever there is Unity, all diversity disappears, and it is only in descending toward multiplicity that differences of form appear, the modes of expression themselves then being as multiple as that to which they refer, and susceptible of indefinite variation in adapting themselves to the circumstances of time and place. But “the doctrine of Unity is unique” (according to the Arabic formula *at-tawhîdu wâhidun*), which is to say that it is everywhere and always the same, invariable like the Principle, independent of multiplicity and change, which can only affect applications of a contingent order.

Thus we can say that, contrary to current opinion, nowhere has there ever been any truly “polytheistic” doctrine, that is, one admitting an absolute and irreducible plurality of principles. This “pluralism” is possible only as a deviation resulting from the ignorance and incomprehension of the masses, from their tendency to attach themselves exclusively to the multiplicity of the manifested. This is the origin of “idolatry” in all its forms, born of the confusion of the symbol itself with what it is meant to express, and of the personification of divine attributes considered as so many independent beings, which, in fact, is the only possible origin of “polytheism”. Moreover, this tendency increases in the measure that one advances in the development of a cycle of manifestation because this development is itself a descent into multiplicity, and because of the spiritual obscuration that inevitably accompanies it. That is why the most recent traditional forms are those which must express the affirmation of Unity in a manner most visible to the outside; and in fact this affirmation is nowhere expressed so explicitly and with such insistence as in Islam, where, one might say, it even seems to absorb into itself all other affirmations.

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The only difference among traditional doctrines in this respect is what we just indicated: the affirmation of Unity is to be found everywhere, but in the beginning it did not even need to be formulated expressly in order to appear as the most evident of all truths, for men were then too near the Principle to fail to recognize it, or to lose sight of it. Today, on the contrary, one could say that most people, engaged almost entirely in multiplicity and having lost the intuitive understanding of truths of a higher order, attain comprehension of Unity only with difficulty; and that is why little by little it has become necessary to formulate this affirmation of Unity over and over again, and more and more clearly — one might even say, more and more energetically — in the course of the history of mankind on earth.

If we consider the present state of things, we see that in a way this affirmation is so hidden in certain traditional forms that at times it even constitutes something like their esoteric side, taking this word in its widest sense, whereas in others it appears quite openly, so much so that sometimes we see it alone; there are assuredly many other things there as well, but they are merely secondary in relation to it. This is the case in Islam, even in its exoteric aspect. Here esotericism does no more than explain and develop everything contained in this affirmation as well as all the consequences deriving from it, and if it does so in terms often identical with those that we find in other traditions, such as the Vedanta and Taoism, this is no cause for astonishment, nor does it have to be seen as the effect of “borrowings” which are historically questionable; it is so simply because Truth is one, and because, as we said at the beginning, in the principal order Unity of necessity conveys itself in its very expression.

On the other hand, considering things in their present state, it is noteworthy that Western peoples, and more particularly Nordic peoples, seem to experience the greatest difficulty in understanding the doctrine of Unity, while at the same time they are more engaged than all others in change and multiplicity. These two things obviously go together, and perhaps this is something which at least in part has to do with the conditions of existence of these peoples, a question of temperament, but also a question of climate, one moreover being a function of the other, at least up to a certain point. Indeed, in the countries of the North, where the sunlight is feeble and often dim, one might say that all things appear to be of equal value, so to speak, and in a way which affirms their individual existence pure and simple, without giving any glimpse of something beyond; thus one sees in everyday experience nothing but multiplicity. It is completely otherwise in the countries where the sun by its intense radiation absorbs all things into itself, so to speak, making them disappear before itself just as multiplicity disappears before Unity, not because it ceases to exist according to its own fashion, but because that existence is strictly nothing in face of the Principle. Thus, Unity becomes perceptible as it were; this blazing sun is the image of the lightning-flash from the eye of Shiva which reduces all manifestation to cinders. The sun imposes itself as the symbol par excellence of the One Principle (*Allahu Ahad*), which is necessary Being, That which alone is sufficient unto Itself in Its absolute plenitude (*Allahu as-Samad*), and upon which the existence and subsistence of all things depends, beyond which only nothingness remains.

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“Monotheism”, if one can employ this word to translate *at-tawhîd*, although it somewhat limits its meaning by making one think inevitably of an exclusively religious point of view, has an essentially “solar” character. This is nowhere more “perceptible” than in the desert, where the diversity of things is reduced to a minimum and where at the same time mirages make evident all that is illusory in the manifest world. There, the solar radiation produces things and destroys them in turn; or rather, for it is inexact to say that it destroys them, it transforms them and reabsorbs them after having manifested them. One could find no image more true of Unity endlessly deploying itself outwardly in multiplicity without ceasing thereby to be itself and without being affected by it, then restoring itself to that multiplicity, still according to appearances, which in reality it never left—for nothing could be outside of the Principle, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away, because It is the indivisible totality of unique Existence. In the intense light of countries of the East, it is enough to see things to understand them, to grasp their profound truth immediately; and it seems especially impossible not to understand these things in the desert, where the sun traces the divine Names in letters of fire in the sky.