



About Islam

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Do not ask about the caste¹ of a master, ask for his knowledge², accomplish your task with the sword³, leave the sheath⁴ where it is (Kabir).

The religions of man seem to be undergoing a process of severe petrification as a result of their entry into the final phase of the Dark Age. As a religion of the last cycle, Islam is all the more susceptible to corruption. In view of its greater adaptability to the changing circumstances, Islam is being interpreted and misinterpreted in a variety of ways. The most unfortunate development is the almost total disappearance of the extra-religious aspect from the mainstream Islam. The emergence of Wahhabism⁵ in modern times is a curious phenomenon.

When the kernel is lost, only the 'hardness' of the shell remains. With the loss of a unifying thread, which an Indian master Ahmad Sirhindi called the 'unifying essence',⁶ a religion is left to its own devices, thus always prone to be multiplied like an amoeba.

The multiplication of Islam began when it got first divided into Sunnism⁷ and Shiism⁸ due to political reasons. The inclusion of political element in Islam has always been responsible for sowing the seeds of division among Muslims. The Sunni Islam suffered further sub-divisions resulting into the emergence of two main groups: the Gnostics⁹ and the Philosophers¹⁰ on the one hand and the Legalists¹¹ and the Schoolmen¹² on the other.

¹ The word should be taken to imply exotericism.

² Esotericism.

³ Esotericism.

⁴ Exotericism.

⁵ An anti-esoteric ideology propounded by Abd al-Wahhab of Arabia.

⁶ Haiat-i Wahdani, a Persian term

⁷ The acceptance of the doctrine of Caliphate outside the family of the Prophet.

⁸ A view that the ruler of Muslim must come from the family of Prophet.

⁹ Sufiyya.

¹⁰ Falasifa.

¹¹ Fuqaha or Ulama.

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While the former accepted the distinction between the religion¹³ and metaphysics¹⁴ the latter diluted or mitigated or at times even denied the said distinction. A fine Indian metaphysician of the eighteenth century, Abd al-Ali Bahr al-Ulum,¹⁵ harshly condemned the poor understanding of exotericism on the part of the Schoolmen¹⁶ in his treatise entitled, *The Oneness of Being*¹⁷:

“As opposed to the personal opinions and deductions reached by the Schoolmen, the exotericism, in fact, constitutes those principles of action, which are based on the authority of the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet.”¹⁸

The Legalists further split themselves into four factions - the followers of Abu Hanifa, Shafii, Malik and Hanbal, though it is claimed that they are in perfect agreement concerning the principles, nonetheless, they might differ on the question of consequences.

The Shii Islam too was not free from a sectarian tendency. It broke off largely into the partisans of Twelve religious Heads¹⁹ on the one hand and Seven religious Heads²⁰ on the other. Discussing further sub-divisions in Shii Islam would take us too far afield.

Although, there is no conflict between the religious and the extra-religious aspect of Islam, still the history bears testimony to the existence of tension between the Gnostics and the Legalists. This is quite natural because of a greater possibility of imperfect understanding on the latter's side. However, the Gnostics were able to overcome all the tensions thanks to their understanding of metaphysics in a perfect manner.

As the intellectual intuition was altogether inaccessible to the Legalists, they were obliged to prefer an exclusivist and literal reading of the Koran, which further hastened their ossification. This is not to say, that interpreting a text literally is always unrequited. The koranic verse “And for every people there is a messenger” implies, if taken literally, the unity of all traditions. Now, a Legalist would react by resorting to Verily the religion with God is Islam as incontrovertible evidence. Again, interpreting literally the word ‘Islam’ would mean a mode of submitting to God, consequently making all traditions equivalent to one another. At times, the Koran employs the language of symbolism in order to drive home the point:

“And in the earth are neighboring tracts, vineyards and ploughed lands, and date palms, like and unlike, which are watered with one water. Yet some of them we make more excellent than others to eat. Lo! Herein verily are portents for people who have sense.”

¹² Mutakallimun.

¹³ Sharia.

¹⁴ Both Tariqa and Haqiqa.

¹⁵ Bahr al-Ulum is a title in Arabic meaning the Ocean of sciences.

¹⁶ Along with Mutakallimun the Fuqaha and the Ulama should also be included.

¹⁷ Wahdat al-Wujud.

¹⁸ Our translation.

¹⁹ Ithna Ashari.

²⁰ Ismaili.

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Here, the observations of Mansoor Ahmad are quite pertinent:

“This verse of the Noble Koran reminds of the unity of Tradition (one water), which adopts through differentiation (multiplicity within unity) to various receptacles of human collectivity (neighboring tracts, vineyards and ploughed lands and date palms), each according to its capacity (like and unlike) giving existence to diverse religions producing variety of fruits of spirituality. Yet some of them God makes more excellent - each claimant to a uniqueness and excelling in its own taste - than others to eat. Each spiritual tract though sustained by common source of light, heat and water, yet each receiving inimitable quality of Sun (Revelation) and precipitation (Prophet) formulates a unique manifestation of the Essence.”

It is often said that the Legalists being the representatives of exotericism commanded authority over the Gnostics in exoteric matters. This is not perfectly true as the greatest master Ibn Arabi despite the claims that he followed the authority of Malik in exoteric matters, acted in accordance with his own insights and consequently have a school of his own in this regard²¹.

At the time of its birth a tradition is, as it were, synthetic or gathered, so to speak. All its elements are, as if, integrally united so that the cyclic advancement reaches a point where the tradition begins to undergo a process of disintegration. When such a critical moment arrives, the remedy is provided by having recourse to the metaphysical principle of ‘gathering what is scattered’²². But this is, unfortunately, also the time, when true principles are changed into false principles by means of inversion. In the case of Islam, the Legalists thanks to their inborn sectarianism have been promoting the pseudo-principle of ‘scattering what is gathered’ until they multiplied themselves into myriad of sects, all of them vying with one another. One need only look at their large numbers in order to confirm their rabid sectarianism.

In the Indian sub-continent alone dozens of sects have been fighting with one another since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the eyes of the one the other is no less than an infidel²³.

If the members of all the four factions, as it is claimed, are in perfect agreement over the principle, then what is the need to declare one another as infidel, as can be seen in the case of Barelwis²⁴ and Deobandis²⁵ who both claim to be the followers of Abu Hanifa?

In order to ‘exclusive’ the message of the Koran a number of principles have been devised by the Legalists, the most important being the doctrine of abrogation. Those verses of the Koran which have a universal character are either interpreted exclusively by employing philological devices or are deemed to have been abrogated.

²¹ Madhab Akbari.

²² Wa Yaqtauna Ma Amar al-Allahu Bihi Ayyusala (And sever that which God ordered to be joined), Koran.

²³ Kafir in Islam.

²⁴ Followers of Ahmad Riza Khan of Bareilly.

²⁵ Followers of the scholars of a religious seminary at Deoband.

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For those who call themselves the followers of the Koran only²⁶, in their eyes, the whole body of the traditions of the Prophet is suspect. In opposition to them there are those²⁷ who tend to glorify the traditions, including the ones which are spurious or irrational or violative of the koranic spirit, though not denying the authority of the scripture. Whether a tradition is genuine or spurious is determined on the basis of the reliability of a transmitter or a chain of transmitters. The principle of judging a tradition as to its content is altogether disregarded which is why a number of superstitious and naïve traditions have got a place in the Canonical collections.

Among the different categories of Legalists discussed above, the most fanatical being the devotees of Abd al-Wahhab of Arabia, who are mainly responsible for the modern phenomenon of 'Islamic terrorism'. Being the rigid externalists they are extremely hostile to the extra-religious aspect of Islam. They originated from Arabia and now their presence is constantly being felt even in India but fortunately they have not yet been able to influence a greater part of the Muslim population here. In the name of purifying Islam of all its 'foreign' accretions (esotericism being the foremost), they seek to bring it back to the age of the Prophet, which is a naively anachronistic attitude.

While discussing about the spiritual status of the Wahhabis, who are unquestionably the worst enemies of spirituality, with a reader of Rene Guenon we were told that although they are apparently anti-esoteric but in fact they are men of the highest spiritual realization as one sees their eyes being continuously tearful during the prayers. We strongly suspect that this might be the case. On the contrary, the Wahhabis are the victims of their own illusions. Those who are exclusively clinged to the form cannot be regarded as pious even in the religious sense because mere exotericism does not make any sense. How absurd such a suggestion on the part of a reader of Rene Guenon!

According to a report, the Wahabbis in 1801 brutally massacred 5,000 Muslims damaging the Hossein's mosque, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. They did all this in the name of bringing back the pristine purity of Islam. Moreover, they have most willingly adopted modernity and its concomitants. The rapid technologization of Saudi Arabia particularly and the Middle east generally bears testimony to their spiritual impoverishment.

After surveying briefly the length and breadth of sectarianism among the different varieties of Legalists, it becomes quite clear that they are profoundly unaware of the existence of a common enemy - the Adversary. Like a house divided against itself they are promoting self-destruction of the worst kind. They do not show any true understanding with regard to the clear distinction between exotericism and esotericism - the lesser and the greater. And even if they²⁸ sometimes seem to do so, nevertheless, they tend to reduce the latter into the former. What is more, they are all extremely hostile to the Non-Islamic traditions.

²⁶ Supporters of Abd Allah Chakralwi and others popularly known as Ahl-i Quran.

²⁷ Ahl-i Hadith, influenced by the teaching of Shah Ismail who introduced the teachings of Abd al - Wahhab of Arabia.

²⁸ The Barelwis and the Deobandis especially.

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Thus, the group of Gnostics and that of the true Philosophers which, unfortunately, is fast disappearing from the mainstream Islam is deeply aware of the said distinction and therefore, they can be rightly regarded as the true guardians of both exoteric and esoteric dimensions of Islam.

Averroes, a noted Muslim philosopher of twelfth century as well as a great exoteric authority was not unmindful of the existence of the two levels of understanding the same truth. He remarkably wrote in his masterpiece, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*²⁹:

“They (Religions) lead towards wisdom in a way universal to all human beings, for philosophy³⁰ only leads a certain number of intelligent people to the knowledge of happiness, and they therefore have to learn wisdom, whereas religions seek the instruction of the masses generally. Notwithstanding this, we do not find any religion, which is not attentive to the special needs of the learned, although it is primarily concerned with the things in which the masses participate. ...He (the philosopher) should understand that the aim of these doctrines (religions) lies in their universal character, not in their particularity.”

Finally, we would like to add that the Legalists being the representatives of outer darkness does not, in fact, know the basic truth that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness comprehends it not.

Let us wind up the whole discussion by quoting the following verses of the Koran:

“Verily those who believe and those who are Jews, and the Sabeans and the Christians are those who believe in God and the Last day and do righteous deeds, so they have their recompense with God. They shall not fear nor shall they sorrow.”

²⁹ Tahafut al-Tahafut in Arabic.

³⁰ In the Pythagorean sense of love of wisdom, and not at all in the modern sense of the term as Descartes and others conceive it.