

Islam and Consciousness of the Absolute

by

Frithjof Schuon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, Nos. 1 & 2. (Winter-Spring, 1983).

© World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

The essay below appeared first in English in Studies and then later in Frithjof Schuon's book In the Face of the Absolute (World Wisdom, 1989, 1994). The version below is from a new translation, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon.

In order to introduce our subject, we must once again formulate the following doctrine:¹ the Supreme Principle is both Necessary Being and the Sovereign Good; it is Being with respect to its Reality, and Good with respect to its Positivity—or its Qualitative Potentiality—for on the one hand, “I am that I am,” and on the other, “God alone is good.” From “Necessary” Being is derived “possible” being—which may be or may not be—that is, existence; and all manifested qualities are derived from the Sovereign Good which is their only cause or essence.

On the one hand the Sovereign Good is the Absolute, and being the Absolute, it is *ipso facto* the Infinite; on the other hand it is hypostasized—if one may put it thus—into three “divine modes”: Intelligence, Power and Goodness; Goodness coinciding with Beauty and Beatitude. Each of these modes participates in Absoluteness and Infinity, for each is linked to the Sovereign Good or Necessary Being.

Evil cannot be absolute, it always depends upon some good which it misuses or perverts; the quality of Absoluteness can belong to good alone. To say “good” is therefore to say “absolute,” and conversely: for good results from Being itself, which it reflects and whose potentialities it unfolds.

We have alluded more than once to the Augustinian notion that it is in the nature of the good to communicate itself, hence to radiate; to project itself and thereby to become differentiated. This is the Infinity proper to absolute Reality; the Infinite is none other than the Absolute *qua* Possibility, it is both intrinsic and extrinsic since it is first of all Divine Life and then Cosmic Radiation.

¹ We have spoken of it in several works, including this one [i.e. *In the Face of the Absolute*] in the chapter “The Problems of Evil and Predestination.”

As pure Potentiality or Possibility as such, the Infinite gives rise, in the order of cosmic gradation, to the veil of *Māyā* and thus to the unfolding of universal Manifestation, the content of which is still Necessary Being, hence the Sovereign Good, but in relative and differentiated mode, in conformity with the simultaneously exteriorizing and diversifying tendency of Possibility. Moreover, the pole “Infinite,” in combining with the pole “Absolute,” becomes mirrored in the space of *Māyā*: if the existential categories² and the indefinite diversity of things—in short, all modes of extension—stem from the Infinite, the existence pure and simple of things stems from the Absolute, and the qualities of things testify to the Sovereign Good as such.

The existence of things refers to the Absolute by analogy—and analogy necessarily indicates an ontological link—namely in respect to “abstraction,” “contractiveness” and “explosiveness,” if such images are permissible in this domain; for the incredible miracle of existence—this affirmation of all in the face of nothing—is something absolute and consequently must refer to That which is all and which alone is.

The principle of differentiation does not stem solely from the Infinite insofar as the Infinite unfolds the potentialities of the Good, it results also from the Good itself inasmuch as the Good bears these inexhaustible potentialities within itself; their foundation being the ternary Intelligence, Power and Goodness-Beauty-Beatitude. All the cosmic qualities, including the faculties of creatures, derive ontologically from these archetypes *in divinis*.

* * *

Totality of intelligence, freedom of will, disinterestedness of love, hence capacity for generosity, compassion, transcending of self, in short, capacity for integral objectivity: these characteristics of man prove that his reason for being is his relationship with the Absolute. This is to say that only man’s faculties are commensurate with this relationship, and moreover this is why the posture of his body is vertical and why he possesses the gifts of reason and speech; man is so made that he can conceive, will and love that which transcends him infinitely. He can be a metaphysician and can practice a spiritual method; he can find his happiness therein and prove it by his virtues.

It is this nature of man, thus this fundamental disposition—or specific capacity—to know God and to go towards Him, that every religion necessarily takes for granted; not every religion, however, necessarily bases itself upon the saving power inherent in man’s deformity. Theravadin Buddhism and Zen have as their starting point this power to the point of excluding from their perspective all that seems to serve as an objective Divinity; Christianity on the contrary puts the entire emphasis upon the humanly irremediable fall of our nature and upon the

² Space, time, form, number, matter, extending the meaning of these categories to all levels of the cosmos; in which case the notions become no more than symbols.

absolute necessity of a divine intervention, hence coming from outside the human being. The position of Islam is intermediate: man is saved both by virtue of his unalterable deiform characteristics—for fallen man is still man—and by virtue of a divine intervention which turns them to account. What in Islam is human nature turned to account by Revelation will, in Christianity, be represented by Christ: it is He, “true man and true God,” who restores man’s nature; fallen man—the “sinner”—is regenerated in and by the Redeemer.³ This amounts to saying that Christianity is not directly linked to the Absolute as such, but to the Good inasmuch as it manifests its reintegrating function of Mercy; this relativization corresponds to the *de facto* reduction of human nature to a “historical” or cosmic accident, but it goes without saying that in Christianity—as in every religion—there is also a key to the Absolute as such. In Islam, and in analogous perspectives, what corresponds to the “Christly” principle will be the “heart,” sometimes compared to a tarnished mirror; the purpose of Revelation is to restore to this mirror its primordial luminosity. Islam, founded on Unity and Transcendence, necessarily accentuates in its expressions and attitudes the essential aspects of the One, aspects which we spoke of at the beginning of this chapter; it is true that the same accentuations may, or even must, necessarily be found everywhere in one form or another, so that our exposition allows for appropriate applications to the most varied perspectives; but what we are concerned with here is the concrete case of Islam.

Infinitude, as we have said, is the radiation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, of the Absolute: a priori it is internal Bliss, if one may say so; in becoming relative a posteriori, it becomes hypostatic and creative as well as saving *Māyā*; these two aspects, the Absolute as such and its radiating *Shakti*—Infinitude at once substantial and unfolding—determine the most characteristic manifestations of Islam. They are prefigured phonetically in the very Name of the Divinity, *Allāh*; the first syllable, which is contractive, seems to refer to the rigor of the Absolute, whereas the second syllable, which is expansive, evokes the gentleness of Infinitude.

In conformity with these two poles, the characteristic manifestations of Islam can be divided into two categories: one which evokes implacable Truth (*Haqq*) and the Holy War (*jihād*) associated with it, and one which evokes generous Peace (*Salām*) and moral and spiritual resignation (*islām*). And similarly: the mystery of the Absolute is linked to the idea of the Lord (*Rabb*) before whom man can only be a slave (*‘abd*), and the mystery of the Infinite is linked to the idea of the Clement (*Rahmān*) who encompasses everything; Rigor and the Law are related

³ We have often had occasion to cite this patristic formula: “God became man that man might become God.” In Lutheran mysticism, the relationship between God and man gives rise to this reciprocity: in making our sin his sin, Christ makes his justice our justice; that is, Christ takes the chastisement upon himself and from us requires faith alone, and also, as a consequence of faith, the accomplishment of our duty and the sincere intention not to sin; sincerity here being the key to efficacy, and the support for the justice which Heaven grants us.

to the Absolute, and Gentleness and Pardon are related to the Infinite; this is the complementarity between “Majesty” (*Jalāl*) and “Beauty” (*Jamāl*).

* * *

To the objective reality of the Absolute there responds the subjective reality of certitude; certitude gives rise to a characteristic feature of the Moslem mentality, because the entire faith of Moslems is based upon the simple and irrefutable idea of “Necessary Being” (*Wujūd wājib*) or “Absolute Being” (*Wujūd mutlaq*); the necessary is that which cannot not be, whereas the possible (*mumkin*) or the contingent is that which may or may not be. Not that certitude is lacking in the other forms of religious faith; but in Islam it has a crystalline and implacable quality stemming precisely from the metaphysical self-evidence of its fundamental content; assuredly, not every Moslem is a metaphysician, but the self-evidence of the Absolute is in the very air that he breathes. Thus the Moslem has the reputation for being “unconvertible,” and this inflexibility is all the more understandable in that, in a certain respect, the simplest truth is the surest.

The sense of the Absolute has produced in Moslem theology a curious over-emphasis on the confrontation “Lord-servant” or “Master-slave”: one piously imagines that God has the right to anything, even the right to commit what, for us, is an injustice and an absurdity;⁴ thus one forgets that the personal God, being perfect, cannot have the imperfection of laying claim to all possible rights, and that it is only the impersonal Divine Essence which, as All-Possibility, has “all rights” in the sense that, given its limitlessness, it manifests the negative as well as the positive possibilities; but this Essence, precisely, asks nothing of man. Being perfect, God cannot be inconsequential: He could not create a being with the aim of having an interlocutor without thereby assuming certain limitations; for reciprocity is not conceivable without certain sacrifices on the part of both partners, intrinsically incommensurable though they may be. Once God turns to man, He situates Himself in *Māyā*, and assumes all the consequences.

One could also say, in this order of ideas, that the notion of right implies that of duty, logically and ontologically; the just man who does not wish to assume a particular duty renounces *ipso facto* a particular right. To say that the pure Absolute⁵ has no duty means that It cannot lay claim to any right, for It has no interlocutor.

⁴ The Koranic formula “do not impose upon us that which we have not the strength to bear” concerns a relative, not an absolute situation; a factual difficulty, not a principial one, and thus a situation with indeterminate boundaries. This formula seems to allude to the ancient Hebrews, whose prescriptions were realizable, but which in fact the Hebrews frequently violated either by reason of shortcomings—obviously relative—in their mentality, or because of the seductiveness of the pagan ambience.

⁵ We have alluded more than once to the seemingly contradictory, but metaphysically useful and even indispensable, idea of the “relatively absolute,” which is absolute in relation to what it rules, while pertaining to relativity in relation to the “Pure Absolute.”

The Law exists for man, not man for the Law;⁶ in other words: the personal God is by definition a moral Person; it is true that the divine Essence is “amoral,” if one will, but it does not follow from this that the divine Person is immoral, *quod absit*; to maintain that He is so, even in an indirect way and through the use of pious euphemisms, amounts to confusing the impersonal subjectivity of All-Possibility with the personal subjectivity of God as Legislator and Savior.⁷

In an altogether general manner, the Moslem tendency to abrupt simplifications, trenchant alternatives and peremptory gestures (of which the reputedly rough and ready justice meted out by the *qādis* is at least a symbolic example, for in fact Moslem law is not so simple as that) stems, in the final analysis, from a voluntaristic distortion of the sense of the Absolute. By vulgarizing the idea of the Absolute in the moral climate of an Imrulqais, of a Tarafa and of an Antara,* there is a considerable risk of ending with the logic of the drawn sword.

* * *

To repeat, the point to bear in mind is that the two mental or moral attitudes that typify Islam *de facto*, namely certitude and serenity—which, when exaggerated, become fanaticism and fatalism—derive in the final analysis from the mystery of Unity as it becomes polarized into Absolute and Infinite. As regards the consciousness of Infinitude, the importance of the idea of Peace in Islam is well known; it is this which inspires resignation and generosity, the two key-virtues of Moslem piety. And it is again this same element that is outwardly manifested in such liturgical phenomena as the call to prayer from the height of the minarets, or in such cultural phenomena as the monotonous whiteness of Arab clothing and towns;⁸ this climate of peace is prefigured in the desert which is inseparable from the Arab world—ancestrally the world of Hagar and Ishmael—and consequently from the Islamic world. In the Moslem Paradise, the chosen “say only Peace, Peace” (*illā qīlan salāman salāma*); and “God calleth to the abode

⁶ Exoterically, one submits to the Law in order to please God and escape chastisement, not to mention the practical or moral value of the Commandment, to which every man should be sensitive; esoterically, one submits to the Law taking into account its intentions, and knowing that God does not require anything more, as He sees the nature of things and the “spirit,” rather than the “letter.”

⁷ In the climate of Christianity, we have encountered an analogous opinion: it appears that God has the “right” to impose what is nonsensical on the human mind, since He is “above logic”; but this too is impossible, for having created human intelligence “in His own image,” God could not possibly wish to impose upon it contents incompatible with the ontological relationship between the mind and the truth, and therefore contents which are necessarily false. *Credo quia absurdum* quite clearly has in view apparent illogicalities only—ellipses touching on things that escape our earthly experiences or fragmentary reasonings.

* Famous pre-Islamic poets of the 6th century.—Trans.

⁸ Leaving aside, of course, Turkish and Persian influences.

of Peace” (*ilā dār as-salām*); the same fundamental idea is moreover contained in the word *islām*, which means “abandonment” to the Will of Him Who, being the One (*Ahad*), is the “Absolutely Real” (*Wujūd mutlaq*).⁹

Certitude and serenity: with these two attitudes are associated respectively combativeness and resignation. It is well known how important in the Path (*tarīqah*) are on the one hand spiritual “combat” (*jihād*)—prayer in all its forms (*dhikr*) being the weapon against the still untamed soul—and on the other hand “poverty” (*faqr*) “for the sake of God” (*ilā 'Llāh*), which make us independent of both the seductive world and the seducible soul. The Sufi is both *mujāhid*, “combatant,” and *faqīr*, “poor”; he is always on a battlefield and, in another respect, in a desert.

The Testimony of Faith of Islam, according to which “there is no divinity except the one Divinity” is both sword and shroud: on the one hand it is a lightning-bolt in its fulgurating unicity, and on the other hand a sand dune or a blanket of snow in its peace-giving totality; and these two messages refer respectively, not only to the mysteries of Absoluteness and Infinity, but also—in a certain fashion—to those of Transcendence and Immanence. Be that as it may, Immanence would be inconceivable without the Infinite: it is thanks to the Infinite that there is a cosmic projection enabling the Sovereign Good to be immanent; and it is starting from this projection that we can have the presentiment that all values and qualities have their roots in—and open out onto—Necessary Being, which is the Good as such.¹⁰

⁹ There is no point in objecting here that the personal God is not, strictly speaking, the Absolute since by definition He is already situated— He first of all— within universal Relativity; for He represents Absoluteness for all the subsequent contents of this Relativity. Similarly, when we speak of “Necessary Being,” we simply mean transcendent Reality and not the creating and personal Principle only; the word “Being” has in fact two different meanings, namely “Reality” and “ontological Principle.”

¹⁰ If the first Testimony of Faith, which testifies to the Unity of God, is linked to Transcendence, the second Testimony, that of the Prophet or of the Logos, is in the final analysis the formula of Immanence.