

The Three Dimensions of Sufism

by

Frithjof Schuon

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 1. (Winter, 1976). © World Wisdom, Inc.
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“FEAR” (*makhâfah*), “Love” (*mahabbah*), “Knowledge” (*tarîqah*): In Sufism (*tasawwuf*), these are the three dimensions or stations of the way (*tarîqah*); “dimensions” from the point of view of their vocational separation or from the point of view of their coincidence in every spiritual vocation, and “stations” from the point of view of their succession in spiritual development.

By “Fear” must be understood our consciousness of the Divine Rigour and all the volitional consequences that this consciousness implies, whether by way of actions or abstentions. We must accomplish those things that bring us nearer to God, in principle or in fact, and we must abstain from those things that separate us or alienate us from God. “In principle or in fact”, for it sometimes happens that a thing is forbidden notwithstanding that it may not alienate such and such a man from the intrinsic Divine Will, and thereby from Grace, or it may happen, on the contrary, that a thing may alienate such and such a man from God notwithstanding that it is not forbidden. Thus, poetry, music and dancing are to all intents and purposes forbidden in Islam, but the Sufis practise them in their own way. Inversely, many apparently inoffensive occupations or pastimes are permitted exoterically, but the Sufis abstain from them so as not to be detached from intimacy with God, or so as not to poison themselves spiritually, as the case may be. On this ambiguous plane, everything depends on circumstances and intangible factors, both subjectively and objectively.

Be that as it may, the fact that Christ stressed the love of God at the expense of formal precepts, or the inward at the expense of the outward, proves the relativity of the regime of “Fear”; and consciousness of this relativity is already an element of esoterism, without being the whole of esoterism, for the latter, while it includes “Love”, belongs essentially to the domain of “Knowledge”.

If we were asked where exoterism (*sharî'ah*) ends and esoterism (*haqîqah*) begins, our answer would be that the boundary line passes through love, which amounts to saying that love is at the same time both exoteric and esoteric, and that it thus constitutes the link between the two domains. Nevertheless, exoterism necessarily comprises—albeit indirectly—an element of Knowledge, namely speculative theology, just as, inversely, esoterism comprises an element of Fear, namely the discipline, including first and foremost the exoteric frame-work which is obligatory on all.

If there are three spiritual categories, namely “Fear”, “Love” and “Knowledge”—in place of “Fear” one could also say “Action” or “Merit”, and in place of “Love” one could also say “Grace”—it must follow that there are men who are more particularly qualified for one or other of these ways. Strictly

speaking, the man who is limited by the perspective of “Fear” has no place in esoterism, except *de facto* by indirect participation; but esoterism welcomes as a matter of course the man of “Love” and *a fortiori* the man of “Knowledge”, that is to say those who prefer the “Gardener” to the “Garden” or, in other words, who aspire to a mode of Union rather than a pure and simple recompense.

If this be so, what is it that distinguishes the man who is naturally destined for the perspective of Love from the man who possesses the qualifications for Knowledge? Or to put it differently —using well-known Hindu terms—how is one to know whether a man is by nature a *bhakta* or a *jñānin*? The following is a decisive criterion: notwithstanding that a man may have understood the doctrines of *jñāna*, if these doctrines do not eradicate the defects in his character he is by nature “bhaktic”, assuming of course that he is a spiritual and not a worldly man, and that *bhakti* is in consequence a means of curing him of his defects. The born *jñānin* is a man who perfects himself morally through arguments that are intellectual and refer therefore to the nature of things, while the born *bhakta* is a man who perfects himself through arguments that are moral and refer to a particular conception of good; the *bhakta*’s will is *de facto* indifferent to meta-physical arguments, whereas the will of the *jñānin* is indifferent to the sentimental pressures of morality. We have said that a *bhakta* may have understood the doctrines of *jñāna* but in fact, if these doctrines do not improve his character, this means that he has understood them only imperfectly; his understanding may be complete in the dimension of concepts, but the concrete, imaginative or existential dimension is missing, if one may so put it. When theologians inveigh against Platonists, they are subjectively right, for the doctrines of Plato and Plotinus could not in their case give rise to a moral regeneration; but they forget that there are men for whom the doctrines in question possess this virtue, men whose moral nobility—or the full flowering of this nobility—is in fact a function of their Knowledge, directly or indirectly.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that if there are men whose nature is “bhaktic” and others whose nature is “jñānic”, elements of both *bhakti* and *jñāna* are to be found in every man, aside from the fact that spiritual temperaments are often mixed, in which case the way will be a question of destiny rather than of choice. Moreover, the true *jñānin* is so detached that it sometimes happens that under the pressure of his environment he takes himself *a priori* for a *bhakta*, only recognizing his true nature later on when it becomes unmistakable; inversely, many of those who without hesitation take themselves for *jñānin* are unjustified in so doing, and their belief simply stems from reading, aided by self-esteem. The true *jñānin* is neither glacial and arrogant through rationality, nor over-tolerant and indifferent because of a concern for “objectivity”; he is essentially receptive to the truth while remaining fully human in the positive meaning of the word, that is, while practising the virtues, for the virtues are intrinsically linked to the truth whether we are conscious of it or not; and to be a *jñānin* is precisely to be conscious of this. The man who possesses a sense of the true or the real possesses thereby a sense of beauty. One is tempted to say, somewhat schematically, that the *jñānin* is an aesthete before being a moralist, or that he is the latter through being the former; in short, that a sense of moral good is in his case a sense of beauty at every level, to the extent that aesthetic intuition or musicality is a necessary component of knowledge of the Real. It enters into this knowledge owing to the fact that Beauty, which in God coincides with Beatitude

and Generosity, is a dimension of the Divine Essence itself, as is indicated by the Vedantic ternary *Sat-Chit-Ânanda*, and as is indicated in Islam by the Name *Rahmân* in so far as it is a Name of the Essence; it is what the Gospel means when it teaches that “God is Love”. And since it is above all with Sufism that we are concerned here, it may be recalled that for Ibn ‘Arabî, the complementarity Beauty-Love constitutes in the final analysis the very substance of universal Reality.

It is on this complementarity that the soul of the *jñânin* lives, and he glimpses the traces of it on every plane, for he possesses naturally a sense of the metaphysical transparency of phenomena; no gnosis is possible without beauty of soul, and for the *jñânin*—the ‘*ârif bi-’Llâh* (“knowing by *Allâh*”) of Sufism—this beauty is a function of the perception of the Divine Beauty, the only Beauty there is. God is essentially “Majesty” (*Jalâl*) and “Beauty” (*Jamâl*), or “Majesty” and “Benevolence” (*Ikrâm*) according to the Quran; being Absolute, He is Infinite, and His Infinitude is nothing else but His Radiation and His Beauty.

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An allusion was made earlier to the opposition between the celestial “Garden” and the Divine “Gardener”, which permits or even compels a digression, since it is difficult to approve this way of speaking. The opposition or alternative in question provides an example, not simply of an intention which is aimed at the Essence and refuses to stop at phenomena—even though they be celestial,—but also of a certain dialectical thoughtlessness. Logically, it is not plausible that the gardener is more than the garden, for the garden is the reason for the existence of the gardener and not the other way about; on the other hand, the reason for the existence of the palace is the king, who is not the servant of the palace but its end or its content. Instead of speaking metaphorically of the Garden of Paradise and the Divine Gardener, one might have said: the wine is to be preferred to the cup, or the bride to the bridal robe; for the thirsty man has little use for the cup, even though it be of gold, and the bridegroom desires the woman and not the dress, even though it be studded with pearls. One ought to have rested content with the Quranic image of the Garden, and the desired distinction should have been made within and on the basis of this image, for the celestial phenomena are one thing and our ways of perceiving and enjoying them are another. Alternatively, one ought to have adhered to the notion of “creation” and “Creator”, for no-one is in any doubt that the latter takes precedence over the former; the Quran says nothing other than this, while it never speaks of the “Gardener” nor permits the Garden to be despised. In the same order of ideas, to speak with disdain of the *houris* on the pretext of wanting only God has the grave disadvantage, not only of being disobliging to God who promises the *houris*, but also of giving the impression that the human individual as such can have a motive for this disdain; here again one should transpose the symbolism and remount to the Divine Prototypes of phenomena. Be that as it may, we shall doubtless be told that the “Gardener” of the Sufis is perfectly intelligible since everyone knows that it refers to God; in that case, there was no point in veiling the clear idea of God with the question-able image of the gardener. And it is just this that has been avoided by those Sufis who have established the metaphor on the basis of the Garden; in place of the “Gardener” they speak of the “Garden of the Essence” which they oppose to the different

phenomenal Gardens; the Garden of the Essence is none other than God Himself. This image possesses the immense advantage, not only of being logical in itself, but also of not contradicting the Quran, even indirectly.

A Quranic notion which allows the relationship in question to be harmoniously expressed is that of *Ridwân*, Divine “Contentment”.¹ One might say in fact that the Beatitude of the Sufis is centred upon this “Contentment” or “Acceptance”, whereas the Beatitude of the men of “Fear” is nurtured on various phenomena rather than on the unitive Presence. A simple manner of speaking, perhaps, but one that nevertheless has its value in a mystical language that is careful of Scriptural imagery.

After this digression, which seems to be not without significance in the general context, let us return to the question of the three dimensions of spirituality.

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“Fear”, “Love” and “Knowledge”: this ternary, as we have seen, is divergent as well as convergent, successive as well as simultaneous; the three dimensions constitute distinct ways as well as being aspects of one and the same way, and they are steps or stations as well as being virtues. All these positions or functions result from the fact that the three dimensions reside in the very nature of man; the three elements *corpus, anima, spiritus*, and the corresponding human characteristics, bear witness to this.²

That the ternary, *makhâfah-mahabbah-ma‘rifah* belongs to *tasawwuf*—aside from the fact that it results from the nature of things—is proved by two principal factors, one extrinsic and the other intrinsic. On the one hand, the historical or cyclical unfolding of Sufism was accomplished in three stages, *grosso modo*, constituted precisely by the regimes of Fear, Love and Knowledge; on the other hand, the Sufi Rosary, the *wird*, which constitutes the basic practice of the *tarîqah*, essentially comprises three formulas relating respectively to *makhâfah*, to *mahabbah* and to *ma‘rifah*. So far as the cyclical unfolding is concerned, it should be remarked that it clearly does not imply any sort of progress, for everything essential was present from the beginning; it indicates, all told, an order of spiritual aptness, if one may so put it, from the point of view of the doctrinal and accentuated manifestation of the mysteries.

¹ While this word has a rather general meaning in the majority of passages, it refers to a more particular reality in the three following verses: “For those who fear (God), there are beside their Lord gardens in which rivers flow, wherein they will abide eternally, and there are pure companions, and Acceptance (*Ridwân*) from God . . .” (Quran, 3:15) — “Their Lord giveth them good tidings of Mercy from Him, and Acceptance, and gardens where enduring pleasure will be theirs”. (9:21) — “God promiseth to the believers, men and women, gardens in which rivers flow, wherein they will abide — excellent dwellings in gardens of Eden. And Acceptance from God is greater still; it is the supreme Beatitude.” (61:12).

² In the Gnostic terminology: *hylikos* or *somatikos, psychikos, pneumatikos*. The hylic and the somatic—the material type and the corporeal type—are synonymous.

The three formulas of the *wird* are the *Istighfâr*, the *Salât 'alâ'n-Nabî* and the *Shahâdah*; that is to say, the “Asking for forgiveness”, the “Blessing upon the Prophet” and the “Attestation of faith”. This signifies that “Fear” essentially calls forth regret and forgiveness; that “Love” of necessity passes through the Prophet or the Logos; that “Knowledge” is above all that of the unique God, and that it is therefore in substance discernment between the Real and the illusory, or between the Absolute and the contingent.

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“I ask forgiveness of God”: this is the literal content of the *Istighfâr*, and it is the formula of ascesis and so of purification or the re-establishment of equilibrium. This concerns every man, for every man finds himself by definition subject to ambiguity and vacillation; “the just man sins seven times daily”, that is to say there is always in contingency a margin of imperfection, even if there is no transgression in the strict meaning of the word. According to Islamic doctrine the Prophets are exempt from sinning, but not from this margin, which is the price paid for our ontological alienation from God. Without this margin, the “servant” (*'abd*) would be the Lord (*Rabb*); and if Muhammad himself sought forgiveness of God every day, it was not for his sins that he did so, but uniquely on account of the traces of human contingency. For, the most perfect man undergoes a kind of obscuration or disequilibrium owing to the unevenness of his environment and the reactions which it inevitably provokes. Reactions to an imperfect environment cannot always be absolutely perfect, and there is not always a strict dividing line between values. It is to be noted that the Prophet, who is *'abd*, and who is even the synthesis and summit of the “servants of God” since he realizes their prototype, had to manifest to perfection all the attitudes implied in the existential state of “servitude” (*'ubûdîyah*); he was therefore the first to “ask forgiveness of God”, and he did so, in effect, in the name of the whole of humanity, represented in fact by his community.

“Fear” possesses a negative aspect, and this is ascesis or abstention, including fasting, vigils, silence and solitude. It also comprises a positive or affirmative aspect, and this consists in activity and works, *karma-yoga* as Hindus would say. This point of view could not on its own constitute an esoterism, but no man can wholly escape its claims.

As for the dimension of “Love”, it is expressed in the *wird* in the following form: “O my God,³ bestow thine illuminative Blessing upon our Lord Muhammad, Thy Servant and Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, and upon his Family and his Companions, and bestow upon them Thy peace-giving Blessing”.⁴ According to the Quranic doctrine, love of God is, practically speaking, a function of love of the Messenger, and love of the Messenger implies the imitation of his example; whosoever wishes to love God must enter into the mould of the Prophet and love God through participation in the Muhammadian

³ *Allahumma* is an almost untranslatable vocative of the Name *Allâh*; it can be rendered “O my God”, though this has the disadvantage of putting into the singular prayers whose subject is in the plural.

⁴ Cf our book *Understanding Islam*, chapter on the Prophet. (Mien and Unwin London, 1963; Penguin Books, Baltimore, U.S.A. 1972).

perfection; God loves the Prophet and he will love man to the extent that he is integrated in the spiritual form of the Prophet. It is in this way that Islam approaches the mystery of *mahabbah*; it is not *a priori* a movement of the servant towards the Lord, it is a reciprocity which lays down its conditions. To love God is to be loved by God; God loves the Sunna, therefore one must enter into the Sunna in order to become through its framework the object of the Divine Love. There is a formal and historical Sunna, and this is the example (*uswah*) of the Arab Prophet; but there is also a Sunna according to the *fitrah*—the primordial, supra-formal, intrinsic Norm—of which the Muhammadian Sunna is a particular application, and which is the inward and universal condition of all love of God; in this sense we may say that to love God is to realize the beauty of the soul, for “*Allâh* is beautiful and He loves beauty”.

The primacy in practice of an objective Sunna over the subjective experience of Love has the motive of allowing every man access to Love, and hence to the grace of being loved by God. This motive and this perspective cannot prevent the love of God from being a pure gift, and thus an *a priori* unconditional favour; it is in this sense that St. Augustine was able to say: “Love God and do what you will”. This is a possibility that Islam could not deny; if it admits it necessarily as a quasi-charismatic gift, it is by referring to the innate Sunna, to the “secret” (*sirr*) of the Heart, which brings us back to the doctrine of the primordial Norm, the *fitrah*.⁵

“Love” as a spiritual principle—whether we look upon it as a gift or as a form of zeal, the two being moreover interdependent—presupposes and brings into operation an active quality, and this is goodness, generosity, fervour; generosity which gives itself to God and which, in so giving itself, gives itself also to men. “Love” also comprises a passive perfection, and this is the sense of beauty, of peace, of harmony. It is this quality, at once both contemplative and moral, that is referred to in the Quran in these terms: “There (in Paradise) they will hear no vain talk and no sinful word; only the words: Peace, Peace!” (56: 25-26).⁶ The following verse is completely analogous: “Say: *Allâh!* Then leave them to their vain discourse” (6:91). The Name *Allâh* is as it were the Substance which reabsorbs the accidents; the existential foundation of things is Goodness, Beauty and Peace; privative accidentality superimposes itself thereon while allowing the message of Love to show through.

As for the dimension of “Knowledge”, it is represented in the *wird* by the *Shahâdah*, with the addition of the following words from the Quran: “He is without associate; to Him belongeth the Kingdom, and to Him returneth praise; and He hath power over all things” (64:1). This is to say that secondary causes—such as the natural laws—are only reverberations of the First Cause; it is the Absolute which determines every phenomenon, and nothing escapes it, even in the realm of infinitesimal contingencies.

⁵ The Torah stresses the primacy of Love in so far as it coincides with observance of the Law. Christ stresses this primacy in so far as Love coincides with the inward Law, and hence with virtues that are both “horizontal” and “ascending”. Islam, concerned as always with equilibrium and synthesis, combines both points of view.

⁶ The word “Peace” (*Salâm*) is also a Divine Name.

Knowledge comprises essentially two perspectives, one objective which is concerned with transcendence, and the other subjective which is concerned with immanence; but there is also an objective immanence, namely the Omnipresence of God, just as there is also a subjective transcendence, namely pure Intellect—*incretus et increabilis* according to Eckhardt—which is in fact transcendent in relation to the ego. The first of the two perspectives just mentioned gives rise to metaphysical doctrine in its mental form, while the second concerns mystic realization determined by the “Unity of the Real” (*wahdat al-Wujûd*); in other words *ma‘rifah* is metaphysical discernment in the objective dimension, that of the Principle, and mystical illumination in the subjective dimension, that of the immanent Essence; this is tantamount to saying that it includes everything.

With respect to the Absolute in itself, considered independently of the polarization we have just been discussing, we must call attention once again to the following point which is of capital importance; metaphysical doctrine, as one knows, essentially involves discernment between the Absolute and the relative; and this implies that one must take into consideration the root of relativity in the Absolute, and, inversely, the manifestation of the Absolute within relativity. The first of these two hypostases, if one may so put it, is the creative Principle or the Divine Intellect as the *locus* of the archetypes; the second hypostasis is the created Logos in all its aspects: Prophet, Revelation, Archangelic Spirit (*Rûh*), spiritual Authority, sacramental Symbol.

From the standpoint of the microcosm or of subjectivity, or from the mystical standpoint if one wishes, the position is analogous. One must discern in the immanent Absolute—which is pure Consciousness, pure Spirit, pure Ipseity—the uncreated anticipation of relative and therefore individual consciousness, just as, inversely, one must discern the manifestation of absolute Consciousness within this subjective relativity. This is to say that within the Supreme Self—considered as residing in ourselves—one must discern the affirmation of the differentiated and differentiating Intellect, which corresponds to the creative Principle conceived objectively, just as, within the individual soul, one must discern a faculty of impersonal knowledge, namely the reason, which would be inconceivable without the presence of the pure and quasi-divine Intellect in the depths of the heart.

Ma‘rifah or Gnosis is the reintegration of the immortal soul in this immanent Intellect. Correlatively, the penetration of the Intellect into the soul is the miracle of the coincidence of “true man and true God”, to speak in Christian terms, and this is the whole mystery of the personification of the incommensurable, without opposition or mixture. This Mystery enables us to grasp the intention behind this esoteric maxim which is at once paradoxical, elliptical and profoundly true: “The Sufi is not created” (*as-Sûfî lam yukhlaq*).