

# Remarks on the Sunnah

by  
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To the “Book” (*Kitāb*) of God is joined the “Practice” (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet; it is true that the Qoran itself speaks of the Sunnah of *Allāh*, meaning by this God's principles of action with regard to men, but tradition has reserved this word for the ways of acting, customs and examples of Muhammad. These precedents constitute the norm, at all levels, of Moslem life.

The Sunnah comprises several dimensions: physical, moral, social, spiritual, and others besides. Belonging to the physical dimension are the rules of decorum that result from the nature of things: for example, not to engage in intense conversation during meals, nor *a fortiori* to speak while eating; to rinse one's mouth after eating or drinking, not to eat garlic, to observe all the rules of cleanliness, and to leave one's shoes at the door. Equally a part of this Sunnah are the rules relating to dress: to cover one's head and, for men, to wear a turban whenever possible and not to wear silk or gold. Other rules require that men and women do not mix in public gatherings, or that a woman does not preside at prayer in front of men; some allege that she should not even do this in front of other women, or that she should not chant the Qoran, but these two opinions are belied by traditional precedents. Finally, there are the elementary Islamic gestures which every Moslem knows: ways of greeting, thanking, and so on. It goes without saying that the majority of these rules admit of no exception in any circumstances whatsoever.

There is also, and even above all in the hierarchy of values, the spiritual Sunnah, concerning the “remembrance of God” (*dhikr*) and the principles of the “journey” (*sulūk*); this Sunnah is very parsimonious as regards what is truly essential in it. Basically, it contains all the traditions referring to the relationship between God and man; this relationship may be either separative or unitive, exclusive or inclusive, distinctive or participative. There is another domain which must be rigorously distinguished from this

spiritual Sunnah, although it may sometimes seem to overlap with it, and this is the moral Sunnah, which concerns above all the highly complex realm of social relationships with all their psychological and symbolist concomitances. In spite of certain obvious coincidences, this dimension does not enter, strictly speaking, into esoterism; it cannot form part—without abuse of terminology—of the sapiential perspective, for it is clearly alien to the contemplation of essences and to concentration on the one and only Reality. This intermediate Sunnah on the contrary goes as it were hand in hand with the specifically devotional or obediential perspective, at any rate to a large extent, and it is consequently exoteric, whence its will-bound and individualistic appearance; the fact that certain of its elements contradict one another shows moreover that one can and must make one's choice.

What the *faqīr* (the spiritually poor) will retain of this Sunnah will be, not so much the ways of acting as the intentions that are inherent in them, that is, the spiritual attitudes and the virtues which relate to the *Fitrah*.<sup>1</sup> to the primordial perfection of man and thereby to the normative nature (*uswah*) of the Prophet. Every man must possess the virtue of generosity, for this is part of his theomorphic nature: but generosity of soul is one thing, and a particular gesture of generosity characteristic of the Bedouin world is another. It will doubtless be said that every gesture is a symbol; with this we agree, on two express conditions: firstly, that the gesture does not proceed from a conventional automatism, insensitive to the possible absurdity of the results; and secondly, that the gesture is not the vehicle or the prop of a religious sentimentalism incompatible with the perspective of the Intellect and the Essence.

Fundamentally, the moral or social Sunnah is a direct or indirect adequation of the will to the human norm; its aim is to actualize, and not to limit, our positive horizontal nature; but as it is addressed to all, it necessarily vehicles limitative elements from the point of view of vertical perfection. This horizontal and collective character of a certain Sunnah necessarily implies that it is a sort of *māyā* or *upāya*,<sup>2</sup> which means that it is both

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<sup>1</sup> The primordial perfection of man, corresponding to the “Golden Age”.

<sup>2</sup> A “saving mirage”, according to the Mahayana.

a support and an obstacle and that it may become a veritable *shirk*,<sup>3</sup> doubtless not for the ordinary believer, but for the *sālik*.<sup>4</sup> The intermediate Sunnah prevents the ordinary man from being a wild beast and from losing his soul; but it may also prevent a man of outstanding spiritual gifts from transcending forms and from realizing the Essence. The intermediate Sunnah may favour vertical realization just as it may hold a man back in the horizontal dimension; it is both a factor of equilibrium and a weight. It favours ascension, but does not condition it; it contributes to the conditioning of ascension only by its intrinsic and non-formal contents which, precisely, are in principle independent of formal attitudes.

From the point of view of the *Religio perennis*, the question of the Sunnah implies a highly delicate problem, given that the accentuation of the intermediate and social Sunnah goes hand in hand with a particular religious psychism, which by definition excludes other equally possible religious psychisms and which fashions, as they do, a particular mentality, one which obviously is not essential to Islamic gnosis. Quite apart from this aspect of things, it should not be forgotten that the Prophet, like every man, was obliged to accomplish a multitude of actions during his life, and that he necessarily performed these in one particular way and not in another, and even in different ways depending on the outward or inward circumstances; he fully intended to serve as a universal model, but he did not always specify whether or not a given action amounted, strictly speaking, to a prescription. Furthermore, the Prophet gave different teachings for different men, without being responsible for the fact that the Companions—of very diverse gifts—later transmitted all that they had heard and seen, and that they did so sometimes in divergent ways, depending on individual observations and emphases. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that not every element of Sunnah imposes itself in the same way or with the same certainty, and that in many cases the teaching lies in the intention rather than in the form.

Be that as it may, there is a fundamental truth that should not be lost sight of, namely, that the plane of action is in itself entirely human, and insistence on a multitude

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<sup>3</sup> An “association” of something with God.

<sup>4</sup> The spiritual “traveller”.

of forms of action, belonging necessarily to a particular style, constitutes an absorbing *karma yoga*<sup>5</sup> which has no connection with the way of metaphysical discernment and concentration on the Essential. In the person of the Prophet there is both simple and complex, and amongst men there are diverse vocations; the Prophet necessarily personifies a religious—and therefore human—climate of a particular character, but he likewise personifies, and in a different connection, the Truth in itself and the Way as such. There is an imitation of the Prophet founded on the religious illusion that he is intrinsically better than all the other Prophets, including Jesus, and there is another imitation of the Prophet founded on the prophetic quality in itself, that is on the perfection of the Logos become man; this imitation is necessarily more true, more profound and consequently less formalist than the first, it is centred less on outward actions than on the reflections of the Divine Names in the soul of the human Logos.

Niffari, who incarnates esoterism in the truest sense of the word, and not a will-conditioned and still largely exoterist pre-esoterism, bore witness to the following: “*Allāh* said to me: formulate thy petition to Me thus: Lord, how must I attach myself firmly to Thee so that on the day of my Judgement Thou wilt not punish me or turn Thy face from me? Then I (*Allāh*) shall answer thee saying: Attach thyself to the Sunnah in thine outward doctrine and practice, and attach thyself in thine inward soul to the Gnosis which I have given thee; and know that when I make Myself known to thee, I will not accept from thee anything of the Sunnah except what My Gnosis brings thee, for thou art one of those to whom I speak; thou hearest Me and thou knowest that thou hearest Me, and thou seest that I am the source of all things.” The commentator on the passage remarks that the Sunnah has a general application and that it makes no distinction between the seekers of a created reward and the seekers of the Essence, and that it contains what any and every person may have need of. Another saying of Niffari: “And He said to me: My exoteric (*zāhiri*) Revelation does not support My esoteric Revelation (*bātini*)”. And yet another, of an abrupt symbolism that needs to be understood: “The good actions of the pious man are the bad actions of the privileged *of Allāh*”. Which indicates as clearly as possible the relativity of certain elements of the Sunnah and the relativity of the cult of the

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<sup>5</sup> A path based on action.

intermediate Sunnah.

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Adab—traditional politeness—is in fact a particularly problematical sector of the Sunnah because of two factors, namely narrow interpretation and blind convention. *Adab* can be flattened out into a formalism that is so cut off from its profound intentions that formal attitudes supplant the intrinsic virtues which are the whole point of their existence; an ill-understood *adab* can give rise to dissimulation, touchiness, untruth and childishness; on the pretext that one must neither contradict a person one is speaking with nor tell him anything disagreeable, one leaves him in harmful error or one refrains from giving him a necessary piece of information, or one inflicts on him, out of kindness, situations which may to say the least, be undesirable, and so on. Be that as it may, it is important to know—and to understand—that *adab*, even when well understood, has limits: thus, tradition recommends that one should conceal the faults of a brother Moslem, if thereby no harm results for the collectivity, but it lays down that one should reprimand this brother in private, without regard for *adab*, if there is a chance that the reprimand will be accepted: likewise, *adab* must not prevent the denunciation in public of faults and errors which run the risk of affecting others. As regards the relativity of *adab*, it may be recalled that the Shaikh Darqāwi and others have sometimes obliged their disciples to break certain rules, without nevertheless going against the Law, the *sharī'ah*; in this case it is not a question of the *Malāmātiyah*, who seek their own humiliation, but simply of the principle of the “breaking of habits” with a view to “sincerity” (*sidq*) and “poverty” (*faqr*) before God.

As regards a certain Sunnah in general, reference may be made to the following saying of the Shaikh Darqāwi, reported by Ibn Ajibah: “The systematic pursuit of meritorious acts and the multiplication of supererogatory practices are habits amongst others; they pull the heart in all directions. Let the disciple therefore hold fast to a single *dhikr*, to a single action, each according to what corresponds to him.”

From a slightly different point of view, it might be objected that a quintessential and consequently very free interpretation of the Sunnah can only concern a few Sufis and not

the *sālikīn*, the “travellers”<sup>6</sup> We would say, rather, that the liberty concerns the Sufis in so far as they have transcended the world of forms ; but it also concerns the *sālikīn* in so far as they follow in principle the way of Gnosis and their starting point, from this very fact, is of necessity inspired by the perspective that conforms to this way; in the nature of things they are aware *a priori* of the relativity of forms, especially of some, so that a social formalism with sentimental undertones cannot be imposed on them.

The relativity of a certain Sunnah, in a perspective which is not a *karma yoga*, still less an exoterism, does not annul the importance which the aesthetic integrity of forms has for a civilization, right down to the objects that surround us; for whereas abstaining from a symbolic action is not in itself an error, the presence of a false form is a permanent error,<sup>7</sup> even the one who is subjectively independent of it cannot deny that it is an error, and thus an element contrary in principle to spiritual health and to the imponderability of *barakah*.<sup>8</sup> The decadence of traditional art goes hand in hand with the decay of spirituality.

In Amidism and also in *japa-yoga*,<sup>9</sup> the initiate must abandon all other religious practices and put his faith in quintessential orison alone; this is the expression, not of an arbitrary opinion, but of an aspect of the nature of things; and this aspect is reinforced in the case of men who, in addition to this reduction as to method, base themselves on pure and total metaphysics. Moreover, knowledge of the various traditional worlds, and so of the relativity of doctrinal formulations and formal perspectives, reinforces the need for essentiality on the one hand and universality on the other; the essential and the universal are all the more imperative because we live in a world of philosophical supersaturation and spiritual disintegration.

The perspective which allows the actualization of the awareness of the relativity of conceptual and moral forms has always existed in Islam—witness the passage in the Qoran about Moses and al-Khidr, and also some *ahādith* which reduce the conditions of salvation to the simplest attitudes. This perspective is likewise that of primordality and

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<sup>6</sup> Those who have not yet reached the destination.

<sup>7</sup> Modern churches and priests in civilian dress are irrefutable evidence of this.

<sup>8</sup> Blessing, spiritual presence. (translator's note).

<sup>9</sup> The incantatory method, whose Vedic seed lies in the monosyllable Om

universality, and so of *Fitrah*; this is what Jalāl ad-Din Rūmī expresses in the following terms: “I am neither Christian, Jew, Parsi nor Moslem. I am neither of the East nor of the West, nor of the land nor of the sea . . . I have put aside duality, I have seen that the two worlds are one; I seek the One, I know the One, I see the One, I invoke the One. He is the First, He is the Last, He is the Outward, He is the Inward ...”