

C H R I S T I A N J A M B E T

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FOUR DISCOURSES ON AUTHORITY IN ISLAM

Like the other monotheistic religions, Islam, in a sole act of faith, affirms the absolute unicity, transcendence and authority of God.¹ Psychoanalysis, which is what brings us back together again today, lends no support to any figure of unicity, position of transcendence, legitimacy of authority *in itself*. No reality is accorded to the One, if this number has pretensions to some kind of theological validity. Unity, unicity, unification: these concepts, which we find at every stage of Muslim thought, are held by psychoanalysis to be imaginary. No transcendence, if the real is the real of the unconscious. No legitimation of authority of any kind, if it is true that psychoanalysis flushes out and desacralizes every form of the ideal ego. It ruins political belief, the belief in a subject supposed to know, who would unveil the truth in action and determine justice within the political bond. Psychoanalysis sustains propositions inverse to those of monotheism, for the same reasons it critiques the political conception of the world. How could a practice and a doctrine, Freud's, which aims to liberate the subject of identifications from representations of collective mastery, allow for an identification that founds the faithful's collective link to their scriptural revelation?

Freud deduced two propositions about the status of religion from his conception of the unconscious. For Freud, religion can be taken back to an obsessional neurotic representation of the Law, guaranteeing an illusion of a brilliant future. Religious illusion, precisely symmetrical to the imaginary inflation of the paternal figure, is not unlike revolutionary illusion. Revolutionary illusion condenses elements from two mirages, those of the political and the religious illusions. Without any exaggeration, one could say that Freud discredits all revolutionary discourse for the same reasons he made religious hope an illusion. Freud sought to dissipate what he held to be illusion, while explaining its power and the necessity of its rule. This is why psychoanalysts who have sought to account for the meaning and depth of Islam have had difficulties finding their marks. Are they referring to a group of imaginary representations that to a greater or lesser extent structure the discourse of the

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analyst? Would they submit the dogmas of this religion to a Freudian interpretation? In both cases, they treat as a miscognition something that the believer, to the contrary, holds to be the real par excellence, God, the Unique, whose speech heralds a promise and issues commandments, the essential conditions of salvation. Exposing the causes of such a belief, they force truth's appearance to vanish. But in so doing, do psychoanalysts not dodge the proper mode of existence of the religious phenomenon? In revealing the truth of the unconscious, the truth that belief represses and consciously modifies, do they not neglect the ontological stakes of truth to which belief testifies? But in consenting to such a positioning of the religious problem, would they not have to renounce Freud?

Introducing psychoanalysis to the Muslim world is a noble ideal, evocative of the Enlightenment. Does it not possess the same weakness, always characteristic of the *Aufklärung*, the division of truth between a consciousness that analyzes its illusions and an objective real stripped of all certainty? Is it a question of summoning Muslims to an analytic praxis whose axioms are atheist? The analysand will have ceased to believe *absolutely*, such that his or her certainty of faith appears, finally, only as a *subjective* certainty, and no longer as objective truth, such that the truth of the faithful is reduced to the truth of his or her conscience, to his or her singular anchoring in the truth of the unconscious. This is essential, if analytic praxis is not to be reduced to an inoffensive psychotherapy. But if the testimony of *the* revealed truth holds firm, not the *subject's* truth but *the* objective truth of God's speech, how will one grant the analyst his well-known paradoxical authority, which throws the discourses on authority into turmoil?

Speaking here as a philosopher and not as a psychoanalyst, my question is not whether the various contents of the Muslim faith are true or illusory, or whether or not the Enlightenment ideal is preferable to these dogmas. Even if the notion of truth, the concept of truth, were to merit a more profound examination here, it is enough to admit, as a provisional postulate, that the dogmas of the Muslim religion correspond to what Kant, rightly, maintained is one of the fundamental constitutions of man, without which, neither moral questions, nor the most basic questions of subsistence could sustain themselves. Kant resumes his account of the enduring question of hope in the Christian heritage and demonstrates its connection with faith. If philosophical critique could only make hope in a sovereign good vanish from the horizon of reason and freedom of the moderns, it remains *a fortiori* at the heart of reason and liberty in the foreign thought systems of this modern reason. Our intention, in the following, is not to decide in favor of Freud's irreducible atheism nor, on the contrary, of the philosophies that accord some weight of truth to religious phenomena. Philosophy and psychoanalysis both accord the greatest importance to the status of authority and, more specifically, to the following question: which subject is supposed to decide what constitutes legitimate authority? Without pretending to an exhaustive inquiry, such is the question we wish to pose here regarding authority in Islam. Let us begin, then, with several elementary observations.

Islam is often presented, correctly, as a legalistic religion. However, to translate the expression "*al-sharī'a*" with "the Law" does not clarify the meaning given to this term. To understand by this the exercise of jurisprudence would be to forget that the

legislation elaborated by the major juridical schools, Sunni or Shi'ite, is not the whole of the Law and even less the whole of religion, but only a part of them. It would be to neglect the horizon of the Law, without which the Law loses all meaning, namely, eschatology. Belief in the Day of Judgment, hope in just retribution, God's satisfaction and what the faithful receive in return are the ultimate reasons and first notions of the Mohammedan revelation. On the other hand, like all religion, Islam poses the question of being in its own way. Who has the right to be? What is the authentically subsisting being? What is it to be? Without examining religion from an ontological perspective, one inevitably misses the seriousness of that religion; it is reduced to a number of superstitions, rites and modes of obedience that have nothing at stake. The Law may well lie at the heart of a revelation that offers a number of commandments one must respect. But it is not the whole of revelation. Before it prescribes, and in order for its prescriptions to be authoritative, the revelation states what the real is, existence par excellence, and *who* the real is. It is from this decision that touches the real, the division between the real and the unreal, that the Law draws its authority.

Consequently, it is worth keeping the distinction between the three terms—revelation, Law, jurisprudence—in mind. Hope, which is a revealed certainty for Islam, is expressed in numerous apocalyptic verses in the Qur'an, heralding the Day of Judgment, Paradise and Hell. It is intrinsically bound to the presentation of human nature, the *fitra* or original conception of man. This original nature is that of a respondent. In the seventh sura, *al-'A'raf*, which is a condensation of the entire prophetic revelation, a celebrated verse states, "When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): 'Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?'—They said: 'Yea! We do testify!' (This), lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: 'Of this we were never mindful' (7: 172).² What constitutes man, the thing that confers him with both original, non-adulterated, authentic existence and suitable essence is testimony, often called the "primordial pact." Testament to divine lordship, man is fundamentally a servant, *al-'abd*, according to a definition that retains Biblical connotations, insofar as it contains an eminent dignity in the idea of divine service that the angels themselves have no part in. Is the Messiah not announced in the Biblical prophecy of the "suffering servant"? In the highly complex notion of "servant," we find obedience to the Law, of course, but also all that it circumscribes, interprets and amplifies in eschatological meanings or spiritual variations.

We must now recall this fundamental relation between the servant and the Master so as to illuminate the difficulty one encounters in approaching the question of authority in Islam. Are our conceptions of *auctoritas* entirely adequate to the concepts at stake here? I do not think so. They rely too much on the structures of public law and Christian political theology, on the legacy of Roman law and the reforms carried to these structures, both by the doctrines of natural law and its adversaries. If one is looking for an equivalent to authority in terms such as *al-ri'asa*, the political commandment, *al-sultân*, political and religious power, or *al-molk*, royal authority, one restricts one's field of examination to the phenomena of authority. The

² *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. Yusuf Ali.

use of the unique term, “authority,” seems to me to be legitimate and essential only on two conditions: to greatly expand this concept and, consequently, grant it a large number of different meanings; to define authority in its most generally accepted form: as the legitimacy accorded by the faithful to that which is *for them* the correct interpretation of revealed speech. Far preferable to looking exclusively to juridical devices, the question of authority, taken in this sense, enables the psychoanalyst to penetrate the thickets of Islamic religious discourses with greater clarity and distinction.

It seems to me that the first move of the psychoanalyst, the first impulse, which involves a certain familiarity with Freud, is not always the best. Often, it reduces the complexity of Islamic obedience to a love of the Law, in the sense of the Catholic obedience distilled by Pierre Legendre according to the schema of a “love of the censor.” Such a reduction presupposes an implicit juridical definition of the Law. Now, despite the apparent synonymy that the French language introduces, it is not true that the Law of Islam is *ipso facto* a *juridical* representation of religion. Its ordinary meaning is much more expansive, and it enables one to understand how the subject is determined by the juridical interpretation of more complex legalistic injunctions, and what the stakes are between the law and non-juridical norms.

Beginning from this false step, the psychoanalyst cannot help but err: he will want to subject the stakes of the relations between the servant and his Master to this love for the Law, for the deciphered *shari’a* exclusively in terms of the discourse of jurisprudence. Either Law will be the truth of Islam and its diverse forms of non-juridical spirituality relegated to an unessential “interior” religion, or this interior religion will pass as superior to external religion, that which determines legislation. Whichever we choose, we will subject exterior religion and interior religion to a logical relation between two terms that are mutually exclusive. This scenario exists, of course, but it is not unique, general, prevalent. Those who reduce the essential core of the Law to jurisprudence, like those who challenge all “legalistic” approaches in the study of spiritual phenomena, agree on a common postulate, what it means, without doubt, to put it in question. We risk becoming victims of polysemy, the word “Law” meaning “scriptural revelation,” “norms of behavior and thought,” “divine commandments,” “human jurisprudence deduced from revelation. One would do well to recognize that variations in the meaning of expressions “*al-shar*” or “*al-shari’a*” often authorize such homonymic effects.

To this disastrous impulse, I shall oppose a number of prudent arguments. *Shari’a* has concentric meanings. It designates, in its widest sense, the path traced by a brook, the path which leads to God. In this first meaning, *shari’a* is not the discourse of legislation but the revealed guide to the Prophet. *Shari’a* is identified with the right path, *al-sirât al-mustaqim*. We must therefore distinguish between norms of conduct, guidance, and jurisdiction. Prophecy can be very strictly normative, without originarily being legal. It is the source of legality and of legitimacy without being anything other than a system of norms. It may well generate norms of behavior that will nevertheless aspire to be extra-legal, that is to say, which do not pretend to juridical speech. In another sense, by the force and authority acquired by the illustrious founders through precise historical conditions issuing from thousands of

Sunni traditionalists, the integral *sharī'a*, which was first conceived as a divine knowledge (*hikma*), found itself identified with a rational exercise of juridical deduction, *usūl al-fiqh*.

It is notable—to cite only one major example—that in his *Risāla*, Shafi'ī maintains that the essential core of the Book, the Qur'an, lies in its naming of the “statutes,” in other words, the juridical articulations of the divine law. That it makes the contents of knowledge from the science of these “divine statutes,” and from this knowledge all authentic jurisdictional *illumination* of the heart of the faithful. Shafi'ī interprets the pact of adoration that binds the servant to his Lord in the following way: obligations, devotions instituted by the Qur'anic letter, duties imposed by the Prophet, the obligation to make one's own ruling (*ijtihād*). To speak of obligation, is it to speak of law (*droit*)? Yes, but on two conditions: first, that obligation is the concept translating the sovereignty of the divine commandment; second, that the jurist is the subject who expresses the meaning (*bayān*) of this obligation. Shafi'ī contends that the knowing jurist is entitled to explain these four categories of adoration, of the worship rendered to God. It makes the jurist the preeminent authority, institutes a hermeneutic filter for the Book, of the Sunna of the Prophet and the practice of *ijtihād*. The inversion is striking: *sharī'a*, reduced to revealed “statutes” and rationales of Muslim law, has become the foundation of *hikma*, of knowledge and expresses the totality, in the space which contains wisdom, as one of its regions, the juridical statutes. To comprehend knowledge as adequating to the integral revelation accorded to the Prophet as essentially constituted through duties and obligations is to prepare the ground for juridical interpretation in this precise sense: the jurist will, *more than others*, have access to the true meaning, prescriptive of the Book and of the Law. Such is the decision of the discourse of the jurist's authority. It appears only to state what the Book is, what the Sunna is, what *ijtihād* is, and doing so, seems to say nothing other than what the theologians, mystics of other readers of the Qur'an say. But through the turn it gives to the reading of duties and obligations, it surreptitiously introduces a juridical turn that has a very precise function: to situate eminent authority in the jurist himself. Today, it passes as self-explanatory, for a self-engendered reality. It is permitted as such by a number of exegetes, it governs the reflexes of certain psychoanalysts. Thus its genealogy is forgotten, its history occulted, and its validity sacralized. Now, there is no shortage of counter interpretations. One will not be surprised to find them in spiritual exegeses of the Qur'an above all. Thus, *hikma*, knowledge, is considered something much greater than *sharī'a*, which constitutes a degree, but only a degree, seldom the most elevated.

Another imprudent reflex: it is often said that in Islam, political power and authority are not distinguished from each other, and neither can be analyzed without the other. Consequently, Islam would necessarily be a political religion, and the interior life of the Muslim would be governed by the exercise of a public worship indissociable from the organization of the State. Now, we can make an objection to this representation, which has dominated the debates following its adoption by certain contemporary Islamic political theories. It neglects numerous recognized authorities who by no means aspire to to be “political.” These non-political authorities are not without producing some effects, and consequently they are accompanied by a certain power.

But this power is reversible, it can have a secondary political facet and a principal non-political facet, or vice versa. Both stakes must therefore be studied with precision. We can mention, for example, the figure of the master in the Sufi brotherhoods or even certain paradoxical figures in the shi'ite theory of the imamat. At base, this reminds us that the chief historical fact, namely, prophecy, unifies a State by chance, but unifies a community by essence. If one speaks of the social effects of the Muslim religion, the modes of religious authority in public life, one must employ the concept of community rather than that of the State. It would only be to illuminate the difficulties confronting the various Muslim states following the confounding of the caliph with state power, in the delicate exercise of the two, often incompatible, functions: the government of men and of things, on the one hand, and the spiritual guidance of the community of the faithful, on the other. Here, too, we should be attentive to the history of these concepts. Political science, in classical Islam, distributes itself across several disciplines, and it has never enjoyed the independence and unity that we encounter in the West since antiquity. One must recognize this, one comes across it a little everywhere: in certain philosophers, theologians, in the *hadith*, in the writings of "councils," in the poets or the authors of fables and stories, in the art of the novel, even in the mystics. Dispersed and multiple, veiled and discreet as in the court poets, systematically in the philosophers, it is always a science of the foundation of authority, but often a moral reflection on the rules and exercise of power. It is thus not a matter of a general theory of the State but a reflection on the qualities and on the essence of the man of government. Moreover, the State is not the indispensable horizon of these reflections, but only a step between the economy and the postulated universal human community "faithful to God." Downstream of the State, the refinement of moral rules, the counsel of good management; upstream of the State, the universal theory of guidance, the link between authority and truth. The political would only boil down to the image offered by our modern reflections on the sovereignty of the State. Islam is not Hobbesian.

Let us come to what pertains more specifically to the Muslim city. When Hellene philosophers study various political regimes, it is in Platonic terms, respecting Plato's classifications, combined with the moral lessons of Aristotle without the least bit drawn from experience. Their object is not a theory of the *Islamic* State but the re-foundation, in an *apparently* Muslim frame, of the institutions of justice bequeathed by the Sages. There is no explanation of how the infidel State passes into the Islamic State because the question does not arise, resolved by the facts, if one understands by this that the world where such a passage would be judged necessary does not exist at times when Islam has legal preeminence, and the hostile world that surrounds it is entirely a foreign world, a world outside the world of political reflection. When the atheist is an exception, when the polytheist is a species on the way to extinction, how could one consider the necessity of the Islamic State? One questions the essence of the perfect city, the perfect mode of consent between the classes, the political and spiritual guidance of the political man, the corruption of this model, etc. When it became obvious to Fârâbî or to Nasîr al-Dîn Tûsî that their thoughts concerned people already living in the *dâr al-islam*, their aim was to conceptualize the traits of a community ruled by justice and not the conditions under which an Islamic State should be installed. It is *today* that the concept triumphs, on the ruins of a

community become improbable or “ideal,” like a strange fruit on the tree of Western science, to which are grafted modern speculations issuing from the triumph of the jurist’s authority. No speculation, in the classical ages of Islam, has ever treated the Qur’an as if it pertained to a code of public law which replaced infidel constitutions. Never, at least until the situation changed, when Islamic territory appeared existentially threatened, until the supreme authority in public law, that of the caliph or the “Keeper of the Book” faded gravely or entirely, in short, until the contemporary revival of the solitary, and contested in its time, work of the great Hanbalite reformer Ibn Taymmiya. It was necessary for the models of Western political representation to be the occasion for rejection, belief and, consequently, the source of a new interrogation, in view of contesting this representation. Thus it was that a political thought invited the faithful to an *exclusive* valorization of the Qur’an in its literality and turned this literality, like that of the Sunnah of the Prophet, into a political code. A man such as al-Ghazālī would simply not be able to write in such an *episteme*. These are the Sunni religious reformers of the 20th century, quickly followed by certain Shi’ite intellectuals, who constructed a theological-political system where *shari’a*, understood as the wise jurist’s reading of the Qur’an, has pretensions to the status of the sovereign decision in matters of public law. It has often been rightly remarked that the Shi’ite concept of “government by the wise jurist” strictly appropriate to the thesis that emerged from the Sunni milieu according to which the Qur’an must become the constitution of the State, is an *innovation*. This innovation of course has its history, which is that of the slow and sure appropriation of power by the jurists, to the detriment of the traditionalists, mystics, theologians and spiritual philosophers, to the detriment, also, and above all, of the great sovereign figures of the imamat. It has a reality: but no intrinsic sacrality in itself. It is strictly dependent on what it opposes, the modern political *episteme*, liberal philosophies of political *representation*, whereas the question of political representation, and thus its contestation, were incompatible with the classical Islamic *episteme*.

Nothing of the least political consequence, in the modern sense of this term, is expressed in the Qur’anic revelation of divine sovereignty. It is correct to say that only in God do authority and power make One, as certain theologians have had no difficulty in sustaining the thesis of the fundamental unity of the attributes of God: in Him alone, science, the will and power essentially make One, distinguishing themselves from each other only in words (*bi l-i’tibâr*) and not in reality (*bi l-haqîqat*). But what about in man? More generally, how can the absolute sovereignty of God ever found the legitimacy of human authority? The hypothesis of a delegation, of a representation of the divine authority in human authority seems impossible *a priori*. No space opens up between the exercise of divine authority, revealed in prophetic speech, and that of the faithful servant’s obedience. Nothing that resembles a minister or a pope, even less the secularization of religious authority under the leader of a sacralization of the political body.

This apparent difficulty was not absent from Islam’s situation at its origins. When compared with Christianity, the contrasts are striking. Whereas Christianity has operated pretty much according to the schema of orthodoxy/heresy, one finds

nothing like this in Islam. Of the numerous heterodox Christian currents, as numerous as they were, as resurgent and renascent as they appear, there was nothing in the theological desire for truth that was and remains a desire for orthodoxy *in the ecclesiastical sense of the term*. One can deplore or approve of this desire of the ecumenical councils, of the Fathers and Intellectuals, one can recall the violent excommunications of the theologians and Christologians. One can mention the multiplicity of rites and beliefs. What remains is that the schema that orders this variety, that of orthodoxy, designating and stigmatizing heresy, is nothing other than the exercise of the truth in a precise context, that of the revelation of the set of divine truth and a way, a life and a truth that concentrates itself entirely in the figure of Christ, opening the way to the incorporation of the truth. "Who has seen me has seen the Father": the mediation between the hidden and the apparent, the divine world and the supersensible and the access to the divine is guaranteed by the fleshly manifestation of the Word and the divine Man in such a way that this Incarnation is conducted in the mode of manifestation of the subject of the truth that is the "Church." There are no Christian sects, but only expressions of the "Church phenomenon," as reduced and marginal as they may be. Inversely, and even if the diverse currents of Islam mutually refute and condemn, or even curse each other, if each has pretensions as the sole sect that will be saved at the Day of Judgment, this does not play out according to the schema of orthodoxy/heresy, because the problem is not, cannot be, that of the orthodox constitution of the Church phenomenon, of a Church as subject of truth.

On this, Islam presents an astonishing face to our inquiry. Whatever the divisions that separate and oppose them, Muslims today are conscious of belonging to the single and the same community. The multiplicity of beliefs does not affect this universality of the communal consciousness. Unhappy consciousness, living the drama of the *fitna*, of discord, as a permanent drama. Consciousness avid to make an end of things, and anxious to force an historical destiny that dooms it to an intolerable pluralism. Among the simple faithful, this nostalgia for the lost unity encourages attachments to literalist preachings, which promote the return to the letter of the Book and to the Sunnah. Which Book? Which Sunnah? Immediately the division returns, the one sole, inevitable fact of the interpretation of texts. Depending on whether the corpus of the Sunnah is constituted by this master of truth or that, Sunnite or Shi'ite, we will have a different text. Despite the recognition that has amassed to a unique text, with some variations, the Qur'an is not exempt from this multiplicity, if it is true that the text never stands on its own but always in the weave of a commentary, a literal explication or a mystical or moral exegesis whose principle of validity is an authority that itself requires foundation, and which frequently only sublates itself.

The unity of consciousness thus goes hand in hand with the multiplying proliferation of the figures of authority: the Prophet, the Imâm who succeeded him, either in the various senses that the different schools of Shi'ism give him, or in the general sense, admitted in the Sunnite world, of the guide of believers, the Caliph or successor of the Prophet, the Preacher, the missionary, the traditionalist, collector of the *sunnah*, itself variable, the jurist, the *wali*, the friend of God whose qualifications come from

the sanctity of his life or the predestination of testimony, the sage (*al-hakīm*), whether in the strict philosophical sense or inspired by a more globally encompassing knowledge of the secrets of revelation, the ascetic, the scapegoat, the diverse varieties that one conveniently regroups under the heading of *ahl al-tasawwuf*, of Sufism, the inspired poet, the astrologist, the commentator, the rationalist theologian (*al-mutakallim*), etc.

Nevertheless, four main types of authority seem to me to dominate this infinite plurality: the prophetic guide, Prophet or Imām, the theologian, the jurist and the sage. Which authority prevails respectively amongst them, what kind of authority diffuses from them further downstream? The Prophet or Imām authorizes himself through divine inspiration, or the connaturality that unites him with some emanation from the divine world. The theologian invokes the omnipotence of the rational intelligence, itself founded in the truth of divine intelligence. It was necessary that this gesture, this decision by which the Greek *logos*, the mode of deduction of the demonstrative intellect, was identified with the *‘aql* and with certain processes of science that God eternally possesses of the beings he created, in order for theology to affirm its legitimacy. The jurist sometimes invokes a double source of authority: the literal tradition and the deductive intellect. It is the same intelligence, understood in the sense of contemplative intelligence, which founds the activity of the sage. It culminates in a direct vision of the intelligible, and a proximity or a unification with the intelligible.

The intelligence, its problematic union of the intelligible and the act of intellection, thus seems to me to be at the heart of the validating devices of authority, whether of the sage, the jurist or the theologian. One cannot overestimate the problems posed by the theory of intellectual knowledge, when one interrogates the principles of authority in Islam. It is through the mediation of such problems that the question of the juridical norm, the moral norm and proximity to the divine decree becomes receptive to various constraining solutions. The authority of the spiritual masters of Sufism, like those of the saints, requires a slightly different foundation, visionary imagination, the power of unveiling, vision of the supersensible presence, which moreover does not exclude the power of intelligence. This principle, which we find as well at the origin of prophetic authority or imamology, is the *walāya*. This term is very difficult to analyze, since it designates a “friendship” with God which has a very rich meaning. It signifies as well a perfect conformity to the divine order of a science that is supernatural to the secrets of revelation. It is a symptom of what constitutes, at the end of time, the problem posed by human authority: how to adequately reflect the sole authority that exists, God’s authority? Let us examine this in the context of the Caliphate.

We know this difficulty was resolved in various ways. For the Omeyyade Caliphs, the substitution of the name “Caliph of God’s Envoy” for “Caliph of God” enables us to suppose that the function of the Prophet’s “successor” in the temporal order, the absolute authority of decision of the Caliph, was an authentic exegete of God and of his sovereignty. This, designated by the term *al-amr*, the imperative, the command, the order, is summarized, by a process of rarefaction, with the exercise of a command in the order of the confusion between religious life and civil life, and the successor of

the Prophet found himself named “commander of believers” in both a secular and a religious sense. In this way, the exercise of authority in exterior exoteric matters could not miss carrying it over to spiritual guidance, and the Caliph of the Prophet very quickly became confounded with figures of royalty.

It is this that originally caused the rebellions and uprisings of the various partisans of ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, known under the generic term Shi’ite. The very idea of expressing divine authority under the auspices of a state Caliphate power seemed to them to be in contradiction with the authentic, primitive notion of prophecy and of the just imamat, the authority of the guide. In their eyes, this had to have its foundation in God itself, if human authority was to have any chance of avoiding becoming a substitute for God’s authority. More generally, it imposed a division between exterior authority and interior authority, the dimension of the exterior, of the apparent, the exoteric, and that of the interior, the hidden, the esoteric. There are thus three main options possible: an equilibrium between the apparent, the exoteric, exterior prescriptions and the hidden, esoteric; a disequilibrium, weighted in favor of interiority, eventually leading to an indifferent, or even explicitly anti-legislative, authority to the letter of the Law; finally, a repudiation of all esoteric dimensions. It is impossible to address these questions of authority without encountering this haunting and at times meticulous discussion of the possible roles of the *zāhir* and the *bātin*, of the exoteric and the esoteric. But, from another perspective, the protests of the kjarijites or hanbalite traditionalists and their disciples are no less revealing. Every time an all too human authority threatens to substitute itself for the divine imperative, seeming thereby to ruin the eschatological vocation of prophecy, voices calling for a return to the true sense of the prophecy and of the caliphate are raised.

The exercise of authority is like living a contradiction. Absolute divine authority is in itself non-participatory. Now, in order to found human authority, a man of excellence must be able to participate in it, by virtue of his divine election. Here I am choosing to employ terms that are foreign to the Qur’an’s scriptural universe, but which rapidly became familiar to Islamic thinkers, terms which belong to the Platonic lexicons: participation, participatory, participated, non-participatory. I feel authorized to do so by the fact that a number of Islamic metaphysical theologians employ them when they find it useful to think in these hellenic neo-Platonist terms, along with those from the beginning of the third century of the Hijra. Non-participatory is a predicate of God’s absolute unity. The divine One is not the first term of a numeric chain of multiples, but his unity is fundamentally separated from all multiplicity. It involves an ineffable unity, indescribable, hidden and revealed but simultaneously reserved and veiled by the names that God gives himself in his holy Books. Now, according to the Qur’an, it is only with the inexpressible essence of God that divine authority makes One. Authority and creation belong to God (see the Qur’an, 7: 54: “Is it not His to create and to govern?”)—to God in his pure identity, in his mysterious unity. The exercise of divine authority is the foundation, no less mysterious, of what God decrees when he decrees. The notion of foundation encompasses the following meanings: instantaneity, incomprehensible on first examination by human reason, separation from the power that founds, eminent, transcendent, and the founded reality, which is neither necessary in itself nor of the

same ontological rank as the founder. If God founds and exercises his authority in this act of foundation, He remains transcendent to what he founds, which thus does not succeed him in the way an effect succeeds its cause, and encompasses the reality of a part of its cause. But, being non-participatory in what he founds, God thus remains inimitable in the exercise of his authority and all human authority becomes, by definition, contradictory. The divine Real disjoins itself from the symbolic order it founds.

From this perspective, there would be nothing to efface the distance between the divine act and human history. Nothing, if not prophetic discourse. The first discourse on authority, which Islam never stops referring to, in multiple forms, is prophetic discourse. In effect, it is prophecy that manifests a sacred history, situated between the eternity of the divine imperative and the historical progress of the world. This prophetic history has its origin in Adam's pact of obedience and its end in the resurrection (*al-quyâmat al-kubra*). Its historical curve bestows the authentic caliphate with the right to endure until the end of time. But, all the other discourses of authority, the jurist, the theologian, the spiritual master, will have to justify themselves before him as well.

Let us recall that the Qur'an only employs the term caliph, *al-khalîfa*, plural *al-khalâ'if* or *al-khulafâ'*, in the context of a different register to prophetic authority. More properly, the verses 2.30 do not specify what the caliphate is, except by default, or rather through the protest it generates among the angels: "Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth.' They said: 'Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?—whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?' He said: 'I know what ye know not.'" The authority God confers upon man differs from the angels' worship of perpetual adoration. The angels are ignorant of the ends of divine providence, and, consequently, the necessity of prophetic history, while maintaining that they know the evil that man will sow. The caliphate authority of God exercises itself "on the earth."

This successional authority entrusted to Adam is not a simple *potestas*. It is not only directed at things below, but also at the realities of the other world. It connects this nether world, evanescent, temporal, illusory, with the real, eternal world, which is the divine world, that of the Throne of God, of "reconciled" archangels, of the Throne, of Paradise, and Hell. It makes One only through obedience, in such a way that man's authority is a paradoxical authority: it exerts much better than it submits to its Lord. It is the opposite of temporal omnipotence, although at its lowest level it includes temporal power. We know this theme has been fed by every contestation of established power, either through the testimony of spiritual leaders and mystics, or through the support given to the Call (*al-da'wa*) launched by various individuals claiming a certain form of participation in prophetic destiny, most notably in shi'ism, or by traditional discourses refusing any concession to innovation and laicisation.

To cite just one example, let us consider this protest, this appeal to the destination and essence of prophecy in the prologue of the *Book of Oriental Theosophy* by Sohrawardi: "If in a given epoch there is someone who is profoundly devoted to the

divinization of self (*al-ta'alluh*) and study (*al-bahth*), authority (*al-ri'âsa*) is returned to him and it is he who is the caliph of God.”³ Thus spiritual authority asserts its origin in its proximity to the God of the prophets, better yet, an *apotheosis*, a divinization of self that effaces the distance between the divine world and the world of creation, accompanied by “study,” by which we understand the study of truth through gnostic paths, through spiritual knowledge. The non-political, indeed anti-political aspiration of this authority, Sohrevardî makes explicit: “Speaking of the authority returned to the perfect sage, I do not mean the exercise of triumphant temporal power (*taghallub*). Far from it because if the imam invested with mystical experience (or divinization of self) sees his authority publicly recognized, he also remains hidden.” We recognize here the division that political knowledge and Sufism have maintained between *taghallub*, the tyrannous temporal dimension (in the Platonic sense, and Greek term) and the true work of spiritual guidance.

It is equally valid that the conceptual content of prophetic authority is hierarchically distributed across humankind in its totality. Whence the burning questions of election and hierarchy which never cease to pose themselves once the discourse of prophecy must be relayed through other discourses following the death of the Prophet of Islam. The following verse testifies to this: “It is He Who hath made you (His) agents, inheritors of the earth: He hath raised you in ranks, some above others: that He may try you in the gifts He hath given you” (Qur'an, 6:165). The meaning of the elect community is thus the following: to be the caliph in the earth through respect of the primordial pact, and to recognize a hierarchy in itself which is not temporal but essentially prophetic, guarantor of the meaning of the prophecy in its unity. The close relation between the exercise of this authority and the care taken to purify its spiritual interiority are emphasized by the proximity of several major notions: “Verily Allah knows (all) the hidden things of the heavens and the earth: verily He has full knowledge of all that is in (men's) hearts. He it is That has made you inheritors in the earth” (35: 38-39).

Of course, by way of the eminent example it makes of the two prophets preceding Muhammad, the Qur'an indicates that this authority has two essential missions. The case of David must interest us in particular, because it bears in itself all the Biblical promise of the messianic future, entirely synthesizing the function of the judge with the prophetic function. He “judges people based on the Real” says the Qur'an (36: 26). The case of Noah is of no less importance. He is invoked to show how the caliphate is eternal, even when the greater part of humanity perishes through the wrath of God. Muhammad invokes his example in dramatic circumstances, when he is himself the victim of his peoples' mockery and incredulity: “He said: ‘O my people! I am no imbecile, but (I am) an apostle from the Lord and Cherisher of the worlds! I but fulfill towards you the duties of my Lord's mission: I am to you a sincere and trustworthy adviser. Do ye wonder that there hath come to you a message from your Lord through a man of your own people, to warn you? call in remembrance that He made you inheritors after the people of Noah, and gave you a stature tall among the

³ Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Sohrevardî, *Kitâb Hikmat al-Ishrâq, Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, ed. Henry Corbin, vol. 2 (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Mutali'at va Tahqiqat-i Farhangi, 1993 [reprint of the 1945]) 12.

nations. Call in remembrance the benefits (ye have received) from Allah. that so ye may prosper” (7: 67-69).

The juridical authority attributed to David evidently founded prophetic authority in a specific domain: to discriminate the faithful from the rebels in accordance with the highest justice, that designated by the term *al-haqq*, which signifies both the real and the law, not in the sense derived from jurisprudence, but in the sense of the law to which God has the right, in short, obedience to his commandments and to the letter of the Book. Noah’s exemplariness consists in that prophetic authority is transhistorical. From this transhistorical perspective, the caliphate is no longer a temporal responsibility, posing the well-known problems of dynastic succession, but a constant presence, rejuvenating itself age after age, a responsibility of the envoy that, around this envoy, is returned to humanity at large. It is easy to recognize here the Judeo-Christian notion of the True Prophet, through which the transhistorical reality passes from age to age before ultimately being revealed in Jesus. Persuaded of his paracletic mission, Muhammad applies the idea to himself, but not without combining it with the notion borrowed from the Mani, that of the Seal of the prophecy.

It is impossible to give an account here—this was extremely brief—of the considerable number of works by Muslim intellectuals that, in the service of successive imperial powers called caliphates, have borrowed from these original concepts. What we can insist on, however, is the repeated process by which they have tried to emphasize the moral qualities, specific gifts, familial or clan connections, anything that could justify the legitimacy of power, that is to say, the omnipotence of the sovereign. It is clear that the Sunnites, faithful to Omeyyades, made no fewer claims to supersensible powers, to extraordinary powers, than the Shi’ites when it came to justifying the authority of the man of power.

This mystique of authority was nowhere more developed than in the Shi’ite world, particularly in the insurrections that led to the establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate. The Imâm, keeper of the Book, possesses an enlightened nature, and this suprasensible essence makes him the theologian par excellence. Of course, he is not the essence of God, but the manifestation of God, or better, the manifestation of the reality originally founded by God, the universal Intelligence. Thus identified with the temporal manifestation of God’s absolute knowledge, he mysteriously possesses the original expression of the divine imperative in himself. The absolute authority he exercises over the faithful is the authority of the divine “*kun*,” the speech by which God gives existence to things. There is a lesson for us in the very significant speculations of the Ishmaelite Shi’ite intellectuals regarding this authority of the man of God. This authority has a tendency to distribute itself across two different registers, both opposing and interdependent: interiority (*al-bâtin*) and exteriority (*al-zâhir*). If the legitimate guide has authority over the community’s affairs, if he has the right to govern the community, in anticipation of governing the world, it is because he possesses an exterior authority, corresponding to the exterior dimension of reality.

This is why the Shi'ite messianic movements, as rebellious as they were with respect to existing power, could succeed only by means of what they had themselves rejected: a community governed by the power of the elite wise initiated by the supposed science of the Imâm. Divine universal intelligence, manifested in the person of the Imâm, henceforth transmits itself across different gradations and levels of the esoteric hierarchy, and transforms, metamorphoses, into unlimited temporal power. But this temporal authority supports itself on the esoteria of the prophecy, taught by the Imâm, who is the exclusive custodian of it.

The tragedy of power in the Islamic world, in my eyes, finds its truth in this ambivalence of authority, which the Imâmat Shi'ite has experimented with from the 10th century until our era. On the one hand, liberatory authority tended toward the reign of ends, with despotic authority governing, on the other hand, in an indefinite power, according to the double register of the apparent—the exoteric—and the hidden, the esoteric. This reversibility of authority even constituted the essence of Shi'ite political theology, and it explains the more general fate of the theologies of the True Prophet. It is tragic because it expresses two contradictory requirements: either the legitimate guide devotes himself primarily to exteriority, and holds the secret of the esoteric back for an elite. Thus, final ends, the ultimate triumph of prophecy's essential truth in the reign of the awaited resurrector, all this is put off until a later time, perhaps never. Or, the esoteric triumphs, and authority aspires to be authority over hearts and minds, without any concrete historical effectuation. Either absolute power, or pure spirituality. We may well still be at this point.

It strikes me, in effect, that in posing itself in terms of the mediation between the inferior world and the divine world, prophetic authority inevitably bisects between spiritual and temporal authority, in such a way that the different figures of authority who prop themselves up by it assume in a specific way one or other of these missions. I would like to highlight this contradiction, which animates the Muslim experience. On one side, the inevitable pretension of every discourse which particularizes authority. We have seen an instance of this in Shafi'i, when he accomplishes this decisive gesture that reduces and identifies universal knowledge to the exercise of the *shari'a*, understood in a juridical sense. On the other side, the prevalence of what one could call the taste or desire for the *beautiful totality*. Nowhere more than in Islam is it affirmed that the true is the all. Truth, founder of legitimate authority, is everything, must be everything. One will say that this is the hallmark of religion as such. Undoubtedly. It is also the hallmark of philosophy, when it merits its name, at least from Aristotle to Hegel. It is certainly not the conviction of experimental science, or of psychoanalysis, for whom the truth can only be half-said, to borrow Jacques Lacan's expression. Whence this immediate, profound, constant accord between Greek philosophy and Islam, despite all the oppositions coming from the traditionalist or juridical worlds. The true is the all. This is the guiding ideal.

It would be well for us to remember that, in the Islamic world, the phenomena of intolerance, exclusion, or aggressive identification are often born from the miscognition of this statute of truth which is nevertheless unique to it. Contrary to what one all too often imagines, it is not a sectorial reading of the Qur'an and the

texts devoted to the Sunnah, Sunnite or Shi'ite, which founds a freedom and a certain form of detachment between the world of temporal power and that of divine spiritual authority. On the contrary, it often upholds the exclusive choice of a world, that of the exercise of juridical power or, in response, that of the interior life and the interior experience. Certain theologians, today, maintain that it is enough to choose, in the totality of revelation, what seems compatible with "modernity" in order to save Islam while reforming it. Now, this gesture was always, precisely, what was going to engender the violent conflict between theological or juridical authorities, and I would like to draw attention to a strategy that is a little different. This consists in silencing the human authorities who authorize themselves through one part of revelation or another, on behalf of extolling the beautiful totality constituted by the phenomenon of the Book. To thereby void the violence men exercise against one another, the violence of the man who decides he is the authority over other men in religious affairs, who are supposed to grant him their obedience. This is accomplished by a return, in appearance very conservative, to the "beautiful totality" of the Book. It is quite striking that the thinkers responsible for a certain skepticism, or outright opposition, to the omnipotence of the jurist and the political laicization of Islam, its reduction to politics, are those who insist on the laws of the "beautiful totality." These men call themselves *ahl al'irfân*, often translated as "gnostics," which is a little misleading. Let us call them more properly: holders of integral knowledge. Their master, a man who was acutely aware of the paradox we are describing, was the grand master of Sunnite sufism, Ibn 'Arabî. The success, like the attacks, that the Andalusian master's works are known for these days, like those of his disciples, sunni or shi'ite, testify to how he has touched a nerve. I would like, in closing, to give some indications of this, appealing to a work of Qur'anic exegesis, edited in the 17th century by one of the his most faithful readers, who is also, after Avicenna the greatest metaphysician of Islam, Sadroddîn Shîrâzî, commonly known as Mullâ Sadrâ. The work in question is titled *Mafâtîh al-ghayb, Keys to the Divine Mystery*.⁴

It opens with a very thorough examination of the status of the Qur'an. More specifically, of the integral Qur'an, that of which, in the sayings of our author concerning the traditions transmitted by the collections of shi'ite authority, the Prophet Muhammad would have said: "the Qur'an is complete. Nothing is needed after it, and nothing suffices without it." Such is the status of the "beautiful totality," of the true totality. One might believe that it implies a "totalitarian" discourse. We will see that it is the total opposite of this. As the integral truth, the Qur'an is not *simply* jurisdictional. To illustrate the effect of its beautiful totality, Sadrâ employs the concept of spiritual medicine. It is a question of curing, of delivering one from the slavery of the passions, which are "the iron necklaces of burden": the love of people, children, country, riches, passionate attachment to the female sex, cupidity and love of power. Here is the Qur'an thus interpreted in its totality, and on condition of being integral, like an ascetic guide with respect to the bonds that hamper man's existence, and this is done in terms that a disciple of Socrates would find difficult to disown. Not coercion, therefore, but liberation. Not legal exterior norms, but integral moral norms. Placing the greatest emphasis on the letter of Qur'anic writing leads to the

⁴ Sadr al-Dîn Shîrâzî (Mullâ Sadrâ), *Mafâtîh al-ghab*, ed. Muhammad Khâjâvî (Teheran 1984).

inverse of juridical literalism: if the Qur'an is integral, each letter is a universe of symbols: "in each of the letters of the Qur'an, there are a thousand symbols, coqueties and signs." This is why, following the example of a woman, the letter seduces the heart of the faithful, attracts it to the internal meaning that, in restoring his personal secret, the true identity of the subject, liberates him. This is why the letter separates him from the overpowering demands that come to him from others, and from the suggestions made above. It brings him back to himself and to the recognition of how, singularly in him, lies and resides the other beautiful totality, which corresponds to the beautiful Qur'anic totality, perfect man.

My conviction is that the meditations on the perfect man have posed a significant challenge by Qur'anic revelation to the regime of authority. They encompass the theory of the legitimate imamat, the doctrine of the gradations of authorities, and above all a certain re-evaluation of speech, of man as being of language. We see a good example of this here. The perfect man is the true caliph of God, He is thus created according to God's form. His authority is primarily an authority of speech. He converses with God, he speaks of spiritual discourses, he has the hearing of the heart. In achieving intelligence in action, he becomes, says Sadrâ, a "speaking substance." This accession to speech is identification with the imperative power that is God's authority. The perfect man bestows existence on himself, because he participates, by way of meditation on speech, in the act of donation of existence, which is the divine act par excellence. It is not a matter of exercising an authority that runs the danger of becoming a collective *potestas*, but of discovering himself in his position of pure singularity. Sadrâ gives an example of this in the exegesis he proposes of a tradition attributed to Alî ibn Abî Tâlib: "the totality of the Qur'an lies in the *bâ'* of *bismillâh* and I am the point under the *bâ'*."

Here is Sâdra's commentary: "The whole of the revealed pages is in the point of the *bâ* of *bismillâh*. Better yet, the collection of beings is in this point. If you want an example, here is one that will bring you closer to an aspect of this truth. When you say, "To Allah belongeth all that is in the heavens and on earth" (2:284), the totality of what is in heaven and on earth is understood in a single word. But when you try to refer to them by distinguishing one from another, you need numerous books, then you try to connect the expressions and the meanings among them, although the extension of the world of significations, thus the mutual distinction of its unities, are not analogous with the extension of the world of expressions and their distinction. But if it happens that someone leaves this sensible metaphorical existence and heads towards the effective realization of self, by certain intelligible existence, if he would unite himself with the spiritual realm at the point of contemplating the meaning of the verse, "It is He that doth encompass all things!" (41:54), if he saw his own actual self encompassed in this signification, dominated by it, thus he would contemplate his own existence in the point which is beneath the *bâ'*, and he would see this *bâ'* that is in *bismillâh* in a place where the eminent greatness of this signification manifests itself."⁵ This coincidence between the eminent dignity of each person and the infinite totality of the Book is the emancipated response to the challenge of the collective authorities.

⁵ Sadr al-Dîn Shirâzî, 21.

This coincidence of the “self” with the first letter of the Book, in which the total and infinite truth intertwines, has an evidently spiritual meaning: what the infallible Imâm says to himself realizes itself in each of the faithful. This realization of the totality of divine worlds in man is his maximum perfection, his mysterious identification with freedom and the divine lord. Of course, it presupposes an annihilation of God in order to become a permanence in God. Consequently, there is no trace of the individual as natural law thinks it, pertaining far more to an effacement of the partial and superficial consciousness in the ocean of letters and their significations. The subject discovers that he is nothing other than an effect of the letter, that his consistency only makes One with the infinite meaning borne by the letter. The effacement of the I is thus proportionate to the progress of the exegesis, which traces the Book from sensible darkness to intelligible light, and which passes the fidelity of inferior degrees where it tests all constraints of the matter up to the pure immaterial condition. But since we are questioning the discourse of authority, I would like to put the emphasis on another aspect of these pages. Our author, Sadrâ, combines his fidelity to the unique authority of the Prophet and the Imâm with an intuition which he owes to his long meditation on some texts by Ibn ‘Arabî. From it, he takes the following lesson: unique authority, that of the prophecy in its double dimension, expressed by Muhammad and ‘Ali, is the letter of the Book. It enables one to dismiss all other authority (aside from the exegete of these pages, one will say, who is the *‘arif*, the philosophical spiritual sage). The authority that Safrâ asserts thus resides in his fundamental conviction: not to consent to any human authority, if it is not that of the perfect man, who sustains the law of the “beautiful totality.” Now, this perfect man realizes himself in everyone, if he carries out the exegesis of self and of the Book, guided by the Imâm. And respectively, everyone, the semblance of each singular letter, of which the symbol is the total letter, the bâ. The Book is not a guide that addresses everyone collectively, like a political or juridical bond, but all and everyone according to principles of selection and hierarchy. It is helpful to compare this model to that which Michel Foucault recognized in the Christian pastoral tradition: *omnes et singulatim*, each and everyone singularly.⁶ This model differs on one essential point: “all” here designates the invisible community of practicing faithful, effectively the knowledge of self and of God, and not the visible community of a Church. Invisible community, it has reality only in God, erasing itself from this world in order to exist solely in the supreme world of God, the *Jabarût*. On the other hand, singularity affirms itself, emphasizing its rights. Not on the model of the Christian pastoral tradition addressing each sheep of the flock of course, but on its own model of spirituality in Islam, of a Self which is indifferently the divine Self revealing itself to creation or the creaturely Self absorbing itself in God. Such is the gnostic model by which the stakes of authorities finds itself subverted, in a face-to-face “alone” with the One, which is the essence of neo-Platonism. Here, in closing, is Sadrâ’s exposition, following the text which we cited earlier:

⁶ “‘Omnes et singulatim’: Towards a Critique of Political Reason,” reprinted in *Dits et Ecrits* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2001) 953. See also Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France. 1977-1978*, “Hautes Etudes” (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2004) 233.

“We others, and those who are like us, we only contemplate the darkness of the letters of the Qur’an, because we are in the world of darkness. . . . Consequently, sight only sees the colors and the meaning only obtains sensible realities, the imagination only configures imaginable things, the intelligence only knows the intelligible. It is thus that light is perceived by each, only by the light and “for any to whom Allah giveth not light, there is no light!” (Qur’an, 24: 40). Because of this blackness of sight here down below, we only see the darkness of the Qur’an. But when we leave this existence of the semblance, this dark sight, emigrating towards God and his Prophet, when we perceive the death of this condition subjected to sensible, imaginative, estimated, intellectual, practical forms, when we remain, by our existence itself in the act of existing in the speech of God, then when we head towards the stability, in an eternal stability, of death toward life, then we see more than blackness in the Qur’an. We see only pure whiteness, pure light and an actual realization, according to this verse: “We have made the (Qur’an) a Light, wherewith We guide such of Our servants as We will” (Qur’an, 42: 52).