

## APPENDIX I:

### ESOTERIC INTERPRETATION OF THE KORAN

For the Sufis of the classical period, the Koran is the encoded document which contains Sufi teachings. Theologians tend to assume that it is capable of interpretation only in a conventionally religious way; historians are inclined to look for earlier literary or religious sources; others for evidence of contemporary events reflected in its pages. For the Sufi, the Koran is a document with numerous levels of transmission, each one of which has a meaning in accordance with the capacity for understanding of the reader. It is this attitude toward the book which made possible the understanding between people who were of nominally Christian, pagan or Jewish backgrounds—a feeling which the orthodox could not understand. The Koran in one sense is therefore a document of psychological importance.

Chapter 112 of the Koran is an excellent example of this synthesizing capacity of the book. This is one of the shortest chapters, and it may be translated thus:

Say, O messenger, to the people:  
"He, Allah, is Unity! Allah the Eternal.  
Fathering nobody, and not himself engendered—  
And absolutely nothing is like him!"

For the devout and conventional Moslem this is the basic declaration of faith. Allah is God; He has no equal, is the Eternal.

Christian commentators, from the earliest times, have considered this passage to be a direct attack upon the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, and they wax very fierce about it. It is one of the most quoted passages of the Koran, and millions of Moslems use it in their prayers every day.

Viewed on this basis, the "chapter of the Unity" seems to draw a

distinct line between the believers and the rest. The devout Moslem can use it against the Christian, whom he considers to be a heretic of the monotheistic tradition. The Christian reacts by considering it an insult to his central beliefs. Such a situation obtains, however, only where there is a certain psychological climate—a clash between two power groups which struggled during the middle ages for power in a medieval manner.

If we accept these assumptions, we place ourselves within the conflict which, for the Sufi, never existed except for those who chose a conflict within this psychological state.

Such an interpretation of the meaning of Chapter 112 was never accepted by the Sufis. Setting aside the Sufi claim to be able to perceive the real meaning of this chapter, we can find a bridge between ordinary thinking and a possible intention of this passage by referring to the opinion of the great Ghazali about it.

Like all the chapters of the Koran, he says, this one cannot be reduced to similarity with other books by assuming that it has a single, simple meaning of the sort familiar to the ordinary thinker. The Unity has no simple, single aim, no mere superficial meaning. Its impact depends upon understanding and experience, just as much as upon its poetic rhythm.

He refers to the context in which the chapter was revealed. It was in answer, not to a Christian nor to a religious man, but to a party of Bedouin Arabs who approached the Prophet Mohammed with this question: "To what may we compare Allah?"

The answer is that Allah may not be compared to anything. There is no analogy possible between this being (Allah—that which is to be worshiped) and anything familiar to humanity. Allah is the word used to denote the final objectivity, uniqueness, something which has no relationship with numbering, anything in time, anything which propagates in a sense familiar to man.

It is on this level, not even an initiatory or mystical one, that the common ground between Moslems and Christians was laid. By understanding this we can much more easily understand how Sufism bridged the gap between the official interpretations of Christianity and Islam and the needs of the thinking man.

This sense of the meaning of "Allah," coupled with the original rhythm of the poetry, may be conveyed more readily by this sort of reconstruction:

O Messenger—  
 Say: "He, Allah, is but One!  
 Of days neither ended nor begun,  
 Fathering not, a son of none—  
 And none is like to him, not one!"

It is this spirit and this claim to the essential unity of divine transmission which is what has been referred to as the "secret doctrine."

Unless this feeling about the Koran is conveyed correctly, the inevitable conclusions about the limited clash between church Christianity and formal Islam becomes the only frame of reference for the scholar. It may give rise to such translations as the following, bereft of the Sufic connotation:

"ALLAH is the One God; Unbegetting, Unbegotten, Unequaled."