

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN ISLAM

By ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL

AFEW YEARS ago the renowned publishing house of Herder in Freiburg convened a conference concerning the experience of God in Christianity and Islam. The problem was approached by Muslims of various denominations, Christian theologians, and orientalists. The results were surprisingly varied; so much so that it seemed altogether impossible to give a common description. And yet, on closer inspection, several outstanding features of religious experience in Islam emerged, features which are common to the strictly lawbound orthodox Islam and the mystically inspired popular forms, as well as to the theosophical branches of this religion.

First of all it is the unshakeable faith in God as The One, Unique, the incomparable Creator, Sustainer and Judge, out of which the Muslims' whole approach to life as well as the fabric of theological theories have grown. It was this God who revealed himself to the prophet Muhammad first as creator and judge; these two basic aspects made the prophet understand that God must be One, without companions. The fact that God is described in the Koran as both creator and judge implies a more linear understanding of history than is the case, for instance, in Indian religions. This world has a definite beginning in time, or rather, time came into existence with God's creative word 'Be', which caused everything to become. (The contemporary Pakistani painter Sadiqain has depicted this phrase 'Be, and it was', *kun fa-yakun*, by forming the two final loop-like letters *n* as a spiral nebula which dissolves into stars, suns and moons, thus pointing very skilfully to the mystery of creation and combining the koranic words with a modern scientific world view.) But there is still another event, which Henri Corbin has called the 'meta-historical foundation' of Islam. It is the passage *Sura 7/171*, where an account is given of how God addressed humanity which had not yet been created and which he called forth for a moment from the loins of Adam with his word, *Alastu bi-rabbikum*, 'Am I not your Lord?', and they answered, *Balā shahidnā*, 'Yes, we bear

witness'. By giving this answer to God's first words man has once and for all accepted his role as God's servant; at the day of judgment he will be questioned whether he has been faithful to his pre-eternal promise. The 'day of *alast*', as the persian poets use to call this day of the covenant, has been understood by some orientalists, who follow a certain trend in orthodox theology, as a mere divine address to Adam's children; but the general feeling is that the event relates to something of much greater religious significance.. In accepting God's absolute rule, man has also accepted the burden of duties, and, according to the mystical poets, the burden of love; by answering, *balā*, 'Yes', he takes upon himself every affliction. At the same time it is this word *alastu*, the first divine address to the future creation, that separates God and man; hence the goal of the mystics was to go back behind this covenant, to reach once more the unspecified unity in the abysses of the Godhead. On the other hand, the Muslims experienced that man, by responding to this first utterance, has taken upon himself the responsibility of serving God faithfully and preparing himself constantly for the last judgment, in which his actions and thoughts will be measured and weighed.

The Koran describes the last judgment with many images, such as the book of actions, the scales on which man's deeds are weighed, the bridge over which he has to pass; and the formulae of the creed accepts them all as realities, although without asking how this reality should be understood. The fear of the judgment, which was imminently expected during the days of Muhammad, overshadowed the religious life of the early generations of the faithful: would one be saved or sent to hell to be punished until God in his mercy took the believer into the gardens of paradise? Did not a tradition, current in very early times, relate that God says: 'these to Paradise, and I do not care, and these to Hell, and I do not care'? Would not such an attitude completely destroy man's activity? What was the use of working and striving if everything was pre-destined? Or was there a trace of free will left to man? The Koran argues in favour of man's responsibility and yet sees God as the only true agent. Hence discussions between the followers of free will and those believing in absolute coercion were the central topics in early Islamic theology, and even had political repercussions until a middle way was found, which gives man the possibility of 'appropriating' his God-created acts and thus sharing in some of the responsibility.

Even though Islam has been accused of being a religion of

fatalism, one should not compare this attitude with the fatalism of the Stoics or the belief in an immovable, mechanical fate. As time went by, the Muslims became more convinced that, although everything has been written down in pre-eternity, the events of human life were shaped according to a distinct divine plan. God, whose wisdom in creating the world cannot be doubted, certainly knew what would be best for each one of his creatures at every moment of his life. Thus fatalism in Islam relies upon the feeling that even the most awkward event must have some deeper meaning in the long course of man's life or in the history of nations. This is well expressed by the image of God as the master calligrapher who alone can join the letters correctly, and whose way of writing a man's destiny, by placing him into certain situations, expresses this feeling very well, as does the image of God as the great weaver, who alone knows how the finished carpet will look, who uses the different colours according to his eternal design which man has to accept patiently, even gratefully. The calmness of a turkish mother, when she loses her only son and is able to console others, is grounded in the conviction that God must have something special in mind and that it would be ungrateful to rebel against him. Therefore, the pious Muslim will accept the greatest disaster with the sigh and 'praised be God for everything'.

Islam has often been described as static, and the concept of the absolute unity of God as monolithic. God, it was argued, looks like having retired from the world after creating it and allotting everything its place. However, the Koran speaks of God's most beautiful names, and with them the Muslim puts together the rosary of the ninety-nine names which point to his various aspects. God is the Creator and he who gives sustenance; he is mild and forgiving, he is living and self-subsistent; he is the seeing and the hearing, the loving and the constraining, the Eternal King and the Peace, the Lord of overwhelming majesty and the Ever-Patient. God's activities are reflected in these ninety-nine names, and the faithful turn to them when addressing him in prayer. The numerous proper names formed by the word '*abd*', 'servant', in combination with one of the ninety-nine names, show which of God's attributes were dearest to the Muslims: the numberless '*Abd ur-Rahmān*' and '*Abd ur-Rahīm*', 'Servant of the Merciful' or 'of the Compassionate', certainly top the list; but almost every other divine name can be used according to the predilection of the family and their hopes for the development of the child. In later mystical circles, the divine

names were used for meditative practices, and the religious leader had carefully to observe the use of specific names during the forty days of retirement, which the novice had to undergo in the course of his spiritual education. For the intense use of one name could produce strange and even dangerous effects, and the thousandfold repetition had to be chosen according to the disciple's mental stage and spiritual capacity; the insinuation of the *dhikr*, the formula of meditation, was one of the most important duties of the mystical guide. Although interest in the divine names as revealed in the Koran was great in the early days of Islamic mystical thought, it was even more elaborate at a later stage. According to some schools, the names were seen as the means by which God reveals himself in creation, so that every human being is the *marbūb*, the object of a certain Name which is his *rabb*, his 'Lord'. It is through that particular divine name that man can experience certain mysteries of divine life. In this system, as developed by the great thirteenth century Spanish-born theosophist Ibn 'Arabi and his followers, Muhammad the prophet was regarded as the manifestation of the name *ar-Rahmān*, 'The Merciful', which is the highest name after the all-comprehensive name Allah.

But common people could hardly share these lofty speculations, which led away from practical piety into the field of speculations and transformed the early voluntarist mysticism of Islam into a kind of gnostic system, which in the course of time became prevalent in most parts of the Islamic world but was opposed by the representatives of orthodoxy, as well as by some mystical thinkers.

All the beautiful and effective names are only the outward manifestation of God, the One. His Oneness was certainly always the centre of experience, so much so that many mystics already in early times overstressed the words of the profession of faith, 'There is no deity but God', by exclaiming that 'there is no agent but God', and eventually, 'there is nothing existent but God'. Out of this feeling the current which we usually call 'Islamic pantheism' begins; it is, at its outset, an experience rather than a philosophical theory.

The divine names taken in their fulness point to still another aspect of God. They are often seemingly contradictory, so that he appears as the Hidden and the Outward, the First and the Last, He who gives life and He who takes life. The Muslims used to classify the divine names into those connected with *lutf*, 'Divine Grace and Kindness' and with *qahr*, 'Divine Wrath and Majesty',

and recognized that only the interplay of these two aspects of the Divine can keep the created world moving. They reveal God's *jalal*, 'Majesty', and his *jamāl*, 'Beauty', concepts which correspond exactly to what Rudolf Otto defined (in *The Idea of the Holy*) as the *tremendum* and the *fascinans*. But they come together in the depths of the Divine Life as *kamāl*, 'Perfection'. This twofold manifestation of God in his actions offers the background for both the poetry and thought of muslim writers.

It is even more evident in Muslim prayer. It seems to me that prayer in Islam tells us most about the religious feeling of the Muslims, the saying *lex orandi, lex credendi* certainly applies here. The Koran orders the ritual prayer, *salat*, five times a day: a prayer which consists of a prescribed sequence of bowing, prostration, standing and recitation of koranic verses. Man and woman have to be in the state of ritual purity and can perform their prayer in any clean place. The complete recollectedness of a praying Muslim, whether he be in the mosque, in a crowded boat, in the loneliness of the desert or on the battle field, shows better than anything else whence Islam takes its strength. Besides the prescribed prayers, there exist free prayers, and although some rigorists claimed that there was no point in asking God for something by praying to him, the general attitude was that prayer was licit since God himself had ordered it in the Koran: 'Call me, and I shall answer' (*Sura 40/62*). The numerous prayer books that were composed throughout the centuries show how seriously the Muslims responded to this divine promise. Prayers inherited from the prophet and his companions, or, in Shia Islam, ascribed to the Imams, beginning with 'Ali, the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, were handed down from generation to generation, and while the prayers of the earliest period, which may well be authentic utterances of the prophet, are usually short and somewhat austere, later writers embellished their prayers most beautifully. Long chains of rhymes, puns on the roots of certain arabic words, highly dramatic descriptions of great beauty, are found in muslim prayer books. The main bulk of these prayers, even though they may contain a request for the solution of some problem, are concerned with laud and praise, for the Koran attests several times that God did 'not create men and *djinn* but that they might worship him'. The muslim mystics who had purified their hearts by constant struggle against the lower self were able to hear the silent praise which permeates the whole of nature: the whistling of the wind and the movement of the waves, the song of a bird or the

growing of a flower were understood as utterances of this praise of God in which created things participated, from the atom to the sun. Hence, human prayer has to consist mainly of praise, whether it be a short ejaculation or artistically elaborated poems or prose-pieces with which muslim authors usually begin their works. The sweetness of nightly orisons has been described in loving terms by many of the pious, and the experience of *dhikr*, the constant remembrance of God by repeating certain formulas or Divine Names, forms a cornerstone of the mystical experience. Does not the Koran attest: 'Verily by remembering God the hearts become tranquil' (*Sura* 13/28)? The muslim theologians felt that even prayer was not man's own work; it was given to him by God. Just as God first spoke to man in the Covenant, he once again begins the dialogue by calling man to himself. Even if a prayer is not granted, the conviction that we can only pray because God first calls can become a source of strength to the devout. In the end the praying muslim may experience that, although his wish has not been granted, his will has nevertheless been changed, so that he accepts what God in his eternal wisdom has decreed.

The uniqueness and unicity of God form the centre of the islamic experience of the Holy. However, we should not forget that such an experience can be shared by believers in many other religions. The islamic profession of faith contains in its second part the acknowledgment that Muhammad is the messenger of God. This statement limits the islamic world-view, and draws the borderline between Islam and the other religions. The Koran mentions the example set by the prophet as the binding norm for the Muslim; and out of the order to follow him the meticulous observance of his actions and words ensued. Because it was necessary to preserve every detail of his actions, the science of *hadith*, 'tradition', developed, by which the words attributed to the prophet were collected and sifted. *Hadith* became one of the most important constituents of islamic life in all its aspects, because the Koran offers only brief rules for proper conduct and legal actions, or simply hints at actions that were to be elaborated later by the lawyer divines. The tradition, which was developed out of the prophet's framework, was used to explain certain koranic statements and to shape the lines along which the muslims should lead their lives. The 'beautiful model' of Muhammad's conduct was always before the eyes of the faithful, whether it concerned habits of eating and drinking, legal decisions, matters of worship. As Armand Abel once

put it: contrary to the *imitatio Christi*, which is the imitation of suffering, the *imitatio Muhammadi* is an imitation of actions. The words ascribed to him in the traditions (the reliable ones being written down in six collections), during the late ninth century, formed the life-style of the Muslims, wherever Islam went; for the collections of *hadith* by Bukhari and Muslim were taught, along with their scholia, in every college in the muslim world. The system of etiquette and proper behaviour developed out of the imitation of the prophet, so that the same time-honoured customs are, or rather were, in use in muslim India and in Morocco, in Central Asia and in the Arabic Peninsula; just as the arabic script, in which the revealed word of the Koran was preserved, became an important unifying factor in Islam.

The Koran had mentioned that God and his angels prayed over Muhammad (*Sura 33/56*); therefore the formula of blessing for him and his family is pronounced dozens of times a day by the pious, and has often developed into a formula of *dhikr*, or else degenerated into a mere protective charm. The fear of judgment, so prominent in early ascetic Islam, later softened when the faithful discovered that Muhammad would intercede for his community on the *dies irae*, and that God out of love for him would not leave a single Muslim in hell. This idea of Muhammad's *shafa'a*, his intercession, plays a paramount role in popular piety, although it is difficult to extract from the Koran. However, it proved to be a consoling thought for millions of pious souls. The number of poems written in honour of the prophet in all the regional languages from West Africa to Indonesia reflects this absolute trust in and love of Muhammad, a love which is perhaps the strongest binding force of the islamic society. Muhammad assumes various roles; he is the perfect 'servant of God', and as such the model for man; the interlocutor of God who was blessed with immediate vision, and experienced the presence of the most Holy during his nightly ascension, which he realized once more, and taught his followers to realize, in the experience of ritual prayer; he has been seen by the theosophists of Islam as the perfect man, and again as the tender hearted *paterfamilias* who dearly loved his wives and his children, particularly his two grandsons Hasan and Husain. Folk poetry describes him mainly with images taken from this area. Modern writers describe him as the political leader, the social reformer who, although deeply immersed in the divine Will, actively participated in the affairs of this world; for the true believer

acts in every moment as if he were in the presence of God, even when his actions are outwardly profane. Muhammad is the focal point for the love of millions of muslims and literature resounds with his praise. For he is the last of the prophets whose long line begins with Adam, since God never leaves his creatures without divine guidance. In Muhammad, the precious revelations are summed up and integrated, and therefore the line of prophets closes with him. Shia Islam admits of the existence of the Imams from Muhammad's family, the last of whom – according to the Twelve Shia (the official religion of Iran) has disappeared and rules the world from the invisible; the Nizari Ismaili Shia, on the other hand, believes in the presence of the living Imam among the faithful; he translates for them the commands of God and activates the community. Sunni Islam, however, does not accept such a continuing activity of inspired personalities, although in mystical circles the saints, the 'Friends of God', may assume a similar role. The concept of the *mujaddid*, the Reformer who is supposed to appear at the beginning of a new millennium, belongs here. But under no circumstances can anyone claim to be a prophet after Muhammad.

What, then, is the gist of the religious experience of Islam? One may say that it is the interiorization of the profession of faith: that there is no deity save God, and that Muhammad is his messenger. The deep, unshakeable faith in the unity and uniqueness of God has been expressed in different religious attitudes, in mystical systems, in legal schools. It may appear as unflinching obedience to the revealed divine Law, which was elaborated to the smallest detail, or in over-emphasizing the feeling of God's unity and thus reaching a radical mystical stance, 'pantheism' or 'monism', although these terms certainly do not express the muslim mystics' true concern.

The second half of the profession of faith results in the firm belief that the prophet was sent 'as mercy for the worlds' (*Sura 21/107*), and has acted as the perfect model for his community. 'We are like a rose with a hundred petals, and he is our scent, and he is one', sings Muhammad Iqbal, a modern Indian Muslim, who has stressed the fact that Islam means, first and foremost, Unity: one God, one prophet, one direction of prayer, one revelation in the Koran. This spiritual unity should, then, be reflected in the unity of the Islamic community. That would imply the willing acceptance of perfect obedience and surrender to this one God and his prophet: and that seems to be the meaning of true Islam, a word which means 'Submission to God'.