

Book Reviews

DIMENSIONS OF ISLAM.

By Frithjof Schuon.

(Allen and Unwin. £1.75).

Review by Martin Lings

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The title *Dimensions of Islam* may be taken in two senses. Firstly and more obviously, this remarkable book can be considered as a complement to the author's *Understanding Islam* (reviewed by the same reviewer in *Tomorrow*, Winter, 1964). It is characteristic of the author to go straight to the most difficult points, and to give answers which not only convince and satisfy but which as it were set us free to look at the matter in the clearer light of more open horizons. In view of the theme, many of the "problems" touched on are inevitably connected with Christian reservations about Islam; but since these two religions are sounded to depths which they have in common with all religions, most of the questions take on a universal import.

"One of the stumbling blocks for the Westerner in his approach to Islam is the question of the sanctity of the Prophet". One would have thought that this question had been answered once and for all in the third chapter of *Understanding Islam*. But now the author answers it far more briefly in quite a different way, as compelling as it is original—but let us leave the reader to judge this for himself.

Another paragraph begins: "An attribute of Islam which particularly disconcerts Westerners is what might be called its 'belittling of the human'; this attribute is explained by the concern to relate every greatness to God alone, and to forestall the development of 'humanism', that is, to forestall a way of looking at things which will lead to the cult of Titanesque and Luciferian man". Connected with this is the following note: "The Islamic morality of smallness, obedience and servitude has not much chance of being understood in an age of false liberty and of revolt. Certainly one has every right to revolt against purely human oppressions; but this contingent question apart, one does not have the choice of wishing for anything other than to resign oneself to the Divine mould, which is Origin, Archetype, Norm and Goal, which alone gives peace of heart, by allowing us to be truly what we are".

This quotation brings us to the second meaning of the title, which may be understood in the sense of 'dimensions of *islām*'; for indeed the book does no less than give as it were the measurements of the mould of sainthood expressed by the word *islām*, which may be translated, in its highest sense, 'holy resignation' provided that the 'sigh' usually associated with this last word be thought of above all as a sigh of relief. The Prophet, who personifies for the Sufi the end of the spiritual path, defined that end by saying: "I have a time wherein only my Lord sufficeth to contain me"; and the dimensions of this

container or mould are the Divine Names expressed in the verse of the Qur'an: *He is the First and the Last and the Outward and the Inward*, which are respectively, from the standpoint of the human subject, the already referred to "Origin, Goal, Norm and Archetype", and which form the basis of this book, whose every chapter flows, as it were, along one or more of these dimensions.

"The Sufi lives under the gaze of the First, the Last, the Outward and the Inward. He lives concretely in these metaphysical dimensions... He is consciously the point of intersection where the Divine dimensions meet; unequivocally engaged in the universal drama he suffers no illusions about impossible avenues of escape...

"Every man is as it were suspended between 'the First' and 'the Last': every man has fallen from the primordial state and is threatened with death. Behind him is the Divine Law, which was before him, and in front of him is the Judgment consequential on this Law; God is 'the First' not only as Creator but also as Legislator. In the same way man extends from his bodily form—'made in the image of God'—through the soul and the spirit as far as Being and as far as the Self; he is thus as it were woven into 'the Outward' and opens on to 'the Inward', thanks to that Divine spark within him to which no limit can be assigned... "That which comes from 'the First' must return to 'the Last': this is the foundation of the eschatological drama of man. We are 'a message from God to God' as the Sufis would say".

The "dimension" which immediately concerns us is that of "God-the-Outward"; in other words, in resigning ourselves to the mould which the Divinity holds out to us, our first resignation must be to the "Norm"; but to realize the Norm is, as we have seen, not only to be "woven into the Outward" but to "open on to the Inward", that is, on to the Archetype. The relationship between Norm and Archetype is the theme of the chapter on *The Servant and Union*. The Norm, in a dazzling variety of aspects, is also the theme of the three chapters on Muhammad, Jesus and Mary,¹ whereas in the chapter on the Archangels, *An-Nūr*, we are already altogether in the domain of "the Inward". But it is an Inward which may at any moment "irrupt" into the Outward. The author has already said that a miracle is an irruption of the Inward into the domain of the Outward, and the Angels in a sense personify the miraculous. This chapter is also related to God-the-First for it is rich in quotations from Islamic texts about the creation of the Archangels.

The inseparability of the Norm from Origin, Archetype and Goal is brought home to us again in the chapter on *Earthly Concomitances of the Love of God*, for the author stresses the spiritual importance of three earthly blessings, namely, virgin nature, sanctuaries and the company of holy men, which correspond respectively to "the First" and "the Last" and "the Inward", virgin nature being as it were an echo of the Earthly Paradise and the sanctuary being an anticipation of the Heavenly Jerusalem, whereas holy men are those who are "orientated towards the inward dimension".

The Goal, or "God-the-Last", is the theme of the chapter on an eschatological problem. It dwells profoundly on certain questions which, perhaps more than any others, have been responsible for engendering doubts and anxieties in the souls of men; and it is a chapter that readers in search of peace of mind will go back to as to a sanctuary of refuge. In the opinion of this reader it is perhaps the most remarkable piece of writing about our final ends that he has ever read.

Finally, in the last chapter, *The Five Divine Presences*, the Totality represented by the four "dimensional" Names is unfolded as a hierarchy along the axis Outward—Inward. We have here a masterly exposition of the Sufi doctrine of the five degrees of reality of which the lowest and least real is that which seems most real from the point of view of sensory experience, namely the corporeal or material state.

"The material state extends around us and loses itself in the abysses of space; and yet space, with its galaxies and metagalaxies, and with its milliards of light years, is only a grain of dust in comparison with the animistic state that surrounds it and contains it—though not of course spatially. The animistic state in its turn is only an infinitesimal particle alongside supra-formal or celestial manifestation; and the latter is nothing in comparison with the Principle".

The word "Principle" denotes the two highest Divine Presences which are termed "Personal God" and "Transpersonal Self". In this connection the author liquidates a misunderstanding which has vitiated much orientalist writing, in particular about Sufism. The Sufi doctrine of "extinction" has too often been interpreted to mean that the "Goal" is total annihilation of the individuality. This is partly due to the methodically devastating nature of some Sufi formulations directed against individualistic impediments in the souls of disciples. It is also, in part, simply due to the Arab use of hyperbole which is to be understood in the light of the opening chapter of this book. But the Sufis presuppose, in readers of their texts, a certain common sense, which has not always been the strong point of Orientalists, some of whom seem capable of believing that the mystics of Islam—and also of Buddhism—will pour out their lives in unsurpassed spiritual effort for the sake of attaining in the end to "blank infinite negation". But in this final chapter, Frithjof Schuon makes it clear that the individual loses absolutely nothing when re-absorbed into the Principle: "‘re-absorption’ is not ‘annihilation’ but ‘transfiguration’... In a word, the fact that the heavenly beings have transcended the formal condition cannot have a privative sense; on the contrary, whoever possesses the ‘greater’ also possess the ‘lesser’." He also says: "In the heavenly beyond, the ‘person’ subsists and, by this fact, can always re-assume his individual and earthly form". To sum up, the gist of these closing paragraphs is that our sense of ‘egoity’ in this life is merely a remote and fragmented reverberation of the Transpersonal Self, in which alone the ego can have fulfillment. This is indeed the teaching of all the great traditional wisdoms of the world; but it is here brought home to us in an exceptionally convincing and reassuring way.

¹ This chapter, *The Wisdom of the Virgin*, is the only one which has already appeared in *Studies in Comparative Religion*.