

2. The Loss of the Dimension of Divine Matter

The development of Arabic religiosity especially in Sufism ran, to a certain extent, parallel to Western Christianity. It became more ‘philosophical’ in a way resembling scholasticism and became more spiritualized and refined. The masculine element of the logos slowly prevailed over matter. The Gothic cathedrals striving to the heights can be, *mutatis mutandis*, compared with the ever higher differentiation of Sufi thought and art, but *one* element got lost in both religious cultural realms. It is a loss which we only now begin to realize: the archaic archetypal idea of animated matter. The idea of matter in itself became less and less important in the high Middle Ages, or it became more and more ‘spiritualized’ in the hands of the theologians and artists, and wherever it subsisted it also became the object of technology. Technology presupposes namely that matter has no ‘will’ of its own, that it is ‘dead’ and therefore can be handled by man. The medieval Arabs developed a highly differentiated technology of water systems and of astronomical and medical instruments, which partly found their way into the West.³¹

Out of this in Europe sprang the dazzling development of modern technology beginning in the Renaissance in which man’s interest returned more to earthly things. In the Christian civilization therefore matter became interesting, even fascinating, but the medieval prejudice that she was ‘inferior’ and could be completely manipulated by man has persisted till today. What got lost is the domain of magic, which was and still is called by both civilizations ‘heathen superstition’. In the Arabic realm this loss began when Neoplatonism began to dominate more and more over Gnostic Hermetism, for the latter, especially in its Egyptian Hellenistic Ptolemaic form, preserved old Egyptian magic elements. What in my view

³¹ For that see in general the ground-breaking work of F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, Vol. I–XII.

marks out the Egyptian religion from other religions is its balance between masculine and feminine elements and also between spirit and matter. Also the Egyptian religion never lost a specific element of the archaic African world, namely its magic. It is not mere chance that the papyri which inform us about antique magic stem from Egyptian soil. What we scornfully call magic is, however, nothing else but a more archaic form of religion which is characterized by treating matter as containing a divine and psychic element. Magic *relates* to matter instead of only manipulating it. It tries to influence matter, not by technological means, but by psychological means. In other words, the goddess of matter has to be propitiated and devotedly worshipped. Even the stupidest magical recipe presupposes thus a 'religious' handling of the materials. It also belongs to the traditional form of magical systems, which believe that man has to put himself into the right attitude in order to be able to influence matter positively. His soul then communicates with the soul of matter. When in the seventeenth century alchemy gradually became chemistry, the idea of the psyche in matter and of an *anima mundi* became lost. But, already before this, the loss had been prepared for by the split within alchemy between the *physica et mystica*. Mystical alchemy clung more conservatively to the concept of animated matter and to the idea that one can contact the soul of matter by meditation. It also preserved many of the so-called 'occult' practices which the developing chemistry discarded more and more.

24 This whole world of mystical alchemy unexpectedly returned to our attention through C.G. Jung's discovery of the collective unconscious. He first saw it as a transpersonal psychic dimension of its own which he also called the objective psyche. But towards the end of his life, mainly by studying synchronistic phenomena, it became more and more probable for Jung that the objective psyche relates somehow to inorganic matter, as if it were so to speak its inner psychic aspect. Therefore Jung postulated an *unus mundus*, a unitary world, which when observed from outside appears as matter and when observed from inside appears as the collective unconscious.

25 These late developments, however, do not primarily concern us here. But we need to know about our author that he still seems to have lived in the Hermetic-Gnostic world where matter was alive and where inner psychological work upon oneself influenced the chemical processes. With this goes the sense that a certain feminine element, which seems lost in later texts like Ibn 'Arabī's or al-Ġazzālī's, still persists in Ibn Umail's work. He seems to have a better relationship to nature. The loving way in which he describes the snail, the frog and the ostrich are not pale metaphors, but seem to have been for him a living reality.

3. The Transition of Alchemy into the Western World

Before alchemy returned through the Arabs into the Western world ²⁶ it had already begun to flow into two different river beds, that of the more chemical interest and that of the more religious inner psychic interest, but they were still flowing together and were transmitted together. Not only the chemical texts but also the religious Arabic alchemy evoked a similar movement in Europe, a movement, which was much greater than most of the historians were willing to recognize until now.³² It is as if the hatred of the Christians against Islam, the spirit of the Crusades, has persisted in the West until today.

A first return of Neoplatonic Hermetic alchemy happened between ²⁷ the late ninth to the twelfth century (mainly in Spain and in Sicily). A second return happened, as is well known, in the Renaissance. The investigations of Miguel Asin Palacios show more and more that there has been an enormous influx of Arabic culture as early as the tenth century (the time of Muḥammad ibn Umail) or even earlier in Spain. Asin Palacios writes:³³

«1. Islam, after the conquest of the countries bordering on Arabia, spread rapidly throughout the north of Africa, Spain, the south of France and southern Italy, and extended its dominion over the Balearic Isles and Sicily. The effect of war in imparting to the belligerents an intimate knowledge of each other is notorious; but in times of peace, too, contact between the two civilizations of Christianity and Islam was established across their eastern and western frontiers through the medium of commerce.

From the eighth to the eleventh century an active trade was carried on between Moslem countries of the East and Russia and other countries of northern Europe. Expeditions left the Caspian regularly and, ascending

³² See for that L. Bréhier, *L'église et l'orient au moyen âge – Les Croisades*.

³³ M. Asin Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, Part IV, Chapter II: 'Communication between Islam and Christian Europe during the Middle Ages', p. 239 ff.

the Volga, reached the Gulf of Finland and so through the Baltic to Denmark, Britain, and even as far as Iceland. The quantities of Arabic coins found at various places in this extensive commercial zone bear witness to its importance. In the eleventh century trade was conducted by the easier sea route across the Mediterranean, chiefly by means of Genoese, Venetian or Moslem vessels. Large colonies of Italian traders settled in all the Moslem ports of the Mediterranean, and merchants, explorers, and adventurers sailed at will across its waters. Benjamin of Tudela has left us trustworthy evidence, in his *Itinerary* of the twelfth century, of the busy intercourse between Christians and Moslems at that time.

To the stimulus of trade must be added the impulse of the religious ideal. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land, which had been suspended owing to the early conquests of Islam, were renewed and, with the establishment under Charlemagne of the Frank Protectorate over the Christian churches of the East, were assured by conventions and assisted by the foundation of hostels and monasteries in Moslem lands. During the ninth, tenth, and the eleventh centuries the number of pilgrims grew, until some of the expeditions comprised as many as twelve thousand; these expeditions were the forerunners of the Crusades.

The influence of the Crusades in bringing Islam and Christian Europe together need hardly be insisted upon. The Christian States founded after the first Crusades may be likened to a European colony implanted in the heart of Islam, between the Euphrates and Egypt. The civil administration and the army of these States were formed on the Moslem model, and even the habits, food, and dress of the Orientals were adopted by the Frankish knights, who poured into Syria in Crusades from all parts of Europe even as far distant as Scandinavia.

The failure to destroy Islam by the sword begot in its turn the idea of the pacific conquest of souls, and led in the thirteenth century to the establishment of the Missions to Islam. The Franciscan and Dominican friars who formed this new tie of spiritual communication were obliged to make a thorough study of the language and religious literature of Islam, and to reside for many years amongst Moslems.

2. More important and more interesting, however, from our point of view than any of these general channels of communication, is the contact of the two civilizations in Sicily and Spain. Beginning in the ninth century with piratical raids upon the coasts of the Atlantic and Mediterranean, the Normans gradually formed settlements in Moslem towns of the Peninsula (such as Lisbon, Seville, Orihuela and Barbastro) and in Sicily. The latter island, indeed, which had become permeated with Islam, was conquered in the eleventh century and ruled by a dynasty of Norman Kings until the thirteenth

century. Throughout that period the Sicilian population was composed of a medley of races professing different religions and speaking several languages. The court of the Norman King, Roger II, at Palermo, was formed of both Christians and Moslems, who were equally versed in Arabic literature and Greek science. [...] But the time when Palermo most resembled a Moslem court was the first half of the thirteenth century, during the long reign of Frederick, King of Sicily and Emperor of Germany. A philosopher, free-thinker and polyglot, the Emperor, even as his predecessors had done in war and peace, surrounded himself with Moslems. They were his masters and fellow-students, his courtiers, officers and ministers; and he was accompanied by them on his travels to the Holy Land and throughout Italy. His harems, one in Sicily and the other in Italy, were under the charge of eunuchs; and even the tunic in which he was buried bore an Arabic inscription. The Popes and other Kings of Christendom raised public outcry against the scandal of the court of such an Emperor, who, though representing the highest civil authority of the Middle Ages, was Christian only in name.

This patron of literature and learning formed a unique collection of Arabic manuscripts at the University of Naples, which he founded in 1224; and he had the works of Aristotle and Averrhoës translated, and copies sent to Paris and Bologna. Not only did he gather to his court Hebrew and Moslem philosophers, astrologers and mathematicians, but he corresponded with men of learning throughout Islam.

It was at the court of Frederick that the Sicilian school of poetry, which first used the vulgar tongue and thus laid the foundations of Italian literature, arose. The Arab troubadours assembled at his court were emulated by the Christians; and the fact is significant inasmuch as it affords an instance of contact between the two literatures, Christian and Moslem.

3. Important as Norman Sicily was as a centre of Islamic culture, it is nevertheless eclipsed in this respect by mediaeval Spain. Here were to be found the same phenomena as in Sicily, but on a much larger scale and with the precedence of centuries. For Spain was the first country in Christian Europe to enter into intimate contact with Islam. [...]

The Mozarabs formed the first link between the two peoples. As early as the ninth century the Christians of Cordova had adopted the Moslem style of living, some even to the extent of keeping harems and being circumcised. Their delight in Arabic poetry and fiction, and their enthusiasm for the study of the philosophical and theological doctrines of Islam, are characteristically lamented by Alvaro of Cordova in his *Indiculus luminosus*.

The contact thus established in the early centuries of the Islamic conquest became, as may be imagined, more pronounced in the course of

time. With intervals of intermittent strife, the intermingling of the two elements of the population steadily continued. And thus we find the Mozarabs of Toledo, the ancient capital of the Visigoths, using the Arabic language and characters in their public documents as late as the twelfth century, after the reconquest of the city. The suggestion that these Christians, who had become half Arabs, communicated to their brethren in the north of Spain, and even in other parts of Europe, a knowledge of Islamic culture, may, therefore, be readily accepted. The hypothesis is strengthened by the fact of the constant emigration of Mozarabs northwards from Andalusia. [...]

4. With the gradual reconquest of Spain by the armies of the Christian kings, the Mudejars, their subdued Moslem subjects, took the place of the Mozarabs in transmitting Islamic culture. The undeniable superiority of this culture commanded the respect of the Christians, and the kings were prompt to adopt the policy of attracting the Mudejar element, thereby contributing to the more rapid and easy assimilation of Moslem civilization. Further political alliances through marriage between the royal houses of Castile or Aragon and the reigning Moslem families were frequent.

Thus Alphonso VI, the conqueror of Toledo, married Zaida, the daughter of the Moorish King of Seville, and his capital resembled the seat of a Moslem court. The fashion quickly spread to private life: the Christians dressed in Moorish style, and the rising Romance language of Castile was enriched by a large number of Arabic words. In commerce, in the arts and trades, in municipal organization, as well as in agricultural pursuits, the influence of the Mudejars was predominant, and thus the way was prepared for a literary invasion that was to reach its climax at the court of Alphonso X or the Wise.

Toledo had throughout the twelfth century been an important centre for the dissemination of Arabic science and *belles-lettres* in Christian Europe. In the first half of that century, shortly after the city had been captured from the Moors, Archbishop Raymond began the translation of some of the more celebrated works of Arabic learning. Thus, the whole encyclopaedia of Aristoteles was translated from the Arabic, with the commentaries of Alkindius, Alfarabius, Avicenna, Algazel and Averrhoës; and also the master works of Euclid, Ptolemy, Galen, and Hippocrates, with the comments upon them of learned Moslems, such as Albatenius, Avicenna, Averrhoës, Rhazes and Alpetragius. Translated into the Romance language of Castile with the help of learned Mudejars and Hebrews, these works were in turn rendered into Latin by Christian doctors drawn from all parts of Christendom.»

28 I have quoted Asin Palacios to some extent and at some length because he seems to me to put the historical facts in the right perspective, but

at one special field we have to look closer: the Arabic influence, though it was strong in the scientific sphere, was even more pronounced in the realm of eros, which, as I pointed out, is also much emphasized by the Arabic alchemists. In the development of Sufism the coniunctio became nearly exclusively identical with the *unio mystica* of the initiate with God, but it generally began with the inter-human love experience which, understood in a Neoplatonic sense, slowly sublimated itself into the experience of God. When this culturally highly differentiated expression of love came to Europe, it influenced the already existing poetry and other expressions of love.

A. J. Denomy sums up: «The currents of philosophical and heterodox mystical thought that reached the South of France from the late tenth to the early twelfth century were Neoplatonism, Albigensianism, Arabic Neoplatonism and Arabic mysticism. Neoplatonism and Albigensianism were certainly there at the time of the first troubadours; Arabic philosophy and mysticism could have been there through the channels already indicated. These were the elements that helped to fashion the mentality and shape the mind of the South of France of that age not only in the courts and at the schools, but also among the people themselves. These were the factors that, so to speak, made that age Neoplatonically minded. We do not know where the first troubadours went to school nor by whom they were trained; we do know that wherever they went and under whomever they studied, they were exposed to these influences. The very intellectual atmosphere in which they lived and moved was saturated with them. Their poetry shows that they were trained men, at least in the art of composing verse and melody.»³⁴ At that time some of the great philosophers, mainly Avicenna, were translated in Spain and exerted a strong influence on scholastic philosophy, especially Roger Bacon, Albert the Great and St Thomas Aquinas. B. Carra de Vaux³⁵ has shown impressively how much these authors have been influenced by Avicenna even to the extent of bordering on heresy. His whole theory of the love of God has mainly influenced them, and the stress which they put on the importance of the *imaginatio* in the alchemical work is also due to him. In the same period, a considerable number of alchemical treatises were also translated into Latin, among others the *al-Māʾ al-waraqī* of Muḥammad ibn Umail.³⁶

³⁴ A. J. Denomy, 'An Inquiry into the Origins of Courtly Love', *Mediaeval Studies*, Vol. VI (1944), p. 257. See also Ibn Sīnā (E. L. Fackenheim ed.), *A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sīnā*, Chapter V: 'On the Love of Those who are Noble-Minded and Young for External Beauty', in: *Mediaeval Studies*, Vol. VII (1945), p. 218 ff. For the Arabic love poetry in itself, see J.-C. Vadet, *L'ésprit courtois en orient*.

³⁵ B. Carra de Vaux, *Notes et Textes sur L'Avicennisme Latin aux confins du XI-XIIIe siècle*.

³⁶ It was translated towards the end of the twelfth century in Spain.

30 Till today historical scholars cling to the idea that alchemy belonging to the natural sciences was transmitted with the latter to the West and constituted the beginning of Western chemistry. This is not completely true. Alchemy had a special position because, according to Avicenna, it did not belong to the ordinary natural sciences. *It was basically a kind of magic.* The underlying theory was the following: the adept submitted himself to the process of yoga meditation and of religious exercises of self-purification through which he came closer to the divinity. Now, in Islamic cosmology, the idea of Creation is different from ours. In the Judean-Christian cosmology God has created the world, but not entered it. From the Moslem point of view God has also created the world and remained completely out of it, but paradoxically at the same time works creatively in it by an activity of *creatio continua*. All miraculous events in nature are due to this activity of *creatio continua*. But even all ordinary natural processes are not solely due to a profane effect of causality, but simultaneously linked with God's creative activity.³⁷ When the adept, through his effort of self-purification, has come into touch with the divinity, he begins to participate in God's creativity and therefore he can work miracles. Alchemy belongs to this kind of miraculous magic. Gold for instance cannot be produced by any profane chemical techniques, but only by a miraculous effect of the sublimated soul of the adept. This Islamic viewpoint has been transmitted to Europe through Ibn Sīnā who formulated it quite clearly.³⁸

31 Alchemy according to Avicenna, and in his wake according to St Albert and St Thomas, belongs to a kind of magic. It is created by the *imagination* of the artifex, which produces—helped by astrological influences—a *magical transformation* of matter. Thus alchemy was dependent on the psychological condition of the artifex. The best description is found in the treatise *De Mirabilibus Mundi* which is ascribed to Albert the Great and which I consider genuine. Albert says: «I discovered an instructive account [of magic] in Avicenna's *Liber Sextus Naturalium*, which says that a certain power to alter things indwells in the human soul and subordinates the other things to her, particularly when she is swept into a great excess of love or hate or the like. When therefore the soul of a man falls into a great excess of passion, it can be proved by experiment that it [the excess] binds things [magically] and alters them in the way it wants, and for a long time I did not believe it, but after I had read the nigromantic books and others

³⁷ For this, see S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, p. 9 f.

³⁸ For details see M.-L. von Franz, *Aurora Consurgens*, p. 175ff., esp. p. 177. Ibn Sīnā now published: *Avicenna Latinus—Liber de Anima seu Sextus de Naturalibus IV–V. Edition critique de la traduction latine médiévale*, p. 64–68.

of the kind on signs and magic, I found that the emotionality of the human soul is the chief cause of all these things, whether because, on account of her emotion, she alters her bodily substance and the other things towards which she strives, or because, on account of her dignity, the other, lower things are subject to her, or because the appropriate hour or astrological situation or another power coincides with so inordinate an emotion, and we [in consequence] believe that what this power does is then done by the soul. Whoever would learn the secret of doing and undoing these things must know that everyone can influence everything magically if he falls into a great excess [...] and he must do it at that hour when the excess befalls him, and operate with the things which the soul prescribes. For the soul is then so desirous of the matter she would accomplish that of her own accord she seizes on the more significant and better astrological hour which also rules over the things suited to that matter [...] Thus it is the soul who desires a thing more intensely, who makes things more effective and more like what comes forth [...] Such is the manner of production with everything the soul intensely desires. Everything she does with that aim in view possesses motive power and efficacy for what the soul desires.»³⁹ It is clear from this text that basically alchemy was, for the author, produced by psychological factors.⁴⁰ Love in its initial form of desire was the main agency in this process of transformation, and linked alchemy with the whole love mysticism in Arabic religion and philosophy. It comprehended not only the higher form of love, but began in true Platonic tradition with *concupiscentia*. Even material things contain this desire towards perfection or 'form' (in the Aristotelian sense of the word) so that the whole of all existing things yearn ultimately for the unification with Allah (*ittiḥād*).⁴¹ Thus, for instance, every metal basically wants 'to become gold' and therefore the soul of the alchemist, which has been purified by its longing for contact with God, can produce a transformation of the metals. This basic idea links alchemy with the love mysticism of that time.

In addition to Denomy's indications Paulette Duval has (in my opinion successfully) proved that Spanish alchemy has influenced and penetrated into the cycle of the Grail legend.⁴² I am not specialist enough to

³⁹ A. Magnus, *De Mirabilis Mundi*, Cologne 1485, undated incunabel in the Zurich Central Library, Gal. II. App. 429/3. Some think that this treatise is genuine. Thorndike thinks that this is doubtful, and some think that it is spurious. See J. R. Partington, *Albertus Magnus on Alchemy, Ambix*, Vol. 1, 1937, p. 8.

⁴⁰ See M.-L. von Franz, *Aurora Consurgens*, p. 418.

⁴¹ See *A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sīnā*, see also S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, p. 53 ff.

⁴² P. Duval, *La pensée alchimique et le Conte du Graal*, Paris, 1979.

judge if her hypothesis that Chrétien de Troyes wrote his text for the Valois is valid, but she is certainly right that the whole world of the Grail legend is filled with a spirit of Eros which goes back to Mozarabic alchemical sources.⁴³

33 Not only in the *Minnesang* and in the novels of courtly love can we trace the influence of Arabic Eros. The mystical love of God of the Sufi has also reached the Western religious mystics,⁴⁴ but the most impressive proof among others is the book by Ramon Llull called *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*⁴⁵ written towards the end of the thirteenth century and showing clearly the influence of Ibn ʿArabī and al-Ġazzālī.⁴⁶ The famous 'Dark Night of the Soul' of St John of the Cross and the love mysticism of Theresa of Avila may also have been influenced in the same way. Ramon Llull initiated in his time a wave of interest for Arabic literature and it is in this connection that the main work of Ibn Umail has been translated in Spain.

34 It is because Sufi alchemy touches on religious matters that in 1317 (six years before the Council of the Canonization of St Thomas) alchemy was for the first time forbidden by the Church, though it was officially only condemned in its aspect of metal forging. It is interesting to note that alchemy as metal forging was condemned, but that the Bull of Condemnation does not touch upon the religious-magical aspect of alchemy. There were rumours at that time that the Pope himself was interested in the latter aspect of alchemy, but it cannot be proved. The religious alchemists probably hid away in an imitation of the Sufi secret societies, and therefore it is difficult to trace their activities. Wherever we find documents of this religious current in Western alchemy, Ibn Umail (referred to as Senior) is one of the highest authorities.

43 Ibid, p. 182 ff.

44 See M. Asin Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*. According to Asin Palacios even Dante's *Divina Commedia* is basically structured according to Islamic traditional visions of the beyond, which may have been transmitted partly directly and partly via some Christian legendary tales. See *ibid.* p. 177 ff. The whole idea of Beatrice as the guide to paradise can be found in close parallels in mystical Arabic texts. See *ibid.* p. 11 ff.

45 R. Llull, *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, edited by M. D. Johnston.

46 R. Llull, *Das Buch vom Freunde und Geliebten*, E. Lorenz (ed.), p. 11 ff. See also on the influence of Ibn ʿArabī in the edition of M. D. Johnston, p. xxii.