

## *Foreword*

As the term astrology means the practical application of astronomy to human use our response to it must necessarily hinge on our understanding of what it means to be human.

What is that 'favourable moment' which the Buddha urges us to grasp? Why does he congratulate those who 'have seized their moment' and lament those 'for whom the moment is passed'?<sup>1</sup> The explanation lies in the traditional<sup>2</sup> view of time. Illumination, or the goal of human existence, is instantaneous in relation to the long cosmic journey of passing time. It is a comprehension of Reality which comes 'in a flash' like lightning. This favourable moment or paradoxical instant suspends duration and places the recipient into a timeless present. This timeless present is paradoxical in as much as it is qualitatively different from that illusive 'profane' present that barely exists between two non-entities, the past and the future, and apparently ceases with our death. Neither does the 'profane' experience have any bearing on the prolongation, beyond time, that the 'favourable moment' brings, which can be likened to a glance 'outside' time.

For those of us who have been educated in the 'values' of modern Western industrial culture the traditional view of time is as difficult to grasp as is its unfoldment represented by the traditional symbolism of astrology.

<sup>1</sup> *Khanātitā; Samyuta Nikāya*, IV 126.

<sup>2</sup> Tradition in our present usage means the animating principle of a normal society or the 'presiding idea' which underlies and inspires the whole life of a people.

For the serious investigator, who is determined to get to the roots of traditional principles this small book is a gold-mine. It is specifically drawn from the perspective of the Islamic contemplative tradition, committed to written form by Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, and unfolds the timeless spectrum of the orders of being as they relate to time and space in 'our' world.

In this volume Titus Burckhardt has distilled the essential symbolism underlying spiritual astrology – as in contradistinction to divinatory astrology: '... for the individual curiosity, all "oracle" remains equivocal and may even reinforce . . . error . . .' As, '... man cannot remove the veil of his ignorance except by or through something which transcends his individual will.' In doing so he points with great clarity to the fundamental difference between this traditional viewpoint and the 'individualist' and 'historicist' viewpoint which contemporary Western opinion has inherited from the flood-tide of Aristotelianism, which invaded the Middle Ages and has dominated its world feeling ever since. So much so that few contemporary Western thinkers would even know of, let alone take into consideration, the principle, so fundamental to the tradition represented by Plato, as that of Perichoresis. This process, or 'permeation of the divine presence', arises from the 'platonic' teaching that states that the world of materiality is unequivocally dependent for its being and existence on the principal first cause, and as such is merely its furthest reflexion or exteriorised expression. As light both causes and permeates shadow, so the divine presence permeates, through perichoresis, to the heart of all materiality. Aristotelianism asserts that universals only have existence in so far as they characterize individual concrete things – thereby implying that universals only exist in the human mind that 'abstracts' them from 'things'. This inversion of the teaching of Plato's academy (that Aristotle left) gave rise to the eventual divorce of mind from matter and spirit from body and soul due to the irreconcilability of individual 'thingness' with the traditional doc-

trine of the total permeability or effusion of the divine presence recognisable as the Universals.

It is no mere chance that Ibn 'Arabi was surnamed 'Son of Plato' (Ibn Aflatun) because of this fundamental viewpoint within the revelation of Islam, that asserts the dependence of the sensible world on the intelligible world, and the intelligible in return on the ontological principle of Unity. To understand the starting point of this perspective of spiritual astrology one needs to make a definitive effort of reorientation; for we 'moderns' are almost unknowingly educated in the totalitarian philosophical empiricism of Aristotelianism.

The reward for the effort may not only open some very valuable doors onto the real significance of astrology in the traditional sense but those same doors may well lead out of the prison of 'historicism' to that 'favourable moment' where, as an integral person, we neither deny ourselves our own historic moment, nor consent to be solely identified with it.

KEITH CRITCHLOW



## I

THE WRITTEN work of the 'greatest Master' (ash-shaikh al-akbar) Sufi, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, contains certain considerations on astrology which permit one to perceive how this science, which arrived in the modern occident only in a fragmentary form and reduced only to some of its most contingent applications, could be related to metaphysical principles, thereby relating to a knowledge self-sufficient in itself. Astrology, as it was spread through the Middle Ages within Christian and Islamic civilizations and which still subsists in certain Arab countries, owes its form to the Alexandrine hermeticism; it is therefore neither Islamic nor Christian in its essence; it could not in any case find a place in the religious perspective of monotheistic traditions, given that this perspective insists on the responsibility of the individual before its Creator and avoids, by this fact, all that could veil this relationship by considerations of intermediary causes. If, all the same, it were possible to integrate astrology into the Christian and Moslem esotericism, it is because it perpetuated, vehicled by hermeticism, certain aspects of a very primordial symbolism: the contemplative penetration of cosmic atmosphere, and the identification of spontaneous appearances – constant and rhythmic – of the sensible world with the eternal prototypes corresponding in fact to a mentality as yet primitive, in the proper and positive sense of this term. This implicit primordality of the astrological symbolism flares up in contact with spirituality, direct and univer-

sal, of a living esotericism, just like the scintillation of a precious stone flares up when it is exposed to the rays of light.

Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi encloses the facts of the hermetic astrology in the edifice of his cosmology, which he summarises by means of a schemata of concentric spheres by taking, as the starting point and as terms of comparison, the geocentric system of the planetary world as the Medieval world conceived it. The 'subjective' polarisation of this system – we mean by that the fact that the terrestrial position of the human being serving as the fixed point to which will be related all the movements of the stars – here symbolises the central role of man in the cosmic whole, of which man is like the goal and the centre of gravity. This symbolic perspective naturally does not depend upon the purely physical or spatial reality, the only one envisaged by modern astronomy, of the world of the stars; the geocentric system, being in conformity with the reality as it presents itself immediately to the human eyes, contains in itself all the logical coherence requisite to a body of knowledge for constituting an exact science. The discovery of the heliocentric system, which corresponds to a development both possible and homogeneous but very particular to the empirical knowledge of the sensible world, obviously could not prove anything against the central cognition of the human being in the cosmos; only, the possibility of conceiving the planetary world as if one were contemplating it from the non-human position, and even as if one could make abstraction of the existence of the human being – even though its consciousness still remains the 'container' of all conceptions – had produced an intellectual dis-equilibrium which shows clearly that the 'artificial' extension of the empirical knowledge has in it something of the abnormal, and that it is, intellectually, not only indifferent but even detrimental.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>“ . . . The 'scientific errors' due to a collective subjectivity – for example that of the human kind and the terrestrial beings in general seeing the sun revolving around the earth – translate as true symbolism, and consequently 'truths', which are obviously independent of the simple facts which carry

The discovery of heliocentrism has had effects resembling certain vulgarisations of esotericism; we are here thinking above all of those inversions of point of view which are proper to esoteric speculation;<sup>2</sup> the confrontation of respective symbolisms of geocentric and heliocentric systems shows very well what such an inversion is: in fact, the fact that the sun, source of the light of the planets is equally the pole which rules their movements, contains, like all existent things, an evident symbolism and represents in reality, always from a symbolic and

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them in an altogether provisional manner; the subjective experience, like the one we have just mentioned as an example, has obviously nothing of the fortuitous. It is 'legitimate' for man to admit that the earth is flat, because empirically it is; on the other hand it is completely useless to know that it is round since this knowledge adds nothing to the symbolism of appearances, but destroys it uselessly and replaces it by another which could never express the same reality, all the while posing the inconvenience of being contrary to the immediate and general human experience. The knowledge of facts for themselves do not have, outside the interested scientific applications, any value; in other words one is either situated in the absolute reality, and in that case the facts are no longer anything, or one is situated in the domain of facts, and then in any case in ignorance. Aside from that, one must say again that the destruction of the natural and immediate symbolism of facts – such as the flat form of the earth or the circular movement of the sun – brings about serious inconvenience for the civilisation wherein they are produced, which is fully demonstrated by the example of the occidental civilizations." (Frithjof Schuon; 'Fatalité et Progrès', in *Etudes Traditionnelles*.)

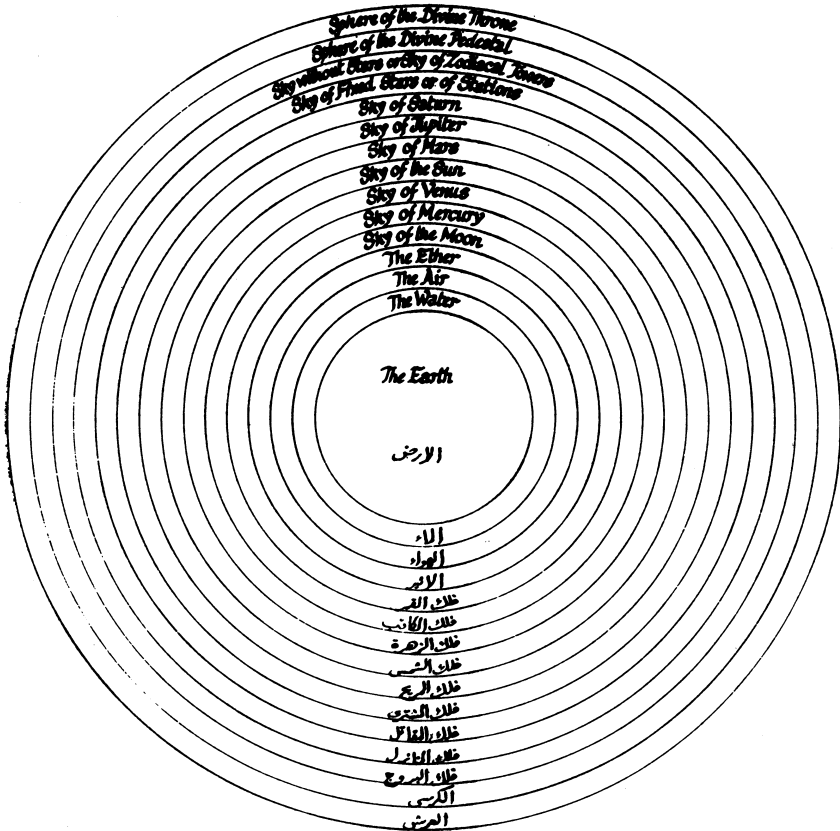
<sup>2</sup> There are indices that allow one to suppose that the Pythagoricians already knew of the heliocentric system. It is not excluded that this knowledge was always maintained, and that the discovery of Copernicus is in reality nothing other than a simple vulgarisation, like so many other 'discoveries' of the Renaissance.

Copernicus himself refers, in his preface – addressed to Pope Paul III – to his fundamental book, *On the Orbits of the Celestial Bodies*, to Hicetas of Syracuse and to certain citations of Plutarch. Hicetas was a Pythagorean; and Aristotle, in his book, *Of the Sky*, says that "The Italic philosophers, who are called Pythagoricians, are of a contrary opinion to most other physicians, because they affirm that the centre of the world is occupied by the fire, whereas the earth, which is a star, moves in a circle around this centre, thus causing day and night." Aristarcus of Samos, astronomer in Alexandria about 250 BC, taught equally the heliocentric system; in the same way Al-Birûnî, the famous Moslem compiler of Hindu traditions, recounts that certain Indian sages hold that the earth turns around the sun.

spiritual point of view, a complementary point of view to that of the geocentric astronomy.<sup>3</sup>

Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi englobes in a certain fashion the essential reality of heliocentricism in his cosmological edifice: like Ptolemy and like those all through the Middle Ages he assigns to the sun, which he compares to the 'Pole' (*qutb*) and to the 'heart of the world' (*qalb al-'âlam*), a central position in the hierarchy of the celestial spheres, and this by assigning equal numbers of superior skies and inferior skies to the sky of the sun; he amplifies nevertheless the system of Ptolemy by yet again underlining the symmetry of the spheres with respect to the sun: according to his cosmological system, which he probably holds from the Andalusian Sufi Ibn Masarraḥ, the sun is not only in the centre of the six known planets – Mars (*al-mirikh*), Jupiter (*al-mushtarî*) and Saturn (*az-zuhal*) being further away from the Earth (*al-ardh*) than the Sun (*ash-shams*), and Venus (*az-zuhrah*), Mercury (*al-utarid*) and the Moon (*al-qamar*) being closer – but beyond the sky of Saturn is situated the vault of the sky of the fixed stars (*falak al-kawâkib*), that of the sky without stars (*al-falak al-atlas*), and the two supreme spheres of the 'Divine Pedestal' (*al-kursî*) and of the 'Divine Throne' (*al-'arsh*), concentric spheres to which symmetrically correspond the four sub-lunar spheres of ether (*al-athîr*), of air (*al-hawâ*), of water (*al-mâ*) and of earth (*al-ardh*). Thus is apportioned seven degrees to either side of the sphere of the sun, the Divine (Throne) symbolising the synthesis of all the cosmos, and the centre of the earth being thereof both the inferior conclusion and the centre of fixation.

<sup>3</sup> That which renders irreconcilable the two systems is obviously not their 'optic' side, but the theory on gravitation related to the heliocentric system.



It goes without saying, that among all the spheres of this hierarchy, only the planetary spheres and those of the fixed stars correspond as such to the sensible experience, even though they should not be envisaged only within this relationship; as to the sub-lunary spheres of ether – which do not signify here the quintessence, but the cosmic centre in which the fire is re-absorbed – of air and of water, one should rather see a theoretical hierarchy according to the degrees of density, rather than spatial spheres. As for the supreme spheres of the 'Divine Pedestal' and the 'Throne' – the former containing the skies and