SEXUAL INTERCOURSE BETWEEN HUMANS AND DEMONS IN THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

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Esoteric and Exoteric

The term “esoteric” has a very specific meaning in the Islamic tradition. The Koran as well as other fundamental religious texts emphasize the difference between what is “apparent” and “outward” (zâhir) and what is “hidden” and “inward” (bâtin). Zâhir is everything that is obvious in our perceptions and thoughts (an empirical phenomenon, the meaning of a text), about the presence of which no doubt can be raised. Bâtin is what is not expressed outwardly (feelings for instance), what is hidden in natural phenomena, or concealed in speech. The “hidden” is, however, no less real than the “apparent.” On the contrary, if anything, the opposite is true. The very etymology of these two terms is significant in this respect. Zâhir refers to zahr, the back, while bâtin refers to batn, the belly. The image is clear: what is apparent in human life is actually the backside of reality, the less interesting part of it. The ‘belly’ of reality, the organism that gives life to it, is hidden from perception and common sense. This opposition between apparent and hidden can be applied to the entire universe. It reflects the structure of God’s manifestation in his creation: “He is the First and the Last, the Outward (al-Zâhir) and the Inward (al-Bâtin).”

The existence of a hidden dimension of reality is also reflected in Islamic culture generally, in which human knowledge is basically divided between exoteric and esoteric sciences. Only the exoteric ones—grammar, religious sciences, or medicine and astronomy—are officially taught: the orthodox doctors do not approve of the quest for esoteric sciences such as alchemy, astrology or magic. They often harshly condemn them as leading to heresy and the transgression of God’s orders;

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1 The opposition zâhir / bâtin was masterly explained in the main works of Henry Corbin, especially Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth, En Islam Iranien and A History of Islamic Philosophy. For a shorter summary of his thought, see Cheetham, The World Turned Inside Out, chapter IV.

2 Koran LVII 3.
but many Sufis consider them, on the contrary, as possible means of transforming the ordinary man into the Perfect Man.\textsuperscript{3} In any case, practically nobody denies that these sciences are in some way true, that they refer to reality and have efficiency. In other words, traditional Islamic societies are living in a world of two dimensions:\textsuperscript{4} while mainly living in the sensible world, they know about a series of boundaries—and openings—between that world and the dimension of the invisible one.

\textit{The World of Demons}

One of the most central tenets of esoteric knowledge in Islam is the link between human society and the world of the “demons.” “Demons” existed in Arabia before the rise of Islam. They were universally present in the common culture and daily life and highly relevant to the domains of illness and health, divination, and many psychic and intellectual phenomena, such as poetry or music. The belief in their existence continued in Islamic culture, but their function was modified and incorporated in the fabric of common Islamic beliefs and ethics. The function of demons in the Koran and the Sunni tradition is a rather paradoxical one. On the one hand, they are often mentioned. Sura LXXII of the Koran is even dedicated to them:

Say (o Muhammad): “It has been revealed to me that a company of the demons (jinn) gave ear, and they said ‘We have indeed heard a Koran that is wonderful, guiding to rectitude. We believe in it, and we will not associate with our Lord anyone.’”\textsuperscript{5}

These “demons” are most commonly referred to as \textit{jinn} (sg \textit{jinnî}, fem. \textit{jinmiyya}). The term stems from the Arabic root JNN and does not seem to be derived from the Latin \textit{genius}, as has been suggested by some scholars. The root JNN suggests the idea of being covered, dark, unseen.

\textsuperscript{3} See Corbin, \textit{Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth}, about the notion of “world of Hûrqâlyâ,” the “place” of the transformation of spirits into bodies and bodies into spirits, the realm of history beyond history. About alchemy specifically, see Part II, IX, 4.

\textsuperscript{4} Quite similar to the one described in Jeff Kripal’s interesting chapter “Sex with the Angels,” in Kripal, \textit{Esalen}.

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Koran} LXXII 1–2. The text goes on: “… The fools among us spoke against God outrage, and we had thought that men and jinn would never speak a lie against God. But there were certain men of mankind who would take refuge with certain men of the jinn, and they increased them in vileness, and they thought, even as you also thought, that God would never raise up anyone, etc.” See also Suyûtî, \textit{Laqt al-marjân}, 44–62.