

A Brief History

The previous lecture dealt with the question of locating the principal origin of Islamic *'irfan*, that is, whether there exists in the teachings of Islam and the lives of the Holy Prophet and the Imams a precedent that could have inspired a series of profound and subtle mystical ideas, on a theoretical level, and which could have prompted spiritual enthusiasm and mystical elation on a practical level. The answer to this question was seen to be positive. Now we will continue this discussion.

The genuine teachings of Islam and the lives of its spiritual leaders, so rich with spirituality and spiritual splendor, which have provided the inspiration for profound spirituality in the Islamic world, are not encompassed by that which is termed as *'irfan* or sufism. However, it is beyond the scope of these lectures to discuss other parts of Islamic teachings that do not bear this name.

We will continue our discussion on the branch that is labeled as *'irfan* or sufism, and obviously the limited scope of these lectures does not permit us to go into a critical research. Here we will try to give an outline of the currents and events that have occurred within this branch. For this purpose, it appears to be appropriate that we begin by providing a simple history of *'irfan* or Sufism from the beginnings of Islam until at least the 10th/16th century, before turning, so far as is practical in a venture such as this, to an analysis of the issues of *'irfan*.

What seems certain is that in the early era of Islam, that is throughout the 1st/7th century at least, there existed no group amongst the Muslims known as *'urafa'* or sufis. The name *sufi* was first used in the 2nd/8th century.

The first person to be called by the name *sufi* is Abu Hashim al-Kufi. He lived in the 2nd/8th century and he it was who first built at Ramlah, in Palestine, a hospice for worship by a group of ascetically-minded Muslims.¹ The date of Abu Hashim's death is not known, but he was the teacher of Sufyan al-Thawri who died in 161/777.

Abu al-Qasim Qushayri, himself an eminent *'arif* and *sufi*, states that the name *sufi* had appeared before the year 200/815. Nicholson also states that the name appeared towards the end of the 2nd century H. From a tradition contained in *kitab al-ma'ishah* (vol. V) of al-Kafi, it appears that a group – Sufyan al-

Thawri and a number of others – existed in the time of al-'Imam al-Sadiq (A) (that is to say, during the first half of the 2nd century H.) who were already called by this name.

If Abu Hashim al-Kufi was the first to be called *sufi*, then, since he was the teacher of Sufyan al-Thawri who died in 161/777, this name was first used during the first half of the 2nd century H., not at its end (as Nicholson and others have stated). Nor does there appear to be any doubt that the reason for the name being *sufiyyah* was their wearing of wool (*sufi*: wool). Due to their asceticism, the *sufis* abstained from wearing fine garments, and instead followed a practice of wearing clothes made of coarse wool.

As for the date this group first began to call themselves '*urafa'*', again there is no precise information. All that is certain, as confirmed by the remarks quoted of Sari Saqati (d. 243/867)² is that the term was current in the third century H. However, in the book *al-Luma'* of Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi, one of the reliable texts of '*irfan*' and sufism, a phrase is quoted of Sufyan al-Thawri which gives the impression that this term appeared sometime in the second century. ³

At all events, there was no group known as *sufis* during the first century H. This name appeared in the 2nd century H., and it seems that it was during the same century that the *sufis* emerged as a particular group, not in the third century as is the belief of some people.⁴

However, even though no special group existed in the first century by the name of '*urafa'*' or *sufis* or any other name, it does not imply that the eminent Companions were merely pious and ascetic persons and that all of them led lives of simple faith devoid of spiritual depth. Perhaps it is true that some of the pious Companions knew nothing more beyond mere piety and worship, yet a group of them possessed a powerful spiritual life. Nor were they all of the same level. Even Salman and Abu Dharr were not of the same degree. Salman enjoyed a degree of faith that Abu Dharr could not have withstood. Many traditions have come to us telling us:

If Abu Dharr knew what was in Salman's heart, he would (considering him a heretic) have killed him.⁵

Now we will list the different generations of the '*urafa'*' and *sufis* from the 2nd/8th to the 10/16th century.

¹. Dr Qasim Ghani, Tarikh e Tasawwuf Dar Islam, p. 19

². Farid al Din al Attar, Tadhkirat al-awliya

³. Abu Nasr al Sarraj, al-Luma, p. 427

⁴. Dr. Qasim Ghani, op. cit

⁵. Abbas al Qummi, Safinat al Bihar, under s-l-m

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