

Chapter 44: Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi

A. Life and Studies

Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, better known as Mujaddid Alf Thani, was the son of Sheikh ‘Abd al-Ahad Makhdum, who was a devout Muslim always anxious to derive spiritual enlightenment from saints. Sheikh ‘Abd al-Ahad Makhdum met Sheikh Allah Dad at Ruhtas and Sayyid ‘Ali Qawam at Juanput. He learned a great deal from both and then returned to Sirhind and lived there until his death in 1007/1598. A great master of all the branches of contemporary knowledge, he taught the prevalent textbooks on philosophy and religion to his students extensively. He was also an acknowledged authority on jurisprudence.

Besides, he taught mysticism to those who were eager to learn it, using *‘Awarif al-Ma‘arif* and *Fusus al-Hikam* as his texts. He was an ardent reader of ibn ‘Arabi and was an authority on his teachings. He acknowledged ibn ‘Arabi’s superiority in philosophy and spiritual insight, but he never followed him if he found him deviating from the Sunnah. He was such an ardent and close follower of the Holy Prophet and his teachings that he never left a *sunnah* (tradition) unpracticed. He loved the devotees of Khuwaja Baha’ al-Din Naqshband of Bukhara called the Naqshbands,¹ and his son inherited this love and devotion to them from him.

Sheikh Ahmad was born in 971/1563 at Sirhind. His name was Ahmad and his surname was Badr al-Din. From his father’s side, he descended from the Caliph ‘Umar. In his early childhood he was sent to a school where in a short time he learned the Holy Qur’an by heart. Then for a long time he was taught by his father. Later he went to Sialkot and there covered some more courses under the guidance of Kamal Kashmiri. He also studied some works on Hadith from Ya‘qub Kashmiri, a great scholar of the time. By the young age of 17 he had mastered a great deal of Islamic sciences and had begun teaching them to others.

He visited Agra where he met some great men of learning including Abu al-Faidi. After some time he accompanied his father to Sirhind. On his way home, he was married to the daughter of a noble named

Sheikh Sultan of Thanesar. On his return to Sirhind he stayed with his father and through his help established spiritual relationship with the Qadriyyah and Chishtiyyah schools of mysticism. Through the training received from his father, he learned the fundamentals of Sufism. In his studies too he had been greatly influenced by his father. He could not go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in his father's life-time, although he yearned to do so. He was anxious to serve his father during his life and could not leave him alone.

After his father's death in 1007/1598 he started on this long cherished pilgrimage. On his arrival at Delhi, he heard of the reputation of Khuwaja Baqi Billah as a saint from a friend, Maulana Hassan. He went to him promptly and was well received. The Khuwaja inquired of him about his intended pilgrimage and then wished him to stay with him for a week or so. He was greatly impressed by the spiritual attainments of the Khuwaja that he made up his mind to become his disciple. The Khuwaja was very fastidious in taking anyone as his disciple but he immediately accepted the Mujaddid as his follower and focused his entire attention upon him. The Mujaddid's heart became the seat of the praise of Allah and he made rapid progress in spiritual knowledge. Under the Khuwaja's guidance he was able to complete his Naqshbandi training in a few months. He was warmly congratulated and was invested with a gown as a symbol of the completion of his training. He went back to Sirhind and began to teach people. After the Khuwaja's death he used to go to Delhi at the 'urs² of the late chief.

B. The Shari'ah

An important period of his life is that between 1028/1618 and 1032/1622. One year of this period was spent in the prison of Gwalior and the other three with the Emperor Jahangir and his army. His increasing popularity aroused the jealousy of his rivals who poisoned the ears of the Emperor and reported him to be dangerous both to the Emperor and the State. The Emperor had faith only in the ascetics and hermits. He could not tolerate a widely popular Sufi in his land. Perhaps Asaf Jah and some other nobles had a hand in this intrigue against the Mujaddid. The matter was worsened still by his refusal to bow before the Emperor on the ground that it was against the tenets of Islam, with the result that he was imprisoned at Gwalior. He was released a year later, but he had to stay for a further period of three years with the army as a *detenu*. Two years before his death he was allowed to go to his home at Sirhind. There he died on the morning of the 28th Safar 1034/10th December 1624.

Some hold that the Sheikh's release was due to the fact that the Emperor had at last become his disciple and had repented of his action of the previous year, but others hold that the above view was not borne by facts.

It was the crying need of the time that there should appear a man who might have the boldness to oppose the worship of the Emperor by refusing to bow before him, and, thus revive the true spirit of Islam and the extirpate heresy. He fearlessly faced the displeasure of an absolute monarch and chose to go into imprisonment rather than renounce his own beliefs and principles. He stood firm as a rock

against the tide of the Mughul heresy introduced by the Emperor's father, Akbar the Great. He is called the Mujaddid because he started the movement of purifying Islam and restored its traditional orthodoxy. His courageous stand against anti-Islam practices resulted in a religious renaissance in India.

The method adopted by him to achieve his purpose was equally bold. He trained groups of disciples and sent them to all the Muslim countries and to the various cities of India to propagate what he regarded as the spirit of Islam. He especially asked them to make people realize the importance of the Sunnah and prepare them to counteract the forces of heresy and to observe and to make others observe the tenets of Islam. His letters to the great men of the Muslim world was given wide publicity. In them he discussed problems connected with Islam and its revival. He pressed the people to follow the Sunnah rigidly and to uproot heresy. He brought numerous noblemen and courtiers to his fold, and in this way tried to change the attitude of the Emperor and his Court.

The Mujaddid strictly adhered to religious practices and sanctioned by the Holy Prophet and was very hard upon those who coined excuses to violate them. He was an authority of *Fiqh* and Tradition. His knowledge was encyclopedic and he was endowed with critical insight in matters of religion. His views on mystical revelation and illumination, pantheism, pre-destinarianism, sectarianism, and Sufism are very important. Sheikh Ahmad's reforms can be easily divided into three categories: (1) call to the Muslims to follow the Sunnah and discard heresy (*bid'ah*), (2) purification of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) from the practices and thoughts which had crept into it through non-Muslim influences and (3) great emphasis on the Islamic Law.

1. Heresy and the Mujaddid's Opposition to It

Heresy implies an innovation. The '*ulama*' (theologians) had divided it into two categories, namely, the good innovation (*bid'at-i hasnah*) and the bad innovation (*bid'at-i sayyi'ah*). The Mujaddid says he can find no beauty, benefit or light in either. In many of his letters he is at pains to tell his correspondents that all heresy is reprehensible. He quotes many sayings of the Holy Prophet in denouncing it. He symbolizes every kind of heresy with dust, dirt, and pitch darkness and regards it as misleading. Those who practice heresy do so for lack of foresight and insight. The Holy Prophet said that heresy misleads people and uproots the Sunnah itself. When a heresy creeps into religion, it deprives the believers of traditional practice. He was of the opinion that Islam is complete in itself; heresy is a useless appendage of it.

Even if it appears right, it is in fact a blot on their fair face of Islam. Any approval of a heresy of disavowal of the completeness of Islam. In the course of time, the Sunnah would disappear, and heresy would prosper. Respect shown to an upholder of heresy is to deal a blow to Islam. Heresy is a cutting axe to religion and the Sunnah is a guiding star. To strengthen Islam heresy must be uprooted. "May it please the Lord," said he, "to show the '*ulama*' that no heresy is good."

2. Reforms in Sufism and the Nature of Sufistic Perfection

“If the contemporary Sufis are just, they should not follow their leaders but the Sunnah. They should never uphold heresy on the pre-text that their Sheikhs did so.”³ If a heresy appears in the guise of an inspiration, it is immediately accepted by the people as a long lost truth. For the long conversations and commentaries of the Sufis had been tending away from the religious law (*Shari‘ah*) and a time came in the history of Sufism when the Sufis began to proclaim that Sufism and the religious Law were poles apart. They did not show the respect that the law deserves. They regarded it as formal and ineffective and, as a result, religion and its values suffered much at their hands, though very few knew the harm that was being done. This attitude of the Mujaddid elicited an unqualified praise from Iqbal for him. Speaking of him he says, “He was the guardian of the Muslim faith in India whom God had given a timely warning.”

The Mujaddid said, “The Sheikhs who in their state of insensibility (*sukr*) praise infidelity and induce men to wear the Brahmanical thread⁴ are to be excused because they are not themselves. Those who follow them consciously in these matters are not to be excused because they do so while they have their senses.”⁵ The rectitude of speculative knowledge depends on its being in concord with theology, and the smallest departure from it is insensibility. According to him, someone asked Khuwaja Naqshband to define the Sufistic institution. He replied that the ultimate end of Sufism is achieved when the rational knowledge becomes revelational or inspired, and the abstract becomes concrete. He did not say that we should seek something over and above the revealed law. The non-essentials that a Sufi meets on his way to Sufistic perfection lose their importance when he reaches his destination. The Law alone is then seen as real. The Prophet received it through a messenger but the Sufis get it by direct inspiration from God.⁶

The Caliph ‘Umar was highly incensed when he was told that Sheikh ‘Abd al-Kabir Yamani was of the view that Allah has no omniscience. He did not attribute this remark to the Sheikh’s insensibility or unconsciousness. He rather thought it to be an infidelity, even if it was committed by the Sheikh with a view to being denounced by the world,⁷ as public denunciation was considered by some Sufis to be contributive to Sufistic perfection. “The true aim of Sufistic institution is to attain sound faith, which depends upon spiritual tranquility without which salvation is impossible. When this tranquility is reached, the heart becomes unconscious of everything but God.”⁸

3. Significance of the Shari‘ah

The divine law is connected with the soul and the spiritualization of the soul depends upon obedience shown to it alone. The Sufi learns this after his perfection.⁹ While still on their way to Sufistic perfection, many Sufis flounder on this mysterious road. One should never lose sight of the divine Law whenever one’s beliefs and deeds are involved.¹⁰ The Naqshbandi Sheikhs have sub-ordinated revelation to the divine Law (*Shari‘ah*) and with them intuition and inspiration are subject to the divine decrees. Ecstasy

should not be given priority to the divine Law. The Naqshbandis are never influenced by the senseless and exaggerated discourses of the Sufis. They never uphold ibn 'Arabi's *fass*¹¹ against the explicit verses of the Qur'an (*nass*).¹²

The light of God which is revealed on occasional flashes to others is to them constantly illuminating. Everything but His name is erased from their hearts, and even if they try for ages they can think of nothing but Him.¹³ The touchstone of the Sufistic revelations and intuitions should be the commentaries of the Sunnite theologians, for even the adherents to heresies and all those who go astray regard the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah together as the fountainhead of their beliefs. They misinterpret them only because of their perverted mentalities.¹⁴ The Sufistic discourse which is congruous with the Sunnite interpretations is agreeable, while that which is otherwise is not. Upright Sufis never transgress the limits set by the divine Law even in their ecstatic discourses, dealings, and philosophies. Whenever a Sufi in his ecstasy or transport opposes the Law, his revelation is a mirage. It should be interpreted and explained correctly.¹⁵ Perfection comes through meek submission to God, which implies submission to His Law. This is the best of faiths in the eyes of the Lord.¹⁶

You can tell an imposter from a sincere believer by their respective attitude to the divine Law. A truly faithful Sufi never transgresses the Law in spite of his insensibility and ecstasy. Despite his claim, "I am the True One," Mansur Hallaj used to offer five hundred *rak'at*¹⁷ every morning in submission to God even while he was chained in a prison cell. It is as difficult for an imposter to observe the tenets of the Law as to remove the Mount Caucasus from its place.¹⁸

According to the Mujaddid, the only duty performed by the theologians (*'ulama'*) is to issue decrees while it is the people of Allah (saints) who do the real work. An attempt at internal purification is to enable one to observe the divine tenets, one who is busy only in internal purification to the extent of neglecting the divine Law is an infidel and hence his revelations and intuitions are like those of an obstinate sinner. The way of uprightness is through divinity and the sign of the real internal purification is the sincere observation of and submission to the divine Law is an infidel and hence his revelations and intuitions are like those of an obstinate sinner.

The way of uprightness is through divinity and the sign of the real internal purification is the sincere observation of and submission to the divine Law. The restoration of the Sunnah and the obligatory prayers is the best of worships and will be rewarded in heaven.¹⁹ The Naqshbandi devotees dislike the mystical revelation that contradicts the Law and denounce the senseless wrangling of the Sufis. They do not like dancing and listening to music. They do not like loud recital of God's name for He is supposed to be ever with them. With them guidance and discipline depend upon one's submission to and acknowledgement of the prophetic institution; it has nothing to do with external trappings such as the cap or the genealogy of the Sheikh as is the case with the other sects.²⁰

C. Existential or Experiential Unity

C. Existential or Experiential Unity (*wahdat al-Wujud* or *wahdat al-Shuhud*)

In order to understand the rift somehow created between Islam and Sufism one must ponder over the philosophical aspect of pantheism. Pantheism was the real bane of Islam. The Mujaddid knew its fallacy and he was one of those who denounced it vehemently. He based his stand on the training he had received from his father and his Sheikh, Khuwaja Baqi Billah. The State of pantheism was revealed to him shortly after he had adopted the Naqshbandi way of approach to reality. He was anxious to understand the mysticism of ibn 'Arabi. The light of God and of His attributes dawned upon him and this, according to ibn 'Arabi is the ultimate end of Sufism.

For years he kept thinking that he had reached the state in which he had realized the ultimate, but all of a sudden this state vanished. Then he came to realize that union with God is only experiential and not existential; God is not and cannot be one with anything. God is God and the world is world. All that the Sunni theologians said in this respect was true. As the Mujaddid had loved pantheism much in the earlier stage of his life, he was rather uneasy at this change. Yet, with the new revelation, the veil was lifted and the reality appeared to him in its true form. This world is merely a *mark* of the existence of its Creator, and it merely *reflects* the various attributes of the Lord. It does not *consist* of these attributes. A pseudo revelation, he thought, like erroneous deductions in religious matters, may not be denounced, but it must not be followed, lest others be misled.

With the followers of ibn 'Arabi, pantheism is the final stage of Sufistic perfection, while in reality it is nothing but one of the states experienced by every devotee. After the devotees have passed this preliminary state, they walk on the right Path. Khwaja Naqshband says that all that is heard or seen or known is a veil. It must be negated with the word "none" (*la*). "I had accepted pantheism," says the Mujaddid, "as it was revealed to me and not because I was directed to it by someone else. Now I denounce it because of the right revelation of my own which cannot be denied, although it is not compulsory for others to follow..."²¹ The presence of the One means that the Sufi sees nothing except the One. The pantheist acknowledges the presence of the One in everything and thinks all besides it as nothing, yet the very same non-entity is regarded by him as the incarnation of the One.

Pantheism is not at all essential, because sure knowledge is possible without it, and sure knowledge does not entail the denial of the existence of others. The sight of the One is in no way a denial of the existence of the others. The prophets never preached pantheism, nor did they ever call the pluralists infidels. They invited people to the oneness of Being. No prophet ever preached that creation is an incarnation of the Creator. Their aim was to inculcate faith in the One Lord who is unique and has no like.²²

D. Revelation and Intuition

Only the Qur'an and the Sunnah are to be trusted. The duty of the theologians is simply to interpret these fundamental sources and not to add anything to them. The mysticism of the Sufis and their revelations and inspirations are to be accepted only if they conform to them, otherwise they are to be rejected. The promise of God is to unveil Himself to His good people in the hereafter and not here. The revelations and "lights" of which the Sufis are so proud are nothing but their own mental projections and fantasies in order to console themselves.

The open sight of God is absolutely impossible to people in this world. "I am afraid the beginners would be discouraged if I were to point out the drawbacks of these revelations and 'lights,' but if I remain silent, the true and the false shall remain undistinguished. I insist that these 'lights' and revelations must be judged with reference to the revelation of God on the Mount of Sinai, when Prophet Moses prayed for the sight of Him. Who can bear the sight of Him?"²³

"Abundance of miracles is not the sign of a devotee's spiritual superiority. A person who has no miracle to his credit may possibly be superior to others in certain respects. Sheikh Shaihab al-Din Suhrawardi says, "Miracles are a boon from God to render the faith firm, but the man who has been gifted with a firm faith does not require them; it is enough for him that his heart praises and remembers Him."

Miracles can be divided into two categories. Those of the first category comprise the transcendental knowledge of God and His attributes. These are beyond the sphere of rational inquiry and are revealed only to a few of His favourites. The second category is concerned with revelation about creation and information concerning this universe. Unlike the former, even imposters can have a share in the latter. The people having miracles of the first category have more chances to reach God than those having miracles of the second, but to the common man, the latter are more acceptable."²⁴

Ibn 'Arabi is reported to have said that some pious devotees were ashamed of their miracles at their death-beds. Why should they have been so if the miracles were the only true touch stone of a pious devotee's superiority? Numerous saints are unaware of their position and status but as they are not prophets they do not need the awareness of their position. Saintly men can invite people to the religion of their prophet without miracles. Their real miracle is to purify the souls of their disciples. The soul being immaterial, they have to turn their attention away from materialism. These people even without miracles are the sureties of peace and prosperity in this world.

The distinction between a true and a false devotee is that the former adheres strictly to the Law, and the latter adheres to his own whims. The man whose company inspires you to be more attentive to God is a true devotee.²⁵ Not even a prophet is safe from the evil designs of the devil. If a devotee is tempted by Satan he should judge his inspiration by its accord to the tenets of the religion of his prophet. If anywhere the divine Law is silent and the Satan's "inspiration" cannot be proved right or wrong, the "inspiration" should be regarded as questionable. The divine tenets are silent in matters which are

superficial, and, therefore, may neither be accepted nor rejected.

Sometimes, without any attempt on the part of the Satan to mislead us, we have false inspirations as in dreams. These false inspirations are the creations of our own fancy.[26](#)

E. The Religious Law

According to the Mujaddid, religious Law has three aspects: knowledge, actions, and fidelity. To acquire these aspects of the law it is necessary to win the pleasure of God which excels all blessings. Sufism and Gnosticism help in purifying one's soul by completing the important aspect of infidelity. They have no end in view but this. Ecstasy, "intoxication," and "illumination" are by-products of Sufism. They are not its ends. They are merely fantasies and projections in order to please the beginners. After passing these on his way, the Sufi has to surrender to the divine will, which is his real destination. One among thousands achieves pure fidelity. Blind men take the by-products for the principle articles and are, therefore, deprived of the truth. A Sufi has to experience these states before his acquisition of the truth.[27](#)

The Mujaddid himself experienced these intermediate states for years, and ultimately achieved the goal of fidelity. Those who think the Law superficial and regard gnosis as the right Path are misled. They are content with the states, the means and ignore the end.[28](#) The straight Path is the path of the Holy Prophet whose guidance the best. Internal purification completes the external and is not contradictory to it. When we submit devoutly to God's beloved, the Holy Prophet, we become His beloved.[29](#)

Submission to the Prophet's tradition (Sunnah) is the real bliss, while opposition to it is the cause of all disasters. Hindu *sadhus* or ascetics undergo much privation but all in vain, for it is not in accordance with the true Law. The most that such ascetics can achieve is some material gain which is transitory. The devotees of the religion Law are like dealers in diamonds who work less but gain more.[30](#)

On the completion of a Sufi's life, real pleasure is derived from the performance of obligatory prayers, while in the beginning non-obligatory prayers are more pleasant.[31](#)

The states of ecstasy, gnosis, and "illumination" are good if they are subservient to the law; otherwise, they are misleading. If not weighed in the balance of the Law, they are worthless.[32](#)

The Sufistic conduct helps one to abide by the divine Law. It controls one's lower passions and undermines their influence. It is neither antagonistic nor equivalent to the religious Law. It is rather subservient to it.[33](#)

Some people are punctilious in the observance of the form of Law, but they ignore its intrinsic truth and worth and regard salvation as their only aim. Some people achieve the truth but assert that they have achieved it through their own effort and not through the help of the divine Law and not of the spirit of it. Either group is ignorant of its intrinsic virtues and is deprived of the divine guidance. True theologians

alone are heirs to the prophets.[34](#)

Those who regard a saint (*wali*) superior to a prophet are senseless and are not fully aware of the attributes of prophethood which is superior to saint ship (*wilayah*) in all respects.[35](#)

The Mujaddid was a great religious enthusiast. The movement that he started in religion is still continued by his followers in various parts of the Muslim world. His heritage is indispensable for a modern reconstruction of religious thought in Islam. He was a Sufi but he did not think of Sufism as the sole aim of life. For him it was merely a means to an end, the end being complete and unconditional adherence and fidelity to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. For an essentially just estimate of his teachings one must consider him with reference to his times. His books are a valuable record of his practice and thought. He gave us a treatise on Sufistic perfection, but the best of him is found in three volumes of letters. The total number of letters in all these volumes is 535. With some exceptions, these are arranged in their chronological order. Five of his letters have been lost. They prove beyond doubt that the encyclopedic knowledge he had, and make a pleasant and enlightening reading.

Bibliography

● Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, *Maktubat-i Mujaddid*, Newal Kishore, Lucknow; Burhan Ahmad Faruqi, *Mujaddid's Conception of Tawhid*; M. Farman, *Hayat-i Mujaddid*, Board for Advancement of Literature, Lahore, 1958; M. Ikram, *Raud-i Kauthar: Jahangir, Tuzak*, Newal Kishor, Lucknow; Ahmad Hussain Khan, *Jawahir Mujaddadiyyah*; Badruddin Ibrahim, *Hadrat al-Quds*; Khuwaja Kamal al-Din, *Raudat al-Qayyumiyyah*; M. Amin, *Maqamat Ahmadiyya*; Mohammad Hassan, *Maqamat Imam Rabbani*.

- [1.](#) Devotees of Khuwaja Baha' al-Din Naqshband of Bukhara are called the Naqshbandis.
- [2.](#) 'Urs, a gathering to celebrate the death anniversary of a holy man.
- [3.](#) Maktubat-i Mujaddid, Book 2, Letter No. 23.
- [4.](#) A thread worn by the Brahmins around the neck.
- [5.](#) Maktubat-i Mujaddid, Bok 1, Letter No. 23.
- [6.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 30.
- [7.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 100.
- [8.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 161
- [9.](#) Ibid. Letter No. 172.
- [10.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 220.
- [11.](#) Fass, reference to Fusus al-Hikam by ibn 'Arabi.
- [12.](#) Nass, an explicit verse of the Qur'an.
- [13.](#) Maktubat-i Mujaddid, Book 1, Letter No. 243.
- [14.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 286.
- [15.](#) Ibid., letter No. 289.
- [16.](#) Ibid., Book 2, letter No. 42.
- [17.](#) A rak'at is the unit of a formal Islamic prayer and consists of praying in four different positions, standing, kneeling, sitting and falling down in adoration. Each prayer consists of several units.
- [18.](#) Maktubat-i Mujaddid, Book 2, Letter No. 95.
- [19.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 87.

- [20.](#) Ibid., Book 1, Letter No. 221.
- [21.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 31.
- [22.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 272.
- [23.](#) Ibid., Letter no. 217.
- [24.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 293.
- [25.](#) Ibid., Book 2, Letter No. 92.
- [26.](#) Ibid., Book 1, Letter No. 107.
- [27.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 36.
- [28.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 40.
- [29.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 41.
- [30.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 114.
- [31.](#) Ibid., Letter no. 137.
- [32.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 207.
- [33.](#) Ibid., Letter No. 210.
- [34.](#) Ibid., Book 2, Letter No. 18.
- [35.](#) Ibid., Book 1, Letter No. 251.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/history-muslim-philosophy-volume-2-book-4/chapter-44-sheikh-ahmad-sirhindi#comment-0>