

Part 2: The Sufis

Chapter 16: Early Sufis Doctrine

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A

Sufism like many other institutions became, early in its history, a fertile ground for imitators, impostors, and charlatans. The corrupting influence of these charlatans was regarded as a source of great confusion to all those who either wanted to follow the Path of Sufism; or wanted honestly to understand it, one reason why this was so was that Sufism by its very nature was a discipline meant not for the average but for those who always felt ambitious for something above the average.

Besides these charlatans and impostors who put on the garb of Sufism and exploited the credulous and the unwary, there was another group of men who unwillingly became the source of corruption and confusion. Since a Sufi more often than not was a man significantly different from the average, it was but natural that some among the Sufis went so far away from the norms of their societies and communities that they created doubts in the minds of their followers regarding the legitimacy of the commonly accepted norms.

Such doubts, if not properly tackled, could lead to the corruption of vast segments of the communities concerned, an inevitable result of which would have been either a widespread scepticism regarding the erstwhile universally accepted norms, or a universal condemnation of that which such exceptions among the Sufis stood for. Neither of these two courses was considered to be healthy, for, whereas the first would have resulted in the complete demoralization of all Muslim communities, the latter could have resulted in the condemnation not only of the exceptional Sufis, but of all Sufis without exception, as

deviants from the accepted norms.

Most of the early treatises on Sufism, like the one that will be referred to in this chapter, were written with two main aims in view: (1) to point out to all those who cared to read these works what Sufism really meant; and (2) to raise as strong a note of protest as possible against the current malpractices of the charlatans and impostors so that even those who may not have the time and the will to follow the path of true Sufism may at least escape the clutches of these charlatans.

The extent to which this two-fold desire of the early writers shaped their works is worth noting, because it is a measure of the dependability of these works. This is how the author of *Kitab al-Luma'*, one of the earliest, if not the earliest, Sufi texts now available, Sarraj (d. 456/1063), felt: "It is necessary for the intelligent among us that they understand something of the principles, aims, and ways of those who are the people of rectitude and eminence among this group (Sufis) so that we can distinguish them (genuine Sufis) from those who just imitate them, put on their garb, and advertise themselves as Sufis."²

"There are to be found (in our days)," he adds, "many of those who just parade as Sufis, point to themselves as genuine Sufis, and set themselves to the job of answering all sorts of questions and queries regarding Sufism. Everyone of these impostors claims to have written a book or two on Sufism which in reality he has filled with nothing but utter trash and absurdly nonsensical material in answer to equally meaningless and silly questions. Such impostors do not realize that it is not only not good but is a positive evil to do all this...."

The early masters discussed the Sufistic problems honestly and earnestly only to point out through their wise word the true answers to them. They turned to handle them only when they had severed their connection with the materialistic world, had chastened themselves through long and austere prayers, practices, and discipline, and had arrived at the clearest knowledge of reality, which knowledge found its full and necessary expression in their honest, sincere, and truthful actions. Such early masters used to be models of men who having burnt their boats of worldly affairs lived in constant contact with the Almighty."³

In his *Kitab al-Ta`arruf*, another very early work, Kalabadhi (d. 378/988) wrote: "Finally the meaning departed and the name remained, the substance vanished and the shadow took its place: realization became an ornament, and verification a decoration. He who knew not (the truth) pretended to possess it, he who had never so much as described it, adorned himself with it; he who had it much upon his tongue, denied it by his acts, and he who displayed it in his exposition, concealed it by his actual conduct."⁴

In his *Risalah*, al-Qushairi (d.465/1072) too talks in the same vein: "There set in decadence in this Path (Sufism) to such an extent that both reality and the path were lost to men. Neither were the old teachers to be found who could guide the young seekers of the true path, nor were the young stalwarts to be seen anywhere whose life one could take as a model. Piety left us bag and baggage. Greed and avarice became the rule of the day. And all hearts lost genuine respect for the Shari'ah."⁵

Later on, the author of *Kashf al-Mahjub*, 'Ali Hujwiri (d. c. 456/1063), came out even in stronger terms against what was prevalent in his days : “God has created us among men who give the name of *Shari'ah* to all that their base selves crave for, and who give the name of honour and science to all those tricks with which they seek worldly power and glory, and who call double-dealing the fear of God, and who label the art of concealing hatred of men in their hearts the virtue of tolerance.”⁶

'Attar, who came much later, is perhaps, just because of that, more explicit than his predecessors: “Ours is the period in which this mode of talking (the truth) has taken on the veil of complete concealment. It has become fashionable with the charlatans to parade as the wise and the virtuous, and the genuine men of love and insight have become rare like anything. We are living in such times that the evil-doers have pushed the good and the virtuous into complete oblivion.”⁷

The great concern for truth that all those writers felt comes out indirectly also in the special mode of recording and reporting statements from great Sufis which all of them generally (and al-Qushairi especially) adopt. Practically every point that al-Qushairi makes, regarding every feature, major or minor, of Sufi way of life, is supported by him with three types of evidence. (1) Some statement from the Qur'an, better than which there is no basis for any principle governing the life of the faithful. (2) Some *hadith* or some incident in the life of the Holy Prophet. (3) Some comment or some incident in the life of a great Sufi.

So far as the first of these is concerned, we know, the matter is very simple. Nobody can afford to misquote the Qur'an, for the danger of discovery is always there. As to the second and third types of evidence, the risks of misquoting are always there. It was to avoid these risks that scholars of Hadith had devised the special techniques which came later on to be known as techniques of *isnad* (the method of basing traditions on the authority of narrators), and *Asma' al-Rijal* (the chain of narrators supporting a tradition). The care that the Hadith-writers took regarding their *isnad* and its various links was so great that it became the model of authentic reporting in all historical writings. Al-Qushairi follows this technique of Hadith-writing in practically everything he reports and every point regarding the practices of the Sufis he makes, to such an extent that nearly half of his long treatise consists of nothing but the *isnad*.

B

Although none of our sources goes beyond the fifth/eleventh century, we have evidence, in these very sources, that people had started taking interest in Sufism, and in using the words *al-tasawwuf* and *sufi*.

Sarraj starts by repudiating the view that the word *sufi* is of recent (relative to Sarraj's days) origin and that the people of Baghdad were the first to use it. He thinks, on the other hand, that the word was current in the days of the *Tabi'in* (the Successors of the Companions of the Prophet) as well as the *Tab' Tabi'in* (the Successors of these Successors). By implication, he would say, although he does not verbalize it, that the word was current even in the days of the Prophet and his Companions, because, as he states explicitly, it was current in pre-Islamic days.

To show that the word *sufi* was current in the days of *Tab' Tabi'in*, Sarraj quotes a comment from Sufyan of Thaur: "If it were not for Abu Hashim the Sufi I would not have understood the true meaning of ..." [8](#)

It is easy to identify Sufyan of Thaur's period if one were to recall the well-known story of Qadi Shuraib's appointment as the Qadi of Baghdad by the Caliph Abu Ja'far Mansur. Sufyan, according to Hujwiri, was one of the original four great saints and scholars of the day whom the Caliph had called up to select from among them the one who was really fit to administer justice to the people of his vast empires. [9](#)

To show that the word *sufi* was current in the days of *Tabi'in*, Sarraj quotes a comment from Hasan of Basrah: "I saw a Sufi going round the Ka'bah; I offered him something, but he did not accept it saying..." [10](#)

That Hasan of Basrah belonged to the period of *Tabi'in* is borne out by Hujwiri who includes him among the eminent Sufis of this period. [11](#) The exact part of this period to which Hasan of Basrah belonged is brought out by 'Attar who mentions that Hasan was a child when the Prophet was still alive, and on growing he took 'Ali bin abi Talib or his son Hasan as his preceptor. Hasan had met, according to 'Attar, a hundred and thirty Companions of the Prophet of whom seventy had fought at Badr. Hasan died in 110/728. [12](#)

Sarraj anticipates the question why none of the Companions of the Holy Prophet was ever called a Sufi if this word was current during his time. He answers this question by emphasizing that since the honour of having the Prophet as one's preceptor in person and having worked with the Prophet for the glory of God was in the eyes of every true believer the highest honour, nobody ever thought of calling the Companions of the Prophet by any other name. It was for this reason that he whom God gave this distinction was considered to be the embodiment of all that was the noblest in a Sufi without his being called so. [13](#)

To show that the word Sufi was current in the pre-Islamic days Sarraj quotes from the "History of Mecca" by Muhammad bin Ishaq bin Yasar, and from others, that there was a period in the history of Mecca when everybody had gone away from Mecca so that nobody was left there to pay homage to the Ka'bah and to go round it. During these days a Sufi used to come from a distant place in order to go round the Ka'bah in the prescribed manner. If this story is true, Sarraj points out, then it is evident that the word *sufi* was current in the pre-Islamic days, and was used for men of excellence and virtue. [14](#)

Having brought out that the word *sufi* was current even in pre-Islamic days, Sarraj argues that it is derived from *suf* which stands for coarse woollen clothes which had come to be accepted as the conventional dress of the pious, even of the prophets, among the Semitic people. And to show that it was an established custom among the Arabs to refer to men by their specific conventional garb rather than by their specific attributes and traits, Sarraj quotes from the Qur'an: ***wa qal al-hawariyyun***, emphasizing that the Companions of Jesus Christ were referred to by their white garb rather than their virtuous traits. [15](#)

The two comments from Sufyan of Thaur and Hasan of Basrah quoted by Sarraj as evidence of the fact that the word *sufi* was used by *Tab' Tabi'in* as well as *Tabi'in*, have been quoted by several later authors too. Dr. Zaki Mubarak, author of *al-Tasawwuf al-Islami fi al-Adab wa'l-Akhlaq* (second edition, 1954), quotes the comment attributed to Hasan of Basrah from 'Afif al-Din 'Abd Allah bin Asad of Yafa'i's book *Nashr al-Mahasin al-Ghaliyah fi Fadl al-Aslah al-Maqamat al-'Aliyyah*, and the comment attributed to Sufyan of Thaur from Zahr al-Adab of Abu Ishaq al-Husri (who must not be confused with Abu al-Hasan 'Ali son of Ibrahim al-Husri al-Basri, a pupil of Shibli, who died in the year 371/981 and from whom Sarraj himself quotes quite a few comments). Even if these later authors had ultimately taken these comments from Sarraj, which is not improbable, their quoting them at least points to the fact that they did not regard Sarraj's point of view altogether unacceptable.”¹⁶

Sarraj's view that the word *sufi* was current in pre-Islamic days is supported similarly by Abi al-Farab ibn al-Jauzi, Zamakhshari, and Firuzabadi. Dr. Zaki Mubarak quotes the following extract from ibn al-Jauzi's book *Talbis Iblis*: “Mubammad ibn Nasir related to us from Abi Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Said al-Hibal who said: 'Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Ghani ibn Said al-Hafiz said: I asked Walid ibn al-Qasim: What is it on account of which a person is called a Sufi? And he answered: There were a people in the pre-Islamic days known as al-Sufiyyah; they had given up every worldly thing for the sake of God Almighty, and had made Ka'bah their permanent abode, and place of worship.' Those who lived like them came to be known as al-Sufiyyah.”¹⁷

Kalabadhi mentions that there had been seventeen Sufi writers before him who had published the sciences of illusion in books and treatises, and eleven Sufis who had written on conduct.

Al-Qushairi states explicitly in one place that the word *tasawwuf* had been used by people before the second/eighth century: “Those among the Sunnites who took extreme care in keeping their contact with God alive and saving themselves from the paths of negligence came to be known by the special name of *ahl al-tasawwuf*. And this name for these leaders of the pious became well known among people before 200/815.”¹⁸

Men who followed the Path of Sufism had started using the word *sufi* as part of their titles and names long before *Risalat al-Qushairiyyah* was composed.

Hujwiri traces back the use of the word *sufi* even to the Holy Prophet; for example he remarks in one place: “And the Prophet, peace and blessings of God be upon him, said, ‘He who hears the voice of the people of *tasawwuf* and yet does not take their words to heart is listed in the eyes of God as one of the negligent ones.’”¹⁹

C

Sufism went through considerable development and modification as the Muslims came into contact with peoples of other races and cultures in the course of their history. Consequently, what came to be known

as Sufism later on must be distinguished from what Sufism was in its early days. For, in spite of a great deal of what in later Sufism may be recognized as nothing but an elaboration of what was there earlier, it would be instructive to find out at least what the earlier form was. The ideal thing from this point of view would be to go back to the writers of the first and second/seventh and eighth centuries. But unfortunately the sources available to us do not go so far back. We will have, therefore, to be content with whatever can be culled from the sources available.

Qushairi makes a large number of statements about the characteristics of a true Sufi of his own days or of two or three generations earlier. Hujwiri holds practically the same view; only his account is more detailed.

One of the first things that Qushairi emphasizes regarding a Sufi is that he is absolutely convinced that of all the paths of life open to a man his path is the best. This is how Qushairi expresses it: “And the grounds on which their path was built were stronger than the grounds on which the paths of others were established, be they men of tradition and culture, or men of thought and intellect” [20](#)

Having felt convinced that Sufism is the best of all the paths, the Sufi has to take a few decisions regarding his relation to God, man, and the world. For it is in the light of these relations that he can be distinguished from others. In a way these relations constitute the criteria on the basis of which a genuine Sufi could be distinguished from those who just pretended to be so.

Out of these three types of relations the Sufi's relation to God is the most important, because the other two, strictly speaking, are derived from and based on it. Qushairi makes the following significant statements in connection with the Sufi's relation to God.

1. The first and foremost thing is that one's belief in God should contain no element of doubt. It should not be contaminated with new-fangled notions and misleading concepts, and should be firmly rooted in self-evident facts. [21](#)

Doubt in this context means vagueness about the attributes of God and scepticism regarding His existence. Obviously for the Sufi to avoid this vagueness and scepticism is possible only if he relies on whatever has come down to him by way of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. That this is so is pointed out by the warning against “new-fangled” notions and “misguiding concepts.” What these notions and concepts were, one can easily find out from what both Qushairi and Hujwiri bring under the heading of Malahidah and Qaramitah, etc. But what is most remarkable in this connection is the emphasis the Sufi lays on factual evidence, for he believes that the purely conceptual is not the only relation man can have with God; this relation can be experiential too.

2. A person's relation to God should be so thorough, comprehensive, and intimate that it would lead him to feel as if he lives and does everything not because he is doing it all, but because God is doing it all. In identifying himself with God he would go through the double process of losing his mortal self in Him and experiencing Him in every act of his own self. As a consequence of this the Sufi, from the very

beginning, endeavours to have a life about which it may be truly said that it is a life with and in Him.[22](#)

3. Another way of putting the point stressed above is that the Sufi not only stops referring all his acts to his mortal self, but he builds up the positive attitude that it is the divine will which must be accepted by the Sufi as supreme, not on this or that occasion, nor in such and such particular situation, but always, and in every situation of which his life is composed.[23](#)

4. The Sufi's relation to God is a pure relation in the sense that it is a relation just between him and his God without any material link.[24](#)

5. This relation rids man of all occupation with affairs worldly and mundane.[25](#)

6. The Sufi must regard himself as having been created for nobody and nothing except God.[26](#)

Regarding their relations to their fellow-beings and the world at large, the early Sufis were quite explicit in emphasizing that the *Shari'ah* is the framework within which these relations have to be built and maintained. With this in view they enjoined on every Sufi to pursue all the sciences on which the *Shari'ah* is based;[27](#) it was enjoined especially that he should seek enlightenment about the way the Holy Prophet lived his life so that the Sunnah might become the guiding light for him in everything he does and every relationship he builds.[28](#)

While the different schools of Sufis had each its own unique pattern of Sufi techniques, they were all agreed on one common framework of ultimate reference, and that was the framework of the *Shari'ah*.[29](#)

Apart from emphasizing that for a Sufi it is necessary at every stage to keep the *Shari'ah* in view as the ultimate criterion, the early Sufis seldom missed to point out that those who did not care much for the *Shari'ah* got themselves involved in confusion and contradiction. The early Sufis were always anxious that their fundamental position must be clearly distinguished from that of the orthodox scholars and the theologians, as well as the innovators and the sophists.

The distinction between the Sufi's position and that of the orthodox theologian lies in the fact that the theologian regards the Law (*Shari'ah*) and Reality (*Haqiqah*) as one and the same, while the Sufi maintains that the two are so different from each other that unless one explicitly recognizes the difference, one is apt to commit a fundamental error.[30](#) Reality from this point of view is a special aspect of God, such that man can never completely comprehend it, whereas the *Shari'ah* is a code of human conduct which man can and must aspire to understand and act upon as completely as possible.

The identity of reality and the *Shari'ah* which the Sufi attributes to the theologian does not appear to be easy to understand. Going by what one finds in the writings of the leaders of the four schools of *Fiqh*, one would say that the theologian is very logical and cautious in his views regarding the attributes of God. He would be the last person to identify the *Shari'ah* and the *Haqiqah*, for whereas the understanding of *Shari'ah* requires no special faculty other than the one which an average mortal

requires for solving the problems of his daily life, the understanding of *Haqiqah* requires a special capacity with which the prophets alone are endowed.

Regarding the distinction between the Sufis and the innovators and sophists, it is pointed out that while the Sufis hold that the *Shari'ah* and *Haqiqah*, in spite of their theoretical distinction, always operate in intimate relation, the innovators maintain that the *Shari'ah* is operative only so long as a man has not established contact with reality; for whenever he does establish this contact, the *Shari'ah* stops being operative and becomes altogether useless and futile.[31](#)

The broad significance of this distinction is that the early Sufi never regarded himself as completely free from the bonds of the *Shari'ah*. He never dared claim himself, as some of Carmathians and others did, as law unto himself, or as a lawgiver to others.

Apart from these distinctions between the position taken up by the Sufis on the one hand and theologians, Carmathians, etc., on the other, the early Sufi felt the need of another distinction; and that was the distinction between his attitude towards the *Shari'ah* and that of the average Muslim. He held that, while for the average man of religion a large number of conveniences and concessions are permissible within the framework of the *Shari'ah*, there are no such concessions and conveniences for the Sufi. The latter does not believe in sparing himself so far as the rules and regulations of the *Shari'ah* are concerned. For him there is no "take it easy" in the *Shari'ah*. The early Sufi believed in an extremely high level of conformity with the Law. As there is no transgression for the Sufi, there is no relaxation for him. Even the relaxation permissible to others is a threat to him.[32](#)

This unsparing attitude of the Sufi is not the result of his belief in asceticism *per se*. It is rather the logical result of his basic attitude towards God which is his starting point, and by virtue of which alone he is justified in calling himself a Sufi. The concessions given by the *Shari'ah* to an average Muslim are determined by his station in life in so far as he accepts the rights and obligations conferred or enjoined on him by the various groups of which he willingly accepts the membership. For the Sufi there is no such membership of social groups, to begin with; and, therefore, he can claim no special rights and obligations for the fulfilment of which concessions and conveniences within the *Shari'ah* may be necessary.

This point becomes clear when one compares the attitude of the Sufi with that of the ascetic. Whereas the ascetic believes in the strategy of now sacrificing this asset or resource, now that in his search for goodness, the Sufi believes in an all-out bid to reach God. There is nothing too precious, too dear, or too delicate to be spent and expended in the Sufi's endeavour at reaching the fountain which alone can quench his thirst.[33](#)

It would be easier to understand this attitude still further if we bear in mind why the early Sufi regarded the *jihad* with the self as the bigger and the more difficult and worthwhile form of *jihad* than the *jihad* against the political enemy with the help of the sword. For the Sufi engaged in the *jihad* against himself,

all actions stemming from his narrow personal considerations lead to evil directly or indirectly.

This belief, that everything that is narrowly selfish and personal must directly or indirectly lead to evil, is closely related, in the mind of the early Sufi, to his attitude towards God as the only reality, which in technical language is known as *tawhid*. It is the Sufi's acceptance of *tawhid* as basic and fundamental that helps him build the right type of relation with God without which there is nothing in his life because of which he may be called a Sufi. It would be necessary, therefore, to state clearly what *tawhid* meant to the early Sufis.

A Sufi like Junaid of Baghdad believed that *tawhid* means that a man has the knowledge, as sure as any scientific knowledge today would be, that God is unique in His timelessness, and that there is none like Him, and, further, that nothing and nobody can carry out the actions which He, and He alone, is capable of carrying out.³⁴ On another occasion Junaid puts his ideas about *tawhid* thus: It is the maximum of certainty with which you believe that all motion as well as lack of motion of things created is the act of God.³⁵

Ja'far al-Sadiq explained *tawhid* by saying: He who thinks that Allah is in some thing, or of something, or on something, commits the sin of making things other than God His equals, because if God be on something it would mean He is being supported or carried by that something, and if God be in some thing it would mean that He is encircled by that something, and if He is of something it means that He is in time and in space.³⁶

Abu 'Ali Rudhbari expressed what *tawhid* meant to him by saying: God is other than that which man's thinking and imagining makes Him out to be, because He Himself says in the Qur'an, "There is nothing like Him and He hears all and sees all."³⁷

Abu 'Ali al-Daqqaq, the teacher of Qushairi, puts his ideas about *tawhid* in one pithy comment: Somebody asked a Sufi where is God, and he replied, "Woe be to you, you wish to see with your physical eyes where God is."³⁸

Husain ibn Mansur thought the first step in *tawhid* means denying the possibility of there being an equal of God as completely as possible.³⁹ Husri regarded that *tawhid* is based on five principles: (1) absolute negation of God's temporality, (2) complete assertion of the eternity of God, (3) relinquishing of lands and abodes, (4) separation from brethren, and (5) complete disregard of that which one knows and that which one does not know.

Explaining the third principle, Hujwiri says: It means the forsaking by the disciple of the established ways of seeking comfort and convenience for one's own self.

While explaining the last one of the principles, he says: Man's knowledge of things is built upon the answers to his own hows and whys provided by his own intellect, imagination, or observation; all that such man-made knowledge asserts about *tawhid* is contradicted by the true notion of *tawhid*, and that

which man's ignorance regards as *tawhid* is contradicted by man-made knowledge itself. Hence *tawhid* is neither encompassed by that which man knows, nor by that which man does not know.⁴⁰

Offering a positive comment of his own, this is how Hujwiri expresses what *tawhid* means: It is the sifting and absolute distinguishing of the eternal from that which is in time, in the sense that you must not regard the eternal as subject to the laws which govern that which is in time. You must not regard being in time as in any way similar to not being in time. You must accept God to be eternal and yourself to be in time. Nothing that is yours, or is like you, can be attributed to Him, and nothing which is an attribute of His can qualify you, because there is no mixing of the eternal and that which is in time; the eternal was there even before the birth of the possibility of the becoming of that which is in time.⁴¹

Keeping in mind the simple, almost naive, formulations of *tawhid* in the comments given above, one cannot help thinking that the men responsible for these formulations were not so much experts in philosophical polemics, as they were practical men concerned primarily with the guidance of their disciples. None of these formulations can stand the rigour of logical analysis, and yet every one of the formulations can provide a framework of practical conduct.

It is in view of this that, in spite of discerning traces of syllogistic pattern here and there, one must regard the efforts of the early Sufis as primarily the result of their training in the traditions of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, rather than the influences, Greek or Manichaeian, of philosophical thought, to which men like Qushairi and Hujwiri, and their predecessors like Junaid, must have been exposed. It took several centuries more for these philosophical influences to become practically the core of Sufi thinking. But during the period with which we are concerned Sufi thinking was mostly free of such influences.

The early Sufi believed that once he had set the pattern of his life in the mould of the attitudes and relations, described somewhat in detail above, he was ready to make a start in realizing his ultimate ambition, namely, the ambition of experiencing God in such a way that he might be able to say, like every Sufi: "What for others is just a matter of conjecture and vague hypothesis is for him there like the most certain entity, and what for others is a matter of conceptual understanding of God is for him something to be experienced as an existent about the reality of which there can be no possible doubt, so that he can sing with the poet:

"My night is aglow with the beauteous grandeur of the face,
While the darkness of night envelops everyone else,
While others are enshrouded in the pitch darkness of night,
I am experiencing the brilliant light of the day."⁴²

But how he should make a start, and what exactly he should do after having made a start, are matters of controversy among the Sufis. These controversies are more keen and intense among the later Sufis than among the early ones. The intensity of these controversies among the later Sufis can be judged from the simple fact that, as we come out of the period of early Sufism and get into the later period we

find no Sufi who is not anxious to link himself to one of the orders like Qadriyyah, Chishtiyyah, Naqshbandiyyah, Qalandriyyah, Shattariyyah, Uwaisiyyah, Suhrawardiyyah, Malamtiyyah, etc.

Among the early Sufis, on the other hand, we find practically no trace of such anxiety. For example, one finds little mention of such orders in Qushairi, though Hujwiri, who came after Qushairi, shows a good deal of order-consciousness. This order-consciousness of Hujwiri, which most probably reflects the order-consciousness of his contemporary Sufis, finds expression in a discussion of such orders as: al-Muhasibiyyah, al-Taifuriyyah, al-Junaidiyyah, al-Qassariyyah, al-Saiyariyyah, al-Suhailiyyah, al-Kharraziyyah, al-Nuriyyah, etc.

Without going into a detailed discussion of what among the early as well as the later Sufis constituted the basis of inter-order distinctions, one can safely say that at least one basis of such distinctions was just this matter of how one should make a start, and what one should do after having made a start. It seems every one of these orders, more the later ones than the earlier, had its own prescribed technique.

That in Kalabadhi and Qushairi there is little mention of Sufi orders – and Hujwiri discusses them with a good deal of keenness – indicates only that whereas the specific techniques of the respective orders might have been introduced in their rudimentary form in the days of the masters after whom the orders came to be known, it took several generations of followers and practitioners to recognize the merits of these techniques and give them their adequate and more or less perfected forms.

If one could, therefore, overlook the rudiments of techniques which some of the early Sufis might have introduced for the benefit of their respective groups of disciples, one could discover a large body of precepts which constituted the universally accepted techniques which all early Sufis regarded as indispensable. It is such techniques that Qushairi emphasizes in his chapter: “The Last Words to the Disciples,” and it is to some of these that we must now turn.

The first step which is regarded absolutely necessary by Qushairi in this connection is that the disciple should seek a preceptor and put himself entirely under his guidance. For, if the disciple does not do that and relies entirely on his own initiative and efforts, he is never going to succeed.⁴³

The disciple who has no preceptor finds Satan himself acting as one.⁴⁴ Without a preceptor no disciple can achieve more than the mastering of industrious techniques of piety which by themselves never lead to his seeing the light and achieving an experiential contact with the Creator.⁴⁵

The early Sufis regarded reliance on just one's own initiative as misleading, perhaps because they considered the experiences of a beginner to be mostly theoretical, for when he thinks he is in contact with reality, he may actually be just imagining things; or he may be a victim of illusions and hallucinations. If it is just the disciple's own insight, limited as it is in the beginning, and nothing else, on which he has to depend, he will find it almost impossible to distinguish between the genuine Sufi experiences and what he is at the time experiencing.

If, on the other hand, he is under the guidance of an established master and preceptor and observes the

discipline, he is in no danger of falling a victim to illusions and hallucinations; and in case he does fall victim to such confusions, he has, in his preceptor, one who can bring him back to the right path. The preceptor can do it because he is in actual living contact with reality, and his first-hand experience of reality can help the disciple verify whether his own experiences are genuine or otherwise.

This prerequisite, that every disciple must take a preceptor or else he is doomed, raises several issues which were discussed in detail by most of the early Sufis. One of these issues was: Is not the *Shari'ah* enough for a Muslim? Must the disciple accept the position that the framework of the *Shari'ah* is of necessity inadequate?

The most popular answer to such a question among the early Sufis was that in the *Shari'ah* there is room for the average, below average, as well as the above average. That which is for the above average in it is rooted in that segment of the *Shari'ah* which the Holy Prophet bequeathed only to the chosen few of his Companions, for it was meant only for them, and not for the common man.

What distinguished this segment of the *Shari'ah* from the other segments was that an average man's code of conduct could be complete without it, and yet it did not clash with it. To the average man it was something within the *Shari'ah* and, at the same time, over and above the *Shari'ah*, in so far as he needed it.

The discussion of who the chosen few were, for whom this segment of the *Shari'ah* was meant, and what their distinguishing characteristics were, will be too detailed for us to enter into here. Suffice it to say that they were the ones who, on the one hand, had the laudable ambition of shaping their whole lives, and not just parts of it, on the model of the Holy Prophet, and who, on the other hand, were regarded by the Prophet as adequate and competent personalities for carrying the extra load of intimate insight into the nature of Reality, that is, God.

It was from this point of view that the early Sufis regarded the *Shari'ah* of the average Muslim as just not enough for him. And it was to make up for the deficiencies of the average man's *Shari'ah* that he sought the help, guidance, and discipline of a preceptor, belonging to a line of preceptors ultimately ending up with the Holy Prophet from whom the first man in the line got his unique insight.

One additional reason which is sometimes offered by some early Sufis as an explanation for the necessity of a preceptor is that every genuine insight into God's being is an experience of a magnitude altogether beyond the capacity of an average mortal. The collapsing of the Prophet Moses at getting just a glimpse of His being is cited by them as an extreme example of it. If a disciple is lucky enough, through just his own endeavours, to get such an intimate insight into the being of God, then left just to his own personal resources he may collapse and find further progress altogether impossible.

The early Sufis' insistence on every disciple taking a preceptor raises some other issues altogether different from the ones we have discussed so far. The pre-Islamic Arab tribes insisted on certain groups of their members specializing in their genealogical trees, customs, war-records, naturally under some

teachers. Likewise the early Islamic period saw schools of *Tafsir*, *Fiqh*, etc., coming into existence.

The pattern of pupil–teacher relationship was, therefore, not altogether unknown to the early Sufis. But what the pupil in all these fields learnt from the teacher fell under the heading of knowledge in the usual sense of the term. He who had more knowledge and information could impart it to him who was prepared to sweat for it. The question arises: Was this type of pupil–teacher relationship the model of the disciple–preceptor relationship in the Sufis' special field?

There is no simple answer to this question. That the Arabs were familiar with the possibility of one's having knowledge of the phenomena other than the natural ones goes without saying. That the Jews and the Christians among them were familiar with the knowledge of the divine, distinct from the mundane, is also well known. But what is not clear is whether in the days immediately preceding Islam the disciple–preceptor type of relation was developed and cultivated in an institutionalized form or not.

For, on the one hand, we have the Semitic institution of the Prophet who by virtue, not of any ascetic practices of his own, but by virtue merely of divine blessing, is chosen to have living contact with the Almighty and, thus, become His agent for leading the Semitic people to the righteous path; and, on the other, we have the institutions of the Rabbi and the *Rahib*, who by virtue of the ascetic practices to which they devote their entire lives can acquire some sort of contact with the Almighty which puts them above the average mortal. The Rabbi and the *Rahib* in this sense are in the same category as the *Kahins* of the pagan Arabs, i.e. men who through the practices they learnt from their masters were thought to have achieved a contact with reality which could not have been achieved by those who did not have the benefit of those practices. Of course, the reality with which the Rabbi and the *Rahib* establish contact must be distinguished from the reality with which the pagan *Kahin* established contact.

If one looks at the disciple–preceptor relation of the early Sufi against this cultural background of the Semitic peoples, it is easy to see how much of it is influenced by the Jewish and Christian practices. But that is not tantamount to calling Sufism un–Islamic. Strictly speaking, the Sufi disciple–preceptor relationship is as different from its Jewish and Christian models as Islam is different from Judaism and Christianity, for the roots of such models of relations go into the over–all systems from which they spring.

The Sufi disciple–preceptor relation would be un–Islamic if it could be demonstrated that the features which distinguish it from its Jewish and Christian models are not derived from Islam but are, rather, derived from sources other than Islamic. One could say, without going into further discussion; that these extra–Jewish and extra–Christian elements in the systems of the early Sufis were not derived from sources other than the Qur'an and the Sunnah. And one could cite, in support, cases like that of Shibli, the preceptor, and Husri, the disciple. Shibli told Husri in the very beginning of their relationship that if between one Friday and the next, when he had to come to Shibli, i. e., for one whole week, any thought of anything, or any being other than God entered his mind, his coming to Shibli was altogether forbidden.⁴⁶

The case of Shibli and Husri is instructive from another point too. It illustrates in a simple and concrete form what exactly the Sufi preceptor does for his disciple. To think of nothing and to live a life involved in nothing but God, not only for one whole week, but week after week, is the least that is expected of a beginner. Such a way of life is easier described than actually lived. Life as an average mortal lives presents no parallel to this kind of involvement.

For the Sufi, especially the beginner, in spite of his having selected the Path of Sufism, is still a member of a living society which does not stop making demands on him; and he needs attending to so many other things just to survive and remain strong enough to carry out the task that the Shari`ah prescribes for him even in the context in which he has put himself. To carry out adequately all this and yet let no thought other than that of God enter his mind even for the fraction of a moment seems, at the face of it, quite an impossibility.

The only parallel one finds in ordinary life is that of a lover. The lover is seldom forgetful of his love in spite of all his activities of daily life; rather, he does everything ultimately for the sake of his beloved. Even so the Sufi does everything for the sake of his beloved, God. Once this becomes possible, acts not only like those of the prescribed five prayers a day, but even those remotely connected with praying, become acts carried out by him with God constituting the constant frame of reference.

The case of an ordinary lover is easier to understand for the simple reason that, as we all know, there is a lot within us which can never find expression or satisfaction without one's being in love. The person with whom one is in love offers a living answer to so many of the problems of the lover's personality that, without being in love with just such and such a person, the lover might have remained incomplete himself.

In so far as there is this personal, specific, and concrete element in every lover-beloved relation, it falls below the Sufi-God relation. But in so far as every genuine lover-beloved relation means the living by the lover a life which, even when it does not appear to be lived for the sake of the beloved, is actually coloured by the tender thoughts of the beloved deep in the heart of the lover, the lover-beloved relation offers the only parallel in ordinary life for the Sufi-God relation of the type Shibli demanded of Husri.

How the Sufi comes to fall in love with God, the unseen, is one of the greatest mysteries of Sufism. One may, however, safely infer that unless there is a preceptor this would be impossible for a beginner. The conceptual unseen somehow must be made experiential, for otherwise the Sufi can never have a more personalized and intimate understanding of Him than just an intellectual grasp of that which His logically defined nature can provide.

One may say that the preceptor helps his disciple fall in love with God first by turning the intellectual acceptance of God by him into an emotional acceptance. Once the disciple has worked through this stage, and succeeded in converting his own intellectual acceptance of his Creator into an emotional acceptance, he is ready for the next stage, the stage of finding this emotional acceptance of the Creator

so overwhelming that every other reality, social, biological, etc., is completely subordinated to it. And if one were to go into it one may find that these are just the first stages in the Sufi's long, life-long, career in God.

Since our purpose at present is not so much the detailed description of the various stages in the Sufi's development as the finding out of how the preceptor helps his disciple in falling in love with God, we will stop at this point. But before we pass on to the next point we must stress one thing: it is all very well to try to explain the preceptor-disciple relation in terms of modern psychology, but we must not overlook the fact that this in itself is no more than a conjecture.

Instead of relying on such explanations the best thing would be to go back to the accounts of the Sufis themselves with an open mind. If and when they open their lips to describe how they came to fall in love with God and what happened to them from that point on, we must lend credence to their word, for otherwise we shall be left with no data on which to build our own explanations. Unfortunately, there is very little in the literature concerning the early Sufis which could throw light on the actual experiences of the disciple in his progress and development, and we have, consequently, to be content with just the hints we find here and there.

Even the most intimate emotional involvement of the Sufi with the Creator does not result in his losing the perspective of his material surroundings. Account after account of a genuine Sufi's life will convince even the most sceptical that, if at all, the over-all perspective of a Sufi is more realistic than the perspective of even the most realistic of the ordinary mortals among whom he has to live. Keeping this in mind it would not be very difficult for any student of Sufism to reject the charge usually levelled against the Sufis that they are mostly unrealistic persons wrapped up most of the time in the pseudo-universe of which God, a distorted father image, is the centre.

For the early Sufi, who was lucky to have met many of those who had the privilege of seeing the Holy Prophet and learning the Islamic way of life through their personal contact with him, God was the Being not of mere conceptual nature, but rather a Being who was responsible for the Heavenly Journey of the Prophet; the Being to whom in their hour of distress they could turn and call aloud: "When is Allah going to help us!" and the Being from whom they expected to get the response in concrete terms which their anguished hearts desired. For such early Sufis God was not a pseudo-father image;. He was rather the most real and living Being, and the ultimate refuge of those lost in delusions and hallucinations.

But when all is said and done we must admit that the techniques the preceptor employs to emotionalize the disciple's intellectual grasp of God are mystery to all save those who are lucky enough to enter into such a relation with a preceptor. All that we can do by way of making an effort at an intellectual and theoretical understanding of these techniques is to describe and discuss briefly such of the hints as Qushairi gives in the chapter mentioned above.

One of the first things which the disciple learns to do in order to establish his relation on a firm and

operative footing is to put himself completely into the preceptor's hands. This attitude of complete faith in and reliance on the preceptor may lead the disciple sometimes into actions which, to all intents and purposes, go against the most explicit injunctions of the *Shari'ah*. But the disciple, in spite of his awareness of what the *Shari'ah* demands of him, must obey the preceptor. This aspect of the preceptor-disciple relations has been emphasized by the early Sufis as much as by the later ones. And it came in for very strong criticism from the orthodox theologians.

But, in spite of the emphasis the early Sufis laid on the role of the *Shari'ah* in their lives, they justified this attitude of blind obedience of the preceptor, on the ground that it was just a passing phase in the development of the beginner, and a necessary phase because, without it, it was impossible for the beginner to get out of the personal and self-centred frame of reference which throughout his life up to the point he took a preceptor had been his only operative frame of reference. The way Qushairi puts the whole idea is: when the disciple has rid himself completely of the influence of his worldly position, status, and wealth, it becomes incumbent on him to set right his relation with God by deciding never to say no to his *Shaikh*.[47](#)

Once the disciple has put himself completely in the hands of his preceptor, the chances are that he will soon start having experiences of reality which till then were altogether unknown to him. This first contact with reality might not always be conducive to happy results. Sometimes the novice feels the urge of communicating these novel and marvellous experiences of his to anybody and everybody just to test whether he still is in possession of his senses; sometimes he communicates with others to share his delight as well as his agony with them and seek strength from such a sharing of experiences; and sometimes he communicates with others because of some other emotional urges. All this is forbidden. He should keep his experiences of reality as his most precious personal secrets to himself and divulge them to nobody except his preceptor. [48](#)

Although the early Sufi writers have given no explicit reason for this injunction, their general tone suggests that the first experiences of reality of a Sufi are based on such a delicate relation between him and his Creator that unless extreme care is taken the Sufi runs the risk of losing all capacity for such experiences. It was felt that until the newly developed relationship between the beginner's personality and his Creator is properly stabilized he should be as watchful and jealous of this unique achievement as possible. And there is no way of doing that better than sharing all such experiences with the preceptor, for he can, through his identification with the disciple, lend him his own strength and stability.

Having worked with the disciple through these early experiences, the Shaikh finds out the strength as well the weaknesses of the disciple. In the light of this understanding the preceptor then selects one of the various names of the Almighty and takes him through an involvement with it in such a way that, by the time he finishes this period of training, he is completely influenced by it in everything he does.

There are several stages in this which the disciple must pass through under the watchful supervision of the Shaikh. He first repeats this name of the Almighty with just his tongue. Then he puts his heart and

soul into it to such an extent that it is not just the tongue which utters the name of the Almighty, but even his heart and soul utter nothing but this name. Then the disciple is told to keep engaged in the uttering of the name all the time and continue thus till he feels actually as if he is with his heart and soul occupied with and engaged in nothing but his Creator. [49](#)

It is at this last stage that the disciple achieves for the first time that involvement with the Almighty which alone makes it possible for him to go on in his endeavour to achieve an infinitely progressive type of involvement with Him.

The beginner's ability to achieve a view of the universe around him as nothing but that aspect of Being which is signified by the particular name of the Almighty, on which the master trained him, depends a great deal on the influence exerted on him by the master's personality. But apart from this there is a considerable amount of hard work which has to be done by the beginner himself by way of long prayers, series of night-long vigils, self-denial in food, sleep, rest, etc. This hard work which is planned and prescribed by the master has to be carried out by the disciple, however arduous and inconvenient it may be. To this hard work the early Sufis gave the name of *mujahadah*.

The true significance of *mujahadah* is realized only when one finds in the accounts of the early Sufis how much of the first experiencing of reality depends on it. Hujwiri holds, for example, that *mushahadah* (i, e., the first seeing of the Almighty with the mind's eye) can never occur without *mujahadah*.[50](#)

One explanation of the significance of the beginner's hard work (*mujahadah*), in so far as it is a necessary condition for his first contact with reality (*mushahadah*), is that it is a process of disciplined prayers and ascetic practices which ultimately results in such a refinement of the Sufi's personality as to rid it of all that is base and low in it. This disciplined and refined personality is more ready to receive the first vision of reality than the original personality of the beginner which basically is self-centred and crude.

But even the most stringent discipline of this type (*mujahadah*) is not considered by the early Sufis to be the sole and necessary means for the first contact with reality (*mushahadah*). As Hujwiri puts it, all such discipline is the Sufi's own work, but this work brings the proper reward in its wake only when the Creator wills it.[51](#)

Why the early Sufis, in spite of rating the Sufi's labour so high, did not recognize it as the necessary means for the first contact with reality, was perhaps due to the fact that they had at the back of their minds the possibility that this very hard labour could produce in the Sufis a sense of self-righteousness verging on conceit. And this conceit was the one thing which, they thought, had been the cause of Satan's downfall, about whom the Qur'an is very explicit: he refused and felt conceited.[52](#) It was with this in mind that the early Sufis regarded the first contact with reality always a matter of grace rather than something earned by the Sufi just because of his having worked so hard.

The first contact with reality is regarded by the Sufis as just the beginning to which there is no end,

because reality is infinite. But the beginning has a unique importance. Without it there would be, as one might say, no series of contacts to follow. Although there is not much explicit mention of it in the accounts of early Sufis, scores of accounts of later Sufis bear out the fact that sometimes a beginner may toil year after year in fruitless vigils and fasts and may find his labours completely unrewarded.

There is a kind of a barrier between the mortal self of the Sufi, on the one hand, and the glorious Being of the Creator, on the other, which must be broken for the infinite series of evermore-intimate contacts between the two to follow. It is the first crack in this barrier, which, in spite of its being just a crack, gives it its unique significance. For without it there is no possibility of the more adequate removal of the barrier which has yet to come.

What happens after the first contact between the beginner and his Creator is a secret which nobody has ever completely revealed, for the simple reason, among others, that the experiences of the Sufi from this point on are on a plane altogether different from the plane of the average mortal. Communication between the Sufi and the average mortal is consequently extremely hazardous, if not altogether impossible. If the Sufi uses the language of the average mortal, he may mean one thing and actually say another; and if he uses the language he creates in order to give expression to his unique experiences, he may not be understood at all.

All that we are in possession of, therefore, in the writings of the early Sufis regarding the states and relations through which they pass after the first crack in the barrier between them and their Creator, is a collection of carefully coined and scrupulously selected terms which some of them employ to convey something at least of what they see in the course of their journey into the Infinite.

Two such terms are station (*maqam*) and state (*hal*). Each one stands for a specific type of development the Sufi goes through. The basis of distinction between them is the same as the one between *mujahadah* and *mushahadah*. Station is the general term which covers all those stages which after the initial contact with reality are considered achievable through the Sufi's own toil and labour. State, on the other hand, covers all those states which are the result of the ceaseless flow of grace of which the Sufi remains the recipient as long as he does not falter and remains steadfast in his pursuit of reality. This is expressed by Hujwiri in the following words: *Maqam* is consequent upon one's own actions, *hal* is one of the blessings; *maqam* is one of the rewards which are earned by the Sufi, while *hal* is one of the blessings conferred on him independently of his actual actions [53](#)

That of the almost infinite series of stations a perfect Sufi may achieve only a few, is explicitly mentioned by the early Sufis. But we know which the first is and which the last, for Hujwiri sums up the whole thing in two sentences:

(1) *Tawbah* (renunciation of all that had been evil in the Sufi's life up-to-date) is the beginning of the series of *maqamat*; [54](#) (2) *rida'* (absolute satisfaction with the state in which God keeps the Sufi) is the last of the series. [55](#)

Hujwiri indicates what he believes to be the true relation between *maqam* and *hal* by adding: *Rida'* is the last of the series of *maqamat* but the first of the series of *ahwal*. This shows that in spite of the earlier impression that the two lines which intersect at many points, the correct theoretical position is that *ahwal* begin where *maqamat* end. This is in keeping with the basic attitude of the Sufi that in whatever he achieves he is in the last resort indebted more to his Creator than to his own personal endeavours. This point of view looks more logical too.

If *maqamat* are achieved by the Sufi through his personal endeavour, the series cannot be infinite merely because his personal endeavour must have a limit. *Ahwal*, on the other hand, since they are based on acts of the grace of the Infinite, must of necessity be infinite as a series. The two series could not run parallel; and if one has to end before the other begins, it must be the finite, for the infinite will never come to an end.

The discussion of the *maqamat* being a finite series of states, and *ahwal* being an infinite series of states, through which a Sufi may travel, raises an interesting issue. Are we really justified in believing that the Sufi's *ahwal* constitute an infinite series of states of development to which there is no end? Whatever else one might say in answer to the question, within the framework of the *Shari'ah*, the answer in the affirmative is completely ruled out. There must be a point at which the development of the Sufi must stop in order to remain short of the status of a *nabi* or a *rasul* (a prophet without a book, or the one with a book).

Another interesting point that comes out of the discussion of the early Sufi's concept of *maqam* and *hal* is related to his attitude towards the problem of free-will. One can infer from the early Sufi's attitude, regarding *maqam* and *hal*, that with regard to the former he believes in individual freedom and initiative as well as responsibility, and regarding the latter he believes that individual freedom and initiative can take him only up to a point and no further.

Another pair of terms that was common among the early Sufis was that of knowledge (*'ilm*) and gnosis (*ma'rifah*). The difference between the two is brought out first by pointing out that, whereas the theologians (*'ulama'*) make no distinction between them, the Sufis believe that the one must never be confused with the other. For the theologian all sure and certain knowledge is *'ilm*; therefore, *ma'rifah*, in the sense in which the Sufis use it, is also *'ilm* and nothing else. They consequently think that "the possessor of knowledge" (*'alim*) and "the possessor of gnosis" (*'arif*) mean one and the same thing. But, as Hujwiri points out, the theologians contradict themselves when they assert that whereas *'alim* is a descriptive term and can be used for God, the term *arif* cannot be used thus.[56](#)

The Sufis think that between knowledge and gnosis there is a basic distinction which should never be lost sight of. Knowledge, in their eyes, is that which in the last resort, when analysed, never takes us beyond empty verbal form; gnosis, on the other hand, is that awareness which when analysed ends up in direct experience of concrete facts, processes, and things. Knowledge, therefore, seldom influences one's real conduct, while gnosis can seldom remain without influencing it. From their point of view,

knowledge is a rudimentary form of gnosis. Consequently, the possessor of knowledge may not at the same time possess gnosis, whereas the possessor of gnosis must have at one stage possessed knowledge.[57](#)

Apart from this way of distinguishing gnosis from knowledge, the early Sufis tried to bring out the distinction in yet another way. This they did by emphasizing that, whereas in the case of one's knowledge regarding something communication is both possible and desirable, in the case of one's gnosis it is neither possible, nor desirable. In order fully to appreciate this distinction between the two modes of knowledge which the early Sufis regarded basic and fundamental one must keep in mind the fact that in their eyes it is only the knowledge of the ultimately Real which can develop from knowledge into gnosis; apprehension of other facts, things, or processes can never develop beyond knowledge and, therefore, must remain short of gnosis.

Theoretically, this implies the impossibility of gnosis and the possibility only of knowledge of one's own self.[58](#) From this point of view, the attitude of the early Sufi so far as knowledge of reality is concerned is as different from that of the positivist as of any traditional metaphysician.

Another way in which Hujwiri tries to bring out the distinction between knowledge and gnosis is that knowledge can be acquired, while gnosis is a gift of God;[59](#) therefore, it can never be a substitute for gnosis.

All these distinctions between knowledge and gnosis are summed up by Qushairi in what he relates from his preceptor, Abu 'Ali al-Daqqaq: Gnosis is achieved by one who has knowledge of the Real in all the various aspects and then carries out his dealings with everybody within the constant framework of reference to God, gets rid of his own base features ... and does not permit even a single thought to enter his mind which attracts him to anything but God ... he who has achieved all this is known as a gnostic and his state is known as that of gnosis. Such a person achieves gnosis of his Creator in proportion to his estrangement from his own self.[60](#)

Keeping this statement in mind, one could say that the involvement of the gnostic with his Creator is an involvement as concrete and actual as one can think of; it is not mere conceiving of this or that virtue and just imposing on oneself the intellectual framework thus evolved.

Another pair of terms popular among the early Sufis is that of *fana'* and *baqa'*. As to the definition of these terms there is considerable agreement between the early Sufis. But when they come to interpret these definitions in detail, differences crop up. This is illustrated even in the attitudes of Qushairi and Hujwiri. Qushairi maintains, he whom the glory of reality overwhelms to such an extent that he observes neither in itself, nor in its effects, nor in the form of its traces and tracks, anything other than reality, is described as one who has achieved *fana'*, in respect of things created, and *baqa'* in respect of the Creator.[61](#)

Hujwiri, on the other hand, maintains: *Fana'* is the complete loss by the mortal self of the conditions of

his being, and *baqa'* is his being lost in the vision of the Real. He achieves *fana'* through the vision of his own actions and *baqa'* through the vision of the acts of God. His dealings with others are coloured by reference to Him and not to his own mortal self. Hence, he who loses all that is mortal and finite in his mortal self achieves permanence proportionately in the vision of divineness of the Real. [62](#)

This withdrawing from one's own self, and everything else, into the Creator is easier to understand if we take into consideration an explanatory comment of Qushairi: So far as his evil actions and conditions are concerned, *fana'* of the mortal self means his getting rid of all traces of these as completely as possible; while in respect of his own self and other persons and things, *fana'* means just the loss by him of his consciousness of his own self and that of other persons and things as the frame of reference for his actions ... for when he is said to have achieved *fana'* with regard to his self and other persons and things, it is still recognized that his self exists and other persons and things exist too; only he has lost consciousness of his self, on the one hand, and of other persons and things, on the other. [63](#)

Summing up all this one could say *fana'* means the complete disappearance of three things: (1) the bad actions, tendencies, and conduct, (2) the low and base self, and (3) the world at large. So far as the first form of *fana'* is concerned, the disappearance means their disappearing altogether from existence; so far as the second and third forms of *fana'* are concerned it means that, in spite of the self and others still being in existence, the Sufi has become oblivious of their existence.

Hujwiri interprets *fana'* and *baqa'* still in another way by connecting the two with the unity of God (*tawhid*). Both *fana'* and *baqa'* are rooted in one's being sincere in accepting unity, for, when one accepts unity one must also accept as being completely in the hands of God. One who is, thus, in the hands of Another has the status of one who has achieved *fana'*. Such a person must accept his complete helplessness.

For him there is no other status than that of a person who has been made what he is by the Lord. So he must build up the permanent attitude of total submission (*rida'*) towards his Creator. Anybody who interprets *fana'* and *baqa'* in any other way than this, i, e., regards *fana'* as the actual disappearing of the mortal self, and *baqa'* as the actual permanence in the Real, is no other than a sophist. [64](#)

That which distinguishes this comment of Hujwiri's from Qushairi's comments in general, and the one that follows in particular, is the consciousness of the corrupting influences that the Carmathians, Malahad, etc., had started exercising in his days. He wished to keep the definitions of *fana'* and *baqa'* as precise as possible, lest they should become tools in the hands of those who were interested in getting Sufism rid of its roots in the *Shari'ah* and *Tawhid*.

This is how Qushairi describes *fana'* and *baqa'* in the comment particularly pointed out above: "When a person has achieved *fana'* of his self, as described so far, he goes from the vision of his *fana'* into the higher stage of his actual *fana'*.... The first stage in this ascent is the *fana'* of his self and all its attributes through his permanence in the attributes of the Real. Then comes the second stage of his losing his

status in the attributes of the Real and achieving a vision of God Himself. And last of all he loses his status in the vision of the reality by merging himself completely in the being of the Real.⁶⁵

One thing that, in all fairness to Qushairi, must be pointed out regarding this last comment of his is that in spite of his mode of expression being very much like that of the Malahad, the Carmathians, etc., against whom Hujwiri wishes to warn his readers, Qushairi does not mean to maintain that *fana'* is the actual *fana'* of the mortal self and *baqa'* is its actual *baqa'* in the Real as the Carmathians, etc., maintained. Qushairi, on the other hand, maintains, as would be clear from the comments from him quoted earlier, what in substance is maintained by Hujwiri himself.

Although there are scores of such pairs and groups of terms as have been discussed above, what has been said so far should be enough to give us some idea at least of what type of men the early Sufis were, and what went into making them what they were. If, on the other hand, we were to go into a detailed study of their mode of life we will not be able to do justice to it without taking into consideration not only their basic attitudes, as has been done so far, but even the specific applications of these to each and every little detail of their daily lives.

The early Sufi was involved in his Creator in a relationship, an extremely pale example of which is the relation of the maddest love between two human beings. As the lover thinks of nothing, dreams of nothing, sees nothing, and feels nothing but his beloved and of his beloved all the time, a Sufi thinks of nothing, dreams of nothing, sees nothing, and feels nothing but his beloved and of his beloved, that is, his Creator.

The result is that when one studies the lives of these Sufis, one finds that they take not even a single step in their lives without feeling sure within themselves that this and nothing else will please Him. How they should walk when they tread the earth, how they should talk when they mix with their fellow-men, how they should dress, what they should eat, what they should drink, what they should do when they get up in the morning if they go to sleep at all -- each and every little detail of everything relating to these matters is prescribed for them. And the basic principle underlying all such prescriptions is that even the maximum of obedience, service, sacrifice, devotion, and love is not enough; so they should always regard the maximum as the minimum, and constantly strive for a devotion more thorough and a love more intense.

It is this burning desire to lose oneself in the Creator on an ever-increasing scale in everything, major or minor, over the whole period of one's life, which distinguishes the early Sufi from everybody else.

¹. This chapter is based mainly on the following source books : (i) Abu Nasr 'Abd Allah b. 'Ali al-Sarraj al-Tusi, al-Kitab al-Luma' fi al-Tasawwuf; (ii) Khwajah Farid al-Din 'Attar, Tadhkirat al-Auliya'; (iii) Makhdum 'All Hujwiri, Kashf al-Mahjub; (iv) Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi i, Kitab al-Ta'ruf li Madhhab Ahl at-Tasawwuf translated from Arabic by A. J. Arberry: The Doctrine of the Sufis, Cambridge University Press, London 1935 (v) Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi, al-Risalat al-Qushairiyyah, Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah al-Kubra, Misr, 1330 A.H.

The Kitab al-Luma' is regarded as one of the oldest, if not the oldest, Sufi texts available. Its author is 'Abd Allah ibn 'Ali ibn

Muhanunad ibn Yahya Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi who died in 378/988. He is quoted by Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 412/1021), the author of *Tabaqat al-Sufiyyah* (itself one of the oldest texts), Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi, Makhdum 'Ali Hujwiri, Farid al Din 'Attar, al-Ghazali, and scores of early as well as later writers on Sufism. He is considered to have written several books, but *Kitab al-Luma'* is the only one which has come down to us.

According to Nicholson, Sarraj quotes from such well-known Sufis and scholars as Abu Dawud Sijistani, Abu Said al-Kharraz, Abu Said al-'Arabi, Ibrahim al-Khawwas, Amr bin 'Uthman al-Makki, Junaid, and through him Abu Yazid al-Bistami.

- [2.](#) Abu Nasr 'Abd Allah bin 'Ali al-Sarraj al-Tusi, *Kitab al-Luma' fi al-Tasawwuf*, ed. R. A. Nicholson, Luzac & Co., London, 1914, p. 2.
- [3.](#) *Ibid.* pp. 3–4.
- [4.](#) Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi, *Kitab al-Ta'arruf li Madhhab Ahl al-Tasawwuf*, translated under the title *The Doctrine of the Sufis* by A. J. Arberry, Cambridge University Press, London, 1935, p.3.
- [5.](#) Abu al-Qasim al-Qushairi, *al-Risalat al-Qushiariyyah*, Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah al-Kubra, Misr, 1330 A.H., p.2.
- [6.](#) Makhdum 'Ali Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Silyanov Press, Samarqand, 1330 A.H., p. 12.
- [7.](#) Khwajah Farid al-Din 'Attar, *Tadhkirat al-Auliya'*, Karimi Press, Bombay, 1321 A.H., pp.5–6.
- [8.](#) Al-Sarraj, *op.cit.*, p.22.
- [9.](#) *Ibid.*
- [10.](#) *Ibid.*
- [11.](#) Hujwiri, *op.cit.*, pp. 108–10.
- [12.](#) 'Attar, *op.cit.*, p. 18.
- [13.](#) Al-Sarraj, *op.cit.*, pp.21–22.
- [14.](#) *Ibid.*, p.22.
- [15.](#) *Ibid.*, p.21.
- [16.](#) Zaki Mubarak, *al-Tasawwuf al-Islami fi al-Adab wa'l Akhlaq*, Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabi, Cairo, 1954, Vol. 1, p.63.
- [17.](#) *Ibid.*, pp.49–50.
- [18.](#) Al-Qushairi, *op.cit.*, p.8.
- [19.](#) Hujwiri, *op.cit.*, p.34.
- [20.](#) Al-Qushairi, *op.cit.*, p. 180.
- [21.](#) *Ibid.*
- [22.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- [23.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- [24.](#) *Ibid.*
- [25.](#) *Ibid.*
- [26.](#) *Ibid.*
- [27.](#) *Ibid.* p.181.
- [28.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- [29.](#) Hujwiri, *op. cit.*, p. 217.
- [30.](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 446–47..
- [31.](#) *Ibid.* p.446.
- [32.](#) Al-Qushairi, *op.cit.*, p.181.
- [33.](#) *Ibid.*, pp.182, 186.
- [34.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [35.](#) *Ibid.*, p.5.
- [36.](#) *Ibid.*, p.6.
- [37.](#) *Ibid.*, p.5.
- [38.](#) *Ibid.*, p.6.
- [39.](#) Hujwiri, *op.cit.*, p.335.

- [40.](#) Ibid., pp.335–6.
- [41.](#) Ibid., p.334.
- [42.](#) A1–Qushairi, op. cit., p. 180.
- [43.](#) Ibid., p. 181.
- [44.](#) Ibid.
- [45.](#) Ibid
- [46.](#) Ibid. p.182.
- [47.](#) Ibid.
- [48.](#) Ibid.
- [49.](#) Ibid.
- [50.](#) Hujwiri, op. cit., p. 250.
- [51.](#) Ibid., p.252.
- [52.](#) Qur'an, ii, 34.
- [53.](#) Hujwiri, op.cit., p.223.
- [54.](#) Ibid.
- [55.](#) Ibid., p.224.
- [56.](#) Ibid. p.445.
- [57.](#) Ibid. p.320.
- [58.](#) Ibid., p. 329.
- [59.](#) Ibid., p. 322.
- [60.](#) Al–Qushairi, op cit., p. 141.
- [61.](#) Ibid., p.37.
- [62.](#) Ibid., p.299.
- [63.](#) Ibid., p.37.
- [64.](#) Hujwiri, op.cit., p.299.
- [65.](#) Al–Qushairi, op.cit., p.37.

Chapter 17: Early Sufis (Continued)

Although space does not allow us to go into the detailed study of the lives of the early Sufis we may yet give a brief biographical account of some of them who made a definite contribution towards the general doctrine which we have described in the preceding chapter.

Sufis Before Al Hallaj

By B.A. Dar

1. Hasan of Basrah (21/642–110/728)

Hasan of Basrah belonged to the class of those who did not see the Prophet but his Companions (*Sahabah*) and the Companions of his Companions (*Tabi'in*). Although he took no active part in politics, yet in his fight against the Umayyads, he was sympathetic towards Imam Husain.

Hasan represented a tendency towards otherworldliness, piety, and asceticism in which the element of fear of God predominated. In a letter to 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, the Umayyad Caliph, he said, "Beware of this world, for it is like a snake, smooth to the touch, but its venom is deadly Beware of this world, for its hopes are lies, its expectations false." Later on, in the same letter, he praised hunger and poverty as symbols of the righteous and looked upon wealth as an evil which distracts people from their rightful goal. [1](#)

He regarded piety as the quintessence of true religion.[2](#) According to him, it has three grades. The first is that a man should speak the truth even though he is excited through anger. The second grade of piety demands that he should control his bodily organs and refrain from things which God has forbidden. The third and last stage of piety is that he should desire only those things which lead to God's pleasure (*rida'*). A little of piety is better than prayer and fasting of a thousand years.[3](#) It is the lust for this world and avarice that destroy piety.[4](#)

Hasan was so much overpowered by fear and was seldom seen laughing that when he sat he appeared as if he were sitting before an executioner.[5](#) He was ever conscious of his sins and the fear of hell. He thought he would consider himself fortunate if he would be delivered from hell after tribulations of a thousand years.[6](#) Somebody asked him how he felt himself in this world. He replied: Imagine a people in a boat which has capsized and everybody is trying save himself by clinging to broken pieces of wood. Such is the real position of man in this world.[7](#)

[2. Abu Hashim of Kufah \(d. 160/776\)](#)

Abu Hashim belonged to Kufah. There were people before Abu Hashim who were famous for their asceticism (*zuhd*), piety (*war`*), engagement in the science of practical religion, trust in God, and love; but it was Abu Hashim who first of all came to be called by the name of Sufi. The first monastery where the Sufis began to gather for exchange of ideas, and mutual discussion about their mystic experiences was established by some wealthy Christian in Ramlah in Syria where he had observed some Muslim saints engaged in mystic exercises in the open.

According to Sufyan Thauri, Abu Hashim knew the subtlety of *riya'* (showing off) more than anybody else. Abu Hashim once said that it was far easier to pull down a mountain with the help of a needle than to remove vanity and arrogance from one's heart. On seeing a judge coming out of the house of a minister, he remarked: May God protect people from knowledge that does not lead to the benefit of the heart.[8](#)

All these incidents point to the fact that, according to Abu Hashim, inner transformation of the heart was the essence of Sufism.

[3. Ibrahim b. Adham \(d. 160/777\)](#)

Ibrahim b. Adham, whom Junaid of Baghdad called the key to Sufism, also advocated asceticism which, according to him, involved otherworldliness, celibacy, and poverty. For him a true saint is one who covets nothing of this world, nothing of the next, and devotes himself exclusively to God.⁹ In the same strain he told a questioner who had asked him about his occupation that he had left the world to the seekers of the world and the hereafter to the seekers of the hereafter, and had chosen for himself the remembrance of God in this world and the beatific vision in the next.¹⁰ He advocated celibacy and poverty as the prerequisites of true asceticism.

According to him, he who adopts poverty cannot think of marriage, for it becomes impossible for him to fulfil the needs of his wife. When a Sufi marries, he enters, so to say, a boat, but when he gets a child, his boat sinks and his asceticism disappears.¹¹ A certain man was bewailing of his poverty. Ibrahim b. Adham remarked that he had paid nothing for this poverty of his. The man was surprised and asked: Is poverty a thing to be bought? Ibrahim said: Yes, I chose it of my own free-will and bought it at the price of worldly sovereignty and I am ready to exchange one instant of it with a hundred worlds.¹²

In Ibrahim b. Adham we meet with the practice of courting blame (*malamah*) for the purpose of self-discipline. Once he was asked if he was ever happy in his life by attaining his heart's desire. He replied: Yes, twice. He related two different events when people not knowing him mocked and jested at his cost.¹³

He referred to the principle of *tawakkul* (trust in God), but in his case it was a moral principle as enunciated in the Qur'an, which does not exclude earning one's livelihood by one's own efforts.

[4. Shaqiq of Balkh \(d. 194/810\)](#)

Shaqiq of Balkh was a pupil of Abu bin Adham. He developed and perfected the doctrine of *tawakkul*.¹⁴ The story of his conversion to Sufism is revealing. Once in the course of his trade he went to Turkestan and visited a temple of idol-worshippers. Shaqiq told the people there that their Creator is omnipotent and omniscient and they should, therefore, be ashamed of worshipping idols which are powerless in providing them anything. The idol-worshippers told him: If your Creator is omnipotent and all-knowing, why have you come into this distant land for seeking livelihood? Can He not provide you in your own town? On hearing this Shaqiq gave up the world, went to Khurasan and became an ascetic.¹⁵

Shaqiq interpreted *tawakkul* as negation of earning one's living. He once remarked that the efforts put in by man in seeking livelihood are the result of his ignorance of God's ways of dealing with men and, therefore, to work hard in order to win bread is unlawful (*haram*).¹⁶

[5. Harith Muhasibi \(165/781–243/857\)](#)

Harith Muhasibi started his life as a theologian and belonged to the school of Shafi'i. He advocated the

use of reason and employed the technique of the Mu'tazilites in controversies with them and was thus a precursor of the Ash`arites. His career resembled that of Ghazali's in some respects. Both had a complete theological education, were well versed in philosophical and religious problems of their day, and were later on converted to the Sufistic Path, partly under the stress of circumstances and partly as a result of their inner moral strain.

Muhasibi's book *Wasaya* which again served as a prototype for Ghazali's *Munqidh*, relates the events which revolutionized his life. The first thing that struck him was the division of the Muslim community into numerous sects and sub-sects each claiming the monopoly of salvation. He devoted a great part of his life to discovering the clear way and the true path amid these divergences. He met all kinds of people who claimed to know and follow the truth, but in almost every case he failed to be convinced; most of them were busy in worldly gains.

"I looked to knowledge for guidance, thinking deeply and considering long. Then it was made clear to me, from God's Book and the Prophet's practice and the consensus of believers, that the pursuit of desire blinds a man and so prevents him from seeking the right path, and leads him astray from truth." This conviction led him to self-examination (*muhasibah*, which brought him the title Muhasibi),¹⁷ self-discipline, and moral transformation.

He realized that the path of salvation consists in the fear of God, compliance with His ordinances, sincere obedience to Him, and the imitation of His Prophet. When he tried to search for the ordinances in the life and conduct of the saints, he was again struck by differences. Of this much, however, he was assured that only those people can be sure guides who, knowing God, labour to win His pleasure. But at first it proved almost impossible for him to find such men and yet he continued his quest, for it was a matter of life and death for him:

Finally, through God's grace he was successful in his search and came across people who were models of piety: God opened unto me a knowledge in which proof was clear and decision shone, and I had hopes that whoever should draw near to this knowledge and make it his own would be saved. When this enlightenment dawned upon him, the course of future action was clear. "I believed in it in my heart and embraced it in my mind and made it the foundation of my faith."¹⁸

In spite of his conversion, his attitude towards mysticism was marked by his intellectual approach. His famous disciple Junaid of Baghdad relates how he used to discourse with him on different topics of mysticism. Muhasibi would come to Junaid's house and ask him to come out with him. Junaid would protest at being dragged from solitude into the world of allurements. But Muhasibi would press him to ask whatever question came to his mind. This questioning and answering proved very stimulating to him and when he returned home he would put the entire discussion in a notebook.¹⁹ Here we see the picture of a great Sufi teacher who approached his subject in the intellectual spirit of a great scholar.

An important contribution of Muhasibi to the science of mysticism is his definitions of station (*maqam*)

and state (*hal*) and his inclusion of satisfaction (*rida'*) among the states. Station, according to him, is the particular position which a seeker attains after making necessary efforts to reach it; it involves all the obligations pertaining to the stage. State (*hal*), on the other hand, is something that man receives through God's grace without involving any effort on his part. In short, station belongs to the category of acts, while state belongs to the category of gifts,²⁰ as stated in the preceding chapter.

Satisfaction (*rida'*) is an attitude of mind which also, according to Muhasibi, a man is able to attain through divine grace and not through his own efforts. He says, "Satisfaction is the quintessence of the heart under the events which flow from the divine decree."²¹

With regard to the problem whether an attitude of poverty (*faqr*) or wealth (*ghina*) is preferable for a mystic, Muhasibi holds that the latter attitude is better. He argues that wealth is an attribute of God, whereas poverty cannot be ascribed to Him and, therefore, an attribute common to God and man is superior to an attribute that is not applicable to God.²²

Similarly, his attitude in the controversy as to whether presence (*hudur*) or absence (*ghaibah*) is preferable for the mystic, is that presence is superior to absence, because all excellences are bound up with presence. He says that absence from one's self is a preliminary stage on the mystic Path which gradually leads to presence before God, and the Path becomes for him an imperfection after he has arrived at the goal.²³

6. Rabi`ah al-`Adawiyyah of Basrah (95 or 99/713 or 717-185/801)

Rabi`ah al-`Adawiyyah of Basrah was a famous woman mystic, well known for her advocacy of disinterested love for God. She was born into a poor home, stolen as a child, and sold into slavery. But her devotion to a life of piety and prayer enabled her to win her freedom. She decided to adopt a life of celibacy in spite of many offers of marriage by renowned mystics of her time. Once her companion suggested to her in the spring season to come out of the house to behold the works and beauties of God. She replied: Come you inside that you may behold their Maker. Contemplation of the Maker has turned me away from the contemplation of what He has made.²⁴

Rabi`ah's main contribution to mysticism was her doctrine of disinterested love of God which served both as a motive and a goal for her. With most of her contemporary mystics the guiding motive for asceticism and otherworldliness was the fear of hell or the reward of paradise. Rabi`ah, on the other hand, tried to emphasize that a man who claims to attain union with God should be oblivious of both.

`Attar relates that once some mystics came to Rabi`ah. She asked: Why do you worship God? One said: There are seven stages in hell, and everybody has to pass through them; therefore, in fear and dread of them I worship. Another replied: The eight stages of paradise are places of great delight and a worshipper is promised complete rest there. Rabi`ah replied: He is a bad servant who worships God for fear of punishment or desire of reward. They asked her: Why do you worship if you have no desire for

paradise? She replied: I prefer the Neighbour to the neighbour's house (i.e. paradise). She added that God is worthy of worship even if there is no motive of fear or reward.[25](#)

It is related that one day Rabi'ah was running with fire in one hand and water in the other. People asked her the meaning of her action. She replied: I am going to light fire in paradise and to pour water on hell so that both veils may completely disappear from the pilgrims and their purpose may be sure, and the servants of God may see Him without any object of hope or motive of fear.[26](#) In the following verses, she distinguishes the two kinds of love, selfish and disinterested:

In two ways have I loved Thee: selfishly,
And with a love that worthy is of Thee.
In selfish love my joy in Thee I find,
While to all else, and others, I am blind.
But in that love which seeks Thee worthily,
The veil is raised that I may look an Thee.
Yet is the praise in that or this not mine,
In this and that the praise is wholly Thine. [27](#)

The object of this disinterested love, according to Rabi`ah, was union with God. She says: My hope is for union with Thee, for that is the goal of my desire.

[7. Dhu al-Nun Misri \(180/706-245/859\)](#)

Dhu al-Nun Misri is regarded by most biographers as a renowned mystic. He was the first to give expression publicly to his mystic experiences.[28](#) Like other early mystics, he practised asceticism of extreme type,[29](#) regarded the temptations of self as the greatest veil,[30](#) and looked upon seclusion as indispensable for the promotion of sincerity in a Sufi.[31](#) According to him, there are two different paths for the mystic to follow. The first path, lesser in degree, is to avoid sin, to leave the world, and to control passion; the second path, higher in degree, is to leave all besides God and to empty the heart of every thing.[32](#)

Dhu al-Nun interprets *tawakkul* (trust in God) as opposed to reliance on intermediate causes and the use of planning.[33](#) It demands solitude and complete break with the world and its people, and total and full reliance on God.[34](#) Repentance, according to him, is essential for everybody; the common people repent of their sins, while the elect repent of their heedlessness. Repentance is of two kinds: repentance of return (*inabah*) and repentance of shame (*istihya`*). The former is repentance through fear of divine punishment; the latter is repentance through shame of divine clemency. [35](#)

Dhu al-Nun distinguishes knowledge from certitude (*yaqin*). Knowledge is the result of sensory perception, i, e., what we receive through bodily organs, while certitude is, the result of what we see through intuition.[36](#)

In another context he says that knowledge is of three kinds: first, knowledge of the unity of God and this is common to all believers; second, knowledge gained by proof and demonstration and this belongs to the wise, the eloquent and the learned; the third, knowledge of the attributes of Unity and this belongs to the saints, those who contemplate the face of God within their hearts, so that God reveals Himself to them in a way in which He is not, revealed to anyone else in the world.³⁷ It is this knowledge which is called gnosis (*ma'rifah*), the idea of which, it is claimed, was first introduced into Sufism by Dhu al-Nun.

The core of gnosis, according to him, is God's providential communication of the spiritual light to one's heart.³⁸ The gnostics see with direct knowledge, without sight, without information received, without observation, without description, without veiling, and without veils. They are not in themselves; but in so far as they exist at all, they exist in God. Their movements are caused by God and their words are the words of God which are uttered by their tongues, and their sight is the sight of God which has entered into their eyes.³⁹

Thus, with Dhu al-Nun the highest achievement of the mystic is to get super-intellectual knowledge known as gnosis which involves complete unconsciousness on the part of man. In one of his statements quoted by `Attar, he says, that "the more a man knows God, the more is he lost in Him." It appears that he had in his mind the mystic state which his contemporary, Bayazid of Bistam, designated as *fana'*.

8. Bayazid Bistami (d. 260/874)

Bayazid Bistami was a Persian Muslim whose ancestors were Zoroastrians.⁴⁰ In his early life he was a jurist and was reckoned among *ashab al-ra'i*, the followers of Abu Hanifah, but later on he turned to Sufism.⁴¹ His teacher in mysticism was a Kurd. It is related that he associated with a mystic Abu `Ali of Sind, who taught him the doctrine of annihilation in unity (*fana' fi al-tawhid*) and in return Abu Yazid taught him the doctrine of monotheism as embodied in the Qur'anic chapters, *Fatihah* and *Ikhlas*.⁴² He was familiar with the Indian practice of "watching the breaths" which he described as the gnostic's worship of God ⁴³

For thirty years Bayazid wandered in the deserts of Syria, leading a life of extreme asceticism—with scanty sleep, food, and drink. He once said that a mystic can reach his goal only through blindness, deafness, and dumbness.⁴⁴ He seemed to be very scrupulous in the observation of Islamic injunctions and would not tolerate any deviation, however small or insignificant it might be.⁴⁵

In Bayazid's utterances we notice a distinct tendency towards monism. He tries to reach the divine unity by the process of abstraction (*tajrid*) till he is devoid of all personal attributes and feels himself as well as others submerged in the One. In this state of unity he gave expression to his experiences which remind one of the *ana al-Haq*, of Hallaj. "I went from God to God, until He cried from me in me, `O thou I." "Glory to me! How great is my majesty." "When I came out of my 'self,' I found the lover and the beloved as one, for in the world of thought, all is one."⁴⁶

“For twelve years I treated the self (*nafs*) in me as a smith does with his material, heating and beating alternately in the fire of penance and with the hammer of blame (*malamah*) till it became a mirror. For five years I was busy in polishing this mirror with different kinds of religious practices. For one year I looked within myself, and discovered a girdle of infidelity (*zunnar*) round my waist. For another five years I tried to remove that girdle till I recovered my true faith. Then I found everything dead before my eyes and God alone living.”[47](#)

“What is *arsh*? It is I. What is Chair (*kursi*)? It is I. What is the Tablet or the Pen? It is I. What are prophets like Abraham, Moses and Muhammad? They are I.” Explaining it further, he remarked that whoever becomes annihilated in God finds that whatever is, is God.[48](#) His negativism (*tajrid*) is illustrated by the following quotation: “Nothing is better for man than to be without aught: having no asceticism, no theory, no practice. When he is without all, he is with all.”[49](#)

A mystic should be in a domain where neither good nor evil exists; both good and evil belong to the phenomenal world; in the presence of unity there is neither command (*amr*) nor prohibition (*nahi*). [50](#)

Bayazid is the first Sufi who gives a detailed description of his mystic experience and calls it by the name of ascension (*mi`raj*), a practice which was later followed by Ibn 'Arabi and others. We give below a few passages from the account as given by 'Attar in his *Tadhkirah*: [51](#)

“When I attained the stage of indifference (*istighna*) towards the things of this world and was lighted up by the light of God, several mysteries were revealed to me. I looked from God towards myself and found that my light was utter darkness in comparison with God's light, my loftiness was utter lowliness; it was all purity there and all darkness here. But when again I looked, I found my light in His light, my loftiness in His loftiness, and that whatever I did I did through His power.

His light shone in my heart and I discovered that in truth all worship was from God and not from me, though all the time I had thought that it was I who worshipped. I felt perplexed and received the explanation: All that is, is I and not not-I... I looked from God towards God and saw Him as the only reality. I remained in this stage for long, left all efforts and all acquired knowledge. Grace from God began to flow and I got eternal (*azali*) knowledge. I saw that all things abide in God.

“Then I was given wings, and I began to fly in the air and saw strange and wonderful things. When He noticed my weakness, He strengthened me by His strength and put the crown of honour on my head. He opened the gate of the avenue of divine unity (*tawhid*) before me. Then I stayed in the stage of *malakut* till the apparent and hidden aspects of I-ness vanished. A door was opened into the darkness of my heart and I got an eloquent tongue to express *tawhid* and *tajrid* (abstract unity).

Now, my tongue came from God, my heart felt the effulgence of His light, and my eyes reflected His creativity. I spoke through Him and talked through His power. As I lived through Him I became eternal and immortal. When I reached this stage, my gestures and my worship became eternal; my tongue became the tongue of unity (*tawhid*) and my soul the soul of abstraction (*tajrid*). It is He who moves my

tongue and my role is only that of an interpreter: talker in reality is He, and not I.

“My soul passed through all the world of the unseen. Paradise and hell were shown to it but it paid no attention to them. It traversed the different spheres where it met the souls of prophets. When it reached the sphere of the soul of Muhammad, it saw millions of rivers of fire without end and a thousand veils of light. If I had put my foot into them, I would have been burnt. I lost my senses through awe and fear. I tried hard to see the ropes of Muhammad's tent, but could not till I reached God. Everybody can reach God according to his light, for God is with all; but Muhammad occupies a prominent position, and so unless one traverses the valley of *tawhid*, one cannot reach the valley of Muhammad, though as a matter of fact both valleys are one.”

9. Junaid of Baghdad (d. 298/910)

Junaid of Baghdad was well versed in theology, jurisprudence, and ethics and was acclaimed as a leader in the science of Sufism by the Sufis of all schools.⁵² He was perhaps the first mystic who explicitly expressed his indebtedness to `Ali for his mystic knowledge, for `Ali, according to him, possessed an abundance of both exoteric and esoteric knowledge (*`ilm* and *hikmah*).⁵³ He studied law under Abu Thaur and associated with Harith Muhasibi and discussed different problems of Sufism during walks with him.⁵⁴

Junaid advocated the principle of sobriety (*sabr*) as opposed to that of intoxication (*sukr*).⁵⁵ According to him, intoxication is an evil, because it disturbs the normal state of a mystic and leads to the loss of sanity and self-control.⁵⁶ In this connection, the conversation between Junaid and Hallaj, when the latter after leaving the society of `All b. `Uthman al-Makki came to Junaid seeking his company, is illuminating.

Junaid refused to accept him as his disciple because, as he said, association demands sanity which was lacking in him. Hallaj replied: O Shaikh, sobriety and intoxication are two attributes of man, and man is veiled from his Lord until his attributes are annihilated. Junaid replied: You are in error. Sobriety denotes soundness of one's spiritual state in relation to God, while intoxication denotes excess of longing and extreme of love, and neither of them can be acquired by human effort.⁵⁷

This advocacy of the doctrine of sobriety made Junaid a model Sufi who was acceptable both to the mystics and the theologians, and it is for this reason that we find in him an advocate of religious Law. Nobody could raise any objection against him with regard to his apparent behaviour (*zahir*) which was in perfect consonance with the Shari'ah, or with regard to his inner state (*batin*) which was in perfect harmony with the principles of mysticism.⁵⁸

According to him, only he can truly traverse the Path (*tariqah*) who walks with the Book of God (al-Qur'an) in his right hand and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet in his left hand.⁵⁹ He preferred to wear the dress of the *`ulama'* rather than mystics and in spite of constant requests by his disciples and others he would not like to change it for the woollen garb (*khirqah*) of the mystics. ⁶⁰

According to him, the only safe path open to the people is the path laid down by Muhammad, for true and sure knowledge is the knowledge revealed by God in the Qur'an and enunciated by the Holy Prophet, as embodied in the Sunnah. [61](#)

Tawhid, according to Junaid, is the separation of the eternal from that which was originated in time,[62](#) for, as he puts it, God cannot be comprehended by any of the categories of our phenomenal existence.[63](#)

Explaining it further, he says that true belief in unification is “that one should be a figure in the hands of God, a figure over which His decrees pass according as His omnipotence determines, and that one should be sunk in the sea of His unity, self-annihilated and dead alike to the call of mankind to him and his response to them, absorbed by the reality of the divine unity in true proximity, and lost to sense and action, because God fulfils in him what He has willed of him, namely, that his state should be as it was before he existed.[64](#)

According to Junaid, the efforts of man in search of truth throughout human history have been directed towards fulfilment of the covenant entered by man in the presence of God[65](#) and to return to the state in which he was before he was born.[66](#)

Most of the pantheistic Sufis look upon Iblis as their teacher in unification and regard his refusal to bow down before Adam as a testimony of his strict unitarianism. In his conversation with Iblis, Junaid asked him the reason for his refusal and received the same reply. But Junaid does not become an “advocate of the devil” like other pantheistic mystics, and points out his (the devil's) mistake in taking cover under God's will (*mashiyyah*) in order to violate his command (*amr*).

Junaid said, “You lie. Had you been an obedient servant, you would not have transgressed His command”, thus stressing the strictly monotheistic position that moral behaviour is the *sine qua non* of a truly religious life which consists in total obedience to God's command (*`ubudiyyah*). He defines *`ubudiyyah* as the state in which a man realizes that all things belong to God, that He is the cause of their being and existence, and to Him alone they will all return.[67](#)

Trust in God (*tawakkul*), according to Junaid, is to maintain your relation with God now, as you had before you came into existence; it consists neither in acquisition (*kasb*) nor in non-acquisition, but in putting your heart in tune with God's promise.[68](#) Repentance involves three stages: first, the expression of regret at the wrong done; secondly, the resolve to avoid doing that wrong for ever; and, thirdly, to purify oneself of all dross, evils, and impurities.[69](#)

Al-Hallaj

By Louis Massignon

Al-Hallaj (Abu al-Mughith al-Husain bin Mansur bin Mahamma al-Baidawi, in Persian and Turkish

literature abridged as Mansur) was a Muslim mystic and thinker who taught in Arabic. He was born in Persia, at al-Tur,¹ near Baida to the north-east of Shiraz in 244/857. Baida was deeply arabicized; the great grammarian Sibawaihi was born there, among Harithiyyah Yamani clients.

Hallaj's father, a wool-carder by profession, took the boy, a wool-carder by name (for in Arabic word *hallaj* means a wool-carder), with him to Wasit, an Arab city of the Hanbalites with a minority of the Shi'ahs. Wasit had a good school in which teaching of the Qur'an was undertaken. At this school, al-Hallaj became a *hafiz*, trying to "interiorize" his recitation of the Qur'an, so that his "*bismillah*" could become his "*kun*", i. e., his invocation of the name of God might unite him with God's creative will. So did he begin the mystic quest.

He became a disciple of Sahl bin 'Abd Allah of Tustar (the founder of the Salamiyyah school) whom he left in order to settle down in Basrah, where he received the Sufi gown (*khirqah*) from 'Amr bin 'Uthman Makki's hands. He was married to Umm al-Husain. It was a monogamic wedding, unshaken during his whole life. From her he had three sons. She already had a daughter from another Sufi, Abu Ya'qub Aqta' Karnaba'i. The Karnaba'iyyah, Banu al-'Amm of Nahr Tirah, were clients of the Banu Mujashi (Tamim clan) and political supporters of the rebellion of the Zanj, which raised the slaves of Basrah against the 'Abbasid Caliphate under a supposed 'Alid (Zaidi) leader.

Such was the beginning of al-Hallaj's contacts with the revolutionary Shi'ahs, contacts perceptible in the technical terms of his apologetics. Al-Hallaj, in fact, remained always a Sunni, with a strong leaning towards hard asceticism in observing the Ramadan fasts and, when in Mecca, in performing *'umrah*,⁷⁰ in complete silence (cf. Qur'an xix, 27) so as to listen to God from inside.

When he came back to Tustar, he threw off the *khirqah* to deliver God's message to laymen, scribes, and publicans, most of them case-hardened and sceptical. Some of them, of vizierial families, listened to him, becoming his friends (Sunnis: Qunna'iyyah: Ibn Wahab and Ibn Jarrah), or his enemies (Imamis: Ibn al-Furat and Ibn Naubakht), denouncing him either as a miracleworker or as a trickster. Friends from Basrah induced him to carry on his apologetical mission among the Arabs colonizing Khurasan, and among the ribat of the *mujahidin*.

After five years al-Hallaj came back to Tustar and, with the help of Hamd Qunna'i, settled among workers of the imperial *Dar al-Tiraz* (fashion-house) of Tustar (for the *kiswah* [covering] of the Ka'bah) in a suburb of Baghdad. Then took place a second *hajj*, and a second mission to Khurasan and Turkestan (as far as Masin-Turfan), with a kind of apocalyptic goal (seeking the hiding-place of the Talaqaniyyin, the future *Ansar al-Mahdi*). Then he performed his last *hajj*; on the Yaum 'Arafat, he dedicated himself, at the Waqfah, as a substitute for the *dhabihah* (just as some Shi'ahs think of the Martyr of Karbala as *dhabiah 'azim*).¹

Back in Baghdad, he began an extraordinary, way of talking in the streets, about his desire of dying as sacrificed by the Law for the sake of the Law (*kunu antum mujahidun, wa ana shahid*). It was in the last

days of Mu`tadid's Caliphate that a decree (*fatwa*) was given against al-Hallaj for his queer way of proving his love for God by offering his life, by a Zahiri lawyer Ibn Dawud (d. 297/909), the author of a charming anthology about pure love (*Kitab al-Zahrah*). But another lawyer, Ibn Suraij, a Shafi'i, saved him by pleading that mystical utterances were not to be judged on juridical grounds.

It is said that one day al-Hallaj uttered the famous words *ana al-Haqq* (I am the Creative Truth), a kind of eschatological cry (named *siyah bi al-Haqq*) in the Holy Qur'an. "Blasphemy," said the lawyers. Al-Hallaj himself explained it in verses: "Oh! the secret of my heart is so fine that it is hidden from all living beings...." Involved in the Sunni plot of the Caliph ibn al-Mu`tazz, al-Hallaj was prosecuted; he remained hidden in Susa near the tomb of Prophet Daniel, the "announcer of the Last Day," but was arrested in 301/913.

The first trial under 'All bin 'Isa, the "good vizier," was suspended through the influence of Ibn Suraij, and al-Hallaj was merely kept as a prisoner in the royal palace for nearly eight years and eight months. Afraid of Hallaj's influence on the Court of the Caliph Muqtadir, two Shi'ah leaders, the *wakil* Ibn Rauh Naubakhti and his rival Shalmaghani, succeeded in persuading the vizier Ahmed bin al-'Abbas, through his Shi'ah financial supporters, to reopen the trial on two charges.

The first of these charges was that he was a Qarmatian agent of the Fatimids. It is true that al-Hallaj on grounds not political but spiritual did share with the Fatimids belief in the apocalyptic significance of the year 290 of the Hijrah, for in the esoteric alphabet 290 means "Maryam" or "Fatir." The second charge was that with the Qarmatian rebels he advocated the destruction of the Ka'bah and Mecca. It is also a fact that, while in Mecca, Hallaj did write to his disciple Shakir, "Destroy your Ka'bah," meaning in esoteric language "Do sacrifice your life for the sake of Islam as I do."

The Qadi Abu 'Umar Hammadi, a Maliki, insisted on taking this allegorical letter in an unjustifiable literal sense. And al-Hallaj was condemned to death, and "crucified" (*maslub*, cf. Qur'an, vii, 124) on 24th of Dhu al-Qa`dah 309/26th of March 922. Curiously enough, this year 309 is the Qur'anic year of the "Awakening of the Seven Sleepers" (Qur'an, xviii, 25), celebrated by the Isma'elite Fatimid propagandists as the year of the coming out of the Mahdi from the cave of concealment (but al-Hallaj's disciples explained it mystically).

Al-Hallaj's crucifixion has been looked at by the Sunni Sufis as the height (*mi'raj*) of saintship; and many beautiful utterances are ascribed to al-Hallaj while on the stake. Nasr Qushuri, the high chamberlain, put on mourning clothes publicly with the approval of the Queen-Mother, Shaghab. And some Sufi witnesses, Qannad and Shibli, acknowledged his death as the seal of a most saintly vocation.

Though it was proclaimed after the year 309/922 that al-Hallaj had been executed in compliance with the unanimity (*ijma'*) of the jurists (*fuqaha'*), yet a respected lawyer, his friend Ibn `Ata, had objected to this verdict and was killed for that. Ibn `Ata's death nullifies this so-called *ijma'*. The memory of al-Hallaj slowly spread aflame with beauty. Among the Shafi'iyah, Ibn al-Muslimah, the very day he was

appointed as vizier (437/1045), was seen coming to al-Hallaj's place of crucifixion (*maslib* al-Hallaj) and praying – a silent act of rehabilitation.

Sufis have kept his creed (*aqidah*); as a motto in their exoterical books (e.g., Kalabadhi, and Qushairi); and they have his name “understood” in their esoterical *isnad* (with his friends Shibli and Nasrabadhi). Farid al-Din `Attar celebrated al-Hallaj's martyrdom as the “apex” of Sufism, and the great painter Behzad painted it for Baiqara in Herat.. Independent Muslim philosophers, Balkhi, Mantiqi, Abu Hayyan Tauhidi, and Abu al-Hasan Dailami, set off the metaphysical originality of al-Hallaj'a spiritual experiences.

In spite of his adversaries classifying him among the adepts of existential unity (*wahdat al-wujud*), al-Hallaj has been proved to be a vindicator of cognitive unity (*wahdat al-shuhud*). 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani, Ruzbehan Baqili, and Fakhr al-Din Farisi have given convincing explanations of and commentaries on the doctrine of Unity, in spite of the subtleties of Ibn 'Arabi's school. Jalal al-Din Rumi, and after him the great mystics of India, Semnani, 'Ali Hamadani, Makhdum-i Jahaniyan, Gisudaraz, Ahmad Sirhindi, and Bedil have considered al-Hallaj to be a believer in cognitive unity (*shuhudi*). In his Javid Nameh, the great poet-philosopher of Pakistan, Iqbal, stated that al-Hallaj was a kind of “Promethean” personality. L. Massignon also heard him say this when Iqbal gave him the privilege of a visit to him in Paris in 1351/1932.

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Later on, the great Nasir al-Din Tusi included al-Hallaj among the celebrities in his *Ausaf al-Ashraf*.

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[1.](#) A.J. Arberry, *Sufism*, pp.33-34.

[2.](#) 'Attar, *Tadhkirah*, p. 19.

[3.](#) *Ibid.*, p.26.

[4.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 19

[5.](#) *Ibid.*, p.21.

[6.](#) *Ibid.*

[7.](#) *Ibid.* p.28.

[8.](#) Jami', *Nafahat al-Uns*, pp.31-32.

[9.](#) Ali Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, English translation by R.A. Nicholson, p.217; 'Attar, *op.cit.*, p.63.

[10.](#) 'Attar, *op.cit.*, p.65.

[11.](#) *Ibid.*, p.62.

[12.](#) M. Smith, *Readings from the Mystics of Islam*, pp. 19-21.

[13.](#) Hujwiri, *op.cit.*, p.68; see also 'Attar, *op.cit.*, pp.65-66. The events related in the two books are the same but they lead to the same conclusion.

[14.](#) 'Attar, *op.cit.*, pp.127-129.

[15.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[16.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 129.

[17.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 146.

[18.](#) A.J. Arberry, *op.cit.*, pp.47-50.

[19.](#) *Ibid.*, pp.46-47.

[20.](#) Hujwiri, *op.cit.*, p. 181.

[21.](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 179, 180; see also 'Attar, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

[22.](#) Hujwiri, *op.cit.*, p.21.

[23.](#) *Ibid.*, p.249.

[24.](#) 'Attar, *op.cit.*, p.46.

[25.](#) *Ibid.*, p.47.

[26.](#) Aflaki, *Manaqib al-'Arifin*, as quoted in the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p.463a.

[27.](#) M. Smith, *Rabi'ah the Mystic*, pp. 102-104. Commenting on these verses, al-Ghazali says: "She meant by selfish love, the love of God for the bestowal of His favours and grace and for temporary happiness, and by the love worthy of Him, the

love of His beauty which was awarded to her, and this is the higher of the two loves and the finer of them.” (Ihya’) See also Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, p.463a.

[28.](#) Attar, op.cit., pp. 76, 80.

[29.](#) Ibid., p.78.

[30.](#) Ibid., p.83; Hujwiri, op.cit., p.200.

[31.](#) Attar, op.cit., p.84.

[32.](#) Ibid., p.79.

[33.](#) Ibid., p.86.

[34.](#) Ibid., p.88.

[35.](#) Hujwiri, op.cit., pp.298, 299.

[36.](#) Attar, op.cit., p.84.

[37.](#) Ibid., p.81.

[38.](#) Ibid., p.84; see also Hujwiri, op.cit., p.275.

[39.](#) Attar, op.cit., p.85.

[40.](#) Ibid., p.9.

[41.](#) Jami’, Nafahat al-Uns, p.59.

[42.](#) Ibid., p.60.

[43.](#) Attar, op.cit., p.92; see Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. XII, p. 12a

[44.](#) Attar, op.cit., pp. 90, 92, 110.

[45.](#) Ibid., p.90; see Hujwiri, op.cit., p.217.

[46.](#) Attar, op.cit. p. 105.

[47.](#) Ibid., p.92.

[48.](#) Ibid., p.112.

[49.](#) Ibid., p.107.

[50.](#) Ibid., p.110.

[51.](#) Ibid., p.112–115.

[52.](#) Hujwiri, op.cit., p.128; see ‘Attar, op.cit., p.212.

[53.](#) ‘Attar, op.cit., pp. 214–215; Hujwiri, op.cit., p.74.

[54.](#) Jami’, op.cit., p.81; Arberry, op.cit., p.46. According to ‘Attar, he was the disciple of Sari Saqti (op.cit., p.213.)

[55.](#) ‘Attar, op.cit., p.212.

[56.](#) Hujwiri, op.cit., p.185.

[57.](#) Ibid., p.189; ‘Attar, op.cit., pp.216–217.

[58.](#) Hujwiri, op.cit., p.128.

[59.](#) ‘Attar, op.cit., p.214

[60.](#) Ibid., p.216.

[61.](#) Ibid., p.224.

[62.](#) Ibid., p.227; Hujwiri, op.cit., p.281.

[63.](#) ‘Attar, op.cit., p.215.

[64.](#) Hujwiri, op.cit., pp.282–283.

[65.](#) Qur’an, vii, 166–67.

[66.](#) Arberry, op.cit., p.57

[67.](#) ‘Attar, op.cit., p.230.

[68.](#) Ibid., p.228.

[69.](#) Ibid., p.229.

[70.](#) ‘Umrah is the pilgrimage performed at any time other than the 9th of Dhu al-Hijjah.

Chapter 18: 'Abd Al-Qadir Jilani and Shihab Al-Din Suhrawardi

By B.A. Dar

Abd Al-Qadir Jilani

Shaikh 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani (470–561/1077–1166) was born at a period when Malikshah the Saljuq (465–485/1072–1091) ruled over a vast Muslim Empire. This period is famous for great patronage of learning. It was during this period that the great Nizamiyyah University was founded in Baghdad by Nizam al-Mulk. But after Malikshah's death in 485/1092, fight for succession started which brought about anarchy and disorder in the country. In 513/1119 Sanjar succeeded in securing the throne and was crowned at Baghdad. But after his death in 552/1157, there was once again the same anarchy and disorder. Constant wars between the different factions of the Saljuqs destroyed the peace and security of the Empire.

But there are two events which stand out prominently. They contributed much towards the disintegration of the social and political structure of the Muslims of this period. The first was the rise and gradual spread of the group of people called Assassins under the leadership of Hasan bin Sabbah. Thousands of people, great and small, fell to the dagger of these fanatics. The second was the starting of the Crusades.

The first Crusade lasted from 488–489/1095 to 493/1099. The Christian hordes succeeded in occupying Jerusalem in 492/1099, and putting to death thousands of innocent Muslims and Jews. News of the disaster and huge processions of refugees entered Baghdad where people clamoured for revenge. But the Saljuq rulers were too busy in their wars to take up the challenge. The Christian invaders were allowed, for a long time, to rob and destroy the country. Life became unsettled and there was no peace or security.

It was amid such circumstances that Shaikh 'Abd al-Qadir lived at Baghdad where he had come from far off Jilan. Being a man of great intelligence he was soon able to acquire what the usual system of education had to offer. He then became a pupil of a Sufi saint Hammad under whose spiritual care he acquired great proficiency in the mystic lore. For eleven years he spent his life in total seclusion from worldly affairs. After this period of retirement and spiritual discipline he came back to Baghdad and adopted the career of a preacher to the people in response to what he calls the “inner command.”

The students and the people in large numbers began to gather round him and within a short time the premises where he had started lecturing had to be enlarged and expanded. At the age of 51, he got married, and died at the ripe age of 91. He was a man of charming personality and by his eloquent

speech exerted great influence on the people. He stands in the forefront of the Muslim mystics of all ages, and is the founder of the Qadiriyyah school of Sufism which includes within its fold many renowned Sufis of the Muslim world.

Futuh al-Ghaib (Revelations of the Unseen), a collection of eighty sermons which he delivered on different occasions, reflects the unstable condition of the times. He emphasizes in almost every sermon that social ruin and instability is the result of excessive materialistic outlook on life; true well-being is the result of a harmonious development of an individual's personality whose material as well as spiritual demands are being properly looked after. But as a reaction against the prevalent materialism he emphasizes religious values to an extent which seems to be exaggerated.

In the fifty-fourth Discourse, for instance, he advises people in general to adopt an attitude of total and complete indifference towards the world, to kill desires and ambitions of all kinds. In order that his indifference in worldly life may become complete and unalloyed, it is proper for an individual to remove all things from his heart and cultivate pleasure in annihilation, abiding poverty, and want, so that there may not remain in his heart even so much pleasure as that of sucking the stone of a date. [1](#)

With regard to the question of free-will he adopts an attitude of determinism, though sometimes he tries to avoid the extremes of deterministic position by resort to what has come to be known in Muslim scholastic circles as acquisition (*kasb*). He says, "Do not forget the position of human efforts so as not to fall a victim to the creed of the determinists (Jabriyyah) and believe that no action attains its fulfilment but in God. Nor should you say that actions of man proceed from anything but from God, because if you say so you will become an unbeliever and belong to the category of people known as the indeterminists (Qadariyyah). You should rather say that actions belong to God in point of creation and to man in point of acquisition (*kasb*).[2](#)

But in a later Discourse (sixteenth), he points out that to rely on *kasb* is *shirk*, i.e., association of partners with God. There is a verse in the Qur'an³ which refers to a particular episode in the life of Abraham. While denouncing idol-worship, he says that it is God who created you as well your handiwork (*ta`malun*).

Muslim pantheists and determinists have always used this verse in support of their contention, rendering *ta`malun* as "what you do," instead of correct rendering, "what you make." Shaikh Jilani here follows the same line, arguing for total determinism, though he does not advocate cessation of all activities.[4](#)

There is another verse of the Qur'an in which God says, "**Enter the garden of paradise because of what you have been doing.**"[5](#) Here, the text unequivocally points out that paradise is the reward of actions. But this being incompatible with the creed of determinism, Shaikh Jilani hastens to add, "Glory be to Him, how generous and merciful of Him! He ascribes the actions to the people and says that their entry into paradise is on account of their deeds, whereas their deeds owe their existence to His help and mercy."[6](#)

Good and evil are the twin fruits of a tree; all is the creation of God,⁷ though we should ascribe all evil to ourselves⁸. There is, however, the question of undeserved suffering which a man of conscience has to undergo. Shaikh Jilani thinks that the spiritual peace which is indispensable for a mystic cannot be said to be complete unless he is trained in the school of adversity. The degree of the undeserved suffering, according to him, determines his spiritual rank.

He quotes a tradition of the Holy Prophet in this respect: "We prophets are beset with the greatest number of trials and so on according to rank."⁹ What is essential is to hold fast to faith for the ultimate victory of good over evil. This victory is possible not only in the hereafter but also in this world. If a man has faith and is grateful, these things will put out the fire of calamity in this life.

Men can be divided, according to the Shaikh, into four categories. The first category includes those who have neither tongue nor heart. They are the majority of the ordinary people, who do not care for truth and virtue and lead a life of subservience to the senses. Such people should be avoided except when they are approached and invited to the path of righteousness and godliness. In that case you shall be following in the honourable footsteps of the prophets.¹⁰

The second category includes people who have tongue but no heart. They are people of great learning and knowledge and possess eloquent tongue with which they exhort people to live a life of piety and righteousness. But, they themselves lead a life of sensuality and rebellion. Their speech is charming but their hearts are black.

To the third category belong people who have a heart but no tongue. They are the faithful and true believers. They are aware of their own shortcomings and blemishes and are constantly engaged in purifying themselves of all dross. To them silence and solitude are far safer for spiritual health than talking to and mixing with people.

To the last category belong people who have heart as well as tongue. They are in possession of the true knowledge of God and His attributes and are able to reach and understand the ultimate truth. Equipped with this wisdom and truth they invite people to the path of virtue and righteousness and, thus, become true representatives of the prophets. They are at the highest stage, next only to prophethood, in the spiritual progress of mankind.¹¹

With reference to mystical states, he gives us four stages of spiritual development. The first is the state of piety when man leads a life of obedience to the religious Law, totally reliant on God and without any recourse to the help of other people.

The second is the state of reality which is identical with the state of saintliness (*wilayah*). While in this state, man obeys God's commandment (*amr*). This obedience is of two kinds. The first is that an individual strives to satisfy his basic needs, but abstains totally from any luxurious indulgence in life and protects himself against all open and hidden sins. The second obedience is to the inner voice, to what is directly revealed to him. All his movements and even his rest become dedicated to God.

The third is the state of resignation when the individual submits completely to God. The fourth and last is the state of annihilation (*fana'*) which is peculiar to *Abdal* who are pure unitarians and Gnostics. [12](#)

The state of annihilation is the unitive state in which the individual attains nearness [13](#) to God, which implies discarding one's own desires and purposes and identifying oneself with the cosmic purpose of God. In this state man comes to realize that there is nothing in existence except God [14](#) – a position which is characteristic of pantheistic mysticism, though we do not find in the *Futuh al-Ghaib* this statement associated with the usual metaphysical implications that we find, for instance, in Ibn 'Arabi and his followers. It is only an expression of psychological experience of the individual traversing the mystic Path. A man who reaches this stage acquires the creative power (*takwin*) like God's, and his ordering a thing to be (*kun*) becomes as effective as God's. [15](#)

Shaikh Jilani holds that mystic intuition gives the recipient knowledge of reality that is not possible to gain through reason. Not only that, vision (*kashf*) and experience (*mushahadah*) overwhelm the reasoning power of man. This manifestation reveals two aspects of God: (a) His majesty (*jalal*) and (b) His beauty (*jamal*), both of which are revealed to one at different times. [16](#)

But in another Discourse he approaches the problem in a truly empirical way. He says that the only way to know Reality is to look to the self (*nafs*) as well as to observe nature (*afaq*). It is only through this approach that we can arrive at a true conception of God. He quotes with approval the following statement of Ibn al-'Abbas, the famous Companion of the Holy Prophet:

“Everything reflects one or other of the attributes of God and every name signifies one of His names. So surely you are surrounded by His names, His attributes, and His works. He is manifest in His attributes and concealed in His person. His person is concealed in His attributes and His attributes are concealed in His actions. He has revealed His knowledge through His will and His will is manifest in His continuous creative activity. He has concealed His skill or workmanship and has expressed it only when He has so willed. So He is hidden in His aspect of *ghaib* (unseen) and He is manifest in His wisdom and power. [17](#)

Mysticism, according to the Shaikh, is not the result of discussion and talk but of hunger and privation. It consists of generosity, cheerful submission, patience, constant communion with God through prayer, solitude, wearing of woollen dress, globe-trotting, and *faqr*, [18](#) and also of humility, sincerity, and truthfulness. [19](#)

Shihab Al-Din Suhrawardi

Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (539–632/1144–1234) was born at a time when the fate of the whole Muslim world was hanging in the balance. The last king of the Saliuqs, Sultan Sanjar, died in 552/1157. Soon after the Ghuzz came on the scene, and carried fire and sword wherever they went; peace was, however, restored by the Khwarizm Shahs. But in 615/1218 started the Mongol invasion under Chingiz Khan. One town after another was ravaged and people were indiscriminately massacred. There was

nobody to check this advance. The people had lost all morale.

It was during this period of insecurity and fear that Shaikh. Suhrawardi lived. He died in 624/1226, eight years after the death of Chingiz Khan. These events must have influenced the mind of the Shaikh; hence the note of pessimism often met with in his work *Awarif al-Ma'rif*, in which he expresses with a sad heart the decline in moral character of his contemporaries. He passed the major part of his life at Baghdad where he now lies buried. He founded the school of mysticism which is known as Suhrawardiyyah – after his name. His work *'Awarif al-Ma'rif* is a standard treatise on mysticism extensively used in all mystic circles.

Origin of Sufism

According to him, the word *sufi* is etymologically derived from “*suf*,” the coarse woollen cloth which, as he says, was worn by the Holy Prophet.²⁰ He enumerates several other views: (i) The Sufis are those who stand in the first rank (*saff*) before God; (ii) the word was originally *safawi* and was later on changed into *sufi*; (iii) it was derived from *suffah*, the mound where a group of Muslims used to spend their time in religious learning and ascetic ways of life.

According to Suhrawardi, these derivations are etymologically incorrect, though with regard to the third it may be said that the life led by the people of the *suffah* resembled the pattern of life adopted by the Sufis. He also refers to a particular group of the people of Khurasan²¹ who used to live in caves far off from inhabited places. They were called *Shaguttiyyah*, from *Shaguft*, the name of the cave. The people of Syria used to call them *Jau'iyyah*.

A detailed discussion about the origin of the word *sufi* has already been given in Chapter XVI, where, on the authority of Sarraj, it has been maintained that the word *sufi* was in use in Arabia even in pre-Islamic days. Suhrawardi, however, thinks that this word was not used in the time of the Holy Prophet. According to some people, it became current during the third generation after the Prophet (*Taba' Tabi'in*).

According to others, it came into use in the third century of the Hijrah. The titles of *Sahabah* (Companions of the Prophet) and *Tabi'in* (their Successors) were held in great esteem and, therefore, the word *sufi* – a title of honour, no doubt – did not make its appearance during their times. But when these peaceful times disappeared and gave place to turbulent periods of unrest and political intrigue, pious people found it convenient for their peace of mind to shun society and live in seclusion and pass their time in meditation and spiritual exercises.²²

What is Sufism?

Suhrawardi tries to establish a very intimate relationship between Sufism and knowledge. According to him, knowledge that is followed by moral behaviour is the main characteristic of Sufi life. Such knowledge is called by him *Fiqh* which is not used in the usual legal sense but for spiritual insight as it is

used in the Qur'an. He refers to several Qur'anic verses to prove this point. First, he quotes the verse; **"He (God) taught man what he did not know,"**²³ and concludes that the spiritual status of man is based solely on knowledge. ²⁴

Secondly, he holds that Sufis are the people who acquire spiritual insight into religion and this helps them lead people to the right path. This spiritual perception, according to him, pertains to the sphere of the heart and not to the sphere of the head ²⁵ He argues that, according to the Qur'an, knowledge and moral uprightness are the characteristics of the truly learned persons. He holds that knowledge is the consequence of *taqwa*, i, e., piety and moral integrity. In a verse it is said that "those of His servants only who are possessed of knowledge have *taqwa*."²⁶ This verse is very significant in establishing the relationship between knowledge and moral behaviour, for, as Suhrawardi puts it,²⁷ it excludes knowledge from those who are not characterized by moral integrity (*taqwa*).

But to what kind of knowledge does Suhrawardi refer? In this connection he enumerates different views. According to some, it is the knowledge of the psychological states of an individual, for, without this kind of knowledge, it is contended, it is not possible for a person to distinguish between different types of revelations and experiences.²⁸

According to others, it is the knowledge concerning worldly matters, for, without proper information in this respect, a person is liable to be misled in his religious pursuits. According to Abu Talib of Mecca, it is the knowledge of the five religious duties of a Muslim.

But, according to Suhrawardi himself, the knowledge which is incumbent on all Muslims is the knowledge of religious commandments. and prohibitions. And yet true knowledge, which manifests itself in practice and moulds and informs the life of the individual possessing that knowledge, is not formal knowledge that is imparted in schools and colleges but a state of the heart that grasps the truth of things without thereby becoming the master of details.

Such a person is called in the Qur'an the one firmly rooted in knowledge (*rasikh fi al-'ilm*).²⁹ He calls it the knowledge which one receives as a legacy (*'ilm al-wirathah*) from the prophets and saints. He distinguishes it from the knowledge gained through formal education (*'ilm al-dirasah*).³⁰ Their relation, according to him, is like the relation of butter and milk. It is not milk but butter that is the object of man. We take milk only because it yields butter and fat.

This type of knowledge is usually divided into three stages: knowledge by inference, knowledge by perception (or observation), and knowledge by personal experience or intuition (*'ilm al-yaqin, 'ain al-yaqin, and haqq al-yaqin*). A person who attains to the stage of intuition, though less careful in observing ritualistic formalities, is far superior to a man who has many ritualistic practices to his credit but whose knowledge is not of the highest type.³¹

Sufism, according to Suhrawardi, is characterized by two things. It consists in following the practice of the Holy Prophet (*Sunnah*) and in inculcating purity of motives and attaining the highest integrity of

character. There are two different categories of Sufis.

The first includes those persons in whom mystic illumination (*kashf*) is followed by exercise of personal effort (*ijtihad*). He quotes the example of Pharaoh's magicians. When they realized the spiritual stature of Moses in comparison with their petty tricks, they were overwhelmed by the effulgence of spiritual illumination as a result of which they decided there and then to break with the Pharaoh in favour of Moses. This decision of theirs for which they willingly bore all the terrible consequences with which the Pharaoh threatened them came to them with an ease that follows spiritual illumination.

To the second category belong those people who lead a hard ascetic life spending their days in prayers and nights in meditation. It is only after a long struggle spread over days, months, and years that they receive divine illumination. Here illumination is the fruit and crown of personal efforts and hard ascetic life. He quotes a saying of Junaid: "We did not gain access to the domain of Sufism through discursive reasoning or intellectual discussion but through hunger, abdication of worldly lust and prestige, and discarding of even lawful things."

There are two other kinds of people usually called Sufis but, according to Suhrawardi, they cannot be included among mystics at all. The first are the *majdhubs*, i.e., those who receive spiritual illumination through divine grace but cannot reap the full fruit of their illumination because they are not able to supplement it with their personal efforts. The others are the ascetics who spend their whole life in self-mortification and meditation but whose efforts are not crowned with illumination.[32](#)

In another place, discussing the qualities of a spiritual guide, he divides persons into four categories: (1) Pure or absolute ascetic (*salik*). (2) Pure or absolute *majdhub*. People belonging to these two categories do not deserve to be adopted as spiritual guides. The absolute ascetic retains the consciousness of self to the last. He starts with ascetic practices but, unfortunately, he is not able to ascend to the stage of *kashf*. The absolute *majdhub*, on the other hand, receives through divine grace a little illumination, and some veils from the face of Reality (God) are removed for him, but he does not put in the requisite labour that forms an indispensable part of mystic discipline.

(3) First *salik* and afterwards *majdhub*. Such a person is fit for becoming a guide. He starts with ascetic practices and reaches the goal of his endeavour, viz., spiritual illumination, which relieves him of the severity of his earlier discipline. He becomes the repository of divine wisdom.

(4) But the most perfect stage, according to him, is the fourth, viz., first *majdhub* and afterwards *salik*. Such a person receives divine illumination in the beginning and veils are removed from his heart. His interest in the material world vanishes and he looks towards the spiritual world with eagerness and joyful expectations. This inner transformation affects his outward life and the antagonism between love and Law ceases for him. His outward and inward life, this world and the other world, wisdom and power, all become one. His faith is so deep that even if all the veils that hide the face of the Real were removed, he will gain nothing thereby.[33](#)

Suhrawardi makes a distinction between a person of the third rank and a person of the fourth rank. The former who follows the path of a lover (*muhibb*) is freed from the bonds of the lower self (*nafs*) but is tied down in the bondage of the heart. The latter who traverses the way of the Beloved (*Mahbub*) is freed both from the lower self and the heart.³⁴

Again, the former follows the forms of action (*suwar al-a'mal*) and thinks that just as a man cannot do without a body so long as he is alive, so action of one sort or other is indispensable for him. But the man belonging to the fourth category passes beyond all these. He leaves behind everything – lower self (*nafs*), heart, states, and actions – and achieves complete unity with God to the extent that God becomes his ears and eyes so that he hears with God's ears and sees with God's eyes.³⁵

Sufism covers both poverty (*faqr*) and continence (*zuhd*), but is identical with neither. *Faqr* is a difficult term to translate. Usually it means poverty, but in mystic morality it signifies the positive attitude of total independence from worldly needs. Suhrawardi quotes different definitions and descriptions of *faqr* in Sufism given by several eminent mystics.

Ruyam says that Sufism is based on three principles, the first of which is attachment to poverty. Ma'ruf of Karkh says that he who does not possess *faqr* is not a Sufi. *Faqr*, according to Shibli, is indifference towards all except God. ³⁶ According to usage of the terms in Syria,³⁷ there is no difference between Sufism and *faqr*. They argue on the basis of the Qur'anic verse that “**(alms are for) the poor (fuqara) who have devoted themselves to the way of God,**”³⁸ which, according to them, is the description of the Sufis.

But Suhrawardi disagrees with this view. He thinks that a person's constant attachment to poverty and fear of riches is a sign of weakness; it amounts to reliance on external causes and conditions and dependence on expected reward. But a true Sufi is above all these things. He is motivated neither by fear nor by rewards; he is above all such limitations. Again, adoption of poverty and avoidance of riches imply exercise of personal will and freedom of choice which is contrary to the spirit of Sufism. A true Sufi has subjected his will to the will of God and, therefore, he sees no difference in poverty or riches.

Sufism is, thus, distinct from *faqr*, though the latter forms the basis of the former – in the sense that the way to Sufism passes through *faqr*, not in the sense that both are identical or indispensable to each other. The same is the case with asceticism (*zuhd*), which may be a preparatory stage for Sufism but cannot be identified with it at all. There is a Qur'anic verse which says to the believers, to be “**upright (qawwamin) for Allah and bearer of witness with justice.**”³⁹ This uprightness (*qawwamiyyah*), according to Suhrawardi, is the essence of Sufism.

There are three stages in the mystic process; first, faith (*iman*); secondly, knowledge (*'ilm*); and lastly, intuition (*dhauq*). When a person is at the first stage, he is called “one who is like a true Sufi in appearance and dress (*mutashabih*).” When he attains to the second stage, he is called “one who pretends to be a Sufi (*mutasawwif*).” Only he who reaches the last stage deserves to be called a true

Sufi.[40](#)

Suhrawardi again refers to a Qur'anic verse[41](#) where three different kinds of persons are mentioned who have been chosen by God as the repositories (*warith*) of the knowledge of the Book: ***“Of them is he who makes his soul suffer a loss, of them is he who takes a middle course, and of them is he who is foremost in deeds of goodness.”***

The Qur'an uses the word *zalim* for the first, *muqtasid* for the second, and *sabiq* for the third. According to some, *zalim* is the ascetic (*zahid*), *muqtasid* is a gnostic (*arif*), and *sabiq* is the lover (*muhibb*). According to others, the first is one who cries when any calamity befalls him, the second is one who patiently bears it, while the third feels positive pleasure in it. According to another version, the first are those who worship God carelessly and as a matter of routine, the second do it with hope and fear, while the third are those who do not forget God at any time. These three categories of people according to Suhrawardi are identical with the three types of mystics: *Mutashabih*, *Mutasawwif* and the Sufi, respectively.[42](#)

He refers to two other groups. The first are *Malamitiyyah* who do not manifest good deeds and do not hide evil. But they are inferior to a true Sufi who is so engrossed in his experiences and illumination that he does not know what to hide and what to manifest.[43](#) The second are *Qalandariyyah* who are people of integrity but who do not subject themselves to full ascetic discipline. They have no ambition for further spiritual progress and lead a life of happiness and contentment.[44](#)

He mentions a group of people who claim that *Shari'ah* (the religious Law) is binding only up to a certain stage. When reality manifests itself to a gnostic, the bonds of the Law disappear. Suhrawardi holds that these are misguided people, for Law and reality (*Shari'ah* and *haqiqah*) are not antagonistic but interdependent. He who enters the sphere of reality (*Haqiqah*) becomes bound to the rank of slavehood (*ubudiyyah*). Those who subscribe to the doctrine of incarnation (*hulul*) and employ the Christian terms *lahut* and *nasut* [45](#) without understanding their real significance are all misguided people.

He holds that the saying attributed to Bayazid, viz., *subhani, ma a'zamu sha'ni* (all praise to me, how exalted is my position!), if spoken by him at all must have been said about God and not about himself as is commonly held. The *ana al-Haq* (I am the Truth) of Hallaj must be similarly interpreted according to the true intention of the statement. Suhrawardi adds that if it were known that Hallaj by this statement implied incarnation (*hulul*), he would condemn him outright.

There are some people who think that they receive words from God and often converse with Him; and, as a result of this conversation, they claim to receive messages which they attribute to God. Such people, according to Suhrawardi, are either ignorant of the true nature of their experience or are deceived by their intellectual conceit. The words they hear are mere words which appear in their mind and in no way can be attributed to God. Such things appear when a man due to excessive ascetic practices is morally uplifted. Their attribution to God should be like attribution of everything to the Creator

and not as a result of any kind of conversation with Him.

He mentions another group of people who claim to be submerged in the sea of Unity and deny man's free-will and look upon each human action as the direct consequence of God's will or act. It seems that the Shaikh is referring to those mystics who were later called pantheists, for they were the people who claimed to be the followers of the true doctrine of *tawhid*, interpreted by them as the denial not only of any gods besides God but the denial of any existence besides His.[46](#)

Suhrawardi thinks that mystics must live in monasteries (*khanqahs*) quite unconcerned with the problem of earning their bread. Without complete break with the world, it is not possible for them to turn their attention to God and to the purification of their hearts. As this seems to be incompatible with the generally held view, he tries to justify his stand by reference to certain Qur'anic verses and the Prophet's traditions.

There is a verse which says: ***“Be patient and vie you in patience and be steadfast (rabitu).”***[47](#)

Suhrawardi interprets the word *rabitu* in his own way. He says that *ribat* was originally a place where horses were tied, then it came to be used for a fortress the residents of which gave protection to the people. Later on, it came to be employed for monasteries, for the people of monasteries by their godliness are able to protect people from the influence of evil.

So the word *rabitu* in this verse stands, according to Suhrawardi, not for struggle against the enemies but for struggle against the self, not for smaller *jihad* but for greater *jihad*, as a tradition puts it.[48](#) But the Qur'anic verse[49](#) that he quotes in the beginning of the chapter conclusively disproves the whole tenor of his stand. It is clear that the Qur'an refers to the houses, the inmates of which have not turned their back upon the world but are engaged in full worldly pursuits, and these pursuits never stand in the way of their remembrance of God.

If monastic life is accepted as an ideal for the mystic, as Suhrawardi does, it follows naturally that begging and celibacy should be adopted as the basic principles governing the life of the mystics. Naturally, therefore, we find him defending both these principles in spite of his view that they are not in complete accord with the Islamic way of life, as enunciated by the Qur'an and sanctioned by the Holy Prophet. While discussing begging, he refers to several traditions which prohibit a man from begging and yet he insists that a Sufi who is engaged in a life of total dedication to *dhikr-Allah* (remembrance of God) is compelled to satisfy his minimum physical needs of hunger and thirst by resort to begging. For justifying his point of view he misinterprets the traditions.

There is a saying of the Prophet that the most lawful of foods for a Muslim is what he earns by his own hands. Many mystics tried to explain it away by holding that “earning by hand” means stretching hand in prayers to God for sending them food through other persons. He refers to Abu Talib of Mecca who rejected this misinterpretation and still clings to it.[50](#) There is another tradition according to which the upper hand (of the giver) is better than the lower hand (of the beggar). But Suhrawardi, following Hujwiri,

interprets it again in his own way. According to him, the upper hand is the hand of the beggar who by receiving alms gives blessing to the alms-giver.[51](#)

Similarly, discussing the question of celibacy, he wavers between the two positions. On the one hand, he feels inclined towards celibacy as a logical consequence of the conception of mysticism that he holds. On the other hand, there are many traditions to the effect that he who does not marry does not belong to the Muslim community. Ultimately, he leaves the question to the discretion of the individual mystic or to the advice of the spiritual guide.[52](#)

On the question of listening to music, again, his attitude is non-committal. On the one hand, he quotes several eminent Sufis who were fond of music and who referred to several traditions in their support. On the other, there were several eminent persons who did not like it because, according to them, there was no scriptural support for it.

While discussing the question of musical assemblies, he points out that some people look upon these assemblies as innovations. But he adds that not all innovations are religiously blameworthy and, therefore, the question under discussion cannot be decided on this ground.[53](#) Again, he quotes a tradition in support of the mystic dance (*wajd*) and tearing of the mystic robe (*khirqah*) in these assemblies and yet adds that traditions invariably reject them as unlawful,[54](#) and, therefore, the matter stands where it is. But on the whole he seems to be in favour of music.[55](#)

With regard to travel, Suhrawardi thinks that a Sufi cannot be expected to conform to any particular pattern of life. He divides Sufis into four classes in this respect:

First those who start their mystic career as travellers but then change into stays-at-home. Their travelling is for several purposes for acquiring knowledge, which, as the Shaikh quotes different traditions, is incumbent on all Muslims; for visiting people versed in knowledge (*rasikhun fi al-ilm*) and benefiting from their company; for observing the various forms of natural phenomena, for, according to the Qur'an, God shows ***“His signs in the objective world and in the subjective world of the self till the truth is clear to them”***[56](#); for moral and spiritual discipline which will season them and train them to achieve self-control and other virtues.

The second are those who start their mystic life with a retreat to solitude and end up with travelling. Such persons happen to enjoy the company of a perfect saint and under his guidance cover several stages of the mystic discipline and then after maturity try to consolidate their position by travelling from place to place.

To the third category belong people who start their mystic life in solitude and retirement and end with it. “Such people keep their heads on the knees and find therein the Mount of Sinai.” In other words, they enjoy the nearness and see the light of divine illumination. It is said that water if stationary begins to stink. To this the mystics reply that one should become as vast as an ocean and thereby become protected from stagnation and nasty smell.

To the fourth category belong people who are always on the move and with them travelling is the beginning and end of mystic discipline.

Psychology: Soul, Appetitive Self, Heart

The Shaikh bases his account of the soul (*ruh*) on two verses of the Qur'an. In the first it is held⁵⁷ that man was created by God from fine clay, then it successively changed into a moist germ, a clot of blood and flesh, till all of a sudden this compound of apparently chemical changes assumed a form beyond the material plane, acquired the new spiritual dimension and became a new creation (*khalqan akhar*).

Beginning as a piece of matter, man acquires at a certain stage of development characteristics which as if push him out of this plane into the plane of life. This stage, according to Suhrawardi, was reached when soul was breathed into him. But what is this soul which changes a piece of clay and matter into a being of a different dimension? He refers to the second verse: ***“They ask you of the soul (ruh). Say, the soul is from the command (amr) of my Lord.”***⁵⁸

On the basis of this verse, some mystics regard the soul as eternal – as being an emanation of God's *amr*, which, as an attribute of God, is eternal. Suhrawardi, however, thinks that the soul is not eternal but created (*hadith*), though it is the most subtle of all things and purer and lighter than all else.

The next question is to determine whether it is an attribute (*`ard*) or a substance (*jauhar*). In a tradition it is mentioned that the souls have the capacity to move here and there, fly to different places, etc. On this basis some mystics are inclined to the view that soul is a substance characterized by some definite attributes. But Suhrawardi does not accept this interpretation.

He holds that the account of the soul in the traditions is only symbolical and, therefore, cannot be taken in a literal sense. Soul is neither eternal nor is it a substance but created (*hadith*) and is an attribute (*`ard*). It is a created thing which acts according to its nature; it keeps the body alive as long as it is associated with it; it is nobler than the body; it tastes death when it is separated from the body; just as the body meets death when it is separated from the soul.

There are, according to him, two stages of the soul. The first is that of the animal soul (*ruh al-hayawani*) which is a subtle body. It is the source of movement in the human body and produces in it the capacity of receiving sensations from the outside world. This soul is common to all animals and is intimately connected with the digestive organism of the body.

The other grade of the soul is what Suhrawardi calls the heavenly soul of man. It belongs to the world of command (*`alam al-amr*). When it descends upon the animal soul, the animal soul is totally transformed. Now it acquires the characteristic of rationality and becomes capable of receiving inspiration (*ilham*).⁵⁹

The appetitive self (*nafs*) is the source of all undesirable activities. It has two dominant impulses, rage and avarice. When in rage, it is like a circular substance which is by its nature always on the move. When avaricious, it is like the moth which, being not satisfied with a little light, throws itself headlong into

the flame of the candle and burns itself to death.. A man is able to attain true rank of manliness when he tries to purify his self (*nafs*) of these gross characteristics by bringing into play reason and patience.

The self passes through three different stages of development. The first stage of the Self is evil-prompting (*ammarah*), the second is repentant (*lawwamah*), while the third is satisfied (*mutma'innah*).[60](#)

Heart (*qalb*) is a spiritual principle (*latifah*) and has its locus in the heart of flesh. It comes into being as a result of mutual attraction between the human soul and the appetitive self. According to a tradition of the Holy Prophet (narrated by Hudhaifah), there are four kinds of hearts. The first is like a pure soil free from all kinds of vegetation. It is illumined as if by a shining lamp. It is the heart of a true believer (*mu'min*). The second is a dark, inverted heart which belongs to an unbeliever. The third belongs to a hypocrite and is enveloped in a veil. The last is a pure but many-faceted heart, with an inclination towards good as well as evil.[61](#)

Mystery (Sirr)

There is difference of opinion among the mystics with regard to the exact place which the secret occupies in the psychological makeup of man. According to some, it is prior to the soul (*ruh*) and posterior to the heart (*qalb*) as a spiritual principle. To others it is posterior to the soul, though higher and subtler than it. According to these mystics, *sirr* is the locus of spiritual observation (*mushahadah*), soul is the locus of love, and heart is the locus of gnosis (*ma`rifah*).[62](#)

Suhrawardi, however, thinks that secret (*sirr*) has no independent being like the soul and heart. It refers to a particular stage in the spiritual development of man. When man is able to free himself from the dark prison of the appetitive self, and looks towards the spiritual soul, his heart acquires a new characteristic which is called mystery (*sirr*). Similarly, at this stage his soul also attains a special position which again is called mystery. At this stage, man acquires the satisfied self and he acts and wills what God wishes him to do or will; he loses his individual power of action and freedom of choice and becomes a perfect servant (*`abd*).

Reason ('Aql)

It is the essence of the heavenly soul, its tongue, and its guide. The Shaikh quotes the usual traditional account that reason was the first creation of God. God asked it to come forward, to turn back, to sit, to speak, to become silent in turn, and it obeyed God's orders to the very letter. At this God said, "I swear by My majesty and power that I did not create a being dearer and more honourable than you. I shall be known, praised, and obeyed through you. I shall give as well as take through you. My pleasure and wrath shall follow deeds through you. People shall be rewarded or punished in accordance with you."

Some people think that reason develops from the study of sciences (*`ulum*), especially those which are necessary and axiomatic. But Suhrawardi does not seem to agree to this, for, as he argues, there are many people who are not versed in any art or science and yet possess abundance of reason and

common sense. It is the inborn capacity of man which helps him in acquiring different kinds of arts and sciences. There is placed in man a natural power which prompts him to acquire different kinds of knowledge. It is thus truly established that reason is the tongue of the soul which is the Word of God (*amr Allah*). From this flows the light of reason which then leads to the discovery of knowledge, science, and art.

Some people think that reason is of two kinds. By the one, man looks to the affairs of this world, and its seat is brain. The other reason has its place in the heart (*qalb*) with which a man looks to the affairs of the other world. But, according to Suhrawardi, this division is meaningless and unnecessary. Reason as the vehicle of the soul (*ruh*) is one. When it is supported and supplemented by the light of the *Shari'ah* and spiritual perception (*basirah*), it helps a man traverse the straight path of guidance and tread the middle course of the golden mean.

Such a person gets knowledge of the heavenly spheres (*malakut*) which is the innermost secret (*batin*) of the universe. This illumination is the peculiar characteristic of the elect. Such men are capable of looking to the affairs of both the worlds, the world of matter and space and the world of spirit, the present world and the next world. When reason is not supplemented and supported by the *Shari'ah* and *basirah*, a man may be able to do well in this world, but he shall be deprived of the blessings of the world of spirit.[63](#)

As the goal of the mystics is thoroughly practical, their excursion as novices into the psychological field is really for the purpose of securing a good ground on which to build an edifice of moral and spiritual development. Their aim is to attain a vision of God and enjoy communion with Him. This involves the necessity of the destruction of vices and elimination of imperfections, which often raise their head imperceptibly.

The main cause is the wrong interpretation which a man puts on the revelations (*ilhamat*) he receives after undergoing mortification. A true mystic is one who is able to discriminate between the sources of these experiences (*khawatir*). With regard to the sources, he divides these experiences into four kinds: (1) those that flow from the appetitive self (*nafs*), (2) from God (*Haq*), (3) from Satan, and (4) from the angels. There must be one of the following causes why a person cannot discriminate between the sources of experiences: (a) weakness in faith, (b) lack of proper knowledge with regard to the appetitive self and morals, (c) following the dictates of the appetitive self, and, lastly, (d) love of the world and material goals.

Anyone who protects himself from all these causes will surely be able to distinguish between revelations from God and those from Satan. It is an established fact, according to Suhrawardi, that he whose source of livelihood is not pure cannot be safe from evil influences. An attitude of balanced detachment from the material world, mortification of flesh, and constancy in ascetic practices are essential for a true mystic, and it is only then that a mystic can hope to achieve the beatific vision.[64](#)

State and Station (Hal wa Maqam)

Suhrawardi thinks that most mystics confuse state with station because there is a great similarity between the two, and yet these must be distinguished, for otherwise there is a possibility of a misunderstanding the true nature of the mystic experience.

State (*hal*) as a technical term is indicative of a psychological condition which is implied in its etymology, viz., its liability to change and progress, while station (*maqam*) implies a psychological condition which is relatively permanent. A psychological attitude that a mystic adopts at a particular stage of his mystic experience may be called state because the mystic is not yet used to it, but when later on through practice it becomes a permanent feature of his mystic life, it becomes a station.

Take, for instance, the attitude of critical examination (*muhāsabah*) of one's self from a moral point of view. When a mystic adopts this attitude first, it is a state which recurs at different periods; it comes and goes at intervals. By constant practice, however, he is able later on to make it a permanent feature of his normal life. Then it is a station.

Again, the mystic tries to adopt the attitude of meditation or contemplation (*muraqabah*) which becomes his state. Sometimes he is able to contemplate but, due to negligence and other distractions, he cannot find it possible to make it a permanent feature of his life. But steadily and gradually he gains his desired end and a day comes when contemplation becomes a station.

Then he advances to the third stage, of observation (*mushahadah*), where he perceives with his own eyes the secrets of the spiritual world. This, again, is first a state and only gradually by personal effort passes into a station. Thus it follows that "station" is a psychological state which is the result of personal effort, while "state" is the result of divine grace. Every moral attitude is characterized by both.

Contenance (*zuhd*), complete reliance on God (*tawakkul*), and submission to God's pleasure (*rida'*), for instance, have both these aspects – at one stage, they are acquired after a constant and toilsome effort and, at another stage they become a permanent feature of the life of a mystic due to divine grace.⁶⁵

Among the states Suhrawardi discusses love, feeling of nearness to God (*qurb*), bashfulness, reverence, union (*ittisal*), contraction (*qabd*) and expansion (*bast*), annihilation (*fana'*) and abiding (*baqa'*), etc.

Love

There is an instinctive love in man for wife, wealth, and children, but the love at which the mystics aim is not instinctive. It flows from the heart of an individual after he has reached a particular level of moral development where all his capacities and tendencies are directed towards the realization of union with God. It is then that the sentiment of love appears in him and all inclinations are subordinated to it. He begins to feel love for God with the full force of instinctive impulse as well as conscious purpose. There are four kinds of love, according to Suhrawardi: (1) love of appetitive soul (*nafs*), (2) love of reason, (3)

love of heart as a symbol of spiritual perception, and (4) love of soul (*ruh*). The love for God which is the ideal of the mystics combines all these loves.

When love appears in a mystic on the basis of the first three sources, it is called general love which is the result of direct apprehension (*mushahadah*) of God's attributes. But when he passes from attributes to God's essence (*dhat*), his love assumes a new dimension; it flows from his soul, and he is thus enabled to attain his goal. At this stage the mystic acquires and appropriates all the divine attributes. His position becomes what God says: "When I love a person I become his eyes and ears, etc. "

Nearness (Qurb)

This is not physical nearness but only a psychological state in which the mystic feels a profound consciousness of intimacy with the Ultimate Reality. The Qur'an says: "**And prostrate and draw near (to Him).**"⁶⁶ On this basis Suhrawardi thinks that attainment of nearness depends upon concentration on God which enables the individual to surpass levels of normal consciousness. There are two stages in this process. In the first place, the mystic falls as if into a trance and is overcome by intoxication (*sukr*); his consciousness of self (*nafs*) disappears in the spiritual light of his soul (*ruh*). The next phase begins when both *nafs* and *ruh* regain their separate identities and the individual feels the consciousness of nearness intimately and yet, in spite of it, the consciousness of otherness, which is involved in his relation of slavehood (*'ubudiyyah*) to God, is also conspicuously present. He quotes a mystic as saying: "By following the Sunnah one attains gnosis (*ma`rifah*), by observing the obligatory duties (*fara'id*) one reaches nearness, while by practising daily 'extra' prayers (*nawafil*), one attains love."

Bashfulness (Haya')

There is a saying of the Holy Prophet: "Be modest with God as it is due to Him." Suhrawardi explained it as follows: "He alone can be called modest in relation to God who is careful of his daily behaviour towards Him and remembers his death and the hereafter, with the result that his heart cools off towards this world and its entanglements."

But this modesty or bashfulness, being acquired, is a station (*maqam*), while bashfulness of a special quality is a state. In order to define it, Suhrawardi quotes certain sayings of some mystics. One says: "Bashfulness and attachment (*uns*) hover about the heart, and when they find that it is possessed of continence (*zuhd*) and piety (*war'*), they descend into it, otherwise they move away."

This bashfulness is the submission of one's soul to God for maintaining the grandeur of His majesty (*jalah*), while attachment is the soul's experience of pleasure in the perfection of His beauty (*jamal*). When both bashfulness and attachment combine, it is the end of a mystic's ambition. According to Abu Sulaiman, there are four different motives of action: fear, hope, awe, and bashfulness, and that action is the best which is motivated by the last.

Union (Ittisal)

As Nuri says, union is the revelation of the heart and the observation of secrets. There is a person who attains union through his personal efforts but loses this position as soon as there is slackness in his efforts. This is all but natural, for human efforts cannot be kept up at the same degree of intensity for a long time. Such a person is called *mufassal*. But the union that Suhrawardi commends is one which is the result not of personal effort but of divine grace. A person who receives it is called united (*wasil*). But there are several grades of this union.

There is a person who receives illumination from divine actions. To such a person, actions, his own as well as those of others, cannot be attributed, for his role is only passive. It is God who does all actions through him and he loses all freedom of choice or independence of action. Secondly, there is illumination from divine attributes. Here the recipient through revelation of divine attributes of majesty and beauty stays at the stations of awe (*haibah*) and attachment (*uns*).

Then there is the illumination of divine essence (*dhat*) which is a stage towards annihilation (*fana'*). A person at this stage is illumined with the divine light of faith and in the observation of God's face loses his individuality. This is a further stage in union (*ittisal*). It is open only to a few, the *muqarrabin*, who enjoy nearness to God.

Above it is the stage of spiritual perception (*haqq al-yaqin*) which is vouchsafed to very few persons and that only for the twinkling of an eye. It is the complete permeation of divine light in the recipient, so much so that his self (*nafs*) and heart both feel overpowered by it. And, in spite of its being a very rare experience attainable by a few select persons, the recipient feels that he is perhaps at some preliminary stage of his journey towards union. It is a long and toilsome journey for which perhaps a life of eternity may not suffice.

Contraction and Expansion (Qabd wa Bast)

These two emotional states are dependent for their appearance on certain preliminary conditions. They are usually experienced by a mystic when he is traversing the early stages of what Suhrawardi calls the states of special love.⁶⁷ They appear neither at the stage of general love, nor at the termination of the stage of special love.

There are some emotional experiences in the state of general love which seem to correspond to contraction and expansion, but which in reality are nothing more than fear (*khauf*) and hope (*raja'*), while at other times they are what he calls grief (*hamm*) and pleasure (*nishat*) which the experient confuses with contraction and expansion. Grief and pleasure emanate from the self (*nafs*) which is yet at the appetitive stage (*nafs-i ammarah*), a stage susceptible to the promptings of evil. *Hamm* is the feeling of dissatisfaction experienced at the failure of attaining the object of self-love while *nishat* is the crest of the wave when the sea of self-indulgence is all astorm.

It is only when the mystic enters the next stage which is connected with the stage of special love and when his appetitive self becomes the repentant self (*nafs-i lawwamah*) that the true moods of contraction and expansion make their appearance. The mood of contraction is the result of a psychological state when the self (*nafs*) is in ascendance, while the mood of expansion follows when the heart (as an organ of spiritual perception) is in ascendance.

When the appetitive self becomes repentant (*lawwamah*), there is a constant up and down in the urges towards evil; sometimes the urge towards good has the upper hand, while at others there is a tendency towards the other pole. The appearance of contraction and expansion corresponds to these two poles of the life of the self. *Nafs* is the veil of darkness and heart is the veil of light, and as long as an individual is in the sphere of these veils, he continues to experience these two moods of contraction and expansion. But as soon as he passes beyond these veils, these moods also disappear. In the experience of annihilation (*fana'*) and abiding (*baqa'*), there is neither contraction nor expansion; they are intimately connected with the consciousness of selfhood.

According to some Sufis, the mystic first experiences contraction in his spiritual development and then it is followed by expansion. Suhrawardi also holds the same opinion. But there are certain situations where this order is reversed. Under the mood of expansion, the experient feels overjoyed and happy. This happiness then filters down to the self (*nafs*) which is by nature inclined to interpret it appetitively so that this mood of expansion degenerates into an attitude of pleasure. At this stage the mood of contraction of necessity makes its appearance to bring the self to the state of sanity and equilibrium. If the self were to be free from a tendency towards the extremes, the mystic would be in a perpetual state of expansion (*bast*) and blessedness.

When the self passes into the last stage and becomes the satisfied soul, it attains complete harmony and passes beyond the bi-polar strife of good and evil. For such a person the moods of contraction and expansion are nonexistent.

Annihilation and Abiding (Fana' wa Baqa')

According to Suhrawardi, what most mystics describe as the state of annihilation (*fana'*) is in reality not *fana'* but something else. According to some, *fana'* is the annihilation of all attachment, absence of all urges towards satisfaction of worldly desires, etc. This state, according to Suhrawardi, is what is implied in repentance of a true type (*taubat al-nasuh*).

To some *fana'* is the annihilation of evil attributes and *baqa'*, the abiding of good attributes. This, again, according to Suhrawardi, is not true *fana'* and *baqa'* but the result of moral transformation and purification (*tazkiyah*). There are many phases of *fana'*, but the state of absolute *fana'* is one where the Being of God is so overpowering and overwhelming that the consciousness of the finite self is totally obliterated.

He quotes with approval the following event as a true representation of the state of annihilation (*fana'*). A

person greeted 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar while he was engaged in circumambulation (*tawaf*) of the Ka'bah to which he made no response. Later on he heard that the man had complained to someone at the absence of his response. At this 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar replied that in that state he was in communion with God and, therefore, did not have any consciousness of himself, not to speak of others.

There are two kinds of *fana'*. The first is the apparent annihilation (*fana' al-zahir*). Here the mystic receives illumination through divine action with the result that freedom of action and choice disappears from him. He sees all actions, his as well as those of others, emanating directly from God. At the stage of the real annihilation (*fana' al-batin*), the mystic receives illumination from God's attributes and His essence (*dhat*) with the result that he is overwhelmed by the divine *amr* so much so that he becomes totally immune from evil promptings of all kinds.

Some people in the state of annihilation lose all consciousness but, according to Suhrawardi, it is not an essential phase of this state.

In the state of abiding (*baqa'*), the mystic is restored the power of action which had been annihilated previously. God allows him full freedom to act as he likes and as the situation demands. In this state he is conscious of the obligations both to the world and to God and none of these becomes a hindrance to the other. His duty to the world does not make him oblivious of his duty to God, nor does his communion with God debar him from turning his attention to the worldly matters.

The apparent annihilation (*fana' al-zahir*) is for those who are at the station of heart and are busy with emotional states, while the real annihilation (*fana' al-batin*) is for those who have passed beyond that station and attained union with God and who are what he calls *bi-Allah* (with God).[68](#)

Union and Separation (Jam' wa Tafriqah)

According to Junaid, nearness to God in ecstasy (*wajd*) is union while the sense of selfhood (*bashriyyah*) and absence from God (*ghaibah*), i.e., awareness of self, is separation (*tafriqah*). Suhrawardi accepts this position and says that the state where the mystic feels himself united with God (*tauhid al-tajrid*) is denoted by union (*jam'*), while ordinary and normal state of consciousness, where the mystic feels the separate individuality of his own self as well as of other things, is called separation (*tafriqah*).

He adds that both these states are complementary; if we ignore union, we are landed in negation of the divine attributes (*ta'til*) and if we ignore separation, it leads to heresy (*ilhad*) and denial of God (*zandaqah*). Union is annihilation in God (*fana' bi-Allah*), while separation (*tafriqah*) is relationship of an obedient servant to God (*'ubdiyyah*). Union is the result of man's possession of a soul, while separation is due to his possession of a body, and as long as the combination of the soul and the body persists, these two states must equally be emphasized in the life of the mystic.

There is another state which is called by mystics the union of the union (*jam' al-jam'*). When a mystic looks towards God's action, he is in the state of separation; when he looks towards God's attributes, he

is in the state of union; and when he looks towards God's essence, he is in the state of union of the union.⁶⁹

Process of Self-Purification

The ideal life, according to Suhrawardi, is the life of a perfect man who, in spite of the highest spiritual attainments, is yet conscious of his subservience to the Law of *Shari`ah*. But this stage of purification cannot be attained without a long process of self-mortification which demands self-examination, introversion, contemplation, patience, submission to God's will, and an attitude of complete detachment.

The spark of life that is kindled within the heart of the mystic has a charm of its own, but it cannot be kept burning unless it is fed constantly on the oil that flows from continuous efforts towards asceticism. He receives wayward glimpses of the Infinite Beauty and is charmed, but they prove fleeting; he wants this experience to be broadened in extensity and deepened in intensity; he wants this experience to be stabilized and enriched – hence the necessity of the whole process of self-purification. The result is second birth out of the womb of spirit into the kingdom of the re-awakened spirit.

Suhrawardi gives the details of this process of gradual enlightenment. There are four preliminary stages: Faith, repentance (*taubah*), continence, constancy in unblemished virtuous actions. These four must be supplemented by four other things which are essentials of asceticism, viz., minimum conversation, minimum food, minimum stay-at-home, and minimum contact with people.

Repentance (*taubah*) over past shortcomings and determination to avoid them in future are effective only when a person keeps a constant check over his thoughts and actions and is fully awake to all situations.⁷⁰ But to maintain this psychological state of repentance there are certain essential requirements. The first is self-examination (*muhasabah*) and the other is introversion or meditation (*muraqabah*). A person asked Wasti, “Which is the best virtuous action?” He said, “Outwardly self-examination and inwardly meditation; both are perfected by each other and help to maintain the attitude of repentance in the mystic which leads to concentration on and communion with God (*inabah*) “

The other thing that is essential for a mystic is patience (*sabr*) without which it is not possible for him to continue his life. This moral quality enables him to endure the vicissitudes of life. It is far more easy for an individual to show his mettle in adversity than in prosperity and hence the mystics have emphasized the importance of patience in a state of affluence which is regarded superior to patience shown in a state of want.

The next state is that of *rida'* which is in a way the fruit of conversion (*taubah*) where the mystic enters the sphere of fear and hope. He feels shocked at the tendency towards evil and, being morally at a higher stage of development, he fears succumbing to these temptations. This feeling of fear, therefore, serves to keep him aware and make him watchful of any fall towards the satisfaction of his baser self. He is repentant and feels hopeful of ultimate victory over these evil forces. Thus, the life of the mystic

moves between these two poles of fear and hope and gradually attains the stage of what Suhrawardi calls continence (*zuhd*), which in a way sums up all that he has achieved so far.

The stage of continence, in other words, is the stage where the fruits of conversion (*taubah*) with its constituents of self-examination and meditation, patience and voluntary submission to God, piety, hope, and fear, all converge and make the mystic into a perfect ascetic who lives, moves, and has his being in complete communion with God and in total reliance (*tawakkul*) upon Him. This second stage of continence is distinct from poverty (*faqr*). A *faqir* is one who is forced by circumstances to lead a life of poverty, while the continent person (*zahid*), on the other hand, adopts this life of detachment of his own free-will even when the state of affluence is open to him.

The third stage is that of stability in morally virtuous actions. According to Suhrawardi, a *zahid* who does not follow the Law of the Shari`ah is liable to be led astray. It is only through constancy in action for God (*'aml li-Allah*), remembrance (*dhikr*), recitation from the Qur'an, prayers, and meditation (*muraqabah*) that a mystic can hope to attain his objective which is *'ubudiyyah*, perfect obedience to God.

Sahl b. 'Abd Allah Tustari said about this stage: "When a man after passing through repentance, continence, and constancy in virtuous deeds reaches the stage of slavehood, he becomes totally passive towards the divine will and of his own free-will decides no longer to exercise his freedom of choice and action. Then he is granted full power of activity and freedom of action because he has identified himself with the will of God. His self-determination is equivalent to God-determination; the liability of his falling prey to evil temptations and ignorance are totally obliterated."

According to Suhrawardi, the stage of giving up freedom of choice and action is the stage of annihilation, while the second stage where the mystic freely acts, because his will follows the will of God, is the state of abiding in God. It is the shedding of the mortal self for the eternal, material for the spiritual, human for the divine. The mystic at this stage is the perfect servant.⁷¹

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¹ Futuh al-Ghaib, Discourse 54, pp. 102–104.

² Ibid., Discourse 10, pp. 23–24.

³ Qur'an, xxxvii, 96.

⁴ Futuh al-Ghaib, Discourse 27, pp. 56–58; see also Discourse 13, p. 29, and Discourse 70, pp. 129–30.

5. Qur'an, xvi, 32.
6. Futuh al-Ghaib, Discourse 27.
7. Ibid., Discourse 27, p. 56.
8. Ibid., Discourse 70, p.130.
9. Ibid., Discourse 27, p.59.
10. Shaikh Jilani extols in many sermons the role of a mystic saint who, after completing his spiritual discipline and attaining proficiency in mystic lore, assumes the onerous duty of leading the people to the way of God. The ideal type of a mystic in his eyes is not one who becomes a recluse or anchorite but a man of the world who by the example of his life and the words of his mouth helps the ignorant and misguided to the way of taqwa, righteousness.
11. Futuh al-Ghaib, Discourse 33, pp.66–69; see also Discourse 77 where a different division is presented.
12. Ibid., Discourse 10, pp.23–26; see also Discourse 18, p.40.
13. Shaikh Jilani is careful to point out that the term union (wusul) is only symbolical, for this union is something totally different when applied to human individuals. See Futuh al-Ghaib, Discourse 17, p.36.
14. Futuh al-Ghaib, Discourse 40, p.81; Discourse 17, p.37.
15. Ibid., Discourse 46, p.93; Discourse 13, pp.40–42; Discourse 18, p.60. Discourse 28, etc.
16. Ibid., Discourse 9, p.21.
17. Ibid., Discourse 74, pp. 135–6.
18. Ibid., Discourse 75, p. 137.
19. Ibid., Discourse 76.
20. According to the tradition translated by Ans b. Malik, cf. Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chapter 6.
21. Khurasan had been one of the centres of Buddhist missionaries before Islam, where, it seems, people adopted the practice of Buddhist Bhikshus in later times.
22. Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, Awarif al-Ma'arif, Urdu translation, Newal Kishore Press, Lucknow, Chapter 6.
23. Qur'an, xcv, 5.
24. Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chapter 1, p. 17.
25. In another place he explicitly says that this knowledge is intuitional. Only he who experiences it can fully realize its import. You may describe the sweetness of sugar in any way you like, but it can be realized only by one who tastes it. Ibid., Chap. 3, p. 43.
26. Qur'an, xxxv, 28.
27. Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap.3, p.46.
28. Reference is to what is theologically called as interpolations of Satan in the revelations of saints. See the Qur'an, xxii, 51, and also 'Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap.3, p. 36.
29. Qur'an, iii, 6.
30. Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap.9, p.21; Chap.6, p. 14; Chap.25, p.50.
31. Ibid. Chap.3, p.54.
32. Ibid., pp. 61–64. He adds that any revelation or ecstatic experience (kashf or wajd) which is contrary to the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet is unacceptable to the Sufis.
33. Ibid., Chap. 10, pp. 103–07. But Ghazali thinks otherwise. According to him, the third category is the perfect specimen of spiritual leaders. See B.A. Dar's article, "Intellect and Intuition," in Iqbal, Vol. IV, No. 3, pp. 97–99.
34. He defines nafs as a dark earthly veil and qalb as a veil of heavenly light.
35. Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap. 10, pp.103–107.
36. One mystic, Abu al-Muzaffar Farnaisi, said that faqir is one who is independent even of God. Such a saying is, of course, a blasphemy, but almost all mystics have tried to explain away its sting. Qushairi in his Risalah and Suhrawardi in his book both try to justify this saying, but Ibn al-Qayyim is not satisfied with any of these explanations and rejects this definition in two. See Islami Tasawuruf, al-Hilal Book Agency, Lahore, pp. 124–26
37. Syria here does not stand for the geographical area which is now called Syria. Previously, nearly all the land now including Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, etc., was called Syria.
38. Qur'an, ii, 273.

- [39.](#) Ibid., v, 8.
- [40.](#) Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap.7, pp.80ff.
- [41.](#) Qur'an, xxxv, 32.
- [42.](#) Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap.7, p.82.
- [43.](#) Ibid., Chap.8, pp.85–90.
- [44.](#) Ibid., Chap. 9, pp.90–92.
- [45.](#) Lahut and nasut are terms for the divine and human aspects of Christ's personality. This doctrine became the basis of many controversies in the Christian Church and many sects like the Nestorians and Monophysites (or Jacobites) appeared in Syria and Egypt respectively. But in spite of Suhrawardi's protests, these terms were used first by Hallaj and then by Ibn 'Arabi and even Ghazali, after which they were accepted by almost all later mystics.
- [46.](#) Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap.9, pp. 93–96.
- [47.](#) Qur'an, iii, 199.
- [48.](#) He quotes the story of two brothers, one of whom was a Sufi and the other a soldier. The latter wrote to his brother inviting him to join war against the enemy because the times were critical. The Sufi brother refused to accept his advice for he preferred his way of life to that of his brother's, with the remarks: "If all people were to follow my path and remember Allah sitting on their prayer-carpet, they would have conquered Constantinople." Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap. 13, pp. 125–26.
- [49.](#) Qur'an, xxiv, 36–37. "In houses which Allah has permitted to be exalted so that His name may be remembered in them; they glorify Him therein in the morning and evening, men whom neither merchandise nor selling diverts from remembrance of Allah"
- [50.](#) Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap. 19, pp.178–179.
- [51.](#) Ibid., Chaps. 19, 20, pp. 173, 186.
- [52.](#) Ibid., Chap. 21, pp. 192–206. It appears that, in his estimation of women, he is influenced by the Christian doctrine that woman is the source of all evil. See p.195.
- [53.](#) Ibid., p.224.
- [54.](#) Ibid., p.248.
- [55.](#) Ibid., Chaps. 22, 23, 24 and 25.
- [56.](#) Qur'an, xli, 53.
- [57.](#) Ibid., xxiii, 12–14.
- [58.](#) Qur'an, xvii, 85.
- [59.](#) Awarif al-Ma'arif, p.552.
- [60.](#) Ibid., pp.555–558.
- [61.](#) Ibid., p553.
- [62.](#) The Shaikh points out that the Qur'an mentions only soul (ruh), self (nafs), reason ('aql), heart (fu'ad), but there is not reference to what Sufis call sirr. See Awarif al-Ma'arif, p.558.
- [63.](#) Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap. 56, pp.541–64
- [64.](#) Ibid., Chap.57, pp.565–78.
- [65.](#) Ibid., Chap. 58, pp.578–82.
- [66.](#) Qur'an, xcvi, 19.
- [67.](#) As previously stated in this chapter, general love is the result of observation of divine attributes as distinguished from special love which appears when the mystic passes to the observation of divine essence (dhat).
- [68.](#) Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap. 61, pp.623–53.
- [69.](#) Ibid., pp.655–57.
- [70.](#) He calls them scolding of one's self (zajr), warning (intibah), and awakening (bidari).
- [71.](#) Awarif al-Ma'arif, Chap. 59, pp. 585–600.

Chapter 19: Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi Maqtul

By Seyyed Hossein Nasr

The intellectual life of Islam and that of Christianity – the two sister civilizations in the Middle Ages can be compared with each other to a large extent through the role that Aristotelian philosophy played in them. Peripatetic science and philosophy entered the Western world through translations from Arabic in the seventh/thirteenth century and eventually became dominant to such an extent as to replace the Augustinian and Platonic wisdom of the earlier period only to be overthrown itself by the humanistic rationalism of the Renaissance.

In Islam the attack of Sufis and theologians upon the rationalistic aspect of Aristotelian philosophy weakened its hold at the very time when that philosophy was gaining strength in the Christian West and was replaced in the Muslim world by two elements, the doctrinal Sufism of Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi and the *Hikmat al-Ishraq*¹ or illuminative wisdom of Shaikh al-Ishraq Shihab al-Din Yahya ibn Habash ibn Amirak Suhrawardi,² both of which aimed at an effective realization of the “truth” and replaced the rationalism of Peripatetic philosophy by intellectual intuition (*dhaug*).

Life, Works and Sources of Doctrines

Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, whose *ishraqi* wisdom has played such a great role in the intellectual and spiritual life of Islam and especially of Shi'ism, was born in Suhraward, a village near the present city of Zinjan in northern Persia, in 549/1153. He studied at first with Majd al-Din Jili at Maraghah and later with Zahir al-Din Qari at Ispahan. Having finished his formal studies, he began to travel through Persia, meeting various Sufi masters and benefiting from their presence and teachings. During this period he spent much time in meditation and invocation in spiritual retreats. He also journeyed during the same period through the regions of Anatolia and Syria and acquired great love for the cities of these countries.

On one of his journeys, he went from Damascus to Aleppo and met Malik Zahir, the son of Salah al-Din Ayyubi, the celebrated Muslim ruler. Malik Zahir became much devoted to Shihab al-Din and asked him to stay at his Court. It was here that the master of *ishraq* fell into disgrace with the religious authorities in the city who considered some of his statements dangerous to Islam. They asked for his death, and when Malik Zahir refused, they petitioned Salah al-Din himself who threatened his son with abdication unless he followed the ruling of the religious leaders. Shihab al-Din was thereby imprisoned and in the year 587/1191, at the age of 38, he was either suffocated to death or died of starvation.³

Many miraculous features have been connected with the life of Suhrawardi and many stories told of his unusual powers. His countenance was striking to all his contemporaries. His illuminated and ruddy face and dishevelled hair, his handsome beard and piercing eyes reminded all who met him of his keen intelligence. He paid as little attention to his dress as he did to his words. Sometimes he wore the

woollen garb of the Sufis, sometimes the silk dress of the courtiers. His short and tragic life contains many similarities to the life of Hallaj, whom he quoted so often, and to that of the Sufi poet 'Ain al-Qudat Hamadani who was to follow a similar career a few years later.

The writings of Suhrawardi are numerous despite his short and turbulent life. Some of them have been lost, a few published, and the rest remain in manuscript form in the libraries of Persia, India, and Turkey.⁴ Unlike his predecessors, Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali, he was never translated into Latin and, therefore, never became well known in the Western world. Yet, his influence in the East can almost match that of Ibn Sina, and any history of Islamic philosophy written without mentioning him and the school of *Ishraq* is, to say the least, incomplete.

Histories of Muslim philosophy written by Westerners, like Munk and de Boer, usually end with Ibn Rushd because the authors have considered only that aspect of Muslim philosophy which influenced Latin scholasticism. Actually, the seventh/thirteenth century, far from being the end of speculative thought in Islam, is really the beginning of this most important school of *Ishraq*. Suhrawardi's writings came to the East at the same time as Peripatetic philosophy was journeying westward to Andalusia and from there through the influence of Ibn Rushd and others to Europe.

There are altogether about fifty titles of Suhrawardi's writings which have come down to us in the various histories and biographies.⁵ They may be divided into five categories as follows: ⁶

1. The four large doctrinal treatises, the first three dealing with Aristotelian (*masha'i*) philosophy with certain modifications and the last with *ishraqi* wisdom proper. These works, all in Arabic, include the *Talwihat*, *Muqawwamat*, *Mutarahat*, and the *Hikmat al-Ishraq*.⁷
2. Shorter doctrinal treatises like *Hayakil al-Nur*, *al-Alwah al-'Imadiyyah*, *Partau-Nameh*, *I'tiqad al-Hukama'*, *al-Lamahat*, *Yazdan Shinakht*, and *Bustan al-Qulub* ⁸ all of which explain further the subject-matter of the larger treatises. These works are partly in Arabic and partly in Persian.
3. Initiatory narratives written in symbolic language to depict the journey of the initiate towards gnosis (*ma'rifah*) and illumination (*ishraq*). These short treatises, all written in Persian, include *'Aql-i Surkh*, *Awaz-i Par-i Jibra'il*, *al-Ghurbat al-Gharbiyyah* (also in Arabic), *Lughat-i Muran*, *Risalah fi Halat al-Tufuliyah*, *Ruzi ba Jama'at-i Sufiyan*, *Risalah fi al-Mi'raj*, and *Safir-i Simurgh*.
4. Commentaries and transcriptions of earlier philosophic and initiatic texts and sacred Scripture like the translation into Persian of the *Risalat al-Ta'ir* of Ibn Sina, the commentary in Persian upon Ibn Sina's *Isharat wa Tanbihat*, and the treatise *Risalah fi Haqiqat al-'Ishq* which last is based on Ibn Sina's *Risalat al-'Ishq* and his commentary upon the verses of the Qur'an and on the Hadith.⁹
5. Prayers, litanies, invocations, and what may be called books of the hour, all of which Shahrazuri calls *al-Waridat w-al-Taqdisat*.

These works and the large number of commentaries written upon them during the last seven centuries form the main corpus of the tradition of *ishraq* and are a treasure of traditional doctrines and symbols combining in them the wisdom of Sufism with Hermeticism, and Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Zoroastrian philosophies together with some other diverse elements. There is little doubt that Suhrawardi is greatly indebted to the Muslim philosophers, especially Ibn Sina, for the formulation of many of his ideas.

Moreover, inasmuch as he is a Sufi as well as a philosopher or, more properly speaking, a theosophist, [10](#) he is in debt, both for spiritual inspiration and for his doctrines, to the great chain of Sufi masters before him. More specifically he is indebted to Hallaj whom he quotes so often and to al-Ghazali whose *Mishkat al-Anwar* played so important a role in his doctrine of the relation of light to the Imam.

Suhrawardi came also under the influence of Zoroastrian teaching, particularly in angelology and the symbolism of light and darkness. [11](#) He identified the wisdom of the ancient Zoroastrian sages with that of Hermes and, therefore, with the pre-Aristotelian philosophers, especially Pythagoras and Plato, whose doctrines he sought to revive.

Finally, he was influenced directly by the vast tradition of Hermeticism which is itself the remains of ancient Egyptian, Chaldaean and Sabaeen doctrines metamorphosed within the matrix of Hellenism and is based on the primordial symbolism of alchemy. Suhrawardi considered himself to be the reviver of the perennial wisdom, *philosophia perennis*, or what he calls *Hikmat al-Ladunniyyah* or *Hikmat al-`Atiqah* which existed always among the Hindus, Persians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and the ancient Greeks up to the time of Plato. [12](#)

The concept of the history of philosophy for Suhrawardi and his school is itself of great interest. This school identifies philosophy with wisdom rather than with rational systematization. Philosophy for it does not begin with Plato and Aristotle; rather, it ends with them. Aristotle, by putting wisdom in a rationalistic dress, limited its perspective and separated it from the unitive wisdom of the earlier sages. [13](#)

From the *Ishraqi* point of view, Hermes or the Prophet Idris is the father of philosophy, having received it as revelation from heaven. He was followed by a chain of sages in Greece and in ancient Persia and later in Islam which unified the wisdom of previous civilizations in its milieu. The chain of transmission of *ishraqi* doctrines, which must be understood symbolically rather than only historically, may be schematized as follows:

In the introduction to his *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, Suhrawardi states explicitly the nature of *ishraqi* wisdom and its relation to ancient doctrines. As he writes: "Although before the composition of this book I composed several summary treatises on Aristotelian philosophy, this book differs from them and has a method peculiar to itself. All of its material has not been assembled by thought and reasoning; rather, intellectual intuition, contemplation, and ascetic practices have played an important role in it.

Since our sayings have not come by means of rational demonstration but by inner vision and con-

temptation, they cannot be destroyed by the doubts and temptations of the sceptics. Whoever is a traveller (*salik*) on the way to truth is my companion and a help on this Path. The procedure of the master of philosophy, the divine Plato, was the same, and the sages who preceded Plato in time like Hermes, the father of philosophy, followed the same path.

Since sages of the past, because of the ignorance of the masses, expressed their sayings in secret symbols (*rumuz*), the refutations which have been made against them have concerned the exterior of these sayings and not their real intentions. And the *ishraqi* wisdom the foundation and basis of which are the two principles of light and darkness as established by the Persian sages like Jamasp, Farshadshur, and Buzarjumihir is among these hidden, secret symbols. One must never think that the light and darkness which appear in our expressions are the same as those used by the infidel Magi, or the heretical Manichaeans for they finally involve us in idolatry (*shirk*) and dualism.”¹⁴

The Meaning of Ishraq

The Arabic words *ishraq* meaning illumination and *mashriq* meaning the east are both derived etymologically from the root *sharq* meaning the rising of the sun. Moreover, the adjective illuminative, *mushriqiyyah*, and Oriental, *mashriqiyyah*, are written in exactly the same way in Arabic. This symbolic identification of the Orient with light which is inherent in the Arabic language and is employed often by the Ishraqi sages, has given rise to many difficulties in the interpretations of that wisdom which is both illuminative and Oriental.

Already in his *Mantiq al-Mashriqiyyin* most of which is lost, Ibn Sina refers to an Oriental wisdom which is superior to the commonly accepted Peripatetic (*masha'i*) philosophy.¹⁵ Due to the fact that the word *mashriqiyyun* could also be read as *mushriqiyyin* in Arabic, the latter meaning illuminative, one could interpret the esoteric teachings which Ibn Sina proposes as being illuminative as well as Oriental.

Since the famous article of Nallino,¹⁶ it has become common opinion that the reading is Oriental and has nothing to do with illumination. Yet, this opinion, however correct it may be linguistically, is essentially limited in that it does not take into account the profound symbolism inherent in the language and does not consider the great debt which Suhrawardi and *ishraqi* wisdom owe to Ibn Sina.

Suhrawardi writes that Ibn Sina wanted to recapture Oriental philosophy but did not have access to the necessary sources.¹⁷ Yet, if we consider how the sacred geography of the Orient of light and the Occident of darkness in the initiatory trilogy of Ibn Sina, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, *Risalat al-Ta'ir*, and *Salaman wa Absal*, is followed by Suhrawardi, how the Shaikh al-Ishraq translated several of the treatises of Ibn Sina into Persian, and how parts of *Hikmat al-Ishraq* resemble closely the commentary of Ibn Sina upon the *Theology of Aristotle*, it will become clear how profoundly the roots of Ishraqi philosophy lie in certain of the later non-Aristotelian works of Ibn Sina and how illumination and the Orient are united in this form of wisdom.

The unification of the meaning of illumination and the Orient in the term *ishraq* is connected with the symbolism of the sun which rises in the Orient and which illuminates all things so that the land of light is identified with that of gnosis and illumination. [18](#)

Inasmuch as the Occident is where the sun sets, where darkness reigns, it is the land of matter, ignorance, or discursive thought, entangled in the mesh of its own logical constructions. The Orient is, on the contrary, the world of light, of being, the land of knowledge, and of illumination which transcends mere discursive thought and rationalism. It is the land of knowledge which liberates man from himself and from the world, knowledge which is combined with purification and sanctity. [19](#)

It is for this reason that Suhrawardi connects *ishraqi* wisdom with the ancient priest-kings of Persia like Kai Khusrau and with the Greek sages like Asclepius, Pythagoras, and Plato whose wisdom was based on inner purification and intellectual intuition rather than on discursive logic. [20](#)

In a historical sense, *ishraqi* wisdom is connected with pre-Aristotelian metaphysics. Jurjani in his *Ta'rifat* calls the Ishraqis "the philosophers whose master is Plato." 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani, the celebrated Sufi, in his commentary upon the *Fusus al-Hikam* of Ibn 'Arabi writes that the Ishraqis derive their chain from Seth, often identified with Agathodemon, from whom craft initiations and Hermetic orders also derive their origin. Ibn Wahshiyyah in his *Nabataean Agriculture* mentions a class of Egyptian priests who were the children of the sister of Hermes and who were called *Ishraqiyyun*. [21](#)

Suhrawardi himself writes in his *Mutarahat* that the wisdom of Ishraq was possessed by the mythological priest-kings of ancient Persia, Kiumarth, Faridun, and Kai Khusrau and then passed on to Pythagoras and Plato, the latter being the last among the Greeks to possess it, and was finally inherited by the Muslim Sufis like Dhu al-Nun Misri and Bayazid Bistami. [22](#)

Both metaphysically and historically, *ishraqi* wisdom means the ancient pre-discursive mode of thought which is intuitive (*dhauqi*) rather than discursive (*bahthi*) and which seeks to reach illumination by asceticism and purification. In the hands of Suhrawardi it becomes a new school of wisdom integrating Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy with Zoroastrian angelology and Hermetic ideas and placing the whole structure within the context of Sufism.

In reading the texts of Suhrawardi one is particularly struck by the large number of quotations from the Qur'an, Hadith, and the sayings of earlier Sufis and by the profound transformation into the Islamic mould of all the diverse ideas which Suhrawardi employs. It is by virtue of such an integration and transformation that the *ishraqi* wisdom could come to play such a major role in Shi'ism.

In the introduction to *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, Suhrawardi outlines the hierarchy of those who know in a manner which demonstrates how he integrates ancient wisdom into the perspective of Islam. There are, according to this scheme, four major types of "knowers": –

1. The *hakim ilahi*, or *theosophos*, who knows both discursive philosophy, i.e., Aristotelianism, and

gnosis (*ta'alluh*). Suhrawardi considers Pythagoras, Plato, and himself among this group.

2. The sage who does not involve himself with discursive philosophy but remains content with gnosis, like Hallaj, Bistami, and Tustari.
3. The philosopher who is acquainted with discursive philosophy but is a stranger to gnosis like Farabi or Ibn Sina.[23](#)
4. He who still seeks knowledge (*talib*) but has not yet reached a station of knowledge.

Above all these degrees is that of the Pole (*Qutb*) or Leader (*Imam*) who is the head of the spiritual hierarchy and of his representatives (*khulafa'*).[24](#)

The stations of wisdom are also described in a purely Sufi fashion as degrees of penetration into the divine unity expressed by the *shahadah*. In his initiatory treatise, *Safir-i Simurgh* (Song of the Griffin), Suhrawardi enumerates five degrees of unity [25](#): *la ilaha il-Allah*, none is worthy of worship but God, which is the common acceptance of the oneness of God and rejection of any other divinity; *la huwa illa huwa*, there is no he but He, which is the negation of any otherness than God, i. e., only God can be called "He"; *la anta illa anta*, there is no thou but Thou, which is the negation of all thouness outside of God; *la ana illa ana*, there is no "I" but the divine "I", which means that only God can say "I"; finally, the highest station of unity which is that of those who say *wa kullu shai'-in halikun illa wajhahu*, i.e., all things perish except His face (essence) [26](#).

The formulations of Sufism become, therefore, the framework of his classification of knowledge into which he tries to place the heritage of universal gnosis and philosophy inherited by Islam.

[The Orient and Occident in Sacred Geography](#)

As already mentioned, the term *ishraq* is closely connected with the symbolism of directions and sacred geography which are essential elements of the traditional sciences. In the trilogy of Ibn Sina to which we have already referred, the disciple passes from the Occident which is the world of matter, through intermediate Occidents and Orients which are the heavens and separate substances, to the Orient proper which symbolizes the world of archangels.

A similar division of the cosmos occurs in the writings of Suhrawardi. The Occident is the world of matter, the prison into which man's soul has fallen and from which he must escape. The Orient of lights is the world of archangels above the visible cosmos which is the origin of his soul (*ruh*). The middle Occident is the heavens which also correspond to the various inner faculties of man.

It is important to note that, contrary to Peripatetic philosophy, the Ishraqis hold that the boundary between the Occident and the Orient is set at the *primum mobile*; all that is visible in the cosmos including the celestial spheres is a part of the Occident, because it is still connected with matter,

however subtle it may be. The Orient, properly speaking, is above the visible cosmos; it is the world of informal manifestation with its boundary at the heaven of the fixed stars.

In his treatise *al-Qissat al-Ghubat al-Gharbiyyah*, “the Story of the Occidental Exile,” in which Suhrawardi seeks to reveal the secrets of the trilogy of Ibn Sina, the universe becomes a crypt through which the seeker after truth must journey, beginning with this world of matter and darkness into which he has fallen and ending in the Orient of lights, the original home of the soul, which symbolizes illumination and spiritual realization.²⁷

The journey begins at the city of Qairawan in present-day Tunis, located west of the main part of the Islamic world.²⁸ The disciple and his brother are imprisoned in the city at the bottom of a well which means the depth of matter. They are the sons of Shaikh Hadi ibn al-Khair al-Yamani, i. e., from the Yaman, which in Arabic means also the right hand and, therefore, symbolically the Orient, and is connected traditionally with the wisdom of the Prophet Solomon and the ancient sages as the left is connected with matter and darkness.²⁹

Above the well is a great castle with many towers, i. e., the world of the elements and the heavens or the faculties of the soul. They will be able to escape only at night and not during the day which means that man reaches the intelligible or spiritual world only in death, whether this be natural or initiatory, and in dream which is a second death. In the well there is such darkness that one cannot see even one's own hands, i. e., matter is so opaque that rarely does light shine through it. Occasionally they receive news from the Yaman which makes them homesick, meaning that they see the intelligible world during contemplation or in dreams. And so, they set out for their original home.

One clear night an order is brought by the hoopoe from the Governor of the Yaman telling them to begin their journey to their homeland, meaning the reception of a revelation from the intelligible world and the beginning of asceticism. The order also asks them to let go the hem of their dress, i. e., become free from attachment, when they reach the valley of ants, which is the passion of avidity. They are to kill their wives, i. e., passions, and then sit in a ship and begin their journey in the name of God.³⁰ Having made their preparation they set out for their pilgrimage to Mount Sinai.

A wave comes between the disciple and the son, meaning that the animal soul is sacrificed. Morning is near, that is, the union of the particular soul with the universal soul is approaching. The hero discovers that the world in which evil takes place, meaning this world, will be overturned and rain and stones, i. e., diseases and moral evils, will descend upon it. Upon reaching a stormy sea he throws in his foster-mother and drowns her, meaning that he even sacrifices his natural soul.

As he travels on still in storm, i. e., in the body, he has to cast away his ship in fear of the king above him who collects taxes, meaning death which all mortals must taste. He reaches the Mount of Gog and Magog, i. e., evil thoughts and love of this world enter his imagination. The jinn, the powers of imagination and meditation, are also before him as well as a spring of running copper which symbolizes

wisdom. The hero asks the jinn to blow upon the copper which thus becomes fiery, and from it he builds a dam before Gog and Magog.

He takes the carnal soul (*nafs ammarah*) and places it in a cave, or the brain which is the source of this soul. He then cuts the “streams from the liver of the sky,” i. e., he stops the power of motion from the brain which is located in the head, the sky of the body. He throws the empyrean heaven so that it covers all the stars, the sun, and the moon, meaning all powers of the soul become of one colour, and passes by fourteen coffins, the fourteen powers of *ishraqi* psychology,³¹ and ten tombs, the five external and the five internal senses. Having passed through these stages he discovers the path of God and realizes that it is the right path.

The hero passes beyond the world of matter and reaches a light, the active intellect which is the governor of this world. He places the light in the mouth of a dragon, the world of the elements, and passes by it to reach the heavens and beyond them to the signs of the Zodiac which mark the limit of the visible cosmos. But his journey is not yet at an end; he continues even beyond them to the upper heavens. Music is heard from far away, and the initiate emerges from the cavern of limitation to the spring of life³² flowing from a great mountain which is Mount Sinai. In the spring he sees fish that are his brothers; they are those who have reached the end of the spiritual journey.

He begins to climb the mountain and eventually reaches his father, the archangel of humanity, who shines with a blinding light which nearly burns him. The father congratulates him for having escaped from the prison of Qairawan, but tells him that he must return because he has not yet cast away all bonds. When he returns a second time, he will be able to stay. The father tells him that above them is his father, the universal intellect, and beyond him their relatives going back to the Great Ancestor who is pure light. “All perishes except His essence.”³³

From this brief summary we see how *ishraqi* wisdom implies essentially a spiritual realization above and beyond discursive thought. The cosmos becomes transparent before the traveller and interiorized within his being. The degrees of realization from the state of the soul of fallen man to the centre of the soul freed from all limitation corresponds “horizontally” to the journey from the Occident of matter to the Orient of lights, and “vertically” to the ascent from the earth to the limits of the visible universe and from there, through the world of formless manifestation, to the divine essence.

Hikmat al-Ishraq

Ishraqi wisdom is not a systematic philosophy so that its exposition in a systematic fashion is hardly possible. What Suhrawardi says in one text seems at first sight to be contradicted in another work, and one has to discover the point of view in each case in order to overcome the external contradictions. In expounding the major points of *ishraqi* wisdom we will, therefore, follow the outlines of *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, the most important text in which this wisdom is, expounded, drawing also from the shorter treatises which Suhrawardi wrote as further explanations of his major work.

Hikmat al-Ishraq is the fourth of the great doctrinal works of Suhrawardi, the first three dealing with Aristotelian philosophy which is the necessary prerequisite and foundation for illuminative wisdom. It deals with the philosophy of Ishraq itself which is written for those who are not satisfied with theoretical philosophy alone but search for the light of gnosis. The book which in the beauty of style is a masterpiece among Arabic philosophical texts was composed during a few months in 582/1186, and, as Suhrawardi himself writes at the end of the book, revealed to him suddenly by the Spirit;³⁴ he adds that only a person illuminated by the Spirit can hope to understand it.³⁵

The work consists of a prologue and two sections: the first concerning logic and the criticism of certain points of Peripatetic philosophy, and the second composed of five chapters (*maqalat*), dealing with light, ontology, angelology, physics, psychology and, finally, eschatology and spiritual union.

In the section on logic he follows mostly the teaching of Aristotle but criticizes the Aristotelian definition. According to the Stagirite, a logical definition consists of genus plus differentia. Suhrawardi remarks that the distinctive attribute of the object which is defined will give us no knowledge of that thing if that attribute cannot be predicated of any other thing. A definition in *ishraqi* wisdom is the summation of the qualities in a particular thing which when added together exist only in that thing.

Suhrawardi criticizes the ten categories of Aristotle as being limited and confined only to this universe. Beyond this world there is an indefinite number of other categories which the Aristotelian classification does not include. As for the nine categories of accidents, he reduces them to four by considering relation, time, posture, place, action, and passivity as the one single category of relation (*nisbah*) to which are added the three categories of quality, quantity, and motion.

Suhrawardi alters several points of Aristotelian philosophy in order to make it a worthy basis for the doctrine of illumination.³⁶ A major point of difference between the Ishraqis and the Muslim followers of Aristotle (*Masha'is*), also a central issue of Islamic philosophy, is that of the priority of Being or existence (*wujud*) to essence (*mahiyyah*).³⁷

The *Masha'is* like the Sufis consider Being to be principal and *mahiyyah* or essence to be accidental with respect to it. Suhrawardi objects to this view and writes that existence does not have any external reality outside the intellect which abstracts it from objects. For example, the existence of iron is precisely its essence and not a separate reality. The *Masha'is* consider existence to have an external reality and believe that the intellect abstracts the limitation of a being which then becomes its essence.³⁸

The argument of Suhrawardi against this view is that existence can be neither substance nor accident and, therefore, has no external reality. For if it is an accident, it needs something to which it is an accident. If this something is other than existence, it proves what we sought, i.e., this something is without existence. If existence is a substance, then it cannot be accident, although we say accidents "are." Therefore, existence is neither substance nor accident and consequently can exist only in the intellect.

The issue involved, which is essential to the understanding of all medieval and ancient philosophy, is the relation between Being and existence, on the one hand, and the archetypes and limitations on the other. The Masha'is and Sufis consider the universe to consist of degrees of Being and limitations which distinguish various beings from one another. The Sufis, particularly those of the school of Ibn 'Arabi who are concerned essentially with metaphysical doctrines, transpose these limitations into the principal domain and consider them the same as the archetypes or the Platonic ideas.

The traditional interpreters of Shaikh al-Ishraq interpret his doctrine in a way which does not destroy the principiality of Being [39](#) but rather subordinates the existence of a thing which is temporary and “accidental” to its archetype which with respect to the terrestrial existence of the thing is principal. In other words, essence (*mahiyyah*) is subordinated to Being (*wujud*), if we understand by this term Being *qua* Being; but as archetype, it is superior to particular existence which is an “exteriorization” of Being.

The Ishraqis believe in fact that it is useless to discuss about the principiality of *wujud* and *mahiyyah*, of Being and essence, because the essence or *mahiyyah* is itself a degree of Being. The Ishraqis differ from the Masha'is in that the former considers the world to be actual in its being and potential in its qualities and attributes, and the latter believes, on the contrary, that the world is potential in its being and actual in its qualities and perfections.[40](#)

Another important criticism of the Aristotelians by Suhrawardi is that of the doctrine of hylomorphism, of form and matter, which is the foundation of Aristotle's philosophy. As we shall see later, Suhrawardi considers bodies to be darkness and transforms the Aristotelian forms into the guardian lights or angels which govern each being. He defines a body as an external, simple substance (*jauhar basit*) which is capable of accepting conjunction and separation.[41](#) This substance in itself, in its own essence, is called body (*jism*), but from the aspect of accepting the form of species (*surah nau'iyyah*) it is called the *materia prima* or *hyle* (*hayula*).

He also differs from the Aristotelians in defining the place (*makan*) of the body not as the internal surface of the body which contains it but as the abstract dimension (*bu'd mujarrad*) in which the body is placed. Suhrawardi follows Ibn Sina and other Masha'is in rejecting the possibility of a void and an indivisible particle or atom, and in considering the body to be indefinitely divisible even if this division cannot be carried out physically.

Other elements of Peripatetic philosophy which Suhrawardi condemns include its doctrine of the soul and arguments for its subsistence which he believes to be weak and insufficient;[42](#) its rejection of the Platonic ideas which are the cornerstone of *ishraqi* wisdom and upon the reality of which Suhrawardi insists in nearly every doctrinal work; and its theory of vision.

This last criticism is of interest in that Suhrawardi rejects both of the theories of vision commonly held during the Middle Ages. Regarding the Aristotelian theory that forms of objects are imprinted upon the pupil of the eye and then reach the senses communis and finally the soul, Suhrawardi asks how the

imprinting of large objects like the sky upon this small pupil in the eye is possible. Since man does not reason at the time of vision which is an immediate act, even if large objects were imprinted in smaller proportions, one could not know of the size of the object from its image.

The mathematicians and students of optics usually accepted another theory according to which a conic ray of light leaves the eye with the head of the cone in the eye and the base at the object to be seen. Suhrawardi attacks this view also by saying that this light is either an accident or a substance. If it is an accident it cannot be transmitted; therefore, it must be a substance. As a substance, its motion is dependent either on our will or it is natural. If dependent on our will, we should be able to gaze at an object and not see it, which is contrary to experience; or if it has natural motion, it should move only in one direction like vapour which moves upward, or stone which moves downward, and we should be able to see only in one direction which is also contrary to experience. Therefore, he rejects both views.

According to Suhrawardi, vision can occur only of a lighted object. When man sees this object, his soul surrounds it and is illuminated by its light. This illumination (*ishraq*) of the soul (*nafs*) in presence of the object is vision. Therefore, even sensible vision partakes of the illuminative character of all knowledge.

With this criticism of the Aristotelian (*masha'i*) philosophy, Suhrawardi turns to the exposition of the essential elements of *ishraqi* wisdom itself beginning with a chapter on light, or one might say the theophany of light, which is the most characteristic and essential element of the teachings of this school.[43](#)

Light (*nur*), the essence of which lies above comprehension, needs no definition because it is the most obvious of all things. Its nature is to manifest itself; it is being, as its absence, darkness (*zulmah*), is nothingness. All reality consists of degrees of light and darkness.[44](#) Suhrawardi calls the Absolute Reality the infinite and limitless divine essence, the Light of lights (*Nur al-anwar*).[45](#) The whole universe, the 18,000 worlds of light and darkness which Suhrawardi mentions in his *Bustan al-Qulub*, are degrees of irradiation and effusion of this Primordial Light which shines everywhere while remaining immutable and for ever the same.[46](#)

Suhrawardi “divides” reality according to the types of light and darkness. If light is subsistent by itself, it is called substantial light (*nur jauhari*) or incorporeal light (*nur mujarrad*); if it depends for its subsistence on other than itself, it is called accidental light (*nur `ardi*). Likewise, if darkness is subsistent by itself it is called obscurity (*ghasaq*) and if it depends on other than itself for its subsistence it is called form (*hai'ah*).

This division is also based on the degrees of comprehension.[47](#) A being is either aware of itself or ignorant of it. If it is aware of itself and subsists by itself it is incorporeal light, God, the angels, archetypes, and the human soul. If a thing has need of a being other than itself to become aware of itself, it is accidental light like the stars and fire. If it is ignorant of itself but subsists by itself, it is obscurity like all natural bodies, and if it is ignorant by itself and subsists by other than itself, it is form like colours and smells.

All beings are the illumination (*ishraq*) of the Supreme Light which leaves its vicegerent in each domain, the sun in the heavens, fire among the elements, and the lordly light (*nur ispahbad*) in the human soul. The soul of man is essentially composed of light; that is why man becomes joyous at the sight of the light of the sun or fire and fears darkness. All the causes of the universe return ultimately to light; all motion in the world, whether it be of the heaven, or of the elements, is caused by various regent lights (*nur mudabbir*) which are ultimately nothing but illuminations of the Light of lights.

Between the Supreme Light and the obscurity of bodies there must be various stages in which the Supreme Light weakens gradually to reach the darkness of this world. These stages are the orders of angels, personal and universal at the same time, who govern all things.⁴⁸ In enumerating these angelic orders Suhrawardi relies largely upon Zoroastrian angelology and departs completely from the Aristotelian and Avicennian schemes which limit the intelligences or angels to ten to correspond to the celestial spheres of Ptolemaic astronomy.

Moreover, in the Avicennian scheme, the angels or intellects are limited to three intelligible “dimensions” which constitute their being, namely, the intellection of their principle, of the necessity of their existence, and of the contingency of their essence (*mahiyyah*).⁴⁹ Suhrawardi begins with this scheme as a point of departure but adds many other “dimensions” such as domination (*qahr*) and love (*mahabbah*), independence and dependence, illumination (*ishraq*) and contemplation (*shuhud*) which open a new horizon beyond the Aristotelian universe of the medieval philosophers.

Suhrawardi calls the first effusion of the Light of lights (*nur al-anwar* or *nur al-a`zam*) the archangel *Bahman* or the nearest light (*nur al-aqrab*). This light contemplates the Light of lights and, since no veil exists in between, receives direct illumination from it. Through this illumination, a new triumphal light (*nur al-qahir*) comes into being which receives two illuminations, one directly from the Supreme Light and the other from the first light.

The process of effusion continues in the same manner with the third light receiving illumination four times, twice from the light preceding it, once from the first light and once from the Supreme Light; and the fourth light eight times, four times from the light preceding it, twice from the second light, once from the first light, and once from the Light of lights or Supreme Light.⁵⁰ In this manner the order of archangels, which Suhrawardi calls the longitudinal order (*tabaqat al-tul*) or “world of mothers” (*al-ummahat*) and in which the number of archangels far exceeds the number of intelligences in Aristotelian cosmology, comes into being.⁵¹

Each higher light has domination (*qahr*) over the lower and each lower light, love (*mahabbah*) for the higher. Moreover, each light is a purgatory or veil (*barzakh*) between the light above and the light below. In this manner the supreme order of angels is illuminated from the Light of lights which has love only for itself because the beauty and perfection of its essence are evident to itself.

The supreme hierarchy of being or the “longitudinal” order gives rise to a new polarization of Being. Its

positive or masculine aspect such as dominance, contemplation, and independence gives rise to a new order of angels called the latitudinal order (*tabaqat al 'ard*) the members of which are no longer generators of one another; rather, each is integral in itself and is, therefore, called *mutakafiyah*. Suhrawardi identifies these angels with the Platonic ideas and refers to them as the lords of the species (*arbab al-anwa'*) or the species of light (*anwa' nuriyyah*).

Each species in the world has as its archetype one of these angels, or to express it in another manner, each being in this world is the theurgy (*tilism*) of one of these angels which are, therefore, called the lords of theurgy (*arbab al-tilism*). Water is the theurgy of its angel *khurdad*, minerals of *shahrwar*, vegetables of *murdad*, fire of *urdibihisht*, etc. [52](#)

Suhrawardi uses the names of the *Amshaspands* (*Amesha Spentas*), the separate powers of Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrianism, to designate these archetypes, and in this way unites Zoroastrian angelology with the Platonic ideas. These longitudinal angels are not, however, in any way abstract or mental objects, as sometimes the Platonic ideas are interpreted to be. They are, on the contrary, concrete as angelic hypostases and appear abstract only from man's point of view who, because of his imprisonment in the cage of his senses, considers only the object of the senses to be concrete. These angels are the real governors of this world who guide all of its movements and direct all of its changes. They are at once the intelligences and principles of the being of things.

From the negative and feminine aspect of the longitudinal order of archangels, that is, love, dependence, and reception of illumination, there comes into being the heaven of fixed stars which these angels share in common. The stars are the crystallization into subtle matter of that aspect of the archangels which is "Non-Being" or removal from the Light of lights. This "materialization" marks the boundary between the Orient of pure lights or the archangelic world which lies beyond the visible heavens and the Occident which is comprised of increasing condensations of matter from the luminous heavens to the dense earthly bodies.

The latitudinal order of angels or the archetypes gives rise to another order of angels through which they govern the species. Suhrawardi calls this intermediary order the regent lights (*anwar al-mudabbirah*) or sometimes *anwar ispahbad* using a term from ancient Persian chivalry. It is this intermediary order which moves the heavenly spheres the motion of which is by love rather than by nature,[53](#) and which governs the species as the agent of the archetypes for which the species are theurgies (*tilismat*) or "icons" (*asnam*).

The *ispahbad* lights are also the centres of men's souls, each light being the angel of some individual person.[54](#) As for mankind itself, its angel is Gabriel. Humanity is an image of this archangel who is the mediator between man and the angelic world and the focus in which the lights of the Orient are concentrated. It is also the instrument of all knowledge inasmuch as it is the means by which man's soul is illuminated.[55](#)

This archangel as the Holy Spirit is also the first and supreme intelligence and the first as well as the last prophet, Muhammad (upon whom be peace), the archetype of man (*rabb al-nau' al-insan*) and the supreme revealer of divine knowledge.

The physics and psychology of *Hikmat al-Ishraq* treat of the world of bodies and the world of souls which, along with the world of the intelligences or angels, comprise the totality of this universe.⁵⁶ As already mentioned, Suhrawardi does not divide bodies into form and matter. Rather, his division of bodies is based on the degree in which they accept light.

All physical bodies are either simple or compound; the simple bodies are divided into three classes: those that prevent light from entering (*hajiz*), those which permit the entrance of light (*latif*), and those which permit light to enter in various degrees (*muqtasid*) and which are themselves divided into several stages.⁵⁷

The heavens are made of the first category in the luminous state. As for the elements below the heavens, they consist of earth belonging to the first category, water to the second, and air to the third.⁵⁸ Compound bodies belong likewise to one of the above categories, depending on which element predominates in them. All bodies are essentially purgatories or isthmus (*barzakh*) between various degrees of light by which they are illuminated and which they in turn reflect.

Suhrawardi rejects the view that the change of bodies is due to particles of one element entering into those of another. As a reason against this view he cites the example of a jug full of water that has been heated, i. e., according to this view particles of fire have entered into it. The volume of the water, however, does not change since it does not spill over; therefore, particles of fire cannot have entered into it.

Qualitative change is due rather to the coming into being of a quality which is intermediate between the qualities of the original bodies and which is shared by all the particles of the new compound. For example, when water is heated a new quality between the cold of the water and the heat of the fire is brought into being by the light governing the change.

In the explanation of meteorological phenomena, Suhrawardi follows closely the teachings of Ibn Sina and Aristotle in accepting the exhalation and vapour theory. He differs, however, from them in the importance he attaches to light as the cause of all these changes. For example, the heat which is responsible for evaporation is nothing but one of the effects of reflected light. All changes in fact which one observes in the world are caused by various hierarchies of light. ⁵⁹

The elements are powerless before the heavens, the heavens are dominated by the souls, the souls by the intelligences, the intelligences by the universal intellect, and the universal intellect by the Light of lights.

The elements or simple bodies combine to form compounds which comprise the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms, each of which is dominated by a particular light or angel. All that exists in the mineral

kingdom is “lighted body” (*barzakh nuriyyah*) the permanence of which is like that of the heavens.⁶⁰ Gold and various jewels like rubies make man happy because of the light within them which is akin to the soul of man. This light within the minerals is governed by *isfandarmudh* which is the master of theurgy for earthy substances.

With greater refinement of the mixture of the elements, plants and animals come into being having their own faculties and powers which are so many “organs” of the light governing them. In higher animals and in man who is the most complete terrestrial being these faculties appear in their perfection. Man as the microcosm contains in himself the complete image of the universe, and his body is the gate of life of all elemental bodies. This body in turn is the theurgy for the *ispahbad* light which governs each man.

All the faculties of the soul are aspects of the light which shines upon all elements of the body and illuminates the powers of imagination and memory for which it is the source. This light is connected with the body by means of the animal soul (*ruh hayawaniyyah*) the seat of which is in the liver and leaves the body for its original home in the angelic world as soon as death destroys the equilibrium of the bodily elements. It is the love (*mahabbah*) of the light which creates the power of desire as it is its domination (*qahr*) which brings about anger.⁶¹

Suhrawardi draws heavily upon the psychology of Ibn Sina for the enumeration of the faculties of the various souls.⁶² It may be said in fact that with a few changes his classification is the same as that of his famous predecessor, despite the different role which the intellect or light plays in governing and illuminating the various faculties in each case.

The classification of the various faculties of the soul by Suhrawardi may be outlined as follows:⁶³

Vegetative soul (*al-nafs al-nabatiyyah*):

feeding (*ghadhiyyah*), growth (*namiyah*), reproduction (*muwallidah*), attraction (*jadhbihah*), retention (*masikah*), digestion (*hadimah*), repulsion (*dafi'ah*)

Animal soul (*al-nafs al-hayawaniyyah*):

power of motion (*muharrakah*), power of desire (*nuzu'iyyah*), power of lust (*shahwah*), power of anger (*ghadb*).

Man, besides the above faculties and the five external senses, possesses five internal senses which serve as a bridge between the physical and the intelligible worlds and have their counterpart in the macrocosmic order. These senses consist of:

Sensus communis (*hiss mushtarik*): The centre in which all the data of the external senses are collected. It is located in the front of the frontal cavity of the brain.

Fantasy (*khayal*): The place of storage for the *sensus communis*. It is located in the back of the frontal cavity.

Apprehension (*wahm*): Governs sensible things by what does not belong to the senses. It is located in

the middle cavity.

Imagination (*mutakhayyilah*): Analyses, synthesizes, and governs forms and is sometimes identified with apprehension. It is located in the middle cavity.

Memory (*hafizah*): The place of storage for apprehension. It is located in the back of the middle cavity.

These faculties are crowned by the intellectual soul (*nafs natiqah*) which belongs to the spiritual world and which, through the network of these faculties, becomes for a period attached to the body and imprisoned in the fortress of nature. Often it is so lost in this new and temporary habitat that it forgets its original home and can be re-awakened only by death or ascetic practices. [64](#)

The last section of the *Hikmat al-Ishraq* concerning eschatology and spiritual union outlines precisely the way by which the spirit returns to its original abode, the way by which the catharsis of the intellect is achieved. Every soul, in whatever degree of perfection it might be, seeks the Light of lights, and its joy is in being illuminated by it. Suhrawardi goes so far as to say that he who has not tasted the joy of the illumination of the victorial lights has tasted no joy at all. [65](#) Every joy in the world is a reflection of the joy of gnosis, and the ultimate felicity of the soul is to reach toward the angelic lights by purification and ascetic practices.

After death the soul of those who have reached some measure of purity departs to the world of archetypes above the visible heavens and participates in the sounds, sights, and tastes of that world which are the principles of terrestrial forms. On the contrary, those whose soul has been tarnished by the darkness of evil and ignorance (*ashab al-shaqawah*) depart for the world of inverted forms (*suwar mu`allaqah*) which lies in the labyrinth of fantasy, the dark world of the devils and the *jinn*. [66](#) As for the gnostics or the *theosophos* (*muta'allihin*) who have already reached the degree of sanctity in this life, their soul departs to a world above the angels.

After leaving the body, the soul may be in several states which Suhrawardi outlines as follows: [67](#)

Either the soul is simple and pure like that of children and fools who are attracted neither to this world nor to the next.

Or it is simple but impure and as such is attracted more to this world, so that upon death it suffers greatly by being separated from the object of its desire; gradually, however, it forgets its worldly love and becomes simple as in the first case.

Or it is not simple but perfect and pure and upon death joins the intelligible world to which it is similar and has an undescrivable joy in the contemplation of God.

Or it is complete but impure, so that upon death it suffers greatly both for separation from the body and from the First Source; gradually, however, the pains caused by alienation from this world cease and the soul enjoys spiritual delights.

Or the soul is incomplete but pure, i.e., it has a love for perfection but has not yet realized it; upon death, therefore, it suffers ceaselessly, although the love of this world gradually dies away. Finally, the soul is incomplete and impure, so that it suffers the greatest pain.

Man should, therefore, spend the few days he has here on earth to transform the precious jewel of his soul into the image of an angel and not into that of an animal.

The highest station to be reached by the soul is that of the prophets (*nafs qudsiyyah*) who perceive the forms of the universals or archetypes naturally. They know all things without the assistance of teachers or books. They hear the sounds of the heavens, i. e., the archetypes of earthly sounds, and not just vibrations of the air, and see the intelligible forms. Their souls and those of great saints also reach such degree of purity that they can influence the world of the elements as the ordinary soul influences the body.⁶⁸ They can even make the archetypes subsist by will, that is, give them existence.

The knowledge of the prophets is the archetype of all knowledge. In his nocturnal Ascension (*mi`raj*) the Prophet Muhammad – upon whom be peace – journeyed through all the states of being beyond the universe to the Divine Presence or microcosmically through his soul and intellect to the Divine Self.⁶⁹ This journey through the hierarchy of Being symbolizes the degrees of knowledge which the initiate gains as he travels on the Path in imitation of the bringer of revelation who has opened the way for him. A prophet is absolutely necessary as a guide for the gnostic and as a bringer of Law for society.

Man needs a society in order to survive and society needs law and order and, therefore, prophets to bring news of the other world and to establish harmony among men. The best man is he who knows, and the best of those who know are the prophets, and the best prophets are those who have brought a revelation (*mursilin*), and the best of them are the prophets whose revelation has spread over the face of the earth, and the completion and perfection of the prophetic cycle is the Prophet Muhammad – upon whom be peace – who is the seal of prophethood.⁷⁰

The Initiatory Narratives

In a series of treatises written in beautiful Persian prose, Suhrawardi expounds another aspect of *ishraqi* wisdom which is the complement of the metaphysical doctrine. These works which we have called initiatory narratives are symbolic stories depicting the journey of the soul to God much like certain medieval European romances and poems such as *Parsifal* and the *Divine Comedy* although of shorter length. Unfortunately, in this limited space we cannot deal with all of these narratives each of which treats of a different aspect of the spiritual journey using various traditional symbols such as the cosmic mountain, the griffin, the fountain of life, and the lover and the beloved.

Some of the more important of these narratives are the *Risalah fi al-Mi`raj* (The Treatise on the Nocturnal Journey), *Risalah fi Halat al-Tufuliyyah* (Treatise on the State of Childhood), *Ruzi ba Jama'at-i Sufiyan* (A Day with the Community of Sufis), *Awaz-i Par-i Jibra'il* (The Chant of the Wing of Gabriel), *'Aql-i Surkh* (The Red Intellect), *Safir-i Simurgh* (The Song of the Griffin), *Lughat-i Muran* (The Language of Termites), *Risalah al-Tair* (The Treatise on the Birds), and *Risalah fi Haqiqat al-'Ishq* (Treatise on the Reality of Love).

The titles alone indicate some of the rich symbolism which Suhrawardi uses to describe the spiritual journey. Each narrative depicts a certain aspect of the spiritual life as lived and practised by sages and saints. Sometimes theory and spiritual experience are combined as in the *Awaz-i Par-i-Jibra'il* [71](#) where in the first part of the vision the disciple meets the active intellect, the sage who symbolizes the "prophet" within himself who comes from the "land of nowhere" (*na-kuja-abad*), and asks certain questions about various aspects of the doctrine.

In the second part, however, the tone changes; the hero asks to be taught the Word of God and after being instructed in the esoteric meaning of letters and words, i. e., *jafr*, he learns that God has certain major words like the angels, as well as the supreme Word which is to other words as the sun is to the stars. He learns furthermore that man is himself a Word of God, and it is through His Word that man returns to the Creator. He, like other creatures of this world, is a chant of the wing of Gabriel which spreads from the world of light to that of darkness. This world is a shadow of his left wing as the world of light is a reflection of his right wing. It is by the Word, by the sound of the wing of Gabriel, that man has come into existence, and it is by the Word that he can return to the principal state, the divine origin, from which he issued forth.

The Ishraqi Tradition

The influence of Suhrawardi has been as great in the Islamic world, particularly in Shi'ism, as it has been small in the West. His works were not translated into Latin so that his name hardly ever appears along with those of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd as masters of philosophy. But in the East from the moment of his death, his genius in establishing a new school of traditional wisdom was recognized and he was to exercise the greatest influence in Shi'ism. With the weakening of Aristotelianism in the sixth/twelfth century the element that came to replace it and to dominate Islamic intellectual life was a combination of the intellectual Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi and the *ishraqi* wisdom of Suhrawardi.

These two masters who lived within a generation of each other came from the two ends of the Islamic world to Syria, one to die in Damascus and the other in Aleppo, and it was from this central province of Islam that their doctrines were to spread throughout the Muslim East, particularly in Persia. The main link between these two great masters of gnosis was Qutb al-Din Shirazi who was, on the one hand, the disciple of Sadr al-Din Qunawi, himself a disciple and the main expositor of the teachings of Ibn 'Arabi in the East, and, on the other, the commentator of *Hikmat al-Ishraq*.[72](#)

Throughout the last seven centuries the tradition of *Ishraq* has continued especially in Persia where it played a major role in the survival of Shi'ism during the Safawid period. Among the most important commentaries written on Suhrawardi's works are those of Shams al-Din Shahrazuri and Qutb al-Din Shirazi in the seventh/thirteenth century, Wudud Tabrizi in the tenth/ sixteenth century, and Mulla Sadra in the eleventh/seventeenth century on the *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, the commentaries of Shahrazuri, Ibn Kammunah, and `Allamah Hilli in the seventh and eighth/thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on the

Talwihat, and the commentaries of Jalal al-Din Dawwani in the ninth/ fifteenth century and Maula 'Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji in the eleventh/seventeenth century on the *Hayakil al-Nur*.

These commentaries and many others which we have not been able to mention here present a veritable treasure of *ishraqi* wisdom which has influenced so many philosophers, theologians, and gnostics from Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi and Dawwani to Mir Damad, Mulla Sadra, Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i, and Haji Mulla Hadi Sabziwari. Some of the works of Suhrawardi were also to influence the sages and philosophers in the Mughul Court in India where parts of his writings were even translated into Sanskrit,⁷³ as they were translated into Hebrew some time earlier.

Ishraqi wisdom has, therefore, been one of the universal elements of Eastern intellectuality during the past centuries and, as it is a version of the perennial philosophy, it is touched by the breath of eternity which, as in the case of all expressions of truth, gives it a freshness and actuality that make this wisdom as essential today as it has been through the ages.

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¹ The Arabic word hikmah is neither philosophy as currently understood in modern European language, i.e., one form or

another of rationalism, nor theology. It is, properly speaking, theosophy as understood in its original Greek sense and not in any way connected with the pseudo-spiritualistic movements of this century.

It is also sapiential inasmuch as the Latin root *Sapere*, like the Arabic word *dhawq* by which this wisdom is known, means taste. Moreover, it can be designated as speculative wisdom because *speculum* means mirror and this wisdom seeks to make man's soul a mirror in which divine knowledge is reflected.

[2.](#) Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi is often called al-Maqtul, meaning he who was killed, since he was put to death for certain indiscreet formulations. We, however, refer to him as Shaikh al-Ishraq by which name he is universally known among his disciples.

[3.](#) The best source for the biography of Shihab al-Din is the *Nuzhat al-Arwah wa Raudat al-Afrah* of his disciple and commentator Shams al-Din Shahrazuri. See also O. Spies and S. K. Khattak, *Three Treatises on Mysticism*, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1935, pp. 90–101; H. Corbin, *Suhrawardi d'Alep fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishraqi)*, G. P. Maisonneuve, Paris, 1939.

[4.](#) We are most grateful to Prof. M. Minovi and Mr. M. Daneshpazhuh of the University of Teheran and to Dr. M. Bayani, the head of the Teheran National Library, for making these manuscripts available to us.

[5.](#) See the introduction in M. Bayani, *Dau Risaleh-i Farsi-i Suhrawardi*, Teheran 1925.

[6.](#) We follow in part the classification of H. Corbin, however, with some modifications. See Suhrawardi, *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, ed. H. Corbin, Vol. I, Ma'arif Mathaasi, Bibliotheca Islamica, Istanbul, 1945, "Prolegomene," pp. xvi ff.

[7.](#) The metaphysical sections of the first three treatises have been published in the first volume of the *Opera* by Corbin and the complete *Hikmat al-Ishraq* in the second volume entitled *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques (Opera Metaphysica et Mystica, II)*, Institut Franco-Iranien, Teheran, and Andrien Maisonneuve, Paris, 1952. Henceforth we shall refer to the two volumes as *Opera*, Volumes I and II.

[8.](#) The treatise *Yazdan Shinakht* has often been attributed to Ain al-Quddat Hamadani and its authorship remains in any case doubtful. *Bustan al-Qulub* has also appeared under the name *Raudat al-Qulub* and has been occasionally attributed to Sayyid Sharif Jurjani.

[9.](#) A commentary upon the *Fusus of Farabi* of which no trace has as yet been found is also attributed to him.

[10.](#) The *hakim muta'allih* which Suhrawardi considers himself and other sages before him to be is exactly theosophos by which the Greek sages were designated. See the *Prolegomene* by H. Corbin to Suhrawardi's *Opera*, Vol. II, p. xxiv.

[11.](#) Suhrawardi is careful in distinguishing between exoteric Zoroastrians and the sages among Zoroastrians whom he follows. As he writes in *Kalimat al-Tasawwuf*: "There were among the ancient Persians a community of men who were guides towards the Truth and were guided by Him in the Right Path, ancient sages unlike those who are called the Magi. It is their high and illuminated wisdom, to which the spiritual experiences of Plato and his predecessors are also witness, and which we have brought to life again in our book called *Hikmat al-Ishraq*." MS., Ragip, 1480, fol. 407b, Istanbul, cited in H. Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi*, Editions du Courier, Teheran, 1946, p. 24. Also Teheran University Library MS. 1079, pp. 34ff

[12.](#) *Mutarahat*, *Physics*, Book VI, cited by H. Corbin in Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. I, p. x1i.

[13.](#) Originally, philosophy like all forms of wisdom consisted of a doctrine, a rite, and a "spiritual alchemy." In Greek civilization the first element gradually separated from the others and became reduced to a theoretical form of knowledge which came to be known as philosophy. In the 55th section of *Talwihat*, Suhrawardi writes how he saw Aristotle, who is most likely Plotinus, the author of the *Theology of Aristotle*, in a dream and asked if the Islamic Peripatetics were the real philosophers. Aristotle answered, "No, a degree in a thousand." Rather the Sufis, Bistami and Tustari, are the real philosophers. Aristotle told Suhrawardi to wake into himself and to pass beyond theoretical knowledge (*'ilm suri*) to effective realization or the "knowledge of presence" (*'ilm huduri* or *shuhudi*). See the *Prolegomene* of H Corbin in Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. I, p. lxx.

[14.](#) Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, pp. 10–11. Some modern interpreters of Suhrawardi have considered him to be anti-Islamic and of Zoroastrian sympathy. A. von Kremer in his *Geschichte der Herrschenden Ideen des Islam*, Leipzig, 1868, pp. 89ff., writes that Suhrawardi was part of the current directed against Islam. On the other hand, the scholarly and sympathetic interpreter of Suhrawardi, H. Corbin, insists on the role of Shaikh al-Ishraq in reviving the philosophy of Zoroastrian Persia

and on his sympathy for Zoroastrian and Manichaeic ideas, although he does not consider this revival to be a movement against Islam but rather an integration of ancient Persian myths in “the prism of Islamic spirituality.” In any case, all views which consider ishraqi wisdom to be simply a revival of Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism confuse the form with the spirit. There is no doubt that Suhrawardi makes use of Mazdaean symbols especially with regard to angelology, but that is no more reason for calling him Mazdaean than it is to call Jabir ibn Hayyan a follower of Egyptian religion, because he used Hermetic symbols. The only criterion of orthodoxy in Islam is the first shahadah (la ilaha ill–Allah) and, according to it, Suhrawardi cannot be said to lie outside the pale of Islam, no matter how strange his formulations may be. Furthermore, the disciples of the Ishraqi school consider the Persian sages of whom Suhrawardi speaks to have lived before Plato and Pythagoras and not during the Sassanid period. The genius of Islam to integrate diverse elements into itself is evident here as elsewhere and should not be interpreted as a sign of departure from the straight path (sirat al–mustaqim) or the universal orthodoxy which embraces all the perspectives within the tradition. The vocation of Islam is the re–establishment of the primordial tradition so that all the streams of the ancient religions and cultures have flowed into it without in any way destroying its purity.

[15.](#) Ibn Sina, *Mashriq al–Mantiqiyyin*, Cairo 1338/1919, pp.2–4.

[16.](#) A. Nallino, “Filosofia ‘orientali’ od ‘illuminativa’ d’Avicenna,” *Rivista degli studi orientali*, Vol. X, 1925, pp. 433–67. H. Corbin rightly emphasizes the illuminative as well as the Oriental aspect of Ibn Sina's Oriental wisdom and its profound connection with the Ishraqi school of Suhrawardi. See Corbin, *Avicenne et Lericit visionnaire*, Institut Franco–Iranien, Teheran, 1952–54, Vol. I, Introduction, p. iii.

[17.](#) Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. I, p. 195

[18.](#) In European languages the word “orient” means both the east and the placing of oneself in the right direction, and refers to the same symbolism.

[19.](#) As Corbin states, “Ishraq is a knowledge which is Oriental because it is itself the Orient of knowledge.” Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. I, p. xxix.

[20.](#) Throughout our writings we use the word “intellect” as the instrument of gnosis, of direct intuitive knowledge where the knower and the known become identical, and distinguish it from reason which is its passive reflection.

[21.](#) Ibn Wahshiyah, *Ancient Alphabet and Hieroglyphic Characters*, London, 1806, p. 100. These historical connections are discussed by H. Corbin in *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi*, Editions du Courier, Teheran, 1325 Solar, p. 18, and the *Prolegomene to Suhrawardi*, *Opera*, Vol.I, pp. xxv ff. We are indebted to him for drawing our attention to them.

[22.](#) Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. I, pp. 502–03.

[23.](#) Suhrawardi is considering only the Peripatetic aspect of Ibn Sina.

[24.](#) Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, pp. 10–11. Actually, the stations mentioned are more numerous; we have described only the major ones.

[25.](#) Suhrawardi, *Risaleh Safir–i Simurgh*, MS. Teheran National Library, 1758, pp. 11–12

[26.](#) In this same treatise Suhrawardi writes that the most noble knowledge is gnosis which lies above human reason. As he says, “To seek the knowledge of God through reason is like seeking the sun with a lamp.” *Ibid.*, p. 14

[27.](#) There is a profound correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm in all traditional wisdom so that the inward journey of man through the centre of his being corresponds to a journey through the various stages of the universe and finally beyond it. To escape from the prison of the lower soul (nafs ammarah) is also to pass beyond the crypt of the cosmos.

[28.](#) Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, pp. 274ff

[29.](#) It is said that when Christian. Rosenkreutz, the founder of the order of the Rosy–Cross, abandoned Europe, he retired to the Yaman.

[30.](#) Suhrawardi indicates here the main technique of Sufism which is the invocation (dhikr) of one of the names of God and which Sufi masters call the sacred barque that carries man across the ocean of the spiritual path to the shore of the spiritual world.

[31.](#) These fourteen powers are: Attraction, retention, purgation, repulsion digestion, growth, sleep, imagination, anger, lust, and the four humours

[32.](#) The inward journey beyond the carnal soul (nafs) corresponding externally to the journey beyond the visible universe is described by the Ishraqis symbolically as reaching the fountain of life in which there are found the jewels of the purely spiritual world.

[33.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, p. 296.

[34.](#) The inspiration for the book came to the author on an auspicious day when all the seven planets were in conjunction in the Sign of the Balance.

[35.](#) Suhrawardi writes that he who wishes to understand the essence of this work should spend forty days in a retreat (khalwah) occupying himself only with invocation (dhikr) under the direction of the spiritual guide whom he calls in several places qa'im bi al-Kitab.

[36.](#) For his criticism, see Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 46ff

[37.](#) The term mahiyyah in Arabic is composed of ma meaning "what" and hiyyah derived from the word huwa ("it"). It is the answer given to the question "What is it?" It is used to denote the essence of anything whether the existence of that thing is certain or doubtful, while the word dhat is used to denote the essence of something which possesses some degree of being. In Islamic philosophy reality is understood in terms of wujud and mahiyyah, the latter meaning the limitation placed upon Being and identified with the Platonic ideas. See. S. H. Nasr, "The Polarisation of Being" [Proceedings of the Sixth] Pakistan Philosophical Congress, Lahore, 1959, pp. 50–55.

[38.](#) For a general discussion of this subject in the philosophy of the master of the Masha'is, Ibn Sina, see A. M. Goichon, La distinction d l'essence et de l'existence d'apres Ibn Sina (Avicenne), de Brouwer Descles, Paris, 1937.

[39.](#) In fact, as Mulla Sadra asserts, Suhrawardi substitutes light (nur) for Being, attributing the former with all the features which the latter term possesses in other schools. We are deeply indebted for the knowledge of this interpretation and many other essential elements of ishraqi doctrines to one of the greatest masters of traditional wisdom in Persia, Sayyid Muhammad Kazim `Assar.

[40.](#) Although in his Hikmat al-Ishraq, Suhrawardi does not speak of the necessary and possible beings, in many of his other treatises like the Partau-Narneh, l'teqad al-Hukama' and Yazdan Shinakht, he speaks of the masha'i categories of Necessary Being. (wajib at-wujud), possible being (mumkin al-wujud), and impossible being (mumtani' al-wujud).

[41.](#) Suhrawardi defines a substance in masha'i fashion as that possible being (mumkin) which has no place (mahall), and accident as that possible being which does have a place. He also defines a body as that substance which has height, width, and depth. Partau-Nameh, MS., Teheran National Library, 1257, pp. 190ff.

[42.](#) In his works Suhrawardi insists on the perishable nature of the body and its being a prison into which the soul has fallen. In the Bustan al-Qulub, MS., Teheran Sipahsalar Library, 2911, he gives as argument for the permanence of the soul and its spiritual nature, the fact that the body of man changes its material every few years while man's identity remains unchanged. The masha'i doctrine of the soul is essentially one of defining its faculties; the ishraqi view is to find the way by which the soul can escape its bodily prison.

[43.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 106–21.

[44.](#) As the quotations we have already cited demonstrate, Suhrawardi insists that he is not dealing with the dualism of the Zoroastrians. Rather, he is explaining the mysterious polarization of reality in this symbolism. The Ishraqis usually interpret light as Being and darkness as determination by ideas (mahiyyah). They say that all ancient sages taught this same truth but in different languages. Hermes spoke of Osiris and Isis; Osiris or the sun symbolizes Being and Isis or the moon, mahiyyah. They interpret the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers in the same fashion.

[45.](#) Actually this term means both the divine essence and its first determination which is the archangel or the universal intellect.

[46.](#) "The immense panorama of diversity which we call the Universe is, therefore, a vast shadow of the infinite variety in intensity of direct or indirect illuminations of rays of the Primary Light." Iqbal, The Development of Metaphysics in Persia, Luzac & Co., London, 1908, p. 135.

[47.](#) In his Risaleh Yazdan Shinakht, Matba`-i `Ilmi, Teheran, 1316 Solar, pp. 13ff., Suhrawardi divides comprehension (idrak) into four categories: – (i) Sense of sight which perceives external forms like colours, etc. (ii) Imagination (khayal) which perceives images not depending upon external objects. (iii) Apprehension (wahm) which is stronger than the other two and which perceives the meaning of sensible things, but, like the other two, cannot be separated from the matter of

bodies. (iv) Intellectual apprehension ('aql) the seat of which is the heart, the instrument which is a bridge between the human being and the intellectual world, and perceives intellectual realities, the world of angels, and the spirit of prophets and sages.

[48.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 131–32

[49.](#) Ibn Sina, Najat, MS. al-Kurdi, Cairo, 1938, pp. 256–57.

[50.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 133ff. Also Prolegomene, II, pp. 42ff. In ishraqi wisdom all of the cosmic hierarchies are understood in terms of a series of illuminations (ishraqat) and contemplation (shuhud), the first being a descent and the second an ascent.

[51.](#) Usually in medieval cosmology the elements, the acceptors of form, are called the 'mothers' and the celestial orbits, the givers of form, the "fathers." The term "mothers" used by Suhrawardi to designate the archangelic world should not, therefore, be confused with the elements.

[52.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 157ff. Also H. Corbin, Les motifs Zoroastrien dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi, Editions du Courier, Teheran, 1325 Solar, Chap. I.

[53.](#) The governing light of the heavens moves each heaven by means of the planet attached to it, which is like the organ of the light. Suhrawardi calls this mover hurakhsh which is the Pahlawi name for the sun, the greatest of the heavenly lights. Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, p. 149. Regarding the motion of each heaven, Suhrawardi writes, "Its illumination is the cause of its motion, and its motion is the cause of another illumination; the persistence of the illuminations is the cause of the persistence of motion, and the persistence of both the cause of the persistence of the events in this world." Hayakil al-Nur, MS. Istanbul, Fatih, 5426, Part 5.

[54.](#) Each being in this world, including man is connected to the Supreme Light not only through the intermediary angels but also directly. This light which connects each being directly to the Divine Light and places that being in the hierarchy of beings at a place proper to it is called khurrah. In ancient Persia it was believed that when a new king was to be chosen, the royal khurrah would descend upon him and distinguish him from the other pretenders to the throne.

[55.](#) Suhrawardi describes Gabriel as one of the supreme archangels who is the archetype of the "rational species" (nau` natiq), the giver of life, knowledge, and virtue. He is also called the giver of the spirit (rawan bakhsh) and the Holy Spirit (ruh al-qudus). Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, p. 201.

[56.](#) In the I'tiqad al-Hukama' and Partau-Nameh, Suhrawardi divides the universe into the world of intelligences ('alam al-'uqul or 'alam al-jabarut), the world of souls ('alam at-nufus or 'alam al-malakut), and the world of bodies ('alam al-ajsam or 'alam al-muluk). Also ibid., p. 270

[57.](#) Ibid. p. 187.

[58.](#) Suhrawardi considers fire, the fourth of the traditional elements, to be a form of light and the theurgy of urdibihisht, and not one of the terrestrial elements.

[59.](#) Suhrawardi gives a different meaning to causality than the Aristotelians' whose four causes which he does not accept. For Suhrawardi all these causes are really nothing but light, i. e., everything is made of light and by light, and is given a form by the archangelic light whom he calls the "giver of forms" (wahib al-suwar) and seeks the Light of lights as its goal and end.

[60.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 199–200

[61.](#) Ibid., pp. 204–09.

[62.](#) Ibn Sina, Psychologie v Jehe dile as-Sifa, ed. J. Bakos, Editions de l'Academie Tchecoslovaque des Sciences, Prague, 1956, Vol. I, pp. 53ff.

[63.](#) Suhrawardi, Partau-Nameh, pp. 190ff.

[64.](#) Suhrawardi, Hayakil al-Nur, Sections 6 and 7. In certain other writings Suhrawardi avers that the light of each man is created with his body but survives after it. By creation, however, Suhrawardi means essentially "individualization" and "actualization" rather than creation in the ordinary sense. There is no doubt that his basic teaching is that the spirit or soul comes from the world of light and ultimately returns to it.

[65.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, p. 225

[66.](#) This is, properly speaking, the world of the unconscious which has become the subject of study for modern psychologists. It should be clearly distinguished from the world of archetypes which, rather than the "collective

unconscious,” is the source of symbols.

[67.](#) Suhrawardi, *Risaleh Yazdan Shinakht*, pp.53–63.

[68.](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 66ff. Since human souls are brought into being by the celestial souls they are able to acquire the knowledge which these heavenly souls possess when they are put before them as a mirror. In the dreams of ordinary men this effect occurs occasionally since the external and internal senses which are the veils of the soul are partially lifted. In the case of prophets and saints such effects occur in awakening, i.e., they always reflect the intelligible world in the mirror of their souls so that they have knowledge of the unmanifested world even when awake.

[69.](#) The journey to the spring of life which lies at the boundary of the visible heavens symbolizes the journey through the soul (*nafs*), while the journey to the cosmic mountain *Qaf* from which the spring flows and the ascent of this mountain which lies above the visible heavens symbolize the inner journey to the centre of one's being. In his *Mi`raj-Nameh*, Suhrawardi describes the symbolic meaning of the nocturnal Ascension of the Prophet which is the model that all Sufis seem to imitate.

[70.](#) Suhrawardi, *Risaleh Yazdan Shinakht*, pp. 81–82

[71.](#) For the translation into French and analysis of this work, see H. Corbin and P. Kraus, “Le bruissement de l'aile de Gabriel,” *Journal Asiatique*, July–Sept. 1935, pp. 1–82.

[72.](#) This commentary, finished in 694/1295, appears on the margin of the standard edition of *Hikmat al-Ishraq* which is studied in all the theological schools in present day Persia. It has been the means by which the doctrines of Suhrawardi have been interpreted through the centuries.

[73.](#) Corbin and certain other European scholars have also emphasized the role of *ishraqi* wisdom in the tenth/sixteenth-century Zoroastrianism and the movement connected with the name of Azar Kaiwan. This curious eclectic movement in which elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism are combined but which differs greatly from original Zoroastrian doctrines has left behind several works like the *Dabistan al-Madhahib* and the *Dasatir* some passages of which seem to be forged. Such a leading scholar of Zoroastrianism as I. Poure-Davoud considers the whole work to be purposeful falsification. See his article “*Dasatir*”, *Iran-i Imruz*, second year, No. II.

Whatever importance this syncretic movement which is so similar to the religious movements at the Court of Akbar may have had, its followers paid great attention to the writings of *Hikmat al-Ishraq*. In fact, one of the disciples of Azar Kaiwan by the name of Farzanih Bahram ibn Farshad translated several works of Suhrawardi into Persian. For a discussion of the school of Azar Kaiwan, see M. Mu`in, “Azar Kaiwan wa Pairuwan-i ,u,” *Revue de la Faculte des Letters, Teheran University*, Vol. IV, No. 3, 1336/1917, pp. 25–42.

Chapter 20: Ibn `Arabi

By A.E. Affifi

Life And Works

A fair and critical account of the life and thought of Shaikh Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi (or Ibn 'Arabi as he was known in the East) presents certain difficulties. Biographical material is not lacking; he is given great prominence in many of the biographical and historical books, both in Arabic and Persian. Some whole books and chapters of books have been written in defence of his orthodoxy or against his alleged heterodoxy. Many of his own works, particularly the *Futuhat*, *Risalat al-Quds*, and the “Memorandum” in which he enumerates his works and describes the conditions under which they were written, throw abundant light on some of the obscure aspects of his life as a man, and above all as an eminent Sufi and Sufi author.

But the account we derive from all these various sources is conflicting, and the real problem that faces us lies in drawing a true picture of his personality, his pattern of thought, and his works, based on such account. Yet as far as his personal life and his mental and spiritual make-up are concerned, our best source should be his own works to which we have already referred; for in such works we have first-hand information about his mental and spiritual progress.

There are also abundant details concerning his early masters in the Sufi Path, his personal contacts with the men and women he encountered on his vast travels. Here and there we come across a vivid description of his mystical experiences, visions, and dreams. Without the help of such material which has hitherto been neglected, Ibn 'Arabi's true personality, both as a thinker and a mystic, would remain considerably unknown to us.

The task is by no means easy. It means hunting through his voluminous *Futuhat* and other works for the biographical details we have just described. An outline of the main historical facts of his life is easy enough to give, but it would be no complete or scientific biography in the full sense of the word.

Ibn 'Arabi was born at Murcia – South-east of Spain – on the 17th of Ramadan 560/28th of July 1165. His *nisbah* – al-Hatimi al-Ta'i – shows that he was a descendant of the ancient Arab tribe of Tayy – a fact which proves that Muslim mysticism was not the exclusive heritage of the Persian mind as some scholars maintain. He came from a family well known for their piety. His father and two of his uncles were Sufis of some renown.

He received his early education at Seville which was a great centre of learning at the time. There he remained for thirty years studying under some of the great scholars of that city such as Abu Bakr b. Khalaf, Ibn Zarqun, and Abi Muhammad 'Abd al-Haqq al-Ishbili. At Seville he also met a number of his early spiritual masters such as Yusuf b. Khalaf al-Qumi who was a personal disciple of Shaikh Abu Madyan,¹ and Salih al-'Adawi whom he describes as a perfect ascetic. He refers to such men in terms of admiration and gratitude in his *Futuhat* and *Risalat al-Quds*, and acknowledges his debt to them for the initiation he had received from them into the Path of Sufism.

While making Seville his permanent place of residence, he travelled widely throughout Spain and Maghrib establishing wherever he went fresh relations with eminent Sufis and other men of learning. He visited Cordova, while still a lad, and made acquaintance with Ibn Rushd, the philosopher, who was then the judge of the city.²

In 590/1194 he visited Fez and Morocco. At the age of 38, i.e., in 589/1193, he set out for the East during the reign of Ya`qub b. Yusuf b. 'Abd al-Mu'min, the Sultan of Africa and Andalusia. His apparent intention was to perform his pilgrimage, but his real aim was perhaps to seek settlement in another country far away from the very much troubled West. The political and religious atmosphere there was stifling, and men like Ibn 'Arabi. were looked upon with suspicion both by the narrow-minded theologians and the ruling monarchs. The Sultans of the Muwahhids and Murabits feared them for the influence they

had over their followers and the possible danger of using these followers for political purposes as was the case with Abu al-Qasim b. Qasi, head of the Muridin, who was killed in 546/1151.

The Malikite theologians of the West were most intolerant towards the new school of thought that was beginning to take shape at the time. Even al-Ghazali's teaching was rejected and his books committed to the flames. The East, on the other hand, was more tolerant and more ready to accept new ideas and movements. Yet not the whole of the East can be said to be so, for when Ibn 'Arabi visited Egypt in 598/1201, he was ill-received by some of its people and an attempt was made on his life.

After leaving Egypt he travelled far and wide throughout the Middle East visiting Jerusalem, Mecca (where he studied and taught Hadith for a time), the Hijaz, Baghdad, Aleppo, and Asia Minor. He finally settled down in Damascus until he died on the 28th of Rabi al-Thani 638/17th of November 1240. He was buried in Mount Qasiyun in the private sepulchre of Qadi Muhyi al-Din b. al-Dhaki.³

Ibn 'Arabi is one of the most prolific authors in Muslim history. He is adequately described by Brockelmann ⁴ as a writer of colossal fecundity. There are at least 140 extant works which bear his name, varying from short treatises of some few pages to voluminous books like the *Futuhat*. The exact number of his works is uncertain. Sha`rani gives the figure of 400, ⁵ and the Persian author Jami, the much exaggerated figure of 500. ⁶ Muhammad Rajab Hilmi, in a book entitled *al-Burhan al-Azhar fi Manaqib al-Shaikh al-Akbar*, enumerates 284 books and tracts.

In the "Memorandum" which Ibn 'Arabi himself drew up in the year 632/1234, six years before his death, he gave the titles of 251 of his writings and said that that was as far as he could remember. The writing of the "Memorandum" has its significance. It provides a written evidence against anyone who might attempt to forge books in his name; and there must have been many amongst his enemies in the East who made such attempts.

To establish the identity and authenticity of all the works that have been ascribed to him is a task which has not been undertaken by any scholar yet. But we know within limits the genuineness of most of his major works, although doubt might arise with regard to certain parts of their contents. If what Sha`rani says about the *Futuhat* is true, it would make us wonder how much of this most important book is genuinely Ibn 'Arabi's and how much of it is foisted upon him.⁷

When he tried to summarize the *Futuhat*, Sha`rani said, he came across certain passages which he thought were in conflict with the established opinions of the orthodox Muslims. He omitted them after some hesitation. One day, he was discussing the matter with Shaikh Shams al-Din al-Madani (d. 955/1648) who produced a copy of the *Futuhat* which had been collated with Ibn 'Arabi's own MS. of the book at Quniyah. On reading it he discovered that it contained none of the passages which he had omitted. This convinced him, he goes on to say, that the copies of the *Futuhat* which were in current use in Egypt in his time contained parts which had been foisted upon the author as done in the case of the *Fusus* and other works.⁸

This may very well have been the case, but having not yet read the Quniyah MS. of the *Futuhat* which is still extant, one is unable to say how it compares with the printed texts of our time. A critical edition of the book based on the Quniyah MS. is of utmost importance. Indeed it might considerably alter our knowledge of Ibn 'Arabi's mystical philosophy.

What seems more certain is that many works or parts of works were written by later disciples of Ibn 'Arabi's school and attributed to him; and many others were extracted from his larger works and given independent titles. All these exhibit the same strain of thought and technique which characterize his genuine works. Such facts account, partly at least, for the enormous number of works which are usually attributed to him.

Although his output was mainly in the field of Sufism, his writings seem to have covered the entire range of Muslim scholarship. He wrote on the theory and practice of Sufism, Hadith, Qur'anic exegesis, the biography of the Prophet, philosophy, literature, including Sufi poetry, and natural sciences. In dealing with these diverse subjects he never lost sight of mysticism. We often see some aspects of his mystical system coming into prominence while dealing with a theological, juristic, or even scientific problem. His mystical ideas are imperceptibly woven into his writings on other sciences and make it all the more difficult to understand him from a mixed and inconsistent terminology.

The dates of only ten of his works are definitely known, but we can tell, within limits, whether a work belongs to his early life in Spain and al-Maghrib, or, to his later life in the East. With a few exceptions, most of his important works were written after he had left his native land, principally at Mecca and Damascus; and his maturest works like *Futuhat*, the *Fusus*, and the *Tanazzulat* were written during the last thirty years of his life.

His earlier works, on the other hand, are more of the nature of monographs written on single topics and show no sign of a comprehensive philosophical system. It seems that it is his contact with the resources and: men of the East that gave his theosophical speculations their wide range, and his mystical system of philosophy its finality.

His *opus magnum*, as far as mystical philosophy is concerned, is his celebrated *Fusus al-Hikam* (Gems of Philosophy or Bezels of Wisdom) which he finished at Damascus in 628/1230, ten years before his death. The rudiments of this philosophy are to be found scattered throughout his monumental *Futuhat* which he started at Mecca in 598/1201 and finished about 635/1237. The general theme of the *Fusus* was foreshadowed in the *Futuhat* in more places than one, and more particularly in Vol. II, pp. 357–77.

Pattern Of Thought And Style

The extraordinary complexity of Ibn 'Arabi's personality is a sufficient explanation of the complexity of the manner of his thinking and his style of writing. It is true that sometimes he is clear and straightforward, but more often – particularly when he plunges into metaphysical speculations – his style becomes

twisted and baffling, and his ideas almost intractable. The difficulty of understanding him sometimes can even be felt by scholars who are well acquainted with the characteristic aspect of his thought. It is not so much what he intends to say as the way in which he actually says it that constitutes the real difficulty.

He has an impossible problem to solve, viz., to reconcile a pantheistic theory of the nature of reality with the monotheistic doctrine of Islam. His loyalty to both was equal, and indeed he saw no contradiction in holding that the God of Islam is identical with the One who is the essence and ultimate ground of all things. He was a pious ascetic and a mystic, besides being a scholar of Muslim Law, theology, and philosophy. His writings are a curious blend of all these subjects.

He is for ever trying either to interpret the whole fabric of the teaching of Islam in the light of his pantheistic theory of the unity of all being, or to find justification for this theory in some Islamic texts. The two methods go hand in hand, with two different languages, i. e., the esoteric language of mysticism and the exoteric language of religion, used concurrently. Logically speaking, Islam is irreconcilable with any form of pantheism, but Ibn 'Arabi finds in the mystic experience a higher synthesis in which Allah and the pantheistic One are reconciled.

Interpretation within reasonable limits is justifiable, but with Ibn 'Arabi it is a dangerous means of converting Islam into pantheism or vice versa. This is most apparent in the *Fusus*, and to a certain extent in the *Futuhat*, where the Qur'anic text and traditions of the Prophet are explained mystically or rather pantheistically. Furthermore, while he is thus occupied with eliciting from the Qur'anic text his own ideas, he gathers round the subject in hand material drawn from all sources and brings it all into the range of his meditation. This accounts for the very extensive and inconsistent vocabulary which makes his writings almost unintelligible.

Whenever he is challenged or he thinks he would be challenged about the meaning of a certain statement, he at once brings forth another meaning which would convince the challenger. He was asked what he meant by saying:

“O Thou who seest me, while I see not Thee, How oft I see Him, while He sees not me!”

He replied at once, making the following additions which completely altered the original sense, by saying.

“O Thou who seest me ever prone to sin, While Thee I see not willing to upbraid: How oft I see Him grant His grace's aid While He sees me not seeking grace to win.”⁹

Similarly, when his contemporaries read his *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, which is supposed to be written on divine love, they could see in the *Diwan* nothing but erotic poems describing beautiful women, lovely scenes of nature and ordinary human passions. They accused the Shaikh of being in love with Shaikh Makin al-Din's daughter whose physical and moral qualities he describes in the introduction of the *Diwan*.

On hearing this he wrote a commentary on the work explaining it all allegorically. He did not deny that he loved al-Nizam, the beautiful daughter of Makin al-Din. What he denied was that he loved her in the ordinary sense of human love. For him she was only a symbol, a form, of the all-pervading beauty which manifests itself in the infinite variety of things.

“Every name I mention,” he says, “refers to her; and every dwelling I weep at is her dwelling ... Yet the words of my verses are nothing but signs for the spiritual realities which descend upon my heart. May God guard the reader of this *Diwan* against entertaining thoughts which do not become men with noble souls and lofty aspirations, for the hearts of such men are only occupied with heavenly things.”¹⁰

It is not improbable that Ibn 'Arabi made a deliberate effort to complicate the style, as Professor E. G. Browne remarks, in order to conceal his ideas from the narrow-minded orthodox and the uninitiated. He certainly succeeded, partly at least, in covering his pantheistic ideas with an apparel of Qur'anic texts and Prophetic traditions – a fact which is largely responsible for the controversy which raged throughout the Muslim world regarding his orthodoxy. But it is also possible, as we have already remarked, that he was equally convinced of the truth of Islam and of his own philosophical system which was verified by his mystical experience. In this case there is no need to talk about concealment of ideas or intentional complexity of style.

It would be a mistake to judge Ibn 'Arabi by the ordinary canons of logic. He is undoubtedly a thinker and founder of a school of thought, but he is pre-eminently a mystic. His mystical philosophy, therefore, represents the union of thought and emotion in the highest degree. It is a curious blend of reasoned truths and intuitive knowledge. He is also a man of colossal imagination. His dialectical reasoning is never free from forceful imagery and mystic emotions. In fact, his thought seems to be working through his imagination all the time. He dreams what he thinks, yet there is a deep under-current of reasoning running through.

He does not always prove his ideas with a formal dialectic, but refers his readers to mystic intuition and imagination as the final proof of their validity. The world of imagination for him is a real world; perhaps even more real than the external world of concrete objects. It is a world in which true knowledge of things can be obtained. His own imagination was as active in his dreams as in his waking life.

He tells us the dates when and the places where he had the visions, in which he saw prophets and saints and discoursed with them; and others in which a whole book like the *Fusus* was handed to him by the Prophet Muhammad who bade him “take it and go forth with it to people that they may make use thereof.”¹¹ He calls this an act of revelation or inspiration and claims that many of his books were so inspired.¹²

“All that I put down in my books,” he says, “is not the result of thinking or discursive reasoning. It is communicated to me through the breathing of the angel of revelation in my heart.”¹³ “All that I have written and what I am writing now is dictated to me through the breathing of the divine spirit into my

spirit. This is my privilege as an heir not as an independent source; for the breathing of the spirit is a degree lower than the verbal inspiration.”[14](#)

Such claims point to a supernatural or supermental source by which Ibn 'Arabi's writings were inspired. Yet in discussing the problem of revelation (*kashf* and *wahi*) in general, he emphatically denies all outside supernatural agents, and regards revelation as something which springs from the nature of man. Here are his own words:

“So, if any man of revelation should behold an object revealing to him gnosis which he did not have before, or giving him something of which he had no possession, this `object' is his own *'ain* (essence) and naught besides. Thus from the tree of his 'self' he gathers the fruit of his own knowledge, just as the image of him who stands before a polished mirror is no other than himself.”[15](#)

Revelation, therefore, is an activity of man's, soul, when all its spiritual powers are summoned and directed towards production. It is not due to an external agent, neither is it the work of the mind as we usually know it. What is sometimes seen as an “object” revealing knowledge to an inspired man is nothing but a projection of his own “self.”

Ibn 'Arabi is quite consistent with himself when he denies an outside source of divine inspiration, for man, according to him, like everything else, is in one sense divine. So there is no need to assume a duality of a divine revealer and a human receiver of knowledge.

Another very important aspect of his thought is its digressive character. He has offered the world a system of mystical philosophy, but nowhere in his books can we find this system explained as a whole or with any appreciable degree of unity or cohesion. He goes on from one subject to another with no apparent logical connection, pouring out details which he draws from every conceivable source. His philosophical ideas are widely spread among this mass of irrelevant material and one has to pick them up and piece them together.

That he has a definite system of mystical philosophy is a fact beyond doubt. It is hinted at in every page in the *Fusus* and in many parts of the *Futuhat*; but the system as a complete whole is to be found in neither. It is extraordinary that he admits that he has intentionally concealed his special theory by scattering its component parts throughout his books and left the task of assembling it to the intelligent reader. Speaking of the doctrine of the superelect (by which he means the doctrine of the Unity of all Being), he says:

“I have never treated it as a single subject on account of its abstruseness, but dispersed it throughout the chapters of my book (the *Futuhat*). It is there complete but diffused, as I have already said. The intelligent reader who understands it will be able to recognize it and distinguish it from any other doctrine. It is the ultimate truth beyond which there is nothing to obtain.”[16](#)

The third aspect of his thought is its eclectic character. Although he may rightly claim to have a

philosophy of religion of his own, many of the component elements of this philosophy are derived from Islamic as well as non-Islamic sources. He had before him the enormous wealth of Muslim sciences as well as the treasures of Greek thought which were transmitted through Muslim philosophers and theologians. In addition, he was thoroughly familiar with the literature of earlier Sufis.

From all these sources he borrowed whatever was pertinent to his system; and with his special technique of interpretation he brought whatever he borrowed into line with his own ideas. He read into the technical terms of traditional philosophy and theology – as he did with the Qur'anic terms – totally different meanings. He borrowed from Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Philo, and the Neo-Platonists terms of which he found equivalents in the Qur'an or in the writings of the Sufis and Scholastic Theologians. All were used for the construction and defence of his own philosophy from which he never wavered.

Controversy About His Orthodoxy

There has never been in the whole history of Islam another man whose faith has been so much in question. The controversy over Ibn 'Arabi's orthodoxy spread far and wide, and occupied the minds of the Muslims for centuries. We may even say that some traces of it are still to be found. Muslim scholars in the past were not concerned with his philosophy or mysticism as such, but with how far his philosophical and mystical ideas were in harmony or disharmony with the established dogmas of Islam. Instead of studying him objectively and impartially, and putting him in the place he deserves in the general frame of Muslim history, they spent so much time and energy in trying to prove or disprove his orthodoxy. No work could have been more futile and unrewarding.

The difference of opinion on this subject is enormous. By some Ibn 'Arabi is considered to be one of the greatest figures of Islam as an author and a Sufi, while others regard him as a heretic and impostor. His peculiar style perhaps is largely responsible for this. The ambiguity of his language and complexity of his thoughts render his ideas almost intractable, particularly to those who are not familiar with his intricate ways of expression. He is a writer who pays more attention to ideas and subtle shades of mystical feelings than to words. We must, therefore, attempt to grasp the ideas which lie hidden beneath the surface of his conventional terminology. Again, we must not forget that he is a mystic who expresses his ineffable experience – as most mystics do – in enigmatic language. Enigmas are hard to fathom, but they are the external expression of the feelings that lie deep in the heart of the mystic.

People who read Ibn 'Arabi's books with their eyes fixed on the words misunderstand him and misjudge him. It is these who usually charge him with infidelity (*kufr*) or at least with heresy. Others who grasp his real intention uphold him as a great mystic and a man of God. A third class suspends their judgment on him on the ground that he spoke in a language which is far beyond their ken. They have nothing to say against his moral or religious life, for this, they hold, was beyond reproach.

It seems that the controversy about his religious beliefs started when a certain Jamal al-Din b. al-Khayyat from the Yemen made an appeal to the *'ulama'* of different parts of the Muslim world asking

them to give their opinion on Ibn 'Arabi to whom he attributed what Firuzabadi describes as heretical beliefs and doctrines which are contrary to the consensus of the Muslim community.

The reaction caused by the appeal was extraordinarily varied. Some writers condemned Ibn 'Arabi right out; others defended him with great zeal. Of this latter class we may mention Firuzabadi, Siraj al-Din al-Makhzumi, al-Siraj al-Balqini, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, Qutb al-Din al-Hamawi, al-Qutb al-Shirazi, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and many others. Both Makhzumi and Suyuti wrote books on the subject. They could see no fault with Ibn 'Arabi except that he was misunderstood by people who were not of his spiritual rank.

Suyuti puts him in a rank higher than that of Junaid when he says that he was the instructor of the gnostics (*arifin*) while Junaid was the instructor of the initiates (*muridin*). All these men are unanimous in according to Ibn 'Arabi the highest place both in learning and spiritual leadership. They recognize in his writings a perfect balance between *Shari'ah* (religious Law) and *Haqiqah* (the true spirit of the Law), or between the esoteric and exoteric aspects of Islam.

The greatest opposition appeared in the eighth and ninth/fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when an open war was declared against speculative Sufism in general and that of Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn al-Farid in particular. The Hanbalite Ibn Taimiyyah (d. 728/ 1328), with his bitter tongue and uncompromising attitude towards the Sufis, led the attack. He put these two great mystics in the same category with Hallaj, Qunawi, Ibn Sab'in, Tilimsani, and Kirmani as men who believed in incarnation and unification. In this respect, he said, they were even worse than the Christians and the extreme Shi'ites. [17](#)

He does not even distinguish between the mystical ravings of Hallaj, the deeply emotional utterances of Ibn al-Farid, the cold-blooded and almost materialistic pantheism of Tilimsani, and the monistic theology of Ibn 'Arabi. They were all guilty of the abominable doctrines of incarnationism and pantheism.

Curiously enough, he was less violent in his criticism of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine which, he said, was nearer Islam than any of the others.

By far the worst enemy of Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn al-Farid and most insolent towards them was Burhan al-Din Ibrahim al-Biqali (d. 858/1454). He devoted two complete books to the refutation of their doctrines, not sparing even their personal characters. In one of these books entitled *Tanbih al-Ghabi 'ala Takfir Ibn 'Arabi* [18](#) (Drawing the Attention of the Ignorant to the Infidelity of Ibn 'Arabi) he says:

“He deceived the true believers by pretending to be one of them. He made his stand on the ground of their beliefs; but gradually dragged them into narrow corners, and led them by seduction to places where perplexing questions are lurking. He is the greatest artist in confusing people; quotes authentic traditions of the Prophet, then twists them around in strange and mysterious ways. Thus, he leads his misguided followers to his ultimate objective which is the complete overthrowing of all religion and religious beliefs. The upholders of such doctrines hide themselves behind an outward appearance of Muslim ritual such as prayer and fasting. They are in fact atheists in the cloaks of monks and ascetics, and veritable

heretics under the name of Sufis.”¹⁹

These accusations are unjust as they are unfounded. Ibn 'Arabi, it is true, does interpret the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions in an esoteric manner, and he is not the first or the last Sufi to do it, but his ultimate aim is never the abandonment of religious beliefs and practices as Biqa'i maintains. On the contrary, he did his utmost to save Islam which he understood in his own way. The charge of pretence and hypocrisy is contradicted by the bold and fearless language in which Ibn 'Arabi chooses to express himself. He does not pretend to be a Muslim in order to please or avoid the wrath of true believers to whom Biqa'i refers.

He believes that Islam which preaches the principle of the unity of God could be squared with his doctrine of the unity of all Being, and this he openly declares in the strongest terms. He may have deceived himself or expressed the mystical union with God in terms of the metaphysical theory of the unity between God and the phenomenal world, but he certainly tried to deceive no one.

In contrast to Biqa'i's terrible accusations, we should conclude by citing the words of Balqini who had the highest opinion of Ibn 'Arabi. He says

“You should take care not to deny anything that Shaikh Muhyi al-Din has said, when he – may God have mercy upon him – plunged deep into the sea of gnosis and the verification of truths, mentioned towards the end of his life in the *Fusus*, the *Futuhat*, and the *Tanazzulat* – things which are fully understood only by people of his rank.”

Influence On Future Sufism

Although Ibn 'Arabi was violently attacked by his adversaries for his views which they considered unorthodox, his teachings not only survived the attacks, but exercised the most profound influence on the course of all future Sufism. His admirers in the East, where he spent the greater part of his life, called him al-Shaikh al-Akbar (the Greatest Doctor), a title which has never been conferred on another Sufi since. It pointed to his exceptional qualities both as a great spiritual master and a Sufi author – and it is held to be true of him to this-day. He marks the end of a stage where speculative Sufism reached its culminating point.

The centuries that followed witnessed the rapid spread of Sufi orders all over the Muslim world; and Sufism became the popular form of Islam with much less theory and more ritual and practice. The founders of the Fraternities were better known for their piety and spiritual leadership than for their speculation. This is why Ibn 'Arabi's theosophy and mystical philosophy remained unchallenged. They were in fact the only source of inspiration to anyone who discoursed on the subject of the Unity of all Being, whether in Arabic-speaking countries or in Persia or Turkey.

Some writers of his own school, such as 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili and 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani, did little

more than reproduce his ideas in a different form. Other schools of Sufis were not entirely free of his influence, at least as far as his terminology was concerned. The tremendous commentary of Arusi on Qushairi's *Risalah*, which is the classical model of Sunni Sufism, abounds with ideas and terms borrowed from Ibn 'Arabi's works.

His influence seems to show itself most markedly in the delightful works of the mystic poets of Persia from the seventh/thirteenth to the ninth/fifteenth century. 'Iraqi, Shabistari, and Jami were all inspired by him. Their wonderful odes are in many respects an echo of the ideas of the author of the *Fusus* and the *Futuhat*, cast into magnificent poetry by the subtle genius of the Persian mind. They overflow with the ideas of divine unity and universal love and beauty.

God is described as the source and ultimate ground of all things. He is for ever revealing Himself in the infinite forms of the phenomenal world. The world is created anew at every moment of time; a continual process of change goes on, with no repetition and no becoming. The divine light illuminates all particles of Being, just as the divine names have from eternity illuminated the potential, non-existent realities of things. When these realities become actualized in space and time, they reflect, like mirrors, the divine names which give them their external existence. The phenomenal world is the theatre wherein all the divine names are manifested. Man is the only creature in whom these names are manifested collectively.

These are but a few of the many ideas which the mystic poets of Persia borrowed from Ibn 'Arabi and to which they gave an endless variety of poetical forms. It is said that 'Iraqi wrote his *Lama'at* after hearing Sadr al-Din Qunawi's lectures on the *Fusus*, and Jami who commented on the same book wrote his *Lawa'ih* in the same strain. The following is an extract from 'Iraqi's *Lama'at* which sums up Ibn 'Arabi's theory of the microcosm (man):

“Though Form,” he said, “proclaims me Adam's son,
My true degree a higher place hath won.
When in the glass of Beauty I behold,
The Universe my image doth unfold:
In Heaven's Sun behold me manifest
Each tiny molecule doth me attest....
Ocean's a drop from my pervading sea,
Light but a flash of my vast Brilliancy:
From Throne to Carpet, all that is doth seem
Naught but a Mote that rides the sunlit Beam.
When Being's Veil of Attributes is shed,
My Splendour o'er a lustrous World is Spread ... “.20

Doctrines

Unity of All Being

The most fundamental principle which lies at the root of Ibn 'Arabi's whole philosophy, or rather theologico-philosophical and mystical thought, is the principle of the "Unity of All Being" (*wahdat al-wujud*). Perhaps the word "pantheism" is not a very happy equivalent, partly because it has particular associations in our minds, and also because it does not express the full significance of the much wider doctrine of the Unity of All Being as understood by our author. From this primordial conception of the ultimate nature of reality all his theories in other fields of philosophy follow with an appreciable degree of consistency.

Much of the criticism levelled against Ibn 'Arabi's position is due to the misunderstanding of the role which he assigns to God in his system – a fact which attracted the attention of even Ibn Taimiyyah, who distinguishes between Ibn 'Arabi's *wahdat al-wujud* and that of other Muslim pantheists. He says that "Ibn 'Arabi's system is nearer to Islam in so far as he discriminates between the One who reveals Himself and the manifestations thereof, thus establishing the truth of the religious Law and insisting on the ethical and theological principles upon which the former Shaikhs of Islam had insisted."²¹ In other words, Ibn Taimiyyah does not wish to put Ibn 'Arabi in the same category with Tilimsani, Isra'ili, and Kirmani whom he condemns as atheists and naturalists.

Ibn 'Arabi's pantheism is not a materialistic view of reality. The external world of sensible objects is but a fleeting shadow of the Real (*al-Haqq*), God. It is a form of acosmism which denies that the phenomenal has being or meaning apart from and independently of God. It is not that cold-blooded pantheism in which the name of God is mentioned for sheer courtesy, or, at the most, for logical necessity or consistency. On the contrary, it is the sort of pantheism in which God swallows up everything, and the so-called other-than-God is reduced to nothing. God alone is the all-embracing and eternal reality. This position is summed up in Ibn 'Arabi's own words

"Glory to Him who created all things, being Himself their very essence (*'ainuha*)";

and also in the following verse:

"O Thou Who hast created all things in Thyself,

Thou unitest that which. Thou createst.

Thou createst that which existeth infinitely

In Thee, for Thou art the narrow and the all-embracing."²²

Reality, therefore, is one and indivisible. We speak of God and the world, the One and the many, Unity and multiplicity, and such other terms when we use the language of the senses and the unaided intellect. The intuitive knowledge of the mystic reveals nothing but absolute unity which – curiously

enough – Ibn 'Arabi identifies with the Muslim doctrine of unification (*tauhid*). Hence the further and more daring identification of his pantheistic doctrine with Islam as the religion of unification.

“Base the whole affair of your seclusion (*khalwah*),” he says, “upon facing God with absolute unification which is not marred by any (form of) polytheism, implicit or explicit, and by denying, with absolute conviction, all causes and intermediaries, whole and part, for indeed if you are deprived of such *tauhid* you will surely fall into polytheism.”²³

This, in other words, means that the real *tauhid* of God is to face Him alone and see nothing else, and declare Him the sole agent of all that exists. But such a view points at once to a fact long overlooked by scholars of Muslim mysticism, i.e., that Muslim pantheism (*wahdat al-wujud*) is a natural – though certainly not a logical – development of the Muslim doctrine of *tauhid* (unification). It started with the simple belief that “there is no god other than God,” and under deeper consideration of the nature of Godhead, assumed the form of a totally different belief, i. e., there is nothing in existence but God.

In Ibn 'Arabi's case, the absolute unity of God, which is the monotheistic doctrine of Islam, is consistently interpreted to mean the absolute unity of all things in God. The two statements become equivalent, differing only in their respective bases of justification. The former has its root in religious belief or in theological or philosophical reasoning or both; the latter has its final justification in the unitive state of the mystic. We have a glimpse of this tendency in the writings of the early mystics of Islam such as Junaid of Baghdad and Abu Yazid of Bistam, but they speak of *wahdat al-shuhud* (unity of vision) not of *wujud* (Being), and attempt to develop no philosophical system in any way comparable to that of Ibn 'Arabi's.

It is sufficiently clear now that according to Ibn 'Arabi reality is an essential unity – substance in Spinoza's sense; but it is also a duality in so far as it has two differentiating attributes: *Haqq* (God) and *khalq* (universe). It can be regarded from two different aspects. In itself it is the undifferentiated and Absolute Being which transcends all spatial and temporal relations. It is a bare monad of which nothing can be predicated or known, if by knowledge we mean the apprehension of a thing through our senses and discursive reason. To know in this sense is to determine that which is known; and determination is a form of limitation which is contrary to the nature of the Absolute. The Absolute Monad is the most indeterminate of all indeterminates (*ankar al-nakirat*); the thing-in-itself (*al-shai*) as Ibn 'Arabi calls it.

On the other hand, we can view reality as we know it; and we know it invested with divine names and attributes. In other words, we know it in the multiplicity of its manifestations which make up what we call the phenomenal world. So, by knowing ourselves and the phenomenal world in general, we know reality of which they are particular modes.

In Ibn 'Arabi's own words “we” – and this goes for the phenomenal world as well – “are the names by which God describes Himself.” We are His names, or His external aspects. Our essences are His essence and this constitutes His internal aspect. Hence reality is One and many; Unity and multiplicity; eternal and temporal; transcendent and immanent. It is capable of receiving and uniting in itself all

conceivable opposites.

Abu Saïd al-Kharraz (d. 277/890) had already discovered this truth when he said that God is known only by uniting all the opposites which are attributed to him. "He is called the First and the Last: the External and the Internal. He is the Essence of what is manifested and of that which remains latent.... The Inward says no when the Outward says I am; and the Outward says no when the Inward says I am, and so in the case of every pair of contraries. The speaker is One, and He is identical with the Hearer."²⁴

Thus, Ibn 'Arabi's thought goes on moving within that closed circle which knows no beginning and no end. His thought is circular because reality as he envisages it is circular. Every point on the circle is potentially the whole of the circle and is capable of manifesting the whole. Looking at the points with an eye on the centre of the circle (the divine essence), we can say that each point is identical with the essence in one respect, different from it in another respect. This explains the verbal contradictions with which Ibn 'Arabi's books abound.

Sometimes he comes nearer the philosophers than the mystics when he explains the relation between God and the universe. Here we have theories reminiscent of the Platonic theory of ideas and the Ishraqi doctrine of intelligible existence (*al-wujud al-dihni*) and the scholastic theory of the identification of substance and accidents (the theory of the Ash'arites).

"Before coming into existence," he says, "things of the phenomenal world were potentialities in the bosom of the Absolute." They formed the contents of the mind of God as ideas of His future becoming. These intelligible realities are what he calls "the fixed prototypes of things" (*al-a'yan al-thabitah*). God's knowledge of them is identical with His knowledge of Himself.

It is a state of self-revelation or self-consciousness, in which God saw (at no particular point of time) in Himself these determinate "forms" of His own essence. But they are also latent states of His mind. So they are both intelligible ideas in the divine mind as well as particular modes of the divine essence. Hence the *a'yan al-thabitah* are identified, on the one hand, with the quiddity (*mahiyyah*) of things, and, on the other hand, with their essence (*huwiyyah*). The former explains the first aspect of the *a'yan* as ideas; the latter, their second aspect as essential modes.

He calls them non-existent in the sense that they have no external existence, on the one hand, and no existence apart from the divine essence, on the other. They are the prototypes and causes of all external existents because they are the potential relations between the divine names as well as the potential modes of the divine essence. When these potentialities become actualities we have the so-called external world. Yet, there is no real becoming, and no becoming in space and time. The process goes on from eternity to everlastingness.

This complicated relation between the One and the many is nowhere systematically explained in Ibn 'Arabi's works, not even in the *Fusus*. A certain formal dialectic can be detected in the *Fusus* where the

author attempts to explain his metaphysical theory of reality, but the thread of the formal reasoning is often interrupted by outbursts of mystic emotion. Ibn 'Arabi is essentially a mystic, and in the highest degree a dreamer and fantast as we have already observed. He often uses symbols and similes in expressing the relation between the multiplicity of the phenomenal world and their essential unity.

The One reveals Himself in the many, he says, as an object is revealed in different mirrors, each mirror reflecting an image determined by its nature and its capacity as a recipient. Or it is like a source of light from which an infinite number of lights are derived. Or like a substance which penetrates and permeates the forms of existing objects: thus, giving them their meaning and being. Or it is like a mighty sea on the surface of which we observe countless waves for ever appearing and disappearing. The eternal drama of existence is nothing but this ever-renewed creation (*al-khalq al-jadid*) which is in reality a perpetual process of self-revelation. Or again, he might say, the One is the real Being and the phenomenal world is its shadow having no reality in itself.

But beautiful as they are, such similes are very ambiguous and highly misleading. They are at least suggestive of a duality of two beings: God and the universe, in a system which admits only an absolute unity. Duality and multiplicity are illusory. They are due to our incapacity to perceive the essential unity of things. But this oscillation between unity and duality is due to confusing the epistemic side of the issue with its ontological side.

Ontologically, there is but one reality. Epistemically, there are two aspects: a reality which transcends the phenomenal world, and a multiplicity of subjectivities that find their ultimate explanation in the way we view reality as we know it. To our limited senses and intellects the external world undergoes a process of perpetual change and transformation. We call this creation but it is in fact a process of self-unveiling of the One Essence which knows no change.

Notion of Deity

In spite of his metaphysical theory of the nature of reality, Ibn 'Arabi finds a place for God in his system. His pantheism, like that of Spinoza, is to be distinguished from the naturalistic philosophy of the Stoics and the materialistic atheists. God that figures in his metaphysics as an unknowable and incommunicable reality, beyond thought and description, appears in his theology as the object of belief, love, and worship. The warmth of religious sentiment displayed in his writings attaches itself to his conception of God in the latter sense which comes close to the monotheistic conception of Islam. Indeed he tries his utmost to reconcile the two conceptions; but his God is not in the strict religious sense confined to Islam or any other creed. He is not the ethical and personal God of religion, but the essence of all that is worshipped and loved in all religions

“God has ordained that ye shall worship naught but Him. “[25](#)

This is interpreted by Ibn 'Arabi to mean that God has decreed that nothing is actually worshipped except

Him. This is an open admission of all kinds of worship, so long as the worshippers recognize God behind the external “forms” of their gods. They call their gods by this or that name, but the Gnostic (*al-‘arif*) calls his God “Allah” which is the most universal of all names of God. Particular objects of worship are creations of men's minds, but God, the Absolute, is uncreated. We should not, therefore, confine God to any particular form of belief to the exclusion of other forms, but acknowledge Him in all forms alike. To limit Him to one form – as the Christians have done – is infidelity (*kufur*); and to acknowledge Him in all forms is the spirit of true religion.

This universal religion which preaches that all worshipped objects are forms of One Supreme Deity is the logical corollary of Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical theory that reality is ultimately one. But it has its deep roots in mysticism rather than in logic. It is nowhere better expressed than in the following verse:

“People have different beliefs about God
But I behold all that they believe.”[26](#)

And the verse:

“My heart has become the receptacle of every 'form';
It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks.
And a temple for idols, and pilgrims' Ka'bah,
And the Tablets of the Torah, and the Book of the Qur'an.
I follow the religion of love whichever way its camels take,
For this is my religion and my faith.”[27](#)

So, all paths lead to one straight path which leads to God. It would be a gross mistake to think that Ibn 'Arabi approves of the worship of stones and stars and other idols, for these as far as his philosophy is concerned are non-existent or mere fabrications of the human mind. The real God is not a tangible object; but one who reveals Himself in the heart of the gnostic. There alone He is beheld.

This shows that Ibn 'Arabi's theory of religion is mystical and not strictly philosophical. It has its root in his much wider theory of divine love. The ultimate goal of all mysticism is love; and in Ibn 'Arabi's mystical system in particular, it is the full realization of the union of the lover and the Beloved. Now, if we look deeply into the nature of worship, we find that love forms its very basis. To worship is to love in the extreme. No object is worshipped unless it is invested with some sort of love; for love is the divine principle which binds things together and pervades all beings. This means that the highest manifestation in which God is worshipped is love. In other words, universal love and universal worship are two aspects of one and the same fact. The mystic who sees God (the Beloved) in everything worships Him in everything. This is summed up in the following verse

“I swear by the reality of Love that Love is the Cause of all love.
Were it not for Love (residing) in the heart, Love (God) would not be worshipped.”[28](#)

This is because Love is the greatest object of worship. It is the only thing that is worshiped for its own sake. Other things are worshiped through it.

God, as an object of worship, therefore, resides in the heart as the supreme object of love. He is not the efficient cause of the philosophers or the transcendent God of the Mu'tazilites. He is in the heart of His servant and is nearer to him than his jugular vein.²⁹ "My heaven and my earth contain Me not," says the Prophetic tradition, "but I am contained in the heart of My servant who is a believer."

God and Man

It was Husain b. Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 309/922) who first laid down the foundation for the theory that came to be known in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi and 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili as the Theory of the Perfect Man. In the final form in which Ibn 'Arabi cast it, it played a very important role in the history of Muslim mysticism. Hallaj's theory was a theory of incarnation based on the Jewish tradition which states that "God created Adam in His own image" – a tradition which the Sufis attributed to the Prophet.

He distinguished between two natures in man: the divine (*al-lahut*), and the human (*al-nasut*). The two natures are not united but fused, the one into the other, as wine is fused into water. Thus for the first time in the history of Islam a divine aspect of man was recognized, and man was regarded as a unique creature not to be compared with any other creature on account of his divinity.

The Hallajian idea was taken up by Ibn 'Arabi, but completely transformed and given wider application. First, the duality of *lahut* and *nasut* became a duality of aspects of one reality, not of two independent natures. Secondly, they were regarded as actually present not only in man but in everything whatever; the *nasut* being the external aspect of a thing, the *lahut*, its internal aspect. But God who reveals Himself in all phenomenal existence is revealed in a most perfect and complete way in the form of the perfect man, who is best represented by prophets and saints.

This forms the main theme of the *Fusus al-Hikam* and *al-Tadbirat al-Ilahiyyah* of Ibn 'Arabi, but many of its aspects are dealt with in his *Futuhat* and other works. Each one of the twenty seven chapters of the *Fusus* is devoted to a prophet who is both a Logos (*kalimah*) of God and a representative of one of the divine names. They are also cited as examples of the perfect man. The Logos par excellence is the Prophet Muhammad or rather the reality of Muhammad, as we shall see later.

So man in general – and the perfect man in particular – is the most perfect manifestation of God. The universe which, like a mirror, reflects the divine attributes and names in a multiplicity of forms, manifests them separately or analytically. Man alone manifests these attributes and names collectively or synthetically. Hence he is called the microcosm and the honoured epitome (*al-mukhtasar al-sharif*) and the most universal being (*al-kaun al-jami'*), who comprises all realities and grades of existence. In him alone the divine presence is reflected, and through him alone God becomes conscious of Himself and His perfection. Here are Ibn 'Arabi's own words:

“God, glory to Him, in respect of His most beautiful names, which are beyond enumeration, willed to see their *a’yan* (realities), or if you wish you may say, His (own) *’ayn*, in a Universal Being which contains the whole affair – inasmuch as it is endowed with all aspects of existence – and through which (alone) His mystery is revealed to Himself: for a vision which consists in a thing seeing itself by means of itself is not the same as that of the thing seeing something else which serves as a mirror... . Adam was the very essence of the polishing of this mirror, and the spirit of this form (i.e., the form in which God has revealed Himself: which is man).”[30](#)

Here Ibn 'Arabi almost repeats the words of Hallaj who says:

“God looked into eternity, prior to all things, contemplated the essence of His splendour, and then desired to project outside Himself His supreme joy and love with the object of speaking to them. He also created an image of Himself with all His attributes and names. This image was Adam whom God glorified and exalted.”[31](#)

Yet, the difference between the two, thinkers is so fundamental. Hallaj is an incarnationist; Ibn 'Arabi, a pantheist. On man as the microcosm he says:

“The spirit of the Great Existent (the Universe)

Is this small existent (man).

Without it God would not have said:

'I am the greatest and the omnipotent.'

Let not my contingency veil thee,

Or my death or resurrection,

For if thou examinest me,

I am the great and the all-embracing.

The eternal through my essence,

And the temporal are manifested. “[32](#)

This is why man deserves the high honour and dignity of being God's vicegerent on earth – a rank which God has denied all other creatures including the angels. This superior rank goes not to every individual man, for some men are even lower than the beasts, but to the perfect man alone, and this for two reasons:

- a) He is a perfect manifestation of God in virtue of unity in himself, of all God's attributes and names.
- b) He knows God absolutely through realizing in some sort of experience his essential oneness with Him.

Here Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical theory of man coincides with the theory of mysticism.

Ethical and Religious Implications

We have already pointed out that Ibn 'Arabi's pantheistic theory of the nature of reality is the pivot round which the whole of his system of thought turns. Some aspects of this philosophy have been explained; and it remains now to show its bearing on his attitude towards man's ethical and religious life.

Everything in Ibn 'Arabi's world is subject to rigid determinism. On the ontological side we have seen that phenomenal objects are regarded as the external manifestations of their latent realities and determined by their own laws. Everything is what it is from eternity and nothing can change it, not even God Himself. "What you are in your state of latency (*thubut*) is what you will be in your realized existence (*zuhur*)," is the fundamental law of existence. It is self-determinism or self-realization in which freedom plays no part either in God's actions or in those of His creatures.

Moral and religious phenomena are no exception. God decrees things in the sense that He knows them as they are in their latent states, and pre-judges that they should come out in the forms in which He knows them. So He decrees nothing which lies outside their nature. This is the mystery of predestination (*sirr al-qadar*).^{[33](#)}

Belief and unbelief, sinful and lawful actions, are all determined in this sense and it is in this sense also that men are the makers of their own destiny for which, Ibn 'Arabi says, they are responsible. "We are not unjust to them," says God, "but it is they who are unjust to themselves." "I am not unjust to My servants."^{[34](#)}

On this Ibn 'Arabi comments as follows: "I (God) did not ordain infidelity (*kufr*) which dooms them to misery, and then demand of them that which lies not in their power. Nay, I deal with them only as I know them, and I know them only as they are in themselves. Hence if there be injustice they are the unjust. Similarly, I say to them nothing except that which My essence has decreed that I should say; and My essence is known to Me as it is in respect of My saying this or not saying that. So I say nothing except what I know that I should say. It is Mine to say, and it is for them to obey or not to obey after hearing My command."^{[35](#)}

There is, therefore, a difference between obeying one's own nature and obeying the religious command, a distinction which was made long before Ibn 'Arabi by Hallaj. On the one hand, all men – indeed all creatures – obey their own law which he calls the creative law (*al-amr al-takwini*). On the other, some obey and others disobey the religious Law (*al-amr al-taklifi*). The first is in accordance with God's creative will (*al-mashiyyah*) which brings things into existence in the forms in which they are eternally predetermined. The second is something imposed from without for some ulterior reason, ethical, religious, or social.

Everything obeys the creative commands in response to its own nature, and by so doing obeys God's will, regardless of whether this obedience is also obedience or disobedience to the religious or ethical

command. When Pharaoh disobeyed God and Iblis (Satan) refused the divine command to prostrate himself before Adam, they were in fact obeying the creative command and carrying out the will of God, although from the point of view of the religious command they were disobedient. To express the same thing in different words, an action-in-itself, i. e., irrespective of any form whatever, is neither good nor evil, neither religious nor irreligious. It is just an action pure and simple. It comes under one or another of these categories when it is judged by religious or ethical standards.

The whole theory reduces obedience and disobedience in the religious sense to a mere formality, and denies moral and religious obligations. It tells us that man is responsible for his actions, but affirms that he is not a free agent to will his actions. Responsibility and complete absence of freedom do not go together. Theoretically, there are different alternatives out of which man may choose his actions, but according to this theory he is so created that he chooses the only alternative which is determined by his own necessary laws. So he actually chooses nothing and has no more freedom than a stone falling down to the earth in obedience to its own law.

Thus, we go on moving within that closed circle of thought which is so typical of Ibn 'Arabi's reasoning. He has one eye on his pantheistic doctrine with all that it entails, and the other on Islamic teachings, and oscillates between the two all the time. His pantheistic doctrine implies that God is the Ultimate Agent of all actions, and Islam insists on the moral and religious responsibility of man for his actions. The two conflicting points of view cannot be reconciled, and Ibn 'Arabi's way of reconciling them is full of paradoxes.

He is more consistent when he says that all actions are created by God and there is no real difference between the Commander and the commanded.³⁶ There is no real servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*), for the servant is one who carries out the commands of his master. But in reality the servant of God is a mere locus (*mahall*) through which God's creative power acts. So the servant is the Lord and the Lord is the servant.³⁷

This seems to contradict what we have already said, i. e., that, according to Ibn 'Arabi, actions belong to man and spring directly from his nature in a determined way. Actually, there is no contradiction when we think of the distinction he makes between the One and the many. In fact, all his paradoxes can be solved when considered in the light of this distinction. When he says that God is the doer of all actions, he is regarding the question from the point of view of the One, for God's essence is the essence of men to whom actions are attributed. And when he asserts that men are the doers of their actions, he is regarding the question from the point of view of the many.

Having reduced obligation, obedience, disobedience; and similar other concepts to mere formal relations, it was natural enough for him to give the concepts of punishment and reward a positive content. Heaven and hell and all the eschatological matters connected with them are described in the minutest details, but no sooner does he give a constructive picture of one of them than he uses his allegorical method of interpretation to explain it away.

His method bears some remarkable resemblance to that of the Isma'ilians and the Carmathians, used for the same purpose. All eschatological terms such as punishment, reward, purgatory, the Balance, the Bridge, intercession, heaven, hell, and so on, are regarded as representations of states of man, and corporealizations of ideas. What we learn from Tradition, he says, are words, and it is left to us to find out what is meant by them,³⁸ i.e., to read into them whatever meaning we please.

This is precisely what Ibn 'Arabi himself has done. Heaven and hell, according to him, are subjective states, not objective realities. Hell is the realization of the individual "self"; it is selfhood. Heaven is the realization of the essential unity of all things. There is no real difference between the two. If any, the difference is one of degree, not of kind. Salvation is the ultimate end of all. Speaking of the people of hell and heaven, Ibn 'Arabi says: –

“Nothing remains but the Fulfiller of Promise alone;
The threat of God has no object to be seen.
When they enter the Abode of Misery they experience
Pleasure wherein lies a bliss so different
From that of the Gardens of Everlastingness.
It is all the same: the difference is felt at the beatific vision.”³⁹

This means that when the truth is known and God reveals Himself as He really is, everyone, whether in heaven or in hell, will know his position, i.e., will know how near or how far he is from the truth. Those who fully realize their essential oneness with God are the blessed ones who will go to paradise. Those who are veiled from the truth are the damned ones who will go to hell. But both parties will enjoy in their respective abodes happiness proportionate to their degree of knowledge.

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages an attempt has been made to give a bird's-eye view of a tremendously vast field. We have concentrated on the most important features of Ibn 'Arabi's life and thought; many important facts have of necessity been omitted for lack of space. If Ibn 'Arabi experienced – as we must assume he did – some sort of strain while writing his mystical philosophy, we are placed under greater strain while writing about him. There is more than one way of interpreting his ideas and fathoming his intricate and obscure style. This makes it possible for scholars to give not only different but conflicting accounts of his teachings.

The present account deals with him as a thorough-going pantheist who tried his best to reconcile his pantheistic doctrine with Islam. In doing so he had to read new meanings into the traditional Muslim concepts, and change Islam from a positive into a mystic religion. It is true he never lost sight of the idea of Godhead, but his God is not the transcendent God of revealed religions, but the Absolute Being who manifests Himself in every form of existence, and in the highest degree in the form of man.

People may agree or disagree with some of his theories, but the fact remains that in production and influence he is the greatest Arabic-speaking mystic Islam has ever produced. It has been said that he has annulled religion in the orthodox sense in which it is usually understood. This is not altogether true. He has done away with a good many concepts which were so narrowly understood by Muslim jurists and theologians, and offered in their place other concepts which are much deeper in their spirituality and more comprehensive than those of any of his Muslim predecessors. His ideas about the universality of everything – being, love, religion – may be considered landmarks in the history of human thought.

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