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Preface by Allamah Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i

Although most people are preoccupied with earning their livelihood and pay little attention to spiritual matters, yet every man has an inherent desire to know the absolute truth. When this dormant power comes to surface and is awakened in some people, they gain a number of spiritual perceptions.

Despite the claim of the sophists and the atheists that every truth is an illusion, everybody believes in the existence of one eternal truth. When man with a pure heart and a pure spirit looks at the permanent factuality of the universe and at the same time observes the instability and transience of its various parts, he realizes that this world and its manifestations are a mirror which reflects the existence of one eternal truth. With this realization his joy knows no bounds and he is so elated that in his eyes everything else becomes insignificant and worthless.

This spectacle forms the basis of that impulse of the gnostics¹ which draws the attention of the godly people to a world beyond perception and cultivates the love of Allah in their hearts. The pull which they feel towards this spectacle makes them forget everything and removes many desires from their hearts. This pull leads man to the worship of the Invisible Being who is more manifest than all that is visible or audible. It is this pull which gave birth to many a religion based on Allah's worship. The real gnostic is he who worships Allah not, because he hopes for any reward or is afraid of any punishment, but only because he knows Him and loves Him.²

It is clear from the above that gnosis is not a religion like other religions. It is to be regarded as the central and the most vital part of all religions. Gnosis is a perfect way of worship, based on love, not on fear or hope. It is a way of understanding the inner facts of religion instead of being contented with its outward and perceptible form. Among the followers of all revealed religions, even among those who believe in idol-worship there are individuals who follow the path of gnosis. The gnostics are found among the followers of polytheistic religions³ as well as among the Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Muslims.

Appearance of Gnosis in Islam

Out of the companions of the Holy Prophet Imam Ali is known for the eloquent description of gnostic truths and the stages of spiritual life. His sayings on this subject are a treasure of knowledge. As for the other companions of the Holy Prophet, their sayings which have come down to us do not contain enough material on this subject. The majority of the mystics and gnostics, whether Sunni or Shi'ah consider the chain of their spiritual leaders going to Imam Ali through such companions of his as Salman Farsi, Uways Qarani, Kumayl bin Ziyad, Rashid Hujari, Mitham Tammar, Rabi' bin Khaytham and Hasan Basri.

Next to this group some other persons like Taus Yamani, Shayban Ra'i, Malik ibn Dinar, Ibrahim bin Adham and Sharif Balkhi appeared in the second century, they were considered holy men by the people. These persons were apparently ascetics. They did not talk openly of gnosis or mysticism, though they conceded that they were introduced to spiritualism by the first group and trained by it.

Towards the end of the second century and the beginning of the third some other individuals like Bayazid Bistami, Ma'ruf Karkhi and Junayd Baghdadi appeared. They openly talked of gnosis. Some of their esoteric sayings based on their spiritual intuition were apparently so obnoxious that they were strongly denounced and condemned by some jurists and theologians. Consequently several of these gnostics were imprisoned and flogged and a few of them were even put to death.⁴ Nevertheless this group continued to flourish and maintained its activities despite all opposition. Thus the development of gnosis or mysticism continued till this system reached the zenith of its popularity and expansion in the seventh and the eighth centuries. During the later periods its popularity fluctuated from time to time, but it has been able to maintain its existence in the Islamic world till today.

It appears that most of the mystic leaders whose names are found in biographies and memoirs belonged to the Sunni school of thought and the current Sufi system that comprises some ceremonials and rituals not consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, is the heritage transmitted by these gnostics and mystics, although their system has subsequently adopted a few Shi'ah rites also.

Some spiritual leaders hold that no mystic or gnostic system or program was prescribed by Islam. The present gnostic system was invented by the mystics themselves; yet it has the approbation of Allah in the same way as monasticism was sanctioned by Allah after it had been introduced by the Christians into their religion with a view to propagate Christianity.

Anyway the mystics trace the chain of their spiritual leaders to Imam Ali through their early preceptors. (This chain of spiritual descent resembles a genealogical tree). The account of the visions and intuitions of the early gnostics also which has come down to us, mostly contains those elements of spiritual life which we find in the sayings, and teachings of Imam Ali and other Imams of the Holy Prophet's Household (Ahlul Bayt). We can clearly observe these facts provided we study their (the mystics) teachings patiently and calmly and are not carried away by their fascinating sayings which are often obnoxious and blasphemous.

(i) The sufis (Muslim mystics) regard the holiness acquired by following the spiritual path as human perfection. According to the Shi'ah belief, this quality is possessed by the Imams⁵ and through them can be acquired by their true followers.

(ii) The sufi doctrine that there must always be a Qutb⁶ in the world and the qualities they attribute to him, correspond to the Shi'ah doctrine of Imamat. According to the "People of the Holy Prophet's Household" the Imam (in Sufi terminology the perfect man) is a manifestation of Allah's Names⁷ and is responsible for supervising and guiding all human activities. This being the Shi'ah conception of Wilayat, the great Sufis may be regarded as the proponents of the Shi'ah doctrine, though apparently they followed the Sunni school. What we mean to say is that the Shi'ites being the followers of an infallible Imam, already possesses all that is indicated by the mystics. As a matter of fact the Qutb or the perfect man conceived by the mystics does not actually exist anywhere outside the Shi'ite world. Mere presumption is obviously quite a different thing.

It may be mentioned here that some authentic Sunni books state that the outward form of the Islamic law and Islamic teachings does not explain how to perform spiritual journey.⁸ On this basis the Sufis say that they have individually discovered certain methods and ways which facilitate this journey. They also claim that their methods have gained Divine sanction in the same way as previously monasticism had gained.⁹

As such the Sufi leaders included in their program of spiritual journey whatever rites, rituals and formalities they deemed fit, and asked their disciples to observe them. Gradually a vast and independent system came into being. This system included such items as total obedience, liturgy, special robes, music and ecstasy and rapture at the time of repeating the liturgical formulas.

Some orders of the Sufis went to the extent of separating the *tariqah* (the Sufi way) from the shari'ah (Islamic precepts). The adherents of these Sufi orders practically joined hands with the Batinites (Those who believe that in Islam everything is allegorical and has a hidden meaning). Anyhow according to the Shi'ah point of view the original source, of Islam, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah indicate what is absolutely contrary to all this. It is not possible that the religious texts would not guide to the truth or would ignore to explain an essential program. Nor is anybody, whosoever, he may be, allowed to ignore his duty in regard to what is obligatory or is prohibited according to the injunctions of Islam.

What do the Qur'an and Sunnah say about Gnosis?

At a number of places in the Holy Qur'an Allah has directed people to ponder over the contents of the Holy Book and not to pass by them cursorily. In a large number of verses, the universe and the entire creation have been described as Allah's signs. They have been called so because they indicate a great truth. When a man sees red light as a sign of danger, his attention is concentrated on the danger and he ceases to pay attention to the light itself. If he still thinks of the shape, color and nature of light, then these things will absorb his attention and he will not be able to attend to the impending danger. Similarly the universe and its manifestations are the signs of their Creator, an evidence of His existence and His

power.

They have no independent existence. We may look at them from any aspect, they indicate nothing but Allah. He who looks at the world and the people of the world from this angle under the guidance of the Qur'an, he will perceive Allah alone. He will not be fascinated by the borrowed charms of this world, but will see an infinite

Beauty, a Beloved manifesting Himself from behind the curtain of this world. No doubt, as we have explained by citing the example of red light, what the signs indicate is not this world, but the person of its Creator. We may say that the relationship between Allah and this world is not that of $1 + 1$ or 1×1 , but is that of $1 + 0$. In other words, this world in relation to Allah is a nonentity and does not add anything to His Essence.

As soon as man realizes this fact, his notion of having an independent existence is smashed and he suddenly feels imbued with love of Allah. Obviously this realization does not come through eyes, ears or any other sensory organs or mental faculties, for all organs themselves are mere signs and cannot play any significant role in providing the guidance we are talking about. [10](#)

When a man having access to Divine manifestation and desiring to remember Allah alone, hears the following passage of the Qur'an, he comes to know that the only path of perfect guidance is that of knowing himself:

O you who believe, you have charge of your own souls. He who errs cannot injure you if you are rightly guided. (al-Ma'idah, 5: 105)

He understands that his true guide is Allah alone who enjoins upon him to know himself and to seek the path of self-knowing, leaving all other paths. He must see Allah through the window of his own soul and thus achieve his real objective. That is why the Holy Prophet has said: He who has known himself, has known Allah. [11](#)

He has also said: "Those of you who know Allah better, better they know themselves." [12](#)

As for the embarking on spiritual journey there are many verses of the Qur'an which urge the people to remember Allah. For example at one place the Qur'an says:

Remember Me, I will remember you. (al-Baqarah, 2: 152)

Man has been ordered to do good deeds also, which have been explained in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Mentioning the good deeds Allah says: ***Surely in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example. (al-Ahzab, 33:21)***

How can it be imagined that Islam would declare that there was a path leading towards Allah without appraising the people what that path is?

And how can it be that Allah would mention a path without explaining how it is to be traversed?

Allah says in the Holy Qur'an: ***Messenger, We have revealed this Book to you. It contains the details of everything. (Surah an-Nahl, 16:89)***

- [1.](#) The Islamic esoterics known as Irfan or gnosis is sometimes associated with Tasawwuf or mysticism whose certain rites and rituals are repugnant to Islam. However Shi'aism considers Islamic acts of worship to be sufficient for gaining proximity to Allah.
- [2.](#) Imam Ja'far Sadiq has said: "There are three categories of the worshippers: 'Those who worship Allah out of fear; their worship is that of the slaves. Those who worship Allah for the sake of a reward; their worship is that of the wage-earners. Those who worship Allah out of love and earnestness; their worship is that of the freeman. This last is the best form of worship.'" (Biharul Anwar, vol. V, p. 208).
- [3.](#) Here the learned author has in his mind the religions of India and the Far East in which different aspects of divinity are represented by gods and goddesses in a mythical and symbolic form.
- [4.](#) Refer to the books on the biographies of the sages, such as the Tazkiratul Awliya' by Attar and the Taraiqul Haqa'iq by Ma'sum 'Ali Shah.
- [5.](#) The twelve successors explicitly expressed by the Holy Prophet of Islam through Divine Will.
- [6.](#) When a gnostic becomes totally oblivious of himself, in the Sufi parlance, he is said to have passed away in God, for he completely surrenders himself to the will and guidance of Allah.
- [7.](#) The gnostics maintain that the world has derived its entity from the Names of Allah and its existence and continuity depend on them. The source of Allah's all Names is His most perfect and loftiest Name. This Name is the station of the perfect man, called the Qutb of the universe also. The world is never without a Qutb.
- [8.](#) In Islam spiritual journey is called Sair wa Suluk, which signifies a journey towards Allah.
- [9.](#) Allah says: But monkery the Chnstian invented, We ordained it not for them. We ordained only seeking Allah's pleasure, but they observed it not. (Surah al-Hadid, 57:27).
- [10.](#) Imam Ali has said: "Allah is not that who may be comprehended by knowledge. Allah is He Who guides the argument to Himself." (Biharul Anwar, vol. II p. 186).
- [11.](#) A well-known tradition repeatedly quoted in the books of both the Sunni and Shi'ah gnostics.
- [12.](#) Another tradition cited in the books of the Sunni and Shi'ah gnostics.

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