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'Urafa' of the Second/Eighth Century

1. Al-Hasan al-Basri

The history of what is termed as *'irfan*, like *kalam*, begins with al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728). He was born in 22/642 and lived for eighty-eight years, having spent nine-tenths of his life in the first century H.

Of course, al-Hasan al-Basri was never known by the term sufi, but there are three reasons for counting him amongst the sufis. The first is that he compiled a book called *Ri'ayah li huquq Allah* (Observance of the Duties to Allah)[1], which can be recognized as the first book on sufism. A unique manuscript of this book exists at Oxford. Nicholson has this to say on the subject:

The first Muslim to give an experimental analysis of the inner life was Harith al-Muhasibi of Basrah ... 'The Path' (*tariqah*), as described by later writers, consists of acquired virtues (*maqamat*) and mystical states (*ahwal*). The first stage is repentance or conversion; then comes a series of others, e.g. renunciation, poverty, patience, trust in God, each being a preparation for the next.[2]

Secondly, the *'urafa'* themselves trace their orders back to al- Hasan al-Basri; and from him to 'Ali (A), such as the chain of the shaykhs of Abu Sa'id ibn Abi al-Khayr.[3] Similarly, Ibn al-Nadim, in his famous *al-Fihrist*, traces the chain of Abu Muhammad Ja'far al-Khuldi back to al-Hasan al-Basri, stating that al-Hasan al-Basri had met seventy of the Companions who had fought at Badr.

Thirdly, some of the stories related of al-Hasan al-Basri give the impression that he was in fact part of a group that in later times became known as sufis. We will relate some of these stories when appropriate later on.

2. Malik ibn Dinar

He was one of those who took asceticism and abstinence from pleasure to the extreme. Many stories are told about him in this regard. He died in the year 130/747.

3. Ibrahim ibn Adham

The famous story of Ibrahim ibn Adham resembles that of Buddha. It is said that he was the ruler of Balkh when something happened that caused him to repent and enter the ranks of the sufis.

'Urafa' attach great importance to this man, and a very interesting tale is told about him in Rumi's Mathnawi. He died around the year 161/777.

4. Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyyah

This woman is one of the wonders of her time (d. 135/752 or 185/801). She was named Rabi'ah because she was the fourth daughter of her family (*rabi'ah*: fem. gender of fourth). She is not to be confused with Rabi'ah al-Shamiyyah, who was also a mystic and a contemporary of Jami and lived in the 9th/15th century.

Lofty sayings and soaring mystical verses are recorded of Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyyah,' and she is noted for amazing spiritual states (*halat*).

5. Abu Hashim al-Sufi of Kufah

The date of this man's death is unknown. All that we can say is that he was the teacher of Sufyan al-Thawri; who died in 161/777. He appears to be the first person to have been called sufi. Sufyan says about him: "If it were not for Abu Hashim I would not have known the precise details of ostentation (*riya'*)."

6. Shaqiq al-Balkhi

He was the pupil of Ibrahim ibn Adham. According to the author of *Rayhanat al-'adab*, and others quoted in *Kashf al-ghummah* of 'Ali ibn 'Isa al-'Arbili and *Nur al-'absar* of al-Shablanji, he once met al-'Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (A) and has given an account of the Imam's great station and miracles. Shaqiq died in 194/810.

7. Ma'ruf al-Karkhi

He is one of the famous *'urafa'*. It is said that his parents were Christian and that he became a Muslim at the hands of al- 'Imam al-Rida (A), learning much from him.

The lines of many orders, according to the claims of the *'urafa'*, go back to Ma'ruf, and through him to al-'Imam al-Rida, and through al- 'Imam al-Rida to the preceding Imams and thus to the Prophet himself. This chain is therefore termed the 'golden chain' (*silsilat al-dhahab*). Those known as the Dhahabiyyun generally make this claim.

8. Al-Fudayl ibn 'Iyad

Originally from Merv, he was an Iranian of Arab descent. It is said of him that at first he was a highwayman, and that as he was preparing to carry out a robbery one night he heard the voice of his potential victim, reciting the Quran. This had such an effect on him that he experienced a change of heart and repented. The book *Misbah al-Shariah* is attributed to him and it is said to consist of a series of lessons that he took from al-'Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (A). This book is considered reliable by an erudite scholar of traditions of the last century, the late Hajj Mirza Husayn Nuri, in the epilogue to his *Mustadrak al-Wasa'il*. Fudayl died in 187/803.

1. Harith al Muhasibi, not Hasan al Basri
2. Nicholson, op cit p. 214
3. Dr. Qasim Ghani, op cit p. 462

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