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'Urafa' of the Seventh/Thirteenth Century

This century has produced some mystics of the highest stature. We will mention some of them in a chronological order:

1. Shaykh Najm al-Din Kubra

One of the greatest and most celebrated of mystics, the chains of many orders go back to him. He was the pupil and disciple of Shaykh Ruzbihan, and was also his son-in-law. He had many pupils and disciples, amongst whom was Baha' al-Din Walad, the father of Jalal al-Din Rumi.

He lived in Khuwarizm (in the present day USSR) at the time of the Mongol invasions. Before his city was attacked, he was sent a message informing him that he could lead a party of his family and disciples out of the city to safety. Najm al-Din's reply was that, 'Throughout all the days of comfort I have lived alongside these people. Now that the day of difficulties has come I will not leave them.' He then manfully strapped on a sword and fought alongside the people of the city until he was martyred. This happened in the year 624/1227.

2. Shaykh Farid al-Din al-'Attar

One of the foremost of mystics, al- 'Attar has works both in verse and in prose. His book *Tadhkirat al-'awifya'* on the lives and characters of the *sufis* and mystics - which begins with al-'Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (A) and ends with al-'Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (A) - is considered a source book of documentary significance, and great importance is attached to it by the orientalists.

Similarly, his work *Mantiq al-tayr* ('The Speech of the Birds') is a masterpiece of mystical literature.

Rumi, commenting about al-'Attar and Sana'i, says:

'Attar was the spirit and Sana'i his two eyes,

We are following in the steps of Sana'i and 'Attar.

Rumi has also said:

'Attar passed through seven cities of love,

While we are yet in the bend of a single lane.

What Rumi means by the 'seven cities of love' are the seven valleys of which al-'Attar speaks in his *Mantiq al-tayr*. Muhammad Shabistari in his *Gulshan-e raz* says:

I am not ashamed of my poetry,

For, the like of 'Attar a hundred centuries will not see.

Al-'Attar was the pupil and disciple of Shaykh Majd al-Din of Baghdad, who was amongst the pupils and disciples of Shaykh Najm al-Din Kubra. He also benefited from the company of Qutb al-Din Haydar, another of the shaykhs of the age and one after whom the town in which he is buried, Turbat-e Haydariyyah, was named.

Al-'Attar lived during the time of the Mongol invasions, and died – some say at the hands of the Mongols – around 626-28/1228-1230.

3. Shaykh Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi

He is the author of the celebrated *'Awarif al-ma'arif,* an excellent text of *'irfan* and sufism.

He claimed descent from Abu Bakr. It is said that he went each year to visit Makkah and al-Madinah. He had met and conversed with 'Abd al- Qadir al-Gilani. Amongst his disciples were the famous poets Shaykh Saidi and Kamal al-Din Isma'il al-'Isfahani. Sa'di had this to say about him:

My wise shaykh the murshid, Shihab, gave me two advices:

One, not to be egocentric,

The other, not to regard others with pessimism.

This Suhrawardi is not the same as the famous philosopher known as Shaykh al-'Ishraq, who was killed around 581-590/1185-1194 in Aleppo, Syria. Suhrawardi the gnostic died around the year 632/1234.

4. Ibn al-Farid al-Misri

He is considered one of the mystics of the first rank. His mystical poetry, in Arabic, reaches the loftiest summits and is of the greatest elegance. His *diwan* (collection of poems) has been published several

times and has been the subject of many distinguished commentaries. Of those who wrote a commentary on his work was 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, a well-known mystic of the ninth century.

The poetry of Ibn al-Farid in Arabic is comparable to that of Hafiz in Persian. Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi once suggested to him that he should write a commentary on his poems. Ibn al-Farid replied that the commentary of his poems was Ibn al-'Arabi's own *al-Futuhat al- Makkiyyah*.

Ibn al-Farid is of those who went through abnormal 'states' (*ahwal*). More often than not he was in an ecstatic state and it was in such states that many of his poems were composed. He died in the year 632/1234.

5. Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi:

One of the descendants of Hatim al-Ta'i, Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi was originally from Spain. Most of his iife, however, seems to have been spent in Makkah and Syria. He was a pupil of the sixth-century mystic Shaykh Abu Madyan al-Maghribi al-'Andalusi. Through one intermediary link, the chain of his order goes back to the Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani mentioned above.

Muhyi al-Din, also known by the name Ibn al-'Arabi, is certainly the greatest mystic of Islam. No one else has been able to reach his level, neither before nor after him. Thus he is known by the sobriquet 'al-Shaykh al-'Akbar' (the Greatest Shaykh).

Islamic mysticism, from the time of its first appearance, has made progress one century after another. Each century, as indicated above, produced great mystics who have developed *'irfan*, always adding to its heritage. This advancement had always been gradual. But in the 7th/13th century with the appearance of Ibn al-'Arabi *'irfan* made a sudden leap and reached the summit of its perfection.

Ibn al-'Arabi took *'irfan* to a stage it had never reached before.

The foundations for the second branch of *'irfan*, that is theoretical *'irfan* and its attendant philosophy, were laid by Ibn al-'Arabi. In general, the mystics who came after him ate the crumbs from his table.

Besides bringing *'irfan* into a new phase, Ibn al-'Arabi was one of the wonders of time. He was an amazing person, and this has led to wildly divergent views about him. Some consider him *al-Wali al-Kamil* (the Perfect Saint) and the *Qutb al-'Aqtab* (the Pole of Poles). Others degrade him so much as to regard him a heretic, calling him *Mumit al-Din* (the Killer of the Faith) or *Mahi al-Din* (the Effacer of the Faith). Sadr al-Muta'allihin (Mulla Sadra), the great philosopher and Islamic genius, had the greatest respect for him, considering him far greater than Ibn Sina or al-Farabi.

Ibn al-'Arabi authored over two hundred books. Many of his works, or perhaps all of those whose manuscripts are extant (numbering about thirty), have been published. Of his most important books, one is his *al-Futahat al-Makkiyyah*, a colossal work that is a veritable encyclopedia of *'irfan*. Another is his

Fusus al-hikam which, although brief, is the most precise and most profound text of *'irfan*. Numerous commentaries have been written on it, yet perhaps there have been no more than two or three persons in any age who have been able to understand it.

Ibn al-'Arabi passed away in 638/1240 in the city of Damascus, where his grave is still well known even today.

6. Sadr al-Din Qunawi:

He was the pupil, disciple and son of the wife of Ibn al-'Arabi. He was a contemporary of Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi. He corresponded with Khwajah Nasir, who paid him great respect. Similarly, at Qunyah(in present day Turkey), there was perfect friendship and cordiality between him and Rumi. Qunawi used to lead the prayers and Rumi would pray behind him, and it has been said that Rumi was his pupil.

There is a story that when one day Rumi came to join Qunawi's circle, he raised himself from his special *masnad* and offered it to Rumi. Declining, Rumi said that he would have no excuse before God for taking Qunawi's seat. At which Qunawi threw away the *masnad*, saying, if it did not suit Rumi it would not suit him either.

Qunawi provided the best exposition on the thought and ideas of Ibn al-'Arabi. In fact, without Qunawi it is possible that Ibn al-'Arabi would never have been understood. It was also through Qunawi that Rumi became aquainted with Ibn al-'Arabi and his school, and it seems that the reason for considering Rumi as having been Qunawi's pupil is that Ibn al-'Arabi's ideas are reflected in Rumi's Mathnawi and in his Diwan-e Shams.

Moreover, students of philosophy and *'irfan* have used Qunawi's books as textbooks for the last six centuries. His three famous books are: *Miftah al-ghayb*, *al-Nusus* and *al-FuQuk*. Qunawi passed away in 672/1273 (the year in which both Rumi and Khwajah Nasir al-Din died) or in 673/1274.

7. Mawlana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi Rumi:

Known in the East as Mawlawi and in the West as Rumi, author of the world famous Mathnawi, this man is one of the greatest geniuses the world and Islamic *'irfan* have ever seen. He was descended from Abu Bakr. His Mathnawi is an ocean of wisdom and full of precise spiritual, social and mystic insights. He ranks amongst the foremost Persian poets.

Originally from Balkh, he left it with his father when still a child. Together they visited Makkah, and at Nishabur they met with Shaykh Farid al-Din al-'Attar. On leaving Makkah his father went to Qunyah and there they settled down. At first Rumi, being a scholar, engaged himself, like the other scholars of his rank, in teaching, and he lived a respectable life. Then he met the famous mystic Shams-e Tabrizi.

Rumi was magnetized by this man and at once gave everything up. His *diwan* of *ghazal* is named after Shams, and he has repeatedly made ardent mention of him in his Mathnawi. Rumi passed away in 672/1273.

8. Fakhr al-Din al-'Iraqi al-Hamadani:

A well-known poet of *ghazal* and a mystic, he was a pupil of Sadr al-Din Qunawi and a *murid* and protege of Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi. He passed-away in 688/1289.

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