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The Origins of Islamic 'Irfan:

In order to understand any discipline or science, it is essential to study its history and the historical developments associated with it. One must also be acquainted with the personalities who have originated or inherited it and with its source books. In this lecture, and the fourth one, we will turn to these matters.

The first issue to arise is whether Islamic *'irfan* is a discipline that originated in the Islamic tradition, such as *fiqh*, *usul al-fiqh*, *tafsir*, and *'ilm al-hadith*. That is, is it one of those disciplines that were originated by the Muslims who, having received in Islam the original inspiration, sources and raw material, developed them by discovering their rules and principles? Or is it one of those sciences that found their way into the Islamic world from outside, like medicine and mathematics, which were then developed further by the Muslims in the environment of Islamic civilization and culture? Or is there a third possibility?

The *'urafa'* themselves maintain the first of these alternatives, and are in no way ready to admit any other. Some orientalists, however, have insisted - and some still insist - on the second view that *'irfan* and its subtle and sublime ideas have come into the Islamic world from outside. Sometimes they maintain a Christian origin for it, and claim that mysticism in Islam is the result of early contact of the Muslims with Christian monks.

At other times they claim it to be a result of the Persians' reaction against Islam and the Arabs. Then again sometimes they make it entirely a product of Neo-Platonism, which itself was composed of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, influenced by Alexandrian gnosticism and the views and beliefs of Judaism and Christianity. Sometimes they claim it to be derived from Buddhism. Similarly, the opponents of *'irfan* in the Islamic world also strive to show the whole of *'irfan* and sufism as being alien to Islam, and for this purpose they too maintain that gnosis has non-Islamic origins.

A third view admits that *'irfan*, whether practical or theoretical, draws its primary inspiration and material from Islam itself; having taken this material, it has tried to give it a structure by devising certain rules and principles and in this process has also been influenced by external currents, specially the ideas of scholasticism and philosophy, especially of the Illuminationist school. Now there are a number of questions which arise in this context. Firstly, to what extent have the *'urafa'* been successful in

developing correct rules and principles for structuring their material? Have the *'urafa'* been as successful in carrying this out as the jurisprudents?

To what extent have the *'urafa'* felt themselves bound not to deviate from the actual principles of Islam? And, similarly, to what extent has *'irfan* been influenced by the ideas of outside traditions? Has *'irfan* assimilated these external ideas by shaping them in its particular moulds, and used them in its development? Or, contrarily, have the waves of these foreign currents carried away *'irfan* in their flow?

Each of these questions requires a separate study and careful research. But that which is certain is that *'irfan* has derived its basic sources of inspiration from Islam itself and from nowhere else. Let us consider this point.

Those who accept the first view, and to some extent also those who take the second view, see Islam as being a simple religion, popular and unsophisticated, free of all sorts of mysteries and difficult or unintelligible profundities. To them, the doctrinal system of Islam rests on *tawhid* (monotheism), which means that just as a house has a builder other than itself, so the world has a transcendent Creator other than itself. Also, the basis of man's relationship with the enjoyments of this world is, in their view, *zuhd* (abstinence). In their definition of *zuhd*, it means refraining from the ephemeral pleasures of this world in order to attain the everlasting enjoyments of the Hereafter. Besides these, there are a series of simple and practical rituals and laws that are handled by *fiqh*.

Therefore, in this group's view, that which the *'urafa'* call *tawhid* is an idea that goes beyond the simple monotheism of Islam; for the *'arif's* view of *tawhid* is existentialist monism in the sense that he believes that nothing exists except God, His Names, Attributes, and manifestations.

The *'arif's* conception of the spiritual path (*sayr wa suluk*), likewise, they say, also goes beyond the *zuhd* enjoined by Islam, for the spiritual path of *'irfan* involves a number of ideas and concepts – such as love of God, annihilation in God, epiphany – that are not to be found in Islamic piety.

Similarly, the *'arif's* concept of the Tariqah goes beyond the Shari'ah of Islam; for the practice of the Tariqah involves matters unknown to *fiqh*.

Furthermore, in the view of this group, the pious among the Holy Prophet's Companions whom the *'urafa'* claim to be their precursors were no more than pious men. Their souls knew nothing of the spiritual path of *'irfan* and its *tawhid*. They were simple otherworldly people who abstained from worldly pleasures and directed their attention to the Hereafter and whose souls were dominated by mixed feelings of fear and hope – fear of the punishment of Hell and hope of the rewards of Paradise. That is all.

In reality this view can in no way be endorsed. The primal sources of Islam are far more extensively richer than what this group – out of ignorance or knowingly – supposes. Neither the Islamic concept of *tawhid* is as simple and empty as they suppose, nor Islam limits man's spirituality to a dry piety, nor were the pious Companions of the Holy Prophet simple ascetics, nor is the Islamic code of conduct confined

to the actions of bodily limbs and organs.

In this lecture, brief evidence will be produced that will suffice to show that Islam's fundamental teachings are capable of having inspired a chain of profound spiritual ideas, both in the theoretical and the practical realms of *'irfan*. However, the question of the extent to which the Islamic mystics have used and benefited from Islam's fundamental teachings and the extent to which they may have deviated, is one that we cannot go into in these short lectures.

On the subject of *tawhid*, the Holy Quran never likens God and the creation to a builder and a house. The Quran identifies God as the Creator of the world, stating at the same time that His Holy Essence is everywhere and with everything:

Wither so ever you turn, there is the Face of God.... (***2:115***)

And We are nearer to him than the jugular vein. (***50:16***)

He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward; .... (***57:3***)

Evidently, these kind of verses represent a call to the thinking minds to a conception of *tawhid* which goes beyond commonplace monotheism. A tradition of al-Kafi states that God revealed the opening verses of the Sura al-Hadid and the Sura al-'Ikhlas because He knew that in future generations there will emerge people who will think profoundly about *tawhid*.

As to the spiritual path of *'irfan*, in which a series of stages leading to ultimate nearness to God are conceived, it suffices to take into account the Quranic verses which mention such notions as ***liqa 'Allah*** (meeting with God), ***ridwan Allah*** (God's good pleasure), or those which relate to revelation (*wahy*), *ilham* (inspiration), and the angels' speaking to others who are not prophets - for instance, Mary - and especially the verses relating to the Holy Prophet's Ascension (*mi'raj*; 17:1).

In the Quran there is mention of the

'commanding self' (***al-nafs al-'ammarah; 12:53***)***, the 'self-accusative self'*** (***al-nafs al-lawwamah; 75:2***)***, and the 'contented self'*** (***al-nafs al-mutma'innah; 89:27***)***.***

There is mention of 'acquired knowledge' (*al-'ilm al-'ifadi*) and inspired knowledge (***al-'ilm al-ladunni*; 18:65**), and of forms of guidance resulting from spiritual struggle:

And those who struggle in Us, We will surely guide them to Our paths ... (***29:69***)

Mention is made in the Quran of the purification of the self, and it is counted as one of the things leading to salvation and deliverance:

(***By the self***) ***... verily he who purifies it has succeeded, while he who corrupts it has indeed failed.*** (***91:7-10***)

There is also repeated mention there of love of God as a passion above all other human loves and attractions.

The Quran also speaks about all the particles of creation glorifying and praising God (17:44), and this is phrased in a way to imply that if one were to perfect his understanding, he would be able to perceive their praise and magnification of God. Moreover, the Quran raises the issue of the Divine breath in relation to the nature and constitution of the human being (32:9).

This, and much more besides, is sufficient to have inspired a comprehensive and magnificent spirituality regarding God, the world, and man, particularly regarding his relationship with God.

As previously mentioned, we are not considering how the Muslim *'urafa'* have made use of these resources, or whether their utilization has been correct or incorrect. We are considering whether there did exist such great resources that could have provided effective inspiration for *'irfan* in the Islamic world. Even if we suppose that those usually classed as *'urafa'* could not make proper use of them, others who are not classed as such did make use of them.

In addition to the Quran, the traditions, sermons, supplications (*du'a'*), polemical dialogues (*ihtijajat*)* and the biographies of the great figures of Islam, all show that the spiritual life current in the early days of Islam was not merely a lifeless type of asceticism blended with a worship performed in the hope of the rewards of Paradise. Concepts and notions are found in the traditions, sermons, supplications, and polemical dialogues that stand at a very high level of sublimity. Similarly, the biographies of the leading personalities of the early days of Islam display many instances of spiritual ecstasy, visions, occurrences, inner insights, and burning spiritual love. We will now relate an example of it.

Al-Kafi relates that one morning after performing the dawn prayer, a young man (*Harithah ibn Malik ibn Nu'man al-'Ansari*) caught the Prophet's eye. Lean and pale, his eyes sunken, he gave the impression of being unaware of his own condition and of being unable to keep his balance. “How are you?” inquired the Prophet . “I have attained certain faith,” the youth replied. “What is the sign of your certainty?” the Prophet asked.

The youth replied that his certainty had immersed him in grief. It kept him awake at night (in worship) and thirsty by day (in fasting), and had separated him from the world and its matters so completely that it seemed to him as if he could see the Divine Throne already set up (on the Judgement Day) to settle the people's accounts, that he together with all of mankind were raised from the dead. He said that it seemed to him that even at that moment he could see the people of Paradise enjoying its bounties, and the people of hell suffering torments and he could hear the roar of its flames.

The Holy Prophet (S) turned to his Companions and told them, *“This is a man whose heart has been illuminated with the light of faith by God*”. Then he said to the youth, “Preserve this condition you are in, and do not let it be taken away from you.” “Pray for me,” the youth replied, “that God may grant me martyrdom.”

Not long after this encounter, a battle took place, and the youth, taking part, was granted his wish and was martyred.

The life, utterances and prayers of the Holy Prophet (S) are rich with spiritual enthusiasm and ecstasy, and full of the indications of gnosis, and the *'urafa'* often rely on the Prophet's supplications as reference and evidence for their views.

Similarly, the words of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (A), to whom nearly all the *'urafa'* and *sufis* trace the origin of their orders, are also spiritually inspiring. I wish to draw attention to two passages of the Nahj al-balaghah. In Khutbah No. 222, 'Ali states:

Certainly, God, the glorified, has made His remembrance the means of burnishing the hearts, which makes them hear after deafness, see after blindness, and makes them submissive after unruliness. In all the periods and times when there were no prophets, there have been individuals with whom God - precious are His bounties - spoke in whispers through their conscience and intellects.

In Khutbah No. 220, speaking about the men of God, he says:

He revives his intellect and mortifies his self, until his body becomes lean and his coarseness turns into refinement. Then an effulgence of extreme brightness shines forth for illuminating the path before him, opening all the doors and leading him straight to the gate of safety and the (*permanent*) *abode. His feet, carrying his body, become fixed in the position of safety and comfort on account of that which engages his heart and on having won the good pleasure of his Lord.*

The Islamic supplications, especially those of the Shi'ah, are also replete with spiritual teachings. The Du'a' Kumayl, the Du'a' Abi Hamzah, the supplications of al-Sahifat al-Kamilah and the group of supplications called Sha'baniyyah, all contain the most sublime spiritual ideas.

With the existence of all these resources in Islam, is there a need for us to search for the origin of Islamic *'irfan* elsewhere?

This reminds us of the case of Abu Dharr al-Ghifari and his protest against the tyrants of his time and his vocal criticism of their practices. Abu Dharr was severely critical of the favoritism, partisan politics, injustice, corruption and tyranny of the post-Prophetic era in which he lived. This led him to suffer torture and exile, and finally it was in exile, deserted and alone, that he passed away from this world.

A number of orientalists have raised the question of what motivated Abu Dharr to act as he did. They are in search of something foreign to the world of Islam to explain his behavior.

George Jurdaq, a Lebanese Christian, provides an answer to these orientalists in his book *al-'Imam 'Ali, sawt al-'adalah al-'insaniyyah* (Imam 'Ali, the Voice of Human Justice). There he says that he is amazed at those who wish to trace Abu Dharr's mentality to an extra-Islamic source. He says it is as if they see someone standing at the side of a sea or river with a pitcher of water in his hands, and begin to wonder

from which pool he has filled his pitcher, and then, completely ignoring the nearby sea or river, go off in search of a pool or pond to explain his full pitcher of water.

What other source other than Islam could have inspired Abu Dharr? Which source could have the power of Islam in inspiring the likes of Abu Dharr to rise against the tyrants of this world such as Mu'awiyah?

Now we see a similar pattern in regard to *'irfan*. The orientalists are in search of a non-Islamic source of inspiration of *'irfan*, while they completely overlook the great ocean of Islam.

Can we really be expected to overlook all these resources - the Holy Quran, the traditions, the sermons, the polemical dialogues, the supplications, and the biographies - simply in order to give credence to the view of a group of orientalists and their Eastern followers?

Formerly, the orientalists took great pains to project the origins of Islamic *'irfan* as lying outside the original teachings of Islam. Lately, however, such individuals as the English R.A. Nicholson and the French Louis Massignon, after having made extensive studies in Islamic *'irfan*, without being unacquainted with Islam in general, have expressly admitted that the principal sources of *'irfan* are the Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah.

We will conclude this lecture by quoting a passage by Nicholson from the book The Legacy of Islam:

(Though Muhammad left no system of dogmatic or mystical theology, the Qur'an contains the raw materials of both. Being the outcome of feeling than reflection, the Prophet's statements about God are formally inconsistent, and while Muslim scholastics have embodied in their creed the aspect of transcendence, the Sufis, following his example, have combined the transcendent aspect with that of immanence, on which, though it is less prominent in the Qur'an, they naturally lay greater emphasis.)[1]

"Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (***xxiv:35***)***;***

"He is the first and the last and the outward and the inward" (***lvii:3***)***;***

"there is no god but He; everything is perishing except His Face" (***xxviii:88***)***;***

"Have breathed into him (***man***) ***of My spirit"*** (***xv:29***)***;***

"Verily, We have created man and We know what his soul suggests to him, for We are nigher unto him than the neck-artery" (***1:15***)***;***

"wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of Allah" (***ii:114***)***;***

"he to whom Allah giveth no light hath no light at all" (***xxiv:40***)***.***

Surely the seeds of mysticism are here. And, for the early Sufis, the Qur'an is not only the Word of God: it is the primary means of drawing near to Him. By fervent prayer, by meditating profoundly on the text

as a whole and in particular on the mysterious passages (xvii: 1; liii: 1–18) concerning the Night journey and Ascension, they endeavored to reproduce the Prophet's mystical experience in themselves.2

The doctrine of a mystical union imparted by divine grace goes beyond anything in the Qur'an, but is stated plainly in apocryphal traditions of the Prophet, e.g. God said, “My servant draws nigh unto Me by works of supererogation, and I love him; and when I love him, I am his ear, so that he hears by Me, and his eye, so that he sees by Me, and his tongue, so that he speaks by Me, and his hand, so that he takes by Me.”3

As repeatedly said before, we are not concerned here with the question whether the *'urafa'* have succeeded in correctly utilizing the inspiration provided by Islam; our purpose was to consider whether the main source of their inspiration lay within Islam or outside it.

1. R.A Nicholson, Mysticism in The Legacy of Islam, London 1931 ed. by Sir Thomas Arnold and Alfred Guillaume pp. 211–212
2. Ibid
3. Ibid

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