

SUFISM – The Mystical Face of Islam

We now turn to the more contemplative side of Islam. Sufi teachers take their followers away from the mechanical performance of external rituals and rather place the chief stress on the activities of the inner self. This demonstrates an effort to break away from the unsatisfying idea of a purely transcendent, unapproachable God on the one hand while at the same time counteracting the spirit of the free-thinkers (Mu'tazilas) who sought to solve all philosophical difficulties through pure reason alone.

As early as the Ummayyad dynasty (680 - 750) pious Muslim believers were so disgusted by the worldliness and pomp of the Umayyad Khalifas that they sought peace of soul in a life of seclusion. These early Islamic mystics living as hermits a life of poverty and renunciation soon began wearing a distinctive garb of wool (arab. *suf*) and thus became known by the nickname *sufi*. In time, love and devotion to the Divine Being came to be looked upon as the characteristic of true Sufism.

Muslim mystics would fix their thoughts on statements such as Sura 57:4 „He is with you where soever you may be“, Sura 2:115: „Wither soever ye turn, there is Allah's countenance“ or the famous light verse Sura 24:35:“ Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of his light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. This lamp is kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth of itself though no fire touched it. Light upon light...” It is against such a background we hear about Rabi'a, a slave girl from Basra (died in Jerusalem AD 801), who impressed her master so much by the sincerity of her ascetic mode of life that he freed her to devote her days completely to the love of God. She used to pray: „O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of hell, burn me in hell, and if I worship Thee from hope of paradise, exclude me from it; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty.“

Many of the early sufi were men of remarkable wisdom, extraordinary contentment, humility and humour. Some examples may illustrate this:

Hasan of Basra was once asked: „What is Islam, and who are the Muslims?“ to which he simply replied: „Islam is in the books, and Muslims are in the tomb.“

A Sufi teacher was once approached by one of his followers with a purse containing five hundred gold pieces. „Have you any more money than this?“ asked the Sufi. - „Yes, I have“. - „Do you desire more?“ - „Yes, I do.“ - „Then you must keep it, for you are more in need than I; for I have nothing and desire nothing. You have a great deal and still want more.“

Great learning and wisdom in itself, however, could not fulfill the utmost desire of the Sufi saints. They were seeking to transport themselves into a state of ecstasy aiming for the ultimate stage of extinction or ‚annihilation of self in god‘. Bayzid's prayer is typical for this mystical desire: „O God, how long will there be ‚I‘ and ‚Thou‘ between me and you. Take this away, that my ‚I‘ may become ‚Thou‘, and ‚I‘ be nothing.“ He scandalized the orthodox by exclaiming while in a state of ecstasy: „Glory to me! How great is my majesty! Verily, I am God, there is no god except me, so worship me“ (compare with Sura 21:25).

Not surprisingly, when Mansur al –Hallaj (died 922) came up with the claim: „I am the truth“, the orthodox Ulama were so outraged that they were determined to set an end to such blasphemy. He was first imprisoned for 10 years, then dismembered alive, crucified and finally put to death.

Finally under the influence of one of the greatest Islamic theologians of all times, al-Ghazzali (died 1111), Sufism gained a place of recognition in Islam. He is remembered as the one „who succeeded in assuring the mystical or introspective attitude a place within official Islam side by side with the legalism of the lawyers and the intellectualism of the theologians.“ (Wensinck)

Interestingly, while Sufi Islam holds a lot of attraction for many young people in the West in their search for guidance and deeper meaning of life in contrast to a mere pursue of wealth and success, modern Muslims, such as Dr. Isma'il Faruqi, judge it in almost completely negative terms:

„Mysticism succeeded in reorientating the Muslims away from life, from the world, from reason and common sense, and delivering them to introspective meditation. Mysticism dulled the Muslim sense of realism and drew Muslims away from society, from their businesses, even from their families. Instead of pursuing the will of God as law, Sufism taught the Muslims to run after the dream of union with God in gnosis, or ‚mystical experience.“
(*Islam* by Isma'il Faruqi, Argus Communications, Illinois)

In Africa Sufism has found its way from both the Indian subcontinent (in Southern and Eastern Africa) and via North Africa into West African communities. In South Africa practices of *pir* veneration, ‚grave worship' at the tombs of these saints, *kalifa* or *ratib* displays are common features. These are linked closely to the Chisti and Nashbandi orders predominantly found in India (see J. Gilchrist for a detailed description).

The West African religious landscape is very different with its strong network of Sufi brotherhoods (*marabouts*) that have left an unmistakable mark upon the political, communal and religious face in the francophone countries. The visitor may first be struck by the multitude of mosques and *madrassas* not realizing that the real powerbase lies in the many *tariqas* (arab. for way, a method to follow a personal religious example, and organized in brotherhoods). One has to become an insider or at least a close confidant of an initiated member of a local *tariqa* to appreciate this.

How are these brotherhoods organized? Important elements of a certain *tariqa* are the *wird* (the specific prayer ritual of the order) which is part of the *dhikr* (prayer formula such as *allah-u-akbar* or *al-hamd-ul-illah*). It has to be performed regularly by the muqaddam (initiated student), but more so during massive gatherings commemorating the birth (*mawlid*) or death (*hawliyya*) of the founder. Authority and power (*baraka*) is passed on by a chain of transmission from teacher to student (*silsila*) and may well include magical powers of healing or causing misfortune to an enemy.

In many brotherhoods the student's initiation is marked by a vision of the Prophet Muhammad or at times the founder of the *tariqa*. Others claim to have received a direct revelation from Muhammad or a previous famous founder along with the teaching and initiation from a famous sufi figure. The influence of these sufis was especially prominent during the colonial period. The European masters often saw them as a challenge and threat to their authority and had many put in exile, oppressed them or had to face them during military clashes. But in most cases this only added to their popularity and helped the growth and dissemination of these brotherhoods, especially were sufi leaders acted primarily as political and military figures.

Today these brotherhoods are under a new attack from within their own quarters: Islamic „reformists“ see them as carriers of African traditions that they want to see replaced with „true“ Islamic values. But there seems to be a capacity for the brotherhoods to accommodate this reformist tendency and create new structures more adapted to a modern society. It remains to be seen to what extent the brotherhoods will continue to spread Islam to new territories as they have done so effectively in the past, especially in the last one hundred years in continental East Africa. But more importantly, the Christian witness is under obligation to look deeper than the outward face of apparent Islamic strength and present the Gospel to those seekers of a closer union with God. We may be surprised to find many among them more open to the Gospel than most other Muslims.

Sources:

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