

Sufism: the flame and the shadow

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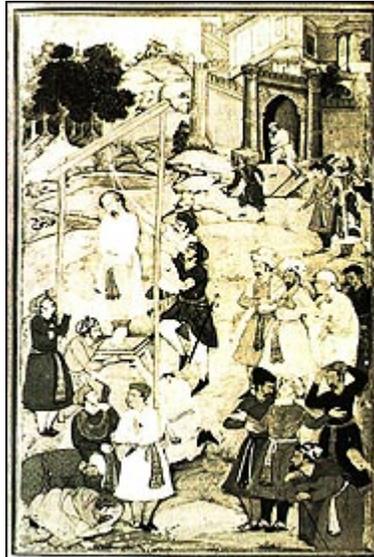
Sabieh Anwar

At the times of greatest turmoil, the spirit found its fullest expression

Sufism is a fusion of contrasts; it lives and flourishes because of those contrasts. It possesses the capability to attract and distract, invite and disenchant. It pleases the pantheist and the monotheist. It is a passport for political refuge and escapism, and a motivation for dynamism and activism. It submits to foreign rule and occupation, and becomes the clarion call for freedom and independence.

An early 19th century rector of the famous Al Azhar University in Cairo identified the two aspects of this richly diverse movement. "The lure of Sufism falls into two categories," he remarks. "One is concerned with disciplining the character and investing it with spiritual courtesies... In the other category, the masters of Sufism are concerned with mysteries being unveiled and with direct spiritual perceptions and what they experience by way of Divine manifestations."

The first of these categories is the simpler to understand. It involves spiritual purification, which the Quran would term *tazhkia*. Some may claim that this purification is the basic essence of Islam. The Sufi's task is to polish the diamond of the heart until it transforms into a resplendent gem, eventually reaching



Burning truth: the execution of Al Hallaj

“

The discord between intellect and revelation is only artificial, Why should the pulpit consider Hallaj's gibbet as an adversary? Both in times of supremacy or subjugation, the godliest of men, Are safeguarded by the shield of proud detachment. The Archangel should not attempt at impersonating my passionate fervour, As indolent heaven dwellers are better off with their relaxed glorifications.

”

“

At the surface of the sea, the storm was wrecking

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such a state that the hearts of his fellow humans may also bathe in its glorious lustre.

anything that came its way,
but in the deepest fathoms,
pearls of philosophy were
forming



The second category is the more exciting, and correspondingly more difficult to grasp. Those who would embark on a journey along this second path would find the scenery breathtaking but the track dangerous, to be followed only by those who have been initiated in the Sufi path. Individuals who eventually brave the perils of this path become shining examples amongst their peers and to their disciples. But it also happens that their “manner of expression does not (always) convey their meaning, and if taken literally, it may conflict with all logical evidence”. It is on one such station of the spiritual journey that Mansur Hallaj (d 922) cried “*Anal-Haq*” (‘I am the Creative Truth’) and became the cherished ideal of mystic sainthood. As Ibn-e-Arabi (d 1240) once exclaimed, “sainthood is longer lasting than prophethood, but the sainthood of a prophet is longer lasting than that of a saint”. In the same spirit, Rabia of Basra (d 801) vowed once to burn heaven with the fire and extinguish hell with the water – it seems she could love and fear nothing but God.

We could say that the first, quieter kind of Sufism leads to the state of illumination, while the second leads to conflagration. One is the light that shines, and the other the light that burns.

The tensions in Sufism are not just found in the forms it takes; its role in history is equally riddled with conflicts. Over the centuries it emerged as a movement of political despair combined with intellectual hope, it wedded worldly fatalism with an ultimate idealism. The negativist shade of Sufism taught otherworldliness in a time of political and moral turbulence, while the positivist shade built and chiselled out the formidable intellectual heritage of Muslim thought and morality.

“All great poets of Sufis,” Iqbal (d 1938) held, “have lived and sung in times of political decadence.” An environment of political turmoil became a catalyst for scepticism and forged the urge to escape from physical wealth, political and material ambition, and sometimes even physical existence itself – the search for otherworldliness. The ambience manufactured the greatest spiritual ecstasies, unfolding in pen and letter, but also encouraged a self-imposed retirement from worldly businesses. What ensued was therefore a silent revolt against the environment – a revolt that called for a change within, rather than a change without. The rebellion was one of disenchanting absence from worldly matters, calling for inaction and patience rather than active protest. As the weather outside grew inhospitable, these souls

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hibernated and rediscovered their mystic potential.

One of the greatest mystics and intellectuals of all time, Abd al Qadir Jilani (d 1166) serves as an example. At the time of the first Crusades, when the Christians had brought havoc to Jerusalem (1099) with their occupation, there was much unrest throughout the Islamic world. The occupation became a major source of unrest and rioting in Baghdad, where the Seljuqs had become the virtual regents of the Muslim empire. Jilani was living in Baghdad at the time, and preached not only spiritual affirmation, but also austerity and a fervent detachment from material and political crises. His collection of teachings *Futooh-ul-Ghaib* ('The openings of the unseen') is a reflection of the political and moral crises of his times.

There is no shortage of parallels in history. In the third century of the Roman Empire (235-284) usurpations and civil war were commonplace. In half a century there appeared almost 35 emperors, of whom only one died of natural causes. The Goths and Gauls invaded Roman territories effortlessly and Palmyra seceded under Queen Xenobia. It was natural that while public life shattered, private devotion became a real asset. The political and military crisis proved fertile for the development of neo-Platonism under the philosophy of Plotinus (d 270) and his student Porphyry (d 304). At the surface of the sea, the storm was wrecking anything that came its way, but in the deepest fathoms, pearls of philosophy were forming silently in their secluded shells.

Similarly during political turmoil mysticism flourished in an intellectually rich and philosophically prolific society, and grew into a complete discipline finding its foundations in the deeply intellectual debates and writings of its masters. This is what I refer to as 'intellectual positivism', which provides much of Sufism's positive and optimistic outlook on life and knowledge. Equipped with this outlook, Sufism became instrumental in the expansion of Muslim frontiers, and more importantly in the infusion of the Muslim ideal of life into the hearts and minds of people. Today the spiritual fraternities spread from the straits of Gibraltar to Malacca, permeating and affecting the lives of millions.

Although the Muslim political ideal was elusive, the intellectual culture was in full bloom. Intellect versus revelation, rationalism versus orthodoxy. These part metaphysical, part theological debates were crystallised with the well-defined movements of Mu'tazilism and Ash'arism. Ideas from the Quran, Peripatetic philosophies and Aryan and Zoroastrian influences mixed freely within a monotheist framework, resulting in the growth of several new schools of thought to which modern Muslims owe their discipleship today. This rich synthesis of

ideas marked the most vibrant phase in Muslim intellectual history, a zenith unfortunately never to repeat itself with the same vigour.

Sufism was atop the highest summits of the intellectual landscape of its times. The Sufis employed instruments of philosophy to refute dry intellectualism, earning the name Ibn-e-Falatoon ('The sons of Plato'). Almost all accomplished philosophers were either practicing Sufis or delved into the mystic intellection with fervour.

The seeds of free inquiry and independent thought blossomed into a bouquet of diverse flowers. The political roots of mysticism sensed the gravity of the dark soils while its flower petals were happiest flirting with the fresh air of intellect. It was a colourful landscape, on which the complete mystic would tread his way, equipped with the armour of knowledge (*ma'rifah*) but guided by the inner light of mystic experience (love or *hubbah*). The fusion of these faculties is what is called the *heart-intellect*.

These contrasts show that Sufism is a valuable resource, a great motivation for an intellectual revolution and a spiritual democracy. It has always remained a great contributor to civilisation, Muslim and otherwise. There is now a need to relive this universal yet particular civilisation. The immense spiritual resource needs to be tapped again. The heart can live on its own but is most valuable when it serves the body.

This reawakening has been spelt out beautifully by the late Annemarie Schimmel (d 2003). She says that "the individual self [being] extinguished... in the all embracing ocean of the Divine" is undesirable, but there is a need for the desire "for bringing the heart closer to God, to bring it, then, into communion with God, to lead it from the blind and fruitless acceptance of inherited truths to a participation in the *life of the eternal*".

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March 05 - 11, 2004 - Vol. XVI, No. 2