

Sufism

SUFISM. The Sufis do not form a sect with definite dogmas. Like the monastic orders of Christendom, they comprise many shades of opinion, many schools of thought, many divergent tendencies—from asceticism and quietism to the wildest extravagances of pantheism. European students of Sufism are apt to identify it with the pantheistic type which prevails in Persia. This, although more interesting and attractive than any other, throws the transcendental and visionary aspects of Sufism into undue relief. Nevertheless, some account must be given here of the Persian theosophy which has fascinated the noblest minds of that subtle race and has inspired the most beautiful religious poetry in the World.

Some of its characteristic features occur in the sayings attributed to Bayezid (d. A.D. 874), whom Buddhistic ideas unquestionably influenced. He said, for example, “I am the wine drinker and the wine and the cup-bearer,” and again, “I went from God to God, until the cried from me in me, ‘O Thou I.’” The peculiar imagery which distinguishes the poetry of the Persian Sufis was more fully developed by a native of Khorasan, Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abi’l-Khair (died A.D. 1049) in his mystical quatrains which express the relation between God and the soul by glowing and fantastic allegories of earthly love, beauty and intoxication. Henceforward, the great poets of Persia, with few exceptions,

adopt this symbolic language either seriously or as a convenient mask.

The majority are Sufis by profession or conviction. "The real basis of their poetry," says A. von Kremer, "is a loftily inculcated ethical system, which recognizes in purity of heart, charity, self-renunciation and bridling of the passions the necessary conditions of eternal happiness. Attached to this we find a pantheistic theory of the emanation of all things from God and their ultimate reunion with him. Although on the surface Islam is not directly assailed, it sustains many indirect attacks, and frequently the thought flashes out, that all religions and revelations are only the rays of a single eternal sun; that all prophets have only delivered and proclaimed in different tongues the same principles of eternal goodness and eternal truth which flow from the divine soul of the world." The whole doctrine of Persian Sufism is expounded in the celebrated *Mathnawī* of Jalāluddīn Rūmī (q.v.), but in such a discursive and unscientific manner that its leading principles are not easily grasped. They may be stated briefly as follows:

God is the sole reality (al-Haqq) and is above all names and definitions. He is not only absolute Being, but also absolute Good, and therefore absolute Beauty. It is the nature of beauty to desire manifestation; the phenomenal universe is the result of this desire, according to the famous Tradition in which God says, "I was a hidden treasure, and I desired to be known, so I created the creatures in order that I might be known."

Hence the Sufis, influenced by Neoplatonic theories of emanation, postulate a number of intermediate worlds or descending planes of existence, from the primal Intelligence and the primal Soul, through which “the Truth” (al-Haqq) diffuses itself. As things can be known only through their opposites, Being can only be known through Not-being, wherein as in a mirror Being is reflected; and this reflection is the phenomenal universe, which accordingly has no more reality than a shadow cast by the sun. Its central point is Man, the microcosm, who reflects in himself all the Divine attributes. Blackened on one side with the darkness of Not-being, he bears within him a spark of pure Being.

The human soul belongs to the spiritual World and is ever seeking to be re-united to its source. Such union is hindered by the bodily senses, but though not permanently attainable until death, it can be enjoyed at times in the state called ecstasy (ḥāl), when the veil of sensual perception is rent asunder and the soul is merged in God. This cannot be achieved without destroying the illusion of self, and self-annihilation is wrought by means of that divine love, to which human love is merely a stepping-stone. The true lover feels himself one with God, the only real being and agent in the universe; he is above all law, since whatever he does proceeds directly from God, just as a flute produces harmonies or discords at the will of the musician; he is indifferent to outward forms and rites, preferring a sincere idolater to an orthodox hypocrite and deeming the ways to God

as many in number as the souls of men. Such in outline is the Sufi theosophy as it appears in Persian and Turkish poetry. Its perilous consequences are plain.

It tends to abolish the distinction between good and evil—the latter is nothing but an aspect of Not-being and has no real existence—and it leads to the deification of the hierophant who can say, like Ḥuṣain b. Maṣṣur al-Ḥallāj, “I am the Truth.” Sufi fraternities, living in a convent under the direction of a sheikh, became widely spread before A.D. 1100 and gave rise to Dervish orders, most of which indulge in the practice of exciting ecstasy by music, dancing, drugs and various kinds of hypnotic suggestion.

Sufism is a term used by Muslims to denote any variety of mysticism, is formed from the Arabic word Sufi, which was applied, in the second century of Islam, to men or women who adopted an ascetic or quietistic way of life. There can be no doubt that Sufi is derived from, ṣūf (wool) in reference to the woolen garments often, though not invariably, worn by such persons: the phrase labisa's-ṣūf (“he clad himself in wool”) is commonly used in this sense, and the Persian word pashmīnapūsh, which means literally “clothed in a woolen garment,” is synonymous with Sufi. Other etymologies, such as Ṣafā (purity)—a derivation widely accepted in the East—and σοφός, are open to objection on linguistic grounds.

In order to trace the origin and history of mysticism in Islam we must go back to Muhammad. On one side of his nature the Prophet was an ascetic and in some degree a mystic.

Notwithstanding his condemnation of Christian monkery (rahbānīya), i.e., of celibacy and the solitary life, the example of the Ḥanīfs, with some of whom he was acquainted, and the Christian hermits made a deep impression on his mind and led him to preach the efficacy of ascetic exercises, such as prayer, vigils and fasting.

While Allah is described in the Quran as the One God working his arbitrary will in unapproachable supremacy, other passages lay stress on his all-pervading presence and intimate relation to his creatures, e.g., “Wherever ye turn, there is the face of Allah” (ii. 109), “We (God) are nearer to him (Man) than his neck-vein” (l. 15).

The germs of mysticism latent in Islam from the first were rapidly developed by the political, social and intellectual conditions which prevailed in the two centuries following the Prophet's death. Devastating civil wars, a ruthless military despotism caring only for the things of this world, Messianic hopes and presages, the luxury of the upper classes, the hard mechanical piety of the orthodox creed, the spread of rationalism and free thought, all this induced a revolt towards asceticism, quietism, spiritual feeling and emotional faith.

Thousands, wearied and disgusted with worldly vanities, devoted themselves to God. The terrors of hell, so vividly depicted in the Quran, awakened in them an intense consciousness of sin, which drove them to seek salvation in ascetic practices. Sufism was originally a practical religion, not a speculative system; it arose, as Junayd of Bagdad says, "from hunger and taking leave of the world and breaking familiar ties and renouncing what men deem good, not from disputation."

The early Sufis were closely attached to the Islamic church. It is said that Abū Hāshim of Kūfa (died before A.D. 800) founded a monastery for Sufis at Ramleh in Palestine, but such fraternities seem to have been exceptional. Many ascetics of this period used to wander from place to place, either alone or in small parties, sometimes living by alms and sometimes by their own labor. They took up and emphasized certain Quranic terms. Thus dhikr (praise of God) consisting of recitation of the Quran, repetition of the Divine names, etcetera, was regarded as superior to the five canonical prayers incumbent on every Muslim, and tawakkul (trust in God) was defined as renunciation of all personal initiative and volition, leaving one's self entirely in God's hands, so that some fanatics deemed it a breach of "trust" to seek any means of livelihood, engage in trade, or even take medicine.

Quietism soon passed into mysticism. The attainment of salvation ceased to be the first object, and every aspiration was centered in the inward life of dying to self and living in God. "O God!" said Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, "Thou knowest that the eight

Paradises are little beside the honor which Thou hast done unto me, and beside Thy love, and Thy giving me intimacy with the praise of Thy name, and beside the peace of mind which Thou hast given me when I meditate on Thy majesty.”

Towards the end of the second century, we find the doctrine of mystical love set forth in the sayings of a female ascetic, Rābi‘a of Basra, the first of a long line of saintly women who have played an important role in the history of Sufism. Henceforward the use of symbolical expressions, borrowed from the vocabulary of love and wine, becomes increasingly frequent as a means of indicating holy mysteries which must not be divulged. This was not an unnecessary precaution, for in the course of the third century, Sufism assumed a new character. Side by side with the quietistic and devotional mysticism of the early period there now sprang up a speculative and pantheistic movement which was essentially anti-Islamic and rapidly came into conflict with the orthodox ulemā.

It is significant that the oldest representative of this tendency—Ma‘rūf of Bagdad—was the son of Christian parents and a Persian by race. He defined Sufism as a theosophy; his aim was “to apprehend the Divine realities.” A little later Abū Sulaimān al-Dārānī in Syria and Dhu’l-Nūn in Egypt developed the doctrine of gnosis (ma‘rifat) through illumination and ecstasy. The step to pantheism was first decisively taken by the great Persian Sufi, Abū Yazīd (Bāyezīd) of Bisṭām (d. A.D. 874), who introduced the

doctrine of annihilation (fanā), i.e., the passing away of individual consciousness in the will of God.

It is, no doubt, conceivable that the evolution of Sufism up to this point might not have been very different even although it had remained wholly unaffected by influences outside of Islam. But, as a matter of fact, such influences made themselves powerfully felt. Of these, Christianity, Buddhism and Neoplatonism are the chief. Christian influence had its source, not in the Church, but in the hermits and unorthodox sects, especially perhaps in the Syrian Euchites, who magnified the duty of constant prayer, abandoned their all and wandered as poor brethren. Sufism owed much to the ideal of unworldliness which they presented.

Conversations between Muslim devotees and Christian ascetics are often related in the ancient Sufi biographies, and many Biblical texts appear in the form of sayings attributed to eminent Sufis of early times, while sayings ascribed to Jesus as well as Christian and Jewish legends occur in abundance. More than one Sufi doctrine—that of tawakkul may be mentioned in particular—show traces of Christian teaching. The monastic strain which insinuated itself into Sufism in spite of Muhammad's prohibition was derived, partially at any rate, from Christianity.

Here, however, Buddhistic influence may also have been at work. Buddhism flourished in Balkh, Transoxiana and Turkestan before

the Islamic conquest, and in later times Buddhist monks carried their religious practices and philosophy among the Muslims who had settled in these countries. It looks as though the legend of Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, a prince of Balkh who one day suddenly cast off his royal robes and became a wandering Sufi, were based on the story of Buddha. The use of rosaries, the doctrine of fanā, which is probably a form of Nirvana, and the system of “stations” (maqāmāt) on the road thereto, would seem to be Buddhistic in their origin. The third great foreign influence on Sufism is the Neoplatonic philosophy.

Between A.D. 800 and 860 the tide of Greek learning, then at its height, streamed into Islam from the Christian monasteries of Syria, from the Persian Academy of Jundēshāpūr in Khūzistan, and from the Ṣābians of Ḥarrān in Mesopotamia. The so-called “Theology of Aristotle,” which was translated into Arabic about A.D. 840, is full of Neoplatonic theories, and the mystical writings of the pseudo-Dionysius were widely known throughout western Asia. It is not mere coincidence that the doctrine of Gnosis was first worked out in detail by the Egyptian Sufi, Dhu 'l-Nūn (d. A.D. 859), who is described as an alchemist and theurgist. Sufism on its theosophical side was largely a product of Alexandrian speculation.

By the end of the third century the main lines of the Sufi mysticism were already fixed. It was now fast becoming an organized system, a school for saints, with rules of discipline

and devotion which the novice was bound to learn from his spiritual director, to whose guidance he submitted himself absolutely. These directors regarded themselves as being in the most intimate communion with God, who bestowed on them miraculous gifts (karāmāt).

At their head stood a mysterious personage called the Quṭb (Axis): on the hierarchy of saints over which he presided the whole order of the universe was believed to depend. During the next two hundred years (A.D. 900 through 1100), various manuals of theory and practice were compiled: the Kitāb al-Luma' by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, the Qūt al-Qulūb by Abū Ṭalīb al-Makkī, the Risāla of Qushairī, the Persian Kashf al-Maḥjūb by 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, and the famous Iḥyā by Ghazālī.

Inasmuch as all these works are founded on the same materials, namely, the Quran, the Traditions of the Prophet and the sayings of well-known Sufi teachers, they necessarily have much in common, although the subject is treated by each writer from his own standpoint. They all expatiate on the discipline of the soul and describe the process of purgation which it must undergo before entering on the contemplative life.

The traveler journeying towards God passes through a series of ascending "stations" (maqāmāt); in the oldest extant treatise these are (1) repentance, (2) abstinence, (3) renunciation, (4) poverty, (5) patience, (6) trust in God, (7) acquiescence in the will

of God. After the “stations” comes a parallel scale of “states” of spiritual feeling (aḥwāl), such as fear, hope, love, etcetera, leading up to contemplation (mushāhadat) and intuition (yaqīn). It only remained to provide Sufism with a metaphysical basis, and to reconcile it with orthodox Islam.

The double task was finally accomplished by Ghazālī (q.v.). He made Islamic theology mystical, and since his time the revelation (kashf) of the mystic has taken its place beside tradition (naql) and reason (‘aql) as a source and fundamental principle of the faith. Protests have been and are still raised by theologians, but Muslim sentiment will usually tolerate whatever is written in sufficiently abstruse philosophical language or spoken in manifest ecstasy.

DERVISH, a Persian word, meaning “seeking doors,” i.e., “beggar,” and thus equivalent to the Arabic faqīr (fakir). Generally, in Islam it indicates a member of a religious fraternity, whether mendicant or not; but in Turkey and Persia it indicates more exactly a wandering, begging religious, called, in Arabic-speaking countries, more specifically a faqir. With important differences, the dervish fraternities may be compared to the regular religious orders of Roman Christendom, while the Ulema (q.v.) are, also with important differences, like the secular clergy. The origin and history of the mystical life in Islam, which led to the growth of the order of dervishes, are treated under Sufism. It remains to treat here more particularly of (1) the dervish fraternities, and (2) the Sufi hierarchy.

1. The Dervish Fraternities. In the earlier times, the relation between devotees was that of master and pupil. Those inclined to the spiritual life gathered round a revered sheikh (murshid, “guide,” ustadh, pir, “teacher”), lived with him, shared his religious practices and were instructed by him. In time of war against the unbelievers, they might accompany him to the threatened frontier, and fight under his eye. Thus murābit, “one who pickets his horse on a hostile frontier,” has become the marabout (q.v.) or dervish of French Algeria; and ribat, “a frontier fort,” has come to mean a monastery. The relation, also, might be for a time only.

The pupil might at any time return to the world, when his religious education and training were complete. On the death of

the master the memory of his life and sayings might go down from generation to generation, and men might boast themselves as pupils of his pupils. Continuous corporations to perpetuate his name were slow in forming. Ghazali himself, though he founded, taught and ruled a Sufi cloister (khānqāh) at Tus, left no order behind him. But ‘Adī al-Hakkārī, who founded a cloister at Mosul and died about 1163, was long revered by the ‘Adawite Fraternity, and in 1166 died ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, from whom the Qādirite order descends, one of the greatest and most influential to this day.

The troublous times of the breakup of the Seljuk rule may have been a cause in this, as, with St Benedict, the crumbling Roman empire. Many existing fraternities, it is true, trace their origin to saints of the third, second and even first Muslim centuries, but that is legend purely. Similar is the tendency to claim all the early pious Muslims as good Sufis; collections of Sufi biography begin with the ten to whom Muhammad promised Paradise. So, too, the ultimate origin of fraternities is assigned to either Ali or Abu Bekr, and in Egypt all are under the rule of a direct descendant of the latter.

To give a complete list of these fraternities is quite impossible. Commonly, thirty-two are reckoned, but many have vanished or have been suppressed, and there are sub-orders innumerable. Each has a “rule” dating back to its founder, and a ritual which the members perform when they meet together in their convent

(khānqāh, zāwiya, takya). This may consist simply in the repetition of sacred phrases, or it may be an elaborate performance, such as the whirlings of the dancing dervishes, the Mevlevites, an order founded by Jelāl ud-Dīn ar-Rūmī, the author of the great Persian mystical poem, the Mesnevi, and always ruled by one of his descendants. Jelāl ud-Dīn was an advanced pantheist, and so are the Mevlevites, but that seems only to earn them the dislike of the Ulema, and not to affect their standing in Islam.

They are the most broad-minded and tolerant of all. There are also the performances of the Rifā'ites or "howling dervishes." In ecstasy they cut themselves with knives; eat live coals and glass, handle red-hot iron and devour serpents. They profess miraculous healing powers, and the head of the Sa'dites, a sub-order, used, in Cairo, to ride over the bodies of his dervishes without hurting them, the so-called Dōseh (dausa).

These different abilities are strictly regulated. Thus, one sub-order may eat glass and another may eat only serpents. Another division is made by their attitude to the law of Islam. When a dervish is in a state of ecstasy (majdhūb), he is supposed to be unconscious of the actions of his body. Reputed saints, therefore, can do practically anything, as their souls will be supposed to be out of their bodies and in the heavenly regions. They may not only commit the vilest of actions, but neglect in general the ceremonial and ritual law. This goes so far that in

Persia and Turkey dervish orders are classified as *bā-sharʿ*, “with law,” and *bī-sharʿ*, “without law.”

The latter are really antinomians, and the best example of them is the Bakhtashite order, widely spread and influential in Turkey and Albania and connected by legend with the origin of the Janissaries. The Qalandarite order is known to all from the “Calenders” of the Thousand and One Nights. They separated from the Bakhtashites and are under obligation of perpetual travelling. The Senussi (Senussia) were the last order to appear, and are distinguished from the others by a severely puritanic and reforming attitude and strict orthodoxy, without any admixture of mystical slackness in faith or conduct. Each order is distinguished by a peculiar garb.

Candidates for admission have to pass through a noviciate, more or less lengthy. First comes the *ʿahd*, or initial covenant, in which the neophyte or *murīd*, “seeker,” repents of his past sins and takes the sheikh of the order he enters as his guide (*murshid*) for the future. He then enters upon a course of instruction and discipline, called a “path” (*tarīqa*), on which he advances through diverse “stations” (*maqāmāt*) or “passes” (*ʿaqabāt*) of the spiritual life.

There is a striking resemblance here to the gnostic system, with its seven Archon-guarded gates. On another side, it is plain that the sheikh, along with ordinary instruction of the novice, also

hypnotizes him and causes him to see a series of visions, marking his penetration of the divine mystery. The part that hypnosis and autohypnosis, conscious and unconscious, has played here cannot easily be overestimated. The Mevlevites seem to have the most severe noviciate. Their aspirant has to labor as a lay servitor of the lowest rank for 1001 days—called the *kārrā kolak*, or “jackal”—before he can be received. For one day’s failure he must begin again from the beginning.

But besides these full members there is an enormous number of lay adherents, like the tertiaries of the Franciscans. Thus, nearly every religious man of the Turkish Muslim world is a lay member of one order or another, under the duty of saying certain prayers daily. Certain trades, too, affect certain orders. Most of the Egyptian Qādirites, for example, are fishermen and, on festival days, carry as banners nets of various colors.

On this side, the orders bear a striking resemblance to lodges of Freemasons and other friendly societies, and points of direct contact have even been alleged between the more pantheistic and antinomian orders, such as the Bakhtashite, and European Freemasonry. On another side, just as the dhikrs of the early ascetic mystics suggest comparison with the class-meetings of the early Methodists, so these orders are the nearest approach in Islam to the different churches of Protestant Christendom.

They are the only ecclesiastical organization that Islam has ever known, but it is a multiform organization, unclassified internally or externally. They differ thus from the Roman monastic orders, in that they are independent and self-developing, each going its own way in faith and practice, limited only by the universal conscience (ijmā', "agreement": see Islamic Law) of Islam. Strange doctrines and moral defects may develop, but freedom is saved, and the whole people of Islam can be reached and affected.

2. Saints and the Sufi Hierarchy. That an elaborate doctrine of wonder-working saints should have grown up in Islam may, at first sight, appear an extreme paradox. It can, however, be conditioned and explained. First, Muhammad left undoubted loop-holes for a minor inspiration, legitimate and illegitimate. Secondly, the Sufis, under various foreign influences, developed these to the fullest. Thirdly, just as the Christian church has absorbed much of the mythology of the supposed exterminated heathen religions into its cult of local saints, so Islam, to an even higher degree, has been overlaid and almost buried by the superstitions of the peoples to which it has gone.

Their religious and legal customs have completely overcome the direct commands of the Quran, the traditions from Muhammad and even the "Agreement" of the rest of the Muslim world (see Islamic Law). The first step in this, it is true, was taken by Muhammad himself when he accepted the Meccan pilgrimage and the Black Stone. The worship of saints, therefore, has

appeared everywhere in Islam, with an absolute belief in their miracles and in the value of their intercession, living or dead.

Further, there appeared very early in Islam a belief that there was always in existence some individual in direct intercourse with God and having the right and duty of teaching and ruling all mankind. This individual might be visible or invisible; his right to rule continued. This is the basis of the Ismā'īlite and Shī'ite positions (see Islamic Religion and Islamic Institutions).

The Sufis applied this idea of divine right to the doctrine of saints, and developed it into the Sufi hierarchy. This is a single, great, invisible organization, forming a saintly board of administration, by which the invisible government of the world is supposed to be carried on. Its head is called the Quṭb (Axis); he is presumably the greatest saint of the time, is chosen by God for the office and given greater miraculous powers and rights of intercession than any other saint enjoys. He wanders through the world, often invisible and always unknown, performing the duties of his office. Under him there is an elaborate organization of walīs, of different ranks and powers, according to their sanctity and faith. The term walī is applied to a saint because of Quran, Sura 10, verse 63, "Ho! the walīs of God; there is no fear upon them, nor do they grieve," where walī means "one who is near," friend or favorite.

In the fraternities, then, all are dervishes, cloistered or lay; those whose faith is so great that God has given them miraculous powers—and there are many—are walīs; begging friars are fakirs. All forms of life—solitary, monastic, secular, celibate, married, wandering, stationary, ascetic, free—are open. Their theology is some form of Sufism.