

# AN INTRODUCTION TO 'IRFAN

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'Irfan is one of the disciplines that originated within the realm of Islamic culture and developed there to attain a high level of sophistication. But before we can begin to discuss 'irfan, we must realise that it can be approached from two viewpoints: the social and the academic. Unlike the scholars of other Islamic disciplines – such as the Quranic commentators (*mufasssirin*), the scholars of *hadith* (*muhadithin*), the jurists (*fuqaha*), the theologians (*mutakallimin*), the philosophers, the men of literature, and the poets – the 'urafa' are a group of scholars who have not only developed their own science, 'irfan, producing great scholars and important books, but have also given rise within the Islamic world to a distinct social grouping. In this the 'urafa' are unique; for the scholars of the other Islamic disciplines – such as the jurists, for instance – form solely academic groupings and are not viewed as a social group distinct from the rest of society.

In view of this distinction the Gnostics, when referred to as belonging to a certain academic discipline, are called 'urafa' and when referred to as a social group are generally called *sufis* (*mutasawwif*).

The 'urafa' and *sufis* are not regarded as forming a separate sect in Islam, nor do they claim themselves to be such. They are to

be found within every Islamic school and sect, yet, at the same time, they coalesce to form a distinct social group. The factors that set them apart from the rest of Islamic society are a distinctive chain of ideas and opinions, a special code governing their social intercourse, dress and even, sometimes, the way they wear their hair and beards, and their living communally in their hospices. (Pers. *khaniqah*; Ar. *ribat*, *zawiyah*; Turk. *tekkiye*)

Of course, there are and have always been 'urafa' – particularly amongst the Shi'ah – who bear none of these external signs to distinguish them socially from others; yet, at the same time, they have been profoundly involved in the spiritual methodology of 'irfan (*sayr wa suluk*). It is these who are the real Gnostics; not those who have invented for themselves hundreds of special mannerisms and customs and have brought innovations into being.

In this series of lectures, in which we are taking a general look at Islamic sciences and disciplines, we will not be dealing with the social and sectarian aspect of gnosis, that is to say, *tasawwuf* (sufism). We will limit ourselves to an examination of 'irfan as a discipline and branch amongst the branches of Islam's scientific culture. To look thoroughly at the social aspects of sufism would

require us to examine its causes and origins, the effects – positive and negative, beneficial and detrimental – it has and has had upon Islamic society, the nature of the relations between the *sufis* and other Islamic groups, the hue it has given to the whole of Islamic teachings, and the role it has played in the diffusion of Islam throughout the world. This is far beyond the range of these lectures, and here we will consider the tradition of 'irfan only as a science and as one of the academic disciplines of Islam.

'Irfan, as a scientific and academic discipline, itself has two branches: the practical and the theoretical. The practical aspect of 'irfan describes and explains the relationship and responsibilities the human being bears towards itself, towards the world and towards God. Here, 'irfan is similar to ethics (*akhlag*), both of them being practical sciences. There do exist differences, however, and later we will explain them.

The practical teaching of 'irfan is also called the itinerary of the spiritual path (*sayr wa suluk*; lit. 'travelling and journeying'). Here, the wayfarer (*salik*) who desires to reach the goal of the sublime peak of humanness – that is to say, *tawhid* – is told where to set off, the ordered stages and stations that he must traverse, the states and conditions he will undergo at these stations, and the events that will

befall him. Needless to say, all these stages and stations must be passed under the guidance and supervision of a mature and perfect example of humanity who, having travelled this path, is aware of the manners and ways of each station. If not, and there is no perfect human being to guide him on his path, he is in danger of going astray.

The perfect man, the master, who must necessarily accompany the novice on the spiritual journey according to the 'urafa', has been called in their vocabulary as *Ta'ir al-quds* (the Holy Bird) and Khidr:

همتم به رقه راه کن ای (طابرقدس)

که در از است ره مقصد و من (نوسفرم)

*Accompany my zeal on the path. O*

*Ta'ir al-Quds,*

*The path to the goal is long, and I new*

*to the journey.*

ترک این مرحله بی همراهی خضر مکن

ظلمات است بترس از خطر گمراهی

*Leave not this stage without the*

*company of Khidr,*

*There is darkness ahead; be afraid of*

*losing the way.*

Of course, there is a world of difference between the *tawhid* of the 'arif and the general view of *tawhid*. For the 'arif, *tawhid* is the sublime peak of humanness and the final goal of his spiritual journey, while for the ordinary people, and even the philosophers, *tawhid* means the essential Unity of the Necessary Being. For the 'arif, *tawhid* means that the ultimate reality is only God, and everything other than God is mere appearance, not reality. The 'arif's *tawhid* means that 'other than god there is nothing'. for the 'arif, *tawhid*

means following a path and arriving at the stage when he sees nothing but God. However, this view of *tawhid* is not accepted by the opponents of the 'urafa, and some of them have declared such a view to be heretic. Yet the 'urafa' are convinced that this is the only true *tawhid*, and that the other stages of it cannot be said to be free of polytheism (*shirk*).

The 'urafa' do not see the attainment of the ideal stage of *tawhid* to be the function of reason and reflection. Rather they consider it to be the work of the heart, and attained through struggle, through the journeying, and through purifying and disciplining the self.

This, however, is the practical aspect of 'irfan, which is not unlike ethics, in this respect, for both discuss a series of things that 'ought to be done'. However, there are differences, and the first of these is that 'irfan discusses the human being's relationship with itself, with the world and with God, and its primal concern is man's relationship with God. Systems of ethics, on the other hand, do not all consider it necessary for the relationship between man and God to be discussed; it is only the religious ethical systems that give importance and attention to this matter.

The second difference is that the methodology of spiritual progression, *sayr wa suluk*, as the words *sayr* (travelling) and *suluk* (journeying) imply, is a dynamic one, while ethics, is static. That is, 'irfan speaks about a point of departure, a destination, and the stages and

stations which, in their correct order, the wayfarer must traverse in order to arrive at the final destination. In the 'arif's view, there really is a path before the human being – a path that is actual and not in the least a metaphor and this path must be followed stage by stage, station by station, to arrive at any station without having traversed the preceding one is, in the 'arif's view, impossible. Thus the 'arif views the human soul to be a living organism, like a seedling or like a child, whose perfection lies in growth and maturation in a accordance with a particular system and order.

In ethics, however, the subjects are handled solely as a series of virtues, such as righteousness, honesty, sincerity, chastity, generosity, justice, and preferring others over oneself (*ithar*), to name but a few, with which the soul must be adorned. In the view of ethics, the human soul is rather like a house to be furnished with a series of beautiful objects, pictures and decorations, and no importance is attached to a particular sequence. It is not important where one begins or where one ends. It is of no consequence whether one starts at the ceiling or at the walls, at the top of a wall or at the bottom and so on. On the contrary, in 'irfan the ethical elements are discussed in a dynamic perspective.

The third difference between these two disciplines is that the spiritual elements of ethics are limited to concepts and ideas that are generally commonplace, while the spiritual elements of 'irfan are much more profound and expan-

sive. In the spiritual methodology of 'irfan, much mention is made of the heart and the states and happenings it will experience, and these experiences are known only to the wayfarer of the path during the course of his struggles and his journey on the path, while other people have no idea of these states and happenings.

The other branch of 'irfan is related to interpretation of being, that is, God, the universe, and the human being. Here 'irfan resembles philosophy, for both seek to understand existence, whereas practical 'irfan seeks, like ethics, to change the human being. However, just as there are differences between practical 'irfan and ethics, so also there exist differences between theoretical 'irfan and philosophy, and in the following section we will explain these differences.

### Theoretical 'Irfan:

Theoretical 'irfan, as said before, is concerned with ontology, and discusses God, the world, and the human being. This aspect of 'irfan resembles theological philosophy (*falsafeh-ye ilahi*), which also seeks to describe being. Like theological philosophy, 'irfan also defines its subject, essential principles and problems, but whereas philosophy relies solely upon rational principles for its arguments, 'irfan bases its deductions on principles discovered through mystic experience (*kashf*) and then reverts to the language of reason to explain them.

The rationalistic deductions of philosophy can be likened to

studying a passage written originally in the same language; the arguments of 'irfan, on the other hand, are like studying something that has been translated from some other language in which it was originally written. To be more precise, the 'arif wishes to explain those things which he claims to have witnessed with his heart and his entire being by using the language of reason.

The ontology of 'irfan is in several ways profoundly different from the ontology of philosophers. In the philosopher's view, both God and other things have reality, with the difference that while God is the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*) and Existing-By-Himself, things other than God are only possible existents (*mumkin al-wujud*), existing-through-another, and are effects of the Necessary Being. However, the 'arif's ontology has no place for things other than God as existing alongside Him, even if they are effects of which He is the cause; rather, the Divine Being embraces and encompasses all things. That is to say, all things are names, qualities, and manifestations of God, not existents alongside Him.

The aim of the philosopher also differs from that of the 'arif. The philosopher wishes to understand the world; he wishes to form in his mind a correct and relatively complete picture of the realm of existence. The philosopher considers the highest mark of human perfection to lie in perceiving, by way of reason, the exact nature of existence so that the macrocosm finds a reflection within his mind

while he in turn becomes a rational microcosm. Thus it is said when defining philosophy that:

صيرورة الانسان عالما عقليا مضاهيا للعالم العيني

[Philosophy is] the (final) development of a rational knower (*'alim*) into an actual world (*alam*).

This means that philosophy is a study whereby a human being becomes a rational microcosm similar to the actual macrocosm. But the 'arif, on the other hand, would have nothing to do with reason and understanding; he wishes to reach the very kernel and reality of existence, God, to become connected to it and witness it.

In the 'arif's view, human perfection does not mean having a picture of the realm of existence in one's mind; rather it is to return, by means of treading the spiritual path of progression, to the origin from which one has come, to overcome the separation of distance between oneself and the Divine Essence, and, in the realm of nearness, to obliterate one's finite self to abide in Divine Infinity.

The tools of the philosopher are reason, logic and deduction, while the tools of the 'arif are the heart, spiritual struggle, purification and disciplining of the self, and an inner dynamism.

Later, when we come to the world-view of 'irfan, we shall also discuss how it differs from the world-view of philosophy.

### 'Irfan and Islam:

'Irfan, both practical and theoretical, is closely connected with the holy religion of Islam. Like

every other religion in fact more than any other religion. Islam has explained the relationships of man with God, with the world, and with himself; and it has also given attention to describing and explaining existence.

Now, the question inevitably arises here about the relation between the ideas of 'irfan and the teachings of Islam. Of course, the 'urafa' never claim that they have something to say that is above or beyond Islam, and they are earnest in their denials of any such imputations. In fact, they claim to have discovered more of the realities of Islam, and that they are the true Muslims. Whether in the practical teaching of 'irfan or the theoretical, the 'urafa' always support their views by referral to the Quran, the Sunnah of the Prophet and the Imams, and the practice of the eminent amongst the Prophet's Companions.

However, others have held different views about the 'urafa', and these may be mentioned:

(a) A group of muhaddithun and jurists has been of the view that the 'urafa' are not practically bound to Islam, and that their referrals to the Quran and the sunnah are merely a ruse to deceive the simple minded people and to draw to themselves the hearts of the Muslims. This group is of the view that 'irfan basically, has no connection with Islam.

(b) A group of modernists who do not have favourable relations with Islam and are ready to give a tumultuous welcome to anything that gives the appearance of free-

dom from the observances prescribed by the Shari'ah (*ibahah*) and which can be interpreted as a movement or uprising in the past against Islam and its laws, like the first group believe that in practice the 'urafa had no faith or belief in Islam and that 'irfan and *tasawwuf* was a movement of the non-Arab peoples against Islam and the Arabs, disguised under the robes of spirituality.

This group and the first are united in their view that the 'urafa are opposed to Islam. The difference between them is that the first group considers Islam to be sacred and, by banking on the Islamic sentiments of the Muslim masses, wishes to condemn the 'urafa' and, in this way to hoot them off from the stage of the Islamic sciences. The second group however, by leaning on the great personalities of the 'urafa' — some of whom are of world-renown — wishes to use them as a means of propaganda against Islam. They detract Islam on the grounds that the subtle and sublime ideas of 'irfan found in Islamic culture are in fact alien to Islam. They consider that these elements entered Islamic culture from outside, for they say, Islam and its ideas thrive on a far lower level. This group also claims that the 'urafa's citations of the Quran and hadith were solely due to dissimulation and fear of the masses. This, they claim, was a means for them to save their lives.

(c) Besides the above two, there is also a third group which takes a rather neutral view of 'irfan. The view of this group is that 'irfan and sufism contain many innova-

tions and deviations that do not accord with the Quran and the traditions; that this is more true of the practical teaching of 'irfan than its theoretical ideas, especially where it takes a sectarian aspect. Yet, they say, the 'urafa, like the Islamic scholars of other ranks and the majority of Islamic sects, have had the most sincere intentions towards Islam, never wishing to make any assertions contrary to its teachings. It is quite possible that they have made mistakes, in the same way as the other types of scholars — theologian, philosophers, Quranic commentators, and jurists — have made mistakes, but this has never been due to an evil intention towards Islam.

In the view of this group, the issue of the 'urafa's supposed opposition to Islam was raised by those who harboured a special prejudice either against 'irfan or against Islam. If a person were to disinterestedly study the books of the 'urafa', provided that he is acquainted with their terminology and language, although he might come across many a mistake, he will not doubt the sincerity of their complete devotion to Islam.

Of the three views, I prefer the third. I do not believe that the 'urafa' have had evil intentions towards Islam. At the same time I believe that it is necessary for those having specialised knowledge of 'irfan and of the profound teachings of Islam to undertake an objective research and disinterested study of the conformity of the issues of 'irfan with Islamic teachings.

(To be contd.)