

AN INTRODUCTION TO 'IRFAN

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Shari'ah, Tariqah and Haqiqah:

One of the important points of contention between the 'urafa' and the non-'urafa', especially the jurists, is the particular teaching of 'irfan regarding the Shari'ah, the Tariqah (the Way) and the Haqiqah (the Reality). Both agree in saying that the Shari'ah, the body of Islamic laws, is based upon a series of realities and beneficial objectives. The jurists generally interpret these goals to consist of certain things that lead the human being to felicity, that is, to the highest possible level of benefit from God's material and spiritual favours to man. The 'urafa', on the other hand, believe that all the paths end in God, and that all goals and realities are merely the means, causes and agencies that impel the human being towards God.

The jurists say only that underlying the laws of the Shari'ah is a series of benign objectives, that these objectives constitute the cause and spirit of the Shari'ah, and that the only way of attaining these objectives is to act in accordance with the Shari'ah. But the 'urafa' believe that the realities and objectives underlying the laws of the Shari'ah are of the nature of stations and stages on the human being's ascent towards God and in the process of man's access to the ultimate reality.

The 'urafa' believe that the

esoteric aspect of the Shari'ah is the Way, the Tariqah, at whose end is the Reality (*al-Haqiqah*), that is *tawhid* (in the sense mentioned earlier), which is stage acquired after the obliteration of the 'arif's self and his egoism. Thus the Gnostic believes in three things: the Shari'ah, the Tariqah, and the Haqiqah, and that the Shari'ah is the means to, or the shell of the Tariqah, and the Tariqah again is the means to or the shell of the kernel of Haqiqah.

We have explained how the jurists view Islam in the lectures on *kalam*.¹ They believe that the Islamic teachings can be grouped into three branches. The first of these is *kalam*, which deals with the principal doctrines (*usul al-aqa'id*). In matters related to the doctrines it is necessary for the human being to acquire, through reason, shackles belief and faith.

The second branch is ethics (*akhlaq*). It sets forth the instructions about one's duty in regard to ethical virtues and vices.

The third branch, *fiqh*, deals with the law (*ahkam*), which relate to our external actions and behaviour.

These three branches of Islamic teachings are separate from each other. The branch of *kalam* is related to thought and reason; the branch of *akhlaq* is related to the self, its faculties and habits; and the branch of *fiqh* is related to the organs and limbs of the body.

However, on the subject of doctrines, the 'urafa' do not consider merely mental and rational belief to be sufficient. They claim that whatever is to be believed in must be arrived at; one must strive to remove the veils between oneself and those realities.

Similarly, with respect to the second branch they do not consider ethics to be adequate on account of its being static and limited. In place of a philosophical ethics, they suggest a spiritual methodology (*sayr wa suluk*) with its particular composition.

Finally, in the third branch, they have not criticisms; only in specific instances of they express opinions that could, possibly, be taken as being opposed to the laws of *fiqh*.

These three branches are, therefore, termed by the 'urafa' as Shari'ah, Tariqah, and Haqiqah. Yet they believe that in exactly the same way as the human being cannot be divided into three sections, that is, the body, the self, and reason, which are not separate from each other and form an indivisible whole of which they constitute inward and outward aspects, so it is with the Shari'ah, the Tariqah, and the Haqiqah. One is outward shell, another is inward kernel, and the third is the kernel of the kernel. There is a difference, however, in that the 'urafa' consider the stages of human existence to be more than three; that is, they believe in a stage that tran-

scends the domain of reason. God willing, this shall be explained later.

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 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 civilisation 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

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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 phi-

losophy, 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 jurists? 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 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:

...فَايْمًا تَوَلَّوْا فَمِنْ وَجْهِ اللَّهِ...
... *Withersoever you turn, there is the Face of God...* (2:115)

...وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ#
... *And We are nearer to him than the jugular vein.* (50:16)

هو الاول والاخر وظاهر والباطن...
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 Surat *al-Hadid* and the *Surat al-Ikhlās* 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 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:

والذين جاهدوا فينا لنهدينهم سبلنا...
And those who struggle in Us, We will surely guide them to Our paths... (29:69)

To be contd.