

AN INTRODUCTION TO 'IRFAN

The Origins of Islamic 'Irfan:

(contd.)

Mention is made in the Quran of the purification of the self, and it is counted as one of the things leading to salvation and deliverance:

وَنَفْسٌ... قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مِنْ زَكْهَنَاءِ
وَقَدْ خَابَ مِنْ دَهَنَاءِ

(By the self)... verify he who purifies it has succeeded, while he who corrupts it has indeed failed. (91:7-10)

There is also repeated mention there of love of God as a passion above all other human loves and attractions.

The Quran also speaks about all the particles of creation glorifying and praising God (17:44), and this is phrased in a way to imply that if one were to perfect his understanding, he would be able to perceive their praise and magnification of God. Moreover, the Quran raises the issue of the Divine breath in relation to the nature and constitution of the human being (32:9).

This, and much more besides, is sufficient to have inspired a comprehensive and magnificent spirituality regarding God, the world, and man, particularly regarding his relationship with God.

As previously mentioned, we are not considering how the Muslim 'urafa' have made use of these resources, or whether their utilisation has been correct or

incorrect. We are considering whether there did exist such great resources that could have provided effective inspiration for 'irfan in the Islamic world. Even if we suppose that those usually classed as 'urafa' could not make proper use of them, others who are not classed as such did make use of them.

In addition to the Quran, the traditions, sermons, supplications (*du'a'*), polemical dialogues

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of sublimity. Similarly, the biographies of the leading personalities of the early days of Islam was not merely a lifeless type of asceticism blended with a worship performed in the hope of the rewards of Paradise. Concepts and notions are found in the traditions, sermons, supplications, and polemical dialogues that stand at a very high level of sublimity. Similarly, the biographies of the leading personalities of the early days of Islam display many instances of spiritual ecstasy, visions, occurrences, inner insights, and burning spiritual love. We will now relate an example of it.

Al-Kafi relates that one morning after performing the dawn prayer, a young man (Harithah ibn Malik ibn Nu'man al-Ansari) caught the Prophet's eye. Lean and pale, his eyes sunken, he gave the impression of being unaware of his own condition and of being unable to keep his balance. "How are you?" inquired the Prophet. "I have attained certain faith," the youth replied. "What is the sign of your certainty?" the Prophet asked.

The youth replied that his certainty had immersed him in grid. It kept him awake at night (in worship) and thirsty by day (in fasting), and had separated him from the world and its matters so completely that it seemed to him as if he could see the Divine Throne already set up (on the Judgement Day) to settle

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(*ihtijajat*), and the biographies of the great figures of Islam, all show that the spiritual life current in the early days of Islam was not merely a lifeless type of asceticism blended with a worship performed in the hope of the rewards of Paradise. Concepts and notions are found in the traditions, sermons, supplications, and polemical dialogues that stand at a very high level

the people's accounts, that he together with all of mankind were raised from the dead. He said that it seemed to him that even at that moment he could see the people of Paradise enjoying its bounties, and the people of hell suffering torments and he could hear the roar of its flames.

The Holy Prophet (S) turned to his Companions and told them, "This is a man whose heart has been illuminated with the light of faith by God", Then he said to the youth, "Preserve this condition you are in, and do not let it be taken away from you." "Pray for me," the youth replied, "that God may grant me martyrdom."

Not long after this encounter, a battle took place, and the youth, taking part, was granted his wish and was martyred.

The life, utterances and prayers of the Holy Prophet (S) are rich with spiritual enthusiasm and ecstasy, and full of indications of gnosis, and the 'urafa' often rely on the Prophet's supplications as reference and evidence for their views.

Similarly, the words of Amir al-Mu'min 'Ali(A), to whom nearly all the 'urafa' and sufis trace the origin of their orders, are also spiritually inspiring. I wish to draw attention to two passages of he *Nahj al-balaghah*.

In *Khutbah* No.222, 'Ali states:

ان الله سبحانه وتعالى جعل الذكر جلا،
للقلوب، تسمع به بعد التوقة، وتبصر
به بعد العشوة، وتنقاد به بعد المعاندة،
وما برح لله - عزت الاوه - في البرهة
بعد البرهة، وفي ازمان الفترات، عباد
نا جاهم في فكرهم، و كلهم في ذات
عقولهم.

Certainly, God, the glorified, has

made His remembrance the means of burnishing the heart, which makes them hear after deafness, see after blindness, and makes them submissive after unruliness. In all the periods and times when there were no prophets, there have been individuals with whom God - precious are His bounties - spoke in whispers through their conscience and intellects.

In *Khutbah* No.220, speaking about the men of God, he says:

قد احيا عقلت، وامات نفسه، حتى ذق
جليله، ولطف غليبه، وبرق له لا مع
كثير البرق، فابان له الطريق، وسلك به
السبيل، و تدا فعنه الابواب الى باب
السلامة، ودار الاقامة، وثبتت رجلا-
بطمانينة بذنه في قرار الامن والراحة،
بما استعمل قلبه، وارضى ربه.

He revives his intellect and mortifies his self, until his body becomes lean and his coarseness turns into refinement. Then an effulgence of extreme brightness shines forth for illuminating the path before him, opening all the doors and leading him straight to the gate of safety and the (permanent) abode. His feet, carrying his body, become fixed in the position of safety and comfort on account of that which engages his heart and on having won the good pleasure of his Lord.

The Islamic supplications, especially those of the Shi'ah, are also replete with spiritual teachings. The *Du'a' Kumayl*, the *Du'a' Abi Hamzah*, the supplications of *al-Sahifat al-Kamilah* and the group of supplications called *Sha'baniyyah*, all contain the most sublime spiritual ideas.

With the existence of all these resources in Islam, is

there a need for us to search for the origin of Islamic 'irfan elsewhere?

This reminds us of the case of Abu Dharr al-Ghifari and his protest against the tyrants of his time and his vocal criticism of their practices. Abu Dharr was severely critical of the favouritism, partisan politics, injustice, corruption and tyranny of the post-Prophetic era in which he lived. This led him to suffer torture and exile, and finally it was in exile, deserted and alone, that he passed away from this world.

A number of orientalists have raised the question of what motivated Abu Dharr to act as he did. They are in search of something foreign to the world of Islam to explain his behaviour.

George Jurdaq, a Lebanese Christian, provides an answer to these orientalists in his book *la-'Imam 'Ali, sawt al-'adalah al-'insaniyyah* (Imam 'Ali, the Voice of Human Justice). There he says that he is amazed at those who wish to trace Abu Dharr's mentality to an extra-Islamic source. He says it is as if they see someone standing at the side of a sea or river with a pitcher of water in his hands, and begin to wonder from which pool he has filled his pitcher, and then, completely ignoring the nearby sea or river, go off in search of a pool or pond to explain his full pitcher of water.

What other source other than Islam could have inspired Abu Dharr? Which source could have the power of Islam in inspiring the likes of Abu Dharr to rise against the tyrants of this world such as Mu'awiyah?

Now we see a similar pattern in regard to 'irfan. The orientalists

are in search of a non-Islamic source of inspiration of 'irfan, while they completely overlook the great ocean of Islam.

Can we really be expected to overlook all these resources – the Holy Quran, the traditions, the sermons, the polemical dialogues, the supplications, and the biographies – simply in order to give credence to the view of a group of orientalists and their Eastern followers?

Formerly, the orientalists took great pains to project the origins of Islamic 'irfan as lying outside the original teachings of Islam. Lately, however, such individuals as the English R.A. Nicholson and the French Louis Massignon, after having made extensive studies in Islamic 'irfan, without being unacquainted with Islam in general, have expressly admitted that the principal sources of 'irfan are the Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah.

We will conclude this lecture by quoting a passage by Nicholson from the book *The Legacy of Islam*:

(Though Muhammad left no system of dogmatic or mystical theology, the Quran contains the raw materials of both. Being the outcome of feeling than reflection, the Prophet's statements about God are formally inconsistent, and while Muslim scholastics have embodied in their creed the aspect of transcendence, the Sufis, following his example, have combined the transcendent aspect with that of immanence, on which, though it is less prominent in the Quran, they naturally lay greater emphasis.)² 'Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth' (xxiv:35); 'He is the first and the last and the

outward and the inward' (lvii:3); 'there is no god but He; everything is perishing except His Face' (xxviii:88); 'Have breathed into him (man) of My spirit' (xv:29); 'Verily, We have created man and We know what his soul suggests to him, for We are higher unto him than the neck-artery' (1:15); 'wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of Allah' (ii:114); 'he to whom Allah giveth no light hath no light at all' (xxiv:40). Surely the seeds of mysticism are here. And, for the early sufis, the Quran is not only the Word of God: it is the primary means of drawing near to Him. By fervent prayer, by meditating profoundly on the text as a whole and in particular on the mysterious passages (xvii:1; lxxi:1-18) concerning the Night-journey and Ascension, they endeavoured to reproduce the Prophet's mystical experience in themselves.³

...The doctrine of a mystical union imparted by divine grace goes beyond anything in the Quran, but is stated plainly in apocryphal traditions of the Prophet, e.g. God said, "My servant draws nigh unto Me by works of supererogation, and I love him; and when I love him, I am his ear, so that he hears by Me, and his eye, so that he sees by Me, and his tongue, so that he speaks by Me, and his hand, so that he takes my Me."⁴

As repeatedly said before, we are not concerned here with the question whether the 'urafa' have succeeded in correctly utilising the inspiration provided by Islam; our purpose was to consider whether the main source of their inspiration lay within Islam or outside it.

'Urafa' of the Sixth/Twelfth Century:

1. 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani: Of the most enthusiastic of mystics, 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani was the disciple of Ahmad al-Ghazali's, younger brother of Muhammad, who was also a mystic. The author of many books, he also composed some brilliant poetry that, however, was not altogether free of theopatetic exclamations (*shathiyyat*). Charges of heresy were brought against him; he was executed, and his body burnt and his ashes cast to the winds. He was killed around 525-533/1131-1139.

2. Sana'i Ghaznawi: A famous poet, his verse is loaded with profound mystic sentiments. Rumi, in his *Mathnawi*, has cited some of his sayings and expounded them. He died around the middle of the 6th /12th century.

3. Ahmad Jami: Known as "Zhand-e Pil", Jami is one of the most celebrated of 'urafa' and sufis. His tomb lies at Turbat-e Jam, near the border between Iran and Afghanistan, and is well-known. Following lines are among the verses he composed on fear (*khawf*) and hope (*raja*):

غره مشو که مرکب مردان مرد را در
در سنگاخ بادید بیها بربیده اند
نمیدهم مباش که رندان جرعد نوش
تاقه به یک ترانه به منزل رسیده اند
Be not haughty, for the mount of
many a mighty man
Has been hamstrung among
rocks in the desert;
But neither despair, for even
wine-drinking libertines
Have suddenly arrived at the
destination by a single song.
Contd...

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

دوش قت سحر از عصنه حاچم داد
و در آن طلعت شب آب حاچم داد

بِحُجَّةِ ارْجُحَةٍ سَرِيبٌ وَّاَحْكَمَ كَرْدَمٌ
بِاَدَدٍ اَرْجَامٍ تَحْكِي صَفَّ اَتَمْ اَذَدٌ

باقی از زیورتین شرکه این دست است
که بدان جزو حب اسپری باشد
این ته شهد و سکر خشم هم
اسپریست که از آن ساخته شده
بت خاطر داشتی خود را درین پوست
که زین غم نایاب باشد از داده

حافظ سیراز

نای بارکہ و حسنه مولانا ایمروشنان ن۔ نجف
Holy Shrine of Imam Ali (a.s.) Najaf

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