



THE BEGINNINGS OF SUFISM

The Sufi, through creative expression, remembers and invokes the Divine order as it resides in a hidden state within all forms. To remember and to invoke, in this sense, are the same: to act on a form so that that which is within may become known. The Sufi thus re-enacts the process of creation whereby the Divine came to know Itself. The receptacle in which the creation is re-enacted may be an external form such as an artifact, or it may be the life form of the mystic which is transformed. Here the very soul of the Sufi-to-be reaches towards the Divine centre through the mystic Quest.

According to the followers of the Sufi path, Sufism in its essence is timeless; but its historical manifestation begins with the descent of the Quran (p. 52). Some sources trace the origin to an incident that occurred to the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). One day, while he was teaching the verse, 'God created the seven heavens' (65:12), a special meaning of this verse was revealed to him. Ibn 'Abbas, the great transmitter of his Traditions, who was present, was later asked what the Prophet had said. Ibn 'Abbas answered, 'If I were to tell you, you would stone me to death.' Through this allusion to the inner meaning of things, the meaning which is not comprehensible to all, the inner path to God was opened (p. 38). The Companions of the Prophet were devout men who performed acts of meditation and constant remembrance of the Divine through its Names and through repetition of the text of the Quran; and after the death of the Prophet this group spread and trained disciples. The name of Sufi was still unknown.

At the beginning of the eighth century AD (2nd Islamic century), these ascetics came to be known as Sufis. The derivation of this word is not known for certain. It may come from the word meaning 'wool', referring to the rough woollen garments they wore; it may come from the word meaning 'purity'. Some say the word stems from 'line', referring to the people who prayed in a line directly behind the Prophet. Still others among the Sufis themselves say the word is too sublime to be derived from anything.

In another Tradition of the Prophet, his Ascent or Night Journey (p. 85) is described in part in the following manner:

'On my spiritual ascent I was taken to Paradise. I was placed before the door of a house. Gabriel was at the door. I asked to be let in. Gabriel said, "I am only a servant of God. You must pray to God if you want the door to be opened," and so I did. God said, "I open the door only to those who are most beloved. You and your followers are most dear," and the door was opened. Inside I saw a casket made of white pearls. I asked Gabriel to open the box. He told me only God could do so. I asked it of God, and the box was opened. God said, "That which the box contains will be held for you and your progeny." The box contained two things: spiritual poverty and a cloak. When I descended, I brought the cloak with me and I put it on 'Ali's shoulders, and after 'Ali his children will wear it.'

Quran, the numerous commentaries made upon the Quran by the individual Sufis, and the Traditions concerning the Prophet, are also essential Sufi sources of doctrine. The books of the sayings of the Shi'ite Imams are important, especially those of 'Ali, the first Imam of Shi'ism, which brings Shi'ite Islam very close to Sufism. Another important source is the great wealth of Sufi poetry, above all the *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (p. 53), which has been described as virtually a Persian commentary upon the Quran.

Sufism also assimilated concepts through texts which preceded it in time. The criterion for assimilation was that the foreign element preserved and supported the central doctrine of the Unity of Being. The *Enneads* of Plotinus, for instance, was the most complete metaphysical text to reach Islam from the Greeks; and Plotinus was known to Muslims as the 'Shaykh' or spiritual master. Teachings of the Pythagoreans, especially Niomachus, were also assimilated. The writings of Empedocles on cosmology and the sciences of nature received much attention.

The Hermetic writings of the first to fourth centuries AD, preserving the inner dimension of the traditions of Egypt and Greece, were translated into Arabic; one treatise which appears over and over again is the *Poimandres* attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the founder of Hermeticism. Hermes is traditionally related to Enoch, and appears in the Quran as the Prophet Idris.

Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Iran, also influenced Sufism. The twin concepts 'There is law in Nature. There is conflict in Nature' helped to develop the great Sufi cosmological themes. The Master of Illumination, Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī, extended certain Zoroastrian ideas in his angelology of lights.

Sufism spiritualized myths and legends from pre-Islamic times, from Persian, Arabic and other sources, by expounding their inner significance. Stories about the Buddha were assimilated: Avicenna based his story 'Salman and Absal' on them.

Returning to Quranic sources, the major Old Testament prophets and the sayings of David and Solomon were very important to Islam in general and to Sufism. The Virgin Mary (p. 82), and the miracle of the virgin birth of Christ, the Word of God, as contained in the Quran, are important Sufi symbols of aspects of the Truth: for the birth of the Word to the Virgin Mary is as the birth of the Word to the unlettered Prophet. The miracle of Islam is the Quran, as the miracle of Christianity is the Christ.

THE CONTAINER AND THE CONTAINED

Every spiritual way emphasizes a particular aspect of the Truth. Christianity, for example, is essentially a way of love; the Christian is tied to Christ through love. To the Sioux, on the other hand, the most important element is self-renunciation. Islam emphasizes knowledge. Sufism begins with the way of knowledge, but carries it to its highest form, knowledge which illuminates.

The way to illumination is often described as consisting of three attainments: the Knowledge of Certainty, the Eye of Certainty, the Truth of Certainty. The distinction may be understood by taking fire as the symbol of Truth. To attain the Knowledge of Certainty is to know fire after having heard it described. To attain the Eye of Certainty is to know fire from seeing the light of its flames. The highest attainment, the Truth of Certainty, belongs to those who know fire from having been consumed in it.