

COMMITTEE VII
In Search for Understanding
Among the Monotheistic
Religions

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THE MYSTICAL WAY TO UNITY IN ISLAM

by

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Though trenchant, Voltaire's remark is nevertheless true: "Man created God in his own image." The infinite God can never be grasped with the finite mind. The Iranian poet Sa'di wrote in his famous work Gulistan:

O You who are beyond our thoughts, guesses, conjectures
and fancy -

Beyond all that has been said or we have heard and read.

Writing Your praise a lifetime has been spent

But it seems as if we have just begun.

Everyone forms the notion of God on the basis of one's knowledge, understanding, experience and vision. It would be wrong to say that one notion, reached sincerely, is wrong and the other is right. This has been best illustrated in a story in the famous work of Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, the Mathnawi. One day Moses heard a shepherd addressing God and asking Him to allow the shepherd to become His servant so that he could serve God by stitching His shoes, combing the hair, washing the clothes, killing the lice, bringing milk, massaging the feet and sweeping the room clean. Moses found this absolute nonsense and rebuked the shepherd for having ceased to be a Muslim because of his blasphemous words. Taken aback, the shepherd disappeared into the desert, repenting. God sent a revelation to Moses: "You have put asunder My servant from me. Did you come in order to unite, or to tear apart?"¹ Take no step to separate, so far as you are able; the most hateful of all things to Me is divorce. I have ordained for every man a manner of conduct; I have given to every man his own way of expression. In regard to him it is praiseworthy, in regard to you it is blameworthy; in regard to him it is honey, in regard to you it is poison. I am independent of all purity and uncleanness; I am far above all cloth and clarity. I made not any commandment that I might make

profit, but that I might be bountiful to My servants. To Indians the usage of Hind is praiseworthy, to Sindians the usage of Sind is praiseworthy; I am not sanctified by their magnificats, it is they who are sanctified so that they scatter pearls. I do not regard tongue and the speech; I regard the inward soul and the spirit's state. I look into the heart, whether it be humble even though the words spoken be far from humble. For the heart is the substance; speech is only the accident; therefore the accident is adventitious, the substance is the true object. How many more of these phrases, these concepts, these metaphors? What I want is burning, burning; attune yourself to burning! Kindle a fire of love in your soul, burn utterly all thought and expression!²

The moral of the story narrated by Rumi is that God, in his infinite love, holds close all His faithful servants, no matter what and how they think of God. People's thinking is conditioned by a large number of factors - the environment, the life-style, the available vocabulary, the extent of experience and the capacity to think and understand. And as a Persian poet has said:

Everyone's capacity to think
rests on the extent of one's courage.³

Circumscribed by the given conditions, it would be wrong to say that one person has stated the truth and the other has not. A famous Indian story explains this. Three blind men came upon a tree, and started trying to find out what it was. They touched and tasted different parts of it and came to different conclusions. One said that it was tender, another said that it was quite rough and hard. One found it sweet, another found it bitter and the third person said that it had neither taste nor aroma discovered by the other two. One blind man thought that it was not a tree-trunk but the trunk of an

elephant. Differing in their interpretations, the blind men started to belie each other and fling abuses, until another person appeared who had eyes. He explained to the blind men: "The statements of all of you are basically sound, but wrong in being limited."

We are all like the blind men. We try to see the Reality from our limited knowledge and experience, from our own angle of vision, and from our own level of understanding. The Prophet of Islam expressed this fact beautifully when he said: "Talk to the people according to the level of their understanding."

Very often we tend to ignore the simple fact that we are on different levels of understanding, which leads to clash of views instead of forging unity.

Coming back to the notion of God, we find that people have always had different notions, sometimes the notion being so hazy as to border on atheism, as is the case with the Buddhists. We shall not scrutinize the concepts of God, or Godlessness, according to different religions of the world, but shall restrict ourselves to the three major monotheistic religions of Semitic origin - Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Even among these three major religious traditions with a strong and fundamental belief in monotheism, we find that the notion of God is not uniform. We shall first take up the Islamic concept of God, and then show to what extent it differs from the Jewish and the Christian concepts of God.

As tauhid, or radical monotheism, is the bedrock of the religion of Islam, it has been dealt with throughout the Qur'an beginning from the first Chapter, which runs as follows:

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds,
The Beneficent, the Merciful,

Master of the day of Requitall,
 Thee do we serve and Thee do we beseech for help.
 Guide us on the right path,
 The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed favours,
 Not those upon whom wrath is brought down, nor those who go astray.

to the last Chapter (No. 112):

Say: He, Allah is One.
 Allah is He on Whom all depend
 He begets not, nor is He begotten;
 And none is like Him.

In between these two chapters, a number of Attributes of God have been mentioned: that He is Loving, He is Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Omniscient; He is Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer; He is Absolute Beauty, Absolute Good and Absolute Justice. He is Ultimate goal of our aspirations; the Ultimate Source of authority and knowledge. "He is the First," says the Qur'an, "and the Last and the Manifest and the Hidden, and He is the Knower of all things."⁴

In a famous passage, God has been described as Light:

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth.
 A likeness of His light is as a pillar on which
 is a lamp - the lamp is in a glass, the glass is
 as it were a brightly shining star - lit from a
 blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western,
 the oil whereof gives light, though fire touch it
 not - light upon light. Allah guides to His light
 whom He pleases. And Allah sets forth parables for
 men, and Allah is Knower of all things.⁵

In another famous passage, God has been spoken of as follows:

He is Allah besides Whom there is no God: The
 Knower of the unseen and the seen; He is the
 Beneficent, the Merciful.

He is Allah, besides Whom there is no God; the
 King, the Holy, the Author of Peace, the Granter
 of Security, Guardian Over all, the Mighty, the
 Supreme, the Possessor of greatness. Glory be
 to Allah from that which they set up (with Him).

He is Allah, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner:
 His are the most beautiful names. Whatever is in
 the heavens and the earth declares His glory; and
 He is the Mighty, the Wise.⁶

One more very famous passage in the Qur'an depicts God as:

Allah - there is no god but He, the Ever-living
 the Self-subsisting by Whom all subsist. Slumber
 overtakes Him not, nor sleep. To Him belongs what-
 ever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth.
 Who is he that can intercede with Him but by His
 permission? He knows what is before them and what
 is behind them. And they encompass nothing of His
 knowledge except what He pleases. His knowledge
 extends over the heavens and the earth, and the
 preservation of them both tires Him not. And He is
 the Most High, the Great.⁷

The verse of the Qur'an cited above offer a broad notion of God. When a Muslim compares this description of God with the description of God given by Judaism, he finds so much in common, yet there are a couple of points which pose difficulty. The first is the Old Testament teaching that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Rest and sleep, according to Islam, belongs to man, and not to the All-powerful God. In verse 2:255 which we have just quoted, the Qur'an is emphatic that God is never overpowered by slumber of sleep. These are man's limitations and do not extend to the Almighty. The second point is the special relationship of God with the Jews through the Covenant. Islam does not approve of the idea of any section of the human society being more favoured by God than the rest. The only people who find favour with God are the pious people. The Qur'an declares emphatically:

O mankind, surely We have created you from
 a male and a female, and made you tribes and
 families that you may know each other. Surely
 the noblest of you with Allah is the most
 dutiful of you. Surely Allah is Knowing, Aware.⁸

The importance of this Qur'anic statement can be realised from the fact that it was quoted and stressed upon by the Prophet of Islam in his last address at the time of the pilgrimage shortly before his death. Not only this verse tells us that God's only chosen people are the righteous, it also shows us that the existence of tribes, families, nationalities etc. have no other purpose than facilitating us to identify them. There is no substantial difference among them since they are all the offspring of a single male and

a female. However, there is a way to reconcile the difficulty which the concept of God's special relationship with the Jews poses. It can be argued as some Jewish theologians have done, that the special relationship in which God holds the Jews is a special responsibility that the Jews have been charged with for the ultimate fulfilment of God's design for the whole world. At the time the Jews entered into the Covenant with God, there were other gods existing, like El and Baal. Thus the monotheism of the early Jews was, strictly speaking, not radical monotheism like Islam which has emphatically denied any kind of partnership with God, such as we find in Zoroastrianism, but in due course Jewish monotheism came very close to Islamic monotheism. The real difficulty for the Muslims lies in fathoming and reconciling the Christian doctrine of Trinity, which seems to be analogous to the Hindu doctrine of Brahma, Siva and Vishnu. There is no doubt that Christianity is also a strongly monotheistic religion, but the way it derives its monotheism via the Son and the Holy spirit and the formula 'one in three and three in one' has always confounded the Muslims. The view of Jesus being the Son of God and of his intercession for the salvation of the world has been discarded by the Qur'an in some of the verses cited above, as well as in the following verses:

And they say: Allah has taken to Himself a son -
glory be to Him! Rather, whatever is in the
heavens and the earth is His. All are obedient
to Him.⁹

O people of the Book, exceed not the limits in
your religion nor speak anything about Allah,
but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary,

is only a messenger of Allah and His word which He communicated to Mary and a mercy from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And say not, Three. Desist, it is better for you. Allah is only one God. Far be it from His glory to have a son. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth. And sufficient is Allah as having charge of affairs.¹⁰

Wonderful Originator of the heavens and the earth! How could He have a son when He has no consort? And He created everything, and He is the Knower of all things.¹¹

And say: Praise be to Allah! Who has not taken to Himself a son, and Who has not a partner in the kingdom, and Who has not a helper because of weakness; and proclaim His greatness, magnifying.¹²

And they say: The Beneficent has taken to Himself a son.¹³

Certainly you make an abominable assertion.¹⁴

The heavens may almost be rent thereat, and the earth cleave asunder, and the mountains fall down in pieces.¹⁵

That they ascribe a son to the Beneficent!¹⁶

And it is not worthy of the Beneficent that He should take to Himself a son.¹⁷

Allah has not taken to Himself a son, nor is there with Him any (other) god - in that case would each god have taken away what he created and some of them would have over-powered others. Glory be to Allah above what they describe.¹⁸

Since Islam does not believe in reincarnation or anthropomorphism, it is difficult for the Muslims to accept Jesus Christ as being one substance with God the Father. The Christian interpretation that Christ was the historical particularization of the universal God to shape the human history and to fulfil God's whole design in the eschaton is, philosophically speaking, quite appealing, but then it does create problems for monotheists like Jews and Muslims who find in the doctrine of Trinity a kind of diluted monotheism. One other aspect in which the Jews and the Muslims differ from the Christians is that whereas the first two make no representations of God, the third does so on a rather grand scale.

Whatever differences one discovers in the various theological positions arise out of historical conditioning; they are dogmatic, not existential. To seek real unity, one must go beyond the historical and dogmatic straitjacket. This is possible in only one way: to rise above the sensory perceptions and try to discover Reality through mystical, spiritual, intuitive experience. The language and goal of the mystic, based on love and yearning for Union with the Divine, is universal and the mystical experience is almost uniform.

We shall deal here with two of the greatest mystics of Islam, one of Arab descent and the other an Iranian, both of whom have inspired generations of people and put them on the mystic path. The first is Shaikh Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-'Arabi and the second is Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi.

Ibn al-'Arabi was born in A. D. 1165 in Spain. He travelled in many lands, meeting the famous scholars, like Ibn Rushd, and mystics. He tried to integrate in the best possible manner the teachings of Islam, of mysticism and Hellenistic rational thought. This serious attempt led many theologians to believe that Ibn al-'Arabi was really trying to reassert the Greek philosophy to the detriment of the teachings of Islam. He was not only bitterly criticized, even an attempt was made to assassinate him during his sojourn in Egypt. Some say that he wrote as many as 500 books. This figure may be somewhat exaggerated, but it shows that Ibn al-'Arabi was a prolific and profound writer. No single work of his suffices to bring out clearly his philosophic system; it is only through a careful and arduous study of his major works that one can weave Ibn al-'Arabi's mystical ideas into a systematic whole. His most famous doctrine, which has also proved to be the most controversial is the doctrine of Unity of Being (wahdat al-wujud). It has been applauded by many and criticised and condemned by others. This has largely been due to misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the doctrine of the Unity of Being. This doctrine holds that there is only One Reality - the Essence, and the phenomenal world is its manifestation. We have already quoted a verse from the Qur'an saying that God is Hidden and Manifest and Ibn al-'Arabi seems to have taken this verse into consideration in expounding his Doctrine of Reality and Appearance. The phenomena point to the Essence, and the Essence manifests itself as phenomena. Thus, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, the Essence and the phenomena, or Appearance, are two aspects of the same thing. The Appearance seems real to us because with our finite minds we are accustomed to break up the whole into smaller finite entities. As the famous Indian poet Mirza Ghalib put it:

Our imagination breaks up the Unity into Multiplicity
And turns us into idol-worshippers.¹⁹

Only when we are able to see the Whole as a Whole that the dichotomy between the Reality and Appearance disappears. This, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, is possible only when a person has developed the vision of a mystic and, transcending the sensory perceptions, is able to reach the state of Intuition where the multiplicity of phenomena dissolves and he is able to see only the Reality. The number of the mystics who have been able to attain to this position is not small, and some of them had to lay down their life at the hands of the orthodoxy bereft of mystical vision. Sarmad in India had reached such a mystical state, and charged with blasphemy, he was slain. When the slayer came to him, Sarmad smiled and said, "Come forth, in whatever form you come, I know you well." Ghalib echoed this in his famous verses:

We do not fear the executioner, nor quarrel

with the preacher;

We recognize Him whatever garb he may wear.²⁰

Obviously, Sarmad saw in the slayer God Himself. Sarmad's fate was shared 800 years earlier by Husain b. Mansur al-Hallaj who was charged with incarnationist idea when he uttered his famous words, "Ana al-Haqq" or "I am God."²¹ It is very likely that Ibn al-'Arabi was influenced by Hallaj's teachings of the two natures in man, the Divine and the Human, and the need to unite them in the mystical state. However, Ibn al-'Arabi did not quite approve of Hallaj's view of 'union' or 'incarnation'. Ibn al-'Arabi considered Hallaj's declaration "I am God" as inaccurate and modified it as follows:

"I am the mystery of the Real, not the Real Himself."

By mystery Ibn al-'Arabi meant the phenomenal world. Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine of the Unity of Being, being quite complicated, aroused a great deal of controversy. The mystics liked it; the theologians disparaged. It was considered by most scholars as pantheism. The famous Indian scholar, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, was one of the bitter critics of Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine of the Unity of Being which he said should more appropriately be described as wahdat al-shuhud, a term which has already been used by Junaid of Baghdad and Abu Yazid of Bistam. Wahdat al-shuhud or Unity of Appearance enabled the mystic to see only one Reality and nothing else, but the doctrine of the Unity of Being misled the mystic into believing that the phenomena themselves are the Reality.

Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi's attack on Ibn al-'Arabi caused quite a stir in the circle of the academics and the mystics and it was left to the great mystic-theologian, Shah Waliullah²² (1703 - 1763) of Delhi to show that the doctrines of Ibn al-'Arabi and Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi were essentially one and the same; the difference lay only in interpretation. Shah Waliullah wrote:

No doubt, God's revelation continues to produce in the hearts of the people one science after another according to His Wisdom in every period — a fact not known to you. We, in the present generation, have been destined to receive from out of the bounty of God a concatenation in our hearts of the rational, traditional and mystical science (developed) by the scholars of that blessed community, and a conformation^a of one science with another with the differences smoothed away, each statement falling into its proper place. This is, then, by the grace of God

(praise be to Him!) the principle that applies to the (various) branches of knowledge -- jurisprudence, scholastic theology, mysticism, and so on.

Remember, the divine knowledge, as remarked by Khidr, is a fathomless ocean knowing no beginning and no end, and the rationalists (rushing) at it are like a needle which, dipped in the ocean, does not affect it a whit, or like a bird that drinks its fill from the ocean and flies away (leaving it intact). None of them is able to tell of more than one aspect of Perfection, or describe more than one facet of the Beauty.

Those who try to describe Him resort to a
variety of descriptions;

Time flows on, and He cannot be described.

In situations like this the hearers are (bound to) split into groups. He, who understands the status of the allusions of everyone (of the scholars) and the theme indicated, is able to direct each statement to the (appropriate) place and confirm the truth of all. But he who is menaced by the verbal differences and variety of allusions, and is unable to free himself in order to get to the (real) extent of the differences, is left completely bewildered.

Even though Shah Waliullah was held in the highest esteem both as a scholar and a mystic, and his writings exercised a powerful sway over the learned of his time, his sincere endeavour to iron out the differences between Ibn al-'Arabi and Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi which had brought about a sharp division

both among the scholars as well as the mystic, did not put the controversy to an end as is shown by the appearance of a number of works, like Nalah-i 'andalib of Khwajah Mir Nasir and 'Ilm al-kitab and Waridat-i dard, both by the famous Indian mystic-poet Khwajah Mir Dard. The writers of these books continued the fierce attack on Ibn al-'Arabi's pantheistic views which were held as totally invalid. They also held that the Reality cannot be understood in the way Ibn al-'Arabi tried to show. We can understand Reality only from the revelation sent by God to His Prophets. For a time, interest in the two most famous mystical works of Ibn al-'Arabi, Fusus al-hikam and Futubat al-Makkiyyah, declined, but it was not long before interest in them was revived and Ibn al-'Arabi was rehabilitated in the Indian sub-continent as elsewhere.

The other great mystic of Islam is Jalal al-Din Rumi born in Balkh in A.D. 1207 who left his home with his father and, after staying in Nishapur, Baghdad, Damascus and Zinjan, finally arrived to settle down in Konya. Rumi's vast reading and encounters with the great intellectuals of his time prepared him to expound authoritatively the Qur'an, the Traditions, Islamic law and mysticism. Rumi had encounters with both the rationalists, influenced by Greek philosophy, and the mystics, and he profited from both as his great work The Mathnawi shows. Rumi does not discard man's rational faculty, but he urges that the other faculties latent in man should be quickened. He speaks in his Mathanawi of the five undiscovered faculties of man:

There are five more senses apart from the five we hold

These are like copper but those are like gold.²³

And then Rumi goes on to describe how those five hidden senses can be awakened

to enable us to understand God. Our sensory perception, or our rational arguments, can never help us understand God properly for God is a Reality which can only be directly experienced in the depth of one's being where the human and the Divine are harmonized and the finite is embraced by the infinite.

Like Ibn al-'Arabi, Maulana Rumi believes in Divine Emanation, and not in creation of the phenomenal world in time. For him, the Reality is beyond space-time continuum. Creation is like the drops of water splashed by the ocean waves. As soon as these drops mingle with the ocean, they lose their identity and become the ocean. Rumi teaches us to merge our egos with the Ocean of Reality. And, according to him, all egos have a natural inclination to rise and merge with their Origin, i.e. the Reality. Rumi points to the process of evolution that goes on continuously in the phenomenal world. Rumi says: "For several epochs I was flying about in space like atoms of dust without a will, after which I entered the inorganic realm of matter. Crossing over to the vegetable kingdom I lost all memory of my struggle on the material plane. From there I stepped into the animal kingdom, forgetting all my life as a plant, feeling only an instinctive and unconscious urge towards the growth of plants and flowers, particularly during the spring time as suckling babies feel towards the mother that gave them birth. Rising in the scale of animality I became a man pulled up by the creative urge of the Creator whom one knows. I continued advancing from realm to realm developing my reason and strengthening the organism. There was ground for ever getting above the previous types of reason. Even my present rationality is not a culmination of mental evolution. This too has to be transcended, because it is still contaminated with selfseeking, egoistic biological urges. A thousand other

types of reason and consciousness shall emerge during the further course of my ascent; a wonder of wonders!"

Maulana Rumi states elsewhere that since man is rising continuously higher and higher, he should not fear death for that is one more stage of man's ascent. As the ground of all creation is spiritual, man's salvation lies in the state of spirituality. And how does one achieve that state? Rumi's answer is the same as given by the mystics of different religious traditions at different times: Love. Love, says Underhill, "is one of the most distinctive notes of true mysticism; a note which marks it off from every other kind of transcendental theory and practice, and provides the answer to the question with which our last chapter closed. It is the eager, outgoing activity whose driving power is generous love, not the absorbent, indrawing activity which strives only for new knowledge, that is fruitful in the spiritual as well as in the physical world.

"Having said this, however, we must add — as we did when speaking of the "heart" — that the word Love as applied to the mystics is to be understood in its deepest, fullest sense; as the ultimate expression of the self's most vital tendencies, not as the superficial affection or emotion often dignified by this name. Mystic Love is the offspring of the Celestial Venus; the deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul towards its source. It is a condition of humble access, a life-movement of the self: more direct in its methods, more valid in its results. -- even in the hands of the least lettered of its adepts — than the most piercing intellectual vision of the greatest philosophic mind. Over and over again the mystics insist upon this."²⁴ Love is the essence of the Mathnawi of Rumi. Rumi cries out:

I should rejoice that I am seized with the
malady of love -

A malady that has really the healing touch
of Plato and Galen.

The idea of Love so common among the Muslim mystics is really to be found in the Qur'an:

O you who believe, should any one of you turn
back from his religion, then Allah will bring
a people, whom He loves and who love Him, humble
towards believers, mighty against the disbelievers,
striving hard in Allah's way and not fearing the
censure of any censurer. This is Allah's grace --
He gives it to whom He pleases. And Allah is
Ample-giving, Knowing.²⁵

This verse of the Qur'an foresees the emergence of the mystical class, and Rumi, a great scholar of the Qur'an, must have been influenced by this verse as from his association with God-mad mystics like Shams-i Tabrizi. In the very First Book of the Mathnawi, Maulana Rumi shows how desperately one is in need of Love with the Divine through the medium of the human. Love with human beings is shown to be deceptive; one is really yearning for love of the Divine and there can be no rest until that is achieved. Love ultimately leads to man's union with God and this is what is meant by the direct experience of God. In this state, the reasoning faculty disappears and words lose their meaning:

God, show me the state where I may

Communicate with You without the help of words.²⁶

As love, according to the mystics, originates in the heart, Rumi emphasizes the purification of heart so that the Reality may be experienced there and not in the beyond where God is supposed to be. He says: I searched for God among the Christians and on the Cross but therein found Him not. I went into the ancient temples of idolatry; no trace of Him was there. I entered the mountain cave of Hira (where the Archangel Gabriel appeared to the Prophet) and then went as far as Qandhar but God found I not, neither in low nor in high places. With set purpose I fared to the summit of Mount Caucasus and found there only 'anqa's habitation. Then I directed my search to the Ka'bah, the resort of old and young; God was not there even. Turning to philosophy I inquired about Him from Ibn Sina but found Him not within his range. I fared then to the scene of the Prophet's experience of a great divine manifestation only a 'two bow-lengths' distance from him' but God was not there even in that exalted court. Finally, I looked into my own heart and there I saw Him; He was nowhere else."

We started with the question: How can the infinite Reality be grasped by the finite mind? Some mystics, like Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi who has been mentioned already, think that this is never possible, and whatever appears, even though on the spiritual and intuitive level, is not real but a deception. But the number of mystics who believe, like Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi who has been mentioned already, think that this is never possible and whatever appears, even though on the spiritual and intuitive level, is not real but a deception. But the number of mystics who believe, like Rumi, that direct spiritual, intuitive knowledge of God is possible and real is overwhelming. Even al-Ghazzali, who wielded considerable influence on the

theologians and does not seem to have been very favourably inclined towards Sufism in his early life, admitted that what characterizes a Sufi "cannot be learned but only attained by direct experience, ecstasy, and inward transformation." It is a view that, leaving a small group, unites the mystics of different religious traditions — the Jews, the Christians, the Muslims and many others.

If we look at the hundreds of mystical orders that sprang up in the Islamic world through the centuries, we will find that they all had the same quest and concern: direct experience of God. Sufi orders originated in Central Asia, India, North Africa and in the Arab world. Many found the soil of their origin fertile, prospered and were carried to distinct lands; others had a weak influence and were localized. Many orders died after a time. Often, one order gave birth to another, ~~which~~ which in turn gave birth to different branches under different names. We may take, for example, Central Asia which provided a congenial atmosphere for the growth of Sufism. Apart from Rumi, whom we have already discussed and after whom the famous Mawlawiyya order was founded, several other large Sufi orders were born there. One of them was Kubrawiyya, named after Najam al-Din Kubra (d. 1221) who was born in Khiva. It had at least ten branches, many of which died out. Three of them are still to be found in India: Firdausiyya in Bihar, Ashrafiyya in North India, and Hamadaniyya in Kashmir. Naqshbandiyya, Chishtiyya, Bektashiyya, and Shattariyya are the other important orders which were born in Central Asia, the first two extending their influence to India. It may be noted here that the Indian soil was the most fertile for the growth of Sufi orders, for this was a land where the perennial quest for the Ultimate Truth had

been going on for thousands of years, and every seeker of truth was welcome. Apart from this, the people had learnt to venerate the saints, and so when the Sufis appeared on the Indian scene, they were given the status of saints. The Suhrawardiyya, ~~the~~ Chishtiyya, and ~~the~~ Qadariyya orders had, and continue to have, a wide appeal in India. The invasion by the Mongolian hordes, who ransacked Central Asia and the Middle East, eventually conquering Baghdad in 1258, made many Sufis flee for safety to India. Thus most of the major Sufi orders were able to establish themselves on the Indian soil. The influence of several of them radiated to other countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. The Naqshbandi influence spread to the Arab world.

Although the Middle East was not congenial to the growth of Sufi orders as were Central Asia, Iran, India, Malaysia and Indonesia or North Africa, yet in the 18th and 19th centuries Makkah, because of its special position, was the source of diffusion of Sufi teachings to far off countries like Indonesia.

Sufi orders became more active in North Africa in the 19th century. The Shadhliyya order, with nine branches, was an important order, founded by Abu Hasan al-Shadhli (d. 1258). The Tijaniyya, founded by an Algerian Sufi, Abul 'Abbas Ahmad bin Muhammad bin al-Mukhtar al-Tijani (d. 1815 in Fes), after he dreamt that the Prophet of Islam had given him permission to found his order, has a strong following in North Africa. The Darqawi order, founded by Abu Hamid al-'Arabi al-Darqawi (d. 1823) has about ten branches, one of which is the 'Alwiyya founded in 1918 by Ahmad Ibn al-'Alwi who is the subject of one of the important books on Sufism published in this century.²⁷

The appeal to Sufism in the present day is evidenced ~~from~~^{by} the revival of the old Sufi orders as well as the growth of new ~~Sufi orders~~^{ones} in the East and the West, some of which may not be very much in line with orthodox Sufism, like the Subud in Indonesia or the Sufi order of Hazrat Inayat Khan in the U.S.A. and Holland.

One may raise the question: Why so many Sufi orders in Islam? The difference among these orders does not lie in the basic objective which is the same, but in the approach, technique, methodology and local conditions. As a scholar of Sufism has observed: "To this day, the differences between the various orders are mainly differences of selection, by the founders of the orders, from the wide range of practices offered by the Prophet's own example and recommendations."²⁸

The Sufi orders, however, did not just confine themselves to only one issue - training the initiate to proceed by stages to have the direct experience of God. These orders played multiple roles: They offered religious and spiritual education to the unlettered people, and many of them even opened schools for children. They had an important social role, as they were quite responsive to the social needs as they arose, feeding the hungry, for example, or resolving social tensions, like putting to an end inter-religious disharmony. They raised the social status of man, however low, and of woman. They enriched the cultural life of the people through their contribution to music and special ceremonies. They had a political role, too. Many states in North Africa would not have been free today without active support from the Sufi orders. In India also the eminent Sufis, Nizamuddin Auliyya' and Nasir al-Din Chiragh-i Dehli opposed the tyrannical policies of

Muhammad bin Tughlaq in the 14th century. On the literary side, the contribution of the Sufis is great, as they enriched the vocabulary with similies, metaphors and allegories. The most famous poets of Persian, Urdu and Turkish were inspired by these figures of speech without which their works would never have enjoyed the popularity and prestige that they find today.

Sufism still has an important role to play in the modern world which has cut itself off from its spiritual roots and is in agony, like the reed in the opening lines of Rumi's Mathnawi, which is wailing ceaselessly for having been cut off from the reed-bed. It can provide balsam to the wounded society by bringing man closer to his roots, i.e. re-integrating him with the Divine. It can also end the inter-religious conflict by bringing together all men and women on earth as a single family, as described in the Qur'an.

Footnotes

- 1 Famous lines of the Mathnawi تو برای وصل کردن آمدی
نہے برای فصل کردن آمدی
- 2 A.J. Arberry, Tales from the Masnavi (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1961), pp. 132-133.
- 3 فکر ہر کس بہ قدر ہمت اوست
- 4 Qur'an 57:3
- 5 ibid., 24:35
- 6 ibid., 59:22-24
- 7 ibid., 2:255
- 8 ibid., 49:13

- 9 Qur'an 2:116
 10 ibid., 4:171
 11 ibid., 6:102
 12 ibid., 17:111
 13 ibid., 19:88
 14 ibid., 19:89
 15 ibid., 19:90
 16 ibid., 19:91
 17 ibid., 19:92
 18 ibid., 23:91

19 کثرت آرائی وحدت ہے پرستاری وہم
 کودیا کافران اصنام خیالی نے مجھے

20 جلا د سے ڈرتے ہیں نہ واعظ سے جھگڑتے
 ہم سمجھے ہوئے ہیں اسے جس بہیں میں وہ آئے

21 al-Haqq literally means 'The Real' or 'The Truth'. It is the sufi term for God. See Trimingham, The Sufi Orders in Islam (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.1. According to Ibn al-'Arabi, even the Perfect Man cannot claim "I am the Truth" because unlike God his mind cannot think of all objects of knowledge simultaneously. At the most, he can claim "I am a truth."

22 See his The Medinian Letter: An Inquiry into Wahdat al-Wujud and Wahdat al-Shuhud and their Reconciliation, translated by S. A. Ali in Recherches d'Islamologie: Recueil d'articles offert à Georges C. Anawati et Louis Gardet par leurs collegues et amis. Editions Peeters, Louvain.

23 پنج حس ہست جز این پنج حس
 آن چوں مثل زر و این مانند مس

24 Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism, 11th ed. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1926), p. 101.

- 25 Qur'an 5:54
- 26 اے خدا بنما تو مارا آن مقام
کاندران بے حرف می روید کلام
- 27 Martin Lings, A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century:
Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi (London: George Allen & Unwin
Ltd., 1961)
- 28 Martin Lings, What is Sufism? (London: George Allen &
Unwin Ltd, 1975), p. 101