THE
MYSTICS OF ISLAM

BY

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EDITOR'S NOTE

IF Judaism, Christianity and Islam have no little in common in spite of their deep dogmatic differences, the spiritual content of that common element can best be appreciated in Jewish, Christian and Islamic mysticism, which bears equal testimony to that ever-deepening experience of the soul when the spiritual worshipper, whether he be follower of Moses or Jesus or Mohammed, turns whole-heartedly to God. As the Quest Series has already supplied for the first time those interested in such matters with a simple general introduction to Jewish mysticism, so it now provides an easy approach to the study of Islamic mysticism on which in English there exists no separate introduction. But not only have we in the following pages all that the general reader requires to be told at first about Sūfism; we have also a large amount of material that will be new even to professional Orientalists. Dr. Nicholson sets before us the results of twenty years' unremitting labour, and that, too, with remarkable simplicity and clarity for such a subject; at the same time he lets the mystics mostly speak for themselves and mainly in his own fine versions from the original Arabic and Persian.

THE MYSTICS OF ISLAM

INTRODUCTION

THE title of this book sufficiently explains why it is included in a Series 'exemplifying the adventures and labours of individual seekers or groups of seekers in quest of reality.' Sūfism, the religious philosophy of Islam, is described in the oldest extant definition as 'the apprehension of divine realities,' and Mohammedan mystics are fond of calling themselves *Ahl al-Haqq*, 'the followers of the Real.'[1] In attempting to set forth their central doctrines from this point of view, I shall draw to some extent on materials which I have collected during the last twenty years for a general history of Islamic mysticism—a subject so vast and many-sided that several large volumes would be required to do it anything like justice. Here I can only sketch in broad outline certain principles, methods, and characteristic features of the inner life as it has been lived by Moslems of every class and condition from the eighth century of our era to the present day. Difficult are the paths which they threaded, dark and bewildering the pathless heights beyond; but even if we may not hope to accompany the travellers to their journey's end, any information that we have gathered concerning their religious environment and spiritual history will help us to understand the strange experiences of which they write.

In the first place, therefore, I propose to offer a few remarks on the origin and historical development of Sūfism, its relation to Islam, and its general character. Not only are these matters interesting to the student of comparative religion; some

knowledge of them is indispensable to any serious student of Sūfism itself. It may be said, truly enough, that all mystical experiences ultimately meet in a single point; but that point assumes widely different aspects according to the mystic's religion, race, and temperament, while the converging lines of approach admit of almost infinite variety. Though all the great types of mysticism have something in common, each is marked by peculiar characteristics resulting from the circumstances in which it arose and flourished. Just as the Christian type cannot be understood without reference to Christianity, so the Mohammedan type must be viewed in connexion with the outward and inward development of Islam.

The word 'mystic,' which has passed from Greek religion into European literature, is represented in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, the three chief languages of Islam, by 'Sūfī.' The terms, however, are not precisely synonymous, for 'Sūfī' has a specific religious connotation, and is restricted by usage to those mystics who profess the Mohammedan faith. And the Arabic word, although in course of time it appropriated the high significance of the Greek—lips sealed by holy mysteries, eyes closed in visionary rapture—bore a humbler meaning when it first gained currency (about 800 A.D.). Until recently its derivation was in dispute. Most Sūfīs, flying in the face of etymology, have derived it from an Arabic root which conveys the notion of 'purity'; this would make 'Sūfī' mean 'one who is pure in heart' or 'one of the elect.' Some European scholars identified it with σοφός in the sense of 'theosophist.' But Nöldeke, in an article written twenty years ago, showed conclusively that the name was derived from *sūf* (wool), and was originally applied to those Moslem ascetics who, in

imitation of Christian hermits, clad themselves in coarse woollen garb as a sign of penitence and renunciation of worldly vanities.

The earliest Sūfīs were, in fact, ascetics and quietists rather than mystics. An overwhelming consciousness of sin, combined with a dread—which it is hard for us to realise—of Judgment Day and the torments of Hell-fire, so vividly painted in the Koran, drove them to seek salvation in flight from the world. On the other hand, the Koran warned them that salvation depended entirely on the inscrutable will of Allah, who guides aright the good and leads astray the wicked. Their fate was inscribed on the eternal tables of His providence, nothing could alter it. Only this was sure, that if they were destined to be saved by fasting and praying and pious works—then they would be saved. Such a belief ends naturally in quietism, complete and unquestioning submission to the divine will, an attitude characteristic of Sūfism in its oldest form. The mainspring of Moslem religious life during the eighth century was fear—fear of God, fear of Hell, fear of death, fear of sin—but the opposite motive had already begun to make its influence felt, and produced in the saintly woman Rābiʿa at least one conspicuous example of truly mystical self-abandonment.

So far, there was no great difference between the Sūfī and the orthodox Mohammedan zealot, except that the Sūfīs attached extraordinary importance to certain Koranic doctrines, and developed them at the expense of others which many Moslems might consider equally essential. It must also be allowed that the ascetic movement was inspired by Christian ideals, and

contrasted sharply with the active and pleasure-loving spirit of Islam. In a famous sentence the Prophet denounced monkish austerities and bade his people devote themselves to the holy war against unbelievers; and he gave, as is well known, the most convincing testimony in favour of marriage. Although his condemnation of celibacy did not remain without effect, the conquest of Persia, Syria, and Egypt by his successors brought the Moslems into contact with ideas which profoundly modified their outlook on life and religion. European readers of the Koran cannot fail to be struck by its author's vacillation and inconsistency in dealing with the greatest problems. He himself was not aware of these contradictions, nor were they a stumbling-block to his devout followers, whose simple faith accepted the Koran as the Word of God. But the rift was there, and soon produced far-reaching results.

Hence arose the Murjites, who set faith above works and emphasised the divine love and goodness; the Qadarites who affirmed, and the Jabarites who denied, that men are responsible for their actions; the Muʿtazilites, who built a theology on the basis of reason, rejecting the qualities of Allah as incompatible with His unity, and predestinarianism as contrary to His justice; and finally the Ashʿarites, the scholastic theologians of Islam, who formulated the rigid metaphysical and doctrinal system that underlies the creed of orthodox Mohammedans at the present time. All these speculations, influenced as they were by Greek theology and philosophy, reacted powerfully upon Sūfism. Early in the third century of the Hegira—the ninth after Christ—we find manifest signs of the new leaven stirring within it. Not that Sūfīs ceased to mortify the flesh and take pride in their poverty, but they now

began to regard asceticism as only the first stage of a long journey, the preliminary training for a larger spiritual life than the mere ascetic is able to conceive. The nature of the change may be illustrated by quoting a few sentences which have come down to us from the mystics of this period.

“Love is not to be learned from men: it is one of God’s gifts and comes of His grace.”

“None refrains from the lusts of this world save him in whose heart there is a light that keeps him always busied with the next world.”

“When the gnostic’s spiritual eye is opened, his bodily eye is shut: he sees nothing but God.”

“If gnosis were to take visible shape all who looked thereon would die at the sight of its beauty and loveliness and goodness and grace, and every brightness would become dark beside the splendour thereof.”[2]

“Gnosis is nearer to silence than to speech.”

“When the heart weeps because it has lost, the spirit laughs because it has found.”

“Nothing sees God and dies, even as nothing sees God and lives, because His life is everlasting: whoever sees it is thereby made everlasting.”

“O God, I never listen to the cry of animals or to the quivering of trees or to the murmuring of water or to the warbling of birds or to the rustling wind or to the crashing thunder

without feeling them to be an evidence of Thy unity and a proof that there is nothing like unto Thee."

"O my God, I invoke Thee in public as lords are invoked, but in private as loved ones are invoked. Publicly I say, 'O my God!' but privately I say, 'O my Beloved!'"

These ideas—Light, Knowledge, and Love—form, as it were, the keynotes of the new Sūfism, and in the following chapters I shall endeavour to show how they were developed. Ultimately they rest upon a pantheistic faith which deposed the One transcendent God of Islam and worshipped in His stead One Real Being who dwells and works everywhere, and whose throne is not less, but more, in the human heart than in the heaven of heavens. Before going further, it will be convenient to answer a question which the reader may have asked himself—Whence did the Moslems of the ninth century derive this doctrine?

Modern research has proved that the origin of Sūfism cannot be traced back to a single definite cause, and has thereby discredited the sweeping generalisations which represent it, for instance, as a reaction of the Aryan mind against a conquering Semitic religion, and as the product, essentially, of Indian or Persian thought. Statements of this kind, even when they are partially true, ignore the principle that in order to establish an historical connexion between A and B, it is not enough to bring forward evidence of their likeness to one another, without showing at the same time (1) that the actual relation of B to A was such as to render the assumed filiation possible, and (2) that the possible hypothesis fits in with all the ascertained and relevant facts. Now, the theories which I have

mentioned do not satisfy these conditions. If Sūfism was nothing but a revolt of the Aryan spirit, how are we to explain the undoubted fact that some of the leading pioneers of Mohammedan mysticism were natives of Syria and Egypt, and Arabs by race? Similarly, the advocates of a Buddhistic or Vedāntic origin forget that the main current of Indian influence upon Islamic civilisation belongs to a later epoch, whereas Moslem theology, philosophy, and science put forth their first luxuriant shoots on a soil that was saturated with Hellenistic culture. The truth is that Sūfism is a complex thing, and therefore no simple answer can be given to the question how it originated. We shall have gone far, however, towards answering that question when we have distinguished the various movements and forces which moulded Sūfism, and determined what direction it should take in the early stages of its growth.

Let us first consider the most important external, *i.e.* non-Islamic, influences.

I. CHRISTIANITY

It is obvious that the ascetic and quietistic tendencies to which I have referred were in harmony with Christian theory and drew nourishment therefrom. Many Gospel texts and apocryphal sayings of Jesus are cited in the oldest Sūfī biographies, and the Christian anchorite (*rāhib*) often appears in the *rôle* of a teacher giving instruction and advice to wandering Moslem ascetics. We have seen that the woollen dress, from which the name 'Sūfī' is derived, is of Christian origin: vows of silence, litanies (*dhikr*), and other ascetic practices may be traced to the same source. As regards the doctrine of divine love, the following extracts speak for themselves:

"Jesus passed by three men. Their bodies were lean and their faces pale. He asked them, saying, 'What hath brought you to this plight?' They answered, 'Fear of the Fire.' Jesus said, 'Ye fear a thing created, and it behoves God that He should save those who fear.' Then he left them and passed by three others, whose faces were paler and their bodies leaner, and asked them, saying, 'What hath brought you to this plight?' They answered, 'Longing for Paradise.' He said, 'Ye desire a thing created, and it behoves God that He should give you that which ye hope for.' Then he went on and passed by three others of exceeding paleness and leanness, so that their faces were as mirrors of light, and he said, 'What hath brought you to this?' They answered, 'Our love of God.' Jesus said, 'Ye are the nearest to Him, ye are the nearest to Him.'"

The Syrian mystic, Ahmad ibn al-Hawārī, once asked a Christian hermit:

"'What is the strongest command that ye find in your Scriptures?' The hermit replied: 'We find none stronger than this: "Love thy Creator with all thy power and might."'"

Another hermit was asked by some Moslem ascetics:

"'When is a man most persevering in devotion?' 'When love takes possession of his heart,' was the reply; 'for then he hath no joy or pleasure but in continual devotion.'"

The influence of Christianity through its hermits, monks, and heretical sects (*e.g.* the Messalians or Euchitæ) was twofold: ascetic and mystical. Oriental Christian mysticism, however, contained a Pagan element: it had long ago absorbed the ideas and adopted the language of Plotinus and the Neoplatonic school.

II. NEOPLATONISM

Aristotle, not Plato, is the dominant figure in Moslem philosophy, and few Mohammedans are familiar with the name of Plotinus, who was more commonly called 'the Greek Master' (*al-Sheykh al-Yaunānī*). But since the Arabs gained their first knowledge of Aristotle from his Neoplatonist commentators, the system with which they became imbued was that of Porphyry and Proclus. Thus the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, of which an Arabic version appeared in the ninth century, is actually a manual of Neoplatonism.

Another work of this school deserves particular notice: I mean the writings falsely attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, the convert of St. Paul. The pseudo-Dionysius—he may have been a Syrian monk—names as his teacher a certain Hierotheus, whom Frothingham has identified with Stephen Bar Sudaili, a prominent Syrian gnostic and a contemporary of Jacob of Sarūj (451-521 A.D.). Dionysius quotes some fragments of erotic hymns by this Stephen, and a complete work, the *Book of Hierotheus on the Hidden Mysteries of the Divinity*, has come down to us in a unique manuscript which is now in the British Museum. The Dionysian writings, turned into Latin by John Scotus Erigena, founded medieval Christian mysticism in Western Europe. Their influence in the East was hardly less vital. They were translated from Greek into Syriac almost immediately on their appearance, and their doctrine was vigorously propagated by commentaries in the same tongue.

“About 850 A.D. Dionysius was known from the Tigris to the Atlantic.”

Besides literary tradition, there were other channels by which the doctrines of emanation, illumination, gnosis, and ecstasy were transmitted, but enough has been said to convince the reader that Greek mystical ideas were in the air and easily accessible to the Moslem inhabitants of Western Asia and Egypt, where the Sūfī theosophy first took shape. One of those who bore the chief part in its development, Dhu ’l-Nūn the Egyptian, is described as a philosopher and alchemist—in other words, a student of Hellenistic science. When it is added that much of his speculation agrees with what we find, for example, in the writings of Dionysius, we are drawn irresistibly to the conclusion (which, as I have pointed out, is highly probable on general grounds) that Neoplatonism poured into Islam a large tincture of the same mystical element in which Christianity was already steeped.

III. GNOSTICISM[3]

Though little direct evidence is available, the conspicuous place occupied by the theory of gnosis in early Sūfī speculation suggests contact with Christian Gnosticism, and it is worth noting that the parents of Maʿrūf al-Karkhī, whose definition of Sūfism, as 'the apprehension of divine realities' was quoted on the first page of this Introduction, are said to have been Sābians, *i.e.* Mandæans, dwelling in the Babylonian fenland between Basra and Wāsit. Other Moslem saints had learned 'the mystery of the Great Name.' It was communicated to Ibrāhīm ibn Adham by a man whom he met while travelling in the desert, and as soon as he pronounced it he saw the prophet Khadir (Elias). The ancient Sūfīs borrowed from the Manichæans the term *siddīq*, which they apply to their own spiritual adepts, and a later school, returning to the dualism of Mānī, held the view that the diversity of phenomena arises from the admixture of light and darkness.

"The ideal of human action is freedom from the taint of darkness; and the freedom of light from darkness means the self-consciousness of light as light."[4]

The following version of the doctrine of the seventy thousand veils as explained by a modern Rifāʿī dervish shows clear traces of Gnosticism and is so interesting that I cannot refrain from quoting it here:

"Seventy Thousand Veils separate Allah, the One Reality, from the world of matter and of sense. And every soul passes before

his birth through these seventy thousand. The inner half of these are veils of light: the outer half, veils of darkness. For every one of the veils of light passed through, in this journey towards birth, the soul puts *off* a divine quality: and for every one of the dark veils, it puts *on* an earthly quality. Thus the child is born *weeping*, for the soul knows its separation from Allah, the One Reality. And when the child cries in its sleep, it is because the soul remembers something of what it has lost. Otherwise, the passage through the veils has brought with it forgetfulness (*nisyān*): and for this reason man is called *insān*. He is now, as it were, in prison in his body, separated by these thick curtains from Allah.

"But the whole purpose of Sūfism, the Way of the dervish, is to give him an escape from this prison, an apocalypse of the Seventy Thousand Veils, a recovery of the original unity with The One, *while still in this body*. The body is not to be put off; it is to be refined and made spiritual—a help and not a hindrance to the spirit. It is like a metal that has to be refined by fire and transmuted. And the sheikh tells the aspirant that he has the secret of this transmutation. 'We shall throw you into the fire of Spiritual Passion,' he says, 'and you will emerge refined.'"[5]