

SUFISM

BY

A. J. ARBERRY



*An Account of
the Mystics of Islam*

Sufism, the mystical movement within Islam, in a thousand years of history has influenced powerfully the life, art and literature of the Muslim peoples. It has supplied the element of personal devotion and direct apprehension of Divine Realities which the more formal and practical character of orthodox ritual tended to overshadow. Thinkers like Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī, such poets as Ibn al-Fārid, Rūmī, Hāfiz and Jāmī were greatly inspired by the lives and sayings of the early Sufis. In this volume Professor Arberry has written the first short history of Sufism to appear in any language, illustrating the development of its doctrines with copious quotations from its literature.

Some Press Comments

'This packed little book provides a ready introduction to its history, its literature and its decline.' TABLET.

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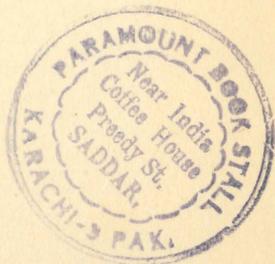
to

Rev. Fr Thomas Merton

by

Ch: Abdul Aziz

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OF ISLAM

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LONDON

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THE ASCETICS

Now I will tell a tale of long ago,
How first the Faith began, and how it grew
To full perfection; yea, and I will tell
How next it withered, till it hath become
E'en as a faded garment. After this
I have for thee a very gem of knowledge
Which thou canst gain, if thou wilt heed my words,
A knowledge copious, to scour the heart
Of stain and rust, and make it clean and bright.
True is my knowledge, clear and eloquent,
Precious as pearls and rubies of great price;
By Grace Divine I indicate the truth,
Being taught by God Himself, for that I live
Within an age become exceeding strange,
Cruel, and terrible, wherein we need
Most urgently a statement of our faith
And intellectual arguments thereto:
Islam hath been most nobly eulogized—
As mourners praise the dear, departed dead!

These lines were written by Ahmad b. 'Āsim al-Antāki of Antioch, who was born at Wasit (Iraq) in 140/757 and died at Damascus in 215/830; they represent very well the mood of religious men in the early days of the Abbasid caliphate. The far-flung conquests of the first century of Islam brought immense power and wealth to the hands of men not of the Prophet's House, who exercised sway over vast territories and in their palaces lived a life of ease and luxury that scandalised simpler souls.

Muhammad's immediate companions and followers are pictured in pious legend as innocent of these excesses; despite their position of privilege, they maintained the

simple dignity and austerity of habit which they had learned from the Prophet.

When Abū Bakr succeeded to the leadership, and the world in its entirety came to him in abasement, he did not lift up his head on that account, or make any pretensions; he wore a single garment, which he used to pin together, so that he was known as the 'man of the two pins.' 'Umar b. al-Khattab, who also ruled the world in its entirety, lived on bread and olive-oil; his clothes were patched in a dozen places, some of the patches being of leather; and yet there were opened unto him the treasures of Chosroes and Caesar. As for 'Uthman, he was like one of his slaves in dress and appearance; of him it is related that he was seen coming out of one of his gardens with a faggot of firewood on his shoulders, and when questioned on the matter he said, 'I wanted to see whether my soul would refuse.' When 'Ali succeeded to the rule, he bought a waistband for four dirhams and a shirt for five dirhams; finding the sleeve of his garment too long, he went to a cobbler and taking his knife cut off the sleeve level with the tips of his fingers; yet this same man divided the world right and left.¹

So the "Righteous Caliphs" appeared to al-Kharrāz, famous mystic of the third/ninth century; and the report of their holiness was widely accepted. With the succession of the cunning Mu'āwiya (661-80) all was changed; worldly considerations supplanted spiritual aspiration as the basis of government; while Mu'āwiya's son and heir Yazīd (680-3) was a confirmed drunkard. The transference of the capital from Mecca to Damascus was itself symptomatic of this decline in piety; the enervating effeminacy of Syria replaced the ascetic manliness of Arabia. When in due course an extravagant new capital, Baghdad, was built on the ruins of the old Persian empire in a land where Arabic was almost a second language, the course of degeneracy was fully run.

In these circumstances nothing was left to the religiously

minded but more and more to withdraw from a society which was obviously on the road to damnation. Many of those who had seen the Prophet were compelled to take this, the only way left open to them, in their later years to register their horror at corruption in high places. Secure in the conviction of their own righteousness, they did not fear to thunder denunciation and threaten the imminence of Divine punishment; and it became the well approved diversion of puritanical circles to listen to the eloquent jeremiads of the ancient faithful.

There was one honourable exception to the rule of caliphal ungodliness in the person of 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (717-20), who is praised not only for his own virtuous conduct but also because he corresponded with al-Hasan al-Basrī (d.110/728), an eminent early theologian renowned for his piety and asceticism, who is claimed by the Sufis as one of their first and most distinguished partisans. The tenor of al-Hasan's message, which may be taken as typical of the ascetics of the first age and has in it nothing of the theosophy which developed later, is illustrated by some passages from a letter which he wrote to his exalted patron.²

Beware of this world with all wariness; for it is like to a snake, smooth to the touch, but its venom is deadly. Turn away from whatsoever delights thee in it, for the little companionship thou wilt have of it; put off from thee its cares, for that thou hast seen its sudden chances, and knowest for sure that thou shalt be parted from it; endure firmly its hardships, for the ease that shall presently be thine. The more it pleases thee, the more do thou be wary of it; for the man of this world, whenever he feels secure in any pleasure thereof, the world drives him over into some unpleasantness, and whenever he attains any part of it and squats him down upon it, the world suddenly turns him upside down. And again, beware of this world, for its hopes are lies, its expectations false; its easefulness is

all harshness, muddied its limpidity. And therein thou art in peril: or bliss transient, or sudden calamity, or painful affliction, or doom decisive. Hard is the life of a man if he be prudent, dangerous if comfortable, being wary ever of catastrophe, certain of his ultimate fate. Even had the Almighty not pronounced upon the world at all, nor coined for it any similitude, nor charged men to abstain from it, yet would the world itself have awakened the slumberer, and roused the heedless; how much the more then, seeing that God has Himself sent us a warning against it, an exhortation regarding it! For this world has neither worth nor weight with God; so slight it is, it weighs not with God so much as a pebble or a single clod of earth; as I am told, God has created nothing more hateful to Him than this world, and from the day He created it He has not looked upon it, so much He hates it. It was offered to our Prophet with all its keys and treasures, and that would not have lessened him in God's sight by so much as the wing of a gnat, but he refused to accept it; and nothing prevented him from accepting it—for there is naught that can lessen him in God's sight—but that he knew that God hated a thing, and therefore he hated it, and God despised a thing, and he despised it, and God abased a thing, and he abased it. Had he accepted it, his acceptance would have been a proof that he loved it; but he disdained to love what his Creator hated, and to exalt what his Sovereign had debased. As for Muhammad, he bound a stone upon his belly when he was hungry; and as for Moses, the skin of his belly shewed as green as grass because of it all: he asked naught of God, the day he took refuge in the shade, save food to eat when he was hungered, and it is said of him in the stories that God revealed to him, 'Moses, when thou seest poverty approaching, say, Welcome to the badge of the righteous! and when thou seest wealth approaching, say, Lo! a sin whose punishment has been put on aforesaid.' If thou shouldst wish, thou mightest name as a third the Lord of the Spirit and the Word (Jesus), for in his affair there is a marvel; he used to say, 'My daily bread is hunger, my badge is fear, my raiment is wool, my mount is my foot, my lantern at night is the moon, my fire by day is the sun, and my fruit and fragrant herbs are such things as the

earth brings forth for the wild beasts and cattle. All the night I have nothing, yet there is none richer than I!' And if thou shouldst wish, thou mightest name as a fourth David, who was no less wonderful than these; he ate barley bread in his chamber, and fed his family upon bran meal, but his people on fine corn; and when it was night he clad himself in sackcloth, and chained his hand to his neck, and wept until the dawn; eating coarse food, and wearing robes of hair. All these hated what God hates, and despised what God despises; then the righteous thereafter followed in their path and kept close upon their tracks.

Here we already see the establishment of an important Sufi theory, that poverty and abstinence were practised by the prophets themselves; and it is interesting to note how al-Hasan al-Basrī attributed to Jesus and David the austere practices which presently characterised so distinctively the Sufi ascetics, even to the wearing of wool. Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/728), a celebrated scholar contemporary with al-Hasan who attacked the latter's teachings and habits on many accounts,³ in particular condemned the wearing of wool (*sūf*), which was already being affected by certain devotees, as being an imitation of Jesus, saying that "he preferred to follow the example of our Prophet who clothed himself in cotton."⁴ The nickname Sufi, which is undoubtedly derived from the Arabic word for wool, appears to have been applied in the first place to a certain Abū Hāshim 'Uthmān b. Sharik of Kufa, who died about the year 160/776; by the middle of the third/ninth century it had become the regular appellation of those who practised austerity; in the fourth/tenth century it also acquired a theosophical connotation.⁵

From Basra and Kufa the ascetic movement spread to all parts of the Islamic world, notably to Khorasan which during the second half of the second/eighth century became an important focus of political and religious

activity; it was in Khorasan that the plot was hatched which overthrew the Umayyads and established the Abbasid caliphate. To this remote province, which had once been a flourishing centre of Buddhism, belonged the celebrated Ibrāhīm b. Adham, prince of Balkh (d.160/777), the legend of whose conversion to austerity became a favourite theme among later Sufis and has often been compared with the story of Gautama Buddha.

'My father was of Balkh,' Ibrāhīm b. Adham is reported to have said,⁸ 'and he was one of the kings of Khorasan. He was a man of wealth, and taught me to love hunting. One day I was out riding with my dog, when a hare or a fox started. I pricked on my horse; then I heard a voice behind me saying, 'It was not for this thou wast created: it was not this thou wast charged to do.' I stopped, and looked right and left, but saw no one; and I said, 'God curse the devil!' Then I pricked on my horse again; and I heard a voice clearer than before, 'O Ibrāhīm! It was not for this thou wast created: it was not this thou wast charged to do.' I stopped once more, and looked right and left, and still I saw no one; and I repeated, 'God curse the devil!' Then I pricked on my horse once more; and I heard a voice from the bow of my saddle, 'O Ibrāhīm! It was not for this thou wast created: it was not this thou wast charged to do.' I stopped, and said, 'I have been roused! I have been roused! A warning has come to me from the Lord of the Worlds. Verily, I will not disobey God from this day on, so long as the Lord shall preserve me.' Then I returned to my people, and abandoned my horse; I came to one of my father's shepherds, and took his robe and cloak, and put my raiment upon him. Then I went towards Iraq, wandering from land to land.

The story goes on to describe how he roamed from place to place seeking a way of living "lawfully," until for a time he earned his daily bread working as a gardener in Syria; but presently his identity was discovered, and so he went out to live in the desert. There he fell in with

Christian anchorites, from whom he learned the true knowledge of God.

'I learned gnosis (*ma'rifa*),' he related to a disciple, 'from a monk called Father Simeon. I visited him in his cell, and said to him, 'Father Simeon, how long hast thou been in thy cell here?' 'For seventy years,' he answered. 'What is thy food?' I asked. 'O Hanifite,' he countered, 'what has caused thee to ask this?' 'I wanted to know,' I replied. Then he said, 'Every night one chick-pea.' I said, 'What stirs thee in thy heart, so that this pea suffices thee?' He answered, 'They come to me one day in every year, and adorn my cell, and process about it, so doing me reverence; and whenever my spirit wearies of worship, I remind it of that hour, and endure the labours of a year for the sake of an hour. Do thou, O Hanifite, endure the labour of an hour, for the glory of eternity.' Gnosis then descended into my heart.

A disciple asked Ibrāhīm b. Adham for a definition of service, and he replied, "The beginning of service is meditation and silence, save for the recollection (*dhikr*) of God."⁸ On another occasion, being informed that a certain man was studying grammar, he commented, "He is in greater need of studying silence."⁹ He is said to have prayed, "O God, Thou knowest, that Paradise weighs not with me so much as the wing of a gnat. If Thou befriendest me by Thy recollection, and sustainest me with Thy love, and makest it easy for me to obey Thee, then give Thou Paradise to whomsoever Thou wilt."¹⁰ In a letter to one of his fellow ascetics he wrote as follows.¹¹

I charge thee to fear God, Who may not be disobeyed, and in Whom alone is thy hope. Fear God; for he that fears God is great and mighty, his hunger is satisfied and his thirst is quenched, and his mind is exalted above the world. His body is indeed seen to dwell among the peoples of this world, but his heart is face to face with the world to come. When the eye beholds the love of this

world, the sight of the heart is extinguished; wherefore a man will loathe the unlawful things of this world and eschew its lusts, yea, and he will abstain even from such things as are lawful and pure, except for such shreds as he needs to bind his loins and clothe his nakedness, and then only the thickest and roughest he can find. He has no trust nor hope save in God; his trust and hope are exalted above every created thing, and repose in the Creator of all things. He labours and exhausts himself, and wears out his body for God's sake, so that his eyes are sunken and his ribs stare; and God requites him therefor with increase of intellect and strength of heart, and all the things besides that He has stored up for him in the world to come. Then spurn the world, my brother; for love of the world makes a man deaf and blind, and enslaves him. Say not 'to-morrow' or 'the day after to-morrow'; for those that perished, perished because they abode always in their hopes, until the truth came upon them suddenly in their heedlessness, and wilful as they were they were carried to their dark, narrow graves, abandoned by all their kith and kin. Devote thyself to God with a penitent heart, and an undoubting resolve. Farewell!

The Khorasanian school of asceticism was continued by Ibrāhīm b. Adham's pupil Shaqīq of Balkh (d. 194/810), said by some authorities to have been the first to define trust in God (*tawakkul*) as a mystical state (*hāl*).¹² The story of his conversion as told by his grandson is interesting as shewing again the contacts between Islam and other religions at this time, and the influence such contacts were felt to have exercised upon the development of Sufism.¹³

My grandfather owned three hundred villages on the day he was killed at Washgird, yet he had not even a winding-sheet to be buried in, for he had given everything away. His raiment and sword are hung up to this hour, and men touch them for a blessing. He had gone into the lands of the Turks to do trade as a young man, among a people called the Khusūsiya, who worshipped idols. He

went into their temple and there met their teacher, who had shaved his head and beard and wore scarlet robes. Shaqīq said to him, 'This upon which thou art engaged is false; these men, and thou, and all creation—all have a Creator and a Maker, there is naught like unto Him; to Him belongs this world, and the next; He is Omnipotent, All-providing.' The servitor said to him, 'Thy words do not accord with thy deeds.' Shaqīq said, 'How is that?' The other replied, 'Thou hast asserted that thou hast a Creator, Who is All-providing and Omnipotent; yet thou hast exiled thyself to this place in search of thy provision. If what thou sayest is true, He Who has provided for thee here is the same as He Who provides for thee there; so spare thyself this trouble.' Shaqīq said, 'The cause of my abstinence (*zuhd*) was the remark of that Turk.' And he returned, and gave away all he possessed to the poor, and sought after knowledge.

In Shaqīq's discourse, so much of it as is preserved by later writers, we discern the beginnings of a formal system of self-discipline, such as the Sufis of the third/ninth century developed much further. His pupil Hātim al-Asamm (d. 237/852), himself a noted member of the school of Khorasan, quoted him to the following effect.¹⁴

If a man continued alive for two hundred years and did not know these four things, he should not (God willing) escape from Hell:—first, the knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God; second, the knowledge of himself; third, the knowledge of God's commandment and prohibition; fourth, the knowledge of God's adversary and his own. The interpretation of the knowledge of God is, that thou knowest in thy heart that there is no other who gives and withholds, hurts and advantages. Knowledge of self is to know thyself, that thou canst not hurt or advantage, and that thou hast not the power to do anything at all; and likewise to oppose the self, which means, to be submissive to God. Knowledge of God's commandment and prohibition is to be aware that God's commandment rules over thee and that thy provision depends upon God, and to trust in this provision, being sincere in all thy actions;

and the sign of such sincerity is not to have in thee two characteristics, namely covetousness and impatience. Knowledge of God's adversary means being aware that thou hast an enemy, and that God will not accept from thee anything save it be as a result of warfare; and the warfare of the heart consists in making war against the enemy, and striving with him, and exhausting him.

Typical also of the Persian school of asceticism is 'Abd Allah b. al-Mubāarak of Merv (d. 181/797), claimed by the Sufis as one of them, who wrote a book on self-denial (*Kitāb al-Zuhd*) which has survived.¹⁵ It consists of a collection of *hadīth* relating to abstinence, and is therefore of some importance not only as being the earliest of such specialised collections but also because it shews the ascetic at work assembling evidence in the Prophet's life and preaching to justify his own. A somewhat later native of Merv was Bishr b. al-Hārith al-Hāfi ("Barefoot") (d. 227/841), who in his own words was "a rogue, a gangster" before he heard the call to God.¹⁶ He taught a doctrine of indifference to the opinions of other men that foreshadows a later development in Sufism, the Malāmatiyya movement which came to acquire much notoriety. Bishr is reported to have said, "Conceal your virtuous actions, as you conceal your evil deeds," and again, "If thou art able to be in a situation where men will suppose thee to be a thief, by all means contrive to be so."¹⁸ He wrote to a disciple as follows.¹⁹

Return to the course that is nearer to thee, namely to please thy Lord; let not thy heart revert to the applause or reproof of the people of thy time. Those thou fearest are indeed dead, except the righteous whose hearts are irradiated with life. For thou dwellest in a place where dead men are, amongst the graves of men living indeed, but dead to the world to come, whose footsteps are all obliterated from its paths. These are the people of thy time: wherefore hide thyself from that place where God's

light never shines. Be not concerned if any man desert thee, and despair not over losing him, for it is more fortunate for thee to have them afar than to have them nigh thee; let God be thy sufficiency, take Him for thy associate, and let Him be the substitute for them. Beware of the people of thy time: it is not good to live with any that men to-day think well of, nor with any they think ill of either. It is better to die alone, than to live; for if any man thinks he can escape from evil and from the fear of temptation, let him know that there is no escape for him; if thou givest them power over thee, they will incite thee to sin, and if thou avoidest them, they will lay a snare for thee. So choose for thyself, and shun their society. I hold that the best counsel to-day is to dwell alone; for therein lies safety, and safety is a sufficient advantage.

The extreme pessimism of the outlook of Bishr is eloquently evidenced in verses attributed to him.²⁰

I swear it is the nobler part
 To drink the salt tears of the heart,
 And crush the datestone, than to stand
 With greed in soul, and cap in hand,
 To gain—for recompense now!—
 The lowering glance and wrinkled brow.
 Then with despair be satisfied;
 'Tis greater wealth than aught beside,
 A bargain to rejoice the soul.
 Despair is fine and worshipful;
 God's fear is true nobility,
 Desire leads on to infamy;
 For, let the world be fair to-day,
 It shall at last assault, and slay.

Meanwhile in Iraq the ascetic movement was similarly striking out in new directions. The violence of Bishr b. al-Hārith's reaction against society is fully matched by the sentiments of al-Fudail b. 'Iyād (d. 187/803), himself a Khorasanian by birth who lived for many years at Kufa and died in Mecca. "In truth," he said, "I would

rather be this dust, or this wall, than dwell in the shambles of the noblest of earth's inhabitants to-day. Thou fearest death; but dost thou know death? If thou tellest me that thou fearest death, I will not believe thee; for if thou didst indeed fear death, it would not profit thee to eat or to drink, or to possess anything in this world. If thou hadst known death truly, thou wouldst never have married, or desired children."²¹

A pupil remarks that he accompanied al-Fudail for thirty years and never saw him laugh or smile except once, on the day his son 'Alī died; asking him the reason for this unexpected change of mood, he received the answer, "Almighty God desired a certain thing, and I desired what God desired."²²

A less lugubrious though equally austere note is struck in the utterances of Rābi'a, the famous woman mystic of Basra (d. 185/801). Her hand was sought in marriage by a number of pious men, but she declined all offers, declaring, "The contract of marriage is for those who have a phenomenal existence. But in my case, there is no such existence, for I have ceased to exist and have passed out of self. I exist in God and am altogether His. I live in the shadow of His command. The marriage contract must be asked for from Him, not from me."²³ Rābi'a was overwhelmed by the consciousness of the near presence of God; once, when ill, she said to a visitor who asked her what her sickness might be, "By God, I know of no cause for my illness, except that Paradise was displayed to me, and I yearned after it in my heart; and I think that my Lord was jealous for me, and so reproached me; and only He can make me happy."²⁴ Close to this saying is the mood of her celebrated prayer: "O God! if I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine Everlasting

Beauty!"²⁵ With her name is generally associated the first enunciation in Sufism of the doctrine of Divine Love, which later came to be so dominant a feature of the movement: her short poem on this theme is one of the most often quoted in Sufi literature.

Two ways I love Thee: selfishly,
 And next, as worthy is of Thee.
 'Tis selfish love that I do naught
 Save think on Thee with every thought.
 'Tis purest love when Thou dost raise
 The veil to my adoring gaze.
 Not mine the praise in that or this:
 Thine is the praise in both, I wis.²⁶

We quoted at the beginning of this chapter some verses by Ahmad b. 'Āsim of Antioch, and will end our brief review of the early ascetics with him, for he furnishes an excellent example of the beginning of a transition which from his time forward gradually affected the character of Sufism; converting it from a way of life taken up as a protest against the worldliness prevalent in high places, into a theory of existence and a system of theosophy. Himself a pupil of a noted ascetic, Abū Sulaimān al-Dārānī, he is the writer of the earliest surviving treatises that can be truly said to be mystical in character, and he is thus the forerunner of the great Sufi authors of the third/ninth century.²⁷ A brief dialogue between him and an unnamed disciple shews him in the part of spiritual preceptor, a feature of Sufism which now assumes increasing importance.²⁸

Q. What sayest thou of consulting with others?

A. Have no faith in it, save it be with a trustworthy man.

Q. And what sayest thou concerning the giving of advice?

A. Consider first whether thy words will save thyself; if so, thy guidance is inspired, and thou wilt be respected and trusted.

- Q. What thinkest thou of association with other men?
A. If thou findest an intelligent and trustworthy man, associate with him, and flee from the rest as from wild beasts.
- Q. How may I best seek to draw near to God?
A. By leaving the inward sins.
- Q. Why inward rather than outward?
A. Because if thou avoidest inward sins, the outward sins will be void as well as the inward.
- Q. What is the most harmful sin?
A. The sin thou dost not know to be a sin. And more harmful than this is to suppose that it is a virtuous act, while all the time it is a sin.
- Q. What sin is the most profitable to me?
A. The sin thou keepest before thine eyes, weeping over it constantly until thou departest from the world, so that thou wilt never have committed the like again. That is 'sincere repentance' (cf. Kor. 66:8).
- Q. What is the most harmful virtuous act?
A. The kind that causes thee to forget thy evil deeds; the kind thou keepest before thine eyes, relying upon it and confident, so that in thy delusion thou fearest not for the evil thou hast done, on account of pride.
- Q. Where is my person most concealed?
A. In thy cell, and within thy house.
- Q. And if I am not safe in my house?
A. In any place where lusts do not cleave to thee, and temptations do not beset thee.
- Q. What grace of God is most profitable to me?
A. When He protects thee from disobeying Him, and assists thee to obey Him.
- Q. This is a summary: explain it to me more clearly.
A. Very well. When He assists thee with three things: a reason that suffices thee against the vexation of thy passion, a knowledge that suffices thee for thy ignorance, and a self-sufficiency that drives away from thee the fear of poverty."

THE MYSTICS

Thereafter the first did not fail to call the second, and the predecessor the successor, with the tongue of his work, which freed him of the necessity of speech. But then desire diminished and purpose flagged: and with this came the spate of questions and answers, books and treatises; the inner meanings were known to those who wrote, and the breasts of those who read were receptive to understand them.¹

Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Khorasan had participated equally in the growth of the ascetic movement. We have watched self-denial (*zuhd*), a virtue applauded by the most orthodox of Muslim theologians—and the illustrious Ahmad b. Hanbal (d.241/855), founder of the strictest of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, himself wrote a book entitled *Kitāb al-Zuhd*²—gradually turning into something quite different: a total disregard of worldly wealth and ambition is exalted into an entire absorption with the fear, and then the service, and finally the love of God.

Asceticism for its own sake tends to become a rather joyless and negative attitude to the universe; when warmed by spiritual emotion it converts into an ardent fervour rejoicing in hardship and delighting in ecstatic experience; subjected to the searching light of speculative reason, it is transformed into the hard discipline that is the necessary prelude to a proved theosophy. This final development took place at Baghdad, which now became the most important centre of Sufism as it had also come to be the focus of literature, theology, law and philosophy. No

doubt the free debates between Christians and Muslims, which for a brief period of splendid tolerance enlivened the Abbasid court, and the translation of Plato, Aristotle and the later Greek philosophers into Arabic, played an important part in stimulating this transition. The doctrine of the Divine Unity (*tauḥīd*) exercised the minds of the learned and religious increasingly, as the contest between creeds and sects became keener; so that it is scarcely surprising that the Sufis should also have evolved their own interpretation of this crucial point in Islamic theology. But an examination of these interesting matters lies outside the scope which we have allowed ourselves in the present book.

The first Sufi author of the foremost rank whose preserved writings may truly be said to have formed to a large extent the pattern of all subsequent thought was al-Hārith b. Asad al-Muhāsibī. He was born at Basra in 165/781 but came early in life to Baghdad, where he passed the greater part of his days, dying in the Abbasid capital in 243/837. Being a keen student of *hadīth*, he lavished extreme care upon providing apostolic authority for his teachings; but Ahmad b. Hanbal condemned him for using "weak" traditionists, and he was constrained for a time to flee to Basra. One of his disciples was the eminent al-Junaid, who has supplied a revealing account of the relationship in which he stood to his master.³

Al-Hārith b. Asad al-Muhāsibī used to come to my house and say, 'Come out with me, and let us grind.' I would say to him, 'Wilt thou drag me forth from my solitude and spiritual security into the highways and allurements, to behold lustful things?' He would answer, 'Come out with me: there is nothing for thee to fear.' And when I had come with him to a certain place where he sat down, he would say to me, 'Ask me a question.' I would reply, 'I have no question to ask thee.' Then he

would say, 'Ask me whatever comes into thy mind.' Then the questions would rush upon me, and I would question him, and he would answer accordingly forthwith; then he would return to his dwelling-place and make them into books.

Here we have the portrait of the Sufi teacher acting like any other learned man of his time, composing his fundamental works in reply to questions put to him by a pupil. The structure of al-Muhāsibī's books, especially his masterpiece *al-Ri'āya li-huqūq Allah*,⁴ fully confirms this description.

The bulk of al-Muhāsibī's writings is concerned with self-discipline—his name is connected with the word for self-examination (*muhāsaba*)—and *al-Ri'āya* in particular exercised a great influence on the illustrious al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111) when he came to write his *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, to which we shall refer later. His *Kitāb al-Wasāyā* (or *al-Nasā'ih*) is a series of sermons mainly on ascetic themes. The introduction to this work is autobiographical in character, and may well have been in Ghāzālī's mind when the latter wrote his famous *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*. Some extracts translated from an unpublished manuscript of the *Wasāyā* will indicate its character.

It has come to pass in our days, that this community is divided into seventy and more sects: of these, one only is in the way of salvation, and for the rest, God knows best concerning them. Now I have not ceased, not so much as one moment of my life, to consider well the differences into which the community has fallen, and to search after the clear way and the true path, whereunto I have searched both theory and practise, and looked, for guidance on the road to the world to come, to the directing of the theologians. Moreover, I have studied much of the doctrine of Almighty God, with the interpretation of the lawyers, and reflected upon the various conditions of the community, and considered its divers doctrines and sayings. Of all this

I understood as much as was appointed for me to understand: and I saw that their divergence was as it were a deep sea, wherein many had been drowned, and but a small band escaped therefrom; and I saw every party of them asserting that salvation was to be found in following them, and that he would perish who opposed them. Then I considered the various orders of men. For some there are who are acquainted with the nature of the world to come, and do prefer it: such are hard to find, but they are very precious. And some know nothing of this: to be far from them is a boon. Some make show to be like them that know, but are in love with the present world, and prefer it. Some carry an uncertain knowledge of the other world, but with that knowledge seek after respect and elevation, obtaining through their otherworldliness worldly goods. Some carry a knowledge, but know not the interpretation of that knowledge. Some make a show to be like the godly, and to resemble good folk, only they have no strength in them: their knowledge lacks in penetration, and their judgment cannot be trusted. Some possess intellect and intelligence, but are lacking in piety and goodness. Some secretly conform with their desires, being ambitious for worldly gain, and seeking to be rulers of men. Some are devils in human form: they turn their faces from the world to come, and rush madly after this world, greedy to collect it, avid of enrichment in it: report says they live, but in truth they are dead; with them virtue becomes an abomination, and evil-doing a virtue. In all these classes of men I sought for my aim, but could not find it. Then I sought out the guidance of them that were right guided, looking for rectitude, truth and guidance: I looked to knowledge for direction, thinking deeply and considering long. Then it was made clear to me, from God's Book, and the Prophet's practice, and the consensus of believers, that the pursuit of desire blinds to right direction, and leads astray from truth, causing one to abide long in blindness. So I began to expel desire from my heart. I paused before the divergences of the community, ardently seeking the party of salvation, and anxiously avoiding fatal schisms and sects bound for ruin; for I feared that I might die before finding the light. With all my heart I sought for the path of salvation; and

I found, through the consensus of believers regarding the Revealed Book of God, that the path of salvation consists in laying hold of the fear of God, and performing His Ordinances, abstaining from what He has made lawful and unlawful alike and following all that He has prescribed, sincere obedience to God, and the imitation of His Prophet. So I sought to inform myself of God's Ordinances, and the Prophet's practices, as well as the pious conduct of the saints. I saw that there was both agreement and contrariety; but I found that all men were agreed that God's Ordinances and the Prophet's practices were to be found among those who, knowing God and knowing of God, laboured to win His Pleasure. I therefore sought from among the community men such as these, that I might follow in their footsteps and acquire knowledge from them; and I saw that they were exceedingly few, and that their knowledge was utterly swept away: as the Prophet said, 'Islam came a stranger, and shall return a stranger as it began.' Great then was my trouble, when I could not find godfearing men to be my guides; for I feared lest death should suddenly overtake me while my life was yet confused. I persevered in my quest for that which I must by all means know, not relaxing my caution nor falling short in counsel. Then the Merciful God gave me to know a people in whom I found my godfearing guides, models of piety, that preferred the world to come above this world. They ever counselled patience in hardship and adversity, acquiescence in fate, and gratitude for blessings received; they sought to win men to a love of God, reminding them of His Goodness and Kindness and urging them to repentance unto Him. These men have elaborated the nature of religious conduct, and have prescribed rules for piety, which are past my power to follow. I therefore knew that religious conduct and true piety are a sea wherein the like of me must needs drown, and which such as I can never explore. Then God opened unto me a knowledge in which both proof was clear and decision shone, and I had hopes that whoever should draw near to this knowledge and adopt it for his own would be saved. I therefore saw that it was necessary for me to adopt this knowledge, and to practise its ordinances; I believed in it in my heart,

vigil accompanied by complete self-surrender, obediently and with great haste ere dread death come upon him; and the lover speaks of love according to the measure of the Light bestowed upon him. Hence it is said, that the sign of the love of God is the indwelling of God's Favours in the hearts of those whom God has singled out for His Love. A learned man quotes these lines on this theme.

He hath His chosen few,
Inspired to love Him true;
Elect expressly so
In ages long ago;

Elect, or ever He
Fashioned them forth to be
The vessels of His Love,
His Benefits to prove.

Contemporary with al-Muhāsibī was Dhu 'l-Nūn the Egyptian (d.246/861), whose tombstone at Giza still survives. He is generally credited with having introduced the idea of gnosis (*ma'rifa*) into Sufism, but this would appear to be incorrect since the conception certainly occurs in the fragments of earlier ascetics. Dhu 'l-Nūn is represented in Sufi biographies as an almost legendary figure, half-mystic half-chemist; he is said to have known the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and to have been familiar with the Hermetic wisdom. A number of short treatises of extremely doubtful authenticity are attributed to him; his poems and prayers, so much as are preserved of them, give a truer impression of his mode of thought, which is marked by distinctly pantheistic tendencies.

O God, I never hearken to the voices of the beasts or the rustle of the trees, the splashing of waters or the song of birds, the whistling of the wind or the rumble of thunder, but I sense in them a testimony to Thy Unity (*wahdāniya*), and a proof of Thy Incomparableness; that Thou art the All-prevailing, the All-knowing, the All-wise, the All-just,

the All-true, and that in Thee is neither overthrow nor ignorance nor folly nor injustice nor lying. O God, I acknowledge Thee in the proof of Thy handiwork and the evidence of Thy acts: grant me, O God, to seek Thy Satisfaction with my satisfaction, and the Delight of a Father in His child, remembering Thee in my love for Thee, with serene tranquillity and firm resolve.⁷

In his poetry Dhu 'l-Nūn uses the passionate language of the devoted lover, as Rābi'a of Basra had done before him, and so helped to fix a tradition that is thereafter so prominent a characteristic of Sufi literature.

I die, and yet not dies in me
The ardour of my love for Thee,
Nor hath Thy Love, my only goal,
Assuaged the fever of my soul.

To Thee alone my spirit cries;
In Thee my whole ambition lies,
And still Thy Wealth is far above
The poverty of my small love.

I turn to Thee in my request,
And seek in Thee my final rest;
To Thee my loud lament is brought,
Thou dwellest in my secret thought.

However long my sickness be,
This wearisome infirmity,
Never to men will I declare
The burden Thou hast made me bear.

To Thee alone is manifest
The heavy labour of my breast,
Else never kin nor neighbours know
The brimming measure of my woe.

A fever burns below my heart
And ravages my every part;
It hath destroyed my strength and stay,
And smouldered all my soul away.

Guidest Thou not upon the road
 The rider wearied by his load,
 Delivering from the steeps of death
 The traveller as he wandereth?

Didst Thou not light a Beacon too
 For them that found the Guidance true
 But carried not within their hand
 The faintest glimmer of its brand?

O then to me Thy Favour give
 That, so attended, I may live,
 And overwhelm with ease from Thee
 The rigour of my poverty.⁸

Far bolder and more immoderate in the language of pantheism is Abū Yazīd (Bāyazīd) of Bistam, the Persian (d.261/875), first of the "intoxicated" Sufis who, transported upon the wings of mystical fervour, found God within his own soul and scandalised the orthodox by ejaculating, "Glory to Me! How great is My Majesty!" His ecstatic utterances (*shathiyāt*) were a grave embarrassment to his more "sober" brethren, until they developed the technique of interpreting them as innocent of the blasphemy that to the uninitiated seemed all too apparent in them; al-Junaid himself, a very lucid and subtle thinker and no "drunkard", exercised his ingenuity in writing a commentary upon them.⁹ Abū Yazīd was also the first to take the Prophet's Ascension (*mi'rāj*) as a theme for expressing his own mystical experience, in this setting a fashion which others later followed.¹⁰

I saw that my spirit was borne to the heavens. It looked at nothing and gave no heed, though Paradise and Hell were displayed to it, for it was freed of phenomena and veils. Then I became a bird, whose body was of Oneness and whose wings were of Everlastingness, and I continued to fly in the air of the Absolute, until I passed into the sphere of Purification, and gazed upon the field of

Eternity and beheld there the tree of Oneness. When I looked I myself was all those. I cried: 'O Lord, with my egoism I cannot attain to Thee, and I cannot escape from my selfhood. What am I to do?' God spake: 'O Abū Yazīd, thou must win release from thy thou-ness by following my Beloved (sc. Muhammad). Smear thine eyes with the dust of his feet and follow him continually'.

Similar in spirit is another narrative attributed to Abū Yazīd.¹¹

Once He raised me up and stationed me before Him, and said to me, 'O Abū Yazīd, truly My creation desire to see thee.' I said, 'Adorn me in Thy Unity, and clothe me in Thy Selfhood, and raise me up to Thy Oneness, so that when Thy creation see me they will say, We have seen Thee: and Thou wilt be That, and I shall not be there at all'.

Here we may observe fully developed the doctrine of passing away in God (*fanā'*) which from Abū Yazīd's time onwards assumes a central position in the structure of Sufi theory. It was after all not a difficult transition to make from saying that all else but God is nothing (which is the logical outcome of the extreme ascetic teaching that the world is worthless and only God's service is a proper preoccupation of the believer's heart), to claiming that when self as well as the world has been cast aside the mystic has passed away into God.

Credit for reconciling this daring but logical development with the orthodox doctrines of the Divine Unity (*tauhīd*) is sometimes assigned to Ahmad b. 'Īsā al-Kharrāz (d.286/899);¹² however, his *Kitāb al-Sidq*, which alone survives of his writings, is pitched at a somewhat lower level of thought. Nevertheless this little book is full of interest and significance to the student of mysticism. The author was at pains to prove that all the prophets of

old followed the kind of life which the Sufis sought to attain.¹³ The climax of the treatise is an eloquent and, as it seems, authentic description of the state of intimacy with God.¹⁴

Know that the disciple who is seeking after truthfulness acts in all his affairs in the fear of God, keeping watch over his heart, his purpose, and his members, and examining them. He concentrates his purpose, being afraid lest aught which concerns him not should enter into it, and being afraid of heedlessness, lest his bodily motions as manifested in his external members cause him to be somewhat wanting, and lest the purposes which enter inwardly into his heart perturb his (single) purpose. Thus he frees himself from all such motions, even if they be right and proper: for the heart is overwhelmed by an urgent desire that his recollection (of God) shall be perpetual, and his purpose single. If he continues thus, his heart gains a quick understanding, and his thoughts become clear, and light lodges in his heart: he draws near to God, and God overwhelms his heart and purpose. Then he speaks, and his heart surges with the recollection of God: the love of God lurks deeply hidden in his inmost heart, cleaving to his mind, and never leaving it. Then his soul is joyfully busied with secret converse with God, and passionate study, and ardent talk. So he is, eating and drinking, sleeping (and waking), in all his motions: for when God's nearness takes possession of a man's heart, it overwhelms all else, both the inward infiltrations of the purposes and the outward motions of the members. Thereafter that man continues, going or coming, taking or giving: there prevails in him the purpose which has ruled his mind, namely, the love of God and His nearness.

So far as reliable documentation goes, it appears that the responsibility for developing the doctrine of *fana'* as an integral part of a well-coordinated theosophy belongs to al-Junaid of Baghdad (d.298/910), pupil of al-Muhāsibī, called in later times "the Shaikh of the Order," by far the most original and penetrating intellect among the Sufis of

his time. Whereas others before him and his contemporaries had by brilliant flashes of intuition grasped one or another of the spiritual heights now falling to their mastery, he, standing as it were upon the supreme mountain-peak of analytical thought, took within his ranging vision the whole landscape of mystical speculation stretching below him, and with an artist's eye brought it to comprehension and unity upon a single canvas. In a series of letters and brief tracts brought but recently to light,¹⁵ he sketches in profoundly subtle, deeply meditated language a consistent system of Islamic theosophy which has certainly not been improved upon, and which formed the nucleus of all subsequent elaboration.

The classic definition of *tauhid* given by al-Junaid, and quoted by many later writers, is that it consists in "the separation of the Eternal from that which was originated in time."¹⁶ Taking as his point of departure the pre-eternal covenant sworn by man with God and referred to (according to Sufi exegesis) in the Koran,¹⁷ he views the entire course of history as the quest of man to fulfil that covenant and return to "the state in which he was before he was." In a comment on the conversation said to have taken place between man and God on that remote occasion, al-Junaid writes :¹⁸ "In this verse God tells you that He spoke to them at a time when they (sc. Adam's descendants) did not exist, except so far as they existed in Him. This existence is not the same type of existence as is usually attributed to God's creatures; it is a type of existence which only God knows and only He is aware of. God knows their existence; embracing them He sees them in the beginning when they are non-existent and unaware of their future existence in this world. The existence of these is timeless." Elsewhere he remarks: "In this verse God has stated that He spoke to them when they had no formal existence. This is possible because God perceives

them in their spiritual existence. This spiritual existence connotes their knowledge of God spiritually without in any way postulating their being aware of their own individuality."

Man's separate and individual existence in the universe, according to al-Junaid, is the consequence of a deliberate act of God's Will, Who at the same time desires to "overcome" man's existence by the outpouring of His own Being. Commenting on the well known *hadith*, "When I love him, I am his ear, so that he hears by Me, etc."¹⁹, he remarks, "Then it is God Who strengthens him, Who enables him to achieve this, Who guides him and gives him the vision of what He wishes in the manner He wishes, so that he achieves rightness and is in accord with Truth. This then is the Act of God in him, the Gift of God to him and only to him. It is not to be attributed positively to the worshipper, since it does not originate from him."

In a definition he describes Sufism (*tasawwuf*) as meaning that "God should cause thee to die from thyself and to live in Him."²⁰ This "dying-to-self" is called by al-Junaid *fanā'* (a term reminiscent of the Koranic phrase "Every thing is perishing (*fān*ⁱⁿ) except His Face"²¹; the "life-in-Him" is named *baqā'* (continuance). By passing away from self the mystic does not cease to exist, in the true sense of existence, as an individual; rather his individuality, which is an inalienable gift from God, is perfected, transmuted and eternalised through God and in God. At the same time the return to continued existence is a source of trial (*balā'*) and affliction, for man is still apart and veiled from God; and so al-Junaid uses the imagery of the lover yearning after the Beloved, yet taking intense joy in the suffering which this separation causes him. Having enjoyed mystically anew the experience of life-in-God, and being restored to material life—"after their union with Him, He separates them from Himself

(and grants them their individuality again), for He makes them absent (from this world) when they are in union with Him, and makes them present (in this world) when He has separated them from Himself"—thereafter "the souls of those who have known God seek after the verdant pastures, the beautiful vistas, the fresh green gardens" and every lovely thing in this physical world, to console them, as examples of God's handiwork, for the loss of the Artist's own Presence. It is to this dual sense of union and separation that al-Junaid refers in a short poem.²²

Now I have known, O Lord,
 What lies within my heart;
 In secret, from the world apart,
 My tongue hath talked with my Adored.

So in a manner we
 United are, and One;
 Yet otherwise disunion
 Is our estate eternally.

Though from my gaze profound
 Deep awe hath hid Thy Face,
 In wondrous and ecstatic Grace
 I feel Thee touch my inmost ground.

When al-Junaid in this way was succeeding to escape from the mortal peril of preaching the apotheosis of man, his junior contemporary al-Hallāj was not so fortunate in his reading of the riddle of existence, and being condemned for blasphemy he was executed upon the cross in 309/922. He went along with al-Junaid so far as seeing in the supreme mystical experience a reunion with God; but he then proceeded further and taught that man may thus be viewed as very God Incarnate, taking as his example not, as one might suppose, Muhammad, but Jesus. He did not claim Divinity for himself, though the utterance which led to his execution, "I am the Truth" (*ana 'l-haqq*)

seemed to his judges to have that implication. The context of this startling paradox occurs in his *Kitāb al-Tawāsīn*.²³

If ye do not recognise God, at least recognise His signs. I am that sign, I am the Creative Truth (*ana 'l-haqq*), because through the Truth I am a truth eternally. My friends and teachers are Iblis and Pharaoh. Iblis was threatened with Hell-fire, yet he did not recant. Pharaoh was drowned in the sea, yet he did not recant, for he would not acknowledge anything between him and God. And I, though I am killed and crucified, and though my hands and feet are cut off—I do not recant.

In al-Hallāj we have the supreme example—even more extreme than Abū Yazīd—of the “intoxicated” Sufi; so complete was his absorption in serving the Will of God as he conceived it to be that he was utterly reckless of the consequences, which in his case were certainly disastrous. The legend of his death invests him with extraordinary nobility, and challenges comparison with the Christian story of the Crucifixion which may well have been in his mind as his torturers made ready to slay him.

When he was brought to be crucified and saw the cross and the nails, he turned to the people and uttered a prayer, ending with the words: ‘And these Thy servants who are gathered to slay me, in zeal for Thy religion and in desire to win Thy favour, forgive them, O Lord, and have mercy upon them; for verily if Thou hadst revealed to them that which Thou hast revealed to me, they would not have done what they have done; and if Thou hadst hidden from me that which Thou hast hidden from them, I should not have suffered this tribulation. Glory unto Thee in whatsoever Thou doest, and glory unto Thee in whatsoever Thou wiltest’.²⁴

The century which produced al-Muhāsibī, al-Junaid and al-Hallāj abounded in Sufis of only comparatively

less significance, each of whom made his special contribution to building up the structure of Islamic mysticism. Not least important of these was al-Hākīm al-Tirmidhī (fl. 280/893), the psychologist of Sufism, whose lost work the *Khatm al-wilāya* in which he argued that the saints had a "Seal" as well as the prophets compelled him to flee for his life, and was afterwards a source of Ibn 'Arabī's theory of sainthood and prophetship.²⁵ In a review of this kind, however, it is impossible to include more than a brief account of the leading figures, and we conclude the present chapter by quoting a few verses of Yahyā b. Mu'ādh of Raiy in Persia (d. 258/871), the associate of Abū Yazīd, and of Abu 'l-Husain al-Nūrī of Baghdad (d.295/907), al-Junaid's colleague.

In doing so, we must draw attention to the important part played by mystical verse in the Sufi life. Many anecdotes of the early Sufis relate how fond they were of quoting love-poetry, often in the first place of a purely human character, which they interpreted allegorically to accord with their own passionate spiritualism. We have seen how such saints as Rābi'a and Dhu'l-Nūn composed original verse, sometimes of high quality, in which they expressed their emotions in frankly erotic imagery. Fully to understand the later poetry of Sufism, especially that of the Persian school—though this is equally characteristic of writers like Ibn al-Fārid and Ibn 'Arabī—it is necessary to keep in mind how fundamental in Sufi thought is this allegory of love, and how readily in their minds human and Divine imagery is interchanged.

Yahyā b. Mu'ādh writes:

The lover joys to dwell
In love with Love;
Yet some, as strange I tell,
Do Love reprove.

About God's Love I hover
 While I have breath,
 To be His perfect lover
 Until my death.²⁶

In another short poem he gives us an interesting glimpse of the Sufi ritual of dancing, which had already so early begun to enliven their austerities and was later to become an essential feature of their spiritual life.²⁷

The Truth we have not found;
 So, dancing, we beat the ground;
 Is dancing reproved in me
 Who wander distraught for Thee?
 In Thy valley we go around,
 And therefore we beat the ground.

A man came to Abu 'l-Husain al-Nūrī on the eve of the Bairam festival, and asked him what garments he proposed to wear upon the morrow. He answered:²⁸

'To-morrow is the festival!' they cried,
 'What robe wilt thou put on?' And I replied:
 'The robe He gave me, Who hath poured for me
 Full many a bitter potion. Poverty
 And Patience are my raiment, and they cover
 A heart that sees at every feast its Lover.
 Can there be finer garb to greet the Friend,
 Or visit Him, than that which He doth lend?
 When Thou, my Expectation, art not near,
 Each moment is an age of grief and fear;
 But while I may behold and hear Thee, all
 My days are glad, and Life's a Festival!'

On another occasion al-Nūrī declaimed:²⁹

So passionate my love is, I do yearn
 To keep His memory constantly in mind;
 But O, the ecstasy with which I burn
 Sears out my thoughts, and strikes my memory blind!

And, marvel upon marvel, ecstasy
Itself is swept away: now far, now near
My Lover stands, and all the faculty
Of memory is swept up in hope and fear.

The following verses, also attributed to al-Nūrī, come very close to expounding the doctrine which we have described as taught by al-Junaid.³⁰

I had supposed that, having passed away
From self in concentration, I should blaze
A path to Thee; but ah! no creature may
Draw nigh Thee, save on Thy appointed ways.
I cannot longer live, Lord, without Thee;
Thy Hand is everywhere: I may not flee.

Some have desired through hope to come to Thee,
And Thou hast wrought in them their high design:
Lo! I have severed every thought from me,
And died to selfhood, that I might be Thine.
How long, my heart's Beloved? I am spent:
I can no more endure this banishment.