

THE SUFIS: INTRODUCTION

THE EXPERIENCES OF MUHAMMAD

In Islam it has been said that one cannot help feeling that Sufism is so radical a distortion of the orthodox doctrine as to constitute almost a separate religion.

The Qur'an is more of a unity than the old testament, but it has been closely linked with one man, the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad was an able administrator, a careful politician and a brave soldier, but he was primarily and always a prophet and a man of God.

the question is, was he a mystic?

he was 40 years old when he began receiving the Qur'an as a result of his solitary vigils away from Macca into the desert.

He was asleep in a cave on Mount Hira when the angel Gabriel brought him the command of God. He saw a colossal figure with feet astride the horizon, and wherever he looked there was this figure.

Gabriel came and drew near with a coverlet of brocade whereon there was some writing, and said, "Read". He pressed Muhammad with it tightly so that he thought it was death, and said "Read".

Muhammad asked, 'what shall I read?' and he recited chapter 96 of the Qur'an, traditionally the first to be revealed.

the Qur'an is not an autobiography, but there are occasional glimpses of the prophet's religious experiences which are sharp and impressive.

in Surah 53:6-18 there is a description of the experience of this figure.

He stood upright on the high horizon, then he came near and let himself down/ until he was two bow-lengths near or almost, / and he told his servant what he told him. He saw him again at a second descent, / by the plum-tree at the boundary. ./ When the tree was strangely enveloped. / the eye did not turn aside or pass its limits. / and truly he saw one of the greatest signs of his Lord.

there is no suggestion in the Qur'an that this celestial figure was Gabriel but some scholars think Muhammad thought it was God. If this was so then God, is not excessively transcendent in the Qur'an.

THE NIGHT JOURNEY

another possible experience of importance to the Sufis, but which has only a tabularizing reference in the Qur'an is the supposed Night Journey of the prophet to Jerusalem, and his ascension from there to heaven.

the biographer reports. that "the apostle's body remained where it was but God removed his spirit by night."

Later legend, cherished to this day, saw the prophet riding on a winged mule and flying up to the seventh heaven, and for this mystics this symbolized the soul's ascent thru successive circles up to God.

but in the Qur'an there is only a brief and enigmatic statement: 'Glory to him who travelled with his servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Farther Mosque.' it would be unwise to read a mystical meaning into this verse alone, yet Jerusalem is Islam's third most sacred city because of the 'night journey.'

More significant are the "mantle verses in chaps 73 and 74 of the Qur'an:

O you who are wrapped in garments/ watch almost the whole night/
or half the night, a little less or more. . .

O you who are wrapped in your mantle, / arise and warn!/
magnify your Lord, purify your garments. . ./wait patiently for your Lord.

ever since Elijah the prophet, the mantle has symbolized prophetic authority, even in Arabia.

but the most plausible idea is that the mantle was used by Muhammad as part of a deliberate technique to induce a mystical state. It was not a robe, but a 'tent' thrown over the head, to isolate the wearer from sense distraction and enable him to concentrate his mind. The prophet would then achieve a state of trance or separation from the physical world, leading to self-control and union with God.

That the prophet had unusual experiences is generally admitted but it is also true he felt revulsion from the antics of the ecstasies so profoundly that it urged him to suicide. '

he said: "None of God's creatures was more hateful to me than an ecstatic poet or a man possessed. . I will go to the top of the mountain and throw myself down that I may kill myself and gain rest." but then the figure appeared astride the horizon and called him the Apostle of God.

Not only visions and voices but the contents of the message are important for establishing the claim that Muhammad had mystical feelings of the immanence of God as well as his transcendence.

the basic teaching is expressed in the Witness or Testimony: 'There is no god (small g) but God (capital).

this means that God is the only real deity, and God (Allah), like YHWH is a personal name which has no plural.

from epithets applied to him it is clear that God is regarded as eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and the only reality.

Later Sufis developed this to mean that only God exists, and that men are one with or identical with him.

the most commonly recited attributes of God in the Qur'an are 'in the name of God' which heads every chapter but one. "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful'

closely akin to this are the Most beautiful Names, a phrase occurring several times in the Qur'an, many of which are used to fit in with the rhymes of the verses.

this recitation of the divine attributes became popular in devotion, and mystical groups tell over the names on prayer beads and sway to and fro while chanting them.

There are said to be 99 Beautiful Names, while the hundredth remains unknown, except perhaps to saints, like the Hebrew unutterable name.

The Quran may not be systematic but it is theistic in the highest degree and is theocentric.

it has been said that Muhammad was 'God intoxicated', a description used of other mystics also.

Both by his religious experiences and by his teaching, Muhammad qualifies as a mystic. The fact that he was also eminently sane, a skillful religious reformer and an astute politician shows that he had practical qualities like other mystics.

For Muhammad, God was the sole Creator, the only Self-existent Being. It has been estimated that he would have said, w/o hesitation, that there was a time when nothing existed but God.

Whether he would have gone further and concluded, like some Sufi mystics, that there will come a time again when nothing will exist but God cannot be stated with certainty.

The Sufi mystics took the road of finding that nothing existed but God, and for some of them the world became merged into God, since he was the All, and they arrived at a virtual pantheism or monism.

Muhammad held neither this view or one that said that God was remote from the world (Deism) but the richness and variety of his teaching allowed for the development of these views.

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RISE OF SUFISM

during the same time that the law and theology of Islam were being formed, the mystical movement known as the Sufis also arose.

The word actually means wool and refers to the rough wool garments the first ascetics wore which became their trademark.

the rise of the movement had many causes but important among them was the increasing distance between ordinary Muslims and their religious leaders.

As the law and theology became established sciences, they grew more specialized and made greater demands on the people.

the majority of people could not follow the involved arguments and the result was that little guidance was found in them.

with the mystical leaders, the situation was entirely different for they offered guidance at the level of the common persons needs and their piety was highly charged with emotional content that provided warmth of religious experience otherwise lacking.

thus Sufi really means anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this.

Sufism then, includes all those tendencies in Islam which seek the direct communion of God and humans. It is a spiritual experience which claims a knowledge of reality.

There was undoubtedly some Christian influence, and Muhammad himself spoke appreciatively of Christian monks whose hermitages shone as lights in the desert. In the early centuries Islamic mystics frequented Christian monasteries and studied their devotional literature.

but sufism was a natural development within Islam, both as a reaction against the worldliness resulting from the success of the Arab armies, and as a search for a more pure and inward religion. It owed little to non-Islamic sources and developed its own lines of thought and action, though it did borrow from gnosticism and Neoplatonism.

Sufism is not basically a system of ideas but, like other devotional movements it is a 'Way' a way of purification

the Sufi sought an experience of God in an emotional or contemplative mysticism.

around leading mystics there gathered groups of disciples, and the many 'orders' of Islamic mystics came to be known from the "Way" which they followed.

by the 6th Islamic century, or 12th cent. CE, mysticism had such a hold in the life of the community that it touched virtually everyone including many of the learned custodians of the law.

for more than five hundred years and into our own century, some form of mystical piety has been the effective religion of most the people in Islamic lands.

the coming of reform and modernism has criticized this as superstitious and anti intellectual but in such areas as India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, especially among rural people, it is still the reality of Islam for the majority.

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THE QUR'AN

besides the verses in the Qur'an explicitly connected to Muhammad, there are several of significance to the Sufis.

the verse: "Whether ye turn to the East or the West, there is the Face of God." and

"God is nearer to thee than thy jugular vein."

the most famous for mystics is the so called "light verse" of surah 24:35ff:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth;
the likeness of His light is as a niche
wherein is a lamp
(the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star)
kindled from a Blessed Tree,
An olive that is neither of the East nor of the West
whose oil will nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it;
Light upon Light.

These verses have been commented on by thousands of Sufis who see them as an unambiguous teaching of God's presence in all things, places, and times.

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THREE STAGES OF GROWTH

I. the golden age of mysticism --with the appearance of ascetics in the first Islamic century (622-722) the first principle was a single master mystic with a circle of disciples with intimate relationships.

These were itinerant, with no place to live and a minimum of rules but a common life. This was the basic form till the 10th cent, C.E.

since ascetism itself is not necessarily mystical there also developed an inner discipline which sought to destroy the hold of thoughts, emotions, and desires to seek God.

Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyah (d. 801) was a renowned woman who is looked upon as a kind of ideal mystic. She gave eloquent expression to this all-consuming love in her prayers:

her most famous statement was:

"O God, if I worship Thee for 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 Thy own sake, grudge me not Thy everlasting beauty."

or again

O God, whatsoever Thou has apportioned to me of worldly things, do thou give that to thy enemies; and whatsoever Thou hast apportioned to me in the world to come, give that to Thy friends; for Thou sufficest me."

The Sufis were an intellectual and aristocratic movement and emotionally aristocratic as well.

they used exercises to induce ecstasy as well as meditation and contemplation.

however the important thing was not the intellectual teaching but the direct experience of immediate intimacy with God that was the goal desired.

The various sufi schools differed in their technique, but in general all agree upon a spiritual pilgrimage that leads the devotee through ascending spiritual stages that are attainable by sheer human effort until the limit of the human's self-perfectability is reached.

thereafter there are a variety of states which are the gift of God's grace to those who seek him.

the journey reaches its climax in TAWHID or unification with God.

this however must finally come to FANA which is living in that state where the personality is lost and there is renunciation of the desire of

Union with God.

FANA must finally give way to BAGA which is the remaining or subsisting in God as a permanent condition even tho one may continue to be physically present in the world. This happens to relatively few and is arduous.

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THE SECOND PERIOD

was the formative period in the 13th century. CE when rules were established and brotherhoods were organized. the transmission of doctrine, the mystical methods, etc. were passed on through communities which were solidified and in some cases still exist today.

I will discuss some of these leaders in the next two lectures.

thTHIRD PERIOD

was the 15th century, CE when the Sufis became really popular.

it was at this time that communities resembling monasteries developed tho they resisted anything really resembling monasticism.

they considered their places a center from which the work of instruction and propagation and other activities of the order were to be conducted.

the result was an organization somewhat resembling a monastery but the sufis might not live there, rather they were engaged as wandering mendicants.

the Sufis became responsible for bringing Islam to the People.

they propagated the worship of saints and the tombs became a place of pilgrimage. When women could no longer enter the mosques by the 12th cent, ce they could still go to the shrines of saints.

WALI is a person who is him or her self of the highest spiritual attainment, and this penetration to the very Divine Being has conferred on that person miraculous powers by which they may be recognized.

even after death, walis are believed to retain miracle-working ability

Thus one of the most popular forms of piety was visiting the tombs of sufi saints.

These tombs are scattered throughout Islamic lands and some attract hundreds of thousands of pilgrims at celebrations of the saints honor.

It is thought that there exists in the world at any given time a comprehensive hierarchy of saints whose many degrees and stages culminate in the highest spiritual authority who is called the QUTB or the pole or pivot.

Whenever some member of the hierarchy passes away he is replaced by another so the invisible spiritual structure of the universe remains always intact.

These saints represent the means of the mediation of Divine Truth in the World.

The hidden imams of the Shiite Moslems serve the same function.

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DHIKR is the key method of worship and each Sufi brotherhood has its own unique form.

This simply means remembering the name of God, or recollection in obedience to a verse in the Qur'an which says: "Remember God Always."

Typically members of a brotherhood meet each week on Thursday evening for the celebration of Dhikr, which is the richest ceremonial known to the Islamic tradition.

In some cases only the name of God, "Allah" is spoken while others may chant "Allahu akbar" (God is most great). Other groups, with the aid of prayer beads, may chant the 99 names of Allah already mentioned in the Qur'an.

Often this dhikr is accompanied by swaying movements of the sufis who stand with arms linked, or whirling as the dervishes of Turkey. The tempo tends to increase with the length of the repetition.

The object of this form of devotion is to fix the mystic's mind on the unique reality of God so that all else is driven from the consciousness.

Its climax is an ecstasy which to a greater or lesser degree for individuals approximates the desired union with the Divine nature.

the study of philosophy and mysticism was pushed aside as not being exact and strict enough so many groups died out by the 18th cent. CE. in the 20th cent there is little overt Sufi practice.

the majority of Sufis accept Moslem law, the Sharia, but many feel once one is in union with God there is no need for the law.

however, the practice of the sharia is the minimum starting point for beginning the quest, tho experience is the key.

doctrine is secondary to experience and is only used to rationalize the experience.

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THE SEVEN STAGES OF PERFECTION

there are seven stages of perfection that most sufi groups agree on. but particularly in Iran, these are associated with a color.

this doctrine of light is called PHOTISM and is the technical term for the appearance of a subjective but quasi-physical light, which is sometimes associated with mystical experience.

some philosophers accept it as genuine, but explicable in terms of molecular rearrangement in the brain.

whatever the source of the light, it is associated with the seven stages:

PURIFICATION OF THE SOUL is first from thoughts and desires that are natural to humans, that is detachment. The base is the center of the experience and the light is blue which represents the lower soul.

SUBSTITUTING WITH LOVE is the second step and is a key concept in sufism. substituting impure love with the pure love of God which is reciprocal.

instead of legalism its emphasis is on God's love for the world and the soul. He loves the soul and thus loves himself.

When Allah looks at the soul of a human its like looking in a mirror.

The emphasis on the soul is a slide into Greek Philosophy with its body/soul dicotomy.

the center is in the heart and the light is yellow and it is a sign of the fidelity of faith.

PASSION is the third stage where the passion of the soul for God becomes all consuming. Desire of the soul for God is often discussed in sexual terms.

the center of this is the spirit and the light is red, the color of passion.

UNION is the forth stage where ones own carnal mind is completely subdued. one only desires what Allah wants. The center is again the heart and the light is white meaning it is limitless.

TRANSMUTATION OF THE SELF is the fifth stage in which the soul is satisfied in God. It is a passing away of the self in God and away from the self.

one is no longer conscience of individual desires

it does not mean there is no longer a 'self' but there is no distinction between God and the soul that can be experienced.

the light is green and represents the mystery of mysteries'

WONDER is the sixth stage where one is still aware of individual self but in union with Allah. It is a stage of joy and transcendence but also bewilderment.

it is the stage of the approved soul and the light is black

EVERLASTING OR ABIDING is God is the last stage. The soul is clarified (complete) Union is no longer a transient experience but the soul achieves a continued presence in God.

the mystics individuality is not lost but perfected and eternalized. the light is colorless since there are now no limits.

between the 5th and 7th stages one loses the sense of self and then regains it perfected in Allah.

FOUR CATEGORIES OF EXPERIENCE

stages along the path to FANA which are acquired by effort, is the first category. It is a process of purifying the world out of the soul.

second, is those who must go through the seven stages of experience just talked about and are guided by grace of Allah.

third is the gnostic genius or Marifa--this refers to the person who is the mystical intuitive who gains knowledge by intuition of spiritual truth. It is a gift of grace and has nothing to do with one's place on the path; it is a gift with which some are born.

fourth is sainthood or wilaya. the protege of God. Some are under the protection of Allah and this has no relationship to the path of perfection.

it is based on the Qur'an 10:63 where it says there is no fear for those under Allah's care.

there are two types of saints:

1. those chosen to be proteges of Allah for all eternity with no consideration of the path to perfection. and
2. those picked out by Allah to receive special favors which also has nothing to do with the path.

one can be a mystic of the highest order without being a wilaya.

IBN ARABI, one we will discuss more later, said all prophets are also wilaya but that the wilaya aspect is higher than the prophetic aspect.

Muhammad is the seal of the prophets so all wilaya partake in his spirit.

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SUFI DOCTRINE

Shirk is the worst sin, means association.. to associate anything with God is the worst sin one can commit. Xians are committing shirk by saying Jesus is God.

TRUTH is existential, experiential--song, exercise and dance are used to teach.

REPENTANCE is something done by those who are elect and is repentance from inattention to God, not sin. somehow forgetting God.

THE ENNEAGRAM - A Sufi Tool for self understanding

The Enneagram has a long but shrouded history.

It is reputed to have originated in Afghanistan almost 2000 years ago, perhaps in the Early years of Christian influence in Persia, and then, after the Islamic conquest of Persia, infiltrated into Moslem circles.

until this century, it remained stricly an oral tradition know only to sufi masters who would reveal to an individual disciple only the part of the Enneagram pertaining to that persons personality type.

a man the name Oscar Ichazo is credited with bringing the Sufi enneagram to public attention first in Chile and then the U.S.

Ichazo grew up in Bolivia and Peru and was taught the Sufi tradition in Bolivia by a man whose name he pledged not to reveal

through the Esalan institute at Big Sur, Calif., it became known and is now being dessiminated in many religious and secular circles throughout the U.S. since the mid 70's.

the Sufi enneagram represents a journey into self.

one may see the types in friends*or acquaintences but the main purpose is to discover one's own type

it is meant to be a "self-enlightenment" which leads to authentic personal freedom on a level never before experienced.

the term "enneagram" is derived form the Greek word "enneas," meaning nine.

according to the enneagram system, ther are nine, and only nine, types of human personality.

each personality type is identified in a negative way through ones compulsions, tho it also has positive characteristics.

a compulsion is ingrained in one's self concept and greatly influences one's behaviour, this compulsion typical of a given personality is experienced as a basic driving force.

it is not simply an obsession, but has the characteristic of prevailing in the way energy is channeled in personal behaviour, and even of being irresistible, especially when it remains unconscious and unrecognized.

discovering this compulsion characterizing one's personality involves the unveiling of the hidden but basic defensive strategy a person has developed for security and meaningful existence.

by discovering this compulsion, and making it conscious, one can choose to follow it or not.

this facing of the self is not easy, and may well be extremely threatening since the compulsion serves to protect oneself and offers personal security.

it is a kind of "death" to face ourselves in this way

it is believed this defensive mechanism is in place by no later than age six, after one has discovered the world isn't what one had hoped.

the crucial step is being willing to admit that this compulsion is a sin for compulsions are selfish as is typical of sin. they amount to a road of "self-salvation" developed by the ego and are a distortion in being as one ought to be.

all nine types are sinful in this sense, none less than any other.

in the reluctance to face negativity, people often identify their personality with the gifts characteristic of a given type.

in doing this they usually find themselves represented in a number of types.

this, of course, is a way of skirting around the threat of recognizing any real compulsion or sin

at all in themselves.

the enneagram is of no use as long as this goes on for one must discover the negativity of one's personality to make it useful.

in reverse, this strategy of compulsion developed to protect the self is fundamentally the avoidance of something.

its (the compulsions) power in one's life is felt precisely in this avoidance.

this is generally not recognized for the problem it is, indeed, it is often labeled as something one can be proud of.

the problem is that this pride makes people feel superior to those who do not have their compulsion.

thus, this tool has been and is being used by many now, particularly in religious circles, to bring self-knowledge, one of the main parts of any spiritual journey.

many claim this is even more important than the Jungian type theory solidified by Meyers-Briggs testing. especially where a spiritual journey is intended.

overview of the nine types

ONES avoid anger although they do perceive much to be distressed or upset about, it is very important to them not to become angry and not to express anger to others.

They are very dedicated to being perfect which is their idealized view of themselves.

for this they are ready to work very hard preparing their tasks, cleaning the house, etc. They are bothered when things are not done right, whether by themselves or others.

TWOS avoid recognizing they have needs. they readily see needs in others; indeed, they are preoccupied in noticing what needs others have.

they pride themselves in being helpful especially to anyone special to them. As regards themselves they do not admit they need others for any help, nor that they have needs which they should attend to themselves.

it is important to them not to admit being in need

THREES avoid failure. something drives them to be always working for success in their lives. their personality actually identifies with the successes they attain.

consequently, they will seek to avoid failure of any sort, even at great cost to themselves and others.

FOURS avoid ordinariness. It is very important to them always to be special. They experience themselves as persons of refinement and sensitivity and in no way simply as ordinary persons.

they are inclined to think others do not understand them because of the uniqueness of the feelings they have experienced, especially concerning the sorrow and even tragedy of their lives.

FIVES avoid emptiness, they are preoccupied with growing in their store of knowledge, which they seek to acquire wholly through their own efforts.

they feel a deep need to know more than they ever say to others, as though sharing everything would leave them with nothing.

it is very important not to get caught in social involvements which are boring to them, i.e, not helpful for learning something.

SIXES avoid deviance they see life as governed by laws, rules and norms and out of responsibility to the demands life makes on them they strive to avoid any neglect of their duties.

they are preoccupied that all regulations be observed, especially those given by a person in

authority or set down in writing.

they see this in terms of loyalty to the group or groups to which they belong.

SEVENS avoid pain. They are optimistic and fun-loving persons, and to them life should not be experienced as painful in any way.

They avoid noticing pain or distress in the lives of others around them.

often they fail to carry out what they have planned to do because of the difficulties and discomforts involved in its execution.

EIGHTS avoid weakness. they glory in being strong persons. they perceive life as a struggle for what is right. the fact that the world is not the way it should be means that to keep their personal dignity they must be ready to meet head on whatever is wrong and unmask its injustice and pretenses.

They like to "have it out" with others. they are watchful not to be taken advantage of, and take extreme care not to let others see them as weak in any way.

NINES avoid conflict. they feel uncomfortable with any tension or lack of harmony between people. to them nothing is as important as peace and restraint.

they have a lot of concern not only to maintain their own inner tranquillity, which is fairly easy to do, but also to keep peace among those around them.

they feel a need for others to draw them into activity, otherwise they lack incentive to do things.
~~_____~~ *add in stance toward world*
 This description barely scratches the surface of what the enneagram theory is all about but it gives you, I hope an idea of what is involved.

There are many books coming out about it so if there is interest, many are available.

Fr. Richard Rohr of Albuquerque is very much involved giving workshops and he has written a book about it also.