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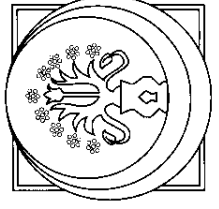
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# Beacon of Knowledge

*Essays in Honor of  
Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

*Edited by  
Mohammad H. Faghfoory*

*With a Preface by  
Huston Smith*



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## Notes on Contributors

**Ejaz Akram** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at the Catholic University of America. Mr. Akram has written numerous articles and book reviews published in scholarly journals. He is affiliated with the International Institute of Islamic Thought and is the managing-editor of the Journal of Muslim Social Scientists to which he contributes regularly.

**Mehdi Aminrazavi** was educated at Temple University and the University of Washington and is currently Associate Professor of philosophy and religion at Mary Washington College. His main area of interest includes non-Western philosophical and religious traditions, especially the school of Illumination and its founder Shaykh Shahāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī. Dr. Aminrazavi is the author of numerous articles, and the book *Suhrawardī and the School of Illumination* (1997). He co-edited *The Complete Bibliography of the Works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (with Zailan Moris) and the multi-volume *Anthology of Persian Philosophy* (with Seyyed Hossein Nasr). He is also the editor of *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia* by S. H. Nasr.

**Naṣīr ‘Aṣṣār** graduated from the faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran and joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1945. Between 1949-1964, he served as a career diplomat at Iran's embassies in Germany, Turkey, and the United Nations. After serving a year as the Director-General of the Prime Minister's Office, Mr. ‘Aṣṣār was appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister and the Director of the Office of Pious Endowments (Sāzmān-i Awqāf). Between 1972-1975, Mr. ‘Aṣṣār served as Iran's Ambassador to the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and Secretary-General. Before the 1979 revolution he was Undersecretary for Political and Parliamentary Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and lecturer at the University of Tehran where he taught courses on collective security and regional defense pacts.

**Osman Bakar**, a leading figure of the Malaysian intellectual scene, is Associate Professor of philosophy of science at the

## The Real Shams-i Tabrīzī

William C. Chittick

Few people who have heard of Rūmī are unfamiliar with the name Shams-i Tabrīzī. Little is known about him for certain. The only thing that is completely clear is that his arrival in Konya marked a decisive turning point in Rūmī's life and led to his prodigious output of inspired poetry. Given the important role that Rūmī's poetry has played in Persianate Islam, one can easily conclude that Shams played a providential role in Islamic history. Seyyed Hossein Nasr made this point in a study of Rūmī published almost thirty years ago:

There is no doubt that Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī was not just a Sufi master for Rūmī. Jalāl al-Dīn had already practiced Sufism for many years before meeting Shams al-Dīn. It seems, rather, that Shams al-Dīn was a divinely sent spiritual influence which in a sense 'exteriorized' Rūmī's inner contemplative states in the form of poetry.<sup>1</sup>

The accounts of Shams in the popular literature on Rūmī in the West have tended to emphasize the dramatic sides to the Shams legend. We are given the picture of a wild lover of God who was utterly unconcerned with societal and religious conventions. Only in the past few years have Western scholars begun to look closely at the most important source on his life and teachings, his own *Maqālāt* or "Sayings," a 700-page book that became available in a good edition only in 1990.<sup>2</sup>

The task of producing a critical text of the *Maqālāt* was accomplished by the Iranian scholar Muhammad 'Alī Muwāḥḥid. It made especially difficult because the original manuscripts represent scattered notes apparently taken down by different people listening to Shams as he spoke. No final version was ever prepared, and the texts are full of breaks, ellipses, and obscure

references. Many of the sayings are anecdotal, much like the collection of Rūmī's sayings known as *Fīhi mā fīhi*. A rather high percentage recount Shams's personal history and tell of the various teachers and shaykhs whom he had met. Although the legend tells us that Rūmī spent most of his time only with Shams, the sayings were clearly not taken down by Rūmī himself, and in many cases the text suggests that many people were in attendance while Shams was speaking.

One of the most striking features of Shams's personality that comes out clearly in the *Maqālāt* is his utter certainty concerning his own highly elevated spiritual rank. He had no doubt that he was, in Dr. Nasr's words, "a divinely sent spiritual influence." His remarks about himself led Annemarie Schimmel to speak of his "immense spiritual pride." (3) A less sympathetic observer might be tempted to call him "arrogant" or "outrageously pretentious." Shams was perfectly aware of how his words must appear to those unaware of his inner states. He says,

These people have a right to find my words un-congenial. All my words come in the way of magnificence [*kibriyā*]. They all appear as pretension [*da'wā*]. The Koran and the words of Muhammad all came in the way of need [*niyāz*]. Hence it all appeared as need. They hear words that are not in the path of seeking or need – words so high that, if you look up at them, your hat falls off. But, this assertion of magnificence is not a fault for God. If they find fault, it is as if they are saying, "God asserts His magnificence." They speak the truth, and where is the fault?<sup>1304</sup>

The texts are full of statements in which Shams appears to be making outrageous claims. Here are just a few of them:

When someone finds the way to be my companion, his mark is that companionship with others becomes cold and bitter for him – not such that it becomes cold while he continues to be

their companion, but rather such that he can no longer be their companion.<sup>74</sup>

My existence is an elixir that does not need to be poured on copper. When it is put before the copper, all of it becomes gold.<sup>148</sup>

In this world I have nothing to do with these commoners – I haven't come for them. Those people who are the world's guides to the Real – I have my finger on their pulse.<sup>82</sup>

When those who are the top shaykhs of the Sufi paths reach me, they have to start their practice all over from the beginning.<sup>92</sup>

I'm not one of those who'd go out to meet someone. . . . If God were to say to me ten times "Peace be upon you," I wouldn't answer. After the tenth time, I'd say, "and upon You." I'd make myself deaf.<sup>273</sup>

Part of the legend of Shams, partly confirmed in the *Maqālāt*, was that he had little use for book-learning. However, this does not mean that he himself was unlearned. His frequent mention of his own teachers and his use of the traditional sources show that he knew the Islamic sciences well. It even comes out that for a time he was a teacher in a Qur'ān school, and the school was large enough to have many instructors and a head-master. Moreover, in many passages, Shams refers to his own knowledge of jurisprudence.

Someone asked my friend about me: "Is he a jurist [*faqīh*] or a fakir [*faqīr*]?"

He said, "Both jurist and fakīr."

He said, "How is it then that all he talks about is jurisprudence?"



He answered, "Because his poverty [*faqr*] is not of the superficial kind such that it would be proper to speak of it with this group. It would be a pity to speak of it with these people. He brings out words by way of learning, and he speaks the secrets by way of learning and in the curtain of learning, so that his own words may not be spoken."<sup>326</sup>

Shams's contempt for book-learning was aimed not only at jurists and exoteric scholars, but also at the circles of dervishes. In one passage he even tells us that he prefers the company of jurists to that of the Sufis:

At first I did not sit with jurists, I sat with dervishes. I used to say, "The jurists are strangers to being dervishes." Then I came to know what it is to be a dervish and where they are, and now I would rather sit with the jurists than with those dervishes. At least the jurists have taken trouble. But the dervishes just brag about being dervishes. I mean, where among them is a dervish?<sup>249</sup>

Shams's basic complaint about the dervishes that he met was that they did not live up to their high calling. In one typical passage he writes,

The speech of the lovers has an awesomeness... But I am talking about the love that is true, the searching that is true... I would not give you the dirt off the old shoe of a true lover for the "lovers" and "shaykhs" of these days.<sup>91</sup>

In another passage he refers to the proliferation of false masters as well as what one might well understand as his own function. He was a cat who had come to rid Islam of mice.

Most of these shaykhs have been bandits in the religion of Muhammad. All these mice in the house of Muhammad's

religion have worked ruin. However, God has cats among His dear servants, and they clear away these mice. If a hundred thousand mice should come together, they wouldn't have the courage to look at the cat, because the cat's awesomeness would not leave them any collectedness.<sup>613</sup>

What may surprise those who are familiar only with the Shams legends is that the key attribute that Shams encourages in his listeners is "following" (*muṭāba'at*), that is, following the Sunnah of the prophet Muhammad. He certainly had in mind the Qur'ānic verse, "Say [O Muhammad!]: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you'" (3:31).

The lover alone knows the states of the lover – especially these sorts of lovers who go forward in following. If I were to show my following, even the great ones would despair.

"Following" is that one not complain about commandments. And if he does complain, he must not abandon following.<sup>119</sup>

Needless to say, Shams's idea of following does not always conform to that espoused by jurists and preachers. Nonetheless, it certainly does demand following the *Sharī'ah* with care. Take, for example, this passage:

The Prophet, upon whom be peace, said, "There is no *ṣalāt* without the recitation [of the *Fātiḥa*]." He also said, "There is no *ṣalāt* without the presence of the heart [*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*]."

A group of people supposed that when they find presence of the heart, they have no need for the form of the prayer. They said, "Seeking the means after obtaining the goal is ugly." In their opinion, they have taken the right position, because the state [*ḥāl*] has shown itself completely, along with sanctity [*walāyat*] and the presence of the heart. Nonetheless, for them to abandon the prayer is a defect for them.

[I say to someone like this:] "Did the Messenger – God bless him – achieve this perfection that you have achieved, or not?"

If he says that he did not, then they should cut off his head and kill him. And if he says, "Yes, he did achieve it," then I say to him: "Then why don't you follow such a noble messenger, the unparalleled good-news-giver and warner, the *light-giving lamp* [33:46]?"

If there happens to be one of the saints of God, whose sanctity has been established such that there is no doubt whatsoever, and there is also this fellow Rashīd al-Dīn, whose sanctity has not become manifest; and, if the saint abandons the outward form, whereas Rashīd al-Dīn is assiduous in the outward form, I will take after Rashīd al-Dīn and not even greet the saint.<sup>140</sup>

Of course, "following" the Prophet demands much more than simply performing the daily prayer, even in the midst of performing the prayer. As Shams puts it, "Following Muhammad is that he went on the *mi'rāj*, so you also should go in his tracks"<sup>645</sup>. The key to true following, then, is presence with God. Shams explains this in reference to a hadīth often cited in Sufi circles, "An hour's meditation is better than sixty years of worship." This *Hadīth* lends itself to the type of misunderstanding that Shams criticizes in those who neglect following. In interpreting it, he has an eye on another well-known *Hadīth*, *al-ṣalāt mi'rāj al-mu'min*, "The daily prayer is the *mi'rāj* of the believer."

What is meant by this "meditation" is the presence of the sincere dervish – an act of worship in which there is no false show whatsoever. Certainly that is better than outward worship without presence. The *ṣalāt* can be made up for, but there is no making up for [lack of] presence.

Muhammadan fakirs strive in this: "There is no *ṣalāt* without presence." It is not that they abandon the *ṣalāt*'s form so that the ego may be happy. . . .

If Gabriel comes during presence, he will be given a slap. The Prophet had not yet reached presence when he said to Gabriel, "Come on!" Gabriel replied, "No, if I approach another inch, I will be burnt to cinders."<sup>208-9</sup>

Shams' learning often shows up in his frequent commentaries on Koranic verses. Sometimes he quotes other commentators, but then he will go off on his own. On occasion, he makes fun of the shortcomings of the usual sort of literal-minded commentaries that people read. As he remarks in one passage, "A literal translation of the Koran's words? Any five-year child can tell you that"<sup>634-5</sup>.

In one passage, he even makes fun of his own commentaries, which clearly must have set the minds of many of his listeners reeling:

They said, "Make an exegesis of the Koran for us." I said, "As you know, my exegesis is not from Muhammad, nor is it from God. My 'I' also denies it. I say to it, 'How can you deny it? Leave me alone, go away. Why do you give me headaches?'"

"It says, 'No, I won't go. I'll just keep on denying.' And that's my own self – it doesn't understand my words."

"This is like the calligrapher who used to write three kinds of calligraphy. One, he read but no one else. Another, he read and others did too. The third, neither he nor anyone else could read. That's me when I talk. I don't understand, nor does anyone else."<sup>272</sup>

When Shams criticizes outward learning, he does so because it has been undertaken for the wrong reasons, or because it acts as a barrier to a deeper understanding. As he says,

The reason that these people who study in the *madrasahs* do so is [that they think to themselves], "We'll become teachers, and we'll run *madrasahs*."

They say, "Good deeds – one must act beautifully." They talk of such things in these assemblies so that they can get positions.

Why do you study knowledge for the sake of worldly mouthfuls? This rope is for people to come out of the well, not for them to go from this well into other wells.

You must bind yourself to knowing this: "Who am I? What substance am I? Why have I come? Where am I going? From whence is my root? At this moment what am I doing? Toward what have I turned my face?"<sup>178</sup>

Many passages quote Shams as pointing out the shortcomings of well-known exoteric scholars, such as the great Koran commentator Fakhr-i Rāzī.

If it were fitting to perceive these meanings by study and debate, then it would be necessary for Abū Yazīd and Junayd to rub their heads in the dirt out of regret before Fakhr-i Rāzī. They would need to become his student for a hundred years.<sup>128</sup>

However, Shams extends his critique of scholarship even to some of the well-known Sufi authors, including Qushayrī, author of the famous *Risāla* or "Treatise." Notice that he does this in keeping with his stress on the necessity of "following."

I would not trade the least report from Muhammad for a hundred thousand treatises by Qushayrī, Qurayshī, and others. They have no flavor, no taste. They have not found the tasting of that.<sup>209</sup>

In one passage, he criticizes Fakhr-i Rāzī precisely for not having been a true follower of Muhammad.

What nerve Fakhr-i Rāzī had! He said, "Muhammad Tāzī [the Arab, i.e., the Prophet] says this, and Muhammad Rāzī says that." Isn't he the apostate of the time?! Isn't he an unqualified unbeliever? Unless he repents.<sup>288</sup>

One needs to remember that when Shams highlights the weakness of exoteric learning, he is speaking to people who already have that learning. He does not mean to suggest that it is worthless. If he sometimes preferred the company of jurists to the company of dervishes, it was precisely because many of the dervishes were proud that they knew little of the Islamic sciences, and at the same time they were ignorant of spiritual and divine things. One of these dervishes seems to have been called Sayf Zangānī. His name tells us that he was from Zanjan, a city near Tabriz. Concerning him Shams says,

Who is Sayf Zangānī that he should speak ill of Fakhr-i Rāzī? If Fakhr-i Rāzī were to break wind, a hundred like Sayf would come into existence and disappear. I defile his grave and his mouth. My compatriot? What kind of compatriot! Dirt on his head!<sup>64</sup>

Shams, in short, had little patience with stupidity. He targeted the pretensions of his listeners and told them to empty themselves for the sake of God.

Whoever becomes a completely learned man is completely deprived of God and completely full of himself. A Byzantine who becomes a Muslim right now finds a scent of God. But when someone is full, a hundred thousand prophets can't empty him.<sup>206</sup>

Shams was particularly hard on hypocrisy, which is to be full

of one's own intentions while claiming to worship God.

The "God is greater" of the prayer is for sacrificing the ego. When will He be greater? As long as pride and existence are within you, you must say "God is greater," and you must intend the sacrifice. How long do you want to take the idol under your arm and come to the prayer? You say, "God is greater," but, like the hypocrites, you firmly hold that idol under your arm.<sup>303-4</sup>

Part of hypocrisy is the attempt by many believers to put God into their service, rather than submitting themselves to His service.

Someone says, "O God, do this! O God, do that!" This is exactly as if he were to say, "O king, lift up that pot and bring it over here!" He's made the king into his own blessed butler! He commands him, "Don't do that, do this!"<sup>17,266</sup>

The goal of the Sufis is to become a friend of God. However, Shams did not think that many of the dervishes whom he knew did much more than talk about being God's friend:

I wonder what these people think that friendship [dūstī] with God is. This God who created the heavens, who created the earth, who made the universe appear – is His friendship gained so easily that you come in and sit down before Him, you talk and you listen? Do you fancy that this is a soup kitchen? You come in and you drink it down? Then you just leave?<sup>236-7</sup>

In one passage Shams sums up the spiritual path by saying that it comes down to two things: knowledge of *tawhīd* (the assertion of divine unity) and emptiness before God.

*Know that there is no God but He* [47:19]. This is a commandment to knowledge. And ask forgiveness for your

sin [47:19]. This is a commandment to negate this existence, because it is contingent. How can this existence, which is contingent, see the Knower of eternity?<sup>218,9</sup>

Such knowledge of *tawhīd* is clearly not theoretical knowledge alone. It demands the transformation of the soul. I leave you with one more saying that nicely sums up the message of both Shams and Rūmī.

Someone said, "God is one."

I replied, "So, what's it to you? You are in the world of dispersion – hundreds of thousands of dust motes, each of the dust motes scattered, withered, and frozen in the worlds. *He indeed Is. He is eternal Being.* What's it to you? For you are not."<sup>280</sup>