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June 19, 2014

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RELIGION

Sufism and the Path of Love

Posted: 04/13/2011 7:00 pm

Before modern times, sharia-mindedness played a much more limited role among Muslims than it does today. No doubt jurists devoted a great deal of effort to writing books on the fine points of law, and theologians dedicated their lives to investigating the mysteries of the divine nature. But these were the pursuits of scholars who often had little or no influence on the lived Islam of the people.

Those who asked questions about the meaning of life or felt the call of love for God did not seek guidance from jurists or theologians. Instead, they turned to teachers experienced in matters of the spirit. These teachers were called by a variety of names, "Sufi" being one of many. They were usually deeply learned in both jurisprudence and theology, but they considered these the groundwork for the real task of becoming fully human. From around the 11th century, many of these teachers reached out to vast audiences through poetry. The best known examples remain Ibn al-Farid in Arabic, Rumi and Attar in Persian and Yunus Emre in Turkish.

During the same period there was a flowering of prose works on love. One of the most influential authors in the Persianate lands was a man by the name of Ahmad Sam'ani, who died in 1140, 65 years before the birth of Rumi. He was a member of an eminent family of scholars from Merv, a great cosmopolitan city in Central Asia. Unlike some of his more famous relatives, he wrote only one book, a 600-page discourse on the 99 most beautiful names of God. During his own lifetime he was known as an eloquent preacher.

Sam'ani explains that God is motivated by love and compassion in everything he does. No matter which of the divine names we take as a starting point for meditation, we will find that it serves the purposes of love. This includes not only gentle names like merciful and forgiving, but also awe-inspiring names like severe and avenger.

Along with others who wrote on the same topic, Sam'ani understood love as an immediate corollary of *tawhīd*. God, in his absolute unity, embraces an infinity of possibilities. He desired to make these manifest: "I loved to be recognized," as the famous saying puts it, "so I created the creatures that they might recognize Me." Otherwise, why bother with creation?

On the human side, recognizing God's merciful self-manifestation stirs up love for him. Since he alone is real, love for anything else is ephemeral and unreal. In any case, people cannot avoid love. They are full of desires, wants, wishes, loves, passions, cravings (as the consumer society knows so well). Created in the image of a loving God, they cannot not love. Their problem is that they cannot see beyond their noses.

Settling down in love depends upon achieving recognition of the One, because nothing can satisfy unlimited craving but the Infinite. Self-centeredness, however, makes love for fellow humans impossible, much less love for God. As Rumi said, the ego is "the mother of all idols," the greatest obstacle to love.

Sam'ani's book aimed at awakening people to beauty and alerting them to their innate love for God. Theologians could offer creeds, jurists could tell people what to do and what not to do, but all this was dry and stultifying if not leavened by love. In contrast, Sam'ani offered delicious prose mixed with occasional poetry, a fine sense of humor and wonderful anecdotes, in many ways prefiguring Rumi. Here is a typical passage from his book, urging readers to see through their own illusions and to engage in the really difficult task of overcoming the self:

Ash'ath the Covetous was passing by a tray-maker's shop. He said, "Make these trays you're making bigger. Maybe someone will give me something on one of them." Here you have your own breast full of wishes, your own worthless heart! It is said that there were 360 idols placed in the Kaabah. If all the accountants in the world came to record the number of idols in your breast, they would be not be able to do so. In our times it is not necessary for Azar to carve idols, for everywhere in the world there's someone with unwashed face, an Azari idol in his breast. "The ego is the greatest idol." In the city a Zoroastrian is walking and wearing his cap, and you are walking with the turban of *tawhīd* on top of your head and a fanciful notion of *tawhīd* inside it. If turban and robe make someone a Muslim, then bravo, O leader of the sincerely truthful! And if "Zoroastrianism" means to attach your heart to two, well, you know what needs to be done. In short, know that nothing is given out on the basis of talk! Abu'l-Qasim Mudhakkir lived in Naishapur, though he was originally from Merv. He was a sweet-tongued preacher. Once he was holding a session and saying fine words. A man stood up and said, "If the work is done with talk, you have gone to the place of honor. But if this pot needs some seasoning, then you can't settle down on the basis of words." There was a singer who used to go to the home of a nobleman. Whenever he sang a song, the nobleman would say, "Bravo!" He would sing another song and

again he would say, "Bravo!" The singer was also a poet. One day he said,
Every time I sing, you say, "Bravo, sing another!"
But bravo doesn't buy me any flour.

In the bazaar, you can't buy anything with "Well done!" They want pure gold and unalloyed silver.
O respected man! In this road they want a burnt liver, they want a heart full of pain, they want footsteps with truthfulness, they want a spirit with love, they want togetherness without dispersion. If you have the hard cash, then the work is yours.
Indeed, the first trial you face is the trial of your own being. Gather this being and hand it back to the Sultan of *tawhīd* so that he may destroy it, for nothing can bring together a dispersed man except *tawhīd*. *Tawhīd* is assaying: discarding the specious temporal and selecting the authentically eternal.
Everyone in the world is attached to giving one and taking two. Those who follow this path are attached to giving all and taking one.

For more of Sam'ani, see Chapter 9 of my 'Sufism: A Beginner's Guide'