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978-1-107-62605-8 - The Idea of Personality in Sufism: Three Lectures Delivered in the University of London

Reynold A. Nicholson

Excerpt

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LECTURE I

THE title which I have chosen for these Lectures—"The Idea of Personality in Şúfism"—seems to call for a few words of explanation at the outset, so that the scope and limits of the subject, as I propose to treat it, may be indicated. What Şúfism is you all know: I am using the word in its ordinary sense as synonymous with Islamic mysticism and as denoting that type of religious experience with which the writings of the Şúfís or Mohammedan mystics have made us familiar. It may be of some interest to consider how far this experience involves the personality either of the devotee or of the object of his devotion, that is, God; and obviously, before entering on such an investigation, we must define, at least in general terms, what we mean when we ascribe personality to God—a question of prime importance for Christians, but one which Moslem theologians have never asked themselves, much less attempted to answer. I would remark, in the first place, that the expression "Divine personality" cannot be translated adequately into any Mohammedan language. The dictionaries render "personality" by *shakhsíyyat*; but the word *shakhs*, meaning "a person," is really not applicable to Allah, though it occurs with reference to Him in the Tradition, *Lá shakhsa aghyaru min Alláhi*, "There is no person more jealous than Allah." *Huwiyyat* (an abstract noun formed from *huwa*, "he") denotes individuality or "ipseity" rather than personality: it is used by some Şúfís of the Absolute Divine Idea in which all ideas are contained as the tree in the seed.

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Another word, *dhāt*, which in Moslem theology signifies the essence of Allah as distinguished from His attributes, will not serve to translate a term that implies no such distinction; moreover, *dhāt* may denote the essence of a thing as well as that of a person. In short, while Allah is described in Mohammedan creeds as *fard*, single, and as having no like, *i.e.* as a unique *individual*, He is nowhere described by any term that implies for Moslems what the word *person* implies for us. The reason for that lies in the history of the word, and I need only remind you that

what we may call the philosophical use of *person* in the modern European languages has been determined by the use in the formulation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity of *ἰπρόστασις* and *persona* as equivalent expressions¹.

Of course it does not follow, because Moslems possess no equivalent for a term associated with a doctrine which they reject, that they are therefore to be regarded as not believing in a personal God; on the contrary, I think it would be nearer the truth to say that for the most part they have always conceived God as personal in the sense in which that word is commonly understood, though their conception of His nature may sometimes assume a form that seems irreconcilable with Western notions of personality. What, then, do we mean when we speak of God as personal? For the present purpose I will ask you to accept the view of a recent authority, Professor C. C. J. Webb, that

only so far as *personal relations* are allowed to exist between the worshipper and his God, can that God be properly described as personal; and that such personal relations are excluded alike by extreme stress on the "immanence" and by extreme stress on the "transcendence" of the object of worship¹.

¹ C. C. J. Webb, *God and Personality*, p. 46. ² *Ibid.* p. 11.

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This definition will provide a convenient starting-point for our discussion. I do not suppose that it would satisfy Moslem theologians. For in a well-known article of their creed it is laid down that Allah is entirely different from all created beings, and we know personal relations to be impossible without some element of likeness, without some degree of moral affinity. And further, although the criterion suggested by Professor Webb, whereby we should decide whether the relation is personal or not, would present no difficulty to Moslems—they have terms equivalent to transcendence and immanence in their own theology—few of them, I think, would be prepared to deny personality to a God either so immanent or so transcendent that personal relations with Him are, to us, barely conceivable. While in Islam as elsewhere personal religious experience is not peculiar to the mystics, it can hardly rise to its full height without becoming mystical, and this is the case in Islam to a greater extent than in Christianity. The point of view from which the subject is here regarded has, I hope, been made clear, but only a very imperfect sketch can be attempted on the present occasion. It will be my aim to bring before you, in historical order so far as possible, some of the ways in which earnestly religious Moslems have expressed and satisfied their craving for personal intercourse between themselves and God.

Apart from the fact that Şúfism, like every other religious movement in Islam, has its roots in the Koran and the Sunna and cannot be understood unless we study it from the source upwards, the particular aspect of it which we are now considering takes us back at once to the man with whom the Islamic idea of Divine personality

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begins and who himself during the Middle Ages became the object of a mystical devotion comparable to that which has often attached itself to the person of Christ. We must therefore spend a few moments on the problem of Mohammed's relation to God, leaving for a subsequent lecture the question why and how the view of the person of the Prophet which prevailed amongst his Moslem contemporaries was so fundamentally altered in after days, when Islam had spread beyond the borders of Arabia and grown into one of the great religions of the world.

I am going to take for granted what has often been doubted or denied—the sincerity of Mohammed and the reality of his prophetic inspiration—partly because it is a point on which all Moslems are agreed and also because it seems to me that on no other hypothesis can the origin and early history of Islam be accounted for. It is easy to emphasise the contradictions into which he was drawn by his postulate of a fixed and immutable revelation, written in a heavenly book and communicated to him by a process in which he was merely the passive medium, while the course of events constantly required that the revelation should be plastic and responsive to his needs. If he was an impostor, we can only wonder at his lack of foresight; but if he was sincere, it must be admitted that his prophetic endowment was not of the highest order. Had he stood in the same intimate and free relation to God as the Hebrew prophets, would it ever have occurred to him that the Koran is the literal Word of God, and would his own part in it have been confined to hearing it dictated by Gabriel? The stimulating thinker whose definition of personality I have quoted remarks that “the tendency of Islam is to reduce the personal relations which can exist between man and God to the lowest terms, to

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those, namely, which may exist between a slave and a master of absolutely unlimited power¹." This statement would be better applied to the Koran than to Islam in general, and though it is a true statement as far as it goes, it gives no clue to the secret of Mohammed's enthusiasm. Few can read the short Súras, which stand last in the book but came first in order of time, without feeling that he was conscious of being, as we say, in touch with Allah—conscious, after much inward tribulation, that what possessed him was not an evil spirit but the spirit of Allah who by His grace had chosen him, like the prophets of old, to warn his countrymen of their impending doom "on the day when the earth shall be ground to dust, and thy Lord shall come, and the angels row by row; and Hell on that day shall be brought nigh" (Kor. LXXXIX, 22–24)². The vision of Judgment stirred Mohammed to the depths of his soul, it broke down every barrier and set him face to face with the Lord who says, "Call unto Me and I will answer you" (Kor. XL, 62). So the Moslem "in prayer can come directly to God³." We see from the Koran that Mohammed spoke as a prophet, heedless of logical consistency. In him were two voices, one certainly louder and more frequent than the other, yet "each a mighty voice⁴." One voice declares that Allah sits on His throne, that He is the great Taskmaster whose eye is ever on His servants⁵, as ready to punish

¹ Webb, *God and Personality*, p. 87.

² I follow Snouck Hurgronje and Andrae (*Die Person Muhammets*, 8–10), who hold that what made Mohammed a prophet was his conviction that the Day of Judgment was at hand.

³ D. B. Macdonald, *The religious attitude and life in Islam*, p. 38.

⁴ Wordsworth, Sonnet entitled *Thought of a Briton on the subjugation of Switzerland*.

⁵ Kor. LXXXIX, 13.

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and destroy the wicked as to pardon and protect the righteous; the other proclaims that Allah is the Reality (*al-Ḥaqq*)¹ which shall remain when all else has passed away², that He is the Light of heaven and earth³, that He is nearer to us than our neck-vein⁴, that wherever we turn He is present with us⁵. Is not this just what the Ṣūfīs are never tired of saying? For them, indeed, Allah is pre-eminently the Beloved, while Mohammed's love of Him was overshadowed by his fear. Yet the former feeling was by no means strange to him. In a Súra of the Meccan period (LXXXV, 14) Allah is described as "the Loving One" (*al-Wadūd*); and in many passages it is affirmed that He loves the beneficent, the patient, those who keep themselves pure, and so on. Man's love of Allah is mentioned only thrice, but one of these references I must quote because it shows how closely Mohammed could identify himself with Allah; it has, too, a further significance which will appear when we come to consider the position occupied by the Prophet in Moslem theology. The passage runs thus (Kor. III, 29): "Say: if ye love Allah, follow me, so will Allah love you and forgive you your sins, for Allah is forgiving and merciful. Say: obey Allah and the Apostle." Here Mohammed seems to be echoing the words of Christ, "He that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me"⁶; "the Father himself loveth you because ye have loved me"⁷. Be that as it may, there are many things in the Koran which afford a real basis for Ṣūfism. To express this fact in another way, though Mohammed's relation to God cannot on the whole be called one of intimacy, it had in it a mystical aspect,

¹ Kor. XXII, 6, 61, etc.² Kor. XXVIII, 88; LV, 26-27.⁴ Kor. I, 15.⁶ Matthew x, 40.³ Kor. XXIV, 35.⁵ Kor. II, 109.⁷ John XVI, 27.

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namely, a direct consciousness of the Divine presence, which is "religion in its most acute, intense, and living stage¹." Without that, I am convinced, he could never have become the founder of Islam.

When, after the Prophet's death, his followers established themselves in Persia, Syria, and Egypt, they were brought into contact with old religions, theologies and philosophies, under the influence of which their simple faith was gradually transformed. We can trace the working of these foreign ideas in every department of Moslem thought: in theology and jurisprudence no less than in asceticism and mysticism. Of course the foundation of the whole fabric was the Koran, a very quicksand of contradictory notions expressed in language that is often vague and obscure. The Koran, however, could be supplemented by the *Ḥadīth*, *i.e.* the Traditions of the Prophet. These were particularly useful for system-building just because they were so easy to invent: every student of Islam is aware how many sayings have been put in the Prophet's mouth by those who desired to claim Prophetic authority for their own doctrines. This pious fraud was practised by all the early Mohammedan sects. The Şúffis are not a sect, but they too produced a vast number of spurious Traditions to support their contention that Şúfism is in truth the esoteric teaching of the Prophet.

The oldest type of mysticism in Islam was ascetic and devotional rather than speculative, and the word "Şúffī" first appears in literature as a name applied to a certain class of ascetics². In the second century of the Hijra there arose a spontaneous and wide-spread movement towards world-flight. Dreading the wrath to come, thou-

¹ Rufus Jones, *Studies in mystical religion*, Introd. p. xv.

² Jáhiz, *Kitābu 'l-Bayān*, I, 138.

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sands of men and women gave themselves up to the religious life, either singly or in companionship with a few friends. The consciousness of sin lay heavy on them: the slightest offence against the Law had to be expiated by a long penance. From the injunctions which they found in the Koran to think on God and trust in God they developed the practice of *dhikr* and the doctrine of *tawakkul*. Here, no doubt, they learned something from Christian asceticism. *Dhikr* was at first a form of meditation consisting in the incessant chanting of a brief litany such as "Allah! Allah!" "Subhán Allah!" or the like. The command to trust in God (*tawakkul*) some of them carried out so thoroughly that they would not act on their own initiative at all, refusing, for example, to seek food or take medicine; and they scarcely exaggerate when they describe their attitude as that of a corpse in the hands of the washer who prepares it for burial. This kind of devotion might sink into lip-service and hypocrisy; still, for many of them, it was no matter of rule: it was as intensely real as the terrors which inspired it. Ḥasan of Baṣra, hearing mention made of the man who shall only be saved after having passed a thousand years in Hell-fire, burst into tears and exclaimed, "Oh, would that I were like that man!"¹ And if in this emotional religion the master-feeling was fear, yet there was also love. With the growing influence of Hellenistic ideas Moslem asceticism became mystical: ascetic exercises began to be regarded, not as having their end in future salvation or perdition, but rather as a means of purifying the soul so that it may know and love God and attain to union with Him. As we have seen, the Koran speaks incidentally of God as loving men and of men as loving God, but the tone of

¹ *Qútu 'l-Qulúb*, I, 101.

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these texts does not suggest that the Şúfí conception of Divine Love was derived from the Koran. Already in the second century after Mohammed the saintly woman, Rábi'a of Başra, implores God not to withhold from her the vision of His everlasting beauty¹, while Ma'rúf al-Karkhí, author of the earliest definition of Şúfism, declares that love is a gift of God and cannot be learned from men². When Ma'rúf died, his pupil Sarí al-Saqatí saw him in a dream.

Meseemed he was at the foot of God's throne, and God was saying to His angels, "Who is this?" They answered, "Thou knowest best, O Lord." Then God said to them, "This is Ma'rúf al-Karkhí, who was intoxicated with love of Me and will not recover his senses except by meeting Me face to face³."

That Ma'rúf felt himself to be in the closest personal communion with God appears from his saying on one occasion to Sarí al-Saqatí, "When you desire anything of God, adjure Him in my name⁴." According to the Egyptian Şúfí Dhu 'l-Nún (ob. A.H. 245 = A.D. 859), Divine Love is a mystery that must not be spoken of, lest it come to the ears of the vulgar⁵. Dhu 'l-Nún took a very important step in the development of Şúfism by distinguishing the mystic's knowledge of God (*ma'rifat*) from traditional or intellectual knowledge (*'ilm*) and by connecting the former with love of God (*mahabbat*).

"True knowledge of God," he says, "is not the knowledge that God is One, which is possessed by all believers; nor the knowledge of Him derived from proof and demonstration, which belongs to philosophers, rhetoricians, and theologians; but it is the knowledge of the attributes of Divine Unity,

¹ *Tadhkiratu 'l-Awliyá*, I, 73, 5.

² *Ibid.*, I, 272, 12.

³ Qushayrí (Cairo, 1318 A.H.), II, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 173, 3 fr. foot.

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which belongs to the Saints of God, those who behold God with their hearts in such wise that He reveals unto them what He revealeth not unto any one else in the world¹.”

And again: “Real knowledge is God’s illumination of the heart with the pure radiance of knowledge,” *i.e.* the sun can be seen only by the light of the sun². Hence “the more a man knoweth God, the deeper and greater his bewilderment in God,” because (as the commentator explains) the nearer he is to the sun the more he is dazzled, until he reaches a point where he is not he³.

“They that know God,” Dhu ‘l-Nún continues, “are not themselves and subsist not through themselves, but in so far as they are themselves they subsist through God. They move as God causes them to move, and their words are the words of God which roll upon their tongues, and their sight is the sight of God which hath entered their eyes. The Prophet, on whom be peace, told of these qualities when he related that God said: ‘When I love a servant, I the Lord am his ear, so that he hears by Me, and his eye, so that he sees by Me, and his tongue, so that he speaks by Me, and his hand, so that he takes by Me⁴.’”

These quotations show that what the Şúffis call *ma‘rifat*, knowledge of God, resembles the *γνώσις* of Hellenistic religion: it is an immediate experience in which the intellect has no share, an ecstatic contemplation of God by the divinely illuminated heart. Moreover, it involves the effacement of the individual self and the substitution of divine qualities for human; yet all this is the act of God. Just as St Paul said to his Galatian converts, “Now that ye have come to know God, or rather to be known of God⁵,” so the Şúffí ‘*arif* or gnostic imputes all his knowledge to Him who by revealing Himself causes the veil

¹ *Tadhkiratu ‘l-Awliyá*, I, 127, 3.

² *Ibid.* I, 127, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.* I, 127, 21

³ *Ibid.* I, 127, 16.

⁵ Galatians IV, 9.