

Introduction

This short introduction to *irfan* is a part of the author's book *Ashnai ba ulum e Islami* (An Introduction to the Islamic Sciences) written in seven parts: 1) logic, 2) philosophy, 3) *kalam*, 4) *irfan*, 5) *fiqh*, 6) *usul al fiqh*, 7) *hikmat e amali* (ethics).

Irfan is one of the disciplines that originated within the realm of Islamic culture and developed there to attain a high level of sophistication. But before we can begin to discuss *irfan*, we must realize that it can be approached from two viewpoints: the social and the academic.

Unlike the scholars of other Islamic disciplines – such as the Quranic commentators (*mufasssirun*), the scholars of *hadith* (*muhaddithun*), the jurists (*fuqaha'*), the theologians (*mutakallimun*), the philosophers, the men of literature, and the poets – the '*urafa'* are a group of scholars who have not only developed their own science, *irfan*, producing great scholars and important books, but have also given rise within the Islamic world to a distinct social grouping. In this the '*urafa'* are unique; for the scholars of the other Islamic disciplines – such as the jurists, for instance – form solely academic groupings and are not viewed as a social group distinct from the rest of society.

In view of this distinction the gnostics, when referred to as belonging to a certain academic discipline, are called '*urafa'* and when referred to as a social group are generally called *Sufis* (*mutasawwifah*).

The '*urafa'* and *sufis* are not regarded as forming a separate sect in Islam, nor do they claim themselves to be such. They are to be found within every Islamic school and sect, yet, at the same time, they coalesce to form a distinct social group. The factors that set them apart from the rest of Islamic society are a distinctive chain of ideas and opinions, a special code governing their social intercourse, dress and even, sometimes, the way they wear their hair and beards, and their living communally in their hospices. (Pers. *Khaniqah*; Ar-*ribat*, *zawiyah*; Turk. *tekkiye*)

Of course, there are and have always been '*urafa'* – particularly amongst the Shi'ah – who bear none of these external signs to distinguish them socially from others; yet, at the same time, they have been profoundly involved in the spiritual methodology of *irfan* (*sayr wa suluk*). It is these who are the real gnostics; not those who have invented for themselves hundreds of special mannerisms and customs and

have brought innovations into being.

In this series of lectures, in which we are taking a general look at Islamic sciences and disciplines, we will not be dealing with the social and sectarian aspect of gnosis, that is to say, *tasawwuf* (sufism). We will limit ourselves to an examination of *'irfan* as a discipline and branch amongst the branches of Islam's scientific culture.

To look thoroughly at the social aspects of sufism would require us to examine its causes and origins, the effects – positive and negative, beneficial and detrimental – it has and has had upon Islamic society, the nature of the relations between the *sufis* and other Islamic groups, the hue it has given to the whole of Islamic teachings, and the role it has played in the diffusion of Islam throughout the world. This is far beyond the range of these lectures, and here we will consider the tradition of *'irfan* only as a science and as one of the academic disciplines of Islam.

'irfan, as a scientific and academic discipline, itself has two branches: the practical and the theoretical. The practical aspect of *'irfan* describes and explains the relationship and responsibilities the human being bears towards itself, towards the world and towards God. Here, *'irfan* is similar to ethics (*akhlāq*), both of them being practical sciences. There do exist differences, however, and later we will explain them.

The practical teaching of *'irfan* is also called the itinerary of the spiritual path (*sayr wa suluk*; lit. 'traveling and journeying'). Here, the wayfarer (*salik*) who desires to reach the goal of the sublime peak of humanness – that is to say, *tawhid* – is told where to set off, the ordered stages and stations that he must traverse, the states and conditions he will undergo at these stations, and the events that will befall him. Needless to say, all these stages and stations must be passed under the guidance and supervision of a mature and perfect example of humanity who, having traveled this path, is aware of the manners and ways of each station. If not, and there is no perfect human being to guide him on his path, he is in danger of going astray.

The perfect man, the master, who must necessarily accompany the novice on the spiritual journey according to the *'urafa'*, has been called in their vocabulary as *Ta'ir al-quds* (the Holy Bird) and Khidr:

Accompany my zeal on the path, O Ta'ir al-Quds,

The path to the goal is long, and I new to the journey.

Leave not this stage without the company of Khidr,

There is darkness ahead; be afraid of losing the way.

Of course, there is a world of difference between the *tawhid* of the *'arif* and the general view of *tawhid*. For the *'arif*, *tawhid* is the sublime peak of humanness and the final goal of his spiritual journey, while for the ordinary people, and even the philosophers, *tawhid* means the essential Unity of the Necessary

Being. For the *'arif*, *tawhid* means that the ultimate reality is only God, and everything other than God is mere appearance, not reality. The *'arif's tawhid* means that 'other than God there is nothing'. For the *'arif*, *tawhid* means following a path and arriving at the stage when he sees nothing but God. However, this view of *tawhid* is not accepted by the opponents of the *'urafa'*, and some of them have declared such a view to be heretic. Yet the *'urafa'* are convinced that this is the only true *tawhid*, and that the other stages of it cannot be said to be free of polytheism (*shirk*).

The *'urafa'* do not see the attainment of the ideal stage of *tawhid* to be the function of reason and reflection. Rather they consider it to be the work of the heart, and attained through struggle, through the journeying, and through purifying and disciplining the self.

This, however, is the practical aspect of *'irfan*, which is not unlike ethics in this respect, for both discuss a series of things that 'ought to be done'. However, there are differences, and the first of these is that *'irfan* discusses the human being's relationship with itself, with the world and with God, and its primal concern is man's relationship with God. Systems of ethics, on the other hand, do not all consider it necessary for the relationship between man and God to be discussed; it is only the religious ethical systems that give importance and attention to this matter.

The second difference is that the methodology of spiritual progression, *sayr wa suluk*, as the words *sayr* (traveling) and *suluk* (journeying) imply, is a dynamic one, while ethics is static. That is, *'irfan* speaks about a point of departure, a destination, and the stages and stations which, in their correct order, the wayfarer must traverse in order to arrive at the final destination. In the *'arif's* view, there really is a path before the human being – a path that is actual and not in the least a metaphor – and this path must be followed stage by stage, station by station; to arrive at any station without having traversed the preceding one is, in the *'arif's* view, impossible. Thus the *'arif* views the human soul to be a living organism, like a seedling or like a child, whose perfection lies in growth and maturation in accordance with a particular system and order.

In ethics, however, the subjects are handled solely as a series of virtues, such as righteousness, honesty, sincerity, chastity, generosity, justice, and preferring others over oneself (*ithar*), to name but a few, with which the soul must be adorned. In the view of ethics, the human soul is rather like a house to be furnished with a series of beautiful objects, pictures and decorations, and no importance is attached to a particular sequence. It is not important where one begins or where one ends. It is of no consequence whether one starts at the ceiling or at the walls, at the top of a wall or at the bottom and so on. On the contrary, in *'irfan* the ethical elements are discussed in a dynamic perspective.

The third difference between these two disciplines is that the spiritual elements of ethics are limited to concepts and ideas that are generally commonplace, while the spiritual elements of *'irfan* are much more profound and expansive. In the spiritual methodology of *'irfan*, much mention is made of the heart and the states and happenings it will experience, and these experiences are known only to the wayfarer of the path during the course of his struggles and his journey on the path, while other people have no idea

of these states and happenings.

The other branch of *'irfan* is related to interpretation of being, that is, God, the universe, and the human being. Here *'irfan* resembles philosophy, for both seek to understand existence, whereas practical *'irfan* seeks, like ethics, to change the human being. However, just as there are differences between practical *'irfan* and ethics, so also there exist differences between theoretical *'irfan* and philosophy, and in the following section we will explain these differences.

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