Theoretical Irfan

Theoretical *'irfan*, as said before, is concerned with ontology, and discusses God, the world, and the human being. This aspect of *'irfan* resembles theological philosophy (*falsafeh-ye ilahi*), which also seeks to describe being. Like theological philosophy, *'irfan* also defines its subject, essential principles and problems, but whereas philosophy relies solely upon rational principles for its arguments, *'irfan* bases its deductions on principles discovered through mystic experience (*kashf*) and then reverts to the language of reason to explain them.

The rationalistic deductions of philosophy can be likened to studying a passage written originally in the same language; the arguments of *'irfan*, on the other hand, are like studying something that has been translated from some other language in which it was originally written. To be more precise, the *'arif* wishes to explain those things which he claims to have witnessed with his heart and his entire being by using the language of reason.

The ontology of *'irfan* is in several ways profoundly different from the ontology of philosophers. In the philosopher's view, both God and other things have reality, with the difference that while God is the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*) and Existing-By-Himself, things other than God are only possible existents (*mumkin al-wujud*), existing- through-another, and are effects of the Necessary Being. However, the *'arif's* ontology has no place for things other than God as existing alongside Him, even if they are effects of which He is the cause; rather, the Divine Being embraces and encompasses all things. That is to say, all things are names, qualities, and manifestations of God, not existents alongside Him.

The aim of the philosopher also differs from that of the *'arif.* The philosopher wishes to understand the world; he wishes to form in his mind a correct and relatively complete picture of the realm of existence. The philosopher considers the highest mark of human perfection to lie in perceiving, by way of reason, the exact nature of existence, so that the macrocosm finds a reflection within his mind while he in turn becomes a rational microcosm. Thus it is said when defining philosophy that: [Philosophy is] the (final) development of a rational knower (*'alim*) into an actual world (*'alam*).

This means that philosophy is a study whereby a human being becomes a rational microcosm similar to

the actual macrocosm. But the *'arif,* on the other hand, would have nothing to do with reason and understanding; he wishes to reach the very kernel and reality of existence, God, to become connected to it and witness it.

In the *'arif's* view, human perfection does not mean having a picture of the realm of existence in one's mind; rather it is to return, by means of treading the spiritual path of progression, to the origin from which one has come, to overcome the separation of distance between oneself and the Divine Essence, and, in the realm of nearness, to obliterate one's finite self to abide in Divine Infinitude.

The tools of the philosopher are reason, logic and deduction, while the tools of the *'arif* are the heart, spiritual struggle, purification and disciplining of the self, and an inner dynamism.

Later, when we come to the world-view of *'irfan,* we shall also discuss how it differs from the world-view of philosophy.

'Irfan, both practical and theoretical, is closely connected with the holy religion of Islam. Like every other religion – in fact more than any other religion – Islam has explained the relationships of man with God, with the world, and with himself; and it has also given attention to describing and explaining existence.

Now, the question inevitably arises here about the relation between the ideas of *'irfan* and the teachings of Islam. Of course, the *'urafa'* never claim that they have something to say that is above or beyond Islam, and they are earnest in their denials of any such imputations. In fact, they claim to have discovered more of the realities of Islam, and that they are the true Muslims. Whether in the practical teaching of *'irfan* or the theoretical, the *'urafa'* always support their views by referral to the Quran, the Sunnah of the Prophet and the Imams, and the practice of the eminent amongst the Prophet's Companions.

However, others have held different views about the *'urafa',* and these may be mentioned:

(a) A group of *muhaddithun* and jurisprudents has been of the view that the *'urafa'* are not practically bound to Islam, and that their referrals to the Quran and the Sunnah are merely a ruse to deceive the simple-minded people and to draw to themselves the hearts of the Muslims. This group is of the view that *'irfan*, basically, has no connection with Islam.

(b) A group of modernists who do not have favourable relations with Islam and are ready to give a tumultuous welcome to anything that gives the appearance of freedom from the observances prescribed by the Shari'ah (*ibahah*) and which can be interpreted as a movement or uprising in the past against Islam and its laws, like the first group, believe that in practice the *'urafa'* had no faith or belief in Islam, and that *'irfan* and *tasawwuf* was a movement of the non-Arab peoples against Islam and the Arabs, disguised under the robes of spirituality.

This group and the first are united in their view that the *'urafa'* are opposed to Islam. The difference

between them is that the first group considers Islam to be sacred and, by banking on the Islamic sentiments of the Muslim masses, wishes to condemn the *'urafa'* and, in this way, to hoot them off from the stage of the Islamic sciences. The second group, however, by leaning on the great personalities of the *'urafa'*– some of whom are of world-renown – wishes to use them as a means of propaganda against Islam. They detract Islam on the grounds that the subtle and sublime ideas of *'irfan* found in Islamic culture are in fact alien to Islam.

They consider that these elements entered Islamic culture from outside, for, they say, Islam and its ideas thrive on a far lower level. This group also claims that the *'urafa'*s citations of the Quran and *hadith* were solely due to dissimulation and fear of the masses. This, they claim, was a means for them to save their lives.

(**c**) Besides the above two, there is also a third group which takes a rather neutral view of *'irfan*. The view of this group is that *'irfan* and sufism contain many innovations and deviations that do not accord with the Quran and the traditions; that this is more true of the practical teaching of *'irfan* than its theoretical ideas, especially where it takes a sectarian aspect. Yet, they say, the *'urafa'*, like the Islamic scholars of other ranks and the majority of Islamic sects, have had the most sincere intentions towards Islam, never wishing to make any assertions contrary to its teachings. It is quite possible that they have made mistakes, in the same way as the other types of scholars – theologians, philosophers, Quranic commentators, and jurisprudents – have made mistakes, but this has never been due to an evil intention towards Islam.

In the view of this group, the issue of the *'urafa'*s supposed opposition to Islam was raised by those who harbored a special prejudice either against *'irfan* or against Islam. If a person were to disinterestedly study the books of the *'urafa'*, provided that he is acquainted with their terminology and language, although he might come across many a mistake, he will not doubt the sincerity of their complete devotion to Islam.

Of the three views, I prefer the third. I do not believe that the *'urafa'* have had evil intentions towards Islam. At the same time I believe that it is necessary for those having specialized knowledge of *'irfan* and of the profound teachings of Islam to undertake an objective research and disinterested study of the conformity of the issues of *'irfan* with Islamic teachings.