

'Urafa' of the Third/Ninth Century

1. Abu Yazid al-Bistami (Bayazid)

One of the great mystics, it is said Bayazid was the first to speak openly of 'annihilation of the self in God' (*fana fi 'Allah*) and 'subsistence through God' (*baqa' bi 'Allah*).

He has said "I came forth from Bayazid-ness as a snake from its skin."

His ecstatic ejaculations (*shathiyyat*) have led others to call him a heretic. However, the '*urafa*' themselves consider him one of those given to mystical 'intoxication' (*sukr*), that is, he uttered these words when he was beside himself in ecstasy.

Abu Yazid died in 261/874 or 264/877. Some have claimed that he worked as a water carrier in the house of al-'Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (A). However, this claim is not supported by history; Abu Yazid was not a contemporary of the Imam.

2. Bishr ibn al-Harith al-Hafi

One of the famous sufis, he was another who led a corrupt life and then repented.

In his book *Minhaj al-karamah*, al-'Allamah al-Hilli has related an account that depicts Bishr's repentance as being at the hands of al-'Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (A), and because at the moment of his repentance he was barefoot in the street, he became known as '*al-Hafi*' (hafi=barefooted). However, others have given a different reason for his being known as al-Hafi.

Bishr al-Hafi (born near Merv c. 150/767) died in 226/840 or 227/841 in Baghdad.

3. Sari al-Saqati

One of the friends and companions of Bishr al-Hafi, Sari al-Saqati was one of those who bore affection for the creatures of God and of those who preferred others above themselves.

In his book *Wafayat al-ʿaʿyan*, Ibn Khallikan writes that Sari once said, “It is thirty years that I have been seeking forgiveness for one phrase, Praise be Allah's, that I allowed to pass my lips.” When asked to explain he replied, “One night the bazaar caught fire, and I left my house to see if the fire had reached my shop. When I heard that my shop was safe, I said, 'Praise be Allah's'. Instantly I was brought to my senses with the realization that, granted my shop was unharmed, should I not have been thinking about others'?”

Sa'di is referring to this same story (with slight variations) where he says:

One night someone's chimney kindled a fire, And I heard that half of Baghdad had burnt down. One said, thank God that in the smoke and ashes, My shop has not been damaged. A man who had seen the world replied, O selfish man, Was your grief for yourself and no other? Would you be satisfied that a town should burn down by fire, If your own dwelling were left unscathed?

Sari was the pupil and disciple (*murid*) of Ma'ruf al-Karkhi, and the teacher and maternal uncle of Junayd of Baghdad. Sari has many sayings on mystical unity (*tawhid*), love of God and other matters. It was also he who said: “Like the sun, the *ʿarif* shines on all the world; like the earth, he bears the good and evil of all; like water, he is the source of life for every heart; and like fire he gives his warmth to all and sundry.” Sari died in 253/867 at the age of ninety-eight.

4. Harith al-Muhasibi

He was one of the friends and companions of Junayd. He was called *ʿal-muhasibi* due to his great diligence in the matter of self-observation and self-reckoning (*muhasabah*). He was a contemporary of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who, being an opponent of *ʿilm al-kalam*, rejected Harith al-Muhasibi for entering into theological debates, and this led to the people avoiding him. Born in Basrah in 165/781, he died in 243/857.

5. Junayd of Baghdad

Originally from Nahaw and, the *ʿurafaʿ* and *sufis* have given Junayd the title Sayyid al-Taʿifah, just as the Shiʿah jurisprudents call al-Shaykh al-Tusi Shaykh al-Taʿifah.

Junayd is counted as one of the moderate mystics. The kind of ecstatic ejaculations uttered by others were never heard from his lips. He did not even put on the usual dress of the sufis, and dressed like scholars and jurisprudents. It was suggested to him that for the sake of his associates he should wear the sufi dress. He replied: “If I thought clothes were of any importance I would make an outfit of molten iron, for the call of truth is that:

There is no significance in the (sufi) cloak, Importance lies only in the (inward) glow.

Junayd's mother was the sister of Sari Saqati and Junayd became his pupil and disciple. He was also

the pupil of Harith al-Muhasibi. It seems that he died in Baghdad in 298/910 at the age of ninety.

6. Dhu al-Nun al-Misri

An Egyptian, he was the pupil in jurisprudence of the famous jurist Malik ibn Anas. Jami has called him the leader of the sufis. He it was who first began to use symbolic language and to explain mystical matters through the use of a symbolic terminology which only the elect could understand.

Gradually this became the standard practice, and mystical concepts were expressed in the form of love-poetry (*ghazal*) and symbolic expressions. Some believe that Dhu al-Nun also introduced many Neoplatonic ideas into *'irfan* and sufism.¹ Dhu al-Nun died in 246/860 in Cairo.

7. Sahl ibn 'Abd Allah al-Tustari

He is one of the great *'urafa'* and sufis. A sect of gnostics who consider the main principle of spirituality to be combatting the self is named 'Sahliyyah' after him. He associated with Dhu al-Nun of Egypt at Mecca. He died in Basrah in 282/895.²

8. Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj

Now famous simply as al-Hallaj, he is one of the most controversial mystics of the Islamic world. The *shathiyyat* uttered by him are many, and he was accused of apostasy and claiming divinity. The jurists pronounced him an apostate and he was crucified during the reign of the 'Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir. The *'urafa'* themselves accuse him of disclosing spiritual secrets. Hafiz has this to say about him:

He said, that friend, who was raised high on the cross,

His crime was that he used to reveal secrets.

Some consider him no more than a juggler, but the *'urafa'* themselves absolve him and say that the statements of al-Hallaj and Bayazid that gave the impression of unbelief were made when they were beside themselves in the state of 'intoxication'.

Al-Hallaj is remembered by the *'urafa'* as a martyr. He was executed in 309/913.³

1. Ibid, p. 55

2. Abu Abd al Rahman al Sulami, *Tabqat al sufiyyah*, p. 206

3. Authors work *Ilal e girayeh be maddehgari*

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