

I

Sufism and the Perennity of the Mystical Quest¹

لقد خلقنا الانسان في احسن تقويم ثم رددناه اسفل سافلين
Surely We created man of the best stature (*aḥsan taqwīm*)
Then We reduced him to the lowest of the low (*asfal sāfilīn*).
(Quran, XCV, 4-5; Pickthall translation)

گمان مکن کہ چو تو بگذری جهان گذرد هزار شمع بکشتند وانجمن باقی است
Think not that if thou passest away, the world will also be gone;
A thousand candles have burned out, yet the circle of the Sufis
remains.

The Quranic verse cited above defines the situation of man in this world in a manner that is at once perennial and universal. Man was created in the best stature (*aḥsan taqwīm*) but then fell into the terrestrial condition of separation and withdrawal from his divine prototype, a condition which the Quran calls the lowest of the low (*asfal sāfilīn*). And inasmuch as the situation described in this Quranic verse pertains to the innermost nature of man it is a permanent reality that he carries within himself. No amount of supposed evolution and change can destroy the divine image which is his origin or the state of separation and hence wretchedness and misery in which he finds himself due to this very separation from his spiritual origin. Man carries both the image of perfection and the experiential certainty of separation within himself and these elements remain as permanent aspects and conditions of the human state above and beyond all historical change and transformation.²

¹ Originally the Charles Strong Memorial Lecture in Comparative Religion delivered in Australian Universities in 1970.

² After over a century of complete surrender to historicism and evolutionism only recently have some of the scholars and scientists in the West been becoming aware that the permanent elements of human nature and of the relation of man to the cosmos dominate over the transient and passing elements; hitherto these had been emphasized so much as to obliterate the much more blinding reality of the permanence of things. See E. Zolla (ed.), *I Valori permanenti nel divenire storico*, Roma, 1968, and the article in that volume by S. H. Nasr, 'Man in the Universe, Permanence amidst apparent Change', which also appears as Chapter VI of the present work.

Concerning the Quranic term *aḥsan taqwīm* the ninth/fifteenth century Sufi commentator, Kamāl al-Dīn Ḥusayn Kāshifī, writes that it means God 'created man as the most complete and perfect theophany, the most universal and all-embracing theatre of divine hierophany, so that he may become the bearer of the divine trust (*amānah*) and the source of unlimited effusion'.³ And he identifies *asfal sāfilīn* with the world of natural passions and heedlessness. Hence man bears at once the imprint of the 'divine form'—he possesses a theomorphic nature according to the *ḥadīth*, 'God created man in His own image' (*khalāqa 'Llāh ādam 'alā ṣūratihī*)⁴—and has fallen from this innate perfection which yet he cannot forget.

The grandeur of the human state, its great possibilities and perils, and the permanent nature of man's quest after the Divine thus lies in the very fibres of human existence. Were man to be only 'of the best stature' and were he to remain in the paradisaical state of proximity to the Divine and of identity with his celestial archetype, there would be no mystical⁵ quest in the usual meaning of the term. There would already be union; the goal which stands at the end of the mystical and spiritual life would have already been achieved. Likewise, if man were to be only a creature of the sensory world, bound to passionate impulses and imprisoned by his natural and physical inclinations, or in other words were he to belong only to the state of *asfal sāfilīn*, again there would be no mystical quest possible. Man would not remain dissatisfied with the finite and would not continue to seek, albeit often

³ Kamāl al-Dīn Ḥusayn Wā'iz Kāshifī, *Mawāhib 'aliyyah* or *Tafsīr-i ḥusaynī*, vol. IV, Tehran, 1329 (A. H. Solar), p. 427.

⁴ See F. Schoun, *Understanding Islam*, chapter I.

⁵ The reader needs to be warned concerning the word 'mystical', which is used here in its original sense of having to do with the 'divine mysteries'; in other words, with a knowledge combined with love that, far from being irrational, is concerned with the intellect in its original sense, the source of reason which through its effusion illuminates the human mind and endows it with the knowledge of the spiritual order. Thus, mysticism refers to the inner aspect of a revealed and orthodox religion, bound to spiritual methods and techniques derived from that revelation, and not to vague reveries or individualistic whims and fancies or worst of all to forms of pseudo-occultism divorced from the religious context such as are becoming so prevalent in the West today. In this connection it must be specially emphasized that Sufism cannot be practiced outside of Islam even if self-styled 'masters' in the West using the name of Sufism say otherwise.

'Scientific works commonly define Ṣufism as "Moslem mysticism" and we too would readily adopt the epithet "mystical" to designate that which distinguishes Ṣufism from the simply religious aspect of Islam if that word still bore the meaning given it by the Greek Fathers of the early Christian Church and those who followed their spiritual line; they used it to designate what is related to knowledge of the "mysteries".' T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 12.

blindly, the Infinite Reality which can deliver him from the bonds of the finite and the limited. He would be content as an earthly creature. Transcendence would have no meaning for him. He would be limited like other earthly creatures and also like them he would remain unaware of the fact that he is limited and bound in space and time. But precisely because both of these elements, the theomorphic nature and the terrestrial crust which covers and hides this spiritual core, are parts of human nature, man lives in this world and is yet bound by his own nature to transcend it. Religion in general and the mystical quest in particular are as permanent as human existence itself, for man cannot remain man without seeking the Infinite and without wanting to transcend himself. To be human means to want to transcend the merely human. Hence to be satisfied with the merely human is to fall into the infra-human state. The history of Western man during the past five centuries provides ample proof of this contention.

The mystical quest is perennial because it lies in the nature of things, and normal human society is one in which such a quest is given recognition in the life of the collectivity. When a collectivity or society ceases to recognize this profound need and when fewer men follow the vocation of traveller upon the mystical path, then that society crumbles through the sheer weight of its own structure or dissolves as a result of psychic maladies it is not able to cure, by the very fact that it has denied to its members the only food that can satisfy the hunger of the psyche for the Spirit. In such cases certain men will still continue to seek and to follow the mystical way, but society itself will no longer be able to benefit fully from the illuminative presence of those who by the very fact of their seeking the supra-human allow their fellow men to remain at least on the human level and provide society itself with the only true criteria of its own worth and value.

If men of a spiritual and contemplative nature continue to appear even in the darkest periods of spiritual eclipse it is precisely because the economy of a human collectivity necessitates their existence. Were human society to be without any contemplatives at all, it would simply cease to exist. All terrestrial existence comes from Being, the luminous source of all that exists, and being and knowledge are ultimately one. Were the light which the contemplative casts upon the terrestrial environment to come to an end, the bond between Being and its earthly manifestations would terminate and the latter would become deprived of the conscious ontological nexus with its source. It would fall into the abyss of nothingness. The tradition according to which the world will not come to an end as long as there are men on earth who invoke the name of God refers to the same truth, for the

invocation of the Divine Name is the royal path towards spiritual realization in Sufism. Moreover, since the purpose of creation is that through it, as summarized in the heart of the gnostic (*al-'arif bi'LLâh*), the Divine comes to know Itself, but for the presence in the world of contemplative man the creation itself would cease to have a reason for existing.⁶ That is why in Islam it is said 'The earth shall never be empty of the "witness of God" ' (*Lâ takhlu'l-ard' an hujjat Allâh*). The quest after the infinite alone provides meaning for the finite world in which man finds himself on earth. The imprint of that perfection which man bears within himself makes any finite existence bearable for man only provided it can lead him to the Infinite and the Absolute.⁷ Hence the perennity of the mystical quest and the striving of man throughout the ages to see beyond the finite the Infinite Reality which determines and encompasses all things.

The cosmos itself continually reveals to man the eternal message of the Truth. Its finite forms reveal the Traces of the Infinite. As 'Alî said, 'I wonder at the man who observes the Universe created by God and doubts His Being.'⁸ But to gain this awareness man has need of revelation, which like the cosmos comes from the Infinite and the Absolute but in a more direct sense, and hence serves as the key for the unfolding of the mysteries of man's own being as well as those of the Universe. Revelation is in itself a gift that has descended from the Divine Mercy (*al-rahmah*) to enable man to pass beyond the finite to the Infinite. Having fallen from the state of 'the best stature' to that of the 'lowest of the low' man cannot regain the former state save through the grace of heaven. It is only by virtue of the beatific vision that he is able to see the cosmos as reflections of aspects of the spiritual world in the mirror of the material and the temporal.

⁶ The metaphysical principle that knowledge and being are ultimately one, and that through intellection the cosmos has gained its existence, underlies both the gnostic and the theosophical doctrines of Islam. Without an understanding of this principle the essential role that gnosis and contemplation of the Divine play in the sustenance of the cosmic environment cannot be understood. For an explanation of this principle see S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, chapter 13 and *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1964, chapters XI on.

⁷ 'Man, whether he be concerned in the plural or the singular, or whether his function be direct or indirect, stands like "a fragment of absoluteness" and is made for the Absolute; he has no other choice before him. In any case, one can define the social in terms of Truth, but one cannot define Truth in terms of the social.' F. Schuon, 'No Activity Without Truth', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Autumn, 1969, p. 196.

⁸ *Nahj al-balâghah*, trans. by Syed Mohammed Askari Jafery, Karachi, 1960, p. 286.

بترد آنکه جانش در تجلی است همه عالم کتاب حقّ تعالی است
عرض اعراب و جوهر چون حرفست مراتب همچو آیات وقوفست

To him, whose soul attains the beatific vision,
The universe is the book of 'The Truth Most High'.
Accidents are its vowels, and substance its consonants,
And grades of creatures its verses and pauses.⁹

(Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabistārī)

The saving grace of revelation alone makes possible this journey of the soul from the outward to the inward, from the periphery to the Centre, from the form to the meaning, the journey which is none other than the mystical quest itself. And because of the intimate relation the soul possesses with the cosmos, this journey is at once a penetration to the centre of the soul and a migration to the abode beyond the cosmos. In both places, which are in reality but a single locus, resides the Divine Presence, the Presence which is at once completely our-Self and totally other than ourselves.

As a Sufi master of the last century has written: 'The soul is an immense thing; it is the whole cosmos, since it is the copy of it. Everything which is in the cosmos is to be found in the soul; equally everything in the soul is in the cosmos. Because of this fact, he who masters his soul most certainly masters the cosmos, just as he who is dominated by his soul is certainly dominated by the whole cosmos.'¹⁰

It is only by the grace of revelation or the message from Heaven in whatever form it has been revealed within the different religions of mankind, that the soul is able to free itself from the taint of finitude and imperfection to seek the Infinite and to pursue the task for which it was created. To quote Khayyam.

O soul; from earthly taint when purified,
As spirit free, thou shalt toward heaven ride,
Thy home the empyrean: Shame on thee
Who dost in this clay tenement reside:

In love eternal He created me
And first He taught the lore of charity.
Then from my heart he filed a key that might
Unlock the treasure of Reality.

⁹ Sa'd ud Dīn Maḥmūd Shabistārī, *Gulshan-i Râz, The Mystic Rose Garden*, trans. by E. H. Whinfield, London, 1880, p. 21.

¹⁰ Shaykh al-'Arabī al-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. by T. Burckhardt, London, 1969, p. 4.

In some low Inn I'd rather seek Thy face,
 Than pray without Thee toward the Niche's place.
 O First and Last of all: As Thou dost will,
 Burn me in Hell—or save me by Thy grace!¹¹

But the saving grace of revelation is always there and has always been there. To be human is to see before man the path that leads from the relative to the Absolute; it is to be able to follow the mystical way. As Rûmî says,

The moment thou to this low world wast given,
 A ladder stood whereby thou mightest aspire.¹²

The transparency of the cosmos and its function as a ladder to the Metacosmic Reality can only be realized if the grace provided by revelation is operative and if by virtue of this grace the soul has been able to penetrate into its centre and truly become itself.¹³ And this possibility is always there even if it is not realized by all men. Both revelation and the cosmos—the second by virtue of the first—can lead men to that Infinite whose joy and beatitude so many vainly seek in the shadows of the finite world.

Revelation is limited in its outer form; it is outwardly finite and so appears to men in its rites, doctrines and symbols as one more set of finite forms along with others that surround him in this world. But unlike other forms, the religious and revealed forms open inwardly toward the Infinite, because it is from the supra-formal Centre that they originate, the Centre which contains all these forms and is yet above them.¹⁴ The reason for the persistence of traditional forms and symbols is none other than this fact that although outwardly they are forms subject to time and space, their inner content leads to the Infinite. Hence they reflect even in the transient world of time and space the permanence that belongs to the spiritual world. They thus fulfil that perennial need of man to transcend the finite, to go beyond the transient and seek the permanent.

¹¹ From the quatrains translated by E. H. Rodwell, cited in M. Smith, *The Sufi Path of Love, An Anthology of Sufism*, London, 1954, p. 63.

¹² Rûmî, *Dîwâni Shams Tabrîz*, trans. by R. A. Nicholson, Cambridge, 1898, p. 343.

¹³ On this question see S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, Chapter 13 and *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, chapter XV.

¹⁴ This cardinal truth has been fully explained in the different writings of F. Schuon, especially his *Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. by P. Townsend, London, 1953.

As for the cosmos, traditional cosmologies both Islamic and Christian and even those of some of the Hindu and Buddhist schools—to speak only of some of the better known examples—have depicted it as finite in outward form, but these cosmologies, like revelation or tradition to which they are intimately bound, are infinite in their symbolical content. The traditional cosmos is bound in space; its limits are almost ‘felt’ and certainly visible. When traditional man looked to the stars he saw in the heaven of the fixed stars the limits of the Universe. Beyond that heaven there was no ‘space’ or ‘matter’ (*lâ khala’ wa lâ mala’* as the Islamic philosophers would say) but only the Divine Presence. This finite cosmos, however, was far from being a prison without an opening. On the contrary by the very fact of its finite form it served as an icon to be contemplated and transcended. Thanks to its symbolism—the concentric spheres acting as a most powerful and efficient symbol for the states of being which man must traverse to reach Being Itself—the content of this cosmos was infinite and its finite forms like the forms of religion led man to an inner content which was limitless.

Modern science since Giordano Bruno has broken the boundaries of the cosmos and hence destroyed the very notion of ‘cosmos’, which means literally ‘order’. The Universe has become limitless outwardly. But precisely due to the lack of a ‘metaphysics or theology of nature’ in the West, the symbolic meaning of this new vision of the Universe has not been made generally known, and moreover, because modern science leaves aside the symbolic significance of things, the content of this outwardly ‘infinite’ Universe remains finite. It is bound to the purely material level of existence. In a sense the situation has become the reverse of what existed in the traditional sciences. There, the cosmos is outwardly finite but with an inner content that leads to the Infinite, whereas in modern science the Universe is outwardly ‘infinite’ but inwardly finite. Hence on the one hand modern man seeks to fly to the planets and ‘conquer space’, due to an unconscious urge or ‘mystique’ to transcend his earthly finitude—but in a physical manner which is the only manner modern men believe to be possible—and on the other hand those modern men who understand the full implication of the finiteness of the contents of the Universe as conceived by modern science are subdued by this very realization and often seek an outlet from the tyranny of the finite physical world through the use of drugs, which they believe will open to them ‘the doors of perception’ into another world.

Both those who wish to fly into space and those who would break the hold of physical sensations upon them by the use of drugs enabling

them to experience reality differently prove through these very efforts the perennity of the need for spiritual experience and of the necessity to follow the mystical quest, in the sense that man in whatever age he lives needs the Infinite and the Absolute in order to remain man. His finite psyche can remain sound and healthy only when it is in quest of that Beloved the union with whom is the goal of all mystical romances.

The failure of such efforts, whether they be space flights or 'trips' made possible through drugs—a failure instinctively felt by most men to be a poor substitute for that felicity and peace which accompanies all true contacts with the Spirit—itself proves that only a true mysticism that comes from God through one of His revealed religions can render the mystical quest successful. Only a path that comes from God can lead to Him and only such a path can guarantee the soul's final beatitude and union with the One. Only traditional authority can protect the soul from the great dangers that lurk upon the path of him who wishes to climb mountains without a guide and without following an existing trail. The end of the one path, of true mysticism, is the absorption of the soul in its divine prototype; the end of the other, the pseudo-mysticism so rampant today, is the dissolution and decomposition of the very substance of the soul. The soul of man was made by God and only He has the right to remould it. He has given man the urge for the mystical life and the desire for the perfection which lies at the end of the path. He has also provided for man the genuine means to reach this end. It is for man to choose the path which will lead him from the *asfal sâfilin* to the state of *aḥsan taqwīm*, the path which will allow him to be truly himself.

Sufism is one such path, placed by God within the bosom of Islam in order to provide the possibility of spiritual realization for the millions of men who over the ages have followed and continue to follow the religion of the Quran. In its essence it joins the paths of spiritual realization found in other traditions while in its formal aspect it shares the genius and the particular features of Islam.¹⁵ It is the path within Islam that leads from the particular to the Universal, from multiplicity to Unity, from form to the supra-formal Essence. Its function is to enable man to realize Divine Unity (*al-tawḥīd*), the truth which has always been and will always be. It is the depository of the 'eternal mysteries' (*asrâr-i alast*) going back to the primordial covenant made between God and man even before the creation of the

¹⁵ In fact, as already mentioned, the Sufis refer to all true spiritual paths and metaphysical doctrines of other religions as *taṣawwuf*.

world.¹⁶ Its message is therefore perennial, referring to the profound nature of man which lies beneath the layers of dross that the passage of the ages and the gradual removal of man from his original perfection in the state of *aḥsan taqwīm* have imposed upon that original theomorphic kernel at the centre of man's being. In its doctrines Sufism speaks of a truth that is at once perennial and universal; in its methods it employs techniques which are conformable to the nature of the men of this age, a nature which in its essence remains unchanged from that of primordial man but which in its accidents and outward manifestations has become ever more impermeable to spiritual influences and which in its contemplative faculties has become ever more atrophied and weakened.

Sufism serves essentially the function of reminding man of who he really is, which means that man is awakened from this dream which he calls his ordinary life and that his soul is freed from the confines of that illusory prison of the ego which has its objective counterpart in what is called 'the world' in religious parlance. By appealing to the true nature of man, Sufism fulfils the real needs of his nature, not what he feels to be his needs in terms of outer impressions and forms which the soul receives continually from the outer world into which it has plunged its roots. Man seeks his psychic and spiritual needs outwardly precisely because he does not know who he is. Sufism reminds man to seek all that he needs inwardly within himself, to tear his roots from the outer world and plunge them in the Divine Nature, which resides at the centre of his heart. Sufism removes man from his lowly state of *asfal sâfilîn* in order to reinstate him in his primordial perfection of *aḥsan taqwīm* wherein he finds within himself all that he had sought outwardly, for being united with God he is separate from nothing. As Ḥâfiz says,

سالهادل طلب جام جم از ما می کرد
و آنچه خود داشت زیگانه تمنی می کرد

For many years our heart sought the 'cup of Jamshîd'¹⁷ from us;
It sought from the stranger what it possessed itself.¹⁸

¹⁶ The term *alast* refers to the Quranic verse *Alastu bi rabbikum*. 'Am I not your Lord?' (VII, 172), which concerns the relation between God and man in pre-tertnity before the creation of the world. See S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, pp. 24 ff.

¹⁷ The *Jâm-i jam*, or 'cup of Jamshîd,' refers to the cup of the mythical Persian king Jamshîd in which he saw the reflection of all events and phenomena. In Sufism it has become the symbol of the heart of the gnostic in which all realities are reflected, the eye of the heart ('*ayn al-qalb* in Arabic or *chasm-i dil* in Persian) with which the mystic 'sees' the supernal realities.

¹⁸ Translation by S. H. Nasr.

To discover the 'cup of Jamshîd' within, one must sacrifice the carnal self which hides from man the Spirit dwelling within him. As Abû Yazîd Basţâmî has said. 'I triply divorced the world and alone proceeded to the Alone. I stood before the Presence and cried, "Lord God, I desire none but Thee. If I possess Thee, I possess all."

'When God recognized my sincerity, the first grace that He accorded me was that he removed the chaff of the self from before me.'¹⁹

Sufism speaks essentially of three elements: the nature of God, the nature of man and the spiritual virtues, which alone make possible the realization of God and which alone can prepare man to become worthy of the exalted station of *aḥsan taqwîm*, of becoming the total theophany of God's Names and Qualities.²⁰ These are the eternal elements of Sufism as of every true mystical path. The end is God, the beginning is man in his terrestrial state and the way or path is that which links man to God, that is, it is the method that engenders the spiritual virtues in the soul of man and the doctrine that outlines the contour of the Universe through which the traveller or mystic is to journey to reach the Divine Presence and gain true immortality.

The heart enquired of the soul
 What is the beginning of this business?
 What its end, and what its fruit?
 The soul answered:
 The beginning of it is
 the annihilation of self,
 Its end faithfulness,
 And its fruit immortality.²¹

(Khawâjah 'Abdullâh Anşârî)

The mystic path as it exists in Sufism is one in which man dies to his carnal nature in order to be reborn *in divinis* and hence to become united with the Truth.

Will the seeker of God be content to be far?
 Nay, for he needeth no less than Union. . . .

¹⁹ Farîd al-Din 'Aţţâr, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, trans. by A. J. Arberry London, 1966, p. 122.

²⁰ See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 131 ff. Concerning Sufism see also Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*; T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*; M. Lings, *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*; S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, chapter III; and S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Studies*, Part III.

²¹ Translated by Sir Jogendra Singh, *The Invocations of Sheikh 'Abdullâh Anşârî*, London, Wisdom of the East Series, 1939, p. 42.

He dieth before his death to live in his Lord,
 Since after this death is the supreme migration.
 He calleth himself to account ere he be called,
 He herein most fitted to act for the Truth.
 The Truth's Being he seeth before his own,
 And after it, and wheresoever he turn.
 Alone God was, and with Him naught else.
 He is now as He was, lastly as firstly,
 Essentially One, with naught beside Himself,
 Inwardly Hidden, Outwardly Manifest,
 Without beginning, without end. Whate'er thou seest,
 Seest thou His Being. Absolute Oneness
 No 'but' hath and no 'except'. How should God's Essence
 Be confined with a veil? No veil there but His Light.²²

(Shaykh al-'Alawî)

What Sufism has to teach about the Divine Nature, the Universe and man, comprising nearly the whole of Sufi doctrine, cannot be analyzed here. We can only emphasize that the Sufi teachings revolve around the two fundamental doctrines of the 'Transcendent Unity of Being' (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and the Universal or Perfect Man (*al-insân al-kâmil*).²³ All things are theophanies of the Divine Names and Qualities and derive their existence from the One Being who alone 'is'. And man is the only creature in this world who is centrally and axially located so that he reflects the Divine Names and Qualities in a total and conscious manner. To become a saint in Islam is to realize all the possibilities of the human state, to become the Universal Man. The mystical quest is none other than the realization of this state, which is also union with God, for the Universal Man is the mirror in which are reflected all the Divine Names and Qualities. Through the Universal Man God contemplates Himself and all things that He has brought into being.

The message of Sufism is timeless precisely because it speaks of truths which determine what one might call the pre-temporal existence of man in relation with God and which are based on elements of reality both transcendent and immanent within human nature which neither evolve nor decay. To this doctrinal message is attached a method derived like the doctrine from the Quran and prophetic *Ḥadīth* and possessing efficacy only by virtue of the particular grace

²² Lings, *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century*, pp. 199-200.

²³ See S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, chapter 13.

(*barakah*) made available through initiation and transmitted from master to disciple going back to the Prophet himself.

To understand the doctrine is to possess intellectual intuition (*dhawq*), which is already a divine gift. But to accept to follow the method, to realize its necessity and to be willing to surrender oneself to the discipline of a Master as well as to the obligations of the *Shari'ah* or Divine Law, which is the basis for all authentic practices of Sufism, requires yet another divine gift, which is none other than faith (*imân*).

'The merit of faith is fidelity to the supernaturally natural receptivity of primordial man; it means remaining as God made us and remaining at His disposition with regard to a message from Heaven which might be contrary to earthly experience, while being incontestable in view of subjective as well as objective criteria.'²⁴

If man possesses this faith and is willing to undergo the necessary spiritual travail under the direction of an authentic Master, then he is reborn in the spiritual world with its infinite horizons and delivered from the prison of contingency and the finiteness of the terrestrial world that surrounds him. Sufism, based upon the sacred forms of Islam, enables man to transcend the finite and reach the Infinite through these very forms. Thanks to the *barakah* present in its methods, it makes possible the liquefaction of the outer crust of man's being, thus revealing to man his own divine centre, which is the 'Throne of the Compassionate' (*'arsh al-rahmân*) to use the language of the *hadith*, and by virtue of the same transformation making the cosmos and all that it contains transparent so that the infinite content becomes revealed through the finite form. In this manner Sufism achieves the goal of the mystical quest, a goal which is perennially sought since, as already explained, it lies within the depth of human existence itself. As long as man is man this search continues and must continue; otherwise the world would simply cease to exist, for it would no longer have an empowering reason to continue. To quote Hâfiz again,

تا زمیخانه ومی نام و نشان خواهد بود سرما خاک ره پیر مغان خواهد بود
حلقه پیر مغان از ازلم در گوش است بر همانیم که بودیم و همان خواهد بود

As long as the name and sign of the tavern and the wine remain
Our head shall be the dust of the path of the 'Wise Magi'.

The ring of the 'Wise Magi' has been in my ear since pre-eternity;

²⁴ F. Schuon, 'Understanding and Believing', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1969, p. 131.

We continue to be what we were, and we will continue to be so in the future.²⁵

With its universal doctrine and method as well as the living tradition which guarantees the efficacy of its practices, Sufism contains within itself the possibility of being practised in any circumstance in which man finds himself, in the traditional world as well as in the modern one whose manifestations seem in so many ways to negate the Divine and to make man forget who he is and where he is going. Since it is based on the social and juridical teachings of Islam, Sufism is meant to be practised within society and not in a monastic environment outside the social order. But the attitudes of monastic life are integrated with the daily life lived within the human community. The Sufi bears spiritual poverty (*faqr*) within himself even if he lives outwardly amidst the riches of the world. Sufism is in fact often called 'Muḥammadan poverty' (*al-faqr al-muḥammadi*). The world has died in the Sufi and he lives in the world without being seduced by it. Sufism is able to integrate man into his Divine Centre wherever he may happen to be, provided he is willing to dedicate himself to the Way, which, being sacred, asks of man all that he is.²⁶ Likewise Sufism is the way of integration of the active and contemplative lives so that man is able to remain receptive inwardly to the influences of heaven and lead an intense inner contemplative life while outwardly remaining most active in a world which he moulds according to his inner spiritual nature, instead of becoming its prisoner as happens to the profane man. Men without spiritual principles may claim to make the world about them and to create their own 'times'. Actually it is their times that make them. Only the spiritual man makes his times and moulds the environment about him according to the principles that dominate him inwardly.

Through this possibility of interiorization Sufism bestows upon Islam a dimension in depth through which outer forms become channels of an inner illumination. Through it the exoteric forms of Islam gain the universality which comes from the Formless alone. It also regenerates the moral teachings of the religion from within and at the same time provides those metaphysical and cosmological doctrines which alone can answer the needs for causality on the part

²⁵ Translated by S. H. Nasr. Wine, which combines of the nature of water and fire, symbolizes in Sufi imagery both divine love and the realized aspect of gnosis, while the tavern is the spiritual centre of the Sufis. The term 'Wise Magi' (*pir-i muḥān*) of course symbolizes the spiritual master.

²⁶ See chapter II.

of certain types of believers and prevent the intelligent from seeking the fulfilment of these needs outside the tradition.

Sufism also renders a great service to Islam in clarifying the question of comparative religion which, because of the spread of modernism, is becoming an important problem for certain Muslims and will certainly become even more important in the future. Religions can be studied historically as phenomena or theologically as dogmatic systems or can even be tolerated for humanitarian reasons. But this is far from enough. To tolerate another religion is to believe it to be false yet accept its presence, much as one tolerates pain as inevitable but would rather that it did not exist. To understand another orthodox religion in depth is not simply to analyse its historical manifestations or even its theological formulations and then to tolerate them; rather is it to reach, at least by intellectual anticipation, the inner truths from which spring all the outer manifestations of a tradition. It means to be able to go from the phenomena of a religion to the noumena, from the forms to the essences wherein resides the truth of all religions and where alone a religion can be really understood and accepted.

Being itself the message of the essence in the form or of the Centre at the periphery, Sufism can guide man from the phenomena to the noumena, from the form (*şûrah*) to the meaning (*ma'nâ*) to use the Sufi technical terminology itself. This fact coupled with the universal character of Islam, as reflected in the insistence of the Quran upon man's accepting the authenticity of previous religions, has made of the Sufis throughout history the great proponents of the 'transcendent unity of religions', whose principles they have explicitly formulated. Some like Ibn 'Arabî and Mawlânâ Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî have even applied this concept to specific teachings of non-Islamic religions. Sufism provides the metaphysics necessary to carry out the study of comparative religion in depth so that man can accept the validity of every detail of the authentic religions of mankind and at the same time see beyond these details to the transcendent unity of these religions.²⁷ It is the treasury from which Islam can draw in its confrontation with other religions of the world in the contemporary context. It can also provide many principles for Western scholars who are seeking so desperately today for a meaningful study of comparative religion which would do justice to the nature of religion itself.²⁸

²⁷ See F. Schuon, *Transcendent Unity of Religions* and Chapter IX of the present work.

²⁸ The efforts of W. C. Smith in several of his recent works and of K. Morgan and Huston Smith come to mind particularly in this context.

There are also other fields in which Sufism could be of operative and practical significance for the West, even among those who cannot follow it themselves. Being a living example of the mystical way in its fullness, it contains universal teachings which could certainly help resuscitate forgotten elements in the Christian mystical life, elements which alone can revitalize the metaphysical and mystical teachings and methods of Christianity,²⁹ of which there is such a desperate need today. Unfortunately until now most Western scholars dealing with Sufism have tried to explain it away in terms of historical influences as if the yearning of man's soul for God could ever be due to historical borrowing. But now, thanks to the few authentic and authoritative works on Sufism which have appeared during the past few years,³⁰ those whose interests are serious are becoming ever more aware of the aid that Sufism can offer them in charting a course toward the Centre across this web of illusion and confusion which the modern world has spun around the minds and souls of so many men. Because it is concerned with the perennial and the universal, Sufism remains as relevant today as in every past age; it speaks to the seeking non-Muslim as well as to the Muslim, provided there is an ear to hear and an eye to see.

Granted that Sufism can provide answers for the perennial questions posed for man by the very nature of his situation in the world and of his own intelligence, that is, questions concerning the mysteries of 'pre-natal' and 'posthumous' existence and of our present situation in the total order of things, what about the pressing and urgent problems of modern man? The answer is that had not the truths expounded by Sufism, as by every other authentic metaphysical teaching, been forgotten by the modern world, there would not have been the so-called pressing problems of modern man. Problems always result from a particular ignorance. Modern man wants to eliminate the transcendent dimension of his life and yet not suffer from suffocation in the two-dimensional world he has created for himself. He wants to kill all the gods and yet remain human, which is a contradiction and an impossibility precisely because, as stated

²⁹ Despite the fact that he still had much to learn in questions of the authentic initiatic life and especially of the metaphysical doctrines that underly it, Thomas Merton sought genuine contacts with Sufism until the very end of his life, in the hope of revitalizing by this means the contemplative methods in Christianity. Massignon, the great French specialist in Sufism, also drew on Sufism as a practical aid to his Christian spiritual life.

³⁰ One has in mind particularly the writings of F. Schuon, T. Burckhardt, M. Lings and several other of the traditional authors in the West. Some of these works have been referred to in previous notes.

above, man can remain human only by being faithful to his own theomorphic nature.

To the problems caused by the forgetting of the transcendent dimension of life by modern man, by the imprisonment of his being in the cage of the material world and by the limiting of his horizon to a purely corporeal one (even if this contains nebulae millions of light years distant from us), Sufism would answer by recalling the truth that man was made for immortality and his intelligence was created to grasp the Absolute. Hence no mortal existence, no matter how streamlined, can satisfy his soul, nor can all the information in the world, with which he is bombarded day and night, take the place of the Absolute which his intelligence seeks in virtue of its own nature. To the problems of the pathetic lot of modern, secularized man, Sufism would answer by pointing out that man has become miserable only because he no longer knows who he is; and the modern sciences of man as they are usually taught do not aid him one iota in discovering his true identity.³¹ It would add further that the very quest of youth today for 'vision' through drugs, or for occultist and pseudo-mystical practices is itself proof in reverse of the Sufi conception of human nature. The positivists of the nineteenth century certainly did not extrapolate such happenings as we see today to be the next stage in the so-called 'progress' of man. They never thought that in the most 'progressive' countries in the middle of the twentieth century there would be interest in everything from Yoga to alchemy. They never guessed that man could not remain satisfied for long with the 'positivist' conception of reality into which he had been forced, as into a strait-jacket, by the fathers of positivism and scientism. Sufism sees in all the efforts made by so many today to escape the prison of material existence a desperate attempt—since for them the false idols such as 'progress' and 'evolution' have been broken—to reach the Infinite and the Eternal; an attempt which, alas, because of the lack of discrimination and discipline as well as the scarcity of available mystical ways of a genuine nature, results often in a fall into the infernal depths of the psyche instead of a rising into the state of beatific vision. But these distressing phenomena still remain a proof, albeit in reverse, of the perennity of the mystical quest.

On the positive side the very doctrines and methods of Sufism can act as criteria for judging all that passes in the modern world for 'ways of realization', at least for those with a discerning spirit. It can also

³¹ See J. Servier, *L'Homme et l'invisible*, Paris, 1964, where the author, himself an anthropologist, analyzes with much insight the shortcomings which prevent modern anthropology from understanding who the 'anthropos' really is.

turn this urge to follow the mystical way into a wholesome and meaningful direction for those who are willing to accept its discipline or to apply its insights to their own situation. In both cases, Sufism remains a grace from Heaven and a sign of Divine Mercy (*rahmah*) not only for Muslims but also for non-Muslims, some of whom are seeking so desperately, and so often in the wrong places. In such cases Sufism can act as the net that prevents a fall into the bottomless pit of the 'inferior waters'.

The presence of Sufism in the world is thus a sign of both the perennial character of the mystical quest and the eternal effusion of the Divine Mercy. It is a reminder of the eternal covenant made between God and man by virtue of which man remains in quest of the Divinity as long as he remains truly human. The man who remembers this pact and his own true identity remains ever faithful to his nature, hence faithful to his quest for the Divinity, for that Divinity which is already present at the centre of his being.

هرگز م نقش تو از لوح دل و جان نرود هرگز از یاد من آن سر و خرامان نرود
 از دماغ من سرگشته خیال دهند بجفای فلک و غصه دوران نرود
 درازل بست دلم با سرزلفت پیوند تا ابد سر نکشد وز سر پیمان نرود
 هر چه جز بار غمت بردل مسکین منست برود از دل من وز دل من آن نرود
 آنچه من مر توام در دل من جای گرفت که اگر سر برود از دل و از جان نرود

Thy form shall never leave the tablet of my heart and soul;
 That strutting cypress tree shall never leave my memory.
 The thought of thy lips, from the brain of one bewildered like
 myself,
 Shall never leave, whatever be the oppression of heaven or the
 grief of the age.
 My heart became bound to the lock of thy hair from pre-eternity;
 It will never rebel even until post-eternity; it shall never break
 its pact.
 Whatever lies upon my heart, save the weight of thy sorrow,
 Shall pass away, but thy sorrow shall not leave my heart.
 Thy love hath become planted in my heart and soul in such a way
 That were my head to disappear, thy love would still remain.³²
 (Hâfiz)

³² Translated by S. H. Nasr.

SUFI ESSAYS

Precisely because it is a message of the eternal to what is permanent and abiding within man, Sufism, like other authentic spiritual ways, is perennial and remains engraved in the very texture of the human soul. Men come and go but Sufism remains immutable and transcendent like the vault of heaven, reminding man of the immortality and beatitude that are his in principle and could become so in fact through Divine grace and his own spiritual effort.