

THE MYSTICISM OF ISLAM

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THE attention Islamic Mysticism has so far received in this country presents to the Catholic a study of no little interest. Unlike some of the Indian ascetic practices, it has largely been the object of a purely professional, rather than of a popular and slightly bizarre enthusiasm; but, within the field of scholarship, that enthusiasm has been whole-hearted and uninhibited to a degree not witnessed in our time outside the natural sciences. From the middle of last century onwards, a whole range of scholars—Palmer, Browne, Nicholson, Arberry and Margaret Smith, to name only some of the outstanding among them—have found, and unmistakably gloried in finding, a satisfaction in their studies wider and deeper than the purely academic. It is perhaps not surprising that most of these scholars 'discovered' Islamic Mysticism either (in the case of the earlier ones) when living in an atmosphere of confidently well-bred agnosticism, or (during the present century) when their religious appetite no longer found anything like satisfaction in their own accepted faith. (Significantly enough, the latter has been, almost without exception, the comfortable, correct Anglicanism of the Cambridge Colleges; against such a background, the professedly undogmatic, syncretist attitude of the Islamic Mystics had all the appeal of novelty and private exhilaration at no cost in social peril.) But such a volume of smoke—and very beautiful and impressive the smoke-clouds have often been—would seem at least to suggest a fire of no mean intensity. The life-long preoccupation of a loyal French Catholic scholar like Massignon, moreover, with the person and passion of Hallâj, cannot be taken as other than a confirmation of this deduction. Whether, however, such a fire is of the flame which Professor Allison Peers has done so much to keep bright before our eyes—that is a question infinitely more difficult to resolve.

It is a commonplace to observe that Islam is a sort of Protestant heresy; but the remark is often based on little more than the superficial similarity of negative outlook in the face of the 'dangerous' gifts of this world, those which even a Catholic may properly enjoy, in our fallen state, only subject to the confident impetration of God's grace: I refer, of course, to the human

reason, wine, music, sexual love, and, indeed—if one be appropriately logical—to all else natural besides. The reality, in fact, goes far deeper than this: Islam was from the very first conceived as a recall to the True Scriptures, the Book, the literal, almost (as we should say) sacramentally living Word of God, which Christians and Jews were accused of having corrupted, in their different ways, through neglect and malice. Like the early Protestant 'Reformers', Muhammad said, quite explicitly, that in this, the true reproduction of the archetypal Scriptures, was contained all the guidance man needed for a proper relation with God. No intermediary (apart, of course, from the 'Apostle of God' himself) need, or should, stand between man and his Maker, for such intermediaries, be they the Christian God Incarnate, or angels or men, are a direct derogation of God's unity and unicity. (The horror of the idea of an Incarnation is as fundamental to Islam as it is to Protestantism, though in the former it finds uncompromisingly direct and repeated expression, while in the latter it is, of course, usually only implicit and often unrealised.) Quite apart from doctrine, the errors of historical fact contained in the 'Book revealed to Muhammad' are often childishly easy to demonstrate: the most striking for us is, perhaps, the confounding of our Lady with the sister of Aaron (Koran, *sûrah* XIX). But, as in the case of the Protestant fundamentalist charged with similar errors in, and arising out of, his texts, such demonstrations are quite unavailing: 'This Koran (one could substitute 'Protestant Bible') is the manifest proof and all else is vanity'.

Inasmuch as heresy is often a partial truth (however unintegrated and disproportionate), such an attitude cannot fail to possess it special dignity, nor may it be without its good effect on those to whom the whole truth has become contemptible by familiarity. But it is a dignity which, in the nature of things, tends to spiritual pride and to a satisfied contemplation of worldly prosperity as a special mark of divine favour. Protestant Holland, England and New England at their height were collateral descendants of the great commercial empire of the 'orthodox' Caliphs of Baghdad. Moreover, such an attitude inevitably leaves orthodox Islam as defenceless as Protestant Christianity in times, like the present, of spiritual and economic confusion. Both religions can ultimately only ignore, or succumb to, material disaster or materialist corruption: they cannot grapple with, and bring down,

their adversary, far less win him into the service of their own cause.

What scope does such a religion—if I have drawn it fairly—allow to mysticism? Clearly, in the sense that mystical experience is of the purest grace of God, bestowed in his wisdom where he wills, such a question is falsely conceived. On this plane, the possibility of mystical experience is as open to a Muslim as to a Catholic, and, personally, I am convinced of its realisation in at least one case, that of al-Ghazâlî. But it is generally recognised that while Almighty God does not choose to confer the grace of such experience on by any means all those who wait on it with full expectancy of heart and mind and soul, equally does he not seem to confer it at all where such full expectancy is unattained. It is likewise commonly allowed that such grace would appear to be conferred at least as much for the aid of others as for the comfort of the immediate beneficiary, and that it is, therefore, usually accompanied by a gift to tell of it worthily, humanly speaking. Thus, it is here, in the consideration, on the one hand, of the exercise devoted to the attainment of a full expectancy, and, on the other, of the expression given to the grace claimed, that the only useful comparison of mysticism, as between religion and religion, can be attempted. The question at the head of the paragraph may perhaps accordingly be refashioned: What scope does such a religion allow to mystical practice? A secondary question is now added: In what terms do its adherents speak of the grace they revindicate?

Even those Orientalists most enthusiastic in the cause of Islamic Mysticism now incline to the view that though the latter may be a largely indigenous growth in the sense that it did not necessarily owe much to neoplatonism or similar systems (as was until recently commonly held), nevertheless the later attempts by the Sufis themselves to give all their important tenets Koranic sanction, or at least the Traditional cachet of the Prophet, are in most cases far-fetched and even disingenuous.

Almost by definition, orthodox Islam, like pure Protestantism, is a closed system, reducing religion to a few simple, convenient beliefs and practices which, observed in due time, set the individual free to turn his attention otherwise to important matters of worldly concern. Though, like Pharisaism, it regulates many matters of everyday life that for us would seem to have no direct

religious significance whatsoever (the proper use and size of a toothpick is an obvious example), it is nevertheless emphatically not a religion designed to possess a man's life utterly and entirely, to the exclusion in certain cases of all else. This is at least the general implication of the Prophet's injunction, 'No monkery in Islam', though the saying is usually understood, by Muslims and Orientalists alike, only in its particular application to the question of celibacy and mortification.

If mystical exercise were to grow, then, it had little choice but to grow outside the very sharply defined pale of orthodoxy. The early ascetics and mystics are in fact markedly given to acknowledgement of their association with, and their great indebtedness to, Christian hermits and wandering monks; and neither the comments of the orthodox on the mystics, nor the observations of the latter on the orthodox would suggest that anything but an alien force was making itself felt. The clash was, moreover, often more than merely verbal. At its best, this growth extraneous to orthodoxy was to mean a restoration, a filling-up, so to speak, of those aspects of a normal religion which orthodox Islam was designed to eliminate: an acceptance of Manifestation which came close to (yet was ever to remain so far removed from) the idea of an Incarnation, asceticism, Atonement, the communion of saints and so on. At worst—and this side was to grow more and more pronounced as time passed—it led to imitation (conscious or otherwise) of the gnostic cults, magical practices with their pseudo-scientific certainty of cause and effect, and all manner of downright charlatanry. (Cf. *Sufism* by A. J. Arberry, London 1950, ch. XI.) The disentangling of these two strands, the light and the dark, remains the great task before Orientalists for whom this side of Islamic scholarship exercises a special appeal.

Yet, always leaving aside the figure of al-Ghazâlî, even the golden thread of Islamic Mysticism is of a texture and a colour to which a Catholic will have strong 'allergic' reactions. As Arberry allows (*op. cit.*, pp. 89-92), the *dhikr* gatherings often had an atmosphere which would remind us of Quaker or revivalist meetings in their most primitive form—save only that the Quakers are not on record as having used drugs or hypnosis in order to induce a 'mystical' state. (How often in the West, incidentally, do we ever hear of a mystical *gathering*? It is a permanent feature of Sufism, but our own mystics, even when

closely associated, seem, fittingly enough, to have experienced God in solitude.) Again, to take one often cited as the sublimest of the Islamic mystics, al-Hallâj—what shall one say of his bald announcement 'I am God (the Truth)', when it is placed side by side with St John of the Cross's explicit analysis of the meaning of union with God? (Cf. *Spirit of Flame* by E. Allison Peers, London 1943, pp. 132-3 and 144.) True, Hallâj's ejaculation has been copiously interpreted by others in both East and West, but St John's statement, with its vital distinctions, needs no further interpretation or apology: it reads like the Athanasian Creed itself. Nor is that a coincidence, for the Creeds, with their lawyer-like safeguards of Person and Nature and Substance, have their *raison d'être* in the Incarnation: as long as Islam, and even Islamic Mysticism, could not so much as accept the possibility of that event, so long would it fail to appreciate the significance of such distinctions. So long would its own noblest aspirations be held fast in a morass of pantheism.

Or consider, again—and let it be remembered that we are dealing here with the best in Islamic Mysticism—the classic dictum: 'Who knows himself knows his Lord'. This too is interpreted in various ways, particularly by the Western apologists, who have, in some vague, instinctive fashion, realised its dangerous character. But St John, once more, would spare them any such labour and anxiety: for him, meditation on the creatures is 'after the practice of self-knowledge . . . the first thing in order upon this spiritual road to the knowledge of God'. (*Spiritual Canticle* IV, as quoted by Peers, *op. cit.*, p. 138.) St John, one might say, knew every stage on a long and laborious road which the Islamic Mystics seem only to have begun to traverse.

Take, as another example, the effervescent side of Islamic Mysticism, as it bubbles forth (particularly in poetry) in indiscriminate love of God, human beings, material possessions and so on (Cf. Arberry, *op. cit.*, p. 115). With what a relief I, at least, have often turned to the cool, sure sanity of St Thomas Aquinas's communion prayer for 'the stilling and calm of all my impulses, carnal and spiritual'. St John of the Cross, again, is ever insistent on the necessity of renouncing even spiritual joys before God can be expected in mystical union. What some commentators have likened to the *Dark Night* in Islamic Mysticism impresses at least one Catholic as little more than an almost blasphemously peevish

echo of the words in St Mark 15, 34.

I have discussed at some length elsewhere (chiefly in the *Legacy of Persia*, essay on 'Religion', Oxford University Press, due to appear about now) what for me is one of the crucial tests of the genuineness of Islamic Mysticism as a whole: the imagery in which it is crystallised. That love for God should find human expression in terms of human love, even in terms of sexual love, need shock no one, least of all a Catholic, for whom the Incarnation is a simple reality. When, however, the imagery is drawn from relations utterly lacking in what Pius XI calls *casti connubii dignitas*, informed rather by the grossest sensuality and by flippant and cynical coquetry (as perhaps, but for the grace of God, they inevitably are outside Christianity)—in such a situation, any attempt at justification would seem mere sophistry. For a Catholic, after all, imagery can never be 'mere imagery', as the cliché so often runs: ever since, in the first Eucharist, symbol became reality, imagery remains an organic part of thought and expression.

I have hinted in this article at the anomaly I find to reside in the figure of al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111). (Again, I have dealt at greater length with his significance in the essay referred to above.) In the West there are encouraging signs that his life and work is beginning to receive the special attention it so clearly deserves, while Islam, as D. B. Macdonald saw nearly fifty years ago, 'has never outgrown him, never fully understood him'. As a trained theologian who later turned to the mystical life, his achievement is often described as the 'rehabilitation of mysticism within orthodox Islam'. That he so obviously failed to accomplish this outside his personal life (the emergence of the 'darker' side of Islamic Mysticism is clearly marked from his death onwards), is less to his discredit than to that of the background against which he wrought. For nowhere else in Islam does one find a personality so possessed by charity and simple sanity. His mystical experience he accepts, like God's other gifts of life and light, as an 'incomprehensible bounty'; there is never the trace of a suggestion that, like virtually all other Islamic Mystics, he regards it as evidence of his own superiority to the common run of men, a token of his particular skill in 'mystical manipulation'. It made institutional religion not one whit less valid or significant in his eyes, and the adherents thereof never became for him 'mere babes to be fed on

the pap of empty forms'. Of all the Islamic Mystics he was the best informed on Christianity: indeed, his accurate knowledge of the New Testament is unique in Islam, where an enormous body of false ideas on this subject has been handed down, century by century, to the present day.

Perhaps, however, the most significant of his characteristics in support of his standing as a 'genuine' mystic is his sense of humour. This quality is rare in Islam, rarest of all in its mystics and theologians. One returns, perhaps inevitably, to the Incarnation: we know from that supreme revelation what men seem never to have realised from reason alone—that Almighty God is fond of jokes, so fond, indeed, that one of his most significant statements for his creatures took the form of a Divine pun on a follower's name. Ghazâlî, I am inclined to feel, could scarcely have caught that side of God's Nature save in his presence itself.

It is the materialist enemies of religion who often, in the manner of their attack, pay unconscious tribute to its real strength. In this sense, it is scarcely fortuitous that the modern secularists of the Orient have directed their attack on Islamic Mysticism almost exclusively at the person of al-Ghazâlî.

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